

The Impacts of Book Format on the Creation and Reading of Branching Narratives in Print Comics

Benjamin Wright

ORCID Number: 0009-0000-2791-3297

Output Type: Conference Contribution

Output Date: 2025

Output Details:

20 min presentation

Type of contribution: *20-minute conference presentation*

Illustration and the Paper Artefact, Falmouth University, Falmouth, Cornwall, UK, 4 to 7 September

2025 Jointly organised by Falmouth University and the University of Plymouth

Recommended Citation: Wright, B., (2025) 'The impacts of book format on the creation and reading of branching narratives in print comics', paper presented at *Illustration and the Paper Artefact*, Falmouth University, Falmouth, Cornwall, UK, 4-7 September 2025. DOI: 10.66992/lvadGw

Abstract

The Impacts of Book Format on the Creation and Reading of Branching Narratives in Print Comics

Physical branching narratives expose new tensions when paper moves beyond traditional book formats. How do engineered structures—modular inserts, tabs, wheels, domino tiles, split-tier pages - shift narrative labour between author and reader?

This paper examines commercially produced works such as Chris Ware's *Building Stories* and Jason Shiga's *Meanwhile*, before turning to avant-garde cases including OuBaPo's *DOMIPO* and Shiga's unpublished "paper computer" prototypes. Drawing on ergodic theory, artist-book scholarship, and multisensory studies, we argue that folds, slots, and rotations transform reading into a spatial, embodied act of navigation.

Through practice-based reflection and critical analysis, we show how simple structures may lower creative barriers, while complex mechanisms demand more planning but yield deeper play. By foregrounding format as an active storytelling agent, this study situates branching comics within the wider discourse on paper artefacts and explores how the roles of reader and creator increasingly converge.

References

- Aarseth, E.J. (1997) *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Baladi, I., Ibn al Rabin and Kündig, V. (2006) 'Expansion en Labyrinthe', in OuBaPo (ed.) *OuPus 6*. Paris: L'Association, pp. 32–35.
- Baraou, A. and Chalmeau, O. (1991) *Après tout tant pis*. Paris: Association Rhizome.
- Bernard, J.-C., Chauvel, A. and La Macchia, Y. (2014) *Polychromie*. Strasbourg: Papier Gâche.
- Eisner, W. (2000) *Comics & Sequential Art*. Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press.
- Jeanneau, J. (2011) *Heavy Toast*. Paris: Super Loto Éditions.
- Killoffer, P. and Baraou, A. (2009) *Domipo*. Paris: L'Association.
- Lécroart, É. (2010) *Taquin*. Paris: Éditions de l'An 2.
- Mathieu, M.-A. (2013) *Le Décalage*. Brussels: Delcourt.
- McCloud, S. (1994) *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: HarperCollins.
- McGuire, R. (2014) *Here*. New York: Pantheon.
- OuBaPo (eds) (1997) *OuPus 1*. Paris: L'Association.
- Ruppert, F. and Mulot, J. (2013) *Un Cadeau*. Paris: L'Association.

Shiga, J. (2003) *Hello World* [mini-comic]. Berkeley, CA: Self-published.

Shiga, J. (2003) *Theatre Eroika* [prototype booklet]. Berkeley, CA: Self-published.

Shiga, J. (2010) *Meanwhile: Pick Any Path. 3,856 Story Possibilities*. New York: Amulet Books.

Shiga, J. (2016) *Paper Calculator* [folding device]. Berkeley, CA: Self-published.

Shiga, J. (2010) 'How to Make Your Own Interactive Comic' [YouTube video]. Available at: (YouTube link)

(Accessed: 16 July 2025).

Ware, C. (2012) *Building Stories*. New York: Pantheon.

The Impacts Of Book Format On Branching Comics

Domipo (Killoffer & Barou, 2009)



BENJAMIN WRIGHT

*Who controls
the story?*

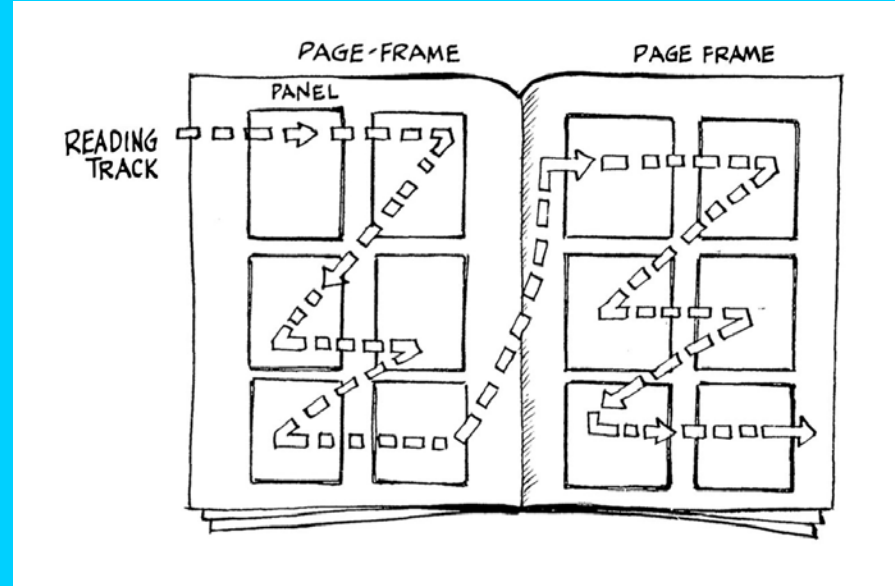
The reading of a traditional comic will be full of convenient visual clues and well placed information.

