Snikt, *Boom*, *K-Chak*:
An Analysis of the Comic Book Domain

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Origin Story

The design of our thesaurus is guided by a functional purpose, which allows for maximum use and benefit for reader's advisory and related purposes. We hope to provide entry points into the domain of comics to diverse populations that have various levels of experience and familiarity of the domain. Some key users we envision are librarians, comic novices, and long-time fans looking to expand their reading habits and knowledge of the form. The structure given to this domain will illuminate not only direct relationships that may be clear to more experienced users, but also relationships that are less obvious, such as similarities between works from different artistic, genre, and narrative traditions that none-the-less share a related story type, which we identify as a trope in our thesaurus. The design and structure of the thesaurus will allow for meaningful, guided browsing and discovery.

In our work on this thesaurus, we rely on Roland Barthes' exhortation to "writerly," rather than "readerly," values (1974, p. 4). In the simplest terms, the writerly is productive and creative where the readerly is consumptive and passive.[1] Comics is fundamentally a writerly medium. It is and has always been an industry of fanfiction that encourages reworking, retconning,[2] and collective creative ownership of stories, characters, and worlds. Because it is, traditionally, such

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[1] Barthes discusses this distinction for the greater part of a book, but the best and clearest discussion of these two values is on pp. 4-5 of *S/Z*.

[2] Retcon: "A situation, in a soap opera or similar serial fiction, in which a new storyline explains or changes a previous event or attaches a new significance to it" ("Retcon," 2011)

a collaborative medium, each work necessarily features a plurality of voices and viewpoints. Characters also tend to endure much longer than creators, so one character may feature in works produced by dozens, if not hundreds, of creators over the years. The sheer number of different contributions ensures that there is room for reader interpretation in a way that is not possible with a novel produced by a single creator. There are dozens of different truths for each character, and a fan gets to decide which they like best. The general perception of comics as a cheap and disposable form also enables this freedom of interpretation, as they do not commend the same automatically awed respect as a thick novel might.

In order to be true to this fundamental aspect of comics, this will be a writerly thesaurus. Rather than attempting objectivity in the perception of our domain or in the construction of our thesaurus, we have chosen a clear perspective and aim to make it explicit at every stage. To use the old metaphor of the mirror and the lamp, we do not aim to merely hold a mirror up to our domain and replicate it in our thesaurus. Instead, we will acknowledge the transformative light of our perspective, and attempt to leverage it for a better product (Abrams, 1953). Our thesaurus aims to function as an expert fan, guiding another enthusiast through the comics canon, with the purpose of moving that reader into comics from other media, between readerships within comics, and to enable reader sensemaking by giving structure to the history and tradition of comics.

Structure of the Thesaurus

As we have analyzed our domain, we have found that there are elements that organize and connect diverse comic books, artists, styles, and traditions. Narrative tropes, useful specific genres, and artistic styles are the large organizing principles at work. Narrative tropes and genres are closely related, but have been separated and conceptualized as distinct elements of

organization to allow maximum useful combination of possibilities. This thesaurus will allow novel compound facets across these broad organizing principles. Each of these three organizing elements could be visualized as cogs on a combination lock. Each cog has several levels from generality to specificity. The user will be able to use terms alone, or in combination with others.

This structure will allow users of various levels of knowledge to enter the domain, browse and retrieve at levels matched to their need and interest. We hope that novel combinations will draw out hidden, subtle connections between works that otherwise seem unrelated. Our concept is that users, regardless of skill level, value elements that appeal to them—within the story, the characters, the tropes and the art. Many of these appeal factors are not explicitly recognized by readers, but we hope to name and define them in such a way that there is a recognition, an ah-ha moment. Additionally, these appeal factors transcend national and stylistic boarders, but users at any level of experience may find themselves wary of venturing into uncharted territory. We hope that the design and function of our thesaurus allows for an engaging, fun, rewarding, and helpful way to navigate this complex domain.

Changeling: The Varied Forms of Comics

Comics are defined and distinguished from other types of literature by their form. Comics are ideas that are represented by interconnected word and images presented in a sequence (Duncan & Smith, 2009) for the purpose of telling a story. As Goldsmith states in reference to graphic novels, "Images here are not illustrations that simply repeat or amplify text, but rather carry information not revealed verbally. Correspondingly, the verbal content provides information not present in the image" (2010).

Comics take many forms, a fact that has spawned a great degree of controversy about exactly what the distinction between the many formats are. This thesaurus is not designed to be a part of that argument. It is our purpose to help break down silos and promote navigation between formats based on the elements of a comic that make it fun to read. The four commonly cited forms, defined below, are: comic strip, comic book, manga and the graphic novel.

Comic Strip: The comic strip is considered distinct from comic books and graphic novels in several ways. Method of distribution, purpose, and the length of ideas expressed vary the most significantly. Comic strips are traditionally distributed through the newspaper industry with the purpose of selling newspapers (Duncan & Smith, 2009). Distribution of comic strips has grown to connect artists directly to readers through websites and e-mail subscriptions, but may expand in the future to other electronic delivery methods.

Comic strips also express different kinds of ideas than comic books or graphic novels. Comic strips tell a self-contained joke or represent a single idea across a short series of panels (Goldsmith, 2010). While characters and themes may persist throughout the life of the comic strip, this feature makes it possible for a reader to begin and end their engagement with the title in one short series of panels. While comic strips are sometimes collected into books, individual strips can often be organized thematically as well as chronologically with no loss of understanding.

