

# **Piecing the Parts: An Analysis of Narrative Strategies and Textual Elements in Microserialized Webcomics**

by

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## Abstract

This thesis details the results of a qualitative and quantitative study of webcomics in accordance to their method of publication. This sequential digital microserialized graphic narrative is analyzed through the literary theories of narratology, textual criticism, media specific analysis, and comics studies. Special attention is placed as to how these forms of serial fiction maintain narrative continuity throughout the entirety of their installments. Results include an in depth analysis as to how the narratives made by webcomic cartoonists change over time in a process called Cerebus Syndrome. A brief history of serialized narratives is provided to familiarize readers with this method of publication and to contextualize the study of webcomics within the tradition of serialization and the serial reading experience. Narrative strategies and textual elements of webcomics are discussed in general and specifically within Rich Burlew's *Order of the Stick*. This thesis also provided pedagogical applications of webcomics within the language and/or literature classroom.

## Resumen

Esta tesis demuestra los resultados de un estudio cualitativo y cuantitativo sobre los cómics por internet (“webcomics”) de acuerdo a su método de publicación. Estas narrativas ilustradas, secuenciales, digitales y microserializadas son analizadas por las teorías literarias de la narratología, crítica textual, análisis específico del medio y estudios de cómics. Se enfoca en cómo estos trabajos de ficción serializada mantienen su continuidad narrativa a través de todos sus episodios. Los resultados incluyen un análisis sobre como las narrativas de estos autores cambian mientras más tiempo pasa, en un proceso llamado Síndrome de Cerebus. Se provee una breve historia sobre las narrativas serializadas con el fin de familiarizar a los lectores con este método de publicación y con el objetivo de contextualizar este estudio de “webcomics” con la tradición de la serialización y la experiencia de la lectura serializada. Estrategias narrativas y elementos textuales de los “webcomics” son estudiadas de forma general y específicamente en la obra de Rich Burlew, *Order of the Stick*. Esta tesis también provee posibles aplicaciones pedagógicas para el salón de clases de literatura.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Resumen.....	iii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Figures .....	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Chapter 2: Review of Literature .....	11
Chapter 3: A History of Serial Literature .....	34
Chapter 4: Narrative and Textual Elements of Webcomics.....	58
Chapter 5: Measuring the <i>Order of the Stick</i> .....	99
Chapter 6: Pedagogical Implications and Conclusion .....	141
Appendix A.....	159
Appendix B .....	194
Bibliography .....	203

## List of Figures

(Figure 4. 1) .....	63
(Figure 4. 2 News/blog page next to Twitter feed as seen on February 8, 2010 from <i>Goblins</i> website) .....	68
(Figure 4. 3 part of the FAQ page for <i>OOTS</i> . All entries are hyperlinks.....	69
(Figure 4. 4 the section for <i>8-bit Theater's</i> FAQ page) .....	69
(Figure 4. 5 from Giant in the Playground website shows two comics and their most recent available installments, another serialized narrative, and an area about gaming articles.) .....	76
(Figure 4. 6) .....	80
(Figure 4. 7) .....	80
(Figure 4. 8) .....	80
(Figure 4. 10) .....	86
(Figure 4. 9) .....	86
(Figure 4. 11) .....	87
(Figure 4. 12) .....	87
(Figure 4. 13) .....	87
(Figure 4. 14) .....	87
(Figure 4. 15) .....	88
(Figure 4. 16) .....	88
(Figure 5.1) <i>OOTS</i> example of a small break in narrative continuity.....	102
(Figure 5.2) <i>OOTS</i> example of the issue of death being handled with a punchline.....	103
(Figure 5.3) <i>OOTS</i> example of the issue of death being handled without a punchline.....	103
(Figure 5.4) <i>OOTS</i> compressed installment that breaks with traditional page format.....	105
(Figure 5.5) <i>OOTS</i> reference to D&D with unique creature types.....	107
(Figure 5.6) <i>OOTS</i> reference of D&D with rule exploitations.....	107
(Figure 5.7) <i>OOTS</i> example of metatextual awareness.....	108
(Figure 5.8) <i>OOTS</i> example of breaking the fourth wall.....	109
(Figure 5.9) <i>OOTS</i> example of a visual anachronistic element.....	110
(Figure 5.10) <i>OOTS</i> example of verbal anachronistic element.....	110
(Figure 5.11) Graph with summary of total findings.....	111
(Figure 5.12) Graph of breaks in narrative continuity.....	112
(Figure 5.13) <i>OOTS</i> example of major break in narrative continuity.....	113
(Figure 5.14) Graph of installments that lack a punchline.....	113
(Figure 5.15) Graph of installments with non-traditional page format.....	114
(Figure 5.16) Graph of D&D references.....	116
(Figure 5.17) <i>OOTS</i> of dialogue with and without D&D statistics.....	117
(Figure 5.18) Graph of metatextual references.....	118
(Figure 5.19) <i>OOTS</i> example of metatextual moment done without humor.....	118
(Figure 5.20) <i>OOTS</i> example of metatextual moment done with humor.....	118
(Figure 5.21) Graph of metaliterary references.....	119
(Figure 5.22) <i>OOTS</i> example of a character's metaliterary awareness.....	119
(Figure 5.23) Graph of fourth wall breaking moments.....	120
(Figure 5.24) <i>OOTS</i> example of a blatant fourth wall breaking moment.....	121
(Figure 5.25) Graph of references to elements outside of <i>OOTS</i> .....	122

(Figure 5.26) First <i>OOTS</i> close reading example.....	123
(Figure 5.27) Second <i>OOTS</i> close reading example.....	124
(Figure 5.28) Third <i>OOTS</i> close reading example.....	127
(Figure 5.29) <i>OOTS</i> example of metatextual awareness to prequel books.....	129
(Figure 5.30) <i>OOTS</i> example of cryptograms in print and digital formats.....	131
(Figure 5.31) <i>OOTS</i> example of characters informing readers of future bonus content.....	131
(Figure 5.32) <i>OOTS</i> example of discrepancy between digital and print format.....	135
(Figure 5.33) <i>OOTS</i> example of awareness of different continuities.....	136
(Figure 5.34) <i>OOTS</i> example of a dated reference.....	139
(Figure 6.1) Concluding message from <i>OOTS</i> about the importance of learning.....	158



## Chapter 1: Introduction

Webcomics are the most current incarnation of the tradition of the serial, “a continuing story over an extended period of time with enforced interruptions” (Hughes and Lund 1). Serialization is a method of publication that can be seen in the narratives of the Victorian novel, comics, films, radio, television, and webcomics—the last of which is generally published in such small installments that they have been described as “microserialized.” This microserialization foregrounds the narrative construction of webcomics, which allows for the continuous study of authorial intention and the influences of a highly participatory reading community on the work. This study identifies and defines narrative strategies used in webcomics, analyzes their textuality and how it is shaped by Web and print publication, focusing on the works of Rich Burlew and other webcomic cartoonists. To do this research, it becomes necessary to piece the parts<sup>1</sup> of the narrative, since every installment of a serial work needs to be analyzed.

“To put it in the simplest equation: webcomics are comics + Web. They are everything you loved about long-form comics, short-form comics, sequential strips and single panels – transposed to a new means of distribution” (Guigar et al. 13). This definition shows that webcomics follow the formula of comics, which are a type of graphic narrative. Legendary cartoonist Will Eisner defines a graphic narrative as “any story that employs image to transmit an idea. Films and comics both engage in graphic narrative” (Introduction of *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*). Eisner groups comics as “a form of sequential art, often in the form of a strip or a book, in which images and text are arranged to tell a story” and sequential art as “images deployed in a specific order.” Scott McCloud offers a more refined definition of comics: “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information

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<sup>1</sup> To “piece” is a term used in quilting that denotes the process of making something whole by joining together individual seemingly unrelated parts.

and/or an aesthetic response in the viewer” (*Understanding Comics* 9). Both definitions converge in the sense that they identify a set pattern, in which images are designed to be read “in a specific order” and this “deliberate sequence” provides a path for readers to follow. The design for this specific reading course follows the same intended order as the path set forth with the installments of a serial work where the narrative takes place.

Due in part to webcomics being a subset of comics and a part of new media, they are considered to be more in line with popular culture than with works of literature. Both sides of the debate, that comics are merely a form of entertainment mostly aimed at children or that they be recognized within the literary canon, are highlighted by McCloud with two quotations from the father of modern comics Rudolphe Topffer. McCloud cites a speech by Topffer from 1845 in which he says that, “. . . the picture-story which critics disregard and scholars hardly notice, has had great influence at all times, perhaps even more than written literature” and another from that same year “. . . in addition, the picture-story appeals mainly to children and the lower classes” (*Understanding Comics* 201). The perception that comics are immature entertainment that has an untapped potential for something more, to this day both belittles and idealizes their academic study. Simply put, cartoonists employ a combination of drawings and text as a means of expression to convey a message, with varied receptions of their method and execution, just like with any other form of writing/art.

The intention of this study is not to convince the academic community to include webcomics in the literary canon. There has been much debate about the supposed “low” and “high” categorizations of literature. Resolving this argument far exceeds the limitations of this study. The term literature itself is subject to critical interpretation, and there is no clear consensus about what it is. For example, Jonathan Culler defines literature as:

A speech act or textual event that elicits certain kinds of attention. It contrasts with other sorts of speech acts, such as imparting information, asking questions, or making promises. Most of the time what leads readers to treat something as literature is that they find it in a context that identifies it as literature. (27)

This is a very broad definition of what literature can be, yet it focuses attention on two key components: the attention elicited by the “textual event” and the context in which such attention thrives. The textual event he refers to probably does not take into account the images used in graphic narratives, even though notions of what constitutes a text have expanded to include non-linguistic materials, such as images. Even though webcomics are traditionally contextualized as popular culture, this study focuses on their features as narratives, a very relevant context in the study of literature. Whether we wish to define webcomics as literature or not, this particular perspective allows for the study of microserialized narrative, a phenomenon difficult to find in the literary canon. Other forms of media, like movies, are already utilized and analyzed within the literature classroom even though they are technically not considered to be literature, so I see no problem with the study of webcomics, with or without this classification.

Webcomics warrant academic study because they are one of the few remaining forms of serial fiction that have an almost direct line between author and reader. They are conceived, planned, written, drawn, and published by one person in most cases. In contrast, television, film, and radio have production crews and editors that serve as intermediaries for the text between the reader and the author. In these media, the work is performed by the reader and it is that performance that one perceives. Textual critic George Thomas Tanselle makes an analogy between music and literature that applies to the previously mentioned media in that:

Performers of sonatas and conductors of symphonies need not necessarily be concerned with composer’s intentions; but when they are, there is still no uniformity of result, because scores cannot provide instructions so explicit as to eliminate ambiguity regarding intention. Everyone understands that performance involves interpretation . . . The act of performing music and that of reading literature both entail the interpretation of

instructions, which in turn involves a critical assessment of the adequacy of those instructions. (23-24)

These performances can lead to interpretations of the text on the part of the reader that can result in a different text than the one that the author intended. Even traditional print comics now have a multitude of pencillers, inkers, editors, printers, and other such workers that can lead to a different interpretation than the one the cartoonist wants. Other forms of literature, like the novel, are also subject to interventions from editors and publishing houses that can limit and shape the text. These changes can be perceived as refining the text, even by the author him/herself, but ultimately the work is altered by outside forces. The author still has the last word as to what changes do occur to the text, yet the work is affected by another layer of interpretation that keeps it from being a pure text created by the author. While it is certainly implausible that one could find a narrative whose “textual purity” has not been compromised in one way or another, by reducing the production variables there is an opportunity for a more direct line between author and the reader to exist. Webcomics are a form in which the relationship between the author and the reader with the text has a minimal number of human interventions in the publication process. Webcomics allow for a more direct relationship between author, reader, and text to take place and this part of the serial reading experience can be better illustrated and documented because of the many small installments as part of their microserialized nature, which is not present in other narrative forms.

While webcomics seem to be an ideal place for reader and author to come together, there are still several places where limitations can occur. The narrative has to be adjusted to the technological aspects of its digital medium and overcome the challenges of its serialized publication format. Narrative strategies employed in webcomics have to be shaped to work in this framework and how this happens is one of the main foci of this study. Webcomic cartoonist

Rich Burlew, creator of *The Order of the Stick (OOTS)* made these comments regarding his creative process which illustrate how the narratives of webcomics lack a definitive model:

I really just write this story the way that I think it would be most interesting, without too much regard for writing theory or structure. I mean, the idea of a serialized one-page-per-installment story (that almost always ends in a punchline) isn't really directly analogous to most other media anyway – a TV show dispenses an hour a week, while a comic book gives you 22 pages per month. Even a double-length *OOTS* comic has room for only a fraction of the plot advancement of either format. Thus, I'm usually stuck trying to adapt my story to this format without any guidelines – I'm always flying without a net. How many strips is too many to focus on the villains? Do I need to recap previous plot points, or do I trust them [the readers] to figure it out on their own? I have struggled with many of these questions over the last few years, with no clear cut answers yet appearing. (*War and Xps*, How I Didn't Learn to Write a Plot)

Accounts and supplementary information from the authors, like the information provided in the quotation above, allow for a study of how this ongoing narrative is produced at different moments in time and how narrative strategies used within it change accordingly. Burlew's account shows that his narrative process is heavily dictated upon by the microserialized publication format, for which there is no precedent or clear formula.

The rationale for using these supplementary accounts can be best summed up by Tzvetan Todorov who wrote about the author and the text, "Literature is always more than literature, and there are certainly cases in which the writer's biography stands in a relevant relation to his work. But in order to be usable, this relation must be given as one of the features of the work itself" (*The Fantastic*, 145). Webcomics are published on websites that usually contain blog posts, news, biographical information, and an online forum which serve as supplementary texts and are therefore also relevant to this study. In the case of Burlew (among others), feedback from his readers serves to hone his craft as both reader and author undergo a trial and error process with the text. Current readers can see traces of this process in the narrative, forums, and archive and

can become participants, if interested. While this information is not essential to understand the narrative as a whole, it can be useful because it is a part of the text.

Because webcomics are the central focus of this work, some parameters need to be established so as to more clearly define how they are analyzed. After all, there are over 18,000 (and counting) webcomics available (Manley) that employ a wide range of literary and artistic techniques. In order to limit the scope of the materials studied, only webcomics that fulfill the following two criteria will be a part of this study: (1) containing an overarching narrative throughout their installments and (2) being consistently published for a minimum of three years. Still, in order to discuss variations and unique features found in webcomics, some examples that do not fall within these parameters will be used.

The first parameter is that the webcomic be a continuing narrative for the clear majority of its issues. Most webcomics use the comic strip model. In this type of webcomic, more often than not, the story does not extend beyond the few panels presented in said strip and hence engage in what Umberto Eco calls “narrative redundancy.” This term represents narratives where the events of one installment have no effect on any subsequent part of the work. Webcomics with narrative redundancy are commonly referred to as “gag-a-day” comics, though non-humorous examples do exist. These gag-a-day comics do not contain a clear ongoing narrative and thus are not analyzed in this study. Some of these types of comics may have a story arc, wherein the events of a given number of strips are directly related to each other. These story arcs are an exception in these comics and will therefore not relate to this study. Webcomics that publish an issue that breaks away from the narrative will still be considered when it is clear that such strips are a rarity, i. e. less than two percent of the totality of the literary work. By establishing this

parameter, the focus is maintained on the complete narratives found in webcomics and allows for a more manageable sample of works for this study.

The second parameter limits the study to webcomics that are, or had been, running for at least three years with a regular updating schedule throughout this time. This choice facilitates a diachronic analysis of webcomics, especially since one of the areas of study for this thesis includes how the narrative of a webcomic is made and how it changes as time elapses. In order to do this, one needs to find a multitude of different strips for analytical comparison. By limiting these further to those that are regularly updated, findings show subtle variations between issues, rather than drastic ones that may occur in other serialized narratives. Webcomics that are updated on a regular schedule provide better examples of the enforced interruptions that define serials.

Out of all the webcomics that could potentially fall within the previously stated parameters, Rich Burlew's *The Order of the Stick* was selected because of the wealth of secondary texts that surround this work, its active forum community, and its critically acclaimed award winning narrative. This justification is elaborated upon in the following chapter.

Six research questions guide this study.

1. What are the narrative strategies used in webcomics? How are they similar and how do they differ from the ones used in other forms of serialized fictional narratives, such as the Victorian novel, comic strips, films, comic books, and television?
2. In what ways do the technical aspects of the digital medium in which webcomics are published affect the narrative itself? What changes occur when shifting from digital to print media?
3. Does the narrative itself change in terms of style or genre? How does the narrative

change over time? How do these changes appear?

4. How can changes in narrative be used to examine shifts in authorial intention?

How are shifts in authorial intention presented? In what ways do these affect the narrative?

5. How are issues of narrative continuity addressed and maintained in webcomics?

How are these similar and how do they differ from the ones used in other forms of serial fiction?

6. How is the serial reading experience of webcomics similar or different from other forms of serial fiction? How do readers affect the process of narrative construction in webcomics and in other serial works?

The majority of the research presented here comes as a result of qualitative analysis. This study employs narratology, textual criticism, media specific analysis, and comics studies to analyze webcomics. Since prior research on webcomics is (at the time of this writing) rare, the aforementioned theories have been modified to analyze the narrative strategies and textual elements of this form of serial fiction. Using these kinds of critical tools allow for findings to be attributed not only in terms of causality and correlation, but also to deepen the understanding of webcomics in context, thus making qualitative research protocols a must for this study.

Qualitative analysis works well for the synchronic study of webcomics; however, for one to truly grasp how the narrative of a particular webcomic changes diachronically, quantitative analysis becomes a necessity. With no studies being done on webcomics at a microserialized level, unique statistical measures had to be created. The quantitative research that was conducted entailed close readings of each of the installments of *The Order of the Stick* in order to locate particular narrative strategies and how their occurrence rate varies throughout its first 700 issues.



Narrative strategies, also known as storytelling techniques or tropes, reflect an active choice by the author as to how construct any aspect of his/her narrative. While webcomic cartoonists may not be fully aware of the ramifications of their choice of narrative strategies, these decisions actively shape their ongoing works of serial fiction. Complete details of the quantitative model can be found in chapter five of this study. All findings are reported through graphs and tables available in Appendix A.

This study is organized in six chapters. This current first chapter serves as an introduction to the main ideas, methods, and works to be explored in this study. The second chapter reviews prior research done in the areas of webcomics, serial publication, and offers further explanations of the theories used throughout this study. The third chapter presents a history of serialized narratives, in order to contextualize how this form of publication has produced and shaped narratives throughout various literary periods and media, from the Victorian serial to current forms of serial narratives. The fourth chapter analyzes textual and narratological elements of webcomics in general, through the application of the different theories mentioned above and through media specific analysis. The fifth chapter shows the results of a qualitative and quantitative study of the narrative strategies and textual elements of one specific webcomic, Rich Burlew's *The Order of the Stick*. The sixth and final chapter concludes this study and provides recommendations for the use of webcomics within the literature classroom. Further pedagogical applications can be found in Appendix B of this study.

The primary audience for this study is academics interested in narrative and textual criticism. I wish to expand the fields of narrative study and literary analysis by adding webcomics to the list of texts that can be analyzed. Webcomics offer a myriad of contemporary literary genres and styles and are growing in readership. This study will provide researchers

specializing in serial fiction with more texts and narrative strategies that can be applied to already established forms of serialized fiction. While this study focuses on the analysis of webcomics in an academic context, practical applications can also be attained. These pedagogical implications are explained in detail at the end of this study.

My secondary audience is that of everyday webcomic and comic book readers. These readers often look at a handful of comics everyday and are exposed to many of the stories that they contain but the majority of these fans do not know the narrative and textual intricacies that appear within each issue and how they affect upcoming ones. While the gamut of readers can range from the casual to the obsessed, most do not look beyond the presented text and are missing out on a deeper analysis that can lead to a better understanding and enjoyment of these comics.

Readers are temporal beings that are different at each moment in time when they exist. The reader changes and will forever be a dynamic entity of perception, yet the text and the author are perceived to be frozen at one moment in time and are thus impervious to chronological change, since the texts themselves are static. The texts of serialized narratives are composed of many such moments that together combine into one much larger narrative work. Webcomics not only allow the reader to see the narrative in flux directly as it takes shape as a text and as an expression of an artist's goals and sensibilities, but also allow readers to contribute to it by providing spaces for audience participation. For an educator or critic, the study of webcomics can provide a greater understanding of processes that affect narrative construction.

## Chapter 2: Review of Literature

How does one approach webcomics in way that contributes to literary studies? Some of the critical theories employed may seem obvious, such as the use of narratology, but other types of approaches offer insight into this emerging artform. In order to study webcomics and the narrative strategies they use, this study therefore draws from theories in diverse fields. The primary theories employed for this research are those of narratology, "the theory of narrative texts" (Bal 1), and the tradition of serialized literature, particularly the Victorian novel, to see the publication format and the narrative strategies that Victorian novelists employed. Textual criticism (also known as editorial theory or bibliography) is also taken into consideration to see how the text itself is produced, the different stages of production it goes through, and to discuss the fluidity of authorial intent. Comics studies and comics history allow us to see the narrative strategies employed in this type of visual narrative, and media specific analysis to study how texts and stories are shaped by the medium in which they are presented.

Prior academic research about webcomics (at the time of this writing) is quite limited. In fact, the term "webcomic" is not even used by all of the writers of this form of sequential art. There are those who utilize the term "digital comics" while others prefer the variant "Web comic." I believe that as with many technologically founded neologisms, words tend to simplify, combine, and lose their capitalization. Years ago, one would refer to "Electronic mail" and "Web sites" rather than their current abbreviated versions. The same has occurred with webcomics, which justifies my use of the term with that specific spelling, as with the contemporary use of this term by other writers.

Scott McCloud, a respected figure in comics studies, first contemplated the potential for webcomics in *Reinventing Comics*, when he distinguished them from comics that were merely being distributed through the digital medium (I also apply this distinction for this study when

defining webcomics). McCloud argued that webcomics could change the comics industry as a business but, more importantly, could revolutionize how the narratives could be presented because of the limitless spatial dimensions of the digital world. Further explanation of what McCloud calls the “infinite canvas” of webcomics and examples of it can be found in chapters four and five of this study, respectively. McCloud devoted two chapters of his book to webcomics, and other books on the topic examined the business potential and served as instructional materials for would be webcomic cartoonists. Most of these books are about comic making in general with sections on webcomics. One of the few books to solely examine the economic aspect of webcomics is Guigar et al’s *How to Make Webcomics*. These writers focus on how to create a loyal readership and how to make webcomic cartooning a financially viable option. They direct most of their advice towards webcomics of the “gag a day” format, though their recommendations can also be helpful for narrative-centered webcomics.

The most informative by far of the different books is Troy Campbell’s *A History of Webcomics*. This unpaginated book<sup>2</sup> provides a detailed diachronic analysis of webcomics starting with the first ones published via the ARPANET system during the 1980s. Campbell provides a myriad of examples of many important events, like the webcomics crash that came after the “dot com boom” at the beginning of the millennium. While the book provides exactly what its title indicates, Campbell also notes how the narratives of webcomics can change dramatically and how webcomic cartoonists of different genres would go beyond earlier forms of comics and/or how they would follow those traditions.

Throughout my research, I have found only one other published academic work on webcomics. Sean Feanty’s, Trena Houpp’s, and Laurie Taylor’s dissertation titled “Web Comics:

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2 By “unpaginated” I mean that the book itself has no page markers. Rather than numbering all the pages myself, and thus make future readers have to engage in this practice as well, all references in this study denote the specific subsection of the many presented in Campbell’s work.

The Influence and Continuation of the Comix Revolution” focuses primarily on the role of webcomics as counter-culture material freely accessible on the Internet. They emphasize how a lack of editors and relative ease of publishing a webcomic translates into unique and unrestricted content available to anyone with a computer. That study analyzes the potential sociological implications of webcomics but does not take into consideration the narratives of these texts or even applies any other theories. The thesis you are currently reading studies webcomics under a multitude of theories and analytical models to offer a greater understanding for these digital microserialized graphic narratives.

One of the few purely academic forms of research done on the textuality of webcomics is that of Amy Thorne’s paper, “Webcomics and Libraries.” Her presentation, during the Southwest/Texas Popular & American Culture Association Conference of 2010, focuses on webcomics as emerging literature whose popularity brings many new readers each day and on how libraries can accommodate the needs of this new readership. One of the more interesting distinctions done by Thorne involves the differences between the print and digital presentations of webcomics:

It also didn’t take long for comics creators to begin exploring the web as more than just a delivery system. *Argon Zark* was one of the first, if not the first, comics to use programming tools within the strip, creating a comic specifically for the web, one that was interactive with its readers even—and that could not be reproduced on paper. At least, not in its original state, a hard copy was released, billed on the website as the “deluxe, portable, cordless, *Argon Zark!* Souvenir dead tree edition”, but obviously, those elements of the comic that are unique to the web would have to stay there. To see *Argon Zark* as it was originally intended to be seen, readers must go to the webcomic and this is true, to varying extents, of other later webcomics that produce print versions . . . *Argon Zark!* was the one of the first, if not the first, webcomic created for the web, using web tools, creating a web-based experience for its readers. It wouldn’t be the last comic to exploit a digital existence so fully, but comics that rely on it did not become the norm.

The arguments that Thorne presents here show the necessity of utilizing media specific analysis in the study of webcomics, as the media may not be able to convey the intended text. Further debate on the issues of textuality in webcomics can be found in chapter five of this study.

Digital only sources, such as blogs, contain relevant information about webcomics. Brad Guigar (the same Guigar mentioned earlier) also edits the website of webcomics.com. Here, he and other contributors provide several blog posts and podcasts to help amateur and professional webcomics alike. Many other blogs of varying reputation review different webcomics. One of the most notable blogs, especially for this study, is Eric Burns' websnark.com. Burns comments on many areas of interest besides webcomics, but the key feature necessary for webcomic comprehension comes in the shape of a term he coined. The term, used throughout this study, is that of "Cerebus Syndrome". This term is named after Dave Sim's epic series, *Cerebus the Aardvark*, which started out as humorous but progressively became more serious and complex. Webcomics with Cerebus Syndrome follow a similar process, though with very varied results. Burns comments that, "boredom is generally the key to a Cerebus Syndrome attempt. After a while, even a successful webcartoonist gets tired of fart jokes and sight gags and wants to make these characters more than they've been" (FAQ: Lexicon). Cerebus syndrome translates into a webcomic cartoonist placing greater importance on the narrative aspect of his work and showing a progression of how it is changing over time. Campbell makes a direct reference to Cerebus Syndrome by outlining its three phases: Phase One: Pure Humor, Phase Two: Dramatic Turn, and Phase Three: Tonal Juggling. Campbell describes the last phase in these words:

Some strips never moved past Phase Two, but after a time, most at least tried to coax new readers in again, to recapture the spirit of fun with which they'd begun. This was the greatest challenge – done wrong, the humor could spill spoil the drama, the drama weigh down the humor . . . It was a sign of a new medium testing its limits and finding its way. It was more sign of freedom from old standards. (The Melting Pot: Cerebus Syndrome)

Cerebus Syndrome, regardless of critical reception towards the change in tone, shows the fluid nature of the narratives found in webcomics. Both this term and its three phase pattern are illustrated within the quantitative research found in chapter five.

Webcomic cartoonists and readership communities already have a current, established, and accepted jargon for technical and narrative elements which is useful for this academic study. An example of such terminology is the term microserialized literature, which was provided to me during an online forum discussion and later explained in an email. In this email, Robert T. Balder, who coined the term, defines microserialized literature as a work where each published part constitutes less than one percent of the total literary work. This study modifies Balder's term to study webcomics specifically as microserialized narratives, a term used throughout the entirety of this study.

Multiple user created websites, more commonly referred to as wikis, use, explain, and expand such terminology and I cite them in order to use the already existing and established jargon. The main wikis that I judiciously use are *Wikipedia* and *Tv Tropes*. The latter of the two serves as a guide of sorts for narrative strategies found in various works and defines itself as “a catalog of the tricks of the trade for writing fiction . . . tropes are devices and conventions that a writer can reasonably rely on as being present in the audience members' minds and expectations” (Tv Tropes homepage). I acknowledge that these sources are not generally considered as appropriate for this type of study; however, they provide current and up to date resources which other forms of literature and print sources cannot provide. For example, wikis of the webcomics analyzed in this study are updated within minutes of their newest installments, whereas it could take years for a reputable print source to be published if someone wanted to take on this endeavor. It would be irresponsible for this study to ignore the information that is already

established and accessible, especially when there are little to no other sources available in this area. In order to explain several other aspects of webcomics, other theories and sources are presented as follows.

As with the term literature, it would seem that there would be a consensus about what the definition of narrative is, but, in fact, academics define it in different ways. Marie-Laure Ryan provides definitions by several theorists in her essay “Toward a Definition of Narrative,” showing the similarities and discrepancies between them:

At first sight nothing seems easier to define than narrative. As the following examples show there is a strong consensus among narratologists on the nature of the object of their discipline:

Genette: “One will define narrative without difficulty as the representation of an event or sequence of events.

Prince: “The representation . . . of one or more real or fictive events communicated by one, two or several . . . narrators . . . to one, two or several narratees.

Abbott: “Narrative is the representation of events, consisting of story and narrative discourse, story is an event or sequence of events (the action), and narrative discourse is those events as represented.”

Looking deeper than events, some authors define narrative in terms of what makes sequence and change possible:

Ricoeur: “I take temporality to be that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity, and narrativity to be the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate reference.”

Brooks: “Plot is the principal ordering force of those meanings that we try wrest from human temporality.”

But a temporally ordered sequence of events could be a list rather than a story . . . many authors feel indeed the need to add something to “representation of sequence of events” to turn it from a thumbnail characterization into a full(er) definition:

Prince invokes a certain type of logical relation: “Narrative is the representation of at least two real or fictive events in a time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other.”

Onega and Landa regard causality as the cement that turns sequences of events into stories: “The semiotic representation of a sequence of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way.”

Bal introduces change, causality, and an experiencing subject: “The transition from one state to another state, caused or experienced by actors. (23)



Out of the many characteristics to keep in mind, the most prevalent are those concerning the temporal and causal nature of narrative. Further analysis of the definition of narrative and its often interchangeable but not exact synonym of “story,” only further complicates a supersaturated field. To maintain clarity, this study utilizes the term narrative to denote events told within a maintained temporal and causal world, which is referred to from this point on as the continuity of the narrative. I use the concept of “narrative continuity” as the main factor when analyzing webcomics because it is one of the first criteria that readers and authors react to when dealing with the many installments of a serial work. Narrative continuity shows a temporal verisimilitude that allows for an immersive serial reading experience as each reader goes through the process of piecing the parts of the narrative. By focusing the study of microserialized webcomics on narrative continuity, greater attention can be placed on the process of how all the installments come together to make the entirety of the narrative. There are many other methods towards analyzing a narrative, but these do not translate well in their application of graphic narratives and serial fiction, much less webcomics.

This study applies the concept of narrative continuity to serial fiction, in that each installment develops an ongoing narrative without errors among the parts that make up the entire work. The term narrative continuity does not appear in academic analysis of serial fiction but it is prevalent within comics studies and in the commentary of fans of other contemporary serials. The *Tv Tropes* website states that continuity deals with “the coherence of the characters, plot, and narrative elements through the story” (Continuity Tropes). Works that have enforced interruptions, but that do not maintain narrative continuity throughout, and thus engage in narrative redundancy, are considered to be part of a series, not a serial. While a lack of narrative continuity allows for greater creative direction for the author, since previous events no longer

dictate the direction of the work, this study analyzes how the serialized narratives found in webcomics change over time. After all, the stages of the Cerebus Syndrome indicate a shift from a work with narrative redundancy towards one more centered on narrative continuity. Besides, if one has a general expectation that narrative continuity be preserved throughout the narrative of a novel, then why should one judge a webcomic any differently?

To understand the elements and practices of narrative production, I apply theories of narratology to my analysis of webcomics. The term narratology was coined by Tzvetan Todorov, who also wrote *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to Literary Genre*, where he explains the notions of fantasy and its applications to literature. Most importantly, he defines the rules of fantasy, saying that they must still contain an element of structure, wherein a level of verisimilitude and narrative continuity has to be present. It is precisely these elements of believability within the story that will be analyzed within my research. Among other narratologists, Umberto Eco's research is central for this study. His book, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* explains the concept of narrative redundancy by applying it to the myth of Superman and showing how the events of one part of a story seem to have no effect on subsequent parts of it. To put it simply, narrative continuity is limited to one part of the narrative, one comic book issue in Superman's case, so that the story can continue in whatever direction the writer desires in the next part. Because this makes for a fragmented story, texts that engage in this practice shall be kept out of the primary webcomics to be studied, i.e. works with narrative redundancy will not be a part of this study.

Any work that can be categorized as a narrative falls into what I call the "sliding scale of continuity versus redundancy" based on the different "sliding scale" narrative strategies found in the *Tv Tropes* website. In the case of short stories and novels the scale normally falls heavily on

the continuity side but this varies drastically when it comes to serial fiction. Works in which narrative consistency does not go beyond any given installment go at the farthest end of the redundancy side. There are works that have small story arcs that may encompass several installments at a time but the story arcs themselves do not narratively weave together; these would fall close to the middle but still inclined towards redundancy. The webcomics analyzed in this study fall near the middle but closer to the continuity side because they often contain breaks in narrative continuity, such as with the case of guest strips where another webcomic cartoonist substitutes the original author for one or two installments. In general, works that are more dramatic classify progressively closer to the continuity part of the scale while humorous ones come closer to the redundancy end. Any work can move back and forth throughout the scale as installments continue, thanks in part to shifts in authorial intention. Works with Cerebus Syndrome often start at the redundancy end, drastically shift to the continuity end, but then end up closer to the middle but closer to the continuity part.

To define specific elements of narratology that apply to this research project, I will use other narratological theorists and terms. These range from the general, like Mieke Bal's *Narratology*, where she defines narratology and what a narrative is, to the specific such as Gerald Prince's "Introduction to the Study of the Narratee" where he proposes that the narrative is shaped by the intended listener/reader. Narrative strategies discussed range from the traditional, such as "in medias res" and "deus ex machina" that show how the narrative is presented and resolved respectively, to the more recent, like "retroactive continuity" (or retcon), wherein information is clarified and/or reinterpreted in order to maintain proper narrative continuity. Retcons are commonplace in comic books but have also found their way into other

forms of serial fiction. Further information on retcons can be found in chapters three and four of this study.

Since webcomics are serialized narratives, greater insight can be obtained by analyzing them within the context of the tradition of serialized publishing. This method of publication allowed writers to print their narratives in parts, rather than as a standalone text. Many of these partially published and ongoing narratives are actually more episodic than serial in nature that is that they engage in narrative redundancy. Serialized fictional narratives in the twentieth century can be found in novels but this publishing format is mostly renowned for its publication of graphic narratives, like comics, television programs, and films. These media reflect the use of narrative strategies seen in the serialized narratives found in the Victorian novel. Since this is the most studied form of serialized narratives, secondary sources that investigate Victorian novelists who published their works serially are a part of this study. This choice was made to see how the publication format affected narrative production at that time and to establish a correlation between Victorian serial fiction narrative strategies and those found in webcomics. In addition, to studying the serialization process up close and seeing how "enforced interruptions" affected the narrative strategies of the Victorian novels and of webcomics, I analyze and apply the ideas found in books like Linda Hughes and Michael Lund's *The Victorian Serial*, and others that detail the serial nature of these narrative works, to webcomics.

The third chapter of this study provides a detailed explanation of the history of serialization in order to study how this method of publication has been affecting narrative production in a number of serial forms, such as the Victorian novel, film, television, comics, and other contemporary serial narratives. I utilize the term "serial fiction" interchangeably with "serial narratives" to encompass all works that are or have been at one published serially.

Serialized non-fiction, like magazines, newspapers, and other periodicals, are not studied within this study because they specialize on reporting factual events, rather than the construction of narrative which is one of the main foci of this research. Webcomics fall under the category of serial fiction and serialized narratives and are regarded as such throughout the entirety this study.

The other key literary theories with which this study analyzes webcomics are those of textual criticism or editorial theory. This approach deals not just with how texts are defined but also with how the narrative is constructed throughout time, an important element when analyzing webcomics. Textual criticism focuses on reconstructing an authoritative text from all available versions of the text. Critics like W.W. Greg and Fredson Bowers focused on reconstructing the authorial intention of each text in order to produce “definitive editions,” a methodology attacked by critics like Jerome McGann because it ignored the social construction of texts by privileging first editions and manuscripts. This intentionalist approach was reclaimed and updated by George Thomas Tanselle by refining the notion of authorial intent, acknowledging shifts in authorial intention, which is one of the main foci of this study.

Textual criticism, as of the time of this writing, has not been used to analyze webcomics or even comics for that matter. I apply and modify this theory for my research because it takes into consideration how the physical artifact of the book and how the medium of publication affects the text. The primary theorist in this area for this study is George Thomas Tanselle, who wrote *A Rationale of Textual Criticism*. Here he explains how the writing process consists of the literary work, the text, and the document and how changes to documents can effectively create new texts. Each of these changes can show how the authorial intentions of the literary work are changing. While Tanselle may not be the first or the most current textual critic, he does have the rare combination of having years of experience, relevancy among contemporary critics, and is

still active in research. Among textual critics like R.B. McKerrow, W.W. Greg, and Fredson Bowers, “Tanselle is the only one of them who has lived and written his way through the paradigm shift affecting textual criticism in the last quarter of the twentieth century” (Shillingsburg 9, *From Gutenberg to Google*). Tanselle’s writings on authorial intention and other textual elements may not be accepted among all textual and editorial critics but they are recognized among this academic community. This study focuses on Tanselle’s definitions of the “work” as the “ineluctable entity, which one can admire or deplore but cannot alter without becoming a collaborator with its creator (or creators)” (14), the “text” as the “tangible records of creativity” (20), and the “document” as “the received texts of the work” (28). Using Tanselle’s terminology allows this study to be more easily understood among textual critics and provides an accepted model for textual analysis to be undertaken for future research of webcomics.

