Panel Discussions

Design in Sequential Art Storytelling

Written By:
Durwin S. Talon

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"KIRK'S MONSTROUS MUTATION IS FINALLY **COMPLETED!** MAYBE EVEN I CAN'T SAVE HIM NOW!"

Batman dialogue, written by Frank Robbins

DETECTIVE COMICS #402

Introduction

Batman and all related characters © DC Comics

Figure i: Cover to Detective Comics #402 *written by Frank Robbins, with art by Neal Adams and Dick Giordano.*
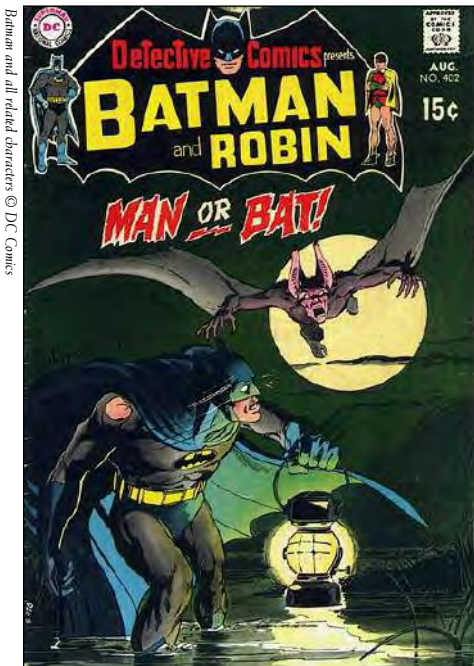
There was a corner store in my neighborhood that supplied all the things any good Canadian boy needed to grow up with. There, I bought my flavored potato chips, Aero bars and hockey cards with money made from cutting grass. But just past the postcards and tacky maple leaf adorned souvenirs, I made the discovery that would forever change my life—a spinning wire rack stocked with all types of comic books.

I was awed at the sight of these bright gods who could fly, heroes falling in love with women from other dimensions and mutants who fought to protect the earth. I still remember the first cover that grabbed my attention.

It showed the Batman, bedraggled and beaten, but still fighting with—and this was the part that I had a hard time wrapping my 6-year-old mind around—a man who had somehow mutated into a giant *bat!* Complete with hair and wings! I thought to myself, this is not like anything I've ever seen on television! I quickly plunked down 15¢ and purchased my first comic.

Though I didn't realize it at the time, the story was well-crafted. It told the story of Kirk Langstrom's profound tragedy: a man whose quest for knowledge backfired and now he was *literally* turning into a giant bat. Bruce Wayne, a man who only dressed up as a bat, heroically tried to save the mutating creature. The book held my feverish little mind at bay until I simply ran out of pages. Not being able to find out what happened in the next issue (extra cash was hard to come by until snow shoveling season), I simply re-read the book continually making up my own conclusions.

I read the book so many times that I could virtually describe every scene backwards and forwards, complete with sound effects. I especially remember the scene where the Caped Crusader was holding onto Man-Bat's legs for dear life as Man-Bat flew crazily, high above the Batcave ceiling. I remember a particularly nasty bank that broke Batman's grip of the creature and sent him falling headfirst into the ground. My head still rings thinking about how anyone could *survive* such a nasty fall.

My copy of Batman *Detective Comics* #472 eventually got lost, traded, or burned in a freakish 'playing with matches' incident (a long story). I continued on with my life, stopped reading comics, went through college, got married, started a career, picked up reading comics comics again, and then started going to conventions.

I was at San Diego Comic Convention one year when I realized I longed to read the first comic I ever bought. I started hanging out at the tables who specialized in silver age comics and many a dealer would listen to me, eyes glazed over, as I informed them about my quest: "I'm looking for a Batman comic that had Man-Bat in it, and Man-Bat found his way into the Batcave, and there was this part where Batman was holding onto his legs, and then he got slammed into a wall…" For two years, no luck, until this one dealer said "You know, that sounds like a Neal Adams/Dick Giordano issue, right… here." And he handed my long lost comic book back to me (which is worth considerable more than 15¢ these days). I tore through the plastic bag to re-read the story.

Funny, when I revisited the comic, I didn't remember all of the word balloons, caption boxes, sound effects or panel breakdowns I *must* have read as a child. What I remember, in my mind's eye, was a fluid story—much like a movie. The cliffhanger ending still drove me crazy, even when I *knew* it was going to happen. From my childhood, I remember these characters interacting, breathing, full of life—like a world beyond my wardrobe.

The comic seemed static compared to my memories of the story.

My young mind must have filled in all of the gaps between the panels and somehow, the story *became* real. My memories of this Batman story were fluid as my memories of my first experience driving a car (which should be turned into a comic book story, let me tell you).

This illustrates the power of good comic book storytelling. To create a good piece of sequential art, be it a comic book or a graphic novel, you have to be more than just an excellent illustrator or writer. You have to be able to find a way to completely immerse the readers into the story's reality and let the story become as vivid

as a memory. Successful comics are the complete synthesis of art and writing, and are designed to best intrigue and involve the viewer.

Successful storytelling is best served by solid design, since a story must find a vehicle to clearly communicate with the reader. Of course, there are many graphic devices necessary to a comic book that also have the potential to distract the reader from the story: everything from word balloons to the physical turning of the pages. If the art is not intriguing and if the story makes no sense, then the reader will most likely put the book down and walk away.

When these devices are successfully added to a comic book, they will more than likely never be *remembered*. Which is why when I recall the Man-Bat story, I can recite scenes like an avid movie goer, though I don't remember the word balloon placement or panel layouts. Yet all of these devices exist within the comic—they must in order for the story to be told.

The analogy that comic books are simply movies on paper is often heard. Both mediums rely on many of the same techniques to tell a story as well as the same vocabulary to describe these techniques. There are so many similarities between the two art forms that it is no fluke many practitioners of comics are avid movie goers and also the harshest critics of cinematic technique. Despite the similarities between the two, few movies make great comic book adaptations and even fewer comics turn into great movies. As similar as the two art forms are, they are also miles apart.

These differences make comic book storytelling a unique and powerful medium. Sequential art, or comic books, relies on the participant to make it successful. This interaction with the audience is what an artist strives to achieve or the reader will lose interest. Razzle dazzle pyrotechnics and scantily clad heroes are not enough to engage a reader.

Great comics means great stories.

Storytelling is the great equalizer in comics. Clear, concise direction of action, placement of text boxes or consistency with colors can make or break a comic book. It cannot make a weak storyline or bad artwork better, but it can simplify or elevate the *experience* of reading the work. If the art and story are solid, then the project gains a higher level of excellence raw talent alone couldn't achieve.

Communication and story immersion are the ideas that can be driven home with good storytelling. Sequential artists strive to design a story so absorbing that the reader cannot tear themselves away from it. To achieve this, the artist makes sure the viewer's attention is directed towards the story as a whole and not insignificant points, which enables the viewer to remember the entire forest and not just a few impressive looking trees.

It starts with an idea, but ends up as complete as a movie—a movie on paper. This book investigates all of the design considerations needed to create a finished comic book. The solution to the problem is very simple: clear communication.

The goal is to communicate the story in the most effective way… and strong design will ensure enjoyability and memorability.

P A N E L   D I S C U S S I O N S

Sequential artists are a rare breed. Unlike other professionals, they like to share their knowledge in the hopes to make the art form stronger. There are a few universal rules to create good storytelling. But sequential art is a relatively uncharted yet vibrant field, so experience becomes the best teacher of many professionals in the field. This is one of the reasons comic book conventions exist: professionals travel far and wide to share their art and storytelling techniques with their fans and each other. Within the convention, this sharing of ideas and insights is called the *Panel Discussion.*

This book brings together fifteen renowned sequential artists and investigates their techniques, styles, procedures, and beliefs in the business of comic book storytelling. They are creators, painters, pencilers, inkers, colorists, writers and editors. Visual storytellers all, they are leaders of their profession and, most importantly, welcome the opportunity to share their insight into the complexity and power which is sequential art, comic book storytelling.

These creators are heads above their counterparts in the industry because they know how to make the words and pictures work together in such a way to communicate a clear story. When stories are easy to understand, the reader does not have to struggle and they can enjoy the worlds created before them.

No special skills should be required to read a comic book; anyone can enjoy them. But from the mechanics of turning pages to dealing with word balloons hovering above the characters, there are many forces that can throw the reader out of the world created within the confines of a comic. The reader is an active participant in the experience. And this is the cornerstone of successful storytelling.

Everyone involved with the creation of comic books uses his or her own personal styles to achieve successful storytelling. Though their methods differ, they all strive toward the same goal while maintaining their unique visions. I have had the distinct pleasure of seeing all of the industry greats interviewed in this book delve into the nuts and bolts of creating comics. All of these individuals are unique within the field in that they are great craftsmen as well as communicators. Having seen these creators expand my students' horizons, I knew they would make the perfect resource for any student and lover of the artform. Mike Carlin, Randy Stradley, Mike Wieringo, Mark Schultz, Dick Giordano, Mike Mignola, Brian Stelfreeze, Scott Hampton, David Mazzucchelli, Chris Moeller, Walter Simonson, Mark Chiarello, John Van Fleet, George Pratt, and Will Eisner comprise the panel of this book. Their topic: design in sequential art storytelling.

F O C U S P A N E L S

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Designing pictures and words in such a way to continually entertain, challenge and satisfy the reader is the hidden glue that binds all of the best in the business. The creators interviewed for this book understand this.

To create a comic book, the artist must design a story in such a way as to maximize the interaction with the reader. This means careful thought must be given throughout every step of the book's creation; total immersion into the creator's worlds depends on the design of all of the necessary graphic elements comics employ. For sequential art stories to be effective there has to be an audience and the audience has to respond or interact with the story. If done correctly, all of the design fades away and the reader is left with something as powerful as a memory.

The different steps needed to create this kind of memorable story are highlighted in each chapter under the *Focus Panels* section. The topics dissected are as diverse as the storyteller's section that precedes it including: concept, script, panel grids, line dynamic, spotting blacks, eye movement through words and acting, pacing, word balloon style, sound effects, lettering, focus and storytelling with color, digital story- telling and synthesis.

Every creator in this book has mastered all of the mentioned tech- niques needed to create sequential art. But some creators have unique and specialized ways to solve these design problems—and so the creator and their solutions serve as perfect examples to be analyzed. All of these solutions, when taken as a whole, solve the problem of storytelling… connecting with the reader throughout the entire experience of reading a comic book. *Focus Panels* concentrates on the basics of visually telling a story and the getting the basics right can be hard enough.

Fancy trappings and obscure goals can lose the audience. These creators keep the goal simple—to tell engaging stories clearly and effectively—and thus reach the widest audience possible. If a story can be told with the same unified voice— art with words and design—then clear communication of the story is not defined by language, it becomes boundless.

Figure 1.1: From Adventures of Superman *#453, edited by Mike Carlin.*

I A M A B L E T O S P O T T H E W E A K N E S S E S I N M Y O W N S T U F F . . . T H I S H E L P S M E S P O T W E A K N E S S E S I N O T H E R P E O P L E ' S W O R K .

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Mike Carlin

C H A P T E R   O N E

Mike Carlin went to the High School of Art and Design in New York, making full use of their cartooning and animation department. While there, he was selected for an internship at DC Comics. "It was awesome and, in a funny way, convinced me not to do comics," Carlin says, "not because DC was a hassle or disillusioning, but I was photocopying Jack Kirby's *Kamandi* pages… and Bernie Wrightson's *Swamp Thing* pages. I'm a dedicated guy, but I'm not stupid… I decided that I was going to have to try to make a living as a humorous illustrator and give up on the superhero stuff. I don't think I was wrong."

Carlin then enrolled at the School of Visual Arts to study under Will Eisner and Harvey Kurtzman. "Eisner gave me my first paying work in any kind of field that was not just slavery; he paid me $1 a joke to write jokes for books he was doing for Scholastics."

From joke writing, Carlin's first paying comic work was with Marvel Comics' *Crazy* magazine. "Larry Hama [the editor of *Crazy*] leveled with me and told me he wasn't crazy about my art… but he liked the jokes and he liked that I was able to get across my ideas in my limited drawings."

After proving his reliability around the Marvel offices, Carlin became Mark Gruenwald's assistant. "They asked me to interview, though it never occurred to me to be an editor of anything," recalls Carlin. After Marvel, he returned to DC Comics where he developed critical success as a writer and editor. Currently, he serves as executive editor for DC Comics. "When Will [Eisner] handed me my Eisner Award a couple of years ago for the [*Return of Superman*] stuff, I just told him, 'from now on, the rate is $2 a joke—because now I'm an award-winning comic book creator.' He got a kick out of that." Though he has won numerous awards, Carlin still maintains that his greatest reward is his paycheck.

MIKE Carlin

T H E   R O L E   O F   T H E   E D I T O R

To Carlin, editing is about using common sense. "The editor's job is literally to make the people I'm working with do their best work or to help them do their best work. However we get there, whether it is a painful struggle or the smoothest thing in the world, I want to feel like my advice, my coaching, my badgering is making the actual book better than it would be from anybody else. I look at myself as a ring master because [editing a comic book] is kind of like a three ring circus where you're trying to steer the audience's eye toward the most important thing at the moment—that can sometimes be a word or it can sometimes be a picture."

"Editing is not something I wanted to do when I was a kid—I didn't know what an editor was. I think I gravitated towards editing because I was good enough at a lot of things but not good enough at any one of them to actually make my living. I keep my hand in a lot of different areas... I call us editors 'jerks of all trades.' You need to have just enough knowledge to push along the guy who is really doing it, bring inspiration to the table, and not overshadow them at the same time. It really is not about what my accomplishment is as an editor."

To be an effective editor, the essence of a story must be formed quickly. The editor determines the story's goals and the creative process that will make it reality— from developing a consistent look to assembling the creative team. Obviously, different sequential art projects require different editing processes.

"The first thing I try to do with a writer is agree on the goal of the project. If you're writing an issue of *Superman*, the goal is different than if you're doing *Batman*. The goal is different on *Superman* even compared to other Superman work done in the past because of the way we try to evolve the stories together these days by having a lot of writers and artists actually cooperate with each other. So once we all agree on what that is, then the rest of our job is geared towards, 'are we hitting our mark—are we hitting the goal?'"

The level of artistic freedom an editor gives an artist or writer depends on the subject matter and the story. "If you're writing Superman, you're not going to be given *carte blanche* because it's somebody else's reality that you're playing with—it's been somebody else's for sixty years, and you are, hopefully, perpetuating and strengthening what that universe is all about. But something that's creator-owned where an editor is there solely as an advisor—there's tons of leeway and freedom."

Carlin believes comic book writers enjoy less artistic freedom than movie or television writers, even with an established book such as *Superman*. "Comic book writers can't do whatever they want. When we killed Superman, we had to get permission from way on high to make sure that was cool with them. And we had to make sure that we had our punchline explained so that they knew what we were getting into and how we were getting out of it before we even started." Limiting story elements is not
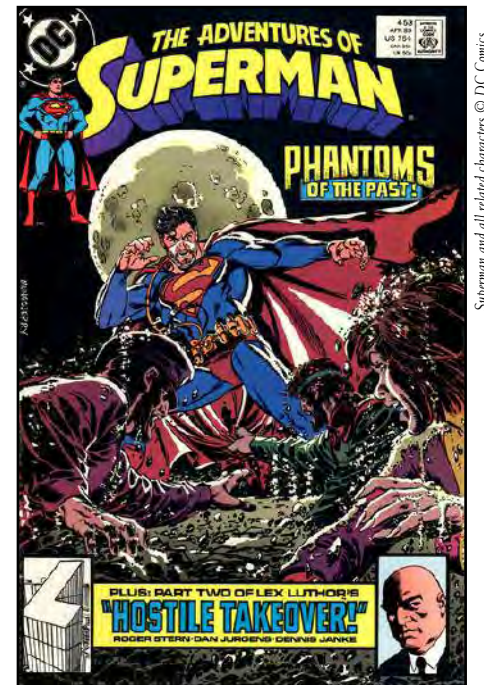

Superman and all related characters © DC Comics

Figure 1.2: Cover to Adventures of Superman *#453 edited by Mike Carlin.*

Figure 1.3: Cover to Death of Superman, *edited by Mike Carlin.*

necessarily a liability to the creative process, either. "As long as everybody is on the same page, you can do some amazing things, even within the constraints. Personally, I find putting some limitations on a project is the best way to make the project get stronger because solving problems is really what storytelling is about: making stuff as clear and as powerful as possible without muddying the water."

The way a writer creates a story concept for DC varies as well. "In the case of the Superman stuff, we got fifteen people in a room every year and hashed out what we all think will be a good idea for a path. There's not one story in the Superman books that I edited that I thought of, but I definitely was the guy who stopped some stories from happening, or maybe enhanced some stories by pushing the concepts or ideas. To me, it's very important that the story come from a creative team." Sometimes, stories are hatched in unorthodox ways. "At times, it would be the artist who came up with an idea, and that is a little unusual in this kind of a collaboration. We even had a couple of stories that the colorist generated: *Superman Red*, *Superman Blue*. Glenn Whitmore, the colorist on *Superman* for over ten years, didn't come up with any part of the actual story itself, and frankly, I believe he mentioned it as a joke, that the story be kind of about the colors. But it definitely, for whatever reason, inspired the guys in the room that day and we had a good concept of making it into the book. We can all argue whether or not the execution paid off, but that can happen to any story. It can work, or it can't work."

On a creator-owned project, the writer usually collaborates with an artist and they come up with the story concept. In this case, Carlin is brought in after the concept is created and is "literally the world's first reader of this comic book. I will point out things that slow me down or steer me wrong; I raise questions. I'm really there just as a sounding board and maybe as an advocate in the office for the series. But I have less at stake there on behalf of the company, so I really do try to let it be the work that the creators intend it to be. You set your gauge at a different point depending what you're doing."

A title that has continual story arcs and requires consistency through many issues, such as *Superman*, has an even more complex creation process. "Part of the Superman meetings would be to have a chart on the wall which had little squares for every single issue for the year—you would have 52 squares up on the wall. We would gauge, by our guts, how long we felt [a story arc] should go… and what particular issues needed to have a certain point emphasized. Some of that was based on, literally, who came up with the idea—whoever thought of it should get the privilege and pressure of executing it. But we would not leave that meeting without fifty-two boxes filled in at least. Sometimes we would go a little further and then when we come back next year, revise the leftover boxes to match wherever we were at that point."

P L O T S   A N D   S C R I P T S

The scripts pencilers use to break down a story are either a full script with dialogue or a simple plot form. Carlin uses both types of scripts. "There are people who are better at doing full scripts than plots. The writer's script is not literally what the world sees, it's still the penciler's, the inker's, and even the letterer's work that the world will see… and ultimately judge. I never thought about it, but that might be one of the reasons why stuff like Jack Kirby's contribution to what Stan Lee was doing really put it over the top." The type of script used changes from comic to comic. "Ultimately that's just worked out between the editors and writers and artists. At DC they do full scripts and vice versa depending on the artist and just the needs of the job that they're working on. So it really does kind of go all over the mat now."

When Carlin worked on Superman, plot form was the method of choice. "We did a plot form because it was easier to make revisions. It was easier for me to write in an instruction to an artist: make sure this guy has a mustache or don't forget that he has to be wearing big shoes to leave the right kind of footprints for the next story," Carlin explains. "The other reason we used plots was because we had a lot of artists on Superman who would be part of coming up with the ideas and also were fairly strong storytellers themselves (guys like Jerry Ordway and Dan Jurgens). So, it was natural to leave some of that pacing up to the artists. That to me is the difference between a full script and a plot: it is more about the pacing, not about literally the story itself. I think that clearly the writer is still making up the story, but if the artist is deciding where close-ups go and where page breaks come to some degree, I think that they are much more a part of directing the story that way."

"I also personally feel it is a truer collaboration…to have the writer then go back in based on the expressions and scenarios that the penciler put in and play off of what drama has maybe even altered or changed. That's not everybody's favorite way to do it, but I personally like that because I do think that whether we like it or not, it is a collaboration and we should actually play to the strengths that come from that.

