

A Narratological Annotation System for Graphic Narrative



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Editor

Tool

Using a graphical interface, Graphic Narrative Markup Language (GNML) supports the annotation of visual objects, word-image-relations, and character relationships.

The editor allows for defining a hierarchy of storyworlds for each graphic narrative. For each page, panel or sub-panel, the storyworld, focalization (external or internal), and focalizing character can be specified, and for each caption the narrator and the diegetic structure can be chosen. Internal focalization is further subdivided into spatial point of view, quasi-perceptual point of view, quasi-perceptual overlay, and internal world representation.

The system's main aim lies in quantitative analysis, which will also serve the critical reconsideration and potential reformulation of established narratological terminology.

Operationalization

Conducted prior to extending the editor for narratological annotation, two empirical studies found that readers successfully distinguish between different forms of focalization during the reading process. This result indicates that focalization, a subject of ongoing narratological debate, can be seen as a valid descriptor for the cognitive processing of subjectivity. Thirty-two students then completed a full narratological annotation with the above criteria for nine long-form graphic narratives (*Watchmen*, *Batman: The Killing Joke*, *Maus*, *City of Glass*, *Signal to Noise*, *From Hell*, *Gemma Boverly*, *Jimmy Corrigan*, and *Persepolis*). Two titles (*Batman: The Killing Joke*, *Signal to Noise*) were fully annotated by two separate groups and one (*City of Glass*) was annotated by three groups.

Download the Editor here:



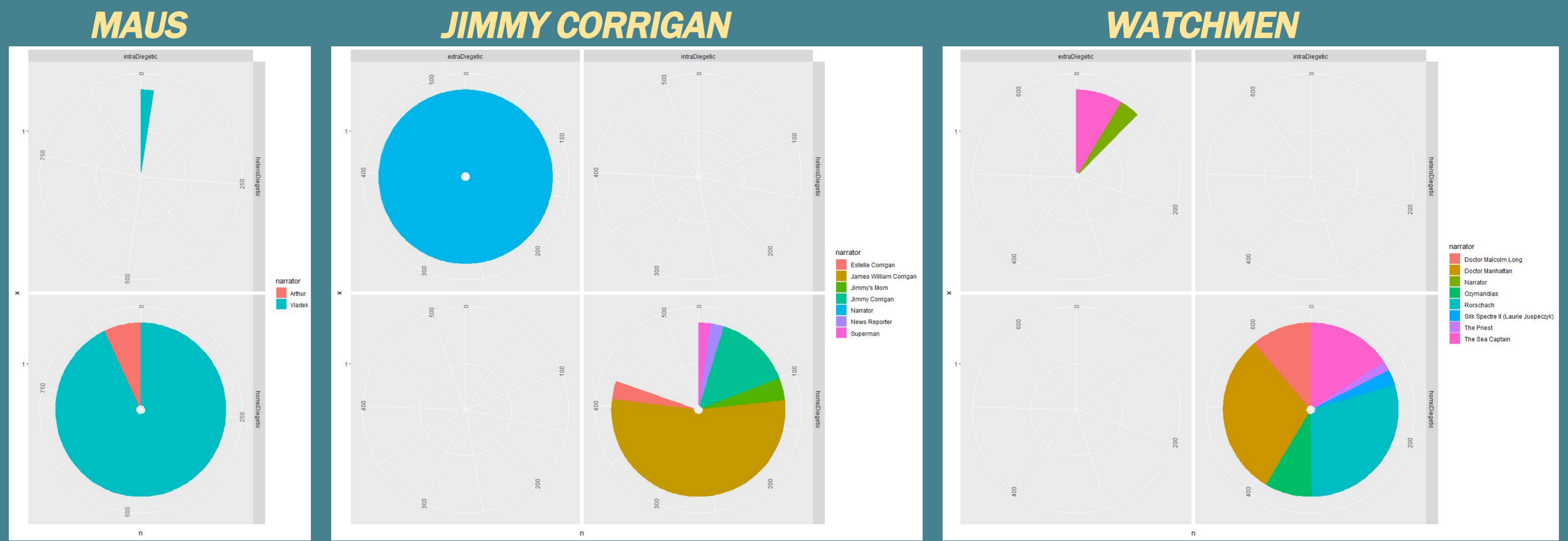
<https://goo.gl/fqu6VW>

Narrator

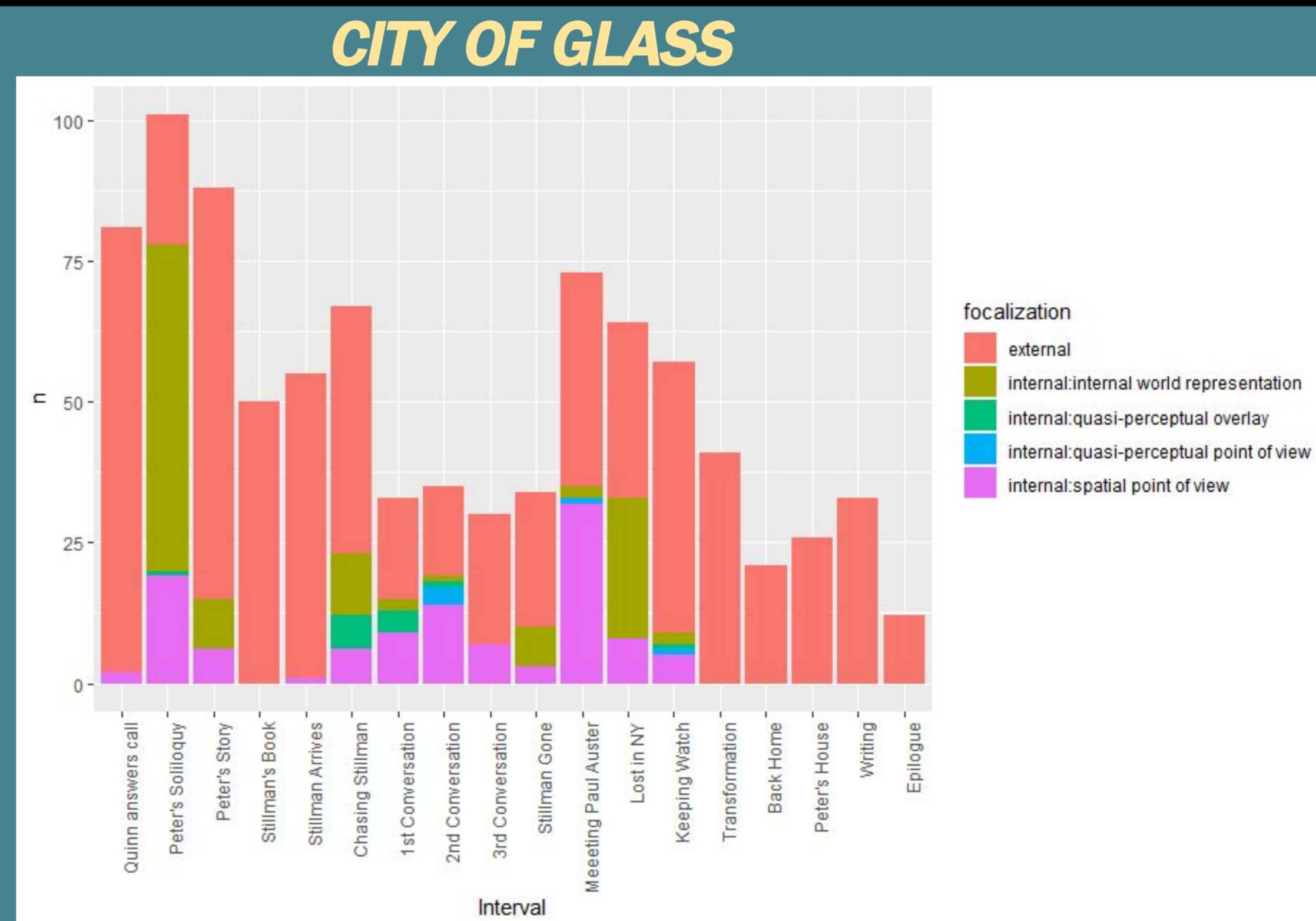
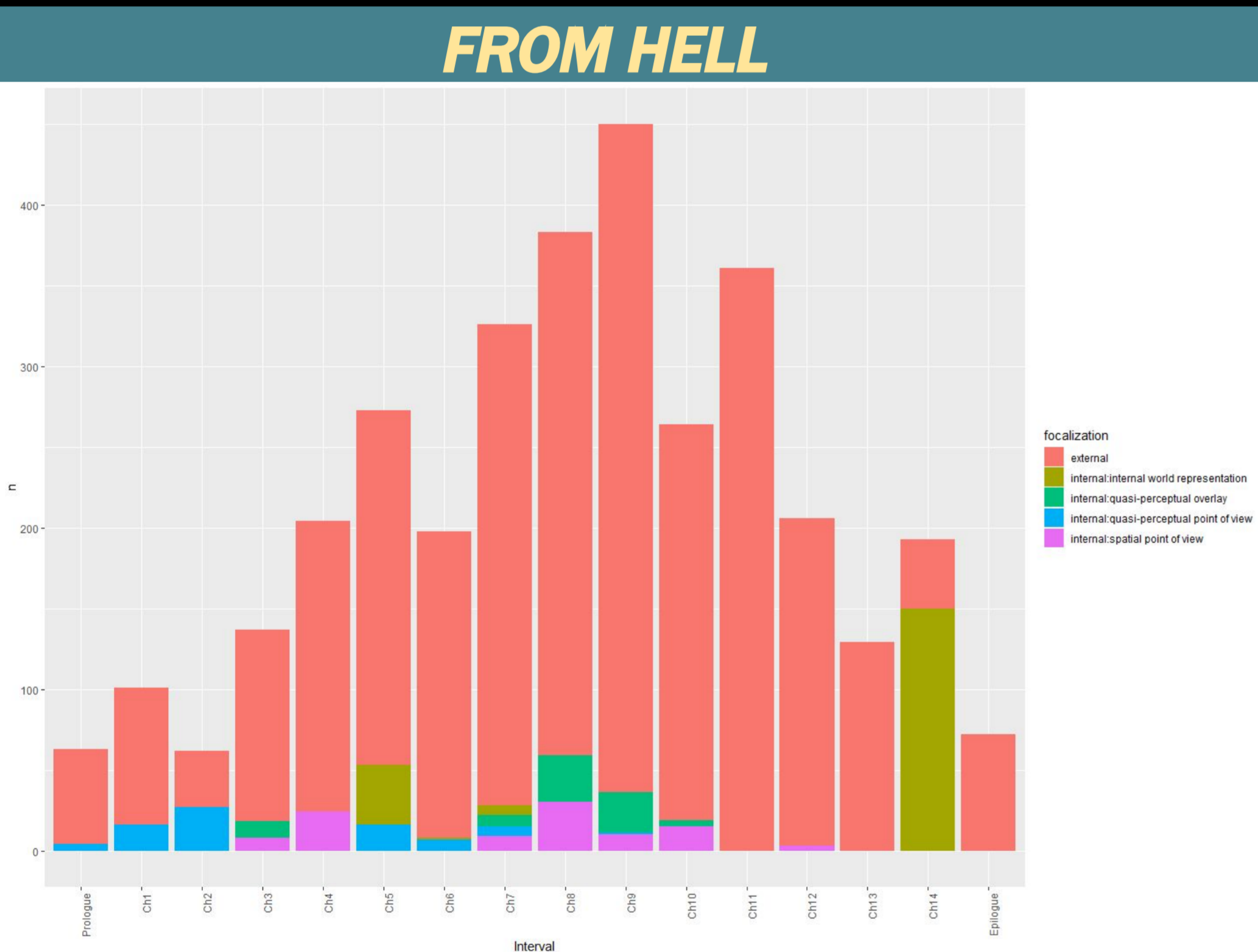
Annotators assessed diegetic structure for all narrators of captions. In the editor, diegetic structure is defined by two choices – hetero-/homodiegetic narrator and extra-/intradiegetic narrator.