Instruction is implicit.

In short - it's easy to read.



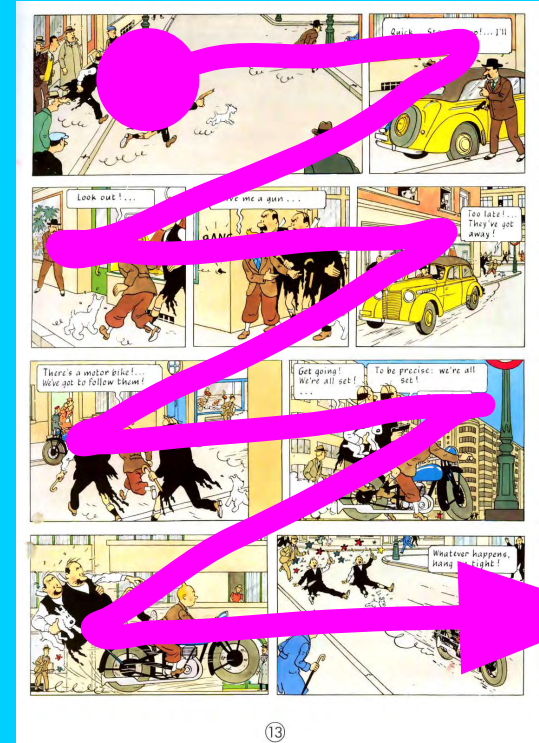
Diagram from Comics and Sequential Art, Eisener 2001

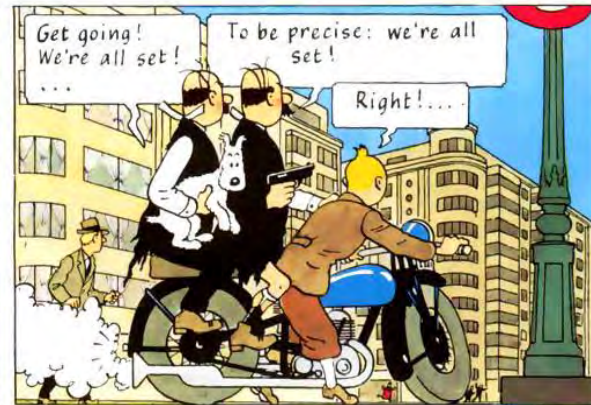


“tacit cooperation of the reader”

(Eisener, 2001)

Ordered structuring means the reader does not need to search for the correct panel order; the sequence and pacing are clearly dictated by the creator's arrangement. Even the panel content supports this progression.





(McCloud 1994)

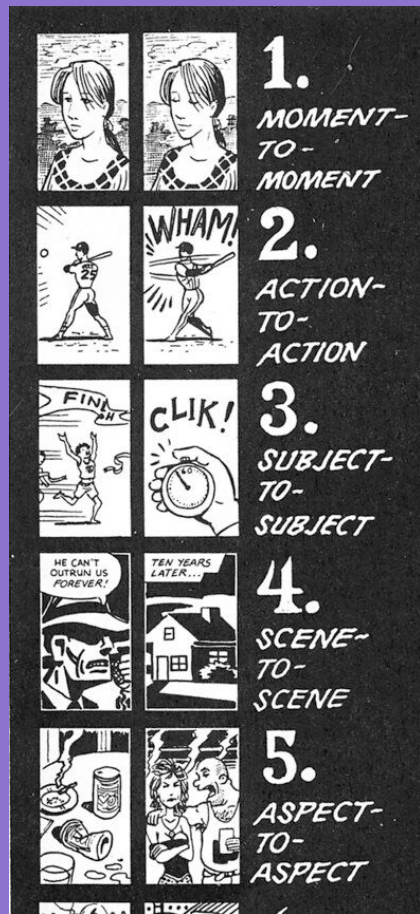
Closure

The mental (cognitive) effort of inferring meaning from juxtaposed images.