The editor always plays to whatever strengths are available within the collaborative team. If the artist is excellent, for example, it may be easier to change the script to match the artwork. "Without meaning to put particular pressure on any individual creator or not, I do think that there are guys who will just be better at certain things than others. I mean Alan Moore writing a full script is definitely still coming through on the page [once it is penciled]. But he is definitely an unusual creator in that respect. It is not what every other Tom, Dick and Harry is able to achieve."
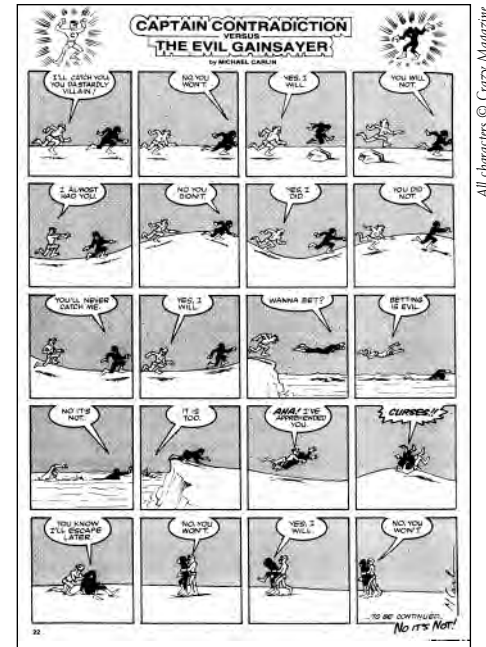
Figure 1.4: Captain Contradiction vs. the Evil Gainsayer, *from Mike Carlin's* Page O' Stuff, *a regular feature for* Crazy *magazine.*
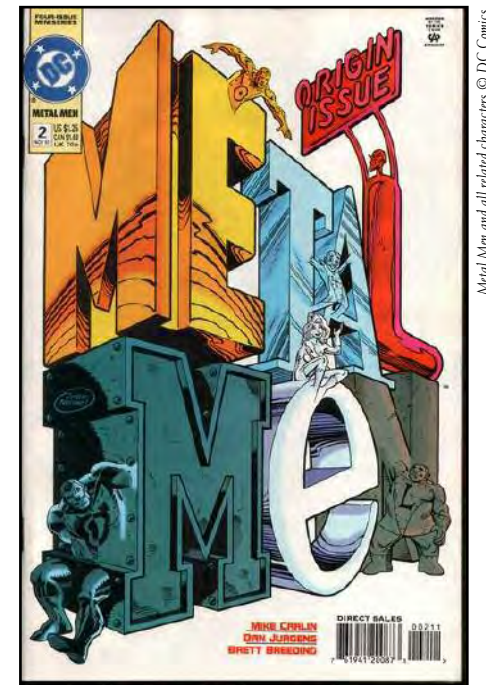
Figure 1.5: Metal Men #2, *written by Mike Carlin. A good editor is well versed in all aspects of sequential art.*

Focus *Panels*

Figure 1.15: *The plot synopsis for one of the most eagerly anticipated stories in the DC Universe can be read just in the title:*
The Return of Superman, *as edited by Mike Carlin.*
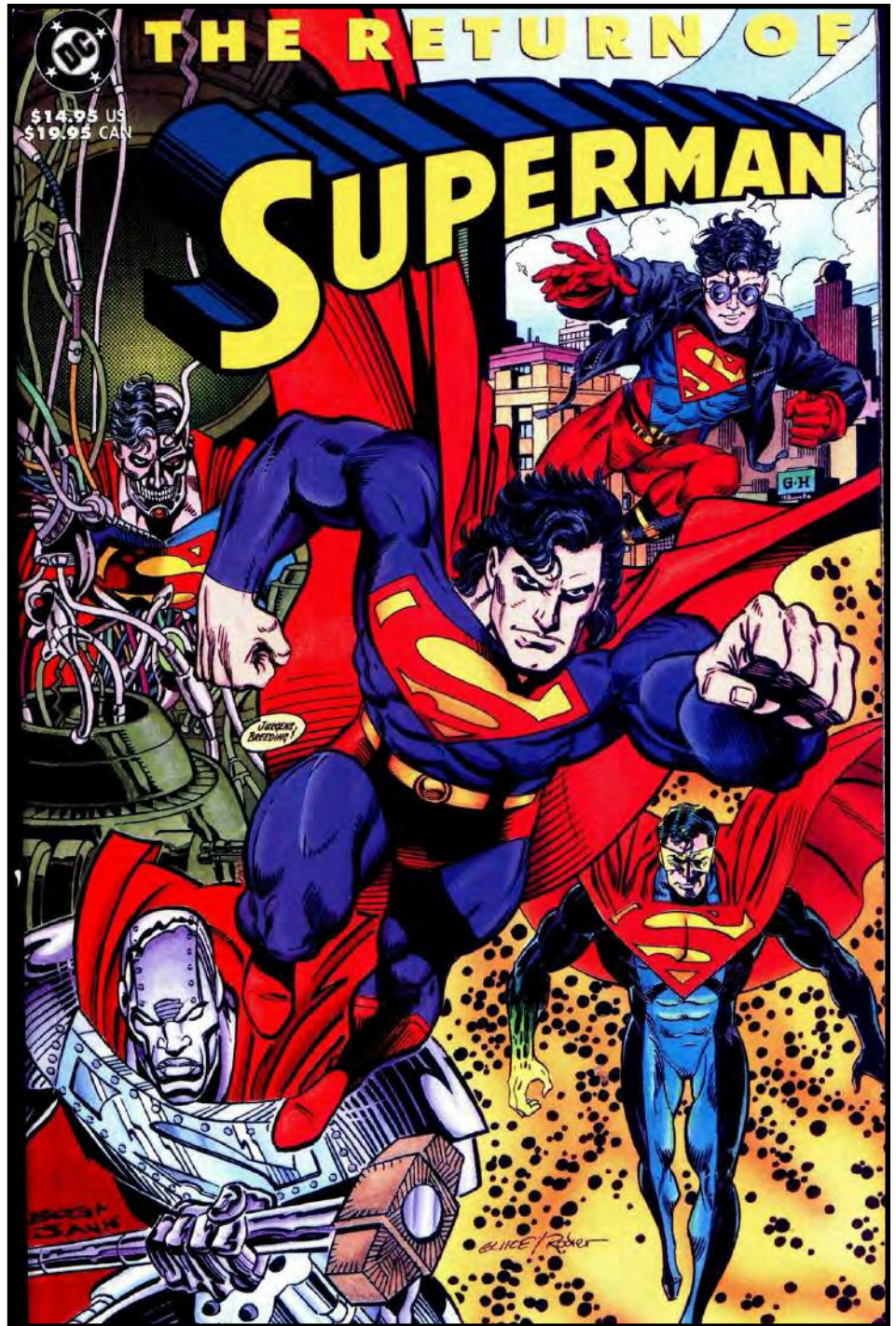
THE CONCEPT OF A STORY

Character motivations, themes and other plot devices have a better chance of being interpreted correctly by the reader if their basic storytelling environment is set up correctly. Storytelling parameters are timeless and limitless. Worlds and universes can be created within the pages of comic books if the storyteller can clearly define the set-

Figure 2.1: Titan from the twelve-issue Will to Power.

IF YOU'RE GOING TO TAKE THE TIME TO DO IT, TAKE THE TIME TO GET IT RIGHT.

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Randy Stradley

CHAPTER TWO

Long before his successful career in the comic book industry, Randy Stradley had a strong interest in film making. However, he felt the creative process involved in movie-making was too crazy and lacked the control that sequential art offered. "I wanted to tell stories, wanted to do it visually, and I had a background in film. I went to a local art museum film school in Portland, Oregon. The more I got into it the more I realized there can be literally hundreds of other people involved. Comics are more hands-on, so more of your original vision makes it to the page. I guess if I could draw, even more of it would." In the summer of 1995, Mike Richardson—who owned several comic book stores and a restaurant—decided the time was right to start a comic book publishing company. He asked Stradley to join and together they created Dark Horse Comics. At its inception, the third largest publishing company in the industry was managed out of a comic shop in Beaverton, Oregon after shop hours. Starting from scratch and learning all he could about every aspect of comic book production along the way, Stradley edited the company's flagship title: *Dark Horse Presents*.

W R I T I N G / E D I T I N G   A C C O M P L I S H M E N T S

Stradley remains one of the most respected writer/editors in the industry today. Known for his integrity and professionalism, he is both an editor at Dark Horse and a creator of comics. "I was very happy with the first *Aliens* series we did and a lot of that goes to the good creative pairing of Mark Verheiden and Mark Nelson. *Tale of One Bad Rat* by Bryan Talbot, all of the Paul Chadwick's *Concrete* stuff, and *Hard Boiled* by Frank Miller and Geoff Darrow: I'm happy about all of those. As a writer I was really happy with the three issues that I wrote of *Will to Power*. A lot of the credit goes to Chris Warner, because he told the story—he knows how to do that."

Like many writers and editors, Stradley experiences some disappointment upon seeing the final outcome of his books. "I'm always excited about all the new stuff I'm working on but, by the time it comes out, something's happened to it. I'll be like, this could have been better if I'd done that. When I look back, those are the things I see; I see all the things I should have done, could have done, rather than what was right at the time. Sometimes you'll look back on past projects sort of knowing what you know now and feel like, well, I could have done that better. Things that were considered cool a couple years ago… nobody even thinks of now. It's just a different look."

O N   E D I T I N G

Editing a comic book can sometimes be a thankless, if not misunderstood, task. Different editors have different working methods: from editing text and art, to dealing with deadlines and printing pressures. Ideally, these talents are geared towards creating the highest standards in the craft. The best editors understand that though comic book fans tend to be loyal, they also are literate and want to read a good story. "To me, the editor's job is to play the part of the reader long before the reader ever gets to see the comic. Chris Warner once said that the editor has to be stupider than the material. You look at it and question everything: where did that character come from? is that how a gun really works? where are we going? Everything that happens in the story you've got to question: is that right? is that correct? is that making sense? The other thing that's important… for an editor to know is everything. Because in addition to being stupider than the material, you've also got to be smarter than the material. If you're going to take the time to do it take the time to get it right. If you don't know if something's right, then you better check; don't assume that just because the writer wrote it or the artist drew it that they know what they're doing. Why turn the editing over to them?

"The development and all that stuff is the most fun. When the artwork starts to come in, that's where it becomes work for the editor. Scripts have to be edited
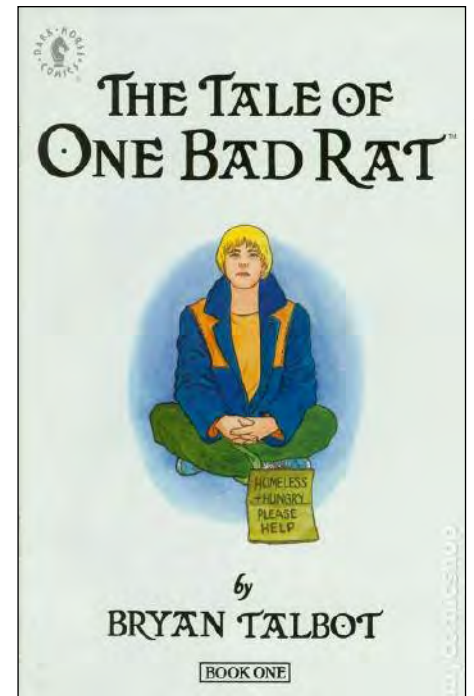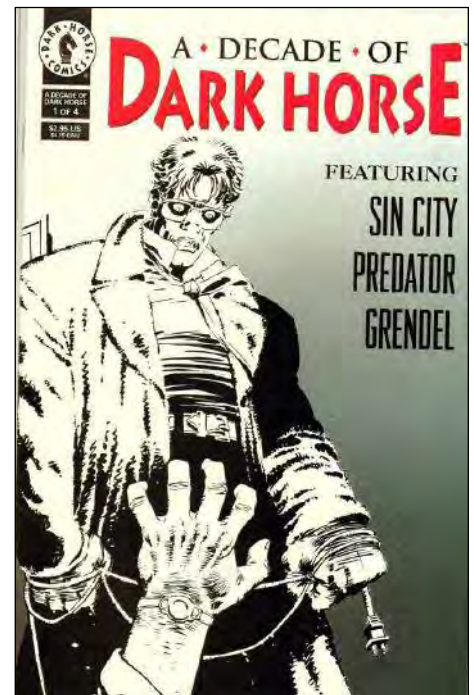

Figure 2.2: Covers for the Eisner Award-winning (above) The Tale of One Bad Rat *and (below)* A Decade of Dark Horse.

Figure 2.3: Example of setting up pace in comics. In the first two panels, Titan flies towards the dome which protects Block 13. The first panel's POV is slightly underneath Titan. The second panel is an easy moment-to-moment transition from the angle established in panel 1 as the reader now assumes Titan's POV. Upon impact, the camera is outside of Titan again with a completely new camera angle. The transition from panel 2 to panel 3 is jarring and seems quicker and more unexpected, where panel 2 was merely the next logical progression of action from panel 1 and the pace seems slower and more deliberate.

with an eye toward whether the artist is going to understand what the writer wants: what needs to be added to clarify this panel or did the writer try to cram too much into a page; or can I cut this story up so there aren't seven panels on a page and… it looks like a brick wall?

"I really think in every story, in every comic, there needs to be some place where the story opens up and there's a big action scene. There's that moment when the reader comes into a comic book store and sees the book on the stands, picks it up and flips through it, just looking, they haven't decided to buy it yet. If they come across some big action shot or some impressive panel, it's a visual point of entry into the story and at that moment they make the decision, 'OK I'm going to buy this.' I think that's important. I'm not adverse to going in and cutting stuff in order to open the story up as long as you're not cutting story from the issue.

"When the pencils come in to the editor, you look at them and say, alright do I need to send anything back because the artist didn't understand what he was supposed to draw? Then you've got balloon placements: did the artist draw the characters in the correct position, because we read left to right. It's astounding the number of artists who don't think about that and they draw the character who has to speak first on the right and the character who responds on the left. Now figure out how to put the word balloons in there so they read in the correct order. The development's the fun part, the editing, that's the work."

When he reviews portfolios or receives pages from artists, Stradley often notices storytelling no-no's. He understands how objectivity is lost when working on a project as complex as a comic book story, but mistakes are still mistakes. "There are common mistakes artists make like getting so involved in the story that they forget to establish where characters are in relation to each other and their backgrounds."

Movies and comic books have always been linked together as similar mediums, but Stradley proves it otherwise. "Another thing I see people doing all the time is trying to break action down into too many panels. I always hear the same thing, and writers do this a lot: 'We want this to be a series of quick cuts.' In a movie you can do quick cuts because film unrolls at 24 frames per second no matter what's happening on screen. So quick cuts last as long as the film editor decides they're going to last. In comics, the reader controls the pacing, and they'll spend as much—or as little—time on a panel as they want to and, in fact, readers spend *exactly* the same amount on each panel regardless of its size. So when you take an action and break it down into a bunch of smaller panels, and show different aspects of the action, what you've done, instead of speeding things up, is that you've actually slowed the experience down for the reader. It's like going into slow motion film. You get exactly the opposite effect that was intended. And to me, it's amazing that creators don't see that. The analogy between film and comics has been stated so many times that people try to force film terms or film effects into the comics medium that don't work."

ON WRITING

Having a good relationship within an art team and a trust between the writer and the artist is invaluable to a successful story. "When I first started writing, I used to have to draw little diagrams of panel breakdowns just for myself to figure out how the page was going to work. Now I don't have any trouble sitting down with a blank page and writing a page of panel descriptions and script while keeping in my mind throughout that process what I think this page is going to look like. Unless there's something really specific I'm trying to accomplish, I don't write directions to the artist like 'put this panel on the middle tier, make it wider than it is tall.' To me, if you start doing that sort of thing, the artist has every right to come after you. That's in their territory. What you want to do is give the artist a real sense of the important things that have to happen in the panel: the mood you're going for, the setting. Try to give them something more than just 'Titan and four guys talk to each other.' That's not writing; you've given up everything to the artist at that point. The writer should indicate what expressions the characters have, what their body language is, or some indication of what's going on in their minds, if it's something different than what they're saying. Give the artist enough information so that he or she can make intelligent decisions, but without telling them specifically how to draw it."

When writing, Stradley tries to invoke mood and setting to give the artist a direction for the story. He wants his writing to "make the artist feel a certain way about the story, as opposed to writing with a flat, cold, diagram of physical detail: 'the room is 11" x 13" and there's a coffee table on one side.' If I were the artist and I got a blank, cold description like that, I'd probably end up drawing something that was as lifeless as the description."

Artists face numerous design and storytelling decisions when they receive a script and they must challenge themselves to arrive at the best solution. There are many teams in the industry and the artist/writer team is an important one. When these individuals work together, the artist interprets the script instead of drawing it out verbatim and regurgitating visually what has been described in words. Conversely, a good writer avoids creating scripts with too much information or too little direction. "I think that if there's a trust between the writer and artist it certainly helps the process of creating comic books. The artist knows the writer is not going to give him something that can't be drawn. The writer's got to be happy with what that artist draws and the artist has to be happy with what the writer has written."

"I think writers can be artists, in a sense. When writing, the job is not to just fill the pages. I see writers who'll say, 'the rest of the page is a spectacular fight scene, have fun with it.' I get scripts like that from writers and send them back. The writer should know what he wants to happen on each page, and what needs to be accomplished in each scene."

GIVE THE ARTIST ENOUGH INFORMATION SO THAT HE OR SHE CAN MAKE INTELLIGENT DECISIONS, BUT WITHOUT TELLING THEM SPECIFICALLY HOW TO DRAW IT.

Figure 2.10: Example of a full script, complete with panel breakdown and scene descriptions. Script for page 2, Will to Power #10, *written by Randy Stradley.*

Character and scene descriptions are meticulously detailed.

The thought given to storytelling is evident through use of shot selections. Notice the last panel directs the action to move right to keep the reader going in the correct direction.

PAGE TWO (two panels)

Panel 1. Large panel. Dusk. The sun is setting directly behind our position. This is a low angle, looking up at Rikki Boyd's newly repaired '63 Thunderbird as it roars down a two-lane blacktop, either coming right toward us, or angled slightly, heading toward the lower right of the panel. This particular stretch of road runs ruler-straight through the Nevada high desert and, if you followed it back the direction from which the Thunderbird has come, you'd end up at Cinnabar Flats. Somewhere along the way you'd come to the dirt road that branches off and eventually leads to King Tiger's cool, isolated adobe-style home. That location, however, is best left for another story. If you stay with the speeding car and its three occupants (blonde, pretty, game-for-anything RIKKI BOYD at the wheel; holding-on-for-dear-life, burnt out ex-hippie cum weapons caddie MILO, riding shotgun with the golf bag full of arcane weapons between his knees; and, leaning forward from the back seat–maybe standing up–a for-once serious KING TIGER) and you'll be in Hoyo Grande in another ten minutes. Tiger is urging Rikki to greater speed. Here's what each is wearing: Rikki: tight, faded jeans, t-shirt, doe-skin jacket (with matching driving gloves), cowboy boots. Milo: baggy chinos, t-shirt, plaid work shirt, baseball cap, tennis shoes. Tiger: essentially the same thing we saw him in last summer. Lighting and coloring notes: they're driving straight into the sunset, and the car's headlights are on.

1 CAP/MILO: THE SUN HASN'T EVEN REALLY SET. NOTHING WILL BE HAPPENING IN <u>HOYO GRANDE</u>' FOR HOURS YET, BUT THAT'S WHERE TIGER SAYS WE'RE GOIN'. AND IN A <u>HURRY</u>, TOO.

2. CAP/MILO: NO WARNING. BIG RUSH. HE JUST MADE ONE PHONE CALL AND WE WERE OUT THE DOOR. NOT EVEN TIME TO CHANGE CLOTHES. MAYBE THAT'S WHAT HAS ME WORRIED. TIGER USUAL-LY DRESSES UP FOR A NIGHT ON THE TOWN –

3. CAP/MILO: – BUT HE'S WEARIN' HIS SORCERER'S OUTFIT.

4. TIGER: <u>FASTER</u>, RIKKI!

5. RIKKI: YOU GOT IT, <u>TIGER</u>!

Panel 2. Closer. Side view of the car as it rushes past our POV, heading toward the right panel border. Milo has turned all the way around so he can speak to Tiger. Milo's long hair is held in place by an old baseball cap, which he has to clamp down with one hand to keep it from blowing away. Tiger is staring straight ahead, as if he can see something no one else in the world can see.

6. CAP/MILO: LAST TIME TIGER DRAGGED US OUT LIKE THIS, WE WENT CHASING AROUND THE DESERT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, FIGHTING <u>DEMONS</u>.*

7. CAP/MILO: RIKKI'S THUNDERBIRD GOT ALL SMASHED UP, AND TIGER CAM THIS CLOSE TO GETTIN' HIS ARM CUT OFF. RIKKI TOLD HIM THAT IF EITHER OF THOSE THINGS EVER HAPPENED AGAIN, SHE WAS GONNA LEAVE HIM.

8. CAP/MILO: I HOPED HE <u>BELIEVES</u> HER.

9. MILO: Uh, TIGER… WE'RE NOT GOIN' JUNGLE CRUISIN' AFTER DEMONS AGAIN, <u>ARE</u> WE?

10. BOTTOM CAP: *IN LAST SUMMER'S <u>KING TIGER</u> – BACK-ISSUE BRICKER.

T H E   S C R I P T

The words "comic" and "book" when placed together suggest a powerful artform. The first word implies the visual world while the latter calls to mind the literary world. Separately, the two words describe totally different things, but together the meaning is clear: words and pictures must work in tandem to tell a story.

Though the process of creating comics starts with words, one must keep in mind that most sequential artists love to *tell* stories not just write or draw stories.

In the comics industry, most successful artists are literary people and they tend to be well-read. Some sequential artists write and draw their own stories.

Conversely, some of the best writers happen to be some of the best visual artists. Though they do not draw, through their words they can visualize scenes, characters and environments so complete and believable that any artist can read the script and immediately "see" the project before him. Clarity of vision is important to art in general but in sequential art, the clearer the initial vision, the truer the story is from beginning to end. The initial stages of writing is important in *telling* a story.

A writer must develop character, motivation and plot. These are things that must be planned out, struggled with and finally written down in script form as a blueprint for the artist to build from. In full scripting the amount of panels per page begins with the writer and it is important to note that a writer should not ask for too many panels on a page—in standard comic page format, 5 to 7 panels is considered a good amount of information. Cinematic techniques and shot selection are determined in the scriptwriting stage. The writer must be able to stage the actions that take place and then flesh out the scenes with dialogue.

Figure 3.1: Koj, Jarek and Serra, from the ten-issue Tellos, *created by Todd Dezago and Mike Wieringo.*

I LIKE MY STORIES TO BE AS CLEAR AS POSSIBLE... I SACRIFICE SUPERHERO DYNAMIC BY DOING CLEAR STORYTELLING.

—

Mike Wieringo

All characters © Todd Dezago and Mike Wieringo

CHAPTER THREE

A perennial fan-favorite, Mike Wieringo made a name for himself in the comic industry during the 1990s. Even as a child, he always had a strong interest in the comic book art form; he was constantly making up stories. He obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Illustration from Virginia Commonwealth University under Donald Early, who Wieringo says taught him more than he would have learned on his own. Wieringo cites college as a "catalyst for me getting into comics. Everyday, I'm thankful for the experience."

Wieringo is known for his control over the exaggerated heroic form, though it was his mentor who pushed for him to be well-grounded in the traditional human form. "Early made me break all of the comic book figure drawing habits I had formed and made me learn from scratch. A lot of people say that an artist needs to learn the rules before you break them." He works primarily in pencils and is known for his work on such titles as *The Flash* (his first major work in comics), *Robin, The Sensational Spider-Man, Rogue, She-Hulk/Thing, Superman* and the *Fantastic Four*. He enjoys developing characters and stories for his own projects and is best known for co-creating *Tellos*.

MARVEL METHOD

When approaching a project, Wieringo feels that he is not just the penciler; he's a part of the creative team. The majority of work Wieringo has received over the years has been from Marvel Comics due to his teamwork mentality that the Marvel method inspires. "The difference between storytelling and being a writer/artist is that I do the storytelling with the visuals but I don't do the overall storytelling of the comic book. It's more of a collaborative thing. That way I'm more able to be a part of the team. I'm more of a collaborator; I'm the visual end of the collaboration."

Much has been said about the Marvel method of creating comics. The Marvel way is a departure from traditional script form; the writer controls every aspect of the storytelling environment. Wieringo enjoys the challenges of working within a plot system: "There are two methods—DC and Marvel. DC involves a full script where the writer gives you everything: dialogue and often times camera angles, whether it's a down shot or a shot from above, a long shot, or whatever. Depending on how complete they want to be, [the writer] sometimes will write a 10-page description for one panel. The Marvel method is where you get a plot outline. Usually we get the story page by page."

Each written and outlined page translates into a page of artwork. In a bare bones system like the Marvel method, it's the artist's responsibility to flesh out the characters, environment and solve pacing issues. The completeness of the final story is determine by the strength of the artist. The artist has the opportunity to augment the story because it is not held fast by a deadline-determined script. With the Marvel method, there is room to play around with the pacing of the story. "If you think, well, this could use a couple of extra panels, you're free to throw in a couple of extra beats in this particular scene and stretch out a moment in time," Wieringo explains.

"The story structure is given to me, I just get to pace it in a way that feels comfortable for me: emphasize certain panels by making them bigger, add panels if I think that I can stretch out among them to make it more of an impact visually, that kind of thing. You're given props and backgrounds and sometimes the postures of the characters. Working [within] the Marvel method, the writer suggest actions, character motivations... and it's up to the penciler to convey them. I prefer using the Marvel method because it gives me more input as opposed to DC's full script method where you're sort of just a hired hand asked to draw the writer's vision and not able to put any of your own in it."