Comic Books: Comic books tell a narrative story that continues from issue to issue. A story arc may span issues and volumes. Comic books are often the work of collaborative authorship and series titles and characters may belong to publishing houses instead of individual authors

(Goldsmith). Comic books have traditionally been published first in issues—magazines of 24-64 pages (Serchay)—released on a monthly basis and sometimes compiled into volumes or omnibuses (Duncan, 2009). Increased sales of volumes or trade paperbacks and decrease in demand for issues combined with digital publishing and web comics have shifted the dynamic of this publication (Serchay). Comics still retain the tradition of episodic releases contributing to a story that builds on each release, especially those that have moved to digital subscription models.

Graphic Novels: The term graphic novel is one that has not yet been firmly defined (Serchay). Some consider graphic novels distinct from comic books that are collected into trade paperbacks as works originally published in volumes. These are sometimes referred to as Original Graphic Novels (Serchay). They have better defined narrative structure with a clear beginning, middle, and end (Goldsmith, 2009). Graphic novels have publishing schedules more like traditional novels (Lyga & Lyga, 2004) and may be published by traditional publishing houses. Like novels, they may belong to a series or stand on their own. They are not monthly publications and are often authored and illustrated by only one or two individuals.

Manga: the Japanese term for comics, which in the United States is often used to refer to any Asian publications. Manga has characteristics of both Comic Books and Graphic Novels, but they look different because they are collected into volumes that are shorter and thicker than the trade paperbacks into which comic books are collected.

Each form bleeds together at the edges. This thesaurus will consider all forms that present a reading experience. Because comic strips do not provide continuous and immersive reading, the need for reader's advisory for this format is not great. Also, due to time constraints, other forms

will not be explicitly included. For example, fotonovellas, a format using pictures that has gained popularity in Latin America, has not yet made significant inroads into the comic book reading community of the United States. Comix, or underground comics, that are often political in nature are also not currently part of this project. However, to account for shifting forms and emerging ideas, our thesaurus will provide accessibility to new and emergent formats.

Form informs decisions about our three main thesaurus facets—i.e., art, genre, tropes—in subtle ways, detailed below.

Art: Like genre and narrative tropes, artistic style may change over the life of a serial comic. Some series have a new illustrator every issue, and long-running characters often get updated looks as time goes on. This affects the level of indexing that must be done with descriptors for artistic styles.

Genre: Forms that have long-running series tend to defy genre classification at the title level. Because of the length of the series, elements from many genres can be present throughout the series, meaning that categorizing by genre can lead to either huge lists or under-representing the style of the work. Faceting the elements of genre can help solve this problem and indexing at an issue or volume level will allow for faithful representation.

Tropes: The serial nature of comics, i.e., some series have no projected endpoint and can be handed off from one creator to the next, means that some unique narrative tropes emerge within comics. Sometimes a new creator takes over a series and, in order to have greater creative license, they may use a story event to undo or kill off important characters or storylines. This is just one way that the production structure and serial nature of comics can create tropes.

No Tin-Foil Hat Needed: A Reader's Advisory Approach

Readers' advisory (RA) is the process of actively assisting a reader (e.g., through an interview process) or passively (e.g., through tools like genre lists) to guide readers to books they will enjoy. Within this broad goal, some practitioners of RA strive to help readers navigate from the kind of reading they are familiar with to works from a different author, genre, or style by identifying the aspects of a book that work for readers and recognizing those features in new and sometimes unexpected places. Our thesaurus draws heavily on this goal, and the principle of providing access to a body of literature based on the various aspects of that literature may provide a point of interest for readers.

RA for Comics: Reader's advisory service for comics has not been a strong focus for libraries outside of Young Adult specialists. There are signs of growth in this area, including 'best of' lists and genre lists. However, even within these attempts, there are many weaknesses and gaps in RA services aimed at comics readers. It is the gaps in current practice that are of most interest to this project. Each of the three major facets of our thesaurus—i.e., art, genre, tropes—seek to address an area of weakness in current practice as it relates to comics.

Art: While RA practice for text-only novels includes consideration of the writing style, there are no tools to assist in the recommendation of comics based on the style of art. Allowing a systematic and overarching approach to styles of art would allow readers to navigate between titles based on this feature.

Genre: Genre lists created for comics often simply transfer the genres used for fiction novels. These divisions do not work for comics, which have their own standard plots, typical characters,

and constellation of story types. Sometimes the genre 'superheroes' is added in an attempt to mitigate this issue, but the typography of genres used for books does not map well to the kinds of stories commonly written in comics. This leaves readers with lists that apply to so many titles as to be useless in helping readers navigate the literature or categories that do not accurately fit the literature. Novice readers find themselves lost in a large and confusing body of literature, and experienced readers view clumsy attempts as ineffective and amateur. Breaking genre down into its components will allow it to be recombined into more meaningful sets that accurately represent the literature of the domain and assist both novice readers and experts looking for new reading avenues.

Tropes: RA resources are primarily created by librarians, publishers, and vendors. They begin at the macro level and focus on dividing literature into smaller and smaller groups. Elements that play a minor role in the big picture of the subject, genre, and style may be central for reading selection. Tropes grow out from close reading of the literature; they represent the small elements of a comic that make it enjoyable to read.

Funnies **How We Got Here: Historical Terms**

Comic books are often thought of as an "American" art form because the comic book format, as we now recognize it, appeared in the United States in 1934 with the release of *Famous Funnies #1* (Goulart 18). This has led to an unnecessarily America-centric bent on comic book history despite the fact that there were many significant international precedents to the release of that particular issue. Additionally, there have been important comic books produced around the world throughout the medium's history.

