Research Thesis

The Relevance of the Graphic Novel as a Form of Visual Communication

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B. Vis Comm Des (Hons)

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Declarations
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# Contents

**Abstract** ........................................................................................................................................... 6

**Chapter One** ..................................................................................................................................... 8

*Introduction* ........................................................................................................................................ 8

  1.1 Research Question .......................................................................................................................... 9
  1.2 The Topic ....................................................................................................................................... 11
  1.3 The Reason .................................................................................................................................... 14
  1.4 Aims ............................................................................................................................................... 16
  1.5 Research Strategy .......................................................................................................................... 17
  1.6 Operational Definitions .................................................................................................................. 19

**Chapter Two** ..................................................................................................................................... 24

*Methodology* ....................................................................................................................................... 24

  2.1 Epistemology .................................................................................................................................. 25
  2.2 Methodology ................................................................................................................................... 27
  2.3 Theoretical Framework .................................................................................................................... 29
  2.4 Methods ........................................................................................................................................ 33

**Chapter Three** .................................................................................................................................... 42

*Literature Review* ................................................................................................................................. 42

  3.1 Key Sources .................................................................................................................................... 43
  3.2 The Bigger Picture ........................................................................................................................... 54

**Chapter Four** ..................................................................................................................................... 104

*Research* ............................................................................................................................................. 104

  4.1 The Early Years ............................................................................................................................... 106
  4.2 Two Separate Worlds ....................................................................................................................... 108
  4.3 Separate Worlds Collide .................................................................................................................. 115
  4.4 Visual vs. Illustration ...................................................................................................................... 118
  4.5 Case Studies .................................................................................................................................... 122
  4.6 Comparison .................................................................................................................................... 158
  4.7 Collaboration .................................................................................................................................... 169

**Chapter Five** ..................................................................................................................................... 174

*Practice Based Enquiry* ....................................................................................................................... 174

  5.1 Background .................................................................................................................................... 177
  5.2 Story ............................................................................................................................................. 182
  5.3 Format ............................................................................................................................................ 194
Please note: This dissertation consists of more than one document. As well as this written theoretical discourse, a practical project was undertaken during the course of study. The product of this creative process – a graphic novel titled *Tsuruhane* – is included as the first item in the Appendix. In order to gain a proper understanding of the progression of my study, as well as capturing the correlation between the two individual components, *Tsuruhane* should be read either prior to, or during, the reading of Chapter 5 (p. 174-244) of this thesis. Other related material can be found in the Appendix; this can be read when prompted to by the text.
List of illustrations

Figure 1: The Comics Code’s seal of approval .......................................................... 55
Figure 2: Schultz’s classic character, Charlie Brown, surveys a rack of comics ....... 58
Figure 3: Glen Le Livre’s tribute to fellow cartoonist Robert Crumb .................... 59
Figure 4: The Dalai Lama holds a copy of Hergé’s Tintin in Tibet ....................... 64
Figure 5: Eisner depicts a man’s palpable grief in A Contract With God ............. 65
Figure 6: A cat-like army officer threatens Jewish mice in Spiegelman’s Maus ....... 66
Figure 7: A panel from Ware’s Jimmy Corrigan: Smartest Kid on Earth .............. 67
Figure 8: Eisner parodies the industry of his day .................................................. 70
Figure 9: Nicki Greenberg’s character designs for The Great Gatsby .................. 80
Figure 10: Mandy Ord’s rather unflattering self-portrait ........................................ 80
Figure 11: Eisner’s instructive comic for the army’s PS Magazine ....................... 85
Figure 12: Darin Fisher in McCloud’s Google Chrome comic ............................ 86
Figure 13: Comparison between Rurouni Kenshin and Kill Bill: Part I ................ 91
Figure 14: How closely the Sin City film replicated Miller’s artwork .................... 92
Figure 15: Eisner’s differentiation between a spectator and a participant .......... 95
Figure 16: McCloud demonstrates some digital layouts ....................................... 98
Figure 17: Wright’s Scott Pilgrim vs. The World viewed on a Kindle device ....... 101
Figure 18: The historical transition from pictogram to writing .......................... 106
Figure 19: Comparison of a Chinese character with an illustration .................... 107
Figure 20: A pictorial sentence ............................................................................ 110
Figure 21: The pictorial sentence arranged as individual words .......................... 110
Figure 22: Oscar the cat - illustration ................................................................. 111
Figure 23: Examples of an abstract artwork and a direct style of prose ............. 116
Figure 24: Oscar - emotive illustration ............................................................... 116
Figure 25: Modes of visual expression: the ‘collision’ of word and image ......... 117
Figure 26: An illustration and a visual ................................................................. 119
Figure 27: Clarity/aesthetic scale of graphic novel imagery and text .................. 120
Figure 28: An illustration by Amano of Kikuchi, the protagonist from Chimera ... 124
Figure 29: The character Morpheus from Sandman ......................................... 125
Figure 30: Yoshitaka Amano’s visual characterization of D .............................. 127
Figure 31: Excerpt of dialogue and sequential art, from Scott McCloud’s Zot! .. 129
Figure 32: Miller’s character portrayal of Lucille and Marv ............................... 132
Figure 33: Comparison of Miller’s artwork with Picasso, Ward and Masereel ... 135
Figure 34: Miller’s use of typography as a panel frame .................................... 136
Figure 35: The visuals which correspond with Marv’s monologue .................... 138
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Kojima’s visual techniques create a dynamic sense of motion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Koike and Kojima’s use of symbolism and metaphor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>An example of a combined fade-in and zooming shot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>An example of an ‘aspect to aspect’ transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>A comparison between Hiroshige and Kojima</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Just eleven of the 31 panels Tezuka drew for <em>New Treasure Island</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Tezuka’s realistically-portrayed anatomy in <em>Black Jack</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Ochanomizu and Higeoyaji; two quintessential Tezuka characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td><em>Tell Adolf</em>, one of Tezuka’s works for more mature audiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>The strange city Tan created for his story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>Tan’s drawings allow the audience to read gestures and expressions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>The migrant character explores his new lodgings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>Without the use of words, Tan depicts a conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>Portraits of early twentieth century migrants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Dr. Ochanomizu &amp; Higeoyaji, as drawn by Urasawa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>The real-life parallels Urasawa inserted into his manga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>Various versions of Tobio/Astro compared with HRP-4C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>Comparison of the same scene, as depicted by Amano and Takaki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>Scenes drawn by McKean and Russell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>The same scene as in Gaiman’s prose, converted into sequential art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>Eisner’s rendition of what can go wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>Eisner surveys a studio filled artists in a scene from <em>The Dreamer</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>The first page of <em>Yokai Forest</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>Twin images of the titular character of <em>Rurouni Kenshin</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>The influence of Lynch’s illustration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>Another early sketch of Shiro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>A Hokusai print of a <em>tengu</em>, and the avian antagonist from <em>Tactics</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63</td>
<td>An as-yet unfinished drawing of Kotori and Ryuuki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64</td>
<td>Hoshiko, Shiro’s much-loved sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>A scene from <em>Tsuruhane</em>’s prose, presented in visuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66</td>
<td>Scenes from <em>Eric and Grandpa’s Tale</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67</td>
<td>My second sketch of Shiro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68</td>
<td>Just some of the many incarnations Kotori went through</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69</td>
<td><em>Tsuruhane</em>’s villains - Ujiki, Tetsu, Gunbei, and Kuno</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70</td>
<td>Assorted characters from Fumi Yoshinaga’s manga, Ōoku</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71</td>
<td>Shaun Tan’s simply-drawn, silent character from <em>The Red Tree</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>An actor wearing a kimono, compared to Russell’s designs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 73: The comparative sizes of a tankōbon, Tsuruhane, and a comic book ...... 216
Figure 74: Page decorations from some classic books ........................................... 219
Figure 75: Ogami and his opponent face each other .............................................. 221
Figure 76: Page 20 of Tsuruhane, at various stages of production ........................... 222
Figure 77: Kenshin faces the assassin Kurogasa .................................................. 223
Figure 78: One of the early drafts for Tsuruhane pages 18-19 ............................... 225
Figure 79: Koike and Kojima introduce the Zodiac Gang .................................... 227
Figure 80: The first book of Uehashi’s Moribito series, with dust-jacket ................. 228
Figure 81: Realistically-rendered backgrounds used in different contexts ............... 230
Figure 82: Two Trees by Hokusai; a photo of forests on Mount Fuji ...................... 231
Figure 83: Various styles of rendering in ink ......................................................... 232
Figure 84: Riyoko Ikeda illustrates Marie Antoinette’s inner turmoil .................... 233
Figure 85: Photo references of casuarina trees .................................................... 234
Figure 86: A photo of a pine tree; a painting by Kim Hoa Tram ............................... 235
Figure 87: Two versions of the same Tsuruhane panel .......................................... 236
Figure 88: Three different text/image combinations from Tsuruhane ...................... 239
Figure 89: The original rendition of the artwork on page 16 of Tsuruhane ............... 245
Figure 90: Watsuki’s pen-inked hatching; CLAMP’s screentone shading ............... 246
Figure 91: The rendering process......................................................................... 247
Figure 92: The very first finished artwork produced for Yokai Forest ..................... 248
Figure 93: Some of the artists who influenced my rendering style ......................... 251
Figure 94: Half-finished artwork from page 18 of Tsuruhane ............................... 252
Figure 95: The background textures and speedlines used in Tsuruhane .................. 253
Figure 96: Illustrations by Arthur Rackham and Jan Pienkowski ......................... 255
Figure 97: The first version of page 23, panel 1 of Tsuruhane .............................. 263
Figure 98: Defining the aesthetic experience and the flow experience .................. 278
Figure 99: Diagram of the author-to-audience communicative process ................. 280
Figure 100: McCloud demonstrates how words are the ultimate abstraction ......... 285
Figure 101: Eddie Campbell’s depiction of his profession’s difficulties ................. 287
Figure 102: How incorrect anatomical proportions are used for narrative effect ...... 289
Abstract

The graphic novel is a medium which tells a story. Through the use of two main structural components - imagery and text - a sustained narrative is conveyed to the reader. The graphic novel format relies on this interaction between its textual and pictorial elements; these two components are integrated, forming a unified visual language. Just as style and content can vary widely from one graphic novel to another, there are also innumerable different ways in which text and imagery can be combined. Some graphic novels depend predominantly on text or prose, with only a few illustrations in between paragraphs. Others give imagery key responsibility, relegating text to captions or speech bubbles. As these ratios between text and image change, the graphic novel’s structural composition alters drastically, and the way in which meaning is conveyed to the audience follows suit.

The purpose of this study is to examine the different ways in which text and imagery can be combined. In the context of a graphic novel, this combination must serve the purpose of telling a story, and as such, I will examine the correlation between design fundamentals, visual structure, literary techniques, and narrative content. In order to achieve this aim, the available literature pertaining to the topic will be thoroughly researched; historical and cultural contexts of the graphic novel will be explored; various graphic novels will be critically analysed through the use of case studies; and a graphic novel, authored by myself, will be produced during the course of a practice based enquiry.

As an outcome of having undertaken this study, I wish to better facilitate my ability to use visual communication for storytelling purposes. By performing both an exposition on the format’s history and a critical analysis of the medium’s current examples, I aim to better inform myself (and this dissertation’s reader) as to the specific features which make the graphic novel such an advantageous means of presenting narratives to an audience. In doing so, I will go some way towards uncovering the graphic novel’s full potential, determining what it has to offer the both author who creates it and the audience who reads it, by filling both of these roles myself. I will use the discoveries I make to augment my theoretical understanding of my topic, as well as improving my practical capabilities as a visual communicator.
Chapter One

Introduction
1.1 Research Question

“Comics are just words and pictures. You can do anything with words and pictures.” – Harvey Pekar\(^1\)

They say ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’. So what happens when you add a few extra words to those pictures? By combining two separate elements – written language and visual representation – together, and by using a bit of ingenuity, skill, and storytelling in the unifying process, you can create a whole novel. A ‘graphic novel’. Illustration has long been a means of artistic expression, a way of conveying meaning in a form which can be shared with others. The graphic novel embodies this principle. Evocative imagery, when coupled with complimentary text, can tell a story with far more nuance and emotive power than any words or pictures could achieve on their own.

Of course, the combination of words and imagery is not exclusive to the ‘graphic novel’ format – many offer types of design, from advertising to corporate logos, sometimes incorporate both text and illustration into their layouts. What truly sets the graphic novel apart, then, is its dedication to its own distinct purpose – to tell a story. Every single graphic novel ever created, no matter how unusual or frivolous or bland or astonishing or profound it may be, still has at its heart some sort of narrative, a plot-driven thread which binds its structural components, tying together to form a unified whole. As much as a graphic novel might dazzle a viewer with its sublime artwork, or beguile its reader with its witty dialogue and literary eloquence, these achievements are superfluous if it does not also impress upon its audience that unique, almost transcendent quality that only a masterfully-concocted storyline creates.

The simple goal of telling a story may sound like a modest aim. However, storytelling indulges a fundamental need which every human possesses – the desire to temporarily leave ourselves behind, escaping into an alternate world of their own choosing. Stories do more than simply inform, incite or entertain; they can transport the reader entirely. A narrative is an intimate, inspirational means of leaving behind the prosaic confines of the everyday. The page (or more likely in modern times, the screen)

\(^1\) Cited in Gravett 2005, p. 10
becomes a portal leading to a temporary solace, where anything and everything is possible.

As a narrative medium, graphic novels possess the unique ability to even more deeply immerse their readers within the realms of fiction. Because they employ both words and imagery simultaneously, they stimulate several of the reader’s senses at once, creating a wealth of evocative experiences. By simultaneously providing a visually-eloquent set of pictorials, descriptive textual commentary, and a replication of audible dialogue in a composite layout, the graphic novel is able to weave a complex illusion around its reader, emulating real sensations to an incredible extent. This suspension of belief is what every storyteller strives to create – and a goal which I myself aspire towards. I have a story to tell, and for me, the graphic novel is the ideal medium with which to tell it.

Though I have long been an enthusiastic reader of graphic novels and comics, there are still many things which I have yet to learn about the medium. The graphic novel is an art form with a diverse history – as much as it is enshrined as a monument of popular culture and steeped in irreverent affection, it is also mired in controversy, even contempt, by those who fail to understand it. Despite its sporadic surges in popularity, the graphic novel is still a widely underdeveloped and misunderstood format. Modern designers are just starting to realize the great potential of a medium which has long existed, yet has languished in the public eye, dismissed as a cache of stereotypes or an inferior alternative to art and literature.

Luckily, my study seems to coincide with an impending Renaissance for the format; I am able to explore recent research materials which have just emerged, coinciding with the graphic novel’s burgeoning status as a legitimate subject for scholarly enquiry. With the development of better printing processes, the ease of distribution that electronic resources provide, and the increasing importance of visual literacy in a graphics-based society, the graphic novel is becoming a prominent medium. In recent years, it has significantly matured and accumulated wider acclaim, finally prompting attitudes to change. However, whilst I can potentially learn a lot by reading secondary sources, by far the best way to learn how to create a graphic novel is to actually become a creator myself.
My motivation for undertaking this research thesis is to explore the potential of the graphic novel as a form of visual communication. Whilst undertaking this research, I seek to both explain the medium to those who may not be familiar with it, or who may have formed an inaccurate opinion of it; and to consolidate my own knowledge of the subject, on both a theoretical and a practical level. My main objectives are to analyse the structural designs used in graphic novels, and to figure out how and why these varying arrangements work. My research focuses on the correlation between imagery and text – how the two elements are combined, how they interact, and how integrating them in different ways can produce different narrative effects. I will then use the knowledge I have gleaned from my research to inform my own practice, creating a self-authored graphic novel. This creative project, presented in a separately printed and bound document, will act as supporting material for any findings my research uncovers; a testing ground for any theories I have formed; and as a product/design artefact in its own right. This will be followed by a self-critical assessment of my creation, as well as a reflective analysis of the production process which led to its completion. By undertaking these various methods of enquiry, I hope to foster an understanding of my subject matter which is as complete and multi-faceted as possible.

1.2 The Topic

The very first thing I should do, at the outset of this dissertation, is to explain exactly what it is that I will be studying. You may well be asking: 'What is a graphic novel, anyway?' This is actually a surprisingly difficult question to answer.

There are a wide variety of graphic novels out there, and they can differ vastly from one another, making a definitive set of characteristics difficult to establish. Furthermore, opinion on the ‘official’ meaning of the term is split, even among professionals. For example, comic-book theorist Scott McCloud unites such disparate items as the Bayeux Tapestry, Egyptian wall-friezes, and Aztec manuscripts within the same category, claiming that they are all early examples of the same format. (1993, p.10-13) However, expatriate Scottish-Australian artist Eddie Campbell argues that
since the ‘graphic novel’ term certainly was not yet been invented at the times when these works were created, such a title cannot be bestowed on them in retrospect. (MacDonald 2010, <http://donmacdonald.com>)

There is even some disagreement on how the medium should be referred to. McCloud remains devoted to the old-school label of ‘comic book’, whilst Paul Gravett and Will Eisner are united under the modernized ‘graphic novel’ appellation; Eddie Campbell has been known to sarcastically refer to his work as ‘very long cartoon strips’ (2007, <http://eddiecampbell.blogspot.com>); and Shaun Tan was certain that he was creating a ‘picture book’, only starting to think of it as a ‘graphic novel’ midway through production. (2006b, <http://www.shauntan.net>) With this much dissent in the air, it is little wonder that newcomers are often baffled. For the sake of simplicity, I have decided to adhere to the use of ‘graphic novel’ within this study, as it appears to be the most current and commonly-used term.

One thing which I can state definitively, without a doubt, is that the graphic novel is a medium, not a genre. All graphic novels do not have the same demographic – they are not limited to a single age group, do not belong exclusively to any regional locality, and certainly do not deal with a universally-common thematic subject. Graphic novels are, in fact, defined by their diversity. Just like other media, such as literature, theatre or film, the format can be adapted to tell any kind of story, and potentially reach any sort of audience. Eddie Campbell goes so far as to declare that the graphic novel “signifies a movement rather than a form”; i.e. it is not a specific structure or visual composition, but an ideology carried forth by a conglomerate of likeminded individuals, all united by a singular mission to visually convey their stories. (MacDonald 2010, <http://donmacdonald.com>)

The term ‘graphic novel’ itself is widely attributed to seminal industry figure Will Eisner (Gravett 2005, p. 38); he also coined the terms ‘sequential art’ and ‘visual narrative’, using them interchangeably to describe his own work. (Eisner 1996, p. xvii) Scott McCloud subsequently elaborated on these assorted descriptions. His definition of the ‘graphic novel’ reads as follows:

“Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.”

(1993, p. 9)
Eisner and McCloud both seem to agree that graphic novels must consist of numerous images, not just one; just as a single page of poetry cannot be classified in the same literary strata as a tome like *War and Peace*. However, this distinction is less about quantity, more about structure. The graphic novel uses multiple elements to create a more complex meaning; the fragmentary pieces are united in order to constitute the whole. Where Eisner’s definition remains superior to McCloud’s, perhaps, is in its emphasis on the ‘narrative’ aspect of the medium. As already mentioned, numerous other graphic arts incorporate multiple images and segments of text into their layouts; however, every part of the graphic novel’s structure should be dedicated to the sole purpose of telling a story. It is this crucial aspect that truly defines the medium.

Eisner and McCloud both tend to concentrate their definitions on the ‘sequential art’ layout; that is, panels of artwork arranged in strips or grids, following one after the other, much like frames in a reel of film. However, this is only one possible configuration which a visual narrative may take. For the sake of this dissertation, I have chosen to extend my chosen definition to include ‘illustrated prose’ as well. These are works that are predominantly text-based novels, yet feature intermittent illustrations on only some of their pages. Various parties might suggest, quite legitimately, that ‘illustrated prose’ should be classified as a literary format, since it contains far more text than imagery. However, I would argue that when part of the storytelling process is delegated to the graphic content of such works, to the point that the tale’s progression becomes dependant on imagery to convey part of its inherent meaning, then that work becomes a form of visual communication, and thus a ‘graphic novel’.

I tried to keep my own definition of the ‘graphic novel’ as broad and structurally-diverse as possible. However, I must assign a few vital characteristics that any proper specimen of the medium should possess:

- consists of multiple pages\(^2\); or is at least of a considerable length.
- conveys a sustained narrative to the audience, having at its core a well-developed storyline which follows a designated path.

\(^2\) There are exceptions to this rule. Digital comics, published on the internet and viewed on computer screens, have made use of the webpage’s versatile nature, compressing extensive layouts onto a single page and allowing readers to scroll through its length, rather than having to turn a page. (McCloud 2000, p. 222) The point is that a ‘graphic novel’ should consist of more than just a simple image; a series of juxtaposed visuals are required to sufficiently build a cohesive narrative.
relies on some sort of visual content to convey part of its intended meaning. Imagery should not be added to pages of prose as a mere form of ornamentation or decorative element. The imagery must be inseparable from the rest of the whole, to the extent that if it were removed, the novel’s overall meaning would be altered or compromised.

This definition is hardly restrictive; within this scope, a multitudinous array of different structures and arrangements are possible. Just a small sample of these myriad possibilities will be examined in subsequent chapters.

1.3 The Reason

Having learned what a ‘graphic novel’ is, my reader may now be thinking: ‘Well then, why bother studying them?’ Of course, the topic I have chosen to devote my attention to was a result of my personal inclinations. However, in order to better set the scene, and somehow justify the study which I am about to carry out, I should mention what the topic means to me, and why I am so drawn to storytelling. This means giving a brief summarization of my academic career, as well as the personal motivations which prompted me to choose to research this particular topic.

I fell into graphic design through a freak turn of events, prompted by little more than serendipity, and the fundamental fact that I had always enjoyed every aspect of stories – reading them, writing them, and illustrating them. I did not seriously consider pursuing my hobby on a professional or academic level until I was in my final year of high school. Acting purely on a whim, I entered a competition sponsored by a large company, to design artwork for a nation-wide series of billboards; I was amazed to find that I had won my age-category. I was later told that my submission had been chosen because of its ‘strong sense of story’. Though I had grown up reading illustrated novels

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3 This summary only encompasses my tertiary study, and my interest in visual communications as a general subject. Chapter 5.1 will properly explore my specific affinity for the graphic novel format.
and had always aspired to become a storyteller, this was the first definite indication I had that I could use imagery to convey meaning.

This resulted in my decision to study graphic design at university. However, my undergraduate course seemed to leave some aspects of my personal interests unfulfilled. I was often told by tutors and instructors that my design work was too ‘illustrative’, not ‘graphic’ enough. The coursework which I was assigned did not have that narrative component that I wished to emulate. It was only when I began my Honours year that I was able to hone in on my specific subject matter; by prescribing my own research topic and embarking on my self-authored creative project, I began to delve into my chosen field far more thoroughly than my previous studies had allowed. This culminated in an even stronger focus on my specialized area of interest when I commenced my postgraduate degree.

Certainly, I have an academic interest in my subject matter; however, and far more importantly, I am personally invested in it as well. I think it would be hard to find someone who genuinely dislikes fiction; after all, everybody likes stories, even when they are presented in factual media, such as current affairs or newspapers. Narratives are presented to us in books and films, in TV shows and video games, told to us over the radio. Stories are an integral part of the human experience; they satisfy the innate curiosity which all people naturally possess. No matter how narcissistic or self-absorbed any person may seem, they have doubtlessly still asked themselves: “what would it be like to be somebody else?” or “what is happening to other people?”

Stories can be far more than just light entertainment, even when they are completely fictional; then again, most stories, however fantastical, usually still contain a tiny grain of truth somewhere in their midst. Stories allow us to explore theoretical scopes of imagination, exercising our empathetic skills and taking us outside ourselves. They give authors an outlet for their creativity, letting them give vent to their innermost psyche; they provide readers with a source of escapism, prompting them to contemplate both the external world and their internal selves.

Though television and film are emerging as the twenty-first century’s primary means of receiving stories, reading can still be considered a widely-practised and extremely satisfying pastime. As opposed to film, which tends to convey its message in a very literal manner, a novel broadcasts its message along a far less figurative channel,
provoking the reader’s imaginative skills and inviting them to further interpret what they have gleaned. As an intellectual, sensual and inspirational activity, reading performs an integral function in our lives, whether we chose to read literary or visual material – or, in the case of the graphic novel, a combination of both. This was a service which I wanted to provide to others, a role which I became increasingly determined to fulfil.

Some people may think that the mere invention of stories is too simple a topic to merit its own research thesis; or that the graphic novel is far too frivolous a medium to have an entire academic paper solely devoted to it. Some might surmise that compared to curing diseases or aiding humanitarian efforts, the relatively safe and selfish act of telling a good yarn pales in significance. But then, I suspect that profundity can have a relative evaluation. When I think of the great fictional works which I have read and continued to cherish for years afterward, I realize just how much they have come to mean to me, and how much they have affected my fundamental development as a person. I like to think that such works may not change the whole world, but they do drastically affect personal worlds, one reader at a time. Scott McCloud believes that fictional stories are the birth-right of all human beings – they help us to find our way in the wider world, and in doing so, help us to re-enter our own personal worlds. (2011, n. pag.) The greatest thing fiction can teach us is how to believe in possibilities, to invest our hope in things which are not yet actual. That in itself is an invaluable lesson – one which I have always been eager to learn, and which I will now hopefully be able to impart to others.

1.4 Aims

As the previous chapters attest, I have some specific goals in mind as I begin undertaking my study. This dissertation addresses the following focus questions:

- Are graphic novels relevant to today’s modern culture, and if so, in what ways?
- What advantages do graphic novels have as a form of visual communication?
- What are the ways in which effective graphic novels have been constructed?
- How do image and text interact in the graphic novel format?
- How can I employ these techniques in my own creative practice?
As I undertake this study, I have the following aims and intentions in mind:

- to critically analyse the structural design of the ‘graphic novel’ format
- to create an accurate portrayal of the graphic novel’s historical and cultural aspects, free from past stereotypes and assumptions
- to draw attention to the significance of the graphic novel as a media in its own right, deserving of further development
- to glean insight from the works of professional practitioners
- to investigate how visual representation can sustain a cohesive narrative, and the ways aesthetic can manipulate meaning
- to gain a better understanding of the ways imagery and words can interact to create informative design solutions
- to use the findings of my theoretical research to inform my own studio practice
- to undertake, observe, and document the process of creating a design artefact
- to produce a body of work which emulates some of the successful ways in which other graphic novels engage their audiences
- to use the graphic novel format to tell an original story of my own devising, in the form of a visually-conveyed narrative

1.5 Research Strategy

The aims listed previously will be attained by utilizing a number of different methods of data collection:

- by examining the available literature, gathering information from knowledgeable sources on the subject
- by learning from the documented practices of successful practitioners in the field
- by analysing existing graphic novels from a critical perspective, in the form of case studies
- by personally undertaking an active creative process
- by then reflecting on that process and that resulted from it, in the form of an exegesis
This study can be divided into two distinct parts – a theoretical component and a practical component – which are nevertheless inseparable, and each of which informs the other. Each of these two parts can, in turn, be split into two chapters or stages: ‘literature review’ and ‘research’ in the former, ‘practice-based enquiry’ and ‘exegesis’ in the latter.

The first part of the study, which is a theoretical enquiry, collects and collates pre-existing knowledge about graphic novels. It concentrates its focus on their historical context and cultural significance. This stage of the research investigates the experience of the audience, i.e. the reader or viewer, who interacts with the graphic novel as a consumer.

The first chapter of the theoretical component is a literature review. Within this chapter, key sources are identified and evaluated; as the medium’s history is explored, past misconceptions are dispelled; the cultural and social interactions of the graphic novel are explained; and the latest developments in the field are introduced. The second chapter of the theoretical enquiry involves research – consolidating the data gleaned from these sources by applying it to my own theories and findings. In such a way, I combine newly-learned facts with my own understanding of the topic, to form hypotheses that are supported by my references. In this chapter, technical components of the format are analysed for their individual functions; the respective roles of imagery and text in the formation of meaning are expanded upon; and notable examples of the medium are critically examined in a series of case studies.

The second part of the thesis consists of personal practice; the findings gathered from the theoretical component are qualified and applied in a creative context. At this stage, the viewpoint of the study shifts from audience to author, i.e. the writer and/or illustrator who produces the graphic novel. Having already examined numerous examples of innovative and effective structural design in the works of others, I then apply this knowledge to the production of my own body of work. This major project takes the form of a self-authored graphic novel. The graphic novel is to be published as a standalone document, and is a design artefact in its own right, whilst still supporting this dissertation, as a product of theoretical enquiry. During the making of this graphic novel, I will document the process and the issues that arose from it, acquiring further
insight from my own first-hand experience. I will then reflectively describe my practice, and evaluate the final product in the form of an exegesis.

The aforementioned change in views, from audience to author, is very important. Most practitioners in the industry undertake both roles throughout their careers. The author must be aware of the work of his/her contemporaries, allowing the innovations of others to inform their own practice. The author must also consider their own audience, anticipating how their work will be construed by those who will read it, and constructing it accordingly, in order to convey their story to best effect. As this sequence of methods is adopted, the results of my study will go through a series of progressions: from data to knowledge, from knowledge to theory, from theory to practice, and from practice to reflection. By utilizing so many different processes and stages, I will be able to attain a better view of all aspects of the topic. As a result of this process, I hope to learn as much about every aspect of my subject matter as I possibly can, within my given timeframe. My intention is to produce a dissertation which informs my reader on a variety of levels, whether they be a reader of graphic novels like myself, an aspiring creator of their own narrative material as I am, or a novice who has never experienced the graphic novel format before.

1.6 Operational Definitions

Back in Chapter 1.2, I mentioned some of the words and definitions which relate to my subject matter. Below is a complete list of some further jargon that my research will frequently refer to, and which will be useful to know during the reading of this dissertation. As already stated, the graphic novel industry is neither a well-defined nor a well-unified one, and a lot of common terminology is often misconstrued. Some of these terms have multiple meanings and have different definitions in different contexts, e.g. a publisher may have a different definition of a ‘graphic novel’ to that of a writer, an artist, or a comic book retailer. The definitions are not intended to be absolute, but are simply to explain the use of these words within the context of this dissertation.
Graphic novel: An extended definition of what a ‘graphic novel’ is has already been presented in Chapter 1.2. More commonly within the comic-book industry itself, ‘graphic novel’ refers to a certain style of publishing, generally defined by a higher page count than average ‘serialized’ comics, which are far thinner and released at more frequent intervals. However, to think of ‘graphic novels’ as just ‘collected issues’ or ‘long comics’ would be erroneous. Works such as Dumas’ *Three Musketeers* and Conan Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes* are still considered to be literary novels, despite having been originally serialized chapter-by-chapter in the respective newspapers of their times and nationalities. Graphic novels, therefore, can be better defined as any works of fiction that incorporate pictorial content into their method of storytelling.

Comics: in the context of this dissertation, the term ‘graphic novels’ replaces ‘comics’ or ‘comic books’. The reason for this is the number of prejudices surrounding the term ‘comics’. These include stereotypical views of the commonly portrayed ‘geek culture’ surrounding comics, and the confusion of the concept with comic strips. Strips, popularized in newspapers and often aiming to produce a daily laugh for their readership, have helped to sow the misconception that all comics should be humorous, frivolous and light-hearted in content. Henceforth, the term ‘comics’ is deliberately avoided in this thesis.

Graphic storytelling and Visual narrative: yet more alternate terms for the graphic novel. They were first referenced in 1996, in the title of a publication by industry legend Will Eisner. Though not commonly used, they provide descriptive definitions of what the medium is and how it functions.

Sequential art: this refers to illustrations arranged in a deliberate sequence, following on from one another and telling subsequent parts of an over-reaching story. Each individual image only performs its intended role when it is juxtaposed with the image which precedes and/or follows it, giving the reader an illusion of time passing or motion taking place, as a narrative device.
Illustrated novel: also known as a ‘GSA’ (Graphic Story Album), ‘illustrated prose’ or ‘light novel’. Illustrated novels are basically prose books which contain illustrations. Though they contain predominantly words, they can still be considered a form of visual storytelling. In a sense, since they still portray progressive moments from a sustained narrative, they can simply be considered as a form of prolonged sequential art, with lengthier delays between each panel, and with text filling in the gaps. Illustrated novels do not receive the same recognition as graphic novels, and are often marketed as pure literature or art books, rather than as their own specific medium. The term has become more commonly used as demand has grown. Despite being only recently recognized as a modern medium, illustrated novels have a rich history, harking back to the so-called ‘golden age’ of illustration that occurred at the turn of the nineteenth century, featuring works by such legends as Arthur Rackham, Edmund Dulac and Aubrey Beardsley, among many others. Illustrated novels are not to be confused with the ‘visual novel’, a type of interactive computer-game.

Manga: broadly refers to ‘Japanese comics’. The term should not be confused with ‘anime’ (derived from the French word for ‘animation’, and used in Japan to define such). Whilst some schools of thought believe that ‘manga’ should refer only to graphic novels intended for Japanese readers, this does not truly encompass what the term implies. Whilst ‘manga’ cannot be reduced to a mere ‘style’ of artwork, as it so often is, it does carry its own complex set of conventions and visual dialects which cannot be fully described here. It is, however, a highly popular phenomenon internationally, with many artists the world over considering their work to be ‘manga’. Artists who draw manga are ‘mangaka’ (manga writers are separately referred to as ‘gensaku-sha’).

Gekiga: a term meaning ‘dramatic pictures’ (Gravett 2004, p. 38) which came to refer to works of manga which are aimed at an older audience (similar to the way that ‘graphic novels’ were differentiated from ‘comic books’ in English-speaking cultures).

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4 The latter term is mostly used within Japan, not in the wider industry.
**Bande dessinée:** The Franco-Belgian term for the graphic novel. (Duncan and Smith 2009, p. 297) *Bande dessinée* draw many parallels with Japanese *manga*, in terms of how they are regarded both at home and internationally. However unlike ‘*manga*’, which is often used to describe works of a specific style that are produced by authors from various nations, ‘*bande dessinée*’ refers exclusively to publications that originate from French-speaking countries, including Belgium and parts of Canada. Although not having such distinctive artistic features as *manga* does, it is nevertheless renowned for its *ligne claire* (‘clear line’) and general level of sophistication.

**Comix:** a sub-genre of graphic novels which emerged during the 1960’s – just as many other radical things did. As an act of defiance following the implementation of stifling censorship laws during the 1950’s, many creators shunned commercial retailers and distributors, avoiding strict in-house regulations by self-publishing. The crowd-pleasing, family-friendly fare of these sanctified institutions was met with the liberated, uninhibited, often X-rated material that these authors were producing. (Lambiek 1994, <http://lambiek.net>) Though sometimes aiming to shock and revile for the sake of sensationalism, comix also became a source of truth and profundity, allowing frustrated authors to unload their psyches and inspiring a generation to air their opinions.

**Artwork:** in this thesis, the word ‘artwork’ broadly refers to any visual components of the graphic novel. It can be further divided into ‘illustrations’ and ‘visuals’ (see below). To avoid confusion, both these terms will be generally referred to as ‘artwork’, unless otherwise specified.

**Visuals/Illustrations:** in *Comics and Sequential Art*, industry legend Will Eisner stressed the difference between these two terms. Whilst an ‘illustration’ acts in conjunction with words as an aide or partner, a ‘visual’ replaces text itself, becoming the primary means of expression. (Eisner 1985, p. 165) In order to avoid confusion, the word ‘artwork’ will be used to refer to both visuals and illustrations, unless otherwise is specified. (See Chapter 4.4 for further details)
Text: refers to elements in a graphic novel which are written rather than illustrative. The word ‘text’ in a graphic novel is not to be confused with ‘story’. The text should not be considered the main part of the work, with the images acting only as supporting material. More often than not, the artwork of a graphic novel performs as much – if not more – of the storytelling process as any text that might accompany it. The text that a novel contains may be minimal or multitudinous, incorporated directly into the imagery, or omitted altogether. This textual component may take the form of descriptive prose, bubble-enclosed dialogue, or onomatopoeia-like sound effects, among many other possibilities.

Multimodal – this describes a work that uses more than one form of communication in order to convey meaning; for example, film uses both visuals and audio\textsuperscript{5} to get its message across. The graphic novel is a multimodal format which utilizes both imagery and text. Not all graphic novels are multimodal; Shaun Tan’s The Arrival is an example of a graphic novel which uses only one means to communicate meaning (i.e. imagery). However, most graphic novels can generally be categorized as a multimodal medium. (See Chapter 2.3.3 for further details.)

\textsuperscript{5} Unless it is a silent film, of course.
Chapter Two
Methodology
‘Fact’ is not the same as ‘knowledge’; any topic can have countless interpretations, depending on the beliefs and biases of the researcher. No researcher is truly impartial, nor should they be; fact has many embedded meanings, any of which may contribute to a particular strain of knowledge. This chapter outlines the theoretical stances and philosophies with which this dissertation is approached. It explores the ideologies which are relevant to my own interpretation of what the study of graphic novels entails.

2.1 Epistemology

An epistemology deals with how knowledge is acquired and expressed, i.e. ‘how do we know what we know?’ As a form of visual communication, the graphic novel’s main purpose is to deliver a prescribed meaning to its audience; therefore, it must be ‘written’ in a language that the audience will understand, both literally and figuratively. The epistemological theory of ‘constructionism’ deals with how humans interact with a built environment, wherein the individual’s perceptions are influenced by cultural and social experiences. The graphic novel can be considered a part of this ‘built environment’, and is itself a product of the culture in which it resides.

Constructionism

This theory, according to Michael Crotty, encompasses the idea that “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality… is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world” (1998, p. 42). As applied to texts, it proposes that when we construct our own meaning, in the form of an authored document, humans must initially assign these meanings to the real world; for, if we are unable to perceive meaning ourselves, how can we communicate it to each other? Just as our observations influence our culture, culture determines how we interpret the things we observe around us, and hence:
“understanding of things, experience and culture come to be almost interchangeable terms.” (Crotty, 1998, p. 74)

According to a constructionist viewpoint, objects do not possess a universal, definitive meaning that can be approved or disproved; infinite interpretations of a single text, visual or object may potentially arise, with each having equal validity. An example is the famous painting the *Mona Lisa*; the meaning of this portrait is ambiguous, and without the artist’s own discourse to guide us, all theories regarding it possess equal credibility, until proven otherwise. Since Da Vinci never provided this commentary, all interpretations must be accepted as plausible, the theory adopted depending on the opinion of the individual.

Graphic novels, due to their predominantly visual nature, often depend on viewer interpretation as a form of audience participation, letting the reader create part of the meaning for themselves, rather than dictating all the information to them. Authors recognize that part of the experience they provide is tied to the audience’s interaction with their work. This symbiotic relationship between author and audience can be explained by the theorizing of Crotty:

“In the Constructionist view… meaning is not discovered but constructed. Meaning does not inhere in the object, merely waiting for someone to come upon it… [it] may be pregnant with potential meaning, but actual meaning emerges only when consciousness engages with them. How, such thinkers ask, can there be meaning without a mind?” (1998, p. 42)

Visual imagery does not provide concrete information; aesthetic and semiotic values must be assigned to that which is seen by the viewer. The format, then, relies on the individual as a product of cultural conditioning, and as a participant in the creation of this ‘potential meaning’, not just as a passive viewer. The graphic novel, as a result, engages the audience on a deeper level, as it asks them to analyse and define the meaning of the work for themselves. In this situation, several equally valid interpretations may arise, controlled by the creator and conforming to the whims of the viewer. The author, therefore, must remain mindful of the Constructionist theory whilst they go about their work, ensuring that their own intended effect corresponds as much as possible with general audience interpretation.
2.2 Methodology

A methodology should not be confused with a method; it is not the physical process of data collection itself, but the overarching rationale behind this process. In the case of this research, ‘content analysis’ is a form of social science which undertakes a qualitative examination of sources, taking into account the subjective readings which all design artefacts are subject to.

Content Analysis

“Content analysis is potentially one of the most important research techniques in the social sciences. The content analyst views data as representations not of physical events but of texts, images, and expressions that are created to be seen, read interpreted, and acted on for their meanings, and must therefore be analysed with such uses in mind. Analysing texts in the contexts of their uses distinguishes content analysis from any other method of enquiry.” – Klaus Krippendorff (2004, p. xiii)

Rare is the graphic novel without something to say; even the most featureless story and simplistic imagery contains some embedded meaning that needs to be deciphered. As both an expressed narrative and a predominantly visual medium, graphic novels cannot be merely read at face value; the deeper connotations of author intention and audience expectation must be recognized and understood, in order for the work to be properly appreciated.

Graphic novels are, in essence, fruitions of both a creative process and social interaction. In order to study such subject matter, a qualitative approach is necessitated. Krippendorff observes that most scientific means of research concern themselves with fact, not with the social and cultural biases which arise in the social sciences (2004, p.xiii). Rather than ignoring these intrusions and endeavouring to remain impartial, content analysts examine these influences as findings themselves, interpreting the text as a rich tapestry of doctored implications, opinions and semantics, taking into account any underlying cultural and/or social conditions which may potentially affect the inherent conveyance of meaning. Content analysis delves into psychological and
philosophical frameworks, treating its subject matter not as a mere culmination of pages of writing, visual compositions or reels of film; but as works of expression, informed by the author’s ideas, orientations and biases. Creative works are intended to provoke emotive responses in their audiences; these spectators will come from varying social and cultural circumstances. The researcher, then, must be aware of both events within and without the work, which may have some form of influence on the work’s meaning.

Content analysis developed from “the early awareness not only that verbal discourse is movable when written, but that writing has predictable effects… a message is the metaphorical container… a ‘container of content’, a vehicle for shipping meanings from one place to another.” (Krippendorff 2004, p. xviii) From a constructionist viewpoint, creative works, as objects, are not the meaning itself, but a vessel in which the meaning resides, waiting to be discovered, revealed and interpreted by the audience. The form the message takes will, however, determine how the viewer interprets the meaning. As linguist theorist Roman Jakobson phrased it: “the message does not and cannot supply all the meaning to the transaction… a good deal of what is communicated derives from the context, code, and the means of contact.” (Noble and Bestley 2005, p. 99)

The structural format of the graphic novel, then, takes on greater significance than in other media, as it is made up of two individual components – written word and imagery – both of which have their own conventionalized ways of constructing meaning. Despite this, these structures need to be examined not as separate entities, but in the conjoined context which they appear in. As well as studying the merits and characteristics of individual works, content analysis can also be used to examine trends and patterns in any given medium, thereby determining the most effective ways that meaning has been conveyed over a broader spectrum, able to project this data into results which can inform future works. In these ways, content analysis is an undertaking of great interest on the part of the researcher, and an illuminating practice for the aspiring creator.
2.3 Theoretical Framework

This chapter encapsulates the philosophies which inform the methodology, providing the rationale behind the research process. For this study, the theoretical framework deals with the ‘visual literacy’ needed in order to review imagery as source material, as well as the logic used to interpret this imagery. ‘Semiotics’, a derivative technique for reading visuals, examines how graphic signs and symbols are utilized as a type of linguistics. Also taken into consideration is ‘multimodal theory’; this principle relates to the graphic novel’s amalgamation of multiple structural elements, all of which must be read and interpreted according to the context in which they appear. These three branches of knowledge constitute the essential theory that underpins any subsequent findings that my research may unearth.

2.3.1 Visual Literacy

Society has long used the visual arts as alternate forms of documentation, sense-making and self-expression. Though it has, in many instances, come to be associated with mere decoration and frivolity, this is certainly not always the case. The importance of imagery as a means of communication in itself, rather than as mere ornamentation, is gradually coming to be recognized. This progressive change of opinion has been observed by Isabel Martins, of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro: “An assumption frequently made, though seldom formally articulated, is that the visual is more transparent a medium than language.” Martins goes on in her essay to challenge the idea that images are simpler than text, according to her own theory:

“Instead, reading images is treated as a complex situated activity, deeply influenced by principles that organize possibilities of representation and meanings within culture. Adopting such a stance questions the long-standing privilege dispensed to language.” (Otero 2002, p. 75)

Although it is unlikely that illustration will ever fully usurp the favoured position text has as the most trusted mean of communication, it is evident that visuals can greatly supplement the effectiveness of textual documents. For example, Richard E. Mayer, in an experiment he undertook, compared students who learnt only from textual descriptions to those who studied texts that were additionally laden with visual
representations of data. He found that while both groups acquired the same information, students who viewed the imagery had a better understanding than those who did not. (Otero 2002, p. 344) Mayer came to the conclusion that when viewing images, one must actively seek out information rather than remaining a passive reader, and thus, by becoming a participant in the interpretation of meaning, one gains a far better understanding of the source’s intended meaning. (Otero 2002, p. 334)

Whilst the aforementioned theory deals with the application of images to scientific learning and factual documents, the same theory can be applied to creative works. Whilst factual documents aim to inform their viewers, narratives must engage their audience on a far deeper level, as they rely on entertainment and the social significance of embedded meaning to hold the attention of their audience. In this respect, illustrations can greatly benefit the escapist qualities of storytelling, lending it a credibility that its fictional status belies. This suspension of belief is a vital tool which the conscientious storyteller may manipulate, in the pursuit of constructing coherent meaning and conveying their views to their readership.

2.3.2 Semiotics

One way in which images can be imbued with inherent information is through semiotics, or the study of signs as a mode of communication. The term ‘signs’ broadly encompasses any kind of deliberately-made imagery. Hodge and Kress define semiotics as the theory that all sign-making is social, and therefore always has a social interest or intrinsic agenda within its construction. (Burn & Parker 2003, p. 5) Within visual medium, there are few accidental structures; we can safely assume that whatever we see has been purposefully constructed in this specific way in order to convey meaning to us, whether it be a minor element, or a major facilitator of understanding. In graphic novels, semiotics are fundamentally any non-textual communications which take place within the piece. Without this semiotic representation of ideas embedded in imagery, the unique format of the ‘graphic novel’ could not exist.

In order to make deciphering the motivations behind semiotic imagery simpler to determine, Jay L. Lemke (1995, p. 6) devised three general classifications for
different types of sign-making:
- representational, semiotics which represent some aspect of the world
- orientational, semiotics which forge a connection between two people
- organisational, semiotics which organize information into a more easily interpreted form

This last type of semiotic is, according to Lemke, necessary for the other two forms to occur, as it composes information in a coherent format which can be understood by persons other than the author. Most graphic novels also conform to one, or both, of the other two types of semiotics.

The effectiveness of semiotics relies on how easily their inherent concept is recognized. Scott McCloud points out that a drawing of an object does not have the same physicality and real-world status as the object itself. (1993, p. 26) It is merely a proxy; a flat, page-bound impersonation, which nevertheless carries the same associations as its real-life counterpart. A symbol may imitate the superficial appearance of a concrete object, such as a ‘car’, ‘hammer’, ‘gorgonzola’; or it may give expression to an abstract entity, such as ‘hope’, ‘joy’ or ‘depression’. It is here that imagery’s unique features diverge from the constraints of reality, as they can give such intangible ideas a visual depiction which does not exist in real life. It is this ability to convey any message, about any subject or idea that can possibly be imagined, which truly gives visual media an advantage over all others.

2.3.3 Multimodality Theory

Just as semiotics is an off-shoot of visual literacy, multimodal theory is in turn a subcategory of semiotics. This ideology concerns itself with works which are created via the synthesis of two or more individual elements. According to Burn and Parker:

“Multimodality theory is a form of semiotics; a theory for the analysis of sign systems, or modes of communication… it looks for semiotic principles common to all forms of communication that are relevant in any given instance… and it looks for ways to describe systematically how these modes might relate to each other; [for example] how the meaning of [spoken] words might be changed by accompanying gestures.” (2003, p. 4)

Essentially, multimodality theory seeks to analyse the integral parts of a constructed text, and interpret its overall meaning as a sum of numerous contributing parts.
Multimodality is gaining far greater prevalence in various fields. For example, film has long utilized the disparate senses of sight and hearing, synchronizing them in order to conjure elaborate cinematic effects. Recently, director Robert Rodriguez has taken these principles to greater extremes, additionally incorporating scratch-and-sniff fragrance cards into the movie-going experience, further heightening his audience’s feeling of transcendent escapism. (Abaius 2011, <www.filmschoolrejects.com>) Graphic novels do not have the luxury of being able to integrate genuine sound and scent into their format; however, they can approximate such sensations, through the use of onomatopoeia, abstract imagery, motion lines, starbursts, and other semiotic devices. This means that while technically only engaging the viewer’s sense of sight, a graphic novel can emulate several senses at once, immersing the audience in a synthesis of evoked sensations.

In the case of the graphic novel, the two ‘modes’ being investigated for their interactions are written text and visual imagery. Within the pages of a graphic novel, these two elements inter-relate to create a more complex meaning than either could create on its own. The use of multiple modes of communication can also make the audience more aware of context. Mayer ascertains as much:

“According to the cognitive theory of multimedia learning, a major step in meaningful learning is to connect corresponding visual and verbal representations. When text is presented alone or separated from illustrations, this process is hindered.” (Otero 2002, p. 354)

This, Mayer surmised, is because image and language are processed by two separate mental channels; when both channels are engaged, the viewer’s perception of the information is far more complete. (Otero 2002, p. 349) The process of combining, contrasting and simultaneously interpreting various elements further exercises the recipient’s cognitive powers; the association between the two elements prompts a more engaging interaction between the semiotics and their receiver.

Words and images form the basis of the graphic novel’s entire construction, and henceforth, the techniques used to arrange, contrast and combine these two elements becomes a primary focus. Scott McCloud has written extensively (1993, 2000 & 2006) on the different word-image interactions which commonly occur across a range of graphic novels, and the effect each of these combinations has on the story in which it appears. In his view, an ideal balance would prevent neither words nor imagery from
becoming the dominant element of the document, with the other, lesser entity added merely as an augmentation. Both modes should work in harmony with each other, not necessarily equally, but in proportions which complement their respective purposes. The mastery – or at least, the solid foundation – of this specialized skill will occupy much of my practice based enquiry, as well as much of my theoretical investigations, as later chapters will demonstrate.

2.4 Methods

Once the theoretical and philosophical approaches have been established, the active process of acquiring data can begin. This study employs numerous types of data collection, in order to gain a more rounded view of the subject matter. These various approaches focus mainly on the different interactions associated with the graphic novel, namely that of the author as opposed to that of the audience. In the first stage, extensive research provides the raw data the study requires, examining what is already known about the subject and formulating it into the researcher’s own theories. Case study is used to dissect the structure of pre-existing graphic novels, critically analysing the effectiveness of their varying constructs and comparing multiple examples to each other, thereby examining a range of techniques used by different authors. My own role then shifts from that of an audience member to that of an author, as I commence a practice based enquiry, gaining further understanding of the creation process through personal experience and active participation. Finally, I undertake an exegesis to reflectively analyse this practice, the issues that arise from it, and the product which results from it.

2.4.1 Research

The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘research’ as “the systematic investigation into the study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions.” (cited in Wigan 2006, p. 18) Those last three words are vital to the research process; to merely recount what has already been said would not contribute anything new to the existing field of knowledge. This would result in not a research
dissertation, but in an extended literature review. As well as collecting data, the researcher must contextualize and interpret this data, turning it into new knowledge. In the case of my own study, it is not expected that any radical discovery will be made; however, new interpretations of the subject may come to light, an alternate viewpoint formed. By combining and consolidating the knowledge of others, we can, as the saying goes, ‘stand on the shoulders of giants’, reaching conclusions which are not new themselves, but which use numerous strains of information to create a better-informed whole.

When undertaking the analysis of an artefact or text, all findings related by the researcher are in fact the opinions of the researcher, grounded in their particular sociological circumstances and cultural upbringing. As an analyst of a doctored meaning, the researcher must also consider the contrasting reactions of others. This is particularly true of sources which are as open to general interpretation as the graphic novel. In such a case, as already determined by the constructionist nature of this enquiry, to label any interpretation of fact as the ‘correct one’ would be futile; what an informed analyst must do is predict the expected outcome, investigate the sociological context from which the author comes, and acknowledge the expressed opinions of other analysts – in the form of reviewers, critics, practitioners within the field, and members of the general audience. The researcher must, in effect, act as the judge, presiding a courtroom full of differing opinions, by being fully aware of the circumstances: “[the researcher] recognizes that much of the likely interpretation of a text depends on the contextual information such as genre, wider discourses in culture and [other similar sources].” (McKee, 2003, p. 131)

If one is to study the creative process of making a graphic novel, the resulting publication is merely the outcome of such an event, and as such reveals only limited data about the process itself. Nevertheless, the analysis of the graphic novel as a design artefact is infinitely valuable, if for no reason other than the fact that it fulfils the product’s purpose: a graphic novel is made to be read, to communicate a specific message or story to its viewer. In this case, the researcher interacts with the graphic novel in the role of the audience.

By contrast, some professionals who actually participate in the industry (see Chapter 3.1.1 for specific examples) have written accounts of their work methods from
their own perspectives, giving the reader an insight into the role of the author; these writings could be classified as primary sources. The experience of the author has equal significance as that of the audience; the creation of meaning takes place where these two roles intersect. By investigating this producer/consumer relationship, we can begin to understand how the graphic novel works as a means of visual communication.

2.4.2 Case Study

“The discipline of illustration has a vast and rich history. Contextualising one’s work within and beyond that history is a way of establishing your own critical dialogue.” – Mark Wigan (2006, p. 7)

According to a series of essays collected from a conference hosted by the Institute for Cultural Studies at the University of Leuven, visual narrative can “only be studied by comparing as many media and practices as possible.” (Baetens 2000, p. 8) Graphic novels are a very structurally-specific medium that can only be truly understood by examining it in its original context. An effective means of doing so is through the use of case studies.

Case study in a casual, almost unconscious form, is practiced by any professional, in almost every field. Even as individuals working alone, we do not work inside a vacuum, oblivious to all else that is taking place. By studying the efforts of their contemporaries, authors further their understandings of their own process and creative objectives. In almost any case, to look at one example of a work from any given industry is to form a partial understanding of aspects of the industry itself. One of the great benefits of case study research is that it grants the researcher insight into the rendering techniques and narrative devices that have been used by professionals who are proven to be successful in the field. By studying the works of others who have already achieved similar aims to our own, we can inform ourselves – and others – on how to proceed in future endeavours.

In his book, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, Robert K. Yin identifies three distinctly different types of case studies – descriptive, explanatory, and exploratory. Each different type of case study will potentially yield a different kind of result, and the choice of which to use is based on the nature of the research question.
(1989, p. 15-16) For this dissertation, an exploratory case study is probably the most relevant type to pursue. This thesis seeks to not only describe what has been done in the past, as in a descriptive study; nor to just explain how a graphic novel has been constructed, as in an explanatory study; but to connect a described structural form to an explanatory reflection of the work’s intended meaning, thereby exploring the symbiotic relationships between text and image, and investigating the possibilities of how they can better work together as one medium. Exploratory case studies focus on ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions; for example, “What are the ways in which an effective school is operated?” (Yin 1989, p. 17) This thesis asks questions of a similar format – “What are the ways in which effective graphic novels have been constructed?” “How has the author expressed their meaning through textual and visual form?” “How can what I have seen be applied to my own work?” An exploratory investigation would yield the qualitative results sought in this investigation.

This thesis endeavours to examine the structure of the graphic novel format, and since every creator has their own individual means of conveying meaning, there is no definitive ‘right’ way, or even a limited number of ‘right’ ways, to structure a graphic novel. In this instance, case studies provide us with the means by which to compare numerous varying, equally valid solutions, so that their relevance to certain, specific contexts may be evaluated. Multiple case studies are thereby essential, in order to collect a sufficient range of qualitative data. Some sort of general criteria must be used to selected cases for study. To randomly select works for investigation would prove pointless, as graphic novels are available in a plethora of varying genres, vernaculars and styles. The most practical method is to review a series of works that do not demonstrate replication, i.e. near-identical outcomes in varying contexts which compound to emphasise a single conclusion (Yin 1989, p. 53); but to choose varying works with widely different structures and outcomes, forming a realistic representation of the sheer range that exists in the industry.

Given the constructionist grounding of this study and the subjective view a researcher will inevitably take when selectively studying the works of others, the case studies presented in this body of research should ideally contain the opinions and viewpoints of other external reviewers, wherever possible, in order to validate the relevance of these chosen cases. These external reviews may provide insight either by
informing and supporting the researcher's views, or challenging the researcher with conflicting reviews, establishing a more well-formed representation of the varied artefact-audience relations generated by a single document with multiple audience participants.

2.4.3 Practice Based Enquiry

“The word ‘sketch’ sounds a little light and vague for what is the illustrator's essential daily tool... A primary use of the sketchbook is to reflect on personal progress and to act as an aid for future projects.”
– Mark Wigan (2006, p. 20)

A creative project is not just a spontaneous invention, but a conscious application of accumulated knowledge. It is as much a cultivation of skill as it is an intellectual exercise; the methods and techniques of artistic creation are put into active use. Throughout the process, the practitioner seeks improvement, innovation, and discovery, both in the final product that results from the making process, and in the experience of the process itself.

Although practice based learning is a separate activity from researching and reviewing the works of others, it cannot be completely isolated from the theoretical component of study. As participants in a field of knowledge, as well as undertaking our own practices, we are aware of the practices of our colleagues, compatriots, rivals and mentors; and all this knowledge of pre-existing practices inevitably influences our own. Says Sullivan, 2004: “the capacity to create understanding and thereby critique knowledge is central to the visual arts and the artists are actively involved in these kinds of research practices.” (p. 48) Any practitioner will start to meld the lessons of the past to fit his or her understanding; it is a natural process which furthers their craft.

By acting as a prospective author, I can follow a similar process of analysis and learning via osmosis, gleaning inspiration from what has been produced before. Despite any research I may carry out, I am aware that none of it can truly prepare me for the creation process itself; in order to learn how to do, the only real means of learning is by actually doing myself. Reading about somebody else’s practice and actually practising will always be worlds apart; likewise, my own methods will inevitably vary from those of other practitioners, no matter how closely I try to follow their examples. Conventions
and precedents become irrelevant; it is futile to emulate the work methods of the world’s most successful artist, if their routine just doesn’t happen to suit me. I must find a system of practise which is specific to my preferences, my practical requirements, and my personal tastes. The point of the exercise is not to imitate, but to assimilate the advice of others, then differentiate my approach, tailoring it directly to my own needs. By acknowledging and documenting my specific process, I can improve my practice and better inform myself for future endeavours. Once I have discovered my own idiom of the creation process, I can then share it with others, so that they might in turn judge its relevance for themselves, and use it to create their own personalized idiom.

My studio practice will culminate in a self-authored graphic novel which reflects insights and knowledge acquired whilst undertaking theoretical research. This graphic novel will be produced as a separate document supporting this dissertation, and as a design artefact in its own right. As part of my study, I will record a series of project journals containing observations on my own practice, making entries throughout the duration of the project. These journals will not be made directly available to readers, due to their personal, informal nature; however, I will refer to these journals in my dissertation, where appropriate. As well as written observations on the project’s development, and the finished graphic novel itself as the primary result of my study, process sketches and visual experimentations will also be included. According to Mark Wigan, “for the illustrator, drawing is a fundamental visual thinking tool.” (2006, p. 20) As such, this study will pay just as much attention to the rough conceptual process as to the final, refined product.

2.4.4 Exegesis

“[Exegesis is] not simply a pragmatic response to the increasingly complex working conditions; it is what begins to happen wherever artists talk about what they are doing, in that simple but enigmatic step, joining hand, eye and mind in a process of material thinking.” – Barbara Bolt (2007, p. 30)

Exegesis traditionally was, and still is, concerned with the interpretation of biblical documents. This definition has now changed to include not just biblical works, but all kinds of doctored artefacts. The term deals with the examination of how we
create meaning through the authoring of a document or object. The exegesis is, according to Julie Fletcher and Alan Mann, a common feature of the ‘creative thesis’ model. (2004, <www.textjournal.com.au>) When it accompanies an artistic work, its task is to explain the process behind that work’s creation. As such, Alan McKee describes an exegesis as “the material traces that are left of the practice of sense-making – the only empirical evidence we have of how other people make sense of the world.” (2003, p. 15) Exegesis, then, is a means of investigating how we see our world, through the works we create.

Practitioner-based enquiry is sometimes criticized as an undisciplined, insubstantial form of research. This is due to, as Estelle Barrett expresses it, to the “complex experimental, material and social processes through which artistic production occurs and is subsequently taken up, [which mean that] it is not always possible to quantify outcomes of studio production.” (Barrett & Bolt, 2007 p. 3) The creative process can be elusive when it comes to observation and/or documentation. Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi explain the difficulty: whilst it is relatively easy to observe an artist painting or sculpting:

“it is not so easy, and often not possible at all, to observe the process of creation while it is occurring, from the germ of an idea to its fruition as a finished painting or sculpture.” (1976, p. 3)

Whilst physical activities such as drawing, experimenting, sketching and rendering may be the factual events which take place in the studio, most of the actual process takes place inside the artist’s head. Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi admit that even when artists consciously record their own process, “they are usually too involved in the doing to describe analytically what they do.” (1976, p.3)

This problem can be remedied somewhat by carrying out systematic documentation during the creative process, such as a learning journal, as I have done. It is also possibly because of these issues that most first-hand observations on the creative process are written after the fact, when authors have sufficient distance from process and product to view them reflectively. Martin Heidegger termed this reflective knowledge ‘circumspection’, as it takes in all the accumulation of knowledge that preceded the creation process, the process itself, and evaluation of the result. (Barrett and Bolt 2007, p.30) Trevor Bennett stresses the importance of theorizing on the
process only after it has occurred, as otherwise, the exegesis “begins to drive their practice, rather than to explain and examine that practice. [The author’s] work can become institutionalised; they may end up merely illustrating a theory rather than creating.” (2007, p. 2)

Just as reading about art-making and actually making art are two very different processes, the act of explaining both creation and creative process to outsiders is different again. The average reader may not understand why I have done this research, what can be learned from it, or what value it has. An exegesis then becomes essential, as it contextualizes the work that I have done, fitting it into a body of pre-established knowledge, and elucidating the specific developments which were unique to my experience.

It is at this point that my study comes full circle; analytical discourse turns to practice, then returns to discourse again, though the perspective has now completely shifted, from observer and researcher to participant and practitioner. At this conclusive stage, every aspect of my study comes together, justifying every step I have taken and revealing what I have learned at each stage – from reading and reviewing the works of others, conducting research into scholarly sources, to using this gleaned knowledge in my own practise, and finally reflecting upon everything that I have done. It is the exegesis which unites all these parts; it “synthesises research and creative practice within an integrated project”. (Fletcher & Mann 2004, <www.textjournal.com.au>) It is this cycle of discovery and self-awareness which informs artistic theory, turning personal experience into a field of knowledge, which can be shared with and appreciated by others.
Chapter Three

Literature Review
It is very fortunate that over the past few years, the graphic novel has gained greater notice as a topic for investigative and instructional literature. Whereas there were once only a meagre handful of materials dedicated to the technical aspects of visual storytelling, there is now a burgeoning library for the researcher to peruse. These texts prove to be invaluable, as they provide many insights into both the historical development of the medium and the direction it appears set to take in the future. Without this expert knowledge from well-known and respected professionals, my own research would not have had a sturdy base on which to stand.

The first step in the research process is to identify and analyse the key sources which will aid me throughout my study. These sources will then be used to examine a number of stereotypes and misconceptions which are traditionally associated with the graphic novel. Using my sources as a gauge, I will reference them whilst I question the validity of these clichéd views, forming a more complete and accurate picture of the medium’s potential. By doing so, I will be able to build a more accurate profile of the ‘comic book’ industry; this collation of data will then inform the rest of my study.

The findings from this literature review are offered to readers of this thesis as vital background information, particularly for anyone who has hitherto had little experience with the comic book industry. The overall aim of this chapter is to broaden and better-inform the average layman’s view on what a graphic novel actually is. For this chapter, the definition of ‘literature’ will be confined to publications which look at the graphic novel from an analytical point of view; actual graphic novels themselves will be explored later, in Chapter 4.5.

3.1 Key Sources

Texts which relate to the study of graphic novels can be roughly divided into two categories. The first are those which were produced by practitioners, i.e. professionals who have themselves created graphic novels, working right inside the industry. Other authors can be classified as observers; persons such as historians, journalists and researchers who have documented the development of the medium with
an outsider’s point of view. Of course, this chapter certainly does not contain every single author on the subject; however it does include the most significant and informative resources that my research has uncovered.

3.1.1 Practitioners

It is reasonably safe to say that few can know the industry better than the very people who work within it. Practitioners offer a rare insight into the creation process itself: the developmental stage which is never actually seen by audiences, yet forms the bulk of what goes into the final product. As well as documenting their own processes and analysing the works of others like themselves, practitioners often present their findings as instructive guides, teaching others their craft and thereby opening the industry to the next generation of creators. Of course there is no single ‘right way’ to produce a graphical novel, and the lessons imparted by the authors of these publications are as unique as they are themselves.


Recognized as a pioneer of the industry, Eisner is to graphic novels what Walt Disney was to animation. More than that, he is recognized as the first industry participant to use the term ‘graphic novel’ to describe his own work. Eisner’s professional work took a far less frivolous tone than that of his contemporaries; even in the syndicated series he produced for the newspapers’ Sunday ‘funnies’, he endeavoured to take the format to higher standards, refusing to give his main characters the superhero costume that were de rigueur at the time, and writing stories with a level of depth which was, and still is, remarkable.

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6 The term, according to Gravett, was actually coined by Richard Kyle in a 1964 article in a low-circulation newspaper; however, Eisner was the first industry figure well-known and respected enough to make the term stick. (2005, p. 38)
The likely reason why he was so far ahead of his contemporaries was that he alone took his craft completely seriously. In 1940, in an interview with the Baltimore Sun, Eisner stated that ‘comics’ were a legitimate artistic form. (McCloud 2000a, p. 26) However, his opinion was seldom shared, not even by others within his own industry. In a conversation with then-industry-veteran Rube Goldberg, the latter reportedly berated him: “That’s bullshit, kid! We’re not artists! We’re vaudevillians! And don’t you ever forget that!” (McCloud 2000a, p. 26) Even flying in the face of this opposition, Eisner believed in the potential of the format – as art, as literature, and as a storytelling medium. In his own words: “There was nowhere to go in comic books, and yet I realized that I would be spending the rest of my life in comics. I really believed in the validity of this medium.” (Heintjes 1992, p. 3)

The result of Eisner’s campaign was a duo of ‘text books’ on the subject; though they only appeared a little under thirty years ago, they were still the first of their kind. Unlike previous ‘how to’ books which taught things like anatomy, perspective, and rendering techniques, Eisner’s publications focus on the more instinctive aspects of storytelling, such as pacing, framing, and most importantly, narrative development. The two books, ‘Comics and Sequential Art’ and ‘Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative’, were based on the syllabus Eisner developed for his teachings at the New York School of Visual Arts (Eisner 1985, p. xii). In them, he delved into how imagery could be constructed with audience interpretation in mind; how to build and sustain a cohesive narrative; and how graphic novels could communicate in a way unlike any other medium. All these lessons were delivered in clear, concise anecdotes and with appropriate images, some of them by other artists, but most of them by Eisner himself. Many of these were rough pencil drawings rather than finished artwork, giving further emphasis to Eisner’s point that good storytelling and an instinctive sense of visual literacy were of a higher priority than polished draftsmanship.

