The Perfect Planet: Comics, Games and Word-building

◀ DYLAN HORROCKS ▶

> There will be no attempt to give them serious consideration on aesthetic grounds, because they are simply not worth it.
>
> – Margaret Dalziel, 'Comics in New Zealand', *Landfall*, March 1955

In the early 1950s there was widespread concern in New Zealand about the influence of comics on young readers. Inspired by anti-comics campaigns in the United States and Britain, New Zealand parents, teachers, politicians and intellectuals raised the issue in magazines, on the radio and even in Parliament. The campaign was not limited to conservatives; in fact, some of the most active anti-comics crusaders were socialists and social liberals, shocked by the violence and jingoistic anti-communism found in many American comics. A. R. D. Fairburn spoke out against comics on National Radio, while Bill Pearson wrote in a letter to *Landfall*: 'The comics erode the most fundamental habits of humane, civilized living and they erode them in the most vulnerable element of our society, our children . . . If we ban the comics we are reducing the chances of war and preventing the further perversion of the world's children.'[1]

Since then, of course, things have changed. These days, comics (or 'graphic novels', as they are known in book-length format) are regularly reviewed in the pages of the *New York Review of Books*. Graphic novels have been awarded the Pulitzer Prize (Art Spiegelman's *Maus)* and the Guardian First Book Award (Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: Smartest Kid on Earth).* There are courses dedicated to comics in English and art history university departments in America, Britain and here in New Zealand. *Landfall* itself has reviewed and even published comics in recent years.[2]

Which is not to say that the concerns expressed by Pearson in 1955 have disappeared. They've just moved on to other media. It's rare today to find such fears attached to Elvis Presley and Superman, but the same cannot be said of gangsta rap, television, the Internet and video games. In fact, the

language used to express these fears has been with us for a very long time. Troubadours, poets, the theatre and, of course, the novel have all been the target of moral panic at various times in the past thousand years, and the complaints levelled each time are often – word for word – identical.

My intention here is not to dismiss such moral concerns. It may be perfectly true that all of these media have been responsible, over the centuries, for 'eroding the most fundamental habits of humane, civilized living'. What interests me, however, is the tendency of contemporary commentators to dismiss all of these art forms as unworthy of 'serious consideration on aesthetic grounds', a judgement that has been levelled at some time at much of the work currently included in the so-called canon of great art and literature. Perhaps when we find ourselves disturbed or bewildered by the popularity of a new genre or medium, it's precisely by giving it that 'serious consideration' that we will begin to get to grips with what it is and how it works.

But how do we do this, when the new work often seems to have so little to do with our existing aesthetic criteria? Perhaps the problem lies in the way we unthinkingly apply whatever aesthetic paradigm is our most familiar, regardless of whether it's relevant to the work we're dealing with. For example, when we talk about fiction, we generally focus on such elements as plot, characterisation, narrative structure, the use of language and so on. When a piece of writing seems thin in these areas, it's easy to dismiss it as 'weak'.

But what if that's simply not where the action is in that particular text? What if the 'art' – the craft, the pleasure and even the purpose – of the work lies elsewhere? Does this mean that work is a failure, for having neglected what's considered important in fiction? Or could it simply be that it's operating within a different aesthetic paradigm?

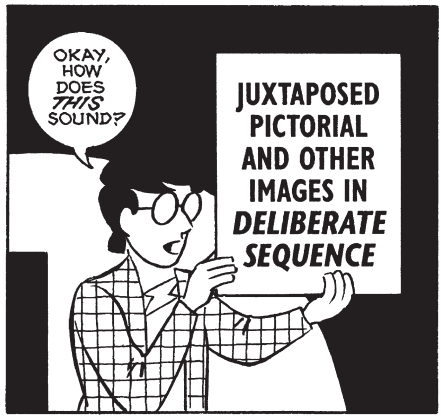
It seems to me that much of the 'action' in narrative art today is going on in places that are below the radar of most criticism and theory. What I'd like to do in this paper is to explore some alternative ways of looking at the art of fiction and see if we can find some 'aesthetic grounds' that will highlight that 'invisible action'. I'll start with the artform I know best: comics.

The invisible art

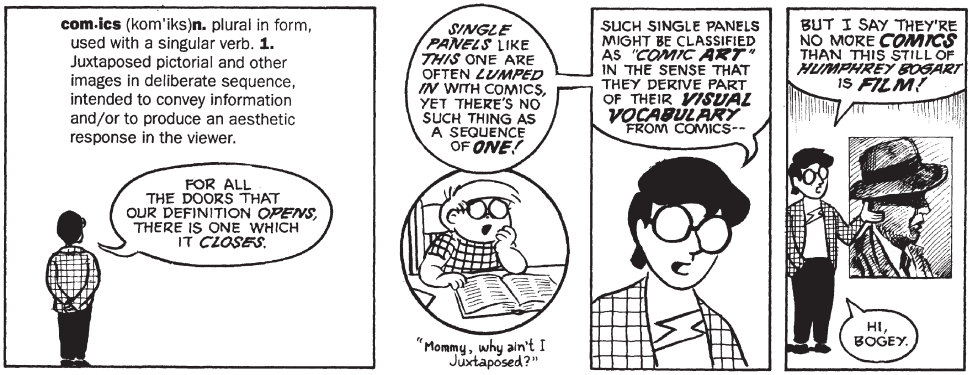
In the past twenty years or so there has emerged a growing body of theory, research and criticism focused on comics. One remarkable contribution to that discussion is Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, first published in 1993. A 216-page comic about comics, McCloud's book explores the history, language and formal structure of the medium. Since it appeared, there have been numerous responses by academics, critics and

cartoonists. But for me, the most interesting to date has been James Kochalka's *The Horrible Truth About Comics* (1999).

At the heart of both books lie two central questions: 'What is / are comics?'[3] and 'What is art?' Here's how McCloud answers that first question:

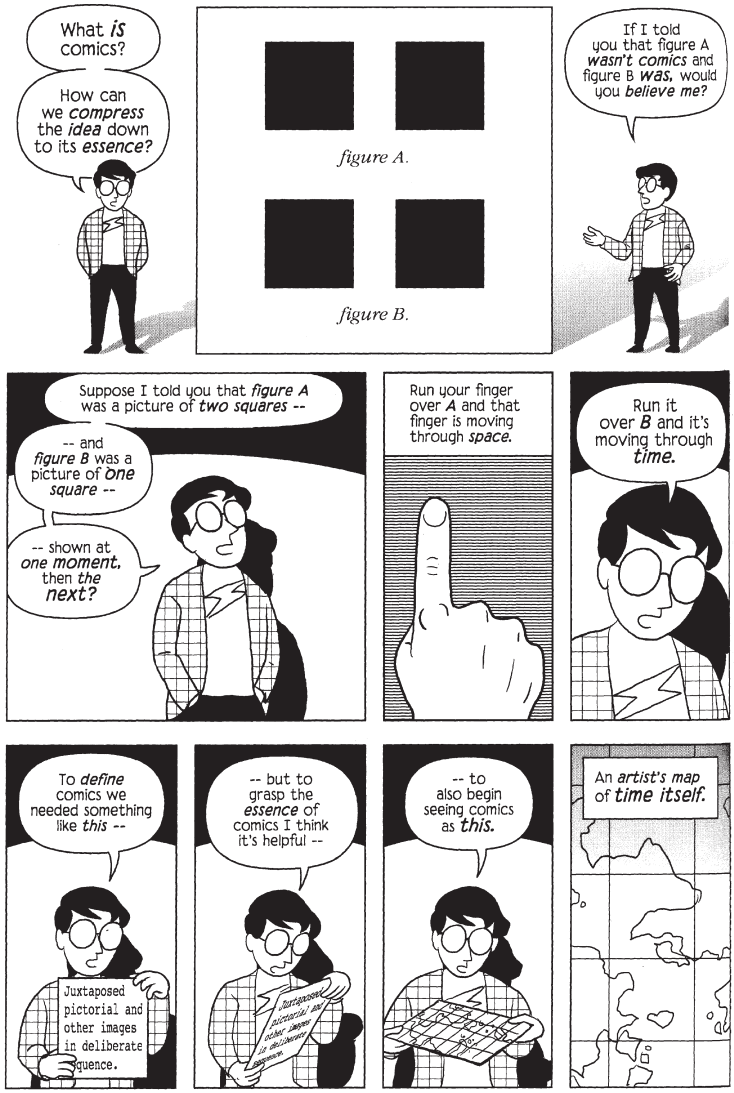


Central to this definition[4] is the division of a comic into a series of individual pictures, which cartoonists call 'panels' or 'frames'. McCloud goes so far as to exclude single-image cartoons (such as those seen on the editorial pages of newspapers):



