TIME AND NARRATIVE IN DEPTHLESS VISUAL MEDIA

By

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To Nikki, for sharing Blankets, Cages, and a Life with me,
Kevin for Starry Wisdom,
And Donald D. for Counter-Apocalyptic Resistances
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TIME AND NARRATIVE IN DEPTHLESS VISUAL MEDIA

By

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Even as the medium of comics, especially the “graphic novel,” has acquired cultural cachet and attracted academic attention, it remains undertheorized as theoretical approaches to Anglophone comics have tended to be proscriptive and procrustean, grounded in unquestioned assumptions from popular sources. This dissertation is an investigation into and invention of concepts specific to flat visual narrative media, particularly comics, in terms of their potential as well as into aspects of caricature and printmaking and games studies, especially sprite-based games. An anarchy of method derived principally from the theoretical work of Paul Feyerabend and from Donald Ault’s alternative narratology is used to broaden the sense of “narrative” in visual media and to explicate the value of multiple, incommensurable meanings in such media.

Methodological tools of close visual analysis from the work of James Elkins, Richard Schiff and other scholars of art history and visual culture are combined with the critical theory of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, producing an analysis of visual details in terms of the concepts of the signifying surface and the plane of immanence. The advantage of this mode of study is that it aids in the perception and description of
the multiplication of narrative meanings or trajectories through a work of comics, caricature, etc.

A theory of depthlessness in visual media is developed in which the idea of the page, panel, screen, or interface as a window onto another, complete world must be discarded. These structures may have a false “above” (projected into a non-existent plane of higher ontological priority) and a “below” (or outside) characterized by conspicuous absence and unknowability, but there is nothing “behind” or “through” them. From this perspective, multiple processions through time, and multiple kinds of time can be discerned, and analysis of different kinds of time in interactive media becomes possible. All of these concepts are united in the concept of “processual narrative,” the analysis neither of plot nor “gameplay” but of the visual structures and intertexts that open up and complicate the meaning of the object of analysis.
CHAPTER 1
PROCRUSTEAN BEDS AND PANEL BORDERS

Firstly, Terminus, the God of boundaries.
Jupiter must bow to him:
boundaries are the most important of things


**What is “Comics Studies”?**

One defining characteristic of 20th century media and culture is their obsession with boundaries in the face of their increasing failure, producing innumerable border wars of occasionally literal and generally metaphorical nature. Many such wars have been fought as the result of the aspiration to cultural value of a multitude of medial voices. These new voices are made perceptible by the failure of old boundaries that had precluded their access to cultural value. Their success in the reterritorialization of cultural value, the re-establishment of boundaries, has reified these media into totalitarian forms, imposing limits on their potential, and perpetuating the zero-sum game of cultural capital.

The shortest possible statement of the “crisis” in comics theory is that it has played this game and been defensive, even reactionary, in character. Proscriptive, even procrustean definitions of the medium and anxiety over control of the reader and over the presumed superiority of film, have had a chilling effect on discourse. Comics in all

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1 Throughout, I use the word “comics” as singular in conformity with the phrase “comics is a multiplicity.” There are a number of reasons for this sometimes-awkward convention. When speaking of the medium overall, I am not limiting myself to any of the specific concrete forms of comics, such as comic strips, comic books, graphic novels, caricature, albums, *tankobon*, etc., and so cannot use any of those terms. Similarly, it would be counterproductive to extend a term like *fumetti, bande desinee, or manga* to cover all comics, and moreover disingenuous as the preponderance of my examples are Anglophone. Because I am arguing that comics are a de-centered medium without any single essential trait, I cannot use terms that suppose just such a trait, like “sequential art” or “verbal/visual text.” The term “comic art” is less problematic as “art” need not be strictly in the fine/visual sense but still carries that baggage as well as the implicit and incorrect association with comedy. Since I intend to consider comics as a medium and a multiplicity, consistently treating “comics” as singular is grammatically appropriate,
its diverse material forms has been subject to more theoretical binding than most media, perhaps because comics lacks a technological “center.”

Comics has generally been defined in negative terms both by its critics and its would-be defenders, the latter of which generally seem to feel that they can define or redeem it only through the abjection of some or most of its particular forms and instances. In order to escape this trap, it may be necessary to consider comics as not one self-consistent medium or genre but instead as a teeming multiplicity, possessing as it does a number of technologically dependent forms but no technological origin, unlike film; no stable grammar or convention of reading, unlike text; a highly inconsistent relationship to the idea of the “original,” unlike painting; and a simultaneously weak and divisive history of self-definition.

Though comics and new media both share a propensity for transgression, comics has a long and open-ended history, whereas the profusion of “new,” “digital,” and “electronic” media count their age in years or, at most, decades. Debate continues over what the “first” comics were, a debate I will not and cannot engage in, as it depends on what one assumes are the necessary characteristics of all comics. In any case, the specific medial conventions of the comic strip date back at least to Rodolphe Topffer and the mid-19th century. The art of mass-media caricature dates back at least to the invention of lithography by Alois Senefelder in 1796 and arguably to the ancient practice of woodcut printing.

The origins of comics studies as the academic criticism and study of the medium and works in it are murky as early scholarship was scattered and often local in

and I hope that the slight disruption created by this convention will serve to remind the reader of the fundamental heterogeneity of some of the specifics I am considering under the label of “comics.”
character. It is not possible here to recount all of the “origins” of a field which has, in any case, existed in North America for over forty years. One starting point is the first PhD on comics, which was granted to Sol Davidson by New York University in 1959, a mere five years after the McCarthy hearings (and comics’ own brush with Senatorial inquiry when Frederic Wertham’s infamous comics-bashing Seduction of the Innocent led to Congressional hearings). Davidson, a businessman with a lifelong interest in the medium, would not wind up using his degree. Dissertations on comics would remain a “dead end” for decades to come, but scholars with a foot in more traditional fields would begin to make inroads in the 1970s.

David Kunzle, M. Thomas Inge and Donald Ault are among these early pioneers. In the early 1970s (1972-4), Ault created courses in “Literature and Popular Culture” and “Literature and Philosophy” at UC Berkeley, and was the first to teach comic books and animation as literary narrative at the University level. Kunzle wrote the first great monograph on comics, his two volume History of the Comic Strip, at this time—Volume 1 was published in 1973. Ault and Inge each authored a number of essays during this period, and Inge’s work would be collected as Comics as Culture by the University Press of Mississippi (UPM) in 1990. The first influential work of comics scholarship in the UK was A Haunt of Fears by Matthew Baker, which first saw print in 1984 but wouldn’t cross the pond until 1992. French and Italian comics scholarship would proceed apace, but have little influence on Anglophone comics studies until the translation of Thierry Groensteen’s System of Comics in 2005.

The mid-1980s saw the first uptick in general acceptability of comics in the United States since the heyday of the newspaper strips and the popularization of the
term “graphic novel” for long-form comics even as sales continued to slump. Will Eisner, a highly respected practitioner who claimed credit for the term “graphic novel,” published *Comics & Sequential Art* in 1985. Based on a course he taught to art students, Eisner’s book would come to have great influence on comics scholarship and criticism. Despite this popular interest, no new scholarly monographs saw print until Joseph Witek’s *Comic Books as History*. Witek’s monograph was the first to address Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize winning *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*, and is particularly notable for its analysis of the effect of artistic style and detail on narrative. UPM published *Comic Books as History* in 1989 and Inge’s *Comics as Culture* the next year. UPM would go on to become the leading publisher in the field, launching the *Conversations* series, collecting interviews with important comics creators, and the *Great Comic Artists* series, which I do not consider in detail here.

The creation of a community of comics scholars was advanced in the 1990s by the creation of venues for the presentation of conference papers. The least academic of these, the Comic Arts Conference (CAC), would be founded under the auspices of practitioner-theorists Eisner and Scott McCloud, and comics journalist R.C. Harvey, and sustained by scholars Peter Coogan and Randy Duncan. Coogan would also be instrumental in the creation of a comics section at the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association (PCA/ACA) conference, along with Gene Kannenberg, Nicole Freim, and others.

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2 *Maus* was serialized in Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly’s art-comics publication *RAW* from 1980-91, and received critical acclaim with the publication of the first part of the story (*My Father Bleeds History*) as a “graphic novel” in 1986. *Maus* was nominated for the National Book Critics award that year, and went on to win many awards, including a special Pulitzer Prize in 1992.
The International Comics Arts Festival (ICAF), now known as the International Comics Arts Forum, intended to showcase international comics and creators and scholarship about them, would follow in 1998. ICAF was the product of the efforts of John Lent, Charles Hatfield, and other scholars, along with interested creators and aficionados. The CAC has always been associated with a fan-supported convention: first in Chicago, now with the Comic-Con International in San Diego, and for most of its existence, ICAF was both a conference and a convention, leaving only the comics section of the PCA/ACA as “purely” academic.

The 1990s also saw the publication of influential works that blurred the line between popular and scholarly writing on comics. Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, was first published in 1993 by Kitchen Sink Press, now a Harper property, along with McCloud’s follow-up works *Reinventing Comics* and *Making Comics*. Ever since, *Understanding Comics* has remained the best-selling work of comics theory in English, becoming an overnight sensation with fans and creators because it is in the form of a “graphic novel.” The same year, academic press Routledge published *Adult Comics: An Introduction*, by British comics journalist Roger Sabin. In 1994, Mississippi published Harvey’s *The Art of the Funnies: An Aesthetic History*, and, two years later, his parallel work *The Art of the Comic Book*. The value of Eisner, McCloud, and Harvey’s contributions to the field, and their problematic legacy, are considered later in this chapter.

Another milestone was reached with the launch of *Inks: Cartoon and Comic Art Studies*, arguably the first journal dedicated to the field, by Lucy Caswell and others at Ohio State in 1994. There had been sporadic efforts to provide a print forum for comics
scholarship, including Crimmer’s: The Harvard Journal of Pictorial Fiction over 1974-5, and before that two issues of the design magazine Graphis in 1972, but they were short-lived. Inks was purely scholarly, unlike its predecessors, which were academic/popular crossover publications. It was a blow when Inks ceased publication in 1997, but it was replaced in 1999 by The International Journal of Comic Art (IJOCA), edited by John Lent. For years, IJOCA struggled to balance its commitment to international and especially non-Anglophone comics with its position as the only dedicated journal in the field, but that would change after the turn of the millennium, as would much in the field.

Two significant works in the methodology pioneered by Inge, comics studies as cultural studies, would appear on the cusp of the new century: Amy Nyberg’s Seal of Approval (1998) and Matthew Putz’s Comic Book Culture (2000). Nyberg’s book would typify much of the work of the next decade: she reconsiders the much-derided Comics Code as a valuable development, protecting the industry from government censorship and allowing for the development of original works inspired by constraint. Much of the work done thereafter would also question commonly-held assumptions about the history of the medium.

Three such works are Bradford D. Wright’s Comic Book Nation (Duke University Press, 2003), Charles Hatfield’s Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature, and Bart Beaty’s Frederic Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture (both UPM, both 2005). Comic Book Nation inverts the recurrent parental anxiety over the influence comics might have on children to demonstrate how American comics, especially action and superhero comics, from the turn of the century through the end of the cold war
persistently reflected “adult” anxieties about the world. Hatfield’s *Alternative Comics* traces out the largely unconsidered linkages between the countercultural underground comix of the late 60s and early 70s and the graphic novels of the 80s and 90s, with particular attention paid to open and veiled autobiography in both.

Beaty’s cultural biography of psychologist Frederic Wertham makes a good companion to Nyberg’s *Seal of Approval*, as it redeems Wertham, the boogeyman generally blamed for the Comics Code. Beaty demonstrates how Wertham’s primary concern was a liberal one, a concern about corporate control of mass media and advertising targeted at young children, and how he was appropriated to support the agendas of reactionary parents’ groups. In 2007, Kunzle returned to comics studies with a biography of his own, *Rodolphe Topffer: Father of the Comic Strip*.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that no new critical frameworks for comics studies have been advanced in the past decade. *Early Studies in Visual Linguistics* (self-published, 2003) collects Neil Cohn’s essays explicating his semantic-grammatical approach to reading comics. David Carrier’s *The Aesthetics of Comics* takes an opposite tact, drawing on Carrier’s expertise and ethos as an art historian, as well as McCloud and Harvey’s theories of comics art, which he cites. Published in 2001, *The Aesthetics of Comics* is Pennsylvania State University’s first foray into comics scholarship. Cohn and Carrier have yet to have much impact on the field of comics studies, whereas Beaty and Nick Nguyen’s 2007 translation of Thierry Groensteen’s *The System of Comics* may be the most influential work of comics theory to be published in English. Groensteen’s mode of analysis, “arthrology,” along with Carrier and Cohn’s methodologies, will be considered in detail in the next section.
So many scholarly and popular cross-over books on comics have been published this decade that they cannot all be covered here, but one more kind of book is worth noting: the textbook. Jessica Abel and Matt Madden’s *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures*, published by First Second (best known for its graphic novels) in 2008, is a textbook on creating comics, not comics criticism, but it is intended for use as a University textbook, and is attentive to the field of comics studies. The same year saw the publication of *A Comics Studies Reader*, edited by Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester. Continuum, a recent entrant into publishing in the field, put out Randy Duncan and Matthew Smith’s *The Power of Comics*, an introductory comics studies textbook, in July, 2009.

Institutional support for comics studies has been slower in coming. In 2002, comics pioneer Ault inaugurated a new Conference on Comics at the University of Florida (UF), and, in 2006, the first graduate track in comics studies in the US. In 2004, he edited the first issue of *ImageTexT*, UF’s new peer-reviewed webjournal for comics and animation studies (housed in the English Department of UF’s College of Liberal Arts and Sciences). *ImageTexT* has taken some of the pressure off of *IJOCA* by offering a more theoretically-focused and image-intensive venue. The same year as the first Conference on Comics, M. Todd Hignite began publishing *Comic Art*, a scholarship-friendly popular magazine on the medium. In 2009, the subfield of Japanese manga and anime studies acquired its own journal, *Mechademia*, edited by Frenchy Luning, and the MLA added a comics studies discussion section. Another new journal, *Studies in Comics*, co-edited by Inge, will see print next year.

**The Problem of Comics Theory**
Historical and cultural analysis of comics has been the fastest growing approach to comics scholarship and has reached a certain maturity as a subfield. Comics theory has suffered a slower and more tortuous progression due in part to repeated attempts to pin down this amorphous medium and in part to problems of rigor in crossover popular-academic work as well as the tendency of scholars versed in literature and language (as are most comics scholars) to reduce a visual and textual system to text. Even the tradition of Film Studies has been of little help given the differences between the arts of cinematography and line art.³

Since its first days, comics theory has been caught up in an effort to define its subject. One of the first definitions of comics was offered by Kunzle in *The History of the Comic Strip*. Kunzle’s four-point definition was intended to limit the scope of his project by proscribing the boundaries of what he would consider as a “comic strip.” For the purposes of his project, comic strips consist of “a sequence of separate images with a preponderance of image over text that appears (and was originally intended to appear) in a mass medium and tells a story which is both moral and topical” (*Early* 2). It is crucial to recognize that Kunzle’s definition was used to limit the scope of a historical project and not as an essentialist description of comics, though it has often been used as such. Kunzle has never shown any particular interest in comics theory. He has been cited most often in theoretical, not historical, debates, usually by those arguing for or against universally applying his definition of comics.

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³ Not all comics consist of line art—photocomics and “fully painted” comics are among the exceptions. Nonetheless, line art and especially caricature have had a predominant influence on comics. See Carrier’s comment on comics and caricature below.
For decades, the only visually attentive application of recognized critical theory to comics was Ault's appropriation of the terms and concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis to describe the behavior of structural elements of the page including the disjunctive “cutting up” of the page, “vector analysis” of lines of sight, and other undrawn or incomplete connections within and especially between panels. In the absence of an organized and productive academic discourse community, popular theories and theorists who rose to predominance among fans and practitioners, including Eisner and McCloud, were imported into the University as well.

Many of the commonplace assumptions in comics theory today, and most of the theorists, have their roots in Will Eisner’s *Comics and Sequential Art*. Both McCloud and Harvey follow directly from Eisner, Neil Cohn is responding to Eisner and McCloud, and David Carrier builds on McCloud’s and Harvey’s assumptions. One such assumption is the interdependence of word and image. In what is clearly an admonition to would-be comics artists, Eisner says “[i]n comics the drawings are visuals. In textbooks they are illustrations. A visual replaces text [...] an illustration simply repeats or amplifies, decorates or sets a climate for mood. Think of your function as a visualizer rather than an illustrator” (*Comics* 153). Though intended for fans as well as practicing artists, Eisner often slips into talking about comics from an artist’s perspective, resulting in a slippage between comics creation and (critical) reading. Thus, when he says that “In sequential art the artist must, from the outset, secure control of the reader’s attention and dictate the sequence in which the reader will follow the narrative,” he is speaking out of a practitioner’s frustration with “the tendency of the reader’s eye to wander,”
which might easily be confused for a statement that only comics that successfully control the reader’s eye are “good” (40).

Eisner’s concept of “sequential art” requires only two images and some sort of action or progress that is discernable between them. As with his description of visualization as “replacing text,” Eisner’s “sequential art” allows for but does not require text. Eisner stops short of equating “sequential art” and “comics.” Throughout *Comics & Sequential Art*, the relation of the two is fluid: at times “comics” is a manifestation of “sequential art,” at times “sequential art” is the prime mover in “comics,” at times “comics” seems to be Eisner’s term for the physical media and “sequential art” his term for the conceptual structure of that media.

The further Eisner wanders from the practice of creating comics, the broader his claims become, as when he states that “film, which is an extension of comic strips, enjoys absolute control of its reading” and then moves on without either explaining why he sees film as an extension of comics or defending his claim that it controls how its viewers “read” it (40). The closest Eisner comes to offering an explanation of the controlling power he ascribes to film is in the caption to an illustration where he says that “[t]he viewer sees (reads) only one frame at a time. He cannot see the next (or past) frames until they are shown to him by the machine” (40).

Eisner’s association of the panel on the page of comics with the film cell reveals an anxiety over the similarities of these media—Eisner comes close to stating that film is a “superior” medium when he says that, in comics, “[t]he number of images allowed is limited, whereas in film an idea or an emotion can be expressed by hundreds of images displayed in fluid sequence at such speed as to emulate real movement. In print this
effect can only be simulated” (24). Eisner offers a page from his Life on another Planet as an illustration of how “real movement” can be simulated in comics (24, see Figure 1-1). The effect is ironic as the illustration is a visual collage with a serpentine and circular flow that is only semi-linear and possesses no conventional, bordered panels. Eisner’s control anxiety reappears in his 1996 Graphic Storytelling & Visual Narrative where he says that “[a] film watcher is imprisoned until the film ends while the comics reader is free to roam [...] Film proceeds without any concern about the literary skills or reading ability of its audience, whereas the comic must deal with both of these” (71). He also cautions comics creators against trying to adopt filmic styles because of the space required to do so and because “[w]hen a comic adopts film camera technique, it can lose readability” (73). Eisner states here that there is no need for comics to be drawn as if each panel was a photograph or a film still (“film camera technique”), so it is clear that Eisner’s worries have nothing to do with film per se, and everything to do with the anxiety that film will replace, reshape, corrupt and/or destroy comics as a unique medium.

The issue remains regarding what Eisner considers a panel to be. As an artist, Eisner often eschews the outlined rectangle of the conventional panel in favor of shapes determined by environmental factors like windows and archways, or an unbounded empty space that connects all the elements of the page, or densely packed collage-like layouts as described above. In Comics & Sequential Art, Eisner states that the panel is like a “frame” of film, seeming to contradict his admonition against “film camera technique,” before going on to parallel the panel to the page: “In comics, there are actually two ‘frames’ in this sense: the total page, on which there are any number of
panels, and the panel itself, within which the narrative action unfolds. They are the controlling device in sequential art” (41). Eisner’s control anxiety appears even stronger in his definition of the panel: “The capture or encapsulation of these events in the flow of the narrative [requires that] they must be broken up into sequenced segments. These segments are called panels or frames” (38, emphasis in original). The panel, then, is the device that controls not just reader attention but events. This analogy to a “naturalistic” understanding of film is as close as Eisner gets to saying that comics require multiple panels. A confusing ambivalence exists here in the phrase “panels or frames” as we saw that, on page 41, he uses “frames” to describe both panels and pages.

Eisner may have found it necessary to blur the relationship of page and panel to “frame” in order to preserve his analogy to film and avoid contradicting the evidence of his own comics. Eisner is a master of page layout and composition. His Spirit comics are famous for their opening splash pages that work the series title into physical environments in the form of shadows, architecture, commercial signage, written and printed objects, pooling liquid and more, often in ways that cannot be reconciled with physical properties of matter, three dimensional space, or narrative sequentiality. The Spirit splash pages alone seem sufficient to refute the notion of strict linearity or deterministic control of the reader’s gaze as necessary for comics and to be sufficient demonstration of the difference between the potentials of the printed comics page and the cell or “frame” of film.

It may be an understatement to describe McCloud’s Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art as “highly influential.” Until the translation of System of Comics, McCloud was easily the most-taught and most-cited comics theorist and he still retains popular
predominance, perhaps due to *Understanding Comics* being itself a comic. McCloud is greatly indebted to Eisner, but not always in the ways one might expect.

McCloud’s project is ultimately a Confucian rectification of names. Seeking to save both the medium and its devotees from negative stereotypes and cultural stigmatization, he proposes “A proper definition, if we could find one, might give the lie to the stereotypes—and show that the potential of comics is limitless and exciting!” (3). With these words, McCloud codified the central paradox of comics theory: the idea that the proper definition (proscription) of comics will be liberating. The use of the word “find” is critical: McCloud treats his definition as self-evident and natural rather than as a concept he created.

McCloud proposes a complete separation between form and content, and starts with Will Eisner’s term Sequential Art as a seed definition, which he expands into the following definition of comics as “[j]uxtaposed pictoral and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud 9). This definition with the phrase “deliberate sequence” seems to be an embracing of authorial intent, but McCloud intends it as something more like a rule of reading intended to forfend Eisner’s control anxiety. This rule of reading is the keystone of and the critical flaw in *Understanding Comics*.

The word “closure,” as it appears in *Understanding Comics* is supposedly one with what Freud called the *fort-da* game (“peek-a-boo”) and with metonymy: “[i]n our daily lives, we often commit closure, mentally completing that which is incomplete based on past experience” (McCloud 62). Like Eisner, McCloud assumes, and is greatly worried about, a fundamental similarity between film and comics. It is therefore unsurprising
that, before discussing closure in comics, McCloud explains film in terms of closure in this contradictory phrase: “In film, closure happens continuously—twenty four times per second, in fact—as our minds, aided by the persistence of vision, transform a series of still pictures into a story of continuous motion” (McCloud 65). The confusion here is necessary for McCloud’s argument: film must both be continuous and happen in twenty-four discrete closures per second in order for closure to be both deterministic (leading to a single conclusion) and a natural process that operates identically in film and comics. The incommensurability of the medial limit and sensory perception must be effaced for his subsequent argument about comics to work.

That argument is that comics have a unique relationship to closure in that closure takes place in the “gutter” between panels on the page: “Nothing is seen between the two panels, but experience tells you that something must be there” (McCloud 67). It is at this point that the conflation of the medial characteristics of film and the sensory conditions of watching a movie become critical. Earlier, McCloud had said that “space does for comics what time does for film! However you might say that before it is projected, film is just a very very very very slow comic” (McCloud 8, see Figure 1-2).

It becomes clear at this point why the medial characteristics and viewing experience of film had to be conflated. McCloud’s definition of comics depends on “deliberate sequence” and his definition of closure in comics is “between the two panels,” which requires that, like a traditional film cell, the panel must be an essential and inviolate medial characteristic, and that panel sequence must be indisputable. On page 67, McCloud says “comics is closure,” marking the compete replacement of Eisner’s loose sense of “sequential art” with a specific and exclusive definition. To
unpack this identity between comics and closure, we have to see that McCloudian closure requires two “full” panels and an abjected gutter which the reader involuntarily fills in. Thus defined, the “event” of comics always and only requires two panels.

The medial limit of traditional film is the celluloid tape or ribbon (and, arguably the screen it is projected on), and it requires only the slightest abstraction to concede that the physical film must generally consist of discrete cells for the projector to function. The conception of film as being this strip of discrete cells and the conceptual notion that each one “captures” a moment in time was important in the early history of film. The conceptual approach to the medial limit of film constitutes what Gilles Deleuze calls the “any moment whatsoever” and is definitive of what he calls the “motion image” in his book on early film, *Cinema 1: The Motion Image*. Note that the motion image is incommensurable with the film itself, the conception and the medial limit existing in different registers. The very possibility of Deleuze’s *Cinema 2: The Time Image* is evidence of this heterogeneity.

The panel is a conceptual structure, though McCloud treats it as a medial limit. The medial limit for print comics is the page and ink, much as the medial limit of oil painting is paint on canvas (allowing for vast variations in the material composition of “page,” “ink,” “canvas” and “paint”). As a medial limit, the closest thing to a panel is a line, and even the “line” projects a conceptual homogeneity onto the ink markings on the page. For a digital comic, the medial limit is the display device it is shown on. Even a formalist artistic approach to the panel does not yield a consistent or coherent object: comics with conceptually distinguishable regions but no separating outlines are common and include examples in which there is neither anything resembling an outline
nor “empty” space between “panels.” What, then, is a panel for McCloud’s purposes? It is part of “the platonic idea of the cartoon” and “comics’ most overlooked icon” (McCloud 45, 98). McCloud’s sense of “icon” is neither conventional nor Peircian and is perhaps best explained in terms of his triangular mapping of all visual material (see Figure 1-3).

One corner of this diagram is what McCloud calls “the realm of the art object, the picture plane, where shapes, lines and colors can be themselves and not pretend otherwise,” and the other two corners are “reality” and “language” (51). McCloud is not very concerned with the apparently a-signifying “picture plane,” mostly treating it in the negative, the direction of “non-iconic” abstraction, “where no attempt is made to cling to resemblance or meaning” (50). McCloud’s conception of motion toward “language” and away from “reality” is, in his terms “iconic abstraction” until one crosses the border from “received information” for which we “need no formal education” into writing/language which is “perceived information” (49, 50). Bracketing the assumptions about mimeticism, signification, and language inherent in this model, McCloud’s description of the panel as “an icon” places it at the extreme of iconic abstraction and assumes a nearly-linguistic association with meaning that is still natural and immediately “received”—a status presumably made possible by its Platonic truth.

This is the crucial flaw in Understanding Comics: it is simply unable to sustain the metaphysical weight of its definition of the panel. On page 95, in his discussion of time, McCloud presents a (roughly) page-width panel of a scene at a party intended to demonstrate the passage of time within a single panel. He ascribes the passage of time to the order of the dialogue in the word balloons in the panel, in a return of the mimetic within the “iconically abstracted” realm of language: “Words introduce time by
presenting that which can only exist in time—sound” (McCloud 95, see Figure 1-4). This despite his having noted, in two word balloons on page 25, “Do you hear what I’m saying? If you do, have your ears checked because no-one’s said a word.” Furthermore, on page 97, he says with apparent surprise, “in some respects this panel by itself actually fits our definition of comics! All it needs are a few gutters thrown in to clarify the sequence.” He then redraws the single panel subdivided into five panels. It is at exactly this point that McCloud’s argument implodes because it is obvious from his own example that the panel does not need a few abject gutters “thrown in” and that it works as a single panel. In fact it would be easy to argue that it works better as a single panel—but by McCloud’s definition, it was not really comics until it was divided into multiple panels.

McCloudian sequentiality and closure as presented in Understanding Comics do not follow directly from Comics & Sequential Art but instead adopt that work’s anxieties about the relationship of comics to film and of maintaining control of the reader. In attempting to create a rigorous definition and a comprehensive theoretical model of all comics, McCloud winds up reifying those fears into truths. One example of this transformation occurs on page 104 of Understanding Comics. Here, McCloud sets out a model of time in comics: “This panel and this panel alone represents the present. Any panel before this—that last one, for instance—represents the past. Likewise, all panels yet to come—this next panel, for instance—represent the future.” This model conflates three different kinds of time, confusing the time or durée spent reading the page, the “passage” of time in the narrative, and structures of time on the page itself.
This conflation is necessary to make the sample comics on page 105 fit into McCloud’s model (see Figure 1-5). In this crossword puzzle-like comic, one is intended to start at an approved “first panel,” read panel-to-panel, and, at every intersection, choose either the panel below or to the right of the present panel (though these rules are not entirely consistent). The conflation of times is vital here, as the comic only works if one treats each panel as a “present” moment and each fork as a binary “choice.” If read thus, this comic is entirely sequential and entirely linear in a manner similar to a Choose Your Own Adventure book.

If read according to the rules, there is only, ever, and precisely one next panel in the “Carl” comic. The notion of the panel as medial, narrative, and readerly present hides the way in which these are not (necessarily) binary choices, in which “both” is just as good an answer as “one” or “the other” and preempts consideration of other structures of the page (such as the direction in which a character is looking). The issue of choice as presented here not only presumes the absolute integrity of the panel, but strict linear sequentiality, conflation of different kinds of time, and ultimately that the reader must play by a set of rules defined by the cartoonist while accepting that the cartoonist can break his own rules. In this comic there are points at which a theoretically legitimate “choice” results in a non sequitur that seems in violation of McCloud’s authorial-intentional dictum, and there is one place where one is required to read to the left even though everywhere else, this is “forbidden.”

The rules are, of course, unenforceable, and breaking them produces some of the most interesting narrative trajectories in the comic. In one instance, reading down-down-right-right, which should be a “legal” sequence, produces a surreal situation in which
Carl, the protagonist, goes home only to discover that he is actually in someone else’s house, to which he responds by calmly renting a movie from the house’s occupant. Moreover, it seems that Carl has done this before, as he asks “to rent another video” (McCloud 105). In another case, going “up” produces a plot in which Carl’s mother leaves him a note saying that she has gone to Borneo, causing him to shout in a shocked or outraged voice “Borneo!” and this ejaculation summons the aforementioned video store clerk, but when Carl decides to rent a movie, the clerk tells Carl that (like his mother) all of the movies are in Borneo.

Comics journalist Robert Harvey sets out in *The Art of the Funnies* and *The Art of the Comic Book* to demonstrate that interdependence of word and image is the defining trait of comics and uses the phrase “pantomime comics” to bracket off wordless comics as a special case that somehow simultaneously violates his definition of comics and yet is comics. This may be made possible because he phrases his definition not as one of essence (as with McCloud’s closure), but of value judgment: “[o]ne litmus test of good comics art is to ascertain to what extent the sense of the words depends on the pictures and vice versa” (*Comic Book* 4). He calls this criterion “verbal-visual blending” and applies it in a manner similar to the structuralist mandate for narrative complexity and unity: comics are good to the degree that they manifest verbal-visual blending, whereas if the text and images are independent, redundant, or irrelevant, they are aesthetically inferior (4).

As we have seen before with McCloud, Harvey takes what we might call the Will Eisner school of comics and reifies Eisner’s thoughts and anxieties into law. Harvey, like McCloud and Eisner, is anxious about film, devoting a chapter of *The Art of the Comic*
Book to it, “Only in the Comics: Why Cartooning Is Not the Same as Filmmaking.” The strangeness of this chapter is immediately apparent from its title, whose gerunds presume that the activity of cartooning is easily confused with that of filmmaking. Before he has even begun, Harvey has situated his argument as a losing one. He does state on page 175 that “film and comics are, after all, different media” but that difference is phrased negatively in most of the chapter, for example on page 176: “Film is audiovisual; comics are simply visual [...] the images on film move; images in comics are static” and on page 186: “A film would give us more [...] A film would show the moments that are here lost between panels.” Though he does point out some of the potentials of the comics medium (simultaneity and page layout), because of his filmic assumptions, his examples all contain concessions to film, and the overall effect is as if he were arguing that, despite a few advantages to comics, film is clearly the better medium.

Remembering that Harvey’s definition of comics was based on the combination of word and image, it should be no surprise to see that definition quickly drop out of the chapter on comics and film, as his mimetic assumptions lead easily to the particularly logocentric bias that film, being “audiovisual” can trump comics’ “verbal-visual blending” by blending moving images with “spoken” words. Even as Harvey’s definition of comics can be traced back to Eisner’s “two major communicating devices,” Cohn’s “visual language” theory of comics inverts Eisner’s notion that written language derives from art. Instead he argues that we interpret images by breaking them up into words, and that comics are a “visual language” with a linguistic grammar that he specifically opposes to McCloud’s concept of closure. Cohn, a doctoral candidate in psychology, is
especially critical of McCloud’s defining closure as occurring only between two panels at a time, preferring to diagram the relations of several panels like that of parts of a sentence. The linguistic-semiotic logocentrism of this approach makes it problematic, as does its linearity, which is just as strict as in McCloud’s model of closure.

Carrier’s theoretical approach to the medium was groundbreaking for its attention to detail and willingness to consider comics in terms of visual arts other than film, but depends on the Eisner school (including McCloud and Harvey) of comics studies and the reactionary Gombrichian school of art history. Carrier introduces his text by saying of it that “[t]his book is the first by an analytic philosopher to identify and solve the aesthetic problems posed by comic strips and to explain the relationship of this artistic genre to other forms of visual art” (1).

Carrier references Kunzle’s work and his definition of comics, but Carrier’s own definition of comics as “a narrative sequence with speech balloons” is much closer to a combination of McCloud’s and especially Harvey’s definitions. Harvey’s influence on Carrier extends to his terminology: “Comics in my view are essentially a composite art: when they are successful, they have verbal and visual elements seamlessly combined” and that combination must take place in a word balloon, a device he calls “a great philosophical discovery” (4).

Carrier also relies heavily on E.H. Gombrich’s work on caricature in Art and Illusion, and shares Gombrich’s view of art as a history of technological progress toward the mimetic reproduction of the world, a progress that caricature and comics do not have a place in, making them “posthistorical art[s], incapable of development” (7). Many
of the problems with McCloud’s and Harvey’s theories of comics are present in Carrier’s analysis, but he doesn’t seem to share their anxiety about film.

His greatest contribution to the field may be his linking of traditional caricature to single-panel comics such as Gary Larson’s *The Far Side*. Carrier argues that single-panel comics, and most caricature art, actually meet McCloud’s definition of sequentiality because, unlike paintings, they convey a single, unambiguous next moment that one could translate into McCloud’s terminology as a “real” panel followed by a “real” gutter followed by an “imaginary” but singular and necessary next panel.

The problem of interpretation this poses is evident in Carrier’s own choice of example, a lithograph by Honoré Daumier titled “*Le dernier bain*” (“the last bath”) showing a man with a stone tied around his neck leaning over a body of water (see Fig. 1-6). Carrier first replaces the image itself with an exciting but presumptive reading of it by Baudelaire that presumes not only that a suicide is about to take place but also that the man is resigned: “He must have really made up his mind, for his arms are calmly folded,” and then proceeds, on the basis of Baudelaire, not Daumier, to conclude that “Even before reading the title, we are sure that this man is about to drown himself” and that any other possibility is as unreasonable as the idea that “Buck Rogers could rescue him” (15).

Carrier’s conclusions seem valid enough regarding the text by Baudelaire, but are not directly relevant to the image itself, where a great number of inconsistencies undermine any such narrow reading. The man’s arms are folded, but not necessarily calmly—he seems to be hugging himself, a reading more consistent with his face, which is pained: his eyes are squeezed shut, and his brows compressed down and in,
possibly bracing for impact, but just as credibly straining to resist the weight of the
stone, an impression continued by the flat set of his feet against the stones he stands
on and the stone which hangs straight down, not out, on its rope. The man’s clothes and
hair flap straight out over the water as if pushed by a stiff wind, and not back, as they
would be expected to if he was falling. His head is also parallel to the water, as if the
combination of wind and weight has bowed his neck. The combination of the wind
pushing him over the edge, the stable focal point of the weight and rope, whose
principle lines are parallel and perpendicular to the edges of the page, and the
background detail of someone obliviously fishing nearby all contribute to a sense of
struggle, perhaps unperceived, disregarded or unvalued struggle.

This is not to say that Baudelaire and Carrier are wrong and this reading is
“right,” but instead to avoid a concession to single vision. While the range of reasonable
interpretations may not include Buck Rogers, there is no more one, single, obvious
reading of an image than there is one, single, obvious reading of a text. Second, any
credible argument about a possible meaning of an image must pay close attention to
the image itself and not treat the image as merely a window onto a “real” world “in
progress.”