At all stages of production, successful comic book creation is about teamwork. Sometimes working with a writer who may not understand the importance of storytelling can be difficult, especially in the Marvel method, the structure is so loose that a writer with real storytelling experience must be able to be visual enough to get production rolling.

"Sometimes I wish I could work with a writer who started out as just a penciler and understands not to smash so much into one script. But so far I've worked

---

the sensational spider-man #23
"the spirit is willing…" plot

PAGE THREE
    Cutting back to SPIDEY, we find that BUEL is finishing his statement from page one, punctuating it with a magikal blast at our most agile WallCrawler!
    As SPIDEY dodges the bolt of energy, BUEL'S shot accidentally hits one of his GREMLYN Minions…
    …and turns him into a puddle of gooey flesh…
    …while a shocked SPIDEY and the other GREMLYNS look on!
    Wide shot as SPIDEY, ducking another blast, real-izes that he's gotta get outta there but that BUEL is between him and that glowing door… Uh oh! SPIDEY'S the coolest, but he's still in trouble! (MIKE — if ya can, also put in the other door BEHIND SPIDEY that he came through from the previous Snowscape. Thanks. t.)

Figure 3.2: Example of a plot-first script (also known as Marvel Style Script).

Above: In this unique comic book creation style, a short plot synopsis without dialog is written. Script for page 3, The Sensational Spider-Man *#23, written by Todd DeZago.*

Below: The artist then takes the plot (usually a paragraph) and creates an entire page. The page will then go back to the writer who creates dialog to fit the art.

Pencils by Mike Wieringo, inks by Richard Case.

only with writers who aren't visual storytellers. They have all these things going on in their minds that they want to see down on a page—this would be great and this would be great and that would be great. They don't realize they have a guy who has to draw all that. Sometimes it's too much to draw, but I want to put it all in and I feel bad about not being able to put it all in. That's the frustration of working with someone else instead of writing and drawing it yourself. [If the artist writes the story he] knows how to pace something and stretch the moment... or make people flip through the pages very quickly. You're not of one mind with this other person. They have their ideas and you have your ideas and it has to hopefully come together smoothly."

"Every different situation calls for a different solution. Sometimes I can talk to the writer and say, "Can we cut this out? You know this isn't necessary, this seems kind of superfluous, I think we can do without this." Sometimes if you really like the scene you'll add a page and stretch it out."

Working with Todd Dezago on *The Sensational Spider-Man* made Wieringo really feel like a part of a team and they were able to concentrate on producing good stories. "Instead of doing a 22-page comic, Todd and I, working together on Spider-Man, did 23- and even 24-page stories. We just told the editor to cut some ads out or some editorial space and they're usually fine with that. Sometimes, if I don't think a scene or plot works visually, I will call the writer and think of a tactful way to say 'we don't need this.' Todd's an easy guy to talk to and is always amenable to making changes. But I would never make changes without consulting the writer. When you are working with a writer, it's best to communicate and not make arbitrary decisions—it's part of the collaborative process."

THE GRID

The grid is one of the standard sequential art conventions that Wieringo utilizes. Relying on the grid helps him keep the story straight and flowing and allows him the freedom to utilize his time in the pencil stage. "I usually end up going by the traditional grid system just so that I can get the layout done in a decent amount of time. I mean it's all about time. When you're doing monthly comics unfortunately it's all about getting a page done a day."

By dividing the layout into even levels of information, Wieringo is able to emphasize only the panels that need to jump out. Great emotion or action merits emphasis, and Wieringo creates the panels in such a way that involves the reader. In a collaborative effort, there are discussions with the writer over which panels need to jump out for attention. "When I was working with Mark Waid on *The Flash*, every panel that he wrote... was so powerful and deserved to be emphasized. I wanted every panel to be the biggest panel. But some of them had to be smaller... that's where I got into the grid system, working with Mark. Because every panel was so powerful that I ended up

Figure 3.3: By utilizing the grid and dividing the panels into even moments of time, it becomes easy to generate a focus panel. Here, in Gen 13 Bootleg, *Wieringo opens up the last panel so that the pace slows down and the reader enjoys Grunge's excuses.*

doing a kind of a standardized grid so that they would all be the same size. Sometimes I'd do a big close up for one, sometimes I'd do a long shot but every panel ended up being kind of the same size because they all had something in there that I thought need-ed to be shown as clearly as possible. So sometimes you get into that situation and sometimes you get into a situation where I know what I want. And sometimes I get lazy. All right, this page has to go fast so the closeup's going to be the biggest thing on the page and everything else will be really small because I have to get this page done today. Sometimes you have to compromise because of that."

The grid helps in Wieringo's storytelling because of the ease informa-tion can be taken in by the reader. He relies on the grid for speed and clarity of read-ing. "[Some] artists don't use the grid system and do panels that are set at an angle and another panel that's set at an opposite angle and sometimes the storytelling gets really confused. But that's where the grid system I think could help people. People who have these really wild, crazy layouts could benefit by starting out using the grid system and moving outward. But I've never been able to do those crazy layouts. I've tried but it usually ends up looking pretentious."

Storytelling clarity is terribly important to Wieringo. Even as early as the roughs stage, he is attuned to what the reader will take in and he always tries to ensure that the story will be a very clear one. "If you go to see a movie and you're enjoying it and the story is captivating and you're really enjoying it, you suspend your disbelief. It's the same when you read a comic book or a novel. If you're used to seeing something in a certain way and all of a sudden a monkey wrench is thrown in there or something that just changes it completely, you either have to find a new way of look-ing at it, a new way of seeing it to adjust to that, or you just give up. Most people don't want to invest the time or the mental effort in trying to figure something out. Especially with comic books."

Figure 3.4: Final pencils created for the Flash *(above). The use of the grid keeps all of the chaotic action contained and manageable. When action breaks out of the panel, a focus is created. As the page printed in* Flash *#88 (below).*

R O U G H S   A N D   P R E P L A N N I N G

The roughs stage is the most crucial stage for Wieringo when he starts visualizing the story. He takes time to peruse the story in its entirety before rushing out to create pages.

"I usually read the whole plot and get a feel for it. I start thinking about the beginning pages, how I'd like to get started. Every time I start on a new comic book I'm always dead cold and it takes me a good week or so to get a few pages done because I feel cold going into it. I'll read the whole plot and start getting some mental images and then I'll start from the beginning and just start laying out page one and usu-ally that's the very hardest page."

During the roughs stage, Wieringo uses an interesting technique in creating his pages. He creates the layout on small premade, photocopied grids, each page reducing to about the size of a trading card (Figure 3.5). "I work this size so that I

Figure 3.12: The panel grid in action. In this example, Tellos #1, *page 18, Mike Wieringo uses the grid to keep the story's flow energetic. In panel 1, the chase is established. When Serra lands in panel 2, the pacing slows down because it is a wider panel than 1.*

Moving to the 2nd tier of information, Wieringo chose to stretch the panel over the width of the page to show that the chase has moved onto the rooftops. Because it the panel is much shorter than the others, the action happens quickly.

Finally, in the 3rd tier, the panel borders are stripped and the figure breaks out of the panel into the preceding panel. Even within rules defined by layout, you can break the occasional rule to emphasize a moment. If every panel on the page broke the grid, than the last panel couldn't stand out. This is the first time the reader gets to see Serra in action, so Wieringo has made it memorable.

All characters © Todd Dezago and Mike Wieringo

PANEL GRIDS

When a narrative becomes complex, good panel arrangement can create order. Good panel design is often an overlooked part of storytelling with many sequential artists. Abstract panel shapes, too many panels on an angle, and haphazard placement of panels can detract from the pacing and eye movement of the story. It can create confusion which can distract a reader.

Panel arrangements should never be arbitrary. Comics storytelling is designed around a finite number of pages. Within each page, many actions and plot points need organization. For Mike Wieringo (Figure 3.12), working within a grid layout is vital. Good panel grids allow the reader to easily follow the action. The story dictates the panel arrangement for an artist; and the artist strives to group many thoughts, actions, and scenes on a single page.

A common mistake is to place too many panels on a page. In doing so, visual clutter occurs with too many graphic devices or panels vying for the reader's attention. Five to seven panels per page is considered the *average* needed to clearly convey a section of storytelling. If more panels are used, more demand is placed on the artist's time and faculties to ensure that the page still communicates effectively.

Xenozoic Tales and all related characters © Mark Schultz

Figure 4.1: Jack and Hannah from Xenozoic *Tales #14.*

T H E   M O S T   I M P O R T A N T   T H I N G   I   C A N   D O   I S   E N T E R T A I N   P E O P L E .

—

Mark Schultz

C H A P T E R   F O U R

Mark Schultz began reading comics at the age of six and quickly became entranced. "As a kid, one month you're into one thing and the next month it's something different, but a recurring theme was to become a cartoonist." Schultz always loved storytelling and drawing, but by the time he went to Kutztown State University, other interests took over. "At the time I was at college, there wasn't a lot of sympathy for cartooning as a career." Schultz graduated with Bachelor of Fine Arts with a concentration in painting.

During college Schultz learned the fundamentals of art (life drawing and composing) which were important for a career in sequential art as well as commercial art. After graduation he had steady work with advertising and book illustration, but found the experience dry. Even in fine art, Schultz was continually trying to communicate stories through his painting. "After a while, I thought 'what am I doing?' This isn't the way to tell stories… there's a better way to do it—through comics and sequential art. My mind was roaming all over the place, so I developed *Xenozoic Tales*."

In the early '80s Schultz became interested in independent comics. "I had three big boxes of DC and Marvel stuff from the late '60s and early '70s and one day decided: 'I'm going to take them into the comic shop and get what I can. As luck would have it, someone had just sold the owner a huge collection of EC comics. It was the ultimate kid-in-the-candy-shop type of thing. And having these originals pushed me over the edge, made me decide that comics was something I want to do, something I want to spend my life doing." It opened his eyes.

Schultz is known for creating intelligent adventure fiction. *Xenozoic Tales* entertained his audiences through comic books, compilations, a children's cartoon and fine art prints. Schultz was recognized for his efforts by winning three Harvey Awards for best cartoonist.

M A R K   Schultz

P R O C E S S

Brevity with both page count and storytelling are important considerations to Schultz when working on a piece of sequential art. "The problem is always how to tell your story in the number of pages allotted. Generally, I do 22 or 20 page stories. And the reason I picked those limits for myself is I know I can get that done in a set amount of time or less; if I allow myself more pages it could take too long to get the comic done. I need to get the art done as often as I can—which isn't very often. So for commercial reasons, I set a page limit for myself. You've got to convey the information you've got to tell in your story within that set amount of pages, as opposed to a movie or television show which is restricted by a set amount of time to tell the story. What I try to do is jam in as much storytelling as possible into a limited number of pages. But you've got to think ahead—you've got to figure out the pacing of your entire story, or you're liable to find out three-fourths of the way through that you haven't enough space in your allotted pages to reach a satisfactory conclusion. You must figure out a way of expressing all the necessary information in a limited number of pages."

Schultz relies on several techniques to design his stories. "Sometimes I'll do roughs, but generally I know the story I want to tell. I just write out a synopsis of the story in longhand or on the computer. Then I lay out, thumbnail-size, 20 to 22 pages, however many pages the story has to be, and then I figure out how to… fit that story into those number of pages in as interesting a fashion as I can. You've got a story and that breaks down into X number of scenes and the idea is to make, ideally, every one of those scenes interesting and compelling, visually grabbing and interesting as far as character development and plotting and pacing go.

"Things just seem to suggest themselves to me as I go through this process. I start breaking down roughly the number of panels I need per page. Let's say I've got 20 pages to tell the story and let's say there are 8 different scenes that are going to be in that story, then I've got to decide how many pages each scene needs… so the reader can follow the story. And then you start taking, let's say, a sequence that needs three pages to develop. How can I most interestingly tell this scene in those three pages? You get rid of anything extraneous in there, anything that does not advance the plot. You must be ruthless, you must ask: is it really communicating what the reader needs to know? If it isn't, generally that goes, which makes what needs to be in there that much stronger because you've got more room to play with.

Mark Schultz is a writer as well as an illustrator. This can be a mixed blessing as several advantages and disadvantages pop up during the creative process. "It gives me advantages in that I get to decide exactly what I want to show on the page. I'm not trying to execute someone else's vision. But that brings disadvantages, too. Sometimes a team allows for fresh ideas—you're not limited to one set of brain waves. But generally, I prefer to work on my own, because my feeling has always been… too many cooks spoil the pot. The fewer people involved in a project, the less chance of the

Xenozoic Tales and all related characters © Mark Schultz

Xenozoic Tales and all related characters © Mark Schultz

Figure 4.2: Examples of the development of the splash stage. (Top) Note the experimentation with camera angles in the roughs stage to utilize all of storytelling options. (Bottom) Final pencils for the opening splash page.

Xenozoic Tales and all related characters © Mark Schultz

Figure 4.3: The final page as it appeared in Xenozoic Tales #13. *Even after tight pencils, figures were added and adjusted.*

original view… getting diluted. Another obvious disadvantage is that it takes a lot longer to do an entire story by yourself. You can get too wrapped up in what you're trying to say. It becomes too personal. That is a problem I have, I become too involved in trying to be really specific in what I'm trying to say and flesh it out to a point where it really slows me down.

"Despite this I'm just much more comfortable writing my own stuff. I like the storytelling aspect more than anything else. I'd rather write for someone else and not draw it if I had to make a decision between the two. I'd rather give up the drawing aspect than give up the writing aspect. It's practical too, because I can also write much faster than I can draw. But I like creating that initial vision, that's the most fun I have in doing a story. Whether I'm developing a concept for myself, or someone else is coming up with it and I'm working from the framework, figuring out how to tell the story is the important thing. The actual writing the script and then drawing it panel by panel is kind of laborious."

The kind of detail Schultz demands from his own work is phenomenal. A renowned brush artist, he uses many techniques to arrive at the final piece. No mark is too small to escape his fullest attention. Schultz uses a painstaking inking process after developing extremely tight pencils on a board. The process takes a long time, and fans of *Xenozoic Tales* often waited a year or longer in between issues. The result was always worth the wait.

Due to the care he takes with his artwork, Schultz feels this is the most difficult part of the creative process, even more so than the initial concepting of the story. "The techniques I use, the way I'm inking is very time consuming and laborious, whereas designing and creating is just pure creation. It's just fun. It's just coming up with ideas and fleshing them out, that's just pure fun. When you actually have to execute things, it can get tedious. Especially working the way that I work. Long, long hours.

"I love what I do and I wouldn't trade it for anything else, but relatively speaking my technique gets rather laborious at times. The long hours of just sitting by yourself doing a panel over and over again till you feel you've got it right. There's that spark of creation and spontaneity and that electric buzz you get when you're creating things, when you're developing things.

"I think in the end, the hard work is worth the effort. Especially with your own work because you are not subject to the same rules that everyone else is under when they do work-for-hire. I've been lucky that I've been with a publisher for a long time who gives me free reign. There's luck involved in that but it's also like that when you do your own thing. On the economic downside, you don't have any big marketing machine behind you that the bigger companies do. Creating your own vision spoils you. I can't blame anyone else but myself if it doesn't turn out right."

Because of the self-imposed quest for perfection, the smallest details become important details with Schultz's sequential art storytelling. "Everything you see on that page has been considered compositionally as well as storytelling-wise, part of the whole. That's what comics are. Comics aren't just the pictures, they're the word balloons, they're the lettering or the typefaces you use, they're the way you structure panels, they're the spaces around the panels, around the borders of the page or the lack of them. All these things have to be considered. That's another advantage of doing it by yourself as opposed to having a team working on it. I know and can figure out exactly where I want my word balloons and my captions to go.

"In companies that create by means of assembly line process, the artist most of the time has no idea of where those word balloons and captions are going to go. He's got to trust that he has a sympathetic editor who's got a good eye for spotting balloons. Much of the time the editors aren't all that sympathetic, or able to discern where the proper place to put the word balloons should be." These are all elements intrinsic to the visual language of comics, these are important details that need to be mastered. "It's a skill just like anything else, but apparently it's just not considered a priority in most of the larger companies."

X E N O Z O I C   T A L E S   # 8

Growing up reading action adventure comics, Schultz has become one of the most talented practitioners of this genre. Developing the adventures of Jack Tenrec and Hannah Dundee, Schultz sets the background in a post-apocalyptic earth where dinosaurs roam the earth with humans in a world filled with high action and intrigue.

In 1989, *Xenozoic Tales* #8 was published through Kitchen Sink Press. In this story, Jack and Hannah are delivering a message to a road gang out in the Xenozoic wilderness. When they reach the site, they find the entire work group dead, as well as the surrounding animal life. Since dark has settled, Jack and Hannah decide to set up camp near the killing field (Figure 4.4).

"There's a lot that's in here that I would do differently today. As a caveat, I think there is a juxtaposition of panels that's confusing. If you're going to juxtapose panels right against each other without the benefit of a gutter to separate them, you've got to be real careful about how you compose them in terms of your blacks and whites. They can be confusing to read because the reader's not apt to be sure where one panel ends and the next begins. That can be a problem… in general. Specifically I bring that up because on page 10 there's an inset panel across the bottom, the two panels on the bottom tier where I think it's a little too confusing. That inset panel doesn't jump out enough. I think I would have been able to use an inset panel, knowing what I know today, much more effectively.

Xenozoic Tales and all related characters © Mark Schultz

Figure 4.4: Page 10 of "In the Dreamtime," Xenozoic Tales #8.

Focus Panels

Figure 4.15: Example of superb inking virtuosity as demonstrated by Mark Schultz in page 7 of Xenozoic Tales *#13.*

L I N E   D Y N A M I C

Good line dynamic can be as important to a story as choosing the correct camera angle. Line dynamic helps direct the flow of the story and makes it look lush and energetic. Deciding to add more shadow to an arm or thickening the line that defines the edge of a leg can give the object more life on the page and reinforce the storytelling.

Figure 5.1: Phantom Stranger and Batman from Detective Comics #500. *Art by Dick Giordano.*

CLARITY IS THE BEST SINGLE WORD TO DESCRIBE GOOD STORYTELLING.

—

Dick Giordano

Batman and all related characters © DC Comics

CHAPTER FIVE

Dick Giordano was sickly as a child so his father used to keep him sedated with comic books. He was instantly mesmerized by the art form. "I got those first issues of *Famous Funnies;* I wish I had saved some of them." He grew up in New York City and attended the School of Industrial Arts. It was here that Giordano learned all of his basics and by the time he was 18 years old, he was ready to work. "I just accidentally walked into Jerry Iger's studio after I got out of high school and I've been in the comic business ever since."

The following year, Giordano moved on to Charlton comics, first as artist and then as managing editor from 1951 to 1967. "One of the things I liked about Charlton was the great variety of material: I did hot rod, western, romance, and the occasional superhero comic. Today there is only one subject matter: superhero. If you're not doing that, you're not working."

In 1967 he had an invitation to work for DC Comics. After working for DC for two years, he wasn't entirely satisfied with the company's direction and worked from his studio freelancing for Julius Schwartz. In 1971 Neal Adams and Giordano started Continuity, which utilized sequential art storytelling techniques for advertising purposes. They created storyboards, motion boards and other items related to advertising.

By 1980 Giordano came back to DC Comics as an editor and has since worked on numerous titles for the company. "The character that I prefer working on at DC is Batman. That was my favorite character in the beginning; he's my favorite character now." In his long career, Giordano is noted for drawing *Batman, Wonder Woman, Catwoman* and *Gordon of Gotham* as well as inking *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* and *Detective Comics.*

R OUGHS

———

Giordano is a jack of all trades in the comic industry. He has been a penciler, inker and editor. As diverse as these talents are, one idea binds them together: the clear communication of the story.

"I have to consider all of the problems involved, including the information that I must detail for the reader. That is what I feel my primary job is—to lay the information out clearly for the reader so that he understands what the story is so that he doesn't have to go back to figure out what's going on. So clarity, in my mind, is the best single word to describe good storytelling. It's basically just being clear."

Giordano tries to understand from the reader's perspective early on in the roughs stage. "I visualize everything on paper before I pencil on the boards so that I can make adjustments. I generally work in comic book size at 100% size. By working the pages out at actual size… I know what the pages are going to look like to the reader. I do very comprehensive pencils and then use an artograph to blow them up to page size. These days, I Xerox the pages up to the right size and work off of a light box.

The impact of the information the reader reads on the page is fascinating to Giordano. "What I do in trying to lay the storyline out is first think of pacing. I also consider the pages that are going to be facing each other, if I have that information. If I know I have the lead story then I know there's going to be an ad on page 4. But I try to figure out what the pages will look like opposite each other."

Giordano stresses the importance of making artistic elements tell a story instead of relying on words.

"From my stand point [as a penciler], I try to ignore the copy to the degree that it may interfere with my decision making. If I read the copy… and I realize that some of the information is told to the reader in dialogue then I might not put it into the graphics. My aim is to be able to draw an entire story and show it to somebody then look and see if they are confused by what's happening. You may need to read the balloons later to get some of the nuances, the meanwhiles, the passage of time and all of the other things that are necessary in a comic book story. Through strong visuals, the reader is able to tell what the characters are doing and why. He knows who the characters are."

With the huge casts of characters that a sequential art story can demand, keeping one distinguishable from the other is the artist's responsibility. "Storytelling requires the artist to start off with a set of clearly defined characters. Of course everybody knows who Batman is, so I don't have to work on that. But the other people you have to define rather clearly so that no matter where they're seen or at what angle, they'll know who you're talking about. Joe Chill might wear a particular kind of a hat, and it's also a good idea to be consistent because you can identify him even when you see the back of his head.

"When I'm going to show somebody, I'm going to have a hand shot somewhere in the sequence so you can clearly see the character's hand. It behooves me to design a distinctive ring or draw a wristwatch or something that's included in a shot in

I HAVE TO CONSIDER ALL OF THE PROBLEMS INVOLVED, INCLUDING THE INFORMATION THAT I MUST DETAIL FOR THE READER.

T HAT IS WHAT I FEEL MY PRIMARY JOB IS — TO LAY THE INFORMATION OUT CLEARLY FOR THE READER SO THAT HE UNDERSTANDS WHAT THE STORY IS.

an earlier panel so that when you see the hand by itself you'll know whose it is. A hand is a hand is a hand in comic books. There isn't that much difference between a woman's hand and a man's hand. Everybody complains about pointed nails on woman action heroes but don't realize that that's just a visual shorthand. [The artist] doesn't really believe that all women have long nails in comics, it's just the only way you can think of to make sure you know that's it's a woman's hand by putting pointed nails on it."

Stressing individuality and personality can differentiate characters and make them more animated. To a degree, Giordano utilizes character stereotypes.

"I try to design characters by shape rather than by detail. A short, fat guy next to a tall, thin guy is recognizable, no matter what point of view I take. If I do a silhouette from way down the beach you can tell the tall, thin guy from the short, fat guy. You can't always do it exactly like that, but I do rely on character shapes. The next thing you have to do is think about props in order to tell a story. When you're setting up a room and there's a prop that's going to become important later in the sequence, you might want to set it up in the foreground earlier in the sequence so that when it comes in it doesn't come out of left field."