Eisner’s ‘instructional books’ were a catalyst within the industry; even today, they are still regarded as ground-breaking. Jerry Craft says that when he first picked up Eisner’s books at the age of ten, “the only other similar book I saw at that time was How

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7 Eisner started producing another book, ‘Expressive Anatomy for Comics and Narrative’, which addresses these topics. It was published in 2008, three years after Eisner’s death. Whilst it is moderately instructive, it is not as insightful as his other publications, covering ideas closer to those found in typical ‘how-to-draw’ books.
Craft continues: “I was blown away that there was that much thought process behind [graphic novels]. As a kid you think it just comes out.” (Andelman 2005, p. 360) Eisner gave readers an insight into the conceptual stage of graphic novel production, a process which readers would have otherwise remained completely unaware of. As a creator himself, Craft took Eisner’s lessons to heart, realizing that every element on a page had visual significance; the slightest variation, even thickening a line or bolding certain words, could alter the meaning entirely. (Andelman 2005, p. 360)

Professionals still regard Eisner’s books as the definitive resource upon which they base their own work. Writer Neil Gaiman declared that “if I were starting out today, with all the books on comics and graphic novels out there, I’d still begin with [these books].” (Eisner 1985, n. pag.) Scott McCloud states several times that he used Eisner as a starting point from which to base his own enquiry. Perhaps the most telling sign of the industry’s respect for the man is that the highest accolade it can award, the cartoonists’ version of the ‘Oscars’, are named the ‘Eisners’ in his honour.


If Eisner was the pioneer of graphic novel research, McCloud took up where he left off, and finished the job more thoroughly than anyone else could have done. Himself a writer and artist, as well as a ground-breaker in the world of webcomics, it is his treatise on the format itself which has made him a famous industry figure. The greatest marvel of McCloud’s work is that it is an essay on the graphic novel which is itself presented as a graphic novel. The three books which make up the ‘Comics’ trilogy

8 A ‘how-to’ guide published by Marvel Comics, this was more of an in-house style-guide than an actual instructional book, and was greatly limited in its applications. As the name suggests, it teaches readers how to draw like an artist working at Marvel, but as a resource on graphic novels, it is only really useful to Marvel employees and people who want to be able to draw like them.

9 Their admiration was mutual; in turn, Eisner quoted McCloud in Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative. (1996, p. xvii)
are: *Understanding Comics*, an exposé of the format’s much-maligned past, dispelling common misconceptions whilst introducing the basic fundamentals of the format; *Reinventing Comics*, which delves into the industry itself, covering marketing and publishing issues, as well as the effect of technology on the graphic novel’s development; and finally *Making Comics*, essentially a ‘how-to’ guide, though like Eisner, McCloud focuses less on rendering techniques, more on narrative development and visual construct.

The influence of McCloud’s treatise was just as pronounced as that of Eisner’s, though McCloud’s viewpoint is a far more current one, and he additionally presented his findings in the very format he was describing. His mastery of the visual language, along with his innate understanding of the industry and his boundless enthusiasm for the medium’s potential, make his message all the more convincing and compelling. If Eisner’s work was that of a teacher lecturing to his students, McCloud’s was the bold manifesto of a visionary, ordering the industry to shape up and improve itself, as much as it was asking outsiders to reconsider the format anew. Unlike Eisner, who is still remembered for his actual graphic novels as much as his research papers, McCloud became associated solely with his textbook series, “like a band with a hit song.” (McCloud 2000a, n. pag.) However, he seems perfectly happy to take on the role of revolutionary, leading a movement which he sees as essential to the longevity and development of the medium.

It is difficult to find anyone in the industry who has not been affected by McCloud’s work – Will Eisner, Jim Lee, Neil Gaiman, Alan Moore, Art Spiegelman, Frank Miller; even those outside the industry, such as Matt Groening, enthuse about him. (McCloud 1993, n. pag.) Shaun Tan, who had not previously read comics and did not come from a background in graphic novels (having almost exclusively worked in ‘picture books’) before creating his own, found *Understanding Comics* to be an indispensable aid whilst working on his wordless story, *The Arrival*. (Tan 2006b, <http://www.shauntan.net/>). Writer Alan Moore says that the books are “quite simply the best analysis of the medium that I have ever encountered. With this book Scott McCloud has taken breathtaking leaps towards establishing a critical language that the comic art form can work with and build upon in the future.” (McCloud 2006, n. pag.)
Indeed, McCloud does not merely reminisce about the history of the format, nor is he content to just instruct readers on how graphic novels should be created today; his works look into the future, anticipating and encouraging a medium that finally starts to meet its true potential. An advocate of new technologies, McCloud continues his observations on his website, ‘scottmccloud.com’, and has been instrumental in the development of the digitally-published webcomic. Whether he works on screen or on paper, he remains the undisputed major-general who will lead graphic novels into the future, towards greater achievement and recognition.

Shaun Tan: ShaunTan.net (2008); Sketches from a Nameless Land (2010); The Bird King and Other Sketches (2010)

Shaun Tan is a rarity among practitioners. Not only is his approach to the graphic novel format innovative, his rendering technique almost virtuoso in its meticulous attention to detail, his works internationally acclaimed and highly awarded. Besides all these incredible achievements, he is also gifted with the ability to articulate his own working process into a comprehensive discourse that shares it with others. Despite the success he’s had in his professional life, he is humble; he is the first to claim that his opinions are solely concerned with his own practice, and may be of no use to anyone else. (Graphic 2010, n. pag.) He is overly modest in this estimation, as his writings and collections of published ‘sketchbooks’ offer an insight into not just the physical creative process, but also the mind of the creator, a perspective which is seldom shared with anyone else at all, let alone with the audience.

Some of Tan’s expositions on creativity came about more by accident than by design. Having amassed a huge back-catalogue of sketches, Tan describes how he never intended to show his production sketches to anyone else – in fact, some of them barely escaped the recycling bin. However, friends assured him that people would be interested in seeing them, and encouraged him to publish them. (Tan & Chan 2010, n. pag.) Over the course of several online articles, miniature essays and published journals, he reveals a complex, convoluted, yet perfectly rational and ingenious thought process, which meanders its way through a variety of different projects.
Some of these revelations are specific to certain works, e.g. *Sketches From a Nameless Land*, released as a companion piece to Tan’s 2006 picture book, *The Arrival*. Others do not reference a particular project, but deal with creativity and the creation process in general. An example of this is *The Bird King and Other Sketches*, a series of unrelated drawings taken straight from Tan’s art diaries. These are, in a sense, an artist’s ideas in their rawest form (or, at least, the rawest physical form). They contain a charming element of spontaneity, are devoid of any self-consciousness, and probably come closer than anything else to revealing the unadulterated stream of ideas and inspirations that flood the mind of a productive author. These visual musings are accompanied by simple titles which are usually just as ambiguous, if not more so, than the works they are ascribed to. There is also a sort of glossary at the end of the book; some of its entries are nothing more than the title and artistic medium of their associated drawing, others containing a few additional lines to explain where the idea came from and the factors that inspired it. This reflects Tan’s preference for viewer participation; he would rather have his audience decide for themselves what his pictures are about, rather than dictating his own take to them with no room for further interpretation. By contrast, some of Tan’s other writings are far more direct: in particular, two essays available on his website address which age bracket his works are targeted at (*Picture Books: Who Are They For?*) and the nature of the creative process (*Originality and Creativity*). These expositions are drawn mostly from Tan’s personal philosophies, and use his own projects as case studies to reinforce his ideas, serving as his own form of exegesis.

Whilst all these writings are, as Tan admits, closely related to his own work, this does not mean that they speak only about his own work. All his explanations are backed by personal experience, and this experience, in turn, becomes a wider knowledge which can be applied to his entire craft. The theories and anecdotes he puts forward are indirect lessons which advise and guide those who also sketch, those who also have stories to tell, and those who also live in the grip of an overwhelming succession of ideas. Creativity is a mysterious thing, even to those who own it; Tan, in a personal correspondence (Tan & Chan 2010, n. pag.), has said that he at least tries to help others make sense of the unpredictable tides which reside in this stream of creativity. After all, we are all in the same boat.
3.1.2 Observers

Although they do not work directly within the medium, ‘observers’ should not be discounted as mere secondary sources. There are two sides to the graphic novel experience: that of the creator, and that of the reader. The reader’s role is just as vital as that of the creator; it is the reader who receives, interprets, and recreates the author’s intended meaning. If the audience is not receptive to the ideas that the author has attempted to express, then the graphic novel becomes redundant as a storytelling medium.

Researchers who examine graphic novels from an observer’s point of view tend to be nevertheless embroiled in the industry in some capacity. Some are working professionals who work in vocations relating to art, literature, publishing or journalism; at the very least, they are unofficial fans, readers and enthusiasts. Observers also have the advantage of greater objectivity; unlike creators, who are biased by their loyalty to their own methods and intentions, observers can document the many variations between differing practitioners with less personal bias. Besides which, a fellow magician is more likely to know how a trick is done, thereby seeing the technique rather than the effect; an uninitiated observer is more receptive to the overall effect an author has created, having a more spontaneous reaction to the work’s inherent ‘magic’ and definitively assessing how successful it truly is.

Paul Gravett: Graphic Novels - Stories to Change Your Life (2005); Manga - Sixty Years of Japanese Comics (2004)

Paul Gravett has, as his website proudly boasts, been involved in the comic book industry since 1981. (2006, <http://www.paulgravett.com>) During those years, he has worn a variety of different hats – publisher, promoter, editor, reviewer, journalist, curator, lecturer, and author, just to name a few. It is probably the last of these professions for which he is best known. Between 2005 and 2008, Gravett wrote a series of tomes on graphic novels, each of them focusing on a different genre or demographic of the industry, including Japanese manga, the British industry, and crime-noir comics.
However, the best-known book in the series is the first, which explores the general, international world of *Graphic Novels*, and is aptly subtitled ‘*Stories to Change Your Life*’. (2005, n. pag.)

Gravett’s book is probably the best place for a beginner to start learning about the industry, as it is more or less a ‘best of’ compilation, sampling every work which Gravett feels has a certain significance to the development of the medium, or is simply of a remarkably high standard. What he has created is a kind of connoisseur’s guide, a ‘must-read’ list which contains only the freshest cream of the crop. As well as including historical anecdotes and deconstructing the stigma around the medium, Gravett undertakes several ‘in focus’ examinations of certain graphic novels which he considers particularly note-worthy. These consist of several reproduced spreads from the work in question, with captions, commentary, quotes from literary reviews, anecdotes from industry figures, and breakdowns of both graphic and narrative structures. After each of these in-depth case studies, there are several smaller dissections of other similar works which ‘follow on’ from the main ones; the message to readers is that if they like one work Gravett has featured, there is a list of several others which they might also enjoy. All the books in Gravett’s series are, in essence, collections of case studies. Although Gravett claims that the novels chosen are merely “personal favourites that struck me profoundly at the time I first read them and have stayed with me ever since” (2005, p. 12), they are seemingly chosen with some method in mind; his chosen ‘favourites’ are all recognized by some critic or external researcher as having defined a specific genre, or made some contribution to the overall development of the medium.

Gravett is probably well-qualified to act as a selector of top-grade works, due to two key qualifiers. The first is the sheer volume of graphic novels he has seen; as well as having seemingly read and reviewed every note-worthy publication available on store shelves, in the past he has worked as an agent and editor for amateur novelists. In this capacity, he was often tasked with selecting submissions for various comics-related periodicals. This means that, between his professional duties and his private interests, he has read a massive number of works. The second qualifier is his deep immersion within the industry itself, which led artist Eddie Campbell to call him ‘the Man at the Crossroads’. (Gravett 2006, <http://www.paulgravett.com>) Campbell, and many others who know Gravett personally, regard him as a visionary who can see what is happening
in all sectors of the industry – in different nations, publishing houses and genres – and somehow reconcile all these various strains into a single, universal medium. He then promotes and supports the most esteemed works his research has turned up; this process has resulted in his books, which display a very broad cross-section of the world’s various graphic novel markets.

Although not actually a practitioner himself, Gravett has so many contacts in the industry, and has contributed to so many publications, that he has become a central figure within it. Reflecting the years of expertise he has gathered in his chosen field, his books are a veritable encyclopaedia on the comic book world. With his own unique skills and affinity for great storytelling, he has made himself an authority on a craft which he himself does not actively practise, yet of which he has become the most respected of connoisseurs.


*The Power of Comics* is the first of its kind: an official textbook on graphic novels, specifically written as support material for courses offered at universities and colleges. Duncan and Smith, both of whom come from academic teaching backgrounds¹⁰, have pooled their professional knowledge to co-author *The Power of Comics*, a study-guide tailored to their specific academic approach. The book in question reads very much like a textbook; each chapter is followed by ‘discussion questions’ and suggested ‘in-class activities’. As one of the most recent books to be written on the topic, Duncan and Smith have had a number of terrific sources available to them in compiling their own dissertation; they heavily reference the works of Eisner and McCloud.

However, like many things that are the ‘first of their kind’, it is not without some imperfections. For a start, though it boasts more than 150 images, these are all black and white, and most are poor in quality, pixelated and badly reproduced. In addition, Duncan and Smith themselves admit that the book is limited to information on the

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¹⁰ They have respectively studied and taught Communications(Duncan) and Media Studies (Smith). (Duncan & Smith n.d., <www.powerofcomics.com/>)
American industry, excluding other world demographics; and to print-based works, as opposed to webcomics and other electronic media. (2009, p. vii) The book is restricted by other, similar limitations: for one thing, it tends to focus mostly on popular commercial publishing houses, such as Marvel and DC. Also, whilst it mentions that many genres exist within the industry, it tends to focus on ‘superhero comics’, devoting a whole chapter solely to them. It addresses the historical background of ‘comics’ in detail, yet it does not venture far into the viewpoint of graphic novels’ creators, at times reading like a rehash of McCloud’s or Eisner’s works. Though it deals with a very visual subject matter, the publication is mostly text-based, making for a rather dry, often tedious read.

Overall, *The Power of Comics* tends to see the graphic novel industry not as a whole, but as being still divided by many boundaries – national and racial, genre, separate publishing houses, etc. – and whilst this ‘old school’ view may be historically accepted, it is not necessarily a realistic depiction of the industry today. It does manage to stand out from other works when it makes the effort to diversify; in particular, its summary of the industry across various countries – relegated to a single chapter, with the rest of the book, as mentioned, dealing exclusively with the American market – manages to deliver a succinct, incisive overview of what is happening on each continent. It is a shame there are not more of these instances. Whilst it may be useful as an academic text, or as a written history of American publishing, *The Power of Comics* fails to contribute any original insight. Then again, that is not really its main intention; it seeks to explain what has gone before, not to blaze any new trails itself. These negatives aside, it may be useful as a guide to the commercial industry, and as an examination of the medium as a pop culture phenomenon. This perspective will become particularly relevant in the following chapter.
3.2 The Bigger Picture

“The graphic novel is not literary fiction’s half-wit cousin, but, more accurately, the mutant sister who can often do everything fiction can, and, just as often, more.” – Dave Eggers

Graphic novels have very much grown up as a secular industry, only fully understood by a relatively small community of initiated disciples. Because of this, they can be quite difficult for an outsider to learn about. That is not to say that they are intimidating or inaccessible; on the contrary, the graphic novel’s versatility and broad appeal make it readily available to a very broad audience. However, this diversity has given rise to its own complications. Within the industry itself, there are a wide variety of stylistic ghettos and cliques. Knowing one part of the industry does not automatically mean understanding it all; a person who reads Marvel publications may not have an intimate knowledge of DC Comics, let alone Tokyopop or Le Lombard. While there is not enough space here to explore the entire industry, this chapter is, at the very least, a beginner’s guide to some essential facts.

More specifically, I wish to focus on the fallacies which are associated with the medium. Any study on the graphic novel must start, unfortunately, with first separating what they are from what they aren’t. Due to the persistent, and mostly negative, cultural identity that it has accumulated, the format is often belittled, berated, or simply misunderstood. The attitudes and biases which surround the graphic novel seem to have become ingrained in our society; stereotypes range from the spandex-loving, basement-dwelling geek to the overweight, sarcasm-spouting ‘comic-book-guy’ from The Simpsons. Whilst such portrayals are caricatures, they are the ones which tend to thrive at the forefront of public consciousness.

The following chapter features a series of common, and completely erroneous, myths which have long been associated with the graphic novel. This is my effort to set the record straight once and for all, laying the medium’s much-maligned history to rest, so that a proper understanding of the topic can be established before my study goes delving into deeper territory.

11 Cited in Gravett 2005, p. 2
3.2.1 ‘Comics are just for kids.’

“Today, adults read comic books, but back then the assumption was that we were writing for children, and all the material I was producing was based on formula, which ceased to be interesting. There was nowhere to go in comic books, and yet I realized that I would be spending the rest of my life in comics. I really believed in the validity of this medium.” – Will Eisner

During the 1950’s, a crippling event very nearly killed the graphic novel; as it was, it drastically inhibited its development. The source of this catastrophe can be traced to one man: psychiatrist Fredric Wertham. His book, The Seduction of Innocence (1954), purported that the graphic novel encouraged all kinds of vices, “from juvenile delinquency to sexual perversions to race hatred.” (McCloud 2000a, p. 86) His writings triggered an avalanche of public outcry, damning the medium. Although the first amendment prevented American comics from undergoing official censorship, most comic-book publishers voluntarily agreed to follow a strict code of ethics, creating a ‘Comics Code’ to enforce these new regulations. What resulted was a bland, patronizing and contrivace batch of publications, limited to G-rated topics and lacking any real diversity. This cataclysm hinged entirely on a single fact: everybody assumed that an illustrated medium must be aimed solely at children.

This view may sound old-fashioned, yet it is still surprisingly prevalent; even today, when I tell people that I want to work in illustration, more often than not the response will be: “Oh, so you want to do children’s books” – an experience which becomes frustrating with multiple repetitions. Of course, children are more than welcome to read graphic novels, and tend to be well catered for; however, not all graphic novels are suitable for children, and nor should they be. As a parallel example, many children like watching

Figure 1: The Comics Code’s seal of approval. (Duncan & Smith 2009, p. 39) Publications with it on its cover were guaranteed not to corrupt impressionable youth. Under the Code’s jurisdiction, graphic novels were not allowed to depict “horror, excessive bloodshed, gory or gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, [and] masochism”. (Duncan & Smith 2009, p. 40)
movies, but there is a vast difference between letting them watch the latest Disney feature, or the latest instalment of Saw. Nor does it mean that anything which does not have a G-rating should be banned or burnt; it is generally accepted that some films are only intended for adults, and that such materials should not be viewed by minors. Yet the film industry has never been attacked with quite the same levels of hysteria and complete lack of tolerance as that with which the graphic novel was assaulted, in the wake of Wertham’s call-to-arms.

Although graphic novels didn’t bring such a stigma upon themselves, in America at least, they certainly didn’t help their own cause. Children were, and still are, a convenient target audience, as they often prefer stories with pictures over those without. They can also be relied upon to purchase the toys, figurines and other merchandise associated with popular comic-book franchises. However, whilst children may be targeted by certain types of graphic novels, they should not become the medium’s sole audience, to the exclusion of all other demographics. Although a lot of the comics that were being published in America during Wertham’s time were somewhat sensational and intentionally shocking, McCloud does not blame the industry itself. He attributes the cause of this adverse reaction to the critics themselves, who completely misunderstood the medium’s intentions:

“As long as the broader community assumes that comics, by their nature, are without social value and, by their nature, are suitable only for kids, then charges of obscenity will always hit their mark. And for all our progress, those assumptions are still in force in many regions of the United States.”

(2000, p. 89)

While these viewpoints may have been, and still are, fairly prevalent within America, they are hardly universal. According to Paul Gravett, Japanese manga suffered a similar backlash – noticeably not in its own cultural context, but overseas. Travel writer Paul Theroux was reportedly horrified by the “decapitations, cannibalism, people bristling with arrows like Saint Sebastian” that he saw in one particular manga which had been left on a subway seat by the little girl sitting beside him. (Gravett 2004, p. 9) Japan, Gravett noted, had a far more mature attitude to graphic storytelling than its Western counterpart. This can probably be credited to the post-war success of the nationally-famed ‘God of Manga’, Osamu Tezuka. An intellectual man and qualified

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13 To my knowledge, at least; I must confess that I am not a film-buff.
doctor as well as a pioneering manga creator, he never wrote down to his audience. His works delve into complex sci-fi worlds of his own creation, telling stories across diverse genres; he even translated Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and an account of the life of Buddha into *manga*. Thanks to his initial influence, and the continued enthusiasm of the graphically-inclined consumer market, manga is accepted as a mainstream medium in Japan, to the incredible extent that in the year 1980, 27 percent of the 4.3 billion publications that were nationally produced – or 1.16 billion units – were some form of printed manga. (Schodt 1983, p. 12)

This is not to say that manga has never had its credibility tested; it has, and in the most horrific way imaginable. In 1989, a Japanese man murdered four little girls in a grotesque and depraved manner. It was later revealed that the perpetrator was so socially inept and isolated from the rest of the world, he spent most of his time alone in his apartment, which was stocked with a massive amount of manga. A psychoanalyst established that from the killer’s perspective, “the little girls he killed were no more than characters from his comic book life”. (Kinsella 2010, p. 309) While the murders were certainly a horrendous incident, the Japanese public was luckily able to separate the perpetrator from his preferred pastime. Manga readers did not all come to be regarded as potential criminals; to this day, it is not unusual, nor shameful, for respectable salary-men to be seen reading manga during their train commute to work.

Perhaps the exportation of Tezuka’s iconic *Tetsuwan Atomu* character across the Atlantic, to appear on American television during the 1960’s as *Astro Boy*, cemented the USA’s association of Japanese manga with children’s fare. Americans came to regard manga with much the same attitude with which they approached their own comics, causing readers to be shocked when more mature material subsequently followed Astro across the pond. In this respect, McCloud admits that his homeland “lagged far behind their European and Japanese counterparts in both popularity and cultural acceptance”. (Sypeck 2000, <www.poppolitics.com/>)

Despite this apparent abhorrence, even America’s Comics Code could not completely destroy so-called ‘perverse’ material; it merely sent it underground. Some creators became adept at adopting a stealthy means of self-expression; Charles M. Schulz introduced subtle themes of alienation and low self-esteem through the character of Charlie Brown in his beloved ‘cute-kids-and-funny-animals’ story, *Peanuts*. Others
were more openly defiant. By the 1970’s, an experimental movement had developed, known as ‘comix’. These writers and artists would intentionally bypass commercial distribution, self-publishing their works (often with nothing more sophisticated than a photocopier and some staples) and gaining publicity via sheer word-of-mouth. This meant that there was no one standing between them and their audience, enforcing censorship or frowning disapproval. This rebellion gave a voice to creators who would have been otherwise suppressed, perhaps even persecuted, within the commercial industry. The greatest success to come out of comix is Art Spiegelman, whose *Maus* novels won him a Pulitzer Prize in 1992. However, press reviewers at the time declared that his work couldn’t possibly be a graphic novel, since it most certainly was not meant for children. (Sturm 2002, p. 2) Spiegelman says of the regulations which he himself had dared to flaunt: “Cartoonists were actually expected to keep a lid on their psyches and personal histories, or at least disguise and sublimate them into diverting entertainments.” (Gravett 2005, p. 22)

American puritans are not the only guilty party. British author/artist Raymond Briggs praised his liberal-minded European neighbours, observing that: “on the Continent graphic novels have been as accepted as films or books for many years, but England has had a snobby attitude towards them. They’ve always been seen as something just for children.” (Mulholland 2007, <www.nytimes.com>) Nor can Australia be completely exonerated. Australia does have a healthy community of dedicated visual-storytellers; however, most of these ‘picture books’ are restricted to kid-friendly fare, as are the organisations which foster and support them.14

![Figure 2](http://archives.tcj.com)

**Figure 2:** Two years before Wertham released his damaging paper, Charles M. Schulz drew this tongue-in-cheek comic strip, as part of his classic Peanuts series. Charlie Brown surveys a rack of comics, a sign above it proclaiming them to be ‘for the kiddies’; it contains titles such as ‘KILL’, ‘HATE’, and ‘STAB!’. (Deppey 2008, <http://archives.tcj.com>)

14 Examples are the Books Illustrated gallery and Dromkeen Society, both based in and around Melbourne – wonderful establishments, but solely child-orientated.
Recently, our fair country has made industry headlines for the wrong reasons. Highly-respected comix legend Robert Crumb was supposed to appear as the keynote speaker at Sydney’s 2011 annual Graphic festival. However, when an article in Sydney’s Daily Telegraph vilified Crumb before he had even arrived, labelling him a “filthy weirdo”, a “sex pervert”, and even inviting an anti-child abuse campaigner to publically denounce him, he understandably decided to cancel his visit. Crumb later admitted that he would have feared for his personal safety if he had decided to make his scheduled appearance at Sydney Opera House: “All it takes is a few people who overreact to something like that to show up and cause unpleasantness. I have a lot of anxiety about having to confront some angry sexual assault crisis group.” (2011, <www.theaustralian.com.au>) Crumb is a figure of immense stature within the graphic novel community. While certainly very provocative, I would not consider him to be depraved, and certainly wouldn’t accuse him of being a child molester, as the Telegraph article did. Local writer Marieke Hardy lists Crumb as one of her personal heroes:

“He’s a truth-teller. He draws what’s in his head; things we all have in our head to some degree, whether it’s sexual, murderous or throwing ourselves off a bridge. To pretend that for some reason you’re above such thoughts, or that you don’t have them and banish the people who dare show that vulnerability and that sense of truth, is revolting. People like Crumb – who sacrifice themselves to make life more accessible for the fuck-ups – should be revered.” (Connolly 2011, p. 38)

Since such uninstigated furores are hardly isolated incidents, the industry has taken precautions to better protect itself. The Comic Book Legal Defence Fund (CBLDF) is a not-for-profit organization which attempts to safeguard the First Amendment rights of authors and artists, providing legal advice and representation to prosecuted graphic novelists. Much of the Fund’s support comes from the industry’s

Figure 3: Cartoonist Glen Le Livre’s eponymous Yes Man character (far left) sits at a bar beside a gallery of Crumb’s creations; just above his head, a portrait of Charlie Brown hangs on the wall. The strip’s publication coincided with the intended date of Crumb’s appearance at the Graphic festival. (Le Livre 2011, n. pag.)
own influential figures. Neil Gaiman, Frank Miller, Jeff Smith, Mike Mignola, and many others have lent the CBLDF financial support; Gaiman is also a member of the organisation’s board of directors. Despite the Fund’s best efforts, they are not always successful in their free-speech campaigns. In 1997, Mike Diana, author of the highly-controversial, violent and sexually-explicit *Boiled Angel* series, became the first artist to be convicted for obscenity in the United States, despite the CBLDF’s multiple attempts to legally defend him.

Although Diana’s works were perhaps somewhat lacking in morality and good taste, whether or not he has actually committed a criminal offence remains a point of contention. His works were inspired by the oppressive religious climate he grew up in; he responded to the stifling shadow of the church by defying it in a way which, while extreme, nevertheless remained confined to the page. Though his *Boiled Angel* comics depicted such atrocities as mutilation, murders and rapes, he had seemingly led a hitherto blameless life. After his arrest, he was regarded as a criminal; he himself says of his treatment by the legal system:

“I was railroaded in court, the prosecution told the jury I was a suspect in the Gainesville murders even though the real killer was caught and had plead [sic] guilty just days before my trial started. They claimed that the art in *Boiled Angel* was made for killers and would turn people who read it into killers.” (Watt 2011, <www.richardsonmag.com>)

Diana was fortunately given parole rather than being forced to serve a jail term, but was still forced to pay thousands of dollars in fines, had to attend psychiatric assessments at his own expense, and perform a course of community service (which he chose to undertake at the CBLDF). Most horrifying of all, however, was the fact that he was banned from coming within ten feet of any children under the age of eighteen, and police threatened to raid his home unannounced at any time, in order to monitor his artistic production and make sure he was not committing any further acts of obscenity.15

(Watt 2011, <www.richardsonmag.com>) It is questionable as to whether or not Diana’s persecution was ever motivated by righteous intentions. He notes with irony that during his trial, his work was put on display, since by law, the public had the right to see the material which was being charged. This allowed anyone, even children, ample

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15 Luckily, the authorities never followed through on this threat. Diana continues to produce and publish his artwork, recently announcing plans to re-release the works which got him convicted in a collected edition. (Watt 2011, <www.richardsonmag.com>)
opportunity to view his work; exposure which his art would never have received otherwise. (Watt 2011, <www.richardsonmag.com>)

Within this maelstrom of misunderstanding, there are still small glimmers of hope; attitudes are genuinely starting to change. The most obvious indication is the abolition of the Comics Code, after almost fifty years of disapproving influence; the last participating publishers withdrew as recently as 2011 (Stephens 2001, p. 22). As the market has opened itself, the graphic novel’s audience has widened to match, with more adults beginning to realize what they have been missing out on for all these years. Young readers are also remaining loyal to the medium. In the past, though children have been encouraged to read comic books by teachers and librarians, they were regarded only as a precursor to ‘proper’ literature. McCloud aptly describes this perception, which has underpinned the medium’s misinterpretation from the very beginning:

“As children, our first books had pictures galore and very few words because that was ‘easier’. Then, as we grew, we were expected to graduate to books with much more text and only occasional pictures – and finally to arrive at ‘real’ books – those with no pictures at all. Or perhaps, as is sadly the case these days, to no books at all.” (1993, p. 140)

While any promotion of the medium may seem well-intended, this idea that ‘reading comics is marginally better than not reading anything’ is little more than a back-handed compliment.

Luckily, educators and critics are now realizing that as well as simplifying the reading process, pictures can also make it more complex, creating far more intricate meanings than words could do on their own. It is the very advantages which make them more easily-read by kids that make graphic novels ideal as a narrative medium for all ages. ‘Easier to understand’ does not necessarily mean ‘less challenging’ – graphic storytelling remains a highly-effective means of conveying information, regardless of the topic it deals with or the age group it specifically targets. Just as the film industry reaches moviegoers young and old through entirely different markets, so too can graphic novels cater to multiple demographics at once, without having to soften the content of every one of its publications in favour of its lowest – or in this case, youngest – denominator.

Eventually, children must grow up; and it seems only natural that graphic novels should mature with them. Will Eisner, himself from a background of ‘children’s stories’, complimented comix creators such as Spiegelman and Crumb, acknowledging the
increasing need for the mature values that these authors were bringing to the industry: "I reasoned that the thirteen year old kids that I’d been writing to back in the 1940’s were no longer thirteen year old kids, they were now thirty, forty years old.” (Eisner 2002, www.english.ufl.edu>) Thanks to authors like Eisner, Tezuka, Spiegelman, and Crumb (among many others), those same kids can still find reading materials to suit them, without ever having to worry that they might ever become ‘too old’ for the medium that they have grown to love.

3.2.2 ‘None of it is any good.’

“Comics is [sic] the nigger of the art world. But every once in a while something happens… that threatens to free comics from its ghetto.”

Not all graphic novels are the same. This may sound like an extremely obvious statement, and yet many people do not seem to realize this simple fact. If someone reads books, it does not automatically mean that they like to read all books; someone who exudes over Tolstoy’s War and Peace may not necessarily enjoy a book of knock-knock jokes. Incidentally, if that same person thought that all books ever written were just joke books, they might very well say ‘literature stinks – none of it is any good.’

Unfortunately, graphic novels are not just remembered by their worst examples – they are often defined by them. In trying to argue a case for graphic novels, it cannot be denied that bad, even atrocious, specimens certainly exist. The reason these pests seem so plentiful may simply be that, like any other industry, graphic novels have tried to replicate past successes by churning out more of the same, resulting in an industry that has stagnated, focusing on sale quantities and marketing opportunities rather than on quality of content. As McCloud puts it: “too much of comics’ growth had been built on a bubble of collectors-item speculation, utterly out-of-touch with the work’s content or even simple principles of supply and demand.” (2000, p. 10) The medium would languish, in the very shadow that it itself had cast, for many years after. McCloud
describes the frustration of this creative fall-out: “Sure, I realized that comic books were usually crude, poorly-drawn, semiliterate, cheap, disposable kiddie fare – but they don’t have to be!” (1993, p. 3)

One man who entirely agreed with McCloud’s opinion was our own imported cartoonist, Eddie Campbell. In 2004, he issued a rallying cry to the industry, in the form of his now-infamous, half-satirical Graphic Novel Manifesto, which he posted to the Comics Journal’s online message-board. In it, he requested that all graphic-novelists make a concerted attempt to “take the form of the comic book, which has become an embarrassment, and raise it to a more ambitious and meaningful level.” (MacDonald 2010, <http://donmacdonald.com>) Perhaps referring to those critics who declared that Spiegelman’s Maus was not a graphic novel after his Pulitzer Prize win, he suggested that all participants in the medium’s critical discourse, both within the industry and without, should stop searching for a definitive yardstick with which to measure the format’s exact structural specifications. Whether the resulting publication is ten pages long or ten thousand, with images on every page or every twentieth, he advised that critics “should only ask whether it increases the sum total of human wisdom.” (MacDonald 2010, <http://donmacdonald.com>)

Regardless of whether or not the industry listened to McCloud and Campbell or not, it is undeniable that things have improved over the past few years. Although these positive developments may seem to be happening all of a sudden, they have actually been decades in the making, and the transition is still taking place at a painstakingly-slow rate. However, this gradual development is finally becoming evident, the improvement reflected by the medium’s increasing prominence within popular culture.

Today’s graphic novel industry is a much more diverse one, and a reader must be finicky indeed if they cannot find anything in it that they like. Whilst quality is a purely subjective attribute, some works stand out from amongst the hordes; either they have been awarded by contemporaries and critics, or they have made significant contributions to the industry itself. Some of these works, and their achievements, are chronologically listed on the following pages.
1930: Most sources generally agree that the modern comic-book was born in America during the early 1930’s. (Duncan & Smith 2009, p. 29) By then, Belgian writer/artist Georges Prosper Remi – better known by his penname, Hergé – had already started publishing what is now his most famous creation: Tintin. (Casterman 2010, <http://bd.casterman.com>) Hergé’s series began as a typical adventure/espionage romp, but developed drastically after he met Chang Ch’ung-jen, a Chinese student who served as a consultant on his oriental-themed story, The Blue Lotus. Moved by Chang’s account of Japan’s expansionist invasion of his homeland, Hergé began to research his material far more rigorously, writing current affairs into many of his plotlines. (Gravett 2005, p. 152) In 2006, 23 years after Hergé’s death, the Dalai Lama posthumously conferred the ‘International Campaign for Tibet’s Light of Truth Award’ upon him, in recognition of his effort to raise public awareness about humanitarian causes. (BBC News 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk>) As well as entertaining the masses, Hergé used Tintin to encourage mutual understanding and tolerance between opposing nationalities.

Figure 4: The Dalai Lama holds a copy of Hergé’s 1960 publication, Tintin in Tibet, during the award ceremony. (Ryan n.d., <www.mountainsoftravelphotos.com>)

1952: Five years prior, Osamu Tezuka had already wowed Japanese readers with Shin-Takarajima (New Treasure Island). His debut work, with its cinematically-styled pacing and dynamic imagery, gave a whole new visual eloquence to a manga industry that was still in its embryonic stages. However, of the 600 manga titles he reputedly produced during his relatively short lifetime, 599 of them were eclipsed by the astronomical success of Tetsuwan Atomu, better known to the Western world as Astro Boy. Like Hergé, Tezuka used his fictional creation as a platform from which to extoll his pacifist ideals. Tezuka’s motivation, however, was a bit more personal; as a teenager, he survived the horrific aftermath of an air raid on Osaka. (Gravett 2004, p. 24) Unlike so many other heroes, who fought for justice or freedom, Astro is so beloved not because he beat the bad guys, but because he strove to maintain peace, both between Japan and
the rest of world, as well as with any extra-terrestrials which might happen to visit. (For more information on Tezuka, see Case Study 4.5.5)

1978: Will Eisner was already a luminary within the comic book industry. His highly-successful newspaper strip, *The Spirit*, had made him a household name and earned him financial security. Eisner, in his fifties and not content to rest on his laurels, took advantage of his comfortable position to indulge in a personal project. Inspired by the young avant-garde comix creators, he crafted *A Contract With God*, his own semi-autobiographical modern fable. (Gravett 2005, p. 36) Unlike the newspaper strips that Eisner had produced previously, which were contrived to provide maximum escapism for his young readers, *A Contract With God* was a lot grittier. It did not shy away from the unpleasant, even grotesque aspects of real life, depicting scenes of violence, death, adultery and rape within its pages. Despite its darker nature, the story still contains traces of Eisner’s trademark storytelling, providing an endearingly off-beat, sometimes even tender look at urban life. The narrative also drew on Eisner’s own experiences. The palpable anguish of Frimme Hersh, the man whose titular ‘contract’ was broken when God allowed his daughter to die, is an indirect allusion to the author, who had tragically lost his own daughter to leukaemia at the age of sixteen. (Kist 2010, <www.cleveland.com>) Elsewhere, the timid fifteen-year-old ‘Willie’, who is seduced by an older woman, could be Eisner’s thinly-veiled young alter-ego; Eisner admitted that “They are true stories. Only the telling of them and the portrayals have converted them to fiction.” (Gravett 2005, p. 40) *A Contract With God* was particularly significant in the history of the medium, as it can be considered the first true graphic novel; in his sales-pitch to his publisher, Eisner used the term to refer to his creation, becoming the first industry figure to popularize its usage. (Gravett 2005, p. 38)

**Figure 5:** For respected Jewish citizen Frimme Hersh, God’s betrayal is even evident in the weather; on the day of his daughter Rachele’s funeral, he returns home dripping wet from the rain. Eisner’s depiction of a man whose grief turns him from religion to commerce may be a self-portrait; during this stage of his life, Eisner was considerably wealthy, but had himself lost his beloved daughter. (Rubio 2006, <www.bitsofnews.com>)
1986: Art Spiegelman was apparently inspired by Eisner’s transition from crowd-pleaser to personal chronicler. (Gravett 2005, p. 56) When fellow comix-creator Justin Green invited Spiegelman to contribute to a comic called *Funny Animals*, he did so, in the process lampooning the typical sunny-slapstick of cuddly anthropomorphised critters. He was also attempting to dispel some particularly nasty personal demons. *Maus* was not so much Spiegelman’s story as it was that of his parents, Holocaust survivors who would often wake a young Art in the middle of the night, crying out in the midst of nightmares. These spectres affected him in turn, when his mother suddenly took her own life, and Spiegelman himself fought his own battle with drug addiction. (Gravett 2005, p. 56) Not for faint-hearted readers, *Maus* is an acerbic, unflinchingly honest depiction of human suffering. With a narrative style which owes more to *Animal Farm* than Mickey Mouse, Spiegelman recounts his parents’ sufferings in a semi-satirical way, portraying them and other Jews as mice, whilst their Nazi tormentors became cats. In one colossal leap, *Maus* went a long way towards laying to rest any notions that graphic novels could not be serious, or that they were for anyone other than children. In 1992, it became the first - and so far, only - graphic novel to receive a Pulitzer Prize. (Duncan & Smith 2009, p. 1)

![Figure 6: A feline Nazi officer threatens Jewish prisoners; one of the ‘mice’ depicted in this scene is Vladek Spiegelman, the author’s father. Spiegelman purposefully chose to characterize real figures from his father’s past as cartoon animals; these caricatures highlighted the racial prejudices of the time, making the divides between races blatantly obvious. (Isabelinho 2009, <http://thecribsheet-isabelinho.blogspot.com>)](image)

1990: Writer Neil Gaiman found himself at the helm of *The Sandman*, a defunct title which DC Comics had decided to revamp. Gaiman completely changed the series’ previous premise, transforming it into an intriguing, unpredictable fable which seemed to change setting and genre with each new chapter. The depth and versatility of...
Gaiman’s narrative style took *Sandman* to heights which the medium had hardly dared dream of before, comparable with works of classical literature or antiquated folklore. The series grew to behemoth proportions; as the project’s sole writer, it took Gaiman seven years and two thousand pages to develop the entire plotline, whilst a rotating roster of artists contributed panel upon panel of artwork. (Richards 2001, <http://januariymagazine.com>) *Sandman* is considered a cult classic and a comic book for intellectuals, managing to be both provocative and accessible at the same time. It was the first graphic novel to ever win a literary award (the World Fantasy Award in 1991), as well as snaring practically every industry accolade on offer, making Gaiman one of the most highly-decorated figures in the industry. (Richards 2001, <http://januariymagazine.com>) The series is also credited with having attracted a greater female readership to the medium, and greatly enhancing its overall credibility; unlike *Maus*, it could not be denied that *Sandman* was a graphic novel, whilst its various accolades and the quality of its content silenced critics who would have otherwise derided comics of any kind. (Duncan & Smith 2009, p. 16)

2001: Chris Ware’s graphic novel, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, controversially beat out hundreds of great literary works to win the Guardian Book Award by just one vote. (Gibbons 2001, <www.guardian.co.uk>) Ware’s rigidly-structured grids of sequential panels and clean, cartoonish artwork juxtapose with the stilted awkwardness and understated emotional resonance of his tale. Based on Ware’s own experiences, the story’s main character is neither a kid nor particularly smart; a dull, emotionally stunted man living in an ordinary suburban dystopia, middle-aged Jimmy’s story revolves around his cringe-inducing first interactions with the father he has never known. What sets Ware’s work apart is its spatial arrangement; the layouts are tightly structured, whilst the narrative flows fluidly through the succession of frames. The images dart

**Figure 7:** One of many awkward conversations between Jimmy and his estranged father. In this sequence, the old man unceremoniously reveals that Jimmy is not his only offspring. The sense of Jimmy’s emotional isolation is emphasised by Ware’s art style; heavy frames contain each panel, while figures are surrounded – and separated – by thick outlines. (Gravett 2005, p. 24)
off on single-panel tangents, travelling back to Jimmy’s unenviable childhood or suddenly descending into one of his surreal delusions. Before taking out the Guardian’s highest accolade, Ware had won six awards at the 2000 Harveys, as well as receiving the ‘Special Award for Excellence in Presentation’ six years in a row. (Lalumière 2000, <http://january magazine.com>)

2006: Australian writer and illustrator Shaun Tan envisioned *The Arrival*, an ambitious work which tells its story through images alone, without any words at all. Having come from a background of writing and illustrating ‘picture books’, Tan quickly realized that his project was becoming a graphic novel, a medium which he had hitherto been unfamiliar with. (Tan 2006b, <http://shauntan.net>) After some research and much experimentation, he managed to find his own brand of visual eloquence, following through on his original concept. His moving story, of a migrant’s exodus and survival in an accommodating yet bizarrely-foreign land, is masterfully conveyed through the use of evocative, meticulously-rendered imagery. *The Arrival* went on to receive numerous literary awards, despite the fact that it does not contain a single word of text. It is a ground-breaking, incredibly unique and innovative work, somehow managing to span the divides which lie between art book, picture book, and graphic novel. Tan has been recognized by readers and critics worldwide, with *The Arrival* winning a slew of awards. In 2011, he was chosen from among 170 candidates across sixty countries to become the recipient of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, the Nobel Prize of children’s literature. (Tan 2006b, <http://shauntan.net>) Tan has subsequently brought international attention to the Australian graphic novel industry, proving that images can more than adequately carry a story on their own.

The titles I have listed may not suit every reader’s tastes; nor are they the only quality materials that the industry has to offer. Some of my own favourite graphic novels are the more obscure ones, having neither garnered any awards nor gained a huge legion of fans. While a few prominent works tend to dominate the general readership, there are still many undiscovered gems lying amidst the rubble that clutters comic-store shelves. Nor has the medium reached its pinnacle within these shining
examples; brilliant though they may be, these works are only the starting points, from which greater future achievements may well follow.

3.2.3 ‘They’re all about superheroes.’

“In all categories of comics there has been a trend towards increasing sophistication. Readers today demand, and artists supply, more than simple boy-meets-girl and justice-triumphs-over-evil plots.”

– Frederik L. Schodt (1983, p. 15)

Some critics who sneer at the graphic novel may do so because they believe that a penchant for lycra is prerequisite for liking the medium. One of the most erroneous perceptions people tend to have is to view the graphic novel as a mere genre, characterized by muscle-bound heroes in tights and busty ‘glamizons’ in scant armoured bikinis. For decades, a cape heroically flapping in the breeze has become as closely-associated with the medium as the classic trench-coat is with noirish mysteries, or the deerstalker hat and magnifying glass with detective fiction. The blame for this stereotypical textile can be pinned upon a single entity, who has simultaneously acted as both the ultimate saviour and potential scourge of the medium: Superman.

Ever since his introduction, the ‘Man of Steel’ has been the poster-child of the comic-book industry. During the 1930’s, the first ‘comic books’ were simply comic strips that had been recycled and re-printed in collected volumes, intended to serve as nothing more than to divert the masses with novelties whilst spinning extra cash. At around the same time, Superman’s co-creators, writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster, were offering their fledgling series to every syndicated newspaper in the country, hoping one of them would feature it as a regular strip; what they got in response was a pile of rejection-slips. When their iconic creation finally made his debut in the first edition of *Action Comics*\(^{16}\) in 1938, it was one of the first comic books to offer original content to a readership who were making do with old material pulled from the Sunday comics.

\(^{16}\) *Action Comics* was just one of several titles released by *Detective Comics Inc.*; known today as *DC Comics*, it remains one of the major publishing powers of the modern-day industry.
papers. (Duncan & Smith 2009, p. 32) Though Siegel and Shuster’s decision to present their narrative in this burgeoning new medium was a matter of necessity rather than design, Superman’s premiere appearance did much to kick-start the graphic novel’s eventual inception.

The central pioneer of the graphic novel’s development, Will Eisner, sheepishly admitted that he was one of the many industry veterans who wrote back to Siegel and Shuster, telling them, in what he calls a “patronising letter”, that they weren’t yet ready to become professionals and to develop their craft further. After the pair achieved their phenomenal success, he humbly acceded: “so much for my professional judgement!” (Kroopnick 2003, n. pag.) Even Eisner would come to struggle with the formidable expectation that the ‘Greatest Super-Hero of All Time’ had left in his wake. Some industry insiders deemed Superman’s premise – a bulletproof extra-terrestrial who could lift cars over his head, shoot lasers from his eyes and fly – was too wacky; however, the sci-fi themes of Siegel’s storyline proved to be just the sort of fantastic escapism that would keep readers spellbound. This resulted in what Duncan and Smith call a “legion of ‘long underwear’ imitators”. (Duncan & Smith 2009, p. 32)

Publishers were very keen to replicate this super-success. Eisner’s own publisher scoffed at the new detective story he was working on in 1940, until he promised to create a costumed character to star in it. He recalled that whilst pitching his idea over the phone, he quickly drew a mask over his leading-man’s eyes, further augmenting his otherwise-ordinary blue suit. (Andelman 2005, p. 54-55) The result was The Spirit, an iconic creation which brought Eisner massive success in his own right; however, he often felt that his eponymous hero was always trying to outrun the Man of Steel’s

Figure 8: In his autobiographical novel The Dreamer, Eisner recalls his early years in the illustration business. He mischievously parodies the industry of his day; it is easy for modern readers to guess which icons the posters on the publisher’s wall, bearing the titles ‘BigHero: Man of Iron’ and ‘Rodent Man’, are meant to reference. (Raja 2009, <www.comicology.in>)
shadow. Though Eisner initially equipped his hero with a flying car, he quickly scrapped it when Bob Kane gave Batman his first Batmobile. (Andelman 2005, p. 56)

Rather ironically given his namesake, Eisner was forever trying to keep The Spirit human and ‘real’, avoiding using any mystical abilities or other miraculous means of empowering him. The Spirit’s alter-ego, Denny Colt, had been a dedicated policeman before a faked ‘death’ prompted him to turn vigilante; even after his career-change, his greatest attributes were still his detecting skills, well-honed street smarts, and the force of his fists. Eisner even avoided drawing the character’s trademark facial accoutrement, drawing him as a civilian in dark glasses as often as he could – probably not realizing that this very idiosyncrasy indirectly mimicked Clark Kent’s casual wear. (Andelman 2005, p. 55)

When Eisner’s classic series was later revived by DC Comics, an in-joke which would have made Eisner sigh occurs – a character cattily refers to The Spirit as “a big blue average with a distraction stuck to his face.” (Cooke 2007, n. pag.)

Eisner was not the only one who felt the increasing need to buck the trend. Prior to Superman’s landing, comics, as its label suggests, had been almost entirely devoted to comedy; post-Smallville, it became nearly an exclusive habitat for caped crime-fighters. Though Superman certainly helped initiate the graphic novel’s evolution into a viable medium, it also did little more than replace the hackneyed slapstick of the ‘funnies’ with its own brand of kitsch-laden, bodysuit-wearing tropes, swapping one batch of stereotypical content for another. By the mid-1980’s, the industry well and truly had a severe case of superhero-fatigue.

Luckily, it was around this time that two new titles were launched, each offering its own antithesis to the tired old stereotypes. For a genre that was used to bright primary colours and clean-cut heroes, the bleakness they both provided was practically refreshing. In 1986, artist/writer Frank Miller decided to dramatically rebooted DC Comics’ original anti-hero, taking Batman back to his dark origins. Devoid of the campy associations that the character had been saddled with in previous incarnations, Miller de-romanticized his titular ‘Dark Knight’, reminding us that Bruce Wayne’s story was borne out of his parents’ tragic deaths, and that his chosen vocation could only continue to fill his life with a barrage of violence, his quest for vengeance quickly becoming mired in bureaucracy and bloodshed. (Gravett 2005, p. 78) A year later, consistently-creepy cult writer Alan Moore teamed up with artist Dave Gibbons to
produce *The Watchmen*, a nihilistic series which revolved around a band of dysfunctional, fatally-flawed superheroes. Taking its title from the ominous warning ‘who watches the watchmen?’, Moore presents a terrifying version of typical costumed-characters who are as bad (if not worse) than any villains they encounter; when not opposing each other or grappling with their own issues, they manipulate global affairs in their own favour, not caring how many innocent lives are lost by the wayside. (Gravett 2005, p. 13)

However, the genre’s greatest upheaval – and possibly its greatest saving grace – came about in 1990, when Neil Gaiman was instated as re-inventor of *The Sandman*, a defunct DC title from the mid-1970’s. In his previous incarnation, the titular character had been a run-of-the-mill costumed hero, armed with a gun that shot sleeping-gas; however, under Gaiman’s direction, he became a shadowy figure of new-age mythology. Gaiman was given complete free rein to do whatever he wished, and so he took *The Sandman* into not just one new genre, but into several in quick succession. (Gravett 2005, p.89) Rather than the ineffectual vigilante of old, Gaiman’s rebooted incarnation of the titular character is a mystic entity known as Morpheus or Dream, a single deity from a pantheon of demi-gods who embody abstract ideas, including Desire, Despair and Delirium. As the immortal denizen of nightly visions and imagination, Morpheus’ saga takes him backwards and forwards in time, to all lands and realms, both real and inexistent, with the transitions to each setting bridged by the collective dreams of humanity. Gaiman’s reasoning seems to have been that if the premise could be ‘dreamed up’, he could include it in this story; this meant that the scope of narratives and genres that he could tackle was literally endless. The series seems to verge into every type of fiction that Gaiman has ever fancied: from gothic horror to Greek myth, Shakespearean faeries, Arabian nights, supernatural thriller, and any scrap of literature in between.

If there was an award for the most diverse series in graphic novels, *The Sandman* would easily win it; Gaiman’s opus has received a slew of industry awards in every genre, from horror fiction’s Bram Stoker Awards to sci-fi’s Hugos and the World Fantasy Award. (Gaiman 2001, <www.neilgaiman.com>) *The Sandman* also went a long way towards breaking down the gender-divide in the medium’s readership, introducing a new influx of female fans. This was most likely thanks to the character of
Dream’s older sister Death, an incongruously-upbeat goth-girl whose popularity earned her several spin-off publications. Gaiman laughingly recalls that when he attended comic conventions, “I would get comic book store owners pumping my hand, saying, ‘Oh my god, you brought women into my store for the first time.’ It was one of the first few things that brought women into comics - they were essentially comics guys could give their girlfriends.” (Vineyard 2008, <http://moviesblog.mtv.com>) In its later years, Sandman would even go on to out-sell the two major heroic heavy-weights, Superman and Batman. (White 1999, <www.writerswrite.com>)

*The Sandman* proves that people read graphic novels for the medium that it is and the stories it presents, not the genre that it most famously launched. Outside of superheroes, the industry can be broken up into any number of different genres – comedy, romance, political drama, true crime, detective, action adventure, historical, coming-of-age, autobiographical and horror, to name just a fraction of them. The range available continues to diversify as more stories are told, and more artists break out of conventional genre stereotypes, telling their narratives in their own way regardless of precedence or popularity. A great way to begin experiencing this incredible range of contents and subjects is through the books of Paul Gravett (reviewed in Chapter 3.1.2), which not only contain exemplary examples from each genre, but further break each focus-area down to its underlying themes, and suggest other reading materials which contain similar subject matter.

Graphic novels are not tethered to costumed-hero stories, like Superman chained to a piece of Kryptonite; the format has the freedom to venture into any subject matter that its authors could possibly wish to explore, and as Gaiman discovered, the only limits to what can be done are the unfathomable depths of human imagination. As McCloud succinctly reminds us, the best way to define the medium is by separating its form from its content: “The artform – the medium – known as comics is a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images… The trick is to never mistake the message for the messenger.” (1993, p. 6)
3.2.4 ‘They’re a purely American phenomenon.’

“Comics are an international language. They can cross boundaries between generations. Comics are a bridge between all cultures.”

– Osamu Tezuka (2002a, p. 223)

Quite often, when books or articles refer to ‘the comic-book industry’, what they actually mean is ‘the American comic-book industry’. Graphic novels are certainly an integral part of American culture, with some of their most famous titles originating there; however, they are not an exclusive State-side quirk. Graphic novels have managed to flourish all across the world, with each region developing its own unique brand of visual eloquence.

I have already explored the Japanese manga market to some extent. It is safe to say that in terms of sheer quantity, the Eastern isles dwarf any other nation’s output. Japan’s enthusiasm for the medium is almost an addiction, with new reading material in constant demand. Frederik Schodt points out that even the best-reputed Japanese magazines tend to prefer manga over any other kind of content, even text-based articles or photographs; he declares that this is because “in Japan today, anything with comics sells.” (Schodt 1983, p. 14) The Japanese industry’s indefatigable momentum also means that it is self-perpetuating; unlike the American industry, whose flood of superhero stories led to an eventual stagnation, Japan’s popular titles have displayed an incredible level of subject diversity.

This factor can again be attributed to the nationally-recognized ‘god of manga’, Osamu Tezuka himself. Whilst he is best-remembered today for having created the nation’s best-loved boy-android, he also had a multitude of other works in his gargantuan portfolio. As opposed to Shuster and Siegel, who encouraged the American industry to develop around a single unique new genre, Tezuka managed to foster almost every major category that makes up the manga industry today. He wrote for every demographic imaginable, from distracted young children to dreamy adolescent girls, bored middle-aged housewives, sombre businessmen, and every other kind of individual in between; his subject matter also encompasses everything from sci-fi to biographic, comedy to romance, psychological thriller to historical. McCloud purports that it was this instant level of diversity, created by one man yet appealing to millions, that allowed
the medium to become so readily accepted within Japan; he further muses that if his own local industry could likewise “expand its territory, plunging into many areas at once” (2000a, p. 18), it might have some chance of imitating *manga*’s success.

By authoring such an impressive range of assorted works throughout his professional life, Tezuka laid some broad foundations for the *manga* industry to build upon. Japanese authors, publishers and readers alike all seem to be in search of this constant variation, resulting in a market which can fluctuate unpredictably. Whilst there is plenty of room in the industry for newcomers, competition tends to be so steep, mediocre titles are swiftly swept aside in favour of promising alternatives, as Schodt observes: “New experiments throughout the comic industry are continually being made. Weeklies, biweeklies and monthlies specializing in science fiction, pornography, sports, or children’s stories may hit the stands one week and be gone the next.” (1983, p. 13) This constant forward motion is what keeps the Japanese industry one step ahead of the rest of the world.

Whilst they may be leading the pack, the Japanese are not quite alone at the forefront. Europe has proven itself to be nearly as *avant garde* as their Asian counterpart, both in terms of the maturity of their works’ content and their quality. You may have noticed that in the chronology I listed back in Chapter 3.2.2, Belgium’s *Tintin* pre-dated other iconic titles by several years. What sets our continental cousins apart from the rest of the world are their publication and marketing methods. Like American comic-strips, Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée* (‘designed bands’) were very popular in newspapers and periodicals; besides *Tintin*, *Asterix the Gaul* stands out as one of Europe’s most recognizable mascots. The massive success of these titles meant that publishers realized very early on how profitable it would be to collect their weekly instalments in extended ‘albums’. These re-printings prolonged the medium’s endurance, both figuratively and literally: “The hardbound albums gave *bande dessinée* a permanence that newsprint periodicals lacked and helped foster a perception among people that they were keepsakes worth rereading rather than disposable ephemera.” (Duncan & Smith 2009, p. 298) This practice, coupled with copyright laws which allowed authors to own their original creations and make a profitable living from their work, meant that the profession soon became one of favourable repute.
The European market’s growth can ironically be somewhat credited to its almost complete segregation. Americans were not the only ones who found the violent content of their own comics abhorrent; in 1949, a review board was established to help censor French comics, and publishers closed their doors to the rest of the world. (Duncan & Smith 2009, p. 298) Unlike Japan, which was flooded with American strips in the wake of the Second World War17 (Schodt 1983, p. 60), French bande dessinée were forced to forge their own way, without any American precedents to serve as their guide. But like Japan (albeit under completely opposite circumstances), the European markets managed to flourish, reaching an impressive standard of quality and diversity. The French censorial board was somewhat undermined during the 1960’s, when American comix were finally smuggled across the North Atlantic. Creators began to aspire to more than just the family-friendly entertainments of Tintin and Asterix. In particular, France’s most famous illustrator, Jean Giraud – better-known by his professional nom de plume, ‘Moebius’ – is renowned worldwide for his surreal sci-fi odyssey, The Airtight Garage; his unique approach to storytelling has inspired the likes of George Lucas. (Gravett 2005, p. 90) Both during their years of censored isolation and afterwards, the European industry has generated its own internal strength, making it a leading contender in the world of visual narrative.

As I mentioned back in Chapter 3.2.1, America and Britain have tended to regard graphic novels as a medium for children, and these attitudes have been slow to change. As a fellow English-speaking nation, Australia holds similar views, though upon our shores, comics seem to be even more of a minority subculture than they are in the States or Old Blighty. Conventions and festivals like Graphic and Supernova have helped to raise the medium’s profile somewhat in recent years, but it is still far from becoming a mainstream institution. This minority status is reflected in the minimal output which we have contributed to the industry. Illustration is given some level of respect in Australia; particularly, some Melbournian galleries, such as Dromkeen and Books Illustrated, have made an effort to promote illustrated works by Australian

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17 Tezuka himself admitted that he was greatly influenced by American comics, as well as other aspects of the culture, which the Japanese came into contact with courtesy of the war. In particular, he shared a mutual admiration with Walt Disney; it is of note that the latter’s 1994 film The Lion King bears more than a passing resemblance to Tezuka’s Jungle Taitei (’Jungle Emperor’, more-commonly known overseas as ‘Kimba the White Lion’), which he had drawn in the 1950’s, and which had already been televised as an one of Tezuka Productions’ animated series during the 1960’s. (Gravett 2004, p. 28)
authors. Although these organisations cater mainly to children, this is still a favourable
development, as some of the world’s premiere children’s illustrators – including the
world-renowned Graeme Base – have fostered visual literacy within our nation, starting
with young audiences. Many adults have come to enjoy reading such works too,
prompting a need for greater maturity in our local industry – a call which, so far, has
been answered by the few.

Perhaps part of the problem is not the lack of comic-makers, but the lack of a
local market. The late Monty Wedd managed to eke out a comicking career, but with
some compromise. Demand for his work soared during the wartime; however, once
restrictions on the importation of foreign publications were lifted, American material
flooded the stands, in a deluge which also affected our literary and film industry. Wedd
went so far as to send his Ned Kelly-esque bushranger, Captain Justice, to the Wild
West in order to prolong his popularity. (Ray 2012, p. 6) However, the dominating US
industry did not reciprocate; Syd Nicholls, reputedly the first artist to produce a non-
derivative, all-Australian comic in, returned from a trip to New York in 1930, having
failed to sell his Middy Malone strip to the Big Apple’s finicky publishers. (Lambiek
1994, <http://lambiek.net>) Despite the dominance of our State-side allies, one of
Australia’s favourite newspaper sagas comes from our own backyard. The popular
comic-strip Ginger Meggs was first created by Jimmy Bancks back in 1921; today,
Ginger continues his rascally romp through Aussie suburbia, currently under the
direction of artist/writer Jason Chatfield. (Foyle 2009, <www.gingermeggs.com>)

More recently, local artists have provided their services to overseas projects. For
example, Sydney-side artist Queenie Chan has worked with American author Dean
Koontz, creating prequel material for his Odd Thomas novels, as well as releasing her
own series, The Dreaming (a gothic-themed thriller set at a boarding school in the
Australian bush and featuring extensive references to Aboriginal folklore) through
Tokyopop, an American publishing-house which specializes in original manga titles.
(Chan 2011, <www.queeniechan.com>) Tasmanian mangaka Madeleine Rosca was
runner-up for the International Manga Award, an accolade sponsored by the Japanese
government, with her steampunk-themed title Hollow Fields (which, coincidently, is
also set in a school, though her academy for evil geniuses is perhaps even grimmer than
Chan’s). (Thompson 2007, p. 225) Some of our talent is also imported; Scottish
illustrator Eddie Campbell, of *From Hell* fame, currently resides in Brisbane (Purdon 2011, <www.couriermail.com.au>). Bryan Sheiddon claims that Australians are the “most avid *Phantom* fans in the world” (2007, <http://deepwoods.org>), referring to a classic comic-book character who is seemingly a distant-cousin of The Spirit, but instead of residing in one of America’s concrete jungles, operates out of Africa – sympathy for our fellow colonials, perhaps?

For decades, the local comic-book scene has existed vicariously, relying on overseas markets to provide both publishing opportunities for our own authors, and reading material originating from other climes. When Australian comics did manage to surface, they failed to replicate the success of popular import; though they did manage to mimic many of the overseas market’s problems. Like many other countries during the 1950’s, Australia’s Department of Trade and Customs intercepted and confiscated any inappropriate materials from local distributors. Australian publishers, hoping to avoid a scandal, may have also refrained from printing local works of a similar vein, despite the horror genre’s prevalent public appeal. These measures only began to be relaxed in the 1970’s. (Patrick 2010, <http://monash.academia.edu>) Several comic anthologies sprang up during the 1980’s, the most successful of them being *Fox* and *Cyclone!*; both of these publications achieved some moderate level of success, but ultimately ceased to exist after a cursory run. (Carroll 1996, <www.tabula-rasa.info>) *Phantastique*, a horror-themed publication which served as Australia’s answer to America’s infamous comix, found itself the subject of an inquisition rather like a small-scale version of that which Wertham had launched three decades ago, and was canned after a very short but turbulent life. (Carroll 1996, <www.tabula-rasa.info>)

It is only in recent years, as demand has started to increase, that a local market has finally begun to establish itself. However, the recent moral-assassination of would-be visitor Robert Crumb (see Chapter 3.2.1) shows that these outdated attitudes are still persistent. Today, just two publishers, Gestalt and Allen & Unwin, dominate Australia’s graphic novel scene. Wolfgang Bylsma, director and senior-editor of Gestalt Publishing, explains why this reluctance has remained, even in our current social climate:

“I think there is a misconception by some publishers, perhaps, that comics are, you know, aimed at remedial readers, or that they remove imagination from works of fiction… I actually see it as being a tremendous positive for the burgeoning industry within Australia. If publishers… come on board to, you know, enable people to understand that graphic novels are a valid art
form – that comics, as a medium, is a worthy expression by creators both within Australia and external to Australia, it can only lead to greater acceptance of the art form by the population en masse.”

(Scott 2010, <www.abc.net.au>)

Perhaps the attitudes of Australia’s publishers are the cause of our graphic novel shortage. Mandy Ord, a local author/artist and 2004 nominee for Ledger Small Press Title of the Year Award, explains that though we have had an enduring underground comic culture for many years, the publishing world’s disconnection from this struggling industry has meant that the medium has struggled to find its audience, with the situation only just beginning to improve over recent years:

“We’ve got a really strong independent publishing scene. People publish their own work, small publishers will take on comics and graphic novels and publish them. So it’s always been there, but in terms of the bigger publishers being interested in printing works and having them more available to, you know, a mass audience, that’s definitely in the last five years. So it’s been really great, but it’s almost like the last ten or fifteen years has been a real build up to that, it’s like a snowball effect.” (Scott 2010, <www.abc.net.au>)

As Ord reiterates, it was not until more recent times that the local industry was able to mature, improve, and make its presence felt. A small but talented band leads the current charge of Australian graphic-novelists, including the following noteworthy campaigners.

**Gregory Rogers:** the illustrator of more than forty picture books, Rogers is a ‘silent storyteller’ in much the same vein as Raymond Briggs and Shaun Tan. In a series starting with *The Boy, The Bear, The Baron, The Bard*, one or more of the title’s lead characters go gallivanting through various settings, both real and fictional, including the fairy bowers of Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the streets of Dutch painter Vermeer’s historic Holland; all the while, their adventures contain nary a word. Rogers’ first textless wonder was listed as one of the Ten Best Illustrated Picture Books of 2004 by the New York Times. (Puffin Books 2011, <www.puffin.com.au>)

**Nikki Greenberg:** having discovered the medium during her late teen years, Greenberg used it to retell her favourite novel, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby.* She chose to populate the classic American novel with strange, vaguely animalistic characters that would not look too out of place in a Dr. Seus book. This adds a surreal quality to the tale, giving visual expression to the emotional landscape which resides within its
Fiona Tsang - The Relevance of the Graphic Novel - Literature Review

dysfunctional, morally-stunted cast. In something of a back-handed compliment, Greensburg’s *Gatsby* was listed as a notable entry in the 2008 Children’s Book Council of Australia awards, even though it is not a children’s book. (Snowball 2010, <www.alia.org.au>)

**Figure 9:** Nicki Greenberg’s character designs are based more on their internal machinations than physical appearances; enigmatic and emotionally-fragile Gatsby is a seahorse, whilst Daisy literally becomes a fluffy, bubble-headed chick. (Castles 2007, <smh.com.au>)

**Bruce Mutard:** though not actually a wartime comic, Mutard’s graphic novel *The Sacrifice* recreates the atmosphere of the era, transporting readers back to Melbourne in the 1940’s. As well as being a co-founder of local visual-art journal *Comics Quarterly*, Mutard was a shortlisted candidate for the 2009 Aurealis Award’s Best Illustrated Book/Graphic Novel accolade, in recognition of his second novel *The Silence*, a psychological thriller which examines the nature of art itself. (Allen & Unwin n.d., <www.allenandunwin.com>)

**Mandy Ord:** this Melbournian’s evocative storytelling explores the profound in the prosaic, depicting everyday occurrences through the nuanced view of an intimate autobiography. Though her fictional self is almost a caricature, rendered in a style which resembles a woodcut print and polarized by its stark black outlines, one of the real stars of Ord’s debut work, *Rooftops*, is the city of Melbourne itself, which is portrayed in a way which makes many of its landmarks easily recognizable. The author retells a simple night spent at the iconic rooftop cinema on Swanston Street, which leads to a personal epiphany, and a glimpse at the inner life of modern Australian urbanity.