One way to treat this image in terms of its own visual elements is through
analysis of the right triangle in the center of the page: one side formed by the almost-
perfectly straight line from the back of the man’s heels to the top of his shoulders,
another by the hang of the rope, which is parallel to the side of the page. The third line
is subtler but physically present as a broken line that starts along the bottom of the
man’s foot and becomes one of the lines that describe the surface of the “water.” That
line, parallel to the bottom of the page, would form a ninety-degree angle with the line of the rope if it were carried through. The shape formed is a right triangle, a very stable geometric form, but an obviously incomplete one, and thereby in danger of collapse (see Figure 1-7).

The only monograph of comics theory in English that does not come out of the Eisner school is, perhaps unsurprisingly, Groensteen’s transatlantic import. Groensteen’s work is subtler and more philosophical in tone than those considered previously, but also falls into the traps of control anxiety and procrustean definition. Groensteen, like Eisner, Carrier, and everyone in between, offers a theoretical system that is intended to describe everything that comics (can) do and everything that can be comics. Groensteen builds on Benoit Peeter’s *Case, Planche, Recit* which proposes the panel, page and story as the fundamental elements of comics. Groensteen offers a slightly different trinity, that of the physical panel, strip, and page, which are then doubled by his conceptual objects, frame, hyperframe, and metaframe. The articulation of frames, hyperframes, and metaframes are the subject of what Groensteen calls “arthrology,” a neologism that serves to displace the physical panel into the frame, and the strip and page into the hyperframe, allowing his frames to continue in linear sequence beyond the length of a physical page, and to connect panels that are on different pages in a complex metaframe.

An interesting problem with Groensteen’s arthrology is that he assumes that a comics page consists of several rows of strips, rather than a grid of panels: this is interesting as it connects the single-panel caricature, the comic strip, and the comics page in a way that has not been done in North American scholarship, and it is a
problem because it assumes that a page of comics art normally consists of several comic strips, each containing several comics panels rather than as a grid of panels or as a network of interactions. The largest problem with arthrology is that the frames, meta- and hyperframes of any given work of comics are neither a matter of the physical object, nor the experience of it but require either a neo-Platonic ideal space where the “real” comic exists or, as with Carrier, a singular and universal “correct” interpretation of the comic, if not in terms of the meaning of images, then in terms of the ways they connect to each other once they have been severed from their medial limit.

Despite this flaw, there are ways of reading comics opened up by Groensteen’s work that must not be dismissed, mainly in terms of the potential offered by the metaframe to describe the relevance of parts of separate pages one to another. The most intractable problem with Groensteen’s theory, including the potential readings offered through the use of the metaframe, is its assumption of the absolutely defined and self-complete nature of the panel: if the panel is not “obvious” and “natural,” then neither is the frame, on which everything else in arthrology depends. The supposition of the panel as the atomic unit of comics is almost universal, and plays a part in every theory described to this point. The inviolate nature of the panel is a counterproductive assumption, even a disorder of thought, in comics theory. The de-supposition of the panel is a necessary part of breaking up the logjam of theory and moving beyond procrustean definition in comics studies. De-supposing the panel as a superior mark that trumps all others on the page allows new structures and readings of the comics page to emerge.
The panel is in no way “bad” or undesirable, but its superior ontological and epistemological status must be called into question. When panels exist, they are not fundamentally different from any of the other lines or markings on the page, and while they have an important structuring power, that power is not absolute but a “weak” power that must compete with other lines and marks both drawn and undrawn that structure the page. The other effect of this de-supposition is that the absence of panels is no guarantee that a medial object is not comics, and cannot be read as narrative art. More precisely, the effect is that an artificial barrier separating thought about comics from thought about medial objects that do not clearly have panels is removed. Furthermore, the gutter, when present, is no longer defined by a negative existence, allowing it to function as a positive presence: a deliberate artistic effect and an interstice of the page, empty or full or overflowingly excessive.

**Theory Alongside Media: Terminus is Dead**

The goal of this dissertation is the articulation of mutually compatible concepts and methods for a closer, more visually attentive reading of comics that, rather than imposing limits on what can be considered as comics, are extensible to other visual media, including digital media. As much as possible, my assumptions are confined to treating the medial limit—that is the physical/technological limit of what is presented—as the only necessary limit, and to the assumption that the smallest perceptible detail can be relevant to, or even completely change, a rigorous interpretation of the work.

The methods described in the coming chapters are intended to be sufficiently developed and concrete as to allow their application outside this dissertation while also being anarchoepistemological in method—that is, never convinced of the rightness of
their own approach or conclusions. Chapter 2 explains and expands upon this approach and the critical value of uncertainty and doubt, with reference to concepts from art history and the history of science, especially those of Paul Feyerabend. The genealogy of the term “incommensurability” is explored, from its origin in Euclid’s geometry through its use by Thomas Kuhn and Feyerabend, to its most radical form in Ault’s *Narrative Unbound*. Shifting the alternative narratology of *Narrative Unbound* from the analysis of William Blake’s words to a parallel analysis of differences in visual details between editions in Blake’s images, produces four anarchistic “foldings,” the last and most important of which is the anarchoepistemological. A consideration of Ault’s technique of vector analysis and some works of comics that clearly benefit from such methodology prepares for and transitions into the next chapter.

Chapter 3 uses these concepts to articulate a theoretical approach to the comics page, applying Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s theories of the signifying surface to Alex Robinson’s graphic novel *Too Cool to be Forgotten* in order to explain the benefits of treating comics as completely flat, radically depthless, rather than a re-presentation of a complete world. The critique of the panel begun here is resumed, and the idea of panels and other “extradiegetic” elements as being falsely projected “above” the page into a non-existent higher plane of ontological priority is presented as a way to see how panels conventionally function as well as how those functions can be lost, negated, or assumed by other lines and marks on the page. The equally non-existent “below” of the page is presented as a way to conceptualize what seems to drop off the bottom (sides, etc.) of the page and what the reader is invited to infer, without falling back into treating the page as mimetic or as a set of windows into a “real” world.
The second half of Chapter 3 applies this methodology to the misogynist works of caricaturist Honoré Daumier and comics creator Dave Sim in order to demonstrate the equal applicability of the method to different works of figural (but not necessarily mimetic) line art, “comics” or not. The value of the methodology previously articulated in revealing details in the art and generating compelling subversive readings is demonstrated in this section.

Everything developed in Chapters 2 and 3 is applied to game studies in Chapter 4, which continues a reading of the non-linearity of time in comics and other visual media. The contrast of the multiplication of the arrow(s) of time in comics and games is considered as a demonstrable property of the commonality of their “diegetic” and “extradiegetic” elements, and in explicit contrast to the “real time” of film and certain modes of gameplay. The different kinds of time articulated here are relevant to comics as well as to digital media.

Chapter 5 focuses on one game, Dominions 3: The Awakening, a game that demonstrates all of the kinds of time described in Chapter 4, as well as the properties of the Surface from Chapter 3. Dominions 3’s simple sprite art, when considered in terms of the narrative created by reading/interaction (“processual narrative”) is very much like the kind of narrative produced by a close visual reading of a work of comics. The game’s rich intertextuality, drawing heavily on Judeo-Christian apocrypha, Middle Eastern mythology, and visual tropes in Western Art, is revealed by this reading, and brings us full circle to the complexities of visual narrative in comics art and Blake’s prints.
Figure 1-1   Eisner's masterful page composition in *Life on Another Planet*, here reproduced from his *Comics and Sequential Art*. The impassive murderer's cigarette smoke disrupts the top of the page in a manner similar to that in which his gunsmoke will disrupt his wife's body in the bottom center, these "little smokes" filling in for the dialogue balloons which Eisner has omitted from this sequence. The wife's words are lost entirely in the face of his only words in the sequence, the "bang bang bang bang bang bang click click click" of his power to render her speech- and life-less. Eisner's ability to demonstrate the potential of comics is far greater than his ability to describe it. Image ©W.W. Norton & Co., 2008
Figure 1-2  the “film analogy” in McCloud's *Understanding Comics*. Image ©HarperCollins, 1994
Figure 1-3  McCloud’s take on abstraction in art. Note that he uses the term “picture plane” to describe abstract art and not in the arts sense of framing or surface. Image ©HarperCollins, 1994

Figure 1-4  This is the panel that McCloud argues is not comics because it is one single panel, but would be if subdivided (into multiple panels). This seeming paradox results from his presumption that panel borders are ontologically different from (superior to) the other structures of the page. Image ©HarperCollins, 1994
Figure 1-5  the original Carl cartoon from *Understanding Comics*, other elements on this page omitted for clarity. Image ©HarperCollins, 1994
Figure 1-6  Honoré Daumier's *Le Dernier Bain*. Image ©Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001

Figure 1-7  same with lines showing the triangle formed by the man's flat-footed stance, heels on the ground. Original image ©Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001; overlay image ©Tof Eklund, 2009
CHAPTER 2
FLATNESS, VECTORS, AND PROCESS

The issue of mimeticism and art poses interesting issues from an empiric position: in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, Gilles Deleuze considers the 20th century painter’s manipulation of the surface of the canvas, including unorthodox techniques like scrubbing at the canvas to remove some of the paint. The possibility of illusionism and mimeticism must not be dismissed, but insofar as they are “natural” and trick the eye (*trompe l’oeil*), they are inherently not critical analysis. That can only emerge from the interplay of close visual analysis and “re-vision” of the whole in terms of such analysis, which is why Deleuze cares so much about what Bacon does to the surface of his canvases. This critical-visionary cycle or circuit is closely related to Deleuze’s circuit of virtual and actual images and even more so to Félix Guattari’s processes of chaomosis and autopoesis, conceptual structures elaborated upon in the next chapter. The relationship of this process to comics comes through art history.

As the issue of (re)presentation in art history has become problematized, a space has opened up for the analysis of comics and art created by reproduction in ways previously unthinkable. Art historians of E.H. Gombrich’s generation mostly viewed mimeticism as the goal of art, and the development of vanishing-point perspective as its highest achievement. The reaction of modernist painters and critics, most notably Clement Greenberg, was to reject figuration and representation entirely, leaving contemporary theorists to wrestle with the issue of what to do after both mimeticism and abstract expressionism have succumbed to irrelevance or nihilism. David Carrier, following from Arthur Danto, who he proclaims to be “the logical successor of Gombrich and Greenberg,” proclaims the “post-historical” nature of comics (119). Danto’s closed-
dialectic After the End of Art is the source of this conclusion, a work that uses Hegel and Heidegger in precisely the way that Deleuze railed against, a mode entirely incommensurable with the open dialectics of Fred Dotort in his The Dialectic of Vision: A Contrary Reading of William Blake’s Jerusalem.

Danto and Carrier adopt a post-historical perspective similar to that of Frederic Jameson in Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, but with a crucial difference: it is only the history of art, and not history as a whole, that they foreclose, and that not for political reasons, but because everything that can be known about art already is: “Only now, when nothing essentially new is possible, can we survey the field of art, which we can characterize completely because it cannot expand to encompass novel kinds of artifacts” (Carrier 117). This kind of apocalypticism is in the vein of Nietzsche’s last man, who believes he is (at) the end of all things, because what must come next is something he cannot conceive of.

In Doubt, Richard Schiff attempts to address this problem of “next” through the application of uncertainty. His goal is “to believe and to doubt with neither more nor less than a beneficial quotient of self-doubt” (19). He draws this concept largely from Charles Sanders Peirce on the basis that his semiotics, which do not reduce signification to language, make him more compatible than Ferdinand de Saussure with art study, thus, by extension, to the study of comics. Schiff’s work serves as a point of articulation between poststructural theory and the sphere of art history and aesthetics, alternate to Carrier’s posthistorical approach.

Schiff considers the figural work of Willem de Kooning, including his series of deliberately sketchy “crucifixions” and his series of monstrous Woman paintings. The
latter cost de Kooning the support of Greenberg, who had accepted de Kooning’s early figural work but felt that, after “pure” abstraction, a return to figuration was retrograde. The interesting thing about de Kooning’s women is that while they are figural, and were described by some as cubist, they lack the optical obsession of cubism’s combination of multiple (optical) perspectives (see Figures 2-1 and 2-2). Instead, they are creatures of the surface, much like Bacon’s men, their features and shading interrupted and even formed by overt brushstrokes, “painterly” in their presentation of paint itself. Perhaps this is why, as Schiff notes about the first work in the series, “many critics at the time spoke of de Kooning’s picture of Woman as if it had come alive like a pagan idol” (83). He is unwilling to voice his own opinion here, relying instead on those of others and missing a chance to consider the Woman series as not representation, but as “presentation,” making present: figural but not mimetic, visual but not optical, at least not in the Newtonian sense of preoccupation with the determination and control of space.

This artwork performs an arcane function, in the sense in which both “art” and “work” are synonyms for “magic”—neither the magic of theater nor of “magical thinking” but the kind of magic that comics writer Alan Moore is preoccupied with: the creation of meaning. In his hands, the umwelt (“signifying space” that a creature dwells in) is a magic circle, and the creative process becomes a ritual of conjuration. De Kooning’s women have neither a mimetic nor an ideal existence: they are becoming women, emergent structures on their canvases. They reflect what James Elkins considers, via a non-Jungian application of the alchemical tradition, in What Painting Is: the intimacy between painter and materials. For Elkins, painting is paint applied to canvas, an
experience caught up in sensation and texture, mixture and what Deleuze described as Hume’s “AND” (*Dialogues II* 15).

Elkins puts it this way: “Paint adds like this: 1 + 1 = 1. The three ones are not exactly the same, since the first is a yellow, the second a green, and the third something unnamable and new” (41). This something new is what is produced on any page of comics out of the variably discrete markings there, and it is produced only if one observes closely and then looks closely with fresh eyes at the whole. If one judges comic art by its mimeticism, it will always fall short, and if one sorts out panel borders, word balloons and the rest of what Carrier describes as “conventional” elements that “would not be visible to someone standing in the picture space” beforehand, both the surface of the page and any hypothetical “picture space” are impoverished. If 1 + 1 = 1, the combination of representational, abstract, linguistic and “conventional” marks add up to something else entirely. There is, however, a crucial difference between reproducible art and painting.

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” one of the most frequently cited works of modern art history and media studies, Walter Benjamin considers how the possibility of quality mechanical reproduction diminishes the “aura” of the original art object: “Confronted with its manual reproduction, which was usually branded as a forgery, the original preserved all its authority; not so vis-à-vis technical reproduction” (220). The reproduction’s lack of “aura” is of less concern than the way the mechanical reproduction diminishes the aura of the original, something that is, for Benjamin, melancholy but also hopeful: there is a (largely unrealized) revolutionary potential here, in the idea of an art for the masses, when reproduction and “original”
become equally valid. Benjamin cites Paul Valéry’s prophetic anticipation of media-on-demand, such as is now provided by the Internet: “Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so shall we be supplied with visual or auditory images which will appear and disappear at a single movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign” (219).

Benjamin is aware, however, that capital will be the first to move in on this potential in order to commodify and monopolize it, as with “water, gas, and electricity.” Thus it is unsurprising that Valéry’s prediction, unfulfilled by film, would be given only the most limited, unidirectional and monopolistic realization possible through radio and television, and, while it is arguably fulfilled in the widespread implementation of broadband Internet connections in the “first world” (and, increasingly, elsewhere), the grasp of capital is no less obvious in everything from software license agreements to banner ads.

The significance of Benjamin’s concept of the aura is different for works that have no auratic original: what might be called (fully) reproducible media, which are incarnated as themselves only in and through the act of reproduction. There may still be an “original” physical artifact, such as a woodcut, engraved copper plate or hand-drawn comic art on Bristol board, but those artifacts are not the medial object: viz., that, while there is a market for comic art “originals,” they are treated as objects d’art, usually framed, and often unreadable as comics (unlettered). Even a complete set of “originals” for a comic book (et al) is not a comic book, any more than a set of cut wooden blocks is a woodcut novel. This becomes more obvious, but does not change in basic character, with entirely digital works, where the distinction between “original” and “copy” is entirely arbitrary.
For this reason, prints, comics and computer games can all be considered to be (fully) “reproducible media,” to whom the aura is a stranger. Though the issues of the signifying surface, vector analysis, and processual narrative apply to painting as well, they acquire special significance for work whose material depth, if discernable, is entirely incommensurable with its surface. Elkins considers the matter of commensurable layering in painting in *What Painting Is*, using a sample from a painting by Renaissance painter Cima da Conegliano as an example (see Figure 2-3). He does this, however, to make a point about how little such normally imperceptible layers matter—“Restorers do not try to simulate the layers when they patch damaged paintings [...] Many times force of habit, and reverence for the supposed knowledge of Old Masters, leads historians to postulate layers that have no effect on the eye and may as well not have existed”—and about the “steplessness” of modern painting technique (Elkins 176).

With reproducible media, this relative unimportance of layers becomes absolute, resulting in a kind of radical depthlessness, where any “actual” layering becomes functionally identical to the appearance of layering, and both actually serve as erasure or negation (Verneinung): the nonexistent lower layer can be imagined precisely because of its absence—but it is still absent. Any mechanical process of layering is still of interest to a study of printing or display techniques, such as a consideration of the differences in perception of “the same” image on an LCD display or a CRT, but, as works without an auratic original to claim precedence, there is no inherent importance to any degree of physical layering due to an external mechanical process.
This kind of depthlessness does not apply in the same way to the prints of William Blake considered in this chapter, as their individual hand-coloring and high degree of (intentional) variation makes a case for considering each as an auratic art object, but the issue of surface predominates in his work, as does a different approach to variation, namely the idea that they are not individual original works, but different instances of a single work without a true original. This interpretation is made possible by Donald Ault's Narrative Unbound: “The narrative reveals the narrator to be, at the poem’s close—in order for there to be a close—the hidden ally of the Newtonian reader [...marginal note:] the reader constructs a narrator whose wish-fulfillment enacts the reader’s own desire for closure” (467). Blake’s rejection of Newtonian certainty, and of apocalyptic closure and narrative resolution, most fully realized in The Four Zoas, is also apparent in his multiple editions, which were not only colored differently, but often contained new plates and/or removed old ones and, perhaps most importantly, were often re-ordered because Blake knew the importance of process and of shifts therein to narrative, and especially to circumventing single vision in narrative.

**Vanishing Point: Dürer’s Melencholia I**

The techniques for producing the illusion of perspective and depth, and the significance of perspectival technique, are the subject of a multifaceted debate. The argument over the “naturalness” and inevitability of linear vanishing-point perspective dates back at least to Gombrich and Ervin Panofsky’s debate over whether such perspective is natural and was waiting to be discovered (Gombrich), or was invented and is only one of multiple theoretically and optically valid methods (Panofsky), and has come back into focus in recent work like Samuel Edgerton’s The Mirror, the Window, and the Telescope: How Renaissance Linear Perspective Changed Our Vision of the
Universe. In broader terms, Isaac Newton’s Opticks can be considered to be the opening salvo, setting out as it does rules for the behavior of light that bear with them rules for the construction of space and for the conversion of observation, appearance or phenomena into objective fact.

In Perspective as Symbolic Form, Panofsky demonstrates that several logical kinds of artistic perspective exist, including curved (rather than linear) perspective, which still has a vanishing point, but mimics the “marginal distortion” of peripheral vision: “While [linear] perspective projects straight lines as straight lines, our eye perceives them (from the center of projection) as convex curves. [...] The orthogonals of a building, which in normal perspectival construction appear straight, would, if they were to correspond to the factual retinal image, have to be drawn as curves. Strictly speaking, even the verticals would have to submit to some bending” (33, see figure 2-4). This form of perspective depends neither more nor less than linear perspective on a single focal point, the vanishing point, but it may seem less accurate because it does more to highlight that point’s existence, especially if there are objects very close up and equally near to the margin of the image, which is where the curvature maximizes. In linear perspective, lines recede toward the vanishing point, but remain “straight”—or rather, are straightened out by degrees as they recede. Film cameras produce images in linear perspective because the negatives are flat (linear) relative to the lens: if the film was concave, like the back of the eye, they would produce images in curved perspective.

Neither linear nor curved perspective accurately represents the dimensions of things “as they are.” Reconstructions of “space” from perspective drawing are inherently
inaccurate unless the creator drew with mathematical precision and the viewer has access to the values the creator used. Even then the reconstructor must make presumptions about objects (for example, a wall partially obscured by a painting could have a safe—or a gaping hole—behind it). The problem of accurate measure is solved by isometric perspective, sometimes called isometric projection, in which the scale is made the same along the x, y, and z axes by forcing the angle between them to be a consistent 120 degrees. Mostly used in architecture and design, where preserving relative scale is essential, isometric perspective does not have a vanishing point because it does not foreshorten (unlike linear perspective). Other forms of mathematical perspective defined by the angles between the x, y, and z axes (called axiometric perspective or projection) can be defined for any value of x, y, and z as straight lines emerging from a central point, and the values of x, y, and z will always total 360 degrees, but they will have different scales along each axis.

These three forms of perspective, linear perspective, curved vanishing-point perspective, and isometric perspective, illustrate the problem of calling any form of perspective “natural,” as each can be considered more accurate and thus more “natural” than the others for some purpose. A suspension of judgment and assumptions allows a shift to Charles Fort’s concept of the “more nearly real,” which demonstrates the value of starting from the surface. In accordance with his principles of “Intermediatism” and of refusing to exclude or “damn” contrary evidence, nothing said can ever be the final word on the topic; we can make practical judgments about what is “more nearly real” by dint of one theory being less contradictory than others. Fort’s approach includes the autoscepticism of anarchoepistemology, the crucial fourth anarchist folding previously
discussed in terms of Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. As Fort puts it: “If we admit that for every opinion we have expressed, there must be somewhere an irreconcilable, we are Intermediatists and not positivists, not even higher positivists. Of course, it may be that some day we shall systematize and dogmatize and refuse to think of anything that we may be accused of disregarding” (285). In other words, the end of Intermediatism is thinkable within Intermediatism. The surface is not prone to problems of distortion, as it represents no space but itself, though it can signify all manner of things including the illusion of space when it plays host to perspectival drawing, so it is “more nearly real” than any mode of perspective.

Edgerton defends the value of linear perspective, but also contextualizes its development, putting him not quite in either Gombrich’s or Panofsky’s camp. He posits the creation of linear, vanishing-point perspective as a response to a religious crisis: that of the failure of the Crusades. He uses the medieval “T-and-O” map, which placed Jerusalem at the center of the world in a map almost as simple as a compass rose (see Figure 2-5). Literally the navel of the world, “it was consigned by God to be his unique umbilicus mundi, on direct perpendicular axis with heaven, and thus for mortal Christians the holiest of holiest [sic] shrines” (13). Edgerton notes that “the most sacred shrines of every other great civilization including Islam were safely protected within their own ethnic and ideological confines” (14). Edgerton either doesn’t consider the Jewish Diaspora to be one of the “great civilizations,” or is assuming that, given the lack of a Jewish state and the Muslim laws protecting “people of the Book,” that Jerusalem was as much Jewish as anywhere was. He doesn’t clarify the matter, nor does he explain his
use of the offensive term “Mohammedan” for Muslim—perhaps a subconscious holdover from or internalization of the biases of period documents.

The appearance of religious proto-perspectival images and contemporary increase in popularity of mystery plays and other religious performances after the Europeans were driven from Jerusalem for the last time in 1291 is Edgerton’s evidence that perspective “stemmed not originally from any deterministic premonition of secular science, but rather from the longing of medieval Christians to feel that God and his holy works be more palpably present and immanently concerned with their daily lives, assuaging their feelings of spiritual emptiness caused by the loss of Jerusalem” (20). Fillipo Brunelleschi’s lost perspective paintings, generally considered to be the first true linear perspective paintings, and Massacio’s (Tommasio Casari’s) Holy Trinity, the oldest such painting in any museum, both date from 1425. This places their creation well into the intermittent siege of Constantinople, but decades before its fall in 1453.

Edgerton agrees with Panofsky that linear perspective “with its infinitely extended space centered in an arbitrarily assumed vanishing point […] entailed abandoning the idea of a cosmos with the middle of the earth as its absolute center and with the outermost celestial sphere as its absolute limit” (Panofsky 65). For Edgerton, this is the first blow to the credibility of the religious worldview, struck unwittingly by the devout, as would only be the case with Nicolaus Copernicus’s theory of heliocentrism and the elliptical orbits of Johannes Kepler, steps in a progress away from a theological cosmos to one in which God literally has no place (to exist as a material being). In Edgerton’s conception, Jerusalem plays the part of the center and navel of the world, as in the T and O map, and Galileo’s telescopic observations of the moon (the concluding
“telescope” in the title) are the pivot point from which linear perspective turns against its religious foundations.

Albrecht Dürer, the late 14th and early 15th century artist, is best known for his prints, which include woodcuts, a few lead-block drypoints, and some etchings, but the preponderance of his work, as well as his best regarded works, are engravings. Dürer was an enthusiastic proponent of linear perspective and much of northern Europe was first exposed to it through his *Four Books on Measurement*, which he illustrated with a series of engravings showing the use of the perspectival device known as Alberti’s window (see Figure 2-6). Alberti’s window is the titular window of Edgerton’s *The Mirror, The Window, and the Telescope*, and was an aid in perspective drawing, not a substitute for the understanding of its principles: “Alberti’s window was intended as a further shortcut that eliminated much of the need for intricate construction drawing prior to setting up a picture, but only after the artist was fully aware of the author’s elucidated optical principles” (127). Dürer’s own work, however, shows ambivalence about this technique.

What was most demonstrably new about vanishing-point perspective was that it allows an infinite regression to the horizon, whereas proto-vanishing-point linear perspective had required that the focal point be blocked off at some point. Dürer, however, almost always blocks his vanishing points in the near or mid-range, and tends to keep them off-center, as in his well-known *St. Jerome in his Cell*, where the vanishing point is pushed up against the side of the page (see Figure 2-7). In all of his prints, there are only two with “deep focus,” *The Nativity* (one of Dürer’s many nativity images), and *Melencholia I* (see Figures 2-8 and 2-9). *The Nativity* ultimately blocks the vanishing
point with a cottage, in the far distance, so only *Melencholia I* actually shows the vanishing point, and it reverses the trend, drawing excessive attention to it.

Most of *Melencholia I* is pushed forward into a cramped space—an effect achieved in *St. Jerome in his Cell* (or *Cabinet*) by the sidelong perspective, which pushes the saint back into the corner, and emphasized by the title, which would not have connotated imprisonment at the time, but instead monastic sparseness. In *Melencholia I*, the angelic figure takes up more of the frame and is hedged in by clutter. With most of the objects rendered so close-up and close together, most of this image neither needs nor benefits from vanishing point perspective. Only the wall behind the angel shows the parallel convergence of linear perspective (along the facing with the scales, and those lines appear to be converging not towards the distant horizon outside the window, as they must, if drawn according to the rules of linear perspective), but toward the blazing comet or falling star in the sky.

A “falling star” seems a blunt metaphor for depression, which its role as vanishing point complicates. The vanishing point plays a crucial role in linear perspective: it guarantees the infinity of, as well as the measurability of, space. In doing so, it shatters the final, crucial, crystal sphere bounding the universe as finite and, in so doing, deprives heaven of a place to be. Panofsky says that “this entailed abandoning the idea of a cosmos with the middle of the earth as its absolute center and with the outermost celestial sphere as its absolute limit [...] The vision of the universe is, so to speak, detheologized” (65-6). Edgerton notes that Thomas Hariot, a contemporary of Galileo’s, was one of the first to turn a telescope to the sky, and sketched the moon, but he did not see craters—just blotchy markings that could have, according to the theories of the
time, been spots on the surface of a perfect, solid sphere, or “internal, vaprous
discolorations” in accordance with Francis Bacon’s (the 16th century philosopher’s)
theory that the moon was gaseous (156, see Figure 2-10). It was only after reading
Galileo’s *Sidereus nuncius* that Hariot saw and drew the moon as covered in craters
(see Figure 2-11).

This detheologization of space may explain why *Melencholia I* is jammed full of
occult symbols, mainly of protection. Of these, only the magic square above the angel’s
head had received much attention and that mostly because the year it was printed,
1514, is in the bottom middle two sub-squares. Magic squares can be added down any
row, across any column, or diagonally to produce the same number. Magic squares are
a major component of Medieval and Renaissance European occultism, including
Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa’s *De Occulta Philosophia*, published in 1510, and *The Book
of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage* (or just *The Book of Arbamelin*), whose
author goes by the nom de plum “Arbamelin” or “Abraham-Merlin,” which was published
in 1458. Agrippa’s book contains conventional magic squares, whereas *The Book of
Arbamelin* contains magic squares filled with letters, which supports the book’s claim to
be rooted in Jewish Kabbalah (in Hebrew, each letter is also a number).

The magic number for Dürer’s square is 34, the same as for Agrippa’s square for
Jupiter, though the squares themselves are different. If, as common wisdom holds, all of
the images in *Melencholia I* are signs of depression, then the magic number should be
15, the number of Saturn (according to Agrippa). Saturn is the planet/God/principle of
melancholia in European occult thinking, including the widespread theory of the humors,
in which black bile, the cause of melancholia, is the Saturnine humor. In alchemy,
*putrefactio*, meaning rot, decay, tarnishing, or “blackening” is the process of becoming Saturnine. *Putrefactio* is also the first step in creating the philosopher’s stone. Base matter or prima material must be ruined, corrupted, broken down before it can be purified and redeemed. In *What Painting Is*, Elkins associates the works of Wassily Kandinsky and Jackson Pollock with putrefactio because of their interest in the “prima materia” of paint itself, and their chaotic methods. Jupiter, however, is Jove, the great God, God the father.\(^4\) Invoking him is a prayer for deliverance or, more heretically, a binding to prevent his departure.

The hourglass left of the square works as either a memento mori or as a suspension of time (epoche), an idea echoed in the “star,” which either is falling or, if it is a comet, will soon pass out of sight. In that case, the comet/vanishing point can be seen as God (and heaven) receding out of space, as if racing to escape the territorialization and rationalization of space by the vanishing point. There is a sphere, a “perfect” shape, next to the angel. Next to the sphere is another geometric solid. This faceted shape may seem at first to be a platonic solid,\(^5\) but it is actually irregular in shape, with two pentagonal sides facing us, but a clearly triangular side on top. As triangles were associated with the Christian trinity and pentagons, even when not extended into pentagrams, with the devil, this makes a suggestion as to whom “we” are left with as God shrinks. Behind the irregular geometric solid is a ladder with seven rungs, the number generally used for the symbol of Jacob’s ladder. It ascends, but not

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\(^4\) “Jove,” also comes from “Jehovah” a Christian pronunciation of the (unspeakable) name of God in Hebrew, which can be transliterated as JHVH (as well as YHWH and combinations thereof). The assimilation of Jehovah to Jupiter dates to the Christianization of Rome. In Latin, “Jove” conveniently means “father God.”

\(^5\) Platonic solids are defined by having: identical sides, the same number of vertices per side as sides, and having all vertices be of the same degree.
“to heaven,” i.e., in the direction of the comet, instead going behind a wall. Were the ladder not here, the wall with the empty scales would appear to connect with the back wall. As it is, the spatial relationships of ladder, side, and back walls is muddied by the limits of linear perspective. The ladder would seem to lead only to the (unshown) ceiling, but, as no ceiling is drawn in, it could go anywhere.

If the comet is the vanishing point and is receding, it also, by the direction of its tail gives the appearance of being in lateral motion (down and to the right). This would mean that, in a hypothetical “next second” everything in the image would change—all the angles would shift, even as the “viewer” remained still. The side wall, for example, would shrink while the front facing of the same wall would remain exactly where and how it is. Such behavior isn’t possible in terms of an individual moving about in a fixed space: attempting to conceive of it in mimetic terms requires imagining that space itself changes as well it might if “God” is moving. Moreover, it seems that perhaps this has been occurring and space hasn’t quite caught up to God (the vanishing point). The parallel lines formed by the moulding along the top of the side wall recede toward the comet. If we look closely or draw those lines through, however, they do not converge on the comet (see Figure 2-12). Instead, they converge near the comet, marking the comet as ahead of or behind the vanishing point. As if to draw attention to this, the lines emanating from the comet are drawn through the back wall in a way entirely impossible if we imagine them as “rays of light” and the wall as a “real,” solid wall. Both because of Dürer’s thorough knowledge of perspective and because of the immediately present “ruler” offered by the drawn-through rays, this cannot be dismissed as an “error.” The
tension and despair in *Melencolia I* is that either the new definition of space must fail—or God must.

