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Where Do We Go From Here? Multiliteracy and the Future of Narrative

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Where Do We Go From Here? Multiliteracy and the Future of Narrative

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English

by

Dustin W. McCrory

B.A. University of New Orleans, 2010

August 2013
Dedication

To my wife, Tara, without whose loving support I never could have completed this project.
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Abstract

Words on a page are insufficient vehicles for complex ideas. When images and words appear together on the page, as in comics, the process of meaning-making through narrative functions more efficiently. Building on this idea, we must establish a “graphic narratology” to understand the process whereby meaning is transmitted. Analysis of narratological conventions, as well as the conventions of mass-market comics, provides a framework for this new narratology.
Introduction

By encouraging distinctions between graphic novels, comics, and words-only texts, literary scholars privilege older forms of narrative that do not utilize graphic imagery and marginalize comics/graphic novels as an inferior subset/offshoot/genre of narrative. Despite these distinctions, universities and secondary schools are beginning to study comics in the classroom. Academia has granted certain “graphic novels” like Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1991), Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2000, 2003), and Neil Gaiman’s *The Sandman* (1989-1996) the elevate status of (high) literature – that is, highly valuable forms of artistic expression, transcending the category of mass-market publications. Comics are increasingly seen as texts worthy of literary and cultural analysis, but I believe there is a greater change occurring: this trend towards graphic-with-text production results from a combination of the postmodern complication of language and communication, globalization, and technological developments like personal computers and the internet.

The evolution of communication – from grunting and pointing, to pictures, sounds, then words – is probably not complete. We began with images on walls and progressed as far as we could before “upgrading” to a phonetic system wherein symbols represented sounds, while words “arbitrarily” representing ideas (Saussure). Perhaps, because of the development of certain technologies (the internet, computers, etc), as well as increasing globalization, we have taken this form of communication to its maximum level. I believe this is where graphic narrative enters the picture. Just as the evolution of humanity, and the evolution of human thought, necessitated the development of language, and eventually writing, so too must further advancement necessitate a more efficient method of communication. It is unlikely that our current method of a literary exchange of ideas is the ultimate (as in last or best) form.
Many of us are familiar with the recent success of the comic book movie: dozens of recent movies come from comics. Yet this is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Successful movie franchises are crossing media boundaries to become graphic novels; television shows become graphic novels, often online as webcomics (Burn Notice); popular children’s books have also spawned graphic novels (Alice in Wonderland). It would appear that commercial success hinges on the ability of an imprint to cross the media divide and become multimodal. Whereas older texts are being “translated” into graphic novels, newer texts are created with multimodality in mind. It appears these various modes of narrative are being rewritten as graphic novels for a variety of reasons, such as globalization and technological advances. Michael McKeon demonstrates how technology like the printing press changed society by making texts cheaper to produce and thus more available and affordable. The increasing availability and affordability created an industry with writers, editors, producers, and printers. The rise of the novel reflected the rise of the middle class, a consumer class who had the luxury of time (and education) which they could spend reading. I do not suggest the graphic novel prefaces a shift in class; rather that it responds to a change in society. Today, the world has become smaller through technological advances such as the internet; cultures separated by thousands of miles are brought into dialogue with each other. Today we can open a program and juxtapose images with text in moments. We can distribute this composition globally in an instant.

Yet a gulf remains between any two cultures in the form of idiomatic expressions, common cultural histories, even language. In Culture and Society (1958), Raymond Williams defines culture variously as “the general state or habit of the mind”; “the general state of intellectual development, in a society as a whole”; “the general body of the arts”; and “a whole way of life, material, intellectual, and spiritual” (xiv). Culture is a collection of complex ideas...
constructed through years of intellectual, social, material, and personal development. Perhaps the reason something ingrained in one culture seems so difficult to understand by another culture is simply (if anything is simple) the ancestral cultural referents, those common histori-cultural artifacts upon which a culture builds. Contemporary examples are memes, internet phenomena that build on common cultural referents, satirizing them, such as captioning a picture of President Obama, or subtitling a video of Hitler shouting. Comics function like memes, reproducing culture and evolving along the way. Whereas memes are especially idiomatic, relying on common cultural referents, graphic novels transcend this limitation, often instructing readers how to read their coded packets of information.

In this post-postmodern moment, we understand that meaning is fluid, and therefore it becomes difficult to fix ideas, especially complex ideas, with concrete, rational meaning. Likewise, language is dynamic, as anyone who has traced the evolution of a word in the OED can attest. To communicate on a global, intercultural scale more easily, we must invest ideas with something more than (arbitrary) words alone. Words are inefficient at transmitting, from one culture to another, complex, subtle aspects of another culture because meaning is often confused or lost in translation. Thus, a new method of ideological and cultural exchange has become necessary. Gabrielle Starr articulates the effectiveness of engaging various senses in the transmission of ideas and the encoding of memories. Additionally, as cognitive and neuroscientists demonstrate, the visual cortex is one of our largest sensory processors. Vision is our most important (evolutionarily) sensory structure. If, as the adage claims, “a picture is worth a thousand words,” perhaps we can illustrate the more complex ideas by marrying pictures with words. Children’s books are illustrated, not only to hold the child’s attention, but also to help cement the ideas built into the words.
By pairing images with text, graphic novels can do more than reinforce meaning; they create deeper, more solid meaning, rather than watch it slip away. Furthermore, the rise of the graphic novel demonstrates the beginning of a shift in values, from purely lexical texts, to hybrids of graphic and lexical modes. Graphic novels and comics have many tools at their disposal, such as the use of color and shape of text in a dialogue bubble to comment on a character’s tone. Comics artists like Scott McCloud and Will Eisner have published a variety of texts examining the various attributes of graphic literature using non-academic discourse, while scholars like Thierry Groensteen have analyzed these attributes in an endeavor to systematize graphic literature more formally. Hundreds of academic papers have likewise analyzed a variety of graphic texts often granted literary status, like *Maus*, *Persepolis*, or *Sandman*. Rather than analyzing one or two of these texts, this paper will demonstrate how effectively graphic narratives communicate by looking at mass-market comics. If these features exist and function at this level, across a variety of texts, the features become part of a system of graphic narratology, a new grammar of graphic literature analysis. Beginning with a thorough examination of the graphic novel – the history and evolution of graphic literary forms – followed by an analysis of the evolution of communication, as well as the “problem” of words and meaning, I argue that, rather than being an insignificant moment in cultural evolution, the graphic narrative explosion represents an evolution in human (cultural and ideological) expression. I will conclude by examining the literary value of graphic literature as well as the ways in which teachers and scholars can utilize graphic narratives to educate students more effectively. By synthesizing information from academic and non-academic discourse and analyzing mass-market art, we can identify a new system of graphic narratology. Thus, it becomes clear that graphic novels are not a
passing fad, nor are they an offshoot or genre of words-only literature; graphic novels are posited to be the next dominant form of literary expression.
The Graphic Novel

Comics have gained popularity over the past decades. What we think of as comic books, starring superheroes like Superman, Batman, The X-Men, or The Avengers, experienced a Golden Age in the mid-20th century. However, this is not when we first discover graphic narratives. Instead, this point marks a shift in the medium; it is the beginning of the graphic novel explosion. Researchers disagree about the earliest productions that we can call ancestors to or proto-graphic novels. Scott McCloud is a comics artist who identifies Mesoamerican artwork and Egyptian hieroglyphics as the earliest ancestors to comics, suggesting “the invention of printing” is one of the most significant events in the 3000+ year history of sequential art (15). Will Eisner also considers hieroglyphics, as well as Chinese and Japanese pictographs, to be the precursors of the modern graphic narrative. Drawing on the “development” of these writing systems, Eisner discusses the “ongoing simplification and abstraction of communicatory pictures” that result in the formation of modern ideographic systems. Eisner further compares the stylized artistic process in graphic narratives with calligraphy, further reinforcing the conclusion that comics is a language (Round 318). If we fast-forward a few centuries, we encounter William Hogarth (1697-1764), an artist McCloud credits as (one of) the first sequential artist(s). Hogarth’s engravings tell a story when “viewed side-by-side – in sequence” (17). Nearly a century later, a Swiss artist named Rodolphe Töpffer (1799-1846) produced “satirical picture stories” that utilized features (like panels and the juxtaposition of words with images) that we still see in contemporary comics (17). Groensteen suggests that, while these early artists
contributed to the development of comics, the medium owes as much to the “invention of lithography” (8).