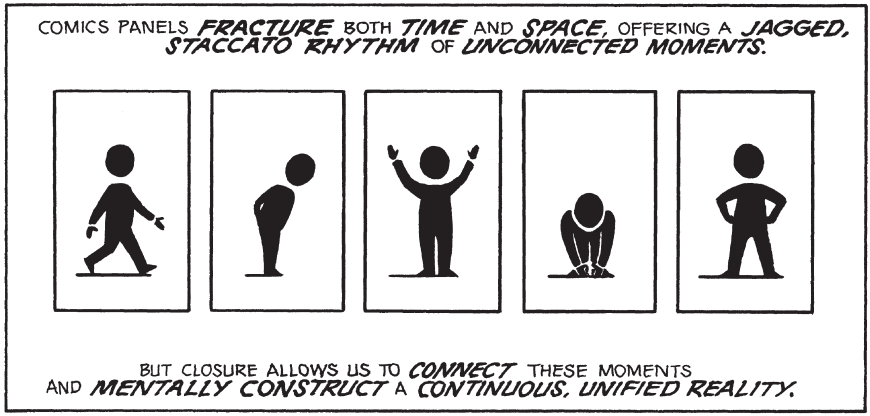
This separation into panels, then, is *essential* to comics. So what *is* a 'panel'? The word comes from the thirteenth-century French *pan*, meaning a piece of cloth (from the Latin *pannus*, or 'rag'). A panel, then, is a portion – a fragment of something larger. As McCloud explains: 'The panel acts as a sort of general indicator that time or space is being divided.'[5] In short, a panel is the basic unit of comics – and it's a unit of *time* or *space*.

Later, however, McCloud seems to have refined his view of the roles of space and time in comics, as we see in this sequence from *Reinventing Comics* (a follow-up to *Understanding Comics*, published in 2000):



For McCloud, space has become the *form* of comics and time the *content*. This is what McCloud means when he sometimes sums up his definition of comics with a simple equation: SPACE = TIME. The relationship between these two elements is beginning to change.

According to McCloud, comics is essentially a 'spatial medium'. We make sense of its fragmented series of images by decoding their arrangement in space:



'Closure' is a term McCloud has borrowed from Gestalt psychology and applied to the way we 'fill in the gaps' between panels. It is what he calls the 'invisible art' of comics:

> If visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure is its grammar. And since our definition of comics hinges on the arrangement of elements . . . then in a very real sense, comics *is* closure.[6]

But this process of closure doesn't always run smoothly. In a chapter entitled 'The Panel as a Medium of Control', pioneering cartoonist and comics theorist Will Eisner warns:

> 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 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.[7]

Eisner goes on to demonstrate some of the strategies a cartoonist can use to control the reader's path through their comic, by the skilful arrangement of panels on the page. Nowhere, however, does he question the need for artists to exercise that control in the first place. Compare this with the following comment by Scott McCloud, when talking in the *Comics Journal* about digital media:

> The question of interactivity generally tends to give a lot of writers the shivers. There's the fear that interactivity is the death of literature, letting the reader start to choose his or her own path . . . But I actually don't find

> it intimidating. I think that the intent of the author is not in any way compromised if the author decides to provide different paths to go down. The gardener might not have control over the direction that people take when they wander through his garden, but that doesn't mean that he's not the creator of that garden, that he's not in control.[8]

The comic as a framework

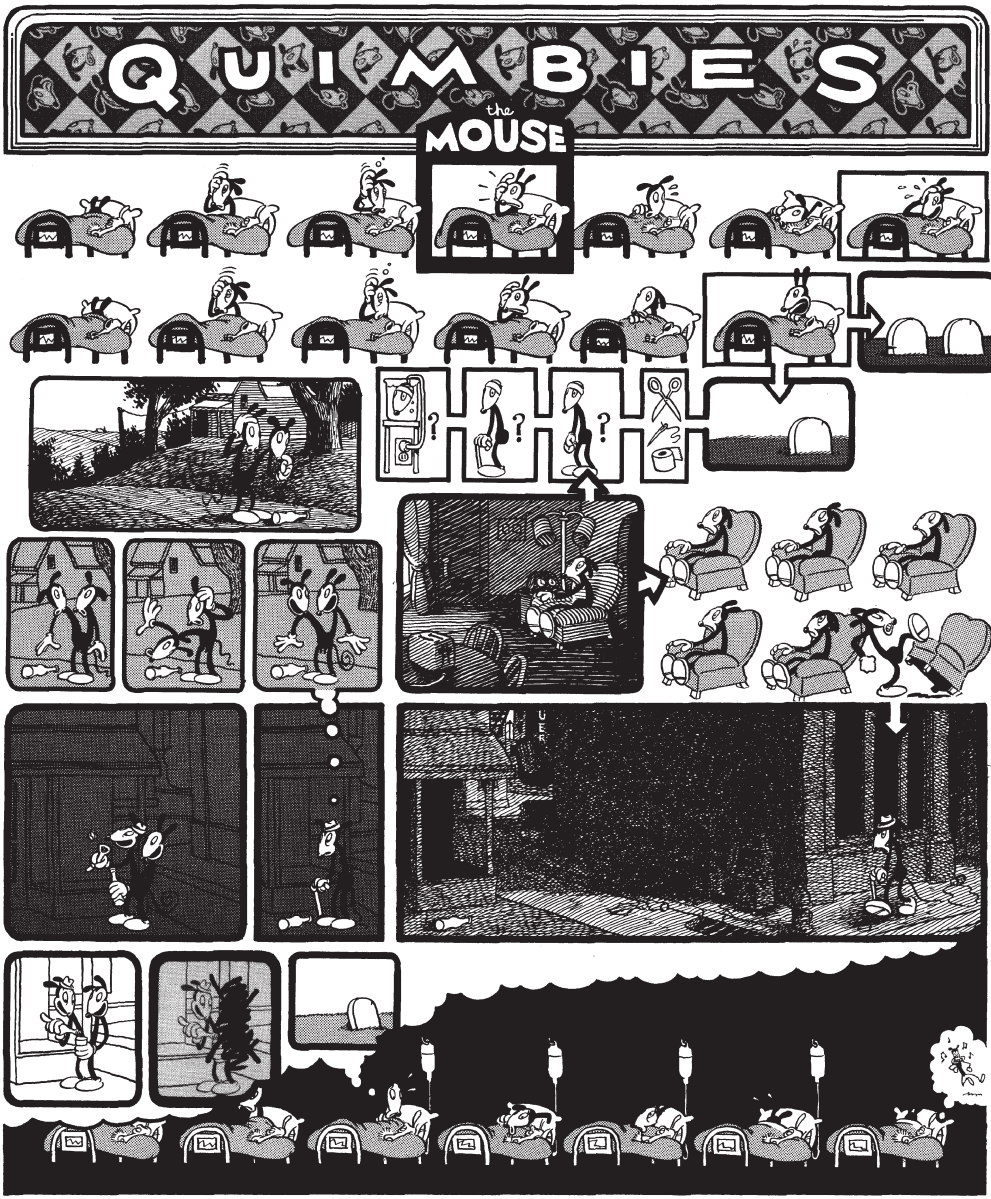
Another name for the panel is the 'frame'. And a frame is 'an *open structure* that gives shape or *support* to something, such as the ribs of a ship's hull or the skeletal beams and uprights of a building'.[9] This meaning is reflected in another of Eisner's chapter headings: 'The Frame as a Structural Support',[10] in which he examines the 'metapanel' – the arrangement of a page or collection of images into a structure or framework through which the narrative is explored. The analogy here is to the rows of windows on the side of a building. But there are many other kinds of frameworks, too: the grid on a map, the threads of a spider's web, or a climbing frame in a playground . . .

