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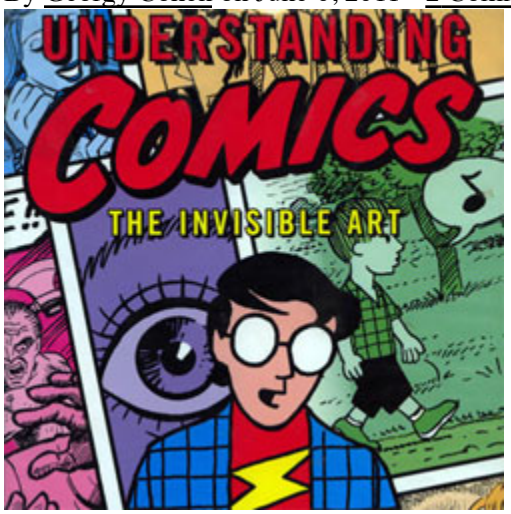
# Web Content Insights Through ‘Understanding Comics’

By Georgy Cohen on June 6, 2011 • 2 Comments




What can comics teach us about content?

I am not a comics nerd (I don’t think my Archie obsession as a kid holds muster), though I have befriended many — and married one. So while I’ve never sniffed at comics and graphic novels as child’s play, I didn’t fully realize the complexity of the form until I picked up a copy of Scott McCloud’s seminal text, Understanding Comics, in which he explains many principles of visual communication and what makes comics tick.

I had heard of the book before, but I didn’t get a clear sense of what it might have to teach me until 2009 when I interviewed Neil Cohn, a psychology graduate student at Tufts who studies the grammar of visual language. “Visual language is to comics what English is to novels,” he explained to me, and you can substitute “novels” with any written content. McCloud’s book, for him, is a foundational text.

Recently, I came across this a blog post by McCloud, referencing an article in UX Magazine on how the concepts McCloud discusses in “Understanding Comics” apply to user interface design. Wanting to learn more, I finally borrowed the book from the library. Suffice it to say, I will be buying my own copy.

As I read, I found myself holding many of McCloud’s insights up to our field, and some clear parallels emerged.

## The Power of the Archetype

McCloud questions why our culture is “so in thrall to the simplified reality of the cartoon.” The answer? “Amplification through simplification.”

> "By stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning,' an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't."

Focusing on specific ideas, McCloud explains, helps elevate the importance and impact of those ideas. By erasing the details of the messenger, or the medium, you raise the visibility of the message. "If who I am matters less," posits McCloud, "maybe what I say will matter more."

Don't let yourself – or your medium – get in the way of your message.

One of the lessons here is, don't let yourself – or your medium – get in the way of your message. It's not about you (or your org chart), and it's not about Twitter. It's about what you're trying to say and who you're saying it to. And the messages that hit the mark will be relevant and appropriate in both subject matter and context.

Part of that context is related to the audience's selves. The iconic quality of cartoon images, McCloud continues, have a universal quality that allows us to see ourselves in them, and thus incorporate ourselves into the narrative. "Storytellers in all media know that a sure indicator of audience involvement is the degree to which the audience identifies with a story's characters," he writes.

If we extend this a bit further, **we can stretch the idea of iconography into that of archetypes**. We use archetypes when we create user personae, write stories about excited first-year students, develop brand messages and even while writing usability testing scripts. We employ them to tap into shared affinities with our audience, or to simply better understand them. To my earlier point, it is the power of those archetypes that is elevated when you strip a message down to its core meaning. That meaning, at its most effective, is something in which the audience sees itself.

## Combining Words and Pictures

"Words and pictures have great powers to tell stories when creators fully exploit them both," writes McCloud. "In comics at its best, words and pictures are like partners in a dance and each one takes turns leading." He goes on to explain seven categories of how words and pictures can be combined:

1. **Word specific**
   The text drives understanding; the image is complementary, but not essential
2. **Picture specific**
   Vice versa; the image drives understanding, while the text is superfluous
3. **Duo specific**
   Words and pictures communicate exactly the same thing
4. **Additive**
   One amplifies the other
5. **Parallel**
   Words and pictures are moving along non-intersecting paths, appearing unrelated
6. **Montage**
   Words are part of the image
7. **Interdependent**
   The most common combination; "Words and pictures go hand in hand to convey an idea that neither could convey alone."

