The Workday Comic:
Adapting the 24-Hour Comic to an Academic Setting

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Abstract

Renowned comics theorist Scott McCloud's 24-Hour Comics project has challenged both professional creators and interested amateurs alike to create a 24-page sequential art story, scripted, drawn, lettered, and inked all within 24 continuous hours. Beginning with *A Day's Work* (McCloud, 1990) and *A Life in Black and White* (Bissette, 1990), the challenge grew and transformed, inspiring 24-Hour Plays, Animation, and Website projects, as well as 48-Hours Films. Hundreds of cartoonists have contributed efforts during years since. Collections of the best began with the eventual publication, *24 Hour Comics* (McCloud, 2004), which McCloud discussed in a recent session at Henderson State University. The current project has involved adapting the 24-Hour Comics challenge to an academic setting as the Workday Comic. Faculty in Art, English, Communication and Theatre Arts, Psychology, and the Huie Library contributed assistance with input, facilities, and other resources. In this project, participating Henderson State University student writers and artists, working individually or in pairs, each created 8-page, or longer, comics in 8 hours. The project editor outlines the challenges involved in organizing the Workday Comic Project and discusses examples of the final products, while addressing both practical and creative issues in terms of collaboration, diversity of perspectives, and innovation through mutual appropriation. It is hoped that this will offer a model that can inspire similar projects at other institutions much as McCloud's and Bissette's original personal challenge to each other led to nearly two decades of related efforts.

Introduction

Renowned comics theorist Scott McCloud's 24-Hour Comics project has challenged both professional creators and interested amateurs alike to create a 24-page sequential art story, scripted, drawn, lettered, and inked in 24 continuous hours. His challenge inspired our own 8-hour project, the Workday Comic, which is not just one third of a 24-hour comic.

McCloud, a cartoonist who wrote and drew comic works including *Zot!*, *Superman Adventures*, and *The New Adventures of Abraham Lincoln*, has become best known for his nonfiction work analyzing the medium itself. Beginning with *Understanding Comics* (1993), then revisiting the topic with the more controversial *Reinventing Comics* (McCloud, 2006), and most recently his newest work, *Making Comics* (McCloud, 2006), he explored the very definition of comics, the history of the medium, its vocabulary and methods so insightfully that Frank Miller, author of *Sin City* and *300*, called him "just about the smartest guy in comics"

(cited by McCloud, 2006, back cover) and *Locus* magazine called him "arguably the most important cartoonist alive" (Shropshire, 2001).

The 24-Hour Comic (an inconsistently hyphenated term) began as McCloud's dare to Steve Bissette. Stephen R. Bissette is an author, editor, publisher, educator, film critic, and artist best known for his award-winning collaboration drawing *Swamp Thing* from 1983 to 1987. No longer active in mainstream comics, he teaches at the Center for Cartoon Studies in Vermont (Center for Cartoon Studies, 2007). Henderson State University's Huie Library houses the Stephen R. Bissette Collection with Bissette's works and memorabilia (Henderson State University, 2007). Both Bissette and McCloud have visited Henderson. McCloud completed the first 24-hour comic, appropriately titled "A Day's Work" on August 31, 1990, and Bissette produced "A Life in Black and White" five days later.

Word of their achievement spread, and soon their accomplishments challenged others. Dave Sim published 24-hour comics in the back of his comic series *Cerebus the Aardvark*. Other creators took up the challenge. Eventually Nat Gertler organized 24 Hour Comics Day in 2004, involving creators around the world. Although the exact date has varied, this event has happened every year since. McCloud maintains an archive of all 24-hour comics. He and Gertler have published collections of the best (Gertler, 2004; Gertler, 2005a; Gertler, 2005b; Gertler, 2007; McCloud, 2004).

Not only did McCloud and Bissette inspire creators to create 24-hour comics, they wound up inspiring others to create new challenges. Tina Fallon created 24 Hour Plays in 1995 (24 Hour Plays, 2007), getting short plays written, rehearsed, and performed for the first time all within a single day. Brickfilms held the 24-Hour Animation Contest (Brickfilms, 2007). The Webdesign International Festival sponsors a 24-hour website competition (cre824, 2007). The 24 Hour RPG Event challenges role-playing game creators (24 Hour RPG, 2007). Other examples abound – e.g., 24-Hour Italy Comics Day (Bianco, 2006) – of so many projects McCloud and his colleagues have inspired, including us.