Here's McCloud again, comparing the way information is organised on the Internet with the more traditional linear arrangement of print:

> I think that what we're talking about in the ordering of information – beginnings and middles and ends – is the linear organisation of information. But it's no more logical than a matrix. For instance, I don't see the construction of a centipede to be any more or less sound than the construction of a spider web. The one may be linear – point after point after point – but a labyrinth of information which is interconnected is just as sound as a row of information.[11]

A lot of contemporary cartoonists play with this idea of comics as a matrix, or framework. The page opposite by Chris Ware,[12] for example, is less a straightforward sequence and more a kind of diagram, which frequently confounds our expectations with dead ends and detours, all of which add up to an intricate 'narrative machine':

It's a little like McCloud's analogy of a 'garden', offering the reader a whole range of possible paths to take – a maze of meaning with no easy way out.


QUIMBIES
the
MOUSE

The horrible truth about comics

Now let's go back to that initial question and see how James Kochalka answers it:

Here, the panel is a unit not of *time* or *space*, but of *meaning* (a kind of *sememe*). And rather than being arranged in a *sequence*, Kochalka's units are arranged in *rhythmic patterns*. The purpose of these patterns, he claims, isn't merely to depict the flow of time, but to 'create and activate a world inside us'.

Now, most discussion about comics (or fiction, for that matter) assumes that their main purpose is to *tell a story* – a narrative that moves through time; hence McCloud's description of comics as a '*temporal* map'. But here, Kochalka seems to suggest something quite different: that comics create a world, a *place*. Instead of SPACE = TIME, this is SPACE = SPACE.

This vision of art as *world-building* has always been a central issue in Kochalka's work. In some early stories it emerges as a kind of anxiety:

But in later work, Kochalka appears to see it not as an undermining weakness in fiction, but as a key part of the process:

Kochalka himself doesn't seem to know what will happen. As he describes it, his role as the author has nothing to do with plot; all he's doing is creating an environment and a situation, into which he places characters like a scientist putting rats into a maze. His primary task isn't building a *story*, it's building a *world*.

World-building

World-building has always been a part of literature. Today we probably associate it most with the 'fantasy' genre, as exemplified by J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-earth. In his lecture *On Fairy Stories* (written in 1939), Tolkien described the world-building process as 'sub-creation':

> What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful 'sub-creator'. He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside.[16]

Tolkien even asserted that there is no higher function for man than the 'sub-creation' of a 'Secondary World'. It was, in fact, a religious act:

> The Christian may now perceive that all his bents and faculties have a purpose, which can be redeemed. So great is the bounty with which he has been treated that he may now, perhaps, fairly dare to guess that in Fantasy he may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation.[17]

For Tolkien, the border between the 'real world' created by God and the Secondary World of Middle-earth that he himself had 'sub-created' was at times tenuous. At times he would call what he was doing 'research' rather than 'invention' – as though Middle-earth were a real place and he himself little more than an assiduous scholar trying to get the details right. 'Every writer making a secondary world,' he claimed, 'wishes in some measure to be a real maker, or hopes that he is drawing on reality: hopes that the peculiar quality of this secondary world (if not all the details) are derived from Reality, or are flowing into it.'[18]

Much to his publishers' exasperation, Tolkien seemed to enjoy working out the languages, geography and cultures of his imaginary world a lot more than actually writing novels. On many occasions frustrated editors were kept waiting for months – and even years – for long-promised manuscripts, while Professor Tolkien tinkered with the minutiae of Quenya vocabulary or Numenorean carpet designs. In a very meaningful sense it could be said that Tolkien's life's work was first and foremost the *world* of Middle-earth, rather than the novels themselves.

In a sense, of course, *all* writers are engaged in 'sub-creation', to the extent that all fiction takes place in a 'Secondary World', no matter how closely it may resemble the real world in which we live. And just as Tolkien spent years 'researching' his setting, so many writers go to great lengths to make their fictional worlds as 'real' as possible.

Private worlds

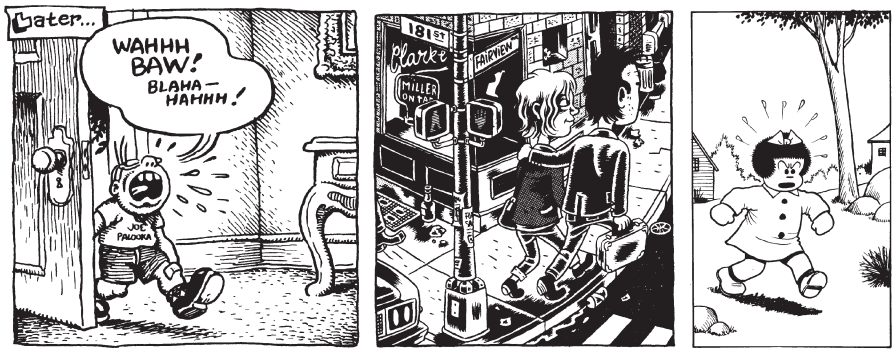
Like many New Zealanders, I grew up reading the adventures of Tintin, written and drawn by the Belgian cartoonist Hergé. Hergé was famous for his obsessive commitment to research; hardly a landscape or prop would appear in any of his comics that hadn't first been checked against countless reference photos, sketches and diagrams. Before drawing *The Red Sea Sharks,* for example, Hergé and his studio assistant Bob de Moor spent several weeks on a Swedish cargo ship, sketching and photographing everything they could. And if the landscapes in *The Black Island* seem familiar to British readers, that's because they were drawn after a long sketching tour around England and Scotland.

I remember that, as a child, one of the things that attracted me to *Tintin* books was the impression that each panel opened a tiny window onto another world as vast and as real as our own. I used to dream of finding a way to step inside those tiny landscapes and enter that other world, where everything was perfect – defined in simple clear lines and smooth bright

colours. Everything seemed somehow more contained and controllable than in the real world. Curling up with a *Tintin* book was like sneaking off to a private paradise.

The same was true of many of my favourite comics and books: Tove Jansson's *Moominvalley,* Richard Scarry's *Busytown,* Alfred Bestall's *Rupert* or C. S. Lewis's *Narnia*. Sometimes it was because the authors had apparently put a lot of effort into 'sub-creating' their 'secondary world'. But with others, there was just something about the way the illustrations were drawn that gave a powerful sense of a parallel universe, a perfect planet, which the reader could enter and explore.

Merely by drawing in their own particular style, cartoonists and illustrators begin to develop their own internal world. A shoe, a chair, even a doorway drawn by Robert Crumb is immediately recognisable as one of *his*, as are the dirty city streets of Julie Doucet or the neat suburban gardens of Ernie Bushmiller:



In comics, even the laws of physics are side-effects of the cartoonist's 'way of drawing' – the way clothes drape across a body, the way shadows fall and water flows. In this sense the cartoonist is a kind of god, creating a whole universe in his or her own image.

These manufactured worlds have a similar appeal to that of model railways, miniature dioramas, dolls' houses – an appeal that seems suffused with intimacy, nostalgia and utopianism.

For me, nostalgia is nothing more or less than an escape from the relentless motion of time. A nostalgic memory isolates individual moments from the passing of time, allowing them to spread out – timeless, relaxed, eternal. We feel as though such moments go on for ever, however transitory, stressful or filled with ambivalence they might have been at the time. Nostalgia, then, is the ability to explore a single moment at our leisure, like the hero of Nicholson Baker's novel *The Fermata*, who has the ability to freeze time

for everyone except himself – entering a timeless state he calls 'the Fold'. Of course, what he chooses to do in those frozen moments is to go around taking women's clothes off and indulging in erotic mischief.

