

INTRODUCTION

I've been drawing comics for as long as I can remember. Like many comic book fans, when I was younger, I dreamed of becoming a professional comic book artist. But I was also extremely interested in computers, and comics quickly took a back seat as a hobby as I trained to become an engineer and later, a designer and product manager. In 2003, I decided to spend more time on my hobby by drawing a weekly webcomic with my former colleague Tom Chi. I wanted to make it funny, and to do so, I picked a topic I knew well—Human-Computer Interaction and user experience. That was the beginning of my intersection between my hobby and my professional life.

A couple of years later, Bill Buxton, who was working on his book *Sketching the User Experience*, met up with us at a CHI conference in Portland. Sketching was of course on his mind and during the course of our conversation, he asked if we'd ever considered using comics to aid in our designs. We hadn't, but the idea was intriguing. So intriguing, in fact, that I tried it on my very next project at Yahoo!. We presented about our experience to IA Summit the next year, just when Rosenfeld Media was getting started. Lou Rosenfeld, with his boundless optimism, suggested that the topic was worth writing a book about.

At this time, user experience was just finding its legs and a lot of energy was spent sharing tools of the trade: practical tools like wireframing, card sorting, user research, personas, and more. The idea of using comics to storyboard a use case wasn't new even then—there are examples from the 1980s and probably earlier of storyboards depicting how someone would use a hypothetical product. But it seemed that this technique was an inadvertent casualty of the field's maturation and many had forgotten the importance of sketching a story before any design work was done.

Since that first presentation, I was encouraged by those who used and adapted comics for various uses—at Adobe, eBay, Google, Adaptive Path, and many other organizations. I started seeing examples of comics in use in education, the military, and business books. The movie industry has understood the power of storyboarding for years, but now product creators were recognizing how they could be applied elsewhere.

Still, I saw a lot of hesitation and resistance. Mostly, people felt they couldn't draw or weren't confident they could convince their organization to invest time in comics. The goal of this book, then, is not to show off some brand new technique but rather to bring back an old tried-and-true technique and help you gain the confidence to use it in your work. I hope comics make their way into your already rich toolbox.

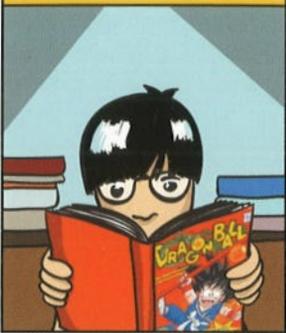
CHAPTER 1



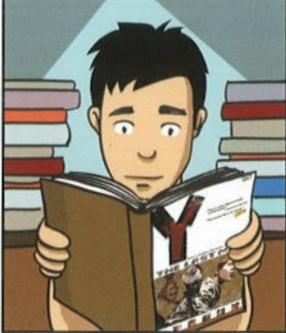
Comics?!



WHEN I WAS GROWING UP, I USED TO READ A LOT OF COMICS.



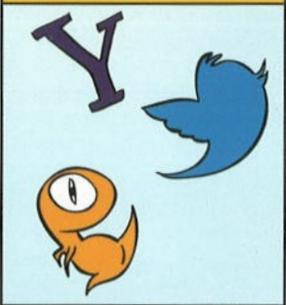
OK, I GUESS I STILL READ A LOT OF COMICS.



I ALSO STARTED PROGRAMMING WHEN I WAS 12...AND THAT LED TO MY CAREER NOW.



I'VE HELPED CREATE APPLICATIONS FOR WEBSITES AND PHONES.



SO I HAVE THESE TWO SIDES...



I NEVER IMAGINED THAT THEY WOULD EVER COME TOGETHER.



LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT THIS UNLIKELY MARRIAGE BETWEEN BUSINESS AND COMICS.

BEFORE THAT, A QUESTION FOR YOU: WHAT DO YOU THINK OF WHEN I MENTION THE WORD COMICS?



STAND-UP COMEDIANS? WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH BOOK AUTHORS?



SUPERHEROES? EXCLAMATION MAN IS NEVER SURPRISED!



CARTOONS? OR A WAY TO SHARE A VISION.



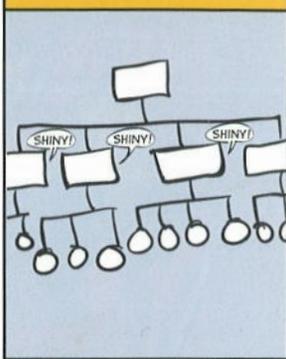
BUT COMICS CAN BE A DOCUMENT PEOPLE WILL READ...



ENGAGING MARKETING MATERIAL...



OR A WAY TO SHARE A VISION.



ALL OF THESE ARE GREAT EXAMPLES OF HOW YOU CAN USE COMICS FOR BUSINESS.



BUT LET'S NOT GET AHEAD OF OURSELVES.



A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, I WORKED AT YAHOO! LOCAL AND YAHOO! MAPS.

WE WERE IN THE PROCESS OF REDESIGNING THE PRODUCT.

LET'S FOCUS ON COMMUNITIES!

YEAH!

GOOD IDEA!

"COMMUNITY" WAS THE FOCUS. WITH A CLEAR DIRECTION SET. WE STARTED RUNNING FULL SPEED AHEAD.

GO!

BUT IT TURNED OUT WE HAD DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS OF "COMMUNITY."

I THOUGHT COMMUNITIES WERE ABOUT FRIENDS.

NO WAY! IT'S NEIGHBORHOODS!

SO WE WENT AROUND IN CIRCLES AND WASTED A LOT OF TIME.

DOES ANYONE KNOW THE WAY TO THE FINISH LINE?

WHEN WE DID FINISH THE PROJECT, WE THOUGHT ABOUT WHAT WE COULD DO DIFFERENTLY.

ARE WE THERE YET?

HOW CAN WE DEFINE THE VISION MORE CLEARLY?

REQUIREMENTS DIDN'T GET READ...

UH...I'LL FIND MY OWN WAY.

PROTOTYPES FOCUSED TOO MUCH ON DETAILS...

HMMM... WHICH SHOES ARE BETTER?

DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOU'RE GOING?

NO...

VIDEOS TOOK TOO LONG TO MAKE...

NONONO, WHAT'S YOUR MOTIVATION?

SO WE DECIDED TO TRY SOMETHING DIFFERENT. COMICS! LIKE THIS ONE...

I HATE THESE BUSINESS TRIPS. I WANT FOOD THAT ISN'T ROOM SERVICE. LET ME CHECK YAHOO! LOCAL...

SAN FRANCISCO...

LOOK AT ALL THESE GREAT RECOMMENDATIONS. THERE'S A MAP OF SAN FRANCISCO WITH THE LOCAL FAVORITES.

OH, I CAN SORT IT BY NEIGHBORHOOD! I THINK I'M IN THE FINANCIAL DISTRICT.

Refine Results
Neighborhood:
 Financial District (405)
 South of Market (750)
 Union Square (441)
 Pacific Heights (359)
 Castro (251)

WE PRINTED AND EMAILED THE COMICS TO A LOT OF DIFFERENT PEOPLE.



WHAT THE--?

WE SHOWED THEM TO TEAMMATES...



TO EXECUTIVES...



AND EVEN TO POTENTIAL USERS!

THIS PART SEEMS COMPLICATED.



I HAVE TO ADMIT, EVEN I WAS SKEPTICAL TO BEGIN WITH.



BUT AT EVERY LEVEL, PEOPLE WERE REALLY ENGAGED.

ESPECIALLY THE USERS.

AND THEN YOU DO THIS WITH THE ZOOMUPABILITY!



AWESOME!

COOL!

THIS IS QUITE NEAT.