“observing the parts but perceiving the whole”

“human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea”

(McCloud 1994)



*But what happens
when linear
storytelling is
disrupted?*

*A much more complex panel arrangement.
'Here' by Richard McGuire
(McGuire 2000)*

*All time strands are presented simultaneously, where the reader must
reconcile the juxtaposing moments together themselves.*

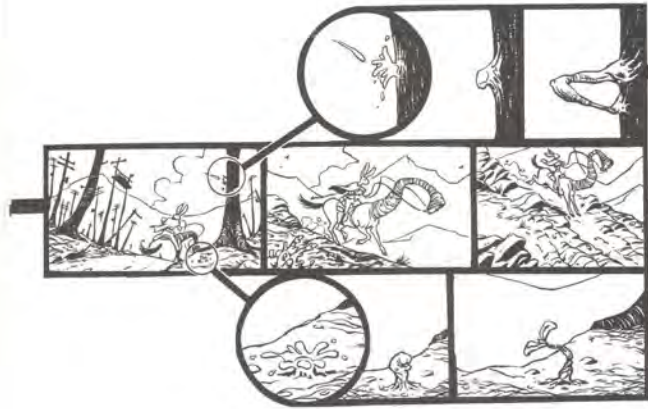


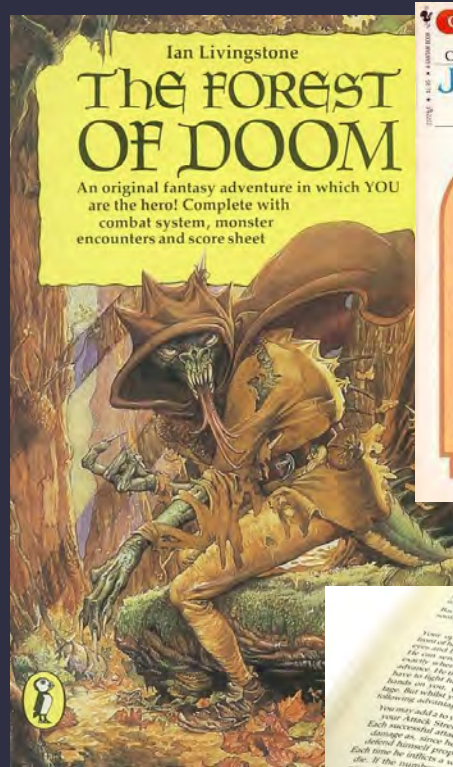
"Now & Then & When", The Guardian, Jillian Tamaki (Tamaki 2008)

Rabbithead, Rebecca Dart (Dart 2004)



*Rabbithead,
Rebecca Dart (Dart
2004)*





The Forest of Doom
(Livingstone, 1983)

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE! 2
YOU'RE THE STAR OF THE STORY!
CHOOSE FROM 42 POSSIBLE ENDINGS.
JOURNEY UNDER THE SEA
BY R.A. MONTGOMERY



ILLUSTRATED BY PAUL GRANT

62

Your friends are understanding about your wish to find the way back to your own time, but they tell you they can show you something you never dreamed of. Since their society is very primitive, you wonder what they could have in mind.

Next day they lead you to another cove where the waves roll in, rise up against the cliff and then roll out again. Sometimes the waves clap against each other and send a foamy spray of water high in the air. You see some young people on tiny rafts—nothing more than surfboards—riding in on the crests of the waves and then riding them out on the rebound. In a few hours you have learned a sport that brings excitement and fascination for hour after hour.

With such delights as this, it is not long before you lose interest in returning to your own time. Sometimes you wonder, but you never learn, whether this paradise lies in the future or the past.

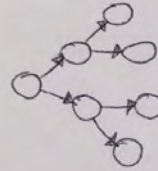
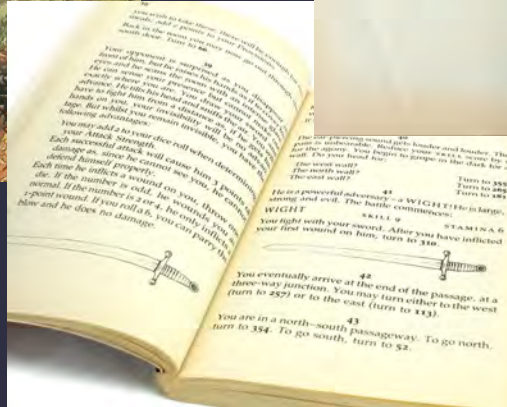
The End

63

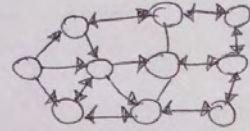
You hug your friends good-bye and climb the edge bordering the jungle. You soon find an animal trail leading through the dense undergrowth into a tropical rain forest. The green canopy of treetops is far overhead and only an occasional dapgle of sunlight reaches the spongy, dark ground. You walk on and on, hoping to reach the mountains, where you might find another entrance to the Cave of Time.

Night falls and you make yourself a crude bed. Your mattress is the mossy floor of the forest. You spread out fern leaves for a sheet. Early the next morning, as the birds are beginning their morning songs, you are awakened by the box constrictor wrapped around your neck.