**Figure 10:** Cyclopean, or just drawn in profile? Perhaps Mandy Ord’s rather unflattering self-portraits are meant to reflect the fact that her autobiographic works are a single, unique view of life in modern Australia. (Jobson & Barry 2008, <http://handmadelife.blogspot.com>)
Shaun Tan: The undisputed poster-child of Australia’s success in the medium. As well as his hallmark magnum opus, *The Arrival*, his portfolio is filled with many other exemplar forms of visual narrative. Each of his works actively pushes the boundaries between imagery and language, displaying a visual verisimilitude of the highest calibre, and setting himself apart as a true world-class contender. It is yet to be seen how Tan’s reception of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, the world’s most prestigious and valuable creative arts accolade, will affect Australia’s visual culture.

All of these authors are aiding our country’s effort to shine a light on our visual culture, slowly establishing us as a beacon in the world’s graphic novel industry. Time, talent, and tenacity will hopefully serve to build our home fires, until we are able to count ourselves amongst the many luminaries that hail from other countries. Already, we are proving that we have what it takes to meet this international challenge.

3.2.5 ‘It’s just a hobby.’

“Comics’ status in the public eye can rise and fall with great fickleness, but either fate can take on an air of permanence when the scrutiny of institutions turns to comics.” – Scott McCloud (2000, p. 92)

James Sturm was disappointed in the lack of support given to graphic novels by academe. He was formerly an instructor at the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD), one of the first universities to offer a graduate degree in Sequential Art. (SCAD n.d., <www.scad.edu>) During his four-year sojourn at the college, Sturm’s department grew to include a team of six instructors and a yearly intake of 250 students. (Sturm 2002, p. 1) He sees this development as reflecting the medium’s own growth into a legitimate intellectual and artistic discipline. Yet outside their own faculty, his students found that they were often treated with disdain. Sturm recalls how excited and relieved they were by his own determination to take them and their work seriously. (Sturm 2002, p. 2)
Sturm was sympathetic, as he had faced similar stigmas himself: “I remember being told in college that comics could influence my work but not be my work. Seventeen years later, little has changed.” (2002, p.2) Sturm himself has had some modest success in his field; one of his publications, *Unstable Molecules*, even won him an Eisner Award. (NACAE n.d., <www.teachingcomics.org>) His own professional achievements aside, he approached his teaching role very seriously. He realized that he was educating a new generation who, unlike many of his own peers, could see the medium’s long-languished potential. (Sturm 2002, p.2)

Creators of graphic novels have long had to work hard to prove to others that they do more than just draw ‘funny pictures’. As Wigan attests, illustrators and cartoonists are commonly accused of “mere vanity publishing” and “pure self-indulgence” (2008, p. 50); outsiders, perhaps due to ignorance or envy, regard ‘drawing for a profession’ as little more than a glorified pastime. One of my own lecturers and mentors once said to me, with much sagacity, that though illustrators and artists are often regarded as self-indulgent egomaniacs, in fact, we all sacrifice something for our craft. In the case of many artists, this sacrifice might be having a steadfast source of income; for others, their time spent deliberating in the studio very nearly swallows up the rest of their lives; in some overly-romanticised cases, artists may literally starve or suffer Van Gogh-like ordeals in exchange for their creative impulses. Though the circumstances of most graphic novels are hardly as drastic as that,18 many of them do seem to make an obligatory trade-in on their level of credibility, all for the sake of creating visual narrative.

Whilst people may regard comedians as genuine professionals, the idea of ‘comic-book creator’ as a paid vocation is somehow harder for some to swallow. Sturm was keenly aware of this discrepancy between his own subject and other disciplines; whilst liberal art colleges treat other modes of ‘entertainment’ – such as video, literature or film – with due seriousness, most would baulk at the thought of actually devoting a

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18 However, some modern-day sob stories do come close. In the footnotes of his *Zot!* comic, Scott McCloud wryly remembers how he and his wife once had to dine on cheap boxes of macaroni-and-cheese in between his inconsistent pay checks. McCloud was chagrined to find that the pasta’s packaging was plastered with images of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, a comic series created by two of his colleagues who had gone commercial and were wildly successful, making millions through endorsements and merchandise. One of those colleagues, Kevin Eastman, would later help fund the publication of McCloud’s signature textbook, *Understanding Comics*. (McCloud 2008a, p. 279)
field of study to graphic novels, with many so-called ‘serious’ scholars considering them little better than graffiti. (Sturm 2002, p. 2) Sturm further cites his own school’s choice of the term ‘sequential art’, over the more commonly-used ‘graphic novel’ or ‘comics’, as a desperate bid for legitimacy. (2002, p. 2) Neil Gaiman described his own reaction when he was faced with a similar situation: “I felt like someone who’d been informed that she wasn’t actually a hooker, she was a lady of the evening.” (Martin 2009, <www.telegraph.co.uk>) Even a young Tezuka, working in an asbestos factory during the wartime and little more than a year away from publishing his first landmark series, would be physically beaten by his supervisors if he was caught doing anything so frivolous as reading or drawing manga. (McCarthy 2009, p.24)

The way the craft has been taught in the past may have adversely affected its own future. New arrivals to the industry still tend to start their careers either as self-taught idealists, inspired by the works of their idols to independently develop their own proficiency; or as ambitious aspirants who have worked their way up through the tiers of the industry, beginning as assistants to others before striking out on their own. These trends are practically universal. In Japan, the only training Tezuka ever received was in medicine, not art or literature; it was his own natural affinity for drawing and storytelling that paved his way to success. The formation of amateur manga clubs has proven to be the genesis of many of today’s most accomplished mangaka, including Rumiko Takahashi, and all-girl creative team known as CLAMP. Meanwhile, biographer Bob Andelman lists a veritable roll-call of former-assistants who once graced the studio of industry legend Will Eisner, all of whom would later go on to become big industry names in their own rights. The most notable of these is probably Jack Kirby, whose many commercially-successful creations – including Fantastic Four, X-Men and The Hulk – somewhat eclipse his mentor’s own claim to fame; despite this, Kirby “never spoke in less than glowing terms about Will.” (Andelman 2005, p. 45)

This tradition of approaching the industry either as a prodigy or apprentice ensures that fledgling authors receive a baptism by fire, forging their careers on the back of proven practical skills, such as genuine artistic talent or story-writing ability. However, this lack of a formal education also means that without qualifications or certified ranks, a career in graphic novels can be regarded by some as a sort of ‘elitist hobby’ rather than as an actual vocation. People of such opinion may regard the comics
industry as nothing more than a pseudo-profession for dedicated slackers, worthy of little accreditation and less merit. Such philistines would hardly realize that many years of laborious slog are behind these hard-earned successes. A literary parallel would be those snobbish authors who belittle J.K. Rowling, just because she wrote her record-breaking novels beside a pram in a crowded London café, rather than in an oak-panelled room or purpose-built study.

For graphic novelists, such notions are unfounded, yet pervading. Internationally, these generalizations do have a single exception: Europe, where sophisticated publishing values have earned authors an enviable level of respect. (Duncan & Smith 2009, p. 298) Elsewhere in the world, graphic novelists have had to repeatedly prove their academic worth. Even in Japan, with its incredibly popular manga culture, university degrees are a recent development. Founded in 2000, the Department of Comic Art at Kyoto’s Seika University is the only four-year degree of its kind nationwide, joining its aforementioned sister-school in Savannah. (Thorn n.d., <www.teachingcomics.org>) The global industry itself seems to be recognizing this deficiency and taking its own steps to remediate it, with veterans like Sturm, Eisner and McCloud stepping into teaching roles. Kazuo Koike, the renowned writer behind the Lone Wolf and Cub novels, teaches a gensaku-sha course which shows students how to structure stories and develop characters – highly specialized and medium-specific skills which they would be unlikely to pick up anywhere else. Seika’s course similarly focuses on storytelling over rendering techniques, the latter of which Thorn believes are overemphasised (n.d., <www.teachingcomics.org>); whilst artistic talent cannot be fostered through academic instruction alone, the skills needed to craft a plausible and enthralling narrative can be taught, giving students the tools they need to become visual communicators.

The format also lends itself well to educational purposes, in a variety of different contexts. Signage and iconography have long been used to direct and inform the masses – a set of Ikea instructions or instruction card of airline safety-procedures are ideal examples – and this technique can be replicated by graphic novelists. During his time in

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19 This may not be wholly accurate; although Matt Thorn, co-founder of Seika’s four-year course, makes this impressive claim, he may be referring to a course which solely teaches about Western comics, excluding schools that specialize in manga from his definition of ‘comic art’.
the army, Eisner was asked to draw a series of manuals on the upkeep of military equipment. These ‘technical comics’ were a hit with servicemen, many of whom were only semi-literate. Eisner prided himself on the fact that he could communicate complex terminology to other civilian-conscripts like himself, in a colloquial language which they could relate to. Though the original engineer’s manuals he worked from might decorously ask the reader to “remove all foreign matter from the walls of the engine”, Eisner cheekily replaced this with a far more casual turn of phrase: “clean the crud out of the engine”. (Andelman 2005, p. 84) Though some of his superiors sometimes frowned upon his artistic licence and use of his trademark humour, his comics were immensely popular around the barracks.

More recently, in 2008, Scott McCloud was commissioned by Google to produce a user’s manual for the new web browser they were then developing, Google Chrome. Using his inimitable sense of visual eloquence, McCloud, who is himself a confessed technophile, produced a comic which made the technical aspects of the software easier for the average layperson to fathom. He succinctly explained all of Chrome’s advantages and exhibited its innovations, providing a ‘look under the hood’ direct from the program’s team of developers. The Chrome Comic became a sensation when it was released ahead of the software’s own arrival; it was sent to journalists and bloggers in order to give them a preview of the new program’s features. The Seattle Post-Intelligencer declared that it was “a masterpiece of software documentation”, whilst Forbes/Newsweek called it “one of the friendliest technical descriptions the software industry has yet produced”; the New York Times, apparently already familiar with McCloud’s work, likened the whole project as “akin to hiring Paul McCartney to write a jingle.” (McCloud n.d., <www.scottmccloud.com>)}

**Figure 11:** Caught in enemy crossfire, an exasperated sergeant rebukes his rifleman: “Do me a favour, tiger... do a quick before-operations check on your rifle before we counterattack.” (Andelman 2005, p. 138) Eisner’s instructive comic would have shown him just how to do it, in a segment provocatively titled *How to Strip Your Baby*. This supplement on the M16A1 rifle appeared in the army’s *PS Magazine*, so named because it was considered a ‘postscript’ for the more serious technical manuals. (Andelman 2005, p. 173)
The Chrome Comic was a revelation for techies and casual readers alike – McCloud had long been a crusader for the medium’s extended capabilities, and had now proven his point. At a lecture he gave during the 2011 Graphic festival, he explained how the graphic novel has long suffered under much the same misconception as many other forms of art – whilst it is recognized as an effective means of self-expression, its capabilities as a mode of informative communication have always been underestimated. (Graphic 2011, n. pag.) However, a certain amount of change is starting to come about. Though the medium has long been closeted in its own niche market, it is becoming increasingly versatile and accessible, attracting readers with its aesthetically-appealing artwork, and connecting with them through its use of demonstrative imagery. McCloud’s collaboration with Google proved that the medium can be used as not just a marketing tool or mode of entertainment, but also as a source of factual information.

Of course, the most highly-awarded graphic novels do not need to be non-fiction in order to be meaningful; exalted media such as art-house cinema and literary masterpieces prove that self-expression can have just as much value. Those who want to read graphic novels rather than create them are not neglected in academe; on the other side of the equation, increased audience enthusiasm has led to the medium’s recognition as a form of literature and social commentary. This venture did not meet with much success in its earliest incarnation, as McCloud explains: “For many years, ‘comics studies’ echoed public perception by relegating comics primarily to the status of cultural artifact… a portrayal of a form driven exclusively by culture, devoid of any independent vision.” (2000, p. 93-94) In a further example of the prejudice I mentioned in the previous chapter, course coordinators seemed to judge the medium based on its less-exemplary specimens.

Other texts that were being studied at universities dealt with much the same themes and content as many graphic novels that were readily available – e.g. a student studying Classical Mythology gleefully told

**Figure 12:** Darin Fisher, one of Google Chrome’s software engineers, begins to explain the browser’s innovative ‘multi-purpose architecture’. (McCloud 2008b, p. 3) The comic’s script was adapted from interviews Scott McCloud conducted with 20 members of personnel, adapting their technical jargon into a format which is easier for the average reader to grasp. (McCloud n.d., <www.scottmccloud.com>
Neil Gaiman how her prescribed texts included *The Sandman*, alongside Euripides, Homer, Sophocles and Vergil. (2012, <http://twitter.com>) It was only the vessel that instructors still seemed to abhor. Graphic novels set about combating this by embracing literary traditions; great works of classic literature – including Dostoyevsky and Shakespeare – have been adapted into the format. Stand-out examples of the medium, such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman*, regularly feature on university syllabi, whilst names such as ‘Archie’ and ‘Spiderman’ are starting to appear in thesis titles.

Still, the graphic novel’s adaption to campus life hasn’t exactly been smooth. Trying to educate people in preparation for a profession that is only just starting to be formally recognized can be a difficult undertaking. Parents would often ask Sturm how much money their children could really make from the skills that they were being taught at SCAD; his immediate reply was that they may not make any at all. (2002, p. 3) McCloud reiterates this, pointing out that a degree does not automatically ensure success in the workforce. However, he insists that these courses give much-needed support to a burgeoning cavalcade of new talent, who hopefully won’t have to struggle quite as much as “self-taught old timers” like himself did:

“We can only guess how many potential masters of the form never put pen to paper because of the utter absence of recognition. We want to believe that great artists will always find their destined careers, no matter what society tells them, but for many, ambition can be a delicate thing, and finding the right road may not be possible, even for the brightest of imaginations, when the road can’t be found on any map.” (2000, p. 92-93)

McCloud firmly believes that “private institutions such as universities, museums and libraries” (2000, p. 92) may be instrumental in earning graphic novels the respect they deserve; such organizations are both indicative of our culture’s standards and influence that culture directly, reaching the public and shaping popular opinion. If today’s educators exalt the graphic novel, the people whom they reach likely will as well.

Even if graduates do not end up in the industry right away, the SCAD course still offers them a wealth of valuable employment opportunities. Sturm relates how one of his previous students works as a video-game developer by day whilst working on his graphic novel in his spare time, hoping to eventually get it published; other graduates have been employed in art studios, publishing houses, as illustrators, producing storyboards for animation, and in journalism, as well as in the actual comic-book
industry itself. (2002, p. 3) Even if Sturm’s students do not make a dime from what he has taught them, he is still investing in the future of the medium. Individual lives can progress along unforeseeable paths, and though no professions are entirely secure, a stable educational environment will certainly encourage the industry’s development. The SCAD course’s curriculum equips students with skills which they will always be able to put to good use, in a society which is constantly developing new forms of entertaining multimedia and placing an ever increasing emphasis on visual literacy.

Sturm saw the increasing number of students in his classes as an indication that today’s emphasis on visual literacy is garnering the medium greater recognition and credibility, and he may well be right; the industry ages with its inhabitants, and its maturity will be reflected in the new attitudes these participants bring. Just as Sturm inspired his students to pursue their ambitions and believe in the medium, some of these students will likely go on to teach the generation that follows them, and their optimism will be passed on to another batch of apprentices. This process will continue, so long as there is a need for visual expression and transcendent narrative. And so long as this market exists, there will always be a profession for graphic novelists.

Since I compared the career of cartoonists with those of comedians, it seems appropriate to quote from one such professional jester (among many other vocations), Stephen Fry; he himself cites legendary writer and flamboyant kindred spirit Oscar Wilde, who serves as a most unlikely careers counsellor:

“If you want to be a grocer, or a general, or a politician, or a judge, you will invariably become it; that is your punishment. If you never know what you want to be, if you live what some might call the dynamic life but what I will call the artistic life, if each day you are unsure of who you are and what you know, you will never become anything, and that is your reward.”

– Fry 2010, n. pag.

Job security has never been the lot of those who earn their bread via creative impulse; however, for those who brave these uncharted territories, the results can be well worth what they have initially had to sacrifice.
3.2.6 ‘If it were any good, they’d make it into a movie.’

“Television and cinema were all very well, but these stories happened to other people. The stories I found in books happened inside my head. I was, in some way, there.” – Neil Gaiman

Graphic novels have become Hollywood’s latest craze. Some cinematic renditions of comic-book fare include the obligatory Superman and Batman franchises, X-Men, The Hulk, Spiderman, Sin City, V for Vendetta, Astro Boy, Captain America and Tintin; there are many others that I do not have room here to list. These big-screen ‘remakes’ may incite some to ask: is the format itself really essential, or would the stories be great no matter what medium they were presented in? Since film versions have the advantages of superior technology and aesthetic realism behind them, why not bypass the book-bound stage altogether, and focus on making great films instead of great graphic novels?

Why is there a such current boom in films that are based on graphic novels? Local comic-book aficionado James Morris has a theory: “Comic books are a goldmine of high-concept ideas for Hollywood, easily digested and easily transferred to screen… Comics are all about visuals and dialogue.” (Joyce 2008, n. pag.) It cannot be denied that the two media have much in common; it is easy for some to label the graphic novel as the outmoded genesis of modern cinema. McCloud concedes: “you might say that before it is projected, film is just a very, very, very slow comic!” (1993, p. 8) The graphic novel’s reclusive twin, the storyboard, has long served as a production tool for filmmakers. Osamu Tezuka showed just how closely-related the two formats were when he made the jump from manga to anime, cementing his place in Japanese history as the nation’s own answer to Walt Disney.

In much the same way silent film became extinct after the introduction of the ‘talkies’, should graphic novels graciously bow out of twenty-first-century society, in favour of the big-budget blockbusters which have seemingly surpassed them? My own answer to this hypothetical is a resounding ‘no’. Someone who would have echoed this sentiment – and would, if Frank Miller is to be believed, even take a combative stance

20 Cited in Gaiman & Sarrantonio 2010, p. 1
on the matter – is Will Eisner. Miller, himself a highly-successful graphic novelist best known for *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Sin City*, recalls how he once cornered the industry veteran at a comic convention and engaged him in a lengthy three-hour conversation. However, the discussion turned into a debate as Miller began expounding his own views: “Without realizing it, I had essentially characterized comics as the poor man’s film, thinking each panel the equivalent of a frozen frame of celluloid. Will ripped me to pieces. Verbally, that is.” (Eisner 2005, p. 7) Miller admits that he brought this tirade upon himself. According to his report, Eisner remained polite, yet was unapologetically insistent as he set Miller straight: “What counts, he told me, is the panel content, the function of the individual panel to enhance a story. Every panel must have story content, he insisted, despite my protests. If you want to make movies, go make movies.” (Eisner 2005, p. 7) Miller appears to have taken Eisner at his word. He did go and make a movie, several in fact – film adaptions of not just his own work, but also of Eisner’s own classic creation, *The Spirit*. Taking this fact into consideration, it seems that Miller has won the argument. However, what really becomes interesting is the way in which Miller chose to transfer these works onto the big screen.

Eisner’s argument seems to have been that, contrary to what McCloud rather flippantly claimed, films are not just ‘very slow comics’. As well as having much in common, there are also irrevocable differences between graphic novels and films. Both are multi-modal media which communicate through the use of words and images, albeit via slightly different means; films replace written words with spoken dialogue, whilst graphic novels must rely on typography for other effects such as onomatopoeia, which film can emulate with actual sound. Both use successive frames to create the illusion of motion and duration, but again, each follows its own inherent method. McCloud purports that “space does for comics what time does for film” (1993, p. 7) – that is, each image in a graphic novel is laid out in its own place on the page, letting readers move freely backward and forward in time by juxtaposing each panel with others in a set sequence; by contrast, each individual frame in a reel of film is projected upon the exact same space, with each frame replacing that which went before it, at a frequency which approximates visible motion.

The visual narrative has its own very distinctive language. It uses a complex system of semiotics, symbols and graphic devices, all of which form a dialect that is
almost entirely specific to the medium itself. Some of these techniques may be compatible with film (see Figure 13, below). Some, like Tezuka’s methods, may have even been inspired by cinematic effects in the first place (see the excerpt from *New Treasure Island* on page 146 for an ideal example). However, there are also many other graphic devices which have no other equivalent, neither in any other media nor in the real world, existing only in the context of the graphic novel. This hasn’t stopped film from appropriating these effects; and this is where particularly Miller excels. The cinema version of *Sin City* didn’t just tell the same story as the graphic novel – it retold it using almost exactly the same visual language.

The man who is ultimately responsible for *Sin City*’s conversion to film is director Robert Rodriguez. He remembers that the rights to the graphic novel’s celluloid conversion had been on offer for years, yet he himself could not initially fathom how the movie would ever be made:

“How could they ever adapt it? It would just become a regular movie, it wouldn’t have the same feel. And I started really looking at it as, instead of trying to turn it into a movie, which would be terrible, let’s take cinema and try to make it into this book. Because the medias [sic] are really very similar. These are just snapshots of movement.” (Miller & Rodriguez 2005, n. pag.)

Rodriguez believed that in order to do Miller’s creation due justice, the novel’s trademark gritty, noir-sodden style needed to remain intact.²¹ Miller’s illustrations

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²¹ For more about Miller’s original graphic novel-version of *Sin City*, see Case Study 4.5.3
contain a mood and atmosphere which is nearly impossible to emulate in real life; and so, rather than limiting themselves to conventional production values, co-directors Rodriguez and Miller chose to incorporate illustrative techniques into their film. What they created is a perfectly-balanced hybrid of cinematography, animation and illustration.

Rodriguez had already experimented with the digital technologies that were revolutionizing filmmaking at the time;\(^{22}\) this experience would serve him and his collaborators in good stead. An incredibly advanced form of green-screen technology allowed he and his co-directors, Miller and Quentin Tarantino, to create startling visual effects. The ensemble of actors was as noteworthy for their resemblance to their ink-rendered counterparts as they were for their incredible talent; Miller recalls: “When we were casting all these parts, strange things started happening. People showed up who looked like my drawings.” (Miller & Rodriguez 2005, n. pag.) Because the actors were filmed against a green screen, the frame around them served as a blank canvas that could be filled with all manner of effects. Only three physical sets were produced for filming; with the rest of the locations being digitally rendered and layered into a final composite. (Miller & Rodriguez 2005, n. pag.) In post-production, the film was decolourised and the contrast in values heightened, effectively recreating the aesthetic of Miller’s artwork. The fragmentary nature of the production process meant that various pieces of footage could be stitched together; for example, principle players Mickey Rourke and Elijah Wood engaged in several furious fight scenes, yet the actors were never on the film set at the same time. (IMDb 2005, <www.imdb.com>)

**Figure 14:** A demonstration of how closely the *Sin City* film replicated Miller’s original artwork. **Top,** a panel from *The Hard Goodbye; centre,** the raw footage, with the actors filmed against a green screen. **Bottom,** the completed film after post-production, with colourization effects and digital backgrounds added. (Parsons 2005, <www.canmag.com/news/4/3/747>)

\(^{22}\) He had already trialled these techniques in the making of such films as *Spy Kids 3-D: Game Over* and *The Adventures of Shark Boy & Lava Girl.*
This was an unorthodox, yet ideal approach to the film’s production, as the aesthetic of Miller’s graphic novel is such an integral part of the story. Miller himself admitted: “I’ve been the most startled by how faithful it was to the original.” (Miller & Rodriguez 2005, n. pag.) Without the incredible advances in digital film technology, the film adaptation could not have stayed as true to its source as it did. After *Sin City* pioneered these techniques, many other filmmakers have utilised them for other projects; similar technology was used to create both Zack Snyder’s adaption of Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* and Miller’s own reimagining of Eisner’s *Spirit*, whilst Stephen Spielberg has used cutting-edge motion-capture technology to bring Hergé’s much-loved Tintin characters to life.

However, there was more to the *Sin City* film than just cinematic wizardry; superficial styling was not the only thing that the two renditions had in common. The substance at the film’s core was also exactly the same. There was no script or screenplay for the film; just the graphic novels themselves. Miller’s artwork served as the storyboards, which the joint-directors used to painstakingly plan each of their shots. (IMDb 2005, <www.imdb.com>) Rodriguez was adamant from the start that Miller would serve as his co-director on the project, despite never having been actively involved in the making of a film before. He declared: “I don’t want to make Robert Rodriguez’s *Sin City*; I want to make Frank Miller’s *Sin City*, because I love the material so much.” (Miller & Rodriguez 2005, n. pag.)

There is a real reason why the *Sin City* film had to stray away from conventional techniques, employing real actors yet combining them with virtual effects. Its visuals stray into areas of abstraction and unreality, relatively unexplored territory for a medium which has long prided itself on its resemblance to the actual world around us. The one great advantage film has always had over graphic novels is its absolute realism. Shaun Tan has observed the way that illustrations “approximate the textures of reality. It [drawing] is like an actual recreation of a material world from other materials.” (Hopper 2008, <www.inframe.tv>) However, films are made from the exact same substance as the material world. Whenever film depicts a person, a flesh-and-blood actor has performed that role,\(^\text{23}\) and no artwork, however masterful, can come close to so

\(^{23}\) This only applies, of course, to live-action films; in many ways, animated film has more in common with illustration than conventional cinema.
perfectly recreating life itself.24 This is, according to Eisner, not necessarily a deficiency on the graphic novel’s part; the medium can operate on a wider premise because it is not restricted to actuality. Illustrators can suspend reality in favour of more expressive, less figurative imagery, a freedom which graphic novelists enjoy “because they [are] unfettered by the confines of the realism in live theatre or film.” (Eisner 1996, p. 73)

Whilst it may not be able to perfectly replicate reality, artwork can interpret real life, and that is where it really excels. Filmmakers like Rodriguez are beginning to recognize this quality, and are incorporating it into their own works.

Graphic novels and films have co-existed for a long time; as such, they need to be mindful of one another. In Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative, Eisner observes: “The comics maker working in modern times must deal with a reader whose life experience includes a substantial amount of exposure to film.” (1996, p. 72)

Conversely, filmmakers are now working in an industry where reels of highlights and preview trailers will precede the release of the full-length feature by months; something as simple as the design of a poster can greatly affect the way audiences will interpret the movie itself. Whereas trademark cinematic techniques such as zooming and panning were once the pinnacle of dynamic cinematography, there now seems to be an emphasis on creating singular iconic ‘shots’, which will look good posted in blogs or printed alongside critics’ reviews.

Once the average moviegoer leaves the cinema, it is unlikely that they will remember the actual motion of a tracking shot over Miller’s decaying urban landscape, or Marv’s gestures as he launches into a vengeful rant. What the audience-member will remember, in far greater detail, is a single enduring image of decrepit buildings silhouetted against a rain-drench sky; or a snapshot of Marv’s hulking form towering over Lucille, his bandages forming patches of blindingly-stark white against the shadow-shrouded crags of his face. The directors pulled this imagery straight from the pages of the novel, in what James Morris refers to as ‘panel grabs’. (2009, n. pag.)

These scenes are brief and simply shot, featuring none of the whiz-bang cinematic effects or dramatic camera angles which are often used by filmmakers to make footage

24 There are some exceptions; artists Stephen John Phillips and José Villarrubia have created a graphic novel called Veils, which combines photographs of costumed ‘models’ with computer-rendered 3-D backgrounds. It is an unusual amalgamation of collage, storytelling and digital media which very much resembles a still-life ‘film’. (Design Graphics 1999, p. 26)
seem more compelling; instead, there is a greater emphasis on visualization and content – the very same intrinsic values which Eisner referred to as the backbone of great graphic storytelling.

This new approach may seem like a minimal departure from traditional cinematic techniques, since film has always sought to generate memorable imagery; however, there is a perceptible change. In comparing film to visual narrative, Eisner subtly made a distinction between the two by referring to the audiences of each under separate terminology; whilst film is watched by a ‘spectator’, graphic novels engage a ‘participant’ (see Figure 15, below). Film presents all its information to the viewer without them having to visualize it for themselves; imagery and sound are represented by real sights and real noises, making data much easier to absorb. By contrast, graphic novels require the reader to use their imagination to a greater extent, converting semiotics and text into actions, emotions or sensations. This reading process means that ‘participants’ perhaps cannot relax as much as they might have done whilst staring at a flickering screen; however, it does mean that they might become more deeply invested in the narrative, since they become involved in the storytelling process itself. By creating visuals which require a greater amount of interpretation than realistic imagery, Miller and Rodriguez have created a film which ‘speaks’ to a participant, in much the same vernacular as graphic novels do.

Films and graphic novels are very similar, yet also very different. Whilst striving to recreate some of the same effects, each medium sets about achieving these aims in very different ways. Each has its own advantages, as well as the potential to influence and improve the other – graphic novelists have learned to make their artwork more dynamic, emulating the sense of motion and cinematic devices from the movies; whilst

Figure 15: Eisner’s differentiation between a film’s ‘spectator’ and a graphic novel’s ‘participant’. (1996, p. 71)
filmmakers are beginning to incorporate graphic elements into their cinematography, experimenting with interpretation and abstraction rather than just relying on pure realism. I am not a film expert; however, given the movie industry’s rapidly improving technologies and our general society’s increasing emphasis on visual literacy, I can tentatively predict that this symbiotic relationship will continue in future. As the technologies needed to produce these kinds of visual effects improve and change how we react to imagery in general, the visual language of graphic novels may start to change what we expect from film. This will thereby keep the graphic novel’s inherent traditions very much alive, both within itself, and in its rival medium.

3.2.7 ‘They’re old-fashioned and out-dated.’

“Comics will be the culture of the year 3794.” – Salvador Dali

The turn of the millennium has ushered in an age of technological advancement. With the aversion of the Y2K bug, our current culture has evolved into an interconnected wilderness of smart phones, blue ray, iPads, Wii, widescreen and wireless. Electronic devices now cater to our whims as never before. In this modern environment, graphic novels may seem like a fossil from a bygone era. Concerns are gathering over the possible extinction of printed publications, in large part due to their usurpation by the electronic ‘e-book’. The year 2011 saw the widespread closure of two of Australia’s leading literary retailers, Borders and Angus & Robertson; the latter has now rebranded itself as an online dispatch store. (Wright 2011, <www.news.com.au>) Since it is also a paper-bound medium, some within the graphic novel industry have begun to prematurely lament the medium’s imminent demise. However, in the competition between the physical book and the virtual document, the supposed ‘survival of the fittest’ depends on what definition of ‘fit’ that you subscribe to.

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25 Cited in Gravett 2005, p. 2
With the advent of new modes of entertainment, the graphic novel may appear somewhat antiquated. However, Sarah Mayor Cox believes otherwise: “Our information age relies more and more on symbols and pictures as our lives get busier and people have less time to read text. As never before, we are living in a visual age.” (2004, p.9) The twenty-first century is, thus far, an era more visually saturated with graphic stimuli than any other. Advances in print reproduction technology, mass advertising, and digital media have made the deciphering of visual language a necessary ability. The graphic novel has always utilized the technique of ‘reading’ imagery; however, this new demand for visual literacy, arisen from our need to swiftly adapt to our own society’s rapidly-evolving modes of communication, means that modern sensibilities now specifically favour the medium more than ever.

From a historical point of view, illustration has benefited from new technologies before. Diana Klemin’s treatise on the progress of visual narrative attributes a rise in the popularity of illustration to an improvement in print technology which occurred during the late nineteenth century, resulting in the industry’s legendary ‘Golden Age’:

“What brought new freedom in book illustration was the success of children’s books, where the increased use of offset printing economically permitted the artist to paint in black wash or in watercolour over the entire page and to integrate the text with the art. The artist and publisher observed these experiments in children’s books. Adults often bought the books for themselves.” (Klemin 1965, p.20)

A very similar trend can be seen in graphic novels; the invention of the CMYK-colour model caused an explosion in coloured comics, a prospect which had hitherto been too expensive to even contemplate. (McCloud 1993, p. 187) Through a balance of commerce and technology, artists could now create effects which would have previously been financially unfeasible.

However, the latest and most expansive new frontier for graphic novels is the web. The greatest campaigner for online graphic novels or ‘webcomics’ – and, indeed, the greatest campaigner for graphic novels in general – is undoubtedly Scott McCloud. He has established a website, scottmccloud.com, which serves as an international mecca for web-based graphic novelists. In a series of online comics entitled I Can’t Stop Thinking, which significantly expand upon the content from his renowned book trilogy, he suggested the concept of ‘micropayments’ some time before such a thing was technologically possible. (Barber & Winthrow 2005, p. 170) Micropayments allow
graphic novelists to be paid tiny amounts – usually no more than 25 cents per chapter – for online access or download of their work; in music terms, this system is akin to paying small fees to purchase individual songs, rather than having to buying an entire album outright. This potentially allows online perusers to read more material, yet pay less than the price of a printed, collected volume for the privilege, while still giving creators due remuneration. Since many of the middle-men, including printers and distributors, are cut out of the process, the smaller price-tag is balanced by reduced production costs, making online publication an extremely viable sales method.

McCloud also pioneered what he refers to as the internet’s ‘infinite canvas’. In digital media, page layouts need no longer follow the conventions of print traditions, i.e. portrait orientation, with panels read from left to right (or right to left in manga) and from the top to the bottom. McCloud’s forays into the netscape have become far less orthodox; using lines which have come to be known as ‘trails’, he links panels together in widely varying arrangements – forming labyrinthine layouts, intricate grids, or sometimes discarding frames altogether, letting the viewer’s scrolling process break up one large panel in a gradual reveal. (McCloud 2000b, <http://scottmccloud.com>) Although McCloud’s new approach may seem radical, it is, in fact, deeply entrenched in ancient tradition; he argues that Egyptian friezes, Grecian pillar-carvings, and the Bayeux tapestry all told their sequential stories in a single line which turned corners or changed levels, but remained unbroken; it was only when printing processes were invented that visual narrative began to follow the relatively-disjointed ‘left-to-right’ format. Once graphic novels become detached from printed formats,

Figure 16: McCloud demonstrates just some of the variant sequential layouts that are possible with the seemingly infinite space that digital media are facilitated with. (2000, p. 223)
McCloud argues, they should be able to seek out alternative spatial arrangements, reverting back to layouts which predate the Gutenberg press, or else find completely original, modern ways in which to arrange themselves. (2000a, p. 217-223) The scrollable, variable, versatile and almost unlimited area of the webpage lets graphic novels break free from their previous page-bound constraints, becoming increasingly experimental.

Some graphic novelists even use the digital realm’s multimedia capabilities to their advantage, including elements like motion in their works, and in doing so straying back towards the divide between comics and cinema. At one end of the spectrum, ‘flash-comics’ use motion solely as a navigation system; produced using the titular Adobe software, interactive buttons or similar devices allow readers to transition between each panel. Particularly enterprising tech-wizards have incorporated simple, looped animation within the frames themselves, forming a unique hybrid of sequential art and film. Though classification of such specimens can become murky, McCloud makes the distinction clear: the motion used in comics is so minimal, it represents only a miniscule increment of time, enough to classify it as ‘motion’ but not actual ‘movement’:

“The best way I’ve come up with to explain it is that looping animation (and sound, for that matter) still communicate a static span of time. If panel 2 clearly comes after panel 1 and before panel 3, it still feels like comics, even if panel 2 is a short loop of some sort.” (2010a, <http://scottmccloud.com>)

As well as influencing story content and narrative techniques, new technologies have made graphic novels increasingly more accessible. The internet allows the medium to attract the attention of a readership that would have otherwise been far out of reach. Webcomics do n’t fight for space on store shelves, allowing them to relinquish their long-wearing battle with popular genres, prompting them to diversify. Readers can find graphic novels to suit their particular interests simply by typing a few words into a search engine. People who have never opened a graphic novel in their life might incidentally read a webcomic while surfing the net, introducing the medium to a whole new audience. Industry veteran Jim Lee has noticed an increase in “lapsed fans, people who read comics at some point, or people who are curious, who are finding comic books for the first time through these new devices.” (Wolk 2011, <www.wired.com>)
Of course, digitizing the industry hasn’t erased all of its former foibles; industry expert and enterprising web-comicker Colleen Doran takes exception to the fact that despite moving into ground-breaking new territory, webcomics still plumb the safer realms of storytelling, with the most popular titles dealing with the traditional fare of gag-strips and superheroes.26 (2011, <http://adistantsoil.com>) Despite this, the web has certainly given the graphic novel space to grow; it need only attain enough confidence to start branching out.

Given all these positive attributes, will the industry eventually decide to leave paper behind completely? General industry outcry seems to fear that this will be the case. Digital comics are as yet still a largely unexplored frontier, and this gaping void of the unknown has put many formerly-comfortable professionals on edge. In the literary world, a number of physical bookstores that have recently been forced out of business pin the blame for their own failure on the gargantuan market of online booksellers. Because of this, there are concerns that comic-book stores, already catering to a minority clientele, may also fall victim. So-called ‘scanslations’ – i.e. foreign-language comics, particularly manga, which has been scanned, translated and posted online by volunteering fans – offer readers scores of titles for their unlimited viewing pleasure, but don’t bother to charge any money, don’t request copyright permission before reproducing licensed material, nor pass any royalties on to the creators.27 With these sites readily available, why would consumers want to go out and buy a book, when they can get it online and absolutely free?

David Steinberger is the co-founder of comiXology, an iPhone app specially designed for reading comics. His product is connected to legitimate retailers and is respectful of the rights of creators; however, even he admits that while technology could potentially revolutionize the graphic novel, it could also “undermine and disrupt the industry in a big way… [it could be] over before digital even gets started.” (Wolk 2011,

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26 Doran’s own series, A Distant Soil, is a rollicking adventure, part sci-fi action and part political-thriller. Originally printed in book form but never completed, Doran’s work went through a renewed Renaissance when it hit the net, a good twenty years after its initial publication. Doran has resumed work on new material for the series, and hopes to finally complete it in 2013. (Doran 2011, <http://adistantsoil.com>)

27 Some of these websites do contain messages, encouraging readers to support the original authors and purchase material legitimately. OneManga, a popular scanslation site, was even forced to remove all of its content, at the request of major publishers who owned the content that it was posting. (OneManga.com 2010, <www.onemanga.com>)
In a worst-case scenario, the digital frontier could financially ruin publishers of analogue-format works, render the skills of traditional artists obsolete, alienate the legions of devoted old-school readers, and, in Douglas Wolk’s words, cause the whole industry to “blow up like Krypton.” (2011, <www.wired.com>)

Despite these grave fears, the push to venture into digitized domain is incredibly insistent. Have we so outgrown our carbon confines that we actually prefer the clinical expanse of a wired world? Within the panicked hordes, there are voices of reason; for every cluster of pessimists, there is an optimist who remains insistent that the paperback is not a dying breed. The analogue argument has fair conviction: paper and ink are not necessarily obsolete, and nor is digital medium superior to them in every aspect. McCloud, writing in the year 2000, was able to recite a veritable list of disadvantages that webcomics were bound by at the time.28 For example, books were more portable than a desktop computer (this statement is rendered impotent by the arrival of iPads and kindles), but they are certainly still significantly less-expensive, at an entry level, than digital equipment. Print can be viewed by anyone with eyes and are easier to browse, requiring no specialist knowledge to operate or taking any time to load. Navigation is in the complete control of the user, not governed by buttons or links. More complex, detailed images can lose some of their sharpness in screen pixilation, whereas publications, if printed properly, will generally retain optimal resolution.29 The ability to bypass professional publishers means that anyone can launch their creations on the net,

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28 Since then, technologies have improved, and developers have started to tackle these problems; at the time of writing this, some of the disadvantages McCloud previously listed no longer apply, and others may be addressed in future years to come.

29 Of course, there are unfortunate exceptions; as I mention back in Chapter 3.1.2, Duncan & Smith’s grainy diagrams showed me how not to format an image-laden document for commercial printing.
producing a flood of works with questionable standards; paper-bound publishers tend to invest more wisely. (McCloud 2000a, p. 162 & 175)

A little over a decade later, some of these problems have already been solved. The now-defunct American manga publisher Tokyopop created ‘Mobile Manga’, a service which sends pages from popular titles direct to mobile phones; although no longer available, it predated comiXology by a year, and the Kindle’s ‘Mangle’ software by four. (Tokyopop 2006, <http://messageboard.tokyopop.com>) This development has been augmented by devices like iPhones and iPads; even pocket-sized communications are now equipped with screens that provide enough resolution to make artwork both impressive and portable. Higher definition screens and faster internet connections are constantly arriving. Soon, the only thing the web will not be able to effectively replicate is the tactile sense of touch a printed book provides.30

And this is where sentimentality overtakes both commercialism and computerization. Art Spiegelman, ever with an eye firmly planted on the past, insists that the paperback’s premature epitaph is based more on hysteria than any legitimate speculation:

“Yes, everybody [in publishing] is panicked, and they aren’t thinking clearly. Yes, books have a function that can be partially supplanted by a little device. But there are other things that can only be experienced from the limitations of paper. Some books want to be petted. The books that have a right to be books make use of their bookness. Graphic novels – who knew that term would stick! – continue to do well because they use their bookness. Comics don’t want to be sizeless.” (Cooke 2011, <www.guardian.co.uk>)

Neil Gaiman, who admits to still writing the first drafts of his novels in longhand with a fountain pen, has a similarly nostalgic outlook:

“I still love the book-ness of books, the smell of books; I am a book fetishist -- books to me are the coolest and sexiest and most wonderful things there are. For an author, they’re your headstone and your living monument: mine will allow me to lecture and entertain people long after I’m gone. Isaac Asimov put it best when he pointed out that the book, especially the paperback book, is a perfectly designed thing. It does not need an on-and-off switch; it doesn’t need power; it’s comfortable to read -- black print on white paper, driven by sunlight, is terrifically efficient; it’s a good size for putting down, and when you drop it you can find your place almost immediately.” (Locus 2005, <www.locusmag.com >)

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30 It is now possible to flip a page by sliding a finger across the screen of an electronic reader, complete with the appropriate rustling noise; however, this is still a far cry from the real thing.
Despite this apparent outpouring of affection, Gaiman remains practical; he admits to being a fan of the Kindle, and accedes that virtual data’s inexistent nature can be useful at times: “I get deeply and genuinely pissed off that books weigh anything, and if I want to take them with me I have to load up a suitcase or the trunk of the car with them. Information weighs nothing!” (Locus 2005, <www.locusmag.com>)

Gaiman’s minor gripe aside, a book’s solidness, or as Spiegelman and Gaiman have dubbed it, ‘bookness’, can lend it a certain appeal. Local bookstore owner David McLean is confident that “there’ll always be a demand for something you can hold in your hand and can own”. (Jones 2011, n.pag.) Buyers will always crave the reaffirmation that their money has earned them something substantial; as a parallel analogy, digital music is certainly convenient, but a folder of mp3 files aren’t half as satisfying as a shelf full of dustily-dignified vintage vinyl, or even a rack of beaten-up and scratched CD’s complete with dog-eared cover slips and eye-catching album art. Similarly, McLean describes some exemplary tomes in his store as “beautiful works of art… just to hold them is a pleasure.” (Jones 2011, n. pag.) It is a pleasure which never dates with time, even for the most jaded of bibliophiles, and an experience which even the cleverest of smart-phones cannot replicate.

Whatever your stance on the page/screen debate, it cannot be denied that new technologies are giving graphic novelists further opportunities to produce, publish and distribute their works. These digital endeavours are still in their formative stages and refinements will definitely need to take place in the future; yet already, many of the necessary adjustments appear to be well underway. A strong net-based community is gathering, with fans of e-books clamouring to add their favourite comics to their virtual bookshelves. Critics and historians are following the cyber-conversion process and anticipating future developments, eagerly awaiting the innovations this new platform will usher in. And in an incidental turn of generosity, the webcomic is renewing a nostalgic yen for the proper paper-bound books of old, acting as the technologically-savvy representative of the old guard. While not necessarily replacing traditional methods, these trend to go digital certainly provides the industry with the motivation it needs to expand and innovate, keeping pace with our modern society’s electronic evolution, whilst still revering the carefully-crafted tomes of our not-so-distant past.
Chapter Four
Research
As the previous chapters attest, there is a lot more to the graphic novel than the clichéd cultural stereotype of superheroes, starbursts and spandex; the medium acts as a vessel for an infinite range of different themes, cultures, age groups, genders, genres, and subject material. However, one single factor unites every graphic novel which has ever been made: the primary purpose of each one, first and foremost, is to tell a story. As someone who enjoys both reading stories by others and telling my own, my main objective whilst undertaking this dissertation was to examine the technical aspects of the graphic novel format, in order to discover the inner workings of a visual narrative and the ways in which one could be constructed. In order to gain this insight, I began to look at the works which I already enjoyed reading; except now I was viewing them not as a casual reader, but as an analytical researcher.

My first task was to identify and examine the basic building blocks of the graphic novel’s structure, i.e. words and images. Once I gained an understanding of how each of these elements worked individually, I began to investigate the relationships that are possible between the two elements, surveying a wide range of different ways in which they could be combined. To this end, I observed the techniques I had seen being used, in their specific original contexts. These examples formed a series of case studies, which I then used to compare and evaluate the varying text/image combinations in terms of their situational appropriateness. Throughout this process, my motivation was my search for a possible means by which I could author my own graphic novel. This research stage formed the bulk of my preparation for my own studio practice.

Before facing that eventual challenge, however, I first evaluated the efforts of the professional authors who had got there well before me (and besides gone striding miles ahead into the distance), closely studying how they each approached their craft. I examined the structures within their works from a technical viewpoint, then considered the effect these visuals had on me as a reader. My research quickly confirmed that there was more to the medium than putting some words and images side by side; so much more consideration goes into the complicated process. When done properly, however, the resulting combinations can be truly stunning, startling, and inspiring. Bit by bit, with each page I turned and story I viewed, I learned innumerable lessons from the experts, revelling in their successes and acknowledging their (occasional) failings. All the while, I was storing away a mental arsenal of techniques I would need later on.
4.1 The Early Years

“I don’t consider them pictures – I think of them as a type of hieroglyphics… In reality I’m not drawing. I’m writing a story with a unique type of symbol.” – Osamu Tezuka31

It could be considered strange that writing and images have become such separate entities; especially since they share a common past. Before the advent of any form of writing, all stories were told in pictures, often accompanying oral storytelling much like they would later accompany text. In most languages, writing would start as mere pictograms, i.e. images representing exactly what they attempted to replicate. These pictures would then become gradually simplified as cultures became more sophisticated and dependant on written records, evolving into a form that was quicker and easier to use extensively. An obvious example is hieroglyphs, which were simplified down into two forms, demotic and hieratic. The cuneiform writing of Mesopotamia evolved in a similar way (see Figure 18, below).

A Simplification of Pictograms

Hieroglyphs

Cuneiform

Figure 18: The historical transition from pictogram to writing (McCloud 1993, p. 209)

Even today, some cultures use pictograms as a form of writing. For instance, traditional Chinese characters do not have a system of phonetic replication. Each individual character stands for a single object, item or idea, and written Chinese incorporates

31 Cited in Schodt 1983, p. 25
thousands of characters, each representing one whole word. Some characters even bear some resemblance to what they represent.

![Figure 19: Comparison of a Chinese character with an illustration (Base 1996, p. 13)](image)

However, in most cases, writing began to lose its pictorial properties, and becoming more closely associated with spoken language. Although images and pictures could coexist in certain contexts, such as in illuminated manuscripts, writing rapidly gained greater prevalence through the invention of the printing press. McCloud notes that while words and images still occurred together on occasion, “those instances were becoming the exception, not the rule… and [they] stayed separate, refusing to mix - like oil and water.” (1993, p. 144) The graphic novel is an example of one of few instances where the two elements, once so closely related, still reunite to perform their original purpose together.

32 In another similar, recent example, Craig Thompson’s *Habibi*, a graphic novel which offers an American interpretation of Islamic culture, incorporated Arabic calligraphy into its imagery. Thompson seamlessly blends the cursive letterforms into his elegantly rendered illustrations, despite not being fluent in the language himself. (Damluji 2011, <http://hoodedutilitarian.com>
4.2 Two Separate Worlds

The most effective ways to utilise writing and images in conjunction, can be better understood if we first understand them as separate entities. By analysing how each element can be best utilized on its own, we can then learn how to combine them.

History shows us that whilst images became more concerned with appearance, trying to replicate the seen as accurately and realistically as possible, words instead delved into the abstract, striving to portray emotions and feelings. The difference can be likened to comparing Michelangelo with Shakespeare. Though Michelangelo could create an imagined representation of Venus’ beauty that was exquisite in its every detail, he could not carve David’s ‘courage’ itself, any more than Shakespeare could recreate the landscape of Verona or the physical features of Othello with words alone, although he could give the latter’s inner jealousy and anguish such vivid intensity.

The purpose of words and the function of images are mirrored in the ways we interact with each. Images are seen, their meaning embedded completely in their surface. Any deeper message must be decoded in our thought processes, translating visual stimuli into a description our minds can understand. An ideal example of this is the ambiguity of the Mona Lisa. Da Vinci replicated her image was almost to perfection, taking great pains to paint her with incredible realism; yet scant information is known about her personality, and any definite indication of her identity as a singular person has been lost. Whether her smile is meant to be a genuine one, or a mocking leer, depends entirely on the interpretation of the beholder.

Writing, by contrast, works in the complete reverse of this process. The mind is given a written description; based on this textual prompt, it must then try to recreate the visual appearance of the subject. If a story’s description gives its heroine the characteristics of snow-white skin, hair black as ebony, and lips as red as blood, so much is left unknown: the length of her hair, the shape of her face, the colour of her eyes, let alone her height, figure, style and manner of dress, and myriad other details, all of which are omitted. The reader constructs their own imagined visage of the subject being described, based on their own aesthetic tastes. The resulting conflict in interpretations becomes obvious when novels are given film adaptations. Whilst the representation created by actors, set designers and stylists may correspond with some
aspects that individual readers have imagined, countless others will necessarily be disappointed, and the final product will not correspond exactly with the version any one reader has visualized.

McCloud perhaps explained it best when he defined images as ‘received’ and writing as ‘perceived’. (1993, p. 49) Images and writing make up two sides of the human experience. Images are received and interpreted, much like the way we view things in everyday life. On a day-to-day basis, we see things – traffic signs, weather patterns, landscapes we navigate, people we meet – and interpret them. We know nothing of them, save what we see and what experience tells us. For example, looking out a window at a blue sky, we might decide that it is a nice day to go out. If we have heard on the radio that there will be thunderstorms, the sight of a blue sky may override this information. Sight is immediate and concrete – ‘seeing is believing’. We accept what we see as truth. We interpret visuals, gleaning clues and forming our own meaning based on this optical information. As Eisner puts it: “reading the imagery requires experience and allows acquisition at the viewer’s pace.” (1996, p. 69)

Writing can be likened to our sense of hearing. Just because we do not see something does not mean we do not know about it or believe in its existence, although seeing may reaffirm what we already know to be true. If we see a blue sky but know that a newspaper report has predicted torrential rain, we may decide to stay inside, based on what we have been told. We may then decide that a few innocent white clouds drifting in the distance actually look a bit dark, and reaffirm our decision to stay indoors. When we hear information, we automatically try to picture what has been dictated to us, making it real by giving it a visual semblance in our minds. Every bit of information we receive from secondary sources – that is, from an authored document, such as a painting or newspaper report – seeks approval from its recipient. As we filter through authored material, we either believe or disbelieve, accept or decline, the idea it has put forward. Words and images both seek our approval, each in their different ways.

Perhaps because writing tended to ‘tell’ rather than ‘show’ and needed little more interpretation to be readily understood, text came to be regarded as a more reliable, better respected means of communication. It is still used today as a predominant means of factual report, in such as media newspapers, articles, and even the dissertation you are currently reading; despite the development of new technologies, like audio
recordings and film. Photography further degraded the role of illustration, making it somewhat obsolete; illustration came to be associated with irresponsible notions such as caricature, propaganda, childishness and frivolity. Despite this, in art circles it remained a devoted study, a powerful means of communication and expression. Imagery is not, in fact, any way inferior to text; it merely operates in an entirely different way. Take, for example, this simple sentence:

\[
\text{The fat cat sat on the mat}
\]

We might represent this same sentence pictorially:

![The fat cat sat on the mat](image)

**Figure 20:** A pictorial sentence (Author’s own collection)

Although this illustration is very, very simple, it conveys the same information as the written words. Each part of the illustration can be broken down to represent different parts of the written sentence, as shown below.

![The fat cat sat on the mat](image)

**Figure 21:** The pictorial sentence arranged as individual words (Author’s own collection)

Although the same aspects are present, the message is more open to misinterpretation. For example, is it a cat, a rat, or a raccoon? Is it sitting on a mat, or
the ground, or a floor, or a raft? The message of the text is far clearer; however, the information in the picture, if properly conveyed, is instantaneously received, and can be delivered with greater nuance. To perform this second task, the simple picture above can be elaborated upon:

![Image of a cat looking out a window with rain and flowers]

**Figure 22**: Oscar the cat - illustration (Author’s own collection)
Although the drawing on the previous page is just a quick sketch – done in about twenty minutes – a number of additional things can be inferred from it:

- This cat has an owner
- The cat’s name is Oscar
- The cat has long, patched fur
- The cat well cared for; it has food, toys, a collar, and shelter
- The cat may have been through tough times previous, since part of its ear is missing
- The cat’s mat is on a wooden verandah overlooking a garden
- The cat’s owner likes old-fashioned flowers
- The cat live in the suburbs or the country, not the city
- It is raining

All of these things can be told instantaneously in one picture. It might take an observant person less than a minute to receive all this information. Visual clues are recognized and interpreted; for example, toys, a food dish and a collar tell us the cat is cared for. Even someone who knows nothing about cats can read the imagery and accept this information as the intended meaning. What would otherwise need at least half a dozen sentences to explain in text can be conveyed in a single image. Additionally, we have learnt something about a character before they have even appeared, i.e. the cat’s owner loves their cat and likes old-fashioned flowers. This information is specific and readily interpreted, that is, from the appearance of the cat, the items around it, and the flowers in the background. We might even draw more inferences from what is visible; for example, we might assume that the owner is a good gardener, is female and is elderly, based on gardens we have seen, people we know, and other situations in stories or life that fit a similar mould. These inferences have yet to be refuted or confirmed; but if this is the only data we have, the cat and its owner have already come alive in the viewer’s imagination.
The same basic information is told in this passage:

- A cat is sitting on a verandah overlooking a garden
- The cat’s name is Oscar
- This cat has an owner
- It is raining

However, numerous things have been omitted: the presence of toys and a food dish, the fact Oscar is wearing a collar, the colour and length of his fur. We don’t know yet that part of his ear is missing, or that there are other flowers in the garden; therefore some of the details about Oscar and his owner are missing. However, other aspects have been added: we know Oscar is devoted to his owner and that he hates the rain, details which were impossible to express in the single illustration before. We also know what happens in the moment after that in which the image exists; the water droplet, on its way down in the picture, lands on Oscar’s nose. Perhaps most significantly, the fact that is central to the picture – that Oscar is a cat – is obscured until halfway through the second paragraph, when the word ‘kitten’ is mentioned. This allows the reader to connect with Oscar’s personality before discovering who/what he is, an effect which is much harder to achieve with imagery alone.
This comparison tells us a number of things about words and images, as summarized below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Images</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tell the reader what is known</td>
<td>Show the viewer what is visible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reader knows meaning, creates form</td>
<td>Viewer knows form, creates meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning is immediate, form built gradually</td>
<td>Form is immediate, meaning built gradually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relies on thought/imagination skills of reader</td>
<td>Relies on sight/recognition skills of viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mimics hearing and thought</td>
<td>Mimics sight and reaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipates what reader will visualize</td>
<td>Anticipates what viewer will interpret</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External interpretation, internal perception</td>
<td>External perception, internal interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creator dictates what reader will think</td>
<td>Creator dictates what viewer will see</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reader decides what he/she sees</td>
<td>Viewer decides what he/she thinks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form is open to interpretation</td>
<td>Meaning is open to interpretation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Art and literature have conformed to these basic principles for many years. However, the text and imagery used in the making of a graphic novel do not necessarily follow the same rules. Graphic novels have had to develop their own idiomatic use of word and imagery, as the two elements, operating within their accepted roles, were too different from each other to cooperate effectively. Luckily, by the early 1800’s, these ingrained traditions were themselves beginning to change, making the divide between text and image far less distinct. This paradigm shift will be explored further in the next chapter.
4.3 Separate Worlds Collide

“I think that language has problems when it comes to describing not-language. What language did you think in before you could talk?”


There is no evidence to suggest that either writing or imagery is a superior means of storytelling. It is just as questionable as to who has a better understanding of the world, the blind or the deaf. The blind must rely on what they are told to know what is around them, and trust that what they are being told is true; a deaf person must rely on their sight alone and trust that they interpret what they see correctly. Our experiences as humans are enriched by both what we are told and what we discern for ourselves; in much the same way, words and pictures both contribute greatly to the storytelling process. Each has its own means of creating narrative conviction, producing an effect which, if successfully communicated across, is then accepted by the recipient.

Words and images can communicate the same information, although they may do so at different rates and in different ways. Despite their differences, in some aspects, images and words can also operate in similar ways:

- Both can create suspense by only revealing part of the scene
- Both can distinguish between internal and external dialogue
- Both evoke familiar concepts, such as metaphor and symbolism, that the viewer will recognize in order to get their meaning across
- Both evoke memory and sensory stimulation in order to produce an emotional response in the viewer
- Both can create an idealized situation, authored to produce an intended reaction

Historically, text and imagery became gradually more and more similar. By the late nineteenth century, a series of trends began simultaneously, in both art and literature. Perhaps because of the invention of the photograph, which rendered the ability to imitate near-realism less valuable, artwork became more and more interpretive, attempting to replicate what was felt inside through expressive brushstrokes and emotive colours. This concept was exemplified by artistic movements such as Impressionism and Abstract Expressionism (see Figure 23, following page). Meanwhile, writing styles were “turning away from the elusive,
twice-abstracted language of old towards a more direct, even colloquial, style.” (McCloud 1993, p. 147)

Both could now do what the other had previously performed: pictures could be interpretive, emulating emotions:

![Figure 24](image)

**Figure 24:** Oscar - emotive illustration (Author’s own collection)

Meanwhile, words could be direct, giving instantaneous physical description:

*Oscar, the calico cat with the torn earlobe, was sitting quietly, waiting for his companion. His favourite old mat was thin and threadbare beneath him. He had left his toys – the ball of red yarn, the felt mouse with the missing eye – scattered across the top step, having long since lost interest in them. The garden was tinged blue by the downpour, which lanced down through his field of vision in dismal, sodden streaks.*

These respective changes to the traditions of literature and art were not immediately appreciated. So-called ‘modern’ art was derided as nonsensical and
ostentatious; more direct prose was dismissed as inelegant and unimaginative. Standards regarding ‘art’ and ‘literature’ were slow to change; McCloud hazards to guess that they haven’t changed much in 150 years. (1993, p. 150) However, these changes eventually came to be somewhat better accepted. They also allowed words and images to coexist far more easily, reuniting them after many long years of near-estrangement.

Pictures were concerning themselves with emotions and the abstract, requiring more perception to be understood, filling a role usually undertaken by words. Words began to concern themselves with actuality and appearance, their information becoming more readily received, like images. Words and pictures, as McCloud puts it, were “headed for a collision”. (1993, p. 147) He illustrated this ‘collision’ in the following table:

The diagram above shows how art and literature have both progressed in a way which completely reversed their divulgence thousands of years ago, causing them to metaphorically ‘collide’ as they met at cross-purposes. Whilst the need for ‘sophistication’, McCloud argues, causes creators to drift towards the outer reaches of this scale, “where words and pictures are most separate”, it is towards the centre of the table that words and imagery most resemble each other, becoming “a unified language”, or the very ‘dialect’ which is commonly used in the graphic novel. (1993, p. 49) Perhaps what McCloud means is that at the centre of the table, the ‘perception’ of imagery and the ‘reception’ of words become less like two separate processes and more like the same experience, thereby making it easier to ‘read’ both near-simultaneously. Eisner agrees, ascertaining that many images which are designed to
accompany text are “rendered with economy in order to facilitate their usefulness as a language.” (1996, p. 9)

This is not to say that the writing and imagery in every graphic novel should always come from the centre of the diagram. A range of different art and writing styles exist within the industry, and this variation is necessary; otherwise the medium would stagnate, becoming a mere pictorial convention rather than an actual medium. Nor should the word ‘simple’ be misinterpreted as ‘low-quality’ or ‘unsophisticated’. Style should not be mistaken for content, nor is ‘simplified’ synonymous with ‘sub-standard’. This theme will be extrapolated upon in the following chapter. In any case, McCloud affirms that whichever side of the scale a creator might align themselves with, “both are worthy aspirations [as they] both stem from a love of comics and a devotion to its future.” (1993, p. 49)

4.4 Visual vs. Illustration

The previous chapter established that (most) graphic novels contain two separate components – imagery and text – which are combined to form a unified whole. Logically, the next question is: how are they combined? Is the creation of a ‘graphic novel’ as simple as taking a piece of written prose and adding a few pictures to it? The simplest answer is: no. The two parts, text and imagery, must communicate with one other, each fulfilling a vital role. If imagery and text merely exist side by side as two separate entities, not bothering to interact with one another, then the ‘graphic novel’ will fail to function properly as a piece of visual communication, falling far short of the medium’s potential.

The idea that illustrations are merely added to text in order to fill empty space, or to make publications ‘pretty’, is a notion that has long pervaded. Some might even question whether the ‘illustrated novel’ is, in fact, a legitimate form of visual communication, or whether it remains closer to the world of literature. However, I include illustrated prose in my own definition of the ‘graphic novel’, due to the fact that if the imagery were culled from such works, it would affect the conveyance of meaning therein. Even when illustrations depend on words to retain their significance
to the storytelling process, this does not make them expendable. A graphic novel, therefore, can be classified by its reliance on imagery to effectively communicate a sustained narrative. Eisner stressed the vast difference between ‘reading’ just text or imagery alone, as opposed to interacting with both simultaneously:

“In writing with words alone, the author directs the reader’s imagination… An image once drawn becomes a precise statement that brooks little or no further interpretation. When the two are ‘mixed’ the words become welded to the image and no longer serve to describe but to provide sound, dialogue and connective passages.” (1985, p. 127)

McCloud takes this concept further:

“Words evoke feelings, sensations and abstract concepts which pictures alone can only begin to capture; they’re comics’ only traditional link with the warmth and nuance of the human voice; they offer comics creators the opportunity to expand and compress time; and when words and pictures work interdependently, they can create new ideas and sensations beyond the sum of their parts.” (2006, p. 128)

The point both Eisner and McCloud seem to be trying to make is that the ‘language’ used in graphic novels more closely mimics a person’s senses than writing or imagery could do alone. Imagery mimics our sight, words emulate our sense of hearing, and combined, they cover a gamut of sensory experiences. In fact, graphic novels could be said to replicate not art nor literature, but the human experience; the only other media that come close to emulating life itself are theatre and film.

Obviously, the exact way in which the two elements are ‘mixed’ will have a profound effect on how they are read. There is no definitive template for the ‘best’ way to combine imagery and text. There is no minimum amount of imagery a novel must contain in order to fulfil its terminology as ‘graphic’, nor is there any reason why it needs to contain any text at all – so long as the story benefits from this arrangement. The only rule worth enforcing, perhaps, is that all the elements that go into a graphic novel must perform a specific purpose. Illustrations should not be added to the text as a decorative afterthought; nor should text merely serve as a caption for imagery. Both images and text are integral parts of the whole, and both halves are created in conjunction, as two parts of the same process.
Some works rely on text as their primary means of communication: for example, on average, renowned artist Yoshitaka Amano only contributes half-a-dozen images to each of the *Vampire Hunter D* novels he has illustrated, the rest of the pages being filled by writer Hideyuki Kikuchi. Alternatively, writer/artist Shaun Tan has excluded words altogether, giving imagery full responsibility as his storytelling medium. Most graphic novels fall somewhere between these two extremes. The exact amount of text in relation to imagery, and vice versa, is up to the creator’s discretion.

Will Eisner went so far as to define different ratios of the word/image combination under different terminology (see Figure 26, previous page). Whilst Eisner’s definition may at first seem a bit simplistic, it demonstrates the varying effects that different proportions can create. The ‘visual’ conveys the humour of the scenario immediately and succinctly; the ‘illustration’, however, coupled with its corresponding text, is far more specific and detailed. Both have their advantages and disadvantages, suiting different types of storytelling. Between these two definitions of ‘illustration’ and ‘visual’, there is certainly plenty of room for variation. Using the aforementioned examples of Amano/Kikuchi and Tan as increments at the opposite ends of the scale, we can tabulate some of the text/image ratios used in graphic novels, as seen in the diagram below:

**Figure 27:** Clarity/aesthetic scale of graphic novel imagery and text (author’s own collection, see references below)

This diagram may appear similar to McCloud’s ‘received/perceived’ diagram. However, this is actually not the case, as the criteria for the two tables are very different. McCloud’s examples are listed in order of their faithfulness to realistic depiction. In creating my own diagram, my concern was not with realism, but with emphasis, either on words or on imagery; in short, the ‘visual/illustration’ theory put forward by Eisner. The most obvious difference between the two sides of the diagram is the amount of text on each. The ‘illustrated novel’ of Kikuchi & Amano, as previously mentioned, contains pages of solid prose with only a few images scattered in between. As the diagram progresses towards the left, the images increase in number and the text gets sparser and sparser, becoming relegated to speech bubbles, until Tan does away with words altogether. Once I recognized this pattern, I was able to identify the connection between the ‘style’ of art used, and the amount of text that accompanied it. What I found was that, generally speaking, imagery that was more abstract, or had a greater emphasis on aesthetic, required more text in order to be understood in a narrative context; whereas art which communicated in a clearer, more figurative way tends to require less.