BY TELLING THE STORY OF THE PRODUCT, WE WERE ABLE TO ITERATE ON THE IDEA BEFORE WE STARTED BUILDING.



THAT PART DOESN'T SEEM VERY REALISTIC.

WHAT IF IT'S NOISY?

THE COMICS BROUGHT USER EXPERIENCE BACK INTO USER EXPERIENCE DESIGN.



THIS IS MY EXPERIENCE

INSTEAD OF FOCUSING ON A PRODUCT IN ISOLATION...



WE WERE ABLE TO FOCUS ON HOW THE PRODUCT WOULD BE USED IN CONTEXT.



I'm sorry, could you repeat that?

AND EVERYONE WAS ON THE SAME PAGE.



SO WE ALWAYS KNEW WHICH WAY WE WERE GOING.



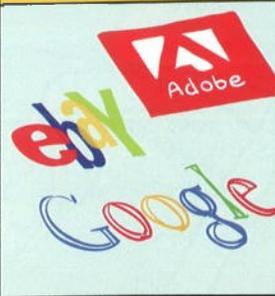
ALL IN ALL, WE WERE ABLE TO MOVE QUICKLY.



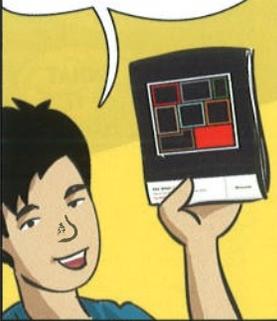
AND THAT WAS WHEN I REALIZED THAT COMICS HAD A PLACE IN THE BUSINESS WORLD.



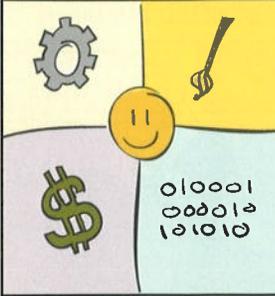
MANY COMPANIES ARE STARTING TO USE COMICS...BUT IT'S STILL UNCOMMON.



I'M HOPING THIS BOOK WILL HELP YOU USE COMICS, TOO.



NO MATTER WHAT YOUR ROLE IS, YOU MAY FIND COMICS USEFUL FOR YOU.



IF YOU'RE A LEADER OF YOUR TEAM OR COMPANY, COMICS CAN HELP YOU DISTILL YOUR VISION.



FOR MARKETING AND SALES, COMICS HELP GET THE ATTENTION OF CUSTOMERS AND PARTNERS.



DESIGNERS AND ENGINEERS CAN USE COMICS TO CRYSTALIZE THE PROBLEMS.



USER RESEARCHERS CAN USE THE SAME STORY TO ANSWER THE QUESTION...



PRODUCT MANAGERS CAN USE COMICS TO MAINTAIN FOCUS DURING DEVELOPMENT.



IN OTHER WORDS, NO MATTER WHAT YOUR ROLE IS...



COMICS ARE A POWERFUL COMBINATION OF WORDS AND PICTURES.



COMICS ARE A POWERFUL COMBINATION OF WORDS AND PICTURES.



THEY COMMUNICATE STORIES EFFICIENTLY.



THEY'RE INCREDIBLY EXPRESSIVE.



AND ARE JUST GENERALLY MORE ENTERTAINING!



THE RESULT IS SOMETHING PEOPLE WILL ACTUALLY READ AND UNDERSTAND.



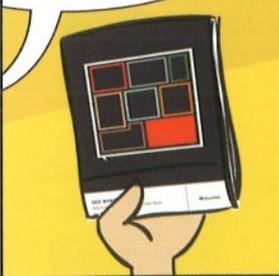
I'M NOT SAYING EVERYTHING SHOULD BE DONE IN COMIC FORM...



WHAT I HOPE TO GIVE YOU IS ONE MORE TOOL FOR YOUR TOOLBOX, AND YOU CAN CHOOSE WHEN TO USE IT.



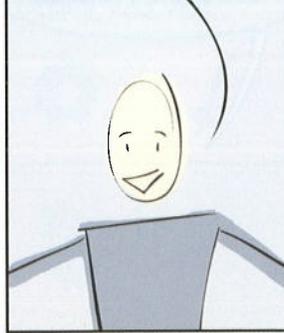
IN THIS BOOK, I'LL TALK ABOUT WHY YOU SHOULD USE COMICS AND WHEN TO USE THEM.



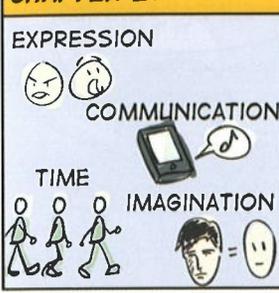
AND HOW YOU DON'T EVEN NEED TO KNOW HOW TO DRAW TO MAKE COMICS!



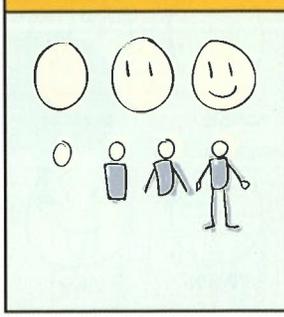
JUST AS LONG AS YOU CAN DRAW A STICK FIGURE!



I'LL START BY TELLING YOU ABOUT WHY COMICS ARE SO POWERFUL IN CHAPTER 2.



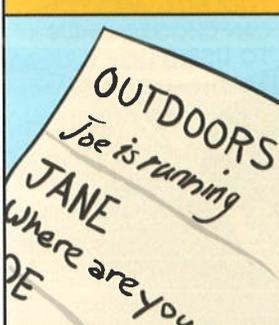
THEN IN CHAPTER 3, I'LL GO THROUGH SOME DRAWING BASICS.



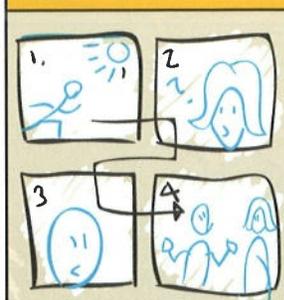
CHAPTER 4 COVERS THE COMIC CREATION PROCESS AND THE FIRST STEP: DEFINING WHAT YOUR COMIC IS ABOUT.



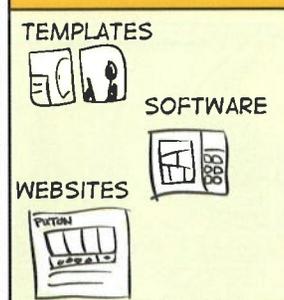
CHAPTER 5 IS ABOUT WRITING THE COMIC BEFORE DRAWING IT.



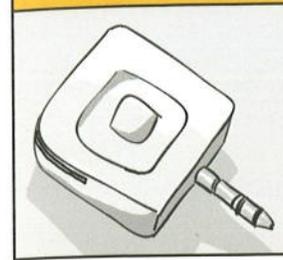
AFTER THAT, THE NEXT STEP IS TO LAY OUT THE COMIC, COVERED IN CHAPTER 6.



THERE ARE SOME TOOLS IN CHAPTER 7 TO HELP YOU MAKE COMICS MORE EASILY.



THROUGHOUT, WE'LL CREATE A COMIC TOGETHER FROM A HYPOTHETICAL EXAMPLE (BUT A REAL PRODUCT).



AFTERWARDS, I'LL TALK ABOUT WAYS YOU CAN USE YOUR COMIC IN CHAPTER 8.



AND LASTLY, IN CHAPTER 9, I'LL TALK ABOUT SELLING COMICS IN YOUR ORGANIZATION.