One of the most consistent tools in textual criticism is the tracking of how the author’s intention changes as the work is published. These shifts in authorial intention are specifically what John Bryant emphasizes in his book, *The Fluid Text: A Theory of Revision and Editing for Book and Screen*. “Fluid texts, insofar as their material versions register these breakdown revisionary acts, are, from the moment of genesis and on into print, a constant ‘deferral’ of the literary work itself” (10). Rather than analyzing a webcomic as many versions of one text, I will apply textual fluidity to webcomics to show how each of the installments contribute to the complete text. After all, the “forced interruptions of the text (Lund 1)” are analogous to the “constant deferral of the literary work itself” since the final part of the text is still in production.

Another theorist who is vital to this study is Peter Shillingsburg, specifically because of his definitions of different types of texts and of textual performances, which include the creative performance where the literary work is first invented, the production performance where it is

ready to be transmitted or published, and the reception performance where the reader interprets the text (*Resisting Texts*, 76-78). This study uses other works on editorial theory and textual criticism by other bibliographers because they expand the terminology of the field and provide other relevant explanations in the study of literary texts.

The term “text” also becomes problematic once put under the scrutiny of academic study. The text itself can be anything that can be “read,” though different forms of literacy can be applied. For the sake of this study, the term text denotes both the written word and the images where they are placed, specifically in webcomics. Further explanation can be found in chapter four of this study. If the texts of webcomics are difficult to categorize, then the classification of those who make them also deserves attention. The combined labors of writing and drawing a traditional comic are generally regarded as being done by a cartoonist. Those who make webcomics must also make and maintain the websites wherein their installments are published. There are cartoonists who use computers for print comics and there are those who take comic strips designed for print publication and merely place them on the Internet as well. Since this study differentiates between comics made for the Internet and those merely placed there, a similar distinction needs to be made between cartoonists whose work is placed on the Internet and cartoonists who design their work specifically for the Internet. The term “webcomic cartoonist” is used for the latter category throughout this study.

The one other term that is used interchangeably with webcomic cartoonist is that of “author”. This term is rather controversial in academic study, due in part to the works of Roland Barthes and many other theorists. Barthes famous essay, “The Death of the Author”, is at the forefront of this debate. He highlights how the academic attention given to the term “author,” saying that, “the image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the

author, his person, his life, his passions” (1466). He also goes on to state that, “we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the author” (1470). Barthes wants to empower the readers by demystifying the role of author, but his discourse suggests that the author be removed from the traditional relationship of author-text-reader. Michel Foucault on the other hand grounds the role of the author. Foucault establishes that there are four features by which one defines “the ‘author’ as a function of discourse” (1628). The first and perhaps most practical of these features is that of,

... objects of appropriation; the form of property they [authors] have become is of a particular type whose legal codification was accomplished some years ago. It is important to notice, as well, that its [the work] status as property is historically secondary to the penal code controlling its appropriation. (1628)

While there can be much debate about the authorship and creation of a given work by an author, there is still a legal ownership and copyright of it beyond the readers’ interpretation. My own view of the author is based on the fact that he/she should be credited with the literary work but not deified as its only purveyor of meaning, and that the reader is a vital part of the literary process. This perspective is echoed by Peter Shillingsburg and his fundamentals of the text: “the physical documents and the experience of reading them – are the irreducible core of literary works. Without the reader the physical documents are inert and inoperative; without the physical documents there is no reading” (60 *Resisting Texts*). If the author is the creator of these physical documents then he/she should be recognized as such. Because of their complex process towards the development of these documents, I can find no better term than author, to describe the work that webcomic cartoonists do to write, draw, program, and publish their narratives almost always single handed. What may complicate the notion of authorship of the text even more so is the figure of the reader. Any reader can influence the narrative of a webcomic through emails and forum posts, but the function of the reader is more akin to that of an editor. The webcomic



cartoonist is the author of his/her narrative, but the readership has an often unrecognized hand in its development.

The use of textual criticism may certainly seem strange. After all, there are other literary theories that are more modern and deal directly with webcomics and digitally produced texts.

While areas of study like hypertext theory and post-structuralism can be used to analyze webcomics (and deserve their own research within these and other theories), their use within this study is limited. I defend this decision with the following quotation by Matthew Kirschenbaum:

To ask such questions - in effect, to take electronic texts seriously as *texts* - lays the groundwork for a theory of electronic textuality that departs widely from the existing approaches to the subject. The community that I believe has furnished us with the best accounts of texts and textual phenomena is neither hypertext theory nor cybertext theory, but the textual studies community... I am simply suggesting that in the long run we do electronic fiction and our critical understanding of electronic textuality no favors by romanticizing the medium through a dated discourse of play that is really only screen deep. I contend that textual criticism and bibliography offer an alternative to post-structuralist discourse precisely because these disciplines provide us with the intellectual precedents and critical tools to account for first generation electronic objects as functions of the material and historical dimensions that obtain for *all* artifacts.

In order to better trace the shifts in authorial intention by webcomic cartoonists, I analyze secondary texts and materials written by these authors. This method of research is done through a diachronic analysis, by looking at blog and forum posts seen on their respective websites from the start of the webcomic to the most current posts. In addition to this, I take into consideration already published interviews, as well as additional commentary, introductions, and supplementary materials in printed compilations of their work when available. This extensive material allows for access to direct communications from the authors in whom they state their potential intentions, rather than just looking at the finished published product.

Because webcomics are a part of comics as a whole, special attention is also placed on comics studies and the history of comics. Webcomics both diverge from and maintain the

tradition of comic strips and comic books, which means that the study of these early forms of comics is essential towards the understanding of their digital incarnation. The history and development of comic strips and comic books can be found in books such as Allan and Laurel Clark's *Comics: An Illustrated History*, Brian Walker's *The Comics: The Complete Collection*, and Jerry Robinson's *The Comics: An Illustrated History of Comic Strip Art*, among others. This historical perspective shows how storytelling through comics has changed, or rather how it retains its basic narrative techniques. These techniques are detailed by Will Eisner in his books *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist* and *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist*. These works are considered the first academic analysis of comics as a medium, and are considered authoritative works about how graphic narratives are perceived and constructed. Perhaps the only other author that has advanced the study of comics to the academic foreground is Scott McCloud with his books *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* and its follow-ups *Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology Are Revolutionizing an Art Form*, and *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga, and Graphic Novels*. McCloud continues the analysis done by Eisner but also shows the processes by which storytelling takes place in comics and the functioning of the comics industry as a whole. The fact that his books are presented in comic book fashion attests to just how well he knows the medium. Eisner and McCloud define several visual literacy terms necessary for reading comics, like the functions of the art, the panel, and the gutter.

One of the problems when dealing with the study of webcomics and comics is determining the context by which any analysis should be done. Comics contain images, so they can be classified as art but they also contain words which categorizes them closer to literature.

Eric Smoodin states that for years, several cartoonists “have tried to determine whether cartoons and comics can qualify as great art, using methodologies pivoting on canon formation, inspired creation, and transcendent aesthetic qualities” (139). Smoodin writes in favor of comics being analyzed politically rather than aesthetically, but this change continues to exclude other viable forms of study. Classifying comics as art, literature, or any other form of communication places their academic study within strict parameters and dismisses potentially pertinent areas of study. Rather than qualifying comics and webcomics within any one category, this study classifies that they be studied as a work of “intermedia,” in that they fall in between the traditional areas of literature and art. Intermedia is a term that “was employed in the mid-sixties by Fluxus artist Dick Higgins to describe the ineffable, often confusing, inter-disciplinary activities that occur between genres that became prevalent in the 1960s” (Wikipedia). The digital microserialized graphic narratives of webcomics are told through both image and the written word and thus can only be properly studied as an intermedia work. This categorization allows for comics and webcomics to be analyzed with literary and artistic theories while still being categorized as unique forms that draw from but are not limited by the rules of literature and art, whatever they may be.

The techniques used in webcomics first appeared in another graphic narrative that also started in the twentieth century, film. I draw on the body of scholarly and academic terminology of film theory, specifically that which describes “mise-en-scène” and the editing techniques that maintain visual narrative continuity. Richard Barsam’s excellent book on the many aspects of film, *Looking at Movies*, states that “mise-en-scène means literally ‘staging or putting on an action or scene’ and thus is sometimes called *staging*. In the critical analysis of movies, the term refers to the overall look and feel of a movie—the sum of everything the audience sees, hears, and

experiences while viewing it” (author’s emphasis 92). The framing and establishment of a “shot” is analogous to how webcomics and comics in general establish the panel. Emphasis is placed on a place, item, and/or character. As time progresses, the focus shifts and yet the mise-en-scène of the scene is maintained from one scene to the next. Forms of cinematic editing, like changes in point of view, also occur in comics, but the transitions between the panels are perceived to be seamless by the reader, as opposed to actually being simple and easy to comprehend as in films. This distinction is made by the fact that films are fluid and show time as an individual factor between scenes, while comics require readers to use their imagination to continue events in between panels where time and space are portrayed simultaneously. Eisner and McCloud compare comics to film in that many cartoonists attempt to mimic the pacing and visual continuity of cinematography.

Since the key distinction between comics and webcomics is the digital media in which they are published, this particular element should also be studied to see if it has any bearing on how the narrative is constructed and perceived. To do this analysis, this study applies media specific analysis to webcomics as a whole. One of the first books to delineate how new technology can shape storytelling is *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* by Janet Murray. While Murray’s observations are still considered farfetched for our current technology, she does emphasize the rising level of interactivity between author and reader. Webcomics are still nowhere near Star Trek’s holodecks for narrative interactivity, but they do have a level of connectivity between author, reader, and text thanks to online forums and email. N. Katherine Hayles, in her book *Writing Machines*, looks at this connectivity:

Materiality thus emerges from interactions between physical properties and a work’s artistic strategies. For this reason, materiality cannot be specified in advance, as if it preexisted the specificity of the work. An emergent property, materiality depends on how the work mobilizes its resources as a physical artifact as well as on the user’s interactions

with the work and the interpretive strategies she develops—strategies that include physical manipulation as well as conceptual frameworks. (33)

Her work is grounded in the science that is current and in how digital multimedia engages in new ways of storytelling. She also explains how it is not uncommon for a digital media work to eventually have a print output, which can be quite different from the original digital media work, something that often occurs with webcomics. I take these ideas into consideration as I directly compare the digital output against the print publication to see what these differences between them are and how they affect the story.

Media specific analysis, specifically when regarding the digital medium, requires an understanding of how the reader interacts with the text through the medium. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in their book, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, focus on two terms regarding this interaction, immediacy and hypermediacy. Immediacy occurs when recognition of the medium is minimal because of a deeper sense of immersion in the act of reading the text. This narrative immersion is also dependent on how quick, or immediate, the interaction with the medium takes place. On the other hand, hypermediacy revolves an awareness of the medium as one interacts with it. For example, when one is reading a very interesting book for hours at a time, the physical act of turning the pages becomes unnoticeable within the reading experience. Because the narrative is so immersing, an awareness of the book is forgotten as it is quite literally a “page turner.” Now imagine that the same book contains the written instructions of “turn to the next page” at every lower right corner of the page. By outlining and foregrounding this process, readers find themselves more aware of the medium and the document and less immersed in the actual text. The self referential nature of hypermediacy often prevents a sense of immersion. Immediacy and hypermediacy occur alongside each other in webcomics and affect the serial reading experience.

The scopes of the literary works in this research project are meant to highlight general narrative strategies that webcomic cartoonists employ. Due to the vast number of potential works which could be studied, researching every possible webcomic is clearly outside the scope of this research. Instead, I concentrate this analysis on key webcomics and their authors, in large part because they offer a wealth of secondary material in addition to the narrative that is essential for this study. Of these authors, the majority of the attention is focused on Rich Burlew and his webcomic *The Order of the Stick* (*OOTS* for short). Burlew's ongoing narrative has, at the point of this writing, over 725 strips that cover more than six years of his work on *OOTS*. During this time he has also published four compilation books that contain *OOTS* issues with bonus strips and analogous writings to show his insight into the writing process of his work. In addition, he has also published two print-only books that show more of the backstory of the protagonists and antagonists which are part of the ongoing narrative continuity of *OOTS* as a whole. Throughout this time, Burlew also created and maintains the "Giant in the Playground" website, which contains *OOTS*, a blog of his upcoming projects, writings on other non-*OOTS* related material, and a forum where other readers (and on occasion he himself) will discuss the ongoing story or just about anything else. Said forum contains posts by a growing community of readers that analyze and discuss the story and its many elements, especially in terms of their verisimilitude and narrative continuity. Not only does *OOTS* have popular appeal, it is also critically acclaimed. It has won several Webcomic Cartoonist Choice Awards for best long form comic, as well as several other awards for its storytelling. Perhaps the back cover of the most recent *OOTS* book, *Don't Split the Party* best explains how well received it is. It states, "*The Order of the Stick* is the most popular fantasy comic strip on the internet, based on several surveys of questionable

accuracy but that we at least didn't just conduct ourselves." The veracity of this fact may not be certain but it illustrates just how popular this webcomic has become.

*The Order of the Stick* is the first webcomic I read and the one that led me to further my academic interest in webcomics. The narrative itself revolves around six heroes that live in a world ruled by the laws of pen and paper role playing games like the ones found in *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D), specifically the edition known as 3.5<sup>3</sup>. The characters are aware of the game mechanics of their universe and they are quite conscious of the common elements of fantasy literature that turn up. It is primarily a work of humor, where the characters make fun of the absurdity of the rules and the staples of their genre. By issue #13 "Plot, Ahoy", we find that there is a much larger narrative present within Burlew's work, one that continues to become stronger and more developed. As more issues are published, the comedic aspect of the work begins to take a back seat to the development of the narrative. Jokes are still quite common but the complexity of the narrative increases with the addition of new characters and plot points. One need only compare one of the first fifty issues with one of the last fifty issues to see the differences between the amount of text and dialogue to see that the narrative itself has changed.

In addition to Rich Burlew's literary work, this study features other webcomics for their storytelling and for their secondary material, which is necessary to consult in order to analyze them using the aforementioned critical literary theories. Among these I include, Brian Clevinger's sprite comic *8-Bit Theater*, Tarol Hunt's *Goblins* and Robert T. Balder's and Xin

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<sup>3</sup> For those of you unfamiliar with D&D or RPGs, here is a quick summary of how the game works. Each player controls the actions of one character in a fantasy world, heavily based on the works of Tolkien, created and controlled by another player called the Dungeon Master. The variety of actions a character can do is determined by the dozens of rulebooks already published. The success or failure of these actions is dependent on appropriate dice rolls. All characters have a class, or job, that determines what you can and cannot do. The simplest distinction between classes is the use of magic, in that there are casters that can use spells and warriors who cannot. All characters begin at level 1 and obtain experience points after succeeding in encounters, like killing monsters, which allow them to level up to a maximum of 20 and obtain more powerful abilities depending on their class. As complicated as it sounds, playing D&D is quite fun and I recommend experiencing the game for yourself at least once.

Ye's *Erfworld*. These works, including *OOTS*, fall under the category of Fantasy Gaming, a fairly common genre of webcomics. While there are certainly many other webcomics that are worthy of analysis, this selection is a conscious decision in order to compare similar styles of ongoing digital serial narratives, thus ensuring greater validity towards the findings of this study.

The relationship between author, text, and reader that webcomics emphasize is one that is very personal. The role of the reader is analyzed in Shillingsburg's discussion of reception performance, which "includes the reader's semiotic reconstruction or reading of the material text as a totality and the influence of the environment in which the reader has undertaken the reception performance" (*Resisting Texts* 79). However, each environment and reconstruction is unique and it would thus be impossible to obtain every possible response of every reader to even a single issue, much less a whole webcomic. After all, serial reading experiences are often defined not by the perceptions of individual readers but rather by the reception of a community of readers. Instead, I will use reader response theory in a stricter manner, by using Stanley Fish's idea of interpretive communities. These "are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing text, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions" (2087). Fish defines these interpretive communities as those with a similar mindset while analyzing the text. However, in webcomics these interpretive communities become much more than that. They go beyond the level of the narratological implied reader discussed by Fish and take the role of the narratee, to whom the narrative is clearly directed, which is discussed by Gerald Prince (320, 322). They become editors of sorts as the webcomic becomes a circulating draft (Bryant 91) before the final version is published which can tell the author what direction to take with the character or even when there is a misspelled word. This is very well illustrated with *OOTS* and its forum, which has over 44,000 members (as



of June 2010). These “forumites” become an interpretive community that analyzes and challenges each installment. The narrative itself has been used on occasion to specifically disprove of a particular theory by forumites, clearly showing them as narratees as the text itself is changed. The introduction of *OOTS* shows that it is a text clearly designed with a certain readership in mind:

It IS a third-rate *Lord of the Rings* knock-off, but it’s something else, too. This world of fantasy operates on three sets of principles. Not only does it obey the familiar laws of physics and the-less-familiar-but-requiring-no-less-calculus laws of magic... but it also holds adherence to the most capricious form of universal order: ...the laws of GAMING! You see, this is the world of a popular fantasy roleplaying game . . . This is old-school paper and pencil RPG material here. It is within this context that we set our tale.  
(*Dungeon Crawlin’ Fools*, A)

This interpretive community knows about the rules of this world and of this genre and they will cry out with complaints when these are broken. They become something more than just a reader.

This is the overview of the critical theories and subsequent secondary sources used in this study analyze the representative sample of webcomics studied in this study. Because webcomics are intermedia, a proper analysis of their texts and narratives requires an inter-disciplinary approach through all of these critical theories. By looking at webcomics through the scope of narratology, textual criticism, media specific analysis, and comic studies, alongside a historic overview of serialized literature and comics, I analyze how this form of narrative construction is similar and/or different to those employed by other serialized narrative works of fiction.

### Chapter 3: A History of Serial Literature

“Reading a serial can be like being pregnant?”

Peter Collister

The microserialized narratives told through webcomics are a contemporary example of the serial publishing format. The rich and diverse history of this method of publication deserves mention in this study in order to trace how webcomics draw on and/or depart from earlier serial narrative constructions. The role of this chapter is to provide a brief history of the different styles of serial writing and publishing in order to contextualize them to readers unfamiliar with this method of publication. The general history of this method of publication helps place this study and the study of webcomics alongside more traditional research of serial fiction. Each form and period of serial writing has been analyzed before in greater detail and I recommend the following sources for those interested in further inquiry into any of these areas: Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund’s *The Victorian Serial*, Richard Barsam’s *Looking at Movies*, Tim DeForest’s *Storytelling in the Pulps, Comics, and Radio*, Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics*, and T. Campbell’s *A History of Webcomics v1.0*, among others. This chapter serves to quickly familiarize readers with this method of publication within the areas that I consider the most pertinent for understanding webcomics. This chapter is divided into five parts which reflect the major distinctions within the realm of serial writing. These divisions are: The Principle of Serialized Narrative Construction, 19<sup>th</sup> Century Print Serials, Non-Print Serials, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Print Serials, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Serials. In each of these parts I also discuss the relationship between the author and the reader created by the serial text, how the nature of these texts and circumstances in which they are read affect the serial reading experience, and how readers affected the construction of these narratives.

#### **A. The Principle of Serialized Narrative Construction**

A serialized narrative is its definition of “a continuing story over an extended period of time with enforced interruptions” (Hughes and Lund 1). What distinguishes a narrative as serialized are the enforced interruptions. An enforced interruption can be anything as simple as waiting for someone to say “who’s there?” before continuing to tell a knock knock joke or as complex as having to wait a decade to see what happens in the seven books that make up J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. The interruption causes a reader or listener to expect more from the author and believe that he/she will eventually fulfill that expectation. Enforced interruptions can occur within a set publishing schedule, at random intervals, and sometimes both. The author can create that expectation by stating that a particular work is part of a series. In other cases, readers may assume that there are more narrative installments soon to come because there are unresolved parts of the story or merely because they enjoyed the narrative so much that they want more of it. Still, whether a narrative is designed to be a serialized work or adapted so that it becomes one, the key trait of such a work is that the narrative is not complete within a given installment.

One aspect of serial works of fiction that requires categorizing is the distinction between works that are designed as serials and those that become a serial. Authors intend and design a serialized work to have a clear beginning and ending and in a given number of installments. Other works become serials because there is demand for additional content. Television programs and films often belong to this latter category, since the reception of viewers assessed by looking at ratings and box office numbers helps determine whether more installments are viable. The production crew’s availability and desire to continue their work also plays a role in this decision. Authors often intentionally make the ending of their work ambiguous to allow for further installments, though this does not guarantee that sequels, prequels, or any other sort of additional installments will be made. Still, additional installments alone do not make a work a serial since a

work with narrative redundancy among its installments is considered to be a series, not a serial.

The series goes hand in hand with what Jason Mittell refers to as an “episodic structure”:

Episodic series present a consistent storyworld, but each episode is relatively independent – characters, settings, and relationships carry over across episodes, but the plots stand on their own, requiring little need for consistent viewing or knowledge of diegetic history to comprehend the narrative. (163)

This lack of continuity contrasts heavily with the serial structure that Mittell later describes, “serial narration features continuing storylines traversing multiple episodes, with an ongoing diegesis that demands viewers to construct an overarching storyworld using information gathered from their full history of viewing” (164). The serial structure is a narrative construction planned out and executed by the author.

The enforced interruption lies in that the rest of the narrative is not available to the reader because it has not been published yet or simply because it has not yet been written. The only ways for a reader to have complete access to the narrative is to do one or more of the following: commit all parts to memory, obtain or have access to the physical documents of each individual installment, and/or obtain or be able to witness a document which has a compilation of every single installment. This task can vary in difficulty with the amount of installments available. For example, finding copies of the three books of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* is fairly simple but finding every single comic book about *Batman* is difficult for even the most avid of collectors and fans. While works originally told and maintained through oral tradition can be a part of serialized narratives, it is very difficult to classify them as such, since stories could be told serially if so desired or not. Because of this lack of definitive data, only narratives that are historically detailed and designed as serialized are a part of this study.

While it is nearly impossible to determine what the first serialized narrative ever told or published is, there is one collection of stories that is certainly told in a serialized manner.

Scheherazade's *One Thousand and One Nights* (or *Arabian Nights*) while certainly not published as a serialized narrative, is certainly narrated in such a way. The premise of this narrative is that King Shahyihar takes a new wife every night and executes her the next morning. When Scheherazade's turn comes, she decides to pique his curiosity by telling him a story in which she stops narrating at key moments but promises to continue the story on the next night. In actuality, the framing of this narrative as being told in different days, or nights rather, only applies to some of the stories; for example, there are instances where two or three stories are told in one night. Other sets of stories are told in a few nights but the most renowned of them span weeks; perhaps the most famous, "Aladdin," is told over a total of 78 nights (Wikipedia entry). By dividing the narratives into sequences of nights, one can perceive these intervals as enforced interruptions of the narrative and thus serialized. The role of King Shahyihar as reader or narratee creates a situation in which this method of narrative transmission becomes a life preserving necessity. Each installment of the story has to be significant enough to keep him interested but told in a way that ensures that the ensuing part is necessary to understand the narrative as a whole. Knowing how much to say and when to stop the narrative to create interest in and expectation concerning the following parts requires an authorial talent that creators of serialized narratives from that day to this one must possess. Scheherazade's narrative technique illustrates the importance of this form of storytelling (quite literally) when one's life depends on it.

## **B. 19<sup>th</sup> Century Print Serials**

Advances in printing technology, as well as an increase in literacy in the United States, Great Britain, and other countries, allowed for print serials to become popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Print serials date back to the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century where literacy rates had increased but books were still relatively expensive. Publishers created a market for potential readers by taking already popular

works of literature and turning them into serials. This practice, wherein only a fraction of a book could be purchased, is referred to as partial publishing. W. S. Ward's review of R. M. Wiles'

*Serial Publishing in England before 1750* sums up the premise:

The plan itself was admirably simple: if the customer cannot or will not buy a book because he does not have enough money, then sell it to him in portions on a pay-as-you-go basis, a certain number of pages each month or each week at a cash price so low he cannot resist . . . The practice soon became big business. (615)

This publication format and entrepreneurial practice helped create the market conditions for the serial to flourish. These partial publications would contain a few chapters, or their equivalent, and readers could purchase them in no particular order<sup>4</sup>. Because these collections lack “enforced interruptions”, I consider them to be purely partial and not serial works. However, this period is worth noting since it trained readers in the practice of serial reading and created a niche for the market of serial publishing.

The most renowned and academically studied of the print serials of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century is the Victorian Novel. These novels were featured in various literary magazines and journals, like *Master Humphrey's Clock*, *Household Words*, and *The Pickwick Papers* to name a few. The installments of these serial works were only one feature of these magazines and journals that would often contain the installments of other serial works, short stories, poems, interviews, and various other forms of articles. Hughes and Lund in their book, *The Victorian Serial*, describe the publication process for these novels in great detail. What follows is summary of these main ideas found throughout the entirety of their book.

Writers would sell the idea of their serial novels to one of these magazines for their exclusive publishing rights. They were then under contract to provide a specific amount of material per installment in a rigid publishing schedule for a determined time period. For

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4 The process is analogous to the purchasing of encyclopedias, as one can buy the entire collection but getting one or two of these books is not uncommon.

example, one writer's contract would require that he provide ten pages of material for a monthly journal for twenty months. Another would specify a word count or a weekly publishing schedule. Because of these strict limits and deadlines, writers needed to have their novels planned out from beginning to end, often before obtaining their contract. Since "material" could vary in content but not in quantity, writers often found that any given installment could run short of material, which brought about the practice of adding illustrations to complement the narrative. Writers would become illustrators as well or hire someone to do this particular labor. The additional images helped stretch the installment to fulfill its quota and became an important feature of the narrative as well. These images juxtaposed areas of the text in order to highlight their narrative importance and to help the reader's imagination better construct the characters and events. The images themselves often served as covers for the new installments, which made readers visually aware of when a new installment had become available. Rather than being supplementary material, images could enhance the serial text and affect the reading experience; thus becoming a part of the way that the narrative conveyed meaning:

Readers associated certain visual tropes with sensation fiction; illustrators could manipulate these tropes, thereby helping to define the generic expectations with which readers approached serial installments. Victorian readers of illustrated serial fiction, then, consumed texts with two kinds of literacy: first, knowledge of inter-pictoriality, and second, an awareness of the relationship between illustration and genre. (Leighton and Sutherland 71)

Illustrations became part of the contractual duties of writers in some cases, though requiring specific quantities of illustrations per installments was rare.

Serial writers were contractually obligated to deliver a certain amount of material for every installment but beyond that they were free to write their narratives as they saw fit. However, serial writers of this era wrote several works, one after the other, which meant that they needed to create a dedicated readership to maintain their current and future narratives. In

order to maintain and cultivate readers, the method of writing had to be adapted to this publication format. One of the most common narrative techniques that serial writers utilized was to end their installments on a cliffhanger or a major revelation. Lack of details and resolution of events created more anticipation for the readers, which motivated them to purchase the following installment once it became available. Now because the novel was already planned out, the expectations and opinions of the readers rarely affected the construction of the narrative. One of the most notable exceptions to this is the altered ending that Charles Dickens wrote for his novel *Great Expectations*, believing that readers had come to expect a happier and more hopeful ending for Pip than the one he had originally written.

The practice of serial writing requires great discipline by the author. Mary Hammer writes about how Anthony Trollope had to develop this craft for his first serial novel:

The novelist had several narrative lines he wanted to pursue; his freedom in moving from plot to plot was restricted by the fact that his narrative was interrupted after every three chapters. It was easy, as he juggled his narrative interests, to let one fall and be forgotten. And the serialist's very awareness of his special problems could work against him: in the attempt to counteract the divisive effect of his form the novelist might be tediously repetitive. (170)

The serial format's enforced interruptions left writers with little room to maneuver. Even with tedious planning, potential storylines and plot hooks could be placed in the early chapters of a given work only for the writer to later realize that there were not enough installments and/or pages to properly flesh them out. Since these narrative appetizers had already been published, many readers expected for early problems to be resolved or at least acknowledged later on, but to no avail and they were often left unfulfilled in their expectations.

While most of the attention paid to serial novels focuses on the Victorian era, a great deal of renowned works of literature throughout the world started as serials. These famous novels include Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers*



*Karamazov*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Eiji Yoshikawa's *Musashi*, and H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, just to name a few. An incomplete but rather substantial list of such novels can be found in the Wikipedia entry for "Novels first published in serial form."

After having published their work serially, authors would then compile it into one standalone text. Publishing this new version brought about minor changes because it required necessary revisions, such as fixing misspellings and grammatical errors. The original experience of expectation and anticipation that readers had when they first read the story in serial form could not be properly reflected in the novel format as cliffhangers would be separated by a few pages rather than the days or weeks that separated installments in the original format. Readers also had problem of accessing the narrative, whether in serial or compilation format, because printing technology and distribution methods paled in comparison to today. Big cities, like London, might have enough of a given magazine or book soon after publication began, but places beyond the big cities had far less material to offer and delivery was not guaranteed. Readers from more rural areas or overseas had to wait longer between installments and possibly even miss out on those installments that did not reach them. The serial reading experience was also affected by the fact that the publication schedule and availability of the work was not uniform.

### **C. Non-Print Serials**

New technologies allowed for narratives to be told in ways that went beyond oral tradition or print format. The first of these new technologies was film, where would be viewers could experience a relatively short narrative, compared to novels and other written works. Issues of continuity and causality now had to include the elements of visual literacy and the visual factor affected the readers' immersion into the narrative. One of the first film serials is *The Perils of*

*Pauline*, which was told through weekly installments which total about two hundred minutes of content. Narrative continuity was difficult to maintain for film serials like this one because consistency of details needed to be present through its entirety in order to achieve narrative immersion. For example, if Pauline rips part of her dress during one installment, then the following installment must have the exact same dress with the corresponding damage or show her obtaining a new dress. The problem with achieving this level of continuity lies in that the order of filming is rarely the same as that of the order of film installments and scenes. To help readers keep track of the narrative throughout the parts of early film serials, the first minutes of a given installment were often the last minutes of the previous one. This footage overlap serves as a type of recapitulation or “recap” of the previous events and quickly refamiliarizes the reader with the narrative. Lack of continuity makes it more episodic than serial and thus limits the narrative to standalone episodes with the same characters but no other common features between them. For example, the *Hazards of Helen* came out the same year as *Perils of Pauline* with a similar story concept but its 119 installments are almost completely autonomous, thus making it a film series rather than a film serial. Viewers of early film serials rarely had their input taken into consideration since the majority of these serials were already produced and edited. Contemporary film serials have years of production time between their installments and their creators use surveys and focus groups to help make movies that people want to see.

Radios followed film as the next harbinger of serial fiction. Rather than requiring you to go to the cinema, the narrative came to you as long as you had a radio. But, radio programs only aired a limited number of episodes, since recording technology was not available during the early days of radio. Serials ran live, which often meant that listeners had only one chance to listen to any given installment. Maintaining narrative continuity in this medium was as difficult as it had

been in the case of the print serial: the writer had to keep track of every detail, avoid self contradiction, and steer clear of writing him or herself into a corner.

Perhaps the most popular of the radio serials was *The Lone Ranger*, which ran for over two decades and was later made into movies, comics, and a television show. Most installments were autonomous and episodic, though more complicated story arcs were made during its later years. *The Lone Ranger* exemplifies how,

Radio had become the modern analogue to the oral storyteller. Like comic strips, it forces the audience to do some of the work – in this case, to provide the visuals. In doing so, radio activates and stimulates the imagination. It forces you to pay attention and rewards you with a level of emotional engagement that few other mediums outside of oral storytelling can match. We're in that cave along the Lone Ranger – with each of us contributing our own private theater of the mind to flesh out the sounds we hear. (DeForest 156)

Radio serials provided a unique reading experience. Unfortunately, original recordings of *The Lone Ranger* and other radio serials are extremely rare, which makes their accessibility to today's reader a near impossibility. Audiences could still write letters or call the radio stations to complain or offer suggestions, though there are no clear examples as to these actions having an outright effect on the process of narrative construction.

Television became a common household item midway through the 20<sup>th</sup> century and would become the medium with the most serials distributed of the three media. Television shows could be prerecorded and then aired even in the early days, yet programming schedules would limit airings to once a week on average. Television shows have the same problems regarding narrative continuity as did films with the added difficulty that they have more installments on average. In order to make the program appeal to new viewers who can catch the show at any moment after installments begin airing, a more episodic approach is used. Programs contain a

situation of the week<sup>5</sup> premise where the main problem is resolved within that particular installment but with a greater sense of causality towards the serial and thus be less episodic and with a more overarching story. For example, the situations can become progressively more complicated, illustrating how the character has learned and improved as a result of what occurred in previous installments. Television programs, whose narratives are of a more serial nature, often have to provide a recap of previous installments to keep readers aware of what they have missed or forgotten. Previews of the following installments are also commonplace used to convince viewers to continue watching. The recap and the preview are important to maintain the reader's awareness and interest, although they take time away from the program<sup>6</sup>. Early television shows also had a live studio audience during recording, which allowed for immediate script changes to be made according to the audience responses.

In any of the three media, the content is strictly limited to a specific time slot. Television and radio programs must last between thirty to sixty minutes, including the time for commercials. Feature length films can run between eighty minutes to almost three hours on average. Still, all have an imposed limitation as to how long each installment can be. Television programs must also contend with advertisements occurring at specific intervals, which in turn break up the installment into smaller parts. Over time, these enforced interruptions have become part of the formula for narrative construction as small cliffhangers are often shown just before the commercial break to keep the viewer from changing the channel.

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5 Detective shows have a crime of the week, medical shows have a disease of the week, superhero shows have a monster/villain of the week, and so on. Situational comedies mostly have a minor problem which does not go beyond a given installment.

6 Contemporary recording devices, like VCRs, DVRs, TiVo, or even watching the television show online are omitted from this discussion because the narrative construction for these serials does not take these additional elements as necessary or even recommended for watching these programs.

From the perspective of the readers, viewers, audience, and narratee, technological advances directly affected the serial reading experience. Distribution of these types of serials was basically uniform, as long as you had access to these technologies, but this also meant that readers had a short window of opportunity to experience each installment. Even with the early advances of home VCRs and tape recorders, most readers saw each installment only once. The most avid and perceptive of those who engage with these narratives will be able to comprehend every detail of the narrative but most will inadvertently misunderstand or miss any given part with no opportunity to backtrack through the serial, as with their print counterparts. Readers could follow these serials at their own pace, but would most likely miss out on many parts of the serial because these narratives go at the pace their authors designate for them. Authors in print works can establish a particular pace for their narratives, but it ultimately falls for the reader whether he or she wants to perform a close reading, what Barthes calls *tmesis*, where one can skip words and/or entire passages while reading (*The Pleasure of the Text* 11). These non-print serials impose a set serial reading experience and the reader has to adapt to them or risk not understanding the narrative. To solve this potential problem and preserve audiences, these non-print narratives dedicated much of their broadcast time to recapping the plot and keeping the reader informed. Of course the recap and the previews lose almost all meaning once the enforced interruption is removed, as is the case with compilations of any medium. Readers do not require reminders or enticements to watch other installments if they have the DVD box set of the entire series.

#### **D. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Print Serials**

Literary magazines continued to publish serialized novels and narratives even as the graphic narratives of film and television became mainstream. However, print serial narratives did not

regain the popularity they had among readers in the previous century. The notion of serial publishing was altered significantly with the introduction of the pulps and would have to engage with the use of images alongside the text with the advent of comics.

The name of the pulps derides from the grainy and generally low quality of the paper in which these types of books were published. They were incredibly cheap for readers to purchase and two related types of publications fall into the category of pulps: “The Penny Dreadful” and “The Dime Novel”. Pulps were small books which contained one narrative, though some provided a collection of different narratives. Critics, both then and now, criticized the pulps for the low quality of paper and of the writing, since the material was often considered to be unoriginal and cliché. Pulps were a very popular reading material, especially among young readers who enjoyed the adventure and horror pulps. The adventure pulps in particular were quite serial in the production of their narratives, as a wandering hero of sorts would face and resolve some problems within a given installment and then have a new set of problems to face in the following installment and so on.

Maintenance of narrative continuity in these types of pulps varied, in some cases causality was very much dismissed and narrative redundancy would become common. Some pulps in particular had trouble keeping the narrative straight even during a single installment.

Writer Tim DeForest highlights pulps of the notorious outlaw Jesse James and how they would,

... suffer from a sort of literary schizophrenia that makes them all but unreadable today. Dime novelists couldn't seem to make up their minds whether James should be a hero or a villain, and they would jump back and forth between the two extremes, often within the same story. In one paragraph Jesse might be ruthlessly torturing an enemy to death to satisfy his own crazy blood-lust. In the next paragraph he'd be a Robin Hood figure, rescuing widows and orphans from evil bankers or some other form of certain doom. If you ever want to experience something truly annoying, try reading a Jesse James dime novel. The failure to consistently establish even a one-dimensional characterization of the outlaw weighs the story down, stripping them of any pleasure they might have otherwise generated. (18)

This example shows how the pulps were written to entertain, rather than providing a serial narrative that could have been just as enjoyable. The serial reading experience of the pulps is far more episodic than other print serials, since their installments contain so much narrative redundancy. Their readers would obtain other installments not because of cliffhangers or suspense but because they wanted to see the characters do more or less the same things they had done before but with different circumstances. There was no clear fluidity between installments in pulps but they also lacked closure and invited readers to keep engaging with the work. Pulps lost their popularity incrementally as the 20<sup>th</sup> century advanced, though some are still being written to this day. Both early and contemporary pulps offer few forms for readers to influence the narrative, since the production time for these narratives was minimal in order for installments to be published at a rapid pace.