A sense of storytelling reality is also important to Giordano. Creating a descriptive panel that places the characters into the story's reality is an important aspect of drawing comics since it suspends the readers disbelief and creates believability. "Always have that establishing shot up front to show you where you are. It's really a simple technique to learn. There really are no rules. The only rule I believe with storytelling is to show the reader, don't tell them. If they follow that rule religiously, all of the other details will fall in place. I think you'd have to be idiot not to realize that the establishing shot in the first or second panel is one way to show the reader where you are. Also, establishing shots are important in showing time of day, weather conditions, that sort of thing. If it's snowing, show it fast. If by the second panel you've got a close up and you've got a little white dot on his face, you won't know what that is unless you have established it's snowing."

"These are the kinds of devices of storytelling needed to get a reader through a story. The props, the character design, creating a sense of reality, and credibility. Credibility in a Donald Duck strip might be a car that looks like a Donald Duck car. If you put the Batmobile in the Donald Duck strip it would look out of place and would lose the reader because they would be trying to figure out why the Batmobile is here. A car should look like a car that belongs in the reality of the story and the artist should know something about cars. And certainly about guns. I've never fired a gun in my life, but I know all the parts and what they do. I might suddenly have to draw a gun without reference and I want to make sure the parts are where they are. The only way to do that is to know what the parts do and how they work. I have a special reference library on mechanical stuff for that reason. I want to know what cars look like, I want to know what planes look like, I want to know what guns look like. I have several reference volumes on buildings. I have reference on all kinds of animals because that comes up regularly."

P E N C I L I N G

Giordano believes in straightforward storytelling. He enjoys experimentation with panel shapes and layout but not at the risk of confusing the reader.

"There are times when I am tempted to be cute with regards to paneling, but if the cuteness makes it harder for the reader to understand what's going on, I will opt for more traditional panels."

Purple backgrounds tie all 6 panels together in the same place as part of the same action in page 2 of *Detective Comics* #500 (Figure 5.2). The action progresses quickly as jump cuts drive the narrative from panel to panel: Joe Chill points his gun at Thomas Wayne, kills him, cocks the hammer, shoots again and young Bruce Wayne stares at his parent's killer and then screams. With these flashback panels, Giordano overlaps the panels and utilizes few gutters to speed up the action.

"I don't want the panel shapes or the space allocated to be the stars. I'm more likely to design a page with a big dynamic panel for something that requires a big dynamic panel rather than something I like to draw. How many times have you opened up a comic book to the big dynamic panel and it's of a woman with big breasts? Not that I'm against women with big breasts, mind you, but that's a waste of space that should be used for a point that's more important to the storytelling."

The establishing shot is one of the more important panels that should serve as a focus panel. In *Detective Comics* #500, page 7, Batman and Robin find themselves on a wharf (Figure 5.3). The color usage establishes the tone for the entire scene and, as Batman tries to procure information from a thug in panel 4, the tan background disappears into a solid brown.

Figure 5.2: Dream sequence. Color unifies this scene as Giordano experiments with the layout and overlapping panels. From Detective Comics *#500.*

Focus Panels

Figure 5.11: Example of storytelling clarity through spotting blacks as told by Dick Giordano in page 14 of Batman #421.

SPOTTING BLACKS

The way the eye moves from panel to panel on the page must be controlled. Typically, the eye will move from shape to shape in quick succession especially if a trait or form repeats. When the reader sees a white oval surrounded by color and tone, the eye immediately searches out the next oval in succession. This is how the comic story is read. Art can also take advantage of this concept to link visual information.

Figure 6.1: *Hellboy from* The Corpse and the Iron Shoes.

I WANT TO SIMPLIFY MY STYLE DOWN TO TELL A BETTER STORY.

—

Mike Mignola

Hellboy™ and all related characters are trademarks of Mike Mignola

CHAPTER SIX

As a child, Mike Mignola loved comics and wanted to draw monsters for a living. He went to the California College of Arts and Crafts and after two years of learning, "I was raring to go out and do real work." Being an illustration major in school, Mignola found that the only place he would be able to draw monsters was in comics.

Since Mignola was not confident that he could draw these creatures and make a living, he trained himself to be an inker. "I started working at Marvel as an inker and I was horrible at it and after about a year one of the editors up there said: 'You're terrible at this, do you want to try drawing this stuff instead?' I didn't have confidence. I didn't know that I could draw anything else. So it really came down to we can't give you any inking work anymore because you're just so awful. So I got demoted into drawing instead. And I've been drawing ever since 1982."

Mignola is best known for his work on his own creation, *Hellboy.* He has won awards for Best Writer/Artist for *Hellboy* and has artist/writer credits on numerous comics projects including: *Fritz Leiber's Fafhrd & the Gray Mouser, Alien: Salvation, Batman: Gotham by Gaslight, Zombie World, Abe Sapien,* and *BPRD.* In movies, he adapted Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stroker's Dracula* into comics and lent his concepts to Disney's *Atlantis* and New Line's *Blade II.* Though he does a lot of "odd and ends," Mignola is happiest when he does his own work, which includes drawing all the monsters he wants.

P R E P L A N N I N G

These days, Mignola creates his own comic book stories. Earlier in his career, this was not the case. "I started plotting my own stories. I did a story for a Clive Barker horror anthology and I told this story to the editor. They said that's fine. I told it to a writer also. I told them what I wanted to do, they said that's fine. I sat down, I drew it and I gave it to this other guy and had it scripted. He was unsatisfying because, while I was afraid of putting the words in my character's mouth, when I saw someone else do it, I thought that's not quite what I would have had them say. That was the experience the first time I did *Hellboy*. I didn't have the confidence to do my own thing so I talked to John Byrne. He said he would do it with me and though he had no input really in the plot, I told him everything I was going to do. He may have made suggestions here and there, but for the most part I sat down, I made up the story, I drew the comic, and then I wrote down what everybody was talking about, gave it to John and he rewrote what they were talking about. There are a lot of places he just copied what I wrote. What I found after doing this for a couple of issues is when he would change my stuff, I liked it better the way it was. To John it meant I had gotten to the point where I was ready to write the stuff myself. But it was scary. I'd been drawing this stuff for 10 or 12 years and writing was something I never aspired to. But now that I'm doing it, it's really difficult to go back and work from somebody else's script."

Mignola does not see himself as a writer and finds being labeled merely an artist too restricting. But as a visual storyteller, someone who creates writing and art to tell a story, he feels he has found an identity.

"There's something to be gained by doing both things together and being able to make the decision of whether I handle this particular problem with a word or with a picture, and working those two things together as opposed to working with a writer where a lot of times you're stepping on each other's toes.

"I just read something with Will Eisner and he said he considered himself one who writes with pictures. That's really a good one because that's what storytelling is. I couldn't imagine just writing something. I've done some projects where I've written for other people but for the most part I would find it extremely unsatisfying just writing because there's things I need to do with pictures. I have to work the two things together; it's a nice niche to be in."

Mignola has no set structure for developing his creations. Every new project is treated differently each time. Mignola definitely gives each story careful consideration.

"I still don't have a real standard formula for [creating comics]. I'm always plotting stories, so at any given time I probably have four mini-series and five or six short stories rattling around in my head. I don't take very good notes, I just keep retelling the stories in my head until the opportunity comes: 'Well we need a short story,' 'We need a mini-series,' or whatever. At that point, I just sit down and I do the thumbnails

Figure 6.2: Mike Mignola has developed a reputation as one of the best designers and storytellers in sequential art. In this page from The Wolves of St. August, *note the use of graphic shapes and atmospheric pacing to tell this horror story.*

for the story and not write any dialogue because I'm very familiar with the story. The only place where I can reverse that, write the dialogue first, is if I'm in a situation where I have just people talking. Most of my stories don't have that. They don't have a five-page sequence of guys in a room having a conversation. If I have that then I've got to write it first so I'll know where to position people. But for the most part, I do thumbnails and then I start drawing the story. As I'm drawing the story I write the script as I go along. It takes me about a day to draw a page, I spend that day on that page, drawing these characters. It gives me ample time to figure out what they're talking about."

This stage of mulling stories around is crucial for Mignola to develop a comfort level with the subject matter, a familiarity that can come across in the story.

"Some stories that are my best have cooked the longest. There are other stories where I sit down and belt out a story, but it wasn't in my brain long enough. If something's in my brain long enough, I add more wrinkles to it and more fun little sequential bits. The best *Hellboy* I've ever done was something I wanted to do a long time ago. So the story was rattling around in my head for a long time and I figured out a lot of things I wanted to do and then when I created Hellboy… I said: 'Hey, if I swapped Hellboy into the story, Bingo!'"

Mignola is known for his extremely graphic artistic style. His art is not simplistic, but every heavy black shape inked is important and a panel would not make sense if even one shape was missing. Each panel and caption is meticulously designed and feels consistent with the story. The initial reaction is that a lot of energy went into the planning, which is true to a point. Mignola spends his energy developing pages as a whole and not in developing panels.

"My thumbnails are not tight; I wish they were. I wish I had the patience to do real tight thumbnails because that would mean when I sit down and draw a page it would go much faster. But generally I'm in such a rush to get stuff done that I do really, really rough thumbnails. And then when it comes down to designing a page I'm almost working from scratch as far as placing my blacks and all that kind of stuff. What I try to do is do thumbnails for one or two comics in a day. When I have a chunk of quiet I'll just pace around a whole day and thumbnail a whole job. I want to get it on paper in one sitting. As far as designing characters… generally when I'm drawing a story I don't allow myself the luxury of sitting down with a sketch book—I'd love to but there's always something to do. More often then not, I will start drawing a story and I haven't figured out what in the hell the characters look like. And when I get to the point where 'Oh! I've got to draw this character' I may pull out a piece of paper or a sketch book at that point to figure out what the hell this character looks like. But again most of these characters have kind of gotten designed in my head."

I S T I L L D O N ' T
H A V E A R E A L
S T A N D A R D F O R M U L A
F O R C R E A T I N G
C O M I C S .

I ' M A L W A Y S
P L O T T I N G S T O R I E S
I N M Y H E A D .

I D O N ' T T A K E V E R Y
G O O D N O T E S ,
I J U S T K E E P
R E T E L L I N G T H E
S T O R I E S I N M Y H E A D
U N T I L T H E
O P P O R T U N I T Y C O M E S .

THE WOLVES OF ST. AUGUST

The Wolves of St. August originally appeared as a black-and-white story in *Dark Horse Presents* #88 - 91. When it was repackaged as a graphic novel, color and additional pages were added to make the continuity smoother as a single issue entity. In this story, Hellboy and Kate Corrigan investigate the death of Father Kelly, fellow field agent of the Bureau of Paranormal Research and Defense. In the tiny village of Griart, Hellboy runs smack into a den of werewolves.

"That is something where I made a conscious decision to slow things down and try to create that kind of atmosphere. It comes from the things I see from various movies and I thought there's got to be a way to duplicate that in comics: spending a lot more time, or a lot more pages, in establishing the mood. One of the best techniques for creating a mood is where I cut away to inanimate objects. And it slows the story down and at the same time creates atmosphere. With traditional comics, a guy is talking and you throw background in. And I thought this story hinges on whether the background is as important as the people, so we're going to let the background be the star occasionally. There's all sorts of things I do

Figure 6.3: To develop atmosphere, an odd close-up will be thrown into the design to slow down the pacing. Note the chalice on the left-hand page and the bird on the right-hand page. From The Wolves of St. August, *by Mike Mignola.*

that are purely design sense. Just like the top of page two, the panel of the priest and the cross, I needed that panel to be a certain size (Figure 6.3). I knew what size and shape that panel had to be. But it left me with this empty space up on the one side. And that happens quite a bit where I'll end up with this space on a page and I have to go in there for pacing and design. So I'll end up just throwing in something, in this case it was a carving of the chalice behind the altar. I'll throw that in there and it slows things down, it adds a bit of visual interest and it helps the design of the next panel. The same with page 3 cutting away to the bird. I just needed something to interrupt these guys talking. That was an accident. That was one of the cases when I was laying this thing out I knew the conversation these guys were having. I knew what that was, but the bird ended up popping in there. I said I need something, not just these guys talking. What kind of a weird detail would just pop up in there? And it ended up giving a nice flavor to that scene. I was able to pick the bird up again at the end of the story. When I plot a story I try to keep things open enough that I can have those kinds of almost accidental things pop up when I'm writing it out. I guess I've learned to trust myself to do those kinds of things."

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Figure 6.10 (left): Page 18 from Hellboy: Seed Of Destruction #4 *as it was originally printed with all word balloons intact.*

Figure 6.11 (right): Without detail, the colors, shapes, and panel arrangement are not enough to indicate page navigation.
Narrative flow is created with the skilled placement of word balloons.

E Y E   M O V E M E N T   T H R O U G H   W O R D S

A comic story must be a marriage of text and image. Most comic readers do not concentrate on just the words, nor do they just look at the pictures; words and pictures have to work in tandem for a comic to be successful.

Several elements can exist simultaneously within a panel—a word/thought balloon, caption box, sound effect, and the visual image. All of these elements, when properly strung together, form a single moment of the story. If the reader struggles to read any of these elements, or gets confused over which panel comes next, then the layout has problems. The experience of reading a comic book should be a smooth one; the reader should not have to work. The key is to design each panel as a cohesive unit of information: should the reader see the image first or the word?

All of the elements involved in panel creation must somehow lead the reader's eye to the next panel and then the next page. This is called eye movement. The pace at which this movement occurs is completely up to the writer and artist. The more information, the more a reader slows down as he or she must take time to absorb the information.

Figure 7.1: Oracle/Batgirl from The Batman Chronicles #5.

Stelfreeze

BRIAN

W I T H   A   C O M I C   B O O K ,   A R T I S T S   H A V E   T H A T   A B I L I T Y   T O   M A K E   P E O P L E   P A Y   A T T E N T I O N   T O   T H I N G S   T H A T   T H E Y   N O R M A L L Y   D O N ' T .

—

Brian Stelfreeze

C H A P T E R   S E V E N

Brian Stelfreeze enjoyed comics as a child and credits the medium for teaching him how to draw. "My dad was in the military so we always moved around a lot, but I knew that no matter where we moved to if I could find a comic shop, I'd have a bunch of friends there. So I would frequent comic book shops and I learned how to draw; that was a quick and easy way to make friends. Because I knew how to draw, I got a job doing commercial illustrations when I was in high school and got out of drawing comics for a long time."

A friend recognized Stelfreeze's potential to draw comics based off of his fashion illustrations and encouraged him to do so. "I took maybe a year to work on a comic book style and then I took some pages to the convention here in Atlanta. I showed my work to Dave Dorman… my plan was to just get him to just look at the stuff and tell me if I was close. But while I was there, this other artist said 'Listen, I'd like to show this to my editor.'"

This meeting landed Stelfreeze's first industry job with *Cycops.* Since then, he's been picky about sequential art assignments: "I tend to do the jobs that no one wants to touch." He is known for his numerous covers in the industry, but is most proud of his sequential art: *Leavetaking, Oracle: Year One, Born of Hope,* and *Desire,* all short stories for DC Comics.

YOU HAVE LOST NOTHING THAT MATTERS, YOU HAVE EVERYTHING YOU NEED. EVERYTHING BEFORE LEADS UP TO NOW AND NOW LEADS TO WHAT SHALL BE.

Batman and all related characters © DC Comics

ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT

Before he draws anything, the first thing Stelfreeze works on is what he calls attitude adjustment. "It basically consists of… just reading the script and making a bunch of notes. The notes that I make are some feelings that I get off of the story. Usually what that does is it gives me a sense of the story's cinematography. I sit back and think of the kind of feel that I want to go for with the story: the type of lighting, the environment, whether it needs to be a kind of retro… or modern. I'll just go through and compile notes on that and start collecting references of raw material. Then, after doing that, I will begin my layout. I do my layout much smaller than the comic book size... maybe 3" x 5", something like that. I design the page and the panels involved per story."

While beginning the roughs stage, Stelfreeze tries to keep his sketches as simple as possible. The importance he places on shot selection makes it the first problem he tackles during preplanning. "There is this weird dichotomy in comics: we don't have a budget. If I want to, I can have a billion dollar scene on every page, but often times that's not what's required. In a movie you only have a limited amount of cameras you can put on a scene because the cameras can start seeing each other. When planning a page, I try to think of it almost as if I'm budgeting a movie. Can I shoot the entire page with one camera angle? If I can't shoot it with one camera then I'll reluctantly put another camera on there. If that doesn't do it, I'll reluctantly add another camera. If that doesn't do it, well, the scene needs to be changed (Figure 7.2).

"When I say camera, I mean viewpoint. I don't try to put in a bunch of different viewpoints. [For example], you have an upshot of a guy and then you get a shot from the ceiling and then you get a shot from out the door. Well, you're talking about a bunch of cameras on the scene and that gets confusing. To me, human beings experience things from a single vantage point, so if I'm going to tell a story, I'm going to try to tell the story from a single vantage point, if at all possible. From panel 1 to panel 2, can I move the camera in such a way to make the scene feel like there's only one camera? The dialogue, what character's speaking first, what character's speaking second, often times dictates what camera angles I can use."

Stelfreeze dedicates most of his energy during the conceptual part of the creative process. "The execution is so easy to actually do. I can probably produce a page a day pretty easily. Just planning things out and making things work, that's the real pain in the butt. Sometimes I'll lay out the pages and say this is the way the story needs to be told. And sometimes I'll find a brilliant reference and go, 'Oh my God, this is so good.' But if it doesn't tell the story, I just really have to pass it up.

"Even though I do my layout small, I always fill them in, not in pencil but actually in black marker. I'll do rough stick figures in pencil and then I'll go through with a pigment marker and sketch everything out and lay in the big areas of black. 'Do I need to put the big black area to the left or do I need to put the big black area to the right? What's going to be the best thing to tell that story?' This is when I solve all those questions."

Batman and all related characters © DC Comics

Figure 7.2: In comics, every panel can contain a different camera angle. Stelfreeze relies on very few points of view and almost lets the action come to the camera. Note how the heavy use of blacks are used to differentiate between scene and time of day. These areas would be planned as early as the roughs stage. As seen in Oracle: Year One, Born of Hope.

S T Y L E   A N D   S T O R Y T E L L I N G

Style and design considerations are a big factor for Stelfreeze when trying to visually interpret and tell the story in the best way possible. Known for high contrast, angular and hyper-tense figures, Stelfreeze maintains that developing a style is secondary to the story. "When I first got into comics I was real concerned about style. But now my style is almost like a by-product. It just happens. I'm just drawing and I'm trying to reflect the story. When I first got into comics I just wanted to be John Byrne so bad. I was thinking: 'If I could get that John Byrne style down, I'd make it in the industry.' But that was actually difficult for me to do. The way that I work now is the way that I work when I'm relaxed. I can't help drawing things graphically—it's just the way that I see things. When someone says, 'Well can you make things a little more realistic'—I'm like this is realistic to me—I see those edges and those angles, I can't help it. I also think it's weird that a lot of young kids try to get their style first and basically wrap that style around any story that they get. I think that hurts them badly. They should decide 'Well let me become a storyteller first, let me decide to tell the story and then my style will follow.' Then the artist has a whole lot of potential. You have to keep working on more than one story. People I consider masters in this industry have a couple of different styles that they can drop to the story, and I think it's really cool."

When it does come down to storytelling, having a very detailed style can be both a blessing and a curse. "I'm an artist and I've got sort of a near photographic memory—every artist does. But, some of the best comic book stories that I've read, some of the stuff that has really stopped me I can't remember any of the art. I can't remember any of the particular panels. You remember what the character was doing and you can remember story, but you can't remember the art. So it seems to me, why should you waste all that time in art if people aren't going to remember it. If I'm an artist and I can't remember panels, I can't imagine the average reader who's not an artist remembering a panel. So, why waste the time in art when you should be using that time in telling the story because that's what people are going to remember—even artists.

"A lot of times making a style consideration can make your job easier but it can make it a whole lot more difficult. Often times I put myself against a wall because I'll look at a story and I'll go 'Oh man, the best thing to do with this is to really make it super-detailed' because I want the reader to move slowly through it. If I want the reader to move slowly I have to put something on the page to stop them, usually that translates into detail. Making that decision means you're going to have to work. You have to really put a lot of detail into the panel if you want to slow down the reader. And there are other times where the story should read fast so everything should just happen. [For example], if I've got a fight scene, you're not going to see any backgrounds and hardly anything else. You might see parts of characters disappear because I'm only interested in you glancing off of it. I don't put a lot of extra stuff on any of the panels. I knock information out and move! (Figure 7.3)."

Figure 7.3: *In the Daredevil story* Devils & Angels, *Stelfreeze utilizes his style effectively to move the eye through the page. In panel 1, he gives the reader pause due to the amount of detail used in the background. In panel 2, the blacks were inked toward the bottom of the panel, moving the eye directly to panel 3. Even though the ink coverage is heavy on this panel, Daredevil's shape is graphic and sleek giving the eye a short rest. The blind man reaches out in panel 4. Because Daredevil suddenly appears in panel 5 (versus taking extra panels to show the steps of Daredevil's landing), his sudden appearance is the more shocking.*

LEAVETAKING

"For my first Batman story I wanted Denny O'Neil to write it—it was this thing that I had going for a while. After seven years of working with DC they finally said 'OK, we got one *(Batman Black and White: Leavetaking)*. So I was pretty happy about that."

Batman: Black and White was an innovative anthology developed by Mark Chiarello, art director for DC Comics. The premise behind this award-winning series was contradictory in this day of computer colored, splashy comics: to tell stories reliant only on pen and ink with no use of color. The mood was immediately dark, perfect for the streets of Gotham City.

With the black-and-white Batman story, Stelfreeze was not able to rely on the color as a storytelling device. That meant that every mark he made took on a greater importance. "This was possibly one of the most challenging stories I've ever had to take on because there's so much going on. I think this particular story would have been tremendously easier if it was in color. That's one of the things that I kind of liked about it, the fact that it's in black-and-white. I tried to cop the attitude of I'm going to do it and I'm not going to slightly fail: if I do fail I'm going to fail big, but if I'm successful at it, it's going to really be cool. It took reading the script a couple of times before I could start seeing it in black-and-white.

"With a story like this there really wasn't a throw-away panel. There's a lot of times you get stories where you make a panel not to tell the story, but just move things along. On this story everything was a fairly critical panel and a lot of the elements in the background were really critical."

The first panel of *Leavetaking* shows a gunman in a silhouette; his features jump into detail in panel 2. When he shoots Batman in panel 3, the reader is drawn toward a flashback in the last panel, which is a smaller panel. The story jumps between the modern day and the past and Stelfreeze's artwork reinforces the fact the final panel is a flashback by leaving hints in the background detail. Dumpsters and ladder fire escapes exist in the modern scenes while trash cans and complicated pull-down fire escapes in the flashback. "Instead of Bruce Wayne's father reaching for him, I wanted to have beat up trash cans... and pylons and a lot of things that would make you look at it and say well this is a little bit cleaner, so the time may be in the past, definitely not the present," he explains. "The present is dirtier."

