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A GUNMAN IN TOWN!

A GUNMAN IN TOWN! CHILDREN INTERPRET A COMIC BOOK

MICHAEL J. PALLENIK

In 1974 Worth and Gross proposed a hierarchic and developmental model of interpretive strategies in communication situations or events. This paper describes some

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investigations of children's understanding of certain visual events—comic books. Ten children in each of three grades (third, fifth, eighth) were interviewed individually about a "story" from a "Western" comic book currently on the market (see accompanying illustrations). They were shown the pictures frame by frame.¹ After each frame three basic questions were asked: (1) What is happening? (2) How can you tell what is happening? and (3) What will happen?

Worth and Gross (1974) divide the class of sign-events (i.e., those events to which we assign meaning at a given moment in time, tacitly or otherwise) into three types: natural, symbolic, and ambiguous. Knowledge of social context determines in what class a sign-event will be understood; no particular, physical sign-event is, by necessity, of one or another type.

Natural sign-events depend upon our knowledge of physical laws (e.g., clouds often cause rain) or cultural rules

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of social stereotyping (e.g., Rolls-Royce equals wealth) for their meaning. The meaning of symbolic events depends upon our knowledge that they are produced purposely in order to convey meaning. Meaning is implied by an articulator, and inferred by an interpreter. Whereas natural sign-events can depend upon our knowledge of social or personal stereotypes, symbolic events depend upon our knowledge of shared conventions. Symbolic meaning is always social. Sign events are ambiguous when we do not know whether they are natural or symbolic. We must then assess their status and determine how we will treat them. Of particular interest in dealing with how children interpret comic books is the fact that some symbolic events lend themselves to being treated as though they were happening naturally.

The conventional story type of which the comic book used here is an example, has three major aspects: elements, contiguity, and structure. A "story" is made up in part of recognizable, meaningful elements (e.g., good guys, bad guys, guns, stagecoaches, etc.). The meaning inferred from these elements in a story is determined conventionally. However, insofar as the elements used in a story are also meaningful if encountered in social reality, their interpreted meaning may be either conventional or natural. Conventional-symbolic meaning and social-natural meaning can overlap.

The elements of a story are ordered by contiguity and structure: some elements occur together; others follow or precede one another. Elements are meaningful because they are ordered in a particular way. Interpreting a story entails not only assessing the meaning of particular elements ("He is a bad guy because he looks mean and is shooting all around"), but also putting elements together in space ("The doll is in the store that the gunman is in") and in time ("... and the townspeople were afraid and no one would face him, and then he went into a bar...") to form a narrative.

Structural relationships exist between noncontiguous elements. Moreover, a pattern or sequence of elements can be related to other patterns or sequences which come earlier or later in the story. Structure is, if you will, the architectural blueprint for the story. It allows for the story's completion

by building relationships between the beginning and ending, among variations on a theme, and so on. Thus, if a gunman, as at the beginning of the comic book, is about to wreck a store which sells dolls, and later a good-looking man drives into town to buy his daughter a doll, the two events are structurally important because they are necessary for the story to end.

Research based upon the above theoretical constructs (Worth and Gross 1974) and using various media has focused on four basic questions: (1) How is the choice of interpretive strategies affected by the natural or symbolic status of the event that is to be interpreted? (Messaris 1972, film; Pallenik 1973, videotape); (2) How does training in a symbolic mode affect the choice of interpretive strategies? (Wick 1973, writing; Messaris 1975, film); (3) How are interpretive strategies altered by the external context or form of a symbolic event in a single medium? (Kenworthy 1973, writing, e.g., the same piece of writing as a letter, a book review, part of a novel); and (4) How do the various strategies for recognizing and interpreting elements, contiguity, and structure change with age? (Harlan 1972, slides; Murphy 1973, slides and stills).

These studies have indicated that: (1) the interpretation of natural and symbolic events proceed along different lines—the former generally involving an assumption of non-intentionally communicated behavior on the part of the actor, the latter, an assumption of an intention to communicate; (2) the recognition of some basic elements, contiguities, orders, and structures in a pictorial medium as a story probably appears well before the second grade; (3) from the second grade to adult, variations in interpretive strategies can, in part, be ascribed to an increasing ability to pick out or recognize complex relations among various types of elements, orderings, and structures; (4) variations in interpretive strategies may also be ascribed to the contexts in which a symbolic event is embedded; (5) one may want to talk about a qualitative difference between strategies used by untrained and trained interpreters; and (6) the model of natural-attribitional versus symbolic-inferential interpretive strategies is particularly suited to the analysis of how we view

AS BRADY ENTERED THE STORE AND BAR, THE TOWNSFOLK WHO HAD BEEN HIDING THERE CAME RUNNING OUT THE BACK DOOR... ALL EXCEPT CLEM FOSS WHO OWNED THE STORE!

OUTSIDE, THE TOWNSPEOPLE TIMIDLY CROWDED AROUND THE DOORS, PEEKING THROUGH, ANGERED YET FASCINATED BY THE COMPLETE LAWLESSNESS OF THE GUNMAN!

MEANWHILE ON THE ROAD NEAR TOWN, ERIC MACKLIN, A SMALL, HARD-WORKING FARMER, WHO RAN A FEW HEAD OF STOCK, DROVE TOWARD TOWN WITH HIS WIFE AND DAUGHTER...