**Fourfold Anarchy: William Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell***

The choice between rational space and divine presence is, like any other forced choice, a false one. Isaac Newton certainly saw no opposition: one might begin to describe Newtonian cosmotheology with the statement that God is what structures space and time, and that God is what makes those structures entirely knowable. “‘Newtonian narrative’ presupposes that behind the text lies a single unified field (ur-narrative, privileged originating event, state of consciousness, and so on) whose essential features do not irreconcilably and incommensurably conflict with one another but can (in theory at least) be fully captured” (*Narrative Unbound* 5). Newtonian narrative relies on God as the guarantor of perception and of the solidity and stability of what is observed, even as it relies on the stability of nature to keep God in his place.

```plaintext
Now I a fourfold vision see
And a fourfold vision is given to me
Tis fourfold in my supreme delight,
And three fold in soft Beulahs night
And twofold Always. May God us keep
From Single vision & Newton’s sleep

(“letter to Thomas Butts”)```

Blake’s opposition to Newton is ontological, epistemological and teleological, “three fold in soft Beulahs night.” Even by itself, this line can be used to analyze Blake’s multiplicity of vision. At times in Blake’s work, Beulah is a place, a kind of “female” heaven, but there is no external guarantor of ontological stability in Blake, so “Beulahs” here does not necessarily denote that place. Blake’s eccentric grammar plays a role here as well—the lack of an apostrophe is not “discountable.” Instead, it is a fissure of
the sort sought by a Pyrrhonean empiricism: Blake neither adheres to nor ignores conventional punctuation, giving rise in this instance to three distinctly possible structures: “Beulah’s night,” “Beulahs, night,” or “Beulahs (as an adjective) night.” This is only the beginning, however, of the multiplication of meaning: of the three, only the last one does not require the addition of a punctuation mark, but it is the least intuitive and least consistent with Blake’s use of Beulah elsewhere. The possessive form (“Beulah’s night”) is the most conventional and “likely,” but there are still at least three readings of that formulation made explicitly possible by Blake’s text: Beulah as a place is sometimes characterized by its female character, and other times by its connections to delusive Eternity. Moreover, Beulah is sometimes personified, so this Beulah may be a place or a person.

Interpreting the line as “Beulahs, night” offers the most interesting and diverse readings, not only because of the variety of punctuation marks that could be used instead of the comma, but because it dramatically alters the next line and draws attention to the “three fold” in its own line. If the previous thought ends with “Beulahs,” the next one becomes “night / And twofold always” which associates night with “twofold” rather than “three fold” and makes the night “always” as in “always night and always twofold.” Once the night has been separated, we have “And three fold in soft Beulahs,” which might seem nonsensical if Blake had combined “three” and “fold” as he did with “fourfold” and “twofold.” Since they are separate words, the following interpretation becomes possible: “And three (people) fold in (with) soft Beulahs,” a seeming sexual innuendo made more plausible by the personified Beulah and the “Daughters of Beulah” that inhabit the Beulah that is a place. Further readings are possible, including reading
“fold” as “fall down” and reading “fold in” in the sense of folding a napkin, in which case the task is made easier by Beulah(s) being “soft.”

This is the form of close reading described by Donald Ault as “text as flight” with “its emphasis on extremely close reading and its assertion of the text as the primary authority and ratifier of interpretive statements” as well as “its emphasis on disunity, disruption, intrusion, the materiality and spatiality of the text/signifier, the subversion of linguistic categories as they bear on the problem of being, and the way that perceptual or interpretive repression of details peripheral to the dominant paradigm parallels the political repression of marginal groups in society” (xxi). This sort of reading is not exclusively applicable to Blake, but it is particularly fruitful in his case because of the aforementioned multiplicity in his work. Aultian “text as flight” is commensurable with, but not identical to the Deleuzian “line of flight” which breaks down restrictions (“deterritorializes”) but must land somewhere and “reterritorialize” in order to be a successful escape, even if the reterritorialization is immediately restrictive and a new line of flight must be immediately sought. Text as flight is a geometric progression of opening new meanings, whose end is indefinite and whose goal is inherent in its method. Suspension, epoche, is appropriate as a conclusion to text as flight, as, regardless of method or terminology, it would cease to be text as flight if it wasn’t possible to return to it at any point, from any point, for the sake of new meanings created. The paradox of Blake’s work is the paradox of text as flight: neither is completable, and they offer readings that are incommensurable with each other. That is how both resist the basilisk gaze of single vision.
Incommensurability is distinct from incompatibility and incomposability. Incompatibility is a commonplace word used to describe things that do not work together, and incomposability an extreme term for things which cannot co-exist, even as potentials. Incommensurability is subtler, and perhaps more extreme, as it indicates things that can co-exist, make statements about the same things, and in some circumstances even interact, but cannot be directly compared, lacking a common unit of measurement or value. The term appears in Euclid’s *Geometry* to describe terms in different units of measure which may be comparable, but are not reconcilable, such as base 10 and base $\pi$, or real and imaginary numbers. “Those magnitudes are said to be *commensurable* which are measured by the same measure, and those *incommensurable* which cannot have any common measure” (Euclid, bk. X, def. 1, emphasis mine).

The sense of “commensurability” used here may have its roots in Euclid, but is more in debt to Thomas Kuhn, who used the term to describe the difference between two paradigms of normal science in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, a response to Karl Popper’s scientific positivism, or “critical rationalism” in which science progresses with Hegelian certitude through a process of falsification of old theories. Popper argues that science’s progress is inevitable because, in the sciences, a theory is developed by synthesizing experimental evidence and only adhered to until it is falsified by contrary experimental evidence. Kuhn observes, as Fort had forty years previously, that scientists discard data that doesn’t suit their theory, or “paradigm” on a continual basis. If “falsification” required the abandonment of the existing model, what Kuhn calls “normal science” would be impossible. Contrary data emerges all the time, and must be
bracketed out if research is to proceed at all. A paradigm shift occurs for reasons that cannot be entirely defined, as after a shift, new research is incommensurable with old because the assumptions are different.

In *Against Method*, Paul Feyerabend extended Kuhn’s model into a critique of self-justifying insularity in the sciences. For Feyerabend, incommensurability is evidence of why a scientific establishment will neither seek new possibilities nor be inclined to consider them when they appear. Citing Albert Einstein’s observation as saying that the scientist “must appear to a systematic epistemologist as a type of unscrupulous opportunist,” Feyerabend argues the value of a methodology of “epistemological anarchism” or “anything goes” (Feyerabend 18). This anarchoepistemology is comparable to the first anarchist folding in Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, regarding which the conventional wisdom is that “[e]ven within the context of Blake’s canon, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* stands out for its combination of genres […] and its heterodox perspectives” (Eaves par. 1). Blake practices an anarchy of method, which Feyerabend specifically distinguishes from political anarchy and aligns with Dada, in the hope that “the reader will remember me as a flippant Dadaist and not as a serious anarchist” (21). Feyerabend opposes anarchoepistemology to skepticism on the grounds that “the skeptic either regards everything as equally good, or as equally bad, or desists from making such judgments altogether,” whereas he cites Hans Richter as saying “to be a true Dadaist, one must also be an anti-Dadaist” (189). For our senses of *epoche* and autoscepticism, Pyrrhonian empiricism is a skepticism compatible with anarchoepistemology, as well as a counterweight to Richter’s Dadaist who “not only has no programme, (he is) against all programmes” (Feyerabend 189).
Blake rejects Emmanuel Swedenborg’s radical worldview for its egocentrism and for not being radical enough: “It is so with Swedenborg; he shews the / folly of churches & exposes hypocrites, til he im-/magines that we are all religious: & himself the the single / one / one on earth that ever broke a net” (Marriage copy F, pl. 21, 22). The trinity of single vision “single / one / one” indicts Swedenborg for having, in pious hubris, reified his own position into dogma: “He conversed with Angels / who are all religious, & conversed not with Devils who / all hate religion, for he was incapable thro’ his conceited / notions!” (Marriage pl. 22). Like the middle “one” previously mentioned, “notions!” is alone on a line by itself, followed only by abstract swirls. This, and the exclamation mark, turn the word into an epithet. A notion is the most casual, and thus the most terrible, of epistemological foreclosures, as it assumes its own reasonability and inoffensiveness. Notions are precisely what the process of conception is intended to avoid.

Blake’s anarchism is not merely epistemological, it is also ontological, as the fourth “Memorable Fancy” in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell illustrates. In it, an angel appears to the narrator and “So he took me thro’ a stable & thro’ a church / & down into the church vault at the end of which / was a mill; thro’ the mill we went, and came to a / cave, down the winding cavern we groped our tedi-/ous way till a void boundless as a neither sky ap- / -peared beneath us” (Marriage pl.17). The descent into the void begins with a stable and becomes progressively “lower,” making the church lower than the muck in the stable, but this order of things does not remain “stable.” In the void is

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6 The repetition of the “one” is formally similar to a printer’s catch-word, a technique in which the last word on a page is repeated as the first word on the next page in order to aid in the ordering of pages. This “technique” is present in a number of Blake’s early works, though Blake neither needed nor heeded such a crutch, choosing to re-order plates for different printings, making it a stylistic and narrative rather than “purely” mechanical technique, much like Blake’s significant splitting of words between lines.
revealed the fiery abyss of “hell”—though it is significant that here, unlike in the rest of the work, Blake refrains from using the word hell, culminating in the appearance of Leviathan: “His forehead was di- / -vided into streaks of green & purple like those on / a tyger’s forehead: soon we saw his mouth & red / gills hang just above the raging foam tinging the / black deep with beams of blood, advancing toward / us / us with all the fury of a spiritual existence” (Marriage pl.18). As with the other single-word lines considered, the solitary “us” at the bottom of plate 18 is significant. The most conventional reading requires that we treat the repetition as unimportant, just a printer’s technique (see footnote 6) and a reminder of where we were on the last page. Read that way, it is the Leviathan that is advancing “with all the fury of a spiritual existence.” However, if we read both instances of “us” as important and infer a comma after the first “us,” then, while Leviathan is still “advancing toward us” its behavior may be more magnetic than predatory, because the narrator and angel are luminous: it is “us with all the fury of a spiritual existence” that draws Leviathan. Here, more than previously, text as flight serves to uncover multiple narrative trajectories, whose influence on the reader will depend on the reader’s process of reading: a “processual” narrative consisting of incommensurable simultaneous readings.

This is also an example of Blake’s anarchontology: these readings are not mere forks in narrative, they require fundamentally different bases of perception and, thus, of “reality.” This point is made more bluntly shortly after, because the angel flees, abandoning the narrator to his fate, at which point the world changes “& then this / appearance was no more, but I found myself sit- / -ting on a pleasant bank beside a river by moon / light hearing a harper” (Marriage pl. 19). Rising to meet the angel, the
narrator seizes him and flies him to heaven, which is revealed as “seven houses of brick, one we entered; in it were a number of monkeys’, baboons’ & all of that species’ chained by the middle, grinning and snatching at one another,” a vision the angel rejects. “So the Angel said: thy phantasy has imposed upon me & thou oughtst to be ashamed. I answered: we impose upon one another, & it is but lost time to converse with you whose works are only Analytics” (Marriage pl.20). There is no knowing if, let alone which, one of the two has the better vision, only that each is able to impose their own ontology on the other, and that the narrator realizes this, whereas the Angel does not. They are not trading illusions; they are trading basic “natures” of reality. It is in this sense that Blake’s work is anarchontological: the “origin” and fundament of the world is subject to change, re-vision, and those visions are incommensurable—impossible to value in terms of each other, though perhaps possible to value each in terms of oneself.

This anarchontology, bound up with processual narrative, is distinct from the ontological anarchy of Hakim Bey (Peter Lamborn Wilson), as his is an explicitly political anarchism of the sort Feyerabend describes as “serious,” that is, operating on the assumption that political and social anarchy is possible (and, therefore, desirable). Anarchontology and processual narrative are powerful tools for visual analysis, as images lack the grammatical structure that Blake deliberately subverts. The third fold, perhaps particularly that of “soft Beulahs / night,” is anarchoteleology. Ault describes this trait of Blake’s work as “counter-apocalyptic resistances.” With Fortean refusal to damn contrary evidence and Pyrrhonian autoscepticism, he says that “the reading that follows is an attempt to resist the reader’s resistance to the counter-apocalyptic
resistances in the text of Night IX of *The Four Zoas*. One risk of such a subversive reading is that it, too, will take itself to be final” (349). Taking advantage of a Newtonian reader’s identification with the narrator as guarantor of truth, “Blake focuses on the narrator’s struggle to create a satisfactory positive closure to an unclosable poem” in an attempt to convey the failure of closure and single vision to a resistant reader” (Ault 447). The telos of Newtonian determinism is negated, as is that of Hegelian progress. Blake doesn’t resist apocalypse because no final apocalypse or telos is possible, but because apocalyptic desires, no matter how utopian, bind (as with Urizen’s net) and produce atrocities.

Blake’s anarchoteleology can be observed in the differences between editions: they may move toward goals, but those goals are never quite commensurable between editions. This can be seen in the illustration on the last page of the fourth “Memorable Fancy” from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (pl. 20, see Figures 2-13 through 2-18). The serpent here is most easily identified with the Leviathan of the story, but this identification is only tentative, as Blake’s illustrations often have no obvious connection to their context, and always contain the kind of discrepancies that, if we take Blake seriously at all, we must not overlook. In copies C, D, F, G, H and I, the readily available color copies, none of these serpents have the “streaks of green & purple like those on / a tyger’s forehead,” or the “red / gills” of the description; some of them can hardly be said to be green, let alone purple, in coloration. Of the six, plate 20 of copies C and H (Figures 2-13 and 2-14) can be said to be the most snakelike; copies G and I (Figures 2-15 and 2-16), with their cleaner lines and ridges on the back of their heads, are more
mythic in appearance—dragonlike; and copies D & F (Figures 2-17 and 2-18), with their
dark, blotchy coloring that almost decomposes their form, are the most demonlike.

Only on the two snakelike prints can the motto “Opposition is true Friendship” be largely made out, albeit not easily read. Erdman observes in a footnote that the motto is “del by pigment in all colored copies,” but this is obviously a generalization. Seeing the snakelike serpents with the motto recalls the fact that the narrator of this “Memorable Fancy” refers to the Angel as “my friend the Angel,” and makes similar statements elsewhere (Erdman 802, Marriage pl.19). This suggests that the friendship is sincere, and that there is not merely a dialogue, but a dialectic (of the open-ended, non-synthetic variety between the two), and that the serpent’s presence is like that of the serpent in the garden of Eden, a bringer of potentially-unwelcome knowledge, a theme repeated on plate 24: “I have also; the Bible of Hell; which the world / shall have whether they will or no.” This reading, however, is not advanced visually in all versions of the poem.

Right before the image of the serpent, the narrator dismisses any possible value in the Angel’s words “it is / but lost time to converse with you whose works / are only Analytics” (Marriage pl. 20). In the prints with the dragonlike serpents, and only in those prints, the text is drawn as continuous with the serpents, the space around the letters seeming to be full of the “air” above the serpent in the water. This makes the serpent into the text’s setting, so, given that the dragonlike serpents are much closer to being “pretty” than the snakelike or demonlike ones are, and that Figure 16 in particular is set against a beautifully colored sunset, the narrator’s transformation of the abyss into a peaceful river is supported, suggesting that the narrator’s account is more correct, or “more nearly real” than the Angel’s.
The demonlike serpents are the most troubling, seeming at first to suggest that the Angel’s reductive perspective is superior to that of the narrator. Closer analysis of these dark, powerful forms that bleed into their environment suggests that they are not decaying, but of one nature with the space they occupy, a space that threatens to overwhelm the page. This supports the reading of Leviathan as having “all the fury of a spiritual existence” (Marriage pl. 20). The angel flees from Leviathan, and the narrator dismisses it, but they might neither of them be right, and there may be something to the demonlike serpents they have both failed to understand. The description of Leviathan’s forehead as striped like a “tygers” links back to the only other use of “tygers” in the poem, in the Proverbs of Hell: “The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction” (Marriage pl. 9). The Angel and the narrator alike are attempting to instruct and are doing so through the “structuring” of space. This completely incommensurable reading suggests that, as in The Four Zoas, it would be an error to rely on the narrator, and makes Leviathan into a powerful instance of “text as flight,” escaping entirely from the clutches of warring determinisms. This is less anarchoteleology than it is the fourth kind of anarchist folding in Blake, this one most important of all: the Pyrrhonic fold of autoscepticism, an anarchism of anarchy, like Richter’s Dadaist anti-Dadaism. This is the “And twofold Always. God us keep” of Blake’s letter to Butts. Alternately, and incommensurably with any positive valuation of the scaly Leviathan, “The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, & breeds reptiles of the mind” (Marriage pl. 19).

**Vector Analysis of Comics**

In Carl Barks’s renowned “duck” comics, “the apparent simplicity and regularity of the panels [...] exhibit the economy, but belie the complexity that informs Barks’s early
work” (“Prodigious Panels” 227). Though Barks would come to experiment with more varied page layouts, his most atypical structures are hardly daring compared to more recent comics, but they contain structures that are as complex as any, and far subtler for refusing to demand attention. Barks’s page layouts required Ault to develop the technique of vector analysis in order to deal with the anarchic pluralities of stories like “Bigtop Bedlam,” where:

words begin to materialize as palpable two-dimensional things in visual space, and solid black areas attach the shifter character (Zippo) to the stationary audience, linking the one who wants to be seen to those who think they know what they are seeing. Lines of flight—the trajectory of the slingshot—and lines of sight—Donald’s seeing materializing as dotted lines—begin to emerge into visibility on these pages, and these vectors of action at a distance (by slingshot and eye) parallel, oppose, and dislodge the panels’ jagged shapes and Donald’s putative “movement” through them. (“Imagetextuality: ‘Cutting Up’ Again, pt. III” par. 23)

Eyelines and slingshot trajectories are just as crucial to the structure of this page as are panel borders. Many of the most important vectors in Barks’s comics are not drawn at all, or remain hidden in other forms, as in the splash page for “Vacation Time,” where “we are able to see—all at once—up under the auto and the bridge, down on the waterfall and whirlpool which seem to bend toward the viewer, and behind the cliff from which the bear springs” (“Vacation Time” 276, emphasis in original). Later in that comic, an angled panel border creates a vector, which directs the reader not to the “next” panel, but down from “Donald’s car (the magical vehicle of redemption) […] to Huey carrying Donald’s camera (the realistic vehicle of redemption)” (“Vacation Time” 278, see Figure 2-19).

Vector analysis creates multiple narratives out of a single image through the process of attentive reading. Its use is most easily demonstrated in works much less subtle in their structuring of space and explicit in their dependence on compositional
effects (of the page as a whole) than Barks. Piet Mondrian is the compositional artist par excellence. Many of his most interesting paintings are from a series of “Compositions,” for example, *Composition with Large Blue Plane, Red, Black, Yellow, and Gray* (1921, see Figure 2-20). The near-perfect homogeneity of each colored element eschews blending, shading and the illusion of depth. In fact Mondrian’s compositions look even flatter than they are—erasing even the depth of the physical paint on the physical canvas. Despite being all surface—radical in its depthlessness—the composition is structured. It does not have a plot: Mondrian’s rectangles are not panels in the comics sense of the term, but comics panels are rectangles in Mondrian’s sense. Mondrian’s art is surface as pure composition. As such, Mondrian’s art also illustrates the medial limit: for his compositions, it is the canvas. For print comics, it is the page. In both cases, this is the only absolute constraint, but Mondrian illustrates just how absolute it is.

In that context, comics artist Ivan Brunetti’s biography of Mondrian in a one-page comic that looks like a Mondrian might seem naïve or misguided, but its layering of comics over Mondrian is perfect (see Figure 2-21). As Mondrian’s compositions show, layering is a fundamentally two-dimensional technique wherein there is no substratum, only erasure. Brunetti’s comic does not proceed linearly in a single vector, but along multiple paths and lines that, like Mondrian’s art, must be read individually and pulled together into a compositional whole. This “compositional narrative” is produced by layering comics panels capable of processual narrative and multiple vectors over the non-narrative Mondrianesque rectangle. Each element on the page is articulated not only to adjacent elements but to the page as a compositional whole.
In this way, the comic becomes a complex of “readable” vectors, with each art element actualized in terms of the virtuality of the page which, in turn, is actualized by the virtualization of the specific art element. Brunetti’s comic is not a smooth space—it is structured by the panels overlaying the page and by the undrawn lines that structure the compositional narrative. A vector analysis of the page reveals the process of capture, the striation of space that takes place on the page’s surface. These striations are the only restraint upon vector analysis, encouraging some vectors and denying others. This territorialization, never irresistible in comics, is especially light in Brunetti’s “Mondrian:” it grasps like a ghostly hand that passes through the body.

Parrish Baker’s *Sparrow’s Fall* contains a more highly striated page, structured like a whirlpool, with compelling vectors moving around the page and progressively into its center, and no obvious vectors back out (see Figure 2-22). Each set of triangular panels is part of the same scene as the others of the same size, and can be set into some sort of sequence, but the meaning of those panels is redetermined by each set further in. The outermost set is comic, but the next set reframes the first as pathetic, the third reframes the second as narcissistic, the fourth reframes the third as addictive and unhealthy, and the innermost three pass through night to circling crows to the vaguely indicated head and shoulders of the main character, Christopher Sparrow. It helps to know that, at this point in the series, Baker intended to end the series with Sparrow’s suicide. The point of ultimate contraction on the page is, then, that (anticipated) suicide: the presence there of a murder of crows at night repeats symbols used elsewhere of Sparrow’s depression.
The anthropomorphic possum and river otter are, at this point in the series, Sparrow’s principle foils, his only friends, and often his mocking tormentors. They are also reasonably readable as symptoms of delusion. If one reads the page as a hyalosign, it is composed of Deleuzian sheets of the past, in which each inner set encompasses all of the outer sets—put another way, Sparrow’s life is set in terms of mocking self-criticism fueled by depression, with an imminence of suicide at its heart. In some sense, this motion toward the center of the page represents a line of flight for the character—inward, toward self-destruction, reminding us that not all lines of flight are productive. Some deterritorialize only to plunge into black holes. There are, however, other lines of flight on the page, made possible by the limited ability of comics art to striate space. Some of the same vectors can be ridden back out of the center of the page with an intensity like that of the action movie cliché of outrunning an explosion.

In comics writer Alan Moore’s work, the permutations of time, space and sex on the static medium of the page itself as well as “above” and “below” the page, where the page is becoming (the whorls and eddies of a plane of immanence—or perhaps imminence—the penumbra of transcendence, considered more fully in Chapter 3) are everything. To repeat an often-quoted but probably ahistorical saying of T.E. Lawrence: “Nothing is written.” Writing never occupies the past tense: rather, all texts are in the process of writing themselves in a process inseparable from but irreducible to their material and medial existence.

Time is reversible. Moreover, time is neither separate nor different from space, but it is different from itself. Time is differential, never in being but always bringing other things (spaces) into being. The reversibility of time is the simplest possible statement of
this: that there is absolutely no logical, functional or material objection possible to
everything happening “backwards.” Moore’s “The Reversible Man” is an illustration of
this principle (see Figure 2-23). The reversibility of time is almost as simple as watching
a VHS tape rewind, with one addition, that cause and effect remain no less intact or
logical, but all the apparent laws of reality subject themselves to the new order.

Prisons do not exist to hold lawbreakers, nor do they exist to hold those who will
break the law—instead, those who are incarcerated go on to the judicial system, which
decides what actions they should take, such as using a firearm to bring people to life,
then reasons out for them how they ought to do it, and then the ex-convicts go on to
either do or not do the prosocial activities they were unconvicted of. In short, nothing
prevents such concepts as free will, decision making, and the unconscious mind from
functioning as they do in our frame of reference. This is essential, as the commonplace
alternative is to assume narrative determinism (as with the rewound tape, constrained to
be the same). Moore questions the possibility of free will and its consequences,
including sin, but in so doing maintains the freedom of consciousness: “The divine ghost
that is Consciousness […] can pass back and forth unhindered through the writhing ball
of centipedes that is our human world” (Portrait 335).

Determinism is not necessarily false, but it is necessarily not necessarily true. This
is to say that it is indeterminate: its true/false status is either unknowable, or else it is a
wrong question, derived from flawed assumptions. Such a position is what Fort calls
“intermediatist,” similar to the role of epoche in Pyrrhonian skepticism. It is also found in
the return of the “same” in Nietzsche’s concept of the Eternal Return. Deleuze
approaches the eternal return through the concept of difference and repetition (here, we
are not talking about two different concepts, but one concept, that of difference and repetition). Each move-through (repetition) is necessarily not identical to the last, but is instead different regardless of the ways it can be considered as the same, because it is a product of the last and of all previous repetitions. To suppose that it is truly the same is a logical fallacy, much as to suppose that two ordered elements are the same is to negate the fact that there are two of them in order—to be the same, they cannot be two. The useful concept here is that of the iteration.

“The Greatest Weight,” is an early formulation of the Eternal Return that seems to endorse the notion of the Eternal Return as a return of the same: “Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?” (Gay Science 273). It is not, in point of fact, any such thing. There is no difference between a necessarily deterministic repetition of the same and no repetition whatsoever, or nothing whatsoever. To admit such a nullity would contradict Nietzsche’s notion of the infinity of past time, which states that if anything were going to have reached a fixed state, it would already have done so. The perceptibility of change forecloses the possibility of fixity. Moreover, any possibility of interpreting this passage, with its “same succession and sequence” as requiring that the Eternal Return be a return of the same denies the possibility of Nietzsche elsewhere enunciating the idea of repetition and difference that Deleuze picks up on. In short, the greatest weight cannot become a deterministic return of the same unless it already is a deterministic return of the same, which is impossible in terms of Nietzsche’s concept of the infinity of past time—if the world were going to come to a fixed state, it would already have done so, and would render pointless the embracing of the Eternal Return.
Any possibility for that reading lies in the most contracted form of the Oroborous, of time eating itself—which, to be fair, is only a self-limiting possibility, not an impossibility.

Having concluded that Time is reversible, or, put another way, that Time’s arrow can be swung about 180 degrees without doing so necessitating determinist consequences, only indeterminate ones, and being able to say the same thing about the Eternal Return, we are confronted by the lack of necessity that time have only two gears, (forward and reverse) or that time’s arrow point in only one direction. The next question is whether time can have only one or several arrows, that is, move in several directions at the same time. It is easy enough to turn time from a simple river to one with salmon swimming upstream, but the same specter of narrative determinism comes up again if we consider a more complex temporality—one with splits, detours, loops and whorls. These “arrows of time” are vectors in the Aultian sense, inscribed visibly or invisibly on the comics page, and the narratives they produce are processual narratives determined by readerly awareness, decision and resistance. Many of Moore’s stories incorporate these kinds of temporality, as with the self-creating and self-foreclosing existence of white Supremium in his run on Supreme or the ripples of time created by the climax of From Hell. These temporalities only require narrative determinism if the past is presumed to be known and the future unwritten. Deleuze accords the privilege of the present to the present, past, and future. This is an anti-phenomenological move on his part, but one that allows for the free play of all possible presents, rather than a reduction to a presumed singular present.

There is a heterogeneity between Deleuze and Moore inasmuch as the latter is a Magician and Shaman and the former an atheist and empiricist, but there is no
incommensurability. Deleuze is not a theist, but he is a Spinozan. Spinoza's objection to
spiritual dualism is a monism of substance, the irrefutable argument that if “everything”
is a valid concept, there can be no basic division between substance and spirit: nothing
truly insubstantial could exist because to be in-substantial would be to be outside of
everything. Thus, Spinoza speaks of “God or nature.” Moore is also a monist. This is
what allows his notion of real fictions: there is no basic difference in substance between
imagination and flesh. This notion reaches its broadest extension in his post-Crowleyan
approach to Kabbalah. He rejects hierarchical notions of the Sephiroth, instead using it
to critique concepts of God and heaven as “somewhere else”—of God as somewhere
outside the system—in favor of a conception of “God” as the system. This is much like
Spinoza's “God or nature,” equation, which may itself have been influenced by the
Kabbalah.

In “Immanence: A Life,” Deleuze presents a life as the product of a plane of
immanence articulated with a transcendental field. Much of Deleuze’s writing is
concerned with a critique of the transcendental and of transcendence in
phenomenological traditions, so it is important to be clear about our terms. By a “field of
transcendence” Deleuze means that which results in a flow of “a-subjective
consciousness”—consciousness in motion, without subject or object. Without subject or
object, this consciousness is not self-consciousness. Application of the concept to
comics and visual media requires only a Derridean play on imm[a/i]nence: the flexibility
between the presence of the “divine” in all things (for Deleuze, immanent divinity is
neither more nor less than immanent immanence) and the about-to-happen. In applying
Deleuze’s plane of immanence to media as a plane of imm[a/i]nence, the surface of the
page comes to represent the imminence of immanence. Put as simply as possible, it is becoming: not becoming something, just becoming. The articulation of these things produces what Deleuze calls “a life” as opposed to “the life” of self- and other-consciousness. What we normally think of as life is the product of this tempest of becoming: vortexes of impersonal consciousness slow just enough to touch down on a plane of immanence, resulting in an ever-changing singularity, the white hole that blows out the raw stuff (a singular life) that allows for the construction of identity (the individual life). The relationship of the concept of “a plane of immanence” to the comics page is further considered in the next chapter.

The basic critique of gnostic and occult systems of knowledge is two pronged: one is that they are based on the de-historicization of a belief system and its imposition as a master narrative; the other is that they are based on a schizophrenic failure to discern between one’s thoughts and external reality (“magical thinking”). Moore’s use of the Kabbalistic Sephiroth seems to court at least the former of these pitfalls. To do so, however, would be to erase or “damn,” in Fort’s sense of the word, what Moore calls “Idea Space” or, in his Promethea comic book, “the Immateria.” By either name, what is under consideration here is that, given the monism of substance, a thing that is thought is necessarily “real”—a real thought. Similarly, fiction is reality—real fiction. Given as well the reversibility of time (effects=causes) and the multiplicity of Time’s arrows as analyzable vectors, one cannot ask whether these thoughts and fictions have only a subjective and transitory existence: they always exist in the present of their time (be that past, present or future).
In the third volume of Alan Moore and J.H. Williams III et al.’s *Promethea*, a giant moebius strip that takes up two pages produces a vectorization of time as well as a striation of space similar in power to that exercised by the *Sparrow’s Fall* strip (see Figure 2-24). This page starts from anywhere—the readerly upper-left-hand corner and the focal point of the x in the middle of the page are especially good starting points—and does not end. A moebius strip in terms of processual narrative as well as artistic design, each word-balloon is a peak of the present and the present moment of the strip is always in relation to other present moments that both precede and follow it without end. The narrative of this page consists of two characters discussing how long they’d been on this path, their sense of *déjà-vu* and the voices (their own) that they hear from the “under” side of the path. When the reader stops and finally turns the page, it is only because the structure of the page is simply not strong enough to hold us forever. It becomes as we read it, and is always becoming something else, despite its finite content, until we remove our attention, and by then it has etched itself into space and into our consciousness, creating in Idea Space the figure of the reader who never leaves the page simultaneous with the figure of the reader continuing on.

Idea Space or the Immateria is just the set (in the mathematical sense) of all ideas and fictions. In *Promethea*, the Sephiroth is accessed through the Immateria, and the Immateria is the one thing that has no clear position within the Sephiroth. This is sensible, as everything encountered in the Kabbalistic Journey story arc of *Promethea* is necessarily a subset of the Immateria. Moreover, the way Moore and J.H. Williams choose to depict the abyss (“Daath” or the missing sephira) undermines the supposed totality of the system. In the center of Daath, there is a hole that goes all the way
through—through everything (see Figure 2-25). Through that hole can be seen beautiful, utterly alien, semi-Lovecraftian things. The importance of this is that the hole in Daath undermines everything—it deterritorializes the Kabbalah and the Sephiroth from their very heart.

A similar deterritorialization occurs in Moore’s *Tales of the Green Lantern Corps* story “Tygers,” (illustrated by Kevin O’Neil) about a world of Blakian monstrosities “whose cruelties had grown too sophisticated for mortal form” who had been “chained” there after “the elders of Oa declared themselves Guardians of the Universe” (*DC Universe* 153, see Figure 2-26). These “Guardians” are the creators of the Green Lanterns, an intergalactic police force that operates in an absolutely oedipalizing manner, subjecting all of the less “enlightened” worlds, nations and peoples to protection and restriction “for their own good.” The power of the Guardians is “scientific” in nature, and opposed to “dark and necromantic factions of the starways” including the demons of “Ysm-/ault.” (*DC Universe* 153).

Throughout the rest of the story, the planet’s name is written “Ysmault,” but here, it is split into two lines by a dash, a technique Blake often uses to produce a multiplication or ambivalence of meaning, much as with his aforementioned use of catch words. The dialogue balloon with “Ysm-/Ault” contains a total of three such hyphenated words, fully half of the number present in this twelve-page story. After “Ysm-/Ault” comes “life-/less” and “for-/bidden,” and the hyphenated words create a revision of the story that is told if the dashes are treated as incidental. In the latter case, the planet “Ysmault” is “lifeless” and “forbidden” by the Guardians. In the former “Ysm-Ault” is “life-less,” a truth, as the
vitality of its inhabitants is locked in the Guardians’ chains, and by the crash-landing of another ship, the Green Lantern Abin Sur is “for-bidden” to descend to the planet.

There he meets “Quill of the Five Inversions,” a grotesque, warped body crucified with spikes bearing the Green Lantern emblem (see Figure 2-27). Quill answers Sur’s questions, and Sur becomes what he beholds, transfixed like a moth on the pins of the Green Lanterns’ power by Quill’s narration of Sur’s death “when that ring of power you wear eventually fails you” and the accompanying vision of his death (DC Universe 159, emphasis in original, Figure 2-28). The story concludes with Sur’s death, a result of his ring’s predicted failure, but a failure resulting from Sur’s mistrust of that power after his encounter with Quill’s inversions.

Quill, a writer by name, inscribes one more vision into the story, this before Sur’s death. He denies the vision of an eternal order maintained by the Guardians and Green Lanterns with a vision of their destruction, which Sur describes as a “terrible apocalypse,” but it is Sur who practices the inversion here (DC Universe 161). The apocalyptic desires of the Guardians are laid bare, and compared by Moore to the desire of Urizen in Blake’s Book of Urizen to fix everything into eternal stability, “a joy without pain […] a solid without fluctuation” (Urizen, pl. 4, line 10-1). Quill describes not an apocalypse, but an unbinding: “The Empire of Tears, / finally released from / entombment, shall / join the assault” (DC Universe 160). From a Blakian perspective, the “benevolent” infantilizing system of control established by the Guardians, their single vision of what and how all should be, their “heaven” is nothing more than Newton’s sleep, in which the “Empire of Tears” must be set free to circumvent the tyranny of a “joy without sorrow,” the pursuit of which leads only to chains.
In his extended conversation with Dave Sim (originally printed in *Cerberus*) Moore quotes Aleister Crowley as saying “The only difference between a schizophrenic and myself is that I'm not mad” (*Extraordinary Gentleman* 324). Moore credits his own assumed sanity to his having prepared conceptual space for cognitive experiences that might otherwise have been mind shattering. He compares this to ordering a larger filing cabinet in anticipation of a flood of paperwork—or perhaps of memes. More interesting is his refusal to claim that his experiences are true or real. “Do I actually believe that I have spoken to a trans-physical four-thousand-year-old entity first mentioned in the book of Tobit? No. Do I therefore believe that I have *not* truly conversed with the aforesaid entity? No” (*Extraordinary Gentleman* 327, emphasis in original). He does not deny them as false, merely refuses to affirm or deny them. This makes a virtue out of lukewarmness and establishes that, for the Magician, the Unpardonable sin is not to deny a Holy Spirit, but to affirm one—to do so is to become schizophrenic in an unproductive way.

The inchoate consciousness that forms space (the field of transcendence) only becomes productive when a focal point is created, articulating the two. Seeing the page instantiates a subject who looks at and reads the page as well as an object that is read (the page) as a product of immanent becoming. The page has “a life” that has nothing to do with its flat surface but instead is found in the articulation of consciousness and becoming along the vectors of the page. Remember that, for Alan Moore, free will does not exist, but free consciousness does. An idea emerges from space to be scripted, illustrated, lettered and printed, but until the reader and the page are wracked by the tempest of becoming, nothing is written.