The flashback scenes on page one are also defined by the gunman's weapons: a modern day automatic versus a revolver. "By giving the guy an old revolver, I'm thinking, OK if the reader is quick enough, he can pick up that it's not actually Batman getting shot, it's Bruce Wayne's dad getting shot in the past.

Batman and all related characters © DC Comics

Figure 7.4: Page 1 of Leavetaking. *Small details, like the gun and the background help keep the present timeline and flashback sequences straight.*

Focus Panels

Figure 7.10: Example of eye movement through acting. Batman *Chronicles #5, "Oracle: Year One, Born of Hope," as illustrated by Brian Stelfreeze.*

EYE MOVEMENT THROUGH ACTING

Word balloons are a very obvious way to draw the reader's eye from panel to panel. But words comprise only half the information within a panel. The figures themselves can also be used to direct the eye. If done discreetly, the choreography of characters' actions can be effective in creating flow for a story.

Figure 8.1: Batman from the graphic novel
Batman: Night Cries.

Hampton

Scott

Batman and all related characters © DC Comics

All the eye-candy you can cram into a comic book is pointless if the reader doesn't know what's going on.

—

Scott Hampton

Chapter Eight

Self-taught and mentored by his brother, Bo, Scott Hampton grew up in the Carolinas drawing comics inspired imagery— not actual comics since he never had the patience to execute a sequence of more than five panels. *Silverheels,* arguably the first painted comic book, was published in 1983 and launched Hampton's career in the field. Working with DC Comics editor/writer Archie Goodwin, he created *Batman: Night Cries* which won the U.K. Comic Art Award for Best Graphic Novel for 1992. In 1993, he wrote and painted *The Upturned Stone,* published by Kitchen Sink Press, and during the past few years has worked on *Destiny: A Chronicle of Deaths Foretold, Confessions of a Cereal Eater, The Bible, Batman Masterpieces* as well as merchandising art for the movie, *Batman and Robin.*

Most fans think of Hampton primarily as a painter of comics, while most of his peers see him as a classical, illustrative storyteller. Though the majority of his comics work is painted, he doesn't see himself as just a painter or illustrator; his pencil and ink drawings, before the paint is applied, remain some of his favorite personal work. "Paint is only in its childhood in the comics field," Hampton says, "A lot of us [comics artists] don't really know what we're doing yet when it comes to paint and storytelling."

THE MEDIUM AS STORYTELLING

Painted comic books have gained in popularity during the past few years, though not all efforts are as successful as Hampton's. Many comics artists are excellent interpreters, but lack Hampton's range and illustrative design in storytelling. Others possess eye-catching styles, but create pieces that ignore the feeling and emotion of the story. "As a painter in comics, I'm primarily interested in finding or experimenting with ways to better tell a story," Hampton explains.

"Paint, for all its advantages in creating certain moods and suggesting nuance, isn't really a natural medium for comics storytelling," Hampton says. "In some ways, it definitely is a case of fitting a square peg into a round hole. First, the lettering is all composed of lines, black lines usually set against a stark white field and held in a balloon or caption box also made of line. Well, you slap that on top of a painted panel and it seems to float there, separate from the action.

"Second, and harder to put into words, is my pet theory about how our brains take in paintings in a different way than line-drawings. A pen and ink drawing requires active seeing—you have to interpret it, translate it, particularly when the drawing is sketchy or gestural." Hampton believes that this translation happens automatically for modern comics readers, but that there's still a "switch" in the brain that is flipped every time a person is faced with a line drawing. "That switch isn't necessarily flipped when you see a painting; a representational painting, because it's tonal, basically the way we see the world, is presented—you can remain passive and let it wash over you. You look at a realistically painted comic and it's like being in a 747 airplane—the ride may be bumpy, it may be smooth, but either way you're a passenger. Pen and ink comics are like being behind the wheel of a car—you can see the landscape in front of you but you're going to have to drive if you want to get through it." Realism poses problems for painted comics because the images may seem frozen in time (Figure 8.2). An extremely photo-realistic panel is "static and unconvincing as a storytelling device. Two guys shaking hands look like they're holding hands, like they've been posed (which, more times than not, they have been). It's ironic that an excruciatingly rendered scene culled from photo reference is unconvincing in a way that Calvin and Hobbes never is."

Action is a more difficult idea to convey with paint than with pen and ink. Explains Hampton, "the best story an artist can create in a painted, realistic fashion would be of a woman sitting alone in a room, reading a book and drinking tea. It's when that woman walks into the kitchen and notices a burglar jumping out of the window that the painter gets in trouble; the reader wants to believe something is actually happening but, instead, is presented with a series of postcards. More and more, these days, I'm feeling that line is an important component for conveying actions, small or large." (Figure 8.3).

Example 8.2: Action painted realistically can feel forced or posed. From Batman: Night Cries.

Example 8.3: Action executed with paint as well as pen and ink. The page seems more active and exciting. From Batman, Dark Knight: Dynasty.

NIGHT CRIES

Batman: Night Cries is a poignant, powerful statement against child abuse. A story idea originated by Hampton, he co-plotted the story with writer Archie Goodwin. But even though Hampton was involved from the beginning, every artist runs into problems with creative layouts and design.

In *Night Cries*, he takes a typical scene with two talking characters and turns it into an interesting visual design which emphasizes the story (Figure 8.4). The black-and-white center images are actually photocopies pasted onto the artwork to further depict the grisly atmosphere of the murders. The cool blue-grays on either side with shots of Batman's head on the left and Gordon's on the right only subtly change during their conversation. "I came up with this approach because I wanted a way to incorporate images of what they're talking about so that we're reminded of these grim acts. The main emphasis is kept on the center images, the keys to the puzzle in the story, and away from the two men talking. "Talking heads" are the bane of every comics artist I know. We'll sometimes go to extraordinary lengths to juice up one of these scenes. I'm always asking myself something like is there any reason why these people can't be having this conversation at, say, the Super Bowl? That way I might be able to cross-cut to the action on the field. This particular scene took about twice as long as normal to work out in terms of storytelling and layout."

Word balloon placement is often at the heart of the comics artist's layout and design problem. When it comes to conveying story, balloons are just as important as artwork and have to be carefully considered. "Balloons aren't drawn or pasted onto the page of painted art as they normally are with black-and-white pages; they're imported after the fact, so the painter has to be very conscious of space for placement."

Hampton's obligation when designing a page is to the readers. "In the west we read left to right, so that has to be adapted into panel layout. I often place the first speaker on the left-hand side of the panel and make sure his balloon isn't cutting across someone's face." Hampton works out balloon placement beforehand so the story clearly advances left to right and doesn't confuse the reader. Very rarely will he alter this order, unless there is no doubt or concern about the storytelling on the panel or page. "While doing *Night Cries,* I became more aware of leading the reader through the image to the text or vice-versa. In these [bottom] panels (Figure 8.5), I wanted the reader to see the images and then read the text." Staples of comic books, spreads and splash pages require more planning than just creating great pieces of artwork. Hampton claims that he doesn't think in terms of spreads or splashes unless there's a place in the script where they would obviously assist the story. "I'm generally aware of what page is going to be on the left and right of a spread, but I'm not all that concerned about how they work together.

Figure 8.4: Batman and Commissioner Gordon discuss the grisly series of murders on their latest case together. The stark layout helps to reemphasize plot points.

Figure 8.5: Bruce Wayne tours a shelter for abused children. Through deliberate balloon placement, the children's drawings are read first and the text is read last.

PANEL DISCUSSIONS: DESIGN IN SEQUENTIAL ART STORYTELLING

Batman and all related characters © DC Comics

Figure 8.6: Gutter color separates time and place.

Batman and all related characters © DC Comics

Figure 8.7: Gutter height separates time and place.

I don't really plan page to page—I just figure that some will work better than others." Hampton's primary goal in layout and design is to make sure that each page works on its own.

For example, in a two-page spread, there's a crucial shift from night-time into daytime (Figure 8.6). "*Night Cries* is a dark, grim story. I didn't want the visuals to become too colorful." Hampton kept his palette fairly dark, even during daytime scenes. "As far as I'm concerned, no one has anything in Gotham City higher than a 20 watt bulb," he jokes. "There is a line of demarcation between these two pages, but I probably didn't realize that this [daylight scene] was on the right-hand page next to the nighttime scene. It doesn't matter as much to me as the continuity within each page."

In another two-page spread, the reader sees Gordon with his wife and son in their apartment before moving on to an exterior shot (Figure 8.7). The oversized white gutter between scenes exists to suggest "a distance in terms of space and time from these panels [apartment scene] to this outdoor scene. It's a lot less jarring if you have this big band to separate them. I'm trying to keep the reader from mistaking this exterior for the Gordon home."

Figure 8.15: Example of developing pacing through detail. In Marvel Knights: Black Widow #3, painted by Scott Hampton, how the reader moves through the moments correlate to the technique used and the details left out.

Panel 1, Yelena slowly regains consciousness in a dumpster. This is an important moment shown not only by panel size but by detail. The acrylic paint adds details, tones and colors that hold the reader's attention.

Panel 2, Yelena wakes up quickly. Here Hampton adds line work to quicken the beat.

Panel 3, Daredevil and Yelena talk. Hampton has taken out the building so that the reader can concentrate on the principal characters. This speeds us along to…

Panel 4, Yelena tries to "sting" Daredevil. Here, the background is still missing, so the eye concentrates on Daredevil, the dumpster and the blast. There are some abstract shapes to suggest windows of a building, but they do not pull the attention away from the important elements.

The best sequential artists understand the moment they are illustrating and know how to deliver it.

PACING THROUGH DETAIL

Directing the eye to move from panel to panel is required for successful storytelling. A natural inclination for most artists is to display their virtuosity by including every detail in even the smallest panel. This attention to minutiae is fine in static illustration, where the illustrator's job is to invite the reader to linger over a given image, but can become problematic for the sequential artist. Needless detail can kill storytelling.

Just as panel size can emphasize or de-emphasize a moment in the story, a lot or a little detail can create the same effect. If there is minimal detail, the story's pace is quick and the reader is swept along. If, on the other hand, there is a great

Mazzucchelli

DAVID

EVEN WITH EVERYTHING THAT'S BEEN MADE SO FAR, THERE STILL IS SO MUCH MORE THAT CAN BE DONE.

—

David Mazzucchelli

CHAPTER NINE

Figure 9.1: Big Man *from the self-published* Rubber Blanket #3

David Mazzucchelli's childhood dream was to someday draw superhero comics. He loved the sequential art form early on and drew his first Batman and Robin comic strip (in crayon) as a toddler and wrote and drew his own comics through high school and college. Mazzucchelli has worked on some memorable comics through DC and Marvel, including *Daredevil* and *Batman: Year One.* Despite this commercial success, he felt that he wanted more from the comics industry than was available to him through the superhero genre and decided to move on.

While taking two years off to collect his thoughts, Mazzucchelli became more interested in the so-called underground or alternative comics being produced in America. He was invited to a European comics convention where he discovered many interesting comics he had not seen before and was specifically struck by the works of artists such as Lorenzo Mattotti and Christian Gorny. He was influenced by their abstract stories and expressionistic style, themes that already interested him in art and literature. Mazzucchelli has since self-published three issues of *Rubber Blanket,* adapted Paul Auster's novel *City of Glass* for comics, and has written and illustrated short stories which have been published in *Snake Eyes, Drawn & Quarterly* and *Zero Zero.* He also teaches comic book courses at the Rhode Island School of Design and the School of Visual Arts in New York.

DAREDEVIL

Mazzucchelli's accomplishments in the sequential art field are numerous. His origins are found in the superhero genre and one of the works he is most noted for in this genre is *Daredevil*, issues 227 - 233. Along with writer Frank Miller, Mazzucchelli orchestrated the downfall of Matt Murdock, a.k.a. Daredevil. In this seven-issue story arc, the Kingpin learns of Daredevil's secret identity and systematically destroys Murdock's life. After many trials and tribulations, Murdock rises above the confrontation and eventually turns the tables on the Kingpin.

Ironing out the story is the most important step in the creative process, and Miller and Mazzucchelli would often discuss plot points and story enhancements. "To begin, Frank and I had conversations about what the story was going to be. He would write a full script and when I got it we would have another conversation. I might make some visual suggestions that were different from what was in the script. Often, Frank agreed with what I wanted to do, which is why he wanted to work with me. He wanted to get my visual input."

Once all of the story's nuances were hammered out, Mazzucchelli would begin work on the art. "The first thing I'd do is read through the story a few times and figure out where the high points were. Then I'd go through it in thumbnail form and start breaking the action down into panels. The planning of pages is very important to me, you know, thinking about where the most dramatic points are going to be. I don't want to use some kind of panel arrangement that I might want to save for a very important part of the story, so I try to think about the rhythm and the flow of where things are going. Then when I start making rough sketches based on those panel breakdowns, sometimes I find that even though I like the way I've arranged panels, in order to draw the thing I want to draw I'm going to have to change it a little bit. Other times, I'm able to fit what I want within the panel shape. To me, how you read the panels across the page is very interesting, and really controls what's going on."

The panel shape itself can help the reader relate to the characters within a scene. "My approach in those stories was to really try to put the reader in the position of the character." The two main characters in this story are Matt Murdock/Daredevil and the Kingpin. Both men trade narration and Mazzucchelli illustrated the characters' feelings by utilizing a graphic device as simple as a panel shape. "A good example of that would be in Chapter 2—"Purgatory" (Figure 9.2). Matt has now lost his home and job, and one way that I hoped to show the difference between the way Matt and the Kingpin were feeling was with the shapes of the panels. In wanted to put Matt in very tall panels, so that you start to get this squeezed, claustrophobic feeling. When you turn the page and see the Kingpin, I put him in wide, open panels so that he is in control of all the space around him. I tried to use narrow, squeezed panels [for Matt] whenever possible. That presented a little bit of a problem because it made the panel composition more difficult. But I think it really gives that sense of him feeling like he has no place to go."

Figure 9.2: Example panels used to heighten emotion. To give the feeling of claustrophobia and persecution, Mazzucchelli draws Matt Murdock in narrow, tight panels. The Kingpin is on top of the world destroying Murdock's life and his panels are much more open and wide.
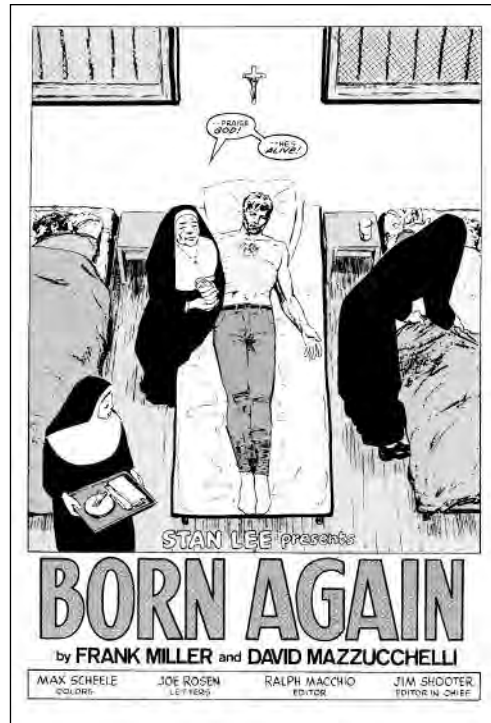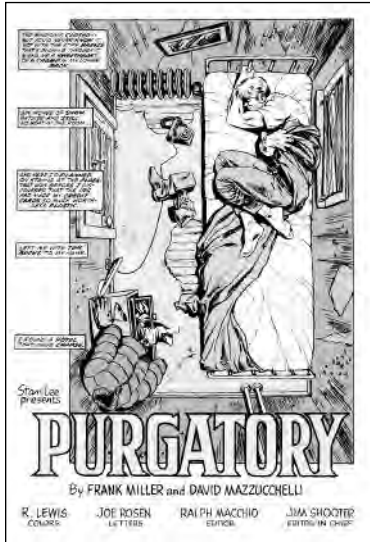
Murdock's life is torn apart slowly by the Kingpin's actions. This slow destruction is apparent via the splash pages which introduce each chapter (Figure 9.3).

"A somewhat unusual use of storytelling as we think of it is something that I came up with to introduce each chapter. What we see in the course of several issues is Matt Murdock's life falling apart, and I wanted to show this very clearly with the splash pages. I chose to do that by showing variations of the same overhead shot of him sleeping, or waking up, so you get to see what condition his life is in as you enter each chapter. In the first chapter, "Apocalypse," you see that he is in his comfortable bed. He's been tossing and turning, obviously, because the sheets are all knotted around him, but he's got plenty of room, light is streaming into the bedroom, and on succeeding pages, we eventually get to see the whole house. In the second chapter, "Purgatory," we're looking down at him in bed again, but this time he's in a very narrow, institutional looking bed which takes up about one half of the room in a very cheap hotel, because it's the only place he can afford. So we see more of a cramped space, and (Matt is) fetal-looking because of his position. In the next chapter, "Pariah," now we're looking down into an alley where he's in a total fetal position, sleeping with the bums among the trash. In the next chapter, "Born Again," he's now at a convent, or a mission, sleeping on a cot, along with other derelicts who have been picked off the street, and nuns are caring for them. The way I've designed this panel with the two windows in the upper left and right corners and the color of the floor and the beds around him, there's this very nice white space that makes a big cross that Daredevil, Matt Murdock, is about in the middle of. We were playing with all kinds of Christian imagery in this story."

Designing action sequences can be a difficult proposition for an artist. An interesting example involves a reporter named Ben Urich, who is interviewing a nurse ready to implicate the Kingpin in a crime.

"Ben is going into the prison to interview that nurse who's going to spill the beans. The scene includes Ben, a woman who's a photographer with the paper, a cop that's protecting him and a shifty-looking detective. The four of them come to the cell where a uniformed guard lets them in. In this scene, I'm thinking that Urich is the center of everything, so I tried to design all the action and compositions in terms of getting you to feel what he's feeling, even though there are five other players involved. We see an establishing shot

Figure 9.3: The splash pages for the first four stories of the Born Again *series.*

of the interior of the cell; the uniformed guard is locking the door, and I've set up the six characters in a way that will play out the action that follows (Figure 9.4). The uniformed guard and the seedy detective have been paid off by the Kingpin to kill everybody, mainly the nurse before she can talk. The way we discover this is important, because it sets up the next page, in which Ben's reaction is the key to the whole scene. The script basically reads, from the middle panel: the guard pulls out his gun, the other detective reacts and then we see the shady guy shoot the nurse in the head.

"First, I didn't think it was necessary to see a head exploding in this comic book. Second, I thought it would be much more forceful not to show the impact of a bullet killing this woman, but to show Ben Urich's reaction, because that is what's important about the scene. First we see the guard pull out his gun, signalling menace—it's big in the foreground, dwarfing the good detective. Then we see the shady guy pulling out his gun with a little smirk, behind Urich, who is in the middle of the action, with the nurse in the foreground—so he's now between the person who is going to shoot and the person who is going to get the bullet.

"On the next page (Figure 9.5), I've composed it in such a way that the nurse's head is completely off the panel, but Urich's face is highlighted and he is staring right at what we, the readers, don't want to see—we can only imagine what he's looking at and what he's feeling. The next tier has the two cops shooting back and forth at each other. Also, the photographer is clicking away the whole time, adding a kind of absurd note to the chaos. The bottom panel is important because Urich acts uncharacteristically by taking action to stop this guy. So I open it up as a wide panel so that we now see the attitude of all the different players as he jumps and tries to grab the guy's gun.

"On the next page (Figure 9.6), the action follows pretty simply: the two characters tumble to the ground, Urich reaches for the other guy's gun and then starts whacking him on the head with it to knock him out, but he goes a little too far because he's caught up, he doesn't believe what's going on and he's completely out of control at this point. So again, as we look at the panels, I'm trying to show you Urich in such a way that we're focusing on what's going on with him as he's experiencing this.

"On the last page (Figure 9.7), after all is done, the photographer for the first time puts down her camera because she realizes it's all over. She's watching Urich in a very uncharacteristic mode, and then we have this lurid shot of Urich as we're looking from the point of view of the guy on the ground that he's been hammering with the gun. I end that scene with the same shot that was the establishing shot, only now we see that everyone in the room is dead except for the reporter and the photographer."

The action had to be choreographed perfectly for the reader to understand what was happening. In this sequence, the use of dialogue balloons were missing, but not the use of words.

"I think sound effects are a very important part of the language of comics. I think they can be very expressive. A comics artist should always think about the design of these words as another element of the drawing and the design of the panel. I penciled them


Figure 9.4: The players are set…

Figure 9.5: Gunplay ensues…

Figure 9.13: (right and inset opposite page) Example of creative use of lettering in storytelling as told by David Mazzucchelli in The Death of Monsieur Absurde.

Traditional hand lettering is almost a lost art with modern comics now leaning towards computer lettering for convenience, consistency and speed. However the imperfections and spontaneity can give life to not only the words spoken in the balloons but to the page as a whole.