It may seem strange to place Shaun Tan’s art, with its concerted attempt at photorealism, next to that of Osamu Tezuka, who uses a far more ‘cartoony’ style of drawing. However, though these two images differ greatly in overall appearances, both of them have the exact same purpose: to make the actions of their characters easily legible and believable to their audience. Tan achieves this by making his figures as realistic as possible, thereby selling the illusion that his characters are actual people. Tezuka’s approach is to simplify complex structures such as faces and anatomy, creating a form of visual shorthand that is easy to decipher. Both these techniques are equally valid, and the imagery featured in each is just as easy for an audience to read. In terms of differentiating visual characteristics of the works from one another, perhaps a better word than ‘style’ would be the ‘purpose’ or ‘function’ of the artwork, as each example is placed in the diagram according to the varying roles its individual components – text and imagery – play in the overall conveyance of meaning; imagery dominates to the left, while text rules on the right.

The works featured in the previous diagram represent the many different ‘dialects’ which exist within the overall vernacular of the graphic novel language. In order to better examine and compare these examples, each of them will now be examined in greater detail, through a series of case studies.
4.5 Case Studies

Given the importance of perception and consumer-interaction to the overall functionality of the graphic novel format, it makes sense to view its various techniques in their original contexts. By doing so, we can more accurately gauge both the author’s original intention, the purposes behind the novel’s various components, and the corresponding impression that the audience is given.

The following case studies provide examples of real works which employ a plethora of visual communication techniques, featuring vastly different artistic and literary styles. For the sake of this study, they also represent a cross-section of works which combine text with imagery in alternating ways. They all feature in the clarity/aesthetic table shown previously, and can be classified, according to Eisner’s theory, as either ‘visual’ or ‘illustrative’ works. In this sample group, there are more of the former than the latter, as there is greater scope for variation within this format, and the works featured here reflect this. Only one of the works examined – that of Yoshitaka Amano – falls strictly into the ‘illustrative’ category; though Miller’s Sin City is positioned to the right of the diagram, it actually forms the mid-point of the scale. The works of McCloud and Willingham, whilst belonging mostly to the ‘visual’ camp, do display ‘illustrative’ tendencies on occasion, and so are kept separate from the more clear-cut definitions.

Although all the examples presented here vary greatly from one another, they all succeed as narrative media and as forms of visual communication, each on their own terms. The layout of each is specifically designed to suit their own purpose, and to best convey the differing stories that they each contain.
Japanese illustrator Yoshitaka Amano has had a career anyone would envy. He is truly prolific, having contributed to a staggering number of projects; he has even expanded his repertoire to include such diverse fields as ceramics, print making, set design and video games. (Mielke 2006, <http://www.1up.com/>) However, Amano does have his limitations. British/American writer Neil Gaiman with whom he collaborated on the highly-awarded *Sandman* series, describes how when initially asked to produce sequential art for the project, Amano was forced to decline: “while he loves comics, he does not draw them.” (Gaiman & Amano 1999, p. 128)

This may seem strange, especially considering Amano’s background in animation, which could itself be considered an extreme form of sequential art. However, one has only to look at Amano’s work to understand this reservation. His art style is just too abstract to provide the level of easy legibility which such an image-based format would require. The scenes he paints are almost bewildering in their detailed complexity. To confine his artwork to the boundaries of a typical comic-book frame would do it an injustice, not to mention confuse and frustrate anyone trying to follow it from panel to panel. Whilst his drawings are masterfully rendered, the problem may be that they are just too sophisticated to be read at face value.

It would seem that Amano follows what Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson describe as the “approaches to aesthetics based on the concept of the Platonic ideal, [which] stressed the belief that art represents not the limited particulars of the world of appearances but the underlying, eternal forms behind them.” (1990, p. 11) Much like modern art, which delves into the psyches of both its creator and its viewer, Amano’s work emulates that of classical masters such as Klimt and Mucha, rich in

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33 Cited in McCloud 1993, p. 123

34 Amano was employed by Tatsunoko Studios for fifteen years; however, whilst there, his role was mostly as character designer rather than as an animator. (Mielke 2006, <http://www.1up.com/>)

35 Hiroshi Unno specifically compares Amano’s work with that of these artists. (Amano 2003, p. 279)
Fiona Tsang - The Relevance of the Graphic Novel - Research

graphic motifs which express far more than the mere physical appearance of what they depict. The pulsating figures, patterns and colours that flit across his paintings have an evocation and expressiveness all their own. His artwork incorporates elements which are by no means essential to expressing physical form, yet heighten the mood and tone of the narratives he illustrates. Baku Yumemakura, author of the *Chimera* novels, describes his painting style as “[a] flood of unknown lines and forms surpassing normal reason.” (Amano 1989, n. pag.) Amano seems to be too unconcerned with surface appearance to be confined to it.

This consistent use of abstraction does make Amano’s work more an execution of style rather than a means of relaying specific information. McCloud affirms that this is not necessarily a bad thing:

“Expressionism and synaesthetics are distortive by their nature. If strong enough, their effects can obscure their subjects. But a lack of clarity can also foster greater participation by the reader, and a sense of involvement which many writers and authors prefer. Creators who use these effects may need to clarify what is being shown, however, either through the content of surrounding scenes or, of course, through words.” (1993, p. 133)

As a result, much more of the storytelling duty must necessarily fall to the textual content of Amano’s novels, which is provided by one of the many writers he has worked with. This does not mean, however, that Amano himself takes a secondary role in the projects he contributes to. Yumemakura quashes such notions: “Illustrations that are drawn by Yoshitaka Amano are not just garnishment. It [sic] can stand on its own and does not wander away from the story. Yoshitaka Amano’s illustration influences the mind of the writer… his illustrations stimulate us writers.” (Amano 1989, n. pag.)

We could surmise that in a sense, Amano paints stories not just externally, as a string of events or series of objects, but *internally*, giving graphic form to the array of emotions that are embedded in any given narrative. In such a way, he illustrates not just the surface meaning, but also the deeper *conceptual* meaning that his stories entail, a consideration few

**Figure 28:** An illustration by Amano of Kikuchi, the protagonist from *Chimera*. Writer Baku Yumemakura claims that scenes featuring the character “cannot be written without the visualizations Yoshitaka Amano created”. (Amano 1989, n. pag.)
commercial artists would bring to a project. His collaborators respect his unique talent, not for his accuracy in depicting precisely what they have written, but for his innate ability to reinterpret what they have created, opening up facets and possibilities that they would never have considered on their own. Gaiman describes Amano’s rendition of his familiar characters as: “fascinating. I loved the perspective on the character: this was Morpheus, but a Morpheus I had never written.” (Gaiman & Amano 1999, p. 128)

These two collaborators obviously held each other in high regard; though Gaiman owned the writer’s duties – a position traditionally associated within the industry as that of the employer and the artist as the employed – this was not the case in their partnership. Amano himself described it as such: “I can communicate with Neil, artistically, we both understand each other’s art, so it’s really a fresh experience for me… With *Sandman*, it’s not like I drew the illustrations and Neil then wrote the story. We did it together, it was a real collaboration.” (Mielke 2006, <www.1up.com/>) This sense of harmony may have been possible because creative duties were more evenly distributed between Gaiman and Amano. As opposed to a highly graphics-based layout would have forced the artist to adhere to the requirements of the script, “generally speaking, the more [that] is said with words, the more pictures can be freed to go exploring”. (McCloud 1993, p. 155) This means that the more text his writers give him, the more creative input Amano is able to have, and the more he is able to deviate away from plotlines. Rather than merely depicting the basic events of the narrative, he can use his paintings to show the viewer things that the text has not, and could not, express.

![Figure 29: The character Morpheus from *Sandman*: top, pencilled by Mike Dringenberg & inked by Malcolm Jones III (Gaiman 1989a, n. pag.); bottom, Amano’s rendition (Gaiman & Amano 1999, p. 99)]](image)

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36 Credit for this idyllic working relationship may also lie with Gaiman, who is renowned for his professionalism and consideration for his colleagues. His approach to collaboration will under further investigated in Chapter 4.7
Amano often seems to work with writers whose prose has similar qualities to his own imagery: intricacy, sophistication, and extreme attention to detail. For their collaborative issue of *Sandman*, Gaiman chose to emulate the tone of an ancient Japanese folktale, combining elegant description and poignant metaphor with both the unique strangeness of a *yokai* ghost story and the unrelenting tragedy of a Greek myth. Hideyuki Kikuchi, possibly Amano’s most closely-associated collaborator, likewise doesn’t spare the word count in his *Vampire Hunter D* stories, filling them with an almost superfluous array of adjectives; some of the words he uses could be considered practically archaic.37 This is just as well, as any prose that was too frank in its telling would be overwhelmed by the sheer scale of Amano’s visuals. Grandiose imagery best matched with, and only equalled by more, grandiosity. Despite coming from opposite ends of McCloud’s reception/perception scale, the two elements work in tandem, complementing each other. Kikuchi’s prose is vividly descriptive, weaving the action, dialogue, and chronology into the story. Though his contribution appears smaller in terms of page numbers, Amano creates the aesthetic of that which the text describes, giving the novels an atmospheric overtone that has proved integral to their success.

Perhaps another key to Amano’s proficiency is a combination of both his distinctive style, and his adaptability. Because his imagery avoids portraying anything too figuratively, the suitability of his ‘style’ for any subject that the text may call for is practically limitless. His art is therefore able to express a gamut of different stories and emotions, without losing its integral characteristics. Whilst retaining his own trademark ‘style’, Amano gives each story he illustrates its own identity, a visual persona all its own. As writer and Amano-collaborator38 Hiroshi Unno describes it:

“Amano moved freely through genre and audience. Time period or nationality never managed to confine his work that rejoices in themes that skip freely through [many different projects]…not being restricted to a single style does not mean having no style.” (Amano 2003, p. 278)

37 Examples of uncommon English words which feature prominently in *Vampire Hunter D* include ‘gelid’, ‘eldritch’, and ‘carbuncle’, among many others. It should be noted, however, that this extraordinary vocabulary may actually result from Kikuchi’s prose having been translated from Japanese into English; what seems to be a deliberate effect may have been influence of translator Kevin Leahy, rather than Kikuchi’s original intention.

38 The pair worked together on *Alice Erotica*, an ‘adult picture book’ which itself crossed many boundaries, challenging ingrained preconceptions about the age-appropriateness of the medium.
Because he uses his distinctive ‘style’ in various applications, Amano’s illustrations are easily recognizable. *Vampire Hunter D* is a prime example of an instance where he has etched his trademark indelibly upon his colleague’s creation. Unno describes sci-fi illustration as “the meeting place of realism and surrealism” (Amano 2003, p. 277); if this was Amano’s design brief, he certainly met his parameters. Reflecting the otherworldly nature of the books’ eponymous half-vampire protagonist, the ‘D’ that Amano paints glowers icily at readers from the page. His black attire and distinctively-shaped, narrowly-lidded eyes combine with Kikuchi’s accounts of his supernatural abilities to produce an eerie effect. With his wide-brimmed hat, longsword and frigid stare, his image has become almost iconic.

Images can live in the mind for longer than words, and more vividly; text often needs to be re-read directly in order to be relived, while visual icons can linger on indefinitely in the viewer’s imagination. It seems fitting, then, that D, a character of a seemingly immortal constitution within the realms of his narrative, is given this treatment in real life by one of his co-creators. Amano himself has said of the many portraits of D he has rendered:

“Like the *Mona Lisa*, after five hundred years it won’t matter whether the model really existed or not. The picture itself will be everything. ‘D’, if the pictures are powerful enough, may come to be seen as something remarkable in the history of painting. Why I cling to this hope is ‘D’ himself. As depicted by Hideyuki Kikuchi, the world of ‘D’ is shot through with a passionate aesthetic. It is hardly necessary to mention ‘D’ himself… The portrait I have conceived of ‘D’ will live forever in this collection.” (Amano 2006, p. 198)
Given the fictional physiology of the character, coupled with the enduring strength of the aesthetic Amano has given him, the artist’s aspirations may well become a reality.

4.5.2 Scott McCloud and Bill Willingham

“Like any married couple, words and pictures have to balance the need to find common ground with the need to explore their separate identities.”

As mentioned previously, there are limitless variations in the ways that text and imagery can be combined, with examples falling under either of Eisner’s ‘visual’ and ‘illustrated’ categorizations. However, there are very few works which can be considered intermediary between the two; works tend to belong in either one camp or the other. However, a few rare examples exist wherein both formats – illustrated prose and sequential art – have both been used to tell a single story.

In his teen-superhero anthology Zot!, Scott McCloud chose to deviate away from his customary use of sequential art, inserting a single page of prose in the midst of a chapter. (2008a, p. 187) He saw this as being the most economical way to convey an extensive verbal exchange between two characters. Throughout the conversation, the dialogue hangs over the characters’ heads in a single text box, reading almost like a script. Although it does compress the page count considerably, this technique is not entirely successful. For example, at the point where one character observes of the other: “Are you crying?”, appropriate visuals could have potentially amplified the emotional charge of this scene. Due to the entire length of text being saddled with a single static image, the result is disappointingly underwhelming. McCloud himself, ever the consummate comic-book theorist, seems aware of the scene’s shortcomings; he admits that he normally prefers to “‘show’ rather than ‘tell’”, and that his decision to express the story this way “went against a lot of my theories about what makes a good comic.” (2008a p. 215) His summation of the technique’s usefulness is that he would willingly try anything once; once seems to have been enough, as it was never
repeated again. Luckily, McCloud has remedied the situation; elsewhere in the novel, he is able to give almost painful expression to a character’s grief, using barely any text at all (see Figure 31, below).

Another instance where the two formats meet is in the pages of *A Wolf in the Fold*, a short story both written and illustrated by Bill Willingham as part of his critically-acclaimed *Fables* series (2002, p. 120-7). Since the characters and plotlines draw continuously from traditional Western fairytales, it is perhaps fitting that Willingham make a detour into prose. Surprisingly, this departure from the narrative’s usual format is a prequel which depicts the initial meeting between two of the main protagonists, an essential backstory which is barely mentioned anywhere else in the series’ long publication history. Though the change from ‘visual’ to ‘illustration’ better suits Willingham’s scenario than McCloud’s, the switch is once again very brief; prose would not feature in Fables again until the hundredth issue.39

A more conscientious effort to combine the two formats was undertaken by Shaun Tan, in a collection of short stories called *Tales From Outer Suburbia*. Throughout this succession of brief tales – some lasting no more than a single page – Tan careens wildly from one format to the other. Some stories consist mostly of prose; others unexpectedly switch to sequential art midway through their length (*Eric, Grandpa’s Story*); some even combine text directly into the artwork as a seamless montage (*Distant Rain, Make Your Own Pet*). Of the authors I have mentioned here,  

![Figure 31:](image)

*Figure 31: Left*, a conversation between Woody & Jenny, with accompanying illustration. The figures retain the same static poses, despite the changing tone of the dialogue. *Right*: Zot’s optimism fractures after seeing a friend murdered before his eyes. His grief is expressed in a near-wordless sequence that spans a double page. (McCloud 2008a, p. 187 & 315)

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39 For the hundredth issue, in a reversal of their usual roles, Willingham produced the illustrations, while regular *Fables* artist Mark Buckingham wrote the prose. (Renaud 2010, <www.comicbookresources.com>)
Tan is the one who remains most ambiguously situated between ‘visual’ and ‘illustrative’; the structure of his book as a series of several separate vignettes, rather than a single continuous narrative as in the other two, perhaps allows him greater the freedom to change formats whenever he wishes.\textsuperscript{40}

All of these examples demonstrate, to varying degrees, ways in which the ‘visual’ and the ‘illustration’ can be implemented at alternating instances within the one body of work, appearing as plotlines require them and then switching when the narrative favours a different means of depiction. This is a theory which heavily influenced my own approach to the medium, and will be discussed in greater depth within subsequent chapters.

\textsuperscript{40} For examples of Tan’s hybrid visual/illustrated format, see Figure 66 on page 198. Further samples of Tan’s work are featured in Case Study 4.5.6
4.5.3 Frank Miller

“What’s most distinctive to me about Frank Miller’s work is the voices of his characters. They’re all looking for real estate – literal or psychological – to call their own… and Frank has the good grace to comment on this neurotic drive with a sense of humour.” – Elvis Mitchell

Scott McCloud has long been an advocate of elevating the graphic novel’s status to that of a recognized, respected medium. However, he has often had to work hard to impress the legitimacy of his view upon others. Of all the works he has had to defend, Frank Miller’s *Sin City* has probably given him the most difficulty. In *Reinventing Comics*, McCloud recalls an interview he and Neil Gaiman gave on the National Public Radio’s *Talk of the Nation* show, hosted by Ray Suarez (McCloud 2000, p.81). Suarez opened the show by playing the following voice-over, complete with atmospheric background music:

“Dames... sometimes all they gotta do is let it out. A few buckets later there’s no way you’d ever know. I watched Lucille slide every gorgeous inch of herself into my coat. I shake my head for what must be the millionth time. Hardware like she’s got and Lucille’s a dyke, it’s a damn crime!”

It was an excerpt from Miller’s first *Sin City* novel, *The Hard Goodbye* (2005a, p.101). If this was not provocative enough, Suarez went on to add: “Many of these books are filled with adolescent guy power trips, sexual fantasies, borderline occult stories, mythological characters, and in many cases, blood, blood, blood!” (McCloud 2000a, p. 81) Faced with this somewhat sordid example, McCloud and Gaiman were then tasked with defending their industry before listeners who were, by this stage, likely biased against them. McCloud insists that “this was no ambush. Neil and I had a whole hour to make our case and Ray was a gracious host… but the tone had been set, first impressions made and now we could only react and defend – while we considered how comics’ revolution in public perception might not have been as far along as we’d hoped.” (2000, p. 81)

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41 Cited in Gravett 2005, p. 122
Did Miller’s work warrant Suarez’s scorn? McCloud describes *Sin City* as a “tongue-in-cheek, over-the-top hyper-noir genre send-up. Unfortunately, the more ironic aspects were utterly lost in translation.” (2000, p. 81) It could be argued that the excerpt was subject to misinterpretation, as it had been taken out of context. Miller wrote the monologue in the voice of Marv, a gentle giant who protects the girls of his neighbourhood. Marv had just found Lucille, his parole officer, naked and mutilated by a psychopath. Miller’s emphasis on Lucille’s sexuality, through the somewhat chauvinist eyes of Marv, perhaps serves as an explanation for his protectiveness without a less-than-platonic relationship having developed between the two; Marv’s real love interest, Goldie, had already died at the start of the story, and was the central catalyst for the antihero’s blood-filled vendetta. Marv goes on to recall how he once suggested to Lucille that she should ‘get treatment’ to turn her straight; her response was to nail him with a punch. (Miller 2005a, p. 101) This interlude serves as character development for Lucille, making it more plausible when she later hits Marv over the head with a rock, temporarily sending the human-monolith sprawling. While on the surface, Miller’s writing may seem crude, possibly even offensive, this dialogue serves a specific purpose – to further the plot, and to provide character development. Fitted back into context, the excerpt becomes somewhat more palatable.

Suarez’s argument seems to be that *Sin City* fits into the vilified stereotype of Frederic Wertham’s day: a B-grade slasher, openly promoting depravity and revelling in its own inappropriateness. It cannot be disputed that many readers, even very open-minded ones, might find some of the scenes in *Sin City* confronting. Brutal slayings, gratuitous torture, and shameless references to prostitution are all standard fare. Miller’s work can be considered the Western

**Figure 32:** After losing her hand (and her composure), Lucille’s mind swiftly turns toward finding a smoke. Though Miller’s reference to her as a ‘dyke’ may seem bigoted or chauvinist, his choice of language serves as character portrayal, exhibiting both Lucille’s toughness and Marv’s unrefined frankness. (Miller 2005a, p. 100)
equivalent of Japanese *gekiga*\(^{42}\) since both are aimed at older audiences. As already noted in Chapter 3.2.1, perceptions on the age-appropriateness of comics were far slower to change in the West than in Japan. As in Wertham’s day, most arguments over *Sin City’s* alleged ‘depravity’ would probably come from those who still believe that comic books were solely aimed at children.

Whilst some may consider Miller’s story to be gratuitously blood-sodden, which in many instances it is, Miller draws his inspiration straight from recognized sources. As a young boy, he had a penchant for urban-noir detective thrillers such as Hammett’s *Maltese Falcon* and Spillane’s *Mike Hammer* novels (Gravett 2005, p. 16). Both these writers were seminal influences in pulp fiction, and while both were derided in their time for their seemingly-inelegant, often-violent and bluntly-articulated writing styles, they later came to be respected for their craft. Their particular strengths were their aptitude for creating an evocative atmosphere, and their intricately-woven plotlines.\(^{43}\) These influences are plain to see in Miller’s work: particularly in its genre trappings, its narrative structure, and its mature subject matter.

Contrary to Suarez’s belief, instead of emulating the pre-existing adolescent-orientated, masculine-chauvinist-action-hero archetype which is now so deplored by modern-day comic-book connoisseurs, Miller was in fact breaking it down, albeit with a level of subtlety which was lost on some. Rather than merely reinventing the colourfully-suited, morally-clear-cut, invincibly super-powered heroes of old, his characters are the complete antithesis of those conventions, which were not just accepted at the time, but were almost enforced as the industry’s characteristic feature. *Sin City* contains figures similar to the ill-tempered, cynical Batman that had Miller created in *The Dark Knight Returns*, a revelatory work which abolished the character’s previous descent into the camp, almost satirical version of the 1960’s. Miller’s revival brought a new seriousness to ‘comic book writing’. It was *Dark Knight*, Gravett ascertains, which gave him free rein to release *Sin City*. Prior to this, Miller, in his own words, “pumped out [these] ‘knights in dirty armour’, but there were no takers. ‘The only game in town was men in tights.’” (Gravett 2005, p. 117)

\(^{42}\) See Case Studies on Koike & Kojima, and on Tezaka, for further information about *gekiga*.

\(^{43}\) Spillane actually wrote for comics himself; specifically under the publisher Funnies Inc., during the late 1903’s and 1940’s. (Thomas and Knutson 1999, <http://twomorrows.com>) He was also recognized for his contribution to literature with the Edgar Allan Poe Grand Master Award in 1995. (MWA 2011, <http://theedgars.com>)
Having gained recognition for his serious rendition of the Caped Crusader, Miller soon set about turning the superhero-convention further on its head; by the time he penned *Sin City*, he was no longer pulling any punches. His subsequent rogue’s gallery makes his butch rendition of Bruce Wayne look like a soft touch in comparison. Far from being the supernaturally gifted, morally centred, colour-coordinated and spandex-clad do-gooders of traditional comic-book fare, all of Miller’s ‘heroes’ are below-average Joes, some of them flawed at best, others downright deranged, yet still well-meaning for all their undesirable traits. Miller says of his various leading men:

“They might be disturbed, but if you look at it, ultimately, their motives are pure… the ends justify being really mean… You can’t have virtue without sin. What I’m after is having my characters’ virtues defined by how they operate in a very sinful environment. That’s how you test people.” (Gravett 2005, p. 122)

Marv is protective of his girls, yet almost grotesque in appearance, and is medicated for an undisclosed mental condition, the ineffectiveness of the drugs inducing his violent rampages. Dwight is a modern-day knight errant whose moral code becomes confused under the influence of the manipulative women around him. Hartigan is a dedicated police officer in a corrupt force, yet has a weak heart, and is very nearly seduced by the girl he rescues from a rapist. Hartigan’s chronic heart trouble serves as a metaphor for all of Miller’s antiheroes; though physically tough, they are mentally and emotionally brittle. This contrasts sharply with the all-he-man image presented in most other action stories of the time. With their psychological foibles contrasting with their strong-armed physical feats, Miller’s characters are simultaneously too human for fantasy, and too outlandish for real life.

When it comes to visuals, no other artist can create a noirish atmosphere quite like Miller can. Although often just as closely bordering the obscene, his artwork does go some way towards de-emphasizing the crassness of his words. Explicit language is undercut by the art-deco sumptuousness of his art; violence is stylised in abstract splatters and clean-edged, silhouetted splashes of gore. As described by Spindler:

“*Sin City* comics are characterized by their own very unique ‘pen and ink’ look, but Miller does not commit himself to only one style, but rather chooses an unconventional combination of hatching, stippling, large black faces, and monochromical silhouettes seeking contrast with the background. Miller’s style is particularly qualified in communicating a dusky and bleak mood.” (2006, p. 2)
His imagery is comparable to the transgressive, borderline-abstract works of artists such as Pablo Picasso, Lynd Ward and Frans Masereel. Miller himself claims several artists as having influenced him, including Wallace Wood, Alex Toth, and Johnny Craig. (2010, <http://frankmillerink.com>).

The Sin City of Miller’s creation is a depressing, dangerous place to live, and is rendered by Miller in suitably dark shades, much of his environs being shrouded in ink-filled shadow. Unlike his characters’ internal environs, the world these tough guys walk contains no shades of grey; it is harsh, full of heavy shadows and sharp lines, throwing the moral and emotional ambiguity of the characters into even sharper relief. Though these drawings are often immensely intricate, much of them is masked by these solid-black expanses. This does not imply that Miller’s artwork is a slave to style or atmosphere; nor does he simply save himself the trouble of having to draw as much by inking in large areas. His motivation for adopting this modus operandi was his apparent exasperation with digital media, whereby a simple ‘cut and paste’ can instantaneously fill a panel with repetitive textures, a trend which, he opines, relegates much of modern comic-book art to “cookie-cutter redundancy.” (2010,

Figure 33: Comparison of Miller’s artwork (bottom row) with that of (top row, from left to right) Pablo Picasso, Lynd Ward, and Frans Masereel. Image references (from left to right, top to bottom): Nelson 1999, <http://www.english.illinois.edu>; Eisner 1996, p. 145; Badman 2010, <http://madinkbeard.com>; Miller 2005b, p. 92; Miller 2005c, p. 30; Miller 2005a p. 181

Both Eisner (1996, p. 140-8) and McCloud (1993, p. 18-19) reference the ‘woodcut novels’ of Ward and Masereel as transitional works, providing the ‘missing link’ between such disparate entities as art, illustration, and graphic novels. Though not formally called ‘graphic novels’ (having existed long before Eisner coined the term) and considered to be series of artworks rather than storytelling media, they are often regarded as the genesis of the graphic novel.
As a reaction against this cheapskate’s trend of cluttering frames with unnecessary elements, Miller will “ritually look over my scribbled pencils to find whatever is irrelevant to the moment, the story, and, as precious and pretty as it might be, I kill it.” (2010, <frankmillerink.com>) There is a sense of priority and necessity to his visuals, born from a Spartan-like hatred of complexity for its own sake; Miller hates mindless adornment. According to his philosophy, the artwork used in graphic novels should:

“Let the eye rest upon, and let it savour, what counts. And never forget the reader’s aptitude for that all-important process of closure... It is the teasing of the viewer’s eye to complete the image you not-so-entirely present. You, the storyteller, leave your piece of work deliberately incomplete, so that the viewer becomes an active, creative participant, finishing the job and thereby enjoying it all the more.”


By giving the audience a greater role in creating this closure, Miller forces his readers to become invested in his work, as well as augmenting the shadowy, mysterious atmosphere of his fictional universe. In such a way, areas of his images which he obscures or omits become just as important as ‘visible’ objects; his use of negative space is unique to his particular ‘style’.

Miller’s imagery is just half of the story; perhaps what makes Sin City truly remarkable, from a structural viewpoint, is its unusual layout. In attempting to describe this format, one can only define it as a lack of a consistently-applied structure; at any given point, Miller seems to use every text/image combination imaginable, from illustrated prose to sequential art with speech bubbles, sometimes even using letterforms as frames for his artwork (see Figure 34, below). His format changes to suit his purpose. His words flit fretfully through tense, suspenseful back-alley sequences, or follow the stalking pace of prowling, predatory thugs; curses and

Figure 34: The enormity of the gun’s savage sound is emphasised by Miller, using the text as a frame to hold the very action it corresponds with.
(Miller 2005a, p. 74)
exclamations blaze through shoot-outs like gunfire. Miller himself describes his intended effect as a “machine-gun-like firing of words, the sheer savagery of it.” (Gravett 2005, p. 117) His literary style is reminiscent of the hard-boiled detective capers he admires, albeit updated for a modern audience, and completely uncensored.

For the most part, Miller uses something which is not strictly ‘sequential art’ nor ‘illustrated prose’, but a middling combination of the two. This makes his novels true rarities, as most graphic works tend to fall into one category or the other. Though the emphasis in *Sin City* is on its striking imagery, this does not demote text to a secondary role. Speech bubbles account for just a fraction of the textual content. Prose passages in long, rambling sidebars, or broken into textboxes which stud the panels like bullet holes, deliver the sort of tortured eloquence which is unique to Miller’s storytelling method.

These long spiels of sustained in-character narration, such as the example Suarez cited on his show, are often necessary for the sake of clarity. Miller’s merging silhouettes and impenetrable black shadows are too abstract to provide closure on their own. The narrative itself relies heavily on this co-reliance between word and image. McCloud defines such text/image relationships as ‘inter-dependent’ (1993, p. 155). As opposed to other combinations, which place emphasis on either one element or the other, ‘inter-dependent’ arrangements require both elements, word and image, to be read in tandem; as McCloud describes it, “words and pictures go hand in hand to convey an idea that neither could convey alone.” (1993, p.155)

Although McCloud ascertains that inter-dependent is probably the most commonly-used word/picture combination featured in graphic novels, it is the way that Miller uses this technique for narrative effect which sets him apart. The men of *Sin City* would become bloodthirsty cretins without their accompanying monologues, which reveal an unlikely inner-sensitivity. It is this prose, raw in its honesty, which unveils the characters’ true mindsets. In the case of Marv, his soliloquy reveals the very human fears beneath his indestructible façade. As he is about to avenge Goldie at last, he considers the high social standing of the man responsible for her death, Cardinal Roark, and the repercussions his actions will have on his dwindling chances of survival:
It is difficult to imagine Superman, or any other of his spandex-clad alumni, thinking such thoughts. Although it certainly isn’t for everyone, it can at least be said that Miller’s work isn’t restricted by industry convention or politically-correct censorship. Nor is it in any way derivative of typical ‘hero’ comics; if nothing else, it adds some variation to a market full of stereotypes, existing as a sub-genre all its own. It is a brazen masterpiece that somehow treads the boundaries between neo-noir literature, experimental modern art, and blood-letting genre explosion. If any one element were missing, the novel would flounder out of its context and sink into depravity; however, through a united effort of dialogue, prose and artwork, it somehow stays afloat.

Figure 35: The visuals which correspond with Marv’s monologue (above). Lashed by rain, the unlikely hero appears as tough as granite; the prose betrays his inner fragility. (Miller 2005a, p. 131)
4.5.4 Kazuo Koike and Goseki Kojima

“The contrast between human bonds and violence on the battlefield is a favourite theme of all samurai stories, and it is the glue that holds this one together.”


Kazuo Koike is a presence of almost monolithic proportions within the manga industry. A *gensaku-sha* (*manga* writer) with a prolific output, his works have inspired the likes of Quentin Tarantino\(^45\) and Frank Miller\(^46\). He also founded the *Gekiga Sonjuku*, a prestigious college which teaches aspiring *gensaku-sha* how to craft their own narratives; some of his famous former pupils include Rumiko Takahashi\(^47\) and Hideyuki Kikuchi (author of the *Vampire Hunter D* novels – see Case Study 4.5.1) (Gravett 2004, p. 17) However, Koike is best known for *Kozure Okami*, or *Lone Wolf and Cub*, a samurai epic which he produced in conjunction with artist Goseki Kojima. The pair are often referred to as the ‘Golden Duo’. (Koike & Kojima 2001, p. 285)

*Lone Wolf and Cub* is as much admired for its visual beauty as it is renowned for its visceral brutality. Speed-lines from slashing swords and explosive blood splatters are recurring visual motifs. Similar in tone and content to Miller’s *Sin City*, the continuous episodes of assassinations and revenge plots could have easily become a mindless gore-fest, if not for the delicacy of Kojima’s drawings and the restrained, sensitive hand with which Koike helms the plot. The story is very much entrenched in Japanese tradition: Koike’s hero, the almost supernaturally-skilled killer-for-hire Itto Ogami, is a faultless upholder of the samurai *bushido* code, approaching all he does with a righteousness and civility which belies his savage swordsmanship. The emotive heart of the story, however, is Itto’s three-year-old son Daigoro, an innocent who expresses childish delight at hearing the candy-seller’s drum or receiving a new toy,

\(^{45}\) One of Koike’s works, *Lady Snowblood* (illustrated by Kazuo Kamimura) was adapted into a film during the 1970’s; Tarantino directly appropriated large chunks of dialogue from it, and even songs from the soundtrack, in the making of his *Kill Bill* diptych.

\(^{46}\) Miller, having long enthused over the series, would eventually produce the cover art for the English-language editions of the *Lone Wolf and Cub* novels. (Gravett 2004, p. 155)

\(^{47}\) A superstar author in her own right, Takahashi is the creator of numerous successful *manga* series, as well as one of the wealthiest individuals in Japan.
yet a moment later watches the carnage unfolding around his father without so much as flinching.

The artwork itself manages to soften the blow of the hard-hitting violence it portrays. Combining traditional sumi-e techniques with his own stylised brand of realism, Kojima’s brushstrokes portray everything the storylines might ask for with a beauty that belies its subject matter, translating the blood-spray from severed limbs into an array of elegantly-rendered ink drops. These visuals walk a very fine line between the abstract and the figurative; though they represent a physical substance (i.e. freshly-spilled blood), they appear on the page almost purely as pictorial elements. In this curious visual phenomenon, figurative graphics function rather like abstract imagery. This dual symbolism recalls the highly-stylised compositions that are fundamental to all Japanese painting.

Frederik L. Schodt, an expert on manga and Japanese culture in general, points out that symbolism is important in all the local arts, and no less in manga (1983, p.21-2). Japan has a long history of using simple icons to represent more complex ideas. Traditional arts such as origami, ikebana, and even bonsai make use of this concept: a sheet of paper is meticulously folded to resemble a much larger object; carefully-arranged twigs and flowers have associations with certain seasons; a dwarf tree contained in a pot or basin is painstakingly landscaped to resemble a rural vista of realistic proportions. In two-dimensional art as well, certain motifs can express multitudes within a single, compact image. Even more so than in the West, there is a strong connection between established semiotics and associated meaning.

In Lone Wolf and Cub, random aspects of the character’s surrounds, such as clouds changing shape, birds taking flight or leaves falling from trees, are interspersed

![Figure 36: The series’ hero, Ogami Itto, engages in a brutal four-way battle. No matter how gory the fights become, Kojima’s skill with the ink and brush translates every spot of blood into an artistic element. Numerous techniques – framing, composition, use of speed lines – create a dynamic sense of motion. By spanning the panel across a double-page spread, the action seems to fly out of the page. (Koike & Kojima 2000a, p. 88-.89)
between panels of action or dialogue. Young Daigoro features in many such scenes; whilst his father discusses the details of an assassination with a client, he plays with piled-up pebbles, folds leaves into a rustic toy ship (see Figure 37 below), or simply takes a nap. Though these devices may seem irrelevant to the story, Koike and Kojima imbue them with as much significance as any other aspect of the overall plotline. These sequences give the story a sense of transience, matching the wandering, outwardly-aimless lifestyle that father and son lead. However, each chapter slowly brings Itto closer to the vengeance he craves for his wife’s murder and his own social disgrace; he and Daigoro lead a humble existence, biding their time between major battles. This does not mean that such plot devices are dispensable ‘fillers’; rather, the sense of pacing is not motivated by a single, climatic resolution, but by a prolonged, slow-burning duration. Koike introduces enough incidental adventures and intrigues to keep the story moving at a steady pace, which never degenerates into a wearisome plod. This clever use of pacing means that the narrative flows gracefully through more than 8,000 pages. (Gravett 2004, p. 105)

Though each undoubtedly skilful in their own rights, it is the cooperative harmony that exists between Koike’s wording and Kojima’s visuals which really sets the series apart. At first glance, it is a somewhat discordant harmony, as the ratio of text to image varies greatly from chapter to chapter. At times, Itto extols wordily on the particulars of the *bushido* code; in other instances, he remains stoically silent, and Daigoro functions almost as a mute character. By contrast, Kojima’s artwork remains continuously multitudinous. Kojima would spend his later career adapting the films of Akira Kurosawa into graphic novels (Koike & Kojima 2001, p. 285); this influence is

![Figure 37: Daigoro folds a boat, launching it from his cart; it lands upside-down. This proves a metaphor, as Ogami’s enemies arrive by boat; the assassin dispatches them all. Moments of childish levity balance out scenes of wholesale slaughter. (Koike & Kojima 2001a, p. 270-2)](image-url)
also evident in *Lone Wolf*. Just as Tezuka before him applied his interest in animation to his panel arrangements (see Case Study 4.5.5), Kojima uses fade and dissolve effects, panning shots, zoom-in tracking, and various other techniques which would normally only be available to filmmakers. Kojima’s rendering skills, coupled with Koike’s innate sense of pacing, make these devices just as effective on paper. They create a genuine sense of motion, by cleverly arranging many still images in ways which mimic a cinematic experience.

At times, the scenery inside the panels changes through gradual transitions, like a picture scroll slowly unfurling, wordlessly transporting the reader to a world wherein every detail is intricately rendered. These transitions, McCloud claims, set Japanese comics apart from those of their Western counterparts. He conducted an investigative survey, analysing the panel-to-panel transitions which occur most frequently in a sample group of graphic novels. The works which he examined and compared were selected from across a variety of genres and cultures. What he found was that graphic novels from the West typically contain ‘action-to-action’ transitions more than any other; these show events, or ‘actions’, clearly following one after another, in a chain of uninterrupted chronology. On the other hand, Japanese *manga* make frequent use of ‘aspect-to-aspect’ transitions, a type which is seldom seen in American comic books, yet is very common in *manga* storytelling (McCloud 1993, p. 75-78). This type of transition is mostly used to set a scene, by showing fragmentary ‘aspects’ of it in a series of sequential panels. Rather than showing a passage of time, as ‘action-to-action’ panels would, these layouts act like a progressive montage, collectively describing a single scenario. These sequences are usually

![Figure 38: An example of a combined fade-in and zooming shot, as Ogami’s figure gradually approaches out of the mist. Such a sequence would not look out of place in a reel of film. (Koike & Kojima 2001b, p. 97)](image-url)
wordless, giving the reader space to explore the scenery at their own pace. Whilst trends and influences certainly helped establish these conventions, McCloud ascertains that the countries’ respective cultures are at the root of these differing approaches:

“Traditional Western art and literature don’t wander much. On the whole, we’re pretty much a goal-oriented culture. But, in the East, there’s a rich tradition of cylindrical and labyrinthine works of art. Japanese comics may be an heir to this tradition, in the way they emphasize being there over getting there. Through these and other storytelling techniques, the Japanese offer a vision of comics very different from our own. For in Japan more than anywhere else, comics is an art of intervals.”

(1993, p. 79-80)

In the case of Lone Wolf, the ‘interval’ McCloud refers to is actually a trade-off between words and pictures. The balance of duties between text and imagery is nothing short of remarkable. Koike’s literature, as befitting such a masterful teacher, is intricate and compelling, exploring complex themes of morality and redemption. However, his use of text is just as calculated in its application as it is in its omission. In the absence of words, Kojima’s visuals are allowed to take centre-stage, uninterrupted by commentary or dialogue, showing rather than telling. As Schodt describes it:

“Like Japanese poetry, Japanese comics tend to value the unstated; in many cases the picture alone carries the story. Just as a dramatic film might opt for a minute of silence, several pages of a comic story may have no narration or dialogue… [Lone Wolf] is an extreme example [of this]…. Sword fights sometimes last for 30 pages, with only the sound of blades clashing.” (1983, p. 21)

The word/image combinations in Lone Wolf are somewhat similar to those used by Miller in Sin City, though in this case, the elements take turns at the leading

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 39:** A man walks by an abandoned temple; on the wall is a ‘demon prayer-paper’, the calling-card of the assassin Lone Wolf and Cub. These panels can be considered an example of an ‘aspect to aspect’ transition, as they shift between different views of a single scene, showing all its relevant parts in greater detail. (Koike & Kojima 2001b, p. 60)
role, rather than operating simultaneously. In what McCloud defines as a ‘duo-specific’ relationship, imagery and words might both state the same message twice-over (1993, p. 153). By contrast, the combinations in *Lone Wolf* tend to alternate between ‘word-specific’ and ‘picture-specific’; as their names suggest, in each of these arrangements, words and pictures respectively take turns at operating as main means of narrative depiction. To have both elements repeat the same information in unison would be unnecessary; for Koike and Kojima, only one or the other is needed at a time in order to carry the story. Like a changing-of-the-guard, Koike and Kojima pass the baton between them, letting the other’s contribution have greater emphasis when appropriate, then rising to the occasion themselves when the balance shifts. Primary and secondary roles are constantly passed between writer and artist. The text-image ratio constantly fluctuates, yet the change never seems abrupt. To achieve a situation where text and image can act so independently, yet are so seamlessly harmonized, is no mean feat.

One cannot help but feel that *Lone Wolf* and Cub is a product of the culture it originated from. Like the tradition-bound artists of their native land, Koike and Kojima walk the fine line between necessity and excessiveness, never crossing it, yet creating a work that contains countless layers and textures. The narrative is painstakingly calculated in its depiction, yet reads very naturally. In spite of its depth, there is a deceptive simplicity in its telling. No elements are wasted; nothing unnecessary is added, no point overemphasized.

It may seem that everything in *Lone Wolf* – from setting and story, to artistic medium, style and execution – is based in antiquity. However, Koike reveals that he, at least, had more modern ideas in mind whilst he worked on the series: “I am writing

Figure 40: A comparison between the work of *(left)* classical painter Ando Hiroshige (2007, n. pag.) and *(right)* *Lone Wolf* illustrator Goseki Kojima. (Koike & Kojima 2001a, p.219) Both use negative space to create the illusion of a mist-shrouded landscape. This is a traditional technique both artists share, despite having lived and worked in different centuries.
about *Bushido*, in a period when the most important thing was to take responsibility for your words and actions. But politicians and leaders today don’t have this spirit.” (Gravett 2004, p. 106) With this dual-consideration for both his nation’s gradually-receding past and its steadily-approaching future, it is no wonder Koike’s stories have captured the imaginations of so many.

### 4.5.5 Osamu Tezuka

“He [Tezuka] once said that a story, like a tree, needed strong roots to be compelling; if these were weak, no amount of flashy detail would hold it up. At the heart of all his stories are questions about the seemingly eternal foolishness of mankind.” – Paul Gravett (2004, p. 30)

Someone who knows nothing about graphic novels might easily dismiss Osamu Tezuka’s *manga* as being stereotypically ‘cartoony’. In actual fact, the reverse could be said to be true: Tezuka was, in fact, the defining influence that inspired Japan’s unofficial national style. In any case, to criticize Tezuka, in Japan or in any of the world’s widespread *manga* communities, could quite literally be considered blasphemy. Tezuka is still commonly known as ‘kami-no-manga-sama’, or ‘the God of comics’, in his homeland.

As already mentioned in Chapter 3.2.1, graphic novels in Japan, or *manga*, have a status unrivalled by those in any other culture in the world, and Tezuka single-handedly did much to cultivate this level of popularity. Almost every genre of modern-day *manga* can be traced to his influence. The large eyes which have become so synonymous with *manga* are considered to be his invention; Tezuka himself was inspired by Western icons such as Disney’s *Bambi* and Fleischer’s *Betty Boop*. (O’Luanaigh 2010, n. pag.) In an opposite move to Amano, Tezuka would eventually transition from comics to animation, forming his own production studio, which would create the famous *Astro Boy* television series. Tezuka’s fascination with

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48 Koike and Kojima’s *Lone Wolf and Cub* from the previous case study is an example of this; McCloud suggests that the later work actually had its genesis in *Dororo*, a samurai story by Tezuka, which had appeared three years earlier. (McCloud 2006, p. 226)
film is evident in his printed work; he pioneered a ‘cinematic’ style which mimicked camera movements and on-screen framing devices (see Figure 41, following page).

Whilst Tezuka’s simple, somewhat cutesy style of artwork may have become iconic, it is far removed from any realistic portrayal of human anatomy, more closely resembling caricature. Tezuka admitted to intentionally making his characters ‘cute’ in order to better suit his steadily-growing core audience of elementary-school-age children. (Tezuka 2003, p. 5) He may also have been influenced by the animation process, designing characters that were relatively easy to draw both repeatedly and consistently. However, this ‘style’ may also contain a clue as to why both children and grown adults find his works so captivating.

One notion that can be put to rest is that Tezuka simplified his human forms due to a lack of technical skill. Tezuka was possibly better qualified to draw human anatomy than anyone else in the industry: he had originally trained as a doctor, though he never actually practised. This expertise is evident in Black Jack, a medical procedural drama in which Tezuka shows complex operations taking place, revealing the intricate bodily structures beneath the ‘skins’ of his characters (see Figure 42, following page). Rather than being merely cartoon-like, Tezuka’s art possesses the clean lines and legibility that a medical diagram would require. In contrast to the

![Figure 41: Just eleven of the original 31 panels Tezuka drew in this sequence for the story ‘New Treasure Island’. (Gravett 2004, p. 27) Unfortunately, only 4 of these panels made it to publication. Though not one of Tezuka’s best-known works, New Treasure Island was revolutionary for its time, drastically changing how manga scenes were planned and composed. Fellow manga-making duo Fujio-Fujiko (famous for their Doreamon character) recall how they “reeled in shock” upon seeing the panels for the first time. (Schodt 1983, p. 63)
sometimes absurd appearances of his characters, many of his backgrounds are rendered with a scientific precision which is breathtakingly true to life.

Tezuka’s decision to go ‘cartoony’ is actually the employment of a very deliberate artistic and communicative device. Though they perhaps do not physically resemble real people, Tezuka’s characters exude a personality and sense of life which makes them beloved by their audience. In Tezuka’s most famous work, *Tetsuwan Atom* (more commonly known as *Astro Boy* to the rest of the world), the bulbous nose of Dr. Ochanomizu is contrasted with his position as chief intellectual at the futuristic Ministry of Science, as well as being Astro’s warm and wise fatherly figure. Astro’s teacher and sometime-detective Higeoyaji, known in various English-language versions as ‘Daddy Walrus’ or ‘Mustachio’, is easily recognized by his prominent facial hair, which bristles comically to match his mood.

This dynamic art style, Schodt claims, is a cultural trait: “Japanese artists in all media have traditionally used a spare approach, concentrating on caricature or on revealing the ‘essence’ of a mood or situation.” (1983, p. 22) Philip Brophy compares the ‘cute’ faces Tezuka draws to classical Japanese theatre, wherein actors wear distinctive masks (*noh*) or make-up (*kabuki*) to signify what role or emotion their character evokes. (2006, p. 123) Tezuka’s ‘cute faces’ similarly become a form of iconography, serving as vessels for specific personality traits and characterizations.

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*Figure 42:* Black Jack, an unlicensed doctor with uncanny skill, reattaches a patient’s arm. Realistically-portrayed procedures and accurately-drawn anatomy add to the story’s authenticity, however unlikely the premise becomes – Black Jack also operates on dolphins, a tumour with its own consciousness, and even himself. (Gravett 2004, p. 69)
Tezuka himself said that one of manga’s greatest benefits as a storytelling medium was that it “allowed for characteristics to be overemphasized without a sense of reality being lost.” (Brophy 2006, p. 91)

By condensing his figures down into caricatures, Tezuka created characters that are almost exaggerated in their uber-human qualities, yet reflect real human sentiments, earning our invested interest and evoking our empathy. McCloud explains the psychology of why this phenomenon occurs: “By de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical world in favour of the idea of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts.” He further adds that this freedom from a realistic appearance can open up more narrative possibilities: “Inanimate objects may seem to possess separate identities, so that if one jumped up and started singing, it wouldn’t feel out of place.” (1993, p. 41) This concept is particularly interesting when one considers that Tezuka’s most famous character, a boy robot, though not strictly ‘inanimate’, is nevertheless not a truly ‘human’ character; though in Tezuka’s capable hands, he developed a set of very humanoid characteristics which have made him adored by fans.

Many of the stories Tezuka wrote were in the sci-fi genre and, though based on Tezuka’s own scientific background and meticulous research, they were still radical for their time; for example, Tezuka had his characters travel to the moon almost a decade before Neil Armstrong would arrive. In attempting to sell such seemingly-outlandish plots to his readers, Tezuka was wise to depict them in a style which clearly advertised their fantastical leanings. Dustin Harbin concurs with this theory:

“It’s almost like a built-in suspension of disbelief: once you are choosing to, again and again on each page, engage with the comic, you are much more likely to accept what’s going on in the story, maybe much more so than in a more ‘realistic’ medium: film, for instance… Being actively engaged in ‘interpreting’ what’s happening in a story maybe gives you an expanded ability to “believe” that story.”


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49 At least two Astro Boy stories - ‘Ivan the Fool’ and ‘The Hot Dog Corps’ - depict moon exploration; they were first published in 1959 and 1961 respectively. The first manned moon landing eventually took place in 1969; however, since the timeline of Astro Boy is set sometime after the eponymous robot’s ‘birth’ date of April 7th 2003, it is arguable as to just who won the space race – NASA, Astro or Tezuka (probably the latter, since in ‘Ivan the Fool’, Astro finds an old rocket, apparently from circa-1965, which had already crash-landed there). (Tezuka 2002b, p. 91)
Once the audience has accepted the speculative nature of Tezuka’s plotlines, pure fictional escapism can be enjoyed by readers of all ages. When needed, Tezuka could also depict fairly realistic characters in more mundane, terrestrial settings. For example, in *Tell Adolf*, a bleak wartime tale set during the Holocaust, Tezuka chose to give realistic-looking faces to the Nazi officers and Jewish prisoners he depicted, reflecting both the gravitas of the narrative and the non-fictional basis from which it came. *Tell Adolf* is considered to be the first *gekiga*. Tezuka would produce many series in this genre during his lifetime, though his children’s works would remain better-known.

Despite contrasting aesthetic approaches, this does not mean that the themes featured in Tezuka’s stories for children were frivolous in comparison to his adult-oriented works. Tezuka used his light and almost innocently-appealing style to package such serious issues as nuclear power, genetic modification, racial discrimination, and biological warfare. On occasion, he would even completely recreate his pre-existing works for a new market, as he did with *Jungle Emperor Leo*, adapting it into a revised version aimed at young adults instead of children, as its previous incarnation had been. (Brophy 2006, p. 25) Tezuka’s unique amalgamation of visually-pleasing artwork with hard-hitting topics soon became a winning combination, and more than twenty years after his death, his seminal influence proves
to be ever-enduring. Perhaps the greatest virtue of Tezuka’s vast body of work\(^\text{50}\) is that though he always endeavoured to make his artwork appealing to his audience, he never wrote down to them, never resorting to ‘lowest common denominator’ storylines or churning out guaranteed crowd-pleasers. No matter what kind of story his artwork conveys, his imagery has a consistent quality, an innate clarity and vivacity, which has served to inspired not just his own nation, but much of the comic-reading world.

\(^{50}\) He completed an estimate 150,000 pages of \emph{manga} during his lifetime (Gravett 2004, p. 24)
4.5.6 Shaun Tan

“They [images] are akin to a page of text, using the same symbols in differing sequences to create new meanings. Images evoke our memory. Each image, when it is near another, creates a small narrative that touches each viewer in a unique way, but a common story is still told. My work, I like to think, is ‘waiting for words’. It is up to the viewer to dream their own.”

– Dianne Fogwell (2006, p. 203)

Most people’s idea of a typical ‘novel’ would be a document which contains some form of text or written content. However, Melbourne-based writer/artist Shaun Tan turns all such preconceptions on their heads with his internationally-acclaimed book, The Arrival. In 2007, it was awarded the Community Relations Commission Literary Award; the decision did not go without criticism, primarily due to the fact that Tan’s ‘novel’ doesn’t contain a single word, save for its title on the cover, its publication details on the flyleaf, and a brief afterword. All the narrative content within the novel is presented through imagery alone. Julie Willems notes that the literary community took great offence, claiming a book without words did not deserve such an accolade. (2007, p. 7) As usual, a lot of the confusion was born out of the fact that most people think of books with pictures as being only for children – surely a book with just pictures, and no words at all, must only be suitable for those who are too young or too dull to read? Tan often has to field this query: “A question I always get asked is, ‘Who is this book for?’ But it’s not for anybody; it’s for everybody. I don’t write for any single audience.” He further adds, “How many words does something have to have before it becomes literature? Is poetry less literary than a novel?” (Schiavone 2007, <www.brisbanetimes.com.au>)

To dismiss any of Tan’s works as mere ‘picture books’ would indeed be a grave injustice. Some of the themes his works deal with – including immigration, genocide, persecution, politics and depression – make their deeper messages unsuitable for young readers, though at face value, they seem innocent enough. For example, when Tan originally took the manuscript of one of his books, The Lost Thing,\(^{51}\) to his publisher, they “contracted it on the basis that it was a book for really

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\(^{51}\) The resulting book was adapted into a short film in 2010; it subsequently won the Oscar for Best Animated Short the following year. (McDonald 2011, <www.readings.com.au>)
young kids. In my mind, I didn’t really see it as being a children’s story; I saw it as an adult fable.” (Hopper 2008, <www.inframe.tv>) Though outwardly a simple story about a mysterious lost creature, the book was originally inspired by such topical subjects as bureaucracy, conventionalism, and the Howard government. Tan describes the final product as a “real simple, childlike idea, but it applies to a more complex situation.” (Hopper 2008, <www.inframe.tv>) It is this method of layering different measures of significance over an outwardly-simple core storyline that makes Tan’s work so compelling. Even though these deeper meanings are certainly still embedded in his finished work, Tan tries not to give his readers too many definite messages: “I go to a lot of trouble to avoid specific or obvious meaning in my work. [The imagery] hopefully discourages any rational assessment, and instead invites more emotional reaction… there is no correct or singular response.” (Tan 2011, p. 12)

Considering Tan’s preference for ambiguity over complete closure, and his concerted efforts to involve the reader in the creation of meaning, The Arrival can be considered the ultimate synthesis of his personal manifesto. It tells the story of an immigrant, a character who is initially alienated in his newly-adopted homeland and trying to make sense of his foreign surroundings. Just as the nameless main character must manage to build a new life in the confusing country he is newly arrived in, the reader must similarly make sense of the visuals, without any text to directly explain the intricacies of the plot. Whilst Tan’s visuals act as informative guides, it is really

Figure 45: Just part of the strange city Tan created for his story, filled with bizarre-looking buildings, industrial smoke-stacks, and unexplained sculptures which dominate the skyline. At the top-left corner of the image, the main character can be seen arriving via hot-air balloon. (Tan 2006b, <http://www.shauntan.net/>) Tan was inspired to create such modes of transport by a documentary he saw featuring spawning polyps, which sent their eggs drifting above underwater coral beds. (Tan 2010a, p. 20)
the viewer’s cognitive skills which construct the story, deducing the unspoken
dialogue for themselves and deciphering the overall narrative from the clues Tan has
left them. Tan describes it as “a story that depends to a large extent on silence and
mystery… like a lost album from an alternate universe. The lack of explanation
[makes] it all the more interesting, the reader presented with only a series of strange
drawings, voiceless characters in anonymous landscapes.” (2010a, p.5)

Tan has worked with many talented writers, and has authored many of his own
books himself, both creating their imagery and writing their text (when text does
indeed feature in them). The lack of words in The Arrival does not reflect a lack of
literary proficiency or professional contacts; nor is the narrative in The Arrival any
less powerful or less poignant for its lack of words. The omission of text was a
conscientious decision, and one which, Tan reiterates, had a very deliberate effect:

“In The Arrival, the absence of any written description also plants the
reader more firmly in the shoes of an immigrant character. There is no
guidance as to how the images might be interpreted, and we must
ourselves search for meaning and seek familiarity in a world where such
things are either scarce or concealed. Words have a remarkable magnetic
pull on our attention, and how we interpret attendant images: in their
absence, an image can often have more conceptual space around it, and
invite a more lingering attention from a reader who might otherwise reach
for the nearest convenient caption, and let that rule their imagination.”

(Tan 2006b, <http://www.shauntan.net/>)

The fact that the character is in a foreign land is echoed in the omission of words in
the novel; with the lack of a common verbal or written language, both the main
caracter and the viewer alike make sense of the story’s environment through
intuition and optical deduction.

Strengthening this empathetic bond is the main character’s presence in a world
that is strange to both him, and to the audience. Tan describes his personal city as an

Figure 46: With help from a friendly passer-by, the migrant learns how to find, identify and
buy local cuisine. The realism of Tan’s drawings allows the audience to read his changing
attitudes through his gestures and facial expressions. Rather fittingly, he also uses images to
communicate, as in the first panel: he points to a picture of a loaf of bread, making an obvious
‘cutting-board’ motion in the next frame. By the end of the sequence, he has learned to like
the local equivalent, though it bears no resemblance to the familiar loaf. (Tan 2006a, n.pag.)
‘assemblage’ of weird architecture from across the globe; this amalgamation may be influenced by his father’s profession as an architect. (Tan 2010a, p. 20) It is a bewildering abstraction of a conceptual city, too otherworldly to ever exist, yet somehow strangely familiar. Tan’s location is an ‘every-city’ which most viewers should be able to relate to, yet still find disconcertingly alien. In such a way, Tan lets the universe he has created step forward almost as a character itself. McCloud postulates that in the absence of words, places greater emphasis on the setting of the story: “Silence also allows the readers to step off the twin conveyor belts of plot and dialogue long enough to let their eyes wander and explore your world, instead of viewing it as nothing more as a backdrop.” (2006, p.165)

Neither the reader nor the protagonist have any understanding of this strange metropolis, other than what they can readily divulge from visual clues. When the protagonist mistakes a handle for a faucet and finds a stream of water coming from an unexpected spout, it is a mistake the viewer could have easily made if they were in his position. In this respect, the experiences of both the reader and the main character are even more tightly fused together as one; every other character in the story, except for the protagonist and the readers themselves, are proficiently knowledgeable and comfortable within this fictional habitat. The reader learns at the same rate as the protagonist, and so explores the visual landscape with him, seeing it through his eyes, making the same discoveries, and forging the same connections. All this occurs in real time, thereby engaging the senses more realistically and involving the reader on a far deeper level than any textual medium could manage.

Figure 47: The migrant explores his new lodgings. His knowledge of this new country’s customs is as limited as the reader’s; through the character’s experiences, the audience explores this fantastical environment, as though his actions are their own. (Tan 2006a, n. pag.)
As well as banishing type from his pages, Tan refrains from using typical comic-book iconography, such as speed lines, starbursts, and other special effects. This may be partly due to his lack of familiarity with these genre-specific conventions, as he did not make or read graphic novels before he set about producing *The Arrival*. (Tan 2006b, <http://www.shauntan.net/>) Another likely reason is a pure matter of preference; for this particular story, Tan wanted to use ‘static’ images which contained very little action, imitating the constant, monotonous pace of an immigrant’s everyday existence. He tells the story through a meandering string of incidents, rather than building toward one climatic instance. (Graphic 2010, n. pag.)

In order to amplify the inherent meaning of his imagery, Tan devotes a whole panel to each individual action, aspect, moment or idea he chooses to depict, letting the reader connect and interpret these fragments themselves. For example, when a viewer sees successive frames of the main character waking, showering, shaving and dressing, they understand that he is getting ready to go out in the morning, a process they are doubtlessly familiar with, since they themselves will have a similar weekday routine. In order to make the viewer relate to this and other similar sequences as much

![Image]

**Figure 48:** Without the use of words, Tan depicts a conversation between the main character and a woman he meets. They soon find that they have common ground, comparing their respective immigration papers. This is followed by the woman’s story, told in panels with borders resembling old photographs; she escaped slavery before she came to live in the city. This and other similarly poignant plot-tangents cause the novel to waver continually between fiction and almost-factual. (Tan 2006a, n. pag.)
as possible, Tan decided that realistic imagery was integral to the storytelling process. Though he, by his own admission, was not pedantic about achieving perfect photo-realism, he strove to create a style of ‘naturalistic imagery’ which effectively conveyed the “social realism of an immigrant’s tale”. (Tan 2010a, p.42) He went so far as to build miniature sets to sketch from and photographed models to use as reference material, all in order to make his illustrations as convincing as possible.

These ‘real life’ moments, as the protagonist fumbles through his daily existence, are contrasted with the private histories of the people he encounters, all of them other immigrants who were once in situations similar to his own. In these scenes, the frames which surround each panel begin to play a role which is nearly as important as that of the imagery they contain. Whilst normal present-day frames are simply surrounded with white, the edges of memories and second-hand tales appear as borders of old photographs, signalling the transition back in time to past events. Cracked, stained and worn, these ‘flashback’ panels appear against a darker page background, and look to have weathered as much incidental damage as a battered, moth-eaten photo album. This effect is coupled with the graphite shading each image is rendered in, effectively replicating the subtle texture of a grainy old photograph; and the evocative sepia colouring. All these aspects amount to a story which feels less like it was ‘invented’, more like a collective chronicle of countless similar histories, all being retold through this singular, fictional portrayal.

Using these clever techniques to express a common theme, Tan is able to relate to a broader audience, all united by similar experiences. Although the story focuses on one character’s plight, this central figure connects with other characters through their corresponding circumstances. Additionally, some readers may feel that they are reading a loose rendition of their own lives, relating the poignant fiction to their own pasts and seeing themselves in Tan’s every-man main character. Tan says that since he has “received impassioned letters from migrant and refugee readers who see their own experiences accurately reflected in its [the book’s] strange imagery”. (Tan 2010a, p. 6) For many people, memories tend to be visual rather than verbal or textual; they are an indistinct a melding of remembered sight and a general aesthetic impression, tied together by an emotional connection to a specific moment in their own personal timeline. By constructing his work in a format that replicates this process of nostalgic recall, and by placing emphasis on interpretation and empathy rather than on specific characterization, Tan creates a story which is not about just one
fictional character, but about the many real people who see their own stories reflected in his – all of them united by a language that surpasses words.

This result is a fitting representation of all Tan stands for, as an artist and as a storyteller. He sees all his works as contributing only one half of the dialogue to an open conversation. Rather than preaching to his audience, he is trying to reflect their own values back at them, prompting them into reflection and further contemplation: “For me, a successful picture book is one in which everything is presented to the reader as a speculative proposition, wrapped in invisible quotation marks, as if to say ‘what do you make of this?’” (Tan 2001a, <www.shauntan.net/essay1.html>) By omitting written words from The Arrival and replacing them with eloquent visuals, Tan has given his readers the language they need to discern his meaning, then interpret it and respond to it in their own unique, deeply-personal way.

![Figure 49: Top row, portraits of real-life migrants from the early twentieth century. (Tan 2010a, p. 10 & 12) Bottom row, the ‘quoted’ versions which Tan drew as endpapers for the novel. (Tan 2006a, n. pag.)The portrait on the far right is of Tan’s own father, who came to Australia from Penang in 1960. Tan cites his father’s history as having been part of his research into the ‘migrant experience’. (Tan 2010a, p.10) He also drew on Aboriginal displacement and the white Australia policy; he himself felt a certain sense of disassociation, having grown up half-Chinese “at a time and place when this was fairly unusual” and experienced “low-level racism” firsthand. (Tan 2006b, <http://www.shauntan.net/>) Despite this, Tan chooses to focus on the positive side of Australian multiculturalism in this novel.

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52 This concept was explored in greater depth (and more negativity) in another book by Tan, The Rabbits, created in conjunction with writer John Marsden. It was named Picture Book of the Year by the Children’s Book Council in 1999, a decision which again drew controversy, as it contained confronting themes which were deemed inappropriate for a ‘picture book’. (Tan 2006b, <www.shauntan.net/>)
4.6 Comparison

The previous series of case studies demonstrated the diverse range of text/image ratios which can be found across a selection of very different graphic novels. The studies also explored some of the possible rationales behind why the authors chose to structure their graphic novels in these specific ways. Although all the works are different, this does not mean that the format used in one is better, or more effective for storytelling, than any other; the structure of each work was designed to give its inherent narrative the best possible framework, and different storylines have different requirements. It would be foolhardy to ask Neil Gaiman or Hideyuki Kikuchi to adapt Tan’s *The Arrival* into a novelization, yet still expect it to engage the audience in the same way. Tan would also have a hard time trying to recreate the intricacies of Kikuchi’s sci-fi setting or Gaiman’s fantasy mythos without using any words. Reviewer Jason Thompson says specifically of Koike & Kojima’s samurai saga: “if *Lone Wolf and Cub* were prose, it would take thousands of words to describe the scenery, atmosphere and costumes of Tokugawa-era Japan as well as Goseki Kojima’s artwork [has done].” (J. Thompson 2008, <www.comixology.com>)

Each of these works – or any work, for that matter – is a result of the countless decisions, both minor and major, which went into its production. If a different option had been pursued at any one of these junctures, then the final outcome would have also been very different. Shaun Tan claims that the greatest terror of working in a creative field is that there is no one ‘right’ or ‘correct’ way to do anything; a project can go a thousand different directions at any given point. (Graphic 2010, n. pag.) In the previous examples, what might the final product have been like if its author’s course had deviated somewhere during the creative process? For the most part, this question remains purely hypothetical; however, in some cases, multiple variations of a single work actually do exist.

Almost all the works featured in the table above have been adapted into other media,\(^{53}\) such as films or plays. As has already been mentioned in Chapter 3.2.6, numerous graphic novels have made the jump from page to screen. Though the image-based nature of the graphic novel makes it reasonably compatible with a

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\(^{53}\) To date, the only exception is Bill Willingham and *Fables*; all the other authors have seen at least one of their works adapted into another format or medium.
celluloid adaption, there are still many pitfalls which can plague the conversion process. Speaking at the Graphic visual-arts festival, Neil Gaiman recalled how one of his works, a comic called Violent Cases, had been adapted into a stage production. This new version was very faithful to the original, to the extent that the graphic novel itself served as the play’s script. However, at opening night, Gaiman noticed that some of the story’s nuances, such as tonality and dramatic emphasis, had been somehow compromised, despite incorporating the exact same action and dialogue that he himself had written. Events in the plotline which he had rendered with great significance now passed by onstage without really registering with the audience; other scenes which hadn’t been crucial to his plot were now given greater potency.  

Gaiman described the end result as “totally faithful, and totally wrong.” (Graphic 2010, n. pag.) He learned from the experience that a story cannot be ‘transliterated’ from one medium to the other; it must be ‘translated’, and given any necessary adjustments which will make it better suited to its new medium. (Graphic 2010, n.pag.)

Of all the works featured in the case studies, Osamu Tezuka’s have probably seen the greatest number of adaptions. His manga have been made into almost everything, from movies and television shows to plays, musicals, and even ballets. (Brophy 2006, p.38) Tezuka’s iconic Astro Boy has been made into no fewer than four television series, as well as a recent feature film. All these adaptions have remained close to Tezuka’s original, both in the general structure of their narratives and in the style of their artwork; even the film, whose digital animation contrasts sharply with Tezuka Productions’ more old-school cel-painted animation, retained the original manga’s use of simplified, cartoonish human figures. Ironically, it would take another manga to initiate a major departure from Tezuka’s approach.