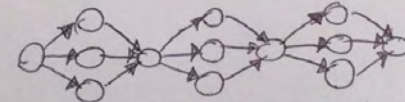
The End



TREE

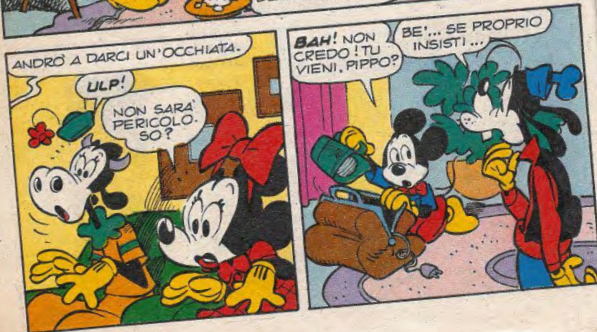
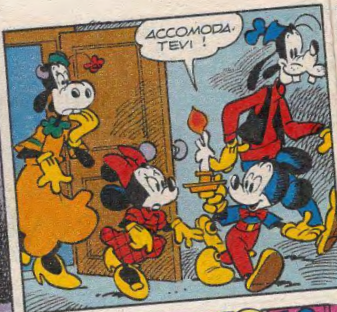


NETWORK



STRING OF PEARLS

A branching narrative “cannot have fewer than three sections: a starting section and two endings connected by a single branching point”(Arnaudo 2023).



COMINCIA LA GRANDE
AVVENTURA, AMICO
LETTORE!

SE DECIDI DI
ESPLORARE
IL CASTELLO,
VAI A PAG. 8

SE PREFERISCI
RIMANDARE,
SALTA A
PAG. 22

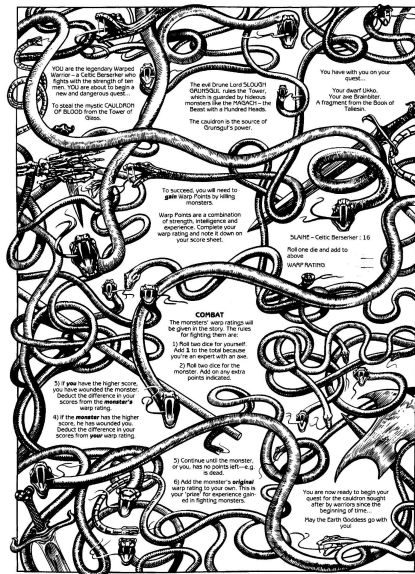


Bruno Concina, George Cavazzano. 1985.
"Topolino e Il Segreto Del Castello'."

In Topolino 1565. Italy - Arnoldo Mondadori
Editore.



"You Are Slaine in Cauldron of Blood" (Mills et al. 1986)



17 AS IT DRAWS CLOSER,
YOU CAN HEAR IT
PANTING AND MAKING A WEIRD
...GIGGLING SOUND...



MAYBE IT'S THE MAGACH!
THE BEAST WITH A HUNDRED
HEADS! WE'VE GOT TO GET
OUT OF HERE!

IF YOU AGREE, YOU
TRY THE DOOR ON THE
RIGHT... GO TO 52
IF YOU WOULD LIKE
TO MEET THE
CREATURE... GO TO 10

AS YOU HEAD UPWARD,
YOU SEE THE EERIE
SHADOW OF SOMETHING
DESCENDING THE STAIRS...



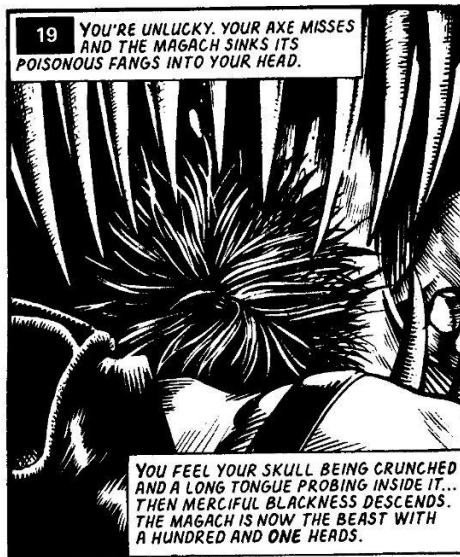
18 YOU TAKE THE GOLD CHAIN— BUT IT
HAS NO EFFECT ON YOU. YOU SHOULD
HAVE REMEMBERED THE CAULDRON WAS THE
SOURCE OF GRUNSGUL'S POWER. YOU DIE.



NO!

THAT'LL TEACH YOU TO BELIEVE
WHAT'S WRITTEN ON LATRINE WALLS—
ESPECIALLY GOBLINS' LATRINES.

19 YOU'RE UNLUCKY. YOUR AXE MISSES
AND THE MAGACH SINKS ITS
POISONOUS FANGS INTO YOUR HEAD.



YOU FEEL YOUR SKULL BEING CRUNCHED
AND A LONG TONGUE PROBING INSIDE IT...
THEN MERCIFUL BLACKNESS DESCENDS.
THE MAGACH IS NOW THE BEAST WITH
A HUNDRED AND ONE HEADS.