With the many voices contained in these pages, computer typography seems like the logical way to go. But because all of the words where drawn by hand but still clear stylistically, the page is a wonderful example of the power of good lettering.
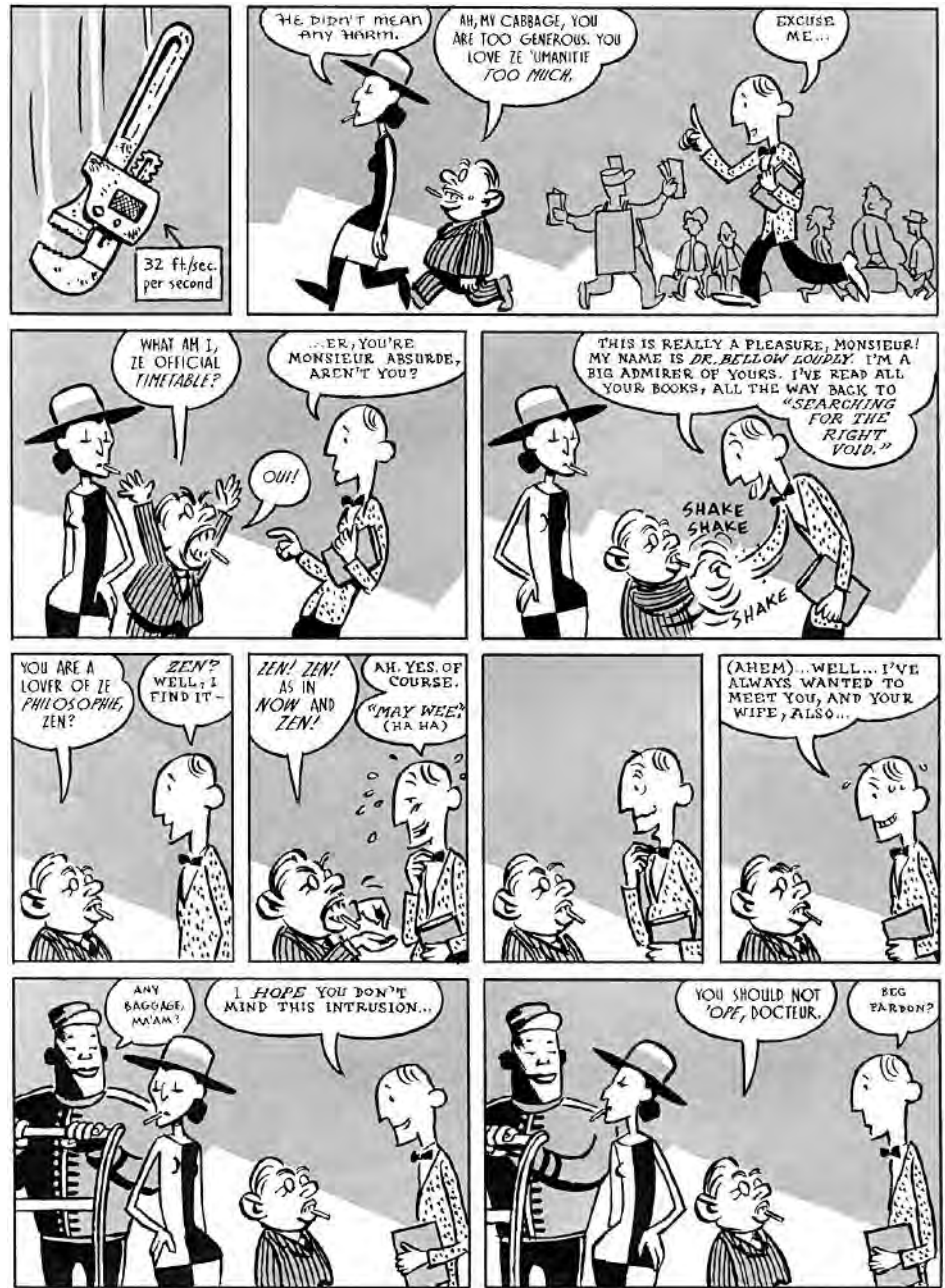
L E T T E R I N G   A N D   D E L I V E R Y

The word balloon is the primary language used by the sequential artist to give the illusion of communication. In most traditional comic books, letterers would just write out the dialogue and thoughts, in legible, uppercase printed characters. Emphasis on specific words could be created by switching into a bold face or italic handwriting, just like classic typography. Effective lettering can add emotion to the words *inside* the balloons.

In panel 2 (Figure 9.13) of *The Death of Monsieur Absurde*, through type choice, David Mazzucchelli establishes visually how the principle actors will *sound*. The typestyles assigned to each major character in the story effectively describes his or her personality.

Figure 10.1: Trevor Faith and Sergeant Holbein from the four-issue Shadow Empires: Faith Conquers.

All characters © Chris Moeller

TO ME THE STORYTELLING IS THE ULTIMATE PURPOSE FOR THE ART BEING THERE... EVERYTHING SACRIFICES FOR THAT PURPOSE.

Chris Moeller

CHAPTER TEN

Chris Moeller's background in the arts is diverse. Even as a child, he drew and was encouraged by the positive reactions his work received. "My mom claims that she never gave me coloring books, just pieces of paper and crayons, so she takes a certain amount of credit for my career."

He obtained an undergraduate degree in painting from the University of Michigan and obtained his masters degree in illustration from Syracuse University. Moeller enjoyed the university systems because of the well-rounded education he received. He credits his education for helping his writing ability. He gained insight into illustration from the Oskar Kokoshka School of Illustration in Austria, as well as through workshops with editorial cartoonist/children's book illustrator David Small and painter/illustrator Richard Williams and illustrator/educators Murray Tinkleman and Bob Dacey.

Originally, Moeller's sequential art influences derived from European comic book artists. "When I was a kid I read comics, but I eventually got out of comics. I got back into American comics in college. In college I stumbled across this Richard Corben book. It had full frontal nudity of a man and a woman and I was like 'Whoa!! Excellent!' It was this amazing painted book and the thing that was eye-opening to me. It was a cool, engrossing story and it was beautifully painted."

Since deciding to concentrate on comics full time, Moeller has been most known for his work in *Rocket Man, Shadow Empires: Faith Conquers* and *Sheva's War,* and *JLA: A League of One.* He has also painted numerous covers for Marvel and DC Comics, posters, trading cards and gaming illustration.

PRELIMINARY TECHNIQUES

Moeller is a diverse artist who has worked both on his own projects and collaborative efforts. Though he prefers to be completely responsible for his own vision, he feels that a team structure works in comics, provided that all people involved in the production process have similar creative goals. "I've found the division between the writer and the artist to be really tough to handle—I felt that my way of interpreting the pages visually was really different than what the writer was intending. If you have a really good relation between somebody who has a similar vision, and both [the writer and artist] are connecting in the same way, then that wouldn't be such a big deal. But 9 times out of 10, that is not necessarily the case.

"I really find that my favorite creators and sources I'm drawn to—like Frank Miller, Mike Mignola and Scott Hampton—are one-man bands in a way. That is what is interesting about comics. I feel that the more successful comic stories are a singular work of art—the creation of a single person. You don't have to fish out the artist's input or the writer's input on a project."

Being the sole creator of a comics project gives the creator complete control. Moeller finds this accountability important in developing the clearest story and also in deciding whether to let the words or art drive the narrative. "From a design point of view, it is really nice to come back to the script and change or move stuff around to improve the page. You can decide if you are going to use dialogue here or if you are going to use art to tell the story.

"Before creating the page, what I do is I write the script up ahead of time. I write a finished script, as opposed to just the plot and then go to pencils. After I write a script, I lay out the whole script really small, postage stamp size almost, in spreads. I lay out the whole book with little indications… on how I want the panels to break down on the page. What that helps me do is to get a feel for the story… and whether I need to add a page here or if I have enough room to put stuff in there. The thumbnails give me a general grasp on how the book is going to work out overall."

One of the more important narrative devices Moeller plans at the thumbnail stage is the page break. "One of the transitional elements of a comic book is when you turn the page. What do you see when you turn the page? Any large, dramatic or sudden scene change, or if something needs to jump out, I want it to hit the reader at the page turn. This allows [the artist] to play around with pacing issues.

"Maybe I will do a half-dozen thumbnails in an hour-and-a-half to two hours or so. It really ends up being me just going through the script and laying them out to see how they fit together. When I'm ready for the next stage, the drawing, I get my references together and I decide if I need to do some cuts or design or whatever. Then I quickly finalize the drawing from there, otherwise I'll forget what the little postage stamp scribbles are.

I REALLY FIND THAT MY FAVORITE CREATORS AND SOURCES I'M DRAWN TO … ARE ONE-MAN BANDS IN A WAY. THAT IS WHAT IS INTERESTING ABOUT COMICS. I FEEL THAT THE MORE SUCCESSFUL COMIC STORIES ARE A SINGULAR WORK OF ART — THE CREATION OF A SINGLE PERSON.

SHADOW EMPIRES: FAITH CONQUERS

Shadow Empires: Faith Conquers is an idea that Moeller has been developing for a long time. Every nuance and detail has been given consideration, from vehicle technical design, planetary locations, politics between castes and worlds, all the way down to the names of every soldier within a division. Moeller's intimate familiarity with the project made the prospects of bringing someone else on as a conceptual editor impossible, but he still wishes he was able to share the conceptual load with someone who knew the universe of *Shadow Empires* as well as he. "In this book, I could have used more input. I was just starting out and there are some elements that are clumsy and a good editor would have helped. The guy I am working with now from DC is a very good editor; we have a very good relationship and he sits down, reads the script and takes time to really think about a story. We've gotten on the phone to talk about what works, what doesn't work, what would be a better way of bring up the certain points and things in a story. But on *Shadow Empires*, I felt like I was the editor. I did the whole thing.

"On the other hand, the more you can do on your own, the better. You're going to make some mistakes, but it also forces you to work hard… you can't rely on anybody else, its just you out there. I think it's important that you do the best work you're capable of at the time."

In *Shadow Empires: Faith Conquers*, war and religion collide and society devolves into greed and chaos. Few people are strong enough to hold onto the older, nobler ways and those who do are rigid and unyielding. Cotar-Fomas Trevor Faith is one of those throwbacks, dedicated to doing what's right instead of acting politically convenient. In *Shadow Empires*, Faith and his Grey Rats are assigned to the planet Hotok and find themselves amidst murder, intrigues and power struggles.

In *Shadow Empires* #3, Faith confronts the cardinals of the church with irrefutable proof of a conspiracy that resulted in the deaths of his predecessor and his lover. In this page, there are clearly two panels, but they are drawn without frame or gutters, creating an interesting layout (Figure 10.2).

"I was very happy the way this page turned out—it was one of my favorites. It works on a couple of levels… it's a transition from the very busy scene on the proceeding page and it functions as an establishing shot as the scene shifts. It's a contrast from the standard storytelling page—you come over and have this kind of big splash page and a different color scheme, different people. On it's most pedantic level, that's what the page is doing: setting up a shift.

"[It successfully] set up the confrontation between the cardinals and Faith. The figures have almost the same scale, these large Cardinals and Faith and that's all there is on the page. They become key elements, so I'm setting up this conflict between the two elements visually. The Cardinals are talking and they are very verbose… they go on and on. Faith comes in shows the difference between them;

Figure 10.2: Example of an unconventional layout. From Shadow Empires: Faith Conquers *#3, by Chris Moeller.*

All characters © Chris Moeller

he doesn't say anything but he's got this girl with him. He is very direct and is in touch with what's going on and the page portrays him as sort of a man of action. He is introduced by this other Priest where he is in the doorway which acts like a panel."

The page would be less effective without dialogue and the savvy placement of word balloons. The balloons carry the eye through the page and the images correctly. "Without dialogue there is no visual cue that he's entering the room, essentially you picture a bunch of guys talking and Faith; it's all one image. The dialogue is used as a storytelling device. When you see this page on the wall, you see it as a straight image. These are considerations comic book artists have to consider that a straight illustrator doesn't. A straight illustration works differently than a comic page; you understand without dialogue. Much of the function of straight illustration is different.

"The page has a nice quality as a painting, but the graphic elements can add to it. When I'm doing the interior pages, I can't be as precious with the artwork as I need to be with the cover. There are a lot of details that are going to be obscured or that people are going to miss.

"There are painters who paint as if every single panel were going to hang on a museum wall. Every panel is gorgeous but the net effect of all of that is that it looks static. By just going from one beautifully painted panel to another, you don't get an overall sense of impact of the page. It is scattered away in all these beautifully executed panels; there's no story flow. In the interest of telling the story, you need to let portions of your painting go in ways that you couldn't afford to if it were a single image. But as a design area, where all of these graphic elements are going to go on top of, it works okay in telling my story."

There are many characters, battles, aliens and settings in *Shadow Empires*. Keeping the cast of characters and unusual settings straight became a high priority for Moeller. With artwork, he utilizes many techniques to deal with transitions, one of the most basic ones being color usage.

When a setting is associated with a particular color scheme, it makes the transition to another scene as simple as creating a new color scheme. "I often notice a set up in doing color shifts… my pages tend to have a predominate color theme. You can make a transition shift in a color scheme to any time of day or something like that and then you can establish a new shot."

In the continuing spread of a heated discussion between Trevor Faith and the cardinals, Moeller demonstrates this color shift. The argument carries over onto the next page (Figure 10.2). "That panel where I use a thinner border and they're floating or coming into the edge of the page. It's one of those mechanisms which allows you to (move from) the old scene to the new scene in a designed way."

The following page is painted with red as a dominant palette (Figure 10.3). "Well, the page where he's holding the girl is painted with strong reds. You have this panel on the facing page where he's turning away and his dialogue terminates the

Figure 10.3: This scene is painted with a dominant palette of red and warm brown.

Focus Panels

Figure 10.10: Example of range and visual styles of the word balloon from JLA: A League of One *by Chris Moeller.*

In panel 1, a character whispers softly.
In panel 2, Wonder Woman addresses Gaea.
In panel 3 & 4, Gaea speaks with a mystical, bubbly visual voice. Assigning a visual style to match a character's traits can help add depth to the storytelling.

W O R D   B A L L O O N S   A N D   S T Y L E

Though some readers believe the art drives the narrative in a comic book, it is often the words, words balloons and caption boxes that are read *before* the art. From a designer's point of view, these design elements, which can be lumped into a catch-all term—*body copy*—deliver dialogue, plot points, or insight into the story. Visually, the body copy

Figure 11.1: Thor by Walter Simonson.

I TACKLE A STORY AS IF THERE'S A PROBLEM I NEED TO SOLVE IN ORDER TO TELL THE STORY MOST EFFECTIVELY.

—

Walter Simonson

Thor and all related characters © Marvel Characters, Inc.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WALTER Simonson

Walter Simonson was born in Knoxville, Tennessee and reared in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC. He went to the Rhode Island School of Design where he majored in Illustration. While in art school, he became interested in the challenges of creating comic books, eventually writing and drawing a 50-page graphic story entitled *The Star Slammers* for his senior degree project.

He moved to New York City in August, l972 and began drawing comic books professionally first as a freelance artist and eventually as a writer as well. Since then, Simonson has worked for a number of companies and drawn such characters as *Orion, Manhunter, Dr. Fate, the Metal Men, Batman, the Teen Titans, Thor, X-Factor, the Hulk, the X-Men, the Avengers, the Fantastic Four,* and *Gen-13.* He has also drawn the comic book adaptations of the movies *Alien* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind,* as well as continuing adventures for both *Battlestar Galactica* and *Star Wars* and written the comic book adaptation of *Jurassic Park.*

The award-winning Simonson also taught a graphic storytelling course at the New York School of Visual Arts between 1992 and 1998.

THE MIGHTY THOR #380

Though Walter Simonson has drawn almost every character in the Marvel Universe, he is probably most noted for his work with Thor. He began writing and drawing the adventures of *The Mighty Thor* for Marvel Comics in 1983 and chronicled the icon's adventures for two-and-a-half years. After turning the artwork assignment over to Sal Buscema, he continued to write *Thor* for another year-and-a-half.

Whenever approaching a new project, Simonson finds it important to understand the nature of the characters involved in the story. The visual storytelling must be inspired by the heart of the story.

"My general approach in terms of overall design is to think first about using the layouts to reflect whatever I regard as the essence of the story I'm telling. *Thor*, to me—as a character and as a book—looks back at the past, to a time of gods and mythology. It has elements of science-fiction in it, but it essentially is a conservative book—at least that's the way I treated it when I was working on the title.

"The result is that I did relatively restrained layouts on *Thor*. They were straightforward, and different from, say, the *Fantastic Four* when I was drawing that title. *The Fantastic Four* was science-fiction based. So for the *FF* I did some pretty goofy layouts. I tried to do layouts that were more design-oriented and radical.

"In many ways *The Fantastic Four* looks forward towards the future as *Thor* looks back towards the past. The overall approach I took to laying out each book was really determined by the way I felt the story needed to be told with those characters.

"In my case I try to let the graphic solutions grow out of the story rather than just applying random graphic solutions to the story. Some stories facilitate unusual layouts and some stories seem to demand something much more straightforward. I try to approach the problem of storytelling by examining the story itself first and then developing the solutions based on that."

In issue #380, Thor battles the Midgard Serpent in a life and death struggle over Midgard, or Earth. This is indeed a grave situation as Thor is pitted against one of his greatest foes. The battle was epic and thus an appropriately grandiose visual solution must be implemented. The final graphic solution and the story plot went hand in hand.

"One of the essential problems in that story, just as graphic narrative, is that in the mythology, the Midgard Serpent is enormous, encircling the Earth at the

Thor and all related characters © Marvel Characters, Inc.
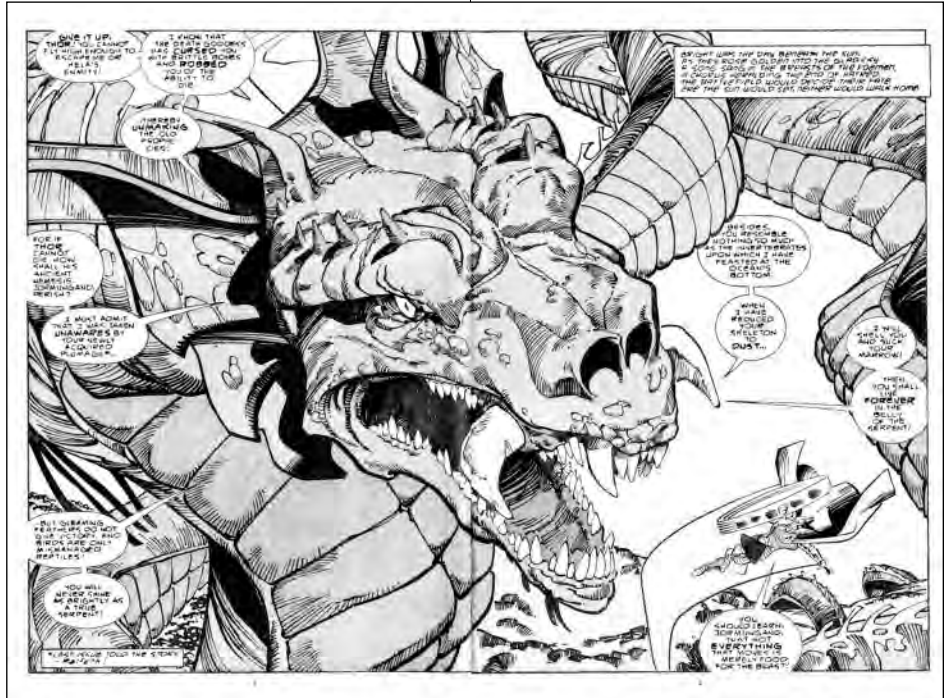
Figure 11.2: To create the effect of an epic battle, Simonson uses several solutions. Visually, he tells the story utilizing splash pages and splash spreads. Narratively, all words were existed on three levels: dialogue, sound effects and poetry.

Thor and all related characters © Marvel Characters, Inc.

Figure 11.3: Through splash pages, Simonson is able to explore size relationships between Thor and the Midgard Serpent.

Thor and all related characters © Marvel Characters, Inc.

bottom the ocean and literally, its head touches its tail. It's very big and the gods are more or less human size, which means you've got a good guy and a bad guy who are on vastly different scales. And that difference in scale makes it very difficult to draw the two characters together in a panel in ordinary breakdowns.

"The problem is that I wanted the fight to be really big, and I don't mean that just in terms of scale or drawing—it's this great, legendary fight. It's one of the major climaxes of the Norse myth of Ragnarok, and so I really wanted it to feel like an important fight, a significant fight. I also wanted it to seem like a struggle that was *long*. Even though the scale of the foes is quite different, they're both very powerful.

"But scale is a big problem. You divide a page in six or seven or eight panels and then if you draw this very massive serpent, Thor becomes the size of a pin-head, which is not very impressive. And if Thor is big, you can't begin to see the Serpent. So I wrestled with how to make the fight epic and how to deal with the problem of scale. One day Weezie [Louise Simonson, his wife] and I went to the Cantina, a restaurant we really liked in our old neighborhood on the West Side of Manhattan. As I walked over the threshold leaving the restaurant, for the only time in my life a light-bulb went off above my head and I thought, 'all splash pages!'

"Now, I don't claim any credit for originating the idea; John Byrne had actually done an all-splash page *Hulk* which I knew about, but at the time I hadn't seen it. But when I thought about an all splash page issue, I realized that was the way to approach this particular story. It would help in the problem of scale because I'd have a lot of room in each page. I could do a big Serpent head and still do a large enough Thor so you could see the character's body language and the emotional language of the face if necessary. I didn't attempt to try to draw the entire Serpent; I showed only parts of it, thereby suggesting that it was so big, it couldn't fit into the drawing!

"We took an extra couple of turns around a couple of blocks before I got home because I was thinking out how I would do this. I had originally thought of including subplots in the issue as a way of breaking up the fight, of making it seem longer by cutting away from it and going back again. But I decided to abandon the idea of subplots because in order to make the scale of the fight epic—even though it might not seem as long a reading experience—I felt that the fight itself was so big and so important that I didn't want to break it up with extraneous subplots that had nothing to do with the story I was telling."

Once the visual solution was found, then came the problems of writing the issue: "At the time I was doing *Thor*, I was reading a lot of the various retellings of the Norse myths. I had found a translation of the *Elder Edda* [also referred to as the *Poetic Edda*], which is a collection of Norse myths in poetic form. That edition had a fairly lengthy introduction about Viking culture, Norse poetry and the poetry's structure. One thing about those poems is that they were done not as rhymed poems. You know, 'There was a Midgard Serpent from Nantucket,'" Simonson laughed.

"Instead, the Norse poems were created using stressed syllables and similar sounds at the beginnings of words. So I decided to tell the story of Thor facing

the Midgard Serpent with captions that are essentially Walter Simonson's imitation of Viking poetry. I make no claims to its quality but that was the attempt! I chose to do it that way because you read poetry more slowly that prose. I was trying to create a combination of words with pictures where the words actually act as part of the graphic solution because they're slowing you down in the reading. You're looking at the pictures more slowly because if you actually read the captions, you've got to stop and read the poetry—at least I can't read poetry as fast as I can read prose—so it was a way of controlling the speed of the reader through the story."

Utilizing words, Simonson deftly sets up three levels to this epic battle. The poem on one level, the combatants conversation on another level, then the sound effects were used to develop a third level.

"You get a mythic echo through the poetry. You get a contemporary take from the dialogue, and the sound effects are kind of a graphic element that serve as visual patterns across the pages that arrest the eye. I've always liked sound effects in comics because they're something you just can't do very effectively anywhere else. They're wonderfully bound to the medium. Sound effects can function to lead the eye through a page visually. In this case I didn't have multiple panels per page so that function wasn't as

important, but I could still use sound effects as a way of leading the eye across the page as a graphic element, the same way you can use a word balloon for the same purpose, to make the eye go the way you want it to go. You don't really hear the sound effect and a lot of sound effects I've written, I'm not quite sure how they'd be pronounced. But, as a graphic device they arrest the eye and, hence, help control the speed of the reader."

When telling stories, visual consistency is extremely important. But every so often, rules can be broken. As long as it serves the story.

"The very last page has four panels; so I didn't do an all-splash page issue, I did an almost all-splash page issue. The real reason for that is a book I had about American Indians when I was a kid. It was a fairly simple, illustrated book for children, and one of the things they talked about was the rug weaving of the Navajo tribe. Now, I haven't asked any Navajo about this, and if you're a Navajo, please don't write me and yell at me if the tale isn't true, but the story in the book was that the Navajo rug weavers, when they would make a rug, would weave a mistake into the rug in order to make sure that they did not create a perfect rug by accident, because perfection was really the purview of the gods, not mortals.

Thor and all related characters © Marvel Characters, Inc.

Figure 11.4: When the storyteller breaks a storytelling rule, it should be to further the story along, never to detract from it. On the last page, Simonson goes back to panels to close in on Thor's body. This creates movement to an otherwise static moment.