THEY SMILED BECAUSE TODAY WAS AN EVENT, LITTLE MILLIE'S FIFTH BIRTHDAY... AND THEY WERE DRIVING INTO PINE HOLLOW FOR HER PRESENT!

pictorial media which can be "realistic" and therefore understood either in terms of the social world depicted, or of the people who are doing the depicting, or both.

WHY COMIC BOOKS—AND HOW

The work I am about to describe differs from previous research on several points. Viewers in previous studies were shown an entire story, film clip, piece of writing, etc., and then interviewed. In this way, questions about what an interpreter thought was happening at a particular time or what he thought would happen were either lost to the interviewer or depended upon the memory of the respondent. It was difficult to discuss how children or adults interpreted, misinterpreted, sought, lost, missed, or retrieved a story's elements as they occurred, and the effect of these possibilities upon the overall interpretation. In an effort to approach some of these questions, I broke the story into its most apparent units (the individual comic book frame), and interviewed children after each unit was presented. In doing so, the question "what do you think is going to happen?" was added to the general interview schedule shared with other studies ("What is happening?" "How do you know?").

I chose comic books because the stimulus had to be short enough so that a presentation and interview could be accomplished in 45 minutes to an hour. Unlike film and television, comic books are also quite portable and the presentation easily controlled. I chose Westerns because that genre is well-known to children and therefore provides a manageable stylistic frame.

I chose the children and conducted the individual interviews with a view toward the widest possible variety within a single age group. The 30 children came from the same parochial grade school; ten children from each of three grades (third, fifth, and eighth; ages 7-8, 10-11, and 12-15, respectively). The sample is about equally balanced in each grade for sex and race (Caucasian and Black). Also, I interviewed one or two Puerto Rican children in each grade. In talking to the children and their teachers, it was clear that there was a wide range of reading skills in the sample, and that the children came from various socioeconomic sectors. While some differences between the children within a single grade do appear, the sample is too small for firm analytic distinctions regarding their use of interpretive strategies. The basic approach in this study was to try to find interpretive strategies shared by the children in a single grade.²

The structure of "A Gunman in Town!" is complex, using three separate but interlocking devices for presenting information. A narrator (who is not a character in the story) speaks in marked areas within frames when: necessary background information is presented (e.g., #1); there is an abrupt change of location (#9); a full pictorial presentation of behavior is uneconomical (#6, 15, 23); all the necessary information cannot be imparted by dialogue (#9, 11, 15, 23); or characters are not speaking (#7). With the exception of frame #7, each frame also contains representations of speech by characters—seen (#1) or unseen (#17). Each frame also contains figural representations and what might be called an angle of depiction (e.g., from above—#1, 23; from below—#2, 8; close-up—#10; from a distance—#9).

We would expect a child familiar with Westerns to

anticipate an eventual confrontation between the gunman and some type of hero. Information appears throughout the story to foreshadow and explain the impending conflict. The bar/store which the gunman enters is named in frame #5; the doll first depicted in frame #7. In frame #9, the narrator notes that the Macklins are driving to town, and Little Millie, in the same frame, states that Foss' bar/store is the specific destination. In frame #10, the narrator and Macklin set up the doll as a central object in the story, and Macklin's face clearly indicates that he possesses heroic stature. The doll is reiterated in frames #12-22. It is possible for the child to be well-informed about the nature of the impending conflict by frame #10, and certain of it by frame #12—the midpoint of the story.

Time and space are telescoped to varying degrees. Recognition of relationships between elements across presentational modes is crucial for understanding the story. There are invisible but implied sequences between frames and internal sequence within frames. It is often necessary to read the words in a frame to understand the affective states of the characters (e.g., #3, 15). It is a convention in comic books to place the individual who speaks first within a frame on the left. It makes for some peculiar re-positioning between frames (e.g., #16-18), but it can be necessary in order to understand the meaning of a frame. For example, if the speeches by the storeowner and farmer in the last frame are not read with the convention in mind, it is quite easy to view the sequence as Macklin putting his money back into his wallet after the storeowner refuses to accept payment.

THE CHILDREN'S INTERPRETATIONS

When the interpretations given by the children in all three grades are looked at, it is clear that there are no large qualitative differences among them. There are no great leaps forward or backward; there are only small jumps. All of the children recognized "A Gunman in Town!" as a Western. They knew the story was made up and had no problem in saying why they thought so. From the beginning, they all knew that the story would end, and with few exceptions how it would end: the gunman would lose. None of the children attached any importance to or expressed any interest in who the producers of the story were although all of them were quite interested in discussing named comic books and television programs and the characters who populate them.

None of this is surprising. The children are dealing with a well-known comic book and cartoon genre. Still, there are differences among the children in the ways they move through and interpret the story. The differences may not be great, but they are, I think, important.

Children in the three grades differ in the proficiency with which they handle the elements of the story. The last frame of the story provides a useful overview. To understand that the farmer pays for the doll, the child must know, at least tacitly, that the key is the order of speakers. The farmer pays because he speaks last. Of the seven third graders who knew that payment for the doll was an issue in the story, only two said that the farmer paid. Four fifth graders and seven eighth graders said he paid.