To succeed, you will need to **gain** Warp Points by killing monsters.

Warp Points are a combination of strength, intelligence and experience. Complete your warp rating and note it down on your score sheet.

SLAINE – Celtic Berserker : 16

Roll one die and add to above

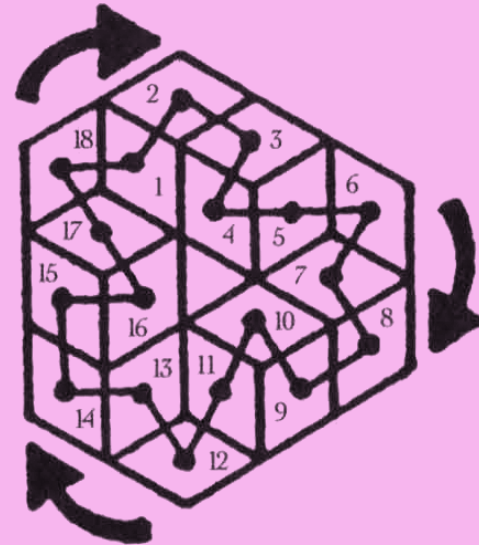
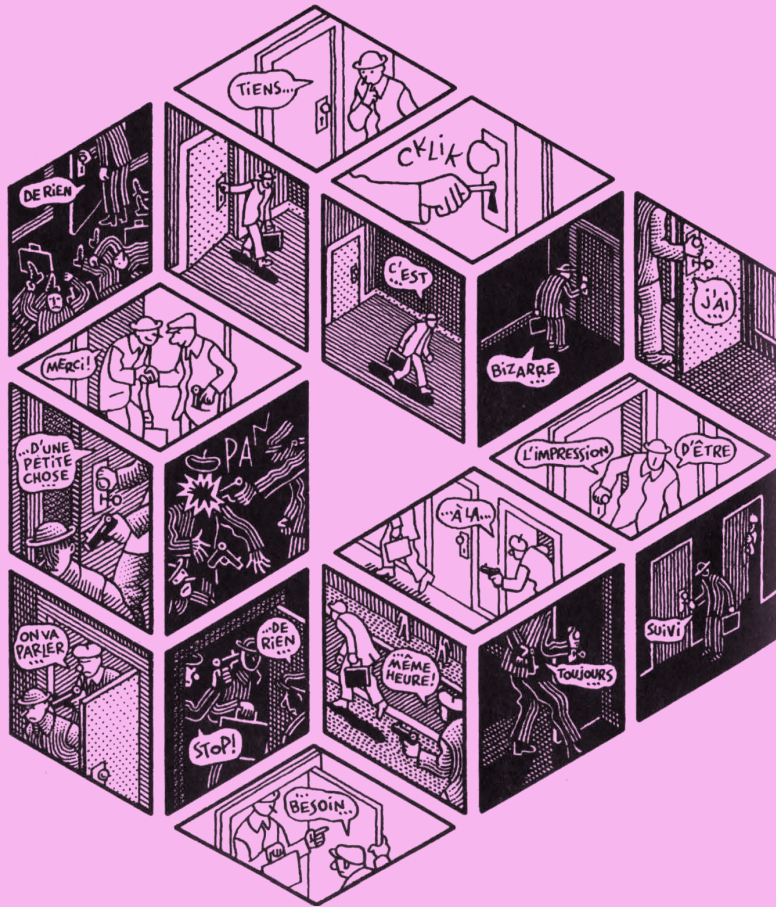
WARP RATING

COMBAT

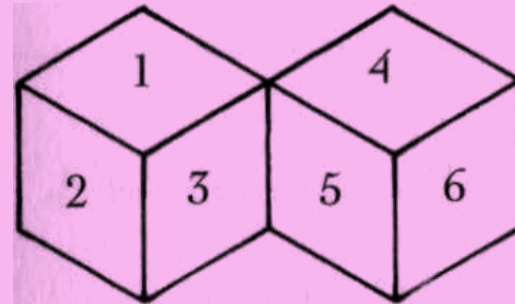
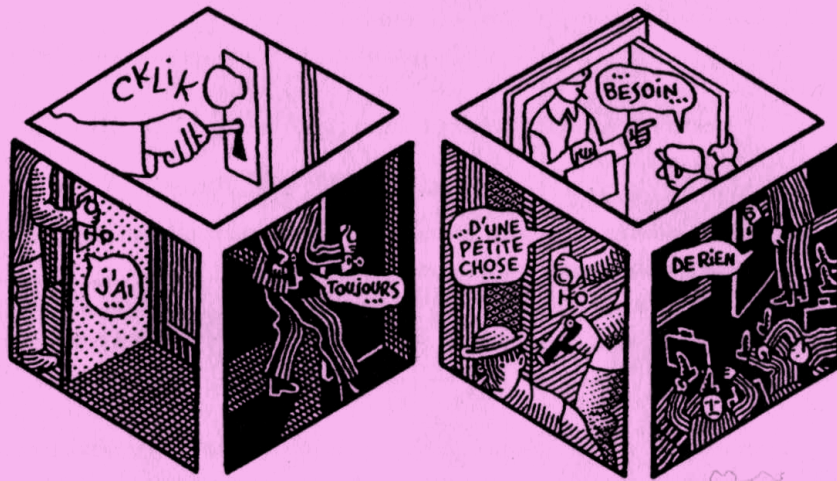
The monsters' warp ratings will be given in the story. The rules for fighting them are:

- 1) Roll two dice for yourself. Add **1** to the total because you're an expert with an axe.
- 2) Roll two dice for the monster. Add on any extra points indicated.
- 3) If **you** have the higher score, you have wounded the monster. Deduct the difference in your scores from the **monster's** warp rating.
- 4) If the **monster** has the higher score, he has wounded you. Deduct the difference in your scores from **your** warp rating.
- 5) Continue until the monster, or you, has no points left—e.g. is dead.
- 6) Add the monster's **original** warp rating to your own. This is your 'prize' for experience gained in fighting monsters.

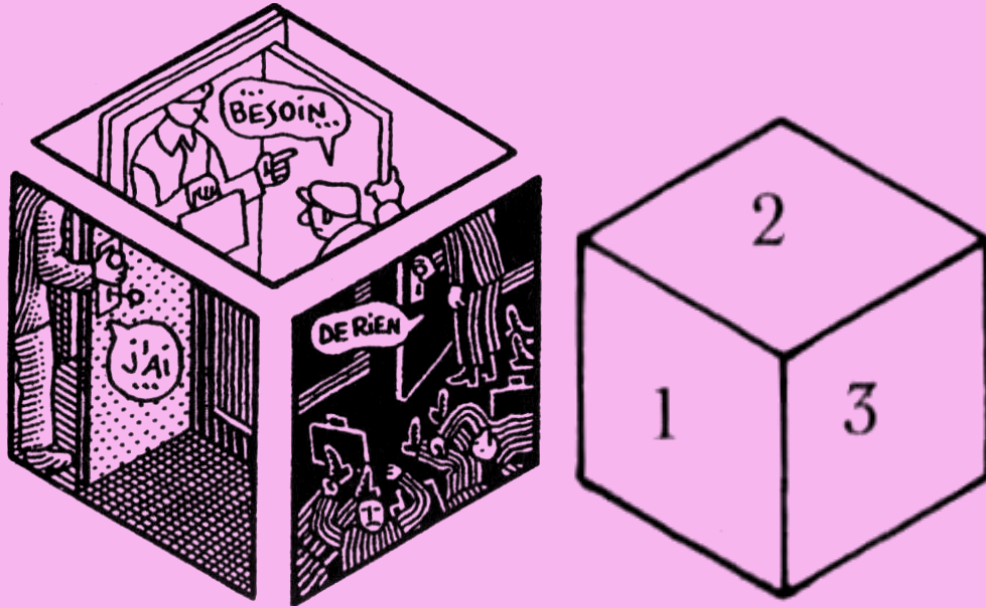
You are now ready to begin your quest for the cauldron sought



Tripoutre in full, with supporting diagram ([Killoffer 1997](#))



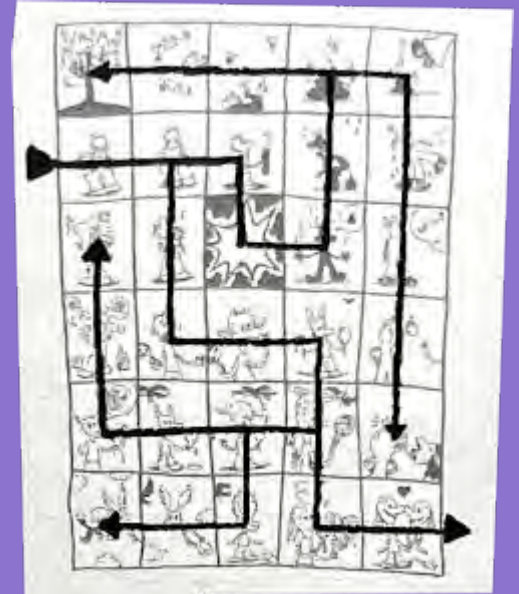
Tripoutre in full, with supporting diagram ([Killoffer 1997](#))



Tripoutre in full, with supporting diagram ([Killoffer 1997](#))

Cognitive Load

the mental effort required from the reader to actively engage with and traverse the text



What branching in comics means

- More than one valid next path
- Order can change between readings
- Choice is stored in the object