Comics belong to the history of sequential art<sup>7</sup> but are most often recognized for their place in newspapers. Comics encompass the comic strip, mostly published on newspapers, as well as comic books and graphic novels. Political cartoons were quite common much before R.F. Outcault started *Hogan's Alley* in 1895. Critics credit Outcault's work as the first comic strip because it was the first of its kind to have a stable cast of characters. *Hogan's Alley's* fame skyrocketed a few years after its debut when it started being published in color. Many comic strips were published in different newspapers all over the U.S. shortly after this initial popularity; however, many if not all at the time contained narrative redundancy. It would not be until Frank King's *Gasoline Alley* that real time affected the time of the narrative. This comic strip began in 1919, but after 1921, with the introduction of baby Skeeze, all the characters began to age

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7 Sequential art arguably begins with cave paintings done thousands of years ago and thus greatly exceeds the study of this study. Many publications about the history of comics deal with sequential art as well. I personally recommend Scott McCloud's excellent *Understanding Comics* for those interested in learning more about the history and mechanics of sequential art and comics.

normally. As of the time of this writing, the comic continues to be written with much of the original cast having died from old age but with many of their children and grandchildren taking center stage. While this level of realism is unparalleled in other comic strips, overarching stories were not really possible, due largely to the fact that such a limited amount of space was available for each comic. At only a few panels a day, a long conversation between characters could take up a week's worth of content and the interactions that can happen in a day suddenly take months to be read. Frank King avoided this by having the time of the comic run almost parallel to real time but this temporal portrayal meant that installments had minimal narrative content in order to provide its daily dose of humor.

Most newspapers allow for each comic strip to have a set amount of space everyday, with the exception of Sunday strips that have double or triple the space. Each comic strip normally has three or four panels to tell a joke or a story. The panel itself is much like a painting, where all the details of drawing and writing come together. Scott McCloud explains that an image is normally seen independently but the process of piecing together multiple images, in order to understand the whole narrative, as is the case when one reads comics, is a basic part of human perception.

This phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole has a name. It's called **closure** . . . Closure can take many forms. Some simple, some complex . . . There lies a medium of communication like and expression that uses closure like no other [comics] ...a medium where the audience is a willing collaborator and closure is the agent of change, time, and motion. (*Understanding Comics* 63-65. Author's emphasis.)

The space allotted for comics in newspapers shrank as years went by and several comic strips had to be adapted for the Sunday editions so that they could run from half a page to a third of a page in order to cram more comics in fewer pages. The first two top panels would often contain a minor joke that referenced the rest of the strip that could be removed at the behest of the



newspapers. Bill Waterson, creator of the *Calvin and Hobbes* comic, negotiated so as to have his comic strip be unbreakable for these Sunday editions. To this day, limited spatial dimensions for comic strips are still an issue, since comic strips are being printed smaller and newspapers have reduced the number of comics they publish as well.

Comic strips became more narratively inclined with the inclusion of adventure and superhero strips. The purpose of humor shifted toward one of storytelling and the limited space was not adequate to tell stories in their entirety. These types of comic strips were serialized in daily as well as Sunday edition newspapers. The sense of time in these types of comic strips was vastly different from humor based ones, since it would take several installments to convey a fight scene and even more to go through a story arc. Some of these comics have taken years to portray the events of just a few days of material. The availability of the comic strips allowed for people to go back through old newspapers and reread installments, though collecting them is not as common a practice as collecting comic books. Cartoonists would include convenient recaps, either through paratextual elements or integrated into the dialogue, to give potential new readers accessibility to the narrative. Still, too much recap meant sacrificing valuable comic strip real estate while few or no recaps meant that all but the most loyal of early readers would find the narrative inaccessible. The serial reading experience here meant that enforced interruptions and publishing schedules had complete consistency. Newspapers are easily obtainable so almost anyone could access these comics. The amount of content per installment left a lot to be desired in which one rarely obtains a general picture of what was actually going on within the few presented panels. Readers needed to have a very good recollection of previous installments in order to keep up with the narrative or start collecting newspaper clipping and making their own archives. Many comic strips favored narrative redundancy to keep the serial reading experience

as simple and accessible as possible for any reader. Those strips that are based on drama and have an ongoing narrative have a difficult time in engaging new readers but the ones who follow them closely have the opportunity to enjoy a compelling and consistent work. Comic strip cartoonists had little room to maneuver, but some did and still do incorporate ideas sent to them via readers.

Comic books started out as compilation books for already published comic strips. Original material appeared soon afterward. Comic books are commonly regarded as superhero material, much in the same way that comic strips are considered as gag-a-day jokes, though almost any type of genre exists in comics. The average comic book contains twenty two pages of material, including advertisements. The additional space allows cartoonists to present more expansive narratives and to showcase their artistic abilities. Many of the first comic books had a lot of narrative redundancy, as the hero would capture the villain and send him to jail by the end of one installment only to have the same villain reappear on the following installment with no explanation.

Maintaining narrative continuity between installments also became a significant issue as larger story arcs were being created. This became even more complicated as new writers started to take on already established characters, while the previous cartoonist was creating installments. One particularly egregious example came when eight different comic books starring Superman were being published at the same time. This confusion led to the establishment of the main comic's continuity with others occurring in alternate universes, while still others served as limited installment hypothetical scenarios. And yet, even with these distinctions, maintaining narrative continuity was still a challenge. "Retroactive continuity"<sup>8</sup> (retcon) originated in comic

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8 The abbreviated version of retroactive continuity appears as both one word and two words in the works of reviewers and cartoonists alike. While there is no specific dictionary entry for this term, I choose the abbreviated

books in order to justify previous events to fit into the “canon” of a comic book. The term originated in Roy Thomas’s comic book *All-Star Squadron*<sup>9</sup> issue #18, though the actual practice of this narrative strategy goes further back (Tv Tropes). Still, cartoonists were often not aware that errors in narrative continuity were occurring and much less how to fix them. Comic book legend Stan Lee of *Marvel Comics* enlisted the readership to help him locate any potential errors and to provide possible retcons. He awarded them the famous “No Prize”, an envelope with nothing inside of it mailed directly from Lee’s offices. This practice made the readership not just as an audience, or even narratees, but as actual editors that directly influenced the process of narrative construction.

Comic strips and comic books have a sense of overall longevity that one rarely finds in other forms of serials. A few American soap operas have been able to run continuously for four decades but this sort of long running show is an exception. Television programs last a few seasons on average. Comics can run for years before their cartoonists truly obtain a sense of direction, be it for humor, narrative, or both. Robinson points out the case of Al Capp’s *Lil’ Abner*, a comic strip which took a few years before it turned from a mere satire to a humorous love story. *Lil’ Abner* is an example of how it, “like most comic strips went through a shakedown period. A strip grows and develops as its creator refines his art and brings his concept into focus. The process often takes years, and at times a new direction or character is required before a strip takes off” (Robinson 147). This “shakedown period” becomes problematic for the maintenance of narrative continuity throughout the work, since early installments were not created with the attention to detail and conceptual focus of later ones.

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one word version for both its nominative and verbal morphology within the entirety of this study.

9 Ironically, this entire work and the world in which it took place was retconned out of existence in a later title.

Comic books go through a similar shakedown period. However, comic books often also had to go through major changes to keep up with the times. Since comic books are bought solely for their content, cartoonists need to make their characters and narratives appealing to new readers while making sure the original readership comes back for more. Comic strips do not have this problem since they are mostly perceived as secondary content within the primary purchase of a newspaper. As comic books have evolved over the course of decades, cartoonists have had to decide whether to alter their characters and narratives to fit the tastes of their grown up original readers, or to make their work appealing to a new generation of readers. According to Alan and Laurel Clark,

Fans became older. Once, they had stopped reading comics when they reached sixteen or so, but by the Seventies many were in their twenties, thirties, or even forties. This had a major impact on the industry – particularly in the writing of the stories. Writers now strove – and many succeeded – to achieve both realism and relevance. The industry began to mature rapidly. (89)

Several comic book companies tried to make a character like Superman relevant to older readers, but they still had to make him appealing and accessible to their biggest purchasers, kids. Few cartoonists were able to get both groups of readers interested simultaneously, unless they utilized the aforementioned multiple universes/continuities to make different versions available.

Cartoonists had to make works for different categories of readers often involving the same characters. The serial reading experience is completely different depending on which type of narratee the work is aimed at. The character of Batman for example changes dramatically depending on the cartoonist and to the type of reader the comic is designed to attract. Kids get Batman the friendly detective, teens read the issues where Batman is the caped crusader that beats up bad guys, and adults would get the emotionally scarred vigilante who preys on the fears

of his enemies. This selective portrayal becomes even stranger when these and other interpretations of the character are published simultaneously<sup>10</sup>.

## **E. Digital Serial Narratives of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The previously mentioned forms of serial narratives continue to be published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, though some have waned in popularity. The availability of computers by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century allowed for the digital medium to become mainstream and with it, a new form of serial fiction. Since webcomics have been discussed previously and will continue to be explained throughout this study, this part highlights other current trends in the realm of digital serial fiction.

The most common form of digital serial narratives comes in the shape of Web serials, which are narratives published through the Internet. Webcomics are a type of Web serials. There are also Web serials that use prose, videos, podcasts (much like radio programs), or some combination of the three. Blogs are generally not considered to be serials, since they are not works of fiction. Interestingly enough, some of the more common Web serials are done in the style of blogs, as evident through the popular *lonelygirl15*, *The Guild*, and *Dr. Horrible's Sing Along Blog*, to name a few. Such videos appear on individual websites as well as on popular hosting sites, like YouTube.

Web serial novels, actual novels published in installments through the Internet, can be accessed through websites. The popularity of this form is growing as authors like Stephen King have published some of their books as “Web Serials” before they are eventually published in print. Still, Web serial novels are far from having the popularity of their print counterparts. An incomplete listing of web serial novels can be found on the website *Web Fiction Guide*.

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10 The many interpretations of Batman can be perceived through the “Batman Alignment Chart” which shows this hero through the nine types of alignments found in Dungeons & Dragons. Visit this website to see it for yourself. <<http://www.overthinkingit.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/06/batman-alignment.jpg>>.

Web serials can contain original material but many other forms also come from expansions of other works. Fan fiction (“fanfic” for short) utilizes characters and settings from other works and places them within different scenarios. Fanfic writers often divide their narratives into parts or even make an entire continuity of multiple installments, thus their work can be classified as web serials. Another fairly recent form of web serials that are based on other works are the videos of an “abridged series”. The makers of an abridged series reedit and redub the audio of television programs, most often as a work of parody.

Perhaps the most interesting narrative achievement of the abridged series is the return of the crossover. Crossovers occur when two distinct narratives come together at one moment, often through having characters from the different narratives come in contact using the premise that they have a shared setting, and thus an intertwining continuity. Crossovers first appeared in comic books, mostly as a marketing gimmick to have the readerships of the individual works come together and hopefully become fans of the other. However, the events of the crossover rarely had a large effect on the narrative as a whole of either title beyond that particular installment<sup>11</sup>. Crossovers go beyond merely parodying or alluding to another narrative, or a cameo appearance. One of the best examples of crossovers in digital serials is Little Kuriboh’s *Yu-Gi-Oh: The Abridged Series*, which makes frequent references to Team Four Star’s *Dragon Ball Z Abridged*. At one point, the latter added the character of Ghost Nappa to the ensemble at the end of “Episode 10: Finale”. A few days after this installment was published, Little Kuriboh released “Episode 40 – Final Deathstination” where one character summons various ghosts and one of them was Ghost Nappa. A later installment showed most of the main characters partying to the Ghost Nappa theme song during “Episode 46 – Melvin’d”, thus making it more than just a

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<sup>11</sup> Reception of these crossovers varies between readers, as some titles are well received while others are just horrible. The DC/Marvel *Elseworld's* crossover of Batman and Captain America is quite famous while *Archie Meets the Punisher* makes most readers cringe.

one time joke. The crossover leads not just to a collaboration between authors but also to one of readerships, and an intertextual relationship between the narratives, to the point where it is possible that both narratives share the same continuity. Readers have to be following both of these abridged series and be up to date with their corresponding installments in order for the crossover to make sense. In order for crossovers that do not engage in narrative redundancy to become viable, readers require access to both narratives, something easily achieved in the case of Web serials where either author can provide a link to the other series.

The most recent trend in the field of digital serialized novels has readers looking at their phones, instead of at a book or a computer. Technological advancements in cellular phones allow users to operate them as they would a computer and access Web serials and just about any other digital text. One does not require an Internet connection or a state of the art phone in order to read “cell phone novels”. Ben Vershbow from *The Institute of the Future of the Book* wrote an article for their blog titled “Novels on Your Phone” in which he describes the popularity of cell-phone novels in Japan that are delivered through text messages. The first popular cell-phone novel in Japan was *Deep Love* by Yoshi. Cell-phone novels are now quite commonplace in Japan and other countries are following this publication trend where spatial limitations are quite rigorous and most texts are under 140 characters. The *Text Novel* website serves as a free writing community portal for would be authors to publish and distribute their work through text messages and emails. Readers can visit the website and subscribe to any of its over two thousand available texts for free as well and provide feedback to these authors, often via text message.

Perhaps one of the more interesting and recent interactive forms of narrative can be found in video games. The history of this form of entertainment encompasses several countries, hardware, and decades. Early computer games offered a type of story in which the player had to

navigate through various options to be able to finish the game. Sequels and prequels to video games are quite common, though these tend to be far more episodic than serial. For example, the *Zelda* series of video games by Nintendo has several installments and yet the narrative timeline between them encompasses several continuities and alternate worlds that confuse even diehard fans<sup>12</sup>. The main consistency between the games are the main characters and plot central items. However there are video games whose only direct relation is their title. The *Final Fantasy* series started in 1987 and the most recent game as of this writing is *Final Fantasy XIII*. None of these thirteen games have a direct narrative relation to each other, though several non-numbered titles work on preexisting continuities<sup>13</sup>. By keeping these video game series in an episodic fashion, players can continue to purchase them without need for any other installment to make sense of the narrative. In contrast, other recent video games have integrated complex narratives into the playing experience that span several installments. For example, the *God of War* series lets players go through the epic tale of Kratos, the Ghost of Sparta, and his clash against the gods of ancient Greece and several other mythological beasts. Each installment directly follows from the previous one in a tightly woven narrative of the life of Kratos and it is this aspect that has helped make each of these installments an award-winning video game. Even video game analyst Michael Thomsen hails the *Metroid Prime* trilogy and compares its great narrative to that of the legendary film *Citizen Kane*. While many may disagree with Thomsen's comparison, it is safe to say that video game developers are making more strides towards the creation of games with more engaging narratives.

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<sup>12</sup> This video attempts to explain the *Zelda* timelines (emphasis on *attempts* to do so).  
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHIP9UtkQDQ>>.

<sup>13</sup> The main exception to this line of narrative redundancy is *Final Fantasy X-2*, which served as a direct sequel to *Final Fantasy X*. Then again, most gamers would rather forget about this game due to its odd mechanics and lackluster story so perhaps it is a good thing that each game be its own independent entity.



Technology allows the text to become accessible to the readers but each particular medium and technological advancement affects other aspects of these serialized narratives. The serial reading experience of the works found in the digital medium is different from those of print texts. The relationship between author-reader-text in the print medium falls primarily on copies of the text reaching the reader through various publishing and delivery methods. With the digital medium, the text now lies within a different space than that of the reader or the author. The text can become accessible through the Internet but both the author and the reader of the work are at the whim of the system that allows the Internet to function. Without electrical power, a reliable Internet connection, or even a computer, the text becomes stranded. Technology used to only hinder the production and publication of the work, but once it had reached the reader then he or she had free access to the text; now the serial reading experience has to be done through a system. However, should the system work as expected, then the serial can now be accessed by anyone with the right equipment. It also helps that many of these serials can be accessed for free or at little cost to the reader. This makes it so that the serial reading experience is no longer limited by geographic or economic factors, though it is hindered by technological ones.

## Chapter 4: Narrative and Textual Elements of Webcomics

Webcomics follow the complex history of serial fiction, as was just detailed in the previous chapter. However, there are narrative and textual elements that differentiate webcomics from the other kinds of serial fiction discussed. Let us return to the definition that states the basic formulation, “To put it in the simplest equation, webcomics are comics + Web. They are everything you loved about long-form comics, short-form comics, sequential strips and single panels — transposed to a new means of distribution” (Guigar et al. 13). With this definition in mind, we see that webcomics stem from traditional comics but depart from them because they are published through the digital medium rather than the original print medium.

The methodology employed throughout this chapter is one unseen in other academic studies of comics, and much less webcomics. The narratives of comics have been studied before within the contexts of their serialized formats but these academic investigations ignore textual and other technical elements of narrative production. The closest thing to a complete academic analysis of webcomics can be found in Troy Campbell’s *A History of Webcomics* and this book covers so much material that many features are only described briefly. This study provides an in depth analysis of the secondary features that surround and ultimately affect the text of a webcomic, as well as the author’s production and the reader’s reception of that text. This process is done in order to piece all the parts of a given webcomic because they are just as much a part of the webcomic as their images and words.

In this chapter, I employ media specific analysis to describe the specific characteristics of webcomics. I describe these characteristics in detail within the first part of this chapter, which examines ancillary materials, such as forums, FAQs, blogs and how these texts are similar and/or differ from the forms of serial fiction discussed in the previous chapter. The second part of the

chapter addresses one of the most narrative influencing auxiliary features of the webcomic, the archive. The third and final part of the chapter consists of an analysis of narrative strategies found in webcomics, like *Order of the Stick*, *8-bit Theater*, *Goblins*, and *Erfworld* among others, using narratology and textual criticism. Throughout the three parts, I contrast these different webcomics to illustrate how their different authors work with these materials and the narratives they construct, in order to come to general conclusions about webcomics as well as identify specific variations. The following list of narrative and non-narrative elements are a representative sample of the most prevalent and common features of webcomics that I have encountered in my research, and the webcomics discussed here provide key examples of said elements.<sup>14</sup>

## I. Non-Narrative Elements

Webcomics are a feature, sometimes the primary one, of a particular website. Much like how comic strips are a fraction of a newspaper, a webcomic must be understood as a part of something much larger, a website on the Internet. Webcomics are not simply a predetermined number of panels in a given order when one goes to a given URL. They are packaged within a particular website. Often times, the webmaster (the person who creates and maintains the website) also writes and draws the webcomic, thus allowing the author almost complete control of the material presented on the website. Even websites that host many webcomics generally allow the webcomic cartoonist to do whatever he or she wants within his/her own part of the website so long as he/she follow the website's terms. For example, the community website *Comic Genesis* hosts webcomics and its "Acceptable Use Policy" states that one cannot post

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<sup>14</sup> The *Tv Tropes* website contains an impressive list of said elements with various examples from a multitude of webcomics. I use a fraction of the information found there for my research and cite it accordingly. I also use, other ideas not found on the website. Visit <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/Webcomics>, if you wish to learn more about this and other areas of interest.

anything illegal, send spam, and hack other accounts amongst its rules. Still, for purposes of this study, when referring to webcomics, I will use the term “webcomic” to denote the website which contains a particular webcomic, both generally and for specific webcomics, to minimize confusion between websites that contain webcomics and those that do not.

The following is a list of prevalent non-narrative elements that webcomic cartoonists utilize in their works with an accompanying explanation provided in order to help the reader better understand these common ancillary features. In the case of those elements that may affect the narrative, additional information as to how they do so is given. By understanding the roles these features play, readers can comprehend how secondary parts of the text may help shape the narratives found in webcomics.

#### A. Spatial Dimensions

Newspaper comic strips, comic books, graphic novels, films, among other media have standardized spatial dimensions within which the narrative is presented. As mentioned in the previous chapter, newspapers are very strict about the space allotted for a comic strip, which generally comes down to a fraction of a page for regular strips and somewhere between a third to half a page for Sunday editions. A feature film is normally projected on a movie screen of about 30 feet by 70 feet, though aspect ratios vary slightly between movies. No matter how big a television one owns, the image of the television program is formatted to fit the television screen, according to predefined standards such as NTSC and HDTV (720p or 1080p). Print publications in comic books and in novels can vary wildly in their dimensions but most books stick to traditional formats that regularly do not go beyond the eight and half by eleven inch page size. However, with webcomics, spatial dimensions are not nearly as limiting as with other media. While any image is still subject to the size of a computer’s monitor, one has easy access to

zooming in and out while being able to scroll the screen vertically and horizontally. Webcomic cartoonists are not subjected to having to pack together panels or to format everything properly within a page, though the website itself is still regulated by pixel content, memory usage, bandwidth, and other technological limitations, such as the reader's computer.

The ability to design the spatial settings of the webcomic allows for increased authorial control over the reader's wandering eye, preventing him/her from ruining a moment of suspense or intrigue by having a glimpse of an image or sentence later on. Will Eisner discusses how panel and page construction in print comics need to be addressed during narrative construction as follows:

In sequential art the artist must, from the outset, secure control of the reader's attention and dictate the sequence in which the reader will follow the narrative. The limitations inherent in the technology of printed comics are both obstacle and asset in the attempt to accomplish this. The most important obstacle to surmount is the tendency of the reader's eye to wander. On any given page, for example, there is absolutely no way in which the artist can prevent the reading of the last panel before the first. The turning of the page does mechanically enforce some control, but hardly as absolutely as in film. (*Comics and Sequential Art* 40)

While Eisner describes how cartoonists deal with spatial dimensions in print media, Scott McCloud details how the technology in webcomics changes this traditional method. Panels can be as large or as small as wanted and can take any shape with any form of placement desired.

This ostensibly infinite space is what McCloud calls the infinite canvas:

In a digital environment there's no reason a 500 panel story can't be told vertically – or horizontally like a great skyline. We could indulge our left-to-right and up-to-down habits from beginning to end in a giant descending staircase – or pack it all into a slowly revolving cube. In a digital environment, comics can take virtually any size and shape as the temporal map, comics' conceptual DNA, grows in its new dish. (*Reinventing Comics* 223)

The amount of narrative presented within a single installment can also vary, being as small or as large as need be, since there are no preset spatial quotas like those found in comic strips and

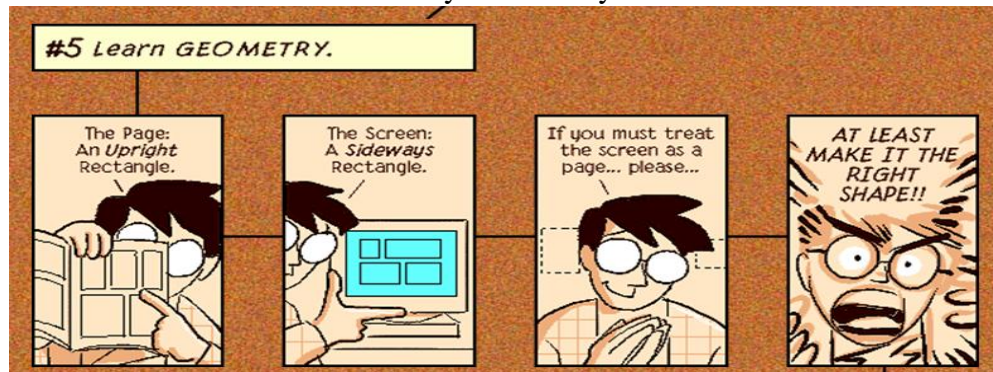
comic books. One interesting example is the webcomics that can be found in the “hiimdaisy” LiveJournal account where the quantity of installments is less than important than the fact that each installment contains several pages worth of text and illustrations of varying themes and narratives.

Although the potential for inventing new types of formatting is virtually limitless, most webcomic cartoonists use newspaper strip style panels and other webcomic cartoonists utilize a format that is more or less the equivalent of one page of a traditional comic book than anything else. This decision is most likely made to simplify the reading process and prepare for the possible adaptation of the webcomic into a print publication. While the technology needed to make McCloud’s infinite canvas a common form is presently available, most webcomic cartoonists maintain the traditional format explained by Eisner. However, the presentation of the full page webcomic format serves as a middle ground between Eisner’s and McCloud’s ideas<sup>15</sup>. Webcomic cartoonists traditionally construct the “page” in webcomics in four horizontal columns which have three panels each, much in the same presentation of a comic book page. The average laptop and computer monitor has larger horizontal dimensions than vertical ones, which effectively means that the reader must scroll down the page in order to view the last horizontal column of the installment. This page construction prevents the wandering eye from seeing the final panels. In the case of humor based webcomics, the last panels contain the punchline, and if the reader saw them beforehand it would ruin the joke. In the case of dramatic and story-based webcomics, the same principle applies but with cliffhangers and resolutions. Interestingly enough, McCloud has adamantly voiced in a webcomic on his website that this format should not be the way webcomics are presented (see Figure 4.1). The decision to present the webcomic in

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15 Campbell groups webcomic cartoonists who follow Eisner's traditional style as “formalists” while those who follow McCloud's perspective are referred to as “Reinventors” (Webcomic's Mad Scientists: The Reinventors).

this way is a personal one for each webcomic cartoonist though I believe that this strategy is used to simplify the reading experience. Immersing the reader in the narrative requires that each reader spend little to no time and effort going through the webcomic. Examples ranging from the outstanding to the horrible can be found with any of these styles.



(Figure 4. 1)

## B. Navigation

Ancillary content and features surround the webcomic. Descriptions of this extra content are provided later in this chapter, but first it is necessary to explain the process of navigating the webcomic. While it is certainly possible for a webcomic to have all its installments and ancillary content within one page through the use of infinite canvas, most webcomics will only provide one installment and a static margin of additional information which one navigates through the use of hypertext. This framework means that certain features are provided and one needs only click on them with a mouse to go to the different parts and subdivisions of the website.

Webcomic cartoonists are also the programmers, so they try to streamline the navigation process to avoid that the readers experience confusion and/or frustration and thus avoid possibly losing them. To prevent potential aggravation, webcomic cartoonists place a type of margin at the top, bottom, and/or sometimes on the sides of the website which contains static links to go to any of the outlined ancillary content of the webcomic. The margins are maintained throughout most if

not all parts of the website, regardless of page content. Clicking on a given hyperlink should redirect your Internet browser directly to the chosen ancillary content. Navigation through individual installments of the webcomic often mean that readers will have to go beyond what is currently presented on the screen as with the issues of page formatting already explained. This navigation requires readers to click with their mouse on page directional arrows most often found on the right and bottom side of the screen, scrolling down the page with the scroll wheel found in some mouse models, hitting the “down” and other directional keys on the keyboard, and/or hitting the “spacebar” key which moves the screen down to the next page almost completely. Of these methods, scrolling and using the spacebar are the ones that are least intrusive, that is these kinds of navigation hinder the narrative the least. Going to the next or previous installments is often simplified with quick access hyperlinks found in the margin though there are ways to circumvent this method, as with the Mozilla Firefox add-on AutoPager created by Wind Li. This program allows the following installment to load below the one you are currently reading every time you reach the bottom of the current page, making it unnecessary to load individual pages. This type of reading works for readers who wish to see the webcomic in its entirety, rather than those who read only the most current installments as they are published.

Navigation for other serial works is far simpler because they are often found only in one particular document or prominently displayed alongside other features. Early literary magazines that contained the Victorian serial contained several articles, interviews, and other serials. Even the same serial would be spread out throughout the magazine, which made it necessary for the index be displayed to navigate throughout the magazine, which often had a few hundred pages of material per installment. The index also helps in newspapers to locate comics. Comic books normally have only one narrative per installment so the navigation process is rather



straightforward. In the case of television, film, and radio, readers depend on consistent programming schedules to stay aware of what is being presented, where and when. Web serials and others found in the digital realm have basically the same navigation process as webcomics.

What now follows is a list of the hyperlinks found in the margins of webcomics that direct one towards various features.

### C. Multimedia

Multimedia, as the name implies, is the use of various media simultaneously. Webcomic cartoonists and creators of other digital media narratives have the ability to make multimedia available to the reader. In other words, if the author places a webcomic with a suggested mp3 file which allows the reader to listen to a particular song while reading the webcomic, the reader decides whether to and when to listen to that song. The author intends that the reading experience to be augmented with secondary materials that go beyond the traditional elements of a webcomic. By being connected to the Internet and having a decent connection speed, readers have access to almost any available multimedia instantaneously. Advances in technology and programming abilities also make it possible to provide moving images in the normally still world of webcomics. Animation of certain images or even the simulation of a page turning can be done if the webcomic cartoonist is skilled enough. Popular sound effects from superhero comics (Pow, bam, boom, to name a few) can be actual sounds with a click of the mouse in some webcomics. But even with the potential for all of these multimedia capacities, few webcomic cartoonists employ them regularly. Scott McCloud in *Reinventing Comics*, states that most uses of multimedia in webcomics are additive in nature (209) with few changes to the core way comics themselves were presented in print media. With multimedia being able to shape the reading experience and help make the comic “come alive” McCloud later asks:

If partial sound and motion can help create an immersive experience – won't full sound and motion do the job more effectively? As the goal of "coming alive" is fulfilled more and more by sound and motion which represents time through time – comic's multi-image structure – the portrayal of time through space – becomes superfluous, if not a nuisance, and isn't likely to endure. When it comes to time-based immersion, the art of film already does a better job than any tricked-up comic can. (210)

I believe that webcomic cartoonists make an active choice as to how and if multimedia elements are present in their works in order to portray an intended reading experience. An article by *The Statesman* titled "How Cartoons Joined The 21st Century." quotes webcomic critic Gary Tyrell echoes this perception in that, "ironically, by throwing animation or interactivity into webcomics, you risk losing that essential 'comic-ness'." By maintaining webcomics close to their roots and "low-tech", webcomic cartoonists can stick to the basics of comics, thus allowing readers of any technological proficiency level to understand and their appreciate their narrative. Also, these authors can better use the time it takes them to produce their webcomic by keeping it simple, and thus sticking to the primary narrative. Multimedia is rarely used, but when it does appear the change in the reading experience can be very distinguishable.

Multimedia is rarely found outside digital works of serial fiction. Television and film integrate sound and images throughout the serial reading experience, be it through music or dialogue alongside the moving image in what can be considered to be multimedia, even if these are now the standard. All other forms use images primarily sight (or in the case of radio, sound) to relate their narratives with few if any exceptions.

Webcomic cartoonists include multimedia in their installments selectively at certain moments. Noah J.D. Chinn's webcomic *Fuzzy Knights* has an Mp3 file of the theme song to the show *Cops* during the first issues that show the Fuzz, their version of local law enforcement. This example of multimedia highlights the parallel comedic and serious nature of these characters. Brian Clevinger uses multimedia in issue #1154 of his webcomic *8-bit Theater*, aptly

titled “Epilepsy Warning, No Seriously” in which there is a moving picture of four characters shifting in space and colors with what appears to be a goat in the background. Clevinger makes particular use of multimedia to emphasize exactly how powerless they were against the whims of the epic level wizard that they encountered. Interestingly enough, Clevinger had to make a non-multimedia edition of that issue so that his readers with epilepsy could experience it safely, which he posted on the news/blog page of his webcomic.

#### D. News/Blog

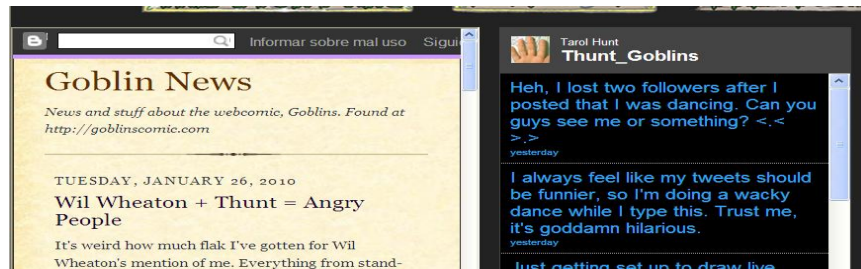
The news page/blog serves as a current events page that is normally one of the first features that the reader sees when accessing the website. More reserved authors may post something once every month or so that previews upcoming convention appearances or anything that they deem necessary for the readers to know about. Other more open authors post something daily, or even more often than that, stating occurrences in their everyday lives that may or may not have anything to do with the webcomic itself. A recent phenomenon is to have a news page and a Twitter feed in the webcomic, as illustrated by figure 4.2 which shows Tarol Hunt’s webcomic *Goblins*<sup>16</sup>. This often leads to information being echoed through multiple channels with some built in redundancy, since the latter cannot give direct access to the former except through a link and readers may not have Twitter. This part of the webcomic serves to inform the reader of various issues that the author deems necessary using the tools he/she has available.

News/blog pages rarely show up in other media. Web serials often have a blog format alongside their narratives, often in a completely different section from their work. Compilations of Victorian serials and comic strips often contain a biography of and/or an introduction by the

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<sup>16</sup> This screenshot and all other images reproduced throughout the entirety of this study are done so with the expressed written consent and authorizations of each of the webcomic cartoonists presented here and are acceptable forms of the Fair Use clause in copyright laws. Since the figures are excerpts of websites and particular installments, I recommend visiting each of the websites to view them in their entirety.

author. Comic books usually contain a small foreword by the cartoonist which can be about anything. Television and films have a few features, but only after they are released on a DVD to be purchased where cast and crew talk about the work. Because recordings of old radio serials are rare, there is no way to tell whether these had any comments by the actual author or any of the actors before or after the production of the work.



(Figure 4. 2 News/blog page next to Twitter feed as seen on

February 8, 2010 from *Goblins* website)

#### E. Frequently

The FAQ page contains a compilation of commonly asked questions and answers about the webcomic and the author. This ancillary content typically includes information about publishing schedules, what the webcomic is about, what programs are used for drawing, and many other combinations of interesting facts and legal information about the webcomic and the author. One general grievance from readers about FAQ pages is that they can become outdated fairly quickly and do not change to accommodate new data, such as revised schedules and lists of publications. There is also the cast page which contains general information about the main characters and goes hand in hand with the FAQ page since both help new readers better understand the narrative without having to read each installment. Cast pages can also become outdated as new characters are presented and the page remains the same as in the first few installments. The FAQ page can contain as much information as the webcomic cartoonist finds necessary. For example, Figure

4.3 shows only about a third of the actual FAQ page for the *Order of the Stick* webcomic. In contrast, *8-bit Theater*'s FAQ only contains one question, as shown in figure 4.4.

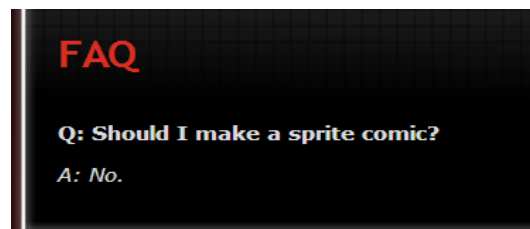
FAQs serve as an overall recap of many factors surrounding the serial. Comic books often have a small recap of who the characters are but that is about it. Other forms simply do not have this feature.

first place. Sadly, that didn't occur to me, and I get deluged with emails and private messages asking the same things over and over. But I pass the benefit on to you, because you can rest assured that every question on this list has, in fact, been frequently asked. **Updated 3/4/05!**

**The Order of the Stick:**

[How come I only get about half the jokes? And what is a \(gaming term\)?](#)  
[Will OOTS ever be collected for publication?](#)  
[How do you make the OOTS strips?](#)  
[How long does it take you to make each comic?](#)  
[How come your art sucks so much? Can't you draw?](#)  
[What does 'The Stick' refer to in the comic's name?](#)  
[What are the character's D&D stats?](#)  
[In Strip #X, why didn't character Y take action Z?](#)  
[Wouldn't it be cool if X, Y, and Z happened?](#)  
[Is Vaarsuvius male or female?](#)  
[Hey, it's 12:01 on Monday/Thursday, where's the strip?](#)  
[Can't you update more often?](#)  
[Isn't the Order of the Stick technically Open Game Content?](#)  
[Can I repost one of the comic strips to another site?](#)  
[Can I translate OOTS into another language for my game site?](#)  
[How far in advance do you plan OOTS? How long will it last?](#)

(Figure 4. 3 part of the FAQ page for *OOTs*. All entries are hyperlinks. Note the date it was last updated to see how outdated it is.)



(Figure 4. 4 the section for *8-bit Theater*'s FAQ page)

## F. Forum

The forum page is where readers come together. While the author and other administrators may write a few posts and enforce the rules, this is a place for the reading community to discuss aspects of the webcomic or anything else they want to. The size of the forum is proportional to the server capacity of the website. A powerful server means that you can post any number of

topics with few limitations while a less powerful one means that there are only a few topics available and that “forumites” (those who participate in the forums) are limited in the amount of daily posts.

Forums serve to help new readers get acquainted with the narrative, by reading previous posts. Readers will often explain that a given segment from the webcomic is actually an allusion to a rare or obscure text, thus helping the rest of the readership attain a higher level of understanding of the webcomic. Other times, a reader, be it of the new or the veteran variety, will ask for specific clarification about what a quote or part of the installment means, or about certain jargon and/or references. A good example of this can be found with the forum thread of the *Order of the Stick* webcomic aptly titled, “Jokes you didn’t get”. Discussions on forums about the webcomic can get to the point where the author needs to step in and clarify the situation. Any information provided in this way is considered “canon” or factual within the narrative and is nicknamed “Word of God” because the author is the ultimate authoritative voice on the subject.

Forums allow for immediate interaction between readers. Many will give their opinion within minutes of a new installment’s publication discussions on a myriad of topics are also common. Perhaps one of the more interesting dynamics of the forum is that they often include a hierarchy of forumites. The most common distinction is between the regular forumites, commonly referred to as users, and the select few in charge of the forums, the administrators, or “admins” for short. The role of the admins is to ensure that the rules of the forum are followed, the most common ones being the prohibition of foul language and cyber-bullying. The admins regularly have the power to give stern warnings, modify posts, lock threads, place forumites under probation, and even ban accounts. While many consider that admins limit or even silence

the voice of the reader, their objectives are focused more on maintaining order and avoiding obscenities, rather than complete censorship.