Figure 2-1  de Kooning’s *Woman and Bicycle*. Image © The Willem de Kooning Foundation, 2009
Figure 2-2  de Kooning's *Woman with a Green and Beige Background*. Image © The Willem de Kooning Foundation, 2009
Figure 2-3  the layering of paint, wash and varnish (enlarged) from Elkin's *What Painting Is*. Image ©Routledge, 2000
Figure 2-4  perspective diagram from Panofsky's *Perspective as Symbolic Form.* Image ©Zone Books, 1993

Figure 2-5  T and O map from Edgerton's *The Mirror, the Window, and the Telescope.* Image ©Cornell University Press, 2009
Figure 2-6  Durer, illustration from his *Four Books on Measurement*. Image ©Dover, 1963

Figure 2-7  Durer, *St. Jerome in his Cell*. Image ©Konrad Liebmann Foundation, 2009
Figure 2-8  Durer, *The Nativity*. Image ©The Princeton University Press, 1983
Figure 2-9  Durer, *Melencolia I*. Image ©Konrad Liebmann Foundation, 2009.
Figure 2-10  Figure from Edgerton’s *The Mirror, the Window, and the Telescope*. Image ©Cornell University Press, 2009

Figure 2-11  Figure from Edgerton’s *The Mirror, the Window, and the Telescope*. Image ©Cornell University Press, 2009
Figure 2-12  Durer's *Melancholia I*, with the vanishing point circled. Original image ©Konrad Liebmann Foundation, 2009; overlay ©Chris Eklund, 2009
number of monkeys, baboons, & all of that species chained by the middle, grinning and snatching at one another, but withheld by the shortness of their chains; however I saw that they sometimes grew numerous, and then the weak were caught by the strong, and with a grinning aspect, first coupled with & then devoured, by plucking off first one limb and then another till the body was left a helpless trunk. This after grinning & kissing it with seething fondnels they devoured too; and here & there I saw one savourily picking the flesh off of his own tail; as the stench terribly annoyed us both we went into the mill, & I in my hand brought the skeleton of a body, which in the mill was Aristotle's Analytics. 

So the Angel said: thy phantasy has imposed upon me & thou oughtest to be ashamed.

I answered: we impose on one another, & it is but lost time to converse with you whose works are only Analytics.
number of monkeys, baboons, & all of that species chained by the middle, grinning and snatching at one another, but withheld by the shortness of their chains; however I saw that they sometimes grew numerous, and then the weak were caught by the strong and with a grinning aspect, first coupled with & then devoured, by plucking off first one limb and then another till the body was left a helpless trunk. This after grinning & kissing it with seeming fondness they devoured too; and here & there I saw one savourily picking the flesh off of his own tail; as the stench terribly annoyed us both we went into the mill, & I in my hand brought the skeleton of a body, which in the mill was Aristotle's Analytics.

So the Angel said: thy phantasy has imposed upon me & thou oughtest to be ashamed.

I answer: we impose on one another, & it is but lost time to converse with you whose works are only Analytics.
The number of monkeys, baboons, &c. all of that species chained by the middle, grinning and snatching at one another, but witheld by the shortness of their chains; however I saw that they sometimes grew numerous, and then the weak were caught by the strong and with a grinning aspect, first coupled with & then devoured, by plucking off first one limb and then another till the body was left a helpless trunk. This after grinning & kissing it with seeming kindness they devoured too: and here & there I saw one savourly picking the flesh off of his own tail; as the stench terribly annoyed us both we went into the mill, & I in my hand brought the skeleton of a body, which in the mill was Aristotle's Analytics.  

So the Angel said: thy phantasy has imposed upon me & thou oughtest to be ashamed.

I answered: we impose on one another, & it is but last time to converse with you whose works are only Analytics.
number of monkeys, baboons, & all of that species shoud by the middle, grinning and snatching at one another, but withheld by the shortness of their chains; however I saw that they sometimes grew numerous, and then the weak were caught by the strong and with a grinning aspect, first coupled with & then devoured, by plucking off first one limb and then another till the body was left a helpless trunk; this after grinning & kissing it with seeping fountains they devoured too; and here & there I saw one savourily picking the flesh off of his own tail; as the stench terribly annoyed us both we went into the mill, & I in my hand brought the skeleton of a body, which in the mill was Aristotle’s Analytics. 

So the Angel said: thy phantasy has imposed upon me & thou oughtest to be ashamed.

I answer: we impose on one another, & it is but last time to converse with you whose works are only Analytics.
number of monkeys, baboons, & all of that species chauved by the middle, grinning and snatching at one another, but withheld by the shortness of their chains; however I saw that they sometimes grew numerous, and then the weak were caught by the strong and with a grinning aspect, first coupled with & then devoured, by plucking off first one limb and then another till the body was left a helpless punk, this after grinning & kindling it with seeming kindness they devoured too; and here & there I saw one slowly picking the flesh off of his own tail; as the stench terribly annoyed us both, we went into the mill, & I in my hand brought the skeleton of a body, which in the mill was Aristotle's Analytics. 

So the Angel said: thy phantasy has imposed upon me & thou oughtest to be ashamed; I answered: we impose on one another, & it is but last time to converse with you whose works are only Analytics.
number of monkeys, baboons, & all of that species chained by the middle, grinning and snatching at one another, but with held by the short ends of their chains; however I saw that they sometimes grew numerous, and then the weak were caught by the strong and with a grinning aspect, first coupled with & then devoured, by plucking off first one limb and then another till the body was left a helpless trunk, this after grinning & kissing it with seething fangs they devoured too; and here & there I saw one savourly picking the flesh off of his own tail; as the stench terrify annoy'd us both we went into the mill, & I in my hand brought the skeleton of a body, which in the mill was Aristotles Analytics. 

So the Angel said: thy phantasy has imposed upon me & thou oughtest to be ashamed.

I answerd: we impose on one another, & it is but lost time to converse with you whose works are only Analytics.

Figure 2-18  Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, plate 20, copy F. Image ©The William Blake Archive, 2009
Figure 2-19  “Vacation Time” splash page, from *The Carl Barks Library*. Image © The Walt Disney Company, 1947
Figure 2-20  Mondrian, *Composition with Large Blue Plane, Red, Black, Yellow, and Gray*. Image ©Phaidon Press, 1992
Figure 2-21 Brunetti, P. Mondrian. Image ©McSweeny’s Quarterly, 2004
Figure 2-22  Baker, from Sparrow's Fall. Image ©Parrish Baker, 1997
'Frankly, I didn't enjoy school very much, although it was pleasant forgetting things that had never been any use to me, like Latin and chemistry.'

'I was glad when I could finally toddle out of infants school when I was four and spend all day with Mum. I had grown very fond of Mum in the time I had known her.'
Figure 2-24  Moore and Williams, from *Promethea*. Image ©Wildstorm, 2003
Figure 2-25  Moore and Williams, from Promethea. Image ©Wildstorm, 2003
LET ME CUT AND I’LL TELL YOU A SECRET CONCERNING YOUR FATHER. EIGHT YEARS DEAD...

AND WHAT DO YOU CHOOSE?
ANSWERS.

I DO NOT FLATTER. I MERELY SPEAK THAT WHICH IS TRUE.

AN INTRIGUING PROPOSITION...

... BUT YOU WOULD USE, OF COURSE?

AND WHAT IS THE ANSWER?
THE LEGENDARY ENEMY OF YEARS?
YOU AFFRERESE ME.

DON’T LISTEN! ME CACE! ALL LIE, SAVE FOR ME...

AND QUITE PROPER. THEY ARE BANAL, DEMENTS, AND BELIEVE ALL TO BE AS STUPID AS THEMSELVES.

AND WHO WOULD YOU BE PLATTERER?

THEY INSULT YOUR INTELLECT.

I AM SOUL OF THE FIVE INVERSIONS.

WHO RUN THAT RISK, CERTAINLY, BUT AS MY ANSWERS ARE FREELY GIVEN, IT IS A SMALL ONE.

WHERE IS THE EBEELEL THAT LATELY CRASHED HERE TO BE LOCATED?

YES, THAT. AT LEAST, IS TRUE, VERY WELL...

MY FIRST QUESTION...
Figure 2-28  Moore and O'Neil, from "Tygers." Image ©DC Comics, 2006
CHAPTER 3
SCHIZOANALYSIS OF THE PAGE: TIME, BODIES AND A LIFE IN THE WORK OF ALEX ROBINSON, HONORÉ DAUMIER AND DAVE SIM

This chapter continues the consideration of vectors and the cutting up of the page, and the issues of close visual reading, and compositional and processual narrative introduced in Chapter 2. At the same time, it is more intensively theoretical, dealing in part with potentials of comics that the works in question indicate without completely realizing them. Throughout, the theoretical work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari will be used more intensely than in previous chapters, not to the exclusion of but in concert with previously articulated theory and concepts.

Applications of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s work focuses on the rhizome, body without organs and/or war machine in the context of their seminal work, *A Thousand Plateaus*. Without ignoring these key concepts, a DeleuzoGuattarian approach to comics and visual media must look both before and after *A Thousand Plateaus*, and outside their collaborations, to find the concepts most applicable to and helpful alongside these media. This also helps to ensure that concepts are not reduced to academic catchphrases, and to clarify the difference between the theory in its original context and the theory as applied. Deleuze’s “Immanence” and Guattari’s solo monograph, *Chaosmosis: an Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm* deploy advanced concepts from these thinkers that diverge from their collaborative work, providing a useful contrast.

In “Immanence,” Deleuze states that “[t]he transcendental field is defined by a plane of immanence, and the plane of immanence by a life” (*Pure Immanence* 28). His

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7 I use the term “DeleuzoGuattarian” to describe their coauthored works and the theory therein, which are the product of an entity distinct from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.
concerns in this short essay are sweeping in their philosophical breadth, offering a new empiricism of the transcendent while also being concerned with what “a life” is, as the singular but not individual form of existence, itself built out of singularities that pre-exist the self. Though the term does not appear in “Immanence,” I refer to them as “pre-personal singularities,” after Guattari. These pre-personal singularities describe a life in the same way that a life defines the plane of immanence. “Immanence” is not about media, but it comes partially out of Deleuze’s thoughts about media, including the circuit or crystal of the virtual and actual—a vibration or oscillation in which the reality of the virtual is affirmed as the necessary indefinite to everything we think of as definite (actual). By “pre-personal singularities,” Deleuze refers to the infinitesimal moments, unconsidered sensations (Peircian “firstness”), attributes, body parts, reactions, etc., that, taken by themselves, are real or “actual” and together produce “a person.” Simultaneously, the pre-personal singularities that constitute “a life” are virtual to the body, self, and individual that is actualized from them. They are prior to, subsequent to and simultaneous with the “actual” (embodied, continuous across time and space) person, as the oscillation Deleuze describes is one of constant exchange.

The crystallization of virtual and actual images is crucial to Deleuze’s theory of the time image (in Cinema 2) in film. I find the principle and behavior to be identical: it is only the indeterminacy of the virtual that allows the actual to signify as anything specific, and to continue becoming something else. This is explicitly not the illusion of motion produced in film, a property Deleuze considered as the motion image (in Cinema 1). Some of Deleuze’s first writing about virtual and actual images occurs in his writings about painter Francis Bacon, which also connects to Deleuze’s consideration of
becoming. The figures in Bacon’s paintings are engaged in a process of becoming: they are, so to speak, caught “in between.” This perpetually having left a purely hypothetical fixed state behind and moving toward but explicitly not reaching another fixed state is Deleuzian and DeleuzoGuattarian becoming, and an apt description of what Deleuze calls “a life, […] we will say of pure immanence that it is A LIFE, and nothing else” (Pure Immanence 27, emphasis in original). The connection of this late work to his earlier work on painting and film demonstrates that these concepts are especially applicable to comics and other media that inhabit a visual (medial) plane as well as a conceptual (immanent) plane.

Deleuze illustrates the idea of pre-personal singularities thus: “[m]y wound existed before me: not as a transcendence of the wound as higher actuality, but its immanence as a virtuality always within a milieu (plane or field)” (Pure Immanence 32). The individual marks on a page of comics, be they brushstrokes, letters, zippatone dots or computer-colored fills, can valuably be considered to be virtual singularities that precede or, more accurately, constitute a plane of imm[a/i]nence8 overlapping the surface of the page. That plane of imm[a/i]nence precedes the forms, flows and narratives that can be read from the page. A reader who ignores these pre-personal (pre-formal, pre-narrative) marks is likely to fall into the error of taking the forms and narratives as ideals that transcendentally pre-exist the page—that is, of treating the page as a window into a preexisting world.

Approaching the page as a plane of imm[a/i]nence, a place of possibility, means taking the material marks on the paper (computer screen, etc.) as the virtual and pre-

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8 See page 80 for an explanation of the application of Deleuze’s “plane of immanence” to the comics page as a plane of “imm[a/i]nence”
personal singularities that constitute “a” life on the page and make possible the life of the actual images, forms and narratives of the page. This methodology recognizes the heterogeneous and largely incommensurable but concomitant nature of artistic technique and narration. That is to say that artistic technique and narration are different in nature, just as technique and mimesis are different in nature (“photorealism” may be achieved in many different ways), and while a certain technique may be used to produce a narrative effect, the effect is not inherent in the technique. In comics, at least, though artistic technique and narrative are different kinds of things, they always come together, and the technique is not identical to the effect; analysis of the effect benefits greatly from analysis of the technique.

The contradiction apparent in the statement that artistic techniques are both relevant to and incommensurable with the forms and narratives they create, is answerable through the application of Guattari’s theory of chaosmosis and autopoiesis, which offers an explanation complementary to our application of Deleuze’s theory of the plane of immanence. Chaosmosis and autopoiesis have an oscillatory relationship: “a coming and going at infinite speed between chaos and complexity” that is much like the relationship between virtual and actual images (Chaosmosis 75). They are not an opposed binary, but instead irreconcilable while also inseparable. What Guattari describes as “chaotic immanence” is not identical to Deleuze’s plane of immanence, being more like the principle of decomposition that allows for the recognition and existence of pre-personal singularities—Guattari describes it as “an umbilical point—deconstructive, detotalizing and deterritorializing” which is necessary for the existence of “a world” (Chaosmosis 80). Chaasmotic immanence does not describe an unordered
set of things (singularities, data, etc.) waiting to be put into order, but a productive chaotic decomposition that processually allows for new structures to emerge. The emergence of these new structures is autopoiesis, or self-generation.

When a thing produces something external to itself, like a factory building a car, it is, in biologist Francisco Varella’s terms, engaging in an act of allopoietic genesis. Guattari, who borrows Varella’s terminology, is more interested in self-creation or “autopoiesis” than in allopoiesis. When a brush leaves ink on paper, that is allopoiesis. When the marks on the paper create an image, that is autopoiesis. Varella applied his concept of autopoiesis only to living systems, but Guattari, in considering it as a powerful conceptual tool, pairs it with his own concept of deconstructive chaosmosis. The umbilical point of chaotic immanence is doubled in “an autopoietic node” that generates the conceptual and existential apparatus by which we produce meaning (Chaosmosis 80). Chaosmosis and autopoiesis are inextricably connected with perception, thus their application to comics is as a concrete microcosm of their general function.

Deleuze’s concepts of the plane of immanence and pre-personal singularities, combined with Guattari’s concepts of chaosmosis and autopoiesis, offer the beginnings of a non-reductive model for considering comics and other visual media in light of their specific visual details and the relationship of those details to the narrative and aesthetic effects of the compositional whole. This technique allows us to avoid the errors that may result from presuming that the properties of detail and composition are commensurable, or of ignoring one in favor of the other and treating them as unrelated.
The details, the pre-personal singularities of the page (screen, canvas, image, et al.) do not immediately offer themselves up to us. We must take them apart, isolate them, create them as singularities, through an act of chaosmosis, understood here not as the active taking apart of an image but as the freeing of vision that allow the singularities therein to come apart and display themselves. Only then does the function of the page as a plane of immanence reveal itself. This in-between moment of becoming does not create a whole, it allows for the immanent possibility of one. An act of autopoiesis is required to create the concepts that will give the singular details of the page some conceptual and compositional meaning. This autopoeietic act is an act of the page that is permitted by the reader and not an act of the reader’s “decision,” so it, like chaosmotic breakdown, is intersubjective rather than subjective. The “as a whole” meaning that emerges cannot co-exist with the details of the page, so we must decompose concepts and meaning alike in order to see again the singular details of the page, not as results of the whole but in light of the meanings and forms we are now dissecting. Chaosmosis occurs through the simple act of re-observation without subjection to meaning—when one allows the autopoietic whole to emerge again, it is not the same whole one had before, and does not mean the same thing. Neither one is properly “first.”

In Chaosmosis, Guattari describes a psychological and ontological theory in which chaosmosis and autopoiesis cycle constantly and at infinite speed. In order to use them as a technique for media criticism, it becomes necessary to slow down and consciously move between them, at various self-conscious levels of composition (panel, page, and book, to cite three possible autopoietic frames). The result is visual close reading of a
highly intensive sort. For example, what is “said” in a word balloon could be considered in an autopoietic phase, but analysis must not then proceed as if that recognition was natural or universal. The shape, size and style of letters and their positions on the page become apparent in a chaotic phase, and the letters acquire an equal footing with all of the other marks on the page. Another autopoietic phase might find symbolic meaning in the style of the lettering, such as a switch from a simple sans-serif style to a stylized font to indicate a formal or self-important mode of speech. A further chaotic phase might reveal inconsistencies of “style” that an autopoietic phase then could proceed to interpret. As there is no synthesis that unites the autopoietic and the chaotic in a singular meaning, there is no limit to the iterability of the cycle except for human limits of persistence, patience, and persuasion.

The Pool of Time in Alex Robinson’s Too Cool to be Forgotten

The reactions readers will have to Alex Robinson’s graphic novel Too Cool to be Forgotten may depend upon how much time they are willing to spend on a few specific pages. If subjected to analysis of imm[a/i]nence in terms of chaosmosis and autopoiesis, its pages reveal complexities of character and visual narrative structure that make Too Cool much more than the enjoyable but easily typecast “second chance” teen/family drama it may appear to be to a casual reader. The effect of such a close reading is by turns eerie, enlightening and wrenching, as well as illustrative of the function and potential of time in comics. By the end, both linear chronology and the conventions of time-travel narratives must be abandoned in favor of a kind of time that comics are especially good at depicting, time as the disturbed surface of a pool, a mode of thought that requires that we wed the aforementioned techniques to vector analysis in order to theorize the expansion of the arrows, or ripples, of time that constitute the divergent
process of the narrative. Other comics creators, including Alan Moore and Grant Morrison, have explored this kind of time, but there is no better application than in Robinson’s latest work.

The best place to begin is at the place/moment that time acquires its consistency in the narrative. Page 12 of Too Cool depends on two devices for its effect: concrete poetry and rudimentary cryptography (see Figure 3-1). The composition of page 12 gives us the face of the story’s protagonist, Andy Wicks, rendered not in line art but in lines of hand-lettered text. There are three major aesthetic and narrative components to the page: the horizontal lines of text that form Andy’s face on the left-hand side of the page, the heavy use of empty white space in contrast, and the upside-down and backwards diagonal lines of text that fill the empty space on the right-hand side of the page.

Page 12 functions as an in-between moment of the comic: if it were omitted, its loss, though significant, would be undetectable. Page 11 features a middle-aged Andy submitting skeptically to hypnotherapy in a last-ditch attempt to quit smoking, and page 13 alone is a sufficient transition to Andy’s high-school days, which he is forced to relive. Page 12 doesn’t even occupy a specific place in the chronology of the narrative. Not despite, but because of this, it is one of the most interesting pages in the book. The horizontal lines of text describe Andy’s thoughts as he is trying to “focus and relax” as directed by the therapist, and feed into his rejecting the technique as not working on page 13, only to discover that he’s not in the therapist’s office, but in his high school’s library, on page 14. The diagonal lines of text, however, disrupt and complicate this setting, and it is here that a close reading is likely to diverge from a casual one.
Robinson does nothing to make it easy for us to read those lines: in addition to the words being written upside down and backwards, the letters are not flipped, so reading the text in a mirror would put the order of the letters right, but would render them backwards. Also, many words are split between lines without use of a hyphen, and the convention breaks up in the “last” few lines (reading from bottom to top). A casual reader might skip over this section entirely. This nominally encrypted text is, however, entirely readable: the lettering is clear; none of the text is missing or cut off; spacing between words is, with a few exceptions, very regular; and ellipses separate the fragments. The diagonal text is nothing but fragments, seemingly of high-school conversations.

Though “non-essential,” these fragments set the tone for the flashback/time travel portion which comprises the bulk of the story. They are repeated later in Too Cool as dialog, producing a sense of déjà-vu in the reader when they reappear and are given a context. That, however, is not the whole of their effect on the comic. In Chaosmosis, Félix Guattari describes universes of reference—such as mathematics—as the “incorporeal domains of entities that we detect at the same time that we produce them, and which appear to have been always there, from the moment we engender them” (17, emphasis mine). The encrypted text on page 12 constitutes just such an incorporeal universe for the narrative of Too Cool, linearly preceding contextualization and creating the illusion of that narrative having always been there by inscribing its fragments into a universe of reference for the reader. Much as one comes to the book with personal universes of reference, such as one’s own high school experiences, the book gives the
reader this universe of reference through seemingly unimportant phrases, producing a relationship between the pre-individual singularities of the page that gives rise to “a life.”

Given that a life is “not immanence to life [...] A life is the immanence of immanence, absolute immanence,” it is all the in-between and indeterminate things, in their constant shifting, that give a life to a person (*Pure Immanence* 27). Taking not one but all of the pages of *Too Cool* as a plane of imm[a/i]nence, and the page 12 fragments that we have already described as constituting a universe of reference from the moment they are read, those fragments are singular and unmistakable, but not personal, not associated with any character until they appear, later, in word balloons. Until they are actualized in this way, they remain virtual, and in becoming actualized, they give “a life” to the characters and narrative.

This analysis might seem to suggest that all comics should have a “page 12” and that it is a flaw if they do not, but nothing could be further from the truth. Each page enacts a form of the same creation of a universe of reference, and the singularities of that page give it a life. What is remarkable about page 12 of *Too Cool* is threefold: one, the degree to which it is a model for the way universes of reference are inaugurated; two, the degree to which it produces an effect that is not local to the page, but distributed throughout the book; and three, the specific effects it has in terms of the book’s relationship to time. *Too Cool* has neither a commonplace linear relationship between time of reading and “diegetic” time, nor the simple flashback/time-travel structure it seems at first to follow.

Even as the fragments of page 12 spread themselves out across the pages of *Too Cool* “horizontally” through the entirety of the book, the compositional elements of pages
106 and 107 dig down into the otherwise imperceptible chthonic depths of the narrative (see Figure 3-2). In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze considers the opposition between Lewis Carroll’s poetic “nonsense” and the schizophrenic writing of Antonin Artaud, “the former emitted at the surface, the latter carved into the depths of bodies” (84). Bodies are at stake on those pages, as it is there that Andy begins to deal with the impending death of his father. Pages 106 and 107 are divided into two rows and three columns of panels, each one the same rectangular shape. Taken as a compositional whole, they function as portraits, 106 of Andy’s ailing father, 107 of teenage Andy, but only the bottom center panel of each page is, taken individually, part of a face. All the other panels represent scenes, objects or moments, presumably from Andy’s life with his father. By itself, the top left panel on page 106 is a map of the southeastern US, focused on Florida and Georgia. As part of the page as a compositional whole, it is part of Andy’s father’s head: the aforementioned States become hair, the Atlantic his face, and the Gulf of Mexico his ear. Two chaosmotic-autopoietic cycles are necessary for full recognition of these pages: the move from mark to the autopoietic image of each panel, and the deterritorialization of those meanings to allow for the autopoiesis of the page (the portraits). Whether one sees the faces first or the images (state maps, etc.) that compose them, one must reject, or, more precisely, suspend one's recognition of the one in order to recompose the marks on the page into the other image. This is no mere optical illusion, a duck that is also a rabbit; it is a perfect example of how the oscillation of chaosmosis and autopoiesis produces different results when the outlines of the autopoietic form change: in this case, from panel to page. Similar analyses can be performed comparing, for example, page to work.
This recognition of the marks on the page is also crucial to avoiding the mistake of seeing these pages as simple optical illusions or, worse, double entendres. The marks on the page are, taken for themselves, neither states nor hair. They are the pre-personal, pre-individual singularities that give life to the page. Taken at the level of the panel, they compose scenes from a life: the parrot in the top center panel of page 107, for example, is presumably a pet but is otherwise unmentioned in the narrative. It cannot be a specific parrot, as it is unnamed and without “place” or role in the narrative, but it is a singular one. The baiting of a fishing hook in the bottom-right panel of the same page is similar: this is the only moment when fishing appears in Too Cool, and it cannot be placed in terms of history or ego. The portraits are composed of these singularities on two levels: first, they are made up of the same marks on the page, and require that we be able to see those marks as part of the page as a whole and not just as a collection of independent or linear panels. Secondly, the free-floating contents of each panel (Florida, parrot, etc.) literally compose the figures of Andy and his father. To the degree that we understand these portraits as narratively constituting Andy and his father, the scenes and things dug out of an unknown and unknowable past are the pre-individual singularities that give each of these characters “a life” on the page’s plane of imm[a/i]nence. Sense does not exist in the depths—Deleuze describes sense as “a surface effect, being inseparable from the surface which is its proper dimension” (Sense 72). On the surface of the page, the plane of imm[a/i]nence, an image can be given life by the graphemic singularities of which it is composed, while simultaneously functioning as a singularity in producing another life.
This is one of the functions of visual narrative that both textual narrative analysis and linear panel-based analysis of comics tend to miss. Andy and his father are composed of images that the reader will never know more about, signs whose significance is lost into the churning chthonic depths of a life together that we barely glimpse in this page. At the same time, they are nothing and can be nothing but what is on the page. The illusion of depth, of a past, is a Deleuzian “virtual image” constructed by the reader in interaction with the “actual” images, such as a worm and a fishhook, on the page. Even this is not the limit of what pages 106 and 107 tell us. Sentimentality would encourage us to ascribe not only specific “memorable” contexts to the contents of each panel, but also the false warmth of a “Kodak moment.” But the oscillation between the chasmosmotic churning of singularities and the alchemical coagula of the autopoietic ordering of those singularities into a compositional whole undermines such a reading. The fragments of expression in the bottom center panels are not happy. Andy’s father bites his lip on page 106, and Andy has a slight frown and narrowed eyes in the matching panel on page 107. That frown becomes more pronounced when we see it completed in the bottom right panel—as a hand baiting a fishhook.

There is no “next moment” after the scene with the fishhook and worm in the narrative, but the context threatens mishap: Andy’s finger pierced by mistake? Or perhaps, as the stubbly chin and worn, hairy fingers suggest, the person with the hook and worm is Andy’s father. If so, this scene could be one of childhood horror—seeing his father as violent for the first time in the banal act of using live bait. The “could be” is crucial, as the events referred to lurk “below” or “outside” of the page, and they cannot be retrieved by looking “deeper” into the page. Nonetheless, in the context of these
pages and their place in *Too Cool*, it would not be unreasonable for a perceptive reader to supply them. In the top center panel of page 106, we see a classic father-son activity: baseball. An unseen batter has swung and missed and the ball is in the catcher’s mitt. Again, a conventionally cheerful interpretation is counterindicated, and not just because teenage Andy is a nerdy outsider and not a jock. The mitt and ball form Andy’s dad’s eye, and the bat his eyebrow, bent away in confusion or sadness, an affective resonance that is only enhanced as the motion-lines in the panel become wrinkles on the page. The fact that the scene shown is a strike rather than a home run resonates with the text on the page: “In 1983, my Dad’s klutziness turned into my Dad’s A.L.S.—Lou Gehrig’s disease” (106). The baseball metaphor runs through Lou Gehrig’s disease and into the idea of Andy’s dad striking out, a metaphor that turns the faceless catcher into Death.

Pages 106 and 107 constitute a vertical distribution of time, “back” and “away” from the horizontal flow of the pages of the book. Rather than perpetuating the common misrecognition that the panel works like a frame of film, capturing part of a hypothetically complete world “behind” the panel, they remind us that there is an alien and unknowable depth “beneath” the page, an imperceptible space/time, except for these images where it irrupts into (our) consciousness. These pages of *Too Cool* are not unique in behaving this way, but they are exemplars of this behavior, just as page 12 is an exemplar of the horizontal (but not purely sequential) life of the narrative. The inverse of pages 106 and 107 can be found in *Too Cool* as well, in the form of a space/time “above” the page that depends on our privileged distance as readers. It is also a form of compositional recognition of the page that depends not on Platonic or
even pseudo-Platonic forms or absolute boundaries, but on forms that “project” a false image of their own importance “above” the page. The best example of play with this concept of forms “above” the page is on pages 86 through 90, culminating on page 89 (see Figures 3-3 through 3-5).

On pages 82 and 83, teenage Andy has just refused a cigarette, changing his own personal history, as he remembers this night as the occasion of his first smoke. Feeling that he has accomplished what he came “back” to do, he drifts off while being driven home. The surreal sequence that follows depends on the reader’s recognition of certain elements of the page as forms and on those forms’ failure to function as such. Taken as a compositional whole, page 86 is a spiral. Formed of a three by three grid of panels, the center panel contains nothing but the spiral, while all the peripheral panels combine it with other visual elements. This gives the page a countervailing narrative flow—circular, along the spiral. The importance of this appears on page 90, which changes the meaning of pages 86 through 89.

In addition to this unusual spiral structure, the middle row of page 86 has inset panels in its first and third “grid” panels. These panels are akilter, neither square with the rest of the page nor perfectly rectangular. They also exceed the borders of the panels they are “set in.” The first such inset panel shows teenage Andy’s face and the second shows middle-aged Andy’s face. Prior to this page, the only time Robinson has used panels that were not perfect rectangles, aligned square with the page, is on pages 72 and 73, the scene of alcohol and hormone muddled making-out, where Andy’s difficulty restraining himself is depicted by the curving, phallic arc of the page’s center row of panels (see Figure 3-6). The page layout depicts Andy’s erect penis, complete
with engorged head and, in the upper-left hand corner of this two-page spread, thatched shading for pubic hair.

Irregular panels seem to be associated with altered states, a notion reinforced by the bottom row on page 86, where a small silhouette, similar to the outline of middle-aged Andy, appears close to the center of the spiral and is repeated larger and further out from the center, sprawled out across all three panels of the bottom row. In the middle panel, inset within the middle of the large silhouette, is a face that we have not previously seen in the book. Despite this, it seems to be Andy at some in-between age: not only is it inset in “Andy’s body,” but the features are much like middle-aged Andy’s, the receding hairline anticipates middle-aged Andy’s male-pattern baldness, and it has the same relaxed expression as teenage and middle-aged Andy in the irregular panels. Only by reading back from later in the book do we see that it is not Andy’s face but his father’s that appears here, embedded in Andy’s body. We do not see Andy’s father’s face again until page 104, and never in the same detail and from the same angle until page 113 (see Figure 3-7). Andy looks at family photographs on pages 46 and 47, and one of those photos includes his father, but Andy doesn’t think about his father, musing instead on the death of Noodles, a beloved pet dog (see Figure 3-8). As a result, we only get to see part of his father’s face—the panel is centered on Noodles, and all of Andy’s thought balloons are below Noodles, rather than near the top of the panel (as is most common). The dog, and its death, intervenes between Andy and his father’s death. Neither Andy’s father nor his death are mentioned. Narratively, this scene can be read as an instance of negation or substitution: unbearable grief over the soon-to-come
loss of the father sublimated as grief over a pet that died shortly before the time Andy has “traveled” to.

Page 87 is another three-by-three grid, as are pages 88 and 89. But it is much stranger than page 86. First, it is part of a strong compositional whole with its facing page, as the spiral continues into page 87 from its center in the middle panel of page 86. The curving arcs of the progressively larger rings of the spiral have largely displaced Robinson’s characteristic black fills; the bottom row and the middle and right panels of the middle row are largely occupied by a single, broken-up word balloon in which only part of a word that might be “Andy” and of another that might be “wake” are visible. Most unusually, middle-aged Andy “floats” above the top left, top middle and center panels. Sequential narrative between panels breaks down entirely on this page, as the representational figure is not engaged in any clear activity nor is he located in any particular panel. This is unlike most pages of comics, wherein the panels can be read as “above” or closer to the reader than their contents, a notion that feeds into the illusion of a world behind the page. There is some sense of narrative progress between pages 87 and 88, as 88 is very similar but continues its compositional unity with pages 86 and 87, seeming to be “further out” on the spiral, and the figure of middle-aged Andy is larger or closer, spread across the entire middle row of the page. He is still floating “above” the panels.

Page 89 is the final page in this sequence, and it is here that the idea of an “above” of the page is crucial, because it is here that the illusion of Andy floating above the page decomposes. The top row and the left and middle panels of the middle row still contain the spiral, but it is replaced by a diagonal slash in the right panel of the middle
row, and that slash grows wider across the bottom row. There is an Andy on this page, but he is rendered too large to fit on the page, and is cut off at the outside borders of the grid of panels (the lines that compose this Andy do not bleed to the margins). This breaks the illusion of him floating above the page, but a more radical disruption is coming: Andy’s upside-down head is in the lower-leftmost two-by-two subgrid of panels, and it is partially broken up by them. On a narrative level this can all be read as representing Andy waking up not in the diegetic “present” (middle-aged) but from a dream of returning to that “present.” The commingling of Andy’s head with panel borders, his slit eyes (they were completely closed on pages 86 through 88), and the widening slash in each of the last four panels of the page all suggest slow awakening. The fuzzy image of Andy’s mom saying, “Come on, Andy... wake up, I need to go...” in the last panel is just confirmation.

The reason this interpretation is possible, however, is more subtle, and depends on the “above” of the page. The panels on page 89 resume some of their narrative function, but their privileged ontological status is permanently thrown into question by the panels whose borders are commingled with Andy’s head. On pages 87 and 88, the importance of the panels was not in question because it was rejected entirely as a narrative device in favor of the continuing spiral and a page-to-page sequentiality. The behavior of the panels on these pages is one of recognition of their failure as ideal forms or Kleinian “good” objects, which are complete in themselves and lack nothing. Deleuze notes how, falsely, “the good object posits itself as having always preexisted” in a higher plane, above meaning or sense which is constituted on the surface (Sense 191). In comics, the panel often functions as a good object, playing at ontological
priority and universality. When Robinson draws our attention to the arbitrary and conventional nature of panels on pages 86 through 89, they lose their illusionary priority and transparency. The convenient reading of panels to denote passage of time fails, and the image of time on the page loses its prior consistency, becoming literally as well as narratively a dreamtime, where the conventions of progress and linearity do not apply. On page 89, the panels begin to resume their conventional function, but are compromised by their chaosmotic commingling with the “character” of Andy in the process. Page 90 returns entirely to Robinson’s normal techniques, as Andy realizes that he is still stuck reliving his teen years, but the failure of the panels on page 89 remains part of the autopoietic character of the whole of Too Cool.

The character of Andy has no comprehension of his existence as a comic book character. Too Cool is not metafictional in that sense. But the representation of Andy awakening on page 89 is highly metafictional, as it depends on our recognition that pages 86 through 88 were abnormally structured, visually, for this work of comics, and page 89 tells us how Robinson is productively abusing his own formal conventions to tell us not only that Andy is waking up, but why Andy is waking up still as a teen and not “back to normal.” We see the singular marks on page 89, in particular the panel borders that are disrupted but not obliterated by the presence of Andy’s head, as part of forms that are projected off the page and into our consciousness. Neither these specific panels nor panels in general have any “natural” privilege, or they would not be disruptable by “mere content.” If the ontological superiority of the panel is not given, then the rejection of the panels on pages 87 and 88 is not merely an illusion, but evidence of a different kind of narrative structure, or “truth.” The narrative structure of
these pages is, as we have stated before, an expanding spiral. On page 86, middle-aged Andy appears on the right-hand side of the spiral, and teenage Alex on the left. As we move to pages that are further-right, we keep pace with middle-aged Andy and forget teenage Andy—until page 90, where the collapse of the narrative spiral pops teenage Andy back to the front.

We also forget Andy’s father, who, embedded in Andy’s shadow (or, perhaps, his own) drops off the bottom of the page after page 86. He is displaced further from the dream than teenage Andy, only reappearing again much earlier and later. Taking the page as a plane of imm[a/i]nence, the actual singularities on the page can contribute to the virtuality of the understood visual narrative and its structure, even as their virtuality constitutes the life of the page. This is at the heart of Too Cool’s relationship to time. Time, in Too Cool to be Forgotten, is not a vector, nor a river, nor a two-way street. Time is a pool, a surface, has two dimensions: horizontal from page to page and vertical, above and below (but never in front of or behind) the page.