Orion and all related characters © DC Comics

Figure 11.11: Example of sound effects used to add visual excitement and an aural effect from Orion #25 *by Walter Simonson.*

Focus Panels

THE POWER OF SOUND EFFECTS

Sound effects are another important trick of the trade storytellers can employ in the comic narrative. Though not looked upon as essential, these effects can add depth to a panel of comics. Similar to adding color to artwork, sound effects can emphasize the narrative. Sound effects rely on typography and placement to read clearly and the artist or letterer must think like a type designer to get the most out of a sound effect.

The art should always be in service to the story. Whatever techniques you use, they should inform the story. But choose your moment.

—

George Pratt

Figure 12.1: Pen and ink from George Pratt's upcoming project— See You In Hell, Blind Boy—*a tale of the blues*

Pratt
George

CHAPTER TWELVE

George Pratt spent three years attending Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. He quickly learned how little comic books mattered to the rest of the university's artistic community. "Comics were totally frowned on, a big no-no. They were considered the bastard son of illustration; still are, I guess. The professors really didn't want anything to do with them. So we kept pushing until we found a few sympathetic teachers. I think the only time I actually did comics for a class was for my senior project." Pratt turned to other sources to learn about the complexity of visual storytelling. "Any storytelling ability I attained came from reading and struggling to figure it all out."

Pratt is a comic book painter and though he loves the comic book as an art form, he has a relatively small body of work to show for his efforts. He has worked on numerous short stories for DC Comics and *Heavy Metal* magazine, and has created cover illustrations for Topps and Dark Horse Comics. He has been nominated twice for the Eisner award, once for his popular book *Enemy Ace: War Idyll,* and once for *Batman: Harvest Breed. Enemy Ace: War Idyll* was also nominated for the Harvey award and won the France Info award for Best Foreign Graphic Novel at the prestigious festival in Angouleme, France. Currently, he is working on a project based on his second love: the Blues, which is proving to be more of an endeavor than *Enemy Ace*. Part of his research for the blues book was filming a documentary in the Mississippi delta, which later won Best Feature Documentary at the New York International Independent Film Festival.

RESEARCH AND PREPLANNING

Pratt approaches every project differently, but the results are always the same: a provoking way to look at the comic art form. No two projects are ever developed in the same way because he's inspired by a variety of experiences.

Approaching a project with the scope of *Enemy Ace* was nerve-wracking for Pratt. "The largest thing I'd done in the industry before *Enemy Ace* was an eight-page story, so I had no conception of how to tackle anything this big. When I helped Kent Williams and J. Muth with *Moonshadow*, I was convinced that I could do *Enemy Ace*. Sitting up there wallowing through some of the pages that we had to do on a deadline proved to me that I could do it on my own, and I went on from there."

Pratt uses only the barest semblance of a system during the conceptual stage, though much of the results are created by instinct and are liable to change if the pages do not "feel" right. "When I sit down to visually tell the story I've got my script in hand and I go through it. In writing the script I don't necessarily break things down into pages, or even panels. I write down what's supposed to happen from point A to point B. Scenes with little dialogue, basically, unless a particular bit of dialogue popped into my mind, then I'd put it in there. So I'll take the printed script and, using a marker, separate paragraphs into what I think should be pages, based on gut reactions to the visual images the scenes evoke. I'm working on a feeling here. This page should be, say, four or five panels, and I'll mark it off. Then I'll take the marked up script and start doing thumbnails from that.

"I design my pages with the spread in mind. I want each page to work independently, but also with the facing page. I want the whole thing to balance, to sit well on the spread, but also to flow, to keep the reader's eye moving through the panels. So I'll do five or six sheets of layouts for each page, and I may be mixing and matching at the very end of that, taking something from the first layout and adding it to a later layout. I have to double-check myself, force myself to change my angles, play with my camera. It's a constant struggle to try and see differently, from a different viewpoint. Sometimes the first idea is the best and I'll go right back to what I first had."

The quest to find perfect panel shapes that assist in storytelling is important to Pratt. "I'll try to see if there's a better angle to use, maybe a better panel shape (Figure 12.2). Panel shapes tend to be fairly intuitive for me. Again—it's a feeling."

Since Pratt was both the writer and the artist on *Enemy Ace*, he decided to concentrate on developing the art first without a full script to develop the story. "I can sit down and write, no problem. It's a struggle, but it's not the same kind of struggle as drawing and painting. For me, it's finding the right words to make it eloquent and succinct, in the same way that I look for the right angle for an image or a subtle pose that best describes a feeling or action. Drawing to me is much more difficult than writing. The labor involved is greater. But in both the grail is to say more with less.

"I didn't really write any of *Enemy Ace* until after the art was done. The story was scene-driven for me, the visual element the catalyst. I wrote a synopsis, which was more of

Figure 12.2: Long thin panels help give this conversation between Mannock and Enemy Ace a cramped, uncomfortable look. Pratt is always looking for the perfect panel shapes to reflect the narrative point of the story.

E N E M Y   A C E

Growing up in Texas, enamored with the action and adventure found within comic books, Pratt always looked up to the likes of Robert Kanigher and Joe Kubert. One of their creations, Enemy Ace, was a World War One fighter pilot on par with the Red Baron or Blue Max. Enemy Ace fought his way into the genre of war comics, much like Sgt. Rock or Nick Fury and his Howling Commandos.

"I grew up with Enemy Ace and Vietnam—so until I was 13 or 14 years old there was always the Vietnam War going on. When I got out of art school I started reading about Vietnam because I wanted to learn more about it. Some of the first work I did when I got out of school was for a Vietnam Veterans magazine, working with a three-tour Green Beret and illustrating veterans' stories.

Pratt also became interested in World War One. Once he came up with the idea to reprise the character of Enemy Ace, Pratt began to research the topic in earnest and started collecting references. "As I read through all the unbelievable, first hand accounts of World War One I found things that were so moving and so powerful that I had to include some of them in the storyline. Through those books I could hear the real voices of those men who fought, struggled and died in the mud and futility of that experience. That brought up the idea of breaking the book into chapters." Pratt would find an inspiring quote to set up the chapter headings (Figure 12.3). "It would give the reader pause to reflect on what was happening and it also gave the package the feeling of a book rather than a disposable comic."

From conception to finish, *Enemy Ace* took George Pratt three years to complete. The project was powerful, telling the story of Enemy Ace in the twilight of his life, helping a fellow soldier named Mannock put the horrors of the Vietnam War behind him. The lack of deadline pressure allowed Pratt to perfect every nuance of this project: from references to art to word balloons and panel design. "Ace was my trial by fire—it was a large undertaking for me. I don't know how comic artists are able to just kind of throw these comic books out as quick as they do. I get so caught up in the reference stage, making sure I have all my facts straight. I like the fact that personal projects take me a long time to finish. The test is keeping my interest high on them.

"As I live with these projects, and I lived with *Ace* for three years, layers of meaning get thrown into the story. Things that may have no relation at all to the project, but which have happened to me in my life, get shoved into the book and they plug in very nicely. I think it gives the story layers of depth and meaning that the book wouldn't otherwise have."

Continually working on the same project for such a length of time can take its toll. In comics, it is important that the characters maintain a recognizable appearance from the first to the last panel. In a painted book, this can become an arduous task: "I was caught up in the times of World War One, the clothes and the people looked very different from today. I enjoyed drawing it, but the labor of producing these realistic images and painting them up, layering all of these colors—got old quick."

All men must die but it is given to few to die for their country.
—Epitaph, 1915, to Colonel Breakspear, in Henley Church
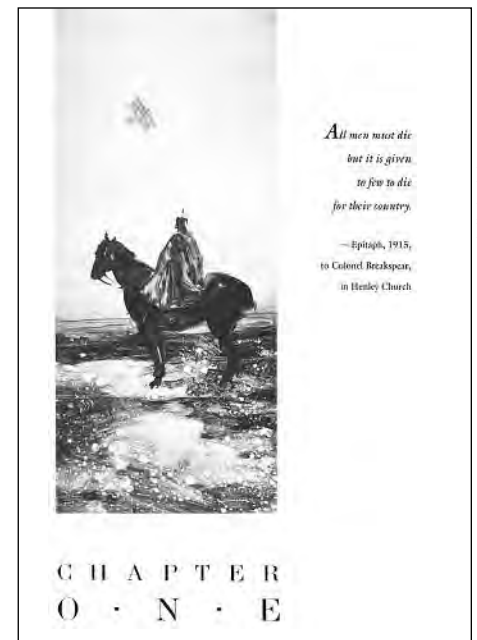
C H A P T E R
O · N · E

Figure 12.3: Quotes from those who lived during the times of World War I were included in the chapter cover pages. This was done to better set up the narrative within each chapter. Also, this gave Pratt an outlet to experiment with different painting media (namely monotypes) and break away from the consistent watercolor painting of the narrative.

with, as far as thinking about the transitions and wanting them to work as pure visual story-telling, was leading into the first tunnel scene underground. We have a close-up of the reporter's eye, which becomes the setting sun. The choppers are coming in and the sun, which is directly behind them, becomes the glow of a flashlight in the tunnel. Inside to the outside and back again to the inside. I was very happy with that."

The strong use of color in the gutters helped tie these two scenes together. Starting on the first page, burgundy was displayed half a panel's height from the last panel. When the page was flipped the color burgundy continues, surrounding all the panels on the page and finishing the change of scene. Gutters need not be white, and can be used to facilitate the story. "In the gutters I pushed burgundy for Vietnam, and black for World War One, giving the reader a visual touchstone. Something they didn't necessarily have to read, but would make an unconscious mental note of." This kind of technique also applies to text and caption boxes used in the narrative.

"If there's one thing disconcerting about comics, it is the balloons—they really get in the way. I thought, 'Why spend all this time making the painting work, when you've got this big white balloon on it?' It doesn't let the light in the piece do its job. So I knocked the balloons back with colored tints so that the art is what's alive, and the balloons aren't as intrusive. Especially with the painted work, the light source is vital in getting all these emotions across. Once you've slapped a white balloon in you've killed it. Sometimes the words need to sit back a little bit so that the image can tell the story and pull the reader in (Figure 12.7). Also, the colors that I used within the balloons and captions were distinctly chosen for each character. So even if a character was speaking in a caption box, the reader had a visual cue as to who it was."

Pratt spent a lot of time deliberating on the design of Enemy Ace's lettering. "I wanted something that wasn't your typical comic book lettering. I wanted something a bit more angular. Comics lettering gets a little too bubbly. It almost feels like shorthand and I wanted this thing to be real, and have a little bit more of the feeling of a book. I got heavy into the lettering, especially the freehand stuff that went later. I'm no letterer, but I knew what I wanted and what I liked. I did examples, and Willie Schubert sent in samples, and he did an incredible job. He nailed the feeling and mood of the text, adding yet another layer to the overall story."

Strong color theory also gives this story much of its impact. Throughout most of Enemy Ace, dark hues were used to reflect the seriousness of the storyline's mood.

Figure 12.6: On the lead in page, the final panel was divided into two panels to create a passage of time. The color burgundy is introduced halfway through the final panel to better set up the following spread. Burgundy is used around all of the panels to better separate this flashback from the previous scene.

Focus Panels

Figure 12.10: Page 6 of Wolverine: Netsuke *by George Pratt. Starting with roughs, Pratt paints his panels one to a sheet and then composes the page on computer. But working as much as he can traditionally ensures the energy, emotion and organic qualities of his art. His vision is never compromised by technology— only enhanced.*
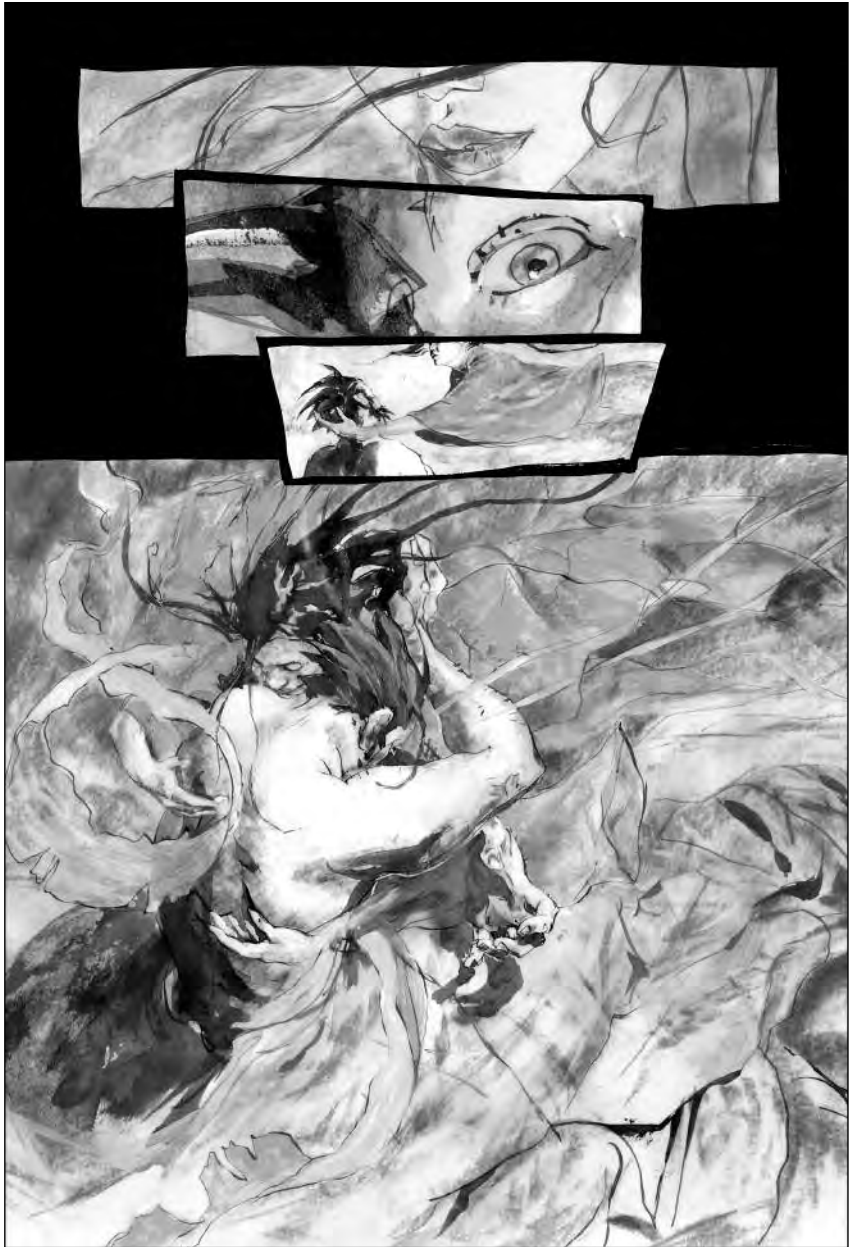
STORYTELLING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

One of the most exciting innovations in comics books is how the computer is being used to help production. From laying out word balloons and scanning in artwork to coloring pages and creating separations, computers are being used at every stage of comic book production. Producing stories is certainly a far cry from creating stories and the debate on how computers should affect storytelling is a hot one indeed.

George Pratt is a painter first, but he never shies away from anything experimental if it will streamline his storytelling. He has utilized the computer effectively and specifically for his last two graphic novels. These days you can see him painting on loose sheets of paper, one panel to a sheet. He will then use the computer to bring these loose

Figure 13.1: Dana Scully and Fox Mulder from the X-Files.

IF YOU CAME UP WITH A STYLE IN WHICH STICK FIGURES WERE TRULY UNIQUE AND ENGAGING, YOU CAN TELL STORIES.

—

John Van Fleet

C H A P T E R   T H I R T E E N

John Van Fleet went to Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, NY with the intention of becoming a graphic designer. It was here that he roomed with George Pratt, Kent Williams, Mark Chiarello, and Scott Hannah, all of whom shared the same upbringing and interests as well as the same classes. Van Fleet's interest in sequential art was piqued through this camaraderie forged through comics, science-fiction, and art.

After learning how to create mechanicals and wax boards, Van Fleet was introduced to the Macintosh computer during his final year of college. "I saw my entire career being pointless. I thought 'this machine is ultimately going to replace every graphic designer on the planet.' So luckily, I also dug illustration…"

Starting with editorial and "boring, dry" technical illustration work, Van Fleet's desire to tell stories and make film—which he still would love to do—matured into sequential art over time. Originally, he avoided comics because all of his friends found success in the field. Still, he found himself in the Marvel offices in New York City and was offered a *Hellraiser* short story. Since then, he has visualized some very sophisticated comics, including *Shadows Fall*, *Typhoid Mary*, the *X-Files* and *Batman*. Van Fleet does the occasional illustration assignment, including numerous cover illustrations for Marvel and DC Comics and spot illustrations. His work is collected in *The Art of John Van Fleet*.

John Van Fleet

R O U G H S / P R E P L A N N I N G

When creating his artwork, Van Fleet concentrates on the last line of dialogue spoken in a panel rather than the first line spoken. "Trying to choose what point in time to focus on from a script that's already written is kind of a challenge. Generally, as a rule of thumb, I focus on the last line because in my mind that makes sense. You shouldn't have the reader see the image before the words. The reader should see the last moment because when they read that last line, they look at the image and then move on to the next page or next panel. So to me that's a natural thing. I see a lot of artists who don't do that. Artists who work with Marvel style scripts… don't do that. It's not their fault when the thing comes back and the words are totally inappropriate to the pictures."

Van Fleet prefers to work from a full script whenever possible. The looseness of a plot-only script lacks the fine points that he feels are important in creating the visual nuances important to storytelling. "If you're working for Marvel, you just get a breakdown, there's no dialogue. A lot of people like that, but it's sometimes harder for me because I don't know what the character's saying. The character could say 'Watch out Jim!', but it's hard to put that shock in their expressions if you don't have the dialogue. The writer will say in the script: 'He yells to Jim.' Well what he yells to Jim is not all that clear. And you'll see when the book finally comes out, the dialogue reads: "Hey Jim, can of Coke's 50¢," and your expression is totally inappropriate because you've filled him with horror."

Visual references are an important element to Van Fleet's professional work: from *Shadows Fall* to *Typhoid Mary* to his current work on the *X-Files*. Lighting is one of the major reasons Van Fleet uses still photos. "The model will sit there in front of me and I say: 'Tilt your head back' and the lighting changes completely. When he tilts his head forward the lighting again changes completely. The immediate satisfaction of having that kind of control over the image is the reason why I put up with the pain in the ass of it. You could sit there and you could draw it, but the minute you start to draw it on a piece of paper you erase it. Maybe I'll change the lighting. Well then you have a whole new image and you can do that maybe twice before the paper starts to complain. But with photographs I can decide at a later date which is better. And I've done that time and time again.

When a comic book is based off of a TV show, like Van Fleet's work with the *X-Files*, the visual references have already been seen by the public and the reader has a level of expectation on how the characters and scenes should look. When likeness issues must be dealt with, Van Fleet finds that photo referencing becomes almost necessary. "Because the *X-Files* is high profile and people like it, there's a demand for it and people will buy it. And most of the work on the *X-Files* is really fun but then the likeness issue is just another thorn in my side. But if I were able to complete what I consider to be my job of storytelling and I were able to say: 'Now let me shoot it from this angle.' Or if I had access to all the still outtakes, then I would say this is the perfect job for me. It's a good story, it's a story that I want to tell. But I'm limited by my references and my demand for likenesses is 110%."

Figure 13.2: Two random pages from Typhoid Mary. *Strong reference sources help define the harsh shadows and make it easier to abstract the painted form. Note the page division: three tiers of information with each tier subdivided into smaller panels, if needed. This allows Van Fleet the freedom to experiment with color theory and camera angles.*

S T Y L E

Figure 13.3: Example of Xerography technique. Tonal information drops out and develops an organic look. Van Fleet then decides what to strengthen or abstract using heavy blacks to hold colors.

John Van Fleet's style can be best described as experimental. The outward appearance is dark, graphic and well-designed. However, the methods he uses to achieve this look are constantly being refined. He is considered to be one of the most distinctive, meticulous painters in the industry, though his methods are innate.

When talking about color theory and colors he uses in painting, Van Fleet jokes that "I take whichever one's closest to me." He chooses colors instinctively. "I think there's an inherent palette in my head that I use and I don't use it because I know it works, I use it because I genuinely like it." Van Fleet has a familiarity with the colors he employs. Pointing to a bottle of paint, he says "this is like the color of my house and here it is in the comic book panel—pretty damn close. The fact that I'm comfortable with it enables me to believe in the reality and… makes the panel work. It's important that I believe it's attractive for me to be able to move on. I have to feel that I've achieved that harmony with the colors and the values in order for me to move on to the next panel. The fact that somebody else may find that attractive pleases me but it doesn't control me. I've got to stick with the harmony that I know."

Van Fleet tends to mix unlike colors together to achieve a better range of colors. He stays away from primary colors. "I think my only theory with color is if you're using a primary color, you should be using a tertiary color. There are no natural primary colors. If you see a primary color, you're in a construction zone." Van Fleet loves to use earth tones and other colors found in nature. To better reflect an environment, he will mix cool and warm colors. "It's always good if you've got a cool picture to have a cool, warm color in there. And vice versa: if you're doing a desert it's always good to have a hot, cool color." He stresses the importance of using a natural range of colors. "To find a warm blue in a desert scene really makes a desert more believable because all those colors are there in a real desert even if you don't see them."

Van Fleet does use a type of the roughs process where he decides what action fits on a page. Once the layout has been decided upon, then he creates the panels. "I don't really have all that many rules; I try to stick with more of a Bauhaus style of creating grids, I kind of break the panel up into thirds and then break the thirds up into thirds and then break those thirds up into thirds. And what you find is a certain harmony on the panels that doesn't stand in the way of the storytelling." Working from a grid also has the benefit of maximizing time. "If I'm going to do my best to set up the image and the point of view and all this other stuff, then to save time I need something that I can rely on as a standby. Since nothing else is constant, panel size and page layout have become my constant. When I start a blank page I don't have that same overwhelming 'Oh my God, what the hell am I going to do.' I can basically break it down into thirds and it takes away some of the anxiety that goes along that white page."

Van Fleet developed a process of visual storytelling involving the use of a copy machine. In essence, an image is photocopied and then transferred onto the

Figure 13.11: The Chalice, *painted by John Van Fleet. The complex, moody style of the cover (left) serves as a true indicator for the action within (above and below).*

T E L L I N G   S T O R I E S   F R O M   E N D   T O   E N D

As much as Van Fleet loves the storytelling power of sequential art, he equally loves the challenge of creating covers (Figure 13.11). "The best part of this job is that I get to do the covers. Really. Because I try to tell the story on the cover, which is probably more challenging than anything else. How are you going to give the reader a sense of the story or convince someone there is a story here to be read with just one piece of art? And you have to keep the cover true to the story. Don't just make it some flashy, big explosion when there's not a single blast in the whole book."