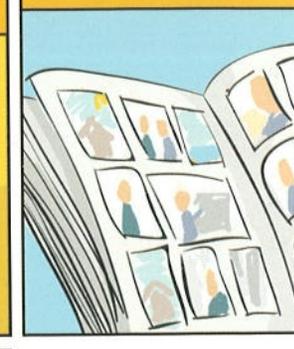
YOU'LL ALSO HEAR FROM OTHER EXPERTS ALONG THE WAY.



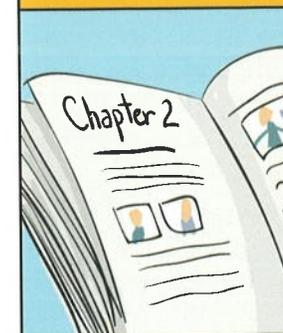
JUST AS I HAVE TWO SIDES, EACH CHAPTER WILL HAVE TWO FORMATS.



THE FIRST WILL BE A COMIC SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER.



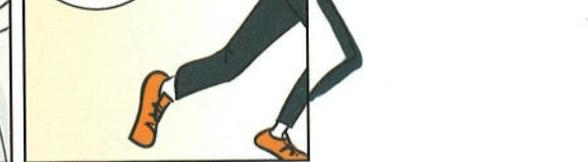
FOLLOWED BY MORE DETAILED TEXT COVERING THE TOPIC.



SO YOU'LL HAVE TWO WAYS TO READ THE BOOK!

WELL, I GUESS WE MAY AS WELL GET STARTED...

LET'S GO!



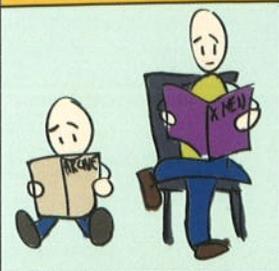
CHAPTER 2



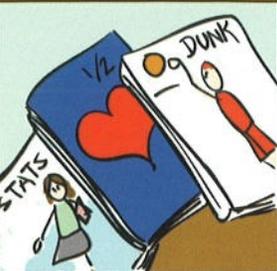
Properties of Comics

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COMICS HAVE HAD A LONG-STANDING WORLDWIDE CULTURAL IMPACT ACROSS ALL AGES.



IN JAPAN, COMICS (OR *MANGA*) COVER TOPICS INCLUDING SPORTS, ROMANCE, BUSINESS, AND MATH.



COMICS SUCH AS *THE ADVENTURES OF TIN TIN* AND *ASTERIX* HAVE BEEN TRANSLATED INTO OVER 80 LANGUAGES!



THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH COMICS THAT ARE "JUST FOR KIDS"...



BUT RECENTLY, A SURGE OF COMICS TACKLING MORE SERIOUS SUBJECTS HAS EMERGED AND SHOWCASE THE POWER OF THE MEDIUM.



FUN HOME



MAUS

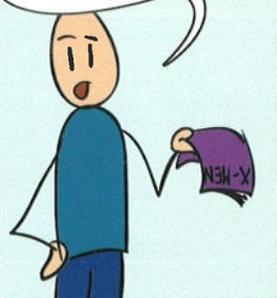


CANCER VIXEN

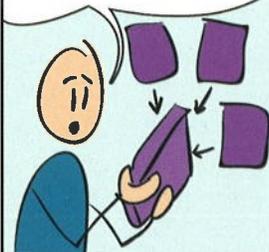
COMICS MAY TAKE MANY FORMS. *COMIC STRIPS* FIT IN LESS THAN A PAGE, LIKE THE SUNDAY FUNNIES.



WHAT WE CALL *COMIC BOOKS* ARE OFTEN MORE LIKE MAGAZINES IN SIZE.



WHILE COHESIVE STORYLINES ARE OFTEN COLLECTED OR RELEASED AS BOUND BOOKS CALLED *GRAPHIC NOVELS*.



WHATEVER THE FORMAT, THERE'S SOME COMMON VOCABULARY USED IN COMICS THAT I'LL BE USING IN THIS BOOK.



THIS BOX I'M IN IS CALLED A PANEL.



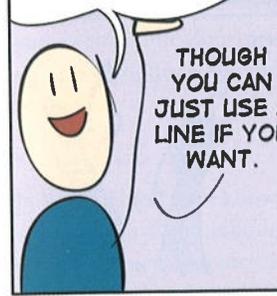
WHILE THIS SPACE IS A GUTTER.

THE *DIALOGUE* DESCRIBES THE WORDS I'M SAYING.



DIALOGUE HAPPENING OUTSIDE OF THE PANEL IS CALLED *OFF-PANEL DIALOGUE*.

THE THING HOLDING MY DIALOGUE IS CALLED A *SPEECH BUBBLE*.



THOUGH YOU CAN JUST USE A LINE IF YOU WANT.

MEANWHILE, BACK IN GOTHAM CITY...



THE TEXT UP TOP IS CALLED A *CAPTION* AND IS USED FOR NARRATION.

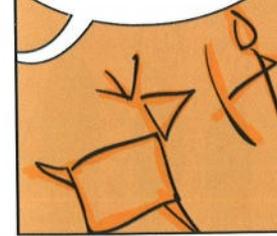
THAT'S IT! NOW WE CAN TALK ABOUT COMICS.



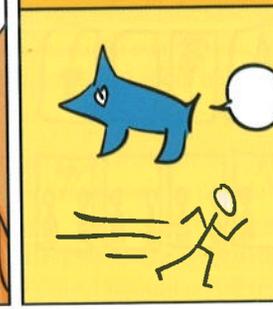
LET'S TALK ABOUT *WHY* COMICS ARE POWERFUL. I BREAK IT UP INTO FOUR CATEGORIES.

1. COMMUNICATION

IF COMICS ARE SEQUENTIAL ART, THEN CAVE PAINTINGS MIGHT BE THE FIRST FORM OF COMICS.



COMICS ARE A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE. ITS VOCABULARY INCLUDES MORE THAN WORDS.



A FEW LINES CAN INDICATE NEGATIVE EMOTION, CURSING, SHAKING, AND MORE!





The word “comics” carries many connotations. In North America, the word is often synonymous with “cartoons” and considered to be something for children. For example, cartoons might be associated with *Batman*, *Superman*, *Spider-Man*, and *X-Men* or with *Garfield*, *Calvin & Hobbes*, and *The Family Circus*.

Merriam-Webster defines comics (or comic) as:

- comedian (a stand-up comic)
- the comic element
- a: comic strip, b: comic book, c (plural): the part of a newspaper devoted to comic strips

and subsequently defines a comic strip as:

- a group of cartoons in narrative sequence

While Sunday comics are a defining part of many people’s experience with comics, it only represents a fraction of what comics are. In my opinion, this definition is indicative of how comics are underappreciated as an art form and a communication medium. In fact, comics have had a long-standing worldwide cultural impact across all ages.

Comics Around the World

In Japan, comics are known as *manga*. They are seen as a popular and mainstream form of entertainment, covering a wide variety of topics, including sports, fantasy, romance, business, and education. The audience demographic is just as broad as the subject matter.

When best-selling author Daniel Pink was living in Tokyo, he noticed how prevalent *manga* was. As an experiment, he attempted to walk a city block without seeing somebody holding or reading a comic book—and failed. He was so inspired by this medium that he decided to write his next business book, *The Adventures of Johnny Bunko*, in comic form. In Chapter 8, “Applying Comics,” we’ll hear more from Daniel about his book and why comics worked for him.

Comics are quite popular in Europe as well. The Belgian series *Adventures of Tin Tin* and the French series *Asterix* were so popular that they were both translated into over 80 languages. Their longevity is equally impressive: *Tin Tin* first appeared in 1929, and its collections are still being reprinted today, while *Asterix* has been around since 1959 and is still running!