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54 This does not necessarily mean that the play was a failure, since Violent Cases is about an adult character recalling events in his childhood which he was too young to understand at the time, struggling to interpret them through a more mature and better-informed viewpoint. The inaccuracy of memory was a prominent theme in Gaiman’s rendition; the very fact that the graphic novel and the play portray the same events with slightly different slants may even reinforce the story’s essential meaning.

55 These include the initial black and white 1960’s version; a similar, though slightly cuter, colour version from the 1980’s; a rebranded version, now called ‘Jetter Mars’ but still featuring essentially the same cast of characters, from the 1970’s; and a post-Tezuka, modernized version released in 2003. All of them were made by the animation company that the mangaka himself founded, Tezuka Productions.
This new version, *Pluto*, was the creation of Naoki Urasawa, himself a respected *mangaka*.\(^{56}\) Instead of imitating the stylistic elements of Tezuka’s masterpiece, as others had done, Urasawa chose to portray the much-beloved characters in a semi-realistic way. While hardly radical on its own, this was a huge deviation from its famous forebear. In terms of style, Urasawa’s imagery is probably closer to Shaun Tan’s in terms of its loyalty to physical resemblance. However, just as Tezuka and Tan have unlikely similarities which belie their different approaches, so Tezuka and Urasawa also have common ground. Since Urasawa uses the same basic storyline that Tezuka wrote – it was initially a story arc titled ‘*The Greatest Robot on Earth*’, but renamed ‘*Pluto*’ by Urasawa after its eponymous villain – the two authors share much the same objectives as storytellers, though their art styles are superficially from opposite ends of the spectrum. In order to portray androids living alongside humans in an assimilated culture, Tezuka chose to simplify the physical forms of both man and machine to basic shapes, translating his characters into conceptual symbols which his audience could more easily accept. By contrast, Urasawa levels the playing field by giving his androids believably-draw, naturalistic faces that make them truly indistinguishable from flesh-and-blood humans; even in the context of the story, human and robotic characters alike often mistake Astro (here retaining his original Japanese name of Atom) for a ‘real’ human boy.

Though this artistic shift was a bold move on Urasawa’s part, it certainly seems to have been warranted; his style suits his drastically-updated retelling of the same story. Perhaps the reason why Urasawa’s method of portrayal works so well is that Tezuka’s audience has also changed. Urasawa himself grew up

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\(^{56}\) Urasawa had already demonstrated that he was at least as diverse as his predecessor. His earlier successes include the action-comedy *Yawara!: Fashionable Ninja Girl*, a work not dissimilar to Tezuka’s own *Princess Knight*, the first femme-oriented *manga* title ever made. In stark contrast, Urasawa’s acclaimed *Monster* series, a dark and twisted psychological thriller set in the medical world, serves as a worthy successor to Tezuka’s *Black Jack*. 

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**Figure 50:** Fan-favourite *Astro Boy* characters, Dr. Ochanomizu & Higeoyaji, as drawn by Urasawa; compare these versions to those drawn by Tezuka in Case Study 4.5.5. Whilst retaining the same trademark characteristics that Tezuka gave them (big nose & luxurious moustaches, respectively) they now possess these traits in realistic proportions. (Urasawa & Tezuka 2005, p. 79; Urasawa & Tezuka 2009, p.126)
reading Tezuka’s *manga*, and his motivation for revamping the story was his envisioning of a renewed, adult take on the plotline he had loved as a child. Reading between the lines, he began to fill in the perceived gaps in the plotline with his own ideas, thereby creating something which was still respectful of Tezuka’s masterpiece, yet reflected a far more modern viewpoint. (Urasawa & Tezuka 2004, p.195) One can imagine others from Urasawa’s generation reading his work in turn, and relating to his refreshed storyline in a similar way. Whereas Tezuka had, by his own admission, created a hypothetical new-millennium future-world based purely on speculation (Tezuka 2002a, p. 16), Urasawa was actually living and working on the story at the time in which it was set (the year 2003 and beyond). He was henceforth able to document life in the twenty-first century firsthand, writing a lot of actual current affairs into his storyline. These additional plot elements reflect the changes which have since happened not just in storytelling trends, but also in the real world’s social and political climes.

Most notably, Urasawa inserted thinly-veiled parody versions of Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush into his narrative. A key subplot in *Pluto* alludes to a past conflict in the Middle East, wherein reported ‘robots of mass destruction’ were at the centre of the turmoil; veteran *Astro Boy* character Dr. Ochanomizu joined the team which was sent to investigate these claims, yet the scientific bureau of which he was a part found insubstantial evidence of any such robots ever existing. Modern readers

![Figure 51: Left to right, President Alexander of the United States of Thracia; King Darius XIV, dictatorial leader of Persia; and a statue of the despot. The real-life parallels Urasawa inserted into his *manga* are blatantly obvious; whilst Thracian allied troops storm Persia, searching for ‘robots of mass destruction’, Darius is put on trial as a war criminal. In this chilling *Pluto* subplot, the line between fiction and reality is disconcertingly vague.](image)

(Urasawa & Tezuka 2005, p. 56-57, 59)

57 Hussein was arrested on 13th December 2003; the first chapter of *Pluto* was published in Japanese magazine *Big Comic Original* on 30th September 2004. (Deskins n.d., <www.tezukainenglish.com>)
could not fail to pick up Urasawa’s obvious critique on America’s military presence in Iraq. Having such well-known, nostalgic characters as Astro and Dr. Ochanomizu deal with these very up-to-date concerns gives a renewed poignancy to Tezuka’s classic story. *Manga* critic and university lecturer Tomohiko Murakami points out that as a professional *mangaka*, “it makes sense that Urasawa would depict the characters of *Astro Boy*… with the same level of critical analysis he uses with his own characters.” (Urasawa & Tezuka 2009, p.196) Both Tezuka and Urasawa, as professional storytellers, use their characters as messengers, entrusting their own views and voices to their fictional proxies; when he adopted Tezuka’s cast of characters, Urasawa gained further allies who would speak on his behalf, acting as vessels for his own intended meaning.58

When Tezuka first drew Astro back in 1951, he set the robot’s fictional birthdate as 7th April, 2003; to him, this year represented a whole new millennium of possibility. By this date, he speculated, such things as humanoid robots, hover-cars and space exploration, mere hypothetical concepts in his own time, might actually be a reality. When Urasawa updated the narrative, sixty years later and one year after

Figure 52: **Left to right**, Tobio, the human child who is killed within the first few pages of the *Astro Boy* manga; Tobio’s robot replica, Astro, as drawn by Tezuka; Astro as he appears in *Pluto*. (Tezuka 2002a, p. 18 & 26; Urasawa & Tezuka 2009, p. 170) Note how Urasawa’s Astro has a still-spiky, yet far more naturalistic haircut, resembling the original Tobio more than he does his mechanical self from the 1950’s. **Far right**, the female android ‘HRP-4C’. (Moriyama 2009, <robot.watch.impress.co.jp/>) With 42 motors in her face alone, she can imitate numerous facial expressions, and she even sings for audiences with the help of a voice-simulation program. Contrasting with her realistic face, her streamline silver body was reportedly “*manga*-inspired”; her creators thought that giving her a realistic body would make her resemblance to actual humans “too uncanny”. (Suzuki 2009, <www.phys org.com>)

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58 One can only imagine how *mangaka* could potentially use Astro, post-2011 and in the wake of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, considering the boy-robot is, according to Tezuka’s character description, powered by an atomic engine. (Tezuka 2002c, p. 94) When Tezuka created Astro (originally named ‘Atom’) back in the 1950’s, a significant portion of Japan’s national budget had just been set aside to develop nuclear power. Atom and *manga*-style mascots like him were used to assure the public that nuclear energy was “friendly”. (Allemang 2011, <www.theglobeandmail.com>) How might Urasawa or Tezuka have incorporated the Fukushima incident into their work? (Tezuka does show a bully suddenly approaching Astro somewhat more hesitantly after learning of his power source. (Tezuka 2002c, p. 94))
Astro’s official ‘birthdate’, humanity had not – and to date, still has not – achieved all of these goals; however, technology has indeed progressed exponentially in this amount of time. Recent scientific developments have proven that Tezuka’s vision of the twenty-first century might be possible – even probable. Humanoid robots are no longer quite so outlandishly fantastical now as they once seemed. A World Robotics Survey found that robots designed for domestic purposes, such as the ‘Roomba’ automatic vacuum cleaner, had as many as 600,000 units in households worldwide; it was predicted that by 2007, this figure would have reached at least 4 million. (Gerson 2006, <www.thestar.com>)

These simple, faceless droids are nothing compared to the truly humanoid robots which have been developed in Japan by the National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science & Technology (AIST). Many of them have realistically-sculpted faces which are based on the features of actual life-models, and the resemblances are truly astounding (see Figure 52, previous page). Though still at an experimental phase, these robots can already emulate human behaviours to some extent: they can imitate naturalistic facial expressions, react to outside stimuli like voices or body language, and handle such environmental obstacles as curbs, doorknobs and light switches. (Gerson 2006, <www.thestar.com>) Whilst they are not exactly flying in the sky on rocket boosters or coming equipped with 100,000 horsepower just yet, scientists predict that robots will one day be able to perform tasks like caring for the sick, cleaning up toxic waste, flying aircraft and searching for mines. (Gerson 2006, <www.thestar.com>)

For the time being, such robots are employed purely in the entertainment industry, where they provide a unique novelty for spectators. The fascination they generate can be attributed to the fact that they appear convincingly real on the surface, yet are artificial inside. This echoes Astro’s fictional character history; in Urasawa’s script, the boy robot says of the time when he was sold to a circus: “I look like a kid on the outside, so people thought it was weird and entertaining.” (Urasawa & Tezuka 2005, p.18) In such a way, Astro’s story has seemingly come full circle; the character’s fictional backstory states that his creator built him in an attempt to replicate his own human son, who had died in a car crash. Who knows what the future will hold – perhaps one day, bereaved families will really be able to purchase robots which have been made in their deceased loved one’s likeness.
Urasawa presented Tezuka’s work to audiences anew, contributing his own unique rendering style and storytelling elements to the original tale. However, he retained Tezuka’s original format of ‘sequential art’, and could be placed on the same spot as his predecessor on the aesthetic/ clarity scale. Both authors used similar image/text ratios for their narratives’ depictions. However, adaptations of other works have made more distinctive changes; they have not just reworked the original format, but have taken it to the opposite end of the scale.

Despite the unique characteristics of his artistry and his formidable reputation, Yoshitaka Amano’s illustrations have been adapted into subsequent incarnations, with varying results. Just as *Pluto* was Urasawa’s homage to Tezuka, the new graphic novel version of *Vampire Hunter D*, drawn by mangaka Saiko Takaki, was her own reaction to the work of writer Hideyuki Kikuchi; she was, first and foremost, one of his loyal readers and most devoted of fans. Takaki approached Kikuchi at numerous fan conventions, offering to produce the official *manga* version of his novels if he ever decided to commission them; it was some years before Kikuchi took her up on her offer. (Takaki 2009, n. pag.)

Despite being predominantly text-based, the prose version of *Vampire Hunter D* still had a very strong visual identity, provided by Amano. Takaki had to take this precedent into consideration, whilst still producing something that was distinctly her

**Figure 53:** “Without a word, the young lady in the white dress and the Hunter in black faced each other.” (Kikuchi 2006c, p. 39) Compare the renditions by Amano (left) and Takaki; both use the exact same poses and spatial compositions. (Kikuchi 2006c, p.40; Takaki 2010, n. pag.) The only significant differences between the two depictions are the artists’ individual styles, their rendering techniques (digital screen tones are evident in Takaki’s work), the latter’s inclusion of speech bubbles, and the use of sequential panels (such as the additional panel Takaki has provided, showing a close-up of the lady’s face).
own. She cites Amano’s art as a contributing factor in the decisions she made, but insists that she did not want to produce a carbon-copy of his unique artistic vision: “I think Yoshitaka Amano’s illustrations for the novels had an enormous influence. If I had not considered Mr. Amano’s illustrations, it wouldn’t have looked like D, but it would be meaningless for me to directly imitate Amano’s illustrations.” (Ciolek 2007, n. pag.) Takaki does a commendable job of replicating the feel and atmosphere of Amano’s version. Though she produces her artwork in a digital medium – as opposed to her predecessor, who paints with traditional ink and watercolours – her aestheticism is reminiscent enough of Amano’s to make her character designs for D easily recognizable. Where panels of her sequential art correspond with Amano’s individual illustrations, Takaki uses poses and framing similar to that which he has used, very nearly replicating the fundamental components of the original imagery.59

Takaki’s take on Kikuchi’s storyline is an abridged retelling, by necessity; any attempt to condense every single one of the writer’s lengthy sentences into a visual

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59 In the case of Volumes 1 and 3 of the series, Takaki also had two animated film adaptions (made in 1985 and 2000, respectively) to contend with. She similarly incorporated aspects of them into her own versions; certain panels of hers look very similar when compared to still frames taken from the films.
format would result in something that would be far too thick to publish in a single volume, not to mention cause much additional stress and infinite hours of drawing for Takaki. She says that it was her “prerogative to try to keep my version as close to the original as possible”. (2010, n. pag) At the same time, Kikuchi reportedly gave her almost complete free-rein, allowing her to rearrange events and edit out expendable subplots as she saw fit, so long as she did not change D’s essential character. (Takaki 2010, n. pag) Takaki further reveals that during the editing process, one of the most common complaints she received from her publisher was that “it’s hard to understand what’s happening.” (Takaki 2010, n. pag.) Nevertheless, Takaki put a valiant effort into honouring and augmenting the creative vision originally shared by Kikuchi and Amano. Her *manga* edition fares well as a standalone incarnation of D’s ongoing saga.

If only her American counterpart had been just as conscientious. P. Craig Russell, a perennial Gaiman collaborator, has adapted several prose works by the author into graphic novels. The first of these conversions was *Coraline*, a children’s story originally illustrated by another of Gaiman’s contributors, artist Dave McKean. In this instance, Russell was remarkably adept at incorporating Gaiman’s original text into the graphics-based format, letting the words snake their way through page borders, or allowing them to occupy space within the panels themselves. This technique effectively preserves the unique intonation of the narrator’s ‘voice’, which itself contributes much of the story’s wryly-gothic charm. Dialogue is also cleverly handled by Russell; in a scene where Coraline vainly rings the police to report that her parents have been stolen by her menacing ‘Other Mother’, the drawn-out conversation, coupled with the character’s repetitive pose, conveys the futility of the call, expressed by the figure’s literal inaction (see Figure 54, previous page).

Russell’s techniques work when the narrative moves forward at a steady pace; however, as the time frame becomes more convoluted, complications begin to arise. Take, for example, the following prose excerpt from Gaiman’s *The Dream Hunters*:

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“The sun was the golden of the late afternoon, and it burnished the world as the fox stepped into the brush and made for the little temple, stopping only to devour a large frog she found at the edge of the stream, and to crunch it down, bones and all, in a couple of mouthfuls. Then she drank the cold, clear water of the mountain stream, lapping at it thirstily. When she came to the little temple, the monk was chopping firewood for his brazier.”
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- Gaiman & Amano 1999, p. 36
In the original text-based novel, this scene was too trivial for Amano to illustrate; his imagery jumped straight to the events which follow on from it. Russell, however, was required to transcribe this sequence into his sequential art, as shown:

![Figure 55: The same scene as that depicted in the prose on the previous page, converted into sequential art. (Gaiman & Russell 2009, p. 36)](image_url)

To be fair, this would be a complicated paragraph to attempt to translate into imagery, as it jumps back and forth between past and present tenses. By contrast, if we were to convert Russell’s graphic rendition back into prose, it would read more like this:

“The fox stepped into the brush and devoured a large frog she found at the edge of the stream, crunching it down, bones and all, in a couple of mouthfuls. Then she drank the cold, clear water of the mountain stream, lapping at it thirstily. Then she made for the little temple.”

The difference may seem trivial, but its implications to the storyline are paramount. Gaiman's version conveys the urgency of the fox’s actions; whilst she is intent upon reaching the temple in order to try to save the life of the human monk, whom she is in love with, she must stop to hastily seek nourishment, having already exerted herself for his sake and preparing to undergo further trials. Russell’s rendition conveys none of this: it simply shows the fox slaking her own hunger and thirst before she goes to
the temple, making the actions seem to flow at a far more leisurely pace. This setback is certainly not at all helped by Russell’s apparent lack of cultural research; whereas Amano, well-versed in Japanese history, could simultaneously render period detail accurately and interpretively, Russell’s ‘samurai’ look more like ridiculous hybrids of medieval Vikings and ancient Egyptians.

Whilst Russell seems more than competent at portraying certain timeframes – both in terms of setting and story-flow – his work begins to bear fundamental flaws when Gaiman’s narrative asks for anything more complex. Amano was freed from such concerns, thanks to his art’s emphasis on aesthetic rather than clarity; this meant that he did not have to provide any of the story’s forward momentum and he was able to selectively illustrate key scenes of his own choosing, rather than having to depict every single plot-point that Gaiman had written.\(^60\) Whilst Russell’s conversion of *Coraline* from prose to sequential art was more than adequate, his take on *The Dream Hunters*, despite utilising the exact same format, is somewhat less successful.

As a result of having analysed and compared this selection of case studies, it became apparent that there are multiple ways in which a graphic novel can potentially be structured. In some instances, the same story can be effectively conveyed using more than one method, as evidenced by Urasawa (*Pluto*), Takaki (*Vampire Hunter D*) and Russell (*Coraline*), who have produced equally-successful versions of pre-existing works. In other cases, such as Gaiman/Amano’s *The Dream Hunters*, Koike/Kojima’s *Lone Wolf and Cub*, and Tan’s *The Arrival*, the original way in which the story was formatted is also the best way.

There is no ‘template’ or ‘formulaic’ way to arrange a graphic narrative. When it comes to a choice of what proportionate image/text ratio should be used in any work, it seems logical to select whichever format would best suit the needs and intended effects of the storyline at hand. This theory formed the basis of my reasoning when I was came to choose the format my own graphic novel would be presented in, a prospect which I will cover more extensively in Chapter 5.3.

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\(^60\) In actual fact, Amano produced twice as many illustrations as Gaiman and his publishers had been expecting; all but one of them was included in the finished book, and in order to accommodate them all, Gaiman’s written afterword, which had originally been significantly lengthier, had to be crammed onto a single page. (Gaiman & Russell 2009, p. 127)
4.7 Collaboration

“The alchemy of collaboration makes the whole greater than the sum of the parts, wildly different from either part, and scorchingly beautiful.”
– Rick Kleffel\textsuperscript{61} (2009, \textltt{http://bookotron.com})

The creation of a graphic novel requires a long and involved thought process, utilizing the author’s abilities to think creatively, express themselves eloquently, and predict how their audience will respond to their work. This formative stage becomes even more complicated when more than one creator is involved on a single project. In many instances, input from a partner, or even a team of contributors, can be a great advantage; professional collaborations such as ‘golden duo’ Koike/Kojima and Gaiman/Amano are highly productive, thanks to an amalgamation of complimentary ideas, a uniting of creative purposes, and a great amount of mutual respect.

This idyllic mindset, however, was not always the case. For many years, the prevailing view within the comic book industry was that artists were just common lackeys, whilst writers occupied the driver’s seat. However, to think of illustrators as just laymen, who are always ordered around by others and simply do as directed, would be completely erroneous. Whilst a lot of illustrators do indeed become involved in projects through the initiative of some employer-like figure, they are not mere subordinates. Some, like Yoshitaka Amano on his self-authored Hero saga, even lead the project and employ a writer in turn.\textsuperscript{62} (Mielke 2006, \textltt{http://www.1up.com})

Neil Gaiman has become something of a poster child for writer/artist relations. He himself reveals that for some time, he was reputed as being something of a \textit{prima dona} within the industry because he always insisted upon being told who would be drawing his story before he would agree to begin writing it. (Graphic 2010, n. pag.) In hindsight, this stipulation seems perfectly logical; however, at the time, an artist was believed to be interchangeable with any other, and aesthetics were often a mere

\textsuperscript{61} In reference to Neil Gaiman and Charles Vess’ collaborative work on a picture book, \textit{Blueberry Girl}.

\textsuperscript{62} Amano describes \textit{Hero} as having started as “a series of random images centred on a common theme, then it was constructed into sequences to create a more coherent story.” (CBRNews 2006, \textltt{<www.comicbookresources.com/>}) The textual content of \textit{Hero}, presented in prose, was provided by ‘scenario writer’ Jessie Horsting; however, the concept’s creation and overall direction were overseen by Amano. Both Amano and Horsting are listed on the cover as the novel’s co-authors. (Amano & Horsting 2006, n. pag.)
afterthought for most writers and publishers. This is an almost insane attitude to have, when one considers how much the artist contributes to such a visually-based medium.

Gaiman is far more conscientious in developing ideal professional relations. Whilst working on the Sandman series over the course of seven years, he collaborated with a revolving roster of assorted artists, and as he learnt more about their individual talents, he began to assign them to certain story-arcs according to their abilities. For example, he specifically appointed penciler Michael Zulli to draw the chapter Men of Good Fortune (Gaiman 1989b, n. pag.) as the plotline jumped through five consecutive time periods, and Gaiman was confident that Zulli could differentiate a 1589-era costume from a 1689 one. The artists he worked with also influenced his writing in turn; he apparently wrote a scene where a lion battles a unicorn into his fantasy novel Stardust, for no other reason than because he wanted to see how illustrator Charles Vess would draw it. (Graphic 2010, n. pag.)

Though Gaiman simply seems to be trying to foster friendly relations with his colleagues, feedback from those he has collaborated with indicates that he goes to extra lengths to make the working environment as conducive to cooperation as possible. Amano, who has worked with many other writers besides, commends him highly: “he creates a warm atmosphere, with a lot of class, and that’s what really appeals to me. And that’s why I feel comfortable working with him… We did it together, it was a real collaboration. I’ve never worked with someone in Japan like that before. Neil was the first.” (Mielke 2006, <http://www.1up.com/>)

Gaiman sets a fine example for the rest of the industry to follow. In a best-case scenario, writers and illustrators should become a pair of collaborators rather than the creator and the commissioned. Both bring their own ideas to a project, each in their own area of expertise; where these ideas correspond, creative harmony can form. Just as some illustrators could not create their best imagery without the prompt of written text, some writers could not create their prose-bound worlds without the input of the

Figure 56: Eisner’s rendition of what can go wrong when writer/artist communications falter. (Eisner 1996, p. 126)
illustrator. The writer is essentially trying to describe to their audience a scenario which they see played out in their mind; the illustrator can replicate (or at least approximate) this imagined visage in a form which can be shared with others. Conversely, many illustrators find that they can apply their skills to the utmost when they are given a framework upon which to base their concepts, working with a story or subject matter that they feel connected to. This does not mean that writers and artists must share the exact same vision; this would be nigh on impossible. Collaborators do not – and should not – want mere ‘yes men’ who will mindlessly obey every idea they put forward; one of the greatest advantages of working with other people is that they will constantly surprise, coming up with concepts and solutions which one person might never have thought of on their own.

Problems abound, however, if collaborators become too preoccupied with perfecting their own crafts, rather than striving to create a unified whole. McCloud warns: “Beware of writer-versus-artist syndrome where one collaborator tries to win the reader over with evocative prose and the other tries to dazzle the reader with sumptuous art, while neither art nor writing acknowledges each other.” (2006, p. 149). Writing traditionally deals with abstraction, and art with realism; these two aims can easily start to diverge in the middle of a project. Mastery of individual disciplines is not enough, McCloud insists: “It’s when words and pictures combine seamlessly that comics are at their best. Whether you work alone or as part of a team, that’s a goal worth pursuing.” (2006, p. 149) The text and imagery in a graphic novel aren’t required to aim for the pinnacle in literature or art; they need to also suit the style and tone of their counterpart. Every construct within the narrative framework should be geared towards conveying the storyline in the most effective way, and in doing so, should remain considerate of the format’s other components.

When working relationships involve numerous participants, they can take various forms and operate in various ways. For example, prolific writer Alan Moore has “been known to write rich, detailed descriptions of each and every panel for his various artists.” (McCloud 2006, p. 148) By contrast, Shaun Tan recalls that whilst

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63 Baku Yumemakura is one writer who attests as much, in regard to Yoshitaka Amano; see Case Study 4.5.1 for further details.

64 Moore went so far as to marry one of his collaborators, Melinda Gebbie, who served as illustrator on Lost Girls. The erotic – perhaps even pornographic – comic apparently sparked a romance between its two authors. (Gaiman 2007b, <http://journal.neilgaiman.com>
working with John Marsden on *The Rabbits*, the personal contact between them amounted to nothing more than a few faxes; despite this, the book went on to win multiple awards. (Graphic 2010, n. pag.) So long as writer and artist have an understanding that suits their needs and gets the job done, almost any arrangement is possible.

Years ago, the creation process involved far more personnel than just a writer and a single artist. In particular, large projects were often completed in a production line, with certain staff specializing in specific tasks. Eisner noted with some apparent disdain: “The traditional production of comics by a single individual has, over the years, given way to the dominance of teams (writer, artist, inkers, colourists and letterers).” (1996, p. xii) The involvement of so many personnel, he opined, makes assigning credit for the finished product something of a quandary: “Who is the ‘creator’ of a comic page which was written by one person, pencilled by another and inked, lettered (and perhaps coloured or had backgrounds created) by still others?” (1985, p. 128) Eisner stressed the importance of making sure that everyone on such comic-manufacturing teams shares the same creative vision, in order for such collaborations to work effectively; however, he himself resolutely believed that the product was best when a single individual had creative control of the entire project.

He would usually write, draw and ink his work himself, resisting the interference of others: “[My publisher] once suggested I hire a radio man [i.e. someone who scripts radio serials] to write stories from my ideas. But I rejected it, and continued to write the stories. Reader response, I think, justified my opinion.” (Heintjes 1992, p.4)

Eisner would no doubt be pleased, then, to learn that current trends are starting to favour production by a single individual. At the Graphic Visual Arts Festival, artist Eddie Campbell describes what he calls ‘authorial illustration’, i.e. the practice of

![Figure 57: In this panel from his autobiography *The Dreamer*, Eisner draws himself surveying rows of artists, each assigned a different task, e.g. pencilling, inking, backgrounds, etc. He describes the sight as resembling "an Egyptian slave galley". (Duncan & Smith 2009, p. 34)]

65 Campbell has previously collaborated with various writers (including Neil Gaiman and Alan Moore; he is best-known for the *From Hell* series, which he produced with the latter), as well as working on his own solo projects. The most notable of these are the *Alec* stories, a series of autobiographical works on which he was both writer and illustrator.
illustrators who, due to a lack of demand or perhaps not finding commissions that suit their interests, initiate their own projects, both writing and drawing their stories on their own. Shaun Tan, who was also present at the same panel discussion, heartily agreed with this work method, and with little wonder; *The Arrival* is probably the very definition of ‘authorial illustration’. (Graphic 2010, n. pag.)

This was a method which I readily adopted when I began working on my own graphic novel. As the only personnel on my self-initiated project, it was my challenge to single-handedly carry the entire process to fruition, from the earliest conceptual stages through to writing the plot, laying it out in my chosen format, composing the imagery, rendering the final artwork, preparing the file for reproduction, and every other task in between. In attempting to do all of this, I found that everything I had learned, from having read these sources and studied the works of these seasoned professionals, would serve as invaluable preparatory knowledge. I gleaned some understanding of how and why graphic novels are formatted in specific ways for specific purposes; I could use those same principles to make the format suit my own purposes. Armed with this knowledge, I embarked on a creative venture which put drawing tools in my hand and took me into the studio, seeking to capture the elusive strands of a storyline in a form that I could share with others; just as those creators had shared their stories with me.
Chapter Five
Practice Based Enquiry
Up until now, the reader has had my observations on the practices of professional authors at their perusal. However, analysing and reviewing the works of others is just one aspect of the methodology that I set myself back at the start of this dissertation. In illustration and design, as in many other creative disciplines, theory alone is not a definitive means of discovery. Any facts my research has uncovered need to be qualified by applying them in a practical context. From the outset, my main motivation for undertaking this study was to uncover information that was pertinent to my own work ethic. Having studied the methods of other practitioners, I then strove to use the knowledge I had uncovered to further develop and improve my own practice. All the lessons I learned from the research stage of my study were subsequently implemented in the creation of my own graphic novel, *Tsuruhane*, a copy of which accompanies this dissertation (see Appendix A).

The transfer from observation to action was not, admittedly, a smooth one. I found from the very commencement of my project that to understand the principles purported by others was one thing; actually implementing them myself was another entirely. This initial frustration highlighted for me the vast difference between receiving from the industry as a consumer, and entering into it as a producer. I had, through years of reading and enjoying graphic novels, developed some insight into their visual language and technical structure; this did not, however, make constructing my own work a natural process.

Despite my own personal lack of practical experience, I was, perhaps, as best prepared as I could be when the time came to enter the studio. Beginning with a reader’s perspective actually aided me in my own efforts as an author. Just as the audience doesn’t watch a magician setting up his trick, the laborious side of the graphic novel’s production is seldom seen by an author’s general readership; I was lucky in that I had a range of invaluable sources from which to glean some of this insight. Time and again, I found myself referring back to the works by others that I had read. Those authors from my case studies served as my role models, guiding me through the process and showing me what was possible.

However, I still had to teach myself much of the process. There are, I suppose, some lessons that cannot be taught second-hand – they can only be imparted by the experience itself. The lessons of the masters could only carry me so far; in the end, I could not call upon the authors I had studied to come and produce my graphic novel.
for me, nor would I want to, however much I admired them. This was my story, my own means of creative expression. It was a deeply personal process which I had to perform on my own, finding my own idiomatic means of making my story visible. With this goal at the forefront of my mind, I embarked on an expedition into the studio.

Throughout the creative process, I tackled a range of issues, just as all creators do. As I went, I kept a journal in which I recorded the gradual development of my creative efforts. These entries were mostly written with enthusiasm, but I also tried to document any difficulties or dilemmas I encountered as honestly as I could. Some excerpts from this journal will be included herein. The convoluted mental and emotional journey is difficult to separate from the actuality of the situation; however, I have endeavoured to save such things for the exegesis that follows this. For now, I will dwell mostly on the practical matters – just how pencil-lead and paintbrush came into contact the paper’s surface; what impression a certain line or specific word was meant to convey; all the physical and conceptual elements which were created, synthesised, and presented in the form of the finished novel. Once you have read this chapter, the technical attributes and calculated effects which went into the final product will be far more apparent.

Neil Gaiman puts it aptly when he says that experience does not teach you how to proceed with every single project you undertake thereafter; it merely teaches you how to manage the project you are currently working on. When a new endeavour begins, you are once again left with a blank slate, and the struggle to figure out what you are meant to do starts all over again. (Graphic 2010, n. pag.) The procedures and problem-solving tasks I undertook during the course of my studio work are all specific to this particular project; and yet, I think that in some ways, the experiences related here may be relevant to not just the construction of graphic novels in general, but to all – or at least many – of the different ways in which visual language is created. Perhaps, by undertaking this project and documenting the process for posterity, I in turn can help someone else who wants to do the same thing; just as the example set by the authors I admire have helped to instruct and guide me.

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66 Except, perhaps, for those mythical, saint-like individuals with a perverse amount of genius and natural-born talent, for whom everything is easy; such a species is the subject of legend, though no documentation to prove or disprove its existence has ever been uncovered.
5.1 Background

“There’s just a drive in some people, just to imagine things which aren’t, rather than to just experience things that are.”

– Graeme Base

The first thing I really should explain – and which has not yet been addressed anywhere else – is why I chose to study graphic novels, of all things, in the first place. It should certainly be evident, if you have read thus far, that I have an interest, even a passion or an irresistible drive, to both read and make graphic novels; but just why is this so? It is a question for which I do not have a definite answer. Authors are prompted to tell their stories for an infinite number of reasons, and these motivations vary widely from person to person. In my own case, my fascination with narratives seems to have been instigated partly by my upbringing, partly through pure happenstance, but mostly through personal choice.

Shaun Tan says that he is often asked: “When did you start to draw?” He typically answers with a question of his own: “When did you stop?” (Hopper 2008, <www.inframe.tv>) As for myself, I can’t remember a time when I didn’t want to tell stories. I suppose it came from being born into a family of librarians; I always had books around, and those first books were always picture books. I used to create my own books, written and drawn with cheap markers on sheets of coloured paper, crudely bound together with sticky-tape and staples. As I grew older, though I learned to read and enjoyed written words just as much, I never quite forgot about picture books; they still remained constant companions, reminding me of a childhood which was gradually receding into the distance (and will, I suspect, soon disappear completely beyond a dip in the horizon).

Then, in my teens, I discovered graphic novels. Upon making this momentous discovery, I realized this was what it had all been about – this was what I would be all about. It was the first catalyst in a chain of events which would lead me to first choose to study visual communication/design at university, and from there to specialize in illustration and visual narrative. That pleasure I got from other people’s stories, along with the desire to tell my own stories, never went away; and to my mind, storytelling

remained associated with imagery. I was not embarrassed, and am still not embarrassed, to go into the children’s section of a bookstore to browse.\footnote{Though it certainly helps that nowadays, there is far more to find there other than ‘See Spot Run’, or other such similarly-contrive, formulaic offerings. I have seen grown adults go into stores to buy copies of Shaun Tan or Graeme Base books for themselves. Incidentally, my most vivid picture-book memory from my childhood is of Shirley Barber’s books; I found the combination of her simply-told fables and intricately-detailed paintings to be absolutely captivating. I was also a fan of works by Eric Carle, Kim Gamble and Veronica Oborn.} I do not look at the medium of the ‘illustrated novel’ or the ‘comic book’ with any sorts of labels which might distinguish them as being for a particular type of audience, or for telling a particular type of story. I enjoy stories told in all different media, regardless of what format they take. The graphic novel is just the medium which I feel most comfortable working in, and which seems to best suit my intentions. I want to tell stories; I just happen to tell them best by drawing them.

Prior to starting this project, I had already done some illustrative work for publication,\footnote{This includes a wide range of different projects, some more commercial than others: a billboard to go on the side of phone booths nation-wide; the cover of a corporation’s annual report; posters for drama productions and plays; and a stint as ‘illustration coordinator’ on a children’s magazine, to name a few.} and had also drawn my own amateur attempts at the graphic novel format. So-called ‘fan-fiction’ is often sneered at; yet I found it to be an ideal means for developing my skills and techniques. By beginning with a framework of sorts – in the form of a pre-existing cast of characters and established storylines, on which I would base my own narratives – I found that I could then practise using the ‘visual language’ of the format to express myself, without the pressure of having to start completely from scratch.

The creation of ‘fan comics’ or ‘fanzines’ is a fairly common practice; particularly so in Japan. The ‘fan comic’, just like the rest of the manga market, has attained a level of acceptance in Japan that is unequalled anywhere else in the world. Doujinshi, as they are called there, are comparable with the American underground ‘comix’, except that they are often – but not always – based on works by professional authors. Although they often contravene the copyright laws of the very works to which they are dedicated, the official doujinshi convention, Comiket (short for ‘comic market’) is allowed to take place in Tokyo twice a year, with doujinshi artists gathering there to sell their works. (Gravett 2004, p. 135) Though I have never been as enterprising as this (besides which, the market for printed-and-bound fan-comics outside of Japan is rather limited), I still often publish fan-based stories, illustrations
and short comics on the internet, simply for the satisfaction of having shared them with others. Many *mangaka* who are famous today once began their careers as *doujinshi* artists, including the now exponentially-successful Rumiko Takahashi, and the equally-affluent women of CLAMP. Even in the west, fan-fiction has been cited by some authors as a useful trying-out exercise. Neil Gaiman\(^{70}\) admits that when he first started writing, he was:

> “…very good at writing like other people… but I didn’t know what I sounded like, and I couldn’t write like me. And it took lots and lots of writing, and lots and lots of words, before one day, I realized that I now sounded like me.” (2004a, <www.neilgaiman.com>)

Having for several years written stories based around the works of others, I had come up with several story ideas of my own, and I gradually began to gain the confidence I needed to put them down on paper.

Since I have already mentioned the Japanese industry extensively throughout this thesis, another fact which I should share (and which may or may not be obvious without my having to explicitly state it) is that my interest in graphic novels is mostly directed at *manga* and *gekiga*, rather than the ‘western’ formats of America or Europe. This does not mean that I only read stories set in feudal, kimonos-and-katana type settings; *manga*, like any other media, can cover an infinite range of topics, and is produced by authors from all over the world, not just those based in Japan itself. Nor do I read Japanese comics exclusively. *Manga* were, however, my initial entry point into the world of graphic novels; they were the first true examples of the format that I ever read,\(^{71}\) and they feature the style of storytelling that I tend to emulate, simply because I am more comfortable with their particular ‘visual dialect’ than any other.

Just before I began this research, I was also fortunate enough to work on a project which was not directly part of my own study, but which certainly encompassed the same interests. *Scribble* is an sporadically-released anthology of

\(^{70}\) During his professional career, Gaiman has continued to pay tribute to the authors he enjoyed reading as a child. Some of his short stories feature favourite characters created by the likes of H. P. Lovecraft, C. S. Lewis and Arthur Conan Doyle. His award-winning fantasy novel *The Graveyard Book* is also an indirect homage to Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*. (Gaiman 2008a, p.293)

\(^{71}\) For the curious, the first *manga* I ever read was *CLAMP School Detectives*, a rather girly and silly, but very charmingly-told, series from the eponymous all-female *mangaka*-quartet. Before that, I had owned a set of art books by *Sailor Moon* creator Naoko Takeuchi, though I never read the actual series. Considering how I now read such adult-oriented stories as *Sin City* and *Lone Wolf & Cub*, you could say that my tastes have matured significantly. I also grew up watching the films of Hayao Miyazaki, and was greatly influenced by his animation techniques and overall storytelling-style, though I did not read his *manga*, *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, until much later.
graphics-based stories, compiled by some of my university colleagues and fellow comic-book enthusiasts – both students and lecturers – who have appointed themselves the ‘Graphic Novel Collective’. The periodical’s first volume was undergoing production just as I was about to commence my own project.

I contributed a twelve-page story to the collection, a supernatural tale called *Yokai Forest* which was, in essence, a prequel to the narrative which I was going to tell in my own graphic novel (see Appendix B). This side-project gave me an additional outlet wherein I could experiment with some of the ideas and concepts I was intended to use in my solo work. I was able to test out elements such as character designs, rendering techniques and panel arrangements, in a ‘dress rehearsal’ of sorts. This experience was also invaluable in other ways; it taught me how to work as part of a creative team, and how to meet deadlines.

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**Figure 58:** The first page of *Yokai Forest*, a story of mine which was included in *Scribble*. Of all the comics pages I have created, I am happiest with this one; I like the way I managed to meld text and imagery together on the page. This arrangement was heavily influenced by P. Craig Russell’s adaptions of Neil Gaiman’s novels. (Tsang 2010, p. 59)

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72 The word ‘yokai’ is literally written with the Japanese characters for ‘weird’ and ‘otherworldly’. (Yoda and Alt 2008, p. 7) and is often translated into English as ‘demon’, ‘goblin’, or ‘monster’. It is a blanket term which covers a variety of different supernatural creatures, including ghosts, evil spirits, and possessed people or objects. The term ‘yokai’ is interchangeable with numerous others which mean more or less the same thing, including ‘mononoke’, ‘obakemono’ and ‘ayakashi’.

73 The former more successfully than the latter, to my chagrin.
Similarly, professional authors have sometimes gone through ‘pilot episodes’ or ‘try-out periods’ with their works, using these initial trial-runs to play with their ideas and gauge audience response. Nobuhiro Watsuki, writer and artist behind the popular *Rurouni Kenshin* manga, produced not one, but two of these ‘pilots’. In subsequent reinventions of the same work, he made some drastic changes (most, if not all, of which he perceived as being sorely-needed improvements) between these preliminary attempts and the final version. For example, three characters who were siblings in his ‘pilot’ were later reinvented as unrelated characters, an arrangement that allowed Watsuki greater scope for storytelling, and which seems to have aided the subsequent development of each individual character. We can safely assume that after having produced multiple incarnations of the same story, Watsuki was eventually able to iron out most of the wrinkles in his initial drafts and learn valuable lessons from his previous mistakes. Though he reportedly received only “mediocre reviews and about 200 letters [from readers]” when his ‘pilot’ chapter was first published, the ultimate version of *Rurouni Kenshin* would become a well-received and highly-successful title. (Watsuki 2004a, n. pag.)

![Twin images of the titular character of *Rurouni Kenshin*; top, in Watsuki’s first ‘pilot’ version, and bottom, Kenshin as he appears in the final series.](image)

Figure 59: Twin images of the titular character of *Rurouni Kenshin*; top, in Watsuki’s first ‘pilot’ version, and bottom, Kenshin as he appears in the final series. (Watsuki 2004a, n. pag.) The differences are minor, but still discernible; Watsuki’s art style continued to change slightly throughout the series’ 28-volume run.

74 These two earlier works were later included as ‘bonus material’ in collected editions of the series. They appear in *Rurouni Kenshin* Volume 1 (Watsuki refers to this as a ‘side-story’ which only loosely relates to his overall plotline), and Volume 3 (the first official ‘pilot’, featuring similar characters and scenarios to the final version) respectively. The final version of *Rurouni Kenshin* emerged about a year and a half after this last ‘rehearsal’. (Watsuki 2004c, n. pag.)
Similarly, I found my ‘prologue story’ for *Scribble* to be a swift and essential learning curve. In order to (attempt to) meet the project’s deadlines, I was forced to very quickly teach myself the general process of creating a graphic novel; in doing so, I unintentionally established some of the work methods which I would continue to use on my master project. *Scribble* acted as a launch pad for my previously rather vague, now considerably more solid, early concepts. I was ready to begin translating my imaginary story into a very real graphic novel – or at least, as ready as I could ever be.

5.2 Story

“Everybody has a secret world inside of them. I mean *everybody*. All of the people of the whole world – no matter how dull and boring they are on the outside. Inside them they’ve all got unimaginable, magnificent, wonderful, stupid, amazing worlds. Not just one world. Hundreds of them. Thousands, maybe.” – Neil Gaiman (1993, p. 181)

I should start, as most storytellers do, at the very beginning. The beginning, in this case, is the inception of my graphic novel’s central plotline, or the ‘story behind the story’, as it were. The content I chose for my graphic novel would ultimately determine how the finished piece would be structurally arranged. If one were to compare the creative process to that of building a house, the narrative would form both the foundations and the framework. Each image, panel, or written word would provide just one brick in the metaphorical ‘wall’; the foundations, however, would give the construct a solid base upon which to stand, while the underlying frame would define the overall shape of the finished product. Any flashy bells-and-whistles I could add at surface level would ultimately be superfluous, if the deeper concept behind them were not strong enough to support them.

Without a story idea to start with, I would not have even thought to create a graphic novel at all. The ‘graphic novel’ format on its own is just a single dialect within the entire range of visual languages; as such, the medium simply acts as the containing vessel for an inherent narrative. A language is, after all, nothing more than a means to an end; even the most eloquent and lyrical of languages will become useless if it does not have any meaningful ideas to express. Without an adequate plot
to connect them, any illustrations or visuals I might try to produce would quickly
degenerate into a mere string of images, static and purposeless. I began the project —
just as many other authors, according to McCloud (1993, p. 178) apparently do — by
asking myself the simple, yet all-important question: *Do I have anything to say?*

Years ago, whilst I was still writing fan-fiction, I had also begun to invent
some stories of my own. These ideas were still vaguely derivative of other works I
had seen or read, and in hindsight, they weren’t very well-constructed; they were
mostly very linear and underdeveloped, lacking any real detail that would make them
more convincing or interesting, riddled with various faults. However, after eventually
coming up with the story idea which would eventually become *Tsuruhane*, the basic
premise rapidly fleshed itself out,75 and it began to feel significantly more robust than
my previous plots. Though this new story could still be considered ‘derivative’, based
as it is on a classic fairytale, this influence merely served as the starting point from
which the narrative began its development, slowly but surely wending its way deeper
into an imaginary world.

What I shall do next is to try to recreate, as best I can, the stream of
consciousness through which my story idea came to be. Though I cannot replicate the
process exactly, I can come up with a rough approximation. The following recounts
the conceptual stage of the basic plotline, as I remember it as having occurred. Whilst
I cannot put an exact date as to when the idea first occurred to me, I can clearly
remember the thought process that preceded it. When I was much younger, I had been
given a book of classic children’s stories titled *The Candlewick Book of Fairytales*.
The series of familiar fables were retold, rather unmemorably and somewhat
predictably, by writer Sarah Hayes; of far greater interest to me were the illustrations,
lushly painted by Irish artist P. J. Lynch.76 Of all the fairytales included in this

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75 Though the initial plotline itself came together relatively quickly, from there, I began to further
develop a number of side plots and minor characters, giving some of these ‘background actors’ whole
stories of their own. What started as just one story gradually turned into a series – potentially an entire
franchise – of at least twelve individual books, featuring a cast of more than eighty characters, as my
imaginary world slowly expanded into an entire universe. This whole invention process took at least
four years (and is still ongoing); whilst the storyline of *Tsuruhane*, on its own, probably gained its basic
shape within the space of a year, and was ready for production by the time I formally began this project.

76 Though perhaps not particularly well-known to the general public, Lynch appears to be a premiere
artist within his own industry; he has been a recipient of the Christopher Medal three times, as well as
once winning the Kate Greenway Medal. (Walker Books 2007, <www.walkerbooks.com.au>) He is a
dab hand at illustrating old folk tales; they are a frequently-recurring theme in his work. (Lynch 2007,
<www.pjlynchgallery.com>)
collection, the one which, to me, stood out prominently amidst all the others – possibly because it was somewhat less common than the oft-rehashed *Cinderella* and *Snow White* – was called *The Six Swans*. The story is, as I now know, a staple of Christian-Andersen and Brothers Grimm repertoires.\(^7\)

The story, to summarize it, is a fairly straightforward one. Six royal brothers are turned into swans by their wicked stepmother. To restore them to their human forms, their sister must take a six-year-long vow of silence – and in this particular version, she must also weave six shirts out of ‘starflower’, a plant similar to a stinging nettle – with one year and one shirt for each brother. Whilst undergoing these hardships, the princess meets, falls in love with and marries a king from a neighbouring realm. However, his mother (in some versions, this character is a disgruntled chamberlain, or even the siblings’ own stepmother, having since remarried to the young king’s father) grows hostile towards her beautiful and sweet, yet suspiciously silent, daughter-in-law. When the couple subsequently have children, she steals each of the newborn babies away, and accuses the mute queen of having killed them. Since she cannot speak to save herself, the sister is sentenced to be burned to death. Just as the flames are being lit, the six years end, and the sister quickly throws the shirts she has made over each of the swans, turning them back into men. However, the youngest brother is left with one white wing in place of an arm, since the sleeve of the last shirt was not quite finished (in other versions which omit the shirts, the sister accidentally broke her vow of silence a moment too soon, with the same result). The sister, now free to speak, reveals all to her husband, who recovers his stolen children and punishes his mother (she is most often herself thrown on the execution pyre). The reunited family – brothers and sister, husband and children – then proceed to live happily ever after. (Hayes & Lynch 1993, p. 43-9)

The entire story was generally rather appealing. However, the aspect of the Candlewick version which I found most compelling was the final illustration Lynch had painted for it; it shows the youngest prince, clad in his starflower shirt and with an anguished expression upon his face, clutching at the oversized white wing where his

\(^{77}\) Christian-Andersen’s rendition was called *The Wild Swans*. The Brothers Grimm collected multiple versions, including *The Six Swans*, *The Seven Ravens* and *The Twelve Brothers*. Numerous other adaptations have also been recorded, containing different accounts of the type/number of birds, and other specific story details. The Aarne-Thompson system, which classifies fairy tales by their common traits, defines all these similar stories as “Type 451: The Brothers Who Were Turned Into Birds.” (Ashliman 1998, <www.pitt.edu>
arm should be. For some reason, the image resonated with me, and as I discovered, was powerful enough to reserve a place in my subconscious for years to come.

One day, whilst browsing in a bookshop, I came across a novel by Juliet Marillier, called *Daughter of the Forest*. The book was, as I learnt from the blurb on its back cover, a retelling of *The Six Swans*, written in a historically-accurate Celtic setting. (Marillier 2000, n.pag.) I instantly remembered the Candlewick story and the impression its illustrations had made on me. I thought what a great idea Marillier had hit upon, and wished I had thought of it myself; but then, I did not know a single thing about Celtic heritage. What I did know well (or at least, considerably better) was the feudal Japanese setting which frequently featured in the *manga* I was reading at the time. Just like that, a single spark of inspiration was ignited. Wouldn’t this image, of a young man with a wing in place of his arm, adapt itself admirably to the stories of Japanese folklore and samurai battles that I so enjoyed reading? I instantly began to visualize a young warrior launching himself through the air, the razor arc of a curved *katana* sword clutched in his right hand, counterbalanced by an outstretched wing where the left arm should be, swooping down upon his opponent. The concept seemed to have potential, and I gradually began to plan a full-scale narrative around it.

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**Figure 60:** Left, “But in place of an arm, the youngest prince had the great white wing of a swan.” P. J. Lynch’s illustration, which struck me so profoundly. (Hayes & Lynch 1993, p.49) Right, the very first sketch I ever did of Shiro. (Author’s own collection) It isn’t very good (it’s at least 5 years old now), but the essential elements of his design are already there. The influence of Lynch’s illustration is pronounced, in the figure’s pose especially.
To start with, I did a lot of miscellaneous research, testing to see if my story idea was viable, and seeking a way to turn my vaguely-imagined concept into something more substantial. As well as Marillier’s novel, I found another book which contained a similar premise: *The Seventh Swan* by Nicholas Stuart-Gray. This particular retelling, set in the medieval Scottish highlands, offers a slightly different point of view: instead of focusing on the sister as the main character, as the various fairytale versions and Marillier’s novel had done, it follows the cursed youngest brother himself, exploring his possible fate after the initial story’s end. (Stuart-Gray 1984, n. pag.) Stuart-Gray’s rendition seems to depict the youngest prince as a figure shrouded in self-pity, both physically and emotionally burdened by the one wing that he bears.78 This alternative take on the classic tale was very similar to what I myself had had in mind; the perspective from Stuart-Gray’s book began to meld in my mind with Lynch’s illustration, culminating in the creation of my main character, Shiro.

With my primary protagonist established, I needed to give him something to do, places to roam, people to interact with, and an ultimate goal to pursue or crisis to contend with. The additional cast of characters I invented to keep Shiro company includes the mysterious demi-goddess Kotori, the sole female presence in the entire story (save for Shiro’s sister and his stepmother, who both appear briefly in flashbacks) as a heroine and romantic-interest for my hero; and a band of thieves, all of whom began life as stock-standard villains, antagonizing the other characters for the sake of being antagonists, but some of whom (particularly Benji and Kuno)

![Figure 61: Another of my early sketches of Shiro, which epitomises how I first pictured him. (Author’s own collection)](image)

78 Other books with similar themes include *Swan’s Wing* by Ursula Synge, and Rafe Martin’s *Birdwing*. Incidentally, I have purposefully avoided reading any of these books, as I did not want to be influenced by them to the point where I unintentionally copied them.
developed more complex identities and significant backstories. Other than Shiro, who serves as the primary action-man and the dramatic lynchpin for the entire story, all these additional characters started off as stereotypical role-fillers, invented simply to further the plot. However, as I typed up textual descriptions for each of them, their individual profiles became increasingly detailed, to the point where even supposed throw-away characters came to be far better-rounded and more ‘complete’ than I had originally intended or expected. The next step was to create the visual design of each character; this process will be more extensively covered later, in Chapter 5.5.

In order to fully carry out my initial concept, I needed to ascertain whether or not I could translate the European-accented folktale into my chosen context. I began to do some extensive research, finding Asian equivalents for every aspect of the original story. The more I compared folklore from the two disparate regions, the more the original fairytale seemed to readily adapt itself to an Oriental setting. One prevalent legend which I found particularly suited my needs was that of the ‘tengu’, a type of yokai which commonly takes semi-avian form. Tengu are often depicted in artworks as having the beaks, claws and feathers of birds, whilst otherwise resembling men. Although sometimes portrayed as violent, malicious, or just plain mischievous, according to ancient superstitions, they were also considered to be wise and benevolent when they wish to be, inspiring reverence and fear in equal measures. Besides having many supernatural abilities, such as shape-shifting, teleportation and telepathy (Yoda & Alt 2008, p. 18), tengu were also said to be highly proficient at martial arts. The most famous tengu tale is one in which the king of all the tengu, Sōjōbō, taught the warrior Yoshitsune, then a child but destined to become a legendary hero, the particulars of swordsmanship. These lessons were invaluable, for by the time Yoshitsune was fifteen years old, he was able to “vanquish as many as twenty small tengu” with a swipe of his sword. (Davis 1928, p. 42)

Almost the whole of Tsuruhane’s third chapter would be dedicated to telling Benji’s backstory, a development which I had not foreseen, but became quite happy about. (That chapter is, to date, still in its first draft stages, and does not appear in the preview of Tsuruhane that accompanies this document) Benji’s personality serves as a foil and a contrast for Shiro, as he is also an antihero, but a completely different kind, and he greatly influences Shiro’s own character development further along the storyline. I eventually awarded Benji his own sequel, in which he could have the starring role; but that is, quite literally, a whole other story.

The only elements from the original which I chose to omit were the shirts made of starflower; the sister in my story merely has to stay silent. I could not find a plant or any other organic material which would both suit my purpose and fit in with my newly-adopted setting. (Nettles aren’t as common in Japan as they are in Europe, and a shirt made of sea-urchin is perhaps a little too far-fetched?)

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One of the great advantages of using Japanese legends as source material is that the old stories are so accessible, and compared to most European cultures, old beliefs are still remarkably prevalent in the present day. Traditional tales have continued to circulate within Japan for centuries, and *tengu* are still regularly worshipped at certain shrines. Modernism and foreign influence certainly haven’t disconnected the Japanese from their rich spiritual heritage; for example, in 1806, a boy who, like Yoshitsune, was fifteen years old at the time, reportedly vanished somewhere in the mountainous regions of Gifu. He returned home three years later, completely unharmed and now an incredibly skilled marksman with the *tanegashima*, a type of rifle which was cutting-edge at the time; it was believed that a *tengu* had taught him his newfound skill. (Yoda & Alt 2008, p.21) *Tengu* turn up quite frequently as characters in *manga*, though they tend to be far more anthropomorphized and eye-pleasing than their antiquated ancestors. The characters Haruka and Sugino from *Tactics*, a series co-created by Sakura Kinoshita and Kazuko Higashiyama, are typical examples of this type of new-age portrayal; drawn as handsome young men with downy wings on their backs, they look more like Western angels than Eastern *yokai*.

The bird-like nature of the *tengu*, together with its martial-arts prowess and ambiguous reputation, suited my storytelling purpose. My main character, Shiro, is the sixth and youngest son of a *daimyo* (feudal lord), just as the original fairytale featured six

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81 ‘Shiro’ is written as 白 in kanji. One of the word’s multiple meanings is ‘white’; an appropriate name for him, given the colour of his wing’s plumage. I got a great deal of enjoyment from giving my characters names with significant meanings; for example, Kotori translates as ‘little bird’, and Shiro’s father, Takahiro, has a name which means ‘filial piety’. Though these aptonyms may not be obvious to English-speakers, they add a subtle layer of further characterisation and hidden meaning.

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princes. He becomes cursed with the feather of a tengu, and just as in other versions of the story, the spell on him is not completely broken, despite his sister’s best efforts. This means that whilst the wing he retains gives him many tengu-like abilities, such as enhancing his agility and complementing his already-prodigious sword skills, the physical disfigurement, coupled with the stigma of having been tainted by a curse and a yokai’s ‘demonic’ trait, cause him to feel a lot of shame. This prompts him to hide the irregular limb in a voluminous sleeve, the end of which is bound with a cord as an extra precaution, hiding it from view until it is accidentally revealed during a sword duel (this occurs well beyond Chapter 1, and is not depicted in the preview of Tsuruhane which accompanies this dissertation).

Unlike other incarnations of the fairytale, which have used primarily swans, ducks or ravens as their bird of choice, I chose to have the six brothers transform into cranes. Although the tengu is most often associated with either crows or the black-eared kite (Morgan 2008, <http://obakemono.com>), cranes have great significance in Japanese culture. In particular, the native red-crowned crane or tacho, reputedly the second-rarest crane species in the world, is an oft-occurring motif in Japanese art and literature. There are deep cultural ties between the Japanese people and their favourite bird, as described by Jennifer Ackerman of National Geographic:

“The Japanese have written the tancho into poems and folktales and myths. They have painted it and made statues and sculptures to it... From its habits they have drawn phrases and metaphors to describe their own behavior. They have imitated it and tried to dance as it dances. They have named streets and cities after it... Most of all, they have made it into an icon and put its image everywhere, so this extremely rare bird is, ironically, seen throughout Japan.”


Folded origami cranes have long been a national symbol of peace and hope. The real birds themselves represent luck, fidelity and longevity; they are reputed as having lifespans of at least a thousand years. (JANM 1998, <www.janm.org>)

One famous love story tells of a man who found an injured crane and nursed it back to health. The crane returned to him in the form of a beautiful woman, and the man married her without knowing what she really was. She wove a magical cloth made from her feathers for the man to sell, earning enough money for them to live comfortably. However, the man decided to watch her as she wove (sometimes due to greed or curiosity, always against her wishes) and realized what she really was; she was then forced to leave him, and he spent the rest of his days pining for her. (Bodkin
The crane could be considered an Asian counterpart to the romanticized swans so popular in Western literature; their romantic connotations can be attributed to the fact that they mate for life. Having adopted the crane as a similar symbol within my own faux-folktale, I accordingly gave my story the title *Tsuruhane* or ‘crane feather’, after both the nature of the main character’s curse, and the ‘name’ of the distinctive sword which he carries.

Though I find Japanese culture intriguing and inspiring, I have never actually been to Japan. Everything I have learned about the country has been gleaned second-hand from books and films. Whilst the country my story is set in is called ‘Nihon’, the same Japanese-language endonym by which native-speakers refer to their homeland, my version is actually a selective pastiche of the real nation’s traditional customs and cultural quirks. It is, ultimately, an outsider’s perception of the country; an ‘idealised’ Japan based on extensive research and fictionalized accounts. Since I didn’t know anything about specific localities within Japan and didn’t want my writing to be restricted by having to somehow find real-life geographic settings, I decided to invent all the place names that I included. My inspiration for doing so was Nahoko Uehashi’s *Moribito*, a series of books that are set on the fictional Nayoro Peninsula (2008, p. 256), a land that appears to be modelled on feudal Japan. Similarly, Lian Hearn’s *Tales of the Otori* takes place in an island nation only known as ‘The Three Countries’. (2002, n. pag.) Many of the place-names I invented were based on Japanese cultural or literary references, e.g. the ‘Kujiki’ is an ancient historical text; ‘Urashima’ refers to a character named Taro Urashima, Japan’s own version of the Rip van Winkle legend. I similarly did not want to be hindered by having to commit to a particular period in Japanese history, so I had *Tsuruhane* take place in the ‘Ninkyo Era’, or ‘era of chivalry’.  

As I developed Shiro’s character further, I decided that the character would be better suited to a rural backdrop, as urban areas would make him self-conscious. As well as fleeing as far from human contact as possible, Shiro ends up returning to the ancestral lands that his family has ruled over for generations. Since *tengu* reputedly haunt mountainous regions, where they preside as ‘gods’ and come to embody their

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82 Though most of my research into the history of Japan focused on the Muromachi Era (1336-1573), I did step outside the Muromachi occasionally. For example, I plan to someday write a story featuring a *geisha* as a main character; however, it was only in 1751 that women began practising as geisha – prior to this, the profession had belonged only to men. (Seawright 2003, <www.thekeep.org>)
associated landmarks, I chose to set my story in just such a locale. I created an
imaginary place which I named the Kujiki Valley, located in Ōkawa han. This
purely-fictional region consists chiefly of Mount Kujiki, a wooded peak with a
waterway flowing down its side; and Lake Urashima, situated at the mountain’s foot
and the final destination of the Urashima River. Both mountain and lake would later
become key plot points in my story, as they each serve as abodes for supernatural
denizens. The former is the home of a bird-like goddess, who bears similar
characteristics to both a tengu and a tennyo, the latter belongs to her brother, a
water-spirit who takes the form of a ryuujin, or ‘dragon-god’. Such spiritual deities
are consistent with the concepts upheld by Shintoism, a widely-practised Japanese
religion which personifies natural landforms. Followers of this theology worship
numerous gods and spirits, or ‘kami’, which they believe reside within aspects of the
natural world. (Breen & Teeuwen 2000, p.2) In such a way, the places in my story
became almost like characters in their own right; this affected the way I chose to
render the background scenery in my illustrations, a development I delve into more
thoroughly in Chapter 5.7.

At this stage, I was fairly happy with how my story was developing. However,
I soon realized that my all-important hero still needed a few adjustments. From the
very start, I had envisaged Shiro as a borderline antihero; he is angst-ridden, anti-
social, and emotionally damaged. However, as the character’s personality became
gradually darker and darker, I realized that if he were to have his surly attitude simply

83 In feudal Japan, a ‘han’ was an administrative division in land, similar to a state or province. Each
han was ruled by a feudal lord known as a daimyo. Like every other location featured in the story,
‘Ōkawa’ is not a real place; it is actually the surname of Nanase Ōkawa, the lone gensaku-sha in – and
de facto leader of – team CLAMP.

84 Tennyo are fairy-like ‘celestial maidens’, women of unearthly beauty who sometimes descend from
heaven to visit the world below. Stories often depict mortal men stealing their feathered robes whilst
they bathe; the tennyo needs this robe in order to fly home, and so by depriving her of it, a man can
force her to become his wife. A famous noh play features just such a story; a tennyo named Hagoromo
Tennyo are often compared to Western swan maidens and selkies, due to the importance of their
magical garments.

85 The character of this dragon-brother, Ryuuiki, was himself inspired by an old folktale common to
many Asian cultures, wherein a fish that manages to leap up a waterfall turns into a dragon. (Suckling
2000, p. 80-81) He was also greatly inspired by Haku, a character from Spirited Away, the Academy
Award-winning film of director-cum-mangaka Hayao Miyazaki. The strong environmental themes of
Miyazaki’s films had a huge influence on Tsuruhane and its affiliated storylines. Although Ryuuiki
does not appear much in Tsuruhane itself, like Benji, he also has a tale of his own.
because of the loss of his arm, he might not retain the audience’s sympathy. He could potentially come off as a selfish and self-pitying, rather than the scarred, yet ultimately self-sacrificing and righteous nobleman I intended him to become. He needed a greater motivation for his brooding behaviour, and so I took a significant detour from the original fairytale.

In every other version of the story that I have so far encountered, the prince’s sister is wrongly sentenced to death (sometimes for witchcraft, more often for having supposedly killed her own children), but is saved in the nick of time, when the allotted years of the curse finally end and she is able to speak in her own defence. In a rather heartless twist, I decided to eliminate this ‘happy’ ending from my narrative. By the time my story starts, Shiro’s sister has long since perished in the flames; her last word, and the word which left Shiro with the mark of the curse still upon him, was the name of her infant son, who was also killed by those who plotted against her (in most original tales, the children are only kidnapped). This burdens Shiro with not just the deformation of his left arm, but also the intense grief of having tragically lost his beloved sister, and the agonizing guilt of believing himself responsible for her death, since it was for his sake that she kept silent. At the start of the story, Shiro is a rather tragic figure, still mourning her death, and subsequently undermining his own self-worth. Throughout the narrative, however, he gradually finds redemption and absolution from his traumatic past; he henceforth uses his sense of duty and his desire to protect Kotori as a means of regaining his will to live.

Figure 63: An as-yet unfinished drawing of Kotori (top of image, in ‘goddess mode’) and her brother Ryuuki. Notice how Kotori’s ‘ears’ now resemble feathered wings, whilst Ryuuki has the horns of a dragon. This image was inspired by the 2011 tsunami that devastated much of northern Japan. I used the theme to reinterpret Ryuuki’s role as a water god. I included a paper crane, as a symbol of hope, at the centre of the drawing. (Author’s own collection)
This extra backstory added a twist of realism to what is otherwise a rather fantastically-themed plotline; in the opening pages of *Tsuruhane*, the mysterious maiden-goddess Kotori rescues Shiro after a failed suicide attempt, pulling him half-drowned from the waters of Lake Urashima. This was a subtle way of channelling my own belief in the futility of suicide through my fictional creation; as well as addressing such themes as grief, depression, and profound loss, with what is ultimately a positive resolution. While I wanted to invent a story which would transport readers to an idealistic realm far beyond the injustices and imperfections of real life (just as all good fairytales should), I also wanted to subtly underlay real-life issues and deeper messages beneath this purely fictional veneer, just as all of my favourite authors had done in their own works. To quote Neil Gaiman, himself citing legendary writer G. K. Chesterton: “Fairytales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.” (2002, p.9)

**Figure 64:** Hoshiko, Shiro’s much-loved sister. She only appears briefly in *Tsuruhane*, and even then only in flashbacks; however, her presence is still keenly felt, even if she doesn’t have a direct role in the narrative. Her death shaped much of Shiro’s current personality, and she is the motivation for much of what he does throughout the storyline. (Author’s own collection)
5.3 Format

Once I had my story ready, all I had to do was set about telling it. The origins of the story would play a prominent part in the overall shape the final product took, as I was soon to realize. One of my first considerations was the format that the finished book should take. Though this may sound like a relatively easy decision to have to make, it was anything but. The case studies I had conducted had clearly demonstrated that there were multiple different ways in which to structure a graphic novel. These examples, along with every other graphic novel I had ever read, provided me with a veritable library of different formats from which to choose. Narrowing that choice down to a single template which I could consistently follow was a task within itself.

As I began the creation process, I had two indispensable tools with which to craft my finished piece: those essential building blocks of visual communication, words and images. As I considered my options, I realized that I could potentially present my story in one of two ways: either as pages of prose interspersed with illustrations, just as the original fairytale retold by Hayes and Lynch had been; or as sequential frames which would visually depict the story action by action, as most typical graphic novels do. My two main influences – fairytales and manga – were at war with each other. I essentially had to choose between the two ends of my aesthetic/clarity scale: I could either pair evocative imagery with informative prose, as in the precedent set by Gaiman, Kikuchi and Amano; or communicate events through a closely-melded combination of expressive visuals and complementary text, as Messrs. Miller, Tezuka, Koike and Kojima (and practically everybody else I have mentioned in this thesis) have done.

The choice was not straightforward. As a reader myself, I had never preferred one format – graphic novel or illustrated novel – over the other, as I had never really considered them to be two separate entities. I had always read both formats with equal enthusiasm, regardless of how many images or how many words the novel in my hands happened to contain. However, the more I looked at the two types of storytelling separately, the more I began to notice their vast differences. Each format utilizes a different means of combining text and imagery. As already evidenced in

86 In this case, both of these elements were, indeed, indispensable; unlike Shaun Tan, I wasn’t too keen on attempting to tell my story without any words at all.
Chapter 4.4, this underlying shift in the word/image ratio could drastically alter the type of interaction the audience would have with my finished novel. When I looked back at the methods that I had seen used by the authors I had read and admired, it was evident that though the techniques they used were all quite different, they were all very effective when used in the right situation. I could see that each format had its own distinct advantages and disadvantages; but I could not tell just which of the two would be best suited to telling my particular narrative. Neither format seemed significantly better or worse than the other for my purposes, and if I were to choose one of them outright, I might later regret not having used the other.