Our Thesaurus: For this thesaurus, there is a desire to take a deep view of comic history that accommodates an international perspective. This thesaurus incorporates established historical categories common within the established literature and discourse of the domain. Core, experienced users will recognize the terms and divisions. At the same time, upon analysis, we have discovered that historical category terms are predominately culturally limited in scope and too broad to hold much meaning or utility. Each of the three major facets of our thesaurus seeks to address an area of weakness in current historical terms and categories used to organize comics.

Ages: Publishers, historians, and pop culturists divide American comic book history into broad eras; Proto-comic books (aka Victorian Age)(Coville 1), The Platinum Age, The Golden Age, The Silver Age, The Bronze Age, The Copper Age, and The Modern Age. These terms are so broad that they encompass many different styles and genres, so they will not be of great use in the thesaurus, other than functioning as lead-in terms.

Art: Art styles can be linked to historical ages to some extent. Additionally, technological advances in printing and art production allow different expressions and styles, thus some artistic qualities would simply not have been possible in certain eras. These eras do not organize a recognizable single artistic style: rather, they define their limits by date. For our thesaurus we will give additional structure to the broad ages to allow more meaningful groupings of artistic styles.

Genre: Historically, genre terms have developed as comics ventured into established literary genres. The only significant comic-book-only genre term that has gained wide acceptance is "superhero". The manga tradition organizes its comic books by target audience age and gender.

There are some genre-like assumptions for some of these terms, but they are inconsistent and do not map well to all comics. In our thesaurus we aim to divide and organize historic genres into more specific, meaningful terms.

Tropes: Through the history of comic books there is no evidence of a concerted effort to identify meaningful tropes that occur regularly in the domain. Adding this organizing element will further shape comics history and future in useful ways.

Curses! Foiled Again!: Attempts to Classify the Comic Book Domain

A review of universal and special classifications created to provide access to our domain has revealed pronounced tension between subject specialists (i.e., comic book librarians and readers) and universal classification systems (e.g., Dewey and Library of Congress). This conflict arises from a milieu created by librarians' general attitude regarding comic books—which has evolved from blaming comics for the *Seduction of the Innocent* (Fee, 2008) to promoting access to comics by innovating cataloguing practices (Markham, 2009)—and the fact that comic books simply do not behave themselves. Intriguing characteristics of comic books include: the integral nature of their illustrations; irregular publication; frequent changes in title, character, creator, and publisher; and the collaborative nature of their production, which can involve a team of writer/artist/cover artist plus others who cannot be listed as a corporate entity (Fee). In short, comics act unlike any other bibliographic entity existing on a shelf or within a catalog, thus placing special demands on classifying and cataloging practices.

Our thesaurus: Understanding this unique behavior helps us ensure that our thesaurus makes visible the hidden conventions and connections between art, genre, and tropes so that readers,

scholars, and researchers can easily navigate within the domain. We have been aided by understanding the shortcomings of current schemes, like Dewey, and exploring the possibilities created by RDA and next-generation catalogs, which help us see the gaps within the search and retrieval process our terms can help bridge.

The Library of Congress Approach: In the 1970s, Library of Congress inaugurated a special range of classification numbers within "General literature" for comics: PN6700-PN6790 (Scott, 1990). However, many comics can also be found in NC1429.K, the section for "pictorial humor and satire." Even today, research libraries have not settled the question of literature (PN) versus caricature (NC), giving rise to discouragement (Scott) and perpetuating the inaccessibility of the subject of comics and their literary worlds (Fee).

The Dewey Approach: Some cataloging departments decided to classify all graphic novels with the Dewey classification number 741.5, which ignored the graphic novel's unique position as both a format and a genre (Tarulli). The introduction of graphic non-fiction into library collections posed a challenge, since cataloging practices were born out of the assumption that the collection would remain a fiction collection. The current compromise employed by some catalogers is to keep graphic novels in the 741.5 classification and classify graphic non-fiction by subject, rather than format. Such a practice raises questions and breaks with tradition: most other collections—e.g., DVDs and magazines—are sorted by format first, and then shelved via subject (Tarulli).

There's Always Brute Force: Other catalogers use a brute-force approach, using non-traditional resources such as the Comic Book Database (www.comicbookdb.com) to augment existing classification schemes to better represent comics (please see Appendix B for such examples).

The bottom line is that librarians now acknowledge that comics are here to stay, and our thesaurus can be a tool to assist in the process of giving the format the professional attention it requires (Goldsmith, 2005).

Please see Appendix B to read more about the special classifications explored for this domain analysis, as well as the indexing and retrieving specialties of the Comic Book Domain.

Exploration: Genre

Genres are socially constructed categories used to identify commonalities between literature (Owen 2007) (Miller, 1984). These commonalities can be useful in allowing readers to find literature they enjoy and are used by writers and publishers to create work consumers want to read (Duncan & Smith, 2009). While there are many variations and genre hierarchies for various kinds of literature, there are few strong instances of comic genres in library literature, although several attempts have been made. The problem is not incorrect classification of titles, but the adoption of genres commonly used in traditional fiction. Comics fall into these categories in different proportions than traditional fiction, where a large percentage of comics contain elements that relate to science fiction or fantasy genres. Since lumping such a large group into these categories is not useful, we will distill singular distinctions from compound genres like science fiction and allow those distinctions to be cobbled back together to more accurately reflect the literature.