In February, 2007, Scott McCloud visited Henderson State University (McCloud, 2007) as part of a 50-state tour to promote his newest book, *Making Comics* (McCloud, 2006). His visit prompted us to develop our own 24-hour comic event, which evolved instead into the Workday Comic. Because of the lack of flexibility in a 24-hour comic challenge, it needed to be revised if it was going to be brought to a university setting where students must work around academic schedules. The biggest difference would be shortening it from 24 hours to 8, what is commonly thought of as a work day, even including a lunch break.

The Workday Comic shared certain basic rules with the 24-Hour Comics: (1) Complete *everything* in the designated time (story, art, lettering, the works). (2) Indirect preparation can be done in advance (gathering tools, reference materials). (3) Pages can be any size, any material. (4) Work can be computer generated or assisted. (5) When time is up, either stop there or keep going until finished – "noble failure variants."

Other rules differed. The 24-Hour Comics placed greater restrictions: (6) Strictly 24 hours. If you take a nap or any break, the clock keeps ticking. (7) No sketches, designs, or plot summaries ahead of time. (8) You work alone.

The Workday Comic, on the other hand, allowed greater flexibility: (6) 8-hour period plus lunch break no longer than 1 hour. (7) Writers should be ready to produce outlines so artists are not sitting around. (8) Collaboration is encouraged.

Contributors could tell any story with only two explicit restrictions: (1) No superheroes. (2) No characters under copyright elsewhere. Of course, implicit restrictions existed, like "Do not break the law (e.g., no child pornography)."

Method

Preparation

Preparing this event in only two months from conception to completion, the editor and Henderson State University's Comic Book Club presented the project to potential writers and artists by speaking to the university's Art Club, English Club, Writers Guild, a computer art class, a creative writing class, and others.

The university newspaper, the *Oracle*, provided coverage (Waddles, 2007) that led to the recruitment of an additional participant. The news reached even farther than expected. 24 Hour Comics Day organizer Nat Gertler discovered the article, told McCloud about it, and shared a laugh over errors in article content (N. Gertler, personal communication, April 12, 2007; S. McCloud, personal communication, April 7, 2007).

Communication's professor Randy Duncan participated in planning and preparation as the Comic Book Club's advisor and, through the club, the project's faculty project. Art professors David Stoddard and Nancy Dunaway provided access to studio facilities. English professor and graduate dean Marck Beggs contributed insight regarding online publication. Psychology professor Travis Langley provided assistance and advice. Librarian Leann Alexander will provide space for project art to be displayed in the university's Huie Library. These and other faculty members (Peggy Bailey, Gary Simmons) provided the editor opportunities to pitch the project to potential student contributors.

Procedure

Except for one participant who had to work from another location due to schedule conflicts, contributors wrote and drew their comic stories in a studio classroom full of drafting tables. A nearby computer room was available for any who needed to look up more images as artistic references.

To add an extra creative challenge in our project, each participant drew a word from a hat that held 100 slips of paper with a wide variety of words or terms. This was not something

our rules required. It was just something we chose to do. One person drew three words. The participant who had to work from a different location chose a number between 1 and 100, and then received the corresponding word via e-mail. Artists and writers were free to incorporate these as images, text, theme, or whatever struck their fancy whether literally or figuratively, prominently or peripherally. One artist who arrived without a writer and with no story in mind built his entire story by starting with the term he drew ("power tool").

While no rule forbade the use of other media such as photographs, sculpture, or collage for story presentation, all works were drawn, with most inked but some simply penciled. Other than an artist who drew in blue pencil but inked over it, only one artist used any color outside black, gray, and white, as one added touches of red for blood. The color will remain red for online publication but will turn gray for a black-and-white publication in print. The rules allowed for works to be computer-generated or computer-assisted, but only one creator involved the computer for anything other than looking up visual references, using Adobe Illustrator to add text.

Results

Student contributors prepared eight comic stories: five eight-page, two nine-page, and one seven-page piece. Nicole Smith stopped "Show and Tell" at seven pages for the sake of artistic integrity, feeling that it did not warrant an eighth. The World War II fantasy "Arbeit Macht Frei" reached nine pages, eight by the artist Mark Head following a splash page drawn by its author Justin Miller. Only Nick Langley's "Cat Hair Sausage" had nine pages of illustrations by a single artist. Stories varied in content and style. The degree of realism varied. Dark humor abounded.

The story that was completed first, and which had the most childlike art, paradoxically had the greatest number of panels, the most story and dialogue, and the most elaborate syntagmatic choices in terms of spacial arrangement and temporal flow. It also had the longest title: "The Ongoing Adventures of Rocket Llama #112: 'Trouble in Paradise,'" by Alex Langley. Thomas Sepe's "Tabellae Volaticus", which involved simple line drawings with no violence, no dialogue, no human characters, and an object for a protagonist, impressed everyone with his unusual story's cleverness, creativity, and sheer originality.