The link between nostalgia, timelessness and *fantasy* - in Baker's case sexual fantasy – seems a powerful one. Not surprisingly, much utopian literature – from Thomas More onwards – seems to contain all of these elements (including an inordinate interest in the sexual habits of the inhabitants). Most utopias are described as static and unchanging, since there is no reason for change in a perfect society. Life in Utopia tends to go on at a leisurely and unhurried pace. This is even more so in traditional descriptions of Paradise, Arcadia and Heaven: an everlasting life, with no need for work, an eternal playtime . . .

Fairyland

Another kind of fictional world I'd like to mention is Fairyland. Many pre-industrial traditions speak of an invisible world of spirits that coexists with ours but is generally seen only by those who are attuned to it, such as shamans or witches – or by those who stumbled into it through magic. Fairyland usually resembles our own world except that everything within is more vivid and intense; appearances are more extreme (either beauty or ugliness), emotions are heightened. And, of course, time moves differently there, so that a day spent dancing with the fairies can equate to a hundred years in the mundane world.

These days we have our own parallel world: the one we see on television, in advertisements and movies. As with that earlier Fairyland, it is a world much like ours, yet strangely different. The world on TV and in magazines seems somehow more vivid and intense than everyday life; people are usually more beautiful and seem to live more leisurely and satisfying lives. Even when unpleasant things happen in this utopia, they do so in a way full of significance; moments of crisis stretch to become eternal tableaux of great power and meaning. When captured in glossy photographs on the cover of *Time* magazine, riots, bombings and disasters are isolated from the merciless rush of time, like Baker's 'the Fold'. They enter that other world, becoming saturated with meaning and poetry, as though aesthetically contrived. It is a world in which even the sickening events of September 11 seem composed, contained and comprehensible – what Karlheinz Stockhausen called 'the greatest work of art ever'.[19]

It is in this modern Fairyland that many contemporary novels take place, too. Stories like those of Michael Ondaatje eschew the hectic banality of everyday life for a kind of alternative reality made up of individual moments

and scenes all engorged with vivid layers of meaning and metaphor, stretching into timeless resonance and poetry. Events unfold according not to the laws of nature, but the laws of narrative structure, governed by themes and metaphors, not physics.

We are used to thinking of Tolkien or Raymond Feist as writers who create imaginary worlds, but the same is also true of Elizabeth Knox, Barbara Anderson or Maurice Gee. The worlds in which *their* stories take place each have their own history, atmosphere and sense of time. No matter how much it may resemble the 'real world', it is actually something else. This is neither good nor bad – it is simply an inescapable fact. Every time a writer tells a story, they also create a world.

Geographies

So what happens when we take that fact and put it at the heart of what we're doing – as writers and as readers? What happens when we focus on *geographical* narrative – the construction of a place – rather than *temporal* narrative – the construction of a series of events? When we replace *plot* with *landscape* as the central organising element? And when, instead of going on a journey through *time,* we set out to create and explore a *space*?

One writer who experimented with doing precisely this was Georges Perec, whose novel *Life: A User's Manual* isn't so much a story as the exploration of an apartment building. In the process, the reader also gets to explore the texture and landscape of the residents' lives. And Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino both played with the idea of a story as an environment, in books such as *Labyrinths* and *Invisible Cities.*

Many biographies seem to follow an almost cartographic model rather than following the narrative paradigm of the story. Gitta Sereny's *Albert Speer: His Battle With Truth,* for example, constructs a detailed map of the troubled landscape of Speer's life – or perhaps a series of maps that operate on several levels – revealing hidden places and attempting to assemble a picture of the whole.

But today I want to pay particular attention to the little-understood literary genre of the role-playing game.

The role-playing game

Role-playing games (RPGs) grew out of tabletop wargaming at the end of the 1960s. Dave Wesley, a wargamer in Minneapolis-St Paul, was inspired by an old combat-simulation game created in the 1880s used to train army officers, which used an objective referee to adjudicate between opposing players. Wesley decided to try this out for himself, so he devised and refereed a Napoleonic

minatures session set in a fictional German town called Braunstein, which stood between two opposing armies:

> Some players represented advance elements of the armies just entering the town, and others represented factions from within the town itself. Each player's faction had differing goals and abilities. The players, used to set-piece battles between armies, had never encountered anything like this before, but soon they were deeply engaged in all sorts of intrigue, with their figures chasing each other around the miniature town of Braunstein. The game dissolved into apparent chaos, and the armies never did get to the town.
>
> This undisciplined brawl violated all Wesley's cherished theories of organized game conduct, and he thought of it as a failure. But the players loved it and were soon pestering him to run 'another Braunstein'.[20]

The players' excitement grew as Wesley's group tried a series of increasingly immersive scenarios, which gradually took on more and more elements of role-playing. In 1971 one of the group's members, Dave Arneson, began running an ongoing campaign set in a mythical medieval barony called Blackmoor. By now, most of the key elements of role-playing were in place: each player was in charge of a single character, whose adventures were not limited to a single session but could continue indefinitely (or at least until their death). The referee created the world and was in charge of everyone and everything inside that world apart from the players' characters. Blackmoor even introduced the idea of adventuring in underground labyrinths, or 'dungeons', which soon became a staple of fantasy role-playing games.

In 1974 Arneson teamed up with fellow wargamer Gary Gygax to design *Dungeons & Dragons,* the first published role-playing game. The rest, as they say, is history. From their initial following among wargamers, RPGs soon grew to become a global craze and the hobby spread to include games set in countless genres and played in countless different ways. You can play with miniatures, with nothing more than pen and paper, with or without dice, online or in a 'live-action' game (LARP). There are RPGs that seek to simulate life in medieval Europe, others that emulate the genre conventions of anime or Hong Kong action films, games about teenage romance or Arthurian legend, and 'universal' game systems that claim to be able to recreate any setting or situation the gamers wish to explore.

The referee (or, as they are now usually called, the game master, or GM) oversees the world in which the game will take place. In the earliest RPGs that world would often be little more than a simple 'dungeon' or battleground. But as the games evolved, entire nations, continents, worlds and even galaxies grew around those humble beginnings. Nowadays you can choose to set your game in any one of hundreds of published settings, from the fantastic *Forgotten Realms* to the star-spanning *Traveller* universe. A

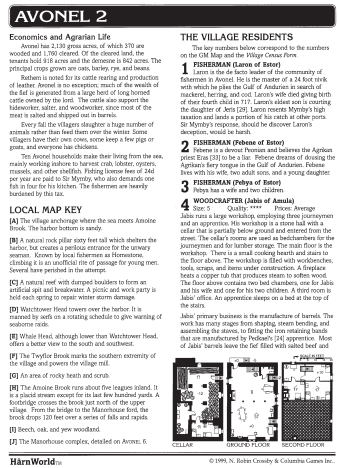
game shop such as Christchurch's Comics Compulsion has shelves of books detailing such settings, while the World Wide Web boasts thousands of sites dedicated to filling in as much detail as possible on these and many other campaign worlds.