Whilst I considered my options, I began by roughly plotting my story in a basic chapter-plan; this helped me to distinguish how much action, how much dialogue, and what proportions of each would make up the overall narrative. I have a great love of martial-arts myself, and subsequently the stories I tend to read are fairly action-oriented. This naturally meant that there were lots of headlong-dashes through forests and soaring treetop sword-duels in my story. I was quick to realize that these plot points could potentially dazzle and impress my audience, if I could manage to present them in a cinematic style of visual progression.

On the other hand, I also love to write prose; even when I plan to tell my stories in a visually-based medium, I still tend to write my ideas out first, in order to get a feel for them. I think of this as being akin to an artist producing a thumbnail sketch first, before picking up a pen or brush to produce their actual masterwork. I could appreciate how the story’s background in traditional fairytales could translate well into prose; those almost lyrical descriptions and whimsical turns of phrase are what I have always loved most about fairy stories. That quaintly-charming atmosphere might be lost if the words I used were to be caged within speech bubbles. Whilst text often plays a vital role in the graphic novel, it is usually relegated to small captions or contained within word balloons. Neil Gaiman still remembers his initial attempts to write for comics, and most likely these recollections are accompanied by a slight tinge of horror; he was forced to grapple with a thirty-words-per-balloon limit, having previously come from writing full-length novels. (Goodyear 2010, <www.newyorker.com> )

Whilst I certainly wasn’t going to be that strict with myself, I had always had maximalist tendencies as a writer, and I did not find the prospect of having to prune back my words at all palatable. By the same token, my overall aim within this project
was to create a graphic novel; if I were to sideline my illustrations in favour of text, featuring them only as page decorations or intermittent distractions, it would undermine the graphic-based nature of the medium I had chosen to work in. I pondered over this quandary for quite some time. As a test, I started writing the story out purely in prose, with a few planned illustrations taking shape in my sketchbook. I liked some of what I had written, but the action scenes I attempted to write – either through a lack of linguistic ability, or due to the passive nature of the written word itself – seemed to come off as rather stilted, lacking the dynamism of the motions I imagined in my head. Jason Thompson87 succinctly summarizes this adverse effect:

“In terms of information density, 10 comics pages are equal to one good page of prose, but there are some things that pictures simply do better… fight scenes work better in manga than in prose, because the spatial relations tend to fall apart into a meaningless drone when reduced to text.”


In trying to depict a fight scene in prose, I found Thompson’s words to be true. It became mildly irritating to have to laboriously describe every tiny movement and moment to my audience, when sequential art could have shown it to them instantaneously. As an example, the text below is my initial prose rendition88 of a scene in Tsuruhane, wherein Shiro, realizing he and Kotori are about to be ambushed by the gang of thieves, plots his next move:

“Shiro cursed inwardly, his eyes on the shuriken-thrower. That was the one he had to be wary of – the others couldn’t do much damage at this range. His arm was discreetly poised at his side. First chance he got, he would go for his sword again – he would have to be quick, if he wanted to still retain a hand with which to wield it. He shifted his weight slightly, ready to lunge for it at a moment’s notice.”

This passage certainly conveys plenty of detail; it reveals all the technical aspects of the hostile warrior face-off I had choreographed, as well as simultaneously delving

87 This comment of Thompson’s is taken from his review of Faust, an anthology of stories which attempted to translate pre-existing manga (including CLAMP’s xXxHolic series) into prose, as well as telling numerous original short prose stories in a ‘manga style’. Thompson’s view of the overall volume was less than complimentary.

88 Even this version has been edited considerably, compared to the first draft which I recently managed to find, scribbled down with pencil in an old notebook. The excerpt featured here it slightly better than what I first wrote, but only slightly; it is still quite atrocious.
into the mind of my main character. However, the description comes off as clunky, as it struggles to convey too many subtleties in a few short sentences, trying far too hard to imitate a mode of communication that is far better-suited to visuals. Compare this with the visuals below (Figure 65), which show how I ultimately ended up conveying the scene. These two frames (or single split-frame, really) show Shiro’s pose, pairing physical appearance with his far more direct inner monologue. This sequence performs the same task as the text above, yet manages to do it much more efficiently and effectively.

By this stage, it was becoming increasingly apparent that some scenes really required a visual approach; however, I did not want to sacrifice the words that I had already written, and which seemed to be doing their job more than adequately. I was seemingly stuck at an impasse, and for about a month, I tried to choose between these two formats. Then, it occurred to me: why did I have to choose? If both formats could effectively convey my intended meaning, why not use both? If neither aspect were expendable, why not keep it all – all the words, both free-range and bubble-bound; all the imagery, both illustrations and visuals – and unite them in one single, all-encompassing format? I returned to that idolized mantra, common to all branches of design: ‘form follows function’.89 My choice of visual expression would follow my story’s content. Since different stages of my narrative had different requirements, it made sense to use multiple techniques, alternating between them as they became appropriate. In scenes which contain a lot of dialogue or less direct, more abstract events, I wrote the scene in prose, accompanied by illustrations. For scenes where

Figure 65: The same scene as in the previous prose excerpt, presented in visuals. This version is the one I ultimately chose to use in Tsuruhane. (Tsang 2011, p. 22)

89 The invention of this oft-quoted phrase is attributed to nineteenth-century architect Louis Sullivan. (Prairie Styles 1999, <www.prairiestyles.com>) The opposite approach, apparently, would be ‘form follows precedent’, a maxim which I also happened to defy, completely unintentionally.
more kinetic action took place, I switched to a sequential arrangement, using visuals as my primary means of carrying the story forwards. Both of these parts became essential to the storytelling process; to dispense with either, or change them to a single format, would have resulted in something far less effective. The two formats I ended up using are, when taken individually, quite different in terms of their spatial structures and visual emphasis; yet when they are united here for a common purpose, the unique combination seems to lend itself to this particular narrative. Furthermore, this multimodal format truly expresses my true values and interests: both my affinity for the written word, and my obsession with all things graphic.

I had seen some stories which used illustrations and visuals in tandem, albeit marginally. However, when narratives did venture down both paths, the different routes they took seemed to completely diverge from one another (e.g. the separate Amano/Takaki versions of Vampire Hunter D), or simply serve as a brief detour from their ‘usual’ format (e.g. the short origin-story Bill Willingham created for Fables). At first, I could not find any works that had already done what I intended to do, utilizing both formats in the one publication. After quite some time spent thinking that no one else had dared attempt it, I eventually discovered that while my concept was a rarity, I was not quite a pioneer. As I mentioned back in Chapter 4.5.2, that consummate innovator of the visual format, Shaun Tan, had already included sudden switches from written prose to textless imagery in his short story anthology, Tales From Outer Suburbia.

In the tale of Eric, for example, Tan’s prose pauses, whilst grids of visual panels are instead used to evoke a foreign visitor’s fascination with the seemingly-

![Figure 66: Left, "Eric was curious and had a lot of questions." (Tan 2008, p. 10-11) Language barriers are a common theme in Tan’s work; for these scenes, he places panels of sequential art between paragraphs, to show Eric’s efforts to communicate. Middle & right, "As long as we stick together, nothing can stop us!" With these words, ‘Grandpa’s Tale’ turns from prose to full-page illustrations, showing the various trials the newlywed couple face. Tan chooses dramatic junctures to switch formats, using the change as a plot device. (Tan p. 41, 46 & 49)
mundane features of an urban environment. This exchange, in which the eponymous Eric communicates almost in sign language (with the odd pictogram to help him out) transcends any need for written language, much like *The Arrival* had already done. Similarly, in *Grandpa’s Story*, the narrator finds himself unable to ‘verbally’ describe events from the past, and so the readers are left to experience it themselves through a series of wordless full-page ‘panels’. This ‘mixed’ format is particularly effective in these stories, as it gives the reader a broader experience, engaging them on numerous levels. The sudden lack of text, rather than being jarring, gives the stories a unique system of visual ‘punctuation points’, which are still complimented by Tan’s evocative prose. I could see that this sort of format could also be used in my own novel; so long as this arrangement suited my content, and there were valid reasons for making these sudden transitions.

It may sound like my decision to use both formats, instead of choosing just one, was based on procrastination;\(^\text{90}\) this would be only partly true, as my motivations for setting my story out like this were far more technical. Of course, I had no verification as to whether or not this amalgamation of separate techniques would work as a whole. The only way to see how it would eventuate was to actually do it. Whether it turned out to be a fortunate calculation on my part, or catastrophic failure, I was confident only that the result would be quite interesting. Expressing my story this way seemed to be a rather experimental path to go down; but I was up for the journey, wherever it might happen to take me and my creation.

\(^{90}\) The will be more written on this topic in Chapter 6.5.
5.4 Design Brief

“From our experience, having a good visual design brief is one of the key elements in a successful project.”

Once I had chosen the format my graphic novel would take, the project gained another dimension. Up until then, my primary motivation for undertaking this study was simply to produce my own graphic novel, and to tell my own story – to have the images drawn, the words in print, the pages bound, and to have something I could hand to someone else, for them to read and (hopefully) enjoy. However, after I had settled on this particular structural arrangement, whilst the story of Tsuruhane was still definitely the driving force behind it, the whole project began to develop an additional purpose. It started to serve as my personal statement on art and literature.

I have always enjoyed these two disciplines for their own sakes, and can see no real reason why they have to be perpetually and needlessly segregated from one another, as they so often are. As I have already stated back in Chapter 4, though many metaphorical lines are often drawn between them, literature and art are not all that different, once one compares their common purposes and intents. Both are forms of creativity; both are means by which to express inner ideas to an audience. With this in mind, I decided that I wanted to push the boundary between words and images towards breaking point, perhaps even breaching it altogether. As a result of this newfound zest for creative exploration, the whole project began to evolve, until it was no longer just about working in the medium – it began to be more about the actual medium itself.

Being the persistent theorist that he is, Scott McCloud has developed a system by which to classify all graphic novels – not just by their different genres, but also by the intentions of the artists behind them. Whilst he acknowledges that the reasons for creating graphic novels are as diverse and varied as their creators themselves, he believes that every artist can be relegated to one of four “loosely-affiliated tribes of like-minded comics artists.” (2006, p. 232)
He defines these four tribes as follows:

**Classicists:** Devotion to beauty, craftsmanship and a tradition of excellence and mastery. The desire to create art that our descendants could dig up in a thousand years and still think: “Hey, this is good stuff!” The understanding that perfection may not be attainable in this life – but that that’s no reason not to strive for it.

**Animists:** Devotion to the content of a work, putting craft entirely in the service of the subject. The belief that if the power of the stories and characters come through, then nothing else matters. The willingness to tell stories so seamlessly that the teller of the story all but vanishes in the telling.

**Formalists:** The devotion to comics itself, to figuring out what the form of comics is capable of. The eagerness to turn comics inside-out and upside-down in an effort to understand the form’s potential more fully. The willingness to let craft and story take a back seat if necessary, in pursuit of ideas that could change comics for the better.

**Iconoclasts:** The desire for honesty, authenticity, and a connection to real life. The determination to hold up a mirror to life’s face – warts and all – and to resist pandering or selling out. The conviction of artists to remain true to themselves while never taking themselves too seriously. To fly no one’s flag – not even their own. (2006, p. 230-2)

Though he goes to the effort of differentiating these different ‘tribes’ from one another, McCloud is also realistic enough to acknowledge that very few creators belong to just one ‘tribe’ at a time. (2006, p. 232) All these different values are worth working towards; however, different people prioritize them differently. An artist may work within the parameters of all of these tribes at once, though they will necessarily favour one tribe above all, and may barely give any consideration to any one, or even all three, of the others. It is no real surprise that the most tribally-balanced work I can think of is Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival*: it has a Classicist’s pursuit of artistic virtuosity, an Animist’s strong sense of narrative importance, a Formalist’s willingness to experiment with visual structuring, and an Iconoclast’s drive to present a realistic account of actual events (in Tan’s case, the harrowing hardships and modest triumphs of a migrant’s experience). However, Tan is, in this respect (as he is in many others) a unique rarity. Few creators will commit themselves to more than two ‘tribes’, and most will remain devoted to just one.
Going into this project, I would have considered myself to be primarily an Animist, with some pronounced Classicist tendencies. The narrative was the most important aspect of the entire graphic novel to me, and remained so right up until the end. This could be said to be true for practically every other project I have ever worked on, and every one I currently still have in development. The Iconoclasts have never appealed me, simply because factuality does not matter that much to me in terms of storytelling; I prefer escapism over realism in my reading material (so long as plotlines remain somewhere within the bounds of plausibility, of course). I instinctively look for the attractive art of the Classicists in all the works that I read, and so also hope to emulate those same high standards in my own graphic work. However, I staunchly refuse to become a slave to my craft (a theme which will be revisited in Chapter 6.5). First and foremost, I am a storyteller, not a draughtsman nor a chronicler; and I believe this focused approach is evident in my work.

At the start of this study, I didn’t really see the medium through a Formalist’s perspective; I was happy to follow the precedent of others, using techniques that were already proven to be effective. It was only when I decided to use my slightly-irregular illustrative/visual format that this aspect became more of a priority for me. This presented me with a potential conflict of interest, since the Animist point of view is not very readily compatible with that of a Formalist. McCloud explains: “A Formalist approach makes the comics form visible through experimentation – exactly what the content-driven Animist tries to avoid by putting story first.” He adds that whilst some authors do manage to balance the two theories within a single work, “they tend to combine like oil and water – each ideal governing a different aspect of the work.” (2006, p. 234)

I could see this situation arising in my own project; but then, it wasn’t necessarily a detrimental feature. The only places where the format of the graphic novel might overshadow its content would be at the junctures between illustration/prose and visuals, where one layout transitioned into the other. For the rest of the volume, content would still take pride of place. In this respect, my experimentations with the format only serve the purposes of the narrative itself, as does my Classicist’s pursuit of quality craftsmanship and aesthetic appeal. If the plot of my graphic novel required a seismic shift away from my usual artistic style, or a drastic reconfiguration of its spatial arrangements, then I would change these aspects far more willingly than if I were forced to tamper with the storyline itself.
Having quite happily pitched my tent in the Animists’ camp (though situated slightly closer to those of the Formalists and Classicists, in the farthest corner possible from the Iconoclasts), my design brief for the project would read as follows:

- My primary goal, first and foremost, is to tell a specific story of my own invention, conveying it to the audience in the most appropriate and effective means possible.

- Secondly, I intend to express my meaning in a format that best suits the content of my narrative; and in the process of doing so, establish my own idiomatic method via which to arrange and structure the graphic/textual elements of my graphic novel.

- Of equal importance is my pursuit of a visually-appealing aesthetic, maintaining a consistently high standard of craftsmanship and artistic composition.

Now that I knew precisely what I needed to achieve, the only thing left to do was to pick up a pencil, and set about doing it.

### 5.5 Characters

“If you have a strong character, the storyline will develop naturally, on its own. The storyline then follows in the character’s wake, and swirls around the character, influencing the character further...Strong manga can only be made when you create a strong character.”

– Kazuo Koike

I would have to say that the hardest - and most time-consuming - part of the entire project was probably the months that I spent just on producing my characters’ visual designs. This surprised me, as it was a task I had been quite looking forward to; however, it turned into a far lengthier and more complicated process than I had anticipated. I realized early on that my character’s outward visage had a far greater importance than just surface appeal. The primary means of expressing a character’s

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91 Cited in Horn 2006, <www.darkhorse.com>
personality is through their visual appearance. The overall success of the novel might well depend upon the attractiveness of the ‘actors’ who would inhabit it and enacted it. If the reader did not invest enough interest in the characters themselves, the story could potentially fall completely flat. Henceforth, I knew that the decisions made during this stage would be indicative of the final product. I wanted to get this aspect right from the start; once the design for each character was finalized, I needed to stick to the visual templates I had chosen. The last thing I wanted to do was to get to the final stages of the rendering process, only to realize that I did not really like how my characters looked, by which time it would be far too late to do anything about it.

According to Scott McCloud, there are three major considerations which should go into the design of a successful character. The first challenge is to create a visual identity which matches the character’s inner personality. The second is to then maintain this distinctive appearance for the duration of the narrative, and to give each character recognizable traits which make them distinguishable from the rest of the novel’s ‘cast’. The third and final difficulty is to then implement this countenance across a range of situations, using it to generate the ‘acting skills’ the character needs in order to properly function within the narrative. (McCloud 2006, p.78) As I went through the design process seven times over (once for each of my characters), I encountered these same three problems over and over again. Each time, I had to come up with alternate ways of addressing them, tailoring my solutions to suit the varying needs of each character.

By this stage, I already had the entire storyline of Tsuruhane plotted out and had written detailed verbal descriptions of each of the narrative’s participants. I was by now well acquainted with the personalities, backgrounds, and motivations of each of my characters. However, I was as yet unsure of what they all looked like, save for a few particulars which were crucial to the novel’s plot. Although I well and truly knew how each person acted, sounded, and what function they performed in the story, I still didn’t know exactly how to draw them. Did Shiro carry his sword in his belt, or strapped across his back? Did Kotori have long hair that hung loose, or was it pulled up with pins and ribbons? Were the sleeves of Benji’s robe long or short? (He has one of each length, as it turns out.) These were just some of the many trifling decisions I had to make; while most of them weren’t particularly crucial to the plot itself, they collectively contributed much to the visual aesthetic, characterization, and overall ‘feel’ of the final product.
To begin with, I had some definite ideas about how my characters should look; but these concepts, when drawn on paper, didn’t always suit the personalities I had drafted in my head. To begin with, I would draw a succession of strangers who didn’t quite look like the characters I was attempting to envisage. The process of capturing these personalities in my sketchbook was rather like trying to draw a portrait of a long-distance pen friend whom I knew intimately, yet had never met face-to-face and would not recognize on sight. I had no references to aid me, save the knowledge I myself had doctored; the only way to discover how my characters looked was to attempt to draw them over and over, with varying outfits and physical traits, until I came up with a figure that just looked ‘right’.

Someone who has been through this process many times before is Eddie Campbell. As an illustrator who is hired to give graphic expression to the stories – and the characters – of others, it can take Campbell a considerable amount of time to properly acquaint himself with the people he must figure out how draw:

“It’s not perfectly clear to me when I start what this character is supposed to look like, because the character hasn’t done anything. That character doesn’t have a life yet, til I’ve given the character a life. I’m usually a good few pages in, you know, maybe twenty or thirty, before I’ve figured out what the character is supposed to look like.”

(Sivasubramanian 2011, <http://deconstructingcomics.com>) Campbell admits that he is sometimes as far as fifty pages into a book before a character’s look really starts to ‘click’. At this stage, he may choose to go back over the forty-nine pages he has already drawn, changing the figure’s appearance accordingly; if these pages have already gone to print, he simply disregards them and continues on with his newfound preferences. (Sivasubramanian 2011,

Figure 67: The second sketch I ever did of Shiro (the first has already appeared in Chapter 5.2). The only real difference between this and the final version is the length of his hair. There are a number of other hidden elements that are integral to his design: most obviously his concealed wing, but also the scars on his arm, and his secret arsenal of throwing knives. (Author’s own collection)
I certainly didn’t want to have to go through a similar process; I didn’t have the time or the page numbers to spend on developing my characters this way, whilst simultaneously trying to use them to convey my narrative. I was determined to get my designs confirmed before I began the actual storytelling process. For the most part, I was successful; Kuno, the very last character whose design I finalized, was completed just as I had to draw him in a panel for the first time. As I experimented with different designs for each character, I sought to try to ‘recognize’ the visuals which matched the ideas in my mind. Once I established some key features for each character, the process became slightly easier.

I was lucky that the design for my primary protagonist appeared almost immediately. During the preliminary stages of the graphic novel’s production, I tampered only slightly with the initial costume I had drawn for Shiro, agonizing over minor details; however, I kept returning to the same basic elements which had always been there, almost from the very first sketch. This was certainly not the case with Kotori, who was easily the most time-consuming character of all to design. Her look had to be carefully balanced between her dual identities; she is a goddess in disguise, so she has to look like a relatively ordinary ‘human’ girl, but still needed to retain a small hint of divinity about her. In order to get this effect, I ultimately modelled her garments on those worn by Shinto shrine-maidens. Her hairstyle and clothing went through countless incarnations before I was satisfied with them. I gradually learned not to give her outfit too many layers, keeping the silhouette clean and the details – such as the flowing sash and stitching on the sleeves – intricate enough to appear decorative, yet simple enough to draw over and over again without becoming too much of a chore.

![Figure 68: Just some of the many incarnations Kotori went through before I settled on her final design. (Author’s own collection)](image-url)
The thieves were a slightly different challenge. Shiro and Kotori were difficult because I wanted them to look attractive; but the thieves were hard to design because I was unaccustomed to drawing ugly people. I wanted most of the gang to be rather repulsive, so that when they are dispatched later in the narrative, the reader will not feel too sorry for them. Of the five, Ujiki was the easiest to draw; his was actually the first character sheet that I finalized, even before Shiro’s. Perhaps this apparent ease was due to his slightly caricaturized appearance; he has a ‘goblin-like’ quality about him, with his bulbous head and scrawny frame. His outfit is unconventional in terms of what the other characters are wearing; it has a slight ‘ninja’ flavour about it, hinting at possible character history. Similarly, I gave Tetsu a stereotypical ‘street-fighter’ look, complete with flashy striped robe and bandanna (hidden under his hat for the duration of the first chapter); this outfit matches his overbearingly cocky, egotistical manner. Gunbei was also quite easy to design; he began as nothing more than a brutish thug, and never really amounted to anything more. His only major character trait is his comparative size – I had to make him hulking-enough to be intimidating at first glance, but not so Herculean that he became too brawny for the relatively-petite Shiro to easily defeat.

Kuno was the last character I completed, and his design, like Shiro’s and Kotori’s, went through multiple incarnations before I returned to my original idea and streamlined it down to its final version. I wanted to give him a rougher edge which set him apart from the rest of the gang, marking him as their leader and hinting at his ruthless nature; his unkempt hair, fur-trimmed vest and weather-beaten sword-hilt go some way towards depicting his slightly ‘feral’ nature. His scar turned into a plot-point, and definitely had to be included (even the eye on which it appeared became integral to the events of a certain fight scene; it had to be on the right). The character would go on to serve a much greater purpose later in the novel, so his overall silhouette needed a certain element of versatility, allowing it to lend itself to future developments (these involve vengeful ghosts and a sort of demonic possession; to say any more would give away plot spoilers).

Benji was the most difficult thief – and besides Kotori, the hardest character – to design overall. Like Kotori, he had a dual purpose: he starts as a bandit and a ‘bad guy’, but rapidly transitions from antagonist to sympathetic anti-hero, gradually revealing his highly-principled moral code and Zen-like nature (which possibly make him the most emotionally-grounded character in the entire narrative). His appearance
had to embody this sense of ambiguity; one way in which I exemplified this was to give his costume an asymmetrical design, reflecting the way that his internal nature is slightly ‘skewed’. He looks a bit rough around the edges (he has to, in order to fit in with the rest of the thieves), but he would most likely clean up well. His outfit was inspired by Chinese martial-artists, particularly the garb of Shaolin monks; this is appropriate, since Benji was formerly a Buddhist monk before he was a bandit, and some oblique hints in the storyline suggest that he might have originally come from the ‘Middle Kingdom’.

Since I am mentioning martial-arts, I should talk about the weapons that appear in *Tsuruhane*; like the characters themselves, their designs also required a great deal of consideration. The weapons each character chooses to wield, as well as saying much about their individual capabilities and personalities, were also integral to the events of the storyline. As a martial-arts enthusiast myself, many of the narrative’s action scenes were plotted around who was fighting whom with what, and where. For example, Shiro’s sword, the titular Tsuruhane, doesn’t have a particularly long blade just because I felt like drawing it that way. Having a longer sword extends his weapon’s reach, keeping opponents further away from him during a fight and making defensive manoeuvres easier. It also adds more weight to the blade, thereby generating more centrifugal and gravitational force when the sword is swung sideways or downwards. Since all Japanese swords are usually wielded with a two-handed grip, the loss of Shiro’s left arm would greatly hinder his fighting ability. Henceforth, this customized and rather uncommon weapon was given to Shiro, in

*Figure 69: Tsuruhane*’s bandits – Benji, Ujiki, Tetsu, Gunbei, and Kuno. To learn more about them, see the descriptions in the graphic novel itself (p. 36-38). (Author’s own illus)
order to compensate for the loss of his arm, and to suit the extra abilities his wing gives him.\textsuperscript{92} However, this advantage does not aid him much against Benji, since the \textit{naginata} the thief/monk wields, with its long handle, has a longer range to match; Benji’s double-handed grip means that he can also generate more power with each swing. As a means of characterization, the \textit{naginata} is a weapon commonly used by Buddhist warrior-monks or \textit{yama-bushi}, making it ideal for Benji. These two characters are the most proficient fighters in the \textit{Tsuruhane} universe, so when they do eventually face off against each other, I have them leap around in the treetops, using the location to show off Shiro’s \textit{tengu} abilities and display both their comparable skills. These are just some of the situations I choreographed, and which influenced the designs of the weaponry each character was equipped with.

Once I had the visual designs for all my characters down on paper, I put them side by side in a ‘line-up’ (as shown in Figure 69, previous page). I did this to make sure that the stylistic elements I had used complemented each other. I also made sure that the designs were not too cluttered or complex, as I knew I would have to draw them all multiple times over through a series of sequential panels, and I didn’t want to make the task of rendering them all more laborious than it needed to be.

One of the biggest concerns in sequential art is consistency; particularly when it comes to the facial features or distinguishing traits that are specific to each individual character. Scott McCloud affirms:

“Consistency is important for keeping readers in your spell. With it, you can create a sense of a single character passing through life in panel after panel. Without it, that spell can break, and leave your readers with nothing but lines on a page.” (2006, p. 79)

If a character is not easily recognizable throughout the entire novel, the story will become difficult to follow. The audience needs to foster a sense of visual familiarity with the characters, rather than feeling that they were being reintroduced to them anew every time they appear again in a subsequent panel. If readers have to constantly pause and reconfirm the identities of the people they are watching before they can even begin to fathom the storyline, the whole reading experience will become laborious and unenjoyable.

\textsuperscript{92} Other additions were made to the sword, including a spring-loaded device in the sheath which allows Shiro to draw it one-handed, and decorative embellishments on the outer scabbard which suit the sword’s name of ‘crane feather’.
Years ago, Neil Gaiman created a solution to a similar problem. A colleague of his on the *Sandman* series named Kelley Jones, whilst being an otherwise adequate artist in many respects, lacked the technical precision needed to make his characters appear exactly the same across multiple panels. Gaiman could have merely replaced Jones, but instead, he decided to give each of his characters very distinct visual characteristics that would make them easily recognizable, even if they were drawn slightly differently each time. For example, in a room full of mythical creatures, a cat-headed woman is obviously the Egyptian goddess Bast; the only figure dressed in a Japanese kimono must be Susanoo-no-Mikoto; the cloaked figure with an eye patch is the Norse god Odin, etc. Even if Jones drew two wholly different-looking cat faces in two separate panels, it is impossible for the reader not to realize that this is the same character, since Bast is the only feline in the story. (Graphic 2010, n. pag.)

After hearing Gaiman describe how he wrote these characters specifically for his artist’s capabilities (or lack thereof), it was only in hindsight that I realized that I had done much the same thing for myself. I have read stories where multiple members of the cast look so much alike, it is difficult to tell just who is who – and thereby to discern who is doing what within the story – based on imagery alone (see Figure 70, below). It was a trap which I could have potentially fallen into, since all my characters come from the same place and time period. This concern was particularly pertinent when it came to drawing the five thieves; even though they are all members of the same gang and thereby share common visual traits (i.e. the straw hats they all wear, and their collective scruffiness), I didn’t want them to just look like five slight variations on the same basic design. I managed to overcome this problem as Gaiman

**Figure 70:** Assorted characters from Fumi Yoshinaga’s *manga*, Ōoku, from left to right: Sugishita, Kashiwagi, and Kakizoe. Since all of them are attired in the fashion of their time, they all wear similar clothes and have similar hairstyles. They are designed so similarly, it can be hard to tell who is who at a glance. Whilst the artwork is beautifully rendered, these clone-like ‘actors’ make the plot difficult to follow at times. (2005, p. 47, 98 & 100)
and Jones had done, by making sure none of my characters could be mistaken for one another. Excluding Kotori, who is the only female character to appear in the story, Shiro is identifiable by his ornate boots and bound sleeve; Kuno has light hair and a scar over his right eye; Tetsu wears a distinctive striped kimono and has scars on his cheek, etc. This established a sort of visual shorthand which made recognizing each character a lot easier for the reader.

Once all the decisions had been made and these ‘costume codes’ had been established, I just had to make sure that I drew every aspect of the designs consistently throughout the graphic novel. Again, this task was not as easy as it sounds. Even professionals – and then, even those who are incredibly proficient within their field – still struggle with the issue of consistency. Japanese film director Hayao Miyazaki is well-acquainted with the repetitive practices involved in the making of hand-drawn animation. Nevertheless, he found the prospect of repeatedly drawing Nausicaa, the titular heroine of his *manga*, to be far more daunting than he had anticipated: “I thought that I should settle down and draw her consistently, but every time I drew her, her face changed - even I was overpowered.” (Saitani 1995, <www.comicbox.co.jp>)

Of course, some variations in a character’s panel-to-panel appearance are permissible; faces should not look like they’ve been reproduced with a rubber stamp, figures like they’ve been traced around a cookie-cutter. There are also other aspects to a character that are far more important than mere aesthetic. The illustrator has to learn to draw not just the character’s outward appearance, but also their inner ‘life’. However well-designed or prettily-drawn a character may be, it also has other, greater responsibilities; characters are themselves a system of visual language, and need to be utilized correctly in order for them to properly perform their roles. For the portrayal of recurring characters, the most important thing is to maintain the same graphic associations and emotional intensity throughout the storyline. Characters guide an audience through a narrative; they act out the physical actions, and express the more subtle, internal theatrics that are included in a novel’s plotline. They should incite the audience’s empathy, acting as a gauge for the emotive reactions the reader should be experiencing alongside them.

This is at least true in Miyazaki’s work; despite his apparent difficulty, both he and his readers remain well aware of Nausicaa’s personable traits, and the central role she played in her own storyline. For Miyazaki, this aspect of her did not change,
although aesthetically she may have altered slightly: “Nausicaa was always Nausicaa. She changed, but she was always Nausicaa. It’s more correct to say that I understand her better than I used to. The way I thought of her inside my head never changed.” (Saitani 1995, <www.comicbox.co.jp>) Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Nausicaa’s design was evolving and developing of its own accord; Miyazaki simply channelled this naturally-occurring process through the medium of his work.

Of course, if – like me – you are an artist for whom any kind of figure-drawing is a challenge, then maintaining consistency is just part of a compounded problem. It is some small comfort to know that I am not alone in my inadequacy; Scott McCloud often bemoans his lack of mastery over anatomy,93 once declaring that all the characters in Zot! looked like “long, stiff shampoo bottles.” (2008a, p. 515) Figure drawing is an essential skill that all illustrators must have, since most stories contain a human presence of some kind; as McCloud flippantly states, “I just couldn’t draw people yet. And people have a way of turning up.” (2008a, p. 535). With this in mind, it is amazing how many artists and illustrators I have encountered – myself included – who are uncomfortable with having to draw people.

This discomfort may be proportionate to how much the figures being drawn need to replicate the appearance of actual humanity. In Tan’s The Arrival, for example, a certain amount of ‘naturalism’ – if not actual ‘photo-realism’ – was absolutely necessary. This type of portrayal gave the fictional narrative the conviction and plausibility it needed to fully immerse its readers in its fantastical world, and to create a stronger empathy with the characters themselves. Just because Tan is capable of realistically depicting humans doesn’t mean that he will every time, however. In The Red Tree, for example, the story’s protagonist is purposefully rendered in an overly-simplistic style, almost like a figure from a child’s drawing (see Figure 71, following page). The book deals with the sensitive topic of depression, and Tan wanted his readers to each find their own personal meaning in his illustrations. His main character’s simple design means that she serves as an ‘every-man’, allowing the reader to superimpose themselves into her role and thereby forge an empathetic awareness with her, using her as a means to ‘live’ inside the book themselves.

93 McCloud claims that his lack of consistency is exacerbated by the fact that he belongs to the Formalist tribe: “We get bored easily and want to change gears and try new things constantly. Character designs waver, inking styles shift.” (2008a, p. 535)
As Tezuka’s cartoony figures exemplified back in Chapter 4.5.5, human characters can carry a lot more emotional clout when they cease to resemble real people, becoming conceptual vessels for deeper meanings and ideals. McCloud agrees that technical proficiency, whilst certainly admirable and desirable in human portrayals, shouldn’t always be the first priority of the artist:

“Even if you’re like me and anatomy doesn’t come easily, you can still improve your storytelling dramatically by just getting the gesture across in every figure you draw… Masters use their knowledge of anatomy to make such gestures vivid and credible. Artists who concentrate on anatomical accuracy but neglect gesture, may create technically ‘correct’ figures, but the results may be utterly lifeless – while artists with technically ‘incorrect’ figures but a strong sense of gesture may produce art that seems real and alive.” (2006, p. 114-5)

One artist who takes McCloud’s lesson to heart is Sarah Burgess. Her short story, Purikura, was selected as a finalist from amongst stacks of submissions sent to the British Manga Jiman competition. Although her narrative does rely on some “evocative body-language” (ILYA 2008, p.384), she does not allow herself to be constricted by a Classicist’s need for aesthetic perfection:

“When I draw, I want to back away from the obsession with symmetry, accuracy of bodies and form. I prefer to give a natural life, movement and expression to my characters. I always try to make my comics flow rather than look stiff, wishing to put my heart and tears into every stroke... More than anything, I want my readers to feel passionately when they read.”

(ILYA 2008, p. 384)

I found that this approach drastically helped me in my own work. The more human figures I drew throughout the course of the creative process, the more apparent it became that my favourite scenes to draw were the action-oriented, ‘gestural’ sequences. My least-favourites panels to draw, consequently, were the somewhat-stilted close-ups, of which there were several. These frames were meant to contribute a strong sense of

**Figure 71:** Shaun Tan’s simply-drawn, silent, almost expressionless character from *The Red Tree.* (2001b, n. pag.) Though her appearance contrasts sharply with the realistic human figures that appeared in *The Arrival*, the narrative she appears in is no less poignant, and her role in the conveyance of meaning is absolutely paramount to the story.
mood and emotional intensity to the story, by focusing solely on a character’s facial expression. However, they may come across as static when compared to the other, far more dynamic shots of warriors flipping through the air which I also got to draw. It seems strange – even to me – that these close-ups, which had very little actual anatomy in them, were far more problematic for me than action sequences, which not only required full figures, but often posed them in complicated positions, as well as incorporating other elements such as perspective, motion, and spatial relations. However, the apparent difficulty arose from the artwork’s shift in focus, from the Animist’s use of expressive ‘gestural’ drawing for action sequences, to the Classicist’s demand for correctness and visual beauty in the close-ups. If given the choice, I much preferred the former means of depiction over the latter. I found that the more I worried about getting my anatomy ‘right’, the more self-conscious and ‘wrong’ my drawings seemed to become.

This situation was not helped by the unfamiliar costumes I was required to draw. Outfits worn in feudal Japan fit the figure in a completely different way to modern attire; hakama and kimono tend to cinch in higher at the waist, billow where Western clothes cling, and are designed to drape in a very specific manner. As someone who was unfamiliar with Japanese national dress, I wanted to do my best to approximate it; I didn’t want to draw a succession of characters that looked like they were wearing dressing-gowns (see Figure 72, below). Reference material and research

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**Figure 72:** **Left,** Actor and stuntman Masahiro Watanabe demonstrates how to correctly wear a men’s kimono. He also has a pair of swords tucked into his belt and carries a woven-sedge sugegasa hat, similar to those worn by Kuno and the thieves. Watanabe appears in a reference book of samurai costumes and poses, marketed specifically to mangaka who want to draw stories set in feudal Japan. (Sakamoto 2006, p. 35) **Right,** P. Craig Russell demonstrates how not to wear (or draw) a kimono. Most of the costumes that appear in his version of *Dream Hunters* look more like bathrobes. (Gaiman & Russell 2009, p. 102)
were an indispensable aid; if I could get these minute details right, it would lend an added authenticity to my story’s setting. As a trade-off, however, the conventional techniques I would typically use for figure drawing were far less effective here. I would often begin by sketching out the ‘correct’ anatomy of the character to the best of my ability, only for it to then look completely wrong when I covered this framework with the drawn-on fabric; the characters ended up looking swamped, the clothes seemingly ill-fitting. I eventually learned to overcome this difficulty, simply by reversing the process; I drew the basic shapes of the outfit first, putting the character into the clothes rather than the clothes onto the character. The key was to let the general shape and ‘flow’ of each garment define the structures underneath, thereby creating the ‘gestural’ figures I was after.

Gradually, through extensive experimentation and much trial-and-error, I developed a set of character sheets that finally looked just ‘right’. I was able to draw complete portraits of each character, which fully corresponded – or at least, very nearly did – with the identities I had imagined. The characters are all diversely different, yet still stylistically resemble each other, establishing a cast of characters who all belong to the same fictional universe. Giving each of my characters a face, a figure, and a unique visual identity was the very first step in conveying my story to the audience. With each of their individual designs now set, my creation had begun to take on corporeal form. Now that all my actors were in place, the real show would soon begin – the story itself was about to start.
5.6 Layout

A few chapters back, I listed the factors that decided which overall format my graphic novel would take. By making this choice, I established the framework around which my novel would be structured. Next, I needed to arrange my various narrative components within this framework. I had to take the story that I had written and mete it out page by page, translating the linear plotline into a volume of multiple pages which would later be printed, bound, and presented in book form. The compositions I chose for each individual page would collectively affect the narrative’s delivery – the sequence it would take, the pace it would have, and how clearly it would be conveyed to the reader.

The very first decision I needed to make was what size and dimensions the finished book should have. As a reader, I was accustomed to the size of a typical manga volume. Known in the Japanese industry as a tankōbon, the size of a standard paperback is roughly 13 x 18 cm (5 x 7 in). Since my work is predominantly manga-inspired, it made sense to work at a similar size. I also felt more comfortable working on a relatively small scale, as opposed to the standard ‘comic book’ size; like most American things, it is significantly larger (17 x 26 cm). I stuck close to the tankōbon size, with one small alteration: I made my layout slightly larger and proportionately wider than a standard volume, with the final dimensions measuring 6.1 x 8 in (15.5 cm). The copy of Tsuruhane which accompanies this dissertation is actually 1.5 cm wider than I had originally intended. When I set up the file for print, I made the inside border on each page purposefully wider, to accommodate for where my bookbinder would later stitch them all together. I did not want the book’s content to be partially swallowed up by the gutter in the middle of each spread, so I gave this edge of the page a wide berth. However, the binder did not crop off this extra half-inch before he began his work, resulting in a particularly wide volume. This doesn’t really affect the final product at all; I much prefer it to be too wide rather than too narrow. To his credit, the bookbinder, Mr. Goarin, did a beautiful job in every other respect.

Figure 73: The comparative sizes of (left to right): a tankōbon trade-paperback, in which manga are usually published; the dimensions I chose for Tsuruhane; and a typical American-style ‘comic book’. (Author’s own)
I had seen other novels in this size on the market – Fumi Yoshinaga’s Ōoku, Nahoko Uehashi’s Moribito, and the Vertical editions of Tezuka’s works, to name a few – and I liked the added substantiality this little bit extra leant to the physical feel of the published book. It was also a calculation that I made to suit my story and its characters – Shiro’s wing takes up (or will take up, once it is revealed in canon) a lot of panel space, so to prevent it from being constantly cut out of the frame, I made my entire book wider, giving myself more lateral expanse to draw it in.

By this stage, I had written several story drafts, transferring the concept in my head into typed-up pages of notes. This document covered both of my chosen formats: the prose portions, which would go directly into the novel as they were written; and the sequential panels, which I wrote out as a script, containing all the characters’ dialogue and detailed stage-directions for each scene. As I wrote, I generated a rough page-count for the entire volume, estimating how much space I would need for each section. I continued to doggedly progress through my narrative, scripting all the narrative’s events and planning out how I would translate my textual plan into equally-eloquent visuals. However, once I found myself scripting ‘page 70’ of my and still only partway through Chapter 2, with at least five more chapters still to come, I knew that I could not possibly get this much done within the timeframe I had allotted for this project. I henceforth decided to limit the amount of story I would initially produce to just the first chapter.\footnote{Even so, due to time constraints, I had to cut an additional four pages off the end of the chapter. These will be reinstated when I continue to produce the rest of the narrative.} I could use this smaller portion of the narrative as a ‘pilot episode’ (as Watsuki had done), trying out concepts and techniques for the sake of this study; I could then attempt to finish the rest of it at a later date.

As defined by the format I had chosen, the overall layout of Tsuruhane can be divided into two different means of graphic depiction: illustrated prose and visual narrative. These two distinctive formats had to be very carefully blended and balanced throughout the novel’s duration, so that the structure of the medium itself did not detract from its content – my Animist approach needed to take precedence over my Formalist leanings. However, this did not mean that the two different formats had to remain completely separate. Words and imagery ended up appearing in varying ratios throughout the novel; they accompany each other, flow into one another, and work together to construct a unified meaning. As events in the plot shift from dramatic to
action-oriented and back again, visuals give way to prose, and prose segues into sequential art. At the point where one format transitions into the other, I was even more aware of the need to conscientiously structure my layouts with care. The most critical of these points occur on pages 5 and 17 of the finished book. At these juncture, I endeavoured to combine the two formats together as seamlessly and harmoniously as possible.

The following outlines the page-by-page arrangements that I used for each stage of the narrative, and the reasons behind why I chose to structure the layouts in these particular ways. The opening pages of the novel establish the ‘mixed’ format that the rest of the volume would take. The short haiku poem in the very first textbox (p. 5) represents the rest of the novel’s literary content, whilst the large frame that covers the subsequent double-page spread (p. 6-7) establishes the presence of graphic components. In terms of narrative, this entire scene acts as an abridged prologue of sorts; the very first tightly-framed close-up creates a sense of intrigue: who is this character, and why is he in the water? The long-shot that follows it then introduces the setting, the situation, and the two lead characters. This spread additionally displays the opening chapter’s title, and formally begins the story. With any luck, this entire sequence will act as a hook that will get readers biting, immersing them in the story from the get-go. This predominantly visual introduction is then followed by numerous pages of prose (p.8-17). The rapid switch back and forth between formats was purposefully designed to unsettle the reader, making them unsure as to whether they are reading a typical literary novel full of words, or a graphic novel in which imagery plays the dominant role. Since the book’s structure partially subscribes to both of these arrangements, this initial ambiguity is ideal, letting the reader know up-front that my chosen format is a little bit different from the norm.

The prose section of the novel was arranged in a fairly straightforward manner. Using a layout similar to those utilized by Tan in Tales from Outer Suburbia and by the Kikuchi-Amano-Gaiman partnerships in their respective works, I paired lengthy paragraphs of text with full-page illustrations, setting the image/word ratio slightly more in favour of the written prose. To even up the score, I interposed numerous illustrative elements within the text itself. These graphic motifs include stylised initial capitals, decorative paragraph-breaks, and floating page-borders with a ‘mist and fog’ design. These components all harken back to the traditions of print-based narrative, offering an affectionate homage to the many classic tomes that were produced during
the so-called ‘Golden Age of Illustration’, which lasted roughly from 1880 to 1920 (see Figure 74, below).

The portraits of Shiro and Kotori that appear on pages 13-14 have a dual purpose: as well as acting as full-page decorative panels, they properly introduce the physical appearance of each character to the audience, placing visual attributes next to the textual descriptions that I had already supplied in the accompanying prose. Thus when I explain how Shiro has a scar on his right arm, “the skin pale and slightly puckered where an extensive wound, possible a burn, had long-since healed over” (p.12 & 15), the audience can both read the text and examine the illustration, instantly comprehending exactly what I mean. By establishing the outward visage of my hero and heroine early in the novel, it would later be easier for the audience to visually recognize them, when the format had changed from illustrated prose to sequential art.

This transfer from one format to the other takes place on page 17. It was here that the mixed-medium was at its most conspicuous; the sudden shift could potentially be disconcerting for the audience, causing the two slightly-different parts of the novel to seem too disparate and disrupting the storyline. In order to prevent this, I utilized a number of techniques. Firstly, instead of having the last sentence of the prose simply stop short, I pulled it out of the ‘grid’ arrangement I had been using for the previous pages, staggering the lines and gradually widening the leading between them. This gives the impression that the text is ‘fading’ down into the imagery. This was further

Figure 74: Page decorations from some classic books. Left, a vine-like page border and an initial capital ‘T’ from Howard Pyle’s anthology of self-authored fables, The Wonder Clock. Top right, from the Kelmscott Press edition of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, an initial capital ‘I’, designed by William Morris. Bottom right, one of Harry Clarke’s macabrely-flavoured paragraph breaks for Edgar Allan Poe’s Tales of Mystery and Imagination. Between them, these volumes feature a winning combination of superb illustrations, elegantly-designed typographic elements, and exhilarating stories. (Pyle 1887, p. 233; Quinn n.d., <www.fromoldbooks.org>; Poe 1987, p. 140)
accentuated by the image itself; the treetops in the background are drawn with an open line, subtly suggesting the shape of a speech bubble.

This leads nicely into the first bit of bubble-bound dialogue that features in the novel, spoken by Benji. The panel he stands in was left without its top and inside frame borders, deceptively making this first ‘visual’ in the ongoing sequence appear to be just another standalone illustration. This way, the introduction of framed panels is less discordant than it would have been if I had immediately inserted a fully-encoded ‘box’ beneath the text, after having had so many ‘free-range’ elements drift across the previous pages. In this way, rather than one format simply stopping and the other beginning, the two separate styles meet in the middle of the page, transitioning from one to the other as smoothly as I could manage. I also positioned the image slightly off-centre, letting it gently ‘lead’ the reader over the edge and onto the next page, into the new format.

Arranging the sequential art was a far more complicated process than setting out the type. Whereas there was only one way in which the text could be laid out (i.e. consecutive left-to-right rows, trawling repetitively across each page), I was now spoilt for choice in all the different spatial arrangements I could use. I also had to pay closer attention to the sense of pacing. Prose can compress facts considerably, delivering data swiftly and succinctly; but because visuals use multiple panels to convey the passage of time, the plot’s happenings are presented to the viewer in real time, sometimes even slower. What might take a few lines of prose (and a fraction of a page) to present in prose, may take a full page of images to show in sequential art.

Every single event in the story had to be broken down and translated into a set of visuals that expressed the same meaning as my initial written script, making the actions easily legible. For example, my script might simply read: “Shiro leapt into the air, coming to land a small distance away”. This one action would then need to be broken down into numerous frames when it was converted into visuals. I would first need to show an establishing shot of Shiro’s initial position; then the act of leap itself; a panel of him travelling through the air (perhaps doing a flip or some other aerial manoeuvre, as he does on page 26); and finally his return to earth (or whatever other perch he happens to find). With a new frame dedicated to each of these single ‘moments’, the whole sequence, though portraying something relatively straightforward, would take a fair amount of page-space to properly convey. Most of
the action scenes in *Tsuruhane* were far more complex than this, requiring multiple pages of panels to fully enact them.

As I prepared to draft these scenes, I sought out artists who had successfully depicted similar action sequences in their works, gleaning useful techniques from their examples which I could then apply to my own layouts. Some of the specific role models that I turned to were the *Lone Wolf & Cub* stories, as drawn by Kojima; and Watsuki’s *Rurouni Kenshin*. Both of these works feature a lot of action scenes, and both use cinematically-inspired sequential arrangements, giving their drawings a dynamic sense of motion. For example, in the *Lone Wolf and Cub* story ‘*Parting Frost*’ (2000c, p. 134-192), Kojima could have shown his combatants rushing at each other in a single panel, swiftly jumping straight to the battle’s conclusion. However, he chose to delay the verdict, slowing the action down by dividing it between multiple panels. This results in something that almost feels like a slow-motion effect; the warriors gradually close in on each other, the speed at which they are actually travelling indicated by the blurred scenery behind them (see Figure 75, below). This prolonged sequence heightens the sense of atmosphere and suspense that surrounds the duel, resulting in a sequence which film directors would thoroughly approve of. This type of depiction means that the layout contains a lot more frames than are strictly necessary for the basic depiction of events; however, the overall effect is well worth the effort of drawing these extra panels.

I started composing the arrangement of my sequential panels by first producing storyboards of each scene. I first drew these as a series of incredibly roughly thumbnail sketches; I did not even bother to rule up my panel frames with straight lines, drawing everything in a simplified shorthand.

**Figure 75:** Ogami and his opponent face each other. Both warriors appear to seamlessly transition from a standstill to a swift forward lunge; by the third panel, the space between them is rapidly closing. Although it only takes a moment, Kojima draws the battle out over multiple panels, ramping up the tension; at the end of this brief exchange, only one man will be left alive. (Koike & Kojima 2000c, p. 186)
True to their name, these thumbnails were usually less than a quarter of the size of the finished product. I generated as many of these tiny drafts as I needed to, trying out various arrangements until I found the ones that worked best. I would then scan these messy drawings, convert them into digital images, and place them in Adobe InDesign, superimposing them over my book layout (the prose pages were already layed out at this stage). I traced my panel borders out on a separate layer, using the thumbnail as a template. This time, however, I produced neatly-ruled, straight-edged frames, using the rectangle and pen tools in the program’s toolbar.

During this process, one trick that I used was to vary the shapes of my frames, using not just rectangular borders, but also rhombuses, trapeziums, parallelograms, and various other geometrics. These added an extra element of interest to the page, as well as aiding the panels’ spatial relations. The angled corner of an asymmetrical frame literally ‘points’ towards the next in the sequence; two images are arranged so that they tessellated together, creating the illusion of a single panel that had been split into separate frames (see Figure 76, below). Since most of my panel transitions are either action-to-action or subject-to-subject, this sense of linkage between panels was integral to the narrative’s overall flow. These frames prompt the reader’s vision to automatically leap across the gutter to the next image in sequence, aiding the impetuous of the story’s pace.

Figure 76: Page 20 of *Tsuruhane*, at various stages of production. **Left**, working from my initial thumbnail sketch, I produced a first draft (middle), sketching far more detailed visuals and properly ruling the frame borders. **Far right**, the final pencils. Traced in red is my ‘two-column-three-row’ grid, which I roughly applied to the layout. This grid was very versatile, able to cater for non-rectangular panels. (Author’s own collection)
Although I avoided using any overly-rigidly system, I tended to arrange my layouts within a basic grid, generally comprised of two panels across and three panels down. This doesn’t necessarily mean that there were six panels on every page (on average, there are usually 4 or 5), but it did give me a general idea of how to best utilize the amount of space I had available. I had plenty of options just within this grid, and certainly didn’t pass up an opportunity to flaunt my self-imposed ‘rules’; some of the layouts I am happiest with were also some of the least conventional.

A prime example of this is page 21. I had a very clear idea of what I wanted to do with this page from early on; the layout was specifically based on one used by Watsuki in a *Rurouni Kenshin* chapter, ‘The Two Hitokiri’. Like Kojima, Watsuki set the scene for a particular tense showdown between his two swordsmen, though in a slightly different manner. Whereas Kojima’s emphasis was on implied motion, Watsuki’s seemingly-static composition belies the emotive potency of the scene. To better illustrate the tensions surrounding the impending conflict, he portrays the two characters standing ‘in front’ of the panels instead of inside them (see Figure 77, below). Although the effects-filled backdrop still does its job, it now recedes even further into the background, placing emphasis squarely on the combatants. This technique was transferred into my own layout. Instead of having the characters simply remaining within the panels, Kuno and Gunbei ‘break the fourth wall’ by breaching the frame borders; Kuno seems to be skulking threateningly towards the reader, whilst Gunbei’s intimidating bulk is too immense for the meagre panel to contain. This effect has a subtle, yet pronounced effect on the viewer, as the characters seem to be coming right out of the page.

![Figure 77](image_url): Kenshin faces off against the assassin Kurogasa. Both of them stand ‘in front’ of the panels; this makes them seem to stand in the very foreground of the page and closer to the audience, thereby engaging the reader more directly in the action. Since the backdrop doesn’t have to ‘ground’ the character, Watsuki uses the opportunity to show a close-up of Kenshin’s unusual sword. (Watsuki 2004b, p. 115)
The aforementioned ‘fourth wall’ refers to the imaginary barrier that separates the audience from the realms of narrative; in this case, the ‘wall’ is the flat surface of the printed page. To continue with this analogy, the frames could be described as ‘windows’ set in the wall, offering readers a view into the imaginary world. When objects or characters are shown overlapping the panel borders, they appear to have traversed this portal and entered into the ‘fourth dimension’, i.e. reality. This visual device further immerses the reader in the story, as it brings the action closer to them, bridging the psychological gap between what is ‘real’ and what is simply ink on paper.

The most problematic layout I had to design was probably the combined two-page spread on pages 18 and 19. This arrangement went through multiple incarnations before I was happy with it. Looking back at one of my old draft versions of these pages, I can refer directly to an entry that I made in my learning journal shortly after having produced it. This is what I wrote at the time:

“One of my supervisors suggested that I change a page, but I liked it how it was, and I went away and wrote a big spiel about the choices I made, how the arrangement set up the story for the subsequent pages, how it affected the pacing, etc. When I’d created the page originally, it had all been rather subconscious, so it rather surprised me how much apparent thought went into it without my realizing it.” – 6/6/2010, 3:44 pm

I find that elsewhere, I also recorded exactly what my supervisor didn’t like about this draft layout:

“When I talked to [my supervisor], he didn’t like that the panels featuring the four bandit characters (top and bottom rows) were rather static, just close-ups of faces with no action or dialogue. He suggested that I either give them something more to do – lines of dialogue, or something – or perhaps include labels that name and introduce each one.”

– 4/6/2010, 12:06 am

Of course, my supervisor’s critique was absolutely right in some respects, and I did indeed make a number of changes to the layout before I got around to rendering the final version (though some things also remained unchanged). However, this incident was invaluable, as it drew my attention to the underlying rationale behind all that I did. I had not been consciously aware of these thought-processes occurring at the time of actually creating the layout; it was only when I had the opportunity to reflect back upon my actions that I fully realized why I had done what I had done. Luckily, I recognized the significance of this ‘spiel’ at the time of writing it, and I saved a copy of it. A reproduction of it is included on the following page, along with the first-drawn drafts of the spread as it appeared at that time.
When I created the page, my main considerations were:

- **Introducing the characters.** The villains were shown in close-up shots without distractions to establish them visually to the reader. The audience already knows the lead hero and heroine, since the prose section of the chapter described them in detail and featured illustrations of them. This gives the other characters a chance to catch up; five new characters introduced at once is a lot for the reader to deal with.

- **Point of view.** The bandits in these panels are seen from the hero’s point of view as he sizes up the situation. Since the text in those panels is his thoughts, any external dialogue would mean a major jump from one point of view to another, and would be confusing for the reader. The page explains the hero’s actions, so while the panels represent his view of others, the page should focus on him and his actions, i.e. taking stock of his opponents.

- **Pacing.** Later parts of the chapter are very action-oriented, so I wanted to set the scene clearly, once again letting the reader get to know and identify each character before following their subsequent actions. There doesn’t need to be action from the get-go; the intrigue needs time to build. The page following this

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**Figure 78:** One of my early drafts for pages 18-19. At this stage, I was still treating them as two separate pages. The floating hats in the second panel are the heads of two thieves who are in the foreground. My primary gripe with this layout was that I did not have the wider ‘establishing shot’ that I really wanted, showing Shiro and Kotori’s positions in relation to the entire gang of bandits; I managed to achieve this in the final version. (Author’s own collection)
featured the first sign of direct conflict (the scene with the throwing star) [i.e. page 20 in the final book]. Keeping this page simple gives the following page more impact.

- **Intrigue.** I didn’t particularly want to name and label each character, as at this point, the reader is in the same position as the protagonist – wondering who these men are and what they will do next. Again, this is a pacing issue. I planned to have a full ‘character page’ later on,\(^{96}\) naming each character, giving a brief description of their age, weapon, personality, etc. For the time being, though, retaining an air of mystique around them enhances the plot. (4/6/2010, 12:06 am)

Even though I made multiple changes (improvements, I believe) to the final version of the layout, all these aims remained intact. The only really major alteration I made was to arrange the large establishing shot so that it spans the entire spread. I had wanted to include a panel like this from the start, but hadn’t found a way to incorporate it whilst this sequence was still split between two single pages. This arrangement was greatly influenced by Goseki Kojima, who illustrated a similar scene in the Lone Wolf and Cub story *Executioner’s Hill* (see Figure 79, following page). This narrative similarly introduced a number of characters – in this case the Zodiac Gang, a six-member band of bounty-hunters – to the audience all at once. Although the Zodiac Gang are essentially throwaway characters (given the number of opponents Ogami carves his way through during the series’ epic run, most characters are similarly disposed of after a single chapter), Kojima still allows their appearances and personalities to register with the audience, however briefly.

In my own story, given the nature of the scene in which the bandits are introduced, it was integral that the spatial relations between all the characters were shown. When Shiro observes that he Kotori are completely surrounded by men with murderous intent, the imagery needs to clearly reflect this. The longshot also serves to establish the location and scenery, aspects which had hitherto only been briefly glimpsed on page 17 and given scant textual description – ‘jagged outline of treetops’ and ‘dark sea of vegetation’ were about as far as I got. (p.11 & 16) One aspect where I feel the previous version was superior to the latter is in the way the thieves’ individual panels appear to ‘surround’ Kotori and Shiro’s close-ups, mimicking the positions of

\(^{96}\) I did indeed end up doing this; character profiles appear on pages 36-37 of the novel.
the characters themselves. However, the final version of the layout is, I feel, far more successful overall.

As evidenced by Watsuki’s and Kojima’s examples, my adoration of *manga* influenced much of my own graphic novel’s content. My other inspiration, fairytales, as well as inciting the style of prose that I ended up using, also greatly affected the external appearance of the book. Since I hope to someday complete the entire novel, I chose to present this first instalment as a hardcover with an accompanying dust-jacket, the same binding that I intend to use for the complete edition. I can imagine the eventual full-length novel residing in a similar volume, albeit much thicker, once several chapters have been collected in a single publication. This format also follows comic-book trends; after an initial run of monthly volumes, series are often re-issued in deluxe collector’s editions, which have a better market value and more consumer attraction than the thin, flimsy initial printing (as I mentioned in Chapter 3.2.4, the Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée* industry was built around this principle).

My model for *Tsuruhane*’s layout was *Moribito*, the first of ten novels written by Nahoko Uehashi and illustrated by Yuko Shimizu. Every volume in the English-edition series is beautifully designed: filled with Uehashi’s graceful prose, chapters are divided by various title-pages which each completely cover a double-spread,

![Figure 79: Koike and Kojima introduce the Zodiac Gang. They first appear in the story’s opening pages, walking astride and seeming to approach the audience; the sight is intimidating, with whole layout spanning the entire double-page spread. Kojima later shows close-ups of each of the characters (top), better establishing their individual identities. (2001a, p. 50) When the gang confronts and surrounds Ogami (bottom), the panel again dominates the spread, showing all the characters’ spatial relations. (2001a, p. 86-87)](image-url)
showcasing Shimizu’s gorgeous artwork to best effect (another feature I incorporated into Tsuruhane, as seen on pages 6-7). The cover illustration wraps around the entire volume as a removable dust-jacket, printed onto a subtly-textured paper. This stunning publication emulates many traditional aspects of bookbinding; a lot of consideration obviously went into the finer details of the novel’s overall presentation.

As a self-confessed bibliophile, I could not resist adopting a similar layout for my own work. The cover binding of Tsuruhane was done in a cloth called ‘Marble Ombres: Blue Windsor’, designed by Holly Taylor for Moda Fabrics. Over this is a dust-jacket, bearing my own illustration. It was then printed onto Archer’s watercolour paper, to add another textural element and tie in with the painted finish of the book’s interior imagery. The endpapers are a Japanese yuzen paper, adorned with a pattern of waves and cherry blossoms in gold, lavender and navy.

Of course, all these exterior elements were added right at the end of the production process. Before I could even begin to think about covers or binding, I had to first complete the novel’s content. Once I had used my thumbnails to experiment with different layout options and gone through several drafts until I found the best-suited solutions, I was finally happy with the various ways I had chosen to arrange each page’s multiple components. Of course, if my layouts were properly serving their purpose, the audience shouldn’t notice them much at all. Usually when I read graphic novels, being a steadfast Animist, I barely ever noticed any of the frames

Figure 80: The first of Nahoko Uehashi’s Moribito series, with the dust-jacket half-removed to reveal the embossed spine and front cover. (2008, n. pag.) These English-language volumes were designed by Phil Falco, featuring artwork by Yuko Shimizu. Photos do not do the book justice; it’s impossible to see just how beautifully designed it is without actually seeing it and exploring it in a tactile sense.

97 Also known as ‘chiyogami’, yuzen is a type of handmade Japanese paper. The delicate sheets of mulberry fibres are silk-screened with elaborate patterns, and are often embellished, as these endpapers are, with gold leaf. (Shizen 2005, <www.shizencreations.com.au>) I also digitally overlaid Tsuruhane’s cover illustration with another yuzen pattern of a similar design.
themselves; I was always far more interested in what they contained. It was only when I set about creating my own graphic novel that I went back and re-read the works of other authors with a Formalist mindset, consciously studying the shapes and configurations of the frames on their own. Only then did I finally recognize the clever elements that Kojima and Watsuki had incorporated into their works.

Despite my momentary foray into Formalism, once again, form was here defined by function: the content of each panel decided what sort of frame would surround it, not the other way around. After all, the frame is merely a window into a fictional world; though it displays the view to the best advantage, it is not really part of the world itself, and as McCloud points out, “if a window frame has passed beyond our peripheral vision, it usually means we’re through it.” (2006, p. 164) The frames would serve as the all-important point of entry, through which my audience would access the narrative; next, I needed to give them something that was worth looking at. Once I had decided upon my finalized layout and my panel borders had been digitally drawn, the only thing left to do was to fill them with some artwork.

5.7 Scenery

“Worlds like this are worlds of the human imagination: their reality, or lack of reality, is not important. What is important is that they are there. These worlds provide an alternative… They give your world meaning. They do not exist; and thus they are all that matters.”


Since my novel was both a piece of ‘period’ fiction and part of the fantasy genre, it was doubly important that my narrative emulated a strong sense of time and location. In order for the story to fully resonate with its audience, I needed to create an evocative landscape which my readers could become immersed in.

The entire tale takes place during a single night, at a single location – Kujiki Valley, a small region that resembles rural Japan during the Muromachi period. The valley encompasses the shores of Lake Urashima, a small hut in the surrounding forest, and the foot of nearby Mount Kujiki. The setting is completely and utterly fictional, but is based on a real historical locale, many elements of which would seem completely foreign to most English-language readers. In order to ensure that my
audience fully understood my story, I had to make sure that they would first understand the context in which it occurred.

Like good set-dressing, the backgrounds of my images needed to tell part of the story. Says Neil Gaiman on the subject: “I always try and treat location as a character, and then watch how other characters interact with that location.” (Surridge 2009, <http://communities.canada.com>) This was an ideology which I took particular heed of; in the depiction of my story, one of the key ‘actors’, as it were, was the setting itself. A convincing setting would give my narrative greater credibility, as well as establishing an appropriate mood and dictating how my characters would interact with their environment. Furthermore, the story delves into the Japanese religion of Shintoism, a faith which believes that all natural elements contain a spirit or deity (kami). Some of the characters in the story are, in fact, the kami who embody their surrounding landscapes. With these considerations in mind, the scenery became an increasingly important component.

Space-filling images of generic trees would not suffice. The scenery that I drew needed to look like an actual Japanese forest. I have never been to Japan, much less any of its forests; however, I did an extensive amount of research. As well as looking at photographic sources, I also examined other artists’ interpretations of the local landscape. After looking at various works, I realized that there were two very different approaches that I could potentially take. I could either focus on resemblance,
creating landscapes which were vividly real and convincingly rendered; or concentrate on producing stylised, conceptual backdrops which receded into the distance, letting the characters that they surrounded take centre stage.

There were legitimate arguments for both camps. Scott McCloud, for one, is an advocate of backgrounds which, if not exactly photo-realistic, at least make more of an effort to impress the reader with their believability. He encourages artists to think of the scenery not as a ‘backdrop’, but as a drawn ‘environment’, which can potentially seem as real to the reader and it is to the characters who inhabit it. (2006, p.178) He emphasises the importance of research, observation, and attention to detail:

“For your readers, it can make the difference between knowing where your story takes place, and being there… Lots of otherwise talented artists tend to skimp on research – especially when on a deadline – with predictably bland, but passable results. But even a little extra effort in the research department can go a long way.” (2006, p. 159 & 176)

Obviously, artists who work in a realistic style will need to render realistic backgrounds to match their other visuals. However, even artists who draw in a ‘cartoony’ style will sometimes create believable background drawings. In particular, Belgian artist Hergé and Japan’s Osamu Tezuka98 both make frequent use of this technique. The high contrast in artistic styles makes the characters stand out against the realistically-depicted scenery. The ‘cartoony’ character’s status as a sort of complex pictogram, rather than an anatomically-correct human figure, allows the reader to ‘project’ themselves into their position, letting them enter the fictional world via proxy. McCloud refers to this effect as

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98 McCloud goes so far as to credit Tezuka with making this technique “virtually a national style” within Japan, yet another of the many conventions that the master-mangaka established. (1993, p. 43)
‘masking’. (1993, p. 42-3) Though the characters themselves are mere concepts, composed of raw visual components which suggest action and/or emotion rather than resembling actual life, their inherent traits can still manage to take on believable dimensions in this context, as the realistically-rendered scenery around them makes the story seem to take place in the ‘real’ world.