One way in which stories are broken out into genre is through the level to which they conform to the laws of reality. Fantasy and science fiction both distinguish stories based in part on how they introduce elements that are not real or possible. Fantasy stories offer no explanation for forces

and creatures that exist outside of reality: they simply assume a different set of rules for the

world, which can include forces like magic and creatures like dragons. Science Fiction does not

totally reject the laws of the world but rather stretches those laws to imagine story elements that

are beyond our current abilities and knowledge, but could exist within the laws of reality.

Facet: Plausibility
Example: Fantastic
Use For: Fantasy, Speculative Fiction
Related Term: Imaginary World

Some genre distinctions group works based on the feeling they are designed to create in the

reader. Horror for example, can be a plausible story about a psychotic human or a fantastic story

about ghosts or demons. The genre can be set in any time period in any location. What creates

cohesion around this genre is the anxiety it is designed to create in the reader. Writers achieve

this by placing characters in terrifying and life-threatening situations that the reader can relate to.

Facet: Affect
Example: Poignant
Definition: This is a title designed to draw feelings of sad, thoughtfulness from the reader.
Use For: Tear-jearker

Example. Horror
Definition: A title designed to create anxiety in the reader through placing characters in
terrifying and life-threatening situations that the reader can relate to.

Stories are also collocated by setting, both physical (in space) and temporal (in time).

Facet: Setting
Sub-facet: Physical Setting
Note: While geographic definitions like the country in which a story takes place would fit this
category, this is an area other resources deal with successfully. Instead of mimicking that work,
we will concentrate on settings that may be of particular interest to comic book readers. More
work on exactly what kinds of settings we want to tackle is needed.
Example. High school
Definition: A school serving grades 9-12.
Note: What level of specificity should we take?

Example: Imaginary World:
Definition: Fantasy worlds, and parallel dimensions.
Related To: Fantastic
Sub-facet: Time/place Setting
Note: Better term needed

Example: Modern
Definition: A story that takes place in the approximate time of publication.

Example. Multiple Time
Definition: Any story that contains multiple times in the storyline, either for reasons of character immortality, time travel, different characters though time, and extended and significant flashbacks. Time shifts should constitute movement between periods with different dress, technology and social mores to qualify.
Use for: Time Travel, Time hopping
Related to: Scientifically Imagined, Fantastic
Note: Need to tighten up definition. Also will need entry Time, Multiple?

Facet: Story type
Note: Need a strong definition of this facet
Example: Epic
Example: Satire
   Definition: A work that mocks social conventions or another work of art.
   Note: Should we consider dividing this further into social vs. art?

Facet: Plot
Note: This section needs fleshing out. Do we want to replace plot genres with tropes? We need to be careful that these two facets do not overlap.
Example: Dramatic Relationships
Definition: A plot that focuses on the relationships between friends, family or romantic relationships.

Terms With Notes:

Nonfiction/Real
Note: Need to work on this term.
Broader Term: Plausibility

Humor
Note: How many subcategories do we want to split humor? There may be a need for some more research into this particular category.
Narrower Term: Black
Narrower Term: Slapstick
Broader Term: Affect

Past
Broader Term: Time/Place Setting
Note: Should we list time periods as numbers, named time periods or time/location combinations and break the faceting a bit? Time/location combinations may have more meaning for users but would be structurally shady.

Opera
Note: Kofmel explains what an opera is. Will this term be useful for faceting? Space operas are common. Are there other 'operatic' combinations that would be useful to the genre or should we ditch this term?

Exploration: Visual Classification

Artistic or visual classification of comics has the least scholarship, either academic or fan-based, of any of the areas within our domain that we are exploring. Most of the work on comics as a visual medium is extremely narrow in focus. They generally study one comic, or a small selection, in extreme detail.[3] The few larger surveys organize their subject matter historically or generically and only partially focus on the visual aspect of the works. Similarly, the traditional visual arts classifications tend to be highly historical rather than content-based. Attempts at a unified theory of comics, which would make interrelated sense of the visual corpus, are almost nonexistent.

The one theorist working on the organization of visual ideas in comics is Scott McCloud. His work is fundamentally visual in approach, and despite its potential problems, it is the main starting point for a unified approach to the medium. His two main contributions to classification within comics are the "Big Triangle" and the "Four Tribes," introduced in *Understanding Comics* and *Making Comics*, respectively. The Big Triangle (fig. 1) is a diagram to plot how signifiers may function in comics, from pure realism (photographs) to pure meaning (words) to

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[3] For an excellent example of this type of scholarship, see Douglas Wolk's *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2007.

pure picture (abstract shapes.) Comics are fundamentally representational in nature (though there are some notable exceptions to this rule), and each creator's choices about representation can be plotted somewhere on this triangle to give a sense of his or her relationship to the rest of the medium. McCloud's four tribes of artists are not specific to comics, but function particularly well for the medium. According to his diagram (fig. 2), every artist can be plotted somewhere on the graph as a Classicist, Animist, Formalist, or Iconoclast, based on his or her fundamental approach to the art form (2006, pp. 230-333). Classicists value tradition and beauty, Animists focus on storytelling, Formalists are interested in the mechanics of the art form for their own sake, and Iconoclasts attempt to break down the limitations imposed by tradition or aesthetics.