While a clear distinction between admins and users does exist, the latter of these have their own hierarchical system. The general information about a given forumite includes the date on which said person joined the forums. This unchangeable piece of data provides a sense of seniority and implies that messages by veteran forumites have more weight than those of who have recently started. Another indicator of hierarchical status comes from the titles of the forumites depending on their post count. Different forums have their own set of titles for their forumites, usually following a theme of the webcomic, and these are attributed automatically once one goes beyond a certain number of posts. General rules about forums prohibit that forumites continually post on threads just to raise their post count and even make a point that titles should have no bearing on the importance of a given message. For example, the Board/Site Issues page of the Giant in the Playground forum specifically states that forumites should refrain from,

Discussing Post Counts: This also includes discussing user level or time being a member. Some people may think that a large post count is a status symbol, or grants them spooky powers. It doesn't. We try to treat all posters as equal, the ones that just started posting and the ones that have been here since the dawn of time have equal importance.

While there may not be any intrinsic value to the titles of forumites, these distinctions do provide a potential for more authoritative discourse to be perceived. After all, one might dismiss the posts of a “Pixie” forumite that joined last week while taking more seriously one by a “Titan” forumite that has been part of the forums for years.

Other digital serials have actual forums. Previous forms of serials had fans come together and actually discuss the work in person. Television shows spread the popularity of organized fan

clubs, which often had forums with mailing lists. Current serials, regardless of media, usually contain a forum on an accompanying website.

#### G. Contact Information

This normally consists of the webcomic cartoonist's email. Most authors will specifically state that they encourage emails and try to read most of them, but make it a point to say that answering each of them is impossible. Regardless of the quantity of readers, some questions just get repetitive, thus the creation of the aforementioned FAQ page. Still, the ability to have instant communication is something that makes webcomics achieve a link between reader and author that rarely appears in other forms. This is evident with Tarol Hunt's use of Twitter to maintain communication with his readership and his clear effort to acknowledge them, as evidenced by this blog post: "Thursday, October 08, 2009 **Twitter Crazyiness:** For 24 hours (which started this morning at 3am) I'm responding to absolutely every tweet I receive. If you'd like to join in, my twitter account is right here. As always, thanks for reading" (Author's emphasis). Hunt repeated the event a month later. He even has a live feed webcam which he uses to record while he draws his webcomic, thus giving the reader a personal look at narrative construction. The webcam feed also includes a "chat" feature which allows for further direct communication between different readers and between reader and author. Still, the webcam is not activated at every moment which leaves Hunt with the ability to choose which parts of his narrative will remain private until they are later published.

Only a few types of serials regularly encourage that the readers contact the author. Comic books used to have a letters to the editor page but these are far less common as of the time of this writing. Many writers of Web serials often appreciate feedback, since they are still honing their craft and even answer emails.



## H. Subscriptions/ Advertisements/Store/Donate

What makes webcomics unique from an economic perspective is the fact that most of them are free of charge. Some sites charge a small subscription fee but even these will allow for a sample of the webcomic to be seen for free. This begs the question that if they are not charging for a product that it takes months and even years of continuous work to produce and distribute, why do webcomic cartoonists even bother? The reality is that only a small fraction of these cartoonists can afford to have their webcomic be their only source of income. Many times the webcomic functions as a creative outlet that the cartoonist does in his/her own time and shares with a few friends. Other times they are added to existing websites to make them more interesting, be it for a private website or for a much larger public one. Other times the webcomic cartoonist's labor serves as a stepping stone towards further cartoonist related goals, such as creating a fan base or building a reputation that can lead to further artistic or writing work. The important thing to consider is that regardless of amateur or professional status, these webcomics are usually produced and distributed by a single person, on his/her own time. The lucky few who actually have their webcomic as their only job usually obtain income in one of three ways.

Some webcomic cartoonists charge readers a subscription fee to be able to read the webcomic in its entirety. Types of subscriptions vary and some can provide a given portion of their webcomic for free. Another form of income comes through advertising, where a larger readership translates into more valuable ad space throughout the website. Ads of different sizes and content can appear at any given place throughout the website, even pop ups should the author allow them, which can ultimately distract readers and potentially hinder the narrative. Lastly, many webcomic cartoonists sell merchandise. Compilation books, t-shirts, original prints, coffee mugs, and just about anything else is available for purchase. These items are often sold

through third party companies that sell merchandise for many webcomics or personally through the author; either way, a “Store” hyperlink is frequently found somewhere in the webcomic.

The only other way to get money is through donations. While not technically income, several webcomics have a specialized account through credit and debit card transaction providers like PayPal where readers can donate as little or as much as they want. A “Donate Here” hyperlink appears in many webcomics.

A hybrid of all the previously noted forms can be found in the system currently being used by the *Erfworld* webcomic cartoonists. This particular webcomic advertises, sells merchandise, and until recently encouraged donations through a “Donate” hyperlink, which has been replaced with a message to instead donate money to the Haiti relief effort. However, they also give readers an option to “Become a Tool” wherein one pays a monthly rate of three dollars or thirty three for a yearly subscription, to obtain added benefits. These include a private forum, better resolution archive, no advertisements, and that every dollar in subscription fees becomes in-store credit for merchandise purchasing, just to name a few. This in turn creates two levels of readership, the casual readers and the dedicated “Tools.” If Tools are considered more important than other readers, then these potentially have a more powerful ability to help shape and direct the narrative, as part of the previously explained notion of the readership’s role. *Erfworld’s* model is becoming more prevalent. Many other websites that provide most of their information for free now give additional content to those who are willing to pay. Beyond a possible higher level of influence, these readership tiers must have minimal effect on the narrative itself.

In short, any form of economic return for a webcomic cartoonist’s work comes directly from their readership. Be it through a small amount of very generous benefactors or many fans

that help out with one or few purchases/donations, the author depends on his/her readers for any type of financial success to be possible.

While other types of serial fiction writers still depend on a large readership to maintain a steady flow of income, most have a regular salary or at least assurance of payment before the first installment is published. With other forms of serials you also purchase the narrative before reading, though something like a subscription service is available. Advertisements are found throughout all forms of serial fiction, be it as separate attachments to the narrative or found within them through the case of product placement. Selling associated merchandise became standard practice for all sorts of entertainment during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Web serials commonly include the equivalent of a donation option found in the website, though some are adapting a model similar to that of *Erfworld*.

#### I. Other links

The webcomic cartoonist can provide hyperlinks to just about anything he/she wants to for the readers to follow. These optional texts include different sections, such as other writings by the author, guest strips, other webcomics, and even thoughts and writings that they believe have their own place outside the blog page. This additional ancillary content is often subdivided into various topics, to facilitate the navigational process for readers. These links can appear at different places throughout the webcomic, though the most important and/or recent of these, as shown in Figure 4.5, appear in the margins.



(Figure 4. 5 from Giant in the Playground website shows two comics and their most recent available installments, another serialized narrative, and an area about gaming articles.)

The margins filled with links and the formatting style of maintaining webcomic panels close together is in line with how many other websites work. As Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin explain, “the strategy that dominates on the Web is hypermediacy, attaining the real by filling each window with widgets and more windows” (210). This goes to show that as freeing as the Web can be for narrative construction, here are still certain standards and practices within this digital medium.

Links are technically exclusive to the digital medium. An equivalent way of recommending other material is largely absent in other media. Television programs often contain advertisements encouraging viewers to watch other programs on that same channel, but nothing beyond that.

## II. The Archive

This page contains every previously published installment of the webcomic. This section of the website makes it so that all installments up to that point are readily accessible to be reread by current readers, for new readers just starting, and for those who have started but are not up to date and have come back to catch up. With other forms of serialized narratives, the responsibility

of obtaining and maintaining each of the parts falls solely on the reader. Be it through newspaper comic strips, comic books, or even serialized novels, the expectation of the reader is that he/she collects and is familiar with every part of the narrative. The only exception to this practice is when compilation editions of the entire work are published after the narrative had ended or after a number of installments and or time had passed since its onset. However, compilation editions can go out of print so readers still have the responsibility of purchasing and securing these collections.

In the case of webcomics, it is the responsibility of the author to secure and collect every installment. The technology of the digital medium allows for easy accessibility to each of the previous installments for any reader with a computer and a reliable internet connection. While there is no law that states that webcomic cartoonists have to create an archive for their work, this practice is almost standard within the community and the technology and effort to make the archive are relatively simple enough so that anyone can do it. Webcomics that publish compilation books of many or all of their installments continue to maintain these on the website's archive page, in some cases even after the webcomic itself has ended. Readers can still collect webcomic installments on their own through saving screen shots of each part and/or through printing them. Readers are in no way expected to do their own archiving but they can engage in this practice and it is perfectly legal so long as they do not violate copyright laws by passing a webcomic off as their own webcomic or by selling the text.

Archives normally classify installments by issue number, specific titles, and in some cases the date when they were published. The webcomic cartoonist chooses the most appropriate appearance for the archive. The most basic format presents every installment with its number and title in chronological order with each title functioning as a hyperlink for that particular one, such

as the style for Rich Burlew's *Order of the Stick*. Other webcomics that have a very rigorous updating schedule can present their archive as a calendar with hyperlinks for the dates of publication. Brian Clevinger's *8-bit Theater* has such an archive that is divided into each of the nine years since its beginning and all of the months are presented with an image from the webcomic, as is done with more traditional calendars. Other webcomics subdivide their installments via major story arcs, much in the same way that a writer divides his/her novel by chapters, or even by books to indicate that said issues are or will be published in a compilation book. Rob Balder's and Xin Ye's *Erfworld* divide the webcomic's archive into books and prose only updates. Some webcomics do not even have every individual installment as a hypertext link and only provide a minor story arc that encompasses somewhere between one and five installments. Tarol Hunt's *Goblins* webcomic contains an archive that divides the work into four books and each of them into these mini story arcs.

The archive impacts the current narrative through the reading practice of those that are new to the webcomic. Strangely enough, new readers rarely start a webcomic with its first issue. They are introduced to the comic through specific issues and/or the most current one, which is most likely since this is the one readily seen upon entering the website. The archive allows for quick access so that new readers are directed to the first issue and work their way up to the current installment. This process may take between hours and days depending on the webcomic. By reading one after another, new readers miss out on the experience of waiting for installments that other readers have gone through. However, this extra time allows readers to analyze a current issue thoroughly and create scenarios as to what happens next. Groups of readers may engage in forum discussions about the direction of the comic, what the characters should do, what the significance of an event is, and many other queries.

The archive also becomes an important tool for regular readers. Because the narrative is readily accessible, there is really no need for flashbacks or recaps between installments. Cartoonists and writers for other forms of comics and serialized narratives often need to devote a good part of the issue to keeping the reader informed of the current narrative situation. For example, the newspaper comic *Prince Valiant* by Hal Foster, often devotes somewhere between a third and a fourth of its weekly installments to recapping the events that transpired in the previous week's issue. On the other hand, there are comics that have no such backtracking, as is the case of the daily newspaper comic, *Rex Morgan M.D* by Dr. Nicholas P. Dallis. In this comic strip, little if any flashbacks or recaps are included and this leaves all but the most dedicated of readers in a state of confusion. This is referred to by the Tv Tropes website as "continuity lockout" wherein "the writers have let the mythos they have generated get so thick and convoluted that a new reader/viewer has very little chance of understanding the significance of anything" (Tv Tropes). Webcomics can still fall into continuity lockout but the archive helps readers overcome this potential narrative roadblock.

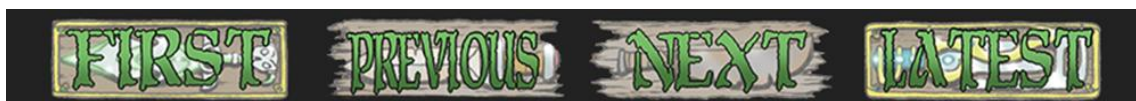
The narrative of webcomics and of serialized fiction in general is not too difficult to keep up with if one has been reading attentively for a long time in a given story arc. But then there are moments when old characters reemerge or a plot point that started several hundred issues ago becomes resolved and one needs to use the archive to reacquaint oneself with that particular part of the narrative. Comic books often have asterisks or footnotes which state "please look at so-and-so issue#" next to previously mentioned events during narrative exposition. However, if that reader did not read that particular issue and has no access to it then that narrative allusion is lost. Such asterisks could serve as hyperlinks in webcomics, though I have not seen any webcomic cartoonist employ such a practice on a regular basis. The webcomic cartoonists can place

hyperlinks in the news/blog page, but more often than not it is a clever reader that makes most connections and makes them available with the appropriate link through the forum page.

The archive becomes even more important when the author presents simultaneous story arcs with different groups of characters and the narrative jumps between them at varying intervals. This could be done with other forms of serialized narratives, but in webcomics, access to prior installments is streamlined and even highlighted as *Goblins*' webcomic cartoonist Tarol Hunt does with his "Previous in Story Arc" option with his latest installment, as seen in Figure 4.6. This margin contrasts with the more conventional quick access buttons that are seen in every other installment of *Goblins*, as shown in Figure 4.7. One interesting option is that of the "random" hyperlink that moves the reader to an indeterminate installment. In the webcomics analyzed in this study, this option only tends to appear in webcomics that contain narrative redundancy. For example, Randall Munroe's *xkcd* has the "random" option in every installment, as seen in figure 4.8.



(Figure 4. 6)



(Figure 4. 7)



(Figure 4. 8)



While most aspects of a webcomic's archive help the reader, some of them are actually detrimental to the narrative and reading experience. I categorize these instances as moments of archive abuse. One intriguing practice of archive abuse is that of backdating installments. This technique occurs when an update was supposed to be posted at one moment but was actually posted later on but with the previous date. Possibly the most exaggerated example of this can be seen with the webcomic *mezzacotta* by David Morgan-Mar and others. It originally started in October 2008 but the webcomic cartoonists decided to backdate several installments before the webcomic started. By searching through the archive, one finds that the first issue of *mezzacotta* is backdated as occurring on January 1, 9999999999999 BC. It has a comic for every day of the year beyond that point. As of October 2008, this webcomic has ostensibly a total of 3,652,425,000,732,961 installments, by far the most of any webcomic in existence. It is completely done in a gag a day format and has no narrative beyond any single issue. It contains a "random" hyperlink, as well as the option to search via date, with the option to look for installments in years classified as BC or AD.

### III. Narrative Elements

The narratives of webcomics are told serially. However, their serial nature constitutes "a continuing story over an extended period of time with enforced interruptions" (Hughes and Lund 1), while being considered what Robert T. Balder categorizes as microserialized works, wherein each installment contains less than one percent of the total work. Following the tradition of comics, webcomic cartoonists tell the narratives of their webcomics through "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud *Understanding Comics* 9). In order to identify and define the narrative elements and narrative strategies of webcomics, I analyze these works

through textual criticism and narratology in order to study how the parts come together to make a complete narrative. As a subdivision of the textual analysis, I also analyze the artistic styles of webcomics, since they are just as necessary to understand the linguistic text itself and its ability to relate the narrative.

### **A. Textual Analysis**

I utilize textual studies in this study of webcomics to better explain each of these parts as it becomes narrative that goes beyond their total sum. George Thomas Tanselle divides written works into three categories throughout his book, *A Rationale of Textual Criticism*. These categories are that of the work, the text, and the document. I apply and adapt these categories to webcomics as follows.

Let us return to Tanselle's terminology of textual criticism. He defines the work as an "ineluctable entity, which one can admire or deplore but cannot alter without becoming a collaborator with its creator (or creators)" (14) and says that "verbal works or statements are thoughts employing particular arrangements of words as their ultimate medium" (15). The work encompasses both the intangible idea as well as the final product of an author's creation. In the case of webcomics, I apply Tanselle's notion of "the work" to the entirety of the narrative found in the webcomic cartoonists creation. The work includes the parts that are already published and those that are still in the process of creation and production, even if he/she does not know about them yet. The ongoing narratives of these webcomics are thus considered to be works in progress. Because others can add to the work beyond the webcomic itself, such as in the case of fan fiction and other additive works, the work itself can be considered never ending. However, for the sake of this study I am limiting the work to the first through last issue of a given

webcomic, as well as pertinent secondary material created by the author and specifically intended for that particular webcomic.

The idea of a text normally applies to written works, though Tanselle says that, “all works of art have texts, whether usually called by that name or not, for they all consist of an arrangement of elements” (18), and they are the “tangible records of creativity” (20). Thus, the presentation of the work is the text. For the sake of webcomics, I modify the term “text” so that it goes beyond just the written word and thus incorporates the artistic elements as well. I distinguish between images and words in other parts of this study, yet I wish to clarify here that when I refer to the “text” of a webcomic I mean the combination of both of these elements. These texts undergo several phases until they become published. In the case of serial works, the author designs each installment as an individual text that is read as such but that must maintain narrative cohesion with texts that have already been published and those that will be published eventually. Webcomic cartoonists design the texts this way in order to maintain narrative continuity throughout the work, an issue discussed at length later on in the chapter.

For Tanselle, the document is the tangible artifact that conveys “the received texts of the work” (28). They are the physical embodiments of the text, created through reproductions and in some cases through different media. Now the term “physical embodiment” is problematic when dealing with digital media, in part due to the virtual/real dichotomy that exists here, so instead I claim that the document is where readers can access the text. For webcomics, the website which contains the text and in some cases compilation books serve the role of documents. I have already detailed several of the aspects of this digital document in the first part of this chapter, though I reference some of them here again as well as highlighting others. One often misunderstood notion of the document is its uniformity and permanency. Readers generally

perceive that every person that visits a website will see the exact same content. However, if only through personal subjectivity and individual sensory attributes (how good one's eyesight is, among other factors), this is not the case. It is rare for any two people at the same time to have the same model computer, resolution imaging, download speed, browser settings, and other technical elements, and this makes every reading experience unique. These minute changes are often imperceptible or negligible but they do exist. The other issue of permanency worth considering is that webcomics often change servers without visibly affecting the webcomic itself. Websites are often given a new layout with different features. Still, the digital document of the website changes every time the author publishes a new installment, adds a new blog post, every time a forumite writes in the forum, or clicks on any given hyperlink, which alters how the given item is now presented to the reader. These minor changes in the document rarely affect the text or the narrative itself significantly, though I discuss instances when these alterations occur later on in the chapter.

The document of the webcomic has another factor that goes hand in hand with the archive. The website serves as a compilation for each installment, which is part of the ongoing work. The division of each of the features of the website and the individual installments allow for each part to be considered its own standalone document that happens to be packaged together. Each document contains its own text which can be read individually but the intended narrative and textual meaning can be obtained when these are read in unison, as the many parts that comprise the entire work.

## **B. Analysis of the Art of Webcomics**

Since the images of webcomics are just as much a part of the text as the written language, the artistic style of these webcomics needs to be addressed. Keep in mind that webcomic

cartoonists use varied computer programs in order to publish their work, much like how artists use different types of brushes, which make artistic expression a completely different process from other non-digital works of art. I utilize the term “art” in part because this is the vocabulary employed by webcomic cartoonists when referencing the creation of their images. The proper term for what they do would be a mix of traditional drawing along with technical programming, but since no such word truly conveys these notions and to maintain simplicity and uniformity, “art”<sup>17</sup> suffices to describe this aspect of webcomics. This section of the chapter also includes an analysis of the development of different artistic styles in webcomics, since visual styles change just as much as narratives do as time goes by.

Rich Burlew’s *The Order of the Stick* is as the title implies a stick figure webcomic.

Many readers consider this art form simple at a first glance. The comic’s FAQ page specifically addresses this issue when Burlew explains the matter:

**Q: How come your art sucks so much? Can’t you draw?**

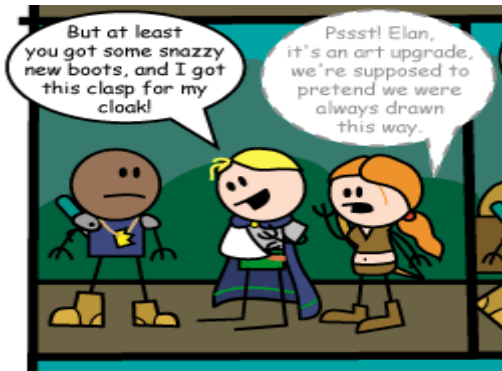
A: Grumble. Let’s be clear: I **choose** to draw stick figures because I think they bring the right air of humor to the strip, and because they create a unique style. People often criticize the OOTS style under the assumption that I am incapable of doing better. I would argue that there is no better or worse involved. I use stick figures because the stick figure style is what is right for the comic. If I were doing a serious fantasy epic, I would draw more realistic pictures.

Simple or not, Burlew handles his figures with great detail when it comes to facial expressions and even grand scale environments. The narrative itself has become more serious than at the time Burlew wrote the above statement, yet the art has maintained this iconic style overall, though the style has changed as time has passed. It now includes finer details as can be seen through the self- in figure 4.9 by Haley and Elan in one panel from issue #198 “The Great Kazoo”. The art itself has also become part of the humor of this webcomic, as we see from an argument between

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<sup>17</sup> Art is another term which is difficult to define controversy. One of the broadest definitions of art can be seen in Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* where he states that art is anything that does not have to directly with survival and reproduction (163-167). My own definition of art acknowledges potential subjectivities towards the classification of “art” in that it is the appreciation of any object or action beyond its most practical function.

two villains in figure 4.10 in one panel from issue #229 “No Offense Aaron.” I discuss the self-referential nature of the webcomic in great detail in the next chapter.



(Figure 4. 10)

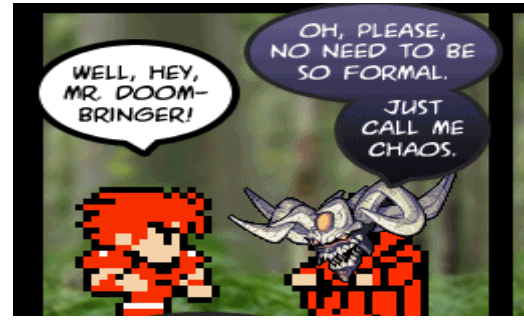


(Figure 4. 9)

While some readers of webcomics consider stick figures simple, they constantly criticize one type of webcomic for its “copy/paste” style. This is a sprite comic, a type of webcomic that uses “computer sprites, often taken from video games, for significant portions of their artwork” (Wikipedia “Sprite Comic”). The sprites themselves are images that one can easily obtain from websites and gaming emulators. Brian Clevinger’s *8-bit Theater* webcomic utilizes the sprites from Squaresoft’s first *Final Fantasy* video game which was done in an eight bit format for the Nintendo Entertainment System. The narrative of this webcomic parodies the aforementioned video game. Clevinger uses these sprites without violating copyright infringement laws due to parody laws, yet these severely limit retail merchandising options, as evidenced by the fact that the webcomic contains a total of 1225 installments and yet no book compilation of them has ever been done. After the first few hundred installments, non-sprite characters were introduced into the narrative, which differ from the eight bit format. Even for an artistic style that makes stick figures look complex, the art has changed a great deal from its first issues to its most recent ones. Just compare figure 4.11 from “Episode #1: We’re Going Where?” with Fighter and Black Mage with figure 4.12 from “Episode #1216: Almost the Right Idea” with Fighter and Chaos.



(Figure 4. 11)

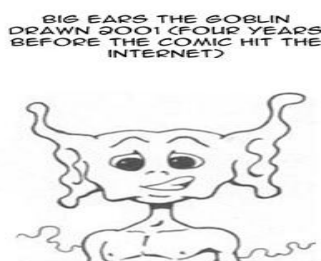


(Figure 4. 12)

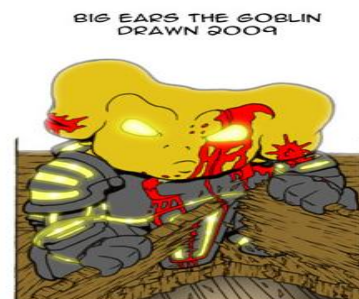
Of the selected comics, one finds the realistic artistic style in Tarol Hunt's hand drawn webcomic, *Goblins*. The webcomic itself has an advisory label before every issue warning of the graphic violence presented in it. To put it simply, Hunt includes blood and a lot of it, strangely no guts, in that no internal organs are shown even when a character is cut in half. The change in artistic style is very pronounced between the first issues of this webcomic and the current ones, to the point that those early issues were originally in black and white while newer ones are now in full color, and the level of detail has increased. Hunt himself has now placed a page where the first installment of the webcomic should be that details just how much the art has changed. Here is an excerpt from this page:

In my effort to always improve, my drawing and writing styles will gradually change. For the readers who have been following the comic for some time, this change will be just as gradual for them, but if you're a new reader, you probably clicked through one or two of the more recent pages, found something that caught your interest and decided to start reading from the beginning. For you, the comic's growth will seem less gradual. Let's rip off that band-aid quickly, shall we?

Hunt goes on to show a sample of his first drawing with one of the more recent ones to illustrate this change. This can be seen in figures 4.13 and 4.14 below.



(Figure 4. 13)



(Figure 4. 14)

Lastly we have another hand drawn webcomic by Robert T. Balder and Jaime Noguchi called *Erfworld*. This webcomic is not as gory as *Goblins* but it does have a certain realism. There are several aspects that distinguish the artistic elements of *Erfworld*. First off, Balder writes while Noguchi creates the images, thus allowing for a shared growth and a type of collaborative authorship of the webcomic. During the summer of 2009, new issues were done in prose rather than comic format. They contained a large amount of text and one illustration, much like the style of many Victorian Serials, and these images were chosen from fan art submissions. Later on, it was revealed that Noguchi had left as illustrator and that Xin Ye, one of the fan artists, had taken his role. Currently, prose style updates intercalate with regular comic updates. From a narrative/artistic perspective, this change means that the current authoritative marker is that of Xin Ye and that the reader has to pretend that the characters have always been drawn that way. Compare figures 4.14 to figures 4.15 to see the differences between how Noguchi drew Parson Gotti in issue #20 of the first book and how Xin Ye drew him in issue #2 of the second book, respectively. They are subtle but they exist and change the character's portrayal, and potentially, the reader's understanding of his actions and of the narrative itself.



(Figure 4. 15)



(Figure 4. 16)

There are many other artistic styles by which webcomic cartoonists express their work beyond those shown within this representative sample of webcomics. Among them we find the picture webcomic, where photos are taken of real life objects and/or persons and then digitally



altered to add text and other elements. Artistic style is just a part of a webcomic as are the characters or the plot and can change just as drastically at the behest of webcomic cartoonists.

#### **D. Narratological Considerations**

Webcomic cartoonists choose whether or not to include an ongoing story within their work. This study specifically addresses those webcomics that do not engage in narrative redundancy, as defined by Umberto Eco and explained in previous chapters. Much in the same way that a webcomic cartoonist carves out his or her own unique artistic style, each one also has his/her own narrative style. What kind of narrative strategies to use and how to use them are questions that webcomic cartoonists ask themselves about their work, as evidenced through their blog posts and commentaries. The narrative strategies that are the most conventional for this form of serialized fiction are the ones that I discuss here.

The microserialized nature of webcomic publication places importance on the composition of each particular installment. These updates can consist of just about whatever length and content that the author wants. However, webcomics that maintain narrative continuity throughout their installments need to ensure a successful cohesion between updates. Some webcomic cartoonists use small introductions that recap the previous occurrences, though tools like the archive make sure such elements are reserved only for switching to a different story arc or set of characters that have not been a part of the narrative for a sufficient amount of time. Each update links up to previous and future installments accordingly to maintain a level of narrative continuity and verisimilitude throughout the webcomic. After all, readers would find it difficult to follow a narrative where a sense of time and place were not consistent.

Rules about updates do exist in certain webcomic circles. Brad Guigar of [webcomics.com](http://webcomics.com) highlights one of these rules in the article “What about Long Form Comics?”:

**Make every comic as significant as possible:** Translated for a long-form dramatic comic, this should read as such: Make sure every update is a satisfying experience for all of your readers. For a humor comic, it's a well-crafted punchline. For a dramatic comic, it might be a strong plot hook or a significant cliffhanger. But here's the rub, that update has to be satisfying to both your regular readers as well as the ones who are arriving at your site for the first time that day. In other words, it has to be significant without the aid of your archives. If you can achieve that, you can hold the new readers your site attracts. (Author's emphasis)

Guigar suggests this rule for those who want to be successful at the business part of webcomics, though this entry also goes hand in hand with proper narrative construction. The consideration of any given installment's "significance" is a subjective matter for author and reader alike. One can consider that installments that show a particular character's death for example might be more significant than one which only provides minor plot advancement. Still, each update needs to be "significant" enough to stand alone while still being interconnected to every other part of the narrative. For example, one webcomic may have two characters in a heated argument. The author could place the entirety of the argument in one installment or place it within more issues, but he/she should not provide part of what any given character states and then leave him or her in mid-sentence. This would connect installments rather well but the average reader would lose interest with the common complaint that the story is going nowhere. Serial fiction writers face the problem of providing enough significance in one installment while leaving the reader interested in reading the next one. Webcomic cartoonists have one narrative strategy available to them that can help solve this problem. They can end each issue on a cliffhanger, wherein a character encounters a suspenseful situation with the resolution being deliberately absent until the next installment. However, in a microserialized work this framing device can lose its effect rather quickly and make readers lose interest.

The webcomic cartoonist adds each installment to the ever growing document of the website that compiles all of the issues published so far. Making all the installments work as a

narrative whole is what makes a webcomic a fluid text of sorts. Textual critic John Bryant defines this term as follows, “simply put, a fluid text is any literary work that exists in more than one version” (*The Fluid Text*, 1). Bryant argues that different editions or versions of the same text are not radical departures from each other but rather that they can be used together to comprehend the authorial intention and other elements about a given work that cannot be found with just one text. I apply the principle of textual fluidity to microserialized fiction, specifically webcomics, not just to show the connection between different versions or editions but rather to show that there is a cohesion between the different texts and documents that contain each installment. Much like the pages in a book, there must be a streamlined meshing between the installments so that the text and the narrative can be better understood by the reader. Because it is a microserialized work as well as an ongoing narrative, webcomics are in constant textual fluidity. All of the many issues need to be interwoven by the webcomic cartoonist in order for the narrative to be captivating and understandable to the reader, especially when shifting from the digital to the print medium, an area I discuss in the next chapter. Webcomic cartoonists that do not achieve this sense of fluidity often create a confusing narrative and will most likely alienate their readership and not find success in this venture.

The reception of installments is also affected by the publishing schedule of the webcomic. Posting new installments before a self imposed deadline is an exception to the rule. Many webcomics are actually late for their deadlines. Readership opinions vary on the reception of late comics. Some are cordial and allow somewhere between a few hours and a day before they voice concern over the new comic. Others are less understanding and voice disdain almost instantaneously. For example, some webcomics update once a week every Sunday. Some readers expect the new installment to be available at 12:01 am of the same day. Others expect the comic

to appear at any given moment in the twenty four hour span of that day but would not be surprised if the actual posting occurred on Monday morning. Some readers will actually have angry email and forum postings ready to be sent the second it becomes 12:01 am Monday about how the comic is late.

The authorial freedom that every webcomic cartoonist possesses includes how to follow a particular publication schedule or even whether to have one in the first place. This freedom means that nothing except disappointing fans can stop a webcomic cartoonist from entering a hiatus or even stopping a webcomic altogether. Webcomic cartoonists that want to be taken seriously are almost required to be as consistent as possible with their updating schedule. Brad Guigar in the previously mentioned article from webcomics.com titled “What about Long Form Comics?” suggests to webcomic cartoonists:

**Update the comic as frequently as possible -- and stick to a regular schedule.** For a comic strip, the conventional wisdom is to have as close to a daily schedule as possible. For a long- form comic, that just may not be possible. So, you’ll have to choose the most frequent schedule you’re capable of maintaining. More importantly, your schedule should be reliable. If you’re trying to cement new readers, you need to make your site part of their regular Web experience. You’re going to have a hard time doing that if your schedule is hit-and-miss. (Author’s emphasis)

Once the webcomic attains a committed readership, then a webcomic cartoonist possesses the freedom of updating at random intervals without losing the majority of his/her readers. Of course, it can take years before such a devoted readership is developed. To maintain as consistent a publishing schedule as possible, many webcomic cartoonists write and draw installments before deadlines and use a computer program to upload the new comic the second the computers internal clock reaches a preset time. Of course, this means that the installment needs to be prepared and ready by that time, something that is a variant factor for each issue.

A lack of a publishing schedule is something that often times prevents readers from

getting attached to the narrative of the webcomic during its onset. Most webcomics now contain an RSS feed which allows readers to sign up to receive an email saying that the website has been updated. However, this notification does not necessarily mean that the webcomic has a new installment, since RSS feeds also show when new blog posts are published as well as when new items are available in the store. This can make some readers complain about spam and ignore the webcomic altogether. At other times, having a strict publishing schedule can be a detriment to the webcomic. From a narrative perspective, it means that narrative pacing is dictated by this schedule. A particularly action packed fight sequence for example might be slowed down by having to wait for the next installment to be available. This occurred with *OOTS* during issues #60-66 when it had a publishing schedule of Tuesdays and Thursdays. Burlew decided that the confrontation between the titular protagonists and the evil Linear Guild could not be adequately told in a twice weekly format. To resolve this, he posted on his blog page that for one week only there would be a new issue every day in that upcoming week. This decision was well received by the readers and delivered adequate narrative pacing while leaving enough time for readers to wonder what would happen next, but it was not so fast that an installment might be missed. Of course, by not having an update schedule one could create an illusion of time passing by to be shared with the temporal perception of the readers. A sense of confusion and despair can be placed within the narrative and then displaced unto the readers by making them wait more than usual for the next installment. However, one must take into consideration that temporal perception is more accelerated on the Internet than in real life, much in the same way that one expects an email to be responded to at a vastly different rate than with a traditional letter. Webcomics that update frequently might have readers confused if a week has gone by without a new issue. Somewhere after two to three weeks without an update, the forumites often voice

their worries as to whether the webcomic cartoonist is sick, with more exaggerated possibilities being posted proportionately as more time goes on. The exception to this is when an announcement is placed on the news/blog page to inform that a vacation and/or hiatus is underway, though some forum posts filled with concern as to whether more installments will be ready eventually may still appear.

One feature of serialized narratives is that new information about the characters and the world they live in is constantly being given with each installment. The problem with this comes when the new information contradicts that which has already been published. This inconsistency leads to breaking the narrative continuity of the work and may alienate readers. In order to fix any contradictions, webcomic cartoonists use retroactive continuity, or “retcon”, a practice frequently used in comic books to make sure that any mistakes are rectified. For example, a character in the first issues of the webcomic might say in passing that he is an orphan. Several hundred issues later, the same character returns to his hometown and is reunited with his parents. Readers mention the disparity between the information in the installments and it turns out the author completely forgot about this. The next issue now retcons the familial situation in any number of ways depending on the particular setting of the narrative. The above situation could be solved through magic, clones, robots, doppelgangers, mind control, or with the simple fact that the character is referring to his adoptive parents. One distinction about a retcon is that it is meant to answer questions about the canon of the narrative without creating further confusion. Some readers misinterpret a textual revelation that discredits their own theories of the narrative as a retcon when it was actually planned that way by the author from the start. This confusion occurs when there is a suspenseful narrative where details are omitted purposefully and the truth is something that goes against the readers’ expectations. In short, authors retcon to ensure narrative

continuity within the work first and foremost.

There are several forms of retcons that can be employed for webcomics. The above example is a traditional one. Works that go through Cerebus Syndrome, discussed in the second chapter of this study, are said to have Cerebus Retcons, where the webcomic cartoonists “retroactively deconstruct previous wackiness and then play it straight (Tv Tropes). For example, a lighthearted humorous webcomic contains one character that is very silly and constantly imagines fantastic happenings in an otherwise normal world. After a few hundred issues the tone of the webcomic has changed to a dark and pessimistic style that focuses on the futility of life. The above character is now retconned so that the reason behind his behavior is said to actually be a defense mechanism for his fragile psyche after years of abuse by his parents, to keep in line with the new direction of the comic. Retcons can occur again should the story continue to change in style and tone. If the above narrative returns to a lighthearted humorous expression then the explanation can be dismissed as being told by an over dramatic psychiatrist who had no idea what he was talking about.

Another type of retcon is that of the Orwellian variety, as it follows the principle of a retcon found within George Orwell’s novel *1984*. The Orwellian Retcon is “achieved not by putting out sequels that change the official story, but by actually going back and changing it in the original work, so that subsequent printings of ‘the same’ work are actually different” (Tv Tropes). Since the archives of a webcomic are on the website, these can be altered by the webcomic cartoonist. Such a practice is considered by readers to be a way to resolve bad writing and lack of planning. Authors certainly can do this in a webcomic but the majority will avoid this practice in its entirety. Some may only alter the artistic style, since they claim that their previous work is not up to par with the current drawing method, and will effectively create new first

comics. The opinions of readers about this practice vary as this can be considered either a necessary update or a destruction of an original part of the work. Narratively speaking, the Orwellian Retcon completely disregards narrative continuity as it effectively eliminates any form of permanency within prior events. However, an Orwellian Retcon can also be applied to emphasize the chaotic nature of the webcomic's setting or even simply for the sake of humor. One Orwellian Retcon, intended as a joke, can be seen in *8-bit Theater* when the character Thief dreams of one day being a ninja. This retcon occurs in "Episode #651: Thief of Time" where he becomes a ninja dressed in bright red, just like every other ninja in this webcomic. However, in the following installment "Episode #652: Solidarity", he appears dressed in black which prompts another character to ask him about his attire. Thief responds that he did not change and adds "besides what kind of a ninja wears bright red anyway?" If one looks at the previous installment, one can see that now Thief is wearing black ninja clothing. This retcon and joke only had its full effect on readers who were up to date at the time of original publication and has little effect on those who read it after the change.<sup>18</sup> It is an example that shows how webcomics are intended to be read serially and how some meanings are lost to those who did not partake in that original reading experience.