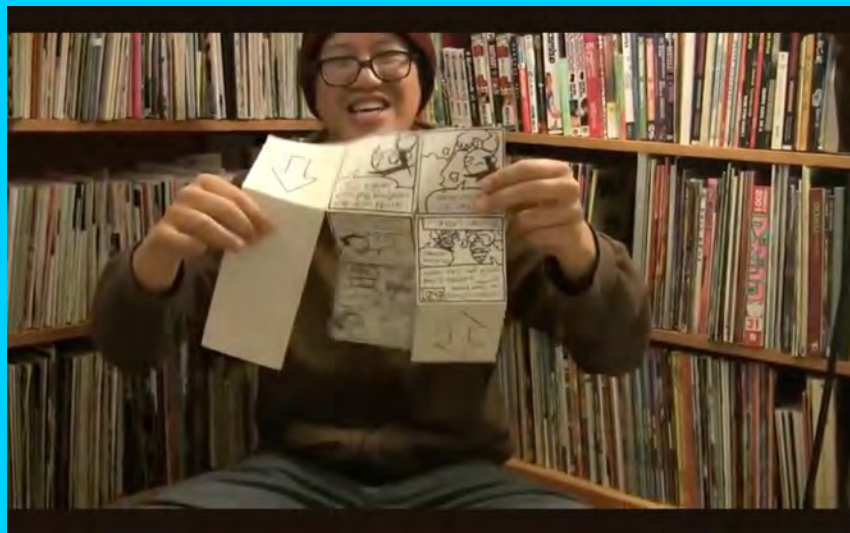
Ergodic Literature

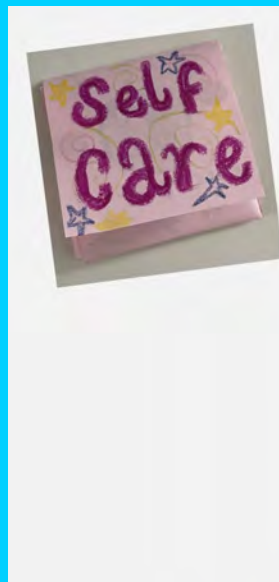
"nontrivial effort is required to allow
the reader to traverse the text"

Espen Aarseth, 1997

*As complexity
increases, the
reader's role is
LESS passive.*

[How To Make Your Own Interactive Comic \(Shiga, 2010\)](#)