When we ask what the children do when they are given a new frame, a different pattern arises. Fifth and eighth graders

are distinguishable but basically the same; third graders appear qualitatively different. Both fifth and eighth graders, on the whole, seem to be reading at a fairly advanced level. They differ in that eighth graders will generally read all of the copy of each frame, while fifth graders usually read the first line or two of the copy that appears most important (usually the first speaker's verbal balloon) and then glance at the rest. They would continue reading if the first line or two indicated that important information followed. (I suspect that eighth graders would have read less and scanned more had many of them not treated the interview situation as a test.)

Unlike the older children, third graders found reading difficult; many found it a chore. Even the better readers had to puzzle out some words. Third graders were likely to focus their energy upon the pictorial component of each frame; they would frequently skip verbal material, particularly in "action frames" and in those "talking heads" frames which were expected, i.e., which came at a point when the child believed a character needed to talk to someone or think about something privately.³

It is easy to be misled here, to notice that third graders are not proficient readers and then to treat this as a trivial aspect of what these children do when they read comic books. The danger is to think that the child doesn't know what he's doing, that he doesn't know he's having trouble. The third grader can tell when things are not making sense to him or her. One third grader had a sensible story going *sans* farmer and doll, but then came upon some troublesome information:⁴

- (3)8#12 Q: What about him, is he afraid?
 A: No.
 Q: Why not?
 A: It looks like he's thinking.
 Q: What's he thinking?
 A: He's thinking that ... (reading) ... he's thinking ... is this all one story?
 Q: Why, don't you think it's all one story?
 A: No.
 Q: Why not?
 A: Cause he's talking about a doll ... and they're talking about something else.

The story which this child had constructed up to frame #12 did not contain a doll as an important element. In reading the copy of frame #12, the child recognized that a doll was being discussed. This information was problematic to him: he recognized that the doll was not just being introduced into the story at this point. The child entertained the possibility that he was dealing with two stories, not one—either what he thought was one story was really a hopeless jumble of stories, or he had missed information about the story or stories that would have made the doll understandable. The difference between older children and third graders is not simply one of proficiency; older children approach the story knowing they can read it, third graders know they may not.

Third Graders: Genre as "World-like"

The third grader approaches the story like a puzzle: all of the pieces are there, but the picture will emerge only when he has ordered the pieces. It is his job to make the best sense he can out of the pieces. In attempting to put these pieces

together, third graders are often forced to take rather extreme measures; sometimes they may even appear to be telling different stories at different times.

When a third grader reads a frame, he will often find unanticipated information, having missed the prior information with which it interlocks. Third graders often do not know how or where to locate such missed information, so they will devise a formulation from available data and hope that later frames will confirm it. In making a formulation, the third grader will revise his sense of what has been happening and may also revise the new information to improve its fit. In later frames, he will now search for elements that will clearly confirm or deny his new formulation. However, if additional unanticipated information is chanced upon later in the story, the child may effectively be back at square one. In a sense, unanticipated information is the most important aspect of story interpretation for the third grader; an entire story will be revised on the basis of it:

- (3)8#9 Q: So you think it's a sheriff who's coming to town?
 A: Mhm.
 Q: What's going to happen?
 A: He's gonna try to get him but maybe he won't get him, maybe he'll have to get out.
- (3)8#10 A: Looks like he's the sheriff ... (reading) ... oh, it's his fifth birthday.
 Q: Whose?
 A: His.
 Q: How can you tell?
 A: Cause it says his fifth birthday ... he looks more than five.
 Q: Anything else happening?
 A: Well, he's thinking of what to do ... maybe since he's gotten older that maybe he could become a sheriff or something ... and if he does become a sheriff, he's thinking of what to do.
 Q: So do you think he's a sheriff, or, is he a sheriff?
 A: He's not a sheriff.
 Q: What do you think he is?
 A: Well, I think he's a boy ... and he's gotten older and since he's gotten older ... somebody could pick him as a sheriff.
 Q: How old do you think he is?
 A: ... Twenty.
- (3)8#11 A: ... I think he's twenty-five now, he's got kids.
 Q: What's happening?
 A: Or ... I think that maybe now he's the sheriff and he's coming to town with his family to get him, maybe they called him up and they're glad to see him.
 Q: How did they get in touch with him?
 A: They called him up.
 Q: Did they use a telephone?
 A: Not the kind you pick up ... like you hold it like this (*demonstrates a crank telephone*).
 Q: Ever see one?
 A: On TV.

Concentrating upon the pictorial material, third graders' statements appear to be stereotypic on two counts. First, much of this particular story is located in the lexical stream; missing it makes the story appear more stereotypic. Bad guys are bad because they look bad; good guys are good because they look good. Second, as information is continually being missed, their explanations do not appropriately depend upon the interlocking elements in the story. Rather, the third grader will draw upon his knowledge of the social world or the genre to explain or fill out the story. The knowledge which the third grader draws upon is usually in stereotypic form, and appears without qualification as a rule or norm:

(3)6#9 A: (*reading*) . . . People who are on a farm they coming in there, a man, wife, and daughter coming in there and the little girl said that maybe they won't have no sense to be there anymore . . . and I think that they are coming in there for something to git . . . maybe they gonna drive there and give some . . . maybe they selling potatoes, or maybe they gonna git some potatoes because they live on a farm . . . because on a farm you-all got to give away all your stuff, and you won't have nothing . . . you'll give all your stuff away to people that need something but you-all be poor by yourself.