Jorge Salgueiro engages with both McCloud’s and Groensteen’s assessments of the graphic novel’s antecedents, but concludes that the “art form” is recent, whereas the “communicative phenomenon” is ancient (381). Certainly, we see how these predecessors employ images as narrative. However, the popular form of the comic strip dates to the late-19th century with the Yellow Kid, while the “tradition of social critique via cartoons” predates even this (Martin 171). Elaine Martin compares the cartoonist with a court jester, “who under the guise of entertainment, could exercise sharp social critique” (171). Early political cartoons retain this social criticism, essentially narrativizing a moment in history. The Standard Oil octopus-monster and the Gerrymander are absurd cartoons, yet they are dense with meaning. Ole Frahm suggests this humor was beyond ironic, that the laughter was anything but light-hearted. Yet the “yellow press” became known as the funny pages quickly enough (6). These early comics were drawn with the technology in mind, according to Eisner, accounting for the heavy black lines that compensated for the “cheap newsprint or pulp paper” (165-6). It was much later when the simple four-color system and “hand-separation” allowed greater artistic stylization. Our current technology empowers artists to stylize their work further, while the process happens almost entirely digitally now (167-8). Eisner tells us during these early years of four-color printing the comics industry standard assumed a comics reader was a “ten-year-old from Iowa” (149). Adults did not read comics; those who did had lower intelligence. While technology has improved dramatically, many standards have remained the same. Webcomics, for example, delivered

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1 See also: Lynd Ward, an American who many comics historians ignore, produced “woodcut novels” using images to tell a story; Frans Masereel author of wordless novels including *Passionate Journey* (1919); Max Ernst’s *A Week of Kindness* (1934) (McCloud 19).

2 Eisner associates this with early images that “recorded events,” “reinforced mythologies,” or told “morality tales or religious stories” to the illiterate. This is thus the origin of comics’ use of stereotype (149).
through a digital medium, still limit what the reader sees. Instead of a page of panels, the reader has a screen of panels. However, the reader can potentially see “the entire graphic novel” or the collected works of a given artist through a digital archive (Zanfei 55-6). Anna Zanfei believes this is a positive development, technologically, because it enables rapid consumption of art, providing “immediacy” and “immersion into an already established community” (56). When considering the “yellow pages” and the ten-year-old Iowan reader standard, we see how comics were always products with mass appeal. Catherine Labio calls comics a “global genre” and a “cross-cultural dissemination machine” (124). If we consider the occurrence of graphic literature around the world, and the popularity of manga in the United States, we begin to understand what Labio means.

To continue, we need to understand exactly what separates comics and graphic novels from other art forms. What begins as a simple exercise of definition can become surprisingly difficult – primarily because of the debated usage of the term we are trying to define. What are we discussing, ultimately? It is the story, the idea, the information that an artist conveys through the medium. The physical medium might change; it might be electronic rather than physical. Other times, the medium might be both electronic and physical. Marvel has developed an application for smartphones that scans a physical comic’s page or panel and provides additional electronic content. Sometimes this content shows the development of a panel, or it can be an audio clip of the creators saying something funny. Perhaps medium is incorrect; perhaps form is a better term. What about the name for this form? Do we stick with McCloud’s collective singular noun, comics? What about graphic novel or graphic narrative? James Bucky Carter prefers the term “graphic novel,” which he defines as a “book-length sequential art narrative” that either collects (as in an anthology) a series of comic books in “a single story line (or arc), or
an original, stand-alone graphic narrative” (1). We see other critics disapproving of the term “graphic novel,” primarily because “novel” denotes fiction, whereas many graphic narratives are non-fiction. Chute and DeKoven argue, “Graphic narrative differs from the novel” because of its hybrid nature (769). They prefer “graphic narrative,” leaving “novel” to remain a different genre. Chute again rejects the term “graphic novel” in “Decoding Comics,” while David Coughlan cites Spiegelman’s rejection of the term “comics” because the tone is not necessarily comic (834). Spiegelman also “disdains the term [graphic novel] … seeing it ‘as a mere cosmetic bid for respectability’” (qtd. in Coughlin 834).

Other critics decry the qualifier “graphic,” suggesting the term connotes “sexual” or violent imagery (Martin 171). Furthermore, many “graphic novels” are shorter than a novel, disqualifying them from the term (171). Labio argues that “graphic novel” should not be an “umbrella term for a whole genre” but that it might be effective in delineating a sub-genre (124). She adds, “Comics’ … reminds us” of the “stubborn refusal” of academics to “accept popular works on their own terms,” that “‘graphic novel’ sanitizes comics; strengthens the distinction between high and low” (126). Furthermore, she disdains “graphic narrative” as a way to “privilege … the literary character of comics over the visual” (126). By calling comics anything else, we allow literary scholars to place comics in an inferior position to non-graphic literature. While I agree with much of Labio’s sentiment, I am more inclined to accept Chute’s distinction that the term “graphic narrative” is a better umbrella term because it maintains the implied length of “graphic novel,” but also accommodates “modes other than fiction.” Chute elaborates, “A graphic narrative is a book-length work in the medium of comics” (453). Frahm stands out from these, suggesting the term “bildergeschichten,” or picture-stories, arguing that comics are “neither literature nor art, they lack the depth of a novel, the richness of a painting, the density of
a poem, the detail of a photograph, and the motion of film” (1-2). While I agree that comics are distinct from these other media, to say graphic literature “lacks” implies it aspires to be any of these. However, it is a multimodal form, not just a single medium. It draws on many elements of representation without trying to be anything except informative or entertaining. Perhaps we should instead consider the form in terms of biological classifications of life: graphic novels are one species of the graphic narrative genus, which belongs to the family of comics, in the literature order, under the class art. For simplicity, I will use the term “comics,” but I will dispense with McCloud’s suggestion that this term will be a singular noun.

The debate amongst scholars and artist regarding the use of terms like comics, graphic novel, graphic narrative, and graphic literature, universally revolves around one form of narrative that can go by many names. So what is this form? We see the modern funny pages, the “comics” section of the newspaper, weekly. We know that the evolution of the graphic narrative form involved an iteration like these newspaper comic strips, but the form continued to evolve. Now we have graphic novels, which are only distantly related to comic strips, much the way humans are only distantly related to chimpanzees. McCloud defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). His definition excludes religious stained glass, film, and single-panel cartoons like The Family Circus (20-1). Eisner uses similar wording to define graphic narratives, yet his definition includes film. He considers comics a subgenre of the generic term “graphic narrative” (Graphic Storytelling xvii). Both McCloud and Eisner use the word “sequence” or “sequential.” In fact, the phrase “sequential art” is what excludes The Family Circus, and it is this singular phrase that surfaces in many definitions. The process of composing a narrative through “sequential art is the act of weaving a fabric” (Eisner, Comics 127). Hilary Chute and
Marianne DeKoven suggests the “verbal and visual narratives” combine in unique ways, transcending simple synthesis (“Introduction: Graphic Narrative” 769). Chute further defines comics as “a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks … register temporality spatially” (“Comics as Literature?” 452). Many prefer to think of comics and graphic narratives as more than a hybrid, but hybrid is not a pejorative. If a graphic narrative is a hybrid text-and-image narrative, it is neither text-based nor image-based; it is both simultaneously. Without both features working together, you would have an illustrated narrative or a proto-graphic narrative. The “hybrid” signifier sufficiently articulates the role of text and image working together to produce a richer narrative. Perhaps, then, a working definition of comics is “a hybrid form of text and image that creates a narrative sequence.” Essentially the form is both text and still images working together to tell a story; the story is not necessarily fiction. McCloud discusses comics in terms of “pictorial and other images.” What are these other images? What do we see, besides text, on a comic’s page?

The visual element of a comic’s page utilizes many conventions. Eisner says that the visuals in comics “replace text,” whereas “an illustration simply repeats or amplifies, decorates or sets a climate for mood” (Comics 165). These visuals tell a story that the words alone do not or cannot. The basic, most fundamental image in comics is the “icon” (McCloud 27). The icon can be both signifier or signified; it can be objective or subjective, diegetic or non-diegetic. The icon comprises comics’ genes. There are different icons and different ways to arrange icons to tell a story. The easiest icon to identify is the panel, or frame. The frame divides time and space. The duration of time within a panel is determined primarily by the actions that occur within its borders. Occasionally a single moment can last longer by exaggerating the physical space of the
panel (McCloud 99). The most basic frame is a solid black line, but the artist can vary this to demonstrate different moods. Eisner calls this a secondary function of the frame, wherein the “panel border itself can be used as part of the non-verbal language” (Comics 44).

![Image](image.png)

Figure 1. In the above page from *Batman: Through the Looking Glass* (2011), Batman has been surreptitiously dosed with a powerful psychotropic compound. His hallucinations begin early in the text, and the frame borders change to reflect his hallucinatory state of mind (Kieth).

The sequence of panels together on a page indicates a larger frame, the page itself. Occasionally a single page may be a frame for simultaneous actions that occur in smaller frames superimposed on the larger scene (Eisner, *Comics* 41). When the page is a frame’s border, this is called a “bleed.” Bleeds play with the temporality and “timelessness depicted in a scene” (McCloud 102-3).

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3 See also Julia Round, 317.
Figure 2. When the Phoenix encounters the X-Men and the Avengers on our moon in AvX Round 5 (2012), the panel depicting the cosmic entity bleeds off the page, suggesting the immensity of the creature in respect to the lunar surface and the vastness of space (Romita; © 2013 MARVEL. Used with permission.).
Words themselves are icons in many ways, too. The written words represent sounds or ideas, but are not themselves the sounds or ideas. Lettering, which can be either hand-drawn or typed, can assume a graphic role and affect the way words are spoken and perceived (Eisner, *Comics* 2-4).
Figure 3. In this page taken from AvX Round 7 (2012), Captain America’s shout, “Avengers assemble!” is written in a color and font that emphasize his volume and sense of urgency. Colossus, Cyclops, and the White Queen, recently taken over by the cosmic entity Phoenix, speak with a different voice than that of the Scarlet Witch. The orange and red text inside the
oddly shaped dialogue bubbles indicates both that their voices are identical, and that theirs is an ethereal, otherworldly tone (Coipel; © 2013 MARVEL. Used with permission.).