One particular Orwellian retcon was added in *Erftworld*, when Robert T. Balder noticed a mistake in one issue that affected how future installments would be done. He informed his readers of this decision with a blog post titled "The Ultimate Naughtymancy" in which he related the narrative difficulties of writing a microserialized work. Excerpts from the blog post read as follows:

There are a lot of difficult things about writing a story webcomic. But maybe the hardest

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<sup>18</sup> I began reading this webcomic after said issues had been published. It is only through forum postings and online discussions about retcons that readers like myself can even be aware of such happenings.



one is this: *the first draft is the final draft*.

If a novelist gets to page 280 and realizes there's a basic conflict with something that was written on page 14, they can go back to page 14 and edit it, before they call the draft done. If a complete draft gets to an editor's desk and they say, "I loved it, but on page 194 you had the Fartaxians shooting lasers out of their sphincters when on page 75 you clearly said they shot antimatter beams," then the writer can say, "Oh, I'll change that." And the reader never sees the mistake. (Author's emphasis)

Balder goes on to say that he realized a key and well defined character trait had been mentioned in an earlier installment that would not allow for further events in the narrative to take place and maintain proper continuity. To fix this mistake, Balder made an Orwellian Retcon to make the necessary change and also added "Retconjugation" to the types of magic that exist in his webcomic to acknowledge that and any future outstanding modifications to the text. Changes to the *Erfworld* website's archives were made immediately as a part of this retcon. However, the archives of the first book of this webcomic were originally published in the Giant in the Playground website, where these changes were never made. Thus readers who only follow the original publication fail to perceive this retcon and will react to this problem as just another break in narrative continuity.

Webcomics have several technological advantages that are not available to their print counterparts, but these are not used at all times. The capacity to go beyond the conventions and standards of their comic strip and comic book counterparts exists and is available to the webcomic cartoonist but the ability to do so does not translate into a necessity for creating this form of narrative. Although features like the forum and the archive actively shape how the narrative is produced, the presentation usually stays true to the traditional models used in previous formats. Some experimental webcomics break away from these norms but they are the exception. As a rule, the actual reading experience is not more complicated than in other forms of comics. The webcomic cartoonist has an expanded authorial role as the webmaster and archive

keeper, though these added responsibilities do not translate into an abusive power over the readers and the narrative. The readership unites and becomes empowered through greater accessibility to the installments through the archives, and readers can contact each other as well as the author when they have questions to maintain a basic level of understanding. Each installment must be significant enough to be a standalone text while still being cohesive with the previous and following texts that can be found in the ever growing documents of the ongoing work. Above all else, what distinguishes the ongoing serial narratives of webcomics that do not engage in narrative redundancy is the clear effort to maintain narrative continuity throughout the work. As with other forms of serialized fiction, some events do not coincide with previously published texts, be it in content or in form, which leads to necessary retcons in order to maintain narrative continuity.

## Chapter 5: Measuring the *Order of the Stick*

The previous chapters focus on the elements of serial fiction and of webcomics in a general manner. This chapter provides a specific analysis of one particular webcomic in order to place the notions of a microserialized narrative into practice. The webcomic in question is that of Rich Burlew's *Order of the Stick* (*OOTS*), an award winning narrative with an active readership of 600,000 people (self-reported by Burlew). To fully comprehend each aspect of *OOTS*, this analysis consists not only of the work as whole, but rather of the individual texts of the installments, as well as of the documents in which the readers can access them. The first part of this chapter contains a quantitative study of a diachronic analysis of *OOTS*, using previously presented theoretical parameters, followed by a presentation of the results and an interpretation of the collected data. The second part of this chapter uses media specific analysis to determine what if any differences there are between the digital and print versions of the webcomic. This chapter ends with a discussion of the textual elements of webcomics with *OOTS* as a primary example.

As of the time of this writing, no quantitative analysis of a webcomic has been done for academic purposes. However, fans of the work often make unofficial tallies and investigations of different factors. Readers of *OOTS* have posted on the website's forum about various minute details, like one with the number of character appearances of every installment. Forum postings regularly update consistently because many other forumites help with the process while others revise and edit. While interesting and informative, these posts rarely go beyond just stating the facts and lack insight towards the narrative construction and development of the webcomic.

### **I. Quantitative Analysis**

As is the case with any serialized narrative, *OOTS* has changed over time. There are several conversations among readers in the webcomic's forums as to how the story is different from what it was at its onset. Several posts in the blog/news page of the website by Burlew, as well as some of the commentaries from the compilation books, show his belief that *OOTS* goes beyond his original intention. Still, these statements do not scratch the surface in terms of explaining how the narrative itself is changing. In order to illustrate if and how any changes occur, I have isolated eight narrative strategies present throughout *OOTS*. They are: breaks in narrative continuity, no punchline, nontraditional "page" format, references to Dungeons & Dragons, metatextual references, metaliterary references, breaking the fourth wall, and references to real world persons, objects, ideas, situations, etc. These particular narrative strategies were chosen because they are the most prevalent within *OOTS* and throughout other webcomics as well<sup>19</sup>.

After choosing these selections, I reread issues #1-#700 to determine whether or not these narrative strategies are present in said installments. The material of the bonus comics and the prequel books are not discussed since these cannot be said to occupy a particular place in the narrative's serialized chronological development. In order to truly show how Burlew's use of these narrative strategies changes over time, subdivisions of all totals were placed at intervals of every fifty issues. All findings are presented through a dichotomous format towards the presence of any all the narrative strategies in each installment. The tables which contain the data have two numbers for each category and installment, with a "1" indicating the presence of a narrative strategy and a "0" indicating its absence. This method was chosen in part to simplify the quantitative analysis but more importantly because other methods would not properly present the

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<sup>19</sup> This is not to say that my investigative tools would work perfectly for any given webcomic. I selected this methodology after being intimately familiar with Burlew's work. I suggest to any future researchers of webcomics to tailor the methodology specifically to each work.

spectrum of these narrative strategies across the totality of the installments. Had the specific quantity of each apparition of each narrative strategy per installment been presented, then only two or so of the categories would be largely inflated and show no relevant bearing towards the goals of this research.

The findings are summarized in Appendix A of this study as tables and graphs that track the narrative strategies and how they differ between installments. What follows is the methodology towards determining the absence or presence of each narrative strategy and the process of categorizing then. Interpretations of the collected data for each category are stated after their individual explanation. These results are expressed through overall percentages and specific quantities.

#### A. Break in narrative continuity

As explained in the previous chapters, narrative continuity is one of the defining traits of serialized fiction. The maintenance and synchronicity of all information presented at different moments reflects a level of commitment on the part of the webcomic cartoonist to making the plot believable so that a reader can immerse him/herself in it. A minor break in narrative continuity can result in unexpected moments that can bring about reactions in the reader that could not be evoked normally. Constant breaks in narrative continuity lead to an erratic structure that can lead to confusion and cause the plot ultimately go nowhere. Webcomic cartoonists use minor breaks mostly through the use of a cutaway panel, wherein the focus is suddenly shifted to other moments and/or characters. Cutaway panels usually show a character's train of thought, mostly for the sake of humor and often have no relation to the actual narrative. There are a few instances where an entire installment breaks away from narrative continuity. While these are not distinguished from minor breaks in the tables and graphs, I explain them during the subsequent

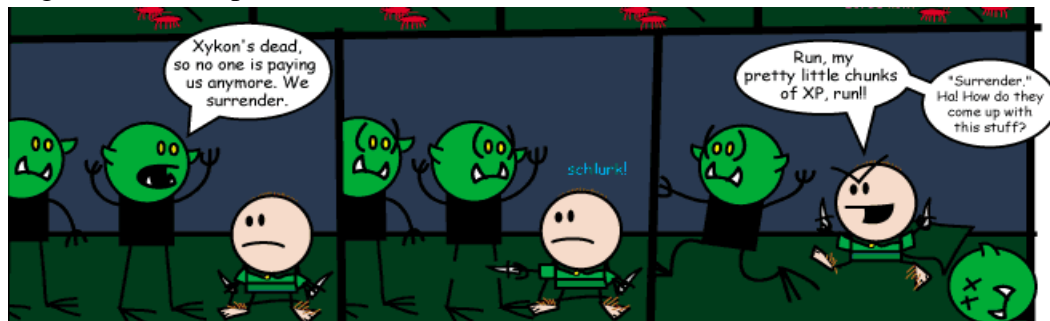
analysis of the collected data. It is important to note that webcomic cartoonists portray their narratives through panels which do not seamlessly blend together like in other graphic narratives. Films and television programs mostly show scenes within a definitive and constant temporal/spatial where the characters interact. Comics on the other hand, have a variant time space relationship between each panel and even within one panel. Breaks in narrative continuity show a complete departure from the expected temporal/spatial pace between panels. Also, this narrative strategy does not include when characters merely say something beyond their current context. In short, a break occurs when the text (the image and the dialogue) does not follow the current narrative line (see figure 5.1 for an example).



(Figure 5. 1 taken from issue #350 “At Least You Get Course Credit”)

The narrative of *OOTS* is one of a comedic nature; hence its structure is framed to end installments with a concluding joke or punchline. Burlew mentions the difficulty of having a punchline when designing each issue, which shows that his intention is to have this narrative strategy present for most of the installments. The lack of a punchline indicates that the narrative has become more important than the comedic aspect. One of the more interesting uses of punchlines or lack thereof comes with issues of death. Killing creatures and monsters can often be depicted in a comedic way (see Figure 5.2), but readers rarely perceive the death of an important character as funny. This is true even when the majority of the readership despises a certain character, as is the case with issue #464 “Not for Everyone” where no punchline is

present. The last panel of that installment is the death of Miko, an unpopular character for the majority of readers, to say the least, as discussed in several forum threads. Perhaps one of the least humorous final panels can be found in Figure 5.3, where the aforementioned Miko curses how another character has escaped justice. This panel is followed by one with said character dead and surrounded by vultures. This category deals only with punchlines because of their importance within the webcomic's structure, and does not deal with individual jokes found in other panels since the presence of funny comments and gags varies between installments. The humor portrayed in the last panel can be a joke told through the written word, a sight gag told through the art, or more often than not a combination of the two (Figure 5.1 is an interesting example of sight and verbal punchlines).



(Figure 5. 2 taken from issue #115 "Dust in the Wind" shows how death can be portrayed humorously)

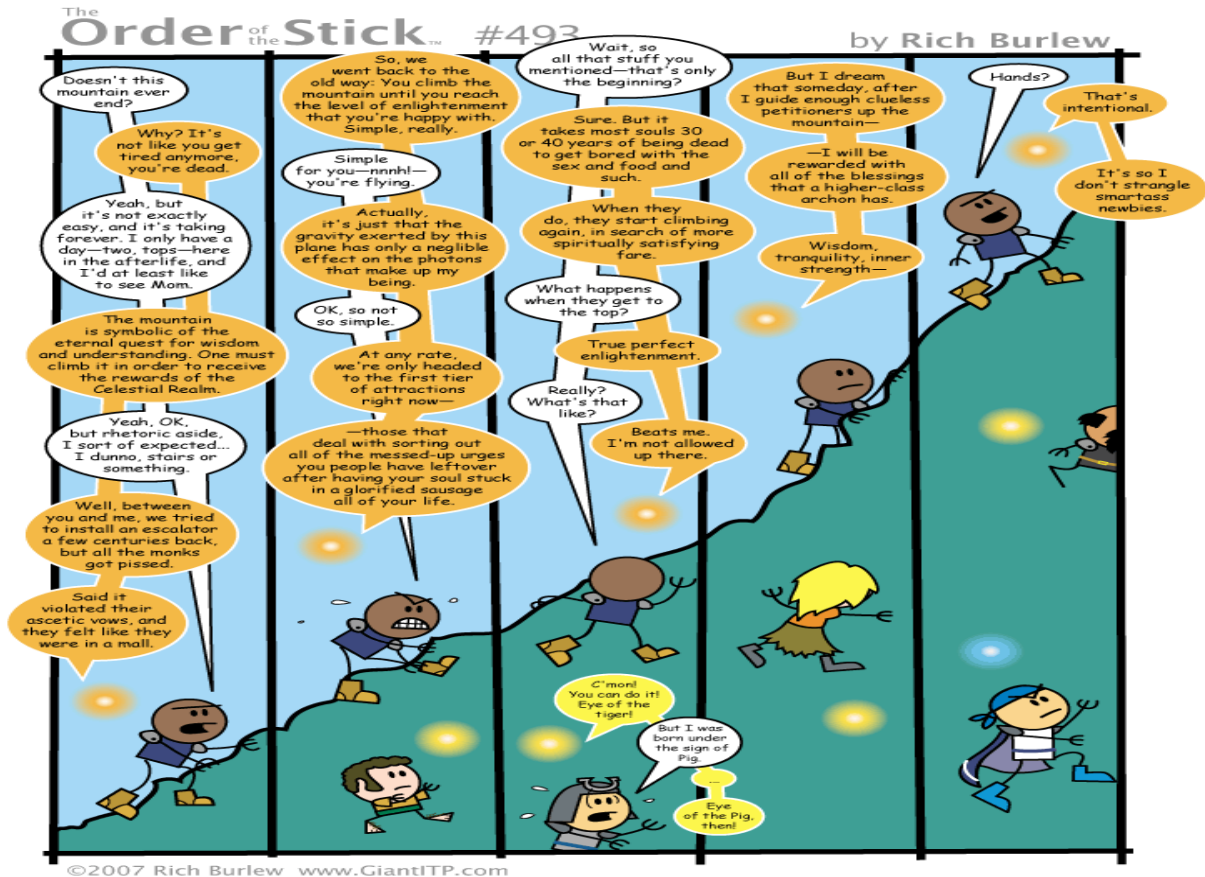


(Figure 5. 3 from issue #460 "Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign" shows lack of a punchline through death)

### C. Nontraditional "page" format

The presentation for most of the installments of *OOTS* equal approximately one comic book page. There are normally four horizontal columns with three panels each and the comic is traditionally read from left to right and from top to bottom. A page has an average total of twelve panels. This category deals with the exceptions to this style and presentation. As Burlew explains, “sometimes, it is difficult to encapsulate a single plot point in twelve panels, so I spill over into a second page” (Introduction *War and XPs*). Hence, each variation upon the traditional page style is done because the narrative of that installment requires it. In other cases, variations of page style are due to experimental artistry, which shows how Burlew’s style is still being refined. The number of panels can slightly vary while still retaining the “page” format and is not counted toward this narrative strategy, as with the case of combined panels and splash panels. Since these are not normal panel layouts, I do not include such panels in this category unless they affect the page as a whole. Additional information often changes the length of installments to one and a half page, double, and triple “pagers” and are the most common varieties found here. Other examples of this narrative strategy include nontraditional order of panel reading, refer to Figure 5.4, and I give special attention to examples of infinite canvas later on in the chapter.





(Figure 5. 4 issue #493 “Led Zeppelin Lied to Us All” compressed to show the

artistic variation of having five long vertical panels instead of the traditional format.)

#### D. References to Dungeons & Dragons

A complex understanding of the rules of Dungeons & Dragons (D&D for short) is not necessary for appreciating the narrative though there are moments when this knowledge would help the reader better comprehend what is occurring. One of the more interesting traits the characters of *OOTS* possess is that they are fully aware that they exist in a world where these rules are the laws of the land. They use the revised version of the third edition of the rules (3.5 ed.) though references to other editions have occurred. Examples of these references include the mention of appropriate dice, skills, feats, spells, items, and classes associated within the game. Particular “races”, such as elf, dwarf, orc, etc. are not considered examples since they are prevalent in other

forms of fantasy literature, but some uses of racial combinations are specific references to the game, as can be seen in Figure 5.5 from issue #599 “Separate Ways.” More interesting is the fact that the webcomic also makes use of the elements of playing D&D, or any other type of pen and paper role playing game. The players of D&D are considered gamers and the activity itself is referred to as “gaming”. Common gaming experiences, such as traps at every corner, knowing how random encounters work, and carrying every type of equipment just in case, are allusions that are not mentioned in any rule system and can only be truly appreciated by gamers who have engaged in these practices before, as with “cheesy” character builds like the one presented in Figure 5.6<sup>20</sup>. Note that some generic spells, like fireball or lightning bolt, are general enough to not be considered references to D&D, but a gamer would be attaching specific interpretations to them that which would differ from the way a non-gamer would understand them. The specific mechanics of the hundreds of specific spells in D&D and consequences of their casting are lost to those who do not know how they work; for example, “Energy Drain” sounds simple enough but it is actually one of the more powerful spells in the game with effects that can make even an avid gamer have to recheck the rules.

Most references are jokes about D&D and gaming but this system literally defines what each character can and cannot do, thus imposing its own level of narrative continuity and verisimilitude that readers who are gamers take to heart. Burlew knows this all too well, as readers cry foul when characters have non level appropriate abilities or when magic spells are used differently, or have other complaints. The presence of a reference to D&D indicates that Burlew keeps the narrative close to its gaming roots while an absence of this narrative strategy

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20 As an avid gamer, recognizing these references is second nature to me. Discussion boards on the forum may discuss some of them but they often do not provide the context one obtains through gaming personally that one needs to fully understand the reference. Almost all D&D references are open content and can be accessed through system reference documents. For more details visit <http://www.d20srd.org/>

shows that the narrative is departing from its original motif and becoming more accessible to non-gamers.



(Figure 5. 5 showcases a reference to D&D through the use of unique creature types)



(Figure 5. 6 from issue #216 “Perfect Combo” contains references to D&D and gaming through the use of rule exploitation)

21

### E. Metatextual references

The characters know their capacities as beings within a universe governed by D&D rules.

However, they are also fully aware that they are within a webcomic. Characters will refer to events occurring after certain number of installments rather than at points in time. Some will even use paratextual elements from traditional comics to their advantage, like in issue #155

“Time is on My Side” when Haley says “later that evening...” to advance the flow of time in the webcomic. (Refer to Figure 5.7) Examples in this category include references to webcomic issue numbers, panels, book compilations, other secondary features of the webcomic, and the fact that

21 Interesting fact: Attacks of Opportunity can only be done once for entering into someone's range, according to the D&D rules. Forumites quickly posted how Burlew apparently also got a C- in his Attacks of Opportunity Class.

*OOTS* is itself a webcomic. Self references to the artistic style of it being a stick figure webcomic are a common source of humor. Webcomic cartoonists use metatextual references mostly for the sake of humor though their presence also indicates an aversion to a traditional reading immersion but teach the reader about the textual specificities of the webcomic. This type of textual training can create a medium specific immersive reading experience for longtime readers of webcomics.



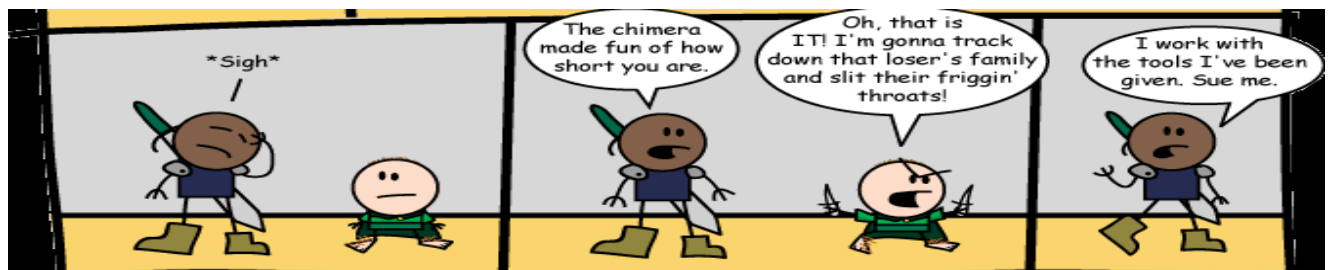
(Figure 5. 7 exemplifies metatextual references and awareness)

#### F. Metaliterary references

The level of awareness of the characters is one that goes beyond their world and extends into the staples of the literary one. Metaliterary references are explicitly stated throughout the interactions of the characters. Heroes are aware that they are the protagonists, villains that they are antagonists, secondary characters know that their place is in the background, and so forth. Other examples include when a character says outright that something is about to happen because of an earlier foreshadowing. While most characters have a certain level of genre savvyness, Elan the bard is the one that will on average deliberately explain literary concepts, to the point that his magical repertoire includes the non D&D spell (but phrased like one), “Summon Plot Exposition” as seen in issue #13 “Plot, Ahoy!”. Burlew’s use of metaliterary references indicates that the direction of the narrative shifts from D&D to fantasy literature.

#### G. Breaks the fourth wall

Other narrative strategies discussed in this chapter may involve breaking the fourth wall but the examples specifically addressed in this section what happens when a webcomic's characters directly reference the readers. This can be as subtle as a wink directed toward the reader, or a bit more pronounced as in moments when a character turns directly toward the reader and says something like "sue me", as seen in Figure 5.8. Other moments shatter the fourth wall as when one character says something to the degree that "readers don't want to go through this again, right people?" Fourth wall breaking moments keep the characters attached to the readers, but they often prevent the characters themselves from truly attaching themselves to the surrounding conflict. Villains and minor characters can do this without affecting the narrative, but protagonists would not be adequately immersed in a situation if they could just ask the reader how to get out of this mess.



(Figure 5. 8 from issue #22 "Leadership in Action" where Roy explains his methods to the reader)

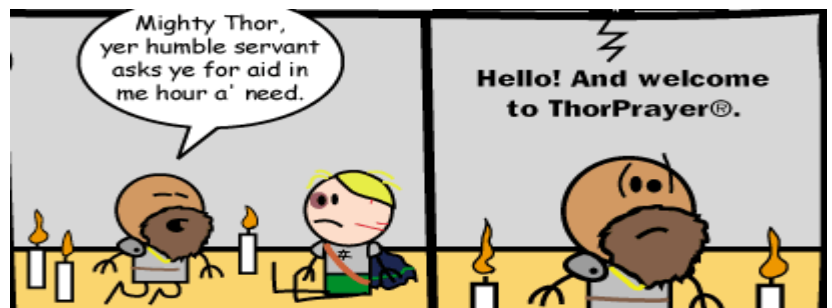
H. References to real world persons, objects, ideas, situations, etc.

Webcomic cartoonists use this narrative strategy through the presentation of elements that are out of place in the world of the narrative, something that is often times done for the sake of humor. The majority of the times, these allusions are anachronistic elements to levels of technology, references to celebrities, or even other fictional characters. This can be done purely with images, such as showing someone with a metal detector, as seen by Haley in issue #692 "Searchin'" and reproduced in figure 5.9. Other times it can be a bit more disguised and subtle

such as in issue #7 “Thorprayer” where there is a parody of Mr. Moviefone, as seen in figure 5.10. While D&D references would technically fall into this category as well, I put them into their own categories so as to more clearly identify how this narrative strategy shapes the narrative. Because these references are satiric, readers require knowledge of what is being satirized, or else the intended humorous response does not occur. This narrative strategy demonstrates contemporary elements beyond the world of *OOTS* and the readership’s awareness of them.<sup>22</sup>



(Figure 5. 9)



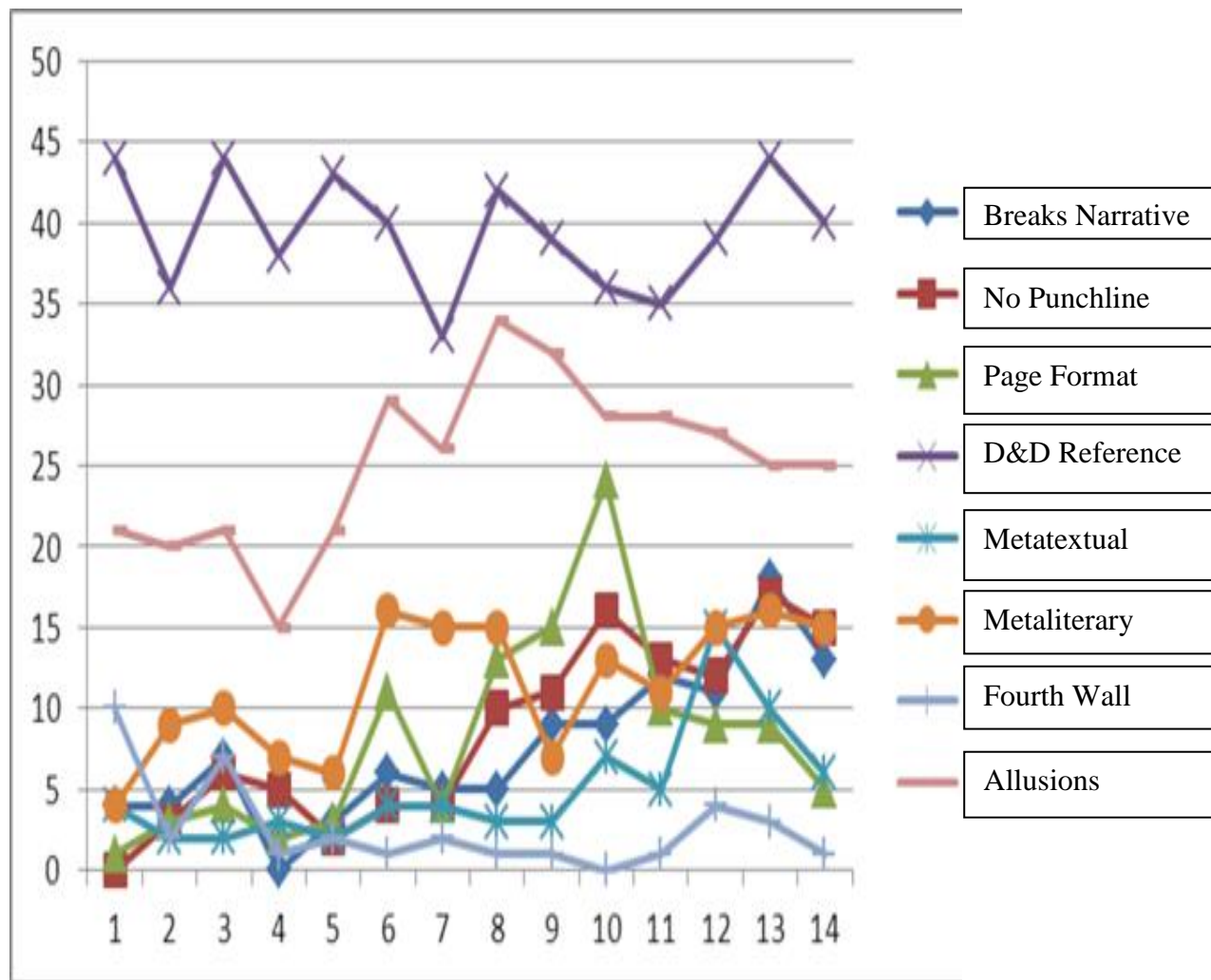
(Figure 5. 10)

## Results and Interpretation of Data

In order to better illustrate how the narrative strategies occur diachronically, I divide all of the installments into particular groupings. The primary divisions are every fifty issues and these findings also coincide with a separation of the narrative into three distinct stages. The first stage encompasses the first issue through #300 and it delineates the beginning of the narrative and its humorous roots, which is contained in the first two compilation books. The second stage includes issues #301-500 and these show a clear narrative shift towards dramatic elements, present through the majority of the third book. The third has issues #501-700 and shows an attained tonal juggling between the previous groups, found in the fourth book and the last ones in the online version. I also make these distinctions since these stages are the ones present within the Cerebus

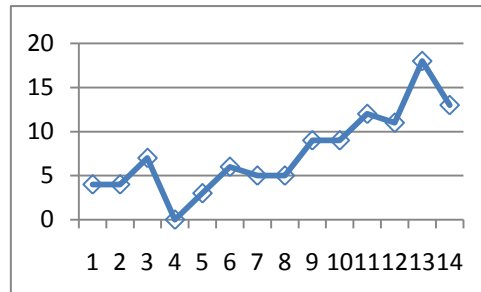
<sup>22</sup> For these and for the previous narrative strategies, the title of the installment is not included within the search for them. While the title can give a general idea of what occurs in that particular installment, it most often works as an additional punchline that works after one has read the entirety of an issue rife with references.

Syndrome, as explained in chapter two of this study. All of the data, tables, and relevant graphs can be found in Appendix A of this study, though a graph which encapsulates all of the results in Figure 5.11. Additional graphs are also present before the explanations of each narrative strategy to outline how they change individually throughout the groups of fifty installments. As with all graphs, the Y Axis indicates the amount of a particular narrative strategy and the X Axis represents the groups of 50 installments.



(Figure 5. 11 Summary of Findings, full table and data available in Appendix A)



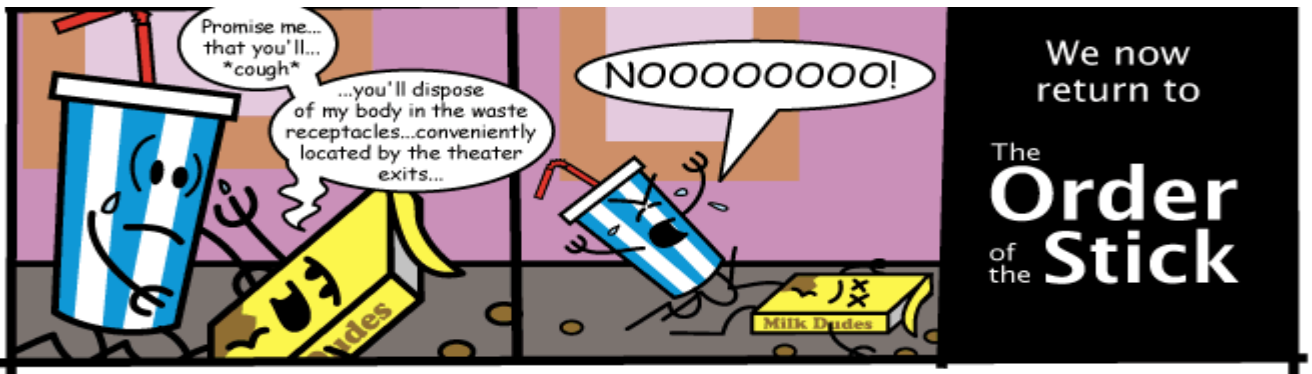


(Figure 5. 12 shows varying amounts of breaks in narrative continuity occurring throughout the installments)

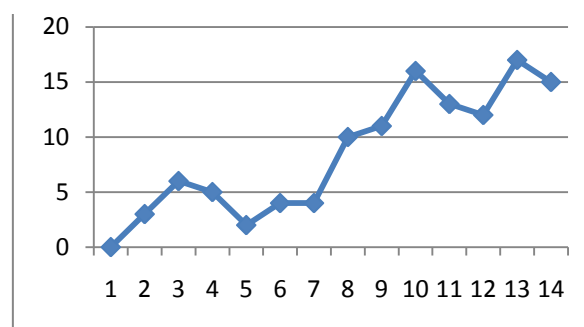
–Breaks in narrative continuity occur on an average of 10% in the installments ranging from issues #1-400. However, the rate changes from issues #401-700 to one higher than 20% of the installments. This can be attributed to a general shift in the way the humor is presented in *OOTS*. There is an increasing tendency to switch perspectives for the sake of a funny joke. These breaks often occur in the last panel of a given installment in order to provide a punchline, though they can also occur in any other given panel. These findings appear to go against the general attitude of the readership that the narrative has become more cohesive and plot oriented from its onset, according to several posts on the *OOTS* forum. I argue that the plot does become a more central factor of the narrative in comparison to its earlier issues, so much so that one of the ways used to maintain the original humorous tone of the webcomic is through these minor breaks in narrative continuity. This view is also cemented by the fact that only earlier installments break with the narrative altogether. Issues #33 “Mail Call”, #121 “Return of Mail Call”, and #259 “Son of Mail Call” are, as their titles imply, installments where the characters stop what they are doing in order to answer some questions from the readers, which also serves to directly break the fourth wall. One issue stops narrative continuity but this one provides its own standalone minor story; Issue #301 “A Brief Intermission” tells of the battle between traditional and contemporary animated concession snacks. It ends with the death of “Milk Dudes” and the last panel is a



paratextual announcement that the primary narrative will now continue. (Please refer to figure 5.13) There are only two other issues which do not relate to the main narrative, but they are designed in a way to still be cohesive with the rest of the installments. These issues were not planned, as they were both tributes to recently deceased people that were instrumental in the creation of D&D. These were installments published after the deaths of Gary Gygax on March 4, 2008 and Dave Arneson on April 7, 2009 and issues #536 “A Brief Tribute” and #644 “An Unsung Legend” celebrated their works respectively. Both issues were published in under 48 hours after the news of both deaths being reported which means that they were drawn and written almost immediately after their passing was known and the rest of the story was put on hold.



(Figure 5. 13 The final panels of a standalone narrative told within *OOTS*)



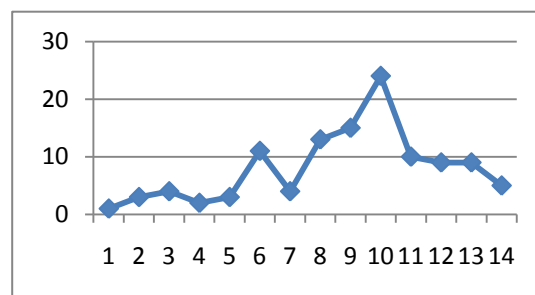
(Figure 5. 14 illustrates the number of installments that do not have a punchline)

–The number of installments where a punchline is absent steadily increases as the narrative goes on. All of the first fifty issues have a punchline. Up until issue #350 less than 10% of the issues do not have a punchline. From then on out, the percentage of non-funny endings rises to a quarter and in some ranges almost up to a third of the installments. The majority of the issues still contain a punchline regardless of this increase; however, the change in the direction of the webcomic’s style is clear. Rich Burlew explains his change in *OOTS*’s direction in the author commentary of one of his compilation books:

As time passed and the number of people reading my silly little stick figure comic grew and grew, though, I began to see an opportunity to tell a really interesting story. I wasn’t certain that I had the writing skill to pull off such a story, but I had nothing to lose. After all, everything about the comic was unplanned at the beginning, including its success. If I tried to convert it to an epic fantasy story and failed, well, nothing ventured nothing gained.

In the process of converting from a gag-a-day comic strip to a continuous fantasy story, I probably lost some readers who really weren’t interested in a big complex story. While unfortunate, I also think it was inevitable . . . I think I made the right choice, if only because I’m still interested in writing the best fantasy story I can, while my interest in making fun of the game rules has significantly diminished. (Introduction *War and XPs*)

Burlew and many of the readers assert that *OOTS* is no longer centered on comedy but that there is a clear effort to stay close to these roots. My findings show that there is less of a focus on the humorous aspects of *OOTS* but this in no way overpowers the general style of this webcomic.

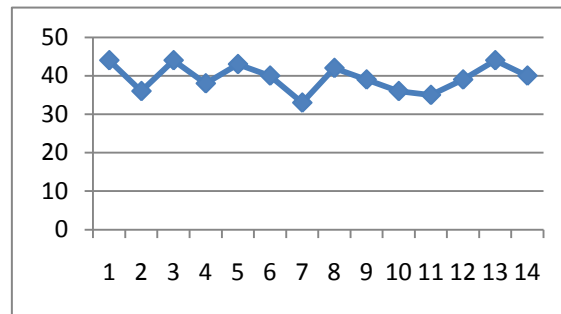


(Figure 5. 15 shows how many installments have a non traditional page format)

–The amount of installments that go beyond the traditional page format peaks between issues #451 and 500. From #1 to 250, only about 5% of the installments are more than one page.

Issue#50 “The Semi-Secret Origin of Nale & Elan” is deliberately set up as something special because of its landmark number and is the first of these to use a non traditional format by being one and a half pages long. Issue #200 “The Confrontation” is another landmark in the webcomic and it is a “quadruple pager”, a format that has not been used in any other installment so far. From that point on, more installments were produced as double and triple pagers until the aforementioned peak when almost half of the issues within this group went beyond the traditional page format. This can be attributed to the fact that this group recounts the end of the epic war for Azure City and the beginning of the Roy in the afterlife story arc, and thus a single page was not enough space to convey all the necessary information needed per installment. However, if the importance of the story is increasing, then why do the subsequent groups of issues show a significant decrease of the use of this narrative strategy which bottom out at less than 10%? While every fan can tell you that more content per installment is a good thing, from the perspective of the narrative it is not altogether necessary. If anything it shows that Burlew’s narrative planning has become more concise as each one page installment provides more information than earlier double or triple pagers. When breaks in the traditional page format do occur, they provide more meaning and visually communicate that it is a special moment or turning point in the narrative. Out of all of these examples, only two take advantage of the previously mentioned notion of the infinite canvas as defined by McCloud. Issue #443 “The First Step is a Doozy” is a long vertical panel that shows the different moments of Roy’s realizations as he is falling to his death, with the last panel showing when he hits the ground. Readers have to scroll down the website to figure out what will happen and the final part comes as an unexpected surprise. The other instance of infinite canvas can be seen in issue #518 “At Least It Wasn’t the Fourth Wall Again” where Haley is hit by a spell that literally breaks the last panel and pushes

her beyond the comic itself. Haley is pushed out of the frame horizontally, which was even more surprising to readers since horizontal page scrolling is never used for any other aspect of the website, and most would not notice that this option was available upon first seeing the installment.



