

CREATIVITY IN THE SPACE BETWEEN

EXPLORING THE PROCESS OF READING GRAPHIC NOVELS

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Graphic novels are immensely popular with children. While some critics have denounced the format as superficial and trite, others have acknowledged it for its stimulation of reading for reluctant readers and boys. Reading graphic novels is a very complex process that combines decoding what is provided in the text and pictures with filling in the gaps in the story left by the author and illustrator. This article explores the immense creativity inherent in the process of reading a graphic novel, as the reader fleshes out the story world that is suggested by the author/illustrator in several panels of the children's graphic novel *Squish*:

Brave New Pond, and it suggests several activities to encourage children to be active cocreators of these stories in comics format.

Creativity

Creativity has been defined as the ability to form "novel combinations of old ideas" (Boden 1994, 75) and the ability "to produce work that is both novel (i.e., original, unexpected) and appropriate (i.e., useful, adaptive concerning task constraints" (Sternberg and Lubart 1999, 3). For a process to be considered creative, then, it must introduce new ideas that are applicable to the situation at

hand. Research on creativity has taken four basic perspectives:

- Product
- Person
- Process
- Environment (context) in which the creation takes place (Mooney 1963, 331).

Analyses of the creative product focus on how an object meets established criteria of creativity. The people-centric approach develops lists of personality traits in an effort to characterize highly

creative people. The creative process approach examines the work strategies and habits of creative individuals to determine whether there are replicable processes that others could use to become more successful, and the environmental approach explores the impact of one's surroundings on the process and products of creative acts.

Scott McCloud explores this issue in his detailed analysis of sequential art. He explains that comics work by leaving some of the story untold—the space between panels known as the “gutter”—so that the reader must fill in the gaps in the story. When readers encounter a comics story—or any story, for that matter—they are confronted with the task of making a cohesive narrative from fragments presented by the author. This process of “observing the parts but perceiving the whole...[is] called closure” (1993, 63). Readers must rely on past experiences and associations, and known pictorial and textual conventions of the comics genre to fabricate this unified story line, and, in the process, readers become cocreators of the ultimate narrative. This is why the reading experience is unique for different readers, and why rereading a story often elicits new emotions and ideas; the reader's cocreated story depends on knowledge and contexts that are constantly changing. As Wolfgang Iser explains, “It is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism” (1972, 284). The unwritten part of the book, then, is where the creative potential of the reader is evoked.

McCloud lists six kinds of transitions that can exist between comics panels in order of increasing demands of closure (i.e., the reader must do more “work” to make sense of the connections).

- Moment-to-moment transitions are the easiest for readers to understand, as the time lapse between panels is very short and usually focused on a single subject. For example, several panels showing a person blinking.
- Action-to-action transitions depict a slightly more extended time lapse between frames while still emphasizing one subject, and often show an initiating action and its consequence. For example, a panel depicting a speeding car on a bridge, and a subsequent panel showing the wrecked car in the ravine below.
- Subject-to-subject transitions move from a panel depicting one person or object to a completely different—but closely related—person or object. For example, a panel showing the speeding car on the bridge followed by a panel showing a person looking on with a horrified expression.
- Scene-to-scene transitions involve large time and space changes as the pictured scene jumps from one locale to another, often relying on the words for connection. For example, a panel showing the speeding car on the bridge followed by a panel of a mother anxiously awaiting her son's arrival.
- Aspect-to-aspect transitions add descriptive detail to a scene, allowing the eye to wander over various aspects, perspectives, or objects within a scene. For example, the wrecked car in the ravine followed by several panels showing other details of the setting (the creek, some wildlife in the nearby bushes, etc.).
- Non-sequitur transitions require the most closure on the part of the reader, as there are no

obvious, logical connections between panels. The reader is forced to extrapolate a connection and impose it on the panels concerned, thereby taking most of the initiative in generating a meaningful narrative (1993, 70–72).

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Mario Saraceni also addresses the connections between the panels—which he calls “cohesion”—and explains that creators of comics use several techniques to help readers make sense of these transitions. “One fundamental way in which two or more panels are linked together is by having elements in common. These can be the same characters, objects, buildings, background, or even very small details” (2003, 37). The repeated elements in the two panels help the reader understand the connection, and the new elements in the second panel move the story forward. Saraceni also mentions “semantic field,” a unifying theme or concept across multiple panels that helps situate

CHILDREN WHO RECOGNIZE THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN THE “STORYING” PROCESS ARE MUCH MORE LIKELY TO READ SINCE THEY FEEL A SENSE OF OWNERSHIP OF THE READING PROCESS.



all of the disparate panels in a common-knowledge area. His illustrative example is one of several different panels depicting running horses, spectators, and bettors, representing the semantic field of a horse race. Finally, Saraceni explains that connections between panels rely on the reader's ability to infer what has been left out, and that ability is dependent on the reader's "world knowledge and contextual clues" (2003, 52). For child readers, "the story should flow very smoothly, with many repeated elements indicating links among panels...for [children's] reading should not normally require any extra effort. In such comics, the gutter is only a blank, empty space between the panels, which readers can skip effortlessly. When there is a change of scene, normally there is also a caption which guides the readers in the right direction" (2003, 55).