Most words appear in a kind of a frame known as a balloon. Balloons are an ancient convention, first seen as brackets depicting speech in Mayan friezes; “as the balloon form developed … it took on meaning and contributed to the narration” (Eisner, Comics 24). Depending on the shape of a balloon, the text inside can be spoken, shouted, or even thought. The background color inside the balloon can indicate tone as well as the identity of the speaker.

Figure 4. These panels from Hypernaturals no.2 (2012) show how the color of dialogue balloons can both distinguish one speaker from another, and indicate an audible quality to the speech. The blue balloons come from an electronic source on the “quantinuum,” an artificially intelligent version of the internet accessed through tiny blue quantinuum uplinks (futuristic smart phones or computers) orbiting each character (Walker and Guinaldo).
Words that occur outside of dialogue balloons are typically onomatopoeia. Salgueiro suggests onomatopoeia is one of several synesthetic effects used to represent sound visually (583). He divides these effects into four phonophoremes: logonarrative, logographic, iconarrative, and iconographic (585-6). Logonarrative phonophoremes are sequences of text that are not dialogue nor are they onomatopoeia (i.e. spitting, sneezing).

Figure 5. In *Kill Shakespeare* (2010), the “hngg” and “ungh!” represent grunts or moans, vocalizations that are not words, emitted by the injured warrior (Belanger; used by permission).

Logographic phonophoremes are onomatopoeia, “a sequence of letters that describe a sound,” rather than the use of letters to indicate a sound (logonarrative). Logographic phonophoremes can be indicative or iconic, and are usually non-diegetic (586).
Figure 6. In the panel above, taken from *The Dark Tower: Treachery* (2008), the word “bang” is an iconic logographic phonophoreme. It is iconic because “bang” has cultural significance as the sound made by a gun (Lee and Isanove; © 2013 MARVEL. Used with permission.).

Iconographic phonophoremes are non-verbal communications such as movement lines, impact (shock) waves, “seeing stars,” and musical notation (586).

Figure 7. In *Kill Shakespeare*, Falstaff enters a tavern singing to the “lusty wenches” a tune (presumably) of his own invention (Belanger; used by permission).
Iconarrative phonophoremes are more difficult to distinguish as they are often “background” or “foreground” sounds indicated through things like waves crashing on a beach, wind, or horses galloping (587).

Figure 8. In Astonishing X-Men (2006), Ord (of the Breakworld) crashes through the glass. The iconarrative sound is not so much written as implied (Cassaday; © 2013 MARVEL. Used with permission.).

Salgueiro specifically regards iconographic and iconarrative phonophoremes non-linguistic (593). These are untranslatable, and are unnecessary to translate. They contribute to comics’ ability to transcend culture, to universalize. However, certain cultures have utilized iconographic phonophoremes differently. McCloud identifies the way in which Japanese manga use movement lines and “subjective motion … [to place] the reader in the driver’s seat (113-4). Subjective motion in manga functions as an autodiegetic iconographic phonophoreme; the reader experiences the world as the subject; by contrast, American artists use “zip-ribbons” to indicate movement, leaving the background stationary (112).
Figure 9. This panel from *Hypernaturals* no.8 (2013) utilizes both types of movement lines. Bewilder has super-speed. From an objective view, she exists as a blur; subjectively, the world blurs as she moves at hyper speed (Walker and Guinaldo).
Besides these physical features of comics, there are a number of narrative elements that distinguish graphic literature from text-only literature. Among these are Groensteen’s terms “arthrology,” “spaciotopia,” and “braiding.” These are the ways comics function, according to his *System of Comics* (2007). “Closure” is the term McCloud uses to describe the dialogue between the reader and the image/text that connects panels across the gutters, which parallels Groensteen’s theory of braiding. Arthrology refers to the way the panels interact with each other in terms of the narrative. This “relation between” the panels can be “restricted” or “general.” Restricted arthrology is linear and sequential; general arthrology is the total network (Venezia 184). Spaciotopia is differently defined as the relationship between time and space (Groensteen; Beaty and Nguyen ix). Julia Round refers to the phenomenon as “a narrative morpheme that uses space to represent time” (316). What we see, in a series of frames, is the appearance of a linear progression. I say appearance because the reader imposes on the page of panels a subjective sequence. It is hard not to look at the last panel, just as it is difficult not to look from the verso to the recto pages of a novel, searching for clues to the outcome of a tense moment. Beyond even this, a comics reader perceives all the moments contained on a page, represented by panels, simultaneously. These moments cannot happen simultaneously; therefore, the reader must organize the panels and understand the limits of time contained within each panel. Cultural conventions, like reading left-to-right, top-to-bottom, are good ways to begin reading space and time in comics. However, some comics’ artists play with these conventions, disrupting the narrative flow, forcing the reader to work harder in order to participate in the construction of a narrative (Round 316). This ultimately discourages passive comics reading.

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4 See also Groensteen, *System of Comics* introduction by Beaty and Nguyen, and Venezia.
Figure 10. In *We3* (2004), Frank Quitely experiments with both bleeds and parallel transitions by using foregrounded panels to show both a sequence that occurs quickly and the smaller moments that make up the scene. There is no correct way to read these two pages, since everything happens so quickly. Quitely plays with narrative time by keeping the cat-cyborg stationary, while his target experiences the onslaught of his projectile claws.

McCloud reminds us that space and movement are similarly linked, citing the use of movement lines to depict continuous action in a frame rather than singular moments (107). Some artists might even use a sequence of panels to indicate motion, something akin to a cartoon flipbook, with a character bleeding through the panels. Typically, a panel is a moment in time, or a brief span of time (2-3 seconds perhaps).
Figure 11. In this two-page panel from *We3*, we see the cat again moving with lightning speed *through* the panels, faster than even the panels can show (Quitely).

It is worth noting that such temporal play encourages a plurality of narration, effectively telling multiple stories in the same temporal space. Paul Crutcher refers to this effect as “layering” (61). The effect of layering serves to produce a depth of story, as well as providing a narrative texture that is often missing in non-graphic literature.
Figure 12. In the sequel to *Who is Jake Ellis?* (2011) – entitled *Where is Jake Ellis?* (2011) – we see Jon Moore and Jake Ellis separated by unknown distances. Both are pursued by assassins, and we perceive their escape attempts simultaneously (Zonjic).
Seeing two things occurring simultaneously expands the reader’s perception of the world – more so than reading a few pages of a chapter and skipping ahead to a section entitled “Meanwhile…” Certainly, novels can tell two simultaneous stories, but rarely (if ever) can the form present these two narratives simultaneously to the reader. Yet another feature, which Groensteen identifies as braiding, describes the unique capability of comics. Introducing Groensteen’s *System of Comics*, Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen define braiding as “the way panels (more specifically, the images in the panels) can be linked in a series (continuous or discontinuous) through non-narrative correspondences” (ix). Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri elaborate on Groensteen’s theory, suggesting braiding and focalization work together by linking panels diegetically (336, 351).
Figure 13. In *Locke and Key: Clockworks* no.6 (2012), siblings Kinsey, Bode, and Tyler all consider the same series of events from the previous day. Kinsey is depressed and thinks about her recently murdered father; Bode (who is possessed by the evil spirit responsible for their father’s death) is happy to see his plan unfolding so neatly; Tyler, unsure of himself, holds the
one thing his father ever gave him (a fishhook) – in it he sees a possible solution. All three narratives are braided together; each plays a part; some (Bode, Tyler) know more than others (Kinsey, Bode) (Rodriguez; used by permission).

McCloud refers to the linkage between two panels, subjectively created in the reader’s mind, as part of the process of closure. He defines this psychological phenomenon as “observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (63). Closure could account for the temporal ordering of panels on a page as well as the links between braided frames. McCloud further identifies six types of transitions requiring varying degrees of closure by the reader:

- Moment-to-moment – requiring very little closure
- Action-to-action – single subject in distinct progression
- Subject-to-subject – stays within a scene or idea
- Scene-to-scene – uses deductive reasoning to transport us across space/time
- Aspect-to-aspect – bypasses time, shows different aspects of a place, idea, or mood
- Non-sequitur – no logical relationship (74)

