

Professional Reflections from a Tyro Comic Writer

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While adjuncting at a community college in the fall of 2012, with my newly-earned doctoral degree so fresh it hadn't yet arrived in the mail, I found myself in the remarkable position of having free time. Instead of submitting portions of my dissertation for publication, conducting research, scouring forums for conference possibilities, or networking with colleagues, I wrote a comic book.¹ I imagine many scholars and hiring committees might see that decision to temporarily abandon my academic ambitions as either cute (at best) or tragically wasteful (at worst). At a time when most graduates justifiably scramble to publish scholarly pieces, I was burning precious time reading biographies, blogs, and how-to books on comic writing. As my brilliant classmates scored well-deserved tenure-track positions, I was evaluating artists' portfolios, learning comic formatting, and writing pitch proposals. The comic was recently picked up by Action Lab Entertainment for national distribution, and though I list the title on my CV, I have no illusions that this genre will give me an edge in future job applications or promotions.

Still, I have to assume other compositionists, not specialized in creative writing, have written fiction to their professional advantage. A line on a CV is the least I can do to describe the impact comic writing has had on my thinking as a teacher and as a writer.

A Novice's Definition

To begin, the comic discussed here is called *Herald: Lovecraft & Tesla*, an alternate history adventure series of 54 issues set in 1923, in which horror writer H. P. Lovecraft and eccentric scientist Nikola Tesla work to rescue an inter-dimensionally trapped Amelia Earhart from the clutches of the apocalyptic Cult of Cthulhu. I'll include some brief words here describing the comic writing process I've used, including some comments about its relationship to traditional academic writing:

- Though some comics are written and illustrated by the same person, many titles are the result of multiple authors. *Herald* is authored by myself as writer, Tom Rogers on pencils, and Dexter Weeks on ink, color, and letters.

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The writing of the comic, in a larger sense, requires image and word acknowledgment of Dale Jacobs's view to "[talk] about comics as multimodal texts, rather than debased written texts" (182). Tom and Dex are each trained and experienced with their respective skillsets, and without their contribution, the comic would not exist as there's no publishing market for scripts/screenplays.

- Collaboration is essential to our writing/production process. Script drafts are passed to Tom, who pencils two possible thumbnail layouts for each page. These thumbnails, in addition to Tom's conceptual character sketches, act as an outline for the issue's art. Tom then pencils larger, detailed images for each page, which are passed to Dex, who digitally inks the penciled pages, adding base colors, elaborating lighting effects and, finally, placing text. What may sound like an assembly line involves constant feedback and checks between the three of us. Our collaboration differs slightly from collaboration in traditional writing because our respective skillsets are so diverse. For example, Tom could write elements of the story, but I'm incapable of drawing, whereas a collaborative academic text allows at least the possibility of equal contributions by its authors. This difference may be negligible if we ascribe to Gebhardt's assertion that "[f]eedback, in fact, can be considered *the* base of collaborative writing because it is what allows all other principles to work" (69 emphasis in original), and in fact, for Tom and Dex, both seasoned professionals, completing a single page takes anywhere from 6-10 hours, and without feedback, valuable time might be lost.

- Along those lines, revision in comic writing can be more painful than in traditional writing genres, particularly for the production of art. In a traditional novel, if an editor/writer decides to eliminate a character or plotline, pages might be cut, but the magic of word processors can still salvage the remaining pages, both conceptually and physically. If a similar issue develops during the writing of a comic, one that requires multiple pages of finished art to be changed, then there's only so much Photoshop can do before the artist(s) need to begin again with a blank page, which could set back the process days or more in an industry that often schedules monthly titles. To prevent the embarrassment of asking Tom and Dex for additional unpaid work, I agonize during the planning and drafting stages, knowing that global revision changes present an enormous burden on my co-authors.