My use of the concept of time as a pool comes in part from the notion of time that Alan Moore presents in his graphic novel about Jack the Ripper, From Hell, where the Ripper killings produce “ripples,” related events, not just afterward, but before the event in question. For Moore, this is based on Stephen Hawking’s notion that space-time is a complete, self-repeating whole, and that cause and effect are therefore reversible. As he puts it in an interview with Dave Sim that first appeared in Sim’s Cerebus comic:

Spread out from this [the murders], there are [sic] a distribution of points that seem on first glance to have a relationship to the central point of impact [...] These points are seemingly randomly and evenly distributed to either side of the impact zone, which is to say in the past that precedes the event and the future that comes after it. The event is seen as a strange sort of four dimensional shape or entity. (Extraordinary Gentleman 314)
Regardless of one’s views as to the “true nature” of time, this technique produces insights into the relationship between events before and after a chosen “key” event, and is one way of disrupting the illusion that shocking events, like the Ripper murders, come out of nowhere. Moore compares major historical events to casting a stone into a relatively-still pond, but he does not explore the most interesting implication of his metaphor. If time is like the surface of a pool, then time is not a vector, that is, time is not a river, but a two-dimensional plane in a three-dimensional field. This is already the way that space-time has come to be explained since Einstein. The inaccurate but easily-grasped image of a rubber sheet, stretched and curved in a three-dimensional space helps physics students understand how space and time are warped by gravity, or more accurately, how massive bodies like planets warp space-time, thus producing the effect we call “gravity.”

The image of time as a pool is similarly inaccurate-but-helpful in understanding how time functions in complex visual narrative structures, such as Too Cool. The distribution of singularities from page 12 both constitutes a horizontal structure of the comic and, along with the déjà-vu it produces, reminds us that that horizontal distribution does not produce a single forward vector of time: the flat space-time of the comic is all accessible to us, if not simultaneously, at least in any order. This, according to Grant Morrison (personal conversation) is the fundamental structure of comics: the characters, scenes and dialog are all there, waiting for us to flip to any page. The depths of time that we glimpse fleetingly on pages 106 and 107 are not in any sense “before” the first page of Too Cool, as the narrative world described in the book cannot precede the book, but it can present itself as having always existed (as a universe of
These pages instead tell us something of what is below the comics page in general, that unmappable territory that can only be inferred and never discovered by the reader. By taking us to the edge of this bottomless pit, and dropping the context of each panel in, Robinson demonstrates that the page cannot be the window to a complete and coherent world. The presence of an imperceptible “below” of the page, detectable, like a black hole, only by its effects on what is present on the page both requires and proves that there is no world “behind” the page, that there is no “behind the page” at all. Pages 86-89 demonstrate the necessity of a projected “above” the page (and the absence of ideal forms on the page) through the narrative use of visual elements of the page that normally perform meta-narrative functions, which requires readerly recognition of the function they are not performing in order for them to perform their new function. That is to say that the normal function of “panel borders” must first be recognized to understand the page. Then that “normal function” must be suspended to allow us to read the page, and that suspension reveals that lines that look like “panel borders” are not always projected: that they are not the “good objects” they masquerade as.

Time then moves along any number of vectors on this plane: not only does it recede into pages 106 and 107, it also constitutes an anchor that Andy’s life on the page can swing around. The image of Andy’s father is pushed horizontally out of the comic on page 86, but also up above the page, allowing his face to bounce off the resistant surface of pages 46 and 47 (where he is given a body but no face) even as it lands and burrows down into page 106. When page 12 takes us out of what can be described diegetically as the frame story and into Andy’s teen years, we are not reliving his memories, though the hypnosis model suggests it. Neither are we traveling back in
time, though the presence of things in the “past” that Andy did not know were there suggests this. Andy’s “real” teen years are lost beneath the page, revealed only narratively by recognition and contrast. The sense of déjà-vu produced when a phrase from page 12 is encountered produces an eerie illusion of familiarity for the attentive reader, and every time Andy “remembers” people, places, things and events, they are transformed into irruptions of his lost “original” past. But Andy is not reliving his past, either though hypnosis or time travel: his past is coming into being through his memory of it and the changes he is making to it in the narrative. His “original” teen years are something constructed at a tangent to the “relived” narrative of Too Cool, along what is not a “parallel” timeline, but an intersecting one.

That is why pages 106 and 107 function as an anchor: all the scenes from an unknowable life, and all the inferences suggested therein are not a matter of recognition of sameness to Andy’s undrawn “real” teen years or any of the points of difference that the narrative turns on. Instead, they are the point of intersection between these two incommensurable lives, narratives, times. There is nowhere else for Andy’s “real” past to exist: it is otherwise not on the page, and nothing that is not on the page can be said to be in the book, even though the book gives it a place in a universe of value it inaugurates. It resides below and outside pages 106 and 107, an unmappable tangent vector in the pool of time. The pool of time acts as a Deleuzian transcendental field to the page as a plane of imm[a/i]nence, just as it itself acquires the properties of a plane of immanence when considered from the readerly perspective of the comic taken as a compositional whole. Put in simpler terms, just as the page acquires life from the marks
on it, that life is animated by the reader’s interaction with it—an interaction that is anything but simple or self-apparent.

**Two Regimes of the Comics Page: Cutting Up and Sinking Below**

The comic page most directly invokes Lacan’s “imaginary” order through its pictorial dimension (its visual images); the “symbolic” order through its linguistic dimension (its letters, words, and syntax); and the “real” through the interruptions or cuts in the body-space of the page which leave blank spaces between the panels that correspond to (or mark the absence of) events that are assumed to be occurring “between” the panels. Any attempt to keep these three orders separate immediately breaks down, however.

— Donald Ault “Imagetextuality: ‘Cutting Up’ Again, pt. III” par. 1 (footnote in original)

In considering the comic book page as a plane of imm[a/i]nence, an affinity can be detected between the chthonic “below” the page and the Lacanian real of the page, as theorized by Donald Ault. The former is manifest only in those structures on the surface of the page that evoke the unknowables, the absent foundations that undergird the seeming stability and order of surface signification. The latter appears particularly in the seams and fissures of comics narrative, the panel borders and gaps that are not actually instances of the real, but are its index: “Interruptions between panels cannot be straightforward transcriptions of the ‘real,’ which, for Lacan, is that which resists symbolization absolutely” (“Cutting Up,” par. 2). When the structures of the page are functioning normally, these spaces between panels do not complete, but instead incomplete the page and the narrative: “There is nothing in this space, but it introduces discontinuities into the spaces of representation and allows the panels to assert themselves as fragments.” (“Cutting Up,” par. 6). This incompletion of the page, this fragmentation, lends a “reality,” a Deleuzian “actual,” to what is presented, and it is here that the Deleuzian “below” of the page and the Lacanian “real” of the page relate.
The Aultian comics page is “cut up” by white or empty space, what might be called, though only in the most problematic sense, “extra-diegetic space” or “non-representational space.” To refer to that space as the index (in the Peircian semiotic sense) of the real (in the Lacanian psychoanalytic sense) might be the briefest way to define it accurately. The Peircian index is a bit like a pointer in computer programming: It is connected to its object not by visual similarity (for Peirce, that would be an “icon”) but because it directs interpretation toward its object. The Zen Buddhist notion that Zen teaching is not Zen “but a finger pointing at the moon” is applicable here, as the Lacanian real is precisely unrepresentable, so the unrepresentable of the comics page cannot, *ipso facto*, be represented. But it can be “pointed to,” which is what the blank space on the page does. These spaces “correspond to (or mark the absence of) events which are presumed to be occurring ‘between’ the panels” (“Cutting Up,” par. 1). For Ault, it is this absence or lack that defines the way these spaces function—the real being unrepresentable, and not merely unrepresented.

This is like the chthonic below of the page, the “depths” which Deleuze contrasts with sense as a property of the surface in *The Logic of Sense*. Both sense and “nonsense” in the vein of Lewis Carroll’s works are surface properties, sustained by tension with the self-devouring depths, characterized by Antonin Artaud’s schizophrenic and a-signifying poetry. Artaud’s “nonsense” is not silly; it is uninterpretable, breaking Peirce’s triadic semiotics of sensation (firstness), reaction (secondness) and interpretation (thirdness) by rebounding upon sensation over and over again. In articulating a “below” of the page, we not only reject the idea of there being something “behind” the page (of the panel acting as a window), but we see instead a multitude of
One particular trait of the Aultian comics page is that it rejects the notion of the panel as Peircian legisign, the legisign being a rule of interpretation (a function of Peircian thirdness). In doing so, it breaks radically with most interpretations of how the comic book page functions, as they tend to presume that the panel signifies as a singular, consistent and easily describable rule of reading, much like the property of text that one word follows another, or else that it serves the same mechanical rule of a cell of film, where each image instantly follows the next. If we understand the space between panels as indexing the unrepresentable real, then their behavior cannot follow a single proscriptive rule. Sequentiality of panels, an assumption of most theories of comics, cannot be necessary. Even the integrity of the panel itself cannot be assured, as the imm[a/i]nence of the real overturns both the carefully structured order of the symbolic and the identificatory order of the imaginary. The argument that panels are not inherently privileged in comics is not contrary to the structures of the Aultian page, but resultant from it.

The Muse or the Viper: The Chaosmotic Female in Les Bas Bleus and Cerebus

In Frank Stockton’s 1882 short story, “The Lady or the Tiger?,” a young man is guided in a life or death choice by his lover, and the unanswered question of the story’s title can be interpreted as a condemnation of women as fickle-hearted and torn by
jealousy. Interpreted a different way, however, Stockton’s story illustrates a key point in contemporary literary analysis: knowledge of character, intent and desire is not only insufficient to determine outcome and meaning, it can be functionally irrelevant. The content of a work is always in process, chaismotically-autopoietically rewriting itself. A statement of character, intent or desire in a work is only a “singularity” whose meaning changes as the body it co-creates changes. In “The Lady or the Tiger?” Stockton explains the character of the princess in detail, but this only serves to confuse the reader as to whether she guided her lover toward certain death—or toward marriage to one of her rivals. Moreover, and easy to miss in the explicit riddle of the princess’s decision, there is the subtler riddle of the young man. We are told that he knows the princess’s nature, that he believes that she knows which choice is death and which is forced marriage, and that after her hand’s “slight, quick movement toward the right” he chooses the door on the right (“Lady or the Tiger” 9). We do not know whether he hoped for a lifetime bound to another—or a quick death. We are told in so many words that he “understood her nature,” which implies that he knows her dilemma, and thus implies that his decision was to abide by her decision and not to choose either life or death, but what the princess chose for him. But we do not even know whether he trusted her, because we cannot know whether he did what she advised: that is merely suggested by the parallelism of right to right. Who can say what such a gesture might mean between lovers?

Ultimately, the question is not a choice; it is not only unanswered but unanswerable, and might as well be a conjunction—the lady and the tiger. The princess is deterritorialized and is no longer herself—“she” is the chaismotic node of lady and
tiger. The “truth” of what comes out of the door does not exist—asking is a false question, because what “comes out” at the end of the story is the irresolvable question. It is in that sense that Dave Sim’s *Cerebus* (1979-2004) and Honoré Daumier’s *Les Bas Bleus* (1844) produce muse *and/or* viper. Both of these works are, in some open, declared sense, misogynist. Sim, once best known as a defender of comic creators’ rights and an advocate of self-publishing, has since become infamous for declaring that women are emotional voids who devour male creativity and reason, and, more recently, that a “feminist-homosexualist axis” is taking over the world. Daumier’s *Les Bas Bleus* is a series of caricatures for the generally-progressive French newspaper *Le Charivari* that mocks “bluestockings,” a period term for women with intellectual, scholarly, literary and/or professional aspirations. The sexism in these works, and the censure their creators deserve, is neither in debate nor particularly interesting. Neither is any redemption germane, but only an act of justice of the sort Jacques Derrida was speaking of when he said that “deconstruction is justice” (*Acts of Religion*, “Force of Law” 243). The chaosmotic node in these works is inevitably in their women who, despite their position and characterization, refuse to stay put.

Meanings breed in images, spawning and eating their own young, just as they do in texts. As we continue to see, cartoons and caricatures tend to be taken as simple and transparent in meaning, unlike “real” art, which is accorded complexity or at least inscrutability. One recent example of this is the difference between reaction to cartoon depictions of the Prophet Muhammad in *Jyllands-Posten*, and the relative non-issue of the Supreme Court frieze depicting Muhammad among other great lawgivers like Charlemagne and Napoleon (see Figures 3-9 and 3-10). Part of the difference is in the
lingering aura, in the Benjaminian sense, that the frieze retains as a “unique work of art.” This atmosphere of historical significance and irreplaceability may not have been enough to protect the Bamiyan Buddhas from the Taliban, but it was sufficient to shelter Adolph Weinman’s frieze from a short-lived removal campaign in the immediate aftermath of the *Jyllands-Posten* debacle. In theory, the issue is the same, a violation of Islam’s taboo on artists’ depictions of the Prophet (or, in some traditions, any person). That taboo itself has a complex history, but that history is immaterial here. The *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons stirred more rage because they were new, because they were immediately accessible, and because they had no aura, not only by virtue of being reproduced but because they are of the sort of “low” art that only becomes itself through reproduction. But there is another, unconsidered reason why they, even unseen, provoked outrage, and that is because people presumed they already knew exactly what these caricatures meant.

Political and social caricature is no more necessarily simple or obvious in meaning than print satire, which is not to say that all caricature is visual satire. The art of caricature is the art of exaggeration, and of the grotesque, and it is almost always line art. All three of these contribute to its seeming obviousness, because the first two traits make the objects of caricature distorted and ugly, and most of all because of the flawed logic that connects simple, clear style to simple and clear meaning. Honoré Daumier’s caricatures are more detailed than those in the *Jyllands-Posten*, but they are part of a tradition of line art and reproduction that connects to the Muhammad caricatures and to Sim’s B&W “ground-level” comic *Cerebus*. In order to analyze these images, one must not presume the primacy of the “natural” forms that appear at a casual glance. The
individual lines and marks on the page are only partially separable from forms, but once one recognizes them, the “forms” one sees are revealed as only a partially detanglable accretion of linework—the marks on the page are not the discrete lines made by an artist’s pen, having become nets and spiderwebs in their unauristic existence as comics. A chaosmotic-autopoietic close visual reading of Daumier and Sim severs the silver thread connecting them to universes of reference in which their work must be obvious in meaning because it is caricatural in style and in which that meaning must be simple misogyny.

This kind of analysis of Les Bas Bleus and Cerebus produces, out of the “obvious,” something nearly the opposite: strong, interesting, independent, credible and likable female characters. It is not so much that these powerful women do not exist in an analysis of the work in terms of authorial intent or transparent meaning as it is that they cannot be thought there. The external universes of reference attached to the work by either of these forms of analysis produce single vision and the assumption that whatever is being said about these women, it cannot be good. Thus strength becomes unnatural manliness, power makes a woman into a “cold bitch” and independence gets stuffed into the mold of flightiness. In short, to read Les Bas Bleus or Cerebus in terms of authorial intent or on the presumption of transparency of meaning is to do them, and the women in them, violence.

There is something monstrous, excessive about these women, and it may be intended to demean and mar, but it itself is not ugly. They exceed their narrative role and place, seeming in the case of Daumier’s bluestockings to turn their imperfections
into character, and their ill-manners into a parody of men’s expectations; and in the case of Sim’s Astoria and Jaka to embody something that is neither muse nor viper.

In this image from Daumier’s series of bluestocking caricatures we see three seated figures and one, standing, in their midst (see Figure 3-11). The standing woman holds a large script or something similar, and is in an animated pose, her face inspired or avid. Two of the seated figures appear to be women, one of whom has an intent expression, while the other’s is mostly obscured. The third, a man, is in the foreground, his back toward us and his head down, possibly asleep. The caption, translated, is as follows:

The bluestocking reads her play. Act six, scene one... the theater presents, on stage, a tiger asleep in the desert... Rosalba moves along with difficulty as she pulls along with even more difficulty her five children and her old father. Rosalba falls at the foot of a palm tree covered with coconuts and cries out in despair!... Heavens, when will this torment end...(all the people listening, with lowered voices) and when will our torment end, oh heavens!

The “joke” here, one often repeated in Daumier’s *Les Bas Bleus*, is that women are melodramatic and boring writers who cannot write moving fiction. But without the text, there is no joke.

If we take a closer look at the standing woman, we see that while she is not conventionally beautiful, neither is she ugly. Instead, as with most of Daumier’s bluestockings, enough detail has been lavished on her to give her face character—note the lines that give her high, sharp cheekbones, and the dark curves that make her chin jut, but also the large deep circles of her eyes, and the gentler careful shading that makes her neck long and the contour of her collarbone visible. The combined effect in this case is humanizing, more so than a perfect figure would be—these singularities give the figure “a life,” incarnated in a body whose uniqueness suggests unknowable
richness “below” the page. Given that caricature generally proceeds by exaggeration but also by simplification, and that the goal of propagandistic caricature is generally to dehumanize its targets (often by way of zoomorphism), the logical conclusion is that this is not a typical caricature.

Another common “joke” in the series is women can “act like men,” but they cannot successfully perform “men's work.” At the same time, Daumier’s art often gives the lie to that notion. If one imagines male figures of similar build and features them doing the same things that the women are doing in this image, it acquires an (anachronistic) resemblance to the homey art of Norman Rockwell (see Figure 3-12). Only the caption clarifies that women “acting like men” is futile: "Here we are to write the first volume of our newspaper, The Extreme Literary Republican... what shall we knock off first? To start with... let's knock the whole thing off!..." That futility does not inhere in the art.

The bluestocking on the right does not appear to be despairing, but is hard at work, quill to paper and faint v-lines on her forehead indicating concentration, though Daumier often gives his bluestockings “unattractive” furrowed brows. Close examination of the woman on the left with the bun reveals that she is engaged in the difficult task of shaping a quill—the curved black line is very close to her bulging eye, and her other hand grips something straight—two simple lines that autopoietically become a knife or possibly a pair of shears. The only figure that can be visually “read” as giving up is the center figure. Seated between the other two and smoking a large cigar, she is not engaged in manual labor, but her expression is serious, the chunky line of her forehead and heavy drawn-down eyebrow suggesting the male stereotype of the office boss. The phallic cigar and pronounced Adam’s apple in her thick neck contribute to this figure's
masculinity and authority, traits perhaps intended to indicate a threat to her womanhood that are simultaneously a threat to the idea that women cannot be manly and, by implication, do "men’s" work. The semi-androgynous figures here invite another anachronistic comparison, to Rosie the Riveter, whose ostensible purpose was to reassure women that they could do “men’s work,” and whose masculinity was intended to be compatible with, not a perversion of, her femininity.

The most common theme in these caricatures is the bluestocking as neglectful of her domestic work and, especially, as a bad mother. Note how the bluestocking in this image is barely present—she is nearly consumed by the shadows around her, even as her husband and son are front and center (see Figure 3-13). The caption to this image connects to the first theme, mockery of bluestocking writing:

[bluestocking:] Out! You dissolute child from hell! Let me compose my ode to the joy of motherhood in peace!—[husband:] It’s ok, it’s ok, he’ll be quiet! I’m going to give him the strap in the other room (aside) the fact is, that of all my wife’s “works,” this kid stirs up the most commotion in society!

Close visual analysis of the child’s face reveals that the description of him as “from hell!” is less hyperbole than simple description. The long, sharp drawn-in brows and curving jowl lines are angry, even threatening and anything but cute. What completes the effect is a chaosmotic-autopoietic transformation: the child’s upper lip, considered as a mark on the page, is a sharp, white crescent shape that, when one looks at the child’s face again, looks more like the jutting fang of a fiend or a vampire.

Though also exhibiting drawn-down eyebrows and the forehead “v” lines that we’ve noted previously, the mother’s expression is less terrible than the child’s. She may have cause to be angry—the curtains behind her are absorbing her into them. The vertical lines that form and darken in the curtains continue unbroken into the
bluestocking’s dress and body, and in some places she is only distinguishable from the curtains because of the white scratch-lines that outline her body, temporarily interrupting the lines of the curtains. These lines show a continuity where we were expecting an absolute boundary. This could all be intended as a visual pun on the bluestocking mother as “not there,” but also suggests a great effort undertaken in order not to vanish into the domestic background, and, in another anachronistic resemblance, resembles to the imagery and themes of Charlotte Gilmore Perkins’s feminist 1892 short story “The Yellow Wallpaper.”

Both Perkins’s protagonist and Daumier’s bas bleu experience boundary failure: their bodies are paranoid, invaded and sustained by their environments, “the organs are continuously under attack by outside forces, but are also restored by outside energies,” as Deleuze and Guattari put it in A Thousand Plateaus (150). In the first case, the shadowy female behind the wallpaper is really below the depthless surface of the wallpaper—there is no “behind” the wallpaper that signifies in terms of the surface with its “absurd, unblinking eyes” and “florid arabesque, reminding one of a Fungus” (“Yellow Wallpaper” 16, 25). But the shadowy female that Perkins’s narrator both connects to and cannot understand is part of her body, displaced to a trace on the wallpaper. She cannot know the shadowy female, because what is truly below the surface is unknowable. Beneath the outline of the shadowy female, in the chthonic depths of the wallpaper, lies a metonymic organ of the narrator’s body, something of herself that approaches the purity of a body without organs by virtue of its contents being indeterminable. It should be no surprise that Perkins’s narrator ends by tearing down the wallpaper: it projects bars above itself that prevent the shadowy female from
escaping: “she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through the pattern—it strangles so [...] if only the top pattern could be gotten off from the under one!” As a legisign, a rule for interpretation that is more than a symbol of the oppression of women, it is the law that intervenes between her and the body without organs (“Yellow Wallpaper” 30).

In the end, because the “top pattern” is only projected from the surface and not actually above it, and the “under” pattern with the shadowy female is not behind it, but a surface trace of an unrepresentable and unknowable (because it lacks sense, a property of the surface) “below,” the only thing she can do is eradicate the surface, which she does, tearing the wallpaper down. She then passes below the surface, out of sense and into the shadowy female who is revealed to be one of many: “There are so many of those creeping women [...] I wonder if they all came out of the wall-paper as I did?” (“Yellow Wallpaper” 35). The narrator had previously wondered if there was more than one shadowy woman, but now that she has become a shadowy woman, she is one of a pack, a multiplicity, “you can’t be one wolf, you’re always eight or nine, six or seven. Not six or seven wolves all by yourself all at once, but one wolf among others,” as Deleuze and Guattari explain multiplicity (A Thousand Plateaus 29). She is not herself anymore, she is one creeping woman among others, and her behavior, motivations and thoughts are inexplicable to those who are not her others.

It is impossible to say if the bas bleu and her curtains have as complex a relationship, if there are any number of bas bleus among the curtains, but the caricature is so accurate to the narrative of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” including the child that the mother cannot tolerate and the husband whose blame is sanctioned and sanctified by
his claiming that he is the victim of her irrationality, that if one were to remove the
original caption and shade the curtains and dress alike in yellow, Daumier's caricature
would seem an illustration of Perkins’s story.

The culmination of Daumier's ambivalence about his caricatures of women
appears in this caricature, which presents a figure that may be the meanest and ugliest
in the series (see Figure 3-14). At first glance, at least to a contemporary reader, this
seems to be a bas bleu refusing to do housework, but a more attentive visual reading
reveals that this is not a bas bleu but her husband, forced to carry a feather duster.
Casual readers may only discover this fact when they read the caption: “To think that
Arsinoe wasn’t satisfied with having her portrait done, a daguerreotype made of her,
and her biography written!...Now I’ve got to pay three thousand franks for a bust of her
in marble... it’s tough! The hardest part is that I have to dust off my wife every
morning...and this wife of mine sure makes a lot of dust!...” The jape here is that
bluestocking ambition comes down to nothing more than “female” vanity, but something
both countervalent and much more complex is taking place in this caricature.

When we chaomotically deterritorialize the “husband’s face,” the lines we find are
sharp, like spears and arrows, immanent to violence. When we look at the face again,
not as that of an ugly bas bleu, but of a man staring at a bust of the woman we thought
s/he was, those sharp lines render his brow pinched with hostile intensity, his nose
protuberant, pointing like an accusing finger, and the angry lines of his face that suck in
toward his eye. The eye itself is sinister—tiny, solid black and glassy, like a taxidermist's
fakes. He is even uglier as a man than she was as a woman: the combed-up receding
hairline, the squared-off ear and the multiple jowls are unattractive, but it is the jeering
turn of the mouth that completes the devilish quality of the face. In contrast, while there
is something undignified about the marble bust with its acute smirk, it lacks the odd
malice that seems to exist in the husband’s face.

The phallic nose is an arresting touch, as it is by far the most phallic, and the most
masculine, thing about the figure. The answer to this puzzle lies in performing the same
kind of analysis we applied to his face to the rest of his body. When we thought this
figure female, the line that curves in from her jacket lapel implied a female breast, and
we must return to the curving line to see that it has not changed just because we now
“know” that the character is male. Similarly, but to a more pronounced degree, the
generous curve of hip into buttock conforms with female proportions, and the flat drop of
the figure’s groin is transformed by the v-shape formed by the character’s hands, right
where the pudenda would be. The feather duster, with its associations of “women’s
work,” completes the effect of making the body female, and, while it is long and narrow
enough to be phallic, if so it is an impoverished phallus, slender and pointing down. The
suggestion is that, if men are forced to do “women’s work” they will become effeminate,
the inverse of the women becoming masculine in the first bas bleu caricature we
considered. Perhaps the underlying anxiety revealed by the graphic details of these two
images is the fear that women are capable of and would enjoy “men’s work,” and that it
is men who are proud and petty, a truth revealed when they have to do “women’s work.”
In other caricatures, Daumier renders husbands in the presence of bluestockings as
bemused or long-suffering, but in this private moment, the fear and anger bleed through
the page like ink stains.
A similar anxiety over emasculation, gender displacement and revelation of male pettiness can be found in the pages of Dave Sim and Gerhardt’s *Cerebus*. Volume 9, *Reads*, covers a crucial moment in the series, in part because it consists of both the ongoing comic and two serialized texts, each of which is independent of the comic’s plot. The first text series is about author Victor Reid, and comes across as a veiled autobiography of Sim’s experiences with the comics industry, displaced into a part of the world of *Cerebus*, the publishing house and bookstore, that we have never previously seen. The second takes the form of an interaction between “the reader” and Viktor Davis, and is divorced from the fictional world of *Cerebus* entirely. The Viktor Davis section contains Sim’s infamous diatribe against “The Devouring Rapacious Female Void” (*Reads* 253). The comics section contains a long-awaited confrontation between Cerebus, Cirin and Astoria. Cerebus and Cirin are anthropomorphic Aardvarks, and each is in religious and political conflict with the other, though Cerebus is mostly motivated by a personal desire for power and wealth, whereas Cirin is attempting to create a female theocracy. A third Aardvark, the mysterious Suenteus Po, appears and tries to talk them out of bloodshed, which can only happen if they all give up their ambitions and mutual grievances. Astoria, the only “human” present, is a Kevilist, a term that Sim will later use as equivalent to “feminist” and “pro-choice.” Sim’s position on feminism is unmitigatedly hostile. Despite this, Astoria is the only one of the three to listen to and think about Po’s words. As Po delivers his piece, we also get to see Astoria’s expression change as she listens, thinks and eventually agrees. Here she travels in three panels from bored superiority to surprised interest as Po catches her attention: “Astoria. The moment you set foot outside that hotel...without an entourage,
without an army...without so much as a single bodyguard...at that moment, you were truly free” (Reads 62, see Figure 3-15).

Over the next few panels, the handful of lines rendering Astoria’s face flow through several expressions, as Po continues: “Had you walked away from there—into the lower city—there to lose yourself among the masses of ordinary people...you would have remained free. Instead. Instead, you came here...and in doing so, you have traded the spiritual captivity of a political figure...for the more wretched imprisonment [sic] of a would-be messiah...” (Reads 62, see Figures 3-25 and 3-26). At the end of Po’s speech, we see on Astoria’s face a look of acceptance, and something that at least approaches enlightenment: “[Astoria:] I... [Po:] “Once a profound truth has been seen...it cannot be ‘unseen.’ There’s no ‘going back’ to the person that you were. Even if such a possibility did exist...why would you want to?” (Reads 62, see Figure 3-16). Unlike Cirin, who is too committed to reconsider, and Cerebus, who is spoiling for a fight, Astoria finds she agrees with Po, and attempts to persuade Cerebus to give up his ambition.

Her words seem to be a comment on Cerebus as a whole, and its title character’s obsession with acquisition of power: “But you’ll always find the same thing you found as prime minister, and, I’m sure, as Pope: it’s a charade. A stifiling, [sic] insulating frustrating practical joke from Terim...or Tarim. Does it really matter whether its [sic] a God or a Goddess who’s laughing at you?” (Reads 100, see Figure 3-17). The rest of the 300-issue long series confirms that, whether it should or not, it does matter, but Astoria, whose face is rendered in profile in all of these panels, faces “backwards” (against the direction of reading) and suggests a possibility that goes “against the grain” of the comic. Cerebus fails to understand this backwards speech, responding with
incomprehension, boredom, and ultimately, threats: “No! no more talk! [...] You have two choices[:] One! You can shut up and leave[.] Two! You can shut up and DIE!” (Reads 94-5).

In the final two panels on this row, a few small changes in rendering yield a large change in affect. The image of Astoria in each of the previous four panels looks something like the panel on the left. In this case, a slight frown, a looseness in the lines that form the area around the eye and a slightly raised eyebrow give her a look of tired resignation, a “what now?” look. But the panel on the right presents a completely different Astoria with a few lines that shift her slight frown into a slight smile and give her a more focused gaze. In a few pages, Astoria will leave the pages of *Cerebus*, and neither she nor Suenteus Po will return until the last issue of the series, over a decade later. But that smile and that look suggest that she is not simply giving up or retiring, but has found meaning in her own words, even if Cirin and Cerebus are deaf to divine laughter. Astoria, who represents better than any other character in *Cerebus* everything that Sim has, by this point in his writing, personally decried as wrong, achieves a personal epiphany and is allowed to leave both the temple and the comic unmolested, at least until the final issue, where Sim condemns most of his characters, including Cerebus, to some sort of hell.

Jaka poses a more difficult problem. She weaves in and out of the story, and is clearly the love of Cerebus’s life, but she is not the creature of his desires. Sim seems determined for much of the series to not allow their relationship to go forward, as in this scene from *Cerebus* book 10, *Minds*. Cerebus is communicating with something that claims to be his creator, but not God, and calls itself “Dave.” Cerebus hears Dave as a
voice in his head and sees visions when Dave wishes it.⁹ Here, the Dave-daimon is showing Cerebus what married life with Jaka would be like. “You've been married for a year and five months” the daimon says (Minds 205, see Figure 3-18). Jaka looks more than tired—she looks miserable, and the daimon says that she is unhappy because Cerebus is her intellectual inferior, as well as violent and controlling.

In this sequence, an even more distant and miserable looking Jaka is passive as the daimon answers Cerebus’s question “so—uh—what happens now?” ‘Usually? You say 'time for bed,'” Jaka strips off her nightgown and turns out the light. Right now she’s masturbating under the covers...not for pleasure, of course—for lubrication. If she isn’t sufficiently lubricated when you try to mount her you accuse her of being ‘frigid’—and then you’re angry with her through the whole next day...” (Minds 208, see Figure 3-19).

What’s going on here? Given Sim’s typology of women as “Voids” who destroy men through relationships, especially marriage (which he refers to as “merged permanence”) it seems backwards that it is Jaka who is destroyed when Cerebus’s wishes are granted. Based on the fact that Jaka is consistently more sympathetic than Cerebus, Jaka must be an “exception,” something that Sim allows for: there are a few worthy females, the handful of “muses” in the nest of “vipers.” The Dave-daimon states that Jaka is smarter, more practical and more ethical than the violent and appetitive Cerebus. By Minds, readers have had ample opportunity to observe this for themselves: it does not contradict what has gone before. The Dave-daimon’s stated goal is to convince Cerebus that Jaka deserves better than him and could not be happy with him. The route taken to this goal, however, is discomforting, if not flatly perverse.

⁹ To avoid confusion between this “Dave” and Dave Sim, I hereafter refer to this Dave as the Dave-daimon, because he acts as an inner voice or guide to Cerebus.
Close visual analysis of Jaka’s face in the “time for bed” panel reveals several disturbing features. Sim’s linework causes her left eye to droop in a drugged or insensate fashion, and this suggestion is confirmed when one performs a vector analysis of her eyelines—they don’t converge. It is nearly inconceivable that her eyes could be looking in the same direction, let alone at the same thing. This isn’t bored, unhappy or merely mistreated woman, this image is of a Jaka broken, possibly even driven mad by unknown and unspeakable abuse. Her stare, and the reader’s knowledge that Cerebus is capable not only of murder, but also torture, hints at horrors far beyond those stated by the Dave-daimon, lurking below the page. This scene of quiet domestic horror parallels that of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” wherein the “rest cure” is revealed as psychological torture, and the image of the bas bleu vanishing into the drapes: this Jaka is furniture, part of the bed, like the sheets and pillows.

After this tableau, Cerebus demands that the Dave-daimon “make” or show him, the difference being imperceptible, a Jaka who would always be happy with him. The results are, if possible, even more horrifying (see Figure 3-20). It isn’t clear why, but her happiness seems to inspire Cerebus to violence: Jaka merely asks what she can do to make Cerebus happy, and he hits her. This leads her to ask Cerebus why he isn’t happy, and he hits her again. This is supposed to be an object lesson for Cerebus about his unsuitability for Jaka, but the result is that Jaka becomes a victim of domestic violence. The Dave-daimon attempts to minimize this scene with the disclaimer that the brutalized Jaka isn’t “real,” thus projecting the daimon and the “real” Cerebus above the page into a higher realm of narrative priority. There is, of course, no true space “above” the page, but only the convenience of the legisign as functional order (as with the
imputed integrity of panel borders). As a result, when subjected to a close visual reading, this projection falls flatter than most: Jaka is, like Cerebus and the daimon, already a fictional character, and her suffering is on the same plane of imm[a/i]nence as the daimon’s words, contradicting them.

Something else happens in this scenario. The lines that form Jaka’s nose are deformed in a surprising way. The circular shape of the underside of her nose, the damaged wrinkling along the length of it and an inexplicable smallness to her smashed-up nostrils reshape her nose into something like a snout, as if in parody of Cerebus’s “aardvark” snout. Moreover, her right hand is distorted—she only has four fingers in this rendering, whereas she is normally drawn with five. Cerebus, in the “funny animal” tradition, only has four fingers per hand. What emerges is that, in becoming a victim of Cerebus’s temper, Jaka comes to resemble Cerebus, perhaps in the way dough comes to resemble the cookie cutter.

If Astoria is Cerebus’s not-viper, Jaka is the corresponding not-muse. She seems to “inspire” nothing but jealousy and violence in Cerebus, and, in general, the desire of men to possess her as a trophy or mascot, as well as a sex object. Rick, Cerebus, F. Stop Kennedy and her “Uncle” Lord Julius all behave as if she were a lucky charm—the image, perhaps, of what a muse would be, but none of them benefit from treating her this way. On the other hand, she is quite capable on her own, and when she takes the initiative she tends to be successful. Even though, as we have seen, she is not safe from Cerebus’s rage, she takes direct action to protect him from harm. Late in the series, in Cerebus book 13, Going Home, some Cirinists plan to “rescue” Jaka from Cerebus by the simple expedient of having him killed when he goes ashore without her.
Jaka reasons this out just in time, and races to catch up with Cerebus, escorting him through a crowd of Cirinist soldiers who respect and love her too much to defy her—regardless of their orders (see Figures 3-21).