The locus of closure is the comics gutter, the space between the panels. Starr’s explanation of multisensory images and narrativity discusses a psychological process similar to closure: “experiments have shown that a small blank space inserted into a recording of a well-known song may trigger auditory imagery” (279). Essentially, when we hear a song, like “The Star Spangled Banner,” and a gap is inserted, we sing through the gap. Through closure, we link two lines (panels) together. What’s more, the brain thinks it hears the song. This works in film as well as in comics, but closure in film requires less conscious participation from the audience (passive), “showing” the narrative at twenty-four frames-per-second. In comics, during closure, our brains actively create a visual connection between the panels. Starr suggests the visual component is stronger, that non-visual stimuli are difficult to engage visually (through text that is). Salgueiro argues comics are better equipped to handle these non-visual phenomena, although similarly handicapped “regarding taste and touch” (583).
Comics are a serial medium, traditionally, meaning the narratives are not complete upon publication. Tony Venezia suggests the process of closure allows readers to link serial publications, that the “inherent fragmentary quality” of comics resemble an “archival collage” that readers engage within an ongoing process of narrativity (190). Reading comics requires a different literacy, and analyzing comics’ narratives requires a different narratology (Round 316). We may still understand comics in terms of defamiliarization, since they are so similar to cartoons – a medium associated with youth and innocence – yet they often employ complex, mature themes (Martin 178). Consider Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, with its cartoony, cute mice, pigs, and cats. Superficially, they are simple cartoons; however, seeing emaciated mouse corpses stacked on each other works to defamiliarize the reader. We understand the mice are European Jews, and we can comprehend the horror of Nazi concentration camps. Yet seeing these images creates a new sense of horror in the reader. Round suggests, “The visual element transcends” the detachment of the reader, imposing “a sense of immediacy on the narrative” (323). We cannot help but become part of the narrative. That is what comics do. Horstkotte and Pedri remind us that the combination of verbal and visual narrative “complicates … narration and focalization.” This complication can be understood, even analyzed, through a new graphic narratology (350). Some comics are representational, they look like what they represent, they are iconic; others look like ideas of things, they are conceptual. Eisner privileges the iconic, representational image, asking comics artists to “emulate … real experience” and to “be constantly concerned with perspective” (Comics 93). This is a myopic view, but his opinion on what *should* be in comics does not undermine the value of what often *is* in comics. Even if an artist prefers to experiment with the conceptual, as long as the idea is not lost in transmission, the comic has value.
Communication

Communication is a fundamental aspect of a species’ interaction, socialization, adaptation, and survival. Human beings have developed a complex system of communication comprised of words, images, and gestures. If one analyzes the evolution of our communicative abilities, one necessarily arrives at a preverbal state wherein few (if any) complex ideas were communicated. An argument can be made that complexity of thought and complexity of communication necessitated or stimulated mutual adaptation and evolution. However, it is not within the purview of this paper to discuss this kind of chicken-and-egg scenario. Instead, I bring up our earliest ancestors’ ability to communicate to demonstrate the progression from a preverbal state to a simple, and finally a complex, system of communication. Early cave paintings like those in Lascaux, France, represent a phase of iconic communication, wherein non-abstract (concrete) ideas like animals and hunting could be depicted by simple visual representation. These paintings date back 17,000 years; our earliest evidence of written linguistic systems dates to nearly 5,000 years ago with cuneiform in Babylon and Hammurabi’s code. This transition from iconic communication to more abstract forms suggests a similar complication of linguistic, verbal communication. For example, one might simply grunt to vocalize the presence of prey, but in order to discuss laws of ownership and punishment, simple inarticulations would be dramatically insufficient. Egyptian hieroglyphics and Babylonian cuneiform visually represented complex, abstract ideas through metaphor, essentially.
Egyptian hieroglyphics progressed through a similar process of abstraction, as did Eastern languages like early Chinese and Japanese. Eventually, languages relied less on pictographs, and shapes began to represent consonant and vowel sounds in the West, while ideographs evolved to represent abstracted ideas metaphorically. Today we have hundreds of languages with their own rules composed of various alphabets. This represents a complication in communication necessitated by the slow abstraction of languages around the world. Just as what we wanted to express or were capable of thinking gave rise to new media of communication, we have recently experienced another new wave of thinking that likewise requires new media. Gunther Kress and the New London School identify “the ways in which we communicate [that] have changed,” calling for an engagement with this change in consideration of “texts and literacies and in our pedagogies” (Jacobs 182-3). This suggests a kind of sympathetic feedback between multimodalities and multiliteracies. Dale Jacobs discusses the changing “concept of communication” using the New London School’s term “multiliteracies,” which “engages with the multiplicity of communication channels and media [and the] increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity” (Cope and Kalantzis, qtd. in Jacobs 183). These multiliteracies depend on fluency in various discursive methods, including but not limited to the use of images and
icons to transcend language barriers. McCloud anticipates such multiliteracy may usher in a new era of universal communication (58).

Such a universal language is predicated upon – or perhaps possible because of – the existence of certain stimuli and phenomena. Cognitive scientists and linguists argue for the necessity of narrative for determining causal relationships. This process or tendency to narrativize, or narrativity, is an “adaptive tactic … correlated with a feeling of control and mastery” (Easterlin 629). Narrativity allows humans to anticipate, learn, and interact within a temporally linear fashion. That is, we understand the relationship of time and sequence from a given result or consequence. Such linearity was fundamental to the survival of humans in the ancestral evolutionary environment in terms of interacting with and understanding the complexity of the world around them (Easterlin 629). Early humans learned to organize information quickly and efficiently and retain ready access to this information. Through a process known as habituation, tremendous amounts of sensory information could be processed then ignored, freeing up precious cognitive resources to respond to new (potentially deadly) information. Our complex brains adapted structures specifically to filter and process this information. These structures became our various sensory organs like the visual cortex. Starr reminds us:

The human visual system takes up a proportionally larger part of the brain than other perceptual systems [and that] visual imagery, like visual activity, plays perhaps the largest sensory role in our imaginative economies and is often experienced as having the greatest vivacity. (277)

In other words, the visual cortex processes the greatest amount of our sensory perception, while memory relies more on vision than any other single sense. Yet when an image is associated with
other senses, through a simultaneous stimulation (i.e. audiovisual), the memories are more strongly encoded. Furthermore, when any of the information occurs singularly, the “entire multisensory image is triggered” (Starr 289). What does this mean for comics’ scholars? Simply this: any information perceived through a variety of sensory organs simultaneously works a more profound effect on the brain. Comics are by definition a multimodal format relying on multiple sensory processes. While primarily a visual medium, comics utilize certain visual phenomena that are already linked to other sensory organs. Comics link form and thought with any combination of sensory perception. Carter discusses a similar aspect of this multimodality through the lens of semiotics, citing two different studies that “found that words and pictures together produced better recall and transfer than either did alone” (6).

Other important aspects of universal communication are translation and the role of language. We often hear the phrase “lost in translation” and accept it as a necessary casualty in the ongoing battle of (multicultural) signification. When considering comics, however, there are usually multiple narrative threads. If we want to translate comics into another language, the only narrative thread translated is the text. The images and the narrative they convey are “considered not to be the translator’s concern” according to Salgueiro (593). This explains cross-cultural exchanges of media like manga, Japanese graphic literature that is widely read in the West. That which is translated, again, is textual, the narrative conveyed through speech or onomatopoeia. That which gets lost in translation will often be the subtle nuances of meaning, the idiomatic expressions, and especially the ubiquitous onomatopoeic text that engages the reader’s aural capacity. Salgueiro considers the relation between “a given language’s orthography” and phonetics, concluding. “All written onomatopoeia is linguistic” (584). This means that, while a sound may be easily imitated though speech, when it is written down, it is composed of
orthographic aspects of language and phonetic systems, and between any two languages, there is
not necessarily enough of a cognate to facilitate translation.

Figure 15. In *AvX Round 5*, the explosions cannot easily be translated into another language,
even if the two languages use similar systems (Romita; © 2013 MARVEL. Used with
permission.).

However, the human body utilizes a language that often requires no translation. Granted, there
are cultural nuances associated with movement, such as head nods and shakes. Given these, we
still recognize a nearly universal “body language” whose grammar and syntax are formed by
what Eisner calls a “non-verbal vocabulary of gesture” (*Comics* 103). Smiles, frowns, worry
lines: these all more easily identify or are associated with emotion or intent.
Figure 16. These gestures indicate a variety of emotions, but often the most expressive is the human face (Eisner 105, 107).

This brings us necessarily to the realm of the language of comics. We understand that communication and language are very complex. Yet occasionally we can transcend subjectivity and truly convey our ideas – with text alone at times, but more often by pairing words and images. Frequently, we need a more diverse vocabulary than words alone can provide. Images fill this void. Martin quotes Alissa Torres, author of *American Widow* (2002), to discuss the problem with conveying raw emotion:

> We were constantly bombarded by the same images over and over: the burning towers. And I was bombarding myself with images of my husband. That’s all I had … 9/11 was such a graphic event. Just writing about it wasn’t enough. I needed to take control of the images. (Qtd. in Martin, 173)

Chute and DeKoven recall Donald Rumsfeld’s difficulty “detailing the trajectory of his own response to prisoner abuse of the Abu Ghraib prison” when he said “words don’t do it … you read it and it’s one thing. You see the photos and you cannot help but be outraged” (771). Just as
“words alone” fail to convey complex emotions or events, so too can solitary images. It is from a sequence of images that we can derive meaning, forming a language much like sequences of words (Carter 12). Groensteen famously introduces his System of Comics (2007) saying, “Comics will be considered here as a language … as an organized ensemble or productive mechanisms of meaning” (2). He continues to claim that comics’ “simultaneous mobilization” of a variety of “visual and discursive” codes reinforces the unique language of comics (6). Taking this to the next step, I suggest that it is not simply a combination of visual and discursive modes, but that the visual is just as discursive, and the multiple modes weave together to form a complex tapestry of narrative and discourse. Roger Sabin echoes this belief, suggesting comics “constitute a weave of writing and art which has its own syntax, grammar, and conventions … Words and images can be juxtaposed to generate a mood,” and time collapses or dilates in the same space (qtd. in Martin, 174). The comics reader must not necessarily be fluent in all the ways one can communicate for the medium to be effective. Often simple literacy is sufficient because of the efficiency with which comics communicates or facilitates communication.