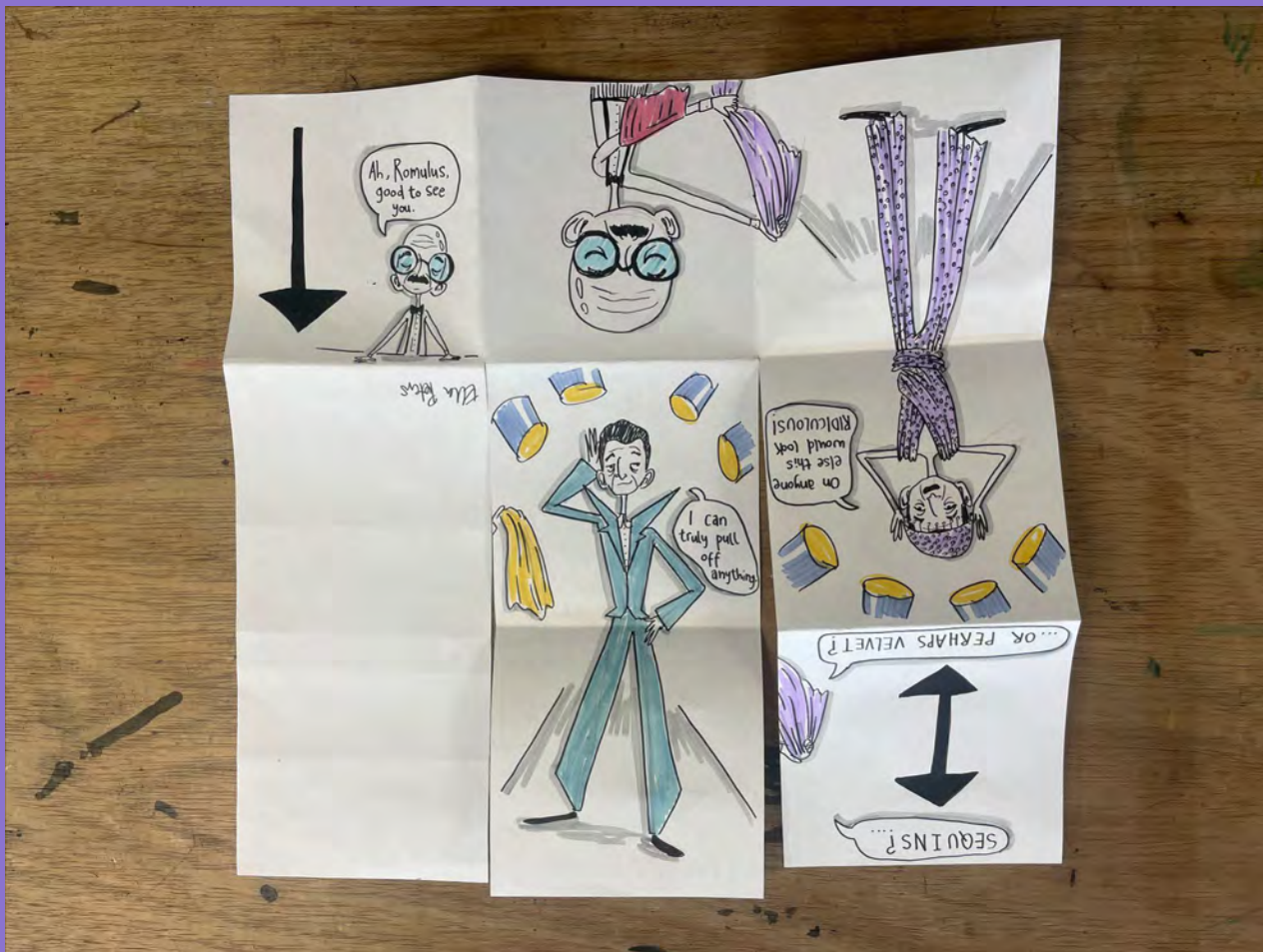
BACK













The Reader as Co-Author?

The control to CHOOSE empowers the reader.

“the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author”

Roland Barthes, 1967

*What happens when
the book behaves like
a device?*

Device?

Mechanisms?

Fourteen separate print objects.

You choose sequence, which scripts the macro-structure before any story content

“no beginning or end” (Ware, 2012)

Building Stories unboxed (Ware 2012)



Colour-coded stems that you follow via tabs. Follow the tubes from one panel across pages.

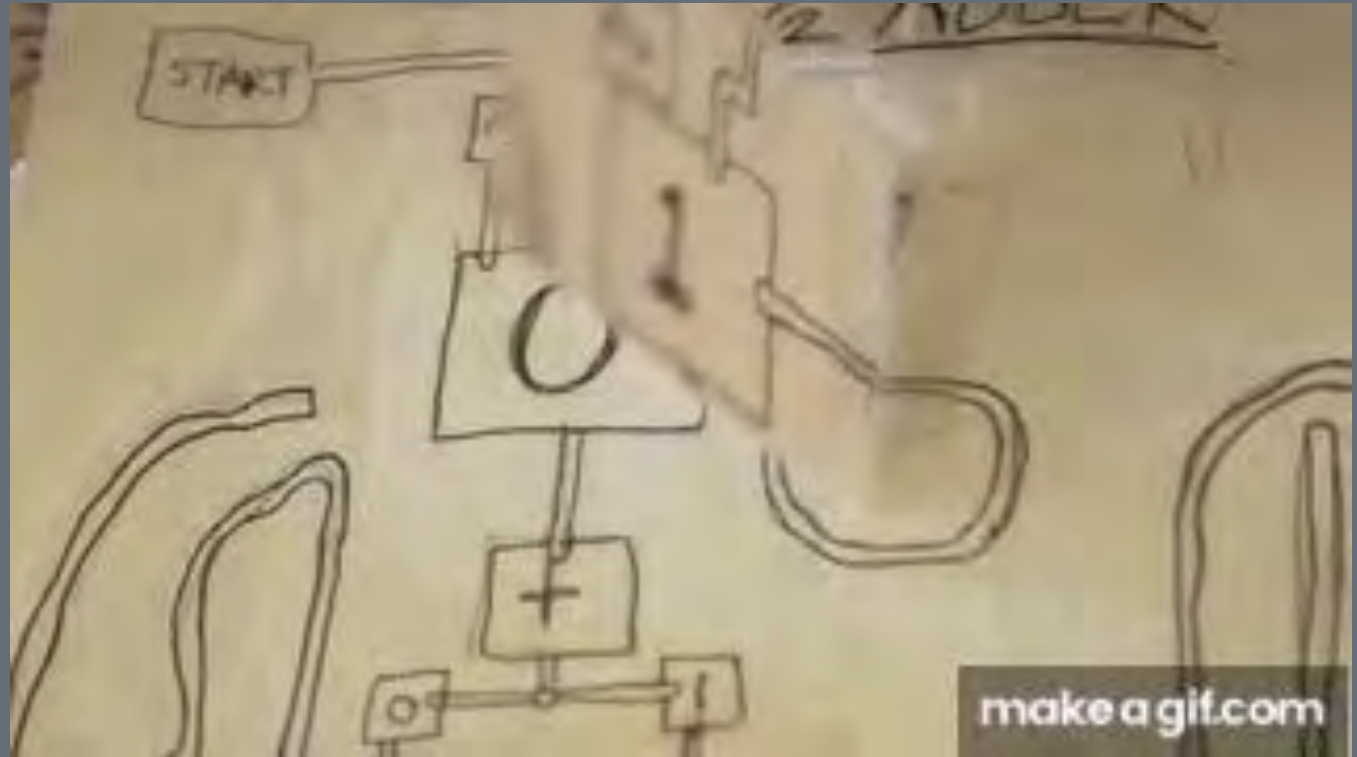


Split tiers store states
and present options.

One wrong