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Reading Time in Graphic Narrative

Visual art—paintings, sculpture, even work as vast as architecture—is often taken at first glance to be synchronic, apprehended all at once. We picture the *Mona Lisa* instantly in our minds. But ever since Lessing's *Laocoön* (1766), critics have acknowledged, even if they did not always feel this, that we need extended time to apprehend art, to read it. When we slow down to study the *Mona Lisa*, we become aware of the sinuous river winding away from Leonardo's model in the distant countryside above which she enigmatically presides, a watery ribbon of time leading to an indistinct elsewhere. The artist put time into the *Mona Lisa*; careful readers of the painting come to understand that. In my combined senior-graduate seminar called Graphic Narrative, one of the key tasks is exploring the representations and manipulations of time, a task that requires both discussion of theory and restraining the speed of the students' habitual viewing of images.

Although graphic narratives are typically composed of frames each one of which may (mistakenly) be taken as susceptible to instantaneous apprehension, graphic narratives as wholes clearly take time to read. Will Eisner, who is often credited with inventing the term *graphic novel*, which was the subtitle to his own *A Contract with God* (1978; see exemplary quotations in the *Oxford English Dictionary*), recognized the significance of temporality

to comics. He named the first important theoretical work in the field *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985). But the idea of sequence alone is inadequate to explore the subtlety of graphic narrative. For example, the time we spend with any given frame varies. Hence, it is not surprising that one of the most important artists whom Eisner mentored, Jules Feiffer, asserted in *The Great Comic Book Heroes* (1965) the widely held but limited view that well-achieved comics are “movies on paper—the final dream!” (68). Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* (1993), the most widely admired theoretical work on reading graphic narrative, rightly distinguishes movies, in which the viewer's progress from frame to frame is controlled by the director and the projector, from comics, in which the reader becomes a “silent accomplice” (68). But McCloud's view of the reader's role also needs refinement. According to McCloud, despite his discussion of the speed ribbons (or zips) that conventionally mark quick motion in a frame, “motion in comics is produced *between* panels” (107), in “the gutter” (66), the place between the frames. That is, when we see a fist pulled back in one frame and contacting a jaw in the next, the movement of fist through air happens in the gutter. Yet while this observation is often true, it hardly accounts for the wide variation in what happens.

Consider how different genre expectations and different degrees of information density affect the speed with which we read a given frame. In *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics* (1986), Frederik Schodt reports a study concluding that the average Japanese reader spends just 3.75 seconds looking at each page of a typical Japanese comic (18). This speed makes sense when one sees how a single sword fight, say, is represented over the course of twenty pages. The manga approaches the condition of a flip book. Yet in a complicatedly allusive and self-referential work like Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen* (1986–87), we find single frames that can hold our eye for minutes as we note and decode a wealth of half-understood detail. Time in graphic narratives, then, is controlled, among other ways, by the degree of information density and representational immediacy in each frame.

In text-only narrative, we can divide the techniques of representation roughly into description, dramatization, and summary. In description—say, a sensuous evocation of a bright and juicy early autumn apple—reading time is much longer than the real glance it represents. In dramatization—say, an angry “he said, she said” exchange between tense lovers—the reading time is more or less equivalent to the real encounter it represents. In summary—say, the “begats” in chapter 5 of Genesis—the reading

time is much shorter than the history it represents. We can say that in comparison with the time of what is represented, description is slow narration, dramatization is even narration, and summary is fast narration.

While poetic devices control rhythm at the most local level of language, which we may call prosodic temporality, the shifts into and out of description, dramatization, and summary—the shifts among slow, even, and fast narration—manipulate narrative temporality so as to produce a reading rhythm that exploits the relations between the pace of the narrative and the life of the reader. Description in narration is more or less equivalent to close-up in film; dramatization is more or less equivalent to drama in film; and summary is more or less equivalent to montage or symbolism in film, both being mechanisms to increase information density in general and to imply simultaneity or commentary in particular.

Comics, like film, can use all these devices to control the viewer's sense of time. However, because comics are not in fact movies on paper but a medium that allows readers to control their own pacing and progress forward and backward, even more can be done. In Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000), we find sequences in which the narrative, by the use of recurring images, offers visual flashback, undercutting Feiffer's assertion that comic books are "too immediate an experience to subjugate the reader to a past tense" (33). (Eisner also violates his protégé's dictum by writing *A Contract with God* in the past tense.) At one point Ware uses the form of genealogical charts, the cells of which have tiny graphics rather than names and dates, to go back through the generations that led to his title character's fraught meeting with an adult sister he never knew he had. The charts cover two wordless, facing pages; they take at least five minutes to read as we construct the narrative segments for each. And those five minutes span generations. McCloud is right that much happens in the gutter, but much happens within the frame, too, depending on whether the viewer is whizzing through a manga, decoding dense symbolism, or constructing backstory.

In a more extended theoretical essay, I tried to capture these relations in a table:

Narrative Temporality	Literature	Painting
Slow	Description	Complexity
Even	Dramatization	Representation
Fast	Summary	Symbolism

For our purposes, *painting* can be taken to mean wordless, single-frame comics. Of course, when we mix the literal (made of words) with the graphic (made of images), as in most comics, the choices available to the artist are even more numerous and subtle.