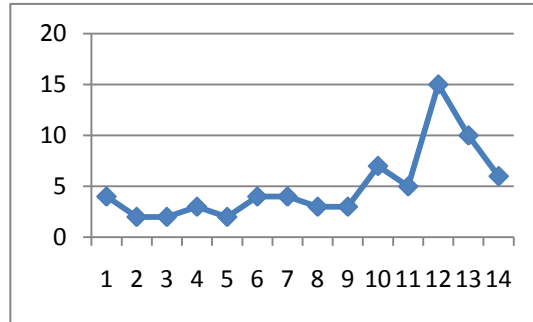
(Figure 5. 16 showcases D&D references)

—The references to D&D remain at a constant high number throughout most of the comic. Appearances of these narrative strategies range from just below 90% of a group of installments, to at their lowest at just under two thirds of that group's installments. Some aspects of the characters, items, and other elements of the webcomic could be told without the use of D&D but doing so would not necessarily work as well. Such a contrast between non specific attributes and D&D terminology is seen in figure 5.17. Interestingly enough the last hundred issues have even more references than the first hundred, something that generally contradicts Burlew's change of narrative direction done as *OOTS* went on. Most readers would agree that the importance of D&D decreases as the story unfolds and yet the data shows something different. I argue that D&D was the only important factor in the first issues and that it later on maintained its importance but not without other narrative factors like plot and character development taking precedence. Gamers partake in a different understanding of the characters by their varying statistics and attributes while non-gamers do not have this frame of reference. Between issues

#401-600 the conflicts of the narrative were focused on the warrior characters, where no specific knowledge of D&D is necessary to understand what is going on and this is shown with 70-80% of issues containing D&D references. Now issues between #600-700 contain two large scale duels between magic users, where knowledge of D&D becomes even more important in appreciating just how powerful each character is. Take for example issue #636, “Shattered, Shattered,” wherein a newly empowered Vaarsuvius begins fighting an ancient black dragon. The last panel shows the wizard casting “Quickened Disintegrate” something that would make the average reader slightly confused but would make gamers drop their collective jaws. This surprise is in part because the D&D magic system allows for nine levels of magic that are exponentially more powerful and Vaarsuvius had just cast a ninth level spell followed by the equivalent of a tenth level spell. Knowledge of D&D becomes even more necessary with the later duel of Vaarsuvius against Xykon, when in issue #652 “No Respect for the Wicked,” the latter casts “Maximized Energy Drain” the equivalent of a twelfth level spell leaving every gamer reading with a complete sense of awe. To understand the spell system, you need to understand the level system of D&D. In this system, you are able to cast higher levels of spells as you obtain more levels in a given mage class. To be able to cast a ninth level spell, a wizard needs to be at a minimum of level 17 where 20 is the maximum. The aforementioned spells show that these characters are literally off the charts.

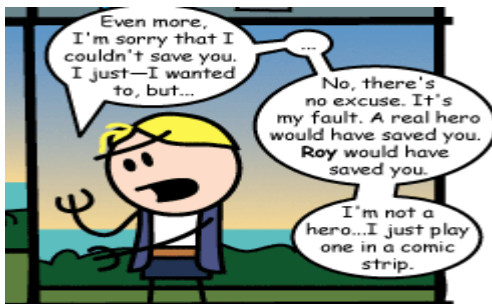


(Figure 5. 17 Taken from issue #297 “Sword Speak”)



(Figure 5. 18 shows appearance of metatextual references)

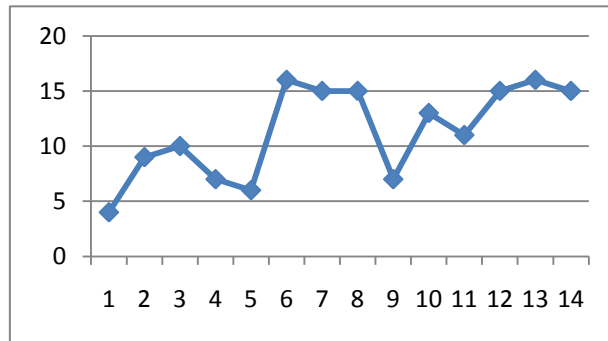
–Metatextual references only occur in a small fraction of this work. The first 450 issues only have them in intervals of 4-8% of every installment. There is a small increase beyond these which culminate in 30% of that group’s installments from issues #551-600. This can be attributed to the fact that most of these strips were centered on Elan, a character known for his awareness of narrative genre and medium. Some of these references are played for humor, though some are used for dramatic effect like in issue #598, “To Say a Few Words”, shown in Figure 5.19. Other references originate through Belkar, another genre savvy character that had been left cursed and diseased for several issues but came back with many of these jokes upon recuperating. One particular comment by Belkar, with several metatextual references, can be found in issue #650 “A Lot Can Happen in Ten Minutes”, reproduced in Figure 5.20.



(Figure 5. 19)



(Figure 5. 20)

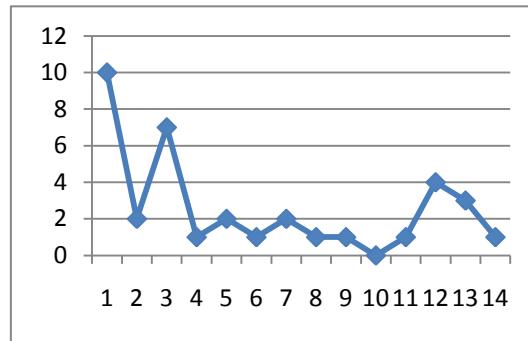


(Figure 5. 21 contains the amount of metaliterary references)

–Metaliterary references only appeared in about 10-20% of the first 250 issues. After that, places this narrative strategy in a relatively consistent manner, with these appearing in approximately 30% of the installments in a given group. Unlike Elan and Belkar, just about any character has this level of awareness, even though these two still provide several of these references. These range from momentary mentions of subplots to knowledge that is in a way life endangering as in Figure 5.22 taken from issue #392 “Death from Above” by Captain Julio Scoundrél after being by Elan asked if he would ever see him again. From a purely comedic perspective, this increase further shows how the humor of *OOTS* has changed since its onset as jokes based on the clichés of fantasy fiction have become a staple of Burlew’s work.



(Figure 5. 22 shows the importance of knowing one’s metaliterary role)



(Figure 5. 23 denotes the moments when the fourth wall is broken)

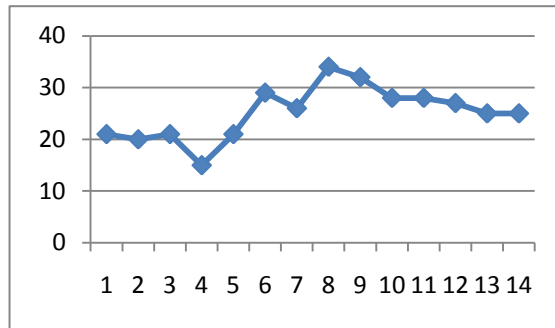
—The distribution of occurrences of direct recognition of the reader is one of my more interesting findings. When reading the first fifty issues one would get the notion that Burlew’s use of this narrative strategy would be a common motif, as characters would turn and face the reader in 20% of these installments. The following issues had less and less direct reader acknowledgment, to the point that from issues #200-550 less than 3% contain this reference. However, there is a sudden and marked, albeit relatively small, increase in issues #551-650. Now if the protagonists have stopped addressing the readership, where are these moments coming from? One answer comes in the shape of the Demon Roaches, a set of minor evil characters that are around the main antagonists and have been described in the prequel book *Start of Darkness* as beings that cause structural damage, “especially to the fourth wall” (33). Most of the reader recognition comments beyond the first hundred or so issues are made by these Demon Roaches. However, their comments are momentary one liners, which differ from the comments made by another character who literally stops what he is doing to talk to the audience. This is the Oracle; whose most egregious recognitions come in issue #572 “The Resistance of Memory” where just after he has revealed that one of the characters would die by the end of the year, turns to the reader, as shown in Figure 5.24. Still, the fact that the main characters rarely if ever engage in these actions beyond the beginning of the webcomic shows that the presentation of the comic has



drastically changed to the point that this breaking of the fourth wall has become a minor feature of *OOTS*. Some may argue that references to the readers still appear but in a way that is far subtler, and is usually directed at those in the forums. One of these potential shout outs can be found in issue #689 “Live Bait” where Belkar stops to ask the other characters about the ramifications of their actions and whether or not they are “ethically acceptable” before bursting out in laughter and dismissing the entire situation. This reference is only apparent if one is following the forum in which there is a lengthy thread titled “Was Roy’s attack on Miko after the murder of Shojo morally justified?” This thread was so popular that it had to be continued in a secondary thread because the first had reached its technical limit of fifty pages. Between the two forum threads, 2,506 posts were made and it was read by 60,194 people according to the forum’s data. Still, for all this post’s notoriety, Belkar’s apparent jab at the forumites is not as direct as on other occasions and will quickly lose meaning even to those readers who follow the forum and the webcomic closely.



(Figure 5. 24 disregards the fourth wall to  
literally winks at the reader)

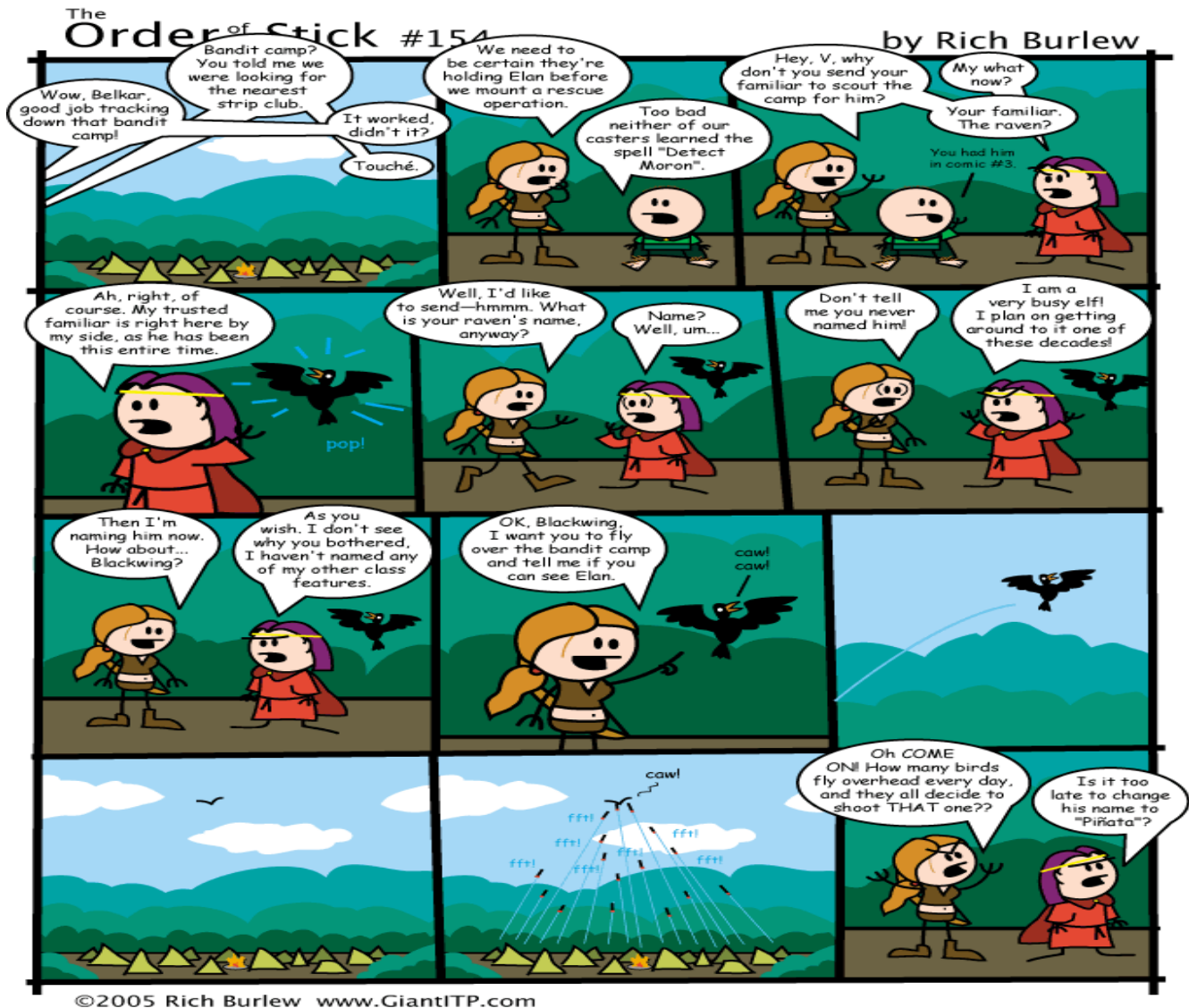


(Figure 5. 25 illustrates the amount of references  
to elements outside of the narrative of *OOTS*)

—Anachronistic elements in *OOTS* have been present from its onset. The first 250 issues average close to 40%, later ones top out at about 60% and the last hundred installments balance out to 50% of them containing these references. While they have generally increased, the fact that the amount is reduced in the latest installments show the search for the right equilibrium; if not, the linear increase would continue. These references often serve as a form of humorous content in the webcomic that go with the jokes about Dungeons & Dragons and fantasy gaming in general. As the narrative shifted to a more serious tone, these references became a standard go to point in order to keep the narrative from being too dramatic. As Burlew achieved an equilibrium of humor within the webcomic itself, so too did the amount of references.

Overall, there are clear distinctions in how the narrative of *OOTS* has been told over time. Accounts by Burlew give an overall description as to how these shifts have occurred but the previous quantitative analysis provides in depth data about how the use of key narrative strategies has been changing. These numbers confirm the general notion that Cerebus Syndrome exists in *OOTS* and detail specific uses of the narrative strategies presented earlier. Still, this data does not fully represent the serial reading experience of this webcomic. To demonstrate how different elements of the narrative change over time, what follows is a close reading of three installments, each representing one of the three periods of Cerebus Syndrome. The three

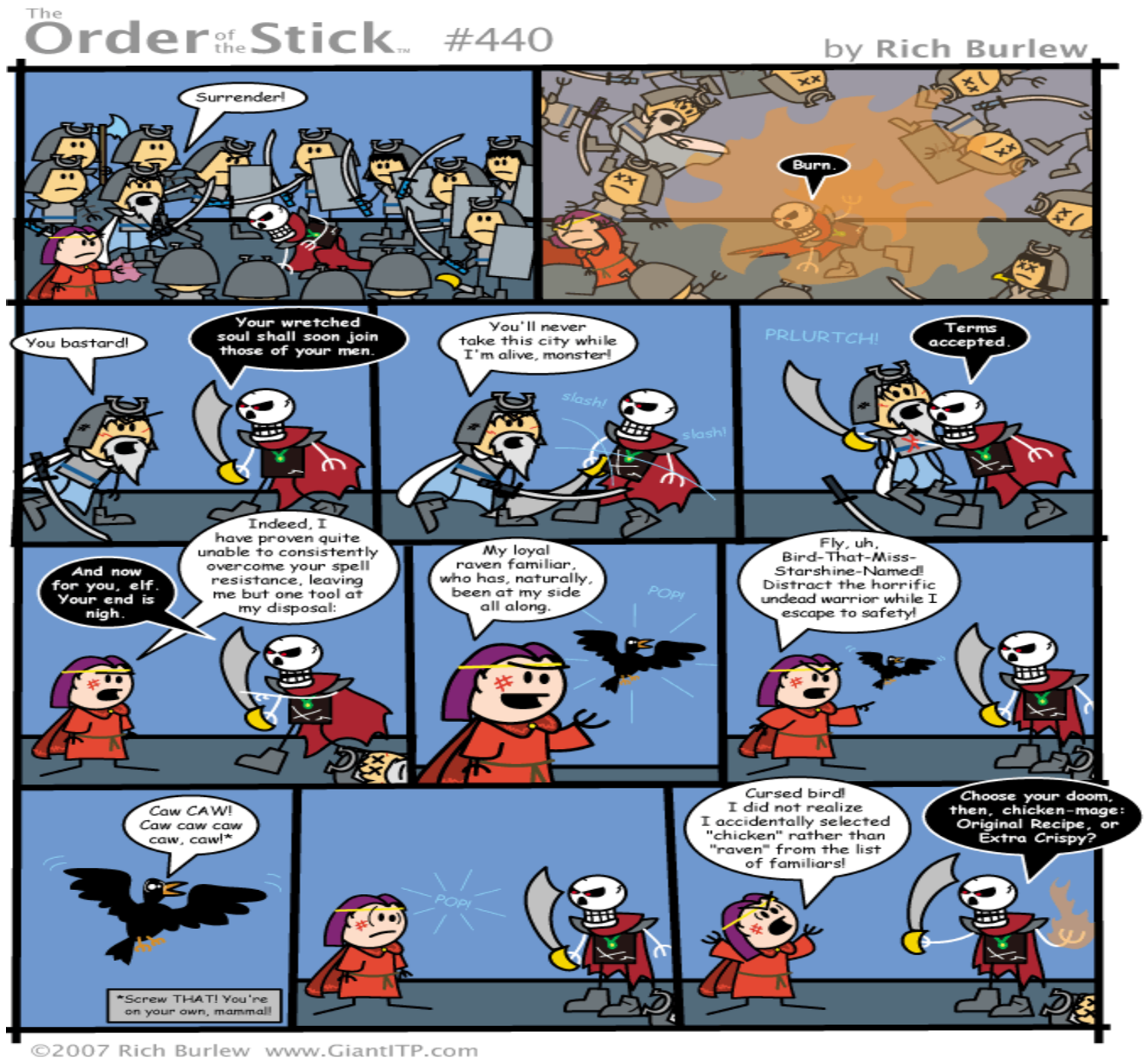
installments revolve around Blackwing, the raven familiar of Vaarsuvius who is often ignored and thus rarely appears in the webcomic, even though he is technically always there. Said installments are reproduced here in their entirety.



(Figure 5. 26 From issue#154 “One Bird with Two Dozen Arrows”)

captured. Belkar’s reminder serves as a metatextual reference, Vaarsuvius’ mentioning of class features is a direct feature of D&D and the mentioning of a piñata is an allusion. The actual installment brings back Blackwing as a member of the team after he was used for a one shot joke

nearly one hundred issues earlier. Sending a familiar to scout ahead is a common tactic for gamers and to see it thwarted so easily is quite humorous to that type of reader. The casual disregard for Blackwing, even after getting attacked, shows how this character is disposable and that any sort of danger they encounter does not have any longstanding consequences.



(Figure 5. 27 from Issue #440 “Flew the Coop”)

This installment shows Vaarsuvius working alongside Azure City guards after s/he<sup>23</sup> is separated from the rest of the party during an epic battle. The skeleton figure is a Death Knight and its spell resistance is a D&D term meaning that most forms of magic have no effect on him, thus making this a very difficult encounter for a wizard. Blackwing had been appearing for small moments during previous installments but this moment was particularly imperative for Vaarsuvius' survival. The death of a dozen or so guards in the second panel shows that this monster is indeed a threat and his slaughter of the old general demonstrates that he can kill even high level characters with ease. Forgetting the name of the thing that might just save your life in a pinch indicates that Blackwing is still just a tool under Vaarsuvius' command. Blackwing's decision to stay forgotten shows a level of continuity as the raven has learned from the previous moments where he is placed in danger. What follows is what I like to call the humorous cliffhanger, where a joke is placed at the end of an installment alongside a potentially dire situation for one of our heroes. These humorous cliffhangers become more prevalent throughout the narratively driven but still funny installments of *OOTS*. The allusion to Kentucky Fried Chicken shows the grave nature of the situation alongside a slightly funny comment. After reading this installment, many forumites commented how this moment would lead to the prophecy involving Vaarsuvius' death while others commented that that it would actually lead to the fulfillment of the prophecy of obtaining ultimate arcane power. Just in case, neither of these prophecies were fulfilled and Vaarsuvius was actually saved by what s/he would later call "a thinly veiled deus ex machina" when the head of a zombie dragon fell on the Death Knight. It makes sense if you read the whole thing.

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23 Vaarsuvius is androgynous and with no stated gender so I utilize the "s/he" form of third person pronouns to talk about him/her. This notion becomes even stranger once one hears that s/he is married and has adopted kids.

The following installment occurs after Vaarsuvius obtains and loses ultimate power. S/he has a change of heart and because of that, Blackwing now regularly speaks in common (the standard language in D&D) with Vaarsuvius and appears at all times, not just when it is convenient. The events of this installment occur immediately after being kicked out of a magic item shop and being informed that his/her mate is suing for divorce and wants full custody of their kids. (Full image available on next page)





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(Figure 5. 28 from issue #679 “Oh, Right, That Other Problem”)

Blackwing becomes the figure of reason and logic that helps Vaarsuvius accept what needs to

be done. The flashback in the fourth panel serves as a momentary break in narrative continuity to show that Vaarsuvius' problem of lack of attention started much before the beginning of the overall plot. The last panel is a flash forward where Blackwing returns to the magic shop that they were kicked out of to buy unique spell components and a shiny bauble. The Mexican disguise and accent are an odd reference but they are also an interesting choice that brings humor to an emotional and complex installment.

Throughout these three installments, Blackwing transforms itself from a disposable magical pet, into a disposable magical pet with common sense, and finally into an important and productive member of the team. The complexity of the plot in the issues at hand also increases significantly: the characters scout a bandit camp, face imminent death at the hands of a killer skeleton, and must come to grips with a roller coaster of emotions caused by the events in these installments. The language of all three scenarios becomes more complex but they all still have an underlying comical tone. The recognition of these changes throughout the narrative is all a part of the serial reading experience.

## **II. Differences between Digital and Print Presentations**

There are two media which one can use to read *OOTS*. The most well known is the digital medium, in this case via the Internet where *OOTS*, can be found on the Giant in the Playground website. The other is print, where Burlew has published four compilation books as well as two print only prequels. Analyzing this webcomic using the theories of textual criticism proposed by Tanselle, as described in the previous chapter, we can define the books and the website as two distinct documents that contain the text of *OOTS*. Both documents contain the different installments; however, there are certain distinctions between the two that effectively create two



different texts, so to speak. What follows is my analysis of the differences of how *OOTS* is portrayed using these two different media<sup>24</sup>.

The most distinguishing feature from the perspective of the narrative is that of accessibility. The website contains the most up to date installments as they are published. It also contains an archive, a feature discussed in the previous chapter, which contains every other installment. Each compilation book only contains a finite number of installments, thus having only a fraction of the narrative. However, the two print only prequel books explain several aspects of the different characters and their motivations. Some of these details have not been introduced into the main narrative (yet) but others contain vital information. Readers without this information are likely to be confused. Small recaps may be included in order to keep the reader up to speed, as is the case with issue #580 “Hey, I Need to Sell Them Somehow” which directly refers to the book itself, as seen in figure 5.29. No such recap has been done, at the time of this writing, to the events of the second prequel book *Start of Darkness*. Interestingly enough, several minor references are made over the course of many installments to the character of Right Eye which only appears in that book. Readers unfamiliar with this work are left to ponder who or what this character is while the others know all about this and other important plot points.



(Figure 5. 29 shows Hank with the prequel book *Origin of PCs* making sure to recap everything important)

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24 Distinctions between the two media are made only in relation to *OOTS*. Aspects such as the portability of books versus online technology are unnecessary, obvious, and irrelevant to this study.

Production time is another factor, that readers are very aware of, that distinguishes the two media. It takes days to make a new installment online while it takes years for a new book to come out. Even when counting the prequel books, that is still only six books in seven years. The last compilation book came out only a few months before the writing of this study, which means that it may take a year or two before there are enough installments to make a new book plausible. Readers who only access the website wait for a short amount of time to get each installment, while those who only have the books have to wait far longer but have hundreds of pages of material for their enjoyment.

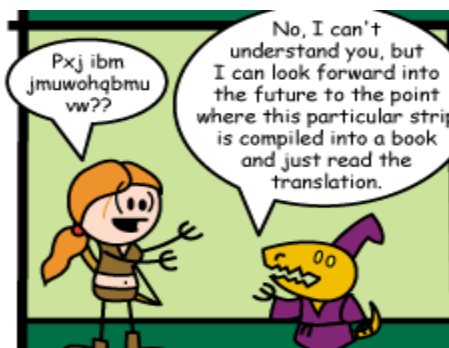
What surrounds the documents because of their packaging is also quite different in these two media. The website contains the blog/news page, forum, FAQ, cast page, additional narratives, extras, gaming articles, and other features that were already explained in the preceding chapter. The first book contains the same cast page and some extra art, while the rest of the books have their own unique cast page. The books also separate the text into chapter style groupings called “rounds” which are only implied in the online installments. What makes the books more than the free website are the author’s commentary and the bonus strips. Much in the same way as one would obtain director commentary features when purchasing the DVD of a feature film; Burlew provides narrative insight into his creative process. Readers get a better notion of the history of the webcomic and of particular installments. Burlew also makes sure to place at least one major revelation about the upcoming story in each book so as to convince readers to continue engaging with the rest of the narrative regularly through the website.

There are several bonus strips featured in the books. These normally detail some minor events that occur in between the rest of the installments. Each book also has a “Foreward<sup>25</sup>” done

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25 This is a different spelling of the traditional “Foreword” which is found in all six books. No explanation is provided for this variant spelling.

by other authors and a Preface done by a character from *OOTS*. In the first book, these are done for humor and rarely affect the rest of the story. The second book has several bonus strips that help to make sense of a few events that are not clear, like how Roy is suddenly using a never before seen weapon. More importantly, it has the official translations for Haley's cryptogram, which are necessary to really understand her as apparent through figure 5.30. The bonus strips from the third book show additional jokes, as well as what the other characters are doing during the grand scale war, something that could not be shown in the webcomic since it would ruin the narrative pacing and mounting tension. The fourth book has some bonus strips in the style of the first one with several other drawings and minor strips about the *OOTS* characters that have no bearing on the narrative. However, this book also has several strips in order to show minor story arcs that were not presented in the online version. Readers that only have access to the website know what happened before and after said events but are left with a teaser to entice them to buy the book as is seen in figure 5.31. Books after the first one also have a recap presented by different *OOTS* characters, of the previous events.



(Figure 5. 30 from issue #330 “Paid in Full. The cryptogram is translated as “You can understand me?”)



(Figure 5. 31 from issue #645 “It’s Where the Cool Kids Swim.”)

All of the previously addressed differences have to do with the features that surround the primary narrative, but there are also distinctions between all of the official installments of *OOTS*. One of the most noticeable variations between the two documents is the art. Color palettes and lines that appear in the books have a higher quality than those in the online version, especially when comparing the first few hundred installments. Issues seen on the website can vary slightly in appearance due to personal computer and Internet browser standards but the books are more consistent in their art.

Page layout remains uniform, when the two media are compared, for most installments except for the fact that issue numbers and titles appear at the bottom of every page in the book, while the online version has the issue number on the top but lacks the title. However, the installments that break with the traditional page format are different when the book and the website are compared. The online version shows all the “pages” stacked together vertically, and the reader scrolls up and down the website. The books on the other hand show each page as an actual page, with the only clue that they are part of the same installment being the issue number and title, which means that readers sometimes do not perceive the full installment if they do not bother to keep flipping through the pages. The website has a scrolling bar to control how much of a given page’s dimensions are available, which lets the reader know how to keep reading to see the entirety of the installment. Readers have suggested that small arrows, or some sort of similar type of indicator, be present for the books to avoid this confusion, but none have appeared in any of the currently published ones. Page layout becomes even more of an issue with installments that contain infinite canvas. Only two issues so far make use of infinite canvas, as I previously explained in the part of the chapter which deals with how they are presented online, and their presentation in their print counterparts deviates greatly from the original. The long

vertical column of issue #443 is shown in the book as a series of long vertical panels packed together over two pages, leading up to the final panel of Roy's death. The sense of immersion and hope over the fate of this character does not translate well in the print medium. Issue #518 is not as different when the two versions are compared, as the print version's presentation conserves everything but the sense of surprise. The book version has the entire installment occurring on the left hand page while the right hand side contains the scene with Haley being blasted out of the panel. This shows the great sense of planning by Burlew as he makes sure that the installments are lined up with the book pages to convey effects of infinite canvas which are as close as possible to the original digital format.

Other differences between the two media have to do with the order of presentation of the material. Excluding the bonus strip from the books, some installments are placed outside of the original numbered serialized format. Interestingly enough, the issues that are placed outside of the original sequence are those that break with narrative continuity altogether. Issues where the characters answer reader mail are present at the end of the corresponding books. Burlew specifically states in the case of issues #33 and #121 that, "while I consider both strips to be quality work, I felt it was too jarring to grind the book to a halt so I could stomp up and down on the rubble of the fourth wall" (Extras! *Dungeon Crawlin' Fools*). Narrative pacing appears to be the one reason to almost eliminate these installments from the rest of the continuity, though readers would be confused upon recognizing that the book might have skipped an issue or two. The same discrepancy occurs with the last reader mail installment for the second book but something odd happens in the case of issue #301 "A Brief Intermission". In the online version, this particular installment occurs at the end of the "Azure City trial" story arc and serves as a denouement to shift the focus of the story towards the upcoming story arc. In the book, it is

placed in between issues #283 and #284 the former of which has a cliffhanger ending as to the verdict of said trial and the latter having the results. This break in continuity helps to increase the tension in the scene by making readers have to wait an additional page to get the results while placing some lighthearted humor in the middle of such a dramatic scene. However, those that read these installments in the original online serialized version had to wait several days to get these results, and having another installment block this realization would have been too much in comparison to a minute or so of additional waiting to read one extra page that readers of the book experience.

There are also instances in which the actual dialogue in the book is different from the same installment on the website. One example occurs in issue #300 “Pick Your Doom” where the last panel has two Demon Roaches commenting on the page itself. The online version has the first roach say “Ooooo, splash page!” which is answered by the second roach say “Must be the end of a story arc.” The print version diverges from this line to have the second roach instead answer “Must be the end of the book.” This discrepancy is one example which shows the strong metatextual nature of *OOTS*. Having the installment on the website say “end of a story arc” lets the readers know that this is just one of many story arcs that make up *OOTS*. In contrast, having the one in the print version say “the end of the book” provides a sense of closure. One urges the readers to continue while the other tells them to stop, two distinct meanings for two different media, since the ongoing narrative of the online version continues to develop but issue #300 was the last installment of the book. This shows one of the differences in the reading experience which occurs when the two documents are compared.

Another instance where the reading experience is different occurs with issue #528 “The Ghost Screamer”. In this installment, Roy attempts to remember minor plot minutiae. In the

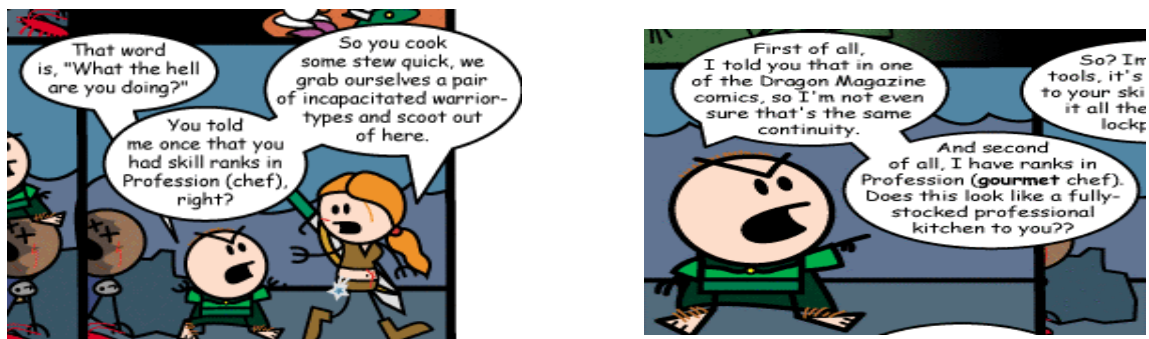
online version, as reproduced in Figure 5.32, Roy says, “Damn it, it’s times like these that I wish I could look back through this comic’s archive.” The print version instead has Roy saying, “Damn it, it’s times like these that I wish I had copies of the previous three books.” Both versions invite the reader to look back through the installments and investigate these possibilities. Readers of the website had immediate access to the archives and much time between the publication of new issues to make these searches, while those with the book need to have the other books on hand for their own inquiries or have a computer with Internet access standing by. Once again, this shows a high level of media awareness on the part of the characters, but the message in this case is relatively the same. However, this change appears to be singled out as one that readers would generally recognize as being different between the two versions. Another change that would have made sense to include would have been Belkar’s comment seen in Figure 5.31, which is reproduced identically in the book. This statement is confusing to readers since the referenced bonus content that is supposed to appear in the “next book” is actually in the same book where this is said.



(Figure 5. 32 from the online version which references the digital archive; the print version references the previous books)

### III. Where is the text of *OOTS*?

According to Tanselle, changes in documents can lead to different interpretations and thus to different texts. Based on this notion, one must then consider where is the definitive text of *OOTS*. Let us go over the different documents where *OOTS* can be read before discussing notions of textuality. Besides the already discussed online and print media, readers can encounter *OOTS* through the different t-shirts and other assorted merchandise. These often contain quotes and images from varied installments, though original content has also been created which seems to have no bearing on the narrative itself. The *OOTS Adventure Game: The Dungeon of Dorukan* is a board game that derives from the first story arc of *OOTS* and expands details on several minor characters. Then there are the issues of *OOTS* that were done exclusively for *Dragon Magazine*. These have the same characters and overall plot of the webcomic but occur within a different continuity, according to Burlew. These separate issues present a different version of the text of *OOTS* with much overlap to the original, as demonstrated by Belkar in issue #475 “Crashing the Party” (see Figure 5.33). Each of these documents contain different texts which make up the entirety of Burlew’s work. However, for the sake of this study, I focus on the textuality of the narrative of this webcomic, which makes documents beyond the books and the website additional secondary features to the text.



(Figure 5. 33 Panels from issue #475 are deliberately placed in a different order from their original presentation to better illustrate the events shown here)



Chronologically speaking, the first form of publication is that of the website, which would make the online version the original one. The books are then considered to be republications of the same material and would therefore fall to a secondary status. Editorial theorists like Tanselle and Bryant place high importance on the original source as the one with the most pure authorial intention, which would make the online version the primary text. The problem with this train of thought is that the webcomic has several mistakes that are often fixed and revised for the books. Even with the ability to be able to change the online archive, many contain odd colors, crooked borders, and several typos. The website has a forum thread to report typos where forumites do just that, and Burlew has commented there that, “any discussion of typos before strip #485 is more or less moot, since many of those typos were fixed before printing the books and are correct there (and I am not going to spend time to go back through the strips on the site and fix them, therefore)” (Post #56). When asked in that same thread why he could not simply change the online installments he responded that, “one of the selling points of the books (especially the first one) is that the comics have been ‘cleaned up’ from their original posting, including art fixes and typo fixes. So there is little incentive for me to change them in the first place” (Post #61). This establishes that books are more final and authoritative texts. This along with the fact that the books contain narrative content that is not present in the website makes the print version the authoritative text.

The online version can be seen as what John Bryant defines as a “circulating draft” where “writers may copy their work for others to read and help edit” (90) In the case of webcomics, these “other” readers amount to several thousand, rather than the very few who normally do this revision for print only publications. Readers will often report typos or errors in the art within a few minutes of an installment of *OOTS* being published online. In most recent ones, Burlew edits

and revises accordingly and then publishes the correct version of said installment almost immediately online.

There is another point of view in editorial theory that considers the final product as the more important text. Peter Shillingsburg identifies Jerome McGann as one of the proponents of this school of thought when he cites what McGann once told David Greetham:

You quote this [distinction between concrete “text” and ideal “work”] as if it were a fact about Textual Scholarship that everyone working in the field, whatever their other differences, would assent to. In fact, it articulates one of the key points of the controversy: far from representing an “alien” condition for messages, it seems to me that “the physical” (whether oral or written) is their only condition. And of course of much consequence follows from those fundamentally different ways people have of imagining and thinking about texts. (*Resisting Texts* 40)

Now, if the books are the finalized and authoritative version of the text, then what is the importance of the website? It certainly works as a circulating draft which helps the author make the books. It also serves to create and maintain a fan base who will later buy the books as they are published. And yet from the perspective of the narrative we need to keep in mind that this is a serialized work. Each of the installments are meant to be read serially. Some of the material is only relevant when read within twenty four hours of the original publication, especially with references to “current” events, which when not read immediately would lack a proper context, as one can see in figure 5.34. Readers are supposed to wait for new installments, read them, go over to the forums, reread them to make sure that no detail was left unnoticed, speculate what would happen, and continue to wait until the new issue is published and then the cycle continues. This process makes for a deeper connection to the narrative and to the characters as years go by. The serial reading experience by someone who just started *OOTS* and goes through every installment in a few days is different from that of a reader who has been present since its onset. These serial readers form a community, most often through the forum, where expectations and

understandings are discussed. They read and reread the previous installments as new ones are published. The serial reading experience creates a sense of anticipation and immersion in the narrative that readers take for granted. The books may contain the authoritative text, but the online version is the intended text.



(Figure 5. 34 from issue #583 “Love’s Sweet Sting”)

The original publication date on the website was August 11, 2008,  
while the Beijing Olympics were under way)

This discussion leads back to the original starting question for this section, where is the text? As someone who read the first 400 of the installments within a few days and then continues to read the rest of the narrative serially as issues are published, alongside all the books, I conclude that the text of *OOTS* cannot be found alone in either media. Individual readers create a third text, where the online and print versions merge with all of the secondary material. Readers stay abreast of the narrative through the website and fix any discrepancies in the plot with the books, especially with the prequels. One can obtain the totality of the narrative through the books; however, until the entirety of the installments are published in the books, the online installments are the only installments. This effectively makes *OOTS* an ongoing trans-media narrative, wherein some parts of the narrative are exclusive to one medium, and some parts are exclusive to the another one. Readers go through the process of piecing these parts together to

make this third text and thus fully attain the narrative. Still, this practice only goes on until Burlew publishes the final book and all of the narrative is collected in one authoritative text. The intended text, as well as the reading experience then becomes something unique that cannot be replicated, regardless of medium or format, which only a few readers come close to having.

Perhaps the one remaining textual element to discuss is whether the compilation books are considered a webcomic. After all, they contain the same text of *OOTS*, just in a different document. Because they are published one at a time, the books are even considered to offer their own unique serial reading experience which is different from that of the online version. And yet, one of the key distinctions made throughout this study is that the method of publication affects the presentation of the narrative. The book format cannot duplicate the microserialization process and the serial reading experience it allows. The content in the two documents may be almost exactly the same but the versions published in these two different formats each supplementary texts, the serial reading experience differs. The process is very similar to when one purchases the DVD of a film or a television program; it is technically the same thing as the film projected in the movie theater but there are several parts of the original viewing experience that cannot be adequately replicated in another publication format.