Comics for Young and Old

It may surprise you as it did me that a comic book was named *Time Magazine's* Book of the Year. There's nothing wrong with comics that are "just for kids"; I still thoroughly enjoy comic strips such as *Foxtrot* or *Calvin & Hobbes*, as well as the occasional superhero comic or movie. But in the last decade, a surge of comics tackling more serious subjects has emerged that can only be described as art. The *New York Times* recognized this trend by starting a Graphic Books Best Seller List category in 2009.

Even if you don't end up drawing a single stick figure, I hope you check out some of these masterpieces. They can illustrate the power of the medium far better than I ever could and will entertain you at the same time. Their subject matter is as diverse as their art styles:

- *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, a memoir by Alison Bechdel, deals with sexual orientation, suicide, and complex family relationships. It's the book that made the *New York Times Best Seller List* before there was a graphic books category and also won Book of the Year.
- *300* and *Sin City* are two comics by American writer and artist Frank Miller. One is a violent fictional retelling of the Battle of Thermopylae and the other is a *film noir* style thriller about murder, betrayal, and corruption. Both are incredibly violent and were turned into equally visually stunning films.
- *Persepolis* is an autobiographical series about author Marjane Satrapi's experiences growing up in Iran.
- *Transmetropolitan* is a 10-volume series by British writer Warren Ellis. It may not be as well known as the others I've listed here, but it's a great example of comics being used as political commentary.
- *Blankets*, another autobiographical tale, is an impressive 592 pages about first love, religion, and adolescence by Craig Thompson.
- *Bone*, by Jeff Smith, is perhaps the first series that has managed to properly recapture the purity of Disney characters, but like *Harry Potter* and other popular children's books, it weaves in deeper themes and emotions that can be appreciated by older readers.

Comic Formats

So what's the difference between a comic book and a graphic novel? Or between a comic strip and a cartoon? Comics can take many forms and depending on how they are bound and distributed, a different name is used to refer to them.

The comics you find in newspapers are referred to as *comic strips*. They usually have fewer than a dozen boxes and are often self-contained. We don't usually refer to them as *cartoons* because that confuses them with the animated cartoons. Besides, Saturday is for cartoons, and Sunday is the day for comic strips!

Today, what we call *comic books* really aren't books at all. They tend to be the size and format of a magazine. These comic books are often released weekly as part of an ongoing series.

For popular and cohesive storylines, comic books are sometimes collected and reprinted as one bound book. Recently, it's become more popular to simply release them directly in bound book form. In either case, these bound comic books are often referred to as *graphic novels*.

Anatomy of a Comic

Like any subject matter, comics have a set of common vocabulary words to refer to their components. Thankfully, the list is small and reasonably descriptive with no gratuitous use of foreign languages (see Figure 2.1). For example, if this book were about dance, you'd be learning about how a dance for two isn't a "dance for two" but a *pas de deux*.

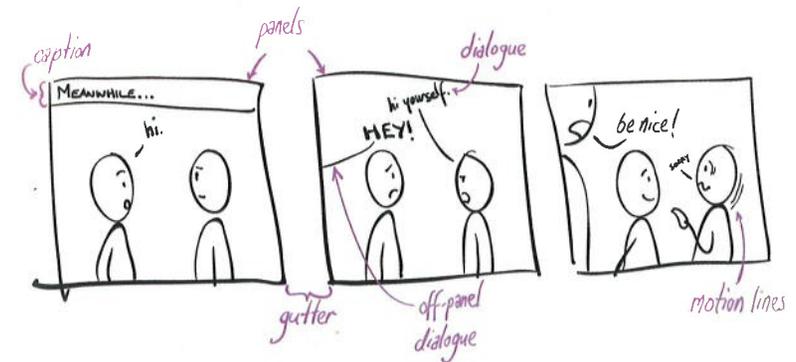


FIGURE 2.1
The anatomy of comics.

Comics generally consist of a series of boxes to show the progression of the story. Each of these boxes that contains the art and words is called a *panel*. The border itself is sometimes called the *frame*, but the two words end up being used interchangeably quite often. I'll be using panels to describe each box. A panel also isn't necessarily rectangular in shape.

The space between two or more panels is referred to as the *gutter*. It's rare that anything goes here at all.

The text coming out of characters' mouths is referred to as *dialogue*. (I guess we do use some French words!) A simple line is enough to show where the words are coming from, but if you want to add a bubble around it, these are called *speech bubbles*. If the dialogue or some other action is coming from somewhere outside of what's visible in the panel, we call that *off-panel*.

Motion lines refer to lines that don't actually represent anything physical but convey something moving (or in this example, shaking).

Finally, when we talk about the *caption*, we're referring to the narrative text that typically resides near the top of the panel. The caption is where, "It was a dark and stormy night..." or, "Meanwhile, in Gotham City..." might appear.

NOTE REALLY, WHAT ARE COMICS?

The Eisner Awards are the comic industry's version of the Academy Awards. It's named after Will Eisner, the American comics writer and artist, who also wrote the book *Comics and Sequential Art*. His book title was also the first time that comics were described as sequential art, which is really what a comic is. Comics are the juxtaposition of words and art placed in a sequence.

Comics can be a single panel like *The Far Side*; a comic strip consisting of 2–6 panels, such as *Calvin & Hobbes*; a traditional magazine-size comic book like *X-Men*; or a full-length graphic novel, such as *Blankets*.

The Four Properties of Comics

When you go to a website, you don't necessarily need to have design training to appreciate good design. As a Web designer, I appreciate everyone's feedback on my designs, regardless of their background. However, because I do have experience and training for designing these experiences, I also have a pretty good grasp of *why* a site is well designed or not.

I know how the use of colors can impact the emotional connection, how the use of different fonts and font sizes can be used to differentiate sections, and how to organize the information so that visitors can find what they want to find.

That doesn't mean you need a degree in design to create better websites, though. If you bought a book on visual design basics, you'd learn a lot of the principles I just mentioned and could probably describe why a design works or doesn't work better than most people. You can do a lot with just a little bit of theory.

Here's another example: We know we need to eat and drink to stay alive; our body tells us this, and we don't need to know how our body works to appreciate that. At the other end of the spectrum, you could study for years to be a doctor who understood all the intricacies of the human body and how every chemical affected you, but that would be pretty extreme if all you wanted to do was improve your nutrition. Instead, you could learn some basics about processed foods, cholesterol levels, calorie counts, and vitamin needs. This relatively small amount of knowledge could get you a long way.

That's the level of theory I'd like to share with you. You might know that comics are a compact and engaging way to communicate to your audience but not quite why. By understanding a few basic properties of comics, you can create much better comics yourself.

I will organize the properties of comics here into four categories: communication, imagination, expression, and time. These properties are not all unique to comics, but they are areas in which comics excel.

Communication

Will Eisner calls comics *sequential art*. Interpreted literally, that's "art that tells a story by putting a number of them in sequence." By that definition, the earliest comics came in the form of hieroglyphics or even cave paintings, as shown in Figure 2.2.

Comics existed over 10,000 years ago!

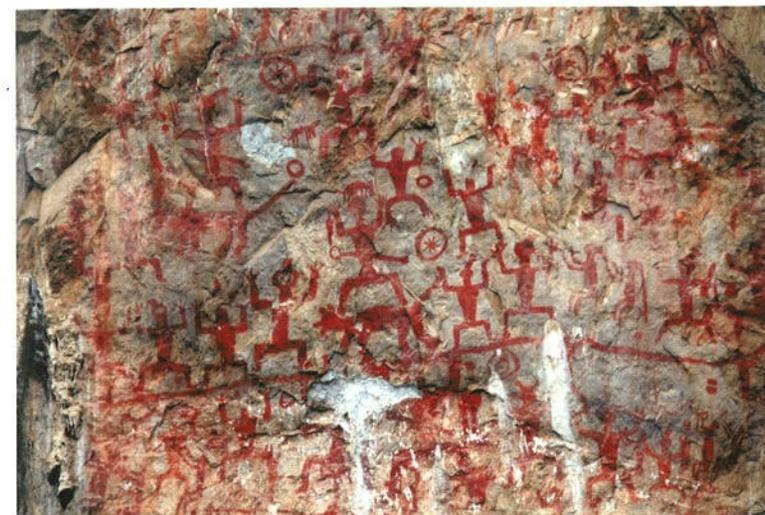


FIGURE 2.2
Prehistoric comics.

