THE LEVITZ PARADIGM

This could be the situation:

Your editor, the fossil, doesn't like arcs. Thinks they're too fancy, maybe. Thinks they aren't real comics. (Did I mention that he was born before 1950?) He wants you to deliver 12 issues and he insists that many of them contain continued stories. What are your options?

You could give him arcs without calling them arcs. Just dash off three issues of excitement as Captain Wonderful combats the killer robots, be sure to give each a different title, and with your fourth issue, start another adventure.

Or you might conclude a story in two and a half issues and begin another in the last few pages of the third issue. (The 1940s Superman radio program used a similar technique superbly.)

Or you could adopt a structural procedure from our television brethren and conclude your main plot in one, two, three or more issues, but let subplots continue longer—years, maybe. But a caution: Don't use the sub-plots as page-killers. As noted in Part One, subplots have to move, develop, and entertain, just like any other kind of plot.

Or you could adopt the Levitz paradigm. It was developed by the man who is now DC Comics executive vice president and publisher, but was once an editor, and before that a writer, and before that, a fan. Paul Levitz probably thought about what a comic book writer does more than any of his contemporaries, or mine, and during his dozen-plus-years stint as writer of *The Legion of Super-Heroes,* systemized what his predecessors did haphazardly, if at all. Then, as an aid to his own work, he created three versions of the Levitz Grid, which you'll find printed somewhere near this paragraph.

Basically, the procedure is this: The writer has two, three, or even four plots going at once. The main plot—call it Plot A—occupies most of the pages and the characters' energies. The secondary plot—Plot B—functions as a subplot. Plot C and Plot D, if any, are given minimum space and attention—a few panels. As Plot A concludes, Plot B is "promoted"; it becomes Plot A, and Plot C becomes Plot B, and so forth. Thus, there is a constant upward plot progression; each plot develops in interest and complexity as the year's issues appear.

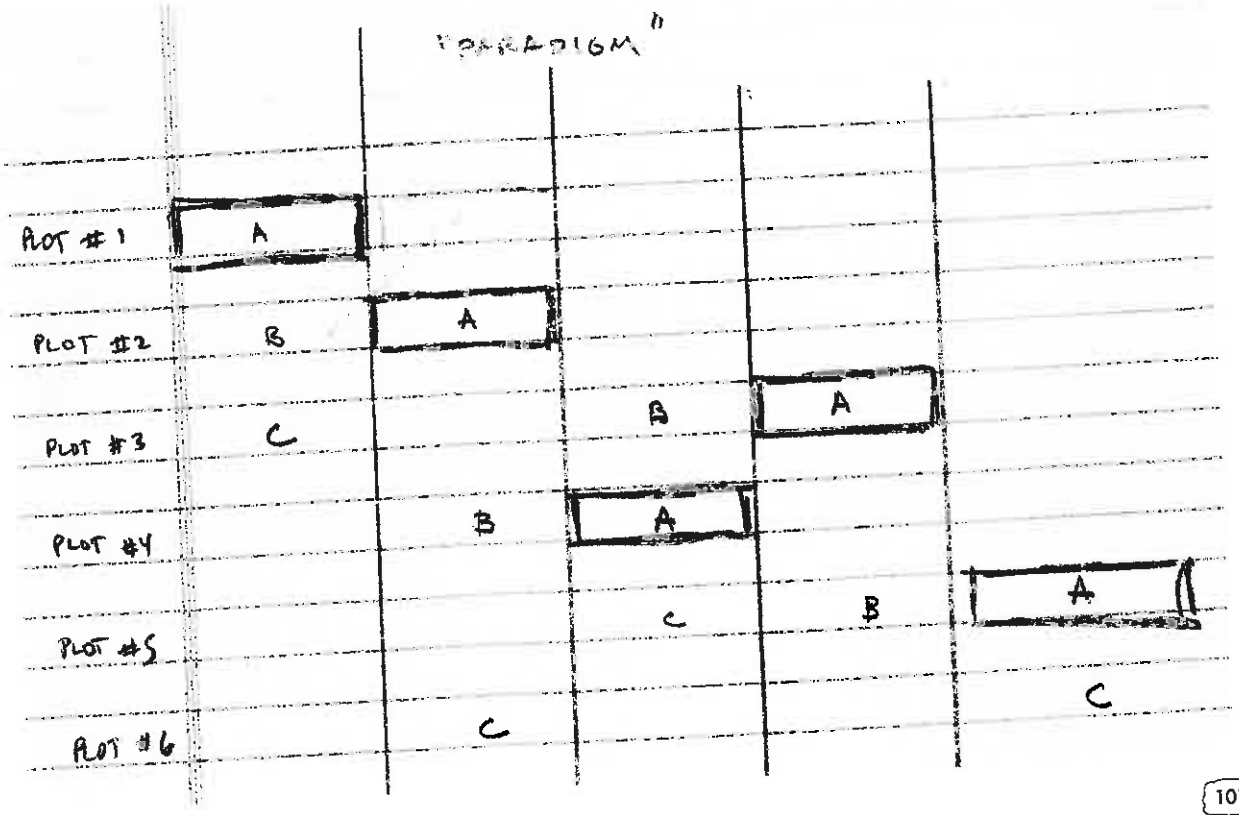
This example of the Levitz paradigm shows typical plotline paths. The only "rule" is that each time a plotline shows up, something must move forward: either new information revealed or development in the character's relationships.