## Chapter 6: Pedagogical Implications and Conclusion

The previous chapters of this study provide an in depth analysis of several aspects of webcomics. These chapters expand the research done so far in this area and develop new theoretical paradigms that can be used to analyze these texts. And yet, there still remains much about webcomics to be discussed. While this study cannot realistically answer all questions about webcomics, a study of this magnitude would not be complete without a discussion of the practical application of these texts which goes beyond their importance just as a form of entertainment. Because this study is aimed at members of academia who most likely also teach, the first part of this chapter discusses pedagogical implications and applications of webcomics in the literature and/or language classroom. This discussion of pedagogy focuses on how webcomics can be integrated into high school and undergraduate English level courses. The chapter starts off with a defense of comics in the classroom, since there is already a large body of prior research within the area of comics studies and pedagogy. Besides, if one cannot appreciate the pedagogic possibilities that the original print graphic narrative then its digital descendant does not stand much of a chance. After that, a few models for teaching webcomics are provided with room for customization and personalization for any teaching style. The second part of the chapter serves as an overall conclusion to the study.

### **I. Pedagogical Implications**

Teachers already utilize comics (comic strips, comic books, or graphic novels) as materials to be read and analyzed in their respective classrooms. The English Content Standards' guidelines in the year 2000 for the Department of Education in Puerto Rico recommend that comics be used as assessment standards for all grades. The report states that,

Comic strips are an assessment technique that permits the student to demonstrate the mastery of concepts, skills, and vocabulary. It develops

creativity among the students. This technique permits the teacher to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the student in the development of concepts, skills and vocabulary. (Appendix 3 Description of Assessment Strategies)

Mark Crilley, a cartoonist and educator, encourages teachers to use these texts to make their classes more dynamic when he says that, “to me [Crilley], the point of bringing comics into the classroom is to show students who are convinced that ‘writing is boring’ that they are dead wrong” (31). Some educators use comics as visual aids, much in the same way that one would show a movie. Gerde and Spencer, for example, emphasize how comics bring more material to the classroom on a sensory level,

Early education studies showed that the additional visual component increases learning, and subsequent studies focused on the visual-verbal dimension of learning (Mayer and Massa 2003). Comic books address both the visual and verbal learner and provide a tangible medium, which students can experience at their own pace. (247)

Others use them as primary reading materials to be studied as one would analyze a novel. One interesting example comes from Thailand; where an English teacher made his own comic to help his students better understand basic grammar skills. Brian Boyd continues to teach and to be the main cartoonist for his comic book and webcomic *Grammarman*, which is now available in several countries outside of Thailand. Boyd’s example of utilizing comics and webcomics in the English as a Second Language Classroom (ESL) fits within the context of elementary schools in Puerto Rico and their ESL courses. In fact, the Puerto Rican Institute of Culture (ICP as per their Spanish initials) makes their own comic books. The “IcéPé.cómic” series is explained on their website as “being directed towards students at the elementary school level with the objective to foment in our children a sense of belonging to the diverse aspects that make the backdrop of the Puerto Rican profile” (my translation)<sup>26</sup>. These comics provide hybrid educational material for

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26 I have personally seen these comics being used in one elementary school of Puerto Rico. The students I saw enjoyed the material and were excited to read these comics out loud and were eager to add to discussion of the text in question. Many other schools are also utilizing these and other types of comics as part of their educational

children to learn about language, history, and culture while still being accessible for teachers of any of these three types of courses.

One of the few drawbacks of comics in a pedagogical setting is that only a few professors take them seriously. All too often they are perceived by the teaching community as necessary evils, Vacca points out:

Some teachers proudly boast that they have never read a comic book in their life. They just know that all comic books are trash. This writer cheerfully agrees that many comic books are sheer graphic in-sanity, but don't teachers care to know who or what is competing with them for pupil attention and interest? An area which attracts several million boys and girls every year should engage the attention of language teachers, whose major activity is communication. (291)

Vacca's writings are rather outdated, as they are from 1959, but they do reflect a present mentality. While comics may never be removed from the category of popular culture, perhaps a worse stigma is the perception that they are "simple" readings. There certainly are comics designed to be read by children, just as there those designed for other age groups. And there are comics in a variety of genres and styles. Every other form of media has the same variety of content in terms of content, and yet comics are still categorized by many as just an entertaining distraction for kids. Perhaps the greatest step towards a larger public acceptance of comics as serious readings came with the Pulitzer Prize Special Citation and Award in Letters going to Art Spiegelman for his graphic novel *Maus*, in 1992. This award showed that comics are not just for kids and are worthy of serious attention. In the same way that it would be reductive to believe that all books are predictable romances, boring biographies, and idealistic self help books because of what we see in supermarket stands, it would be simplistic for the academic community to assume that all comics focus on ridiculous superheroes or childish pranksters.

Contrary to popular belief, the use of comics in classrooms is not a relatively recent phenomenon. Gene Yang traces the history of using comics in U.S. classrooms to as early as 1933, about the same time by which comic books were invented. Academic papers on comics flourished during the 1940s but even then the same divide between those who saw them as great material and those who considered them a detriment to literacy existed. Perhaps the biggest attack on comics came in 1954, when psychiatrist Dr. Frederic Wertham published *The Seduction of the Innocent*. Yang cites Wright's analysis of Wertham's work as "a 400-page war cry accusing comic books of promoting violence, racial stereotypes, homosexuality, rebelliousness, and illiteracy." Scott McCloud writes that Wertham's book "helped trigger a firestorm of anti-comics hysteria . . . Public ire descended most fiercely on the gruesome crime and horror comics which young readers of the day had developed an insatiable appetite for" (*Reinventing Comics* 86). Yang goes on to say that Wertham's words caught the eye of Capitol Hill where the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency investigated the comic book industry. McCloud explains that the investigation "was a public relations disaster for comics" but that,

Thanks to the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution, Congress was unable to officially censor comics – but that same year, comics publishers agreed to a strict code of ethics that would dominate the industry for decades to come and created an authority with the power to enforce it. . . To understand the impact of the Code, imagine that movie producers were subjected to far more stringent requirements for a film to receive a "G" rating – and that there were no other acceptable ratings! (*Reinventing Comics* 86-87)

McCloud marks this as a turning point for comics as a whole and that the public's perception of comics as something designed for kids but potentially harmful towards them stigmatizes comics to this day. The Comics Code Authority would be phased out as the years went on and with it, academic and pedagogic attention to comics returned. As early as the 1970s, new investigators



and educators began using them once more. Yang emphasizes that the current outlook for comics is bright, in that:

Today, educators at all levels are designing new ways of teaching through comics. In 2002, the New York City Comic Book Museum released *C.O.M.I.C.S.*, an eight-lesson curriculum for K-12 students teaching the reading and creation of comics. Dozens of schools across the nation ordered the curriculum before it was even complete. The National Association of Comics Art Educators evangelizes colleges and universities on the importance of comics-based courses. Their website ([www.teachingcomics.org](http://www.teachingcomics.org)) features the syllabi of existing courses, instructional units written by cartoonists and professors, and an online community of comics educators.

More and more resources like the one quoted have become accessible and available for educators who are interested in comics to apply them within their classrooms. It appears that the general perception of comics has shifted from one of fear for the next generation, to one of acceptance and potential.

If comics are increasingly being accepted in language and literature classrooms, then so can webcomics. If anything, they are even more viable as reading materials since most can be seen for free. Students can access webcomics almost instantaneously, whereas it often takes days or weeks for them to obtain their textbooks. The digital divide is a concern here, since the initial costs (computer, Internet access, etc.) are an issue for teacher and student alike. Computers, projectors, and smartboards are becoming more common items within classrooms and these resources can easily be used to view webcomics. Laptop computers and smartphones are becoming more common possessions among students, and those who cannot afford them can easily use a nearby technology center, library, or even an Internet. Unfortunately, rural and underprivileged areas often lack these resources, thus making webcomics impractical and not feasible for these schools and students.

Webcomics offer a wealth of readily available material for discussion and study. Many educators base their curricula on the literary canon, while also using other sources to help their

students learn. The canon itself undergoes revisions in order to make sure that educators and students can become aware of works that best represent a given area of literature. The revisions of the past few decades expand the canon to include groups that were not included, such as women and minorities, and most recently with queer studies. While there have been many additions to the canon in the realms of gender, race, geography, and sexual orientation, I predict that further revisions will include various forms of media. Works other than those found in the print medium have already worked their way into literature classrooms, as is the case with film and music. Even television programming has become pedagogic material. It is only a matter of time until works that originate in the digital medium become widely accepted. Of these digital works, webcomics are the only ones that provide a consistent ongoing microserialized narrative that does not appear in any other media.

One can teach a webcomic like a novel, with installment divisions instead of pages or chapters, but these require that said webcomic be very well established or already finished. Alternatively, they can be taught in a different manner that takes advantage of their publication format and analyzes webcomics as serials. Adding webcomics to the curriculum of a language classroom would be quite simple if they were being read serially. One would merely add the webcomic as ongoing reading material. After giving reasonable time for the students to catch up with the latest installment, the professor could dedicate a few minutes of class in a given week to discussing the latest events. If the chosen webcomic has a continuous ongoing narrative, like the ones analyzed in this study, then one could engage in discussions about what has happened in the current issue and what it means, and what might in the next installments. Performing this classroom activity only once a week would minimize the time taken away from the rest of the class and limit the variables which might occur due to potentially erratic publishing schedules. In

addition, online portals, like Moodle or WebCT that are already used in many classrooms, can double as a forum for students to further study and talk about the webcomic outside the classroom.

During my time as an instructor for Intermediate English at the University of Puerto Rico Mayaguez campus, I inadvertently put these ideas into practice. Early in the semester I had mentioned to my students that I was doing my study on webcomics and Burlew's *Order of the Stick*. Two of my students quite passionately asserted that no webcomic could be as good as I claimed this one was, so I told them to read it for themselves. Within a week's time, they had read several hundred installments and had begun asking me about the parts they did not understand. I usually arrived at the classroom early and they also arrived early in order to further discuss the webcomic. This way, we analyzed the newest installments without cutting into class time, and still reading the rest of all the assigned texts. These students did this additional reading voluntarily despite having a full schedule of academic classes. By the end of the semester, one of the students became interested in other works of fantasy literature and the other was planning on making his own webcomic. While my experience with these students does not constitute a definitive study of the effects of introducing webcomics into the literature and language classroom, it does provide evidence of a practical method for their integration. In the case of these two students, webcomics were the only thing throughout the entire semester that motivated them to do more than just what was required for a class and that sort of push is what many teachers strive for with all their students.

The previous discussion of webcomics in classroom shows how they can be taught, but it still does not provide a good reason why. The methods proposed may still be perceived to promote webcomics and comics in general as fun and accessible material at best. What many

educators do not know is that webcomics are not just a fad, but rather an emerging form of literature. More and more students today are reading one, if not several webcomics, in addition to the rest of their schoolwork. They can juggle between multiple narratives and storylines easily. Even the foremost authorities in academia are accepting comics, as evidenced by the recent publishing of the Modern Language Association's, *Teaching the Graphic Novel*. One entry in said book by Alison Mandaville and J. P. Avila states that, "Comics offer today's visually oriented students an engaging and challenging literary form on their own, which also, when taught as a regularized part of thematic courses, can serve as a motivating connection to other forms of literature" (246). It is these same connections to other forms of literature that I saw in my previous students' efforts to individually further their endeavors. That same article encourages teachers to have their students critically write about comics in the classroom:

Instructors might worry that allowing students to do creative comics criticism will be letting them off the hook for writing real literary criticism or design work, but we must be careful not to reinforce the same old high-low cultural divide and stereotypes about comics that we are trying to resist or at least interrogate. In our experience, students incorporating a creative element in longer research and critical projects take significantly more risks in thinking and spend far more time doing the work than those writing standard papers. Moreover just as we don't usually expect students, particularly, at the undergraduate level, to be producing publishable critical (prose) essays in the course of one term, we should not demand that they produce publishable creative criticism in the same context. (251)

Comics can be complicated works of art and prose just as they can focus on humor and heroism. Either way, comics offer engaging material beyond the traditional print medium that can help students learn.

Webcomic cartoonists also recognize the importance of comics not just as a meaningful variation to narrative writing but as texts that promote a different way of reading. Even Rich Burlew, already presented many times before in this study, said in an interview that the appeal of comics lies in that:

I think comics are one step closer to the way we perceive the world than novels are. By that, I mean that we don't necessarily apply descriptive words to everything we observe, but when you read a novel, nothing happens that is not labeled. By being visual in nature, comics more closely resemble reality by requiring the reader to look at the scene and analyze it based on nonverbal criteria.

I've heard critics say that comics require less imagination than prose, because the scenes are presented to you rather than imagined, but I don't think that's the case. A common piece of advice for novelists is "show, don't tell," meaning that it is better to describe an event and let the reader draw conclusions about the emotions or motivations behind it than it is to simply state them. Aren't then comics the undisputed masters of, "Show, don't tell"? Each panel shows us a scene from which we must extrapolate meanings. Is the character angry or sad? Are they being sarcastic? Are they lying? In the best comics, these aspects are not communicated by the dialogue at all, but simply by the expressions and positions of the characters themselves in the art.

The "show, don't tell" strategy that Burlew says applies to novelists rings true since it is one of the most basic pieces of advice given to students in just about any creative writing class.

Others believe that comics provoke a cognitive reaction that quite literally does not occur when reading books or looking at paintings alone. Rob Weiner, member of the editing board for *The Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, spoke in a panel about comics, during the Southwest/Texas Popular & American Culture Association, about how the process of reading comics requires both the left and right side of the brain, whereas other forms of reading only use one side of the brain. This notion makes sense when considering that the left side of the brain is regarded as the "logical" part that processes the verbal reasoning of words while the right side is the "artsy" part that applies nonverbal reasoning to images. Issue #1347 of *PHD Comics* mentions the research of Neil Cohn, a graduate student of Tufts University who is analyzing the brain waves of people while they read comics, in order to understand the linguistic elements of this form. Once Cohn's research is finalized, cognitive interpretation of comics and webcomics can be better detailed and thus lead to further research in the area.

The previous justifications for teaching comics in the classroom apply just as well to webcomics. Still, beyond the digital and economic factors, few reasons to choose one medium of

comics over another have been advanced before now. However, by doing the research for this study, I have found two key traits that make it clear that webcomics are the better choice for classrooms. These characteristics are that of accessibility and the serial reading experience.

Students and teachers have relatively simple access to the entirety of the narrative of a particular webcomic. Thanks to the archive, the anthology of every installment of a webcomic is readily available. Having each student have to find and purchase each installment of a particular comic seems quite unfeasible. Webcomics that have been published for over a decade still do not have the vast quantity of narrative of more established comic books, especially the superhero titles. In the case of the latter, only a fraction of the narrative can be taught and read in a practical manner, much less obtained, thus providing an incomplete study of the material in question. The sheer number of issues of any title often leads to narrative redundancy in order to appeal to new readers, or to the accumulation of so much material that continuity lockout occurs and even regular reader can be confused. Some of the more popular comic book franchises engage in both of these methods through the use of multiple continuities, which can lead to even more confusion. Even the most convoluted of narrative-based webcomics do not have these problems because of their relatively simple accessibility.

The second defining trait is that of the serial reading experience. Webcomics, specifically those that have an ongoing narrative, provide a serial reading experience, similar to the one elicited by Victorian serials during their time. Graphic novels, perhaps the most “serious” incarnation of comics, present material much the way a novel does<sup>27</sup>. While there is nothing wrong with the form of reading novels, I believe that educators are missing an opportunity to teach these contemporary serials. All too often in literature classrooms students are taught that

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27 Interestingly enough, Marvel has a “Marvel Illustrated” line of graphic novels that are new versions of classic novels, including those that were once serials.

they lack the proper context to understand a work in the way that readers of that time once did. This perception extends even more so to novels that were once serials because one cannot truly replicate the serial reading experience after it has been fully published. Webcomics offer the possibility of engaging in a serial reading experience, not just with family and friends, but also with teachers and other students. Other contemporary serials, like those in televisions and movies, have too much production time between installments to be studied consistently. Besides, students and teachers alike may find it difficult to see any of these serial forms during the limited time frame when they are available to be viewed.

Webcomics warrant a place in the language and literature classroom, not just because they are emerging literature, but because they are easily accessible and provide the opportunity to study a work as it is being developed. The serial reading experience is often taught in hindsight and with nostalgia that suggests that current readers have missed out on the original text as it was intended to be read. Webcomics allow a new generation of readers to engage in a serial reading experience. Educators can let them do this on their own or they can take advantage of this opportunity and guide them through academic discussions and analysis of this incarnation of the serial. Because these webcomics are microserialized and because they contain an ongoing narrative, it is also possible not just to study the work, but also to analyze how the narrative itself is in continuous flux, in the same way that this study has done. Students can see first hand how the serial publishing format of webcomics affects their narratives. They can analyze them as fluid texts and they can see how each installment has to have a certain degree of significance while still meshing with previous and former issues. Students can compare and contrast the media used and study the histories of print, film, radio, television, and digital serials. Students can even do a diachronic analysis of a particular webcomic, much like the one done for this study about *Order*

*of the Stick*, so they can track and provide evidence of shifts in authorial intention and see the ways the webcomic has changed over time. One can teach a singular webcomic throughout a semester and/or assign that each student analyzes a different webcomic, much in the same way that one would make a book report. The methodology for analyzing webcomics within this study can be adapted and applied towards pedagogical instruction, but it is ultimately up to individual teachers to apply these or any other methods to take advantage of webcomics before these too become another serial that was best appreciated in hindsight. More detailed pedagogical applications can be found in Appendix B of this study.

## **II. Conclusion**

At the beginning of this study, six research questions were posed to guide the research. In the different chapters that make up this study, all of these questions have been answered. Let us return to those research questions and answer them concisely once more in order to better grasp the entirety of this study.

1. What are the narrative strategies used in webcomics? How are they similar and how do they differ from the ones used in other forms of serialized fictional narratives, such as the Victorian novel, comic strips, films, comic books, and television?

Webcomics contain just a great variety of themes, genres, and styles, as any other form of narrative and thus have just as many narrative strategies as these other forms. Much like the serial fiction of the Victorian novel, webcomic cartoonists often end their installments with cliffhangers to interest their readers into getting the next one, though not nearly as much as occurred in the nineteenth century. From comic books and comic strips, webcomics derive a traditional format, though McCloud and others advocate breaking the conventional spatial dimensions of the page found in these earlier forms. Films and television provide a narrative



pacing that webcomic cartoonists often emulate as they attempt to have their work read at the same speed at which it is presented. As with all forms of serial fiction, webcomic cartoonists often have to retcon their way out of discrepancies within works in which narrative continuity is important. The analysis of Burlew's *OOTS* identifies eight relatively consistent narrative strategies that are used and eventually change in their distribution patterns as time goes by. The most distinguishing feature of webcomics is their microserialized nature, which is rarely seen in other forms, and shapes the narrative and the narrative strategies used. The form and method of publication of webcomics shape the narrative within a particular context that is often ignored within the analysis of earlier works of serial fiction.

2. In what ways do the technical aspects of the digital medium in which webcomics are published affect the story itself? What changes occur when shifting from digital to print media?

Webcomic cartoonists utilize technologies that make it possible for them to make their works and publish them at a faster rate than other forms of serial fiction. Readers from all over the world have accessibility to the webcomic should their computers be connected to the Internet. The digital archive allows for new and regular readers to check on previous installments at their own convenience, so long as the author maintains the archive. Having an easy access archive allows for recaps to be left to a minimum. Other features made possible by new technology, such as multimedia are still more ornamental than substantive for the narrative. Some ancillary content that appears on a webcomic's website cannot be adequately transposed from the digital to the print medium and thus makes for two different reading experiences. The narrative itself changes only slightly, but several units of meaning that surround the narrative, like the enforced interruptions that make it a serial, are lost.

3. Does the narrative itself change in terms of style or genre? How does the narrative change over time? How do these changes appear?

Many webcomics begin as an entertaining hobby to be shared among some friends. Somewhere along the line, webcomic cartoonists begin to see the potential for something more. This fairly common origin leads to Cerebus Syndrome, where a purely comedic webcomic shifts to a dramatic tone and may potentially achieve a balance between the two extremes of comedy and drama later on. The trend mostly seems to go from wacky to serious, but there are no examples of an inverted style shift, most likely because “serious” artists tend to remain that way throughout their artistic endeavors. The change can also occur because the webcomic cartoonist hones his craft through repetition and practice to the point that the writing and the drawing improve regardless of any outright desire to change his/her work. The narrative can thus become a more central part of the work or it can even appear out of nowhere in a webcomic that had no original semblance of a plot. Any changes that do appear are not drastic, thanks in large part to the microserialized publishing format, though one can still identify general turning points throughout the webcomic.

4. How can changes in narrative be used to examine shifts in authorial intention? How are shifts in authorial intention presented? In what ways do these affect the narrative?

Readers often look at the author’s biography to provide potential context and/or sources for the work of literature. In the case of webcomics, the life of the webcomic cartoonist occurs simultaneously along with the installments and readers take in one alongside the other. Be it through the forums, the blogs, Twitter accounts, or any other source, webcomic cartoonists keep their readers informed of what’s going on beyond the narrative. These authors often realize and tell the reader that the webcomic is undergoing a transformation of sorts for any number of

reasons. Webcomic cartoonists can become sick or get a real job and have to put their narratives on hold. They can also do the opposite and make their webcomic into full time employment and put the narrative into overdrive. One can read the webcomic alone and infer what is going on behind the scenes, but then one misses out on up to the minute context that makes for a deeper attachment and immersion into the narrative.

5. How are issues of narrative continuity addressed and maintained in webcomics? How are these similar and how do they differ from the ones used in other forms of serial fiction?

As mentioned earlier, almost all forms of serial fiction contain some sort of retcon to fix any narrative discrepancies. Because webcomic cartoonists utilize the digital medium, they are able to change the actual document of the work through the Orwellian retcon, instantly and inconspicuously. Other serialized works have to be fixed in subsequent editions or sequels, which often appear long after the first printing/viewing. Also, because the connection between the author and reader is very close, the webcomic cartoonist can actually just admit a mistake and explain how he/she plans to fix it mere moments after the error is found. The serial reading experience entails just as much discovery for the reader as it does for the author, especially when dealing with a writer who is open to feedback. In fact, readers can provide suggestions for how to maintain narrative continuity and can be rewarded with something equivalent to Marvel's No Prize. Retcons and other drastic maneuvers are used more often by webcomic cartoonists than by those in other forms of serial fiction. I believe that this discrepancy is due to the fact that other forms require a larger degree of planning before the first installment is published, as per the strict requirements of whatever company publishes, produces, and/or edits the text. Webcomics provide few barriers for those just starting out, which means that many webcomic cartoonists

start without a consistent central idea, only to go through an eventual shakedown period, and maybe retcon several previous events.

6. How is the serial reading experience of webcomics similar and how does it differ from other forms of serial fiction? How do readers affect the process of narrative construction in webcomics and in other serial works?

Every form of serial fiction depends on readers to be interested so that production of further installments can remain a viable endeavor. From an economic perspective, these readers purchase installments and that money allows the author to stay in business and continue writing his work. If readers do not show their support for a serial, be it through praise or through purchases, there is a good chance that the serial's production will be halted, regardless of the state of the narrative. Writers of serial fiction depend on those in charge of their medium of choice in order for his/her work to be published; be it through magazine editors, film companies, television and radio stations, newspapers, and publishing houses, there is always someone deciding whether the value of the narrative's production translates into a profit. However, webcomic cartoonists operate by different standards because their webcomics are mostly one-person operations. They can write and draw what they want to and there is no one there to stop them. These authors answer only to themselves and to their readers. Some webcomic cartoonists may classify their work as a hobby or an "art for art's sake" endeavor but most do care what their readers think about the webcomic. Few webcomic cartoonists obtain an actual profit but they still plan their installments according to the considerations of their readers. The readers in turn provide feedback as to the different elements of the webcomic so that the author can better hone this craft. Other forms of serials have too much narrative production and/or content per installment to take the readers' opinions into consideration beyond the economic factors.

Webcomics are microserialized, which allows for the readers to have a clear effect on the relatively short installments and production time between each one. This means that the serial reading experience occurs simultaneously and is interwoven with the serial's narrative production. This process occurs at a simpler and faster rate than in other serials in large part because of the near instant communication available between authors and readers of the digital medium in which these webcomics are published. Still, it is ultimately up to the webcomic cartoonist to determine if and how to integrate the feedback of his/her readers. As the narrative starts, the opinions of the readers have a heavier influence on the author but as time goes on many webcomic cartoonists decide to avoid looking at feedback and specific ideas from readers because their narratives are so planned out in advance.

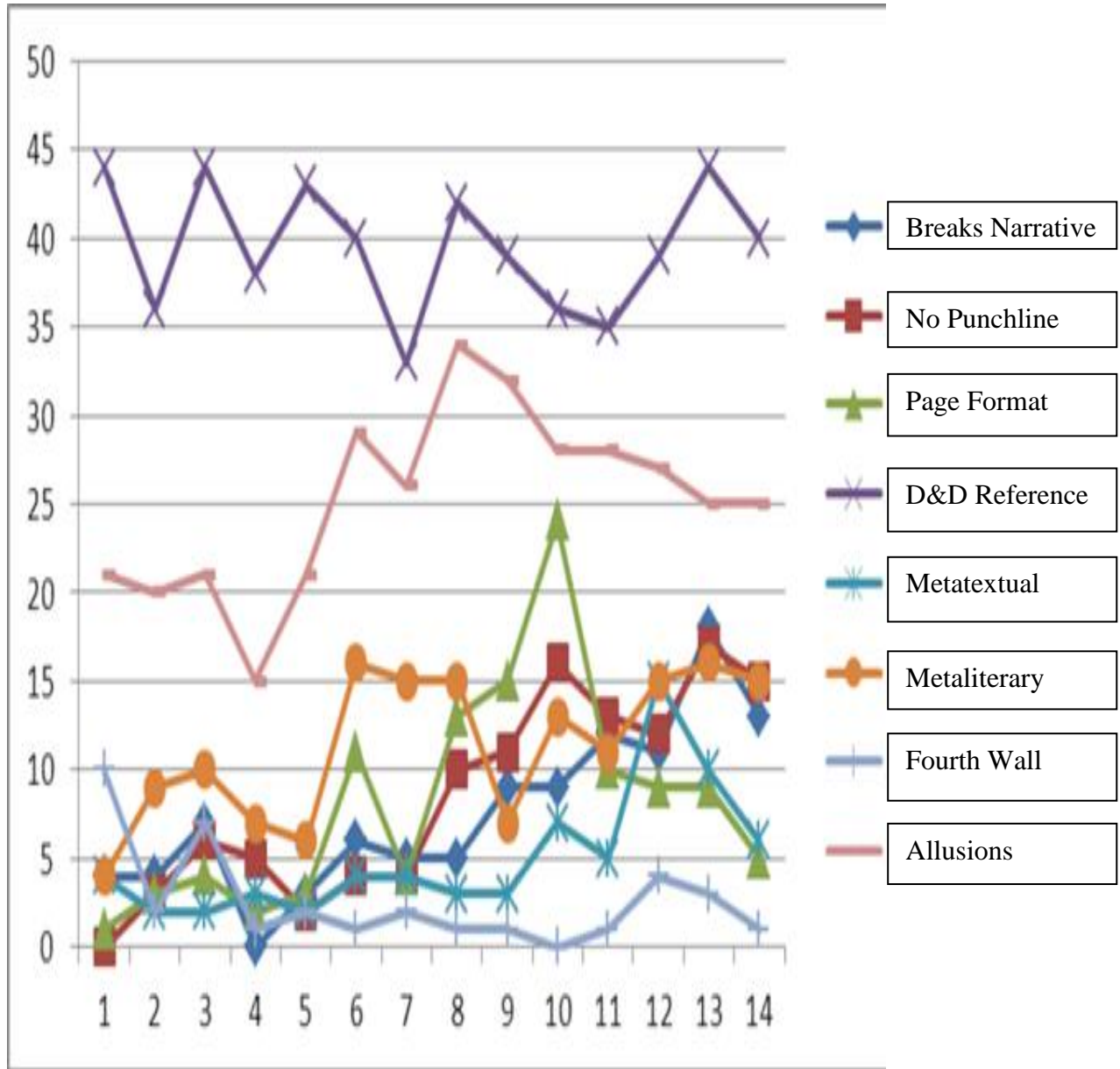
Webcomic cartoonists amalgamate tradition and innovation within their works. During their search for the proper equilibrium, their narratives are created. With other works, this narratological balancing act is a private affair and readers only get to see the final polished product. Webcomics on the other hand take the reader along for the ride, allowing them to see every mistake and masterpiece that is published. In the context of this serial reading experience, this study analyzes the narrative strategies and textual elements of microserialized webcomics. These authors have to develop their ongoing narratives by constantly synchronizing past and future installments constructed at different points in time. Readers and webcomic cartoonists work side by side to piece the parts and together obtain something greater than the sum of these collected pieces. This pieced-together aspect of webcomics are invaluable to academics and educators interested in the study of narrative, issues of authorial intent, textuality, media, publication formats, and reception because the mechanisms are discernible between the parts.



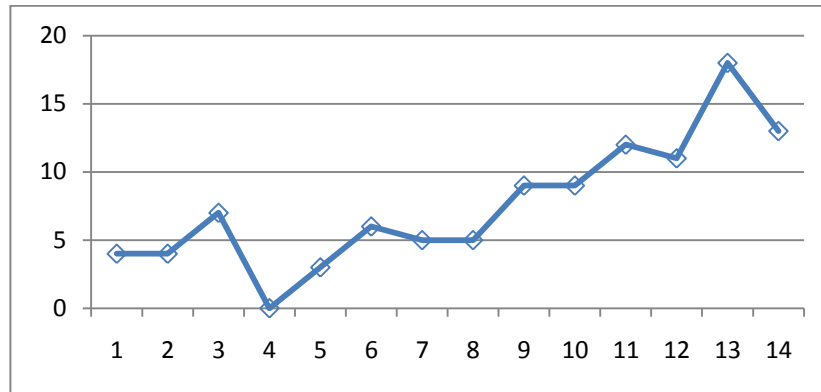
(Figure 6. 0-1 taken from issue “# 145 Mr(s). Wizard Explains It All” where Elan appreciates the lesson taught to him. I hope this study helps you as much as Vaarsuvius’ exposition.)

## Appendix A

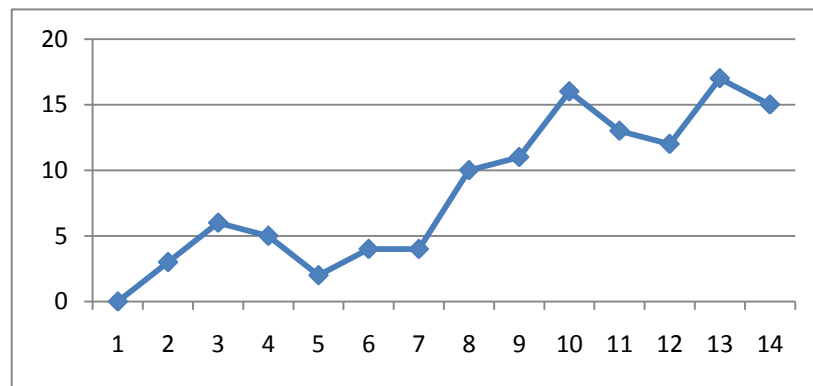
All of the following graphs utilize the same format. The vertical Y Axis represents the amount of any given narrative strategy. The horizontal X Axis represents the groupings of every fifty installments.



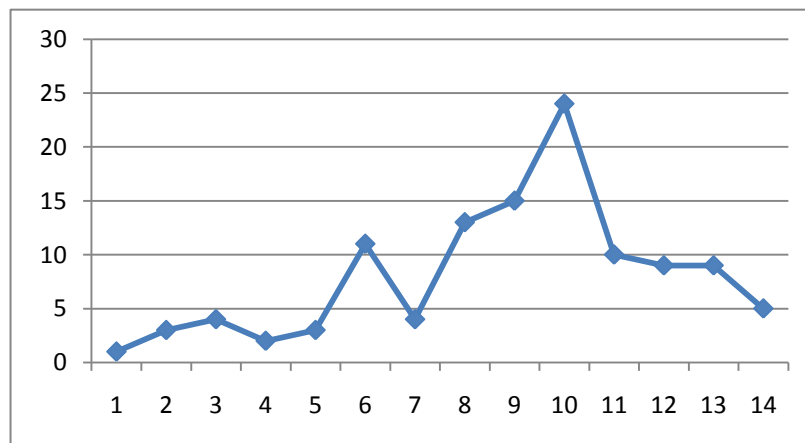
Graph of all narrative strategies presented from issues #1-700 of Order of the Stick



Graph showcasing breaks in narrative continuity

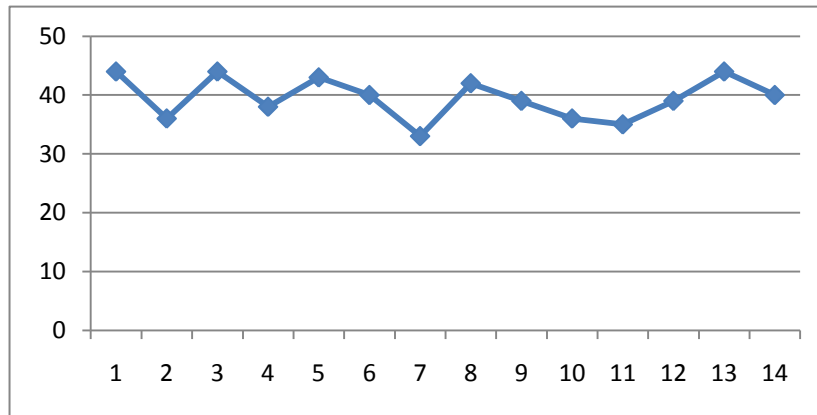


Graph of installments that lack a punchline

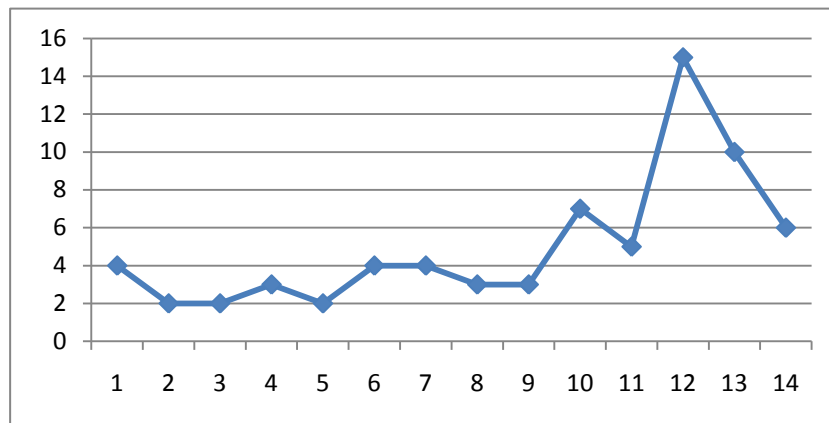


Graph of issues that diverge from the traditional page format

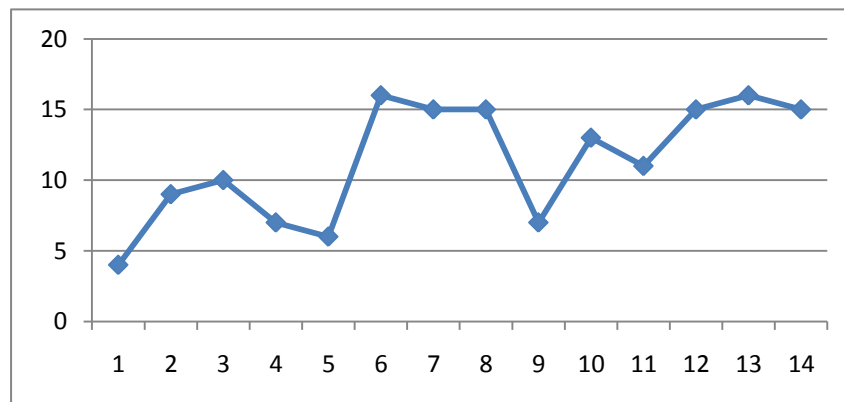




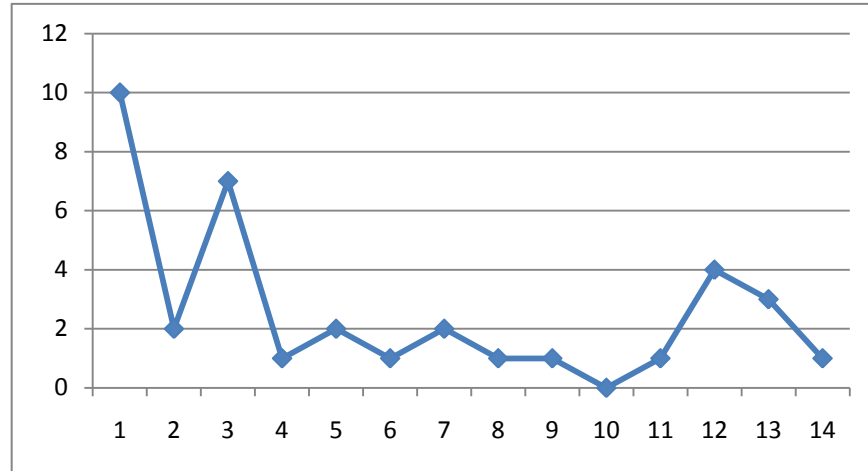
Graph detailing amount of references to Dungeons & Dragons



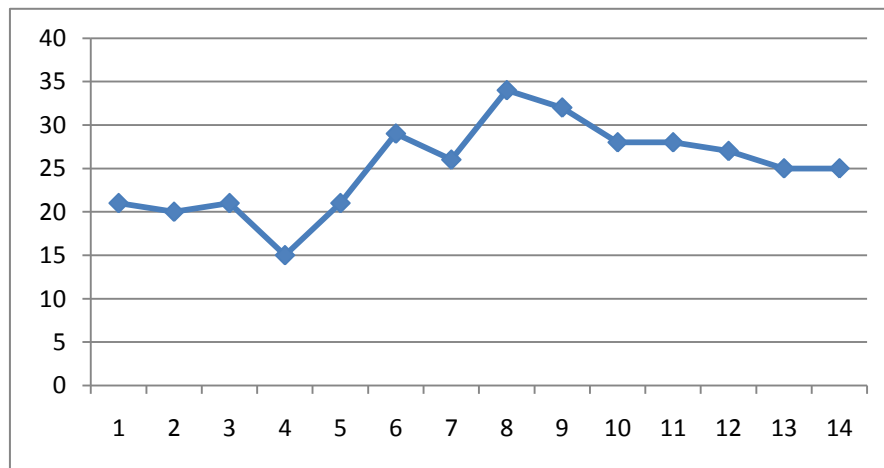
Graph of metatextual references



Graph of metaliterary references



Graph of fourth wall breaking moments



Graph of references and allusions

The following table shows the name and issue number of each of the seven hundred issues analyzed as a part of this study. The following columns depict the presence (with “1”) or absence (with “0”) of the eight narrative strategies explained throughout this study and are placed within the same order as before.