Realistic backgrounds are fantastic, so long as: a) you have the time and skill required to properly render them, and b) a sense of realism alone is enough to effectively transport your readers. My problem was that even when I found photos of real Japanese forests, they did not look particularly ‘Japanese’; unless they were bamboo forests (which are something of a cliché in the martial-arts genre), the photos of trees that I saw could have been anywhere in the world. They did not have the distinctive look that I saw in sumi-e paintings: wispy branches, gnarled ink-lined bark, and splatter-stroke foliage. It was these images that, to me, signified an authentic Japanese landscape; they prompted me to turn away from reality, looking for works which depicted scenery in a far more expressive and interpretive manner. One manga which takes this idea to the extreme is Kuro Gane; the trees that Kei Toume paints look like ink-blots, though given the context that they appear in, there’s no questioning what they are supposed to be. Some artists, including Nobuhiro Watsuki,

![Figure 83: Left](image1) Kei Toume mostly works in traditional media. Though the trees she paints are nothing more than black blotches, they serve their purpose as a backdrop and add to the aesthetic of the artwork. (2006, p. 160) **Top right**, keeping with the rest of his imagery, Watsuki’s scenery is stylized rather than realistic; yet even here, his inking retains its trademark clean, confident sense of shade and line. (2008, p. 343) **Bottom right**, this panel from Koike and Kojima’s Lone Wolf and Cub provides a scenic interlude amidst the constant carnage. This visual effortlessly conjures an innate sense of time and setting. (2000b, p. 155)
stylist their scenery to suit the aesthetic of their artwork. Likewise, Goseki Kojima’s drawings are practically *sumi-e* paintings themselves.

This doesn’t mean that artists who don’t draw in a realistic style are lazy or unskilled; their artwork requires just as much effort to render – though perhaps a different set of skills – as a realistic background. This type of imagery has a completely different emphasis: its purpose is not to convince, but to conceptualize. By skimming over the specific details of a locale, these backdrops put the characters’ actions and emotions firmly in the spotlight, amplifying the more abstract meanings behind the visuals. Quentin Blake is an illustrator who subscribes to this approach; he provides his narratives with “no scenery, just stage props where they are needed.” This is because backgrounds simply aren’t a high priority for him: “The towers and waterfalls and swamps of [the story] were important, but the scenery was not as important to me as the characters in front of it.” (2000, p.50)

At the extreme end of this realism/expressionism scale are those artists who abandon figurative imagery altogether, delving into the abstract for their background material. I mentioned back in Chapter 4.2 that Michelangelo would have had a hard time trying to carve a sculptural representation of David’s ‘courage’; however, painters like Van Gogh and Munch would probably have made short work of it. Much like the art of Expressionists or Surrealists, abstract backgrounds attempt to give visual expression to that which cannot be seen. These vivid surrounds may not tell the reader much about a character’s location, but they can reveal the tumultuous emotional landscape which lies within the characters themselves. This internal aspect is, in real-life interaction, imperceptible to the eye, and perhaps beyond even words to fully express; yet it is an integral part of not just good storytelling, but the entire human experience. This kind of approach, McCloud says, is well-suited to stories which

*Figure 84:* The Austrian princess Marie Antoinette, newly married to the French *dauphin*, must transgress her own moral code in order to avoid offending King Louis XV. Riyoko Ikeda illustrates her inner turmoil with a series of emanating ‘waves’, making her frustration visible to the reader. Ikeda humanized historical figures in her *Rose of Versailles* saga. (2003, p. 141)
emphasise the internal drama of a narrative, rather than mere external action:

“Even when there is little or no distortion of the characters in a given scene, a distorted or expressionistic background will usually affect our ‘reading’ of the characters’ inner states. Certain patterns can produce an almost psychological effect in the viewer. But for some reason, readers will ascribe those feelings, not to themselves, but to the characters they identify with.” (1993, p. 132)

The ‘reason’ for this is probably the proximity of the character to their psychological backdrop; rather than merely functioning as scenery, the imagery becomes an extension of the characters themselves, uniting object and environment on a single visual plane. In this sense, the entire panel becomes a glorified ‘thought balloon’, showing the audience the insides of the characters’ minds. I used this technique on various occasions in Tsuruhane. A prime example is on page 20, as Ujiki threatens Shiro; his intimidation manifests as a dark aura, which wafts across the split-panel in sinister waves.

Another very important aspect of an abstract background is the use of speedlines. Rather than revealing a location or emulating an emotion, these strokes depict a sense of motion, turning static imagery into an action shot. A solitary moment from that action’s duration is captured in a single frame, yet the lines track where object has been, and perhaps suggest where it will go next. The direction of the lines defines the direction of the character or object to whom they are attached; as such, they become an important means of depicting spatial relations and kinetic intent. This visual device is indispensable when it comes to depicting action sequences, of which Tsuruhane has many.

Figure 85: Left, the casuarina forest at the Hunter Wetlands Centre, situated just up the road from my university. (Author’s own collection) Whenever I drew the forests of Tsuruhane, I had this place and these trees in mind. Right, more casuarinas on the shore of Lake Macquarie, just off Swansea Channel. (Author’s own collection) I am lucky enough to live quite close to the lake; it was always my model for Lake Urashima.
The approach I took to drawing figurative scenery tended to focus on expressionism rather than realism. Whilst I sought to emulate some resemblance to actual locales in rural Japan, I also wanted to create a setting that was visually striking and suited the tone of my story. Most of the background elements that I used were created through a process of trial and error; I tried landscaping my panels with various plants, then simply drew and re-drew whichever ones seemed to suit my imaginary forest. Although most of the herbaceous varieties that I drew were purely fictitious, some of them were based on real life. In particular, I developed a mild obsession with the ‘casuarina’, also known locally as a ‘swamp oak’. (HWCA n.d., <www.wetlands.org.au>) This beautiful tree has several varieties which are native to Australia; it grows in coastal regions, and I often see it around my local area. The rough, highly-texturized bark and drooping, pine-like needles have an evocative look, corresponding almost perfectly with my mental image of my fictional forest.

Pines in general also fitted the description; they have long been considered a symbol of longevity and resilience, as the evergreen branches keep their verdant colour throughout the year. (Suckling 2000, p. 50) In Shinto practises, sacred trees were often enshrined, encircled with prayer papers and venerated as spirits. Within the story of *Tsuruhane*, Kotori has a particular affinity for pine trees; as a mountain goddess who embodies the elements of both earth and air, they are closely associated with her and her powers. 99 Fittingly, pine branches appear as a decorative motif,
partially framing her portrait on page 14. Similarly, Shiro is associated with waterlilies, primarily due to his near-drowning in the opening pages of the story. In *hanakotoba*, Japan’s traditional ‘language of flowers’, the waterlily’s cousin, the lotus blossom, is assigned the classical meaning ‘far from the one he loves’ (Sugiso 2009, <www.geocities.com/kazenaga23/hana.htm>); this is also appropriate, given how Shiro’s suicide attempt is prompted by his pining for his deceased sister. Such water-based flowers are often assigned transcendental qualities, since they defy the dark mud from which they were born, reaching hopefully towards the sky. (Finn 2010, <http://95bfm.com>) This draws a parallel with Shiro’s own quest for redemption.

When it came to drawing an entire forest of plants and trees, I arranged my landscapes in a series of layers, trying to create a naturalistic look. If the clusters of vegetation seemed too contrived or regimented, I would alter them, trying to replicate the incidental growth-patterns of untamed wilderness. Since my gang of thieves enter the story by stealthily emerging from the forest’s obscurant shadows, I had to make sure that the mass of trees looked sufficiently dense. I tended to divide my scenery into its own arrangement of foreground, midground and background, with the most detailed leaves and branches at the forefront. The objects behind them turn into mere dark silhouettes as they recede into the distance. I also added banks of dark, hazy ‘mist’ behind the treetops; this was a last-minute addition, but added a greater depth of field to my drawn environment; it suggests that much more of the dark forest lay beyond this imaginary vanishing point, merely obscured by a thick pall of darkness.
Since negative space plays an integral role in much of Asian art, I took care to incorporate this aspect into my own imagery. The primary instance where this principle was incorporated is on pages 6-7. The surface of the lake is technically transparent and invisible; therefore I left it undrawn. The water’s presence is instead suggested by various visual elements, such as the distortion of Shiro’s half-submerged figure, and the shadows of the ripples which are interspersed across the shallow bottom of the inlet. Also, because I was working with a singular colour-palette for most of the novel, value and texture became my primary means of distinguishing different surfaces from one another. Without this variation, the imagery could have degenerated into a chaotic blue-and-white mess. Luckily, my rendering technique was versatile enough to afford me a couple of differently-textured finishes: a stippling-like effect for lush banks of vegetation; intricate lines for veins on individual leaves; and dark silhouettes which still retain a slight sense of light and shadow, suggesting multi-faceted objects rather than flat ink on paper. One of my favourite textures is in the stones that appear on *Yokai Forest*’s titlepage. (See Appendix B) They have a suitably organic look, which surprised me even as I was painting them; this effect appeared completely incidentally, out of the reaction that the ink had with the wet brush.

Overall, I was very happy with the aesthetic appeal of the scenery that I drew. Though hardly realistic, it is instead evocative, and very much invokes the mood which I had originally intended to create. It served as an ideal grounding for both my imagined world’s physical landscape, and my narrative’s emotional terrain. Of course, much of the imagery’s success was rooted in the artistic medium and the rendering technique which I chose to use; both these aspects will be elaborated upon in chapters to come.
5.8 Text

“Stories, like people and butterflies and songbirds’ eggs and human hearts and dreams, are also fragile things, made up of nothing stronger or more lasting than twenty-six letters and a handful of punctuation marks.”


I should devote at least a few paragraphs to that other means of expression that contributed to my narrative’s depiction – written words. Although my project was predominantly ‘graphic’ in nature, text still had an integral role to play. The story could not have been depicted with the same level of clarity without the use of text (as I keep reiterating, I am not Shaun Tan). Although I predominantly express myself visual medium and am more accustomed to explaining things in visual terminology, I will nevertheless attempt to elucidate the literary component of my work.

As you should well know by now, Tsuruhane is roughly divided into two sections – illustrated prose and sequential visuals. Text plays a distinctly different role in each of these two formats. In the prose section of the novel, text is the primary method of conveying meaning. The images that appear beside this text support the data it contains, but let the prose be primarily responsible for the narrative’s conveyance. Scott McCloud, as well as illuminating practically every other aspect of the medium, has also identified several different ways of combining words and images within the context of the graphic novel. He would likely classify my illustrated prose as ‘word-specific’, i.e. a text/image combination where “words provide all you need to know, while the pictures illustrate aspects of the scene being described.” (2006, p. 130) This describes pages 12-15 of Tsuruhane well; the illustrations support the text that they accompany, providing corresponding imagery for the in-depth character descriptions I have written. Although they do not supply any new information, they do corroborate and confirm the meaning of the text.

This text/image relationship contrasts starkly with those that are present in the sequential art. Text here performs a range of different duties, and is combined with visuals in numerous different types of amalgamations. Most noticeably, this half of the novel introduces the use of word balloons. The balloons that appear in Tsuruhane can be further divided into two types: speech bubbles, which contain audible words and dialogue that the characters speak out loud, replicating the illusion of sound; and thought balloons, which contain a character’s inner monologue, imitating the
inaudible process of conscious thought. The other form of text that commonly accompanies sequential art is the sound effect. These are the comic-book equivalent of onomatopoeia; using expressive typefaces, they visually represent any non-verbal sounds which feature in the story. The latter part of my narrative comes to almost rely on these devices; practically all the text from page 25 onwards is a sound effect of some sort (unless you count Gunbei’s utterance of ‘ugh’ as dialogue). The arrangement of this typography was slightly strange for me, since I am so used to the sound effects which appear in manga; since these are written in Japanese katakana (usually with a small English translation beside them), I tend to think of them as nothing more than pictorial elements. When I came to similarly place English words in my panels, they appeared slightly stilted, as I was far more aware of their function as a language. Nevertheless, I arranged them as best I could.

Most of the sound effects that are used in graphic novels appear in the form of ‘montage’, i.e. “where words and letters take on pictorial qualities and are combined more freely with the pictures that surround them.” (McCloud 2006, p. 139) Words are incorporated directly into the imagery itself, so that the audience realizes that these ‘sounds’ are part of the fictional world’s environment. In the case of text that appears in word balloons or boxes, the type of relationship they have with their associated imagery is determined by the content of both elements, as well as which of the two is

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100 I gave thought balloons ‘hazy’ borders in order to distinguish them from spoken words (see p. 22 & 24 for examples). The particular style I adopted is similar to that used by Watsuki in Rurouni Kenshin. Elsewhere in Tsuruhane (p. 19 & 23), ‘thoughts’ also appear without any balloons to contain them.
given greater emphasis. Some of the sequential panels in *Tsuruhane* utilize a word-specific textual relationship, much like the prose does. A good example of this is the first panel on page 23: the text delivers the message (Kuno’s observation that Kotori is missing), which the imagery then complements (the uninhabited space in background implies her absence, while in the foreground, Shiro reacts to her sudden disappearance). Other frames do the exact opposite of this and are ‘picture specific’, making imagery the main vessel for meaning, while the text simply supplies an additional ‘commentary’. The first panel on page 24 does just this; Ujiki’s words only serve to confirm what the audience can already see. The third type of text/image combination used in *Tsuruhane* is ‘intersecting’. This is comprised of “words and pictures working together in some respects whilst also contributing information independently.” (McCloud 2006, p. 130) This idea is exemplified on page 20, in the sixth panel. Imagery and text each form part of the meaning: the *shuriken* (throwing star) in Ujiki’s hand reveals the implement at his disposal, whilst the ‘verbal’ threat in the speech bubble displays the intent behind it; the presence of the weapon further backs up his words, resulting in a symbiotic relationship between text and imagery.

A conspicuous feature of any text in *Tsuruhane* – other than its content or the balloon it appears in, if applicable – is the font that it has been set in. All the text, speech balloons and sound effects in *Tsuruhane* were created digitally. This was partly due to the relative ease of this process, as opposed to the traditional practice of having the text calligraphically rendered by a professional letterer. Digitally adding these elements to the page also helps to distinguish them from the hand-drawn imagery, preventing them from blending into image-laden backgrounds.

A variety of different fonts were used throughout the novel, each serving a different purpose. The stylised font on the dust-jacket is a decorative typeface called, rather fittingly, ‘Manga’. I found it on a font-sharing website and wrote to its designer, Neale Davidson, for permission to use on my front cover, which he happily granted. Individual letters from this font were also used to create the initial capitals which appear on pages 5 and 9. The prose is set in ‘Book Antiqua’, a typeface created by the Monotype foundry. This beautiful ‘roman’ typeface is well-suited to body copy; conservative enough to remain easily legible, yet possessing a warmth and character which sets it apart from more ‘geometric’ fonts, some of which can appear almost

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101 I do not happen to be acquainted with any letterers, and my handwriting is terrible!
clinical. The fact that it is reputedly “based on pen-drawn letters of the Italian Renaissance” (Shanks 2009, <http://web.nickshanks.com>) gives it a classic feel, and I must admit that the name of the font itself swayed me in its favour. I chose the typeface that appears in my speech balloons, a Letraset font called ‘Orange LET’, for similar reasons: its letterforms are not too regimented, meaning it can convincingly emulate hand-rendered lettering yet still be easy to read. All the other miscellaneous fonts that feature in the book were either free typefaces that were already loaded onto my computer, or were found on font-sharing websites. Some of these include ‘Wolf’s Rain’ (a decorative font used for the chapter headings on p. 6 & 7), ‘Adobe Ming Std’ (the font that all the Japanese characters appear in), as well as ‘Verdana’, ‘AR Christy’ and ‘Eastwood’ (all of which were used for various sound effects).

Although my lettering ‘ability’ shamelessly takes advantage of desktop publishing and computer software, Tsuruhane also contains a very small sliver of antiquity, and not just in its fictional setting. On the very first page, the novel opens with a form of traditional Japanese poetry known as a haiku. Though incredibly brief, this poetic style has a long and involved history, containing many established and enforceable conventions. The rigidly-structured verse is required to have a certain number of syllables in each of its three lines, adopting a ‘5-7-5’ pattern. This format is well-suited to the Japanese language, since its individual words tend to consist of very few phonetic segments; the grammatical structure is also fairly linear, making it a very concise means of verbal expression. (Haiku Society 2011, <www.haikusociety.com>) The haiku upholds many of the classic principles of Japanese art; it distils literature down to its barest, purest form whilst still managing to elegantly express a definite concept, using the least possible number of elements to do so.

Today, poets worldwide have adopted the haiku format, and English-language verses have become increasingly common. The haiku that appears in Tsuruhane is an original tercet which I wrote myself. Titled ‘Haiku for the Drowned’, it reads as follows:

“Dark waves embrace him
Water closes over him
Prince of Fishes now.” (p. 5)

Though I kept the haiku’s classic structure intact in my poem, many Western poets dispense with the more ethnically-specific features of the format, doctoring it to better
suit the rather erratic nature of the English language. Some of the truly purist attributes of Japanese *haiku*-writing, such as the use of a ‘*kigo*’ word and a ‘*kireji*’, are seldom found in verses from other nationalities. I incorporated these two techniques into my own *haiku*, more by accident than by design; perhaps in attempting to mimic traditional poetry, I unwittingly wrote these elements into my work, despite not being aware of their existence at the time.

A ‘*kigo*’ word is a noun, usually a naturalistic element, which references a particular season or time of year. (Haiku Society 2011, <www.haikusociety.com>) The connotations linked to this metaphor would have been understood by the average Japanese; a modern-day equivalent would be the association of holly and mistletoe with Christmas or roses with romantic occasions. In this respect, a *kigo* can act as a sort of ‘time stamp’, akin to an artist signing and dating their work once it is complete. This thereby transforms all *haiku* which contain a *kigo* into literary monuments, commemorating the transient nature of life. Although my use of an aquatic theme doesn’t directly reference any particular season, the naturalistic aspect of the *kigo* is still retained. This also ties in well with the prose’s opening lines, which state that the story takes place on “a cool night in early spring… on the shore of Lake Urashima”.

Another related, and similarly unintentional, technique which I just happened to use was the inclusion of phrases which invoke a sensory experience. Examples of these are my descriptions of the “cold, clammy” night air; the “damp smells” of the forest floor; and the way that the lake’s crashing waves merge into the sound of a crackling fire (p. 9-10) These compositions were again happy accidents, as they incite

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102 Some poets even go so far as to abandon the format’s integral 5-7-5 syllabic structure, simply stringing together three short sentences of random lengths, calling the result a ‘free form’ *haiku*. (Haiku Society 2011, <www.haikusociety.com>) I personally think that this is a step too far; it removes too much of the inherent challenge of *haiku*-writing, destroys the distinctive iambic structure, and is just plain disrespectful of the poem’s classical origins.

103 Japanese poems which omit *kigo* and *kireji* are sometimes referred to as ‘*senryu*’, a similar but slightly different form of classical poetry. These verses tend to deal with the antics and foibles of humanity as their primary theme, whilst *haiku* are almost exclusively dedicated to the natural environment. (Virgil 2005, <http://simplyhaiku.com>)

104 I only properly learnt what ‘*kigo*’ and ‘*kireji*’ were whilst doing research for this thesis.
almost all\textsuperscript{105} of the reader’s additional senses – touch, sound, and smell – to be engaged whilst they read, the graphic-oriented format having already exercised their sense of sight. Graphic novels are a solely visual media, or as McCloud calls them, “mono-sensory” (1993, p. 89); however, text and imagery can also mimic many other human experiences. Once the reader’s visual and verbal literacy is fully engaged, other sensations can be transmitted along these channels; this has already been demonstrated by the use of textual sound effects to imitate real-life noises. The intricate tactile descriptions in \textit{Tsuruhane}’s prose generate a wealth of multi-sensory emulations, which then inform and engage the reader on a variety of levels. Including these devices in the text may not always directly advance the plot, but they do go some way towards better fleshing out the world that the story inhabits, inviting the audience to explore the setting through as many of their senses as possible.

Whilst the \textit{kigo} was a fairly straightforward literary device, a ‘\textit{kireji}’ is much harder to explain, as it does not have any real English-language equivalent. A \textit{kireji}, also known as a ‘cutting’ word, is used to split the \textit{haiku} at a key point, signalling a sudden transition to a slightly divergent theme or idea. When English \textit{haiku} incorporate a \textit{kireji}, it tends to be in the form of punctuation, such as a dash or ellipses, rather than an actual word. (Haiku Society 2011, <www.haikusociety.com>) In my \textit{haiku}, the invisible ‘cut’ takes place between the second and third lines: the physical description of a drowning man ends, turning into his conceptual re-imagining as a ‘Prince of Fishes’.

In yet another merging of various inspirations, this last idea was inspired by Western fairytales, just as the story’s initial concept was. The influence of their distinctive literary style was prevalent throughout much of the prose,\textsuperscript{106} though the textual sections of \textit{Tsuruhane} were mostly written in what could be termed my ‘default’ writing style. I am lucky that I have practiced writing enough to have already found out, as Neil Gaiman described it, what \textit{I} sound like as a writer. (Gaiman 2004a, <www.neilgaiman.com>) This literary ‘voice’ was most likely already influenced by fairytales, since those are the kinds of stories that I often read, and which have prompted me to write my own narratives.

\textsuperscript{105} The only sense missing is taste. However, rice cakes will prominently feature later in the plot.

\textsuperscript{106} Since I have already mentioned some of my visual role models, I should list some literary ones as well. On this particular project, they included Hideyuki Kikuchi, Nahoko Uehashi and Neil Gaiman.
I completed the written parts of my narrative – both the prose and the script for the sequential art – well before I started work on any of my visual material. This meant that the textual sections were well-established by the time I began to lay out my panels, serving as a sturdy base for the rest of my novel’s content. I was fairly confident in my writing ability, and had been for a considerable amount of time. As an undergraduate, I had taken several Creative Writing courses as elective subjects, and I scored respectable, if not above-average, marks for my efforts. On reviewing a piece that I had written, one of my instructors described my choice of wording and phrasing as ‘seemingly archaic’. Though it was meant, I think, as a criticism, I have seldom since received a comment that pleased me more; it is an adjective which certainly seems to rather suit my preferred subject matter.

I know that my writing does not conform to current trends, as it doesn’t have the brevity or directness which modern styles seem to venerate (as evidenced by the Whitman example in Chapter 4.3). I tend to take a ‘maximalist’ approach; in particular, I have a habit of overdosing on adjectives. This is simply my idiomatic way of writing; certain traits make my work characteristically ‘me’. To again quote Neil Gaiman: “after a while you’ll have written enough that you can’t help sounding like yourself, whether you want to or not.” (2008, <http://journal.neilgaiman.com/>)

Of course, this could be said about my drawing style as well.

5.9 Rendering

“The word ‘sketch’ sounds a little light and vague for what is the illustrator’s essential daily tool.” – Mark Wigan (2006, p. 20)

The production of Tsuruhane’s imagery was, without a doubt, the single-most difficult and time-devouring aspect of the entire project. All the preparation, reasoning, plotting and practising I had done was of minimal currency when it came to actually putting something on the page. I found myself constantly pitted against an uncompromisingly blank sheet of paper, jousting warily at it with a sharpened pencil,

107 Not to appear conceited or anything!
striving to fill it with something that even vaguely resembled what I had envisaged during the planning stages. Of course, this was also the most important part of the whole creative process; if I had not spent all those painstaking hours at my desk with a pencil or paintbrush in hand, I would not have had anything to show anyone at the end (a possibility explored further in Chapter 6.5). The imagery I produced was the proving point of my entire project; it was the means via which my narrative ultimately came to life. In this vital stage I incorporated every lesson I had learned, every theory I had expounded, and every fragmented idea I had devised, gradually transfiguring these many threads into a single outcome.

As with many other aspects of the novel, the rendering technique I chose to use for the artwork was the result of much deliberation. The very first images I produced for *Tsuruhane* looked starkly different to what would actually appear in the finished book (see Figure 89, below). I originally intended to emulate the style that is predominantly used in *manga*: pen-drawn – usually inked with a nib-pen in order to generate some slight variations in the thickness of the lines – and with screentone applied for shading. This artistic medium is very much *de rigueur* for any type of *manga*-style publication. Book illustration also has a history in ink, as evidenced by artists such as Beardsley, Pyle and Clarke. This medium produces strong, stark lines which reproduce very clearly in print. I was also much inspired by Nobuhiro Watsuki’s rendering technique; his intricate use of hatching gives an extra depth and dimension to his imagery.

Figure 89: My original rendition of the artwork that appears on page 16 of *Tsuruhane*, done with felt-tip pens and digital screentone. (Author’s own collection)

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108 Screentone resembles sheets of clear contact that have been printed with a pattern. Artists cut shapes out of them and apply them to their artwork with self-adhesive backing. It is a quick and easy means of adding instant texture and detail to a drawing, without having to spend hours inking. Half-tone grids are commonly used as an alternative to stippling; when applied to a line drawing, they give the illusion of grey shading, in a way similar to pixilation. This makes it an ideal medium for print reproduction. These days, a lot of screentones are applied digitally instead of by hand.
However, after producing three or four pages in this style, I realized that the medium just wasn’t right for this particular project. I have always felt slightly uneasy working in ink, as it can be a very unforgiving medium; mistakes are difficult to undo, and a single stroke put wrong can instantly ruin an entire drawing. I wasn’t confident enough in my inking skills to produce the entire book this way. I was also unhappy with the artistic traits of this style; it looked too generic and did not seem to particularly suit my subject matter. Instead, I was becoming increasingly inspired by traditional Japanese painting, as well as the modern-day artists who were influenced by it in turn, such as Yoshitaka Amano, Kei Toume and Yaeko Ninagawa. However, sumi-e was just as fraught with complications as drawing with a pen. I had already spent years attempting to learn how to wield a calligraphy brush; I knew I couldn’t possibly become proficient enough to paint an entire book with one in the relatively short time-frame that I had. I wanted a rendering tool that would afford me as much control over the ink as a felt-tip pen, yet also emulate the line quality and expressiveness of sumi-e painting.

I experimented with a wide range of tools, including various pens and brushes, as well as a combination of the two: brush-pens. These pens have a flexible tip which tapers to a point, greatly resembling the shape of a calligraphy brush. However, they also contain built-in cartridges which regulate the flow of ink to the nib. This gives the user much more control than if they were using a regular brush, on which the bristles might unexpectedly splay in the middle of a stroke, and which would need to be repeatedly dipped in fresh ink.

Figure 90: Left, Watsuki creates a vivid sense of motion with his incredible pen-inked hatching technique. (2004b, p. 142) Right, this image, from the CLAMP School Detectives series, makes extensive use of screentones in its shading. (CLAMP 2003, p. 119)
As I tried out various types and brands of brush-pen, it seemed I was taking a step in the right direction. However, it would ultimately be serendipity which resulted in the discovery of my rather unconventional rendering technique. This fortuitous finding had already occurred, back in my first year as an undergraduate. I had bought a black Tombow dual-nib brush-pen and was showing my new acquisition to one of my tutors. She mentioned in passing that it appeared to be filled with water-soluble ink; I tested it, and found that this was indeed the case. I cannot remember exactly how it came about, but it eventually occurred to me to try using these pens much like aquarelle pencils, a medium which I already enjoyed working in. I found that I could make a small mark with the brush-pen on paper, then use a wet paintbrush to ‘bleed’ the ink across the page, teasing it out into delicate lines or spreading it over large areas to form graded washes.

The Tombow pen was perfect for rendering this particular graphic novel. At the commencement of this project, I hadn’t yet used this technique extensively; however, I had enough experience with it to know its potential and feel comfortable working with it. The black pigment found in pens is seldom actually pure black; in the case of the Tombow pen, it contains a predominant blue tinge, which I found to be very attractive. *Tsuruhane* is set entirely at night, so this monochromatic midnight-blue colour scheme perfectly suited my story. It reminded me of numerous works that I already admired, including Yuko Shimizu’s illustrations for *Moribito*, stills from the animated series *Mononoke*, and the blue-and-white *qīng-huā* patterns that traditionally

![Figure 91: The rendering process. From left, I began by strategically placing daubs of ink on the page, using the Tombow dual-nib brush-pen. The wider marks were made with the ‘brush’ end, whilst the finer dots for the hair were done with the narrower pen-nib. I then used a fine-tipped paintbrush dipped in water to ‘bleed’ the ink, spreading it in thin washes for the shading on the face, carefully coaxing it into thin lines for the hair (middle). I continued to gradually build up these washes, adding more ink as I needed it (right); the final step would be to carefully ink in the brows and eyelashes. (Author’s own collection)
adorn Chinese pottery. The reaction of the ink with the water also produced a very interesting and varied texture. The effect was, I thought, very similar to traditional ink-painting, yet far easier to control. Thus I had found a practical, versatile, visually-distinctive medium in which to render my artwork.

Once I had used my thumbnail sketches to determine my page arrangements, and the panels were entered into a storyboard which approximated their final layout, I could begin to produce my first sketches. I continued to use my thumbnails as a rough guide to get my camera angles, perspective and poses just right. The easiest way to begin, I found, was to sketch out my human figures on a blank page without any frames; I needed to properly draw the anatomy, even if my shot was tightly framed enough to exclude parts of it, to make sure that the overall pose was plausible. It almost always took me multiple attempts before I got each visual right; in some extreme cases, I had to do well over twenty draft versions of a single illustration, each traced from my first sketch with minimal changes, until I finally got it as close to ‘right’ as possible. Playing with my scanned images in Photoshop was both a help and a hindrance; it meant that I could correct things digitally with minimal fuss, but it also meant that I could easily obsess over tiny modifications. Sometimes my subsequent versions were better than the preceding ones; other times, I struggled for hours only to realize that my first attempt had been the best. I would often return to my roughs, searching for the feel and atmosphere which I had initially been trying to generate.

One of my greatest frustrations during this process was that I could not replicate the sense of ‘life’ which I somehow managed to imbue my messy first drafts with, yet could not seem to replicate in my clean tracings, which tended to come off as awkward or self-conscious. This was a problem that also affected Bill Watterson, creator of the caustically-witted *Calvin and Hobbes* comics. As he worked, he would

**Figure 92:** The very first artwork that I produced for *Yokai Forest*. At this stage, I was still using felt-tip pens for inking; however, most of the lines in this image were printed. Though initially meant as nothing more than an experiment, the technique was surprisingly effective. (Author’s own collection)
try to do “as little preparatory pencil work for the finished strip as possible, so the inking would be a real drawing encounter, and not a sterile tracing of pencil lines.” (Hilliard 2005, <www.andrews mcmeel.com>) It was a conundrum that I also wrestled with continuously, until another chance discovery showed me the solution; it would prove to be almost the polar-opposite of Watterson’s approach.

Whilst working on Tsuruhane’s prequel story Yokai Forest, I was still experimenting with my rendering technique. As part of my lead-up work, I printed out one of my scanned sketches onto watercolour paper so that I could practise inking it. When I showed the result to one of my fellow Scribble colleagues, she liked it and suggested that I use it as my final artwork. I had only intended to use it as a rough draft, but I actually liked the overall finish of the piece. After fine-tuning the process, I realized that I could scan my rough pencils into Photoshop, use the software to digitally tidy my linework, then ink directly onto a print-out, thereby retaining all the initial confidence of expression that had gone into my first sketch.

David Fairbairn is an artist who uses a fundamentally similar process: begins by first producing etchings or mono-prints which he then paints over, fusing multiple media together in layers to create an image with many artistic dimensions. (Rey 2011, p. 22) The spontaneous nature of print-making allows him to create his initial composition without any reservations; he can then elaborate upon this image during the final painting process. My method was a somewhat streamlined and modernized version of this. I used the digital scans to properly prepare the underlying pencils, getting everything just right before I began applying ink to my linework. This preliminary step gave me the confidence to paint in a far less inhibited manner, knowing that if I happened to make any mistakes, I could always just print out another set of lines and start again. I continued to take multiple scans throughout the process, as a way of documenting my progress and in order to generate numerous drafts which I could play around with at any stage. For example, if I was considering filling in my background with a dark wash, I could scan what I had already done of the foreground, print it out, and test out my idea on this draft copy; if I then decided to leave my background blank, I would have lost minimal time, and avoided potentially wrecking my entire drawing by impetuously acting on a passing idea.

Even though I was increasing the contrast of my sketches to darken them before printing them and inking over them, I was still basically working with pencilled lines. Graphite has always been one of my favourite media to work with, as
it is incredibly diverse and can create any number of nuanced results. Several other illustrators have adopted the pencil as their primary medium, including Kim Gamble, Michael Zulli and Hiroaki Samura. Zulli was the first artist at DC Comics to have his pencils published in their raw form; this was a hitherto almost inconceivable notion for a major publisher with a well-established house style. (Gaiman 1996, n.pag.) Although Zulli had been working on the *Sandman* series for some time, his lines were usually traced over by a professional inker. It was only in *Sandman*’s last issue, *The Wake*, that Zulli’s coloured but otherwise unadulterated art was finally sent directly to print. Zulli’s collaborator, Neil Gaiman, lauded this decision:

“Michael used to send me pencil pages, and they’d be breathtaking; and then they’d come back after being inked, and there would inevitably be some loss of detail, which saddened me… I’d say it [*The Wake*] is the only time the readers got a sense of what Michael Zulli really does, what his stuff actually looks like.” (White 2004, <www.michaelzulli.com>)

Zulli himself said of the medium:

“I find the gray whisper of the graphite line on paper incredibly evocative. When you ink something, you get a black line on white paper, and it’s irrevocable. But a pencil line slips between the cracks of perception; it can go somewhere else; it has possibilities.”


For an artist, sketching in pencil is almost an intuitive activity, made so by its incredible versatility. Mistakes are easily erasable; lines can be as transient or as permanent as the artist wishes; and the scrape of the graphite-point on paper produces a wonderfully raw tactile feel which is very enjoyable to work with.

Having produced *Yokai Forest* before starting on *Tsuruhane*, I had already begun to develop a work method which suited me. I tended to work on one page at a time, rather than laying out every single page in the book, then pencilling every page, then inking them all, etc. I found it heartening to have one page absolutely finished before moving on to the next. Also, establishing the overall aesthetic of the artwork early on helped me to determine the direction that the rest of the novel would take. I started with my rough storyboards, using them as a framework over which to trace my first draft; from here, I would begin to sketch furiously. I drew each panel as many times as I needed to, until I was satisfied with the final version. I then scanned my raw pencils into Photoshop as greyscale images. At this stage, I applied numerous filters, including ‘Despeckle’ and ‘Reduce noise’, to smooth out any rough areas. I increased the contrast of values, creating a more clearly-defined line. I also applied an ‘Unsharp mask’ to the entire drawing and manually removed any flaws or specks of dust that
had ended up on the scan plate. In some instances, I would make more drastic amendments, such as fixing figure proportions or composition, if need be.

Once I was happy with the pencilled image, I would import it into InDesign, where my master file for the book’s layout was set up. The frames in this file at first contained place-holder images, scanned from my thumbnails; as I finished pencilling each panel, I would replace the roughs with my clean linework. At this stage, I would digitally add all my lettering, speech bubbles and special effects; this step might necessitate some adjustments, as I needed to incorporate these textual elements into my imagery. The speech bubbles inadvertently covered up a significant portion of panel space, and so I needed to arrange my artwork around them, making sure nothing vital was lost. I also strove to amalgamate the digital effects with my hand-drawn artwork; words and letters were arrayed less like lines of text, more like pictorial elements. I might arrange the letterforms so that they followed the flow of the artwork, emulating the direction the sound came from (the numerous variations on ‘whoosh’ noises that I used were positioned like this). Alternatively, I could use the general

![Figure 93: Some of the artists who influenced my rendering style. Top left, Yuko Shimizu’s monochromatic illustration for Moribito. (Uehashi 2008, p. 141) Top right, a still from the Japanese animated series Mononoke. (Nakamura 2007, n. pag.) The distinctive artwork was later translated into a manga of a similar style, drawn by Yaeko Ninagawa. Far right, Michael Zulli’s coloured pencil-lines from The Sandman. (Gaiman 1997, p. 49) Bottom right, a sketchy panel from Hiroaki Samura’s Blade of the Immortal series; the manga has flirted with various artistic styles during its extended run. (2001, n. pag.) Bottom middle, one of Kim Gamble’s evocative illustrations from the much-loved Tashi novels. (Fienberg & Gamble 2001, p. 7) Bottom left, Kei Toume’s inking technique on the Kuro Gane manga emulates the style of an old sumi-e painting. (2006, p. 18)]
shape of the word itself to suggest the nature of the sound it represented; hence on p.26, the ‘thwack’ as Shiro’s sword hits Gunbei’s head appears to burst right out of the panel, conveying the volume and intensity of the noise.

When I was satisfied with the overall composition, I would then copy and paste each individual panel onto a blank InDesign page. Once the image was isolated, I further processed it, getting it ready to print and paint. I would first blow it up larger than my layout, so that the final artwork could later be reduced for print, thereby ensuring that there was no loss of quality; I generally worked at about 140 percent of the size of my intended format. I made the panel borders very thin, so that they would not show up in the final artwork; I would paint over them to provide a bit of extra bleed, ensuring that the image would fit its frame perfectly. If I intended to do another clean tracing over the printed lines, I would reduce the transparency of the sketch to as low as 10 percent; if I was happy with my lines and just wanted to redefine them, I would only tone them down slightly, to no less than 85 percent. I then printed each panel out onto its own sheet of watercolour paper. Smaller panels could fit on an A5 sheet; anything larger than A4 would not fit through my printer, so large spreads, such as the title page, had to be hand-traced onto A3 paper from scratch.

Once I had my print-out, I would draw over the lines again with a mechanical pencil, which gave me a far sharper line than the typical HB pencils that I used for sketching. From there, the most enjoyable stage of production could begin: inking. If I were working on a full-colour illustration, I would use Tombow brush-pens in a

Figure 94: Half-finished artwork from p. 18 of Tsuruhane. As you can see, I inked in the lightest areas, skin and (in Gunbei’s case) hair, before the darker clothes and backgrounds. Unfortunately, a lot of the details in the scenery, such as the leaves and branches in the upper right corner, were unavoidably covered by the speech bubble. (Author’s own collection)
variety of hues, as well as a selection of aquarelle pencils - predominantly the Derwent Inktense variety which, as the name suggests, provide a strong, vibrant pigment, but also dilute down well to produce delicate tints. Both these tools were employed in much the same manner, using the water-based technique which I mentioned previously, producing light washes. I also dipped the tips of the aquarelles directly into my tin of water before applying them to the paper, producing an instant injection of concentrated colour (the centres of the waterlilies on page 13 were drawn in this manner).

If I were working on one of the panels for the ‘sequential’ half of the novel, I would restrict myself to just a single black Tombow pen, with a white gel-pen on hand for adding extra highlights. I chose to do all the visuals in a single colour, purely because it was economically sound – not financially, as these pages were still reproduced with four process inks when they went to print, but in terms of practicality. The monochromatic palette saved me a lot of effort and a lot of time, as it was one less decision I had to make; I spent a lot of time on my full-colour illustrations just wondering what hue everything should be. The one black Tombow pen, on the other hand, gave me a range of subtle hues and values in a single implement; that particular blue tint has become something of an artistic trademark for me. I would usually start by inking in the lightest areas of the drawing, which were usually the skin tones of any characters present. If I were to start with the darker areas, I might accidently smudge wet ink across the rest of my drawing (I usually ended up with black-and-blue stained knuckles). Once skin and clothes were painted in, I would do the fiddliest bits last – the finer details like eyelashes, hair, and decorative elements on costumes. The background was usually last time, as it needed to balance the overall brightness of the image; dark figures might look better against a blank white background, for example. Once everything was inked, I only had to go over the linework once more with a pencil to redefine it, and add some white highlights with a ballpoint gel-pen.

Figure 95: Some of the background textures (left) and speedlines (above) which were used in my artwork. They first appeared in Yokai Forest and were reused in Tsuruhane. (Author’s own collection)
The entire process very much alternated back and forth between tradition (albeit unconventional) media, and digital technologies. Once the artwork on paper was complete I returned to my computer desk, scanning the drawings into Photoshop once again. I applied much of the same effects as I done to the linework previously. The final version was cleaned up with various filters which removed eraser dust, as well as any printed pixels that showed through from the printed lines. This happened occasionally; when I had processed the linework, areas that might appear pure white on screen might actually be 1 per cent black, causing a faint dot-grid to appear on the page. This was removed quite easily with the ‘Despeckle’ and ‘Reduce noise’ filters, as well as the Clone tool where necessary.

Although the drawings in *Tsuruhane* were predominantly hand-drawn, a number of digital elements were used to finish them off. One technique I used, in order to further save myself some time, was to paint my speedlines and background textures on a separate page, scan them, and reuse them at various instances. Pretty much all the speedlines that appear in *Tsuruhane* are actually alternate versions of the one set which first appeared in *Yokai Forest*. The lines were inked with my brush-pen technique, scanned and pasted into a new image layer, then altered so that they faced the right direction. I sometimes also painted my backgrounds on a separate sheet of paper, then digitally stitched the two drawings together to form a composite image, placing the scenery on a separate layer and masking it around my figures. This way, if I then some slight compositional change to my layout, I could simply move my figures around as separate elements within the landscape, like actors in front of a painted backdrop. The red trim on Kotori’s outfits was added digitally; the red markers that I originally used tended to scan pink. I wanted to consistently reproduce the exact same shade of crimson without ruining the colour-balance of my entire drawing in my attempts to fix it. I used textures from the rest of the drawing to make these digitally-rendered red areas blend in with the rest of the imagery, colouring over them and lightly shading them with the ‘Burn’ tool to get the end result.

The most obvious piece of digitally-rendered artwork in the novel is actually on the outside; the image on the dust-jacket is completely digital. Like a lot of other aspects of the project, this came about purely by accident. The original sketch that I did for the cover appears on page 39 of *Tsuruhane*, at the beginning of the sketch gallery. I had intended to render this image much like the interior artwork and I was playing with the scanned drawing in Photoshop, planning what I would put in the
background. Purely by chance, I looked at the masked background layer on its own, and noticed the ‘silhouetted’ effect that I had inadvertently created. I rather liked it, and decided to use it as it was, adding other digital elements to complete the cover. Luckily my sketch was already quite clean, so it translated well into a clear silhouette; I imported the shape into Adobe Illustrator, using vector tracings to tidy the edges, but still retaining some of the sketchier elements from my original drawing (such as the wisps of hair). The feathers and cranes were also drawn in Illustrator; the mist and waterlilies were repetitions of elements from the illustration on pages 6-7. The background was a series of textured papers which I scanned and layered in Photoshop: a subtle marbled parchment for the silhouettes; and a yuzen paper, similar to the one that I used for the endpapers, adding additional interest to the negative space. I am rather fond of this style of imagery; it resembles the works of Arthur Rackham and Jan Pienkowski, both of whom have used similar imagery to illustrate fairytales (see Figure 96, below). If I had discovered this look sooner, I would have incorporated more of it into the novel’s actual content.

Once the final artwork was done, the only thing left to do was to place it in the InDesign layout. There might be a bit more fiddling involved – adjusting gutter spaces between panels, shifting a speech bubble slightly to make way for visual elements, and other stylistic minutiae. Some post-processing was then needed to prepare the file

Figure 96: Illustrations by Arthur Rackham (left) and Jan Pienkowski, from their respective fairytale anthologies. (KPL 2011, <www.kpl.gov>; Pienkowski 2006, p.viii) Both artists combined clearly-defined silhouettes with intricately-textured backdrops, much like I did. As fate would have it, Pienkowski’s use of silhouette was accidental, just like mine. Mere hours before having to meet a client, he realized that “the faces [of the drawing] were not right. At the last second I had an inspiration and filled them in with black Indian ink.” (Pienkowski 2006, p. vii)
for print: I set up page bleed and crop marks, converted my more decorative fonts into outlined objects, and flattened the artwork. The complete file was then ready for delivery. A few weeks later, after visits to the printer and the bookbinder, I finally had the finished novel in hands. Although the process sounds simple enough when recounted here, it was in reality an exhausting process that covered many months, required multiple steps that were repeated countless times over, and had to navigate around many minor setbacks. Despite this, the final product was well worth it.

However, how well did my amateur, self-published creation stack up against the professional works which had informed and inspired it? If I were to review my own work, just as I had done with works of others in the case studies of Chapter 4.5, how would my graphic novel fare by comparison? This was the next question that I asked myself, as my studio practise finally came to an end and I had time to properly reflect back upon all that I had just done.
Chapter Six

Exegesis
As I have already mentioned back in the methodology, an ‘exegesis’ is a study of texts. In the case of this particular study, the text that I will be examining is the very one that I created myself. You may think that there must be very little else I could reveal about my creation, which a reader could not discover for themselves simply by reading *Tsuruhane* from cover to cover. However, this is not entirely true. Shaun Tan refers to the finished book or artwork as the ‘tip of the iceberg’ (Graphic 2010, n. pag.), and that is just what *Tsuruhane* is. Although it is the result of a process, it does not represent the entire process itself.

I have already performed a partial critical examination of my work, explaining the stages of the novel’s production in roughly the same order in which I performed them. By doing so, I have deconstructed the novel, laying it out in its individual components (story, characters, layout, etc.), explaining why and how each piece is integral to the united whole. I have recounted the knowledge which I myself had gleaned from outside sources, and which informed my practise before I ever even took up a pencil. However, I haven’t yet fully covered what that practise has taught me in turn, i.e. what I learnt while I had a pencil in hand. The previous chapter revealed the ‘what’, ‘how’, and ‘why’ of the creation process: i.e. what I did, how I did it, and why I chose to do things in these specific ways. What it didn’t reveal was the myriad theoretical junctures and artistic crises which occurred in between each successful step – a whirlwind journey which included episodes of the frustrating, the illuminating and, above all, the unexpected.

As well as reviewing my own work, I will investigate the relationship which I have formed with that work. Though it is a simple story, the graphic novel itself plays a number of roles, and is numerous different things to me. It is the result of a part-strategic, part-instinctive working process; a physical and visual artefact, with which I, or anyone else, can interact with as an audience member; a contribution and homage to the industry which I hope to someday enter into; and a catalyst for the many profound revelations that I had about what I do, and what I wish to achieve within my craft. The project taught me pretty much everything I know about just what it means to work in a creative field. It taught me not just the practical hand-skills and image-making parts of the process, but also the complex headspace that comes with it. It was as much an exercise in philosophy and psychology as much as it was a physical activity; and it is these aspects that I will cover in this exegesis.
6.1 Review: Self-Criticism vs. Self-Encouragement

“I myself continue to find new meanings in the words and pictures as I did when producing the story over the course of a year.”


I began my research as a reader, analysing and reviewing the works of others. Why shouldn’t the process come full circle, now that the practical component of my study has yielded a graphic novel, which is itself fit to be reviewed? When I came to write this entire section of my dissertation, recording my studio practise after the fact, I had had some time to reconsider my work with a bit more impartiality. While I was actually creating the novel, I could not separate the product from the process; now, sufficient time has elapsed to somewhat distance myself from my *opus*. My personal attachment to it is not as pronounced as it once was, so I can now begin to view it with greater objectivity. With my task as amateur ‘creator’ over, I can put down my pencil and brush and switch sides once again, returning to my initial role as a reader. While my opinion of my own novel will still inevitably be somewhat biased, I can at least try to emulate how an external audience might evaluate my work.

I doubt whether any author genuinely enjoys critiquing themselves. The exercise can very rapidly turn into a negative experience (or else degenerate into an ineffectual case of bravado). Finding flaws and faults in past works incites self-doubt and discomfort at best, self-loathing and severe despondency at worst. Judging by what I have read, time seems to be a significant factor in the artist’s dissatisfaction with their past projects. Even artists such as Scott McCloud, Nobuhiro Watsuki and Hayao Miyazaki, whose contributions to the medium have earned each of them great accolades and commercial success, all admit that they feel only frustration when they look back at some of their earlier works. Authors also tend to focus on particular aspects of their respective repertoires, targeting areas which appear to be their personal shortcomings. *Blade of the Immortal* creator Hiroaki Samura exhibits both of these self-critical tendencies, venting his disappointment in an afterword he wrote for one of his artbooks. He is generally unhappy with the greyscale artwork that he produced for the earliest volumes of the *Immortal* series; it is his full-colour covers which continue to depress him:

“When I produce a black-and-white *manga* episode, it’s always painful to look back on it a few years later, when I’m struck by all of the
flaws in the designs… I always open it gingerly, holding my breath, and snap it shut as quickly as possible. It’s very hard on the heart. Of course, this isn’t a bad thing, really, as it means my abilities have improved somewhat over time… The only exception to this rule concerns my colour illustrations. Whether I’m looking at a colour illustration from long ago or one I’ve done recently, the strain on my heart is about the same. This is because I’ve never, to this day, produced a colour illustration I can be happy with.” (2010, n. pag.)

Luckily, Samura’s summation of his own work isn’t all pessimistic; as evidenced in the statement above, he still views the mistakes that he has made as positive learning experiences which have taught him how to progress and improve as an artist. Chances are that one day, he will finally paint a colour image that he can be proud of (since he has actually released an artbook which compiles these works, he mustn’t be too ashamed of them). If I can glean similar lessons from my own project, I really couldn’t ask for anything more, from the process or from the product.

Though the self-critiquing process can be painful, it can also be cathartic, and it is something of a necessary evil. In my own experience, I have been told by instructors (particularly in design work, especially in front of clients) that I should be more assertive, less depreciative in my attitude towards my own efforts. However, I believe that anyone who blithely stands beside their work and claims that it is completely faultless actually has less confidence (and more to hide) than one who can openly acknowledge that aspects of their work could have been better. After all, mistakes and imperfections are nothing more than results of choices made; even if they are not the best choices, the author rationalised them at the time of making them. One ill-advised choice may help them to realize what other options are available to them, should they encounter similar situations in future projects.

A healthy sense of self-criticism, however, should not be confused with artistic nihilism (of which Samura appears to have a touch). It is one thing to be driven towards greater success by past disappointment and quite another to never be satisfied, constantly chasing an ideal which never comes anywhere within grasp. Kenneth R. Ginsburg emphasises the difference between being either a ‘high-achiever’ or a ‘perfectionist’. The former has the right amount of ambition and self-expectation, “driven by a healthy desire to achieve”; whereas the latter is spurred on by a detrimental “inability to accept anything less than a masterpiece.” (2011, n. pag.) Anyone who is striving towards any sort of goal must set themselves aims that are attainable; otherwise they will only be setting themselves up for failure. However, nor
does this mean that artists should simply settle for less than they are truly capable of, resting on their laurels and repeating past successes without trying to push themselves any further. Perhaps the Classicist tribe has got it right; according to McCloud, they understand “that perfection may not be attainable in this life – but that that’s no reason not to strive for it.” (2006, p. 230)

So, what is my opinion of my own work, now that I have the space to step away from it and look at it with a hyper-critical gaze? I certainly cannot profess that Tsuruhane does not have any flaws. My main weaknesses, as I perceive them, are both my anatomy drawing, and the way in which I attempt to portray three-dimensional perspective. While I am fairly forgiving of the full-bodied figures that I have drawn, my faces look rather more awkward than I would like; the expressions that my characters wear do not reach the full potential they might have had for conveying internal drama to the audience. Whilst I made sure that all my fight scenes were carefully choreographed on a technical level, and I had a fair sense of their spatial relations in my head as I invented them, I still had a great deal of trouble translating this visual language into my visuals. I was effectively trying to depict three-dimensional events using a two-dimensional medium, and in the ‘flattening’ process, some of the full effect of the sequence was lost. Techniques like depth of field, camera angles and foreshortening could have been better utilized in these images. Overall, the figures that I drew all look a little wooden, and the action doesn’t flow as well as I had hoped. Even the crux of my project, the combination of words with images, could have perhaps reached a higher potential; I would consider producing my own hand-rendered textual elements next time, rather than simply relying on computer fonts, which occasionally come across as generic and stilted.

If I wanted to, I could pick out a number of specific instances where the typesetting was not as tight as it should have been, or particular panels of artwork which don’t quite come up to scratch. In fact, before my master file finally went to the printer, I delayed production by going back and re-drawing a number of panels which I wasn’t happy with. I had to stop myself from doing this too much, as I could have drawn and re-drawn my entire novel over and over again indefinitely, without ever creating a version that I was one-hundred-percent happy with. Scott McCloud faced a similar situation whilst preparing an anthology of his Zot! comics for print. In an author’s note which follow his Eisner-nominated story ‘The Conversation’, he reveals that he was so dissatisfied with the artwork, he considered giving it a complete
overhaul: “Throughout this collection I’ve made a few adjustments where possible, but the only way I could fix this one [story] eighteen years later is by drawing it over from scratch, and in that way madness lies.” (2008a, p. 535)

Though da Vinci reportedly took years just to paint the lips of the Mona Lisa, most of us just do not have that much time to commit to a single project. Looking at it from an algebraic point of view, I had (x) amount of time to produce something, put (y) amount of effort into it, and the result was (z). What other formulas could I have possibly followed? If I had had double the amount of time (2x), perhaps my (y) and (z) variables would have been different; perhaps I would have put even more effort in, and my product would have been better. However, I certainly can’t guarantee that, and I did not have an extendable time frame in which to work. I had just one closed time frame in which to produce my novel, in a single attempt, and with a single result. No matter how generous my time frame might have been, I would have had to eventually and inevitably narrow down the infinite possibilities of what I could make, to a single actuality which I really would make. As Shaun Tan puts it, in any kind of creative work or endeavour, “you have to pick one [option], and you have to hope that

![Figure 97: An image which readers were never supposed to see. This is the first version of page 23, panel 1 that I drew for Tsuruhane. I was unhappy with Shiro’s woefully wooden-looking pose and weak expression, so I completely re-drew him. I kept the original background scenery, digitally pasting my new figure over the top of the old one; luckily, my work file in Photoshop still retained its original split-layers of imagery, so my speedlines were completely unaffected. The version that appears in the final novel is probably an improvement; however, it could probably also still be better. (Author’s own collection)](image)

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109 Admittedly, mathematics is not my strong suit!

110 To be honest, I ran a bit past my deadlines, but I tried to keep my final delivery dates within the same stratosphere as my original schedule.

111 As yet, at any rate; like Watsuki, this might merely be my first ‘pilot’, with the ‘real’ version yet to come. For the sake of this study, however, I really did have time for only one attempt.
this is a good one. You try out a few, but you don’t have all the time in the world, you have to physically do something.” (Graphic 2010, n. pag.)

It may sound as though my view of my own work is all doom and gloom; however, this is hardly the case. I really have a lot of affection for my first graphic novel. Every aspect of it is completely my own invention, and as such, it expresses a part of myself in some abstract fashion. The reason any creator will feel naturally protective of their creation, whatever other feelings they may also have attached to it, is that they have invested so much of themselves in what they have produced. If I hadn’t believed so strongly in my concept from the start – if I hadn’t had any confidence in my rendering ability, or if at any stage I had seriously questioned my conviction to my task – I would never have been able to produce the final product. Some of this inherent self-belief must have transferred into the final product. In time, my regard for my erstwhile progeny may well improve, as it has in other instances.

The prequel story that I produced for Scribble, *Yokai Forest*, was completed well before I started producing my final artwork for *Tsuruhane*. I have had a lot more time to develop a relationship with it as my own creation. Like Watsuki and Samura, a lot of the flaws which had not been obvious to me during production were suddenly glaringly obvious, once I read it in its final published form. *Scribble* had an even tighter production schedule than I had on my own project; this meant that I cut even more corners, and made more allowances for sloppy artwork, sending things to print which I still wasn’t completely happy with. But you know what? I do not hate the end result. Admittedly, I still had a slight cooling-off period after *Yokai Forest* went to print (especially when I looked at it alongside the other fantastic works that were produced by my colleagues). Still, the backlash wasn’t as harsh as it might have been; I am proud to take ownership of that story, as it is distinctly *me*, and I still appreciate its value as such. I can see myself regarding *Tsuruhane* in a similar light someday soon. Though I can now clearly see many of its flaws, I shall one day be able to enjoy the proverbial ‘forest’, without having to see a blight on any of its single ‘leaves’.

And that is because at its essence, *Tsuruhane* is a story, not a collection of artworks or a piece of literature. It is not really a ‘product’ or an ‘object’; it is a narrative, a fable, an *experience* which the reader has, and will hopefully be evaluated in its entirety. Even if parts of it are flawed, other aspects of it that are stronger may well be able to redeem it. However much I might question its outward appearance or aesthetic appeal, I have never doubted the quality of the story that lies at its core.
Though the visuals certainly have some scope for improvement, I am completely happy with the story that I have told. Now that I know how to compose an engaging narrative, I can subsequently learn ways to better convey it through visual means. The fundamental invention of the story in the first place, however, was something that I feel I have already begun to master. I am an Animist, not a Classicist; story is always my first priority, and so long as this aspect is strong, I needn’t be too harsh on myself. I can only cultivate the optimistic hope that eventually, my skills as a draughtsperson will match the agility and capability of my imagination. After all, the whole point of self-critique is not to sulk over mistakes made in the past; its main purpose is to seek new aspirations, and to foster hopes for what can be achieved in future endeavours.

6.2 Trials and Revelations

“Is it not the point of adventures that you learn much, but not the things you thought of?” – Anthony Minghella (1997, n. pag.)

At the beginning of this project, my main objective was to create my own graphic novel. However, almost from the moment that I started, I realized that the destination was only a small part of the entire journey. I knew (or at least, was optimistically certain) from the outset that my project would result in the creation of a graphic novel; what I could never anticipate were all the amazing things that I discovered along the way. As well as learning how to do something that I had seldom done before and wanted to do better, I gleaned many other valuable lessons from this experience. I discovered things which I certainly had not anticipated, and was provoked into thinking about things which I had never considered before. This in itself is of immeasurable value. I can now apply these to whatever future projects I might embark on.

Though it was I myself who had done these things and developed these outcomes, I was not immediately able to articulate just what I had experienced, nor fully evaluate what I had created. At this point, I became increasingly thankful that I had made an effort to document my thoughts and impressions of the project whilst I had been in the midst of carrying it out. It was only when I read back over my journals and compared separate entries over an extended period of time that issues which had
permeated the entire process, yet had escaped my notice during the fact, slowly began to emerge. It was only when I stopped and explained the chain of events for the benefit of an outsider (i.e. you, the reader of this thesis), that I fully realized all that I had done. All those artistic choices, which had seemed so incidental and almost instinctive at the moment of making them, suddenly gained my full attention for the first time. With this change of perspective, I was able to take what had been a rapid succession of intuitive decisions and interpret them into a series of problem-solving exercises. The process was, however, still only partially conscious and intellectual; the rest can be best described as intuitive, a state of creative thinking which only seemed to arise when I applied the pencil-tip directly to the paper.

If I am going to review the ‘product’ of my research, the process itself was as much a product as the actual, physical object of the graphic novel. These chapters of my dissertation are presented as a series of miniature-essays in their own rights, reflecting the fragmented nature of my collective knowledge. They cover a range of topics, from the specific to the general; the universal to the personal. For the most part, these findings only breed more questions than they manage to answer; but despite this, I still consider them to be legitimate outcomes of the practical learning process. They recount the inner conversations that I had with myself, and invite further dialogue with anyone who may happen to read them. If you are a creative practitioner in any range of fields, the greatest and most productive thing you can possibly do to help yourself is to be present within your authorship – noticing, appreciating, and actively critiquing all that you do, either whilst you are doing it, or a short time after. At the end of the day, studying the observations of others and the surface values of pre-existing works will only teach you so much. When you begin to examine your own inner mechanisms and explore your imminent potential, the true learning process really starts.
6.3 By Art or By Design: Defining Illustration

“Some people have been kind enough to call me a fine artist. I’ve always called myself an illustrator. I’m not sure what the difference is. All I know is that whatever type of work I do, I try to give it my very best.”
– Norman Rockwell112

What discipline does the graphic novel belong to? This may seem like a simple (and at this point, somewhat belated) question. Yet the ultimate answer remains ambiguous, as it asks for definitive boundaries to be drawn between three very similar fields: design, art, and illustration. For example, Gary Spencer Millidge defines design as being “all about visual communication and presentation, a discipline which combines symbols, images, and/or words to express ideas and messages.” He then adds: “That’s not a bad definition of comics in itself.” (2009, p. 8) However, to merely define anything that uses symbols, images and text as ‘design’ would be erroneous, as lots of things conform to this description, whereas some types of design do not fit it at all. For quite some time, I have felt that there are distinct differences between the three disciplines, and that each must be defined in its own right. This may very well be a goal better suited to its own thesis; however, I shall include a brief outline of my own findings here, since it directly relates to both how the graphic novel is regarded in industry terms, and how I myself view my own work.

There is no doubt that all three disciplines are quite similar, sharing many common attributes; there also exists between them many distinct differences. The best and only way I can attempt to define them is to state what I have discovered through personal experience. In hindsight, from the time I first began studying graphic design as an undergraduate, I had already confused ‘design’ with ‘illustration’, and most likely with ‘art’ as well, in my own mind. It was only when my tutors began to tell me that my work was ‘too illustrative’ that I began to notice this source of contention, and by my second year of study, I was beginning to question my own perceptions of what I was doing – was I ‘designing’ or ‘illustrating’? Whilst I have heard some people113 in my academic community claim that ‘design’ and ‘illustration’ are more or less the

112 Cited in O’Malley 2010, <www.sheilaomalley.com>

113 To avoid embarrassment, these entities shall remain nameless.
same thing, I soon realized that this couldn’t possibly be the case, since my own views seemed to constantly conflict with what my lecturers considered ‘design’ to be.

A fellow sufferer of this syndrome is renowned Australian author and illustrator Graeme Base. In an interview conducted by Talking Heads host Peter Thompson, Base recalled his short-lived foray into a career as a ‘commercial artist’. This sojourn terminated quickly – he was fired from the third business that hired him – when he realized that the industry held very little appeal to him; in his words, “I hated it, and it hated me!” He had no interest in drawing diagrams of “insulation bats in a roof cavity... I couldn’t get excited about it… Something in my brain said, ‘This is just a dead waste of time, Graeme. Why don’t you leave?’” (P. Thompson 2009, n.pag.) This may make Base seem like a mere prima donna; however, I, for one, can sympathize with him. It was not just a matter of Base wishing to pursue subject matter of his own choice; before going on to write and illustrate his own books, he made a career illustrating dust-jackets and covers for other people’s narratives, in particular science fiction and fantasy stories, which he found much more enjoyable than his ‘commercial design’ career. The issue was not so much a desire to narrow his scope of work – as Base says to demonstrate the range of his creativity: “I’ve got ideas for toys, I’ve got ideas for industrial design, I’ve got an idea for a vacuum cleaner” (P. Thompson 2009, <www.abc.net.au>) – but a matter of approaching the very thinking process behind creativity in an entirely different way.

I eventually came to the realization that since the general methods and actions utilized in design, illustration and art are all very much alike – all involve creating some sort of imagery by making marks on paper, on canvas, or on a computer screen, as their most basic modus operandi – a better means by which to separate them may be found by looking at the motivations behind each discipline.
6.3.1 ‘Design’

Design, as a process, is present in the creation of most, if not all, of our artefacts and everyday items. Graphic novels can be ‘designed’; artwork can be ‘designed’; cars, fashion, furniture, appliances – the list goes on. The theory behind one type of design may not apply to all fields of design, and so for the sake of this study, the definition of ‘design’ shall be limited to two-dimensional forms of published visual material.

Schön believes that the designer’s role is “that of integrating the results of inquiry into the use-system and user requirements; conversion of user requirements into performance requirements and these, in turn, into linked specifications for component products”. (Dickinson 2006, p. 10) This statement may sound a little dry; in the most basic of terms, design is the organization of visual elements (i.e. imagery and text) in a way that is conducive to first penetration, then understanding. In other words, design usually has a dual purpose of first attracting a suitable audience, then informing that audience.

Whilst this may seem to be true for most examples of art and illustration as well, design can be characterized by acting as a sort of ‘visual signpost’, leading viewers to a larger real-life entity. For example, advertising will direct consumers to a particular product; a simple logo represents a far more complex company or brand, etc. Design is a biased form of communication, seeking to convince and prompt the viewer to take further action. It seldom represents itself; it is constantly associated with some other entity, such as a company, product, client-like figure, or greater purpose. Design is something of a servant to culture, always needing justification and contextualization in order to have a definitive purpose.

6.3.2 ‘Art’

In some ways, art acts as an antithesis to all that design does. Whilst design has to broadcast itself amongst the veritable static of visual material that clutters human experience, art has – comparatively speaking – less of a struggle. Brochures and posters which advertise an exhibition deal with this conundrum; art itself is
presented on gallery walls, expecting by default to have a ready audience. Art, then, can be a bit more self-indulgent than design, and can take more liberties with its audience. Its meaning can be as subtle or as obvious, as deep or as shallow, as thought-provoking or vapid as the artist desires. Of the three entities, the range of intentions behind the construction of imagery is probably greatest within art.

In terms of form, art is often far more self-contained than the other two disciplines. Whereas design is a bi-product of client or consumer demand, art exists purely for itself, and therefore its meaning is also contained wholly within itself. Art seldom needs to rely on an accompanying textual explanation, nor should it. An artwork can be self-sufficient in conveying its message on its own, existing as an independent entirety.

6.3.3 ‘Illustration’

Of the three, illustration is probably the most ambiguous term. A prevalent and pervading view from outside the field tends to be that the discipline is nothing more than a mere genre, style, or otherwise derivative vein of visual expression. Adrian Shaughnessy demonstrates (but does not fully subscribe to) this patronizing view; he compares the disciplines as follows:

“Graphic design’s eclipsing of illustration is explained by illustration’s lack of verbal explicitness. Graphic design is almost exclusively about precise communication, and its facility to combine words and images makes it a far more potent force than illustration… Graphic design’s ability to deliver explicit messages makes it a major (if little recognized) force in the modern world: it is embedded in the commercial infrastructure. Illustration, on the other hand, with its woolly ambiguity and its allusive ability to convey feeling and emotion, makes it too dangerous to be allowed to enter the corporate bloodstream. Our visual lives are the poorer for this.” (2006, n. pag.)

According to Shaughnessy, one of the criticisms levelled at illustration is its lack of directness. This generalization is debatable; some forms of illustration, such as

114 The term ‘art’ here means pieces that are exhibited, the same way ‘design’ refers to published material; dusty canvases sitting in storage are not included in this definition, for obvious reasons.

115 In the cases of numerous pieces being grouped into a series, this collective could be thought of as a single, segmented ‘artwork’.
editorial or satirical, can be bitingly direct in the declaration of their inherent views. Besides, an indirect means of visual communication is not always a bad thing; just look at Shaun Tan, whose visuals are very deliberately ambiguous, yet manage to convey so much and affect people so profoundly. In defence of illustration, and specifically of his own work, he says:

“This [the discipline] can perhaps be best explained when we ignore any straightforward understanding of a word like ‘illustration’; that is, illustration as a visual clarification of an idea, or a form of literal demonstration. Like writers, illustrators are not really attracted to their chosen language for its descriptive clarity or objectivity, but more for its slipperiness, mystery, ambiguity and accidental poetry. The best illustrated stories make the most of this, often prompting us to think about familiar concepts in an unexpected way, offering up a new and interesting perspective.” (2009, p. 3)

Though also using a form of visual language, illustration has its own jargon; it uses a different dialect of imagery, and suits a different context or purpose. Rather than trying to allocate illustration a convenient pigeon-hole within one of the other disciplines, it can perhaps be better described as an amalgamation of certain traits that design and art share with it; yet it stands alone, as a separate discipline in its own right.

