A Narratological Annotation System for Graphic Narrative

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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.

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, Watchmen, Batman: The Killing Joke, Maus, City of Glass, Signal to Noise). The data were used to calculate statistical measures for the diegetic structure of the narratives.

Results visualise and compare narrative devices, and narrative structures. 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”), 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.

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

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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 storyworld). 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.

Annotators created a hierarchy of diegetic space for all panels. The tool allows 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.

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