When discussing the interpretation of comics we necessarily must discuss the process through which the story is revealed to the audience. If narrativity is a biological function, an adaptation of cognitive capabilities passed down through countless generations, then the study of narrative may illuminate the potential of the comics genre. Chute and DeKoven introduce a special edition of Modern Fiction Studies, published in 2006, specifically comparing contributors linked by the cognitive/narratology bridge: “Walsh is primarily concerned with how a cognitive lexicon enriches our understanding of comics, Bredehof elaborates a version of comics own lexicon by turning detailed attention to the grammar” (775). While none of the contributors explicitly defines a “graphic narratology,” it is my focus to demonstrate how a synthesis of
critical approaches helps explain the rising valuation of comics. Narratologists like Tzvetan Todorov study the narrative structure of literature, paying particular attention to the grammar, narrative, perspective (focalization), plot, and story. Obviously, this is an oversimplification, but it is a sufficient springboard for analysis. In terms of structure, comics resemble traditional literature in many ways: in both, there are plot and story, various subjects, and a narrator (of sorts). However, many comics are empowered to deviate from this tradition. Perspective shifts from first- to third-person; time ceases to be perceived linearly; “telling” and “showing” functions blur together (Mikkonen 315). In fact, these features position graphic narratives alongside more traditional (oral, written) forms of narrative. By pairing images with text, comics can further reinforce meaning. However, this does not mean that images only provide structure for the text. In fact, Groensteen suggests that even equating the image with the text presupposes the primacy of text to the “vehicle of storytelling in general” (8). The visual aspect of any graphic narrative is important, it is primary; without a visual narrative – and that is what the images function as – the information would be purely textual or simply illustrated. Comics are a form of “visual polyphony [combining] two narrative within one contextual space” (Kanenberg 184).

We can understand these unique aspects of graphic narrative by analyzing the use of perspective, or focalization. Focalization is “the filtering of a story through consciousness prior to and/or embedded within its narratorial mediation” (Horstkotte and Pedri 330). Whereas we normally use the terms first-, second-, and third-person, modern narratologists like Gerard Genette began using the terms “heterodiegetic” and “homodiegetic,” with “autodiegetic” being a special case of the homodiegetic. Heterodiegetic narration utilizes a narrator who is not involved in the plot; homodiegetic narrators are involved in the plot. Unlike other narrative forms, comics
shifts between these three perspectives with fluidity. Round suggests referring to comics using either terms of perspective (first-, second-, or third-person) or focalization (auto-, homo-, heterodiegesis) is “inadequate,” calling for a “critical terminology that combines both methods” (326).
Figure 17. In this page taken from *Who is Jake Ellis?* we see Jon talking with Jake who only exists as a figment of Jon’s imagination. In the top panel we see only Jon, as would any observer in the world (heterodiegesis); the second panel shows Jon and Jake conversing, which no one would see since Jake is not actually there (homodiegesis); finally we see Jake through Jon’s eyes.
and Jon through Jake’s eyes (autodiegesis). The reader experiences first-, second-, and third-
person in these panels (Zonjic).

Of course, if one reads a section of dialogue from a third-person perspective or heterodiegetic
focalization, one may encounter the use of personal pronouns. This does not indicate the
narrative changes perspective or focalization; at best, it represents a narrative within the
narrative. In the example, the perspective quite literally changes, complicating the subject/object
paradigm. The interaction of the reader is what creates the narrative, allowing the shift between
perspectives. Horstkotte and Pedri discuss this:

Visual content in multimodal narrative is not marked with grammatical pronouns
and thus cannot be attributed to a specific person with any degree of certainty.
Similarly, the visual track in multimodal narrative is not in and of itself
temporally marked, and so all attributions are interpretive much more so than in
linguistic narrative. (351)

The reader imposes on the text the focalization, rather than being subjected to it as with
traditional, words-only texts. Each panel is distinct with its own rules governing time, space, and
perspective. The reader is expected not only to understand the shifts, but also to create them in
between the panels, in the so-called “gutters” or the gaps between the panels (Round 323). Eisner
disagrees with the collaborative nature of reading graphic narratives, requiring the author or artist
to show what the reader would see (Comics 40). His expectation is fundamentally flawed
because it does not account for shifting focalization. Granted, the reader projects a sense of
causality onto the gutter, linking frames together. However, there is no causal link for a shift in
focalization; following this shift requires a “substantial degree of reader participation for
narrative interpretation” (Chute, “Comics as Literature?” 460).
The reader does not just participate in the construction of the causality, linking panels in sequence; a certain degree of time is brought to the interpretation of a given panel by the reader as well. The sequence of panels on any given pages follows a predictable temporal linearity. Other more experimental comics push the envelope in these regards, confusing the reader; but we see this in words-only literature, also. McCloud refers to these complicated shifts between panels as “non-sequiturs” (74). Yet the juxtaposition of so many narrative moments simultaneously lends itself to a disruption of this linearity. This disruption plays with traditional notions of narrative, causality, and chronology (Bredehoft 885). Narrative time is a function of focalization in literature. Rather, focalization establishes time, yet in graphic literature, time is non-diegetic.\(^5\) No narrator establishes time; instead, the reader subjectively creates it by interpreting the juxtaposed panels of different temporal lengths.\(^6\) The rare moments of diegetic time are typically limited to establishing when something happens at a specific time or date (“Meanwhile…” or “Later…”). This is what Kai Mikkonen refers to as a “pure reflector mode of narration,” which can indicate flashbacks or flashes forward (308-9). In graphic literature, narrative flows unimpeded, even without the fixity of time. This is a curious aspect of graphic literature because in non-graphic literature, disconnected temporality jars the reader and disrupts narrative flow, creating a tension between the reader who must revise the narrative or resequence the events. In graphic literature, the reader can engage and disengage with the visual or textual information, progressing forward or backward in the narrative, slowly or quickly, through a focalized, non-diegetic temporal sequence. In fact, the use of images facilitates this process, as we read the two narratives individually and simultaneously. We track back and forth, reading and

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5 “The two-dimensional architecture of the comics’ page allows simultaneous presence of the page of panels depicting various points within a chronological or narrative sequence” (Bredehoft 873).
6 See also Salgueiro, McCloud, and Groensteen.
re-reading, learning new information, what to read (or what we should have read), and how to read it.

Figure 18. These images are taken from DC Comics “New 52” reboot of Wonder Woman no. 9 (2012), showing War and Death meeting for lunch. The second image, on two pages, shows a massive explosion that the reader probably would not expect to encounter. Upon turning back to the first image, we see a van arrive in the background, from which a man emerges, and then runs away. Presumably, this terrorist has driven his car bomb to the location. War and Death bring war and death with them wherever they meet. The narrative thread in the background may go unnoticed until the reader encounters the massive explosion, causing us to find other causal relationships between the gutters (Chiang).

Groensteen suggests the images in a graphic narrative are “irreducible,” as they weave a narrative thread independent yet crucial to the textual narrative: “the sequential image is seen to be plainly narrative, without necessarily needing any verbal help” (9). The images are not simple illustrations; they are another story, a separate narrative that coexists with the words on the page.
Like musical instruments playing different pieces of one composition, each is unique, distinct, and necessary. Together they create a different whole. Chute and DeKoven refer to this as a “cross-discursive” process, since the play between the two (image/text) narratives move the story forward (769).

The tools of narratology, when applied to graphic narratives, function adequately, but they need modification. When we modify these tools, we create prototypes for a new discourse. Focalization, temporality, plot – analyses of these concepts still apply in the strictest sense. However, examining a graphic narrative with a non-graphic narratological lens will necessarily yield disappointing results; certainly, our analysis will be inadequate. Focalization and perspective are not sustained processes in visual narratives, so we cannot perceive them in a manner similar to our literary discourse (Mikkonen 316). The panels’ juxtaposition on a page function like “windows onto another world” allowing readers a “more transparent, more immediate” access to the characters, events, and world of the author/artist’s vision (Coughlan 845). Building towards a graphic narratology, we understand the need for a new grammar to understand the relationship between time and space (spaciotopia), and the various other aspects of graphic literature (arthrology). Horstkotte and Pedri recognize the need for a narratology geared towards graphic narrative to account for a number of semiotic features that distinguish comics from still or moving images and verbal narrative (336). Groensteen reminds us that the scope of narratology is the “narrative genre” and insists we no longer exclude the visual stories (160). While he may not have been the first to articulate a narrative genre (see Paul Ricoueur), Groensteen is one of the first to call for a systematized analysis of the genre’s newest “species,” comics (8).
Words and Meaning