- As a visual medium, comic writing shares principles with film, montage, condensed time, and visual rhetoric. Additionally, comics are often narrative, and whether the subgenre is fiction or non-fiction, theories of creative writing and literary analysis apply demanding attention for conflict, plot, structure, setting, character, theme, and the ubiquitous "show, don't tell" directive.

- The burden of detailed prose is transferred to the artist(s) with comic writing. I provide panel descriptions and reference photos for Tom, who translates/enhances those ideas. Tom's art does the heavy lifting in this regard,

and for readers of the comic, I'll never need to write a sentence, like "He had a long, gaunt face with deep-set eyes and thin eyebrows," as that image will be immediately communicated on the page.

- Serialized fiction isn't new, but many popular comics are intended to continue indefinitely (*Batman*, *Spider-Man*, *The Walking Dead*, etc.). *Herald*, however, has a definite beginning and ending separated by issues. Publishing schedules create an interesting set of problems for writers because revision isn't possible once an issue is printed/distributed, though portions of the whole are considered "finished."

Teacher/Scholar/Comic Writer

I should reiterate that *Herald* is not only the first comic I've professionally published, but it is also my first piece of fiction. This hardly qualifies me as an expert, but I *can* speak to how the comic has subtly changed the way I think of myself as a teacher/scholar.

The question then is how and in what ways comic writing can be useful for academic work, for teaching, and for understanding the writing process. I approach this question from the perspective of a "first-year" comic writer in the same way that first-year students come to engage with academic writing. In Bartholomae's sense, I have been "inventing the comic book," so when he says, "It is very hard for [students] to take on the role—the voice, the persona—of an authority whose authority is rooted in scholarship, analysis, or research. They slip, then, into a more immediately available and realizable voice of authority, the voice of a teacher giving a lesson" (76), I read that as, "It is very hard for me to take on the role—the voice, the persona—of an authority whose authority is rooted in *fiction*, *storyboarding*, or *comics*. I slip, then, into a more immediately available and realizable voice of authority, the voice of *scholarship*, *analysis*, or *research*." Before writing the first issue I read nearly a dozen biographies on the story's historical characters filling a notebook with summary details and potential plot outlines and allusions. As time-consuming as this was, gathering information before inserting myself into the historical conversation (albeit through fiction) felt familiar to me as an analog to planning an academic piece. Much of what I read in those biographies will likely not take root in the comic, and in one sense, it may have been unnecessary. However, having no baseline for what it should feel like when writing a comic, my process understandably clung to what was recognizable.

With one comic title now under my belt, I expect I'll have complete mastery of the comic voice and its conventions in another seventy years or so.² How long should we wait before expecting mastery, a passable proficiency, or improvement at the very least from our students' academic writing, given that first-year students may have no baseline for what it should feel like? And what processes do they cling to as they get themselves through a semester, many of whom have only the slightest fraction of interest in the subjects they are required to take? Teachers often forget how difficult it is for students to adopt, manipulate, and integrate the conventions

of academic discourse, often focusing on their stumbles instead of using them as starting points for discussions on revision.

To better understand this struggle and the voices students shift between, I would recommend teachers seek out a discourse community with which they have little experience and then make a concerted effort at acquiring that community's literacy—record your struggles and the ad hoc solutions you employ. The process you'll go through, its successes and failures, are exactly what Breuch discusses, in "Post-Process Pedagogy," when she says, "[T]eachers [should] move away from a transmission model of education and toward a transformative model that includes active participation from both teachers and students as collaborators" (102), or as Fleckenstein says regarding the changes that occur through writing acts, "[I]t can never be students who change and teachers who elicit that change. Instead, it can only be the teacher-student-cum-classroom who changes" (340). One opportunity to facilitate that transformation might involve inserting yourself into the position of a first-year student of a genre you choose, though a better mirror of students' experiences might require the genre be chosen for you.