A simplified four-issue breakdown might work like this:
Issue 1: *Plot A:* Killer robots attack a tour bus. Captain Wonderful arrives in time to rescue a herd of vacationers from St. Louis. *Plot B:* Meanwhile, Cap's sidekick, the Groovy Kid, finds a golden waffle iron during a field trip with a second-grade class: *Plot C:* And Cap's kindly mentor, Professor Fondue, sees a comet crash near his suburban laboratory.

Issue 2: Cap learns that the robots are controlled by his old enemy, Mr. Nemesis. He flies to Nemesis's lair, where he is rendered unconscious by a magic crumpet, chained to an obelisk, and dropped into a pool full of man-eating guppies. Meanwhile, the Groovy Kid eats a waffle made with the golden iron and turns into a puddle of maple syrup. On the other side of Generic City, Professor Fondue sees a humanoid whirlwind emerge from the comet. And—introducing Plot D—Cap's girlfriend, Susie, gets an e-mail that causes her to shriek.

Issue 3: Cap escapes from the obelisk—by now, he's had considerable practice at this—clobbers Nemesis and drops the now—inert robots off at the Salvation Army: end of Plot A. Meanwhile . . . an alley cat finds a puddle of syrup lying near a waffle iron and licks its chops: Plot B gets promoted to Plot A. The whirlwind announces its plans to run for mayor: Plot C gets promoted to Plot B. And Susie tells her mom she has to go to Poughkeepsie: Plot D gets promoted to Plot C.

Issue 4: Cap, needing to confer with Groovy, arrives in time to see the cat about to slurp up the syrup, guesses what must have happened to his pal—Cap's had a lot of experience superheroing—and shoos the tabby away; the whirlwind blows his mayoral opponents to Kansas where they're attacked by a scarecrow; and Susie's Poughkeepsie-bound bus enters a space warp somewhere north of Albany.



"LEGION"

	#22	#23	#24	#25	#26	#2
	"DEAD END"	"BACK HOME IN HELL"	"SUSPICION"	"REVELATION"	"ILLUSION"	"GOIN HOM
Universe's plot	USES DUPE TO TAKE OUT VIDAR			VIDAR KEPT IN CHAMA		GIM SUSA OF DES
Season Girl	SHOWS IGNORANCE OF RECENT EARTH	MONICA HAS "VISION"	SUSPICIONS FORCE HER TO LEAVE - "EMPTY COSTUME" CLUE	LAST CLUES REVEAL BY EMPRESS	EXPLANATIONS	PROT. AGAIN THEO
Monitor	WORRYING OVER SEKUM LIMIT	SEKUM WEARS OFF - PHANTOM ZONE	EPILOG			
Violet-Ayla	TALK ABOUT LIVES CHANGING	GROWING CLOSER	AYLA DONE WITH BRIN			
Fatal Five		LOOKING FOR PERCUSSER	EMPRESS BUILDS NEW FIVE	LSH SEARCH FOR NEW FIVE	BATTLE - DEATH OF MENTALLO	
Dreamy-Star Boy			DREAMY CHEATING?			BACK TOGE
Return of Garth-Imra				ELEMENT LAD WANTS TO KNOW ABOUT S.GIRL		
White Witch					NEEDED DJ SORCERERS' WORLD	UNSIND OF MORD
Element Lad-Shvaugn						Ceremo ON TO
						ELEC. SAL AMT

This multi-leveled structure has much in common with the way television soap operas—also known as "serialized dramas"—are constructed. Having three-plus stories running simultaneously is a small insurance policy against boring readers. Someone who once worked on a soap told me that the show's writers were aware that not every viewer liked every character and so they gave each principal time in each episode. Don't care for that slut Carrie, gentle viewer? Wait until after the commercial and you'll see what's happening with that hunk Bernardo. . . . Similarly, the upwardly mobile plot construction outlined above gives readers several characters to be interested in and creates the illusion, if not always the reality, that there's a lot going down . . . the issue's just jam-packed. . . .

It has a couple of additional virtues. It solves the problem of how to entice the reader to buy coming issues—every month, you're giving them at least two suspenseful reasons to learn what happens next. Readers sometimes look for reasons to stop buying a title either because they've found other uses for the money—silly luxuries like food and shelter—or because their interest in comics in general is waning. The end of a story is a perfect "jumping off" place. The obvious tactic is to avoid providing that place.

Another reason to employ the Levitz Paradigm requires us to step, gingerly, from the practical to the philosophical. It seems to me that this storytelling method is the best imitation of life possible in a work of fiction. Life, you may have noticed, does not happen in parcels, but as a continuum. Whatever dramas you're involved in at the moment will eventually stop, but *you* won't, not until that final day, and even then, life will continue, even though you aren't participating in it any longer. So it is with this kind of fiction; it imitates the process of living. One of the reasons we read stories is to imagine ourselves having another existence—heightened, more exciting and fulfilling, but recognizably human. Open-ended fiction facilitates the mental leap from the mundane to the imaginative because it provides the illusion of a world that operates like the world we know and that, I submit, can be deeply satisfying.

Unless it's badly done. Badly done, it's deadly.

A recreation of the grid system Paul Levitz used to track plotlines for *Legion* #22–27. If this had really been the grid used at the time for issue #22, titles and information for the later issues would have been missing or indefinite.