"My father went to the store the day he was shot" is a simple past. "My father always went to the store on Tuesdays" is an iterative past, a statement about something that recurred in the past. One of the devices for turning simple past into iterative past in graphic narrative is letting the representation of the event bleed (that's the technical term) off the page—that is, the representation is without a drawn frame. The subtitle of the first volume of Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1973–86) is "My Father Bleeds History." On the last page of the second and concluding volume, the image is of the father's grave marker, the inscription showing us that the husband and wife lie together again at last, that both have finally died. The name above, Spiegelman, is that of the deceased parents and of the living artist. The stone extends upward to cover partially the two frames, in which the dying father, referring to a son lost in the Holocaust, says to his living artist son (his last words), "it's *enough* stories for now . . ." (136). The bottom of the grave marker is drawn in the white space of the page as a whole, with "1978–1991," the dates of the composition of the book, written beside Art Spiegelman's own name. The book is complete, or perhaps in some sense dead, but the image of the marker both covering and escaping the specificity of the framed dying father becomes a fact that reiterates eternally for the artist.

A practice that I have found repeatedly effective in my seminar is having students in turn focus on a single frame of a graphic narrative, speak aloud whatever they see and whatever they infer, including their reflective and proleptic understandings of how the frame fits into the flow of the larger narrative. When each individual stops, others offer alternative or complementary observations. When the group is satisfied, the next person takes up the next frame. This practice is much like going through a poem line by line and works splendidly for single images, like paintings such as the *Mona Lisa*; for narrative scenes in popular books, like *Watchmen* or *Maus*; and for formal experiments, like *Jimmy Corrigan's* genealogical spread. It also works for a Sunday comic (fig. 1).

We English-language readers are trained to think of past-present-future time as moving left-right-down-left-right-etc. on the page. As readers of comics and even of paintings on the walls of museums, we are trained to consider the frame as defining an integrated unit for our attention. Thus my

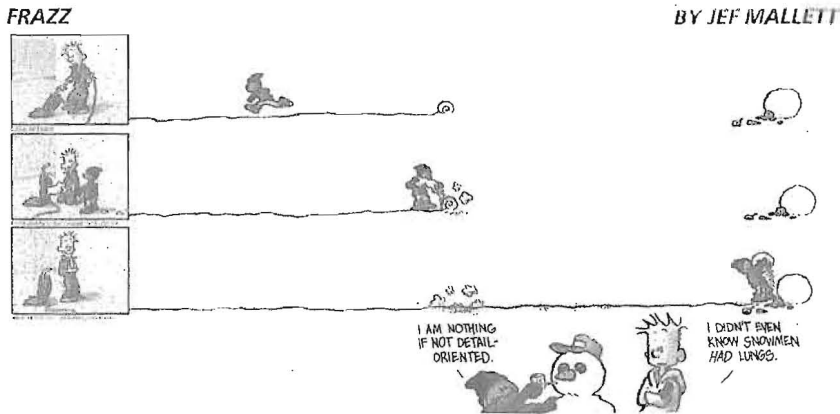


Figure 1. Complete *Frazz* comic from Sunday, 8 January 2006, by Jef Mallett. *Frazz* © Jef Mallett / Dist. by United Feature Syndicate, Inc.

students begin reading this comic by noting that a man is vacuuming in row 1, column A (fig. 2). Staying with that frame, they observe that the room has no door, paintings, furnishings, nothing. It is merely the idea of a room, yet one that connects the man to a world of domestic work. The vacuum cleaner's power cord disappears under the bottom frame, presumably connecting to an out-of-view electrical outlet elsewhere in an out-of-view house. We move our eyes right to what we will ultimately understand is column B to see a boy in winter clothing (note the hat and gloves) running against the temporal flow of our reading, back toward the house. The wavy line he runs above connects him to the house but, like the power cord, disappears at the frame. This frame, however, is not that for image 1B but for 1A. The running boy is unframed until stopped by the house. Already framing has thematic—and temporal—implications. The man is vacuuming back and forth and is enclosed, while the boy (note that both his feet are off the ground) is in the midst of an extended process, the extension of which is made clear by the length of the wavy line that stops in one direction and bleeds into some spiral (1C) and the negative space (1D) in the other.

On first reading, 1D suggests a break before 1E, which itself may be ambiguous. Later, on rereading, which naturally occurs during further classroom discussion, we realize that the unframed 1E represents the base of a snowman and the props for completing him. At first encounter, however, the objects of 1E are a mystery to us, unconnected to anything else in the strip. (Of course, if we let our eyes go down to 2E, 3E, and 4CDE, the mystery is resolved sooner rather than later.)