As can be seen even more dramatically in many 24-hour comics, fatigue and time constraints altered the degree of artistic detail in some stories as time went by. "Show and Tell" ends with a simple splash page. Mark Head's first page of art begins with heavy ink, shadows, and detail, whereas his last page utilizes no heavy ink, no shadows, and little detail. The shift in artistic detail, it should be noted, complements the story's shift from reality to fantasy.

During the work period, the project's faculty advisor, Dr. Randy Duncan, produced a one-page ad for a nonexistent comic, "Imaginary Mongoose," to be included in the collected work. One page of Alex Langley's Rocket Llama story happened to be another bogus ad for a

bogus comic. Inspired by these two, other contributors have decided to produce additional fake comic ads to appear as bonus works in the final publication.

Two stories simply were not completed in the allotted time. By the end of the day, one author/artist had penciled through page 5 of her fantasy piece. Another, whose first page will be our printed product's front cover, realized after a few pages that he had spent too much time getting them right instead of going ahead and sketching out the rest of his story. They both accomplished plenty. They both contributed to the experience overall. Realizing that no work completed in this project should be considered a failure, we dubbed these "overtime" products rather than stick with the term "noble failure variants," used to describe 24-hour comics whose creators took longer than 24 hours to finish them (known as "the Eastman variation" for *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* co-creator Kevin Eastman's 1991 effort) or that simply went unfinished (called "the Gaiman variation" after fantasy writer Neil Gaiman's 13-page attempt that same year). Every student who endeavored to complete the work in time, who worked steadily in the spirit of the project, and who contributed a whole product in the end succeeded at a feat he or she had never previously tried. Every completed work is a success.

Discussion

Lessons Learned

Project organizers should keep potential contributors connected via e-mail newsletter. Once people show interest, keep them informed and help them feel an ongoing connection to the process.

After individuals are found ready to leap into the Workday Comic, encourage writers to bring artists they know and artists to bring writers they know in order to bring in a greater variety of contributors. Have any writers who just cannot attend provide outlines in case artists need content. Make no guarantees that their work will get used, because the preference is for writers who are present.

If writers outnumber artists, show examples of past stories with simplistic art to encourage some of them to take up the pencil and draw. Otherwise, encourage writers to collaborate. If artists outnumber writers, challenge some of them to draw an image that goes with their words from the hat and to build from there. Alternately, artists can work together, dividing the labor (whether backgrounds and characters, pencils and inks) to bring the same story to life.

Be ready to start work and set your clock up to an hour later than scheduled. But do not tell people the first hour is for set-up, or they will come late. Point out that when the instructions begin with the word *complete*, that means no story can end with "to be continued…." A story can have an open ending, of course, and still be written in a way that makes it a complete work. It should not be a teaser or trailer for some other story if it tells no real story of its own.

Tips for contributors begin with simple advice to plan ahead. Begin with the intention of 8 pages in 8 hours. Remember that a sketchy 8-page story completed in 8 hours is in the spirit of this challenge. A story drawn perfectly and inked with fine detail over 8 days is not. Do not sabotage yourself or bring other contributors down by saying you cannot get there in time.

The Future

Two of the Workday Comic's student contributors and two involved faculty members will attend the annual Comic Arts Conference held in San Diego, California, in conjunction with the International Comic-Con. The editor will participate in conference activities as part of a field research program studying the intersection of practicing fan culture and the political economy of industrial marketing (Langley, 2007). There, both will promote the Workday Comic in order to help spread the project to other universities.

We hope to involve additional universities in 2008 and even more in 2009. With numerous schools each participating, no one group necessarily needs to produce as many different stories as we did this first year. Even one or two stories apiece from a wide range of academic institutions could produce enough quality works for a respectable publication each year. By 2010, we hope to publish a "best of" collection from the first three years.

The heart of the Workday Comic lies in exposing students to something resembling a comic book creator's working day in an environment where they can work together, learn from each other, influence one another, and share a common experience. Our project met all these objectives and so much more. We hope that this achievement will offer a model that might inspire similar projects at other institutions much as McCloud's and Bissette's original personal challenge to each other led to nearly two decades of related efforts.

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Biographical Sketch

Nick Langley is a second-year Digital Arts & Design student at Henderson State University. He created, organized, and edited *The Workday Comic*. His art has appeared in the *Oracle* and the *Southern Standard* newspapers, the *Proscenium* literary magazine, the Center for Cartoon Studies comic book *World War Awesome*, and McGraw-Hill textbook resources. He has conference proceedings articles in press, having conducted research on fan behavior and presented findings at the Arkansas Undergraduate Research Conference and the Comics Arts Conference.