In our post-poststructural moment, we have come to understand, even expect, a fundamental disconnect between words and meaning. Semioticians like Ferdinand de Saussure describe the production of meaning as a process of signification. A sign is necessarily composed of two inseparable pieces, the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the sound-image; the signified is the thing itself. Structuralism became poststructuralism under the influence of philosophers like Derrida, who conclude meaning is endlessly deferred along a chain of signification. As meaning slips away from us along this chain of deferral, we experience texts deconstructing themselves while their messages are not transmitted. If a text cannot transmit a message, the process of communication breaks down. McCloud addresses not only this problem, but also the potential solution offered by comics. He argues that words and images were once closely related, but they began drifting apart as language became increasingly abstracted and images became increasingly realistic (artists focused on “realism”). McCloud suggests that a tension developed, necessitating a reversal of sorts, drawing words and images back together. He also analyzes shifting conventions in media and depictions of the world and other complex ideas, essentially placing comics on a continuum of media evolution unhindered by the convention of previous forms (150-2). By his definition, words and images combine to create meaning in seven ways:

- Word-specific – pictures illustrate the text;
- Picture-specific – words add a soundtrack;
- Duo-specific – words and pictures send essentially the same message;
- Additive – words amplify or elaborate an image (or vice versa);
- Parallel – words and pictures follow different courses without intersecting;
- Montage – words are integral parts of the picture;
- Interdependent – words and pictures go hand-in-hand, conveying more information together. (153-8)
McCloud further articulates the processing of time in comics, something comics readers learn to perceive as they read any given narrative. This analysis lacks a certain scholarly approach, however, leading Jacobs to “discard” the simplistic concept of meaning-making “in favor of an approach that views readers … as active creators of meaning, rather than passive consumers” (200). Jacobs elaborates the New London School’s concept of “design” as the primary process of meaning-making. Design consists of three elements: available design, designing, and the redesigned (184). Available design refers to the information brought to a text by the reader and the artist; designing is the use of this available information to produce meaning; the redesigned is the result of exchange between a text and the reader (184-5). Granted, readers have a more active role in the production of meaning (because they construct narratives across the gaps and gutters), but to discard McCloud’s image/text paradigms is premature. Because comics utilizes both text and image to convey information, individually and together, discussion of comics’ production of meaning must not consider graphic literature to be “debased” literature and the requisite multiliteracy a “debased form of print literacy” (Jacobs 182). The old cliché that a picture is worth a thousand words helps us understand Chute’s discussion of the “density” of meaning in *Palestine* (1993, 2001), suggesting the “thickness in verbal-visual form … transmits surplus information,” while the back cover refers to each page as “an essay” (Chute 459-60). From the simple cliché, let us transition to a discussion of the relationship between image and text.

Earlier we learned that the visual cortex processes more sensory information, but in personal interaction it is difficult to produce images. Languages developed to communicate the more complex ideas. Language has become the single most dominant transmitter of information in literature and the world. Language is both the sound and shape of words spoken and written. The debate between the primacy of the written word over the spoken word would be a red
herring here, since it is the abstraction of ideas, symbols, and sounds (language) that is important. Graphocentrism and logocentrism are tangential to this argument. In terms of writing, Eisner reminds us that letters of a written alphabet contribute to meaning. However, the way in which letters are written can change their meaning as surely as “inflection and sound level” (9).

Words are composed of letters whose origins are in symbolic representation. According to Eisner, as words became increasingly sophisticated, their components became “simplified and abstract” (8). There is more discussion of the abstraction of language in previous sections, for now let us simply conclude, “Words are the ultimate abstraction” (McCloud 47). This agrees with structuralist and poststructuralist claims regarding the arbitrary nature of the sign. Since meaning is fluid because of the “continuous interplay of text and context,” comics’ artists concretize meaning by adding stability to the relationship between the word and the thing, thus reducing the uncertainty of meaning (Smith 2). In fact, we have already seen how subjectivity is crucial in the process whereby we derive meaning in comics. Pauline Uchmanowicz refers to our subjectivity as “a pattern language [or] a process that collapses or subverts the space between signifier and signified” (366). The issue taken with this definition is the privileging of words as signifier. In graphic narratives, when images combine to create new, parallel narrative threads, the image becomes the signifier. Groensteen envisions a comics system thusly, asserting it is “the image [that] provides the example of a semiotic system devoid of signs, or at least not reliant on a finished system of signs” (4). If a word or image can be either signifier and signified, the realm of the sign begins to destabilize further. However, we do not exist in this Platonic realm of signs (Forms). In fact, to impose semiotic discourse on comics would obfuscate our comprehension of the object (Groensteen 2). In Coughlin’s analysis of City of Glass: The Graphic Novel (2004), he

\[\text{Cf. Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan.}\]
warns us that the “visual is as capable of misdirection as the verbal”; for him, this represents the “sign’s desire to play, not work” (845-6). If we modify the search for a system of signs, or stop trying to pigeonhole words and images as signifiers and signifieds, we may be able to discuss a system of interdependence and mutual reinforcement. Words and images are only insufficient when they are not linked; together they provide more structure to a narrative than either could alone. Seeking meaning through analysis of signification ultimately undermines the sign itself. Semiotics privileges the word, subordinating the image, which Groensteen calls “the linguistic hegemony of general semiotics” (10). We must remember that, in graphic literature, the image and the word work together, that images are “descriptive” and words “explicative” (Salgueiro 590).
Figure 19. In this page from Chew: Taster’s Choice (2011), the words on the page explain the premise, but the images provide a sense of what Tony Chu experiences when using his “powers” (Guillory).
The words and images work together to provide a different grounded meaning; they become a kind of “hybrid signifier” (Round 320). By undermining the semiotic tendency to create binary oppositions, we encourage graphic literature to engage the process of meaning-making both visually and verbally. Through body language, onomatopoeia, speech, and other visual elements, comics can communicate a diversity of meaning (Zanfei 58). There will be more discussion of these various elements, called phonophoremes, in the following section. By bringing text and image back together, we can engage in a dialogue with the ways in which comics or graphic literature engages this dynamic (Martin 170). McCloud refers to both as “icons,” saying that words and images are visual symbols that represent meaning. However, McCloud suggests they are diametrically opposed, aligning himself with the semioticians who diminish the communicative ability of images. In a way, McCloud disagrees with himself (Round 318). This is the essential problem with comics’ scholarship. I agree with Venezia that there is “tension between image and text” (185), but I disagree that the two are opposed to each other. We understand the information words and images attempt to convey more easily when they occur in juxtaposition. The tension comes not from their pull in opposite directions; instead, they are like magnets, whose poles repulse and attract each other. Both image and text are unique, but they attempt to do the same thing. By bringing them together, we generate tremendous force. The information has less chance of being distorted the closer the image and text get to each. Martin says, “Graphic novels … concretize literary ambiguity,” adding stability to the fluidity of meaning (172). When text and image interweave, and comics readers engage with them to construct meaning, audiences experience what Round refers to as the “hyperreal,” situating the reader as both subject and object (328). Comics “distill” images and words into “distinct cultural

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8 See also Hillary Chute; Pauline Uchmanowicz uses “biocularity” to refer to the way we read words as images and images as words (373).
"tapestries," according to Uchmanowicz, who suggests twenty-first century comics are universalizing, meaning they have the potential to appeal to a global audience, regardless of nationality or other delimiting factors (366). This is the hallmark of a new era of mass communication. In the introduction to *The Language of Comics* (2007), we learn the “balance of power between word and image … shifted in favor of the word” thanks to technology like the printing press. However, the power of the image to convey more information, as well as the technological advances facilitating the immediate transmission of images, creates a “holistic” style of communication (ix).

In comics studies, the realm of the image is not limited to pictures alone. To paraphrase postmodernism, everything is image. Even the space between panels, the void known commonly as the gutter, is a negative image that encourages the reader to create, to impose on the negative space, a sequence of events or a single action. However, since “each reader fills in the gutter in his/her own way” according to Round, “no two interpretations can ever be identical” (317).
Figure 20. In *Witch Doctor: Under the Knife* (2011), Dr. Morrow’s assistant, Eric Gast, defends the doctor’s position using ranged and melee weapons. Between the panels, anything could happen. The reader’s construction of *what* is unique to each reader’s personal experiences. What
happens beyond the panel in the bottom left corner that connects the middle panel to the bottom right? It is different for each of us (Ketner).

We may experience audience participation to a degree in traditional, non-graphic literature, but it is in the world of the comics that we experience the greatest amount of collaboration between reader and creator. Each artist has a style, and this style assists us in deconstructing the tension between signifier and signified (318). We see images no longer relegated to the realm of the signified, to the object of the signifier’s subject. Eisner tries to narrow the definition of image to “the memory or idea of an object or experience recorded by a narrator” (9).

McCloud refers to “pictures” instead of images, calling them vehicles of “received information” instantaneously transmitting information without the need for “formal education” whereas “writing is perceived information,” requiring training in a “specialized” interpretive process (49). These pictures are so easily recognized because, according to Eisner, they are “repeatable symbols” or “stereotypes” (91). While we may need background information for stereotypes to be effective, this information is readily learned through interaction with the world, as well as with other graphic narratives; it requires no formal education. Again, this only accounts for certain types of pictures. A line can represent an apple or a face, “these same lines can be used to represent smoke … or smell,” which McCloud calls a “visual metaphor” (128). They represent many things, thus we can begin to say that lines are essentially the simplest or most basic feature of a graphic novel. They can become words or pictures, concrete or abstract. Background pictures can also convey abstract ideas, like emotion, while the appearance of words in comics can convey complex ideas by changing shape, font, or color (McCloud 132-5). McCloud examines a more theoretical aspect of depiction, drawing a contrast between the “conceptual world” and the “sensual world,” placing identity in the conceptual world with other
abstractions. Artists tend to “de-emphasize the appearance of the physical world,” simplifying things so they enter the conceptual world (38-41). This echoes Eisner’s description of repeatable symbols. We can impose concepts on to images/pictures more easily as they become less specific. This leads McCloud to analyze icons (i.e. faces) in comics. The more abstract or less specific the icon, the more reader identification occurs, facilitating the transmission of the artist’s message. The more realistic the icon, the more distracted the reader will by “the messenger to fully receive the message” (37). In other words, the more we can see ourselves in the narrative, the more easily the information will be transmitted from artist to reader.