Forgotten Realms (centred on a continent named Faerun) is one of the most popular such settings, and has appeared in hundreds of gaming supplements (including the *Volo's Guide* series, written in the style of Baedeker's travel guides) as well as novels and computer games. The *Realms* was created by Canadian librarian Ed Greenwood, initially for a series of stories and later for his own *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign. Although thousands of pages of information have already been published about Faerun, *Realms* fans know that this has merely scratched the surface of the vast archive of notes in Greenwood's basement. The situation is complicated further by the fact that Greenwood sold his 'world' to the *Dungeons & Dragons* franchise in 1987 and although he has been an active contributor to the *Forgotten Realms* line of products since, the 'official' published version of the *Realms* has subsequently diverged in significant ways from the vision of its original creator – and not always with his approval.[21]

Another setting with a smaller but equally dedicated following is N. Robin Crossby's *Harn*, which strives to present a 'realistic medieval environment, unsurpassed in research, depth and logic'.[22] Unlike many commercially produced campaign settings, which evolve over time as new supplements describe new historical events that alter the world, all *Harn* products describe Crossby's world at exactly the same moment in its history. Instead of providing a 'meta-story', which develops over time, *Harn*'s authors thus provide ever more geographical, political and cultural depth, with the goal of mapping each and every region to an astonishing level of detail, including floor plans for important buildings, lists of residents and descriptions of their economic productivity, relationships and social roles (page 212 top).

But of course many GMs choose to create their own world from scratch. Some turn to a book such as Richard Baker's *Advanced Dungeons & Dragon's World Builder's Guidebook*, which contains detailed instructions on generating everything from tectonic plates to weather patterns, ocean currents and population groups (page 212 bottom). By following the author's instructions, you eventually begin mapping individual regions, cities, villages and even houses – with as much or as little detail as you wish.

Others study geography, history, biology and meteorology in order to 'get things right'. A visit to RPG.net's message boards[23] will reveal extensive discussions on everything from the history of coinage to the migration



AVONEL 2

Economics and Agrarian Life

Avonel has 2,130 gross acres, of which 370 are wooded and 1,760 cleared. Of the cleared land, the tenants hold 918 acres and the demesne is 842 acres. The principal crops grown are oats, barley, rye, and beans.

Rathern is noted for its cattle rearing and production of leather. Avonel is no exception; much of the wealth of the fief is generated from a large herd of long horned cattle owned by the lord. The cattle also support the hideworker, salter, and woodworker, since most of the meat is salted and shipped out in barrels.

Every fall the villagers slaughter a huge number of animals rather than feed them over the winter. Some villagers have their own cows, some keep a few pigs or goats, and everyone has chickens.

Ten Avonel households make their living from the sea, mainly working inshore to harvest crab, lobster, oysters, mussels, and other shellfish. Fishing license fees of 344 per year are paid to Sir Myntby, who also demands one fish in four for his kitchen. The fishermen are heavily burdened by this tax.

LOCAL MAP KEY

[A] The village anchorage where the sea meets Amoine Brook. The harbor bottom is sandy.

[B] A natural rock pillar sixty feet tall which shelters the harbor, but creates a perilous entrance for the unwary seaman. Known by local fishermen as Hornestone, climbing it is an unofficial rite of passage for young men. Several have perished in the attempt.

[C] A natural reef with dumped boulders to form an artificial spit and breakwater. A picnic and work party is held each spring to repair winter storm damage.

[D] Watchtower Head towers over the harbor. It is manned by serfs on a rotating schedule to give warning of seaborne raids.

[E] Whale Head, although lower than Watchtower Head, offers a better view to the south and southwest.

[F] The Twyfloe Brook marks the southern extremity of the village and powers the village mill.

[G] An area of rocky heath and scrub.

[H] The Amoine Brook runs about five leagues inland. It is a placid stream except for its last few hundred yards. A footbridge crosses the brook just north of the upper village. From the bridge to the Manorhouse ford, the brook drops 120 feet over a series of falls and rapids.

[I] Beech, oak, and yew woodland.

[J] The Manorhouse complex, detailed on Avonel 6.

THE VILLAGE RESIDENTS

The key numbers below correspond to the numbers on the GM Map and the *Village Census Form*.

1 FISHERMAN (Laron of Estor)
Laron is the de facto leader of the community of fishermen in Avonel. He is the master of a 24 foot nink with which he plies the Gulf of Andurien in search of mackerel, herring, and cod. Laron's wife died giving birth of their fourth child in 717. Laron's eldest son is courting the daughter of Jeris [29]. Laron resents Myntby's high taxation and lands a portion of his catch at other ports. Sir Myntby's response, should he discover Laron's deception, would be harsh.

2 FISHERMAN (Febese of Estor)
Febese is a devout Peorsian and believes the Agrikan priest Eros [33] to be a liar. Febese dreams of drowing the Agrikan's fiery tongue in the Gulf of Andurien. Febese lives with his wife, two adult sons, and a young daughter.

3 FISHERMAN (Pelsys of Estor)
Pelsys has a wife and two children.

4 WOODCRAFTER (Jabis of Annaly)
Size: 5 Quality: **** Prices: Average
Jabis runs a large workshop, employing three journeymen and an apprentice. His workshop is a stone hall with a cellar that is partially below ground and entered from the street. The cellar's rooms are used as bedchambers for the journeymen and for lumber storage. The main floor is the workshop. There is a small cooking hearth and stairs to the floor above. The workshop is filled with workbenches, tools, scraps, and items under construction. A fireplace heats a copper tub that produces steam to soften wood. The floor above contains two bed chambers, one for Jabis and his wife and one for his two children. A third room is Jabis' office. An apprentice sleeps on a bed at the top of the stairs.

Jabis' primary business is the manufacture of barrels. The work has many stages from shaping, steam bending, and assembling the staves, to fitting the iron retaining bands that are manufactured by Pedloar's [24] apprentice. Most of Jabis' barrels leave the fief filled with salted beef and

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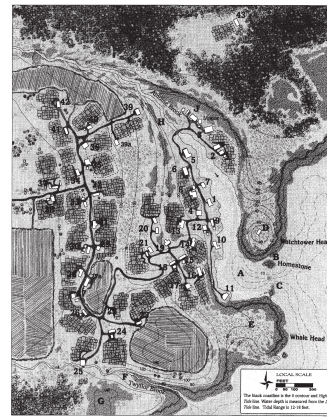
GM MAP AVONEL 9



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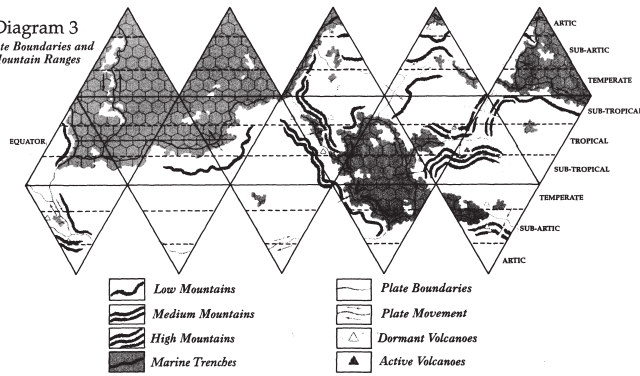


moving away from the rest of Africa. In a few million years (a mere tick of the geological clock) Africa will be pulled apart into two separate continents. Another example of this phenomena can be found in the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, the longest chain of mountains on Earth. As the Atlantic Ocean widens, magma swelling up in the growing space between the plates has created a huge, submerged system of volcanic mountains.

In this step of world building, you'll examine your plate boundaries in and around the continents and determine if they support rift systems or mountain systems. Then, you'll mark the major mountain chains of your world on the world display map. Choose one plate and consult Table 7, comparing it to one other adjacent plate. Repeat this process for the rest of the plate boundaries, or at least the ones surrounding the continent you're primarily interested in. Disregard results that don't make sense, like a plate that is moving towards another plate that's moving away from the first.

Table 7: Plate Movement

d%	Plate movement and characteristics
01-05	Away from bordering plate, no mountains
06-21	Away from bordering plate, low mountains
22-33	Away from bordering plate, rift system[1]
34-39	Alongside bordering plate, no mountains[2]
40-56	Alongside bordering plate, low mountains[2]
57-66	Alongside bordering plate, medium mountains[1,2]
67-79	Towards bordering plate, trench system
80-94	Towards bordering plate, medium mountains[1]
95-00	Towards bordering plate, high mountains[1]

[1] These characteristics are conducive to volcanic activity; see the next section.
[2] These characteristics cause seismic (earthquake) activity; see the next section.