Most approaches to readers' advisory in comics ignore the visual aspect completely. This seems to be partially because of a lack of vocabulary, but also another manifestation of the deformed book theory. While comics are books (or at least look increasingly like them), we generally try to treat them like purely textual, traditional books and ignore any aspects that do not fit into that framework. The visual is a hugely important aspect of comics, in and of themselves, but it is also enormously important in reader appeal. Even non-visual or inexpert readers will have visual styles that they find enjoyable or repellent. Our advisory systems need a mechanism to cope with this.

In our thesaurus, we will start from McCloud's four tribes of artists to classify creators' basic approaches to their work. We will collect industry, scholarly, and fan terms and identifications, classifying these techniques and schools under the most relevant tribe. These terms run the gamut from historically acknowledged schools (like the "Ligne Claire" style made famous by *Tintin*) to fan-created terms for specific visual phenomena (like Jack Kirby's famous psychedelic

method for representing energy, termed "Kirby Dots"). Though terms must be represented in a hierarchical and linear fashion in a thesaurus, we find that plotting these ideas along McCloud's axes is an effective way to think about and represent these terms.

Figure 1: The "Big Triangle," a diagram representing the continua of representation that comic art makes use of. From Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1994, pp. 52-53).

Figure 2: The four tribes of artists ((McCloud, 2006).

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There are also other vital elements, besides artistic paradigm, to a visual classification of comics—e.g., line quality, pacing/compression, the Marvel/Manga continuum of character realism—but delving into the details of this, as much as we may enjoy it, is more of a scholarly pursuit rather than a readers' advisory one. The area, however, is begging for further study.

Narrative and Tropes:

Readers' advisory is traditionally very genre-based, but we have decided that the traditional conception of genre does not produce the most useful categories. Narrative tropes operate on all levels from the universal to the extremely specific and, properly explained and applied, can get a reader a long way to identifying what makes his or her favorite stories work. One-on-one readers' advisory relies heavily on the intuition of these tropes, as they are often what links works together across traditions, but they are seldom explicitly identified. We hope to remedy that, especially because tropes are a vitally important part of a work's appeal. I might know that I love Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, but one of those is about superheroes and one is about Victorian adventurers. Is it just that I like this particular creator? It might be, but these are both also examples of the "Deconstruction Crossover," and feature Moore bringing in tons of characters from different original works to deconstruct our ideas about an artistic tradition. Many other creators have used this trope, as well, and it would be worth seeing if I enjoyed their work too. This type of work is not explicitly being done, despite the enormous potential value.

We see the identification and indexing of tropes –defined here in the loosest possible sense, as those repeatable units of meaning which make narrative work—as a central goal of our thesaurus. Most of the work that has been done on the identification of tropes in popular culture

comes from the fans themselves, and in particular, TV Tropes.org. We will be adapting many of these fan-created concepts for use in our thesaurus, and using ideas adapted from Barthes to facet them into meaningful categories.

The most comprehensive work on dissecting popular narratives comes from fan activity on the web, especially TV Tropes.org. This website is a wiki dedicated to analyzing the narrative devices at work in popular media. The community initially only focused on television shows, but it quickly expanded to include all popular culture. Each trope has a page with a brief explanation of the trope, an image, and examples of the trope in action from comics, television, film, theater, literature, and even professional wrestling. Each work also has a dedicated page, with a list of the tropes functioning within it (Pincus-Roth, 2010).

Example entry from TV Tropes:

Applied Phlebotinum

"Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from a completely ad-hoc plot device"
—**David Langford**, "A Gadget Too Far" ⬏, as a corollary to Arthur C. Clarke's third law

Phlebotinum is the magical substance that may be rubbed on almost anything to cause an effect needed by a plot.
Some examples: nanotechnology, magic crystal emanations, pixie dust, a sonic screwdriver, or even just some Green Rocks. In essence, it is the stuff that makes the plot go. Without it, the story would grind to an abrupt halt. It's science, it's magic, it's strange things unknown to science or magic. The reader does not know how phlebotinum would work and the creators hope he or she doesn't care.
[…]
If the phlebotinum in question is simply a physical substance with unusual/extreme properties you are almost certainly dealing with the element Unobtainium.
A.K.A. Handwavium. Compare MacGuffin, Green Lantern Ring, A Wizard Did It, Hand Wave, and Deus Ex Machina.

[A list of examples and specific kinds of phlebotina follows]

TV Tropes is a fantastic resource for this kind of work because of the approach it takes and the warrant it implies. The focus of the community members (or "tropers," as they call themselves) is explicitly trans-medium, as user studies have identified modern comics readers to be. That is, people generally like the same *kinds* of stories regardless of its packaging as a movie, novel, video game, etc. (Cedeira Serantes, 2009). This is exactly the approach we are taking with our thesaurus, as we aim to enable readers to move between genres and media. The fact that it is fan-created is also hugely important for our work. The tropers who maintain the site engage in indexing and analysis for its own sake, because they care about the tropes themselves. As excited as information professionals get over knowledge organization, it generally seems beyond hope that people on the internet will index things for the fun of it. That element of dedication and fun also implies a level of user and terminological warrant for any included term. Terms collect better definitions, scope notes, related terms and examples through what the tropers call "Wiki Magic," which is essentially the serendipity of other people on the internet happening to have noticed the same trope and having the desire to comment on it ("Wiki Magic," 2011). When the community identifies, names, scopes, and relates a trope, we can assume that it matters to the community and is not a term or idea that we are forcing on the domain.