Q: How do you know?

A: Because on a farmer's . . . they have to . . . give their stuff back . . . they got to give their stuff to other people who don't have nothing . . . and they'll be left poor by theyself . . . I wouldn't be no farmer.

Nonetheless, third graders' statements are not entirely stereotypic. Their descriptions of what is happening and their predictions of what will happen can be quite specific—oftentimes more specific than those of older children. This suggests that the relevant unit for third graders is not the story so much as the genre.

Third graders seem to approach the genre as though it were "world-like." The genre is not, for them, composed of conventional elements, sequences, structures, narrative devices, plots, and so on. They seem to see it as a world populated by particular kinds of people (good guys, bad guys, sheriffs, farmers, women, and children) who act toward one another in particular ways (by killing one another, by sheltering one another, by being afraid or fearless) and in particular places (in town, on a road outside of town, in a saloon). The third grader does not exactly mistake a genre or a story for reality, either past, present, or future (although this can happen); he seems to give it a special time and place in his imagination.

I would argue that, in part, the third grader is able to construct a comprehensible story from partial information because he treats the genre as world-like. Data to support this contention is extremely sketchy—there is a danger of over-interpretation—but I think the following observations lend support to it.

Third graders will frequently describe the story's action in terms of the medium they know best—usually television. There seems to be little separation between media, so that a

third grader will sometimes describe the action in a way that is inappropriate to the medium. For example, they will take a dialogue which is presented in two verbal balloons and describe it in terms of back-and-forth verbal patter:

(3)9#7 A: . . . He's . . . the chef, he ask him does he want, the bad guy, you want any refreshment . . . and he said no . . . and he said you gonna hold up the store? . . . and he said . . . yes . . . and he said I'm gonna get somebody to stop you . . . and he said, you can't get nobody to stop me from wrecking this place.

Q: Did they talk back and forth like that?

A: Uh-huh.

Q: How could you tell?

A: Cause you can see the point . . . after he says something, then he said it.

What is important in this child's description of Foss and Brady's verbal dueling is its bending of the medium to fit what the child thinks would be happening. Sometimes this bending is explicitly referenced to television or the real world; sometimes it is not.

The third grader gives a world-like quality to the genre by applying its rules even though they may not be invoked in the particular story. One third grader, speaking about the gunman in frame #16 was asked:

(3)8#16 Q: You said you didn't really think he wanted to make trouble?

A: Uh-huh.

Q: Why not?

A: He's kind of afraid to, like, to shoot anybody cause he might get in bad trouble.

Q: How would he get in bad trouble?

A: Like if a sheriff from another town hears about it even though they're not allowed to go to another town to get anybody, he might go over there and tell him to get out of that town and go somewhere else.

Q: How do you know that a sheriff from another town isn't allowed to come over?

A: Cause that's what they . . . I seen that in a movie, like the sheriff in one town tried to go over to another town to settle something cause the sheriff was away and he got in jail cause he wasn't supposed to come over . . . cause they had this guy . . . well, his friend, the sheriff's friend was supposed to take care of him, but he wasn't cause, you see, the sheriff's friend was always drunk, so he wasn't doing such a good job.

Just because there is no sheriff in the town is no reason to say there is no jail:

(3)8#16 Q: Which do you think is going to happen?

A: Put him in the jailhouse.

Q: Do you think there is a jailhouse?

A: Mhm.

Q: Why do you think there is a jailhouse?

A: Cause every town should have a jailhouse . . . in those days.

Moreover, third graders seem to have difficulty recognizing impending closure. Although they sense that a fight is coming as quickly as do the older children, and they know that, the gunman must lose in the end, they are less likely to see the farmer as the vehicle of that defeat. At best the pair are seen as evenly matched or as the gunman having a slight edge. If the farmer were to lose the fight, they would expect the story to continue until someone else came along to finish off the gunman. Even after the gunman has lost the fight, third graders can see the story continuing into an indefinite future:

- (3)1#23 Q: Why are they giving him back his guns?
 A: They're giving them back... I don't know... but I know that all the guns are empty... no bullets.
 Q: How do you know that?
 A: Cause if they did have bullets, he would shoot him right now.
- (3)9#24 Q: What's gonna happen?
 A: They're probably gonna ride back home... then probably the bad guy come back again.
 Q: Why do you say that?
 A: Because, like if he waits for two years... like as soon as they go, he might hide somewhere and soon as they leave... a far, far distance like he can't see even with binoculars, then he'll go around there, then he starts shooting the town up.
 Q: Do you think he'll win then?
 A: No.
 Q: Why not?
 A: Because like, somebody that, that he couldn't, somebody probably snuck out and call the guy and he probably, then he probably drop his guns and run.

Although the particular story ends, third graders seem to view the story world as continuing. Likewise, although a particular story or even medium may be seen as unrealistic or unnatural, the story world is viewed as essentially real and true on its own terms.