Salgueiro divides graphic imagery into four categories, or phonophoremes: logographic, logonarrative, iconographic, and iconarrative. We can place logonarrative and logographic phonophoremes in the “domain of the word” and iconarrative and iconographic in the “domain of image” (587). For him, although a face is iconographic, “no sign is absolutely iconic or symbolic.” Instead, we see the various phonophoremes tending toward either iconic or symbolic on a spectrum (583). To draw a comparison, Salgueiro’s icon exists in McCloud’s sensual world; the symbol exists in the conceptual world. Of course, they are not parallel. The following graph might be more accurate:

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9 Salgueiro later suggests, “The logographic phonophoreme is a type of iconographic phonophoreme which uses letters from an alphabet” (591).
For Salgueiro, onomatopoeia is indicative in the written language, but becomes iconic when paired with an image (584). Onomatopoeia is problematic, as we have noted earlier, but in terms of crossing cultural boundaries, translating this type of phonophoreme is only superficially difficult. Iconographic phonophoremes (like “natural phenomena such as the wind, rain, the sea or a storm”) may also be problematic because they do not necessarily represent the same thing to everyone, nor will they be recognized by everyone (587). Another example comes from manga, in which nosebleeds indicate arousal.

Figure 21. McCloud shows us four iconographic phonophoremes that are culture-specific (131).

However, these kinds of barriers are less significant, and readers can learn to “read” them simply by parsing through a variety of similarly representative texts. Salgueiro reminds us that “the relation between two different types of phonophoremes [is] a closed circle of mutual reinforcement” (583).

In an interesting side note, comics exist in a world of metafiction because “the words refer to the drawings [and] the drawings to the words” (Frahm 2). This sense of self-referentiality embedded within the text is emblematic of our postmodern moment. We are aware of the artifice of textual representation; thus, comics are, too. Ole Frahm suggests comics are a postmodern form in which “the signs are exposed as signs….We have to read the words, but at the same time
they are elements of the image” (2). We cannot see the multiplicity of narratives because they are woven together. Similarly, we cannot perceive a single thread in our clothes (unless that thread unravels from the cloth or we seek to find it). The thought balloon and the dialogue bubble are similar. We do not “see” them unless we actively make ourselves aware of them. Once we do, however, we disrupt the narrative flow and our interaction with it. When we ignore the artifice of the text bubbles, we employ a habituation of an otherwise jarring visual effect. Mikkonen discusses the way shape and location of these devices conveys narrative content such as character, mood, etc. (307). Other scholars analyze the panel, suggesting they are the simplest narrative morpheme of graphic narrative (Round 320). That is to say, the panel is the basic unit of narrative – a scene or sequence of action happening nearly simultaneously; the line is the smallest unit of this depiction. In a way, we can say that line is the alphabet, and the panel is the lexicon; perhaps it would be more accurate to say the line is the grammar, and the panel is the syntax. When one considers, again, the density of information that can be conveyed through a single device such as a panel or page of panels, elements like time or sequence and phonophoremes become habituated. Navigating the space and time in graphic narratives (Groensteen’s spaci topology) grants the reader greater control over narrative progress and linearity, but also requires a greater participation on behalf of the audience (Salgueiro 582-87). Coughlin suggests meaning is contained within an image and depends on “adherence to convention” or “verisimilitude,” echoing Eisner’s opinion of the responsibilities of the comics artist (848). However, I believe that Groensteen and McCloud are closer to the truth: “each image comes to represent metonymically the totality of this world” (Groensteen 11).
Literariness

The juxtaposition of image and text is not a modern phenomenon. Some of the earliest antecedents of the modern graphic novel date from the nineteenth and even the eighteenth centuries. Laurence Sterne experimented with images in *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767); Hogarth and Töpffer both produced prints pairing words and images. However, the consideration of graphic narratives having significant literary or cultural value is recent. Within the last fifty years or so, we have seen increasing numbers of scholarly works dedicated to understanding comics. Even more recently, within the past twenty years, we have witnessed the rise of a pedagogy devoted to graphic education. That is, educators from all levels are employing comics in their classrooms. The Modern Language Association compiled a collection of essays entitled *Teaching the Graphic Novel* (2009), edited by Stephen Tabachnik. Carter organized a similar series, *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel* (2007), published by the National Council of Teachers of English. In these, educators present lesson plans for curricula utilizing a variety of graphic narratives. The use of comics in education suggests an ability to bridge gaps, to make connections; graphic literature transmits information more effectively, thus students learn more and learn better, when comics are used in the classroom. Nevertheless, I think we should step back before we look at the current or future potential use of comics in educational institutions. What can we demonstrate about the evolution of the comics that might explain the trend towards a graphic education? Is it simply indicative of shifting cultural values?

It is important to mention that this shifting value is not merely a Western phenomenon. Manga have been very popular for generations, and many Western readers enjoy, even prefer, manga. Carter recalls an instance when he noticed a sixth-grade student reading a manga and
decided to poll the class. He discovered that “seventy-five percent had read and enjoyed a manga … and eighty percent knew what a manga was” (2). He warns that his poll was informal, but qualifies it by saying it represents students from a “tiny town in rural North Carolina,” rather than a major metropolitan area. Eisner’s publications include a comics-based evaluation of graphic literature, which probably influenced McCloud’s desire to publish *Understanding Comics*, also written in comics form. Neither are “scholarly” texts, and both are written with an informal tone, but McCloud approaches a graphic narratology more so than Eisner, discussing a few aspects of graphic literature that demand serious attention. His non-technical language employs a surprising amount of reader-response and cultural criticism, such as when he discusses “audience involvement,” “viewer identification,” and the idea that “cartoons have historically held an advantage in breaking into world popular culture” (42). The idea that something of low artistic value, because of its representation of the changing mass culture, could influence the culture, reminds us of Raymond Williams. McCloud is a kind of organic intellectual who utilizes a pop medium and colloquial diction to communicate an intelligent, yet informal poetics of comics.

If we analyze the rise of one form, as McKeon does with the novel, we might consider comics to be Marx’s “simple abstraction,” a “deceptively monolithic category that encloses a complex historical process (20). Like the novel, comics are both a production and reflection of the historical moment in which it is instantiated. Just like the novel before it, comics are a unique representation of its historical moment. McCloud warns us that it is a “mistake to see comics as a mere hybrid” of text and image (92). It is much more than a hybrid, because the comics whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It is “equitable to literature, art, and film, but also, and more

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10 McKeon analyzes the rise of the novel by considering a variety of social and material factors. The novel is a production of an increasingly literate culture that desired information and entertainment and had the material capability to find and use this information.
importantly, [it is] unique or superior to those media (Crutcher 54). Crutcher argues for a higher artistic valuation of graphic literature because it is not as limited by its format, as other media are. In fact, graphic literature is better equipped to negotiate changing media than the other narrative forms because of its production as a multimodal text. Carter asks for increased critical attention for a form with “unique complexity” arising from its medium, the stories it tells and its use of character (69). The medium is collaborative and yet easily reproduced thanks in part to our current technology. Graphic stories are less superficial (or can be) as we can see with publications like *Maus* and *Persepolis*; the characters are iconic (or stereotypical), easily identified, and understood. Graphic narratives possess all of the capability of non-graphic narratives, but they complicate and enrich the narrative process through the juxtaposition of images and text.

We can trace the advancement of comics to “innovations in the pattern of comics” that rely on a broad, multicultural vocabulary of “symbols and signs” (Uchmanowicz 382). The grammar of graphic literature relies on a shared global culture and human process that approaches the term “universalism.” This is not to say that everyone can read the same graphic novel and get the same response or that anyone can read any graphic novel encountered. However, we can say that certain experiences translate more easily across cultures through graphic rather than non-graphic literature. As I said, have seen an increased scholarship dedicated to the understanding of a medium with a long history and a complex nature. Chute evaluates newer criticism that explores the comics medium, concluding comics is “a form that demands a rethinking of narrative [and] genre” (462). While some scholars focus on aesthetics or sociology as depicted in graphic narratives, others focus on the pedagogical potential of the form; fewer still, like Groensteen, attempt to establish a new critical tradition (Uchmanowicz). In
any case, the technology and the technique of comics production plays a minor role, as does the history of the form. We do not need a history of the graphic novel to understand the current iteration. However, some sense of “the historicity of comics” may be necessary to “delineate the specific set of material orientations that comics bring into the world (Lamarre, qtd. in Smith 144). In Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning (1999), we discover that “the arts alter the learning experience” by enhancing it (Carter 4). What we must do as scholars is understand the role we play in privileging non-graphic literature, or more specifically, the problems inherent in constructing this dichotomy. When the novel supplanted poetry and drama as the form with mass appeal, academics balked, likewise with the short story. Eventually, we learned to value these artistic forms. Let us anticipate the future shift towards multimodality and graphic literature. Chute and DeKoven ask for a more “lively and rigorous” dialogue about comics, that comics should take a more “central place in our conversation” (774-5). However, we should avoid grappling with the “how” or “what” of comics, warns Thomas Lamarre, because this results in evaluating comics’ utility (how it is useful) or distinguishing between genres (what type it is) (qtd. in Smith 138-9). Such superficial debate fails to explore the depths of the medium adequately. Essentially, we need a new discursive system.