Its greatest strength is also its greatest weakness, though, as fan-created works often lack organization, universality, and rigor. The website and the tropes themselves are largely unorganized. The community has made attempts at hierarchies, but they do not always make sense and are often only represented on one end of a relationship (i.e. the narrower term will indicate a broader term, but the broader term will not list narrower terms.) Creating a meaningful hierarchy of terms will be a major challenge for us in this project. The actual terms used for the tropes are also a source of difficulty. The names created by the community are evocative,

entertaining, and often succinctly describe complex concepts (like "Kudzu Plot" or "Dysfunction Junction"), but they are not necessarily searchable.[4] We will need to balance descriptiveness with access, potentially with non-preferred terms.

The majority of tropes from TV Tropes will not be useful or applicable to our project. It is partially a matter of scale –for this project we will only use approximately thirty—but also an issue of scope. Many tropes, including the above example of the "applied phlebotinum," may not be suitable for inclusion because they apply to a small aspect of a work and would not be useful for readers' advisory. We will instead focus on the tropes that manifest on a larger scale within a work or are particularly definitive of a genre.

In order to organize the tropes, we will adapt the five codes that function within narrative according to Roland Barthes: Hermeneutic, proairetic, semic, symbolic, and referential. For our purposes, they will include the following kinds of tropes:

- **Hermeneutic**- Overarching plot tropes that function across genres are hermeneutic. Joseph Campbell's classic theory of the "Hero's Journey" is an example of this kind of trope, as are each of the individual stages of the journey.
- **Proairetic**- Tropes that govern more specific plots or types of situations and relationships are proairetic. The "Five Man Band," an arrangement of characters that manifests everywhere from *Inception* to Arthurian legend is a proairetic trope. Plot

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[4] TV Tropes defines *Kudzu Plot* as "The plot for this arc has been resolved, but it's generated other dangling plot points for the story to segue to. Lots of them, enough to provide writing fodder for several arcs, at least. The story marches on, but the next arc works out the same, creating more unexplained plot points than it resolved, and again increases the quantity of unaddressed story threads running in the background. This continues, probably forever. If never resolved, this may be a sign of Bad Writing." http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/KudzuPlot

tropes like a "Xanatos Gambit," a complicated plan designed to succeed regardless of the outcome, are also examples of this.

- **Semic**- These are tropes that function on the level of nouns, i.e. people, places, things, and the meanings that adhere to them. This category includes types of stock characters ("The Chessmaster"), types of settings ("The Wild West"), or narrative devices like the aforementioned "Applied Phlebotinum."

- **Symbolic**- Tropes that consist of multiple connotative elements juxtaposed by the narrative are symbolic. It seems at this point that this will be the least useful of the codes, as it applies more to analysis of works than readers' advisory.

- **Referential**- Anything that refers to information external to the work itself is referential. Comics in general are extremely referential, and tropes like "Deconstruction Crossover," where a creator collects characters from many different preexisting works or traditions in order to deconstruct a genre, are common.

These codes are extremely useful conceptually, but they will need to be adapted in order to be used in the thesaurus. The names are obscure and discouraging, besides not being terribly applicable after we have adapted them to organize tropes. Developing new terms for their use as facets will be an important priority in the next stage.

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List of Visual Terms discussed:

Classicists: Creators who "worship at the altar of beauty, and yearn to create art that achieves greatness. They believe in objective standards of good and bad, and establish the canon of great artists who embody those ideals. (Neil Gaiman and Frank Cho)" (Walter, 2008a).

Animists: "the first artists, the shamen dancing around the tribal fire who drag raw emotion from their soul and give it to the audience. They are the instinctual artists, concerned above all with content. (Jeff Smith and Jack Kirby would both fall easily under this heading)" (Walter, 2008a).

Formalists: "love talking about art almost as much as they enjoy creating it. They are the experimenters of any given art, obsessing about details of style and technique in their own work and the work of others. (McCloud himself, and Chris Ware)" (Walter, 2008b).

Iconoclasts: "are either the first against the wall when the revolution comes, or at the front leading the charge. They use art as a means of personal and political expression, and when asked will say that they value truth over all else. (See Robert Crumb and Alan Moore)" (Walter, 2008b).

Kirby Dots: "Kirby dots are an artistic convention in superhero and science fiction comic books and similar illustrations: a field of black, roughly circular dots that are used to represent negative space around unspecified kinds of energy" ("Kirby dots," 2011). The term is also short hand for Jack Kirby's highly influential cinematic, psychedelic style that has been imitated since the 1960's. Mike Mignola, creator of *Hellboy*, is a notable modern practitioner of the style.

> Non-preferred term: "Kirby Krackle"

Ligne Claire: A Franco-Belgian school of comic book art pioneered by Herge, creator of *Tintin*. It is characterized by distinct, uniform lines, flat colors, and clear details. It also features simplified, stylized characters on highly detailed, naturalistic backgrounds (St-Louis, 2009).

Figure 3: Image of Tintin, illustrating the Ligne Claire style.

> Non-preferred term: "Clear line"
>
> Related terms: Compare to "Marcinelle"

List of Tropes discussed:

Applied Phlebotinum: http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/AppliedPhlebotinum

Deconstruction Crossover:
http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/DeconstructionCrossover

Kudzu Plot: http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/KudzuPlot

Dysfunction Junction: http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/DysfunctionJunction

Hero's Journey: http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/HerosJourney

Five Man Band: http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/FiveManBand

Xanatos Gambit: http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/XanatosGambit

The Chessmaster: A character who manipulate other characters and plot events through layers of misdirection, backup plans, and influence. Chessmasters tend to be overconfident and panic when their "perfect" plans fail.