Perhaps you may be thinking, “But wait, Kevin. Didn’t you just say that comics are the juxtaposition of words and illustrations? Cave paintings clearly don’t have any words.”

That is precisely one of the strengths of comics that many people don’t recognize. Hidden within comics is a universal language. That language is represented by iconic imagery, body language, and facial expressions that transcend words.

Here’s an example of such imagery. Back at Yahoo!, my design manager Tom Wailes owned a T-shirt, which had a picture similar to the one in Figure 2.3. Aside from being a champion for the comics method within Yahoo!, he also had impeccable fashion sense.

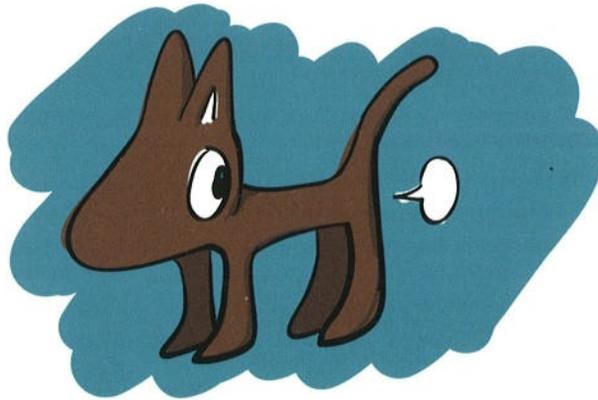


FIGURE 2.3
What’s that doggie doing?

What is the dog doing in the picture? Everybody I’ve shown this picture to knows the answer. A few have some alternate answers. My favorite was, “Maybe it’s a sales dog, and it’s talking out of its ass.”

It’s not surprising that you recognize what the dog is doing, but what surprised Tom was how his two-year-old son, who had never read a comic book in his life, laughed at the shirt and indicated that he understood the dog was passing gas.

Tom’s son might be a prodigy, but this comprehension wasn’t proof of it. I explained to Tom that comics have a vocabulary that doesn’t even require language. In fact, many of its symbols could be considered a language of their own that requires no teaching or explanation.

When there’s a speech bubble, even an empty one, we know it indicates a sound. When we see action lines, we know they represent movement. When the shapes of those lines change, we can interpret emotions such as anger.

One of the reasons that comics like *Asterix* and *Adventures of Tin Tin* translate so well is because they use the same methods to show pain or joy or anger across all of the translations, changing only the words in the comic. If I picked up a French copy of *Asterix*, I would find the same art as I would in any other language. Even when they represent characters cursing, they use symbols to illustrate the emotions, as I’ve done in Figure 2.4.



FIGURE 2.4
Speech bubbles, motion lines, and angry squiggles!

Imagination

In the book *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud discusses the idea of abstraction. He describes how in comics, you can abstract details in characters so as to allow the reader to bring his own imagination into the story. To illustrate this, I’m going to borrow an example from Scott’s book.

I’ve drawn three versions of myself in Figure 2.5 with differing levels of detail. At one end, the simple stick-figure rendition could be interpreted as not resembling me at all or possibly resembling anyone. The lack of detail makes it look like nobody *and* everybody. On the far right, the drawing is much more detailed and leaves little room for interpretation as to who is being represented.

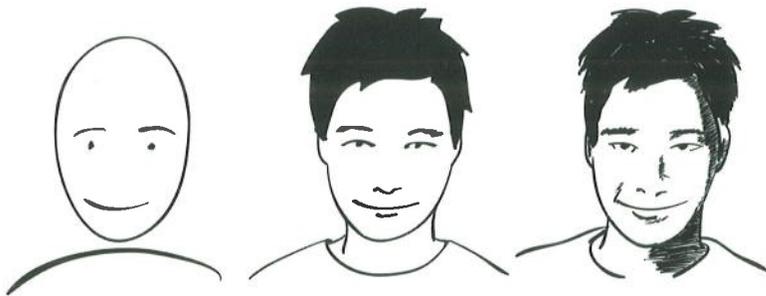


FIGURE 2.5
Varying details of Kevin.

By reducing the amount of detail in a drawing, you can encourage your reader to relate personally to what's being presented. The more detailed and specific a drawing, the more concretely defined it is. You can draw a bridge that looks like a bridge, or you can make it very plainly the Golden Gate Bridge. When it's just a bridge, the reader might associate a bridge they're familiar with in their mind and thus create a more personal connection to your comic.

The lack of detail can be accomplished in the art by using fewer lines. But you can also remove details by being symbolic instead of literal. For example, you could use animals instead of people—like a talking rabbit or a hapless coyote.

When we watch cartoons like *Bugs Bunny* and *Road Runner*, we feel a certain connection to the characters. We laugh at the plight of Wile E. Coyote, but also sympathize with him. These characters are drawn simply and don't try to photo-realistically portray rabbits and coyotes; we would have a lot of trouble connecting with that! In addition to being simplified drawings, though, they're also abstracted by not being human characters. They're not old or young, black or white. They are simply characters. For *Road Runner* and *Wile E. Coyote*, the characters are abstracted even further by having no voice. Without a voice, you can't presume anything based on their accents.

The viewer isn't consciously thinking, "I'm just like Wile E. Coyote. I can never seem to get things right," or "Road Runner is just like my friend Peter!" Nevertheless, they're likely to feel a deeper connection to the characters because subconsciously they can apply their own experiences to fill in the abstractions.

You don't have to use the same level of detail across the whole comic, either. By varying the detail of various elements, you can call attention to particular aspects and help guide the reader's imagination.

A common practice in manga is to draw a very detailed background with fairly simplistic characters. The effect is twofold. First, the characters pop out of the detailed background, creating an effective contrast that guides the

reader's focus to the characters. Second, the detailed background makes the setting very clear while the character remains abstract, allowing for better reader-to-character immersion, as shown in Figure 2.6. Scott McCloud eloquently calls this "one to see, one to be."



FIGURE 2.6
A detailed background leaves no room for interpretation, but the character stands out with its lack of detail.

The practice of reducing detail isn't just restricted to the art. We can also be deliberately vague when conveying user interfaces or processes in our comics.

We learned this when we were creating our comics at Yahoo! Local. In one particular panel, we wanted to illustrate that our character, Dana, was searching through Yahoo! Local (see Figure 2.7). How the search was performed was unimportant; we simply wanted to convey how Dana got to the subsequent page.

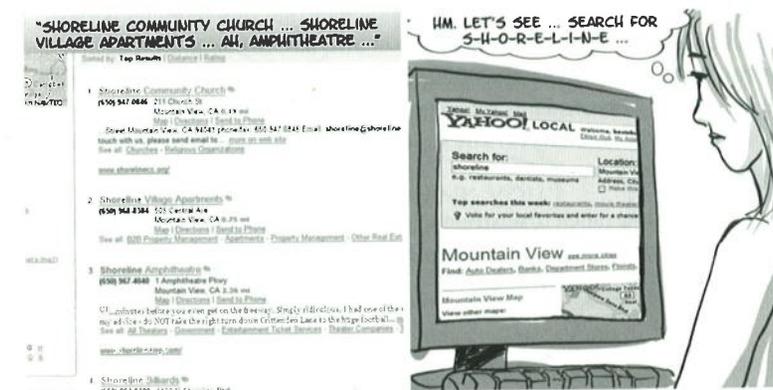


FIGURE 2.7
Yahoo! Local comic where Dana is searching for restaurants.