Results show that the annotated comics vary in number of narrators, but that the majority of narrators are intra- and homodiegetic. In contrast, extra- and heterodiegetic narrators (“omniscient narrator,” third-person narrator”), a typical narrative situation in verbal-only novels, are mostly absent from the annotated comics (*Jimmy Corrigan* being the exception.)

Depending on storyworld complexity and the diegetic space that surrounds the caption, characters may change narrative status, as illustrated in *Watchmen*'s data.



Focalization



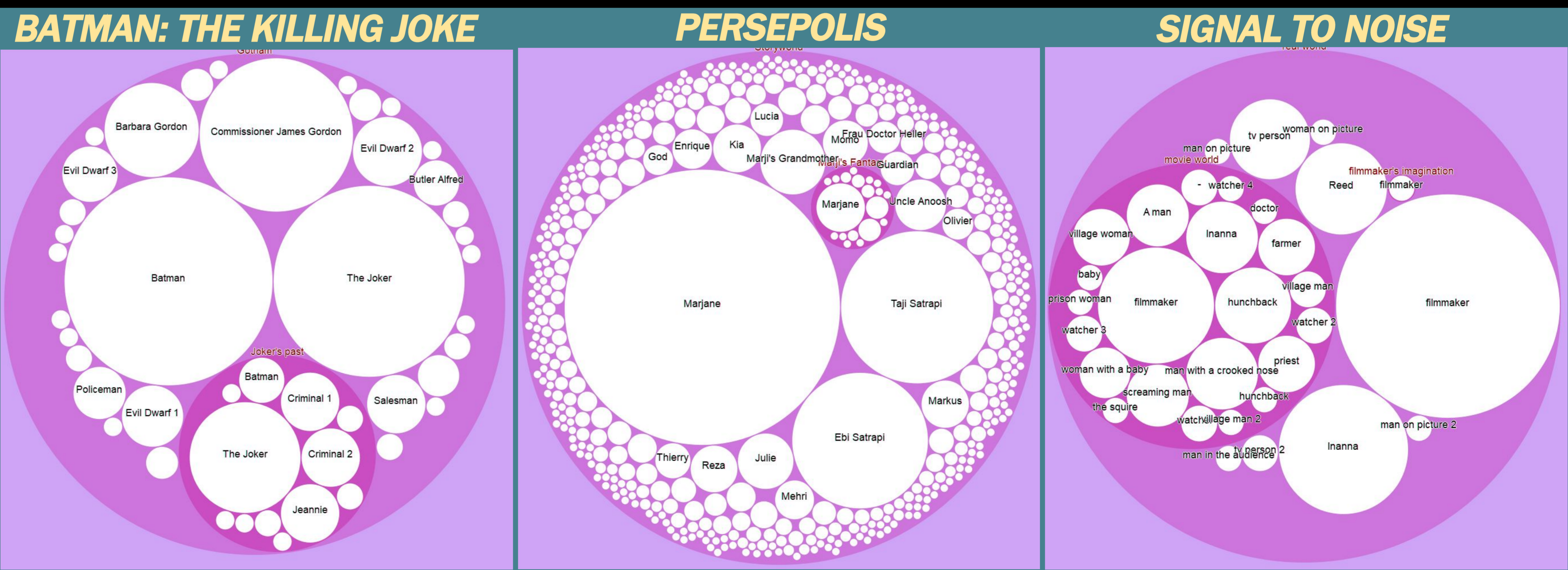
Annotators assessed visual focalization for all panels. Based on previous research findings, external visual focalization was set for every panel by default, while internal visual focalization was subcategorized into: spatial pov (point of view), quasi-perceptual pov, quasi-perceptual overlay, and internal world representation.

Results confirm external visual focalization as default, i.e. unmarked focalization situation. Internal focalization is often marked by some kind of situational marker (different panel frame, change in style) or contextual marker (objects pertinent to some kind of change in narrative subjectivity). Comics such as *From Hell* and *City of Glass* occasionally seem to use a predominant type of focalization to structure specific points in their stories.

Storyworld

Annotators created a hierarchy of diegetic space for all panels. The tool allowed annotators to move storyworlds inside of other storyworlds (hypodiegetic storyworlds / hyperdiegetic storyworlds). A script then compared storyworld annotation and character annotation and plotted visualisations that show (possibly nested) storyworlds and its characters in a single diagram.

Results visualise and compare narrative devices typical of graphic narratives, such as dreams, comic books within comic books, imaginary diegetic spaces, and retellings of past events (possibly retold by an unreliable narrator). Double entries of certain characters imply the problem whether a character inhabiting multiple storyworlds is the same character or a different character altogether. Furthermore, a degree of textual comprehension is necessary in order to differentiate past events (“flashbacks”) from character’s imagination.



Evaluation

Quantified, evidence-based narrative analysis emerges as a valuable addition to narratological methods. Annotation, data processing, and subsequent visualisation of narratological constituents in graphic narratives reveal underlying narrative structures and, in turn, challenge narrative theory in two ways:

- 1) Further operationalization of narratological terminology – using established theory to create productive analytical categories
- 2) Empirical testing of narrative theory – Is narratology reflective of comic book readers’ cognitive processes and reading comprehension?

Annotation Challenges and Potential

Data used in this study required clean-up and correction of numerous annotations due to mistakes by participants, ranging from simple typos to more complex issues (such as misinterpreting storyworld as scenery/setting). During the annotation process, annotators of graphic narrative seem to acquire a level of proficiency in:

- 1) Text comprehension and close reading skills of particular graphic narratives
- 2) Problem-oriented knowledge processing of narratological conceptualisations
- 3) Basic understanding of and methodological sensibility for quantitative analysis

As such, the annotation of graphic narratives not only advances discourse in narrative theory, but also brings forward new pragmatic approaches towards teaching theoretical concepts of narratology that were previously exclusively theoretical.