> Related term: Chessmasters often stage **Xanatos Gambits**.
>
> http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TheChessmaster

The Wild West: http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TheWildWest

Appendix A: Problems Encountered

Our domain analysis has helped us identify that the existing structure of the comics domain terms and concepts does little to aid users and readers in connecting works in meaningful ways. Rather, the structure, as is, does much to partition works into broad, vague categories. Works found together in these categories often have no relation to one another, other than being produced within the same time-span, in the same geographic location. Broad eras, location of creation, format specifications, production details and simplified genre are too broad to hold much meaning or utility. The ramifications of this analysis, relating to the work of creating our thesaurus, is that we will be imposing subjective structures onto the domain. This is not strictly a problem, but it is an issue we will have to keep in mind. It will be important that we evaluate our work and ensure that it will be useful to others.

Within the domain of comics there are existing terms and organizational structures to these terms and concepts, but to a large extent, existing terms will not be used in our thesaurus. This is certainly problematic. Many existing terms will be incorporated as lead-in terms. We foresee that some existing terms and concepts can be adapted to fit our thesaurus with minimal effort. The creation of new, novel terms will certainly be a challenge, but one we feel ready to tackle. First off, there is the issue of the time and effort necessary to identify concepts, create terms, and define terms. Additionally, we want to be sure that our terms resonate with users of all skill and experience level.

Author vs. Team created comics:

Comics are produced both in a team setting and by individual author/illustrators. This different production style affects the literature it creates. Sometimes only in subtle ways, but there may be enough of a distinction that users may be interested in being able to find titles based on this feature.

Production is not a strict dichotomy but a continuum of possibilities. We need to figure out how useful the distinction between these two types is to our readers, in what detail we will represent the continuum, and under what broad facet this idea belongs. Because one of the aspects most

obviously affected by this difference is the art, this is our initial placement of this facet but further consideration is needed.

Narrative Tropes vs. Genre:

While we see narrative tropes as distinct from genre, each describing the literature in unique ways, we acknowledge that careless development could lead to overlap and redundancies. These sections must be developed in careful consideration of each other so that they support and connect without overlapping.

Appendix B: Special Classifications and Indexing Specialties

The following are summaries of how two libraries have dealt with cataloguing comic books. Their use of special classifications and suggested solutions to cataloging practices help inform the construction of our comic book thesaurus by demonstrating thoughtful practice in representing the comic book domain to facilitate greater visibility, access, relevancy, and navigation.

Lubbock Public Library System

The Lubbock Public Library System developed an in-house cataloging system for its graphic novel collection. The system is designed to be both general and specific and is oriented toward browsing. Comics characters that have 20 or more titles in the main library are considered to have their own call number and category. If a title has two characters listed, the first character will determine the call number and category. Graphic novel call numbers are composed of two or three lines: the first line is always "GN"; the second line is a four-letter abbreviation for the category into which the title is placed; the occasional use of a third line will be the first four letters of an author's last name (Weiner, 2010).

Example: Basic call number for an *Elfquest* graphic novel:

GN

ELFQ

Example: A DC call number:

GN

DC

SUPE

A sampling of categories into which Lubbock divided its graphic novels:
- Classics illustrated: Graphic novel versions of classic literature or are related in some way, e.g., *Tom Sawyer*, *War of the Worlds*. GN-CI

- Independents: a wide range of materials that are basically not within the confines of other designations and not published by Marvel and DC. Many of the books are geared toward alternative press material and older readers. Content is fiction. GN-INDP.
- DC Women: books published by DC featuring female characters (e.g., Wonder Woman, Catwoman). GN-DC-WOMA
- Marvel Cosmic: A category for the supernatural/cosmic/alien-type books published by Marvel (e.g., Dr. Strange, Dracula). GN-MARV-COSM

Portland State University Library

Portland State University (PSU) Library has a unique agreement with Dark Horse Comics, Inc., which allows the library to receive, process, and make available the entire body of Dark Horse's published titles—both retrospectively and on a continuing basis. The formal agreement requires the library to "create visibility and access to Dark Horse Comics collection by creating cataloging records that describe the individual items and contributing these records to local, regional, and international catalog databases that reach diverse readers, scholars, and researchers" (Markham). Library catalogers distinguish each title individually while collocating them according to their similarities.

The PSU Library recognizes the importance of noting the full range of comic artists—from colorists to letterers and writers—in their cataloging practices. "Documenting functions of contributors ensure that future graphic artists/researchers have a complete-as-yet-published account of the activities of one graphic art publisher, potentially noting various trends… [I]t has been documented that artists migrate from one function in a book or series to different functions in others" (Markham).

Example: Abbreviated MARC record of licensed Turkish *Hellboy*, which shows how PSU documents contributions of various contributors through the use of relator terms to enhance the potential for scholarly research (Markham):

```
001            74849989
100    1       Mignola, Michael.
245    10      Hellboy  :│bseytani uyandir  /│coyku ve cizilmer, Mike
               Mignola  ;  renklendiren, James Sinclair  ;  giris,  Alan
               Moore  ;  editor, Scott Allie  ;  Hellboy logo tasarimi,  Kevin
               Nowlan  ;  albumu tasarlayan,  Mike Mignola ve Cary Grazzini
               ;  yayinlayan,  Mike Richardson  ;  [ceviren,  Koray Ozbudak].
246    1       │iAt head of title: │aParanormal vakalar dedektifi
260            Istanbul  :│bithaki Yayinlari,  │c2003.
655    0       Comic books, strips, etc.
655    7       Sequential art. │2local
655    7       Action/Adventure. │2Dark Horse
700    1       Sinclair, James, │ecolorist.
700    1       Allie, Scott, │eed.
700    1       Ozbudak, Koray, │etr.
```

Greetings from the Future: RDA and Discovery Tools

Even though initial cataloging practices fall short of expectations, information professionals are aware that the needs of comic book readers are not being met. The cataloging world is transforming to allow for the bending of cataloging rules to include more descriptive practices, and new library catalogs are being developed to complement such practices (Tarulli).