Fifth and Eighth Grade: Contiguity and Structure

If third graders seem to view the genre as world-like, fifth graders seem to view the story as a pattern and sequence of elements. The story is seen as particular and contiguous. Eighth graders share these characteristics, but also tend to move back and forth between their knowledge of conventional genre structure and the particular story before them. Fifth graders, on the other hand, seem to be more constrained by discrete story moments. Attention is given to the narrative details as they are presented.

Because the fifth graders pick up more detailed information as they go than do the third graders, their explanations appear less stereotypic—the particulars of the story explain the events. This also enables them to integrate and anticipate events more quickly and with greater precision, often five or six frames ahead:

- (5)7#10 Q: What's going on?
 A: The guy bought into the store and get a doll cause it's her birthday.
 Q: Who's holding the doll for him?
 A: The storeman probably... and they was poor farmers.
 Q: What do you think is going to happen?
 A: He'll probably see the guy shooting... messing up the place and then shoot the little girl's doll baby and then he'll probably hit the guy or kill him (action six frames ahead).
 Q: Why do you say that?
 A: Cause the guy probably be in the store already by now and he say he going to wreck up the joint so he'll probably shoot the doll babies and things.

The importance of sequence to fifth graders is seen most clearly when they are asked to predict what is going to happen. Each frame can be said to imply something about future developments—either short or long term, or both. Whereas eighth graders make long-range predictions with a view toward how the story will end, fifth graders concentrate upon short term action sequences.

When eighth graders see the wagon approaching the town in frame #9, they are likely to talk about the story's conclusion:

- (8)9#9 Q: What do you think is going to happen?
 A: Well, now probably the guy's coming to visit him will probably fight him.
 Q: Who do you think is going to win?
 A: Probably that guy right there.
 Q: Why?
 A: Cause it has to end eventually.
- (8)2#9 A: Well, the small farmer comes into the act... the farmer'll probably stop him.
 Q: Why do you say that?
 A: Cause he's just now getting into the story while he's terrorizing the town... so he'll probably be the hero for the day.

Based on their knowledge of the gunman, fifth graders are likely to talk about the effect he might have on the family:

- (5)2#9 Q: What do you think is going to happen?
 A: They're probably going to find out that the robber's there... they're going to be afraid too.
- (5)7#9 Q: What do you think is going to happen?
 A: He'll probably see what's happening and then he'll get all excited.

One fifth grader did discuss the end of the story at the ninth frame:

- (5)9#9 Q: What do you think is going to happen?
 A: He's going to ride in and see the gunman and probably run him over.
 Q: You mean he's going to run him over with...
 A: No, by accident, he'll probably run him over.

Q: Why do you say that?

A: Because he probably won't be looking and he'll be going through town, boom, boom, boom, and then he'll just come riding by . . . and hit him, I guess.

None of the eighth graders seemed innocent enough of the conventions of Westerns to think that the story could end with the farmer accidentally running the gunman down with his wagon.

Even if the eighth grader is unsure in the ninth frame, his predictions about the end of the story will generally be definite by the tenth:

(8)6#9 A: See, here comes the guy that's gonna stop him.

Q: How can you tell?

A: Because it always happens in comic books . . . (*reading*) . . . that the farmer . . . no . . . ya . . . I think he'll stand up to him.

(8)6#10 Q: What do you think is going to happen?

A: I think he's gonna get into a fight with the . . . trigger-happy Bill, whatever the guy's name is.

Q: How can you tell?

A: He looks like . . . it always happens in comic books.

Note in the above example, however, that the child had recognized the introduction of the hero without having read the copy or seen the hero's face. His expectation at the ninth frame was based solely on the figural depiction and its location in the story.

In succeeding frames, eighth graders' predictions tend to be one of three types. First, they may simply repeat their predictions from the ninth and tenth frames: the farmer will fight the gunman and win. This type will usually end with the farmer's entrance into the bar/store (frame #15). Second, eighth graders may also predict the next frame or an action sequence. This type may occur between the tenth and fifteenth frames, but is more likely after the farmer enters the store:

(8)9#16 A: Brady's saying he's gonna shoot up the doll and Macklin says don't shoot up that doll, wait a minute cause I'm gonna buy that doll for my little girl.

Q: What's gonna happen now?

A: He's probably gonna turn around and say something like don't tell me what to do something like that and they're probably going to get into a fight.

Third, eighth graders may make predictions about how the fight will be conducted that are not based upon extending an implied sequence but are the consequence of eliminating possible outcomes at higher levels of structure. The question of who will beat the gunman has been answered; the issue is how will the farmer beat him:

(8)6#15 Q: What's going to happen now?

A: He's gonna get into a fight with the other guy and they're gonna . . . say, have a gun-battle . . . they're gonna go in the street.

Q: Does he have guns?

A: No, the other guy's gonna give him one . . . or maybe they'll wrestle . . . cause he'll say I don't use guns.

This prediction is not sequential, but structural; there is nothing in frame #15 implying how the fight will be conducted. In a similar vein, eighth graders will often make two predictions at once, both at the same level of structure, but one having already been eliminated:

(8)9#11 A: They're probably going to fight.

Q: How can you tell?

A: Well, cause it's gonna have to fight eventually cause the guy's gonna have to leave eventually.

Q: Why does he have to leave eventually?

A: Cause the story has to end . . . and they can't leave the guy.

Q: What's gonna happen?

