

Virtual Unreality and the Shape of Time: Virtual comics, postmodern self-referentiality, and the fourth dimension

Abstract

Self-referentiality has been used as a narrative technique in comics since the medium's early newspaper days. There is, for example, a Krazy Kat strip in which Ignatz the mouse paints itself with black ink in order to blend in with a square of black ink floating in one of George Herriman's typically abstract minimalist backgrounds. The episode makes apparent the characters' existence as ink lines drawn on paper, but this metatextual touch works towards the same ends as Herriman's other narrative techniques, telling the absurd brick hurling love story of Krazy and Ignatz. However, in the past decade, comics creators such as Grant Morrison, Alan Moore, and Chris Ware have made use of self-referentiality in their work in order to interrogate such postmodern ideas as the subjectivity of reality and time. Oftentimes these interrogations are attempts to use postmodernist self-referentiality as a tool by which to objectify time, presenting it as perceivable dimension.

This paper seeks to briefly examine how postmodern self-referentiality has previously been used in comics in attempts to make time objectively apparent to three dimensional perceptions. From there it posits how comics in virtual environments might further the use of self-referentiality in sequential art as a cartographic tool in mapping the fourth dimension. The paper closes with a practical application of those posits in the form of "Trees You Can't Climb," a comic created by the authors for the simulated three dimensional environment of CANVAS, the Collaborative Advanced Navigation Virtual Art Studio at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign (<http://www.canvas.uiuc.edu>). In CANVAS, the panels of "Trees You Can't Climb" are displayed as floating two dimensional planes arranged in a manner that portrays time in the story as a simulated third dimension.

AV EQUIPMENT NEEDS

The presenters will bring a laptop with all relevant slides and a projector. All that is required from ICAF is a projector screen and an electrical outlet.

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