A strong visual style can instantaneously set up the correct atmosphere for a comic book story if the style and story work well together. "I don't think that a superhero comic book would be best served with Xerox transfer process. I think the distortion and exaggeration of the human form best suits superhero stories. It's about the appropriateness of the right artist for the right role or the right technique for the right piece. If you've got a great story to tell and you go over to Germany or some other country but no one speaks English, you're not doing anything. I think that the story is your primary function; the story is what you're there for. But putting it into a graphic language that's readable, understandable, presentable, and is not contradictory to the telling of the story is essential. If you drew a comic in stick figures you could still tell a story. And if you came up with a style in which the stick figures were truly engaging and unique, you'd be doing great."
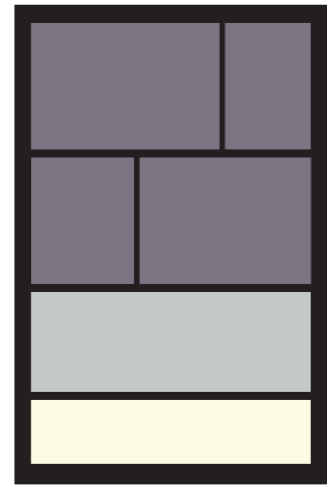
X-Files™ and all related characters © Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation

Figure 13.12: Example of transitioning to another scene gradually through color as painted by John Van Fleet. In X-Files: Pilot Episode, *Page 20, a cool purple color dominates panels 1 through 4. As they time travel, panel 5 is a lighter purple and panel 6 becomes almost white. If the color schemes moved from purple directly to white, the transition would speed up. By adding panel 5, the pacing slows down.*

S T O R Y T E L L I N G   T H R O U G H   C O L O R

The elements within a panel can contain a focus, but so should the overall page. With all the information to be processed by the reader, the transitions from detail to detail and story point to story point become essential. One way to tie all of these aspects together is color.

Unity, movement, and story progression can certainly be created with black-and-white line art and text, but if color is used these ends can be more fully developed. By establishing setting and time, creating a focus, creating a mood or emotional state, and/or associating scenes and characters with larger themes, color can make the reader understand the story's subtleties.

Colors can be called upon to create a passage of time or a merging of two scenes. This is very important. Color differentiates the many environments a story can encompass. By varying color over two or more panels, time and space can pass either abruptly or gently, depending on the technique used. The actual time transition created should always match the intended pacing of the story.

Painters use a unifying glaze or ground color to make all of the elements of an illustration come together. This kind of technique can be used within each panel.

Figure 14.1: Batman from Batman/Houdini: The Devil's Workshop, *painted by Mark Chiarello.*

DRAMATICS, PICTURE MAKING, DESIGN, IT'S ALL IMPORTANT. YOU REALLY CAN'T SEPARATE ONE FROM THE OTHER.

—

Mark Chiarello

Batman and all related characters © DC Comics

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Unlike most comic book artists, Mark Chiarello didn't read comics as a kid. It wasn't until his high school years that he discovered what he had been missing for all those years.

Chiarello went to Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, NY to study painting. It was there that he met John Van Fleet, George Pratt and Kent Williams, other artists who shared the same love of the comics art form.

Before his career in comics, Chiarello had been a successful water-colorist and illustrator, the Stars of the Negro League baseball card set being a highlight. He started in the industry coloring for Marvel Comics and worked his way up to becoming the color editor at DC Comics. He eventually added cover editor to his title and ultimately attained the title of Art Director for DC Comics. He still is active in art, painting *A Piece of Wood, Batman Houdini: The Devil's Workshop* and the story *Electric China Death* in *Gangland.* He has painted covers for *Terminal City,* which were nominated for Eisner Awards. Chiarello has painted *Vigilante* and *Jonny Double* covers and edited the Eisner Award-winning *Batman: Black and White* anthology/series.

CHIARELLO

MARK

C O L O R S

a challenge and using color can be an effective solution to these problems. To Chiarello, color is to comics what the soundtrack is to a movie. "A good soundtrack really helps emphasize the story and enhances the dramatics of the movie. A bad soundtrack can be very evasive, like the laughtrack in a sitcom, and it can ruin what was otherwise a good movie. Good color can really add to the overall package and bad color can really ruin the comic; ruin the artwork.

"The weaker colorists are the guys who get all the uniforms right. By that I mean the color of the sky is blue… and the color of the grass is always green, always doing a pedestrian job. Whereas Sherilyn van Valkenburgh, Matt Hollingsworth or Trish Mulvihill think of ways to get around that and to add emotion to the color of the comic. That's really the stuff that you have to think about. In an industry where the more pages you color, the more money you make, it's admirable that these particular people have chosen to slow down a little bit and make the inspired color choices."

The major problem with any aspect of the production of the comic book is when one part of the whole becomes obvious. When misused, computerized color can detract from a story and lessen its impact or obstruct its flow. "If you're working with colors on top of someone's pencils and inks, you have to do the right thing by that person. You can't go crazy and put in all of those stupid computerized lens flares. The penciler or inker is going to get the job and say: 'you've butchered my job.' A computer is only a tool, like a great set of magic markers or Dr. Martin dyes. It's not the technology that's important, it's the talent you have that you can channel through that technology.

"There are way too many choices on the computer; there are millions and millions of colors. I long for the old days of sh*tty paper where you could only choose from 64 colors. There is where I really excel, because I approach color and illustration like graphic design: you have limited choices and time, so you better be sure if you are only picking five colors on a panel that they better damn well be the right five colors."

As important as coloring can be to the overall story, sometimes readers do not realize the coloring is even there. This is the first sign of effective coloring; the reality the artist is presenting through color is so believable to the story that it is not even questioned.

"As a colorist, I have done jobs where I knew I was being incredibly clever with a scene—maybe doing a scene all in reds to show real violence or real anger and I knew I was doing a good job. I don't think that the reader would say, "gee, the colorist did a great job." I think they'd say that the artwork was great and helped the story. And that's a compliment… it's the whole package.

Figure 14.2: Example of an active layout. The art style changes from rendered watercolor to flat shapes and high contrast light back to rendered watercolors. The colors are used well—from the figures to sound effects' typestyle.
As seen in Batman/Houdini: The Devil's Workshop, *painted by Mark Chiarello.*

R O U G H S   P R O C E S S

Like most artists, Chiarello plans his page layout before diving into the artwork. "I do thumbnails on typing paper... about the size of a baseball card. I put two on each page. The drawings on the thumbnails are incredibly rough and gestural, so much so that only I would understand what I'm looking at. If somebody else looked at it, they would not know what was what.

"I find the process of laying out the story the most important aspect of making comics. Comic books are about one thing—telling a story… it's not about the pyrotechnics of your art or the beauty of your art—it's about telling the story. I think that a lot of people have forgotten that, unfortunately.

"The thumbnails are basically telling the story in very simple terms. It's the bare bones of the story, which is really what you want to capture. So, to me, that's the real tough part. If you will look at the greatest comic storyteller of our time, Alex Toth, his stuff was so simple, it was almost like these little thumbnails, but blown up. There is no extraneous stuff involved. Every line, every background, every character tells a story and it's something that I really, really aspire to and I want to investigate. I am currently drawing… a ten-page gangster story which is the first non-painted sequential comics work for me. So I really want to investigate that as opposed to just telling the story. It's a step."

B A T M A N / H O U D I N I :
T H E   D E V I L ' S   W O R K S H O P

Figure 14.3: Cover to the Elseworld's Batman/Houdini: The Devil's Workshop, graphic novel. *Painted by Mark Chiarello..*

Chiarello and Howard Chaykin worked on *Batman/Houdini* together. "Howard and I are real good friends and we had wanted to work together for quite some time. He is a real fine illustrator himself and he keeps an eye on a lot of young illustrators… over the course of dinner one night, we kicked around a few ideas. Howard is very interested in history and is a big history buff like I am, so we kind of connected. We talked about the turn of the first century and about Houdini, about how Houdini was the first superstar in American history from a media standpoint. That was something that interested the both of us; so we pitched the idea and DC jumped on it, surprisingly."

"Howard is an interesting guy to work with because he's nothing like Archie Goodwin, who is the ultimate writer. Archie wrote straight: if he worked with Alex Toth, he wrote an airplane adventure story or if he worked with Steve Ditko, he wrote an otherworldly, kind of strange thing. Howard is the exact opposite. Howard is the writer and you are the artist and he wants you to know that. When you make suggestions like 'wouldn't it be cool to have a scene that takes place in Chinatown?' He will tell you 'if I can, I can and if I can't, I can't; but I'm the writer, so don't cross that line.' I got a two-page overview of the story [from Chaykin] which had the basic story and I
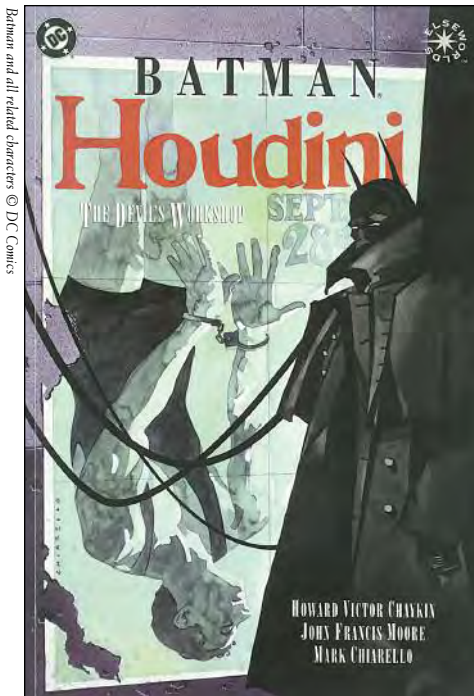
"I didn't want to do the obvious thing, I didn't want to do the big money shot of him getting stabbed. I wanted the time frame to be consistent. The bottom three panels on the tier are sort of like the ticking of a clock in that you know she is picking up the letter opener so it should be obvious what she has done. I think better artists—and I'm certainly not trying to say I'm a better artist—but the better artists try not to do the obvious thing."

Contrast this panel with the reaction on the following page, second panel. The action is a lot more violent comparatively, since a woman stabbing a vampire is not as painful as a vampire striking a mere mortal. Color is used to key up this scene.

"I wanted it to be very warm as he actually strikes her, and I didn't want to go with bright red, so I got as warm as I could without crossing that line of what the colors in the room would really be. I wanted to turn it up a lot, but you can't, you can only go so far."

Panels that are recognized more readily than the others that surround it can further storytelling. Chiarello believes in using focus panels to grab the reader's attention. "Conceptually, I like focus panels. When it comes to doing the actual job, it doesn't always work out that way. On the first panel of the right-hand page of the spread, I really wanted the shot of the Baron with the letter opener in his chest to be the money panel. I wanted it to be just the amount of pain that I put on his face, wanted him to look very nonplussed by having been stabbed, kind of monstrous."

The pacing of this page is even and deliberate. On panel 4, Chiarello opens up the panel by taking out the border. "Everything had been so structured. This monster just left the room and I wanted a moment of repose. It's obvious Vicky is in deep sh*t and she's realizing that now. She has been a modern, ballsy woman, but in that panel, you slow down a little. I always wondered when people read comics if they read the sound effects, too. Like in the next panel, you're supposed to hear the whirring of the plane. I think when I read comics, I subliminally skip over stuff like that, I just go to the picture and read the dialogue. So I was wondering if it worked, when she looked up and heard the whirring of the plane. I hope it's successful. There is a lot of guess work with doing this stuff. You kind of put your best foot forward and hope that the reader gets it."

Figure 14.6: Example of sophisticated shot selections and unique panel emphasis.

Focus Panels

Figure 14.12: (left) In Mark Chiarello's Terminal City *cover, the darks in the stairwell frame the figure highlights while the bright wall frames the figure's shadow to create focus.*

Figure 14.13: (right) In Mark Chiarello's Animal Man *cover, the olive green figure is pushed forward against a complimentary warm scarlet background.*
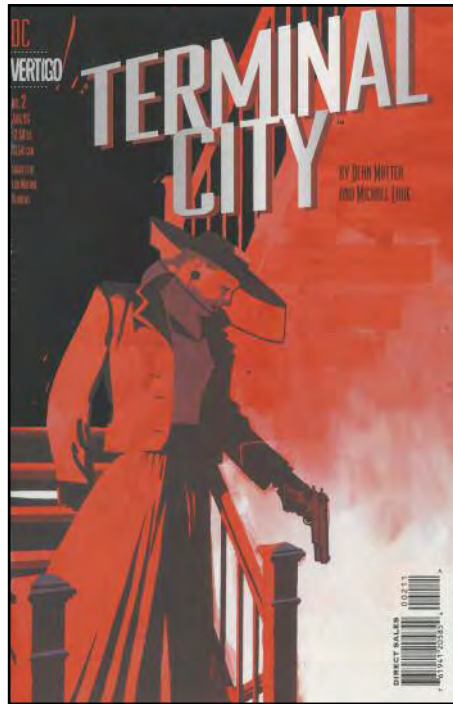
C R E A T I N G   F O C U S   W I T H   C O L O R

If the writing and art breakdowns are the body and soul of the story, then color would have to be the personality. Color adds depth and resonance to any narrative. Correct color usage in a sequential art narrative will not fix badly told stories. Correct color usage can help the viewer move on to the next panel or assist the reader in becoming more involved in the reading experience. Conversely, poor color choices can also ruin a good story.

Color choices should not be arbitrary.

Dynamic color schemes are a trademark of comics. Often, the imagery is powerful, explosive and "in-your-face," so the colors used often reflects this energy. Vivid hues have a powerful effect—they create tension. Too many vibrant colors in close proximity, however, create confusion. Controlling color controls visual interest and keeps the reader properly focused.

Also, a colorist should not rely solely on repetitive local color. In other words, merely using tans or pinks to create skin tones, the same greens for all of the trees or only one blue sky can be tedious to the reader. Lighting gives these colors *personality*. All objects reflect light and lighting helps place objects in a specific scene. The best colorists mix foreground colors with colors found in its environment to create a more diverse palette. Reflective light binds a scene together—object to environment.

When does a colorist go for the bright colors? Or when does a colorist go for muted colors? These decisions are determined by the storytelling. The colorist has the ability to heighten any moment in the story at any time. Focus created through color can accent a panel or an element within the panel.

All characters © Will Eisner

Figure 15.1: Example of the splash page, an Eisner invention.

I ENJOY AND LOOK FORWARD TO THE CHALLENGE OF REACHING OUT BEYOND THE CONFINES OF THE MEDIUM.

—

Will Eisner

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Will Eisner was born in New York in 1917, a son of a Jewish immigrant from Austria, who also was an artist of sorts. Eisner studied under anatomist George Bridgman and painter Robert Brachman before finding work on a comic book publication entitled *Wow* in 1936. *Wow* ran mostly reprinted newspaper strips, but it also ran original material by Eisner and even Bob Kane (creator of Batman).

When *Wow* folded, Eisner teamed up with former editor Jerry Iger to create a shop that would concentrate on publishing entire comic books. *Hawks of the Seas*, a Rafael Sabbatini inspired feature, was created. In 1939, Eisner, in an attempt to reach an adult, older audience, struck a deal with E.M. Arnold, of Quality and the *Register & Tribune* Syndicate, to write and draw an eight-page feature about a masked crime fighter for newspapers. It was in June 2, 1940, and *The Spirit* was born to become one of the most influential and original comic book features ever seen in print. It is here that he created *Blackhawk* and *Uncle Sam*.

Eisner's popularity is world-wide. He produced educational comics for the U.S. Army, invented the modern graphic novel with *A Contract to God* and created other novellas, including *Dropsie Avenue, The Neighborhood* and *Life on Another Planet*. He taught for seventeen years at the School of Visual Arts and is an acknowledged scholar in the field of sequential art—a term he created—having published the texts *Comics & Sequential Art* and *Graphic Storytelling*.

WILL Eisner

D E V E L O P M E N T

During his childhood, Eisner loved newspapers and sold them on the streets of New York City and brought them home each night for he and his family to read. This was during a time when the Sunday comics section actually devoted an entire page to each strip.

Eisner created his most famous strip, *The Spirit*, for the newspaper because he wanted an adult audience that could grasp the more political elements of the stories. It was Eisner's work with newspapers in the 1940s that led to the creation of that modern comic book staple, the splash page.

"The splash page is a result of a practical problem. I first was faced with the fact that here was a free standing 16-page comic book supplement dropped into a Sunday newspaper. Very similar to the TV guide that appears in your newspaper. And I had only 7 pages to tell my story and I had to do two things. First I had to capture a reader who may be flipping through the paper and the second thing is to be able to introduce my story quickly, to create a mood very much like you would do if you're in camp as a kid and you sit around the campfire and you're telling a ghost story. Before you go into the story you kind of set a mood and this is what I did very often. So the splash page arose out of that need. Of course as I experimented I created a better opening page, which everybody calls a splash page. It was the result of need and opportunity, and I had both. (Figure 15.2)

"At this point in my life and my professional career I was still quite young and the style, the technique was important to me. I was showing off. But at the same time I was interested in dramatic effect. One of the things about doing comics is that it's an on-the-job training thing. You're learning as you go along and the wonderful thing I enjoyed was that I could experiment along the way. If I was wrong, well, it was O.K. I would do another story the following week. I could experiment so I would try heavier shadows, I would try way-out formats. I did a story once where I cut away the whole side of the building and made each of the rooms of the building a panel in order to portray movement within a total whole. I was very influenced by live theater. So a lot of things you will see in my work comes from live theater."

Figure 15.2: (Left to Right) Ellen Dolan, the Spirit and Chief Dolan, created by Will Eisner.

P R O C E S S

The process Eisner employs in creating his page layouts differs from other artists: he conceives of the scene in his mind before composing the dialogue. "I don't like working from dialogue first," Eisner explains, "I've never worked from a script in all my years, even when I was running the studio and people worked for me.

"There's a lot of people in the field who are very successful and have status who believe that the first problem they must solve is to create an interesting page.

Figure 15.3: Will Eisner's process begins with with the 8¹⁄₂" x 11" penciled page.

Figure 15.4: The page ends with the 11" x 17" final, inked page. Balloons and type are inked first forcing the figures to adhere to the narrative flow.

I don't start out to try to develop an interesting or arresting composition. My composition and my page and the design of my page and the impact of my page is a direct result of the action that's taking place in the deployment of the figures as I tell that story.

"I have the story in mind and I generally start with the end of the story. I know that I have a man who is going to return to Mars after being frustrated in his attempts to integrate on this planet. Now what I do is try to figure out how best to tell that story so that it'll eventually lead up to that conclusion. First I make a laundry list like on the back of a envelope or a sheet of paper: 1, man arrives on planet; 2, walks into a supermarket; 3, gets arrested for pilfering; 4, so on and so forth. I go all the way down until I've solved the problem of how to get him to the end of the story.

"Then I make a small 'stick figure' rough of the artwork with the dialogue. The third step is to take the very readable roughs, put them on 8½" x 11" sheet of paper. This is where I compose the panels and plan the action page by page until I have what is a complete pencil dummy. Now those pencils are not good enough to be inked on but they're very readable and they're good enough for me to send to publishers or to an editor who edits what I'm doing. I might add a page or two pages in which I develop the character a little bit more, let you know a little more about the inside of the character. This is all done at the so-called pencil stage. (Figure 15.3)

"Then I take copy it onto an 11" x 14" sheet of 2-ply bristol board. All along the way I'm constantly modifying. On the bristol board I'll recompose a panel and put the balloons in position, because balloons in my way of working are integral to the composition of the panel.

"And then at that point my lettering will be put in, in ink first, positioned after I have composed a panel and placed the balloons. The balloons are in first so what you would see if you were looking over my shoulder is a page with roughed-in composition with figures and fully inked balloons."

When laying out a page, Eisner doesn't like to confine himself to a rigid preestablished format. "The only thing that I'm confined to is the rigid shape and dimensions of the page itself," he explains. "Very often the page to me is a meta panel."

The meta panel, another Eisner invention, is a page where the beats contained are a "synthesis of speed, multi-level action, narrative and the dimension of the stage is attempted." The hard border of a panel is missing in many of the panels on the page; the page itself becomes the unit of containment.

"I know that I'm working on an 8½" x 11" page and anything that I put on that 8½" x 11" page is in conformity to those proportions. So I work within that. Many years ago, back at my early shop, we were in those days producing comics as a packaging house. We were getting an average of 5 to 6 dollars a page, so in order to make money, make production economical, we preprinted blank panels on a page and let the artist tell the story within that. But that to me was very confining; I always ran into trouble with that. As a matter of fact, with the daily strip... *The Spirit* in 1940 and 1941... I had problems with the syndicate because I was defying the strip's rigid series

of four panels. One strip I did had nothing but a set of footprints running across the entire long script and The Spirit at the end of it to show that he had been knocked out or shot or something like that. It was a violation of the accepted norm by the syndicate. But, again, I enjoy and look forward to the challenge of reaching out beyond the confines of the medium."

Eisner believes every panel on a page moves the story forward rather than a key focus panel. "The panels and the layouts... are essential to the storytelling," he explains. "If the page calls for a whole series of movements then I will abandon the standard grid and create a montage. I don't regard anything as standing in my way between me, the emotional message, and the reader." (Figure 15.5)

"As I said earlier I don't start with the determination to make an interesting page. I used to run into that a lot listening to artists working for the major comic book houses back in the '40s and '50s... I found that they were being expected to create an interesting page on the theory that the book was on the newsstand and somebody opens up the comic book they hope that the excitement on the page will bring them in.

"And we have that happening a lot today where you get a lot of comics that have absolutely no story content but the producer is satisfied to create a special effect that is so exciting that the reader picks it up. A lot of artists working in the field today assume that their work is going to be bought on the excitement of their art rather than content of the story. And they're not entirely wrong. I can't quarrel with them about that, they have a point, but they waive the endurance good content insures.

"Everybody's talking about storytelling, but the definition of what is a story is very open, a disputable, arguable thing. Images do tell stories, but only briefly unless they are part of a seamless construct. Yes, the comic books that have sensational, dazzling art do sell briefly but rarely have endurance."

A major obstacle the sequential artist has to overcome is that it is difficult to show phenomena in two dimensions. "In film you can show emotion, you can employ sound and you can invoke emotion with music in the background. This obstacle, however, is the driving force of creativity." Eisner says, "in this medium, we

Figure 15.5: *In* Life on Another Planet, *Eisner continually pushes the traditional comic book concept of closure. Abandoning the grid, he turns to the montage to accent the movement of escape.*

All characters © Will Eisner

THE REAL THING

...THIS SCRIPT IS CRAPPOLA!!...JEEZIS! MEGAFILM IS PUTTING 175 MIL INTO THIS THING! THEY WANT A BLOCKBUSTER HERE!

OH, GAWD! NOT A KING KONG THING!

WELL THERE'S ALWAYS THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING

WE NEED **REALITY** HERE!...SPECIAL EFFECTS STUFF, EVERYBODY'S GOT! ...WHAT SELLS IS THE REAL THING!

N   I S   T H E   M E D I U M

The power of sequential art relies on vision to get a story across. "First comes the artist's vision of how to tell the story…" says Will Eisner. "Remember, sequential art is a story that is being unfolded in an interesting and visual manner."

Design is the means to get from one panel to another, but the more successful this flow, the easier the story is to communicate. That is the goal of all good storytellers—to ensure clarity when communicating. Design, however, is not a formula. Storytelling problems should be able to suggest very pertinent solutions. When you string these solutions together, the story will be told naturally.