As an example of one of these struggles and the revision that resulted, consider that one of the discourse conventions of comic writing, according to Alan Moore's reflection of DC Comics editor Mort Weisinger's requirements, which suggests "no more than 35 words per panel, no more than 25 words in a thought/speech balloon, and a maximum of 210 words on a given page" (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 101). Writers play with this rule, but the intention is that a comic's readability improves when balancing images and text while larger, cumbersome bubbles can slow the implied movement of the montage. Before writing the initial draft of *Herald's* first issue, I was aware of this rule, having read variations of it in a handful of how-to books, but knowing the convention and practicing it are often disconnected. Consequently, the first draft included panels with extended (arguably excessive) monologues. In my defense, *Herald* features HP Lovecraft as one of its central protagonists, a notoriously verbose horror writer from the 1920s who fetishized Victorianism and Edgar Allan Poe. The following panels (Figures 1 and 2 below) show the first and revised drafts of a paranoid interrogation by Lovecraft (left) of Nikola Tesla (right) to determine if Tesla is an agent for the apocalyptic Cult of Cthulhu:

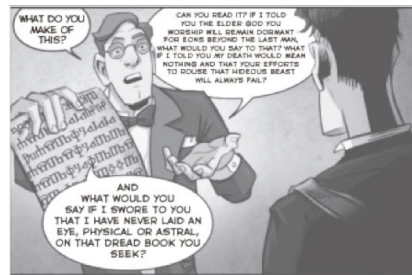


Fig. 1: First Draft

First draft (82 words):

"What do you make of this? Can you read it? If I told you the Elder God you worship will remain dormant for eons beyond the last man, what would you say to that? What if I told you my death would mean nothing and that your efforts to rouse that hideous beast will always fail? And what would you say if I swore

to you that I have never laid an eye, physical or astral, on that dread book you seek?"

Final version (53 words):

"Can you read this? If I told you the Elder God you worship will remain dormant for epochs beyond the last man, what would you say to that? And what would you say if I swore that I have never laid an eye, physical or astral, on the accursed Needle of Zur'in Xal?"



Fig. 2: Final Version

In the first draft, I was shocked by the cluttering effect of stuffing so much text inside an image. What looks perfectly acceptable as five sentences in the script takes on a different quality when attached to its art, creating a frustrating wall of words compounded by the additional sheet of mysterious runes held by Lovecraft. The option existed, of course, to split the panel into additional shots without changing the dialogue. Doing so would either clutter the rest of the page or require rewriting the issue's three remaining pages and push the story's climactic ending beyond the issue's twenty-two page limit. Instead of performing these larger revision options, the panel was revised to eliminate irrelevant and redundant sentences, creating a far more readable panel while maintaining the effect of bombarding Tesla with bizarre questions. If we take a bird's-eye-view of the rest of the panel's page below (Figure 3), we can see why Weisinger's rule is still useful, as the rest of this scene has the greatest word count of the issue:



Fig. 3: Issue #1, Pg. 19

Creator-Owned Works and Mutuality

For the life of the comic industry, publishing giants Marvel and DC, known as the Big 2, have dominated the market. As these publishers spawned a host of iconic franchises now entrenched in the cultural vein, the property rights for most titles remain owned by their studios with writers and artists generally compensated as freelance or salaried employees. The legal battles between Marvel, Stan Lee, and Jack Kirby over copyrights and royalties (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 102-104) speak to the enormous wealth generated by their comic titles and as well as toward an understanding of the collaborative nature of the comic writing process. In the early '90s, however, Image Comics started as a small company of disillusioned artists rejecting Marvel's work-for-hire model, instead implementing a creator-owned system where writers and artists of new titles would own and control their properties. While not as large as the Big 2, Image has consistently maintained a strong presence among publishers due in part to this creator-owned model, which I'll argue later is most similar (in the comic world) to what compositionists call mutuality—which aims to place students and teachers in more equal subject positions.