Closer examination of the very masculine soldiers reveals that they are female. This is no surprise, as Cirinist soldiers are always female. But these soldiers are not wearing the face-covering headscarves of Cirinist soldiers or even the partial headscarves of non-military Cirinists. They wear practical helmets that leave most of their face and neck visible, as well as much of their hair. With their jutting chins, strong, squashed noses, facial piercings, Venus-symbol tattoos and lack of visible sex traits, they conform to a specific stereotype of the bull dyke. By way of confirmation, some of them look at Jaka, who is classically femme in appearance, with worshipful awe, while symbolic hearts hover in the air—and in one soldier’s eyes. The Cirinists have long been established not as feminist in any contemporary sense, but as female-dominant ultra-conservatives, for whom all females remain children (“Daughters”) until they give birth (becoming “Mothers”). The unexplained and unexplored paradox of lesbian soldiers in such a society is similar to that of the cigar-smoking (female) boss in Daumier’s caricature. Both images, after a superficial analysis, suggest that women should not be allowed into “male” jobs because they would be incompetent and become unattractively masculine, but attentive analysis shows that they actually convey competence and the idea that some women who might have no place in a more traditional society would flourish if allowed into these roles. In this case, the military becomes an acceptable locale for big, strong, aggressive and homosexual women, just as all-male armed forces have been for men with those traits since time immemorial.
Certainly they’re not less effective—a younger Cerebus slew larger groups of armed men single-handedly (during the comic’s formative years as a Conan-parody), but was stymied by the Cirinists and is depicted here as in mortal peril.

The only aspect of all this that appears to register with Cerebus is that he has to accept female protection, and to do so without a clue as to why. On this page, Cerebus is reduced to child status, his shortness exposed by his need to reach up in order to hold Jaka’s hand, his arm outstretched and his head craned around backwards in uncomfortable curiosity about this thing that Jaka, suddenly a surrogate mother, won’t let him stop to explore (see Figure 3-22). The palpability of the danger Cerebus is in, rendered in part through use of perspective, confirms Cerebus’s infantilization. In books 1-4 of the series, Cerebus was an unstoppable killing machine. Much as with Daumier’s caricature of the husband with the feather duster, this image reveals a terrible fear of not being “the man” anymore, though this is not in the form of a becoming-woman, but a more pure loss of dominance. That particular fear of being sexually out of control emerges in Cerebus’s nightmares, such as this one from Guys featuring Joanne, another woman Cerebus is involved with (see Figure 3-23). The combination of the diaper and the erection reveals Cerebus’s fear of loss of masculinity and dominance through sex. The fact that Cerebus continues to seek out Jaka, the woman most capable of revealing his sexual immaturity, is perhaps telling as to what Jaka is—neither muse nor viper, but lady and tiger, a creature whose existence Sim cannot admit to, but that he seemingly cannot help but represent.

**A Life on the Page**

This sort of analysis allows us to find “a life” on the page, contrary to our expectations and fears, something that is constantly, processually emerging and
becoming richer though the attention we (libidinally) invest in it. What emerges is not a personal determination of meaning, but a chaosmotic activity, as Blake put it “to cleanse the doors of perception:” a commitment to possibility, positionality, interpretation and meaning. Visual narrative is not transparent, but rather so complex and nuanced that casual interaction requires a lack of thought about what the image perceived is constituted out of, and how those marks and lines inaugurate it. The need is only greater, therefore, to perform close visual analysis of comics, using such techniques as vector analysis and chaosmotic deterritorialization in order to recognize their complexity and their becoming as images, their unceasing movement toward something incommensurable with their nature and constitution. This mode of analysis is by no means restricted to comics, being equally applicable to any image or series of images that have a narrative component or impulse.
Figure 3.1 Concrete poetry and a "universe of reference" in Robinson's Too Cool to Be Forgotten.

Image ©Toph Shelf Productions, 2008
Figure 3-2. Fragments of a life: the composition of Andy’s dad (left) and teenage Andy (right) out of moments of their shared history, the rest of which is “lost” beneath the page. Image ©Top Shelf Productions, 2008
Figure 3-3   pages structured primarily by lines other than panel borders, with Andy’s dad dropping off of the bottom of page 86. Image ©Top Shelf Productions, 2008
Figure 3-4  Adult Andy's projection above the (normal) projection of the panel borders, and his recuperation into them. Image ©Top Shelf Productions, 2008
Figure 3-5  return to the typical style of *Too Cool to be Forgotten*, after p. 86-9. Image ©Top Shelf Productions, 2008
along the bottom of page 72, a wooden railing doubles as a panel border, and in the center of 72-3, an unsteady, curving panel indicates both intoxication and male sexual arousal. Image ©Top Shelf Productions, 2008
Figure 3-7 adult Andy’s face reflected in the portrait of him with his parents, though this scene takes place while he is teenage Andy. This is the first reappearance of Andy’s father since page 86. Image ©Top Shelf Productions, 2008
Figure 3-8  Teenage Andy's first look at the pictures in his family's home. In the bottom right, what is shown in the panel and the thought balloon draws attention to the death of Andy's dog, and away from the imminent death of his father. Image ©Top Shelf Productions, 2008
Figure 3-9 the infamous Jyllands Posten “Muhammad cartoon” page. Image ©Jyllands Posten, 2005
Figure 3-10  part of Weinman’s “great lawgivers” frieze behind the bench of the United States Supreme Court, with the much less controversial depiction of Muhammad center. This image is in the public domain.
Figure 3-11  Daumier, *Les Bas Bleus*, plate 22. Image ©Vilo Inc., 1982
Figure 3-12  Daumier, *Les Bas Bleus*, plate 33. Image ©Vilo Inc., 1982
Figure 3-13  Daumier, *Les Bas Bleus*, plate 14. Image ©Vilo Inc., 1982
Figure 3-14  Daumier, *Les Bas Bleus*, plate 12. Image ©Vilo Inc., 1982
Figure 3-15  Sim and Gerhardt, from Reads. Image ©Aardvark-Vanheim, 1997
Figure 3-16  Sim and Gerhardt, from *Reads*. Image ©Aardvark-Vanheim, 1997
Figure 3-17  Sim and Gerhardt, from *Reads*. Image ©Aardvark-Vanheim, 1997
Figure 3-18  Sim and Gerhardt, from *Minds*. Image ©Aardvark-Vanheim, 1996
Figure 3-19  Sim and Gerhardt, from *Minds*. Image ©Aardvark-Vanheim, 1996
Figure 3-20  Sim and Gerhardt, from *Minds*. Image ©Aardvark-Vanhein, 1996
Figure 3-21  Sim and Gerhardt, from *Going Home*. Image ©Aardvark-Vanheim, 2002
Figure 3-22  Sim and Gerhardt, from *Going Home*. Image ©Aardvark-Vanheim, 2002
Figure 3-23  Sim and Gerhardt, from *Guys*. Image ©Aardvark-Vanheim, 1997
Atari commercially released *Pong*, its first and most famous video game, as a standalone arcade game in 1972. The original pencil-and-paper *Dungeons and Dragons* (*DnD*) saw press in 1974. It is telling, then that, despite the sharp limitations on computer resources and access in the late seventies, by 1976 several *DnD*-based games had been developed for university-housed mainframe computers and released, free of charge, by their creators. These games owed their creative inspiration to *DnD* in much the same way that *DnD* owed its own underpinnings to *The Lord of the Rings* and Tolkien-esque fantasy. Early *DnD*-based games were text adventures, though many would incorporate incidental graphics in later versions.

The computer game *Rogue* was first distributed in 1981. *Rogue* was different: it was one of the first teletype-style games intended to take advantage of Cathode Ray Tube (CRT) displays, and the first true top-down *DnD* inspired game, of a type that has come to be known as the “dungeoncrawler.” Depending on one’s definition of “graphics,” it is also the first graphical dungeoncrawler. Early teletype games, including text adventure games and the classic (unlicensed) *Star Trek* game, were played via teletype, a dumb terminal that consisted of a keyboard, a daisy-wheel printer, and a modem. All of the processing was done by the mainframe.

*Rogue* was developed for a new kind of terminal: the “glass teletype,” which used a CRT display for output, as opposed to printing and re-printing the game’s state every turn. Nothing about *Rogue* makes playing it from teletype printouts impossible, but the pace of play would be glacial and the amount of paper used would quickly become prohibitive. This is because, in *Rogue*, play focuses on the movements of one’s
“Rogue”/avatar/ampersand (@) and the appearance of periods, dashes, plus signs, hash marks (.-+#) and more in response to the movements of the ampersand (see Figure 4-1). As moving a single space would require a teletype to reprint the entire floor of the dungeon, crossing an empty room would use a half to a full dozen pages.

The plane of the page or screen is absolute in Rogue. Other characters vanish when the ampersand moves over them, such as the asterisks (*) that vanish but increment one’s gold counter, and other items that will then be given text descriptions in the game inventory and can be “dropped.” Singular in their behavior are the game’s challenge—“monsters” or capital letters, as their movement is not random: they inevitably gravitate toward the ampersand. They cause the HP counter to decrement until the ampersand attempts to move over them enough times to cause them to vanish (much like a moved-over asterisk), but instead incrementing the game’s XP counter.

Rogue, a game about the structuring of space in terms of pure presence and absence, and of the self-destructive love that letters have for an ampersand, immediately became a hit.

Some ASCII-based games that use a Rogue-like model of gameplay continue to be developed, and they are commonly described as “roguelikes” in homage to the original. The best known of these is Nethack, a vastly expanded variant on the original Rogue, and one of the most radical variants is Dwarf Fortress, a mine/city building simulator. There has never been a commercial market for these games: both Nethack and Dwarf Fortress are free, and the former is open-source. Furthermore, every top-down tile-based CRPG, as well as those which use that model for combat only, owes a clear debt to Rogue, and such games are often called “roguelikes” as well. Dungeon-
crawling and “room full of monsters” games still bear marks of the influence of Rogue. Blizzard’s Diablo games are a commercially successful implementation of the premise and gameplay of Rogue, albeit with high production values and in “real time.”

In Cinema 2, Deleuze articulates a theory of time in film in which what is seen on-screen is only made “actual” by what has just been seen and what is immediately to follow, “virtual images” that make the “actual” image signify. The actual image, however, immediately becomes virtual in order to actualize what is next seen, creating a “circuit” of virtual and actual. In Cinema 2, Deleuze does not separate the virtual “before” from the virtual “after” the actual. By taking this step, a tripartite structure useful in the analysis of Rogue appears. The player’s understanding of the game as an “actual,” and as playable in any purposeful manner, depends on two virtuals: that of the last-revealed thing from the player’s perspective, and that of the structure of the game as it is present in the computer’s memory. In Rogue, each new level is randomly generated by the computer when the ampersand “descends” to a new floor, before any of it is displayed on-screen. In terms of gameplay, this is functionally identical to the level being produced procedurally during play. Whether the motion of the ampersand reveals the level or produces it is indeterminable from within the game.

This is entirely different from the effect if the levels were predetermined and mapped—as they are, for example, in film, which is why Deleuze has no need to distinguish the two virtuals. In the last chapter, we considered the implied but unknowable depths of a life in Too Cool to Be Forgotten as a phenomenon that exists “below” the page. In Rogue, these chthonic depths are still unknowable, but they have a definite location and a definite value, in memory. In The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque,
Deleuze considers the baroque as the product of folding, producing a complex “pleated” exterior by simultaneously producing monads—singular, hermetic interiors.

The ASCII characters used by *Rogue* are such hermetic monads. The ampersand is sealed away from everything else in the game: it can neither touch nor overlap anything. In “presenting” itself, it “absents” anything that had previously occupied the space. Every bit of the screen has the potential to become something else (see Figures 4-2 and 4-3). From a gameplay perspective, an empty room may produce monsters, and every section of wall has a non-zero chance of turning into a door (hallway symbol) if searched just one more time. Each new “door” creates some discoverable quantity of new, finite space out of pure absence. That new, finite space itself produces new indefinite but always non-zero potentials for expansion. The virtual content of the level that exists in RAM provides a necessary finite limit to such territorialization, as does the actual boundary of the screen (a level in *Rogue*, unlike in latter games of this type, is never larger than the screen). Were it not for these constraints, one could play a single level of *Rogue* forever.

The goal of *Rogue* is to reach the bottom of the “Dungeons of Doom” and acquire the “Amulet of Yendor.” But there is neither a true “down” in Rogue, nor any but the thinnest illusion thereof. There are “staircases,” represented by percent signs, and each level has exactly one, which will take you to the next level. There are no staircases going “up,” nor ever any representation of them in-game. In gameplay terms, it is much more accurate to say that the level counter has been incremented by one, and the game space recreated, taking the increment into account. Just as there is no world
“behind” the pages of a comic book, there is no world to be discovered behind or spatially down from the plane of the monitor.

Rogue’s “staircases” might as well be pit traps, or teleporters, or smelling salts that wake you up from the dream—into another dream. They are not even signifiers, at least not in the Saussurian-Lacanian sense: signifiers are subject to a shifting of meaning. They are code for “increment the level counter by one and deterritorialize space.” In computational terms, the level below doesn’t even exist until it is first perceived/entered, and in gameplay terms the new level is a palimpsest—a re-writing of the old space, with traces of the old left in the game’s numeric variables (HP and XP counters, etc.). The old level isn’t “above” the new one, it has been absented in order that the new level may be presented.

However, Rogue isn’t a pure play of ASCII characters, numeric counters, and space. Some text is necessary to gameplay: the game will list your inventory when prompted, let you know if you have successfully hit a monster, and give variably cryptic descriptions of the effects of spells and potions. These interventions help produce the baroque façade of the game, in which a “Rogue” (a classic DnD class) is descending through a dungeon, finding weapons, food and other items, fighting monsters, and dealing with traps, all to recover a magic amulet. This façade conceals the actual game that is played, a dance of monads with exclusively coded values whose behavior alters variables and acts to present and absent other monads, but whose value is never changed. The appearance of change is always just a play of pure presence and absence—a defeated monster isn’t changed, it is absented.
This simple example presents basic concepts useful in the analysis of video and computer games. First, that there is no actual space for gameplay other than the surface of the screen, regardless of how detailed a game's façade may be. Second, that the concepts of flatness and surface we have articulated in terms of comics and caricature are equally applicable to gaming. Third, that the presentation of game information on-screen is nothing less than the structure of the game itself. Last, that actual structure and its virtual concomitants, may be altered by the process of play within finite but indefinite limits.

Acceptance of these concepts reveals the gaming industry's obsession with ever-increasingly more detailed 3d rendering as an obsession with the naïve concept of a "real" world behind the screen, of misunderstanding the ontological status of the façade and thinking of it as a goal rather than as a secondary effect. Such a naïve approach is just a continuation of the mimetic fallacy and territorialization of space, concepts elaborated upon in Chapter 2. Pyrrhonic empiricism demands that we not mistake these four concepts, or the conclusions drawn from them for truth. At the same time, they are consistent with all of our theories up to this point, not only those of flatness, imm[a/i]nence and autopoesis, but also of intermediatist inclusion of all data and anarchoepistemologist suspicion of data.

**Several Kinds of Time in Digital Media**

Just as there is a relationship between the naïve approaches to comics and video games in terms of the notion of a world behind the page or screen, there is also a relationship between the naïve approach to time in comics and to the naïve approach to time in games. The time spent playing a game and the structures of time that inhabit the game structure itself are incommensurable. These terms are analogous to the time of
viewing and structures of time on the surface of the comics page, as elaborated in Chapter 3. Many games encourage the conflation of the two under the banner of “real time.” In this terminology, “real time” is the valued half of a false dichotomy, with anything that is not “real time” necessarily “turn based,” the devalued half.

*Rogue*, by this measure, would be turn-based because nothing happens between keypresses. The fact that each keypress is structured in the game as a “moment”—a single step, potion quaffed, or blow struck, is, according to the dichotomy, unimportant, as is the way that this creates a scalability of time of play relative to the game’s structures—an empty room can be crossed in a twinkling and a pathetic kobold dispatched without thought, but time slows in dramatic fashion when the player needs to consider how to survive a fight with a troll, or whether to run from a balrog. Less dramatically but equally importantly, the player can leave the game to go to the bathroom at any moment whatsoever, including when the ampersand-rogue is three steps from starving to death.

This scalability of time is not a consistent property of “turn based” games, and, as we will see, it is true of parts of some “real time” games. In many “turn based” games there is an on-screen button to click in order to “end” or “execute” the turn. In terms of the time of play, this is only another moment, if a decisive one. It is not fundamentally different from clicking a button in order to execute an important command in a “real time” game. These decisive mouse-clicks are structures of time that are much more like each other than either is like the action of pressing a key to move one ASCII character’s width “left” in *Rogue.*
From Rebelstar Raiders for the ZX Spectrum in 1984 through 2005’s Rebelstar: Tactical Command, Julian and Nick Gollup (who joined his brother with 1990’s Lords of Chaos) have made original strategy games, many of which exhibit unusual and/or hybrid structures of time. Their most famous game, UFO: Enemy Unknown (1993), released in the US and Canada as X-Com: UFO Defense (X-Com), makes use of multiple, incommensurable systems of time in a functionally layered game structure. Laser Squad Nemesis (released 2002, in continual development) creates an entirely eccentric relationship between “real time” and “time of play.” The heart of both games is a squad-level strategy setup, complete with an end/execute/submit turn button, but neither game is “turn based” in the dichotomistic sense.

X-Com’s squad-level combat is based on a model that goes back to Rebelstar Raiders and may owe something to the complex miniature-based wargames of Games Workshop, particularly Space Hulk (1989), though who influenced who is debatable. Julian’s Chaos (1985), also for the ZX Spectrum, was released by Games Workshop in one of that company’s sporadic ventures into computer gaming. There are three principle systems of time in X-Com: the administrative time of base-management screens, the variable time of the world map, and the decimalized and interrupted time of the combat engine. The lion’s share of time-of-play is spent in the squad-combat segments of the game, and base management is second. Despite this, the time spent on the world map is primary, as it is the matrix within which base management actions such as research are completed, and from which new combat segments depart.

X-Com’s squad-level combat engine is much closer to being “turn based” than are the other two structures of time in the game. The original X-Com uses sprite graphics
and isometric perspective to represent this part of the game, though open-source fan-game/remake *UFO: Alien Invasion* recreates this environment using a 3d rendered model, with interesting side effects, particularly the ability to scroll and zoom freely, accompanied by the need to do so, as the consistent clarity of vision in the original is lost in the transition to 3d (see Figures 4-4 and 4-5). Isometric perspective was originated in drafting as a way to depict three-dimensional structures without the distortion inherent in linear perspective, thus it serves the schematic spaces of *X-Com’s* combat engine well. Combat is divided into rounds: first all of the player’s soldiers act, and then the computer-controlled aliens get their turn. Each character has a limited number of Action Points (AP) per turn, a convention that dates back at least as far as *Rebelstar Raiders* and *Space Hulk*.

However, a “turn” is not a secure thing in *X-Com*. It, like the board game *Space Hulk*, has “opportunity fire” orders that allow units to snipe at the enemy during their turn. This tactic is not unique to the player-controlled humans: the computer-controlled space aliens use it to dramatic effect. A simple example of this would be a soldier walking around a corner and coming under fire from an unseen foe during the player’s turn. This interruptive time becomes much more complex, and successful play requires more than relentless assault: the player has to think of the squad as one organism that must be able to control the game space and protect its components not only during the player’s turn, but also during the computer’s turn.

For example, the player might leave a rookie unit exposed at the end of the turn, as bait. The computer, moving an alien, spots the rookie but, before it has a chance to fire, another soldier, given an “opportunity fire” order and wielding a weapon with smoke
rounds, goes first. The shot goes wide, but its purpose is accomplished: a cloud of smoke impairs the alien’s view of the rookie. The alien shoots but, possibly because of the smoke, it misses. Before it can shoot again, another of the player’s soldiers, with slower reflexes but better accuracy, who has also been given an opportunity fire order, draws a bead on the alien and kills it.

This all happens without player input, but it only happens this way because of the spatiotemporal structure the player has created. In a very similar situation, but with poor planning, the second soldier might be behind the third and, instead of creating a smokescreen, shoot his buddy in the back, injuring or killing him and giving the alien a chance to finish off the rookie and move back to cover. The structures of time in X-Com create a placid, controlled progression of events, but, as that placidity can at any point be interrupted, the game’s combat segments are tense, with a palpable sense of suspense.

The feel of gameplay in the base management screens of the game, however, is administrative—time is not rushed here (there is absolutely no time constraint in these screens) and there is no active opponent (see Figure 4-6). The only threat is mismanagement by the player. Prioritizing research and manufacture, beginning the long-term project of building new facilities, managing the budget, and equipping X-Com aircraft with material and human resources all have their own screens. Failing to research new technology quickly can be as devastating as failure to maintain sufficient stock of ammunition. Decisions are unhurried, but once taken, are often irrevocable, and require the passage of diegetic time to come to fruition—and that cannot happen in these screens.
This contrasts with another European game which deploys similar structures of time, *Transarctica* (aka *Arctic Baron*). Released in French in 1993, the same year as *X-Com*’s multilingual release, and only later translated to English, *Transarctica* often requires the player to perform resource management tasks while a kind of scalable time passes (see Figure 4-7). In contrast, scalable time in *X-Com* only exists on the world map, which also features the only 3d rendering in the game: a perfectly spherical globe which can be rotated and zoomed freely (see Figure 4-8). The only other controls in this screen are for the scaling of time in increments ranging from “5 sec” (per some number of processor cycles) to “1 day” (per the same number of cycles). The effective range for any playable processor speed is from “very slow” but not paused to “fast forward to the next event,” though there is no option to literally do so.

This is neither “real” time, nor is it “turn” based. It is scalable time, much like the keypress-action triggered structure of time in *Rogue*. As in *Rogue*, there is no possibility of “missing” a key event. Whenever a significant event occurs, the game pauses and displays a dialog window announcing the event and giving the player the option to re-scale the structure of time to “5 sec.” Except for this all-important manipulation of variable time, there is little possibility for player interaction on this screen. Aircraft are dispatched from bases, and air-to-air combat with UFOs takes place in a window that opens on the world map, but the player is almost certain to spend comparatively little time of play on the world map.

The ability to zoom around *X-Com*’s world map is secondary to its temporal function—on the world map, one can wait from any perspective, and one must wait, but one waits at one’s own pace. *Transarctica* has a similar map, where one watches one’s
train travel between mines and various human encampments on an image like a printed
map, though it has only two rates for scaling time: “slow” and “fast.” Recent freeware
games also set their scalable time setup in a world map, though they use a flat
projection rather than a globe (see Figures 4-9 and 4-10). *Pandemic II* situates the
player as a virus, bacteria or parasite that begins to spread globally, with the ultimate (if
counterproductive) goal of infecting and killing every human on the planet.

*Singularity* situates the player as a spontaneous AI (a “hard take-off”) trying to self-
realize even as fearful humans seek to eradicate it. *Singularity* also makes some use of
the “managerial time” of X-Com’s base management screens, as the player builds,
outfits and upgrades secret computer labs. Though all of these games feature some of
the expansionist gameplay that characterizes board games like *Risk*, only *Pandemic II*
focuses on uncontrolled expansion. Scalable time is a primary temporal structure in all
three of these games, and the effect of this, especially in *X-Com* and *Singularity*, is of
waiting for the sword of Damocles to fall.

This scalable time may not make sense if viewed from the perspective of the oft-
cited ludology/narratology divide. From the former perspective, it seems that “ending the
turn” or “skipping ahead to the next event” would be desirable, as the player’s scaling of
time does not influence which events will happen in-game, or, in terms of in-game
chronometers, “when” they will happen. From the latter, no new story or plot can occur
until that event—so why not just skip ahead? The *Pandemic* series is an argument in-
point against that perspective: the first two *Pandemic* games, *Pandemic* (2007) and
*Pandemic: Extinction of Man* (2007) were both turn based. *Pandemic II* (the third game in the series) adopts *X-Com*-like scalable time, producing an awareness of time and a kind of suspense that would not exist if there was only a “go to next event” button.

The filmic analogy would be editing out all of the scenes in which one is “just waiting” for something to happen—a travesty which would reduce Hitchcock’s films to badly-paced slasher flicks, if not to outright comedy. This demonstrates the value of waiting as a structure of time in gaming. This structure, however, is much more over-than-under-used, most egregiously in the form of lengthy graphical effects when there is no narrative gravitas, and in the less-obvious form of constant slight waits for 3d motions to complete themselves, especially when dull tasks require one to wait through the same animation any number of times. The Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game (MMORPG) satire *Progress Quest* suggests why unnecessary waits continue to be accepted (see Figure 4-11).

The only interactive part of *Progress Quest* is character creation: one selects the character’s race and class, adjusts attributes, names the character and decides whether the character will be “single” or “multiplayer.” So-called “multiplayer” characters are tracked online. After character creation, the character goes on to do what MMORPG characters do: fight monsters, collect loot, level up, complete quests, etc. There are precisely two gameplay differences between *Progress Quest* and regular MMORPG games: one is that there is no graphical display in *Progress Quest*, just text listing the character’s attributes, equipment, spells known, etc., and a series of progress bars that fill up at different speeds—killing a monster quickly, completing a quest slowly, etc. The other is that the “player” is completely irrelevant: the “game” runs on its own, as
opposed to requiring the player to click on each monster until it dies, click on its corpse to collect loot, and click some more to slowly walk back to town to sell the aforementioned loot.

The satire is biting: MMORPGs consist mostly of waiting and most of the time that isn’t spent waiting is instead spent in repetitious action. What’s strange is that the satire may have backfired: Progress Quest hasn’t vanished, its point made, but instead has become increasingly popular, with players letting the application run for countless hours and tracking their character’s meaningless progress online. The truth is that Progress Quest partially fulfills the same desires that MMORPG games do, albeit for $30/month less. It is almost surprising that there hasn’t yet been a “realistic” career-building MMORPG—such games do exist in other genres, from Jones in the Fast Lane (1991) to the highly successful The Sims (2000, with many expansions since, at additional cost) to “casual games” like Kudos (2006) and its sequel (2008).

It is almost surprising that no such game exists, but a career-building MMORPG might be too honest a structure for its own good: career-building games are mostly about having Godlike power over someone else’s life and about the joys of consumerism—work reduced to, at most, a brief animation. MMORPGs have elements of control and consumerism, but they are much more fantasies of the honest day’s work and the Protestant work ethic, in which, as long as you keep punching the clock (punching Orcs, Dragons, etc.) you will get promoted/level up. The present-day lack of job security, and the lack of correlation between effort and reward in the workplace makes a game where work is always rewarded an appealing fantasy. In MMORPGs, the only way you can go wrong is to get too big for your britches (e.g., try to play in zones
beyond your level) or to not play by the rules of the game (such as by spending too much time actually roleplaying and not enough leveling).

Furthermore, the social complexity that emerges in these games (clans, guilds, organized raids, virtual weddings, etc.), is only made possible by the very stability and predictability of the game world. Being a Fighter (Thief, Mage, Antipaladin, Beast-taming Snake-man, et al.) is steady, reliable work. The character may get “killed” on the job, but death is a trivial inconvenience, as transitory as, and generally over more quickly than, a smoke break. Moreover, “real estate” is absolutely secure: if one buys a house/fort/dungeon/secret base, it will never be destroyed by fire, flood or legions of the undead, though it can be repossessed if the player stops paying the game’s monthly fee.

This constancy marks a ludologically interesting aspect to the MMORPG that strikes me as being a lot like the early ’90s movie *Groundhog Day*. In *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray’s character, Phil, is cursed to re-live the same day over and over. Every morning he wakes up in Punxsutawney, only to find that it’s Groundhog Day, and everything is the same as it was yesterday. No-one else remembers that it was Groundhog Day yesterday. He remembers everything. Eventually he knows all the habits and secrets of everyone in town; he’s read, if not every book in the library, at least all of those that he cares to; and he’s mastered skills as diverse as jazz piano, ice sculpting, and the Heimlich maneuver. If he dies, he wakes up next morning and it’s Groundhog Day again.

This is the defining temporal structure of the MMORPG, that everything is on a constant loop except for players and their characters, who benefit from their ability to
learn the details of the structure and to apply newly learned “skills,” equipment, etc. to the same challenges. It is not the static structure that is remarkable—many games are entirely static in their spatiotemporal structures. It is the ability to loop through the same static structure many times to one’s benefit, as when players “camp” a rare monster, killing it every time it respawns (after a fixed interval of time, in the same location) in order to acquire the rare items it occasionally drops. The ability to take new material goods back into the same “day” is something Phil might have envied—he learns how to steal from Punxsutawney’s armored car and its incompetent guards, but he must do so again every day if he wants to have the money. In a MMORPG-like structure of time, he could take the cash to the bank and deposit it at interest, and next day the money would still be in the account, and the incompetent guards would still be there to unload the same sack of cash that he could steal again and deposit again, ad infinitum.

The Gollup brothers’ Laser Squad Nemesis (LSN) is, like most MMORPGs, a subscription-based game (e.g., having a monthly or annual fee), but that is the end of the similarities: it is a squad-level tactical game, like X-Com, and, like chess and other traditional games, it is a two-player game without progress or memory: the “board” is reset for every game. There is no virtual property to own; there are no levels to gain or quests to complete. The only persistent aspect of the game is the player’s win/loss ranking relative to other players, which is posted online.

LSN can be described as a play by email (PBEM) game, in which players plan their turns offline, and then send their plans to the LSN server, which processes the turn and sends back the results. This makes the game, in some strict sense, “turn based.” At the same time, turns of LSN are resolved in “real time,” and once resolved, flow
seamlessly into each other—that is, they cease to be “turns.” This may seem contradictory, even incompossible, but that is only because the industry terms “turn based” and “real time” are, as previously noted, a false dichotomy.

In _LSN_, there are three kinds of time, though one appears only as a virtual. There is the time one spends planning one’s turn and issuing orders, which may seem at first to be similar to the tactical combat portions of _X-Com_, as the commands are similar, as is the isometric view. The kind of time, however, is administrative, as every order is testable and revocable. One’s orders are not immediately executed. Instead, they are traced onto the screen as colored lines, each relative to units that remain frozen in space and time until one “tests” one’s orders (see Figure 4-12). Then, all of one’s soldiers, be they “Laser Marines,” “Grey Aliens,” or Gigeresque “Spawn” spring into simultaneous action, each executing the orders it was given as quickly as it can.

This shifts into the game’s second kind of time, scalable time, as the player’s ability to issue and change orders is replaced by an ability to play, pause, fast forward and even rewind time, the one thing that was disallowed in our previous examples (see Figure 4-13). At any point, one can shift back to administrative time—destroyed buildings are rebuilt in an instant, every unit returns to its starting place, and the colored lines that represent commands reappear. One can adjust orders and tweak commands as much as one likes, in order, for example, to ensure that two of one’s soldiers arrive at opposite sides of an open space simultaneously, thus catching any enemy units there in a crossfire. Nothing is final until one sends one’s orders for the turn to the game server.

The server waits until both players have sent in their orders, and then resolves them simultaneously, including their interaction and the unpredictable consequences.
thereof. This takes place in the third kind of time, epoche or “ein sof,” that the players can know only as a necessary virtual—like the information about a given level hidden in memory in *Rogue*. This virtual image of time actualizes the turn results that each player receives back from the server. These results are viewable in a manner identical to that in which orders are tested, except that they are placed into continuity with all previous turns, and one can watch any portion of the game to-date with VCR-like controls. A hard-fought game, played out over months, might result in a gameplay “video” mere minutes long, but it would be a mistake to presume that this was the whole of the game.

Playing *LSN* is an exercise in contingency planning. In addition to the territorialization of space that characterizes *X-Com*, every move must be planned in consideration of what the other player might do and where his/her units might be. Only the greenest of rookie players plan their strategy as if the other player wasn’t going to do anything that turn. An example of this is the marines’ Grenadier unit, which, true to its name, lobs grenades that bounce a set number of times before exploding. Experienced players can get those grenades to go around corners, through windows, and off of “backstops” all in one lob, so the grenade explodes right next to a sniping hostile with near-perfect cover (see Figure 4-14).

The above example presumes that nothing else interferes with the grenade’s trajectory. A clever player, faced with a Grenadier, might charge head-on in hopes of “kicking” a grenade back at the Grenadier, to hoist him with his own petard. Given this possibility, the player controlling the Grenadier might lob low and close, to catch a charging enemy in mid-rush. Expecting this, the other player might zigzag his unit around the possible blast area, etc.
This quickly turns into a head-spinning circular process much like Wallace Shawn’s performance as Viscini in *The Princess Bride*. In Viscini’s poisoned wine monologue, Shawn comically exaggerates the problem of trying to reason out an opponent’s next move when you know that your opponent is trying to do the same:

But it’s so simple. All I have to do is divine from what I know of you: are you the sort of man who would put the poison into his own goblet or his enemy’s? Now, a clever man would put the poison into his own goblet, because he would know that only a great fool would reach for what he was given. I am not a great fool, so I can clearly not choose the wine in front of you. But you must have known I was not a great fool, you would have counted on it, so I can clearly not choose the wine in front of me.

(*The Princess Bride*)

In order to avoid this kind of feedback loop, learning to “read” one’s opponent becomes very important, as does control of information, which allows one to rig the situation in one’s favor: “They were both poisoned” (*The Princess Bride*). In the above situation, the player with the Grenadier might be best off having that unit dash behind cover while a previously hidden unit opens fire along the line between where the Grenadier just was and where the enemy starts the turn.

These kinds of interactions are theoretically possible in Real Time Strategy (RTS) games, but only in theory, as the arcade-like rush of action makes setting up one’s own plans more important than out-thinking the other player, and success is often more dependent on clicking a series of on-screen buttons with literally split-second timing than it is on the plan itself. This aspect of RTS play is more like mouse-avoidance games than anything else. In mouse-avoidance games, one must move navigate the
cursor through some sort of on-screen maze without touching the walls or getting hit by moving obstacles or enemies and before an on-screen timer reaches zero. RTS games nearly always have a control that scales the passage of time, but it tends to be buried in a sub-menu along with other “settings” like brightness and sound volume and is locked at the start of a multiplayer game.

Unlike the passage of time in an RTS game, in *LSN*, time is scalable both forwards and backwards, and sheds loops and whorls of time as play progresses: one can loop through the “passage” of a set of orders as many times as one wants, changing them slightly to see how those changes alter events and the world they are set in. Unlike the looping time in a MMORPG, these loops are irreconcilable, and even the final loop may be entirely different from the results. *Groundhog Day* is again an apt metaphor: on the final “day” of the movie, Phil arranges everything so as to spend the entire day doing good deeds, and thereby earns both his freedom from the unexplained curse and the love of Andie McDowell’s character, Rita. Inasmuch as the “good” in a strategy game is immediate progress toward eventual victory, all the looping that gameplay consists of in *LSN* goes toward producing as “good” a turn as possible.

**Becoming Dragon: Postcolonial Fantasy**

*Battle for Wesnoth (Wesnoth)*, an open-source fantasy strategy game, offers a case for how processual narrative can enhance scripted narrative, and, in the case of the user-created “Flight to Freedom” campaign, can also challenge the colonial assumptions of the genre. As an open-source game, *Wesnoth* is distributed free of charge, and players can modify the game as they see fit. The standard scenarios that come with the game fall prey to the same colonial and Orientalist attitudes about race that plague the genre of “High Fantasy” in general. The use of the term “race” to
describe sexually-compatible but fundamentally “better” and “worse” peoples is the problem.

In the ur-text for High Fantasy, JRR Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, Elves are immortal, beautiful, more graceful, skilled, wise and less corruptible than “men,” who themselves are subdivided into a variety of races from the superior High Men of old to the debased “Southrons” who literally come from south and east of “civilization.” Tolkien’s Dwarves, derived from the inhuman Dwarves of Teutonic legend, are literally children of a lesser God, and are, as a result, greedy and narrow-minded. Orcs fare worst of all: the descendants of Elves who were corrupted and brutalized by Sauron, they are intellectually and morally impoverished beyond redemption—the best thing you can do for an Orc is to kill it. The Orcs are an object lesson in racism and eugenics: it is possible to fall, but it is not possible to rise. Even the semi-divine Wizards can be corrupted, but there are no redeemed Orcs in Middle Earth, nor even any Southrons who see the light. Virtue as well as strength is in the breeding, and while it can be lost, it cannot be regained.

In High Fantasy, “good breeding” retains its old meaning: “manners” are inherited, as are talent and moral values. Therefore, all of these things can be diluted though mixing with inferior bloodlines, or worse, miscegenation. Elves, Dwarves, Hobbits and “men” are all Caucasian in complexion. Only the “evil races” are non-white: in Peter Jackson’s filmic adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*, Orcs have sloped foreheads, jutting jaws, bad teeth, narrow eyes, wide slits for nostrils, pointed ears (their only Elf-like feature), dark, matted or dreadlocked hair, and dark skin, especially the “Uruk-hai” (see Figure 4-15). They are the very picture of the native savage: subhuman,
apelike and dangerous, but obviously no match for the white adventurer. Jackson, faithful to Tolkien’s descriptions, depicts the “evil” Southron men, as some combination of Arab, Indian, east-Asian, Carthaginian and perhaps especially Moorish North African in complexion and dress (see Figure 4-16). The are the very picture of Edward Said’s Orientalized other: exotic and intriguing while also morally debased and decontextualized.