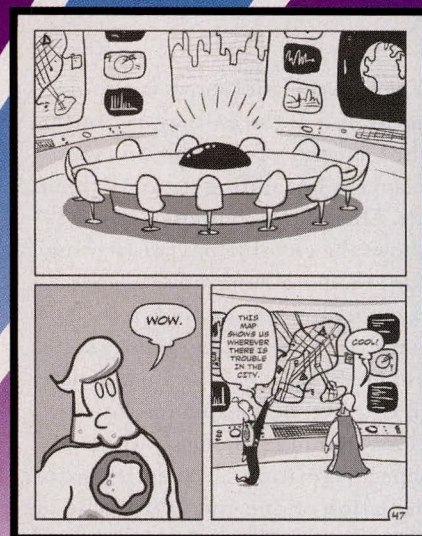
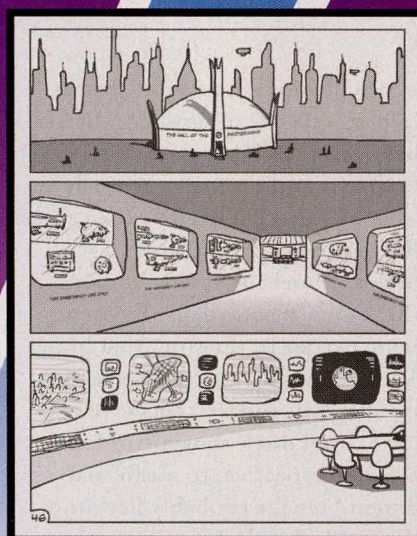
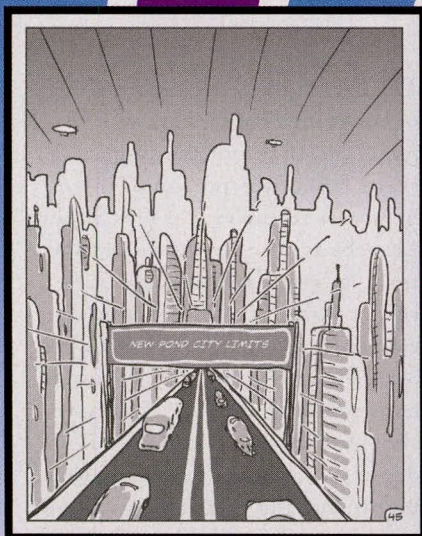
Children reading comics must merge what is given in the story with prior knowledge to cocreate a cohesive narrative, but analyzing what a child must bring to a story is difficult because each reader is unique and children have varying degrees of knowledge. My interest, then, is not to examine what is missing for a particular reader, but to explore more generally what creative interpretation the average child reader might need to bring to the process of forming "novel combinations" between several panels of the children's graphic novel *Squish: Brave New Pond*.

Creative Work in Interpreting Squish

Squish is the main character in a series of graphic novels for children, by Jennifer L. Holm and Matthew Holm, about the daily life and trials of a school-aged amoeba. In the second installment (*Squish: Brave New Pond* 2011), the intrepid main character must deal with the typical school issues of belonging to particular cliques, loyalty to friends, and bullying. Squish receives guidance related to his school encounters as he reads about a comic

book superhero Super Amoeba, who faces similar problems, though on a galactic scale. By imitating Super Amoeba, Squish learns to cope with his real-life problems. Squish's daily life is drawn in shades of green, while the superhero sequences are drawn in gray tones.