Because the search results page already existed, we thought it would be easier to use a screenshot. In hindsight, the outcome should have been quite predictable. Readers focused on the design and content of the search results page more than the story itself.

Once we discovered this problem, we reduced the level of detail so the reader saw only what was necessary to understand context. We included the site's logo, a search box, and the location in large print. The fact that the screenshot wasn't entirely accurate wasn't an issue—just as the fact that a face is only a caricature wasn't an issue.

Then we took the idea of simplification even further by removing the view of the screen entirely, as shown in Figure 2.8.

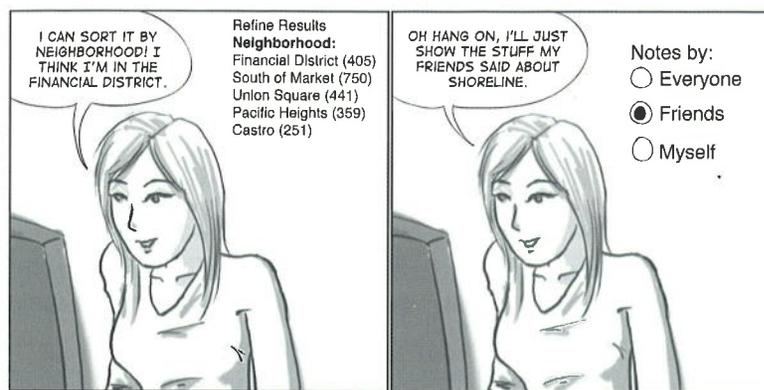


FIGURE 2.8
Showing interface options without showing the screen.

In both of these versions, we can't see the screen that the character is viewing, but we reveal just the right amount of interface to communicate the pertinent elements. In the second iteration, the interface elements are hand-drawn, making the elements informal and even more concise. Keeping the interface within the same artistic style as the rest of the comic also made it less jarring for the reader.

Recognizing how much to abstract away requires some amount of experimentation and practice. For the moment, simply remember the power that abstraction in comics gives you.

Expression

A picture is worth a thousand words, but in comics, pictures can be used to give words richer meaning. If we consider the two phrases, "I'm sorry" and "thank you," they appear to be fairly objective statements (see Figure 2.9). One is an apology, while the other is a signal of appreciation.



FIGURE 2.9
Two objective statements.

In *Comics and Sequential Art*, Will Eisner explores the application of facial expressions as a vocabulary (see Figure 2.10). What can a facial expression tell you that words cannot? Imagine if we took these seemingly simplistic phrases and mapped them to a set of facial expressions.



FIGURE 2.10
Some expressions by Will Eisner.

The same words, expressed with the same font, emphasis, and dialogue bubbles, now carry an added layer of meaning, as shown in Figure 2.11.

Looking at the words with their added context, the phrases might be considered reluctant, taunting, heartfelt, or insincere.

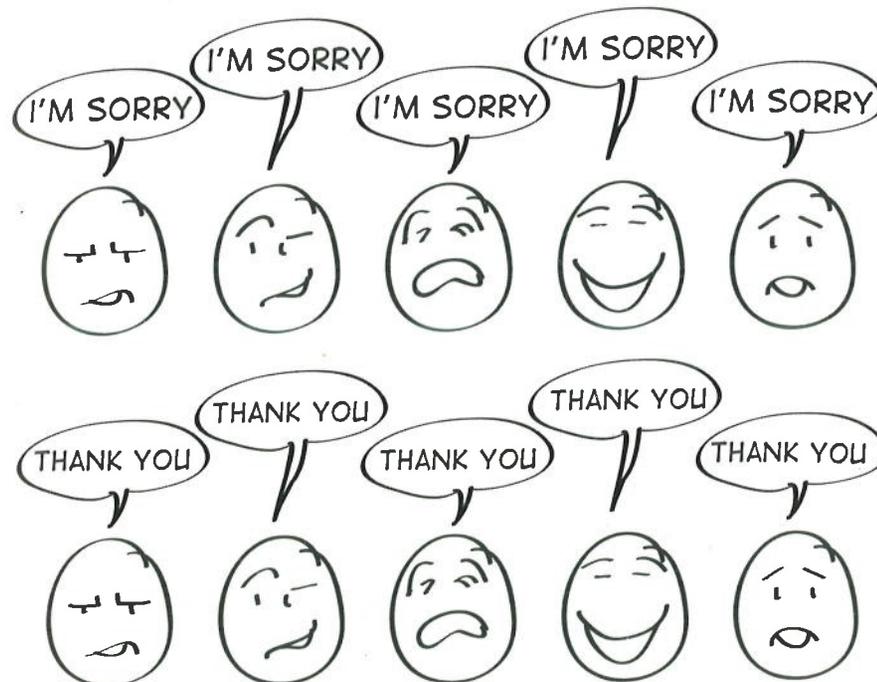
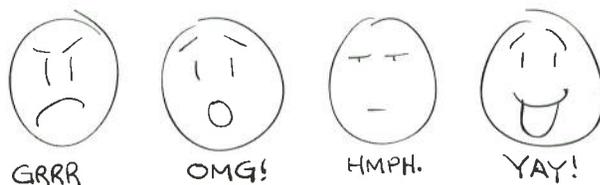


FIGURE 2.11
Expressions change the meaning of the words.

When we consider our face-to-face interaction with other people, the fact that facial expressions add additional meaning may come as no surprise. What is perhaps more unexpected is how little one needs to show to convey meaningful facial expressions.

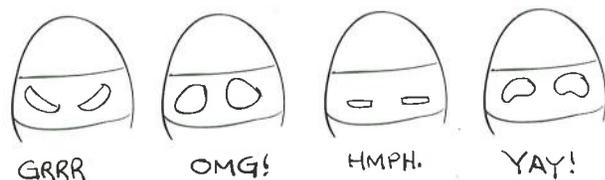
It turns out you can illustrate emotions by modifying only the eyebrows and the mouth (see Figure 2.12). Between these two facial features, a whole myriad of expressions can be represented.

FIGURE 2.12
Just change the eyebrows and the mouth.



In fact, the character *EVE* in Pixar's movie *Wall•E* illustrates that you can still communicate emotion without any mouth or eyebrows, but simply by shaping the eyes (see Figure 2.13).

FIGURE 2.13
Just the eyes can be enough.



Of course, both *Wall•E* and *EVE* have another characteristic to help communicate emotion—their body language.

When a person leans forward, it implies dominance, confidence, or intimidation. Leaning backward can communicate a need for distance, insecurity, or even fear. Drawing body language isn't as hard as you might think. Even a stick figure has body language.

Take a look at these drawings in Figure 2.14 of a person at a computer before and after waiting for a long time for the system to respond. While the eyebrows and mouth already communicate displeasure, the person's hunched posture and the hand against the chin emphasize frustration and impatience. The posture could be interpreted as saying, "I've been waiting so long I can't even hold my head up anymore."

By understanding how a few lines can affect the message being communicated, we can convey an incredible amount of information.