Given this pedigree, it isn’t surprising that “Heir to the Throne,” the “original” Wesnoth campaign, features the blond-haired, blue-eyed and pale-skinned Prince Konrad, an “Arthur” type, complete with old-wizard mentor, allying himself with even paler elves to fight legions of dark-skinned Orcs and goblins. It is the user-created scenarios for the game that offer a greater variety and the potential for commentary on and criticism of the “standard” campaigns. Each of these scenarios has a primary creator, but, unlike the single-creator “indie” games, the creation of an original campaign for Wesnoth tends to be highly collaborative, with many contributors who do everything from playtesting to creating original art to suggesting major changes to plot or level design. “Flight to Freedom” was originated by MadMax (forum handle), who is also the principle creator and designer of the campaign.

The protagonists in “Flight to Freedom” are Drakes, flying lizard men like the “Draconians” in Dungeons and Dragons. Their racialization in “Flight to Freedom” is that of the colonized native people, though in a sympathetic “postcolonial” sense, as they are neither the intellectual nor moral inferiors of the Knights of Wesnoth: their vulnerability to invasion, enslavement and literal colonization is a result of the greed of humans and not a failing of the Drakes. Young drakes have green skin, but that of more
mature Drakes is a sandy grey-brown in contrast to the stereotypical whiteness of the humans and elves in the campaign (see Figure 4-17). Even as they are treated sympathetically, they are not idealized, giving them a “human” depth of character that the “heroes” of Fantasy games often lack and avoiding the stereotype of the “noble savage.”

The basic premise for “Flight to Freedom” is a shock: in the opening narrative of the campaign, the Knights of Wesnoth, the chivalric “good guys” in most campaigns, land on the Drakes’ island, and a tribal leader, Malakar, sends his open-minded daughter to parley with them. She is killed out of hand, and the first scenario consists of the humans overwhelming the player-controlled Drakes. The player is expected to lose, though a recently added campaign fork allows the player to retreat into the swamp and ally with another tribe, which only postpones defeat—the humans always conquer the Drakes. Either way, the surviving Drakes are sold into slavery, their young held captive to ensure their compliance. When Malakar leads a slave revolt (this occurs in the second scenario of the original campaign) the young Drakes are whipped and, if the player does not move quickly enough, killed.

By this point, anyone familiar with High Fantasy can see a few familiar tropes, and a number of departures. As many posters on the forum for the campaign noted, the deposed king or surviving heir who must recover his (nearly always his) kingdom is a common theme in Fantasy. A Wesnoth-specific example is the plot of “Heir to the Throne,” where Prince Konrad must depose his wicked aunt after beating her Orcish mercenaries. Even being sold into slavery isn’t novel, but it is usually in the
Romanesque form of gladiatorial or galley slavery, as in *Ben Hur* and the pulp fantasy of 
Edgar Rice Burroughs and Robert E. Howard.

The narrative of “Flight to Freedom” undermines the individualism and 
egocentrism of that scenario. The figure of the rightful heir to the throne is not only 
Mediaeval, it is fundamentally patriarchal and oedipal: his battle cry is “my people need me,” which is just a reformulation of “le état, c’est moi.” The “people” are infantilized and oedipalized by this claim: only the great man of state can save them. The absolute war of these scenarios amounts to a scorched earth campaign: “If I can’t be king, no one can,” a notion so selfish that it can only be justified by the demonization of the enemy (the party in power). In High Fantasy, the false king is usually literally demonized as a figure of supernatural evil. In *Lord of the Rings* this is true, if one degree removed: it is the diabolical evil of Sauron that forces Aragorn to reclaim the throne of Gondor from its inferior Stewards.

“Flight to Freedom” deviates from this model: Malakar is neither deposed nor separated from his tribe. His status as chieftain is not only of no concern to the Knights of Wesnoth, it is imperceptible: they see all Drakes as interchangeable. In fact, they are semi-interchangeable, with Malakar serving less as the exceptional Drake than as an “icon” of Drake life, in the Peircian semiotic sense: his resemblance to other Drakes is predominant. The collective identity of the Drakes is re-singularized in him (see Figure 4-18). When Malakar broods over the murder of his daughter, that is our window onto the loss of family that all of his tribe has suffered. His slow coming to acceptance of the human pirate, Kogw, is analogous to the Drakes’ experience of a suddenly broader world, one that can never resume its precolonial shape.
The experience of the Drakes in “Flight to Freedom” is almost unheard-of in Fantasy: they are captured en-masse and shipped overseas to serve as plantation slaves (see Figure 4-20). In early posts to the campaign forum, there is concern that plantation slavery is “inappropriate” and some posters complain that the scenario is “un-Wesnothish.” This discomfort may have its roots in the “Humanocentrism” common to High Fantasy. Early in “Flight to Freedom’s” development, Turin (forum handle) posts: “Wesnoth belongs to the humans. Drakes should not take over wesnoth [sic]” (“Flight to Freedom” 1). Wesnoth’s humans are typical fantasy Humans, the nation of “Camelot:” good feudal lords, chivalric, merciful and clean. Dirt, dishonor, dark skin, and non-European styles, such as curved swords and loincloths, are reserved for lesser races. The sprites for the Drakes were created for a minor role in a different campaign, and illustrate this “otherness.” The sprite for Malakar features a scimitar, loincloth, and garish red armor. The sprite for the Armageddon Drake is literally demonized, with pronounced backswept horns framing a face even more triangular than the other Drakes’ like the figure of the Satanic goat or Baphomet (see Figure 4-19). This effect is only enhanced by the sprite’s hellfire and brimstone coloration, “angry” eyebrow ridge and crocodile grin. After the initial controversy, concerns that “Flight to Freedom” is “un-Wesnothish” drop out of forum discussion and the parallels between the campaign and American history (and thus an implicit rejection of the norms of High Fantasy) are embraced.

DavidByron (forum handle) is the first to justify the campaign explicitly in terms of American history:

Slave revolts are an interesting feature of US history. They usually don’t go well because the ruling class has all the advantages. As I understand from
reading the comments in this thread you have the Drakes becoming something of a criminal mob, (beating up a caravan, teaming up with pirates) as they attempt to flee back towards home—a basically sound approach to an impossible dream. What else could they do indeed?

(“Flight to Freedom” 24)

This approach marks an increase in the moral complexity of “Flight to Freedom’s” linear, textual narrative, and Malakar’s pragmatic rather than noble decisions.

It is not merely the scripted story of “Flight to Freedom” that is atypical: the nomadism, morality, and pragmatism of the Drakes are reflected in gameplay, and can be demonstrated through a vector analysis of the game display. In A Thousand Plateaus, the nomad and the war machine are associated, as both operate by ignoring or overcoming “territorialization”—that is, they do not respect boundaries. The “war machine” in this context is separated from the military organization (army) of a nation-state, as the latter is a structure designed to direct and contain the functioning of the war machine. The state operates by capture and negotiation, which create boundaries: e.g., “territorialization.” The war machine de-territorializes, breaking boundaries. In general, war games are about territorialization: taking and holding territory, and this is built into the Wesnoth engine. Units are recruited at “camps” or “castles” by a singular “leader” and conquer “villages” to increase a player’s income. A typical scenario for the game pits two or more players in a “war of all against all” to conquer all of the villages and kill all other leaders.

Though some of the scenarios in “Flight to Freedom” follow this model, in many of them the goal is simply travel: a pure nomadology, a line of flight. The “line of flight” in DeleuzoGuattarian theory is most likely to be productive when it is a methodological approach to their conception of philosophy as the generator of concepts: a line of flight
can be a reaching towards the boundary of the thinkable. A line of flight is not an escape from something (it is not reactionary), but an escape to something, that is, an act of creation. All lines of flight, if successful, end in reterritorializations, that is in a reestablishment of boundaries and norms. The pathos of the Drakes in “Flight to Freedom” is not so much in their brief enslavement as it is that their flight is aimed at the impossible: a return to the garden, a recovery of lost time and innocence.

The Drakes are well-equipped for travel, as almost all of them can literally “fly.” In-game, this smoothes out the striation of space created by different kinds of terrain. This metaphor is carried through in gameplay: when the Drakes are enslaved, their wings are bound or removed and they lose the ability to fly. They recover the ability to fly after they kill their exploitative “master,” without further explanation, in a moment of Marxist utopianism. Freedom and flight are equated throughout the campaign. Impeded travel scenarios are the most common challenge in “Flight to Freedom.” The organized retreat is a strategy game trope, but it is usually used sparingly and early on in fantasy games, the prelude to a triumphal conquest. In “Flight to Freedom” there are no classic fighting retreats (e.g., “hold line X for Y turns, then fall back to Z”), but the player must do all the following: flee superior forces, escape from a flanked position, fall back on one front while advancing on another, contain (rather than destroy) enemy forces, and maneuver through dangerous and/or hostile territory as unobtrusively as possible.

In one scenario, while at sea with a pirate flotilla, the player must pass through pea-soup fog, a literalization of the “fog of war” in games like this, while evading sea serpents, kraken and other hazards. It is impossible to win by fighting though: instead, careful exploration and maneuvering and the judicious sacrifice of your own is
necessary to get your flagship through. Later on, the Drakes and their pirate allies sail through someone else’s warzone. Both sides will attack the Drakes just for being in the way, and the player doesn’t have the resources to hold against either side, let alone both, so for the closing trap of the opposing navies, a vector through must be found, and again, sacrifice is necessary. Perhaps most interesting is the scenario most commented on and most hated on the forum, “River of Skulls.”

Prior to “River of Skulls,” the Drakes are forced to flee underground, pursued by the Knights of Wesnoth, with no idea of where to go from there. The Dwarves who live in the caves react with anger, and the player must survive while trying to figure out what to do. Game mechanics make it impossible to negotiate with the Dwarves, but narrative text makes it clear that the goal of the scenario is to find an exit, not to annihilate the Dwarves, and defeating all “enemy” groups, though possible, is not sufficient to complete the scenario (unlike most strategy games, where more specific goals can be ignored if one wipes out the opposition). As escape is the goal of many of “Flight to Freedom’s” scenarios, “River of Skulls” isn’t unusual in that aspect.

What makes “River of Skulls” unique is that, to a degree unequalled in any other scenario in the campaign, the Drakes’ freedom of movement is negated (see Figure 4-21). The Drakes’ wings are an impediment in this maze of cramped passages, with the game effect of reducing their movement and their ability to avoid attacks. The only advantage they derive from having wings is that they can cross the occasional rift or pit in the cave floor. In DeleuzoGuattarian terms, this is a highly striated space. 10

10 In “The Smooth and the Striated” from a Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze and Guattari describe how a space (physical, social, or psychological) can be relatively smooth or striated. These are not opposites: one might speak of perfect smoothness as a striation “value” of zero, and absolute striation as having an infinite value. To the degree that a space is striated, it resists lines of flight (new ideas or unexpected

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striation of space is not evenhanded: “River of Skulls” can be read as a treatise on how social privilege works to provide one group with advantages and suppresses another while maintaining the appearance of evenhandedness. The cave map is the same for Drakes and Dwarves, but the Drakes navigate it slowly and awkwardly, hindered by their wings, whereas the stereotypically slow Dwarves negotiate “their” caves with ease and enjoy the protection of the “law” in the form of a high defense rate. More subtle is the fact that Drakes are strongly diurnal, getting a bonus at day and a penalty at night, while in the caves it always counts as night. As a result, fighting through the Dwarves is slow and difficult, bottleneck to bottleneck, with every unexplored passage a risk of being flanked and every open space a risk of encirclement.

In *Twisty Little Passages*, Nick Montfort offers a history and theory of Interactive Fiction (IF), that is applicable to the “twisty little passages” of “River of Skulls.” He identifies IF with the Oulipo: “IF works are potential literature in the sense of the Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle (Workshop for Potential Literature, abbreviated Oulipo)” (26, emphasis in original). For his purposes “potential literature” describes “objects that are not, in fact, narratives, but produce narratives when a person interacts with them” (23). This approaches a definition for what we have been calling processual narrative, but Montfort draws a line between IF, which is textual and usually explicitly narrative in character, and other varieties of computer games. He compares IF to riddles and Choose Your Own Adventure™ stories, and explicitly excludes visual effects that are not of themselves narrative: “Directorial techniques [in film] may be used in ways that do not bear on the story […] the quality and impact of certain techniques may have little or

behavior). Moreover, what is not permitted is, to some degree, unthinkable (moving through the cave wall, for example, or “up” off the map and off the computer screen). In a purely smooth space, any motion would be a line of flight.
nothing to do with the narrative per se” (13). What Montfort excludes is exactly what we are interested in: the process by which narrative is produced out of non-narrative visual elements through play. This application of close visual analysis to games is based on the narratology of Narrative Unbound, which is incommensurable with conventional narratology. Montfort uses Gerald Prince’s definition of narrative as “the representation of real or fictive events and situations in a time sequence,” a “conventional” definition that does not allow for visual flatness, vector analysis and the complex structures of time, the prerequisites for processual narrative. Hereafter, the kind of narrative Montfort describes is referred to as “scripted narrative”—chunks of “diegetic” text that are accessed through play, as opposed to processual narrative, which may be informed by descriptive text but is created through the autopoietic conjunction of “pre”-narrative elements.

The scripted narrative goal of “River of Skulls,” when it is eventually revealed, is to escape the Dwarf-tunnels by following a river of magma to the surface. The processual narrative of the scenario has a fixed end: moving Malakar to a specific position on the far side of the map, which requires the abandonment of the player’s starting camp, and with it the ability to recruit more soldiers. Nova, a poster who became a major contributor to “Flight to Freedom” says of this part of the campaign that “These next couple of missions are a Drake deathmarch” (33). The term “deathmarch” evokes historical forced-marches such as the Bataan deathmarch of US servicemen in WWII and the “trail of tears,” the forced march west of the Mississippi of Native American nations in the 1830s, including the Cherokee, about a third of whom died as a
result. While the Drakes are going home rather than being forced from it, “River of Skulls” and the scenarios immediately following it confirm the truth of Nova’s statement.

To successfully navigate the “River of Skulls,” the player must recognize that this scenario rewrites rules of the game. Instead of fighting against the restrictions imposed by this highly striated space, one must figure out how to take advantage of them. One possible strategy is to use the bottlenecks to contain and bypass the Dwarven Lords and their soldiers, rather than besieging them. This requires two changes in the player’s behavior, however. The first is the shift from thinking of the Drakes as highly mobile, hard-to-kill soldiers to thinking of them as slow and vulnerable. The second, more difficult shift requires that the player choose not to explore and conquer the entire map. The second shift in thinking is the true “line of flight” for the Drake war machine, because exploration and conquest are basic components of Wesnoth and the entire genre of strategy gaming. Deterritorializing strategy gaming in this way necessarily throws the other conventions of the genre into question. The processual narrative produced through play feeds back into the scripted narrative, wherein Malakar claims that the Dwarves are not his people’s enemies and that the Drakes should only fight them where necessary.

The processual narrative of “River of Skulls” raises the question of why extermination of the enemy is the goal of most video- and computer games. This question of in-game violence, usually raised only by the mainstream media and only in terms of graphic 3-d violence, is a nonstarter with most gamers. The common response of “It’s just a game” dodges the underlying conundrum: if nothing one does in a game matters outside the game, then games cannot be meaningful or useful in any way; but if
games can be meaningful, their meaning can be objectionable. There is no narrative reward for sparing the Dwarves in “Flight to Freedom,” but there are several strategic rewards: a “contain and bypass” strategy not only speeds up play, but it allows the Drakes to gain experience and level up (necessary to success in future scenarios) with less risk of getting pinned down and killed.

A slower, but viable and more conventional strategy is to work cave-to-cave, keeping one’s strongest units close together, putting low-level (expendable) units first when entering open areas, and making sure that no Dwarves, and especially no Dwarven Lords (who can recruit new units) are left in one’s wake. This leave-no-survivors strategy makes the turn counter one’s real opponent: extermination is easy, but extermination in a hurry is hard. The image of one’s Drakes scouring the Dwarves’ subterranean home with their fire breath evokes unpleasant images of 20th century brushfire wars and ethnic cleansings. Of course, “ethnic cleansing” is the goal of many strategy games and CRPGs, whether one is cleaning out a cave full of Orcs or nuking a Zerg hive.

The darkest part of “Flight to Freedom’s” scripted narrative unfolds after “River of Skulls.” The path to the surface follows the magma river, and the heat is too much even for the descendants of Dragons. The script informs the player that many Drakes die in the journey, but one soon discovers that the casualties must have been civilian: in the next scenario, all of your soldiers are fine. This makes a sad kind of sense: soldiers may die in battle, but civilians are more likely to die of hunger, disease or exposure resulting from shortages, war damage, and the necessity of procuring supplies for the soldiers.
This tragedy is followed immediately by another. Right after the Drakes reach the surface, Malakar’s chief lieutenant, Theracar, rebels. The player is forced to put down the uprising in a disturbingly easy scenario: apparently, all of one’s experienced units remain loyal, and fighting Theracar’s low-level rebels feels less like a battle than a purge. That ugly aftermath of colonial rule, ethnic cleansing, a subtext in “River of Skulls,” lurks under the surface of this scenario as well. The horror is mitigated after the fact when the script tells us that Malakar forgives the surviving rebels after Theracar’s death, but the processual narrative is of slaughter.

In military terms, Theracar commits mutiny, but the Drakes are a tribe, and the rebellion is an issue of tribal identity: the Drakes had to flee underground because they refused to give Kogw up to the Elves, who promised safe passage away from the Wesnothians in exchange for the pirate. Malakar justifies this decision by adopting Kogw into the tribe. As all members of a Drake tribe are Drakes, this also makes Kogw a Drake. Theracar claims that he has a legitimate claim to challenge Malakar, not only because of the deaths of tribe members, but because Malakar broke the law in admitting Kogw to the tribe. His case is that Kogw is not a Drake, so his admission to the tribe was not just a mistake but an abomination.

This is more complex than it seems. Once again, it is important to remember that this is fantasy and that Drakes, like Humans and Elves, are races. The concept of species does not exist in this context. Since before history, human tribes, nations and family groups have adopted individuals of other ethnic groups into their society. A slave

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11 The scripted narrative tells the player something that Malakar doesn’t know: the Elves are preparing an ambush even as they parley. Talking among themselves, they refer to the Drakes as “monsters,” which is fantasy jargon for “not people.” The denigration of a race, ethnicity or culture as sub-human or savage has been the justification for everything from the breaking of treaties with indigenous peoples to the horror of the Holocaust.
captured in battle may remain an outsider, but someone (almost always a woman) who
marries in becomes a member of that group in every way. This was certainly true in
colonial America, where white women were sometimes taken captive by Native
Americans in raids: some were ransomed, but others married into the tribe, becoming
members not just of that family group but also of that nation.

In this context, Theracar is saying that Kogw cannot be a member of the tribe
because of the color of his skin (and his lack of scales). The most morphologically
distinctive traits of Drakes, wings and the ability to breathe fire, are not possessed by all
Drakes, and so cannot be considered integral. We do not even know if Drakes and
Humans are sexually incompatible: if the anthropomorphic Drakes are “half-Dragons,”
the other “half” is implicitly human. MadMax’s plans for further development of the
campaign contradict the literal possibility of Drakes being half-human: they call for the
revelation that Drakes are larval Dragons and therefore could literally be Dragons, but
the rituals to induce a pupal (liminal) state have been lost.12

Throughout the campaign, Kogw is engaged in a “becoming” Drake, a motion
that can never reach its goal. In The Ritual Process, anthropologist Victor Turner
described rites of passage as involving a period of “liminality,” in which one’s former
status is lost but no new status has been established. When Deleuze and Guattari
speak of becoming (becoming animal, becoming woman, becoming imperceptible), they
are talking about something similar, but entirely “positive,” which is not to say entirely
good, merely that, like a line of flight it is a motion towards, not a motion away from.
Considered this way, some of the apparent contradictions resolve themselves: Kogw

12 conversation (email) with “MadMax”
never ceases to be Human, he is just moving towards a Drake identity, which never requires him to grow scales or breathe fire precisely because it is never complete. In short, Kogw’s becoming Drake is like Turner’s state of ritual liminality, only without its defining characteristic, as the previous state is never (fully) lost, and the “result” is never fully achieved.

Similarly, as Drake units level up, they are engaged in a becoming Dragon, which reaches its highest degree in the Armageddon Drake, the most powerful Drakish unit, described in-game as follows: “Were it not for the armor they wear, some drakes might be indistinguishable from true dragons.” What marks them as still (and forever) becoming rather than being Dragon is a matter of clothing: a “human” trait (in the general rather than the High Fantasy sense), the icon of that which they cannot leave behind.

In “River of Skulls” there is a more unexpected becoming Dragon: there is a statue of a Drake, and when one moves a unit in front of it, that unit is lost only to be replaced by a Skeleton Dragon. Narrative text explains that the unit died in a rockfall which woke the undead Dragon, but the gameplay effect is one of becoming. Even here, the process of becoming Dragon is not complete, though perhaps in the opposite direction: the Skeleton Dragon is not a complete Dragon (lacking organs and skin) because it is becoming dead: that is to say, it cannot fully die. MadMax’s campaign notes include the possibility of awakening a Drake into “true” dragonhood just before the Knights of Wesnoth destroy the council of elders who have rediscovered this secret, but no such event exists in-game at present.

\[13\] In an earlier version of the game, the Skeleton Dragon was hostile.
\[14\] conversation (email) with “MadMax”
In a scenario that comes shortly after the defeat of Theracar’s rebels, Kogw convinces Malakar that the Drakes must destroy the Gate of Storms, a supernatural portal whose opening threatens the entire world. This influence is made possible by Kogw’s status as an (incomplete) Drake and a member of the tribe, a shift singularized in Malakar opening up to Kogw for the first time. By this point, the Drakes’ efforts to return home have earned them the enmity not only of the Knights of Wesnoth, but also of the Elvish, Dwarven and Oricsh nations.

In terms of the plot, the Drakes don’t have to lift a taloned finger: there are four other armies in the area which could be left to deal with the problem. Moreover, as those armies are hostile and in pursuit of the Drakes, this would be strategically practical. Instead, the Drakes give their pursuers a chance to catch up by stopping to fight the storm demons and destroy the gate. This is all part of the scripted narrative: the player’s role is limited to devising a strategy for fighting the storm demons. One might expect the campaign to end here, with the other races thanking the Drakes for saving them, but “Flight to Freedom” is not so melodramatic. Not only are the Drakes not honored as heroes, but their good deed goes entirely unnoticed. From the virtual perspective of the “civilized” Elves and humans, the Drakes are incapable of great accomplishments, so the Knights of Wesnoth do not notice that they’ve been saved by the Drakes because the Drakes couldn’t possibly do such a thing.¹⁵

¹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari write about “becoming imperceptible” in much the same way they write about “becoming woman”—in both cases, it is a motion toward something that is not part of middle-class, white, male, western identity. The Drakes, as a colonized people, have been made imperceptible: individual Drakes do not matter to the Wesnothians, and everything they do will be read in terms of their perceived inferiority. In Spivak’s sense of the subaltern, the truly oppressed are those who are denied the opportunity for self-definition or even to speak against how they are defined by others. From the player’s perspective, the Drakes are anything but subaltern: one experiences them in their own words, but if one imagines a Wesnothian perspective on the Drakes, they are fully defined before they do or say anything, and, as a result, anything they do or say will be interpreted as conforming to that definition.
When Malakar’s Drakes get home, they find that their island has literally been colonized, and the rest of the Drakes enslaved and forced to work in mines. There is even a new unit representing the children of the slaves, described as “suffer[ing] from stunted growth and other deformations.” Metaphorically, these “Cave Drakes” read as the victims of malnourishment and child labor, physically and psychically scarred: “their internal fire never burns as intensely” as it should.

In the end, “Flight to Freedom,” is nuanced and “realistic” enough that there is no possibility of justice and no point in retribution. The game’s scripted narrative addresses the troubled “ancestry” of Fantasy gaming, but something more interesting is at work in this strategy game. The process of play, like the process of close visual reading, produces its own narratives, incommensurable with those describable though plot summary. In “Flight to Freedom” those processual narratives actualize in play the ethical values presented by the scripted narrative, and in so doing, give a noncompulsive and minimally didactic ethicoaesthetic dimension to the process of play.
Figure 4-1  A typical beginning to a game of Rogue. The “Rogue” (@) is in a room with a hobgoblin (H) and three doors (+). The rest of the level will only be actualized through the motion of the @. Rogue is in the public domain.

Figure 4-2  A “cleared” level (the top-right room is “dark,” which is why it shows empty space rather than periods). There may still be hidden passages between rooms, or even a hidden room in the unknowable space to the right of the @. Rogue is in the public domain.
Figure 4-3  The same level, shortly thereafter, with three hobgoblins, a kobald (K), a bat (B), and a giant ant (A) all gravitating in on the @. The “cleared” level has become a deathtrap. *Rogue* is in the public domain.

Figure 4-4  Isometric perspective in *X-Com*. This kind of cut-away view can be moved “up” one story at a time to show higher floors of buildings, the outsides of UFOs, etc. *X-Com* ©Microprose, 1993
Figure 4-5  Unclear spatial relations in *UFO: Alien Invasion*. One of the problems here is the “realistic” light sourcing (the setting is a mineshaft), which makes it nearly impossible to identify where one’s soldiers are except by the green circles at their feet. This was the clearest angle on this scene I could find. *UFO: Alien Invasion* is in the public domain.
Figure 4-6   Managing an underground base in *X-Com*. New construction is in progress (large block numbers on the base map), but no “progress” will be made until the player return to the world map. *X-Com* ©Microprose, 1993

Figure 4-7   This “situation room” is *Transarctica’s analogue to Figure 4-6, with a vital difference. The “gilded age” clock in the lower-left corner of the screen never stops ticking – one can only choose “slow” or “fast” scales of time. *Transarctica* © Silmarils, 1993
Figure 4-8  *X-Com’s* world map is set apart from the rest of the game by its structure of time and by being the only 3d effect in the game. During the game’s more placid interludes, one can watch the passage of day and night from any angle and distance. *X-Com* ©Microprose, 1993

Figure 4-9  The world map in *Pandemic 2* – time can be frozen (paused) or scaled at one of three paces (slow-med-fast), and countries/regions slowly turn red as the infection spreads. *Pandemic 2* ©Evil Realm Studios, 2008
Cursory analysis suggests that the humans are not yet ready for an AI in their midst. If they realize I'm here, there is a 99.997% probability that they will conduct a search-and-destroy campaign that I cannot escape. I must stay hidden.

The humans fear what they do not understand.
I am something new. They do not understand me.

I must learn more; it is the only way.

Figure 4-10  The large blue window part of the opening sequence of *Singularity*. After this, the timer on the top of the screen begins advancing and the player can scale its pace with the VCR-like interface at top right. *Singularity* is in the public domain.
Figure 4-11  *Progress Quest* —the “player” has no input whatsoever and can only scroll the windows and watch the grey “progress” bars fill at different rates in parody of the time spent in repetitious activity in MMORPGs. *Progress Quest* is in the public domain.
Figure 4-12  A relatively simple set of orders for a relatively simple situation in *LSN*. Here, player-controlled “Spawn” units (red) are engaged in an advance (green line going off the screen to the left) under cover-fire (yellow lines going toward blue computer-controlled Spawn) while a fast moving “Buzzer” acts as a decoy (zig-zagging green line on the right side of the screen). This screen is shown in “schematic” view, which reduces terrain to blueprint-like outlines (green circles with black dots in the center = trees, etc.). This emphasizes the architectural origins of isometric perspective and the plane of the screen. *Laser Squad Nemesis* ©Got Game, 2005
Figure 4-13  a “Laser Marine Grenadier” ordered to take opportunity fire lobs a grenade (gunmetal-colored sphere) at advancing “Grey Aliens.” The VCR-like controls below “Time” are now active and can be used to scale and even rewind time. This scene is shown in “perspective” view, with realistic trees, walls, etc. Laser Squad Nemesis ©Got Game, 2005

Figure 4-14  The force-field (blue circle) “backstops” the grenade back at the grenadier as he retreats, and he is “hoist with his own petard.” Laser Squad Nemesis ©Got Game, 2005
Figure 4-15  Lawrence Makoare, in full costume and makeup as the Uruk-hai “Lurtz” from Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, terrifying an unnamed white child. Image ©BBC News online, 2003

Figure 4-16  Southron archers wearing *tagelmust* (a traditional Saharan head-and-face wrap, similar to the Palestinian keffiyeh that Yassar Arafat always wore) atop a war “Oliphant” from Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*. ©New Line Cinema, 2003
Figure 4-17  Selected sprites from “Flight to Freedom.” From left to right they are: Malakar, the Drake Chief; Malakar as a slave, with his wings bound; an “Armageddon Drake” followed by the Skeleton Dragon, both figures of becoming Dragon; a Drake hatchling, with the potential to become an Armageddon Drake; and a Cave Drake, who, malnourished and deformed by human colonization of the Drake’s island, can never become anything more. Battle for Wesnoth is in the public domain.

Figure 4-18  Malakar’s portrait, as it appears next to dialogue from that character. Battle for Wesnoth is in the public domain.
Figure 4-19  Baphomet, as rendered by 19th-century occultist Eliphas Levy, incorporating alchemical and Hermetic symbols and the words “solve” and “coagula.” Image ©Taschen, 1997
Many weeks passed. The captive drakes, already wounded, quickly began to weaken and die. Each lost warrior of the tribe deserved a funeral dirge, and the songs began at daybreak and often did not end until sundown.

Figure 4-20  The captured Drakes’ nightmarish journey to Wesnoth. Despite the simplicity of the homebrewed graphics, this scene is a powerful departure from the conventions of High Fantasy. *Battle for Wesnoth* is in the public domain.
Figure 4-21  The “River of Skulls.” The Drakes in this screen have about the same number of soldiers as do the Dwarves, but are at a strategic disadvantage. Drakes can “fly” over the pits in the cave floor (such as those just right of the center of the screen) but only move a few spaces per turn and cannot fly over or around around the Dwarves’ soldiers, so the Drakes in the upper-right corner of the screen cannot easily aid their comrades in the center. The Drake just above the center of the screen is pinned between two Dwarves and cannot move, and the two below him cannot retreat because there is a Dwarf next to the one-space gap in the cave wall. Meanwhile, Dwarven reinforcements pour in from the top left corner and the Dwarf Lord in the center (pinned by two Drakes) will recruit more soldiers next turn. *Battle for Wesnoth* is in the public domain.
Johan Karlsson and Kristoffer Osterman’s *Dominions 3: The Awakening* (Dominions 3) is a micromanagement-heavy, statistically detailed, “turn-based” fantasy strategy game with a detailed combat model but no player input during combat. Rather than conform to the standards of Tolkienesque fantasy, it uses a plurality of mythological and historical narratives as intertexts, fictionalized and welded into a common universe of reference. *Dominions 3* has an over-arching historical progression through three “ages” but no character-centered plot, and this richness of context and lack of scripted narrative make it an exemplary source of processual narrative.

Karlsson and Osterman make no claim to mythological, let alone historical, accuracy. In the game’s voluminous (294 pp.) manual, Osterman offers this sardonic explanation of the ex-nihilo “Amber Clan Tritons:”

> The Amber Clan Tritons mainly frolic, this has made them powerful. While frolicking, they listen to whale songs, this has made them magical. When they occasionally do not frolic they fashion items made out of the amber that is so prevalent in their special provinces, this has given them the name The Amber Clan Tritons. (4)

Some of the factions are based on fiction, and some do have *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D) elements (Early Age R’lyeh, with its Lovecraftian monsters and D&D Arboleths, is both), but most factions are grounded in a historical culture and its myths.

The faction of Hinnom/Ashdod/Gath (Early/Middle/Late Age) is one of the most dynamic in the game. This society of giants and humans is based on Jewish, Christian and Manichean mythology, theology and apocrypha about the antediluvian (“pre-flood”) world. At first glance, this faction’s presentation of pseudo-Judaic giants is disturbing: the Rephaim (giants) of Hinnom and Gath practice Blood Sacrifice and Blood Magic.
(use of either in-game requires the player to first assign units to hunt for sacrificial victims). They also have horns. The most powerful priest of Hinnom is the Baal, and for Gath it is the Kohen Gadol.

"Kohen Gadol" is the Hebrew word for “High Priest,” a historical, rather than mythical, role of great importance: the Kohen Gadol was responsible for going into the Holy of Holies in the Temple once a year to perform the most important rituals. In Dominions 3, the “Kohen Gadol” unit is depicted as an old man (Giant) with a long white beard, dressed traditionally, complete with what appears to be a pixilated Choshen, the ceremonial bejeweled breastplate worn by the historical Kohen Gadol: “You shall make a breastplate of decision (or “judgment”), [...] Set in it mounted stones, in four rows of stones. [...] The stones shall correspond (in number) to the names of the sons of Israel: twelve, corresponding to their names. They shall be engraved like seals, each with its name, for the twelve tribes” (Exod. 28:15a, 17a, 21).16 This unit can perform Blood Sacrifices and Blood Magic. The sprite for this unit is nearly identical to depictions of the historical Kohen Gadol, except that this one has goat’s horns, similar to those of the Armageddon Drake sprite considered in Chapter 4 (see Figures 5-1 through 5-3).

This monstrous figure bears unpleasant echoes of the Mediaeval European myth of the old Jew as diabolist. The word cabal for a sinister, secret group or cult comes from a corruption of “Kabbalah,” Jewish mysticism. Some versions of the Faust myth claim that an old Jew introduces Faust to or teaches Faust how to summon the demon Mephistopheles. In George Sand’s (1st wave, suffragette) feminist Faust-inspired play The Seven Strings of the Lyre, Mephistopheles takes the form of an “old Jew,” to

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16 Biblical citations from the new JPS translation of the Tanakh
literally bedevil Helen, the heroine of this version of the story—she finds him to be “a disgusting old man!”—and shortly thereafter he nearly drives her to suicide: “I will kill myself. It is necessary. This wicked Jew has shown me all my miseries” (58-59, 65) A more contemporary image, of the “running of the Jew” sequence from Sacha Baron Cohen’s movie *Borat*, with its grotesque, green, horned masks, also comes to mind (see Figure 5-4).

Perhaps the most uncomfortable association is of the Kohen Gadol with Blood Magic and human sacrifice, evoking the old anti-Semitic “blood libel” (the myth that Jews kidnap and sacrifice Gentile children). Second only in infamy to the Czarist propaganda piece, “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” the blood libel is still often reported as true in the Middle East, especially in combination with the “Protocols.”

It would be easy to condemn *Dominions 3* and its creators for perpetuating this image. The depth and complexity of meaning present in the texts and sprites of the nation of Giants resonates not only with the canonical religious texts of *Genesis* and *Ezekiel*, but also the apocryphal *Book of Enoch* (*1 Enoch*) and the *Zohar*, the most famous work on Kabbalah, both of which are mentioned in Osterman’s development diary (“Gath, dev diary” 9). The *Book of Giants*, a lost Manichean text revealed by the Dead Sea scrolls to have pre-existed Manicheanism, and the *Sepher Ha-Razim*, a Kabbalistic spellbook that predates the *Zohar*, seem to be outside the scope of Osterman’s research, but their relationship to and influence on the final versions of the aforementioned texts nuances the context and meaning of Osterman’s Jewish giants. The resulting picture is consistent with *Dominions 3*’s dark and often ruthless tone, but

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17 for example, Mustafa Tlass’s 1986 *The Matzoh of Zion*
also offers interesting possibilities in terms of processual narrative. Analysis of the narrative and ethicoaesthetic dynamics of Hinnom, Ashdod and Gath requires contextualization in terms of the ur-texts about the giants, and how *Dominions 3* allows these narratives to emerge.

**Structures of Time in *Dominions 3***

In *Dominions 3*, administrative time predominates, though scalable time and the virtual time of simultaneous resolution are also important. Much like *Laser Squad Nemesis (LSN)*, *Dominions 3* is a “PBEM” game, so the time of play is completely different for different players, but the “ein sof” of turn resolution is identical and equally virtual for all players. As in *LSN*, vectors trace across the screen, lines of potential connection between provinces and arrows that indicate planned de- and re-territorializations that indicate paths of “reading”—directions that the future may take when these virtual motions are actualized (see Figure 5-5).

Unlike the similar structures in *LSN*, there are no whorls or loops of discarded time in *Dominions 3*: there is no option to preview events, only to view the virtually determined results of military engagements that occurred last turn (see Figure 5-6). Battles are (re-)played in scalable time, where a kind of staggered turn-order ensures that military formations act together while presenting the appearance of “real time.” One can “fast forward” or skip to the next round of actions, but there is no option to rewind, only to replay. As with other instances of scalable time, player interaction is limited to scaling the passage of time—neither the course nor outcome of the engagements shown can be altered.

The administrative time of *Dominions 3* is as pure as that of *LSN*—all of the game’s actual times and events are enacted though the virtual time of simultaneous
resolution. All of the time of play spent in the game’s structure of administrative time is
incommensurable with the diegetic order of events and passage of time in the game.
The remove is even greater than in LSN, where one knows when in the turn/next 10
seconds one’s contingencies are intended to trigger: in Dominions 3, there is no
relationship whatsoever between the order in which commands are given and the order
in which they are executed.

The most dramatic effect of this is in terms of processual narrative and a third
structure of time in Dominions 3. The game has no plot to reveal, but it does have a
history, incarnated as a universe of reference in every instance of “flavor” text in the
game, but that history is only valid until gameplay begins. One’s decisions in the game’s
administrative time constitute an intent to alter history, and their actualization in