Our contemporary historical moment is one of sensory polyphony and cultural multiplicity. We are bombarded with sights and sounds; we are asked to be culturally sensitive. One visit to Times Square or ten minutes browsing the internet and we experience this. Our technology links us in ways no one in previous eras could have imagined. The size of our world has decreased dramatically as information speeds around the globe in the blink of an eye and the click of a button. Never before has it been easier to have a tight community separated by thousands of miles. Each successive generation understands the world differently than the one
preceding. Today, “navigating the world around us” requires more than “print literacy” (Jacobs 183). We need cultural and symbolic fluency. This would be a modern heraldry, where a well-educated person, one who is worldly would no longer be well-traveled, but would be culturally fluent. After all, one no longer has to travel to another continent to immerse oneself in another culture. This is where graphic literature steps in, employing its versatile image/text hybridity with remarkable results. From graphic texts explaining other graphic texts,\footnote{McCloud’s \textit{Understanding Comics}.} to historio-graphic novels, the subject of graphic literature has extended beyond the superhero. \textit{The Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Fiction} includes comics, while \textit{The New York Times} Magazine in July 2004, called comics a new literary form, comparing them to what novels were: an “accessible vernacular form with mass appeal” (Chute 453). \textit{Classics Illustrated} produces graphic adaptations of classic literature such as Kafka’s \textit{The Trial}, Austen’s \textit{Pride and Prejudice}, and Dumas’ \textit{Count of Monte Cristo} (Martin 171-2). Frank Miller adapts a highly stylized version of the Spartans’ defense of Greece at the Battle of Thermopylae in \textit{300} (1998); Eric Shanower’s \textit{Age of Bronze} (1998 - ) presents graphic treatments of the Trojan War and Greek History (Scott 549-50). In \textit{Jefferson’s Lewis and Clark Expedition: Heroes Unlimited} (2007), Orville Evjen regales his readers with stories of the two American explorers. Art Spiegelman describes life in a Nazi concentration camp in \textit{Maus I} and \textit{II}. Marvel chronicles the experiences of American soldiers in the Gulf Wars in \textit{Combat Zone: True Tales of GIs in Iraq} (2005). Joe Sacco’s \textit{Palestine} and Marjane Satrapi’s \textit{Persepolis} give us unique perspectives on life in the Middle East. Ted Nomura’s series on dictators includes Saddam Hussein, which more than illustrates his brutality. Several comics about 9/11 have been published, including Spiegelman’s \textit{In the Shadow of No Towers} (2004). In short, many political, social, and historical issues have been graphically depicted. While the above list is not comprehensive, it does demonstrate the diversity of subjects
comics is equipped to handle. These works are real, significant productions of graphic literature that provide multicultural education on global events. The stories are material productions of their culture as well as reflections of their cultures. In this way, comics can be said to be “processed by and to participate in the processing of history” (Venezia 193). To construct a new grammar of comics, we must understand the scope of the form.

The future of comics, its place in the literary tradition, is uncertain to be sure. However, many scholars anticipate the role comics will play in pedagogy and criticism. Comics are predominantly physical, but it readily lends itself to the digital world as webcomics. Eisner calls webcomics “a solid framing ground for new and developing artists” and a “financially feasible alternative to expensive print publishing” (Comics 151). Coupled with the limitless reach of the internet, we can easily see the potential for an inexpensive, popular, mass art form that reflects, transmits, and shapes culture. So, why the explosion in popularity and production? Simply put, technology has helped, but there has been a decades-long buildup of momentum, compounding exponentially. Eventually we may experience a world wherein comics become the new medium for information and entertainment. That is to say, comics will not replace traditional words-only literature, but it will certainly alter the way we interact with the world digitally and textually.

Comics information is synthesized by the reader in a process of closure and gap-filling; thus we may see a resurgence of an active search for meaning, rather than a decline of intellectualism (as critics of the comics medium suggest). Instead of encouraging illiteracy, comics will necessitate multiliteracy. In a conversation between Thomas Andrae, Scott Bukatman, and Lamarre, moderated by Greg M. Smith, they call for a “media theory of comics” rather than a study of the “semiotic phenomenological, structural, and aesthetics” or “representations” in comics (Smith

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12 Jacobs quotes psychiatrist Frederic Wertham from his 1953 *Seduction of the Innocent*; besides illiteracy, comics also encouraged “juvenile delinquency [and] abnormal sexual development (186).”
By establishing a new comics studies schema, we will no longer “nationalize” comics, like reading manga for its “Japaneseness or commentary on Japanese society” (144). Such treatment and division (genre studies) ignores the deeper meaning and potential of multimodal literature. A new critical discourse is developing, one that reimagines literary formalism, or synthesizes reader-response theory with cognitive narratology and cultural criticism. Umberto Eco suggests such discourse will analyze the “proliferation of tendencies, and levels, of which comics can be spoken” (qtd. in Chute 771).

We see multimodal texts and multiliteracies being addressed in the classroom, but educators like Jacobs ask for a more formal engagement with graphic novels to utilize their full potential more adequately (201). Comics experienced a Golden Age from the 1940s-60s; today we see a Golden Age of graphic education on the horizon (Carter 1). If a well-educated person is fluent in art and culture, as many have suggested, we must anticipate the shift to multimodal education. Citing a study by the Comic Book Project, Carter demonstrates the potential educational value of graphic literature:

- 86% of students felt the project helped them improve their writing;
- 92% said they liked their own stories;
- 88% said they look to pictures for clues in stories because of the project;
- 90% of instructors felt students’ writing improved;
- 90% of instructors felt that, as a result of the project, their students like to write their own stories. (5)

Further research published by TESOL Quarterly conducted by Jun Liu demonstrates that students “who received high-level text with a comic strip” outperformed students who received no such graphic accompaniment (Carter 6). By anticipating the shrinking globe and the needs of students, educators and scholars can work toward a pedagogy that trains students “to read the word and the world” (12). We are at the forefront of a tremendous wave, a shifting paradigm in cultural

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13 The Comic Book Project was after-school partnership between Michael Bitz, Teachers College of Colombia University, and Dark Horse Comics, Inc.
reproduction and representation. Comics scholars are among the vanguard, yet we are only “just beginning to plumb its complexities” (Andrae, qtd. in Smith 144). As the shift towards graphic literature takes place, scholars will need a system to analyze this new literature. This system must explain what we can gain from the literature, as well as why we need the literature.
Conclusion

Comics is a unique form, blending words and images into a hybrid signifier, transmitting massive amounts of information using a variety of phonophoremes, transcending cultural and linguistic boundaries. To say that comics is merely a mass-market form is to understate these capabilities. We understand that linguistic communication is an ongoing process, and we further see how comics have evolved over the past 200 years. As the words continue to change, images can help us reinforce what words reference. Furthermore, images can become icons that represent vast amounts of information, can become visual metaphors capable of communicating – almost instantaneously – complete thoughts and complex or abstract ideas. If we believe that a words-only text is the best form of communicating ideas, we must be ignoring a global trend to move past such limited forms of expression. The labels in our clothes tell us without using words how to wash them; a three-second jingle becomes an advertisement for a chain of fast food restaurants; the entire internet blends visual imagery with text; even video games will reference a goal by coloring words differently or juxtaposing the name with an icon. We cannot ignore this trend to push beyond the limits of words-only communication. Obviously, when speaking to one another, we will be thusly limited. We cannot travel around with a bag of items that communicate our ideas for us. However, our methods of communicating aesthetic or educational information do not have the same limitations. We exist in a multimodal world. If literature is going to survive, it must adapt. Actually, we do not have to demand literature adapt to changing global or cultural aesthetics or material conditions. Historically, this has always occurred anyway. For centuries, poetry and drama were the epitome of literary aesthetics; the novel and eventually the short story followed this. However, when one form became more popular, the others did not disappear. We still have poets, playwrights, and novelists – writers – who produce
incredible, beautiful texts. Comics artists are not replacing these other artists, but their form is rising in popularity. Perhaps the literary artist who can best understand this adaptability is the playwright, whose work also transcends words on a page. Drama has always been a multimodal form, open to vast interpretation and reliant on the participation of many individuals to construct meaning. What we see today, in television and movies, is the adaptation of this dramatic artist to new forms of expression. Similarly, we see other creative writers adapting to the demand of multimodality. I expect we will see a growing number of graphic narratives being analyzed in the classroom; some colleges and universities already offer MFA degrees in comics or graphic novel writing. What is to come in this evolution, this shift in narrative form, is largely uncertain. One thing is clear, graphic literature has cultural value, and its academic value is on the rise.
References


Vita

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