At one point in the story (pages 45–50), Squish wants to join the cool clique, the Algae Brothers. In his comic book, he reads how Super Amoeba has just been recruited by the heroic Team Protozoan, and how the superhero goes to the city to see the Hall of the Protozoans for the first time. This gray-tone sequence is composed of fourteen panels, but I will focus on only the first seven. The first shows the city with skyscrapers looming and, indistinct in the background, a road with cars vanishing into the middle of the picture and lines radiating from that central point, several blimps hovering in the sky, and the words "New Pond City Limits" in the middle of the image. Should child readers be familiar with comics' conventions, they would know that this is an "establishing shot," a distant viewpoint to set the overall scene. The second panel is one of



"From SQUISH #2: BRAVE NEW POND by Jennifer L. Holm and Matthew Holm. Copyright © 2011 by Jennifer Holm and Matthew Holm. Used by permission of Random House Children's Books, a division of Random House, Inc."

the city's skyline in the background with a moderate close-up of the Hall of the Protozoans. The repetitive elements that help readers connect these two images are 1) the two blimps in the sky (which, due to their unusual quality, signal that the second panel is the same city as the first), and 2) the city skyline, which, while not exactly replicated, is close enough to the original panel since "small changes will not obstruct the reading, because they are not considered as radical inconsistencies of the represented world" (LeFèvre 2009, 160). Understanding that an object remains the same despite small changes in size, shape, color, or perspective is called "perceptual constancy" and is evident in infants but develops as children grow. This repetition also requires that the reader have a sense of "object permanence," or the understanding that an object continues to exist even when removed from one's ability to sense it.

Knowing the convention that lines radiating from the center of a panel usually signify either intense light (which would make no sense in this instance) or movement, the reader surmises that, during the space

between panels one and two, the story characters have entered and traversed part of the city to find the location in the second panel. This moment-to-moment "zoom" effect is one of the easiest forms of closure for the reader due to the presence of repeated elements in each panel. This panel, however, does require some extra-diegetic (outside the story) knowledge from popular culture for complete understanding because the Hall of the Protozoans is a close visual replica of the Hall of Justice, the superhero meeting spot of the *Super Friends* in DC comics. Knowing this, readers assume that the building depicted in the second frame is a superhero meeting space, and therefore, they expect certain things (costumes, weapons, computers, etc.) to be associated with it.

Due to the central location of the Hall of Protozoans in this second panel and its contrasting color (white on gray) and shape (round versus the rectangular background), the reader's eye is drawn to it as the focal object in the panel. The open doorway of the building invites the reader forward and into the hall, making

the transition to the third image easier. Using the cues provided in these two panels, the reader fills in missing actions (journey across the city), forges connections between similar elements, relies on object permanence and perceptual constancy, negotiates the passage of time, and applies prior knowledge of illustrative conventions in comics to transition between these first two panels.

The third panel is of an interior hallway lined with cases of futuristic weapons and leading toward a room whose walls are covered with computer displays, so the assumptions from the prior panel are met in this image. The reader must make the leap from outside to inside (a more difficult scene-to-scene transition), with the assumption that the inside hallway and room are related to the prior shot of the building's exterior. The reader must also understand that time has passed, though this is a convention of most panels in comics (other than the aspect-to-aspect and non-sequitur transitions), as the characters are assumed to have walked into the building.

The fourth panel shows the room at the end of the hallway, repeating the elements of the table and wall displays, but adding detail to them all. One of the computer displays shows the city skyline, confirming the reader's assumption that the room is, indeed, located in the same city depicted in the original establishing shot. The final panel in this five-part sequence is a close-up of the table, an aspect-to-aspect transition made easier by the depiction of one end of the table in the prior panel and the repetition of the same computer wall displays as in the prior panel. The small lines radiating from the center of the table seem to make it "shine" adding an emotional element (a feeling of novelty, wonder, and awe), and the empty chairs seem to foreshadow an important meeting that Super Amoeba may be attending. The reader, then, must bring to the reading of these five panels: a knowledge of popular culture, a knowledge of comics and pictorial conventions, an understanding of space-time relationships, and an understanding that panels in sequence form a narrative just the way sentences in sequence do in word-only texts.

The transition to the sixth panel is by far the most difficult. Panel six depicts a mid-range close-up of Super Amoeba, eyes agog and mouth wide open, with a dialog bubble that reads, "Wow." The gaps between panels five and six are enormous, and the reader must work hard to make sense of this sequence. First, there has been no indication of Super Amoeba's presence until this shot, so the reader must infer that the preceding panels were not just zooming camera shots of the Hall of Protozoans or a slide show of static pictures, but rather the "camera" was inside Super Amoeba's head, and the reader "saw" those scenes through his eyes. In other

words, he does not simply appear in panel six out of nowhere; he has been traversing the city and hallways, and showing the reader what he sees. The reader, then, must fill in the missing actions to get Super Amoeba from his home to the Hall of Protozoans. Knowing from earlier in the story that Super Amoeba can fly, the reader then reinterprets the first image of the city (panel one), shown from an aerial perspective, to mean that Super Amoeba probably flew into the city before landing and moving through the Hall of Protozoans.