No mountains: The landforms along this boundary are primarily plains or possibly low hills.

Low mountains: A range of old, weathered mountains from collisions in the distant past still marks the boundary of the continental plate. The Appalachians are a good example of low mountains.

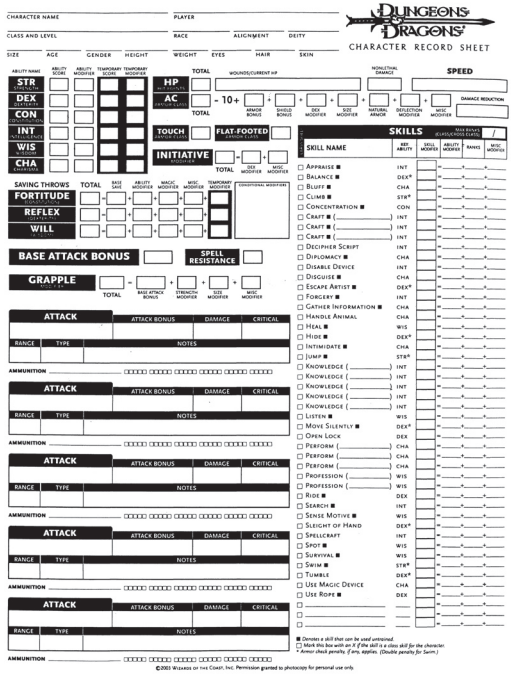
Medium mountains: A new range formed in the collision, or an older range that has experienced a small degree of weathering, exists along the plate boundary. The Rockies or Alps are examples of medium mountains.

High mountains: A young mountain range has reached its maximum height in a violent plate collision. The Himalayas (or possibly the Andes) are examples of high mountains.

Rift system: In places where a continent is pulling apart, a rift system may develop. This creates extensive valleys, low-lying areas, or escarpments that can run for thousands of miles. The stress of the motion may cause buckling and

patterns of different species of birds – and countless other topics that dedicated GMs study in order to make their game world more believable. It's as though the ultimate goal for these world-builders is to outline their world in so much detail that it becomes in some sense actually *real* – like Baudrillard's 'map that precedes the territory'.[24]

Apart from 'campaign settings'. the other kind of book you'll find in RPG shops is the 'system' or rule book. These rule systems provide a kind of language that quantifies the abilities and limitations of people and things within the game – and a way to determine what happens when those abilities are put to the test. A character designed for *Dungeons & Dragons*, for example, will have six basic abilities (strength, dexterity, constitution, intelligence, wisdom and charisma), each of which is represented by a number (usually between 3 and 18, with 10–11 as the average). A character with 18 strength is capable of extraordinary feats, while one with a strength of only 3 could barely lift a mug of ale. Then there are long lists of skills and special abilities, hit points (how much damage they can take before dying), possessions, back-story, etc. All these statistics determine how likely a character is to achieve certain actions; various dice (from the traditional six-sided to the less familiar twelve-sided, twenty-sided and even hundred-sided dice) introduce the element of luck.



In the past three decades RPG systems have gone through numerous evolutionary phases, and today there exist a range of 'schools' or styles. 'Physics engines' are designed to give nothing more or less than the most realistic outcomes in a given situation. 'Narrativist' systems, by contrast, treat a game as an improvised story, and seek to empower players to generate scenes that serve the overall plot and its themes, rather than merely emulating the laws of physics. 'Cinematic' games seek instead to simulate the feel of particular cinematic or literary genres, by encouraging characters to behave in appropriate ways and generating outcomes that fit the conventions of the genre, whether they are realistic or not.

These days there's a lot of theoretical discussion on the topic of game design – mostly on the Internet, of course. Online message boards like RPG.net or The Forge[25] are full of arguments about 'GNS theory' (which stands for gamist-narrativist-simulationist, each designating an element of role-playing), 'Role-Playing vs Roll-Playing' and so on. For some, RPGs are little more than a 'game', but for others, they are a means to collectively improvised complex narratives, experience life as a medieval knight or immerse themselves in another reality.

But whatever the system or setting – whether it's as detailed as *Forgotten Realms* or as vague as a few notes quickly sketched by the GM over lunch – at the heart of all RPGs is *improvisation*. Neither the players nor the GM are able to completely predict or control how a game will unfold. Many GMs do prepare a kind of plot, but even the most plot-driven GM is only able to plan so much. Many published settings include 'plot hooks' – brief open-ended suggestions of *potential* storylines, which the characters may encounter and take further. But these are far from full plotlines – they are hints, pointers, situations.[26] In the end, it is the choices made by the players, tempered by the way the dice roll, that determine what happens on the day.

This unpredictability forces GMs and the authors of RPG settings and systems to adopt a narrative paradigm quite different to that of the traditional novel. Like Scott McCloud's gardener, the GM cannot know which paths his or her players will take. Rather, the trick is to create as interesting a garden as possible – with landscapes, situations and possibilities that give the players opportunities to explore and interact. In some of the most rewarding RPG worlds these landscapes and situations are pregnant not only with opportunities for adventure, but also with emotional resonance, themes and allusions, metaphor and meaning. The art of creating an RPG, then, is very much an art of world-building, or 'sub-creation'. And the way that art is experienced is through play.

Play

> In future, man's way of life will be determined not by profit but by play.
>
> – Constant Nieuwenhuis, 'New Urbanism'[27]

The Situationists, a group of theorists, activists and artists who rose to prominence during the May 1968 uprising in Paris, promoted the rise of a new social order – 'the coming reign of leisure'[28] – in which *Homo faber* ('Man the Maker') would be replaced by *Homo ludens* ('Man the Player'). The terminology comes from Johann Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: a Study of the Element of Play in Culture*, but for the Situationists, *Homo ludens* was more than merely an element of human culture; it was nothing less than the 'highest existential level' of human fulfilment. As Constant Nieuwenhuis argued in his project for a utopian 'ludic' enviroment, *New Babylon,* the emergence of an economy in which automation frees the masses from productive work creates the possibility of a society based on recreation and leisure, in which life enters a state of 'permanent play'. The New Babylon project, like much of the Situationists' writing on urbanism, is not so much a fixed architectural design as an attempt to envision an environment that 'offers the latent potential for things to happen'.[29] In this sense, New Babylon resembles the 'ludic environments' of the role-playing game.[30]

These days, of course, you could be forgiven for thinking New Babylon is here already. Video games – for both computers and consoles like Playstation and X-Box – are now the largest entertainment industry in the world. Many children now spend as much, if not more, time playing these games than they do watching television (not to mention reading books). For their generation, video games provide one of their most significant imaginative pastimes, a fact that is predictably causing no end of concern among parents, teachers, intellectuals and, well, the usual suspects. Naturally, we hear all the familiar worries: that video games cause illiteracy, long-term health problems, violence and even the erosion of children's ability to enjoy 'proper' art and literature. And, of course, almost no one involved in the debate considers such games worthy of 'serious consideration on aesthetic grounds'. After all, these are *games*, designed to be *played* – not *art*. Aren't they?