Issue # and title	Contains break in narrative continuity	Does not have a punchline at the end of the issue	Breaks with traditional page format	Contains self reference to rules of Dungeons & Dragons	Contains metatextual reference	Contains reference to meta-literary concepts	Breaks fourth wall and directly recognizes the reader	Contains reference to real world events, objects, and/or persons.
#1 New Edition	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#2 Second Grade All Over Again	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#3 See Spot Spot	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#4 The Power of Music	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#5 When Plotlines Collide	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#6 The Cleric is "In"	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#7 Thorprayer	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#8 The Benefit of a High Bluff Score	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#9 I am Curious, Elan	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#10 Like Enthral, Only Boring	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#11 Alignment Differences	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#12 Up a Level, Down a Level	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
#13 Plot Ahoy	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#14 Why Roy is Always Tired	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#15 Family Time	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#16 Turn of Phrase	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#17 Rapier Wit	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#18 Double Surprise	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#19 Evade	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
#20 Arcanocalypse now	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#21 It's All About the Drama	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
#22 Leadership in Action	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
#23 Meanwhile...	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
#24 Do You Hear What I Hear	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1

#25 Armor Begone	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#26 Bardic Nudity	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#27 The Delicate Art of Intraparty Negotiations	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#28 Just Like on Three's Company	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#29 Treasure? What Treasure?	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#30 Behind the Secret Door	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#31 All You Can Eat Brain Buffet	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
#32 Biting the Hand that Feeds Me	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
#33 Mail Call	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	1
#34 Math Is Fun	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
#35 Rogues Gone Wild!	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#36 Building a Better PC Trap	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#37 Evil, But Cost-Effective	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#38 Spontaneous Artistic Expression	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#39 Date with Destiny	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
#40 The Gods Must be Busy	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#41 Just Take the AoO	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#42 Belkar Unleashed	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
#43 What's Behind Door #2	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
#44 Meet the Linear Guild	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#45 Strength in Numbers	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#46 Deep Thoughts	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#47 But is it High Definition	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#48 Stab of Opportunity	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#49 Collect the Whole Set	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1

#50 The Semi-Secret Origin of Nale & Elan	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1
#51 Stupid Isn't Always Cute	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
#52 Young Dwarves in Love	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#53 See They're Flying, Because It's an Air Sigil	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1
#54 Touch My Sigil	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
#55 One for the Old-Schoolers	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#56 An Alternate Hypothesis	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#57 Inevitable Betrayal Check?	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#58 First Aid	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#59 The Shot Heard Round the Dungeon	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#60 Everything Comes Together	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1
#61 Brother Against Brother	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#62 Heavy Metals	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#63 Together They're Six Feet of Whoop Ass	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#64 Transference	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#65 The Magic Words	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#66 Thog's Secret Weakness	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#67 Cliffhanger	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
#68 Unconscience	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#69 Hey, It Was Worth a Shot	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#70 That's Just Mean	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#71 Career Girl	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#72 Loose Ends	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#73 Thor's Teachings	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#74 Back from the Pit	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#75 The Blame Game	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0

#76 She's a Sneaky One	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#77 A Battle of Attrition	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#78 Unfinished Business	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
#79 The Heavens Moved	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#80 Replacement Cleric	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#81 The First Church of banjo	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#82 Beats Pay-per-View	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#83 Pillow Talk	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#84 Saddest. Comic. Ever.	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
#85 The Elder Puppet	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#86 The Most Important Quest	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#87 Bathroom Humor	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#88 Getting Closer	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#89 Invisibility: The Lazy Artist's Friend	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#90 Consequences of a Failed Skill Check	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#91 Proof that I am Deeply Disturbed	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
#92 Reading is Fundamental	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#93 Teenage Wasteland	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#94 The Path to Victory	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#95 Dead Men Tell Tales	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#96 Gate? What Gate?	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#97 Evil Plans	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#98 Mmmmm...Tasty	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1
#99 Grilled to Perfection	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#100 Teenage Boys Are CR 1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
#101 Man-to-Man Chat	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0

#102 Lowbrow is the Best Brow	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#103 Practice makes Perfect	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
#104 Dramatic Pre-Battle Speech	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
#105 Hordes of Xykon	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#106 A Sure Bet	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#107 Defense is for Losers	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#108 Help from Above	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#109 Tensions Rise	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#110 Revenge is Best Served Really Cold	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#111 Inukchuk!	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#112 Shatter	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#113 Memories, Like the Edges of My Sword	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#114 Exciting Climax	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
#115 Dust in the Wind	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#116 Finding Stuff	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#117 Delayed Gratification	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#118 They Should Childproof Those Things	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#119 Hollywood, Eat Your Heart Out	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1
#120 The End of the Beginning	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1
#121 The Return of Mail Call	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	1
#122 Adventurers are Coming! Adventurers are Coming!	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
#123 Double Your Entendre, Double Your Fun	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#124 Ding!	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1

#125 Free Experience!	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#126 Multiclass Struggles	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#127 New Wizard in Town	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#128 The More You Know...	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#129 Rock Solid Investment	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#130 Itempalooza	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#131 Money Makes the World Go Round	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#132 Kindred Spirits	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#133 Standardized Setting	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#134 Craft (Plotline)	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#135 Potionomics	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#136 It's NOT a Gaming Session Until Someone Quotes Monty Python	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
#137 Teh Gewd Gods	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
#138 Tomorrow's Technology Today	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
#139 How to Keep the Party Together	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#140 My Little Pony	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#141 Horse Sense	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#142 Misdirection and Subterfuge	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#143 Do-Over	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#144 Pop Goes the Weasel	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#145 Mr (s). Wizard Explains It All	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1
#146 Role Reversal	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1



#147 The Light at the End of the Tunnel	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#148 Hobgoblins and You	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#149 Cultural Differences	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
#150 A Comic as Lovely as a Tree	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#151 Learning Experience	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#152 Arrow Time	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#153 Priorities	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#154 One Bird with Two Dozen Arrows	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1
#155 Time is on My Side	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#156 Cunning Escape	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#157 A Lesson in Leadership	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#158 The Economics of Banditry	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#159 Plotus Interruptus	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#160 The Jell-O Pit Wasn't Available	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#161 Captives	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#162 Soliloquy	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
#163 A Man, A Dwarf, and a Kitty	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#164 Here He Comes, to Save the Day	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
#165 Hangin' Around	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#166 Wolverine, Eat Your Heart Out	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#167 Don't Question the Color of the Bag	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#168 Running on Empty	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#169 The Enemy of My Enemy is a Tree	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0

#170 He's Still a Dwarf at Heart	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#171 The Prisoner Dilemma	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#172 Cure Moderate Hurt Feelings	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#173 It Is Always Where They Intend It to Be	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#174 Interlude of DOOOOOOOM!	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#175 Darn You to Hex	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#176 Leaping Lizards	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#177 Ch-ch-ch-changes	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#178 The Early Bird Catches the Wizard	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#179 Liar, Liar	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#180 Falling for You	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
#181 Cursing the Darkness	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#182 Probability	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#183 Spit and/or Swallow	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
#184 Hawaiian Love	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#185 The Time Killers	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
#186 Return of the Elf	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#187 Love at First Sight	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#188 A Matter of Perspective	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#189 Tied Up Nicely	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#190 A Lesson in Resource Management	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#191 Dungeon Real Estate	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#192 Everything Sits Better on a Ritz	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1

#193 Because Good is Dumb	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#194 You Light Up My Life	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#195 Book Nook	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
#196 The Diary	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#197 A Change of Scale	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#198 The Great Kazoo	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1
#199 It Was a Dark and Stormy Night...	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
#200 The Confrontation	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1
#201 Seeing Signs	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#202 Scanning...	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#203 Just the Facts, Ma'am	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#204 What's My Motivation?	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1
#205 A is always A	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#206 Hidden Benefit of Being an Adventurer	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#207 Now if Only We Could Organize the Fiends Somehow	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
#208 A Battle of Wits	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#209 Multiclass Discrimination	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
#210 Displaced Persons	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#211 The Hook	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#212 Dirt Farm	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#213 The Man Knows His Limitations	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#214 No Plan Survives Contact with One's Allies	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#215 Taking Charge	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#216 Perfect Combo	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#217 Now in OgreVision!	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#218 OD&D	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1

#219 No Joke Too Cliched	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#220 For a Reasonable Fee	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#221 Recycling Works	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#222 A Blissful Marriage	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#223 Love, in the Abstract	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#224 Groggy, Groggy, Groggy	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#225 Checking In	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#226 Who's On the Throne?	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#227 AR&R	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#228 Unlawful Good	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#229 No Offense, Aaron	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1
#230 The Law Strikes Back	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#231 From the Mouths of Babes	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#232 Because They Got Lonely in the Bag	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#233 No Thread Left Untied	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#234 The Ultimate Sacrifice	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#235 Oddly, He Can Still Get Dressed in Under a Minute	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#236 Mean Girl	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#237 Growing Some	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#238 You Try Rhyming "Assassin"	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#239 Roy's Angels	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#240 Next on FOX: When Whores Attack	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
#241 Talking Down	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#242 Chekov's Law Realized	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	1
#243 No Flair for the Dramatic	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1

#244 What? It's a Legitimate Magic Item	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#245 Easy Come, Easy Go	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#246 Rumors of Her Death	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
#247 It's Just Aphasia She's Going Through	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#248 Blame the Hormones	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
#249 Return of the Trouser Titan	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#250 Oh No, He Didn't	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
#251 A Piece of His Mind	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#252 Linear Storytelling	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
#253 Larry Gardener and the Angry Half-Orc	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#254 Half the Elf, Double the Fun	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#255 Meep Meep!	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#256 Six Degrees of Evil Separation	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#257 POW!	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
#258 I Think That Violates the Geneva Convention	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#259 Son of Mail Call	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
#260 The Prison Blues	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#261 I Smell a Solo Adventure	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#262 All You Need is Love and Improvised Thieves' Tools	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#263 The Great Escape	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1
#264 I Cannae Tell a Lie	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#265 A Tale of Two Paladins	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1

#266 Guessing Game	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#267 The Cat Behind the Throne	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#268 The Lawyers Strike Back	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#269 A Familiar Face	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#270 Dueling Egos	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#271 The Prosecution's Case	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#272 The Big Secret	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#273 The Crayons of Time: Doodles on the Sketch Pad of Eternity	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1
#274 The Crayons of Time: The Snarl	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
#275 The Crayons of Time World 2.0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
#276 The Crayons of Time: The Order of the Scribble	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
#277 The Crayons of Time: Breaking Up is Hard to Do	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	1
#278 A New Strategy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#279 No Soup for You	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#280 The Boot	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
#281 Get the Lead Out	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#282 Closing Arguments	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
#283 Rock the Vote	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1
#284 Shattered Expectations	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0
#285 A Moment of Truth	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
#286 A Minor Glitch	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0

#287 Paladins Make Good Tour Guides	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#288 First Word	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#289 Senility Now	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#290 Shojo's Big Secret	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
#291 Not to Mention Little League	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#292 Non-Startling Revelations	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#293 This is Getting to Be a Habit	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#294 Contracts, Shmontracts	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#295 Belkar Leashed	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#296 Boons	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#297 Sword Speak	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
#298 The Future is Forged in the Fires of Today	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0
#299 A Calling Missed	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#300 Pick Your Doom	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	1
#301 A Brief Intermission	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1
#302 New Beginnings	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
#303 Phrenology Today	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#304 A Leper Can't Change His Spots	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#305 The Epistle of Durkon	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#306 Power Word: Annoy	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#307 Take the Problem By the Hand	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#308 Sword Envy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#309 My Dinner with Elan	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#310 Advanced Dates & Dinners	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0

#311 Internal Dialogue	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
#312 Where the Buffalo Wings Roam	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#313 Words Fail	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#314 Goth Advice	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
#315 On Sylph's Wings	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#316 Countdown	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
#317 The Best Part of Waking Up	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#318 The Move Action of Shame	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#319 Healthier Living Through Repression	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1
#320 Bing Crosby's Got Nothing on Us	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#321 Q & A	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
#322 Maybe the Quailtiger?	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#323 Don't Make Me Turn This Quest Around	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#324 Consult Your Doctor Before Reading This Comic	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#325 The Test of the Body	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#326 Getting Ahead in Business	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#327 The Test for the Mind	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
#328 The Test of the Heart	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#329 The All-Seeing Oracle	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#330 Paid in Full	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1
#331 For the Future	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1
#332 The Ephemerality of Memory	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#333 The Bright Side	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1



#334 If You Want Something Done Right	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
#335 A Grand Experiment	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#336 Bedtime for Elan	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#337 Brief and to the Point	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
#338 Tactical Priorities	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#339 C.P.P.D. Blues	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#340 You Should Have Seen What He Did With the Corsage	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
#341 Setting Up the Board	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
#342 Dangling the Bait	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#343 Served With a Side of Whoop-Ass	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#344 A Walk in the Park	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#345 He Invented the Magic System	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#346 Swoop, There It Is	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#347 On the Map	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#348 Someone Was Looking for You	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#349 Every Couple Has Their Quirks	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1
#350 At Least You Get Course Credit	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#351 Pop Quiz, Hotshot	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#352 The Turnaround	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
#353 If a Druid Falls in the City, Does He Make a Noise?	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#354 Copper Piece Arcade	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
#355 Sore Loser	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1

#356 Knight Takes Pawn	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
#357 Pen Beats Sword	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#358 A Taste of Victory	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#359 Roll Over	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#360 Hail to the Chief	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1
#361 Framing the Picture	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1
#362 Grand Theft Identity	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#363 I Fought the Law	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#364 Consider Their Lineage	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#365 Caught in the Act	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#366 Porting Out	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
#367 Innocent Man	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1
#368 All Along the Watchtower	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#369 Fight!	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#370 Kills 'Em Every Time	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#371 The Road to Heck	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#372 Pot vs. Kettle	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#373 Caged	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1
#374 Black and Blue	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#375 Undeliverable	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#376 All Too Easy	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#377 Travel Delays	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#378 He Didn't Even Have to Say Please	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#379 Perform IS on the Aristocrat's Skill List	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
#380 While the Fiend is Away	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
#381 Improved Feint	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#382 Risk vs. Reward	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1

#383 What's Really Scary is That He Knows the Words	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#384 Words Get in the Way	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#385 A Sympathetic Ear	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#386 Not How She Pictured It, Certainly	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#387 The Cliffport Redemption	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	1
#388 The Final Frontier	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	1
#389 As Good an Explanation as is Forthcoming	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	1
#390 In a Class All His Own	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#391 Eye of the Tiger, Baby	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#392 Death from Above	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	1
#393 The Truth Shall Set Her Free	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
#394 Hell Hath Exactly As Much Fury	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#395 Two Steps Forward, One Step Back	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1
#396 The Door Knocks on YOU	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
#397 Leggo My Ego!	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#398 We All Just Want to be Held Sometimes	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#399 Death Actually IS Too Good for Them	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	1
#400 Your Ship Has Come In	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
#401 Breakfast of Champions	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
#402 Speaking From the Heart	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#403 Leadership Is About the Tough Decisions	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

#404 A Paladin's Duty	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#405 The Secrets	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#406 A Moment of Truth	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
#407 Fading	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#408 Fallsville, Population: 1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1
#409 Intercession	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
#410 The New Lord in Town	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#411 The Power Behind the Throne	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
#412 Catching Up	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
#413 Not to Scale	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
#414 Noble is Goodble	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#415 Idiot Box	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
#416 It's Battleicious!	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#417 The Most Important Place to Be	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#418 It's a Type of Boat	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#419 A Special Pre-Approved Offer	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#420 The Trial of Belkar Bitterleaf (Abridged)	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
#421 Oratory of the Stick	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	1
#422 March to War	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
#423 Periodic Bombardment	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
#424 A Wizard's Work	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
#425 War Makes Boys of Us All	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#426 Three of a Kind	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#427 They're Just Another Brick in the Wall	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#428 It Takes a Thief	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1

#429 Stay on Target...	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
#430 Rematch	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
#431 My Three Xykons	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#432 Let Slip the Dogs of War	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#433 Resource Management	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#434 Heavy is the Head	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#435 Amoral Dilemma	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
#436 Non-Military Intelligence	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#437 Battle Momentum	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#438 The Paladin is Your Pal	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#439 Seeing Orange	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
#440 Flew the Coop	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#441 Getting Ahead and Staying Ahead	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#442 We Can Do This the Easy Way...	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	1
#443 The First Step is a Doozy	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
#444 He's Dead, Jim	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	1
#445 A Song for the Departed	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#446 Hell of a Job	1	0	0	1	0	0		1
#447 Guarding the Sapphire	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
#448 Just Crazy Enough to Work	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1
#449 Land of the Rising...	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#450 Wands Are for Suckers	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1
#451 Change of Direction	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
#452 Breaking and Entering	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
#453 Heck of a Fight	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	1
#454 The Longshot	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0

#455 Incoming!	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1
#456 Saved Game	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#457 Anti-Human Resources	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#458 Exit Strategy	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	1
#459 Negative Feelings	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
#460 Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0
#461 I've Got a Bad Feeling About This	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
#462 Good Idea, Bad Idea	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#463 Shattered	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#464 Not for Everyone	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#465 No One Likes a Tattletale	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#466 I Think I Left it in the Bag	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
#467 Learn to Play it Right	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	1
#468 Splitting Up is Hard to Do	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
#469 Crossbones	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1
#470 With Three Arrows Left in the Quiver	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
#471 A Triumphant Return	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#472 I'll Hold Them Off	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
#473 On the Waterfront	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	1
#474 The Body Snatcher	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#475 Crashing the Party	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	1
#476 I Don't Suppose You Have Any Nutmeg?	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#477 Shock and Awwwww	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
#478 On Usefulness	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	1

#479 Jaws of Life	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#480 Change of Address	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#481 Cutting the Cord	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#482 Leaving Azure City	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#483 Broken Stick	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0
#484 At the End of the Day	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
#485 Hey! You! Get Off My Cloud!	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
#486 Next on "As the Planes Turn"	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#487 Their Concierge Service is Heavenly	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#488 This is Your Life	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#489 Keepin' the Little Man Down	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1
#490 Final Review	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0
#491 Those Singing Lessons Cost Money, You Know	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#492 Things to Do in Heaven When You're Dead	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#493 Led Zeppelin Lied to Us All	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
#494 DMILF	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#495 (Eu)gene Therapy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#496 Responsible	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#497 The Grand Fighter	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#498 Gone Fishin'	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1
#499 No Time to Lose	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1
#500 A Reason to Keep Trying	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0

#501 No Cure for the Wedding Bell Blues	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
#502 And I-I-I-I Will Always Love You	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#503 Surreptitious Admirer	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#504 That's a Surprisingly Common Reaction	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#505...Or We Will All Stick Separately	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#506 Flanking Crush	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
#507 Fantasy Troll-Playing Game	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#508 Sure Beats Flatware	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#509 It Has Flowers, Hearts, and a DC 30 Lock	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#510 Killer View	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1
#511 Guerillas in Their Midst	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	1
#512 They've Had Time to Train ,Too	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#513 Security Deposit	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#514 Elan Would Be Proud	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#515 A Momentary Experience	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#516 Turning Azurite, I think I'm Turning Azurite, I Really Think So	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#517 Probably Best to Choose at Random	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#518 At Least It Wasn't the Fourth Wall Again	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1
#519 Nightmare on Blue Street	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1



#520 The Power of Immediate Gratification	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#521 Remorse	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#522 We're Doomed if She Finds a Map Key	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#523 Orders That Won't Stick	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#524 Pretender to the Throne	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
#525 Look More Closelier	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#526 He's Just Pine-ing for the Fjords	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#527 Pep Talk	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
#528 The Ghost Screamer	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0
#529 The Summons	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#530 Regarding the Speed With Which One Removes Band-Aids	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	1
#531 Wake Up Call to Action	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
#532 The Exposition Fairy	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
#533 Open to Multiple Interpretations	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
#534 Medium Creatures	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#535 The Cat Stays in the Picture	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#536 A Brief Tribute	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
#537 What Do You Think Comes in a Disguise Kit, Anyway?	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
#538 Fiend or Foe?	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#539 Well There is That "Saint" Prestige Class	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
#540 Melts in Your Mouth, Not on Your Alignment	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1

#541 He's a Gamblin' Thing	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1
#542 In Azure City, Shark Jumps You!	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
#543 Shhh! Principal's Coming!	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1
#544 A Lot at Stake	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#545 Someone Should Be Wearing Safety Goggles	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#546 O-Chul's Razor	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1
#547 Endurance Feat	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
#548 His Most Despicable Act Yet	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
#549 Grueling Ordeal	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#550 +1 BFF	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
#551 Slow and Steady, My Ass	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
#552 And Yet the Turtle Got Away on His Own	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0
#553 Diplomacy is a Beach	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
#554 You're No Help at All	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#555 Half-Dragons Are Even Worse	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#556 Nuthin' But Net	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#557 The Puppet Mistress	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#558 Sort of Like a Reverse Psion	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1
#559 An Introduction to Comparative Theology	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
#560 Meanwhile, His Teammate Was in Rhodes	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1
#561 Pop Idolatry	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1

#562 Heroic Fantasy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#563 Air Mail	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#564 It's What's For Dinner	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#565 The Test of the Memory	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#566 One for the FAQ	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	1
#567 The Simplest Explanation	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1
#568 A Sign That You Have a Problem	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0
#569 Justice Can Be a Messy Business	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#570 Clean Slate	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
#571 Return Engagement	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#572 The Resistance of Memory	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0
#573 Slumber Party	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#574 A Seller's market	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#575 I Think They're in One of the Rulebooks, Right?	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#576 Construction Workers	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#577 You Can Take the Rogue Out of the City	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#578 A Slick Getaway	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
#579 What They Need Is a Writ of Habeas Corpus	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
#580 Hey, I Need to Sell Them Somehow	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1
#581 A Sight for Sore Eyes	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	1
#582 Moonlight Rendezvous	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#583 Love's Sweet Sting	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1

#584 Improbable Causes	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	1
#585 Immaterial Components	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
#586 No Encounter is an Island Unto Itself	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#587 What to Expect When You're Expecting Assassins	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#588 His Name Probably Helps, Too	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#589 Entrance Qualifications	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
#590 Role Reversal	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#591 Antipathy for the Devil	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
#592 Stuck in the Middle	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0
#593 Another Choice	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0
#594 Rock the Boat	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#595 Trial of the Century	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#596 Convenience Story	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
#597 Threat Assessment	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#598 To Say a Few Words	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
#599 Separate Ways	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
#600 Headed Down	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	1
#601 She Obviously Doesn't have the Endurance Feet	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#602 Clerical Temp	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	1
#603 Familiarity Breeds Piercing Damage	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#604 Bailout Plan	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1
#605 Return of the King	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0

#606 The Philosophy of Chaos	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1
#607 Gherkin Her Chain	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#608 Mean Girls	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#609 It Takes TWO Thieves, Actually	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#610 You're It	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1
#611 None Left Standing	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0
#612 Technically, the "Fish" Version is a Subset of This One	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#613 I Need a Hero	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#614 A Cut Above	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#615 It's a Real Life-Saver	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#616 An Opponent or Rival Whom a Person Cannot Overcome	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#617 Power Meeting	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#618 Flank Cut	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0
#619 Wow. That's a Spicy Meatball!	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	1
#620 Probably About an "8"	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
#621 At Least There Weren't Any Cryptograms	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#622 Don't Hate the Player Character...	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#623 Running Away	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#624 This Happens to Telemarketers All the Time	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#625 Bargain Hunter	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#626 Good to the Last Drip	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
#627 Power Outage	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0

#628 Every Parent's Worst Nightmare	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0
#629 One Chance	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#630 Shoot the Messenger	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#631 Who Doesn't Get Ten of These a Week?	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
#632 My Three Fiends	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#633 Where Do You See Yourself in Five Million Years?	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
#634 The Wrong Reasons	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
#635 I See a Red Robe and I Want to Paint it Black	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#636 Shattered, Shattered	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#637 It Only Shows Reality Programming	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#638 A Dragon's Victory	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
#639 If They Pull a Knife...	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
#640 Madness	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#641 For Every Action	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#642 Choice	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#643 A Wizard Did It	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0
#644 An Unsung Legend	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
#645 It's Where the Cool Kids Swim	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1
#646 ...And It Feels So Good	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#647 Be Prepared	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#648 A Dish Best Served With +1d6 Cold Damage	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1

#649 It's a Shame She Didn't Grab That Script While She Was There	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0
#650 A Lot Can Happen in Ten Minutes	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0
#651 Two Eyes in the Dark	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1
#652 No Respect for the Wicked	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1
#653 Fun While It Lasted	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1
#654 Cages (Steel and Otherwise)	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#655 With a Critical Eye	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#656 It Probably Squeaks, Too	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#657 Second Chance	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#658 A Bird in Hand	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#659 Flight of the Philactery	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#660 Lucky Breaks	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1
#661 The Path of Least Expectation	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
#662 The Price is Right	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
#663 Or Mention That he's Getting Too Old for This	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
#664 Down to Earth	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1
#665 In the Flesh	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#666 But Seriously, She Won't	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#667 Mending Wounds	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#668 Moving the Pieces	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
#669 Logical Conclusions	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
#670 The War Council	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0

#671 Also, She Needs Her Clothes Back Now	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#672 A Familiar Conclusion	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1
#673 Too Slow	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#674 The Elf Who Cried Raven	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1
#675 It Costs an Armor Leg	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0
#676 There's More Than One Way to Fail a listen Check	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#677 This Never Happens to Jiminy Cricket	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#678 First Step in the Process	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
#679 Oh, Right, That Other Problem	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#680 That's Why It's Called a Running Gag	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
#681 All in the Family	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#682 Plus, He Probably Spits, Too	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#683 Whatever You do, Don't Oscillate	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#684 V Was Only Waiting for This Moment to Arise	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#685 On Friendship	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#686 Also, at Lower Altitude	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
#687 Actually, That's Probably You	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#688 The Comics Must Flow	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#689 Live Bait	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
#690 Riders on the Worm	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
#691 All Available Resources	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1



#692 Searchin'	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	1
#693 Tragically, His Arms Would Be Too Short for the Lute	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
#694 Poor Coordination	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
#695 Paranoia Will Destroy Ya	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
#696 Still a Long Way to Go	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1
#697 stuck in the Sand Trap	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1
#698 Stopping for Direction	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1
#699 Escape Clause	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
#700 They Would Likely Both Disagree with That Sentiment	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0

## Appendix B

The following segment serves as a user guide of sorts for educators that wish to utilize webcomics within their classrooms. The format for this section of the study is similar to a Frequently Asked Questions page found in many webcomics and compiles many doubts that students and professors have about webcomics.

- Where do I find webcomics?

Webcomics can be found as individual websites or within portals that serve as community websites that have many webcomics. The Tv Tropes website contains a good list of portals and other websites that deal with and/or about webcomics. You may visit the site at this URL, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/PopularWebcomicSites>. Keep in mind that many individual webcomics are published exclusively at each portal, so the content between websites is vastly different.

- Are all webcomics free?

No, but the majority of them are. Some webcomic portals have general fees which provide for all of the content of many webcomic cartoonists before you can enter. Other portals allow individual webcomic cartoonists to decide their rates but these often have some free material to entice potential subscribers like one or two installments. Even so, the “free” webcomics offer a lot of merchandise to cover production costs. It is ultimately up to readers like you whether or not to make that investment.

- There are thousands of webcomics in each of these sites, how do I choose among them?

Each website categorizes their webcomics through different means. The most common divisions are by genre and by rating. Rating covers the nature of the content and the designated audience for it, almost exactly like movie ratings. Some webcomic sites are very strict about rating while

others allow for more adult content, so tread carefully. Genre categories cover the basic staples of literature like romance, sci fi, mystery, etc. but also include staples that one does not generally find in a traditional library. “Gaming” webcomics revolve around video games and Dungeons & Dragons, while “furry” webcomics are about anthropomorphic animals and these last ones can range a “G” to an “NC-17” rating so be warned. Almost any genre and/or rating can provide a solid narrative worth studying in your respective classrooms.

- How do I know which ones have a long story and which ones are just about jokes?

Unfortunately, there is no classification for type of story in a given portal. I recommend looking at each website and/or their respective wikis to determine these classifications. If you find the words “gag-a-day” then you are in the wrong place. On the other hand, “multiple story arcs” means that there are many stories but these do not interconnect between each other and you will most likely find narrative redundancy. The words you want to find are “overarching story” which means that each installment affects the entire narrative. Keep in mind that Cerebus Syndrome and many other factors can make the webcomic cartoonist change his/her style throughout the development of their work.

- There are a lot of webcomics around here, are they all good?

Well “good” is a very subjective term but it is safe to say that the majority are actually pretty bad. Remember that just about anyone can make and publish a webcomic with minimal investment, financial or otherwise. Only a few dozen webcomic cartoonists are professionals to the point that they can it their day jobs and/or sole source of income and many readers do not like their work. There are a few ways to avoid having to personally check through every webcomic to see what is worth reading. Webcomic reviewers are quite common online and a few are mentioned at the previously cited hyperlink. Many of the portals also show some of the most

well known of their webcomics through a reader rating system of sorts. I also recommend checking out webcomics that are already well established and have won some awards. The Webcomic Cartoonists Choice Awards are quite common but there are other honors to distinguish good webcomics. Also try asking your friends and coworkers, chances are that some of them read webcomics and can recommend a few.

- Which webcomics do you recommend?

Any of the ones studied in this study can provide good material for the average classroom. Some are a bit dense but they are well worth the time to read through. Then again, I am quite biased so feel free to pick for yourself.

- The ones you mention seem good, but I do not have the time to learn all the rules about the games they are referencing. What should I do?

You do not need to know all the rules about a given game to understand the webcomic. Learning the main idea about the general rules does not take too long to do and the rest you can figure out by context or look through the forums. Chances are that you have a relatively shy student in your classroom that already knows the rules so place him or her as the resident classroom expert to answer any questions and get a sense of discovery alongside your students.

- My classroom has a computer but no Internet, how can I show my students a webcomic without access to the Web?

Most webcomics are pretty easy to record and download unto a flash drive. Just point your mouse over the actual image of the webcomic, right click and choose the option for “save as” and then place it wherever you like. The standard “copy + paste” works just as well. If that does not work then click on the “print screen” key, which allows you to basically take a picture of whatever is on your monitor and then edit as you see fit with the picture manager software of

your choice.

- The webcomics themselves are free but the book with all the extra info costs quite a bit.

Should I buy the book for my class?

As someone who wants to support the endeavors of webcomic cartoonists I encourage everyone to buy the books of a webcomic you enjoy. When it comes to teaching, it depends a lot on the specific material you are focusing on. If the class primarily looks at the development of the narrative and character development then the books are nice but not necessary. However, if you want to focus on the webcomic cartoonist to figure out narrative construction and shifts in authorial intention then the books are a must.

- I have a pretty strict curriculum I need to follow, are you sure I can integrate webcomics into it?

It depends a lot on how much space you want webcomics to occupy within the class. Placing a lesson or a few classes to revolve around webcomics is not that difficult. Using webcomics as your only text throughout an entire semester is quite an ambitious endeavor but still doable. Let me demonstrate how to incorporate webcomics by using the context of a course I taught recently. The course was English 3104 at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez Campus.

This was the second part of Freshman English for students who did well on their entrance exams and it focused more on literature, rather than on the nonfiction students read in the previous semester. The standard textbook for the class divided readings between short stories, poems, and dramas and it was expected that you covered each of the categories throughout the semester. Students wrote essays and made a research paper to show their critical thinking skills on a variety of topics, alongside several journal entries. While I did not have the chance to only use webcomics, I am sure that I could have taught them the same skills using only Rich Burlew's *The*

*Order of the Stick* as the only text in the class. Here is an outline of a hypothetical schedule designed around teaching writing and analyzing *OOTS*. Assume that every section takes approximately two weeks in a standard fourteen week academic semester.

Disclaimer: This is of course an exaggeration of using only one webcomic in one class to show that it can be done. I would most likely use webcomics alongside other traditional texts and works of literature.

1. The first weeks of class contain lectures about proper writing techniques and the basics of Fantasy literature and Dungeons & Dragons. Students on their own time read issues #1-300 of *OOTS*.
2. Discuss in class the two main story arcs found within the first 300 installments. Divide class into groups and give each group a different character. Students must discuss amongst themselves the development of each character and distinguish between what the character learns and what the reader learns about the character. Group presentations at the end. Begin reading the next 100 installments.
3. Students begin writing and working on their first paper, an argumentative paper on any aspect of the webcomic read so far in class. Students must use in text citations from the actual installments to argue their points. Classes consist of discussing the Battle of Azure City story arc as students continue to read until issue #487. Take one or two days in between lectures for peer review of drafts. Hand in paper.
4. Discuss implications about separation and death, comparing real life to the events in the comic. Use close readings to discuss issues of belief and political intricacies. Continue reading until issue #600.
5. Students begin working in second paper, a comparison and contrast between any

elements or characters of the webcomic citing sources for their arguments. Read and discuss events from issues #600-650 while alternating class with peer reviews. Hand in papers.

6. Discussion of issues from #650 to most current. Divide class into a court setting to argue whether the actions of each of the protagonists were the correct ones. Have students debate the ideas, not each other, and take several elements into consideration. Set up basics of research paper.
7. Students use webcomic and outside sources to make a research paper. Classes revolve around close analysis of most current installments and proper MLA format as students work on their papers. Take a few days for peer review before they hand in their papers.
8. Final exam is an essay designed for critical thinking, wherein the students do not have access to the webcomic. Students choose one of the following possibilities: alternate character interpretation, how a character has changed throughout the entirety of the installments, or given what we know about the prophecies and current state of the webcomic, explain two potential upcoming events and how these scenarios affect the characters.

Let us go over the official course objectives and cross-reference them with the previous outline to ensure that students are obtaining the appropriate skills for this class.

- Drawing a conclusion about a selected reading and stating it as a thesis.
  - Students analyze and review individual installments and the webcomic as a whole. Conclusions and thesis statements are used and reviewed by students during in-class discussions and their papers.

- Collecting and evaluating evidence from a text and presenting that evidence effectively in support of the stated conclusion.
  - Students cite the text of webcomics, forums, blog postings, or other resources as part of their arguments for group presentations and their essays.
- Arguing persuasively about the relationship between the evidence and the conclusion drawn.
  - Group assignment and papers revolve around students weaving together facts and their thoughts on any particular element of the webcomic.
- Continuing application of the various stages of the writing process to written work, including drafting, peer editing, and publishing.
  - All assigned papers have a minimum of two mandatory drafts before handing their final versions. The first draft is reviewed by the professor while the second one is reviewed by their peers with group work in class. All previous drafts must be included alongside the final version of each of the students' papers.
- Demonstrating knowledge and recognition of elements of fiction, drama and poetry in selected works of literature in analysis and interpretation of these readings in writing.
  - The webcomic is primarily a work of fiction and is analyzed as such. The webcomic is also divided along the stages of Cerebus Syndrome and analyzed within the three act system of the traditional Greek drama to analyze how tone and style are progressively changing throughout the work. Distinctions between prose and poetry are incorporated through the various installments where Elan breaks into song. Rhyme and meter are discussed in each such occurrence.



- Reacting to and interpreting works of literature through the adoption of traditional modes of literary analysis such as comparison and contrast, in-depth study of a literary work, or analysis of elements of fiction.
  - Students analyze various aspects of the webcomic during in-class discussion and with their papers. Their second paper is specifically a comparison and contrast paper.
- Carrying out an elementary literature-based research project using the campus library and the internet.
  - Their third paper requires that they do a research paper incorporating outside sources to the analysis of an element of the webcomic. For example, a paper which analyzes the personality of one or several characters would include research within psychoanalysis, Jungian archetypes, and/or whatever additional sources the student finds pertinent to support his/her argument.
- Demonstrating correct usage of MLA documentation with general formatting, in-text citations, and the Works Cited page.
  - All sources within their research paper are cited with the proper MLA formatting. In-text citations and a Works Cited page are required for the paper to be accepted.

As you can see, it requires some extra effort but webcomics can be used alongside or even instead of other traditional texts within a class. Take into consideration your own curriculum and course objectives and I am sure you can incorporate webcomics as you find necessary.

- Wow, you have pretty much answered everything I can currently think of. How can I contact you if I have any further questions?

I should still have my Facebook account so send me a message about webcomics and I will answer as soon as I can. You can also place my name on any standard Internet search engine and I am pretty sure that my current contact information should be easy enough to find.

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