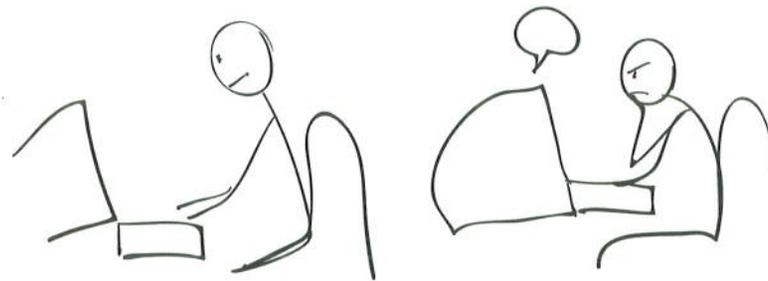


FIGURE 2.14
Body language can say a lot with very little.

Sketch, Sketch, Sketch

While comics have many incredible properties to them, even just the act of sketching can be beneficial. Joshua Brewer, author and co-founder of the blog "52 Weeks of UX" and designer at Twitter, wrote this piece on the benefits of sketching.

I've heard it so many times: "I can't sketch a stick figure to save my life."

Some people are afraid of showing their drawing to others. They think they'll be ridiculed if their sketch looks like it was drawn by a five-year-old.

In truth, it doesn't matter if you are good at sketching. The less formal the sketch, the better. In fact, avoid the urge to use a pencil as it leaves too much room for you to ponder, erase, re-draw, second-guess....

But a permanent marker, *now you're talking*. A nice big, fat Sharpie is the perfect tool because it requires you to really think through your idea before you put the pen to the paper. "What if it doesn't work or the layout's all wrong?" Great! Grab a new piece of paper and start from where you left off, having learned something valuable in a matter of minutes.

The sketch is not the end goal. The end goal of the drawing process is what you learn *while* sketching. So don't worry if you can't sketch. In fact, if you're too good, you might just fool yourself into thinking your sketch is a *deliverable*. It's not. The real value of sketching is that it allows you to explore and refine ideas in a quick, iterative, and visual manner with little overhead or learning curve. Rapid ideation around flow and interaction, layout and hierarchy, can be quickly established, rearranged, or discarded wholesale—all without ever touching a computer.

One added benefit to sketching your ideas is the ability to share, collaborate, and improve upon an idea. Show a stakeholder the sketch and then encourage that person to mark it up. You can even give them the red pen and let them revel in the power!

In the end, you will gain a deeper understanding of the problem you are trying to solve, and a head start on implementing a great design!

Time

When you try to describe how long something takes, how do you express it? You might use specific terms such as, “I was stuck in traffic for an hour!” You can also describe time in more generic terms like, “It took ages.” Another way to describe the passage of time is by describing the action in more detail. For example, you might say, “All the cars were moving really slowly.”

Comics convey time a bit differently. With words, you can describe exactly how long you were stuck in traffic. With a movie, you can actually experience the passage of time through time passing in the movie itself—although it wouldn’t be a terribly fun movie to watch a traffic jam for an hour. With comics, you can still use words to express time explicitly, but you also have many other tools at your disposal.

One simple way to illustrate time and motion in comics is to treat the comic like a book version of an animation. Each panel then acts like a frame in the animation. Here’s the story of a girl who can jump really high in Figure 2.15.

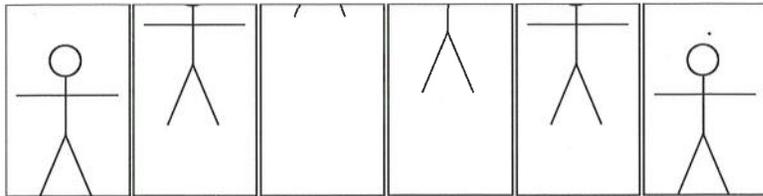


FIGURE 2.15
Jump! Comics as animation.

With this example, we can visualize the character jumping. We can’t tell exactly how long the jump is, but the relative height of the jump and our own understanding of gravity give us a rough idea. In the same way that we use our own experiences to fill in the blanks for characters, we picture the jump and the time elapsed in our mind. The exact amount of time doesn’t matter in this case. Instead, we’ve communicated a very simple story that the reader can actually experience.

When we treat comics like a print version of animation, each panel is representative of the same unit of time. We automatically imagine that the time between each panel is the same from one panel to the next. This animation is also a great example of how the gutter isn’t just empty space; it’s also the space where time passes.

Let’s play with time a little bit in Figure 2.16. If each panel represents the same unit of time, what if we just insert a few more panels that are completely empty in the middle of the comic?

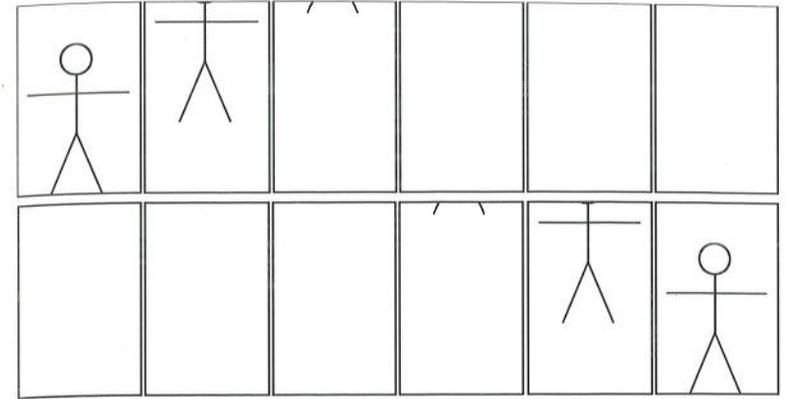


FIGURE 2.16
Blank panels can mean time passing.

The effect is clear. Just by inserting a few blank panels, we’ve given the impression that more time has elapsed. Either the girl is now jumping really high or a spaceship has abducted our heroine. Even though nothing is happening in the panel itself, the reader assumes time is elapsing and the character is somewhere off-panel, above the field of vision, only to return to the ground much later—perhaps after the alien abductors rejected her.

But you don’t necessarily have to add multiple panels to show that a lot of time has passed. Sometimes, just extending the size of a panel can suggest the same effect, as in Figure 2.17. Equally, making a very narrow panel can suggest a very short amount of time (see Figure 2.18).



FIGURE 2.17
Longer panels represent more time passing.

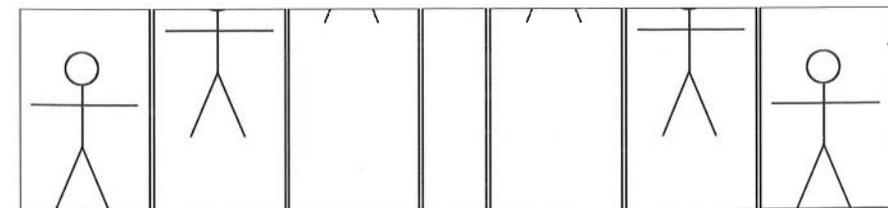


FIGURE 2.18
A narrow panel has the opposite effect.

In the examples I've shown so far, time has been represented by blank spaces, either in the gutters or the panels. You can also show time passing through repetition. Have you ever asked someone a question, only to have that person stare at you blankly for a few seconds before responding? Comics are really phenomenal at portraying these little moments, and it's dead easy to do. To show a pause in a scene, you can just repeat the scene for another panel like the one shown in Figure 2.19.

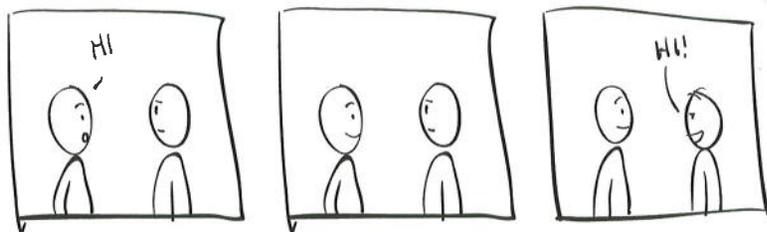


FIGURE 2.19
Repeating a panel to create a pause.