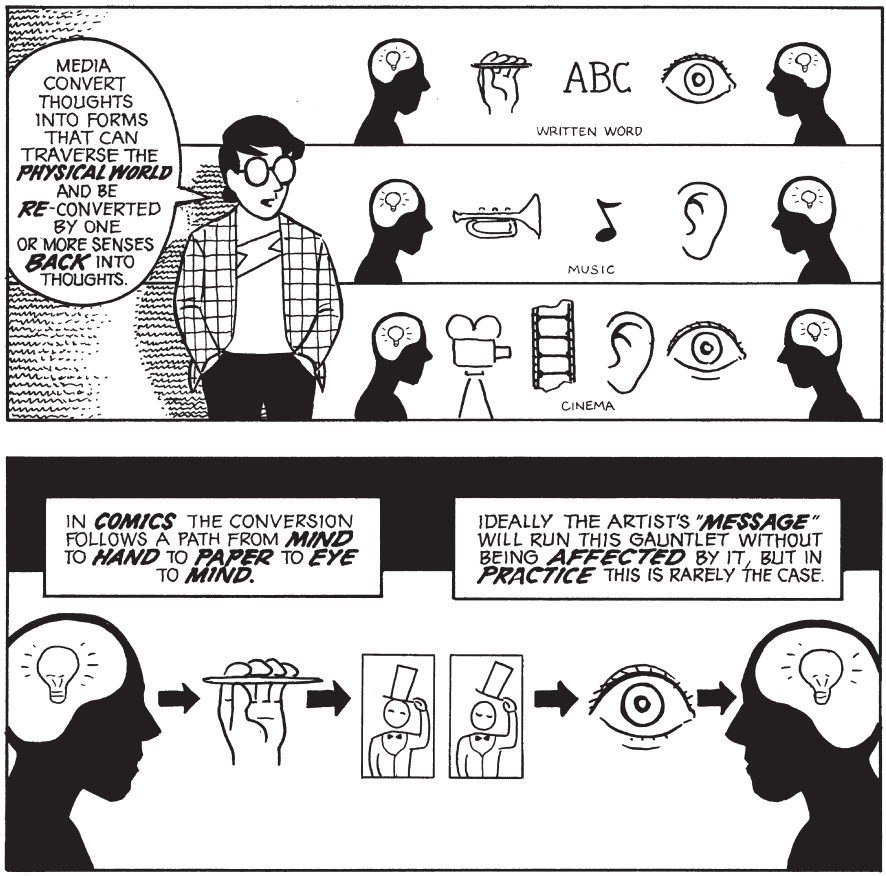
Art

> We have already seen that this notion of 'only playing' in no way excludes the possibility of realizing this 'only playing' with extreme seriousness.
>
> – Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*[31]

> Play – the permanent experimentation with ludic novelties – appears to be not at all separate from ethics, from the question of the meaning of life.
>
> – 'Contribution to a Situationist Definition of Play'[32]

> Play and art are the same thing!
>
> – James Kochalka, *The Horrible Truth About Comics*

Let's return to that second question asked by both Scott McCloud and James Kochalka: 'What is Art?' Here's what McCloud has to say:

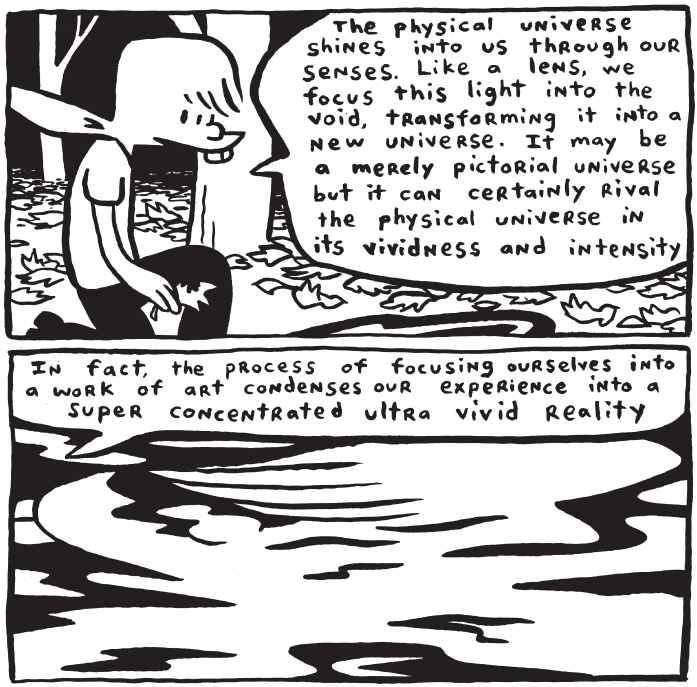


Art, then, is a medium of *communication*, a conduit through which the artist tries to send a 'message' as clearly as possible to the audience. 'The mastery of one's medium,' he goes on to say, 'is the degree to which the artist's ideas survive the journey.'[33] This is, of course, a completely linear process, and one in which control (or 'mastery') by the artist is essential.

This seems far from the 'gardener' described by McCloud in that interview I quoted earlier.

By contrast, Kochalka explicitly rejects this view of art:

And art does this by 'creating a universe':



This is something quite different to the linear path between artist and audience envisioned by McCloud. Instead, Kochalka sees art as the creation of an environment in which the artist him or herself can 'boil in the intensity of [his or her] experiences, condensing and clarifying them'.[34] It's not about telling something, it's about making a place in which to explore ideas and experiences and their meanings. Of course, Kochalka's vision doesn't exclude the audience; they too will have the opportunity to explore this 'new universe':

An artwork, then, is a kind of playground, built by the artist in an attempt to understand something. The shape that playground takes will depend on the artist and what it is they want to explore. Once the playground is built, others can come and try it out – gaining their own insights and understandings along the way. Not all playgrounds are frivolous, of course, just as not all play is pleasurable. A work of art like Claude Lanzmann's documentary film *Shoah* (1985) is a harrowing experience, not to mention physically and emotionally exhausting (it runs for nine and a half hours). It's a playground full of broken glass and barbed wire, and no one plays there for long without getting hurt. But that, after all, is what it's about, and the scars we take away from *Shoah* can teach us a great deal.

This idea, of art as playground, allows us to see viewers, readers and users of art as active, interactive participants, rather than passive recipients of the artist's message. It also recognises the extent to which each individual 'player' brings his or her own contribution, modifying the 'ludic ambience' of the work and changing how it can be used (not only for themselves, but also for anyone who plays alongside them). This is not to say the artist has no influence on how his or her artwork will be experienced, any more than McCloud's gardener has no control over his garden. If you put up swings, people will come and swing on them. But equally, some will use them as imaginary rocketships, others will twist the chains to see them spin, and some adventurous souls might even shinny up to the top of the poles, using them as a climbing frame and not a swing at all.

As McCloud pointed out, this level of 'interactivity' is alarming to many writers and artists. But to others, such as the designers of role-playing games and video games, it's really the whole point. And increasingly, as Daniel Mackay points out in his book *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A new performing art*, this applies not only to work explicitly conceived of as games:

> Today, the paperback, computer game, comic book, role-playing game, film, and CD-ROM markets are all inundated by what I call *imaginary-entertainment environments:* fictional settings that change over time as if they were real places and that are published in a variety of mediums (e.g., novels, films, role-playing games, etcetera), each of them in communication with the others as they contribute toward the growth, history, and status of the setting.[35]

Mackay is talking here about such fictional universes as those seen in *Star Trek, Star Wars, Babylon 5*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and so on. Each of these settings has an enthusiastic fan following who not only watch the movies and read the books, but also actively participate in the creation of these imaginary worlds by writing fan fiction, making fan films (such as

Troops and the countless other short movies available on The Force.net[36] and elsewhere on the Internet), dressing up at conventions and learning to speak in Klingon, playing with toys and video games or even just by sitting back and daydreaming that they, too, are on board the Starship *Enterprise*, going where no man has gone before . . .

But the same is equally true of many other works of fiction and art, as Mackay points out:

> Role-players have actualized an aspect of story-telling that has always been potentially present. Just as the development of the European novel in the eighteenth century highlighted aspects of narrative that were always latent in epic poems and other early literary forms (e.g., the plot structure and characterization of plays), and the introduction of cinema clarified and established a vocabulary for latent concepts in both theater and the novel, so too the role-playing game has highlighted the idea of the fictional world autonomous from a discreet body of work, that grows, changes, and develops through the collaboration of many contributors. Imaginary-entertainment environments, in fact, can be retroactively identified as the great playthings of some of the most lauded artists in the tradition of Western and Eastern arts. For what are mythologies but imaginary-entertainment environments shared and perpetuated across centuries by artists, scholars, and priests?[37]

Mapping ourselves

> A man sets himself the task of portraying the world. Through the years he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and people. Shortly before his death, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his face.
>
> – Jorge Luis Borges[38]

A few pages ago we set out to try to understand what's going on in contemporary art – not just the paintings and novels that find their way into the Tate and the *New York Review of Books*, but also the stuff our kids are into: *Harry Potter*, *Yu-Gi-Oh*, *Vice City*, *Crash Bandicoot* and *The Sims*. Because, like it or not, it's works like these that are shaping the aesthetic interests and priorities of the emerging generation of artists and audiences.