It may seem like these categories are exclusive to comics, but not so. Whether it's a montage splash image on our advancement homepage, a caption on a homepage photo from the playoff lacrosse game or a user-generated image supporting copy about the student experience on campus, we can use different combinations of words and images to achieve different goals. I touched on another way of combining words and pictures in my recent post on infographics.

The mixing of words and pictures is more alchemy than science.- *Scott McCloud*

One of the aspects of web content creation that I find the most intriguing (and challenging) is the meaningful employment of photography. Jakob Nielsen wrote a great article last year about photos as web content, asserting with data from eyetracking studies that "users pay close attention to photos and other images that contain relevant information but ignore fluffy pictures used to 'jazz up' Web pages." Case in point: "girls under trees," which Jared Spool first decried in 2008 as the bane of university homepages.

While McCloud's categories are helpful as a rubric for the potential relationships between words and images on our websites, there is no formula for getting it right. It depends on your goals, your audience, your messages, even your resources at hand. Perhaps McCloud put it best: "The mixing of words and pictures is more alchemy than science."

## The Invisible Art

The subtitle to McCloud's book is "The Invisible Art." Can our work be similarly described? I'm reminded of a moment in Ian Alexander's Confab presentation, when he noted that no user ever said "I love their content strategy" or "What a great content marketing plan." The user is interested in the experience and the story, not the underlying process it takes to get there — and the same goes for the comic reader.

So much of the framework supporting our content goals is not immediately apparent. But it runs deep, and it is essential.

So much of the framework supporting our content goals is not immediately apparent. But it runs deep, and it is essential. Without a rock-solid framework, the plush exterior collapses into a puddle of fabric on the floor. And while the user may not see it or even know it is there, you can bet dollars to donuts that they appreciate it.

Another way to look at the idea of "the invisible art": Comics and content both are occasionally subject to disrespect — comics are sometimes decried as "low art," while content may struggle for a serviceable share of the web project timeline. But books like "Understanding Comics," much like Kristina Halvorson's Content Strategy for the Web, (affiliate link) helped not only demystify a field, but validate a medium and evangelize for that value, in part by breaking down the components of that framework and starting a conversation about them.

As Corey Vilhauer noted recently, there is no one methodology for getting this work done. But by learning, teaching, talking and reading — including books from other fields, like "Understanding Comics" — we'll eventually figure out the methodology that works for us and, in the end, our users.

What else can comics teach us about web content? Where have you drawn unexpected web content insights?

*Postscript: James Callan wrote a great post last August summarizing a talk he gave at BarCamp Seattle on content lessons from comics. I highly recommend giving it a read.*

*Homepage image by jleveque / Flickr Creative Commons*

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**About Georgy Cohen**

Georgy Cohen is director of online content at Suffolk University and principal of Crosstown Digital Communications LLC, a consultancy focused on helping institutions of higher education tell their stories on the web. From 2004 to 2011, she worked at Tufts University, where she led the university's forays into multimedia, social media and online news. Keep going »

### Comments

1.  *Lee* says:
   June 6, 2011 at 6:22 pm

   I wonder if the “girls under trees” photos (or anything else used in that type of role) do serve a non-informational secondary purpose — like the CSS, it helps create an overall tone of the web page, and help shape the user’s mood and impression of the page and therefore the organization?

   Reply
2.  *Jeff Stevens* says:
   June 17, 2011 at 1:23 pm

   Understanding Comics is a must reader for anyone working in a field of sequential art, be it websites, comics, film, or photography. So many insights delivered in a medium anyone can immediately grasp.

   Reply