The contents of the panel matter, too. With the jumping girl, we associate a certain timeframe because of our understanding of gravity. If the girl were wearing a cape instead, the comic would suggest the girl was a superhero and had perhaps flown away. How long it took before she returned would not be as obvious then.

That means we could draw the same number of panels, at the same size, and still change the perceived time by changing what's in the panel. A dripping sink like the one in Figure 2.20, for example, would suggest a more drawn-out time sequence.

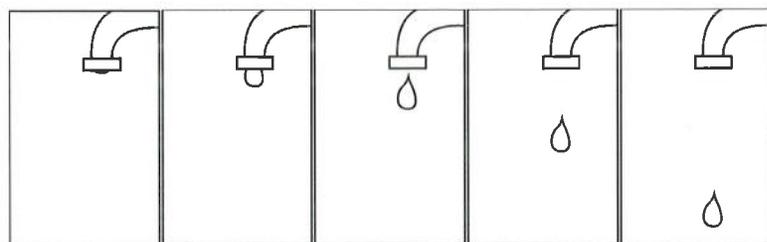


FIGURE 2.20
Changing the content of the comic also impacts time perception.

Sometimes, you may want to be a bit more explicit about how much time is passing. You can do this by explicitly stating the time as we do in conversation. A character could easily say, "Traffic took an hour!" Alternatively, you could use a reference object to show a lot of time had passed.

In the BBC rendition of Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice*, there's a scene where Mr. Darcy is sitting at his desk, getting ready to write a heartfelt letter to Lizzie. The scene fades out and then back in to another cut of Mr. Darcy, still sitting at his desk struggling to come up with the right words. Behind Mr. Darcy, we notice a candle, which has burnt significantly more since the time he first sat down. The viewer has no explicit indication of how long he'd been sitting there, but the candle suggests the duration.

The same technique can be applied to comics. You can show a scene with a clock in the background and then show the same scene with a later time on the clock, similar to Figure 2.21. Or you can show a scene during the day and then the same at night.

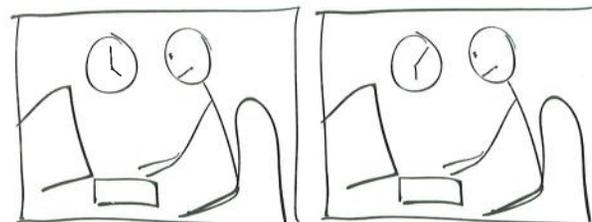


FIGURE 2.21
Reference objects can indicate time passing.

You can see how almost every aspect of a comic allows you to play with time. I feel it's one of the more fun aspects of the medium. While I've shown a number of different ways that comics can uniquely communicate the passage of time, these examples are only a small sampling of what is possible. Much like poems, music, or even sentence structures, comics can use the basic structures and foundations, but more advanced and experienced practitioners of the medium can be more creative and can find novel ways to communicate time and motion.

I encourage you to experiment with these tricks as you create your comics. Once you've gotten a grasp of how time works in comics, you can start trying some really crazy time bending (see Figure 2.22).

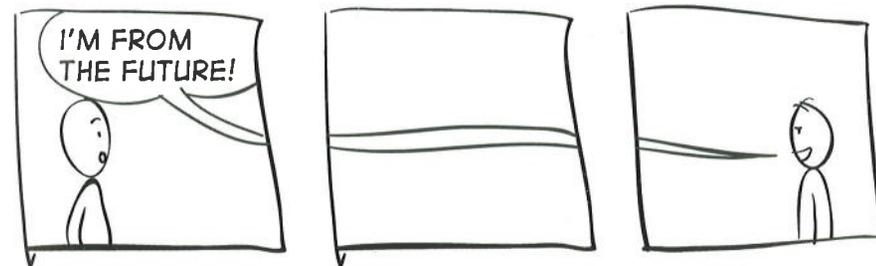


FIGURE 2.22
The webcomic XKCD plays with time.

The Google Chrome Comic

In 2008, Google decided to launch a new Web browser called *Google Chrome*. The market for browsers was already crowded with Internet Explorer, Mozilla Firefox, and Apple Safari battling for market share. Adding to the confusion was the fact that Google and Mozilla had a close business relationship.

In fact, Google had a lot of good but rather technical reasons for creating a new browser. They were trying to remedy a lot of limitations with modern browsers.

One example of the problems they were trying to solve, as explained by a Google engineer:

“Once you have JavaScript executing, it’s going to keep going, and the browser can’t do anything else until JavaScript returns control to the browser. So developers write APIs that are asynchronous and every now and then the browser locks up because JavaScript is hung up on something.”

Imagine 30, 50, or even 100 pages of this. Even the best of geeks would be hard pressed to find the time. The team recognized how important it was to explain why they were building Chrome so their users didn’t simply compare features but needed an accessible medium.

Anna-Christina Douglas was the product marketer for Google Chrome. She explains the problem they were trying to solve, “We wanted to get the technical story out there and help people understand why we were doing it in a clear and digestible way. If we only did a white paper, nobody was going to read it.”

“We were trying to create something that helped focus the story on the technology innovations and not the browser wars or feature comparison. Our goal was to explain this to the technical bloggers and tech-savvy audience who would be interested in one level deeper than features but who wouldn’t read engineering notes and extrapolate the story from there. At the same time, we didn’t want to dumb it down and alienate those who would read the white paper so the comic didn’t water down what the technology was doing.”

“Using comics (see Figure 2.23) gave us a way to create something digestible and playful. We have these things called Tech Talks where an engineer gets up and talks about a product. The comic was similar to that. It felt in line with the Google brand.”

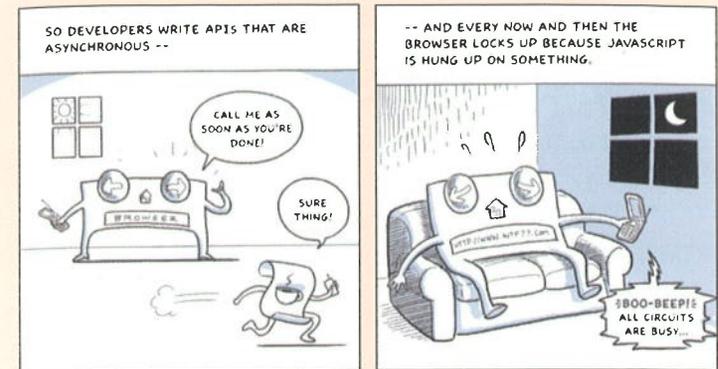


FIGURE 2.23
Sample of the Google Chrome comic.

When it came time to launch the product, a shipping error caused the comic to leak a day before the announcement. As it turned out, by having the comic released first, everyone focused on the comic before the product. By the time Google Chrome actually launched, most of the press and enthusiastic audience already understood the motivation and innovation behind the browser.

“It was a happy accident.”

Summary

Comics are a medium that combines the strengths of words and pictures to create something new and powerful. Today, they're breaking out of the stereotype of spandex and Sunday Funnies into a true form of communication and expression.

Panels, gutters, dialogue, and captions are the components that make a comic, and there are four properties of comics that make them special:

- **Communication:** Comics are a universal form of communication, more easily understood and older than words.
- **Imagination:** You can abstract the unimportant details in a comic, encouraging the reader to focus on the areas of the story that are most important.
- **Expression:** By combining words with simple facial expressions and body gestures, comics can provide more meaning than either words or pictures.
- **Time:** The use of white space, panel size, and reference points provides many creative ways to express time in comics.

When you use comics to communicate an idea, remember these four properties to maximize the impact you can have.