Marvel and DC are unlikely to convert to the creator-owned model any time soon, but dozens of other publishing houses have followed Image's lead, including *Herald's* publisher, Action Lab Entertainment. Action Lab's creator-owned model is similar to Image and some traditional print markets (novels, short stories, poetry) in that greater freedom is given to the text's authors as opposed to most work created by the Big 2. For instance, Marvel's firmly established *Spider-Man* franchise may assign an issue or story outline to a writer/artist with a set deadline, paying a per-page rate that ignores royalties on sales or marketing; Spiderman and all characters used/created by the writer/artist remain the property of Marvel, with Marvel's editor having creative control over the stories produced. Action Lab, on the other hand, solicits submissions for original titles, that, if accepted, pay royalties on sales with intellectual rights held by its creators. The effect of a publisher abdicating ownership to a creator extends beyond finances. While the Big 2 and their respective creative teams are responsible for an influential corpus of authentic American mythology, the freedom given by smaller publishers using creator-owned models provides a space for alternative comic genres (think *American Splendor*, for one). Editorial oversight is still present, but nothing moves forward into the printing/distribution phase unless everyone involved is satisfied, with primacy leaning toward the writing team.

The parallels to composition are clear—doesn't "creator-owned model" sound remarkably at home within the discipline's lexicon as a relative of "student-centered?" This isn't to say that the Big 2's proprietary model is publisher (authority/teacher)-centered, nor is it to suggest that one model is inherently stronger or more likely successful than another. As Patrick Bizzaro says, "the issue of control is not an easy one, certainly not one that fits into an easy dichotomy," though I and many others agree when he adds that we should "leave

as much control as possible in the hands of the student-writer" (272). Professionally, the creator-owned model represents mutuality in practice as creative directors and editors are more concerned with helping its writers create the best possible version of their comic rather than shaping an original idea to fit market demand. That some of the most acclaimed and studied comics in recent decades (*The Walking Dead*, *Saga*, *Habibi*, *Maus*, etc.) have come from this model in an intensely competitive market flooded with thousands of new titles per year, each struggling to find an audience—that these titles earned success—adds enormous credence to mutuality as more than a feel-good theory pretending toward democracy.

Preferring to demystify scholarly work for my students, I often discuss what academics do beyond what is typically seen in class. When applying to a conference or submitting a paper to a journal, I let them know whether I'm accepted or rejected. I'll likewise describe my research projects, faculty meetings, and whatever university service I'm currently performing because in addition to helping establish credibility, I think it's important for students to see the processes we go through in becoming the kinds of thinkers and writers valued at large. However, I'm reluctant to mention the comic during these brief discussions before and after class for reasons I don't think would be present if I were publishing a novelized version of the same story. I have to assume some students would think it's commendable, that they would find me more accessible, more open to dialogue knowing I share their interests. That connection could lead to stronger relationships and bridge the often exclusionary world of academia with their lives, opening the possibility for student writing that comes not from a place of teacher's expectations, but from a passionate center defined by the student. Yet I worry that disclosing the comic might also create the perception of a dilettante, that if they know I'm spending time dreaming up convoluted plots where historical figures battle ancient demons, they may see me as uncommitted to providing a "proper" education and economic mobility. Worse still, they may see me as a self-promoting braggart looking to increase sales.³

This hesitancy may be the result of an imagined academic pressure that champions heavy blocks of leather-bound literature over the kid stuff of campy spandex. Neither medium (novel or comic) might be typically considered as scholarship, but they *do* constitute a considerable writing effort, often requiring extensive research, whose discussion could connect the processes and skills exercised in class with writing outside the academy. Comic writing may be one of the thousands of available options that respond to Patricia Bizzell's hope that "...we can work on ways of making the ethos of academic discourse more accessible to our students" (353). Students almost certainly have more experience with comics than with professional scholarship and the accessibility of comics implores us to exploit the possibility.

Notes

¹ I use the term "comics" interchangeably with "graphic novels" in this paper.

² Give or take an additional seventy years or more.

³ A greater fear and probably closer to the truth is that their impression would be correct.

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