Illustration is often associated with some form of text, whether it is accompanying pages of prose, or a more integrated type of wording, such as dialogue in speech bubbles. This does not, however, mean that illustration is tethered to text; it can exist perfectly well without a word to support it (as was demonstrated in the case study on Shaun Tan, back in Chapter 4.5.6). However, it does usually require some sort of juxtaposition, though these pieces for comparison may form part of a united whole. For example, in sequential art, one panel containing a single, self-contained illustration conveys part of the message to the viewer; the panel next to it conveys another vital part of the whole meaning, as does the one below it, and the speech bubble in that one, and the caption in the next, and so on. These singular units depend on juxtaposition with each other in order to create the greater meaning of the overall piece. This collaborative arrangement conveys more to the audience than any one image could do on its own. This kind of structure makes illustration an impressively rich and complex medium.

Design acts as a public interface which makes information as accessible as possible; art stands alone as a monument, presenting its message as one lump sum within itself; illustration expresses itself as a sum of multiple parts, creating a more
prolonged and engaging experience for the viewer. Illustration is a very different experience to design, which makes a short, sharp point, in order to captivate its audience and convey its information to them as succinctly as possible. It is also very different from art, which is offered for contemplation within its own vacuum, existing as a singular element. This does not, however, make illustration any worse or less-successful as a form of visual communication. For one thing, illustration is a medium that is ideal for publication in book or ‘novel’ form. One usually has to decide almost immediately whether or not to follow the instructions of a designed piece, such as a brochure or poster; and art only interacts with its viewer for the short time during which they stand before it in the gallery. By comparison, a reader can spend hours with a graphic novel, gaining a longer-lasting and more engaging experience from this form of interaction.

To summarize, whilst the actual processes of these three disciplines are quite similar on a fundamental level, each is practised with a particular motivation. Design’s responsibility is ‘to direct’ viewers to entities other than itself. Art’s sole mission is ‘to be’ itself, for the sake of its own existence and to deliver the message of its artist. The purpose of illustration is ‘to tell’ a sustained narrative to its audience. Behind a piece of design, there is usually a client and/or product; behind art, an idea or concept; and behind illustration, a strong sense of story. Whilst these differences may seem superficial, to the authors who have carried out the creative process for varying reasons and with different goals set before them, the difference can be very marked indeed.

6.3.4 Dividing Disciplines

In my own case, I still wonder if my choice of degree was the right one. Would I have been better suited to scientific illustration, which my institution offers as a separate degree? Or perhaps even fine art? I cannot be sure. I do not possess the affinity for scientific enquiry and painstaking accuracy that technical drawing would demand of me; having taken some fine art courses as electives, I found the lack of restrictions almost agoraphobic compared to the structured project work I was used to, centred around a client-dictated ‘design brief’. As I began my Masters degree, I found the sudden switch from short-term engagements to year-long project to require quite a
major adjustment on my part. I alluded to some of these discrepancies in one of my
learning-journal entries:

“So it progresses. I thought this ‘drawing full-time’ thing would be a lark, but it’s quite tricky. I think it may be because I have trained in design instead of illustration. I spent four years trying to be an illustrator in a design course; now I’m actually doing illustration, my training hasn’t prepared me for it at all and I’m feeling out of my depth. I suppose I need to teach myself how to illustrate, whilst utilizing my design side to put those illustrations in a working context.” (9/3/2009, 1:11 am)

Whilst many of the design-based techniques that I had learned – including how to use publishing software and how to properly set type – certainly aided me in my project, many aspects of this illustrative procedure seemed strangely foreign to me.

Even at the time of writing this, I find that I still very much have a ‘design’ approach to my work. Recently, whilst organizing for some of my illustrations to be featured in an exhibition, I belatedly discovered that my original artwork might be put on sale. I consulted the project’s convener on this, as I hadn’t factored the possibility into my work method. Whilst I had satisfactorily completed the imagery for publication standards, my actual, physical artwork did not match it exactly. Backgrounds and foregrounds were painted on separate sheets of paper, to be composited later on; other illustrations had been finished off digitally, and so appeared incomplete on paper; some otherwise finished artwork had my rough sketches on the backs of them. On showing my colleague these partial fragments of the finished product, he merely asked if he could have my entire folder of rough work to put on display. As a design student, I would have been horrified by the prospect of showing a client my rough work; and so would, I suspect, many of my design-based colleagues. While I had no sense of embarrassment at this stage of my studies, it had never occurred to me that anyone would want to see anything so unwieldy and unpolished as these pieces,¹¹⁶ let alone purchase them.

What I had also increasingly noticed, from having presented research seminars during my Masters study, and from having seen students who study Natural History Illustration present their work in turn, was that whilst I could talk quite easily about the concepts and intentions behind my work, I had great difficulty talking about the working process itself, as I saw the illustration students do. This, I believe, is because

¹¹⁶ This attitude may not be discipline-specific. Shaun Tan comes from a fine-art background, yet expressed similar sentiments when asked to put together his book of ‘rough drawings’, The Bird King and Other Sketches. (Tan and Chan 2010, n. pag.)
design is so product-oriented; whilst for the illustrator, the experience of producing the final object is an outcome in itself, with great creative, educational and personal value. I still find it very difficult to articulate that formative stage into words; to an outsider, I think it must simply look like me sitting at a desk for many long hours, scratching away with a pencil or slopping around with a brush.\textsuperscript{117} I know that this process has as much validity and importance as a form of research; but trying to condense that extended period of rendering and creating down into a verbal description (let alone one which others would be interest in hearing about) is immensely hard for me. I am always interested when I hear other people talk about their studio practises or rendering techniques, but I have trouble reciprocating to the same effect. I think this comes back to my design training, as in class we would usually only talk about what we had done, and what the finished product was like; if we did manage to talk about how it had been done, it was usually only on a theoretical level, as a conceptual process rather than a physical or practical one. It is something which I have made some progress on in undertaking this study, and something which I am continuing to learn to do as I undertake more illustration work.

Perhaps I am splitting hairs by trying to draw lines between what are, really, three disciplines that are all similarly based on the simple act of drawing things. And yet, my view seems to reflect an increasing segregation between artistic practices. In their exploration of modern creative education at the Art Institute of Chicago, Getzel and Csikszentmihalyi noted that during Renaissance times, it was not unusual to see apprentices in an art studio “setting jewels, forging a sign for a nearby inn, preparing the cartoon for a tapestry, and designing a saltcellar, as well as painting and sculpting.” (1976, p. 47) By contrast, in today’s industry, being just an ‘illustrator’ is not enough: “One may specialize in children’s book illustration, women’s journal illustration, or medical illustration, for example.” (Getzel and Csikszentmihalyi 1976, p. 48) Practitioners are identifying themselves and their work with labels which are ever-increasing in their precise specification.

There are two schools of thought as to the superiority of either of these approaches. An all-rounder, the modern equivalent of the Renaissance artisan, might take on a greater quantity of projects in a variety of fields, or become a convenience for an employer who wishes to cut costs by keeping all productions in-house; on the

\textsuperscript{117} This seems to be the impression that my family gets, anyway.
other hand, specialization in a particular field and an expert’s proficiency at a certain skill may help a practitioner stand out in an industry where supply far outstrips demand. Also, invested interest can play a major role. Though Graeme Base, as mentioned previously, could hypothetically function in a commercial studio, his lack of interest did not permit him to do so; and yet, by his own admission, he is able to design such diverse objects as a children’s picture book and a vacuum cleaner when the mood takes him. Motivations are a very personal thing for any practitioner, and whilst some might work simply to pay the bills and put food on the table, it cannot be denied that in any given profession, those who more often truly succeed in their field tend to be those who have approached their work with a genuine enthusiasm and overriding passion for what they do. This enthusiasm may extend to various types of projects or may be devoted to a very specific undertaking, depending entirely on the particular interests of that individual.

These collective theories reflect my personal understanding, my own opinion of what the three disciplines – design, art and illustration – fundamentally are. This view is formed from my own limited avenues of enquiry, my personal experience, and from countless hours spent in contemplating the issue. My theories are by no means conclusive, nor do I expect everyone – or, really, anyone – to agree with them. However, I am not fazed by this; perhaps it is just this sort of dialogue between disciplines which is needed. So long as people continue to create visuals and use varying labels to describe both their work and their results, uncertainty will always exist as to where the barriers between design/art/illustration are located. Perhaps it is not the disciplines themselves, but the very boundaries between them, that are of greater significance. So long as there are boundaries, we will be determined to push and challenge them. And so long as there is a question of definitions, we will be forced to define ourselves; thus differentiating our output from what already exists, and how we undertake the creation process as opposed to others.
6.4 Creation and Interpretation: the Author vs. the Audience

“Comics communicate in a ‘language’ that relies on a visual experience common to both creator and audience.” – Will Eisner (1985, p. 7)

Some might assume – as I did – that a well-formed sense of visual literacy, coupled with a story idea and some sort of rendering skill, should help ease the transition from being a mere reader of graphic novels, to becoming a creator oneself. However, I found this was not necessarily the case. Just as being able to read and understand the works of Shakespeare does not mean that an aspiring playwright is able to write just like the Bard himself, I also found that though I recognised the techniques that were being used in other graphic novels, I had some difficulty in applying those same techniques to my own work.

This is probably because the relationships that the author and audience respectively have with the graphic novel are vastly different. If I were to use the metaphor of a connect-the-dots drawing, the audience merely has to fill the appointed gaps in order to finish the picture; all the information needed to complete it is already there. However, the author must mastermind the overall picture (the story), as well as the dots (the clues which will lead the viewer) and the lines that should go in the gaps between them (the interpretation which the viewer will form). In this respect, the creator must act as both theorist and fortune-teller; whilst keeping their own creative vision completely intact, they must predict how their audience will react to what they will produce. The creator is not omniscient; if a thousand viewers do not interpret the intended message correctly, there is little the author can do to remediate the situation. The author must simply hope that the audience will follow where their directions lead; if they have constructed their means of visual communication effectively, reader response will align with their own intended outcome. According to Noble and Bestley, “Audience expectation is a key factor in the development of successful design solutions”. (2005, p. 99) This does not mean that the author’s interpretation of their work is the only ‘correct’ one. In the author/audience dialogue, the author can provide only one half of the dialogue.

At the same time, the reader will be far more receptive to the novel’s meaning if they are on the same wavelength as the author; preferable, the two should share
some common mental ground. Psychology professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi emphasises that both author and audience must perform part of the task:

“[Understanding] occurs when information coming from the artwork interacts with the information already stored in the viewer’s mind… The information in the work of art fuses with the information in the viewer’s memory – followed by the expansion of the viewer’s consciousness, and the attendant emotional consequences.”

(Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson 1990, p. 11)

Csikszentmihalyi has studied a mood which he describes as ‘flow’, i.e. a mental state which presents optimum conditions for performing creative works, experienced by the author. In *The Art of Seeing*, written in conjunction with Rick E. Robinson, Csikszentmihalyi explores the opposite side of the creative endeavour: the ‘aesthetic encounter’, or experience of the viewer. To define this experience, they cite Monroe Beardsley’s 1982 list of recurring themes that are said to be experienced by people viewing art:

1) Object focus: the person willingly invests attention in a visual stimulus
2) Felt freedom: he or she feels a sense of harmony that pre-empts everyday concerns and is experienced as freedom
3) Detached affect: the experience is not taken literally, so that the aesthetic presentation of a disaster might move the viewer to reflection, but not panic
4) Active discovery: the person becomes cognitively involved in the challenges presented by the stimulus and derives a sense of exhilaration from the involvement
5) Wholeness: a sense of integration follows from the experience, giving the person a feeling of self-expectance and self-expression (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson 1990, p. 7)

These five aspects can be loosely applied to the experience of reading a graphic novel, as I have done:

1) Aesthetic: the visual style attracts and holds the attention of the viewer on a superficial level
2) Commitment: the viewer engages with the work, focusing on it to the exclusion of everyday concerns, beginning to read at a deeper level
3) Comprehension: the viewer makes inferences from separate structural elements such as symbolism, abstraction, imagery and text, allowing them to interpret that which is only suggested by these clues

4) Cohesion: the viewer connects and contrasts these disparate elements, filling the ‘gaps’ between ‘dots’ and becoming an active participant in the creation of meaning

5) Confirmation: the viewer interprets all the elements as a unified whole. This unified view gives them an understanding of the work’s meaning in its entirety

Of course, not all of these events take place in every instance. Depending on the type of graphic novel you might be reading, some steps may be omitted; depending on the personal tastes of the viewer, interaction with the work may not progress beyond the first stage. All five steps represent the reading process when the graphic novel performs at its most successful, and when the author adopts all the advantages of the medium to their fullest potential.

Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson additionally compare the viewer’s ‘aesthetic experience’ to the creator’s ‘flow experience’ (see Figure 98, below). They explain the difference between the two as being like a person viewing a painting (aesthetic), as opposed to a sportsman trying to hit a ball over a net (flow). (1990, p. 9) However, one could very well equate the task of serving a tennis ball with the role of the graphic novel’s author, since these activities have much in common. Both involve an absorbing act which demands complete mental concentration; both attempt to meet a challenge which must be solved via skill; and both have a definitive goal. In the case

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRITERIA FOR THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE</th>
<th>CRITERIA FOR THE FLOW EXPERIENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OBJECT FOCUS:</td>
<td>MERGING OF ACTION AND AWARENESS:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention fixed on intentional field</td>
<td>Attention centered on activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FELT FREEDOM:</td>
<td>LIMITATION OF STIMULUS FIELD:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Release from concerns about past and future</td>
<td>No awareness of past and future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DETACHED AFFECT:</td>
<td>LOSS OF EGO:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objects of interest set at a distance emotionally</td>
<td>Loss of self-consciousness and transcendence of ego boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACTIVE DISCOVERY:</td>
<td>CONTROL OF ACTIONS:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active exercise of powers to meet environmental challenges</td>
<td>Skills adequate to overcome challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHOLENESS:</td>
<td>CLEAR GOALS, CLEAR FEEDBACK:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A sense of personal integration and self-expansion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Beaudry 1984, 188-189.  
*Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 39-40.

Figure 98: Comparison of criteria defining the aesthetic experience and the flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990, p. 8)
of the author of a graphic novel, the goal is to communicate a specific meaning to the viewer, i.e. an individual taking part in the aesthetic experience. As such, the ‘aesthetic’ and ‘flow’ experiences become two sides of the same coin; the former is the preparation, the latter is the result.

Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson note how the two sides of their aesthetic/flow table are quite similar in their goals, if not their applications: “Although the two lists do not correspond point by point, they contain the same elements, with little in one list that is not present in the other.” They theorize that this is because they are “essentially the same state of mind.” (1990, p. 8) Perhaps the only real difference is in the first two lines of the table. For the viewer, the novel and the experience of reading are much the same thing; for the author, whilst the physical product is certainly the goal of the entire process, it is the process itself which is valuable.

What, then, is this process? Much of art history and art criticism is focused on the product of the creative process, not the process itself. The rest of the world must view the work of an artist from a consumer’s point of view; it is only the creator who can recount their own ‘flow experience’, and to a limited extent, recognize a similar process behind the works of others. Whilst this creative process varies widely from author to author, with no two creators possessing identical approaches, Scott McCloud has produced a succinct list of six steps which are generally involved in the creation of a graphic novel:

1) Idea/Purpose: the impulses, the ideas, the emotions, the philosophies, the purpose of the work; the work’s ‘content’.
3) Idiom: the ‘school’ of art, the vocabulary of styles or gestures or subject matter, the genre that the work belongs to; maybe a genre of its own.
4) Structure: putting it all together; what to include, what to leave out, how to arrange, how to compose the work.
5) Craft: constructing the work, applying skills, practical knowledge, invention, problem-solving, getting the ‘job’ done.
6) Surface: production values, finishing; the aspects most apparent on first superficial exposure to the work. (McCloud 1993, p. 170-171)
Whilst it seems that McCloud and Csikszentmihalyi came to their conclusions separately, their theories seem to mirror each other. This became even more evident when I collated their findings in a single diagram (Figure 99, below), with McCloud’s production process on the left side of the table, and my reinterpretation of Csikszentmihalyi’s aesthetic experience, as applied to an interaction with a graphic novel, on the right.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critically interprets content</td>
<td>Strategically constructs content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Must interpret creator’s intention</td>
<td>Must anticipate audience’s interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensory experience</td>
<td>Intellectual experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object-based</td>
<td>Experience-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction with design artefact is theoretically permanent and eternal; can endure so long as object exists</td>
<td>Duration of design process is temporal and brief: lasts as long as it takes to bring object into existence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 99: Diagram of the author-to-audience communicative process (Author’s own collection, citing Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson 1990, p.7; McCloud 1993, p.170-171)
It would take an entire separate study to determine just how much viewing other people’s work affects our own work; even then, I suspect the results would be inconclusive. It is likely that all creators struggle to reconcile what they see, admire, are influenced by, and wish to emulate with what they are actually capable of, and what gives their work some aspect of originality. Nineteenth-century illustrator Howard Pyle declared that the hardest task of the artist was “to adapt the knowledge there gained to practical use – to do creative work, for the work in art school is imitative.” (Meyer 1997, p. 212) It is nevertheless doubtless that some knowledge of what has gone before will henceforth inform that which follows on. Authors are not so conceited that they are absorbed in their own work alone; practically all creators develop their passion for what they do from having initially been readers, with most continuing to read the works of others throughout their professional careers.

As Michael Dickinson points out, “Even when we are at our most creative we must remember that we, like any other profession are building from and on the existing knowledge within the profession. Even if we do not acknowledge it.” (2006, p. 70) When we know what has already been done, we can then discover what else is possible; this knowledge forms the foundation for new discoveries. Pyle’s contemporary, Walter Crane, was probably correct when he theorized that the human eye was “the chief organ for the reception of ideas.” (Meyer 1997, p. 19)

6.5 Concept and Object: The Divide Between

“Ask any artist about ‘emptiness’ and they’ll tell you about the constant recurring nightmarish emptiness they must face down almost every day as a part of their vocation: the blank space that they must fill… the blank space awaiting transformation at the hand of the artist can be the loneliest and cruelest [sic] place on earth.”

Way back in the second section of this thesis, I referenced Australian professor and researcher Alan McKee, who described exegesis as the ‘material trace’ or ‘empirical evidence’ that is left at the completion of a project; the fragmentary by-product of a sense-making process. (2003, p. 15) If this is so, then what actual,
physical remainders do I have left, now that the creative aspect of my study is complete? When I look at my production materials (excluding my final artwork and the published novel itself), I find that I am left with three different types of residual artefacts: my written conceptual notes, including plot maps, chapter summaries, and character descriptions; my draft sketches, scribbled in unsightly graphite scrawls, never intended to meet the eyes of the viewing public; and my process journals, in which I jotted down my thoughts and experiences at almost every stage of the project.

You may notice that when I mention my process journals (of which there were several), I stipulate that I documented only ‘almost’ every stage. Obviously, I couldn’t write a journal entry for every single line I drew, or every blank inch of paper that I managed to cover. However, there is another, far more valid reason why I make this particular point. When I eventually looked back at my various diaries, I noticed that while I often wrote long entries about the conceptual development of the project, my self-reportage dwindled away to practically nothing during the hands-on rendering stages. This brought my attention to a significant pattern which had emerged throughout the creative process, without my having been aware of it at the time. Whilst I lifted a pen or sat poised to type at my production-notes and journal entries, my pencil and brush remained completely still. Conversely, when my hands were stained with ink or I was pencilling in a panel, my running commentary abruptly ground to a halt.

When I first noticed this, I was greatly surprised, as I had not adopted these habits consciously. I initially put them down to the conflict between my design/illustration viewpoints, a theme which I have already covered in Chapter 6.3. I knew that I was already predisposed to talk about my thought processes during a creative project, rather than my physical actions. After all, how many times could I actually write: ‘Sat at desk and drew until panel was complete and then started on the next one’, repeatedly, until all the work was finished? Then again, I noticed that this habit was not confined to the final portion of my time frame, which was when most of my final artwork had been produced; it had occurred almost from the outset.

The early stages of the project had their own set of challenges, made all the more daunting by my intended novel’s initial lack of a corporeal form. The novel would not exist until I created it; this may sound like an obvious statement, but it proved to be an unlikely source of consternation. Before I had any sort of physical object on which to expend my efforts, I dealt solely in ideas. The conceptual part of
the project’s design was relatively easy to develop, as I had already had the storyline of *Tsuruhane* in mind for quite some time. However, what I grappled with most of all, right from the start and all the way through to the end, was the constant need to transform my inner ideas into some physical entity, something that was solid and actual and accessible to someone other than just me. In the words of experienced professional executive-editor Diana Gill: “No matter what your vision of the story may be, remember that the readers only see what you actually put on the page.” (2011, <http://twitter.com>) The story would be inherent to the novel’s structure; however, if that structure was flawed, the message would also become fractured, distorted, or simply lost in translation. Though I again may be stating the obvious, the creative process was crucial to the final product’s success. I had a lot of ideas that I wanted to express, and needed to find the single-best way in which to convey each and every one to my audience.

Just a few months into the project, I was asked to give a seminar presentation, sharing my work with other research students. When I went looking for visual material that I could put in my slides, I realized that I did not actually have much down on paper yet; certainly not as much as I seemed to remember having drawn; it was only then that I realized that most of my ideas had only so far happened in my head. It was strange, going to talk to people about my ideas, but not having any actual evidence to demonstrate what I meant. The entire story was so very clear in my mind; I thought that people would be quite impressed by it, if they could only see the inside my imagination. I documented this strange contradiction in one of my journal entries:

“It’s been a while since the last entry, I know. I think I’ve been waiting for something tremendous to happen, and it hasn’t, so I just have to catch up now and write about all the less-than-tremendous stuff that’s happened. I’m not sure if there were really any setbacks, per se. I’m not even sure if anything much happened at all!... I think a lot happened, but most of it happened in my mind rather than on paper.”

(13/4/2009, 7:12 pm) (See Appendix C)

I soon found that I was not alone in this feeling. I spoke to a *Scribble* colleague, who was similarly undertaking her Masters degree and intended to produce a graphic novel of her own. Though she wanted to create a visual work on a massive scale – she told me that the number of panels that she planned to draw was well in the hundreds – she had already used up almost half of the total time frame she had allocated to her project, just on research and conceptual development.
At around the same time, my supervisor made a comment that got me thinking. He told me that some people would argue that design, or creativity, takes place at the point where the pencil touches the paper.\footnote{He later told me that this was, in fact, a paraphrased quote from Henrik Gedenryd’s (1998, n. pag.)} That seemed at first to make sense; but the more I thought about it, the more I began to wonder if I could completely agree. I decided that this statement may be true, depending on your perspective of what ‘creativity’ actually is – whether you regard ‘creation’ as defining the active process, the verb describing the ‘act’ of making something; or the product which results from that process, the ‘creation’ as an object. Certainly, those markings made on paper, which have been so carefully crafted and which were constructed so as to carry a specific meaning, are the physical manifestation of that creative process. The finished artwork, and even the rough lead-up sketches that preceded it, are the evidence that can be presented to others, to show how much work has been invested in the final product.

But what of all those moments that led up to that seminal instant, before the pencil tip first touched the paper? While some great ideas are created purely off-the-cuff – or, perhaps, ‘under-the-pencil-point’ – through incidental doodlings, far more often, this is not the case. Any working artist will tell you of hours spent staring at a rough collection of pencil lines, wondering if they look quite ‘right’; any writer will tell you of the hours they have spent lying awake, trying to resolve a crucial plot point in their sleep-deprived mind. What most people never see is the disproportionate amount of time that the author has devoted just to developing a purely mental concept, before the final product even begins to appear on paper. Shaun Tan likens the division of an artist’s time as being similar to that of someone setting up dominoes: the pattern that they will fall in is planned well in advance, but for the sake of that single fall, a disproportionate amount of time is spent setting them up in readiness. (Graphic 2010, n. pag.) I had plenty of time during these early stages to plan out my story, develop characters and establish key plot points, all in my mind; however, translating this information into some remotely-similar graphic incarnation seemed to be an insurmountable challenge at times.

In some ways, I think the fact that I had such confidence in my story actually hindered the production process itself. Whilst it remained in my mind, my imagined result seemed idyllic, faultlessly structured and flawlessly rendered. However, my
attempts to capture these visions on paper were often disappointing; I could never quite manage to copy down exactly what was in my head onto the pages of my sketchbook. For this very reason, even Shaun Tan sometimes refrains from exploring his embryonic concepts too extensively:

“A lot of these sketches are deliberately not developed, because to develop them would ruin them. You know, it’s like sometimes the best ideas are those that just exist as, you know, the unfinished fragment. The moment you start elaborating them, they crystalize into something hard, and they can’t be anything else.” (Shirref 2010, <www.abc.net.au>)

This was what I felt was happening to me, although ‘crystalized’ might be too lofty a term to describe what I was producing; perhaps ‘carbonized’ would be more appropriate. Sooner or later, my ideas had to be solidified in a physical, visible incarnation, a drawing or artwork of some sort; but when that form finally appeared, I tended to be dismissive and highly-critical of it, convinced that it could have potentially been far better than this paltry approximation I had managed to produce. As I soon discovered, even my best ideas had absolutely no value if I could not express them in some figurative shape or form. My imagination seemed to be streets ahead, while my hand skills were lagging woefully behind.

I became fearful of that backlash, the seemingly-inevitable sense of dejection I would get whenever my sublime imaginary visions became something faintly grotesque when transfigured into graphite. Because of it, I began to baulk at the starting-gate. Rather than making myself struggle through the painstaking process of rendering something that would never live up to expectation, I distracted myself with some other frivolous task. I would often take refuge in the written part of the novel, which seemed so much comparatively easier to create. I wasted time gloating over a newly-

**Figure 100:** In the voice of his villain from the *Zot!* series, the psychotically art-obsessed Arthur Dekko, McCloud demonstrates how words are the ultimate form of abstraction. Physical creations may become tainted or flawed; only hypothetical concepts, ethereal and inexistent, can achieve true perfection. (2008a, p. 208)
invented subplot I had just added to my plot summary, or a character description which I had managed to embellish a bit more. If I did manage to complete a drawing to some sort of adequate standard, I would just keep superficially augmenting it, polishing and perfecting it unnecessarily, rather than starting on anything new. I knew that I needed to be making consistent progress in order to stick to the work schedule which I had set myself; yet every time the prospect of drawing a new panel arose, I would prematurely anticipate my failure to convey what I intended, and my motivation would dwindle away. I would tell myself to put off the work until I felt ‘ready’ to take it on, but since I was always expecting to fail, I never felt prepared to tackle the challenge, and I fell into a self-sabotaging spiral. My fear of failure was holding me back, but much as I was aware of it, I couldn’t seem to break this cycle.

This work method (and I use the term very loosely) of mine was not restricted to illustration. Even during my undergraduate degree and, before that, my senior years at high school, I tended to put off work until just before its due date. It was only when I had this metaphorical finish-line in sight that I felt sufficiently motivated to sprint towards it; before this, my deadline was only a vague concept, still residing in the future and not yet threatening enough to induce me into action. Psychologist Robert Biswas-Diener has identified such tendencies as a legitimate working technique, albeit a rather unorthodox one. He terms it the ‘incubator’ approach, as the user will undergo a period of seeming inaction. During this stage, they will mentally process the challenge they face and map out a strategic plan, which they will then implement at the last minute. (Drape 2011, p. 17) While incubators are often dismissed as mere procrastinators, they are quite different from their indecisive counterparts:

“Rather, they’re incubators who flourish under external pressure. They need that last-minute deadline to fire them up to produce their best. While incubators often appear idle, just like procrastinators, under the surface their minds are preparing for the task at hand. Then, when they are finally forced into action, their work is of superior quality.”

(Drape 2011, p. 17)

The work procedure outlined by Biswas-Diener was one which I identified with; I similarly allowed the looming danger of fast-approaching deadlines to spur me onward. Prior to this, I would use the early stages of my time-frame to strategize my approach to a project, finalizing all the conceptual aspects of it before I plunged into any physical work. However, whilst I could certainly relate to Biswas-Diener’s description of an ‘incubator’, I was also forced to recognize that I may have strayed
Figure 101: In his semi-autobiographical comic, *Alec: How to be an Artist*, Eddie Campbell is extremely honest and frank about his profession’s difficulties, by no means romanticizing what it is like to work as an illustrator. The character Alec appears to foster sentiments (and nocturnal habits) similar to my own. (2001, p. 66)

into genuine ‘procrastinator’ territory. My deadlines were starting to stream by, and I still couldn’t seem to find a rhythm or routine that allowed me to maintain a steady working pace. I did not want to rush through the process, thereby sacrificing quality for punctuality; in the words of Neil Gaiman, “getting stuff done on time isn’t the same as getting it right.” (2009, <http://journal.neilgaiman.com>) However, given the torturously-slow rate at which I was working, it seemed it would still take me far too long to get my project done – if, indeed, I ever actually managed to complete it at all.

Again, my design training may have been a contributing factor; specifically the time management and organizational habits of the field, as opposed to those of illustration or art. I had previously undertaken design projects which were contained within relatively-compacted chunks of time, usually with no more than a month passing between each stage of production. By comparison, or this project, I had a prolonged stretch during which to work. Instead of the short-distance dash I was used to, I found myself suddenly facing an endurance race. It now seemed to take forever for me to produce anything that looked remotely like a finished piece. This was an excuse which I extrapolated upon in yet another journal entry:

“I look back on the past months and wish I’d done more. But then 5 months is a long time too, and I have twelve more after that. And I suppose it’s only natural when you look at how it’s happened. It was a project I had crammed in my spare time for almost two years.\(^\text{119}\) Then suddenly, bang! it was full time. Instead of letting the clutch out slowly, I let it straight out, and I stalled.\(^\text{120}\) But I’ve had time now to get into gear.

\(^{119}\) Before I began working on *Tsuruhane* for this study, it was a side-project which I worked on as a hobby. Despite this, it was still very much in its early development stages when I began my degree.

\(^{120}\) Incidentally, I did exactly the same thing when I was actually learning to drive (a car with manual gear transmission, obviously). Whether that has any correlation to the way that I approach my illustrative work, or any other area of my life, I have no idea. These days, I consider myself to be a pretty good driver – a positive indication, perhaps?
I’ve learnt more now; I can start to drive through this better, faster, more efficiently…

Some days – most, in fact – I feel grossly incompetent. Really when I look at the little time I spend on drawing, it’s little wonder the few things in my sketchbook look so crude. But I have to remind myself, that for every drawing I do, there is one person who is infinitely better than I will ever be, as well as 10 who are much worse, yet are somehow published.”

(30/8/2009, 10:18 pm)

Although I tried to remain positive and just carry on with my work, things did not really change; the same impasse seemed to constantly loom in front of me. The worst thing about it was that it was not an obvious problem with any kind of guaranteed solution; nor was it something that I could identify as being anything more than a trick that my own mind was playing on me. My hurdles were all psychological, invisible to anyone else and incredibly hard to explain to others. And so the problem remained unresolved. It was a conundrum which I pondered over on my own for a very long time. For most of that time, I simply berated myself for being lazy or producing sub-standard artwork, all the while frustrated and unable to figure out what I needed to do to improve.

As I toiled away at the drawing board (or to be more accurate, put off the actual ‘toiling’ for as long as possible), I could see that the only way to develop the proficient drawing skills I needed to effectively convey my story (and at the same time, hopefully boost my self-confidence) was to practise drawing, and to do a lot of it. However, this strategy did not quite go to plan either. Suggestions from supervisors and other well-wishers that I attend life drawing classes only seemed to make my affliction worse. Though I told myself not to worry excessively over the correctness of my anatomy drawing, I nevertheless began to obsess over it:

“It’s strange; I told myself I wouldn’t get too hung up on anatomy, yet somehow it’s been lurking sinisterly in the back of my mind every time I sit down to draw, and every time it happens, what I draw turns out wrong. What I drew two years ago looks horribly anatomically-incorrect now, yet somehow looks more like my characters than the current incantations [sic] do. I think I worried too much about ‘fleshing out’ a character, and lost sight of the fact that all they really are is a bunch of lines on paper. I need to worry less about my art imitating life and more about my art having life, as art, if that makes sense. Amano’s art is wonderful not because of a realistic resemblance, but because you can see the lines and patterns – the art – in it. Of course my work isn’t going to be that abstract, but it’s more what I want to lean towards…”
I realized recently that my drawings are more realistically-proportioned compared to the manga that I love.¹²¹ That’s not really a [disadvantage], but it demonstrates that I’m starting to drift away from what I am trying to achieve. Shiro’s physique has been giving me trouble lately, and I never used to struggle to draw him. I think I need to focus more on the features of the character and regard him less as an ‘anatomical study’ drawing. He’s supposed to be unrealistically gaunt, inhumanly strong, and should be styled as such, rather than having a ‘correct’ body type.”

(13/4/2009, 7:12 pm) (See Appendix C)

Of course, realizing what I was doing and trying to correct it were two very different things. Once I started worrying about anatomy, I found it very difficult to then dispel that pent-up anxiety. The more I drew, the more dissatisfied I became, and the worse I felt about my rendering ability. It came as some comfort to realize that even professionals suffer through similar attacks of self-doubt. Scott McCloud reveals that eighteen years prior, whilst working on Zot!, he felt that his “artistic limitations were increasingly getting in the way of the intended effects.” (2008a, p. 515) Figure drawing, which he describes as having always been his ‘Achilles heel’, began to frustrate him exponentially: “Worst of all, I remember how earnestly I was trying to get it right, even as I could see it slipping through my fingers.” (2008a, p. 535) Has McCloud’s grasp of figure drawing since gotten any better? Probably, but he still

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¹²¹ Mangaka tend to manipulate the proportions of their characters to suit the type of story they are trying to tell. Character height is classified by how many ‘heads’ high a human figure is, and this measurement is proportionate to the story’s tone and content. For example, a light-hearted story aimed at young readers might make its characters seem ‘cuter’ by making them fewer heads high; comedic gags often feature characters with bodies no bigger than their heads, known as ‘chibis’ or ‘super-deformed’. Conversely, a serious story may contain characters that are six to eight heads high, making their bodies seem unnaturally long, and thereby firmly reinforcing their position at the opposite end of the storytelling spectrum. (see the above example of Astro Boy’s varying stature)
doesn’t appear to be satisfied; sixteen years later, in one of his recent books, he states that his depictions of human anatomy could still use some improvement. (2006, p. 114) However, this certainly has not stopped him from producing new work; a fact which I needed to keep in mind, especially on those occasions when my confidence plummeted to its lowest ebb.

Perhaps McCloud can be forgiven for his lack of accurate anatomy, since he is a member of the Formalist tribe; his work has an emphasis on structural innovation, rather than artistic technicality. In my own case, I had to keep reminding myself that I am not a Classicist: I am an Animist. Story is everything to me; so long as my artwork effectively conveys my intended meaning to my audience, I can learn to operate within the current extent of my rendering skill. As McCloud himself poignantly asked the cartooning community at large via his online journal: “Do you know that what you put in your panels is potentially far more interesting than how well you draw it?” (2010b, <http://scottmccloud.com>) Cartoonist-turned-teacher Shane Heron agrees, reiterating that students who turn up for his comic-making course don’t need to be on par with Michelangelo: “They don’t have to be great at anything. As long as they have a passion for it, we can tell stories with stick figures.” (Dalby 2011, <www.thestar.com>) Although I knew all this, I still continued to undermine myself, putting off drawing new things for fear of failing, constantly holding myself back. I needed to change my way of thinking, something far easier said than done.

I finally got the breakthrough I needed when I attended the first Graphic festival, held at Sydney Opera House in 2010. Guest speaker Neil Gaiman has long professed that ‘style’ is not an affectation which authors knowingly cultivated, but something that the individual cannot help but channel into their work; something unintentional and absolutely unique to each and every person who sits down at a desk and makes meaningful marks for others to read. (2008b, <http://journal.neilgaiman.com>) At a panel discussion on ideas and creativity, with Gaiman himself in attendance, local artist Eddie Campbell agreed with this sentiment. He confided that when he was asked by event organizers to draw a picture of the Opera House in his ‘style’ to be used as publicity material, he found himself at a complete loss. He didn’t see himself as having a definitive ‘style’; the aesthetic look that he produces varies to suit each project he subsequently undertakes. (Graphic 2010, n. pag.) Similar to Amano, he didn’t feel that he is restrained by a singular style, which he is forced to
wear as a professional trademark: like any innovative designer, he subscribes to the sacred creed of ‘form follows function.’

Fellow panellist Shaun Tan elaborated even further on this ‘styleless’ theory. He suggested that time itself is a vital factor in any given project, to the point that it begins to define and influence the idiosyncratic features of the artist’s work. Style, he postulated, is not a carefully considered approach to a project, as people so often mistake it to be; it is something done under duress, at a crisis point, when a decision must be made instantaneously. Like Gaiman, he agreed that style becomes something that you just can’t help doing. If given time and space to think, the decisions the creator must make are given far more deliberation; they might consider several different options and start to emulate precedents that have been set by other people. However, when time is short and something – anything – must be put on the paper as soon as possible, the artist starts to act far more instinctively, producing work which is truly expressive of themself, not anyone else. (Graphic 2010, n. pag.)

Once I heard this statement, something in my mind clicked. Perhaps the problem was that I thought about my drawings too much? I knew that my negative thoughts were interfering with my practise as well as my confidence levels; but as an ‘incubator’, I also tended to think a lot about what I would produce, before I ever even touched the pencil-point to the paper. Perhaps I was approaching the drawing process with too many pre-conceived ideas, not investing enough faith in the action of moving my pencil across the page and the invention process which is imbedded in the physicality of image-making? Unlike a lot of artists, I don’t tend to doodle; when I approach a blank piece of paper, I already have a fair idea of what I want to put on it. On the whole, I was probably taking the act far too seriously, thus scaring myself and heaping on such high expectations. Perhaps I needed to do as my supervisor had suggested, letting more of the creative process occur ‘under the pencil-point’?

Shaun Tan’s own artistic philosophy is inspired by artist Paul Klee, who referred to the act of creating an image as “taking a line for a walk.” (Tan 2010b, p. 4) Tan further describes his basic drawing practice:

“…allowing the tip of a pencil to wander through the landscape of a sketchbook, motivated by a vague impulse but hoping to find something much more interesting along the way… Images are not preconceived and then drawn, they are conceived as they are drawn. Indeed, drawing is its own form of thinking, in the same way birdsong is ‘thought about’ within a bird’s throat.” (2010b, p. 4)
This seems to be the very mistake that I was making; I had indeed considered images to be ‘preconceived and then drawn’, discounting the inspiration that the act of drawing itself provides. The very fact that my journal entries were plentiful during the conceptual stages, yet stopped completely when the practical work began, demonstrated just how separately I regarded the two halves of the process:

“It’s funny that I seem to stop writing just when [practical] things start happening. I suppose it is partly to save time, partly because there are fewer milestones to record, just sustained hard work. It also marks, I think, a move from passiveness to action. I’d say it’s indicative [sic] of the design process – while intellectual and practical are always happening in tandem, the emphasis shifts from one to the other.” (15/7/2010, 12:57 am)

What I needed to do was to make sure that the emphasis never fell too heavily on either aspect of the creative process – passive consideration or active practise – but instead incorporated both elements simultaneously, in conducive proportions. If I were to merely sit and think about my project without actively producing anything (as I had been doing), my graphic novel would never be finished; conversely, if I were to haphazardly draw each panel without doing any research or conceptual development, my visuals would not have had the strong narrative base that they had come to rely upon, contradicting my Animistic purposes. Tan admits that the process of making art is not “a casual or simple one”, which can rely solely on happenstance; good drawing still requires “conscientious effort: active research, careful observation of things [in the real world], ongoing experimentation and reference-gathering, all of which exists ‘behind the scenes’.” (2010b, p. 4) However, his message also seems to be that the illustrator needs to be flexible, not trying to follow their pre-conceived ideas too rigidly. They should let creativity happen through a natural progression of alternate stages, those both planned and incidental. This is the method which he practises, and which he recommends to others:

“For people who are interested in illustration, who are interested in the craft of illustration, I think it’s good to explain that many things in [my work] are actually quite arbitrary, that it’s an arbitrary universe, and it could have splintered off into a thousand different directions, and along the way I just had to make creative choices… And I certainly feel that with my work, when drawing, it feels like emotional synaesthesia, that a line has the same feeling as a concept before it reaches language, and that’s how it comes out on the page.” (Shirref 2010, <www.abc.net.au>)
An artist should approach their creative process with some kind of consideration or strategy; yet they should not feel that their creativity is being constrained by even the best-laid plans. They should still allow the movement of the pencil to define the end product, letting it have just as much creative input as the mind that instructs it.

The key to finding the work method that was right for me was to find the perfect balance between the theoretical ‘planning’ and the practical ‘doing’ of the creative process. Professor Shaun McNiff, in an interview with journalist Sarah Wilson, compared creative works to more labour-oriented endeavours, such as brick-laying or plumbing. He points out that carpenters are always “‘fiddling and diddling’ – moving materials round until they find their place” (Wilson 2011a, p. 12) McNiff proposed that artists could do much the same thing with their ideas and with their drawing-implement-of-choice. Even when this practice doesn’t immediately lead to a positive solution, “frustration and blockage are part of the process – they lead to the destruction of tired patterns.” (Wilson 2011a, p.12) Wilson herself agrees that the same immense set of variables which make a puzzle so daunting can be the very factors which leads to a solution: “The research shows, over and over, that uncertainty – or an ability to flow with it – goes hand in hand with creative success. It’s the very act of being in the unknown that sees us strive to know more, and thus stumble upon fresh ideas.” (2011b, p. 11)

The more I read and learnt about other people’s approaches to creativity, the more I realized what a common and widely-experienced problem it was. It is an ordinary and very human practice to struggle with personal expression; but just because the experience is uncomfortable or unpleasant doesn’t mean we should avoid it. Wilson believes that any form of creativity is really an “expression of the human struggle to share our inner selves… We all have, at our core, an important urge to do this, and yet at the same time a primal fear of it. Ergo, creative block.” (Wilson 2011a, p. 12) Neil Gaiman describes the frustration of creative blocks with a rather playful metaphor: “It’s a kind of weird confidence trick you play on yourself, like the Roadrunner running across the air between two peaks, where if you stop and look down you can plummet like Coyote.” (2009, <http://journal.neilgaiman.com>)

One thing not to do (which I did, and had to learn not to) is to regard mistakes as a lack of progress. In comparison to not producing anything at all, producing anything is a form of progress, no matter how paltry or pathetic that thing might be.
Gaiman’s radical advice to would-be authors is as follows:


This was advice which I had been sorely in need of, and which I made a concerted effort to follow. All these words of encouragement, offered by both people I had admired for years and others whom I had never heard of, helped me to overcome my personal inner-hurdles. As I said to Shaun Tan at the 2010 Sketch-O-Rama event, where I was lucky enough to meet him in person: knowing all these pearls of wisdom doesn’t make the creative process ‘easy’, but it certainly makes it ‘easier’.

One thing that greatly helped me to overcome my mental stumbling-block was de-formalizing my approach to drawing as much as possible. By facing the blank page of my sketchbook with fewer expectations, I found that I was able to let creativity happen far more freely, producing better results and enjoying the process a lot more. This is yet another practise that Shaun Tan has adopted, though like me, it took him some time to learn to trust this initial lack of a steadfast creative direction:

“I tend to come up with my best ideas when I’m not trying… and when I actually don’t think the work is, perhaps, important. And you just sort of free yourself up, and go ‘well, I’ll try this’. Sometimes out of desperation, you know, you’re just struggling with an idea, and in an attempt to find some sort of solution, you just stumble on something that’s really good. I used to dismiss it a lot; now I realize most of my stuff does come from the subconscious, and I think all of us operate on a conscious level that draws from the subconscious, almost like fishing from the sea. I think the whole process of actually doing creative work is a bit like fine-tuning that fishing process, so you can do it again and again.”

(Hopper 2008, <www.inframe.tv>)

Since this process was so dissimilar to what I had done before, it took me a while to ‘fine-tune’ it; I am still learning to open myself up to this spontaneous brand of inspiration. I began to use some novel tactics to trick myself into relaxing:

“If I’ve learnt anything from working on [this project], it’s not to be afraid – to just start drawing, in the faith that it’ll turn out alright. I’ve also got to try to be more meticulous about getting things right, which makes it seem as though those two endeavours will cancel each other. I managed to trick myself into succeeding by trying to make it seem to not matter too much – drawing in front of the T.V. still helps. I suppose the best thing is to try to maintain some momentum – once one thing turns out well, start something else without wasting time on gloating, or, conversely, mooning over failures. Which is how I wasted much of last year. I know better now, I hope.” (8/4/2010, 1:10 am)
Contrary to the statement that I made in this journal entry, I do not actually think that the time I supposedly ‘wasted’ was really all that ill-spent; it was a necessary learning curve which I needed to go through, and am still going through. I am still not completely confident in my drawing ability; what I manage to put onto paper still doesn’t perfectly correspond with what is on my mind. However, I now recognize that this aspiration is perhaps an unrealistic one. I need to learn to settle for what I can produce, rather than pining after an imagined visage which I would never manage to perfectly replicate. Like McCloud and those in the Classicist tribe, I can only do my best – always striving to improve, yet still appreciating any small successes that I manage to achieve.

Perhaps things were really not as bad as they seemed. As I struggled to produce artwork that I was happy with, my insecurities could have manifested in any one of a number of ways. I could have either kept drawing Tsuruhane over and over continuously, only stopping when I was finally happy with my result, however long that might have taken me – months, years, maybe even decades; or alternatively, I could have saved myself the trouble by quitting while I was ahead. Despite how much I struggled, I never seriously considered this last option. I was committed to my story and my purpose as a storyteller, so I took my only other available option: to do the best that I could at the time of producing my work, accepting whatever imperfections ended up in the final product by thinking of them as mere idiosyncrasies, rather than regarding them as actual flaws. I kept reminding myself of what my supervisor had told me at the very beginning of my study. I was um-ing and ah-ing over whether I was ready to produce my own graphic novel, or if I should wait until I had gained more illustrative experience, developing my hand-skills some more before coming back to tackle it. My supervisor instead advised me to continue straight on, while I still had some momentum and my motivation was at its peak. He predicted that while I might not produce the best possible work that I was potentially capable of, it would still be better to have produced an imperfect object which was real, rather than to simply imagine a perfection which would never become a reality in any shape or form. In hindsight, I can say that once again, he was absolutely right.

One other thing that this ‘problem’ did was to throw into sharp relief the close correlation between conceptual thought and creative practise, something which I had never really taken into account. Few artists or art theorists seem to have considered the complex circuitry that exists within every artist, situated somewhere between the
mind, eye and hand, connecting these three entities to each other. The act of visually expressing a concept, from vague idea to conclusive object, is not a process with a steadfast set of ordered steps. The imagined concept does not progress directly to the hand, and from there provide the artist’s eye with a visual manifestation of what they had mentally pictured to start with. Wigan claims that “drawing makes our thoughts visible and visually articulates ideas and emotions.” (2006, p. 29) However, if this is absolutely true, why did my completed drawings not correspond more accurately with what I had initially imagined? I suppose the truth of Wigan’s statement depends on how literally you choose to interpret it.

As I now know, the act of drawing is not a direct means of expressing internal ruminations. The rendering process only translates the creator’s meaning approximately, however hard they might try to precisely articulate their thoughts. One has only to look at one possible meaning of the word ‘render’: “to interpret; give an interpretation or rendition of.” (Dicts.info 2003, <www.dicts.info/> I cannot simply project what is in my mind directly onto a sheet of paper; the idea has to be broadcast via my nerves and motor skills, to my hand, and from there to the pencil that it guides. The mind and the hand can war with each other; or, ideally, collaborate with each other. Considered thought and incidental action both shape the visual form which appears on the paper, whilst the eye provides constant feedback, assessing the effort thus far and informing what the artist will choose to do next. All three entities – mind, hand and eye – are firing off messages instantaneously, and all these impulses must then be reconciled into a single piece of imagery. With all these factors to contend with, it is little wonder that the finished product inevitably differs from the initial concept.

My preparatory development certainly informed my finished drawings, yet I could not really rehearse the act of mark-making itself; the final artwork was the result of a one-off occurrence. What I needed to realize was that rather than getting hung up on the ‘correctness’ of my visual depictions, I should instead focus on capturing the tonal ‘essence’ of my story, using my print-tracing technique to preserve the sketchy quality of those instinctively-composed first sketches. The digital component of my work process allowed me to ‘fix’ any glaring errors, to some degree; if a figure’s head looked too large/small, or an arm is drawn at what looks like an awkward angle, I can alter these aspects fairly easily in Photoshop, then use these ‘corrected’ versions as the underlying linework for my finished imagery. What I can’t
digitally manufacture is the dynamic sense of inner-personality which somehow seems to emerge from beneath the pencil-tip: the expression of myself which is inherent in my art and unique to it. However much I try to improve my rendering skills, I must remember to trust my own ‘style’ – those things which I can’t help doing, and which set my art apart from everyone else’s.

This was a very important lesson – one which has undoubtedly changed my entire perspective on creative practices, and which I will probably carry with me for the rest of my drawing days. With realistic ambitions, a fearless (or at least somewhat braver) approach, and a new appreciation for spontaneity at the drawing board, I can start to build up my rendering skills again, without letting my nihilistic tendencies hold me back. Whatever artwork I produce in future, be it ‘good’ or ‘bad’, I can now accept the fact that it will only ever be an approximated version of whatever grand concept I might manage to invent; better or worse, it will still be something which other people can see and experience, making it infinitely more valuable than anything I could merely imagine. The drawing will always be a version of the initial idea, but never quite an exact manifestation of the idea itself. This is part of the frustration, but also part of the adventurousness and sheer wonderment of the profession – the vast expanse of near-infinite possibilities that each blank sheet of paper provides, but which a single pencil-mark can reduce to the singular in an instant. This is what makes creative work so exciting – and for the creator, so very worthwhile.
Chapter Seven

Results
From the outset of this study, I had certain expectations and projected outcomes which I intended to fulfil. However, this study would have been pointless if it had adhered completely to predicted events; creative work offers countless opportunities to deviate off the beaten track, exploring hitherto unmapped areas of knowledge. As well as managing to achieve the goals that I had set myself, I learned a lot of other things besides. Although most of these revelations were of a personal rather than universal nature, I am sure that they will prove to be informative to someone; hopefully several someones. In these chapters, the discoveries which I consider to be most illuminatory are reiterated, as I review the results of my study in retrospect.

7.1 Outcomes

Early on in this dissertation, I outlined numerous methodologies which I later applied to my study, deployed in order to utilize various means of examining the topic at hand. The techniques that I used proved to be effective; each stage of my enquiry provided a diverse assortment of unexpected findings. The following is a summation of the major discoveries that I made throughout my study. To recount absolutely every piece of new knowledge that I found would likely mean recounting this entire dissertation over again; however, the key aspects that really enhanced my understanding of my topic can be summarized as follows.

The Bigger Picture

I began by first analysing the practices, opinions, and prior findings which secondary sources provided. I had access to a wide range of materials on my subject matter, and as I perused as much of this literature as I could, I became increasingly aware of how the graphic novel appears to have languished in public perception, its development arrested by detrimental preconceptions, despite having existed for decades. I investigated several of these outmoded industry tropes, setting the record straight for both myself and my reader.
I was surprised by how much the medium is still trying to define itself; and encouraged to note that matters seem to have undergone recent improvement. At long last, graphic novels seem to be coming of age, reaching hitherto unattained levels of maturity and acceptance. Though past stereotypes still try to cling to it, the graphic novel is diversifying, breaking new ground and undergoing constant innovation. Its adaptability to various technological platforms, versatility in tackling any subject matter, and capability as a storytelling medium all mean that it still has much to offer a new generation of burgeoning storytellers. As authors continue to tap into its immense potential as a form of visual communication, its scope of possibilities is set to continue its gradual expansion.

**Separate Worlds Collide**

One of the main advantages that the graphic novel possesses is its unique multi-modal structure. As I carried out an analysis of the format’s technical aspects, I only became more impressed by this idiocentric aspect of the medium. Words and images, when taken separately, are powerful communication tools; when combined, that power increases exponentially. The specific way in which the two elements are combined is paramount to effectiveness of the novel content’s conveyance.

Though a successful graphic novel will incorporate its words and imagery as harmoniously as possible, the proportions at which the two elements are combined will rarely be perfectly equal. Artwork which errs on the side of abstraction is far more dependant on text to articulate a sequence of events, yet is adept at exploring atmosphere and emulating emotion. Conversely, imagery which is clear and concise can operate as a language in its own right, requiring minimal text to help it get its message across, to the point that words can sometimes be omitted altogether.

The graphic novel’s structure manipulates these text/image ratios to best effect, bringing the two elements together to create an integrated, multi-modal format. This was a lesson which I learned first-hand, via two separate means: first as a reader, observing how others had constructed their works, using my visual literacy to interpret and assess their efforts; then as an author, applying my writing ability and rendering skills to a practice-based project, manipulating text and image in ways which best conveyed my own original story.
Trials and Revelations

The preceding stages of my study allowed me to acquire knowledge via various aspects; by first acting as an observer who views the works of others, then as a participant who occupies the central role of practitioner. I gained a new level of understanding, however, by also observing my own practice, examining the creation process objectively whilst maintaining a personal insight as to how studio work transpires. As I discovered, the creation of any type of art is a complex, unpredictable procedure. Even the most carefully-formulated plans can become obsolete during the actual making of the finished object. Though initial concept and resulting artefact seldom correspond identically at the end of a project, this does not mean that such an exercise was a failure. The finished product will inevitably be a compromise between initial concept and actual object; however, such an outcome is a worthy achievement in itself.

Happenstance and intuitive decision-making are vital parts of creative work; the process itself will determine the nature of the final product. The creator should allow the active steps of production to unfold naturally, not adhering too strictly to any preconceptions. The author also cannot allow themself to become discouraged by unforeseen developments; they must learn to willingly risk the possibility of making mistakes, since these unintentional mishaps may lead to possibilities which would have remained otherwise unexplored. This was something that I came to know all too well, as I continuously struggled to find solutions to design problems, overcoming various stumbling blocks and psychological impasses as I went. By doing so, I learned to trust my creative impulses, coming to trust the intuitive aspects of artistic work, rather than merely agonizing over the purely theoretical component.

These points epitomise, for me at least, the current state of the medium’s evolution, the essential aspects which delineate the nature of the discipline, and the characteristics which make it an object worthy of academic attention. Despite the expectations I had at the start of my research, these findings were revelatory for me, and will be, I expect, for others who read this.
Though I feel I have learned a lot, there are still facets to the graphic novel which I have not yet even begun to fathom; and in coming years, this research might well be rendered redundant, by new developments that have already begun to vaguely loom in the medium’s future. The following chapter will further examine some of the possibilities which are steadily building within the industry, as well as some of the classic traits which make the graphic novel such a viable and valuable medium.

### 7.2 Relevance

“I put up a tollbooth out in a field and I’ve been waiting for a highway to come through. And now I can hear the trucks.” – Will Eisner

The graphic novel is a relatively old medium; it becomes older still if Scott McCloud is to be believed, and relics such as Egyptian friezes or the Bayeux Tapestry are to be included among the industry’s illustrious alumni. (1993, p. 12-15) And yet, the format has long been struggling to hit its stride. This delay was not wholly the medium’s own fault; as well as possessing certain fundamental flaws, many of the obstructions which have hampered its development have come from external sources. These impediments have constricted its attempts to grow, suppressed its freedom of expression, and attacked its already-fragile public image. Despite these handicaps, the graphic novel is learning to expand and strengthen itself, achieving greater feats of excellence and garnering increased levels of respect.

During the 1940’s, Will Eisner firmly believed that the graphic novel had the potential to become a serious medium. (McCloud 2000a, p.26) However, it is only now, sixty years on, that Eisner’s hope is finally starting to become a reality. At long last, the medium seems to be headed for a Renaissance – or at least, is on a better trajectory towards one than it has ever been on before. In order for this belief, expressed by Eisner and shared by many of his colleagues, to become an actuality, numerous factors are required to act as catalysts for the graphic novel’s transformation. Many of these crucial circumstances are either already in place, or are

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foreseeable in the near future. The following list contains a number of reasons as to why the graphic novel is currently gaining greater prominence, on a variety of levels – as a pop-culture fixture, a design artefact, a career option, and a modern medium.

- **Increased visual literacy:** Our society is becoming increasingly dependent upon graphic-oriented platforms: televisions, computers, iPads, mobile phones, and various other screen-based devices. This has resulted in a global culture that is highly saturated in visual material. In order to make sense of all these ocular stimuli, our collective ability to read imagery is rapidly improving. This increased image-reading literacy favours graphic novels, a medium which exemplifies the concept of visual communication.

- **Maturity of the medium:** It is unfortunate that graphic novels are often defined by their worst examples, and many misconceptions deriding them still remain in public consciousness. However, a number of exemplary works are challenging these views, having been recognized for their excellence with awards and accolades both within and without the industry; e.g. Art Spiegelman’s reception of a Pulitzer Prize in 1992; the collective and extensive industry trophies of creators like Neil Gaiman and Shaun Tan. As both authors and readers take the medium more seriously, the industry begins to repair its battered reputation, becoming credible and admired. As standards within the industry continue to improve, audience expectations are also raised, prompting graphic novels to rapidly mature, rising to meet the ascending benchmarks of quality and integrity.

- **Academic value:** Analytical texts on graphic novels were once far and few between, but this is also changing. With the publication of Scott McCloud’s ‘text book’ on the topic in 1993, graphic novels began to gain recognition as a subject for academic study. Education on the subject at a tertiary level is becoming available at numerous institutions, e.g. the Savannah College of Art and Design’s Bachelor degree in Sequential Art. (SCAD n.d., <www.scad.edu>) The old-guard of the industry, influential figures such as Eisner and McCloud, continue to extol the medium’s virtues; and the next generation of graphic novelists is listening attentively, whilst providing their own dialogue in turn. Combining the education provided by the old veterans with the ingenuity and talent of the modern movement, the medium’s longevity and continued evolution seems assured.
- **Improved technologies:** While comix authors once ‘published’ their works as cheap black-and-white photocopies, the days of having to compromise quality for the sake of economy are long gone. The development of high-quality, low-cost print has greatly benefited the industry. Additionally, the introduction of the internet – and the various electronic interfaces that go with it – allows graphic novels to achieve better exposure and easier distribution than ever before, making them readily accessible to an ever-increasing audience. A new culture of webcomics is quickly colonising cyberspace, creating a global community of comickers whose collective solidarity and individual talents are set to revolutionize the industry.

- **Development of a local market:** Whilst Australian graphic novels have existed in the past, they were far from prominent within our regional culture, tending to cater only to specialized interest and barely registering as a blip on the international scene. This began to change in 2006, when local artist Shaun Tan rose to international prominence on the merit of his wordless narrative, *The Arrival*. Since then, several other Aussie authors have also started to gain recognition, both at home and overseas. This exposure of local talent provides inspiration to other aspiring graphic novelists and opportunity for them to enter the industry, encouraging Australians to make their presence felt in the global market. Our own ascension into the ranks of visually-cultured countries is only a matter of time, as the local scene raises awareness and gains momentum.

All of these justifications are ample reasons for the graphic novel to finally realize its potential. The medium’s history has been littered with road blocks and false starts; despite this, the industry – and its inhabitants – has retained tremendous amounts of dedication and tenacity, refusing to accede to critics or abandon their cause. As the latest charge rides into battle, filling barren pages, circumnavigating the internet, and bringing reform to a stagnated frontier, this enduring crusade carries renewed hope, greater potency, and more determination than ever. With these factors just beginning to come into play, the premonition that Eisner had all those decades ago may finally turn into a reality. The medium has every opportunity and ability to succeed; as to whether it actually does, only time will tell.
7.3 Conclusion

As this dissertation has ascertained, the graphic novel is essentially made up of two parts: imagery and text. These two elements are written, rendered, arranged and manipulated by the author, in order to best convey the novel’s inherent narrative. Despite its composite nature, the graphic novel is far more than just a sum of its parts. Once united, these components become integrated, interacting with one another in a symbiotic relationship. By prompting its audience to simultaneously undertake the visual reception of imagery and the perceptive reading of textual discourse, the graphic novel creates a whole new language which incorporates both these forms of communication. Few other narrative media can similarly imitate the way we receive information about the world around us, whilst at the same time interpreting this world, tailoring its depiction to the author’s purpose.

Although it is by no means the only medium which transmits its message via multimodal means, the graphic novel certainly has some idiocentric features. Perhaps its greatest advantage is the intimate way in which it delivers its message. Through words which express the writer’s thoughts and imagery that conveys the artist’s unique vision, we gain direct insight into the author’s creative faculties. As Gertler and Lieber astutely point out, the reading of a book is an activity usually undertaken in solitude, one person per unit; this establishes a one-on-one dialogue between author and audience. (2004, p. 5) This is a tremendous relationship, which the visual communicator should realize, appreciate, and utilize to the utmost advantage. Those within the industry are tapping into the vast opportunity that the graphic novel format provides – a simultaneous outlet for the literary proclaimer, the artistic visionary, and the imaginative storyteller.

As stated in my research question, the purpose of my study was to ascertain the relevance and significance of the graphic novel as a modern medium. Right from the commencement of my study, my opinion on the topic was biased; a fact which I willingly admit, and which does not, I believe, deplete the validity of my research. After all, the graphic novel is attempting to relinquish its unwilling attachment to a chequered past; it could currently use every supporter it can get in its corner. The tide of negativity is, thankfully, slowly starting to turn; current indications suggest that circumstances are finally favouring the format, in terms of both internal quality and external acceptance.
When I was in my Honours year and presenting results from a similar research enquiry to a panel of examiners, one of them asked me if there had ever been a ‘golden age’ of the graphic novel in the past, or if that time was still to come. It was a question which I struggled to answer, and which I have now come to believe is unanswerable, as it furthermore forces one to ask: ‘Is this as good as it gets?’

Certainly, some graphic novels have been resounding successes – the works of Eisner, Tezuka, Spiegelman, Gaiman and Tan are all ideal examples, besides many other outstanding authors whom I have failed to mention – but has, or will, the format ever reach a definitive pinnacle? The much-maligned medium has attempted to come of age many times in the past, yet many of the misconceptions surrounding it have managed to linger on; it is feasible, though unfortunate, that these may continue to do so without redress. It may become inevitable that no matter how great the graphic novel manages to become, whatever internal level of excellence it manages to achieve, it will still never be recognized by the same standards as other ‘respectable’ media. It may be forced to continue playing the role of ugly duckling, with the rest of society, contrary to the traditional fairytale’s happy ending, forever ignorant of the potential swan in its midst. It may be relegated to an unchangeable fate, wherein it is consistently depreciated and despised.

Perhaps the best answer I can give to the question is that if we ever accept the current state of the industry as being the very best that it can be, then this will indeed be all it ever amounts to. Rube Goldberg, in his day, never believed that cartoonists could rise above their role as the artistic world’s vaudevillians; if we likewise conclude that any attempts to change would be futile, then nothing will ever change. However, I know that there is yet more to come – from this generation of authors, and from the next. The professionals of the previous and current eras have already done so much – they have rung in so much change, crafted such works of innovative originality and artistic sensitivity. Many of today’s masters still have much more to give, whilst the works of prior greats continue to live on in memories and in imaginations. Their collective readers, who much like myself have discovered – and been inspired – by their works, will in turn form the next generation of greats, taking what they have learned from their predecessors and moving forward with it. I honestly believe that this will happen. I know that others believe it, too – Scott McCloud, Neil Gaiman, Osamu Tezuka, Will Eisner, James Sturm and many, many others have expressed such hopes and predictions. So long as this enthusiasm, optimism and self-
belief remains within the industry, a ‘golden age’ of the graphic novel is by all means attainable.

My research question sought evidence of the medium’s relevance; however, relevance is ultimately a subjective evaluation. Stating my case to Frank Miller or Paul Gravett would be preaching to the converted. Likewise, I hardly expect to win over the entire world with my somewhat over-enthused argument; there are some people, I am sure, who just don’t like graphic novels, and never will cotton to them, no matter how I try to persuade them. For the rest of us, the graphic novel is a gateway to an idyllic, mesmerising realm of fiction. It may take any number of forms: presented in pages or on screens, in a seamless stream of whimsical imagery or in passages of eloquent prose studded with breathtaking illustrations. It can transport us to any of a myriad of possible locations, delving into every conceivable genre, framed around plotlines of every shape and stock. Some of them are quite good, some pure works of genius. Some, I regret to say, are dismally bad; yet even these abhorrent ones are invaluable, if only because they teach the rest of us what not to do.

They may entrance us, bore us, entertain us, repel us; enlighten, entertain, disgust, or delight us. The only real guarantee you may have when you open a graphic novel, is that you can expect it to tell you a story; that is, and always will be, its strongest, most desirable attribute. We use stories to fill idle hours, to satiate our curiosity; the best ones surprise and entrance us, lead us to epiphany, fill our lives with additional shades of depth and meaning. The stories that the graphic novel delivers to us are no different from those presented in any other media, save that they are both shown to us and told to us. As a person who has always loved both the rhythmic elegance of the written word and the aesthetic captivation that visual images conjure, I can think of no better way to indulge and ignite my senses than by sitting down to read a graphic novel. As both a lover of stories and an author who creates stories, this is a treasure which I want to share with others. This dissertation is an open invitation – to anyone who has read graphic novels before, or anyone who has never dared glance at a page – to consider the format anew, as I have done throughout the course of my study.

As for myself, I am of much the same opinion as I was back when I began, albeit rather better-informed by my research, enlightened by my experience, and sufficiently invigorated to continue working with a medium which I consider to be both my ‘tool of the trade’, and my overriding passion. It is my chosen subject matter,
my specialist area of knowledge, my favourite pastime, my preferred vocation, and the single-most inspiring thing in my life.

At the very start of this dissertation, I recited the trite old adage: ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’. A somewhat-similar Chinese proverb states: ‘Yi zi qian jing’ – ‘one written word is worth a thousand pieces of gold’. (Yen Mah 2002, p. 29) If we compound both these statements, each image is worth a thousand words; in addition, each of those words is worth a thousand pieces of gold. I am no mathematician, but I don’t need to tally the profit to know how enriched my life has been by visual narrative; nor to plainly discern the wealth that the medium offers us, as a form of both literary articulation and artistic expression. It is a versatile performer, able to don many guises; it can play entertainer, informer, teacher, chronicler, free-thinker, philosopher, revolutionary, provocateur, source of refuge, and close-confidant, all at the whim of the author’s personal agenda. Words and images are not so disparate; nor are graphic novels superfluous. They are a timeless, ageless language; they are ingenious communicators and visionary storytellers, the narratives they contain resonating across generations, demographics, and country divides. They offer readers all they could possibly wish to see, and allow authors to express all that they could ever dare envision. They give us free rein to express and to discover, to share and receive, to explore that which is without us and delve deep within ourselves. Such experiences are truly priceless.

I began this thesis with a quote from Harvey Pekar, and I will now close it with the same, as it seems to perfectly encapsulate the phenomenon, the conundrum, the intricate complexity and profound simplicity which is at the core concept of the ‘graphic novel’ format:

“Comics are just words and pictures.
You can do anything with words and pictures.”
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