A common thread running through much of that work, in my view, is an emphasis on *geographical narrative* – on the construction of a virtual environment in which the audience can explore and even 'play'. And the video game – perhaps more than any other medium – seems perfectly designed to do just that. So far, of course, it's been easy to dismiss most video games as intellectually weak, thematically puerile and emotionally shallow – in short, not worth 'consideration on aesthetic grounds'. But then, the same seemed true of comics in 1955.

It's the same old story. New artforms bring new aesthetic paradigms. Those who fail to recognise this tend to miss the point of the work altogether, dismissing it as frivolous, bad or even dangerous. Which is why, when the generation of writers and artists who've grown up immersed in virtual playgrounds begin using the medium of the video game itself to 'boil in the intensity' of their experiences, many in the so-called art and literary worlds won't even notice.

Of course this is already happening. Games like *The Sims*, *The Getaway* and *Myst* and online gaming in general are all pushing the boundaries of the genre in aesthetically challenging ways. In fact, the whole point of *The Sims* is to enter a simulated everyday world, allowing players to experiment with different identities and behaviours and experience the results. Which, if you ask me, sounds a hell of a lot like many novels …

Besides, as an old role-player, I recognise in the video game a lot of elements familiar from tabletop RPGs. This is no coincidence, since a high percentage of computer programmers were, and are, not surprisingly, *Dungeons & Dragons* afficianados. There's an affinity between computer programming and games that require reams of graph paper and twenty-sided dice. Both are artificial universes governed by quantifiable rules, probability, and obsessive mapping.'[39] Over the years I've seen the role-playing game evolve from a simple variation on wargaming to a rich and complex artform, with its own movements, schools and aesthetic controversies. I see no reason why this shouldn't also happen to its digital descendant.

And if there's one thing I've learned from RPGs it's this: *the game is in the playing*. Even the stupidest, most frivolous game system can be used to create powerful and meaningful gaming experiences by the right group of players. I see kids doing that today with video games – ignoring the strategies and paths they're expected to take and instead pursuing goals that are often different to those anticipated by the game designers.[40] After all, this is a playground, not a play.

Hopefully, then, our meandering journey through Mackay's 'imaginary entertainment environments', Tolkien's 'Secondary Worlds', the Situationists' 'New Babylon', McCloud's 'garden' and Kochalka's 'Perfect Planet' has given us a few useful clues – or perhaps 'plot hooks' – that will help guide us into the new fictional landscapes of the twenty-first century.

Because the more we explore the worlds that we and our children build, the better we will understand ourselves.[41]

1. Bill Pearson, letter printed in *Landfall* 9, No. 1, March 1955, pp. 95–97.
2. Barry Linton, 'The Mighty Waikato', *Landfall* 45, No. 4, December 1991; 'Man Can Dream', *Landfall* 46, No. 2, June 1992.
3. McCloud asks, 'What *is* comics?' while Kochalka uses the plural: 'What *are* comics?'. The difference is because McCloud believes he is defining the *essence of the medium* – a kind of Platonic form of 'comics' – rather than merely describing those comics that already exist in the world.
4. McCloud's definition borrows heavily from Will Eisner's *Comics & Sequential Art*.
5. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 99.
6. Ibid., p. 67.
7. Eisner, op. cit., p. 40.
8. 'Round and Round with Scott McCloud,' interview by R. C. Harvey, *The Comics Journal* 179, August 1995, p. 57.
9. *Collins English Dictionary*, my emphasis.
10. Eisner, op. cit., p. 49.
11. Interview with Scott McCloud, op. cit.
12. Chris Ware, *Acme Novelty Library* 2, p. 7.
13. James Kochalka, *The Horrible Truth About Comics*, p. 13.
14. James Kochalka, 'Magic Boy & Girlfriend', drawn c. 1994, reprinted in *Magic Boy & Girlfriend*, p. 47.
15. James Kochalka, *The Perfect Planet*, p. 3.
16. J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy Tales', quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien: A biography*, p. 254. The lecture is reprinted in *The Tolkien Reader* and can also be read online at http://larsen-family.us/~1066/onfairystories.html
17. Carpenter, ibid., p. 255.
18. Ibid.
19. 'The Sound of Discord', *Guardian*, 29 September 2001, available online at http://www.guardian.co.uk/saturday_review/story/0,3605,559766,00.html
20. Lawrence Schick, *Heroic Worlds: A history and guide to role-playing games*, pp. 17–18.
21. See http://www.defragsrealms.com/times/archive/ftedint.html for an interview with Ed Greenwood. Although Greenwood makes it clear that 'sometimes I've had surprises that weren't also delights', with regard to changes made to the *Forgotten Realms*, he also praises many of the contributions made by other writers and game designers and stresses that 'by and large I have no complaints', Nevertheless, the fact remains that the publisher (TSR at the time of the interview, but now Wizards of the Coast) 'owns the *Realms* and artistically controls them', and, as Greenwood says, 'contrary to rumors, I don't get a royalty from every Realms product'.
22. N. Robin Crossby, quoted in Schick, op. cit., p. 187.
23. These can be found online at http://www.rpg.net
24. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Foss, p. 2.
25. The Forge is online at http://www.indie-rpgs.com
26. For example, here is a typically brief 'plot-hook' from Ed Greenwood et al., *The Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting*: 'Ghosts of Northkeep: Lights are seen underwater in and around the Bell in the Deep. Something is stirring down there. What? Why?'
27. *Provo* 9, 1966, English translation by the Friends of Malatesta, Buffalo, NY, 1970, which can be read at the online zine *Not Bored!* at http://www.notbored.org/new-urbanism.html
28. 'Contribution to a Situationist Definition of Play', *Internationale Situationiste* 1, June 1958, translated by Reuben Keehan and available online at http://www2.cddc.vt.edu/situationist/si/play.html

29. Rem Koolhaas, in a panel discussion on museums of modern art in the twenty-first century, 1996, quoted at http://www.thing.net/eyebeam/msg00406.html
30. It also resembles in many ways the Internet – especially the worlds of online gaming, MUDs, MOOs and MUSHs. But that's a topic for another day, as are the resonances between the *Situationist Dérive* and live-action role-playing games . . .
31. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, quoted in 'Contribution to a Situationist Definition of Play', *Internationale Situationiste* 1, June 1958.
32. *Internationale Situationiste* 1, ibid. This text can be read online at http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/play.html
33. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 196.
34. Kochalka, *The Horrible Truth About Comics*, p. 22.
35. Mackay's book is the most in-depth theoretical study of RPGs to date.
36. See http://www.theforce.net/theater. *Troops* is merely one of the most successful of the many *Star Wars* fan-films, and can be found at http://www.theforce.net/theater/shortfilms/troops
37. Daniel Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A new performing art*, p. 33.
38. Jorge Luis Borges, *Dreamtigers*, translated by Mildred Boyer and Harold Morland.
39. J. C. Herz, *Joystick Nation: How videogames ate our quarters, won our hearts, and rewired our minds*, p. 11.
40. Go online and you can even find thousands of unofficial 'patches' for commercially produced computer games: homemade levels, modifications to the visuals and soundtrack, new characters and situations.
41. In preparing this paper, I gained considerable inspiration from conversations with Matthew Chappory, Jeffrey Holman, my wife Terry Fleming and my sons Louis and Abe. Also from discussions on RPG.net and with other fellow cartoonists and gamers, and from articles on TheForge (http://www.indie-rpgs.net) and the wonderful Places to Go, People to Be (at http://ptgptb.org).