The second difficult element of this transition from the fifth to sixth panel is the shift from a fairly emotionless series of images of scenery to a highly charged close-up of a character expressing awe. As Heike Jüngst explains, "Close-ups of characters' faces are very emotive....the character in question is designed for maximum emotive impact and often for maximum identification with the reader. Every feeling he or she has can be seen in the picture" (2010, 202). This emotional leap is mediated somewhat by the wonder suggested by the image of the shiny table, but the reader must still bring to panel six an emotional involvement that was previously nonexistent.

The third element contributing to the difficulty of understanding this transition is the lack of repetition between panel five and six; with no common background to help connect the two images, the reader is left to infer where Super Amoeba really is. Readers' new comprehension of the first-person perspective of the prior scenes helps them guess that Super Amoeba is in the Hall of Protozoans, but confirmation must await the following panel (panel seven), showing him with the computer displays in the background.

The fourth challenging element of the transition is that, with panel six, the camera perspective shifts from first-person to third-person, and the reader sees Super Amoeba for the first time in this series of seven related panels. A reader familiar with the comics conventions of "shot/reverse-shot" (which mirrors the turn-taking of conversation) and "shot/reaction/shot" (which sets a scene, then depicts a character's reaction to it, before moving on to a new image) would have less trouble with this transition because both are at work between panels five and six. The camera's shift from looking through Super Amoeba's eyes to looking at his face forms a "shot/reverse-shot," and the "shiny table/Wow/scene of Super Amoeba backed by computer displays" serves as a "shot/reaction/shot" sequence. Despite the aids given by the author and illustrator, the transition between panels five and six is a difficult one.

The final panel in this analysis (seventh of this sequence) depicts Super Amoeba and one of the members of Team Protozoan looking at a computer display on the wall. The Team Protozoan member is explaining "this map shows us wherever there is trouble in the city," and Super Amoeba responds, "Cool!" This final panel maintains the third-person perspective, so the reader is spared that change in the space between panels. While the camera angle moves to behind Super Amoeba—resulting in the need for the reader to make the mental shift of perspective—the repetition of Super Amoeba's hairstyle, cape, and gray-tone color let the reader identify him without difficulty. The appearance of the member of Team Protozoan requires some work to understand (Why was he not pictured in the room as Super Amoeba entered?), but the reader infers that he either

just arrived in the room, or he was with Super Amoeba the whole time, just out of camera view (i.e., Super Amoeba did not look at him). Either way, the reader gets a clear understanding that the two are now together in conversation in the Hall of Protozoans.

Conclusions

Despite being in a children's graphic novel, these seven panels begin to show the extensive creative effort that child readers must bring to bear on the space between panels in comics. They must fill in gaps in the action and negotiate changes in location/space, changes in time, altered points of view, and changes in the facial expressions and emotions of characters or the moods of different settings. They must also have acquired basic developmental proficiencies in object permanence and perceptual constancy.

Teachers and school librarians, as the purveyors of this format, can help readers of graphic novels enjoy the decoding process by exploring with them the ways they fill in the gaps in stories. Children who recognize their involvement in the "storying" process are much more likely to read since they feel a sense of ownership of the reading process. *They* are the ones who bring the story alive; *they* are the ones who get to add their personal touches to the unfolding story. One activity to showcase this process would be to have a group of students read a story (whether in graphic-novel format or not) and then ask each individually to describe more completely a particular setting or character. Asking students to "tell me more about...." is an effective way to get them to add layers of detail to an existing story. For *Squish: Brave New Pond*, librarians might ask, "Tell me more about what the city looked like that Super Amoeba

was flying through," or "tell me about the colors/smells/people/animals Super Amoeba might have seen while flying through the city." Librarians could ask students to "tell me more about what you think the Hall of Protozoans looked like," or "tell me more about how Super Amoeba felt when he first saw the Hall of Protozoans." Sharing these personal details with small groups or with the whole class then shows the uniqueness of each child's vision of the story. It is important to emphasize that no child's interpretation is "better" or "more correct" than any other's. *Each reader brings part of himself or herself to the reading process, and teachers and school librarians can celebrate that contribution.*

Asking children to draw several pictures that would fill in the gutter between two panels is another activity that would show readers what has not been covered by the text and illustrations. This storyboarding activity is a unique way to combine an art class with an ongoing literature unit. It is my hope that others will begin to explore this "space between" in graphic novels because, to paraphrase William Makepeace Thackeray, "...it is the unwritten part of books that ...[is]... the most interesting" (1945, 391).



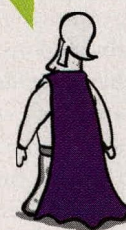
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