- **RDA**: Fans dislike that classification of graphic novels and their content do not pull together relationships or similarities. Development and implementation of RDA into cataloging practices should help make relational values available (Tarulli).

- **Next-generation catalogs**: the emergence of discovery tools allow for faceted searching and browsing of cover images within the catalog. Social catalogs allow sorting by format (e.g., graphic non-fiction, graphic novel, downloadable audio), and users are given the option to search the subject of Superman, for examples, as a topic, a series, or a personal topic without a convoluted search string (Tarulli).

The Anatomy Lesson: Indexing and Retrieving Specialties of the Comic Book Domain

It is a misnomer to call a general comics collection "alternative," because so much of its content is mainstream entertainment. On the other hand suggesting that a comics collection fits wholly into the category of "popular culture" doesn't work, because so many comics are just not "popular" in any sense… They are not, apparently, fine art. They are not, apparently, literature. The unique conventions,

history, and value of the various comics traditions are not transparently obvious to most people (Scott).

Our comic book thesaurus aims to make the hidden conventions, narratives, and genres of comics visible so that readers, scholars, and researchers can easily navigate within the domain. To accomplish this task, it is essential to understand the unique terminology used to describe comics. As Hjørland notes, such terminology places special demands on systems for organizing and retrieving documents (2002).

The following is a brief list, taken from Scott's "Comics Librarianship" handbook (1990), of the terminology important to our domain.

Panel Art: a comic strip is usually divided into three or more successive pictures, called panels. Comic book pages are similarly subdivided most of the time. Comics art in general is referred to as "panel art." Some scholars call themselves "panelologists."

Words with pictures: within panels, characters communicate via "word balloons" or "thought balloons." Non-words or dramatic sounding words, e.g., "Bam!", are used as sound effects and are not typically enclosed in balloons. Narration can be found in squared-off boxes that can be called "captions."

Episodic by nature: comics are organized into "stories," which may be episodes of a continuing saga, stand-alone stories involving continuing characters, or separate stories. A single issue could contain one or several stories. A unique "story title" may be found identifying the current issue's story. American convention is to run stories that are anywhere from 6 to 64 pages in length.

The splash and indicia: a comic book typically begins with a "splash" page or panel on which the individual story title, the strip or series title, and credits are displayed. The small print usually found at the bottom of the first page of a comic book is called the "indicia" and serves the function of a masthead by listing corporate officers, addresses,

periodicity, and copyright information. The indicia usually begins with the title of the comic, and this title is the basis for consistency in comic book bibliography. The cover title may seem to vary wildly; the indicia title is conservative about changing.

Division of labor in the credits: comics appear to be produced by committee. Credits on a splash page may include up to a dozen people, or all the functions may be done by one or two people. The job of writing a comic can be divided between "plotter" and "scripter." The word "writer" implies both plotting and scripting, but the word "storyteller" is likely to cover some or all of the writing and drawing. Drawing is usually divided between "penciler" and "inker." The coloring and lettering of comics are handled by specialists. "Colorists" and "letterers" are usually given less critical attention, but both are influential in how the final story looks. The "editor" oversees workflow and maintains perspective on the story.

Genre Terms Round Up
Example of genre terms and subject headings used by selected publishers and libraries, which may or may not inform the creation of preferred terms:

Dark Horse Comics—genre terms supplied to PSU Library from publisher (Markham): action/adventure; art book; classic; crime; fantasy; fiction; horror; humor; manga; manhwa; non-fiction; reality; science-fiction; seasonal, short stories/anthologies; Star Wars; superhero.

DC Comics—as found on the DC mobile application: action/adventure; anthology; anthropomorphic; Blackest Night; children's; comedy; crime; drama; fantasy; fiction; holiday; horror; movies & TV; mystery; psychological; romance; science fiction; slice of life; space; superhero; supernatural; suspense; thriller; vampires; video games; war; webcomics; werewolves; western; zombies.

Marvel Comics—as found on the Marvel mobile application: action/adventure; children's; crime; drama; fantasy; horror; literature; Marvel Monday!; Maximum Carnage; movies & TV; science fiction; superhero; supernatural; war; western; zombies.

Michigan State University (Scott): adventure story comics; African-American comics; career girl comics; comic book artists; comic book writers; comic books, strips, etc.; detective and mystery comic books, strips, etc.; erotic comic books, strips, etc.; fantasy comics; funny animal comics; funny ghosts comics; funny horror comics; funny kids comics; funny military comics; girls' comics; gothic romance comics; horror comic books, strips, etc.; jungle adventure comics; kung fu comics; new wave comics; prehistoric adventure comics; robot comics; romance comics; science fiction comics, strips, etc.; sports comics; spy comics; superhero comics; superheroine comics; sword and sorcery comics; teen humor comics; underground comic books, strips, etc.; war comics; western comic books, strips, etc.; women's comics.