A: He's probably going to get into a fight with him, either that or he's just going to go in and get the doll and walk out again.

Eighth graders do not totally eliminate structural endings but they do treat some as more remote than others. No fifth grader did this.

By the tenth frame, fifth graders are also likely to say that the farmer may fight the gunman:

(5)2#10 Q: What's happening there?

A: Well, it looks like that's the little girl's father . . . or something.

Q: How can you tell?

A: It looks like he's the brother because he's younger . . . and it's a little girl . . . and I think he's going to try to kill the robber.

Q: Why do you say that?

A: Well, he looks real strong . . . and he looks like he's going to save the town.

However, while fifth graders will say that the two *may* fight, eighth graders will say that the two *will* fight. Eighth graders' justifications may include explicit references to the fact that the story has to end; fifth graders will rely upon how the farmer looks. Where eighth graders make structural predictions, fifth graders, in succeeding frames, will often respond with "I don't know" or "I can't tell from this frame."

The fifth frame—showing the gunman entering the bar—lends itself easily to the question, "What is going to happen?" When fifth graders are asked this question, they will tend to respond with what they think the gunman will do because he is the focus of attention:

(5)9#5 Q: What do you think is going to happen inside?

A: He'll probably push the bottles off the shelf.

Q: Do you think anyone will stop him inside?

A: I don't know . . . throw a glass of beer in his face.

(5)6#5 Q: Do you think anything is going to happen inside?

A: Yeah.

Q: What?

A: He might break every . . . like he could tip the bottles over and ruin the bar.

Q: What do you think will happen after that?

A: I guess he'll come back out.

Eighth graders, on the other hand, will look toward the end of the story:

(8)6#5 A: He's going into a bar, shooting down the windows and now everybody's saying now anything can happen . . . like maybe the bartender'll get mad, and maybe he'll start shooting.

Q: So what do you think is going to happen?

A: Maybe the bartender's gonna start shooting, if he's a good shot, otherwise they're gonna be in trouble.

(8)1#5 A: Well, he probably meet up with a drunk that probably got faith while he's drunk . . . not why he's going into the saloon . . . and that's when they probably have somebody to go against him, the drunk probably don't know what he's getting into cause the guy just blast him away, and then he probably get mad cause some nut coming up to try to stop him and he probably just wreck that place too.

Eighth Grade: Genre as Conventional

Like younger children, eighth graders see the story as grounded in the genre. Unlike younger children, they explicitly see the genre as conventionally ordered. They acknowledge that some of what happens in a story is part of the nature of storytelling, either in general or specific to a genre.

Eighth graders will explicitly use a presence/absence principle. If the storyteller had wanted to say something different, then what appears in the story would be different:

(8)9#8 Q: How can you tell that they're too scared?

A: Cause if they weren't scared they wouldn't be looking in the windows, they would come in.

(8)2#11 Q: Are they talking to one another or to the farmer?

A: To one another.

Q: How can you tell?

A: Cause they're not talking to him cause he don't answer . . . cause this guy says *that* homesteader and this guy says *that* fool farmer driving with his wimmin folk at a time like this.

Eighth graders are more likely to recognize that the story has an audience (however indefinite) in their descriptions of what is happening. Their descriptions are frequently a step removed from the action; the expository functions of a frame are recognized.

(8)9#2 A: Now he's shooting up the signs, I think, and now you find out that there's no kind of sheriff or anything.

(8)9#10 A: That saying that tells it why the family's

going into town . . . going into town to get the little girl a doll for her birthday.

Once the story is seen to have a conventional structure, it is possible for an eighth grader to say that the story ends well for a reason:

(8)6#23 Q: Why do you think they have the farmer giving the guns back?

A: There has to be a moral to the comic, they can't just keep the guns . . . then all the little kids, they'll keep the guns, they got to make it so they all say, Wow! he's my hero, and now we're gonna give everything back if someone hits me with it.

(8)8#24 A: Comics, they just make up all kinds of stories to make young kids happy and keep reading stories about Western . . . I guess the kids happy . . . it's like on TV they say that . . . a monster picture and the guy wins . . . they like the guy that wins . . . and this like shows . . . he won the fight . . . like him . . . and comic books about it.

And that categories of stories can be put to different purposes:

(8)1#24 A: Cause when I was younger many times I used to read . . . I read a couple of stories like this before . . . I can make up a good one like this too . . . like it just come the thoughts, you just make it up . . . like some kind of makers got different thoughts . . . some comic makers got love stories like, others got cartoon stories . . . like that Spiderman story, that Dick Tracy story, Charlie Brown and others got like these stories, like these interesting stories you can read like, stories that you ought to think about sometimes. Like most of the time I put all the good ones together and you know all the funny ones . . . you know . . . when I get thinking I read the interesting ones that something that makes me think on.

There seemed to be two major types of interpretive styles among the eighth graders. When these children did not find the story compelling, they tended to use a flat style of interpretation. This flat style is a refinement of the fifth graders' contiguous approach: the child pays close attention to the events which have happened, processes them, and then waits for more:

(8)4#6 A: And they say right here . . . that Tiger Brady telling them to run . . . and he saying ain't no man gonna stand up to him.

Q: What do you think is going to happen next?

A: I don't know . . . I got to read that first.

Eighth graders using a flat style focus upon the story as an object to be perceived, decoded, and understood as it unfolds. The elements of the story determine what is to be thought at each point in time. The child assumes that all necessary information is or will be presented, that it will be presented bit by bit, and that all one has to do is understand

what has happened and wait for the rest.

The difference between a flat style and a contiguous approach is that the former includes a relatively self-conscious form of waiting while the latter does not. Fifth graders seemed to be involved with the story; it was fun and they liked it. The flat style user is not involved with the story and does only what is necessary to do at the time. When he makes a prediction, it will be a crystallization of what he is supposed to think at the time, and no more. He is more likely to respond with "I don't know" or "Let's wait and see" to requests for predictions. These predictions, while sequential, are also structural. It almost seems that the child actively restrains himself:

- (8)7#9 Q: What do you think is going to happen?
A: Just gonna go there and they'll see what's happening.
Q: And then what?
A: I don't know.
- (8)7#10 A: The farmer wants to get his daughter for her birthday a doll . . . they're driving into town to get it.
Q: What's going to happen?
A: I don't know.
Q: Do you have any idea where the doll is?
A: Probably in the store where the bar is too.
Q: Why do you say that?
A: Cause in the other picture there was a doll sitting on top . . . I guess it was a cabinet or something.
- (8)7#11 Q: Does the farmer know what's going on in town?
A: No . . . cause nobody told him yet cause he just got into town.
Q: What do you think is going to happen?
A: He's going to drive right into the middle of it.
Q: What do you think'll happen after that?
A: I don't know.
- (8)7#12 A: The guy's telling him that they better get the little girl and the mother into a building or something so nothing'll happen to 'em . . . and the little girl says she still wants her doll . . . and the guy says that you'll still get it.
Q: What do you think is going to happen?
A: He's gonna fight the guy.
Q: Why do you say that?
A: Cause he's saying that you'll get your doll and the only place he'd get it is from where the guy's at right now.

When an eighth grader was involved with the story, (or the interview), he used an expansive style.⁵ The style is nicely brought out by the fact that comic books are schematic. In using an expansive style, the eighth grader plays against the schematic order of the story. The principal characteristic of the style is an interest in filling in the blanks; the eighth grader creates a world around the story (but not one which makes up for missed information, as with third graders). The elements of the story are seen as limiting one's ability to fill

out a narrative world:

- (8)2#17 A: And Brady says after he gonna shoot up the doll, he gonna shoot up the farmer and then the farmer says I don't reckon, I don't reckon that mister you can do that.
Q: Why is he going to shoot the doll before he shoots the farmer?
A: He shot everything else up in the store but the doll . . . shot the doll up to get that over with, then he'll shoot the man.

In order to produce this answer, the child must know that, *vis-à-vis* the structure of the story, the time dimension between frame #7, when the gunman says he's going to wreck the bar, and frame #16, when he's about to shoot the doll, is ambiguous. As long as the essential order of the story is kept intact, an ambiguous piece of time is open to interpretation. Moreover, the presence/absence principle need not apply because the gunman's actual target practice is not structurally important beyond his attempt to shoot the doll.

When an eighth grader using an expansive style is asked to make predictions, the world which he invokes becomes clearer to see. The eighth grader's expanded world will usually rely upon personal knowledge of what reality is like. Whether or not the town does anything about the gunman is more than just structurally important. A real world can be built upon it:

- (8)1#4 A: Well they trying to say that there ain't no guy faster in that town . . . faster than Brandy . . . and you know he just tearing it down . . . and there ain't no man in the town that would face against him . . . he just too fast for them . . . and don't nobody want to lose their life.
Q: How can you tell?
A: Cause in the poster, there's one guy saying . . . wouldn't anybody in the town stand a chance against him . . . what he was trying to say that there ain't nobody faster than him in the town . . . they probably sooner or later try something.
Q: Do you think there's a way to stop him?
A: Ya . . . I think the way to . . . look . . . the way I see it . . . one of them gonna die probably two . . . but all of them got guns . . . they just surround him . . . or hide . . . and when he comes in to wreck more part of the town . . . they just blast him.
Q: How do you know they have guns?
A: Mostly . . . they would have guns . . . one reason why they got guns because most of them, they got faith . . . and so they try to protect their homes, robberies in the town . . . so they got to have something on them.
- (8)1#5 A: Well, its's the bartender who got the heart probably cause it's his own bar . . . but the rest they probably so shaken up that they

runs out the back door . . . but I say if I was the bartender too, I'd stand there and try and back up my bar . . . no wise guy gonna come in . . . just shoot his guns . . . that ain't gonna scare me cause I probably got one too.

CONCLUSIONS

The data indicate that all of the children had a basic knowledge of the elements, contiguities, and structure which comprised "A Gunman in Town!" along with some recognition of the genre. The children know pictures "tell" a story. With few exceptions, they know how the story is going to end: the gunman will lose.

Each of the children did introduce aspects of his social world when commenting upon the story. However, they tended to restrict their use of "real world" knowledge to occasions when they either were at a loss to explain the action from elements within the story (third graders) or felt that the story's structure had left the matter open to interpretation (e.g., expansive style). By and large, the children were more likely to explain and predict from the elements of the story or their knowledge of the story-type than from a knowledge of social reality. This was not surprising given the comic book medium.

The development from third to eighth grade can be seen as an increasing ability to encounter a story as a story, as something made up. Criteria for identifying "storyness" became more sophisticated. Third graders said the story was not real but this depended upon the medium: because the comic book is drawn, the story is fabricated—although it could happen. Eighth graders went beyond the medium; "storyness" depended upon the identification of a conventional story structure. It permitted certain elements to be seen as improbable:

(8)6#24 Q: Do you think comic book stories like this are real?

A: No.

Q: Why not?

A: Cause that wouldn't happen, the guy would . . . the guy would have shot him, cause he hit him with his hands, and he would have shot him.

Q: Is there anything else which isn't real?

A: Well, I don't think the guy would go so far to get his daughter a doll.

Q: Why not?

A: I don't know, would you try and get yourself killed just to get your daughter a doll . . . I'd go somewhere else.

Improbability depended upon the child's sense of how the real world works and his knowledge that the story was conventional. The doll was not viewed as an improbable element until it was understood structurally, as a vehicle for ending the story. To risk one's life for a doll is improbable in reality and is, therefore, clearly made-up.

To recognize that some elements are improbable by identifying them with a conventional structure does not make all elements suspect. Eighth graders' recognition of

conventional structure can be seen as growing out of prior (e.g., third graders) treatment of the genre as world-like. It is against this "world" that conventional structure seemed to develop. But this derivation may be only partial.

The recognition of conventional structure seemed to develop because: (1) with age, the child becomes more familiar with the "ways" of story-types and social reality so that comparisons can be made; (2) by the eighth grade, the child has mastered the recognition of elements and contiguities; and (3) a concern with endings seemed to run through all of the children's encounters with the story.

Although the concern with endings must be treated with extreme caution (since a strong influence was necessarily exerted by the question, "What is going to happen?"), it suggests that the improbability of the events in the story was perceived and interpreted in terms of the author's attempts to resolve the story according to the conventions. The machinery which eighth graders saw was the mechanics of closure. An eighth grader could note that the ending was unrealistic, and yet accept the premise that a town without a sheriff invites trouble. The premises apparently remain unquestioned even though they may be quite familiar (e.g., the sheriff has left town; the sheriff has just been killed)—and therefore part of a definition of conventional structure—or surprising (e.g., the hero is a farmer and not an honest, wronged gunslinger). A recognition of conventional structure did not seem to supplant the world-like aspect of the genre; it developed out of it. This world-like aspect may endure because the child cannot necessarily learn from the story or the genre that an event or premise which is symbolically probable can be naturally improbable. There is an outside source of information for this to occur.

The boundaries between an imaginative world and social reality can remain porous so long as the child does not chance too often upon conflicting information. Moreover, the child has little reason to question a story in its own right since the stories which he interprets will generally be authored by adults. Much of his social knowledge is given to him by adults and parallels popular story morality; and his sphere of personal experience is, relative to adults, limited. Without discrediting outside information, then, the child might not learn to understand story structure as conventional, intentional, and symbolic.

NOTES

¹The 24 frames of "A Gunman in Town!" were separated and pasted onto individual cards. The child was handed the frames one at a time, and questioning was begun whenever the child gave some indication that he understood the frame and was ready to talk about it. Frames which had already been discussed remained in view and within easy reach so that the child could refer back to previous frames whenever required for understanding or discussion.

²Research of this type faces some major problems. The person interpreting the interviews is also the person conducting them. Theoretical bias can operate in both the interpretive and interview situations. I can only say that I recognize the problems and have tried to report the study as accurately as I could. Also, the effects of the interview situation must be gauged. When a black, eighth grade female responds with "I don't know" to a question put by an older white

male, is it that she doesn't know the answer or that she won't give the answer at this point in the negotiations? Recognizing that the same answer to the same question about the same comic book frame may nevertheless mean something different in each case, interviews were conducted in a looser manner than would otherwise be warranted. While the basic questions remained the same for each frame and for each child, sometimes certain questions were dropped and others added to gain an adequate sense of the child's interpretation.

³While film, television, and comic books are all mixed media, film and television generally mix the pictorial with the aural, and comic books mix the pictorial with the written. Since mastery, or the achievement of transparency, occurs later in written than in aural codes, this is likely to alter the interpretive strategies children use in encountering a comic book story. Any generalization from what third graders did with "A Gunman in Town!" to what they would do with a film or television program must be undertaken with extreme caution. The data are suggestive of a development but are not definitive.

⁴Examples drawn from the interviews will be preceded by an interview code. The number enclosed in parentheses refers to the grade level of the child interviewed. The number following the parenthesis refers to the order of the child's interview. Finally, the number following the "#" sign refers to the frame discussed at that point of the interview. Thus, "(3)8#12" translates as the eighth third grader interviewed, talking about frame #12.

⁵Among the eighth graders, females tended to use the flat style, while males tended to use the expansive style. The story is oriented toward males, and the expansive style is more apparent among them. However, females sometimes employed an expansive style when some element in the story seemed to be important to them, and males would use a flat style when the action did not seem interesting. The two styles of interpretation were not consistently used by either sex or any particular child. Interest in or involvement with the story seemed to be a better determinant of which style would be used.

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