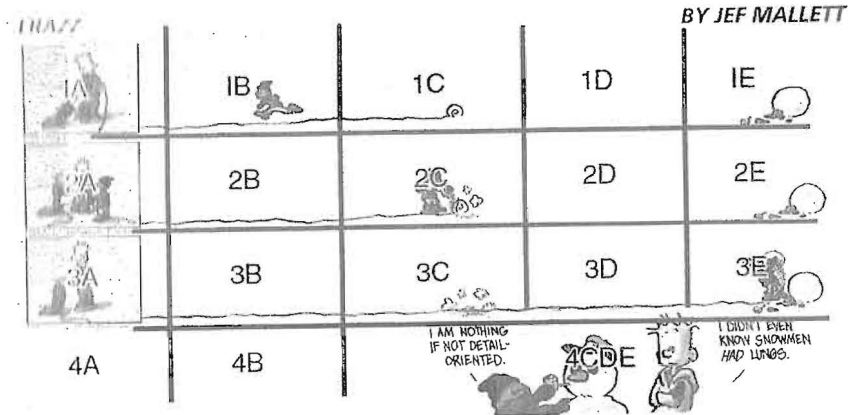


Figure 2. Complete *Frazz* comic with overlay defining notional frames. *Frazz* © Jef Mallett / Dist. by United Feature Syndicate, Inc.

The frame 2A shows the boy holding out his hand to the man and the man taking a dust bag from the vacuum cleaner. Given that the boy has just run in (wet spots behind him suggest he doesn't much care about the man's domestic agenda), he probably has asked for the bag to be removed instead of happening to be there to carry it away for the man. Our guess is confirmed if our eye drops to 3A, where the man, no longer able to use the bagless vacuum cleaner, stands in clear perplexity. If our eye follows its usual path, however, we go to 2C, where the boy does something that we may be able to decipher as emptying the bag onto a small snow boulder. Meanwhile, 2D remains untouched, like 1D, and 2E continues to show unblemished snow and immobile material.

Returning to 3A, we share the man's perplexity. Frame 3B looks like 2B, so nothing has happened there. But we see puffs in the air in 3C, finally the wavy line continued through 3D, and the boy putting the now larger snow boulder on top of the original one from 1E. Suddenly we realize that the wavy line has been the trace of earlier activity, rolling the snow boulder. That there is no such trace leading to 1E suggests that time—and wind—passed since its creation.

Skipping down to 4A and 4B, we see nothing, but once we see the close-up of 4CDE taken as a single, unframed image, we realize that the emptiness of 4A and 4B is different from that of 1D and 2D. The earlier emptinesses represent the work of wind; the later, a separation that puts the domestic scene literally out of the picture and also out of mind.

When the boy says, “I am nothing if not detail-oriented,” we don’t know why that is appropriate to the story we have been reading. But when the adult replies, “I didn’t even know snowmen *had* lungs,” we realize that there has been a temporal gap between 3E and our final close-up, a gap in which the man has put on a coat, walked out to the boy, and begun a conversation that must have included the man asking what he wanted the dust bag for and the boy explaining that he needed to add it in the midst of rolling his upper boulder. Then follows what we read. In other words, with the man’s last line, our minds race backward in time to reconstruct the whole story and resolve its mystery.

Viewed another way, we can see three different plot lines arrayed simultaneously on the page. The man pursuing and then abandoning his domestic chore, the boy intent on making the best possible snowman, and the patient snowman itself. Note the quickness of the running boy in 1B and the concentration in 2C and 3E. There are three different rhythms interwoven here, the man’s, the boy’s, and the snowman’s. The boy’s and man’s stories intersect in 2A and 4CDE; those and the snowman’s intersect in 4CDE. Jef Mallett controls the way our eye moves along the rows, offers opportunities for us to skip up and down the columns, and ends with a close-up (description, slow) that gives us the time to ponder the ironic humor that has just burst upon us.

In using this strip in class, I begin by projecting (one could also use handouts) a version that I have previously reduced to black and white. All the observations above arise from its discussion. However, by then showing the original, we can go through the strip again, seeking new observations. We find that blue is the natural color for the man at home, the boy outside, and even for the snowman whose body is realistically shadowed blue rather than black because it is colored by sky-colored light reflected up from the snow around it. The dust bag is yellow, as is the man’s coat and the corn-cob pipe. Yellow, then, becomes symbolic of dirt created by and creating adult human labor. Read that way, the green cap of the snowman is more hopeful than the yellow coat that the blond man donned to follow the boy. There is an overt critique of smoking here, of course, but a covert critique of modern industrial life that teaches even children to sully the pure snow, at least if the children are imaginative. In short, we can and should attend to the strange mirroring of society visible in the impulses of children.

Time in this strip exists in many ways, bound by frames, turned iterative by framelessness, made slower by complexity, as in 1E and 2E, and

faster by symbolism, as in 4CDE. By exploring how time works in first and subsequent readings and in differing paths across the rows and columns, students understand and explicate the timing of the joke—and of the more far-reaching critique that gives it substance—which grows not merely from sequence but also from the manipulation of the subtle mechanisms of narrative temporality, be they literal or graphic, and the reader’s participation in them. It is precisely these analytic principles that allow one to read a single frame, like the *Mona Lisa*, or an entire novel, like *Jimmy Corrigan*. We must always take the time to read time in graphic narrative.

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