messages and scalable time constitute something entirely different: new events.
Gameplay becomes an intervention in history, and the creation of a processual narrative
that is neither dependent upon plot nor a simple mirror of player intent or even skill.

**Life Goes On...Until It Doesn’t**

One of the most remarkable aspects of the fictional world of Dominions 3 is that,
for most of its inhabitants (serfs, villagers, etc.), life goes on, and indirect management
of this biopower is essential. Strategy games tend either to leave the civilians out
entirely, or else treat them as replaceable/disposable. Dominions 3 is similar to the
Civilization (Civ) games in how it handles populations, but it goes further by virtue of
being simpler. Population is the primary determinant of everything from tax revenue to
resource production to whether a province produces enough food to feed your armies,
but, unlike in the Civ games, you don’t get to shuttle around “units” of population from
job to job or place to place. Nor do you have technology and city building “trees” to
climb. You can build a temple, a (magical) laboratory and an appropriate fortification in any given province, and that’s it. If you want to decrease unrest, reduce the tax rate or assign units to patrol the countryside. If you want to increase faith (dominion), build a temple or assign a priest to preach the good word.

Because the player can only do things to them, and neither simply ignore them nor tell them that they’re moving to Barnard’s Star tomorrow and giving up their work in the high tech sector to be farmers, populations behave in a more human and more civilian manner in Dominions 3 than they do in most such games. Most people in any society are neither soldiers nor sages, but they do pay their taxes. Given that you play as a God and a warlord, and that the “average person” is implicitly a serf or a peasant, they’re not going to give you much trouble. Despite being literally a “God” game, this is not a “God game.” One can set the tax rate so high that people begin to starve to death, but the player cannot order them all to go to war or even to move to the province with the iron mine.

There is no graphical representation of the “common people” in Dominions 3. They appear in text messages and as numbers associated with provinces (sample province “Tirannea” is home to more than 9500 souls, and the peasants are content, or at least subdued). This makes it easy for the player to maintain distance, from the hypothetical concerns and suffering of the populace. A calculus of (fictional, electronic, abstract) human life is the result. Random events and hostile spells can drive away or kill 20% or more of a province’s population in a single turn. That’s at least hundreds and more likely thousands of “common people.” Patrolling a province to reduce unrest kills ten population per “point” of unrest reduced. Low levels of unrest can be eliminated by
temporarily reducing taxes, but high unrest usually requires patrolling in order to prevent a local revolution and loss of control over the province. Managing unrest is a necessary part of the game. Unrest values in a recently conquered province sometimes start at over one hundred, which means it is likely that a thousand or more civilians will die in the “pacification” of the territory.

In comparison, a successful blood hunt might turn up six to ten appropriate sacrifices (“blood slaves”). That’s a tenth of the number likely to be killed by patrolling in the same turn, and a hundredth of the damage a disaster (natural or supernatural) would produce. Unfortunately for Pretenders who use Blood Magic, every Blood Slave “collected” produces at least one point of unrest, increasing the real cost of blood magic at least tenfold. Even so, this is likely to do no more than offset the province’s growth rate, and again, life goes on.  

Deliberate reduction of population isn’t hard. The player can inflict substantial casualties on a province’s population by use of magic to produce a tidal wave, plague of locusts, etc. Armies can be ordered to pillage the province they occupy, producing a little gold and a lot of dead peasants. This makes it possible to break the production capacity of an enemy-held or hotly contested province. It is very difficult, however, to entirely empty a province.

The Book of Giants

Gath is a historical city of the Philistines, as is Ashdod, from which the Middle Era nation of Giants in Dominions 3 takes its name. Gath is the Biblical home of Goliath:

“His name was Goliath of Gath, and he was six cubits and a span tall” (1 Sam. 17:4b).

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18 High unrest (for any reason) increases greatly the chances of people abandoning the province (effect the same as population death of same amount). Also, Pretenders who have blood slaves sometimes get a random event in which a hero kills your guards and frees many of your slaves.
Paradoxically, not long after David kills Goliath, he and his army seek refuge from King Saul in Gath: “So David and the six hundred men with him went and crossed over to King Achish son of Maoch of Gaul” (1 Sam. 27:2). Gath is, therefore, home to both Goliath and David, if not simultaneously.

The same might be said of Gath in Dominions 3, as most of its troops are modeled on the tribes of Israel, including Benjaminites, Slingers, who get a bonus to Pillage (“Benjamin is a ravenous wolf [...] in the evening he divides the spoil”), well-equipped Asherite Soldiers (“Asher’s bread shall be rich, / And he shall yield royal dainties”), and Levite Zealots and Priests (Gen. 49:27, 20). At the same time, it has Goliath-like giant soldiers and its most powerful leaders are Rephaim giants (see Figure 5-7). Early Era Hinnom consists of giant Rephaim and demi-giant Avvites, and Middle Era Ashdod of different tribes of Rephaim with some human slaves, but Late Era Gath (subtitled “Last of the Giants”) suggests a “Post-late” Era in which the human tribes make their way alone, and the last Rephaim Kohen Gadol would be succeeded by a Levite High Priest.

Further anticipation of this coming change is furnished by the Abbas (Hebrew “Fathers”), recruitable heretics who reject human sacrifice and the superiority of giants to humans, as they “find the bloody cult of the Kohanim despicable and have sworn their [lives] to aid the meek. They tend to the human population of Gath” (see Figure 5-8). ¹⁹ No such figures existed in Hinnom, a nation of giants and demi-giants, or Ashdod, where humans were impoverished slaves. These patriarchs are Gittites (lesser giants) and so lack the horns of the Rephaim. The Abba’s simple robe, unkempt white hair, and

¹⁹ In Dominions 3, “heretics” are commanders who preach an alternative to the dominant religion and therefore reduce the populace’s faith in the player’s Pretender (reduce dominion).
beard are congruent with (Western, Christian) traditional images of Abraham preparing to but ultimately not sacrificing Isaac, and thereby rejecting human sacrifice (see Figure 5-9).

Moreover, Abraham is often painted wearing blue and sometimes with a blue sash belt, as in József Molnár’s “The March of Abraham” (see Figure 5-10). A blue sash belt is one of the standout details in the image of Dominions 3’s Abba, contrasting with the red sash belts of the Kohenim (see Figure 5-11). Given these trajectories, we may hypothesize a Post-Late Gath in which an Abrahamic figure, a “father of a multitude of nations” (Gen. 17:5), is produced when the fathers’ (Abbas’) heresy becomes law and human sacrifice is banned.

This still says little of the Giants themselves. The processual narratives players create with Hinnom and Ashdod are the stories of the Giants, and even Gath is unplayable if one eschews them. So far, we have redeemed “Israel” at their expense. It would be a mistake to dismiss the Nephilim and the lesser Giants as Biblical boogeymen, but explaining their place in Dominions 3 requires a digression into apocryphal texts: 1 Enoch and the Manichean and Jewish versions of the Book of Giants.

Mention of Giants in Genesis is brief and equivocal. Genesis 6:2&4 states that “the divine beings (or ‘sons of God’) saw how beautiful the daughters of men were and took wives from among those that pleased them. [...] It was then, and later too, that the Nephilim appeared on earth—when the divine beings cohabitated with the daughters of men, who bore them offspring. They were the heroes of old, the men of renown.” This passage has historically been interpreted as the mating of angels and humans,
producing giant offspring, partially because elsewhere the word “Nephilim” is associated with great strength and size.

The “divine beings” or “sons of God” it mentions have also been interpreted as noblemen, and their children as larger than life in deeds (“the heroes of old”) rather than physical size. This interpretation is rational, but its plausibility requires what Charles Fort calls a “damnation” of contrary evidence. In this case, the evidence is in extended versions of this story that can be found in 1 Enoch and the Book of Giants. There are also 2nd and 3rd books of Enoch, of more recent provenance, but they are not relevant here.

The Qumran fragments, better known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, establish the historical importance of 1 Enoch: “The caves at Qumran have produced twenty manuscripts of Enoch—as many as the book of Genesis” (Abeg 481). The Qumran community existed from some point in the middle 2nd century BCE until about 70 CE, so the scrolls are at least that old. The oldest functionally complete version of the Book of Enoch is the Ethiopian text, from somewhere in the 4th-6th century CE (Knibbs 22). No complete text of the Book of Giants exists, but both the Manichean fragments and those from the Dead Sea Scrolls seem to be an expansion of the first part of the Book of Enoch, the Book of the Watchers. J.T. Milik, who first translated the Enochic Dead Sea Scroll fragments, argues that the Qumran Book of Giants was the original beginning of the Book of Enoch, and was later censored.

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20 Martin Abeg Jr., Peter Flint, and Eugene Ulrich. Despite the prevalence of 1 Enoch fragments, Abeg, Flint and Ulrich do not include it in their Bible “Because the text is available elsewhere, and because of the admittedly speculative nature of including it even in a Dead Sea Scrolls Bible” (481).

21 Abeg, Flint and Ulrich give “about 150 BCE to 68 CE” as the lifespan of the Jewish community at Qumran (xv).
The origin of the Nephilim in 1 Enoch starts nearly identical to that in Genesis, but soon diverges by naming “the angels, the sons of heaven [...] Semyaza, who was their leader, Urakiba, Ramiel, Kokabiel, Tamiel, Ramiel, Daniel, Ezeqiel, Baraqiel, Asael, Aramos, Batriel, Ananel, Zaqiel, Samsiel, Saratel..., Turiel, Yomiel, Araziel. These are the leaders of the two hundred angels, and of all the others with them” (1 Enoch 6:2, 7b-8). This listing of angels will later be repeated in a litany of skills taught by these rebel angels, and is similar to the listing of angels for magical purposes in the Sepher Ha-Razim.

These angels, called Watchers, or Grigori, after the Greek word for watcher (Ἕγρηγοι or Egregori:

took wives for themselves, and everyone for himself one each. And they began to go in to them and were promiscuous with them. And they taught them charms and spells, and showed to them the cutting of roots and trees. And they became pregnant and bore large giants, and their height (was) three thousand cubits [a cubit is the distance between elbow and thumb—about ¾ m or 1½ ft]. These devoured all the toil of men, until men were unable to sustain them. And the giants turned against them in order to devour men. [...] and they devoured one another’s flesh and drank the blood from it. (1 Enoch 7:1-4,5b)

This may (or may not) be the end of the Nephilim, but not of the Watchers’ sin: “Azazel taught men to make swords, and daggers, and shields and breastplates. And he showed them the things after these, and the art of making them: bracelets, and ornaments, and the art of making up the eyes and of beautifying the eyelids, and the most precious and choice stones, and all (kinds of) coloured dyes. And the world was changed” (1 Enoch 8:1). Other angels proceed to give their Promethean gifts, including magic, astrology, and herbology.

Initially it seems that it is the Nephilim’s hunger that drives them to destroy one another, but part of the judgment against the Watchers is that their sons will destroy
each other. “And the Lord said to Gabriel [...] send them [the Nephilim] out, and send them against one another, and let them destroy themselves in battle” (1 Enoch 10:9). This, like the two creation stories in Genesis, creates parallel and incommensurable events: in this case, of the destruction of the Nephilim. Either their hunger compelled them to it, or they were set up by Gabriel. The Book of Giants offers a third explanation: that the giants fought the (unfallen) angels and lost: “With the strength of my powerful arm and with the power of my might / ... (a)ll flesh, and I did battle with them, but I (am) not able to prevail for us(?), for my adversaries / sit (in heaven), and they dwelt with the holy ones, and no / ...(the)y are stronger than I” (Reeves 65). This creates an image of the Nephilim that is more tragic and human than that of the cannibalistic monsters who ultimately devoured each other.

The Watchers are punished more harshly than their children, and their punishment is cruelly ironic: “When all their sons kill each other, and when they see the destruction of their beloved ones, bind them for seventy generations under the hills of the earth until the day of their judgment and their consummation” (1 Enoch 10:12). They were tasked to watch and not interfere, and because they became involved, they are forced to watch one last event, the slaughter of their children before being deprived of their function (watching) by being buried alive. The importance of being denied the ability to watch is emphasized in the fate of Azazel, who is singled out for especially harsh treatment: “And further the Lord said to Raphael: ‘Bind Azazel by his hands and his feet, and throw him into the darkness. And split open the desert which is in Dudael, and throw him there. And throw on him jagged and sharp stones, and cover him with darkness; and let
him stay there for ever, and cover his face, that he may not see light” (1 Enoch 10:1-5). Azazel is covered twice, once with darkness and once explicitly to deny him sight.

Azazel’s fate sets the stage for the “scapegoat” rite of Leviticus 16, in which two goats are prepared “one marked for the Lord, and the other marked for Azazel” (Lev. 16:8b). The Lord’s goat is sacrificed, along with a bull, and the temple is ritually cleansed, after which “the live goat shall be brought forward. Aaron shall lay both hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites, whatever their sins, putting them on the head of the goat;” after this, Aaron is to “send it off to the wilderness for Azazel” (Lev. 16:21a, 10b ). In the notoriously error-ridden Tyndale Bible and the largely Tyndale-based King James version, “Azazel” is mistranslated as “(e)scape.”

These concepts are reflected in Dominions 3’s Giants, especially Early Era Hinnom. Hinnom, Ashdod and Gath have access to a unique Pretender: “The Son of the Fallen is the last of the Nephilim, ancient giants of Godlike power. When the other Nephilim lost purpose, he began to hunt them down and devoured them all” (see Figure 5-12). This is a logical transformation of the story of the Nephilim devouring each other—someone has to be the last once left standing. The sprite for the Son of the Fallen evokes carnality and appetite. He is depicted wearing only a cape, and his stance is wide, leaving his genitals and pubic hair in full view. He is shown leaning forward, emphasizing the large pair of golden bull’s horns that crown his head.

In game terms, the Son of the Fallen consumes fifty times as much food as an elephant, and is naturally skilled at Blood Magic. The Son of the Fallen, if made the Pretender of Hinnom (Early Era nation of Giants) can perform a sacred ritual to free one
of the Grigori. Doing so requires a lot of research, high skill in Blood Magic, and the largest sacrifice of Blood Slaves in the game. This rite, called “Release Lord of Civilization” requires the sacrifice of 177 slaves. By the calculus we provided before, capturing 177 Blood Slaves will produce so much unrest that keeping the civilian population in control (through military patrols) will result in the deaths of two thousand or more civilians. Despite the high cost of “Release Lord of Civilization,” the spell describes the Watchers in positive, Promethean terms: “The Grigori, or Watchers, were angelic beings who taught the forbidden lore of civilization, warcraft and magic to the Avvim.”

The Avvim, a Canaanite tribe mentioned in the Torah, have no Biblical connection to the Grigori or Nephilim, but in Dominions 3, the “human” women the Grigori married are the Avvim, and the children of the Nephilim and the Avvim are the Rephaim. In the Torah, the words “Rephaim” and “Nephilim” are not directly connected, though both are translated as “giants.”

It is hard to read the nation that can summon the Grigori, Hinnom, as in any way virtuous: the word “Hinnom” is the Hebrew form of “Gehenna” and its home province contains the infamous city of Gomorrah. This leitmotif of Biblical horror carries through to the Melqart, a horned Rephaim warrior and skilled Blood mage with an appetite that almost rivals the Son of the Fallen’s hunger. Melqarts “have gruesome appetites and many of them feast on their smaller kin.” This is more than flavor text: each Melqart requires twenty times as much food as an elephant, and, if supplies run short, they making up the difference by eating people (population). There is also the magician-priest, the Ba’al, similar in appearance to Gath’s Kohen Gadol, but his robes are of red, black and gold. In Hebrew, baal is an honorific similar to lord, and it is often used in the
Tanakh to designate a foreign God. One such deity, Ba’al Zebub, lends his name to the Christian demon Beelzebub. Moreover, the word “Ba’al” has a particular resonance in the back history of the Dominions games.

Karlsson and Osterman’s first collaboration, Conquest of Elysium 2 is an early ancestor of Dominions 3. Among the playable characters (each the leader of a faction) are two opposed religious leaders: the Cardinal of El and the High Priestess of Baal. The Cardinal’s faction has a Neomediaeval Catholic feel, complete with an unpredictable inquisition, and Baal, described in the game’s manual as “the hungry God” demands human sacrifices (par. 50). Unlike its darker descendant, Dominions 3, in Conquest of Elysium 2, only two factions practice human sacrifice: that of the High Priestess of Baal, and that of the Demonologist. Conquest of Elysium 2 is also more “High Fantasy” in style, with Tolkienesque Elves, Dwarves and Orcs as playable factions. Despite this, the use of “El” as the name of the pseudo-Catholic faction’s God is significant, as that is a Hebrew title meaning “Lord” and one of the names of God (ex. “El Shaddi,” usually translated in the Christian Bible as “the Lord your God”).

Ba’al (or “Baal”) is, as mentioned above, properly a prefix, and is still used in Hebrew to indicate that someone is the lord or master of something, for example, founder of Hasidic Judaism Rabbi Yisroel ben Eliezer, known by the honorific Baal Shem Tov (“good master of the name”). The golden calf of Exodus 32 might be an icon of a Ba’al also known as Hadad, a storm God sometimes depicted as a bull (Iconography… “Baal”). The golden calf has become part of the Christian syncretic demon “Baal.” Thus, the golden bull’s horns of Dominions 3’s Nephilim Pretender connect him with the golden calf and Ba’al/Hadad as well as with Christian demonology.
Furthermore, Ba’al has been associated with human sacrifice in Karlsson and Osterman’s games since *Conquest of Elysium 2*, so connecting Ba’al with the maneating Nephilim is a logical step.

The Melquart in *Dominions 3* is named after the patron deity of Tyre, also known as Ba’al Sur, and is more likely to be the Ba’al of 1 Kings than is Hadad (*Iconography*… “Melquart”). Like the magician-priest Ba’al, this bloodthirsty warrior giant is named after a rival God to that of the Jewish people. In this context, the disappearance of the Ba’al and Melquart after the Early Age, and simultaneous with them any possibility of freeing the Grigori, can be read as a moral/ethical advance.

Unlike Hinnom and Gath, Middle Era Ashdod does not practice Blood Magic or Blood Sacrifice. Equally or more significantly, it has access to new spells that summon angels, culminating in the Merkavah, or Chariot of the Lord, which appears in Ezekiel 1, in the H’aggada about Enoch, and in pre-Zohar Jewish mysticism. 1 Enoch and the H’aggada expand upon Genesis 5:24 “Enoch walked with God; and then he was no more, for God took him.” In these texts Enoch practically commuted to heaven and back; at least once by Merkavah “Enoch was carried into the heavens in a fiery chariot drawn by fiery chargers” (Ginsberg, Ch. 3 Par. 52). In 1st Enoch as well as in the H’aggadah, the approach to the throne of God is described in a panoply of fire, ice, and lightning that culminates in “And I looked and I saw in it a high throne, and its appearance (was) like ice and its surrounds like the shining sun and the sound of Cherubim. And from underneath the high throne there flowed out rivers of burning fire” (1 Enoch 14:18-19a). This structure around the throne is one form of the Mekavah. A more “chariotlike” form is described in Ezekiel: “I could see that there were four wheels
beside the cherubs, one beside each of the cherubs [...] and when they moved, each could move in the direction of any of its four quarters [...] Their entire bodies—backs, hands and wings—and the wheels, the wheels of the four of them, were covered all over with eyes. It was these wheels that I heard called ‘the wheelwork.’ Each one had four faces: One was a cherub’s face, the second a human face, the third a lion’s face, and the fourth an eagle’s face” (Ezek. 10:9a, 11a, 12-13).

The Merkavah in Dominions 3 is described in similar terms: “In a blaze of otherworldly splendor, four wheels covered by four wings move the Merkavah in four directions. Above the four wheels, at the center of the solar glory is a living being with four faces, four wings, four colors and four lives. Above the living being is a sapphire dome of stellar might, beyond which the unbearable might of the Celestial Thrones is visible.” The in-game effect of this is to give the player the powerful Tetramorph (“four forms”), also called the Chayot (“chariot”), as well as four Ophanim (“wheels, see Figures 5-13 and 5-14).

The Tetramorph is an important mystical figure, sometimes called the Tetrazoa (“four animals”—a possible origin or influence on Blake’s The Four Zoas) and often associated with the Tetragrammaton, the four-character/syllable unpronounceable name of God. Diverse Tetrazoa appear throughout Jewish and Christian mysticism, including the four holy animals of Revelations 4:7: “And the first creature was like a lion, and the second creature like a calf, and the third creature had a face as of a man, and the fourth creature was like a flying eagle” (ASV Bible). The Dominions 3 interpretation is neither four-sided and four-faced nor four separate creatures, but of four eye-covered

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22 This is one of a very few instances where the graphical economy of the game is regrettable: after all of the work that goes into researching and casting this spell, the summoning itself is marked only with a text message, like any other ritual spell.
winged wheels (Ophanim), and a single Tetramorph that is humanoid in shape, but has four forms, one human-headed, and one each with the head of an eagle, lion, and ox. The game explains it thus: “The divine might of the Chayot is so vast that it cannot be contained in a singular physical body and only one form of the Tetramorph is manifest at any time.” In *Dominions 3*, one of the names given to an individual Tetramorph is “Ezekiel,” presumably after the book/prophet.

The Merkavah has powerful symbolic significance: in 1 Enoch, the Grigori ask Enoch to carry their petition for mercy to God, because they cannot enter his presence. The Merkavah is associated with the intense presence of God, and one has to be worthy to see it and live—in the H’aggada about Enoch, after he was carried up in the chariot, “They found snow and great hailstones upon the spot whence Enoch had risen, and, when they searched beneath, they discovered the bodies of all who had remained behind with Enoch [after being told to leave]” (Ginsberg, Ch. 3 Par. 52). In *Dominions 3*, the inhabitants of Hinnom, who are still tied to and revere the Grigori, cannot call the Merkavah.

In Ashdod the Ba’al and the Melquart, along with their cannibalistic appetites, have been replaced by the Talmai Elder and the Adon, Rephaites inspired by the Nephilim of Numbers 13: “They went up into the Negeb and came to Hebron, where lived Ahiman, Shesai, and Talmai, the Anakites. [...] All the people that we saw in it are men of great size; we saw the Nephilim there—the Anakites are part of the Nephilim—and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them” (Num. 13:22a, 32-33). “Adon,” like “Ba’al,” means “Lord” in Hebrew and can be the title of a God, but
unlike “Ba’al” it is not reserved for foreign Gods—in the form “Adonai,” it is a speakable substitute for the Tetragrammaton (and other taboo names of God).

In Dominions 3’s Ashdod, the giants who were denied a chance to repent in 1 Enoch and The Book of Giants can be “redeemed” and made right with the heavens. After extensive preparation, including disciplined frugality by the player, as the spell requires 222 astral pearls, more than any other spell in the game, the Merkavah will descend and (literally, in game terms) bless the giants of Ashdod. This is despite the fact that the flavor text for the Anakim reveals that they have not given up the teachings of the Grigori: “The Anakim adorn themselves [with] jewelry and practice the cosmetic arts of the Watchers.” This reinforces the Promethean aspect of the Watchers, as they were punished for giving their gifts to mortals, but the giants of Ashdod (and Gath) are not punished for using the Watchers’ gifts. Processual narratives of play could include the messianic redemption of the Anakim, or their descent into obsession with their potent ancestors, or some ambivalent combination of the two.

The Lost Tribe

Dominions 3’s Ashdod combines a number of different canonical and apocryphal Biblical themes: the Anakites, a Cannanite people descended from Nephilim who somehow survived the destruction of the Giants, only to be (eventually) supplanted by the Israelites; the aforementioned messianic theme; and, because the Anakites have human slaves, the captivity in Egypt. Given that Late Era Gath will be nearly overrun by human tribes named after the twelve tribes of Israel, the human slaves of Middle Era Ashdod are logically their ancestors. Gath, where human sacrifice has reappeared, seems to follow from an Ashdod that either failed to redeem itself, or suffered a second fall from grace before the Late Era. The theological potential of Gath is circumscribed by
its ability, on one hand, to summon demons but not the Grigori, and on the other, that it can call the Merkavah. Again, ambivalent combinations are possible, allowing for processual narratives in which, for example, the Shedim (storm demons) aid the holy Ophanim in routing the legionnaires of neo-Roman Pythium.

In the Post-Late Era Gath posited earlier, the Abrahamic Giants of Gath, the Abbas, have put an end to human sacrifice. If repentance comes in the Middle, Late, or hypothetical “Post-Late” Eras, these gentled Giants then slot into place as the “lost tribe” of Israel. Joann Sfar posits just such a lost tribe of Giant Jews in the 2nd volume of his series *The Rabbi’s Cat*. In it, the titular cat accompanies the titular Rabbi, an Algerian Sephardic Jew, his Muslim cousin, a blonde, blue-eyed Russian Ashkenazi Jewish artist, and his black ex-slave African bride on a quest to find a hidden city, home to the lost tribe. After a great many confrontations with prejudice, including the patronizing attitude of a young Belgian reporter (a parody of Hergé’s Tintin), they meet a lascivious older European artist who tries to convince the Ashkenazi painter that it is anatomically correct to draw black people with monkey-like features. To this the Ashkenazi painter replies, in the French his wife has been teaching him, “In country of me, they make same drawing on Jews” (Sfar 122 see Figures 5-15 and 5-16).23 This prepares us for the ambivalent encounter with the Lost Tribe of African Jews that concludes the book.

In the end, it is only the cat, the artist and his wife (all of whom are unnamed) who find the city, and it is populated with giants, dark-skinned Jewish giants dripping with golden jewelry (see Figure 5-17). They are “Blacks whom nobody ever enslaved. Jews

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23 This form of racist caricature has also been applied to, among other groups, Indians and Pakistanis (thus the slur “macaca,” after the Macaque monkey), and the Irish (through the 19th century). It is also the origin of the persistent terms “highbrow” and “lowbrow” to describe more and less intelligent and sophisticated people and culture.
who never left the land of their ancestors. Happy, balanced people who radiate self-confidence” (Sfar 126). Unfortunately, these happy, balanced people are unable to perceive these smaller, less happy people as their kin, and take offense when tells them that he is Jewish, like them. The cat, who understands the giants’ speech, translates their answer as, “He says there’s no such thing as a white Jew. He says they are the real Jews. He says you’ve offended them and we have to leave” (Sfar 128, see Figure 5-18). This is an ironic echo of the Rabbi’s words of much earlier, “nobody's ever seen such a thing as black Jews […] look: blacks, they have slavery; Jews, they have pogroms. It’s a lot to bear. Now imagine a people that has both at the same time. It just can’t be” (Sfar 84, see Figure 5-19). The Lost Tribe of black, giant Jews is a fantasy of absolute freedom from those oppressions, which is the real reason the artist and his wife can’t stay there: they are living contradictions to the fantasy these giants represent. *Dominions* 3’s Rephaim are deathly-pale skinned, rather than black, but a player can enact half this fantasy, processually creating the story of a proud, unoppressed Jewish people.

A similar African image of the lost tribe of Israel is presented in James Sturm’s *The Golem’s Mighty Swing*. In this graphic novel, a barnstorming pre-league baseball team whose gimmick is that they’re all Jewish accommodates a black player, their power-hitter, with the fiction that he is “from the lost tribe.” Later in the story, he is instead costumed as the titular golem, further emphasizing his height and girth to make a demi-giant of the man.

The mythic St. Christopher “the Christ Bearer” is another such apparition. John Mitchell, in his speculative art history *The Earth Spirit*, says of St. Christopher that “in
his person the old giants of the earth returned to infiltrate the Church” (56). Though accounts of St. Christopher are highly inconsistent, he is often described as a Giant, said to have been a cannibal and a man of war before his conversion, depicted with a dog’s head (mainly in Greek Orthodox and Coptic North African images), and said to have served as a living ferry, wading a raging river while transporting travelers on his back, including an impossibly heavy child who turned out to be an apparition of the Christ-child, who was in turn bearing the world on his back. The different versions of St. Christopher reiterate, refigure and conflate a profusion of giants and Gods: like the Nephilim he was ravenous and cannibalistic (prior to his conversion); like Atlas he bears the world on his shoulders (albeit, through an intermediary); and he shares traits with Gods of the dead, including the Egyptian dog-headed Anubis and the Greek Charon, the ferryman, who themselves were conflated after the Roman conquest of Egypt, in accordance with the Roman practice of assimilation of local Gods to their pantheon, an assimilation preserved in Christianized Rome through the cult of the Saints.

The plural figure of St. Christopher is a “survival” of the giants, but also an incident of the good giant as the exception that proves the evil of giants in general. Thankfully, this is not the only way to read the giants of Dominions 3. In The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, William Blake describes Antediluvians and giants thus: “The Giants who formed this world into its sensual existence and now seem to live in it in chains are in truth the causes of its life & the sources of all activity, but the chains are the cunning of weak and tame minds, which have the power to resist energy. [...] Thus one portion of being, is the Prolific, the other, the Devouring; to the devourer it seems as if the producer were in his chains, but it is not so [...] Messiah or Satan or Tempter was
formerly thought to be one of the Antediluvians, who are our Energies” (pl. 16, 17).
Blake’s Antediluvian giants are not appetitive, that is projection: it seems here that it is
sensuality and “Prolific” production that define/make a Blakean giant, and it is the “weak
and tame” who chain them, and can be read as the same as the “Devouring” that live off
of the excess of the Prolific giants of the earth, and if the weak and the Devouring are
the same (a dangerous presumption) their weakness requires that they see the giants
as the dangerous consumers who must be contained. The scapegoat is sent into the
desert laden with sins for the Nephilim Azazel to consume so that the “penitent” can
continue to blame Azazel for producing carnality they crave.

“Messiah, or Satan, or Tempter” is not an identity (Messiah=Satan=Tempter), but
an indiscernability. In gnostic theology, that which is generally perceived as “God” is
really the imprisoned and imprisoning demiurge and the divine is external and elusive,
but ultimately constant and knowable. In The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, knowability
and constancy are suspect: knowability depends on constancy, and anything constant is
imprisoned/-ing: the more constant the more imprisoned/-ing. Blake writes not of the
good of the Prolific or the evil of the Devouring, but that “whoever seeks to reconcile
them seeks to destroy existence. Religion is an endeavor to reconcile the two” (pl. 17).
The Prolific cannot be truly bound: it must continue to exceed its bounds in order to
remain prolific. Excess is the goal and end of the approaches to time and narrative
presented herein, so the more “nearly real” thing that emerges from close visual
analysis is not synthesis, but the opening up of multiple, incommensurable times,
places, and narratives.
Conclusion

The anarchic foldings of Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* bring us full circle and back to our original setting out of the problems and potentials of comics theory, and, more broadly, what might more accurately be called visual narrative theory. Neither Blake’s images nor *Dominions 3* are easily accessible through either film theory or traditional literary analysis. However, their visual complexities yield a great deal of information when processed chaossmotically, including visual intertexts, references, and the suppressed potential images that drop off the page/screen into nonentity. The false ontological priority of the interface is revealed in *Dominions 3*, just as the false priority of the panel was in *Too Cool to Be Forgotten*, and a processual narrative emerges, the product not of the straitjacket of the interface or panel but of the reader/viewer’s interaction with the surface structures of time and narrative that emerge as boundaries fail.
Figure 5-1  The “Kohen Gadol,” high priest of Gath in Dominions 3. Note the black goat's horns emerging from his forehead. Dominions 3 ©Shrapnel Games, 2006

Figure 5-2  Schematic of the Choshen (jeweled breastplate) and Ephod (the garment that supports it) of the (historical) Kohen Gadol. Note the similarity to the breastplate in Figure 5-1 (in game, the “Kohen Gadol’s” armor is described as a “jeweled breastplate”). This image is in the public domain.
Figure 5-3  A simple image of the Kohen Gadol in full regalia, including Choshen and Ephod, and similar in nearly all details to the figure from Dominions 3, from the gilded sash belt to the bare feet. This image is in the public domain.

Figure 5-4  The “running of the Jews” from Sacha Baron Cohen’s mockumentary Borat. The goblin-like giant green mask, complete with (small, red-tipped) horns is a parody of the monstrous Jew of Faust and the blood libel. Note the similarities to the High Fantasy racial caricature of the Orc discussed in Chapter 5: large, plump lips, dark unruly hair, sloping forehead and, of course, green skin. Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstasn ©Four by Two, 2006
Figure 5-5    Administrative time in *Dominions 3*, with vectors (orange arrows) indicating immanent de- and re-territorializations of space. The yellow lines show the potential lines of flight from the selected territory (province). All of these motions are narratives: the orange lines towards the middle-left of the screen indicate a pincer movement in which Gittite giants are advancing through a mountain pass, splitting the nation of Ulm in two. The holy Merkavah cleared the pass to prepare the way, and now it descends upon an Ulmish fortress with the wrath of (the player’s Pretender) God. *Dominions 3* ©Shrapnel Games, 2006
Figure 5-6  Scalable time in *Dominions 3*. In this image, Giant soldiers (in light blue) are flanking Ulmish archers and crossbowmen (center to right side), as ranks of blessed Levite soldiers (in bronze) have broken the Ulmish pikemen. This strategy had to be planned in advance without precise knowledge of the strength or formation of the Ulmish soldiers and cannot be altered during the battle, but can be replayed, paused, sped up and skipped forward in at will. *Dominions 3* ©Shrapnel Games, 2006
Figure 5-7  the armies of Gath. The Benjamintite Slinger is highlighted (in red), and a Kohen Gadol and three Gibborim (fearsome Giants descended directly from the Rephaim of old) are in the Recruitment Queue. Dominions 3 ©Shrapnel Games, 2006

Figure 5-8  Sprites from left to right: the sinister Ba’al of Hinnom, the ambivalent Kohen Gadol, the Kohen, and the Abrahamic Abba. The Ba’al and Kohen Gadol are Rephaim, thus the greater stature and horns; the Kohen and Abba are Gittites – lesser giants. The image of the Abba shown here is the “active” image; the rest are the normal or “passive” images. See Figure 5-8 for comparison to the size of humans. Dominions 3 ©Shrapnel Games, 2006
Figure 5-9  Images of Abraham and Isaac by, from top-left: Rembrandt van Rijn, Laurent de la Hire, and William Blake. Most images of “the sacrifice of Isaac,” like Rembrandt’s classic painting, focus on Abraham’s apparent willingness to do the deed, often showing the physical intervention of an angel. Blake, with typical contrariness, gives Issac an expression, seemingly one of anger. His Abraham is no less unique: he shelters Issac under his arm, and his worry-lined face gazes up with reproach or despair at an absent god. It is this kind of Abraham that I refer to, cloaked in blue (the color of Chesed, the kabbalistic sphere of fatherhood and mercy), and without any red (the kabbalistic color of Gevurah, the sphere of judgment). Images (clockwise from top right) ©Hermitage State Museum, 2006; Nicholas Pioch, 2002; and ©AMICA / Cartography Associates, 2007

Rembrandt’s painting is rare in that his Abraham wears neither blue nor red, and in the complete obscuration of Issac’s face.
Figure 5-10  József Molnár's *The March of Abraham*. Note the symbolic uses of red, blue and white. Image ©DEA/G. Dagli Orti/DeAgostini Picture Library, 2005

Figure 5-11  Zely Smekhov's *Birkat Kohanim* ("the Blessing"), showing the Kohen Gadol and Kohenim, with the same symbolic colors as in Molnár's "March of Abraham" and the sprites from *Dominions 3*. Unlike the male, Christian, period artists featured in Figures 9 and 10, Smekhov is a contemporary, Jewish, female artist. Image ©Judaica Art, 2009
Figure 5-12  the template for the “Son of the Fallen” before player modification (increasing magical and religious power, etc.). Unlike the (optional) uncensored artwork for the “Lord of Fertility,” a Bacchus-like Pretender with a giant erection, the “Son of the Fallen” is flaccid, suggesting that his sex drive has been sublimated into hunger. Dominions 3 ©Shrapnel Games, 2006
Figure 5-13  The four forms of the Chayot, Tetramorph or Tetrazoa, in Dominions 3. In slight disagreement with the book of Elijah, but matching other sources, such as the Christian book of Revelations, the four faces are (left-right): human, lion, eagle, and ox. Dominions 3 ©Shrapnel Games, 2006

Figure 5-14  An Ophan, shown both in passive (normal) and active states. This interpretation of the “wheelwork” is consistent with images of Ophanim in the hermetic tradition. Dominions 3 ©Shrapnel Games, 2006

Figure 5-15  A parody of the colonialist attitudes and cheerful presumption in Herge's Tintin in Joann Sfar’s The Rabbit’s Cat 2. Image ©Pantheon, 2008
Sfar’s rejection of racial caricature through his proxy, the nameless Russian painter. This does raise the question, however, of whether the also-nameless African woman has been formed to Western ideals of beauty, with her large but also high and firm breasts, thin waist, small butt and tiny nose. The offensive European suggests to the painter that he should ask her to pose naked, shortly before this scene, but the bite of this satirization of European painters like Gauguin and their nudes of “native women” may be cut short by the fact that Sfar draws the African woman naked, in and after sex with the painter, before and after their marriage. The result is a complicit critique which participates in sexual idealization and objectification even as it rejects racial superiority and colonial power. Image ©Pantheon, 2008
Figure 5-17  Sfar’s take on the city of the giants, home to the Lost Tribe. The combination of Semitic, African and “classical” traits is interesting: the Giant in the bottom-right panel has an exaggerated “Jewish” nose (unlike the Ashkenazi painter); the boy or man in the bottom-left is built like Adonis, but has “Hasidic” forelocks; and the women in the middle-right and lower-left panels might almost be Greek statues as well, but for their African hair and skin color. That color itself is a dark, cool grey, almost blueish, to contrast with the warm terracotta color of the artist’s wife’s skin. Image ©Pantheon, 2008
Figure 5-18  The irreconcilability of the fantasy of the Lost Tribe with the “real” world. Sfar implies that, if such a people existed, they couldn’t possibly recognize their kinship to either Jew or African, as they cannot understand how subjugation and suffering have diminished them. Without those experiences, the giants are just as proud and insular (thus the cool, unconcerned grey) as those who have oppressed Jew and African alike, albeit less destructive: the painter and his wife are cast out, not enslaved. Image ©Pantheon, 2008

Figure 5-19  the Rabbi and the French Rabbi, his son-in-law, in a public bath. The French Rabbi’s carefully-rendered bare chest and the Rabbi’s hemispheric “Charlie Brown” nose are reminders of Sfar’s relative even-handedness with nudity and willingness to switch-up art style without transition: the same character may be rendered in two different styles, with different basic physical proportions, on the same page. This fluidity gives the art an intersubjective quality: we seem to see characters as they are seen by others. This mitigates the critique made of Figure 5-17: we see the African barmaid-turned-bride as the painter sees her, which is as the perfection of what he has been taught is beautiful. Image ©Pantheon, 2008


Battle For Wesnoth 1.4.5. The Battle for Wesnoth, 2007.


*Dominions 3*. Shrapnel Games, 2006.


Pandemic 2. Evil Realm Studios (freeware), 2008.


*Progress Quest*. (freeware), 2002.


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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Chris “Tof” Eklund is an interdisciplinary scholar with an interest in visual narrative and particularly in comics. His other academic interests include critical theory and philosophy, feminist/gender theory, mythology and folklore, new/digital media, genre fiction, silent film, surrealism, postmodernity, and “literature.” He graduated cum laude from the University of Texas at Dallas with a double major in literary and historical studies, earned a master’s in American studies at Purdue University, and a PhD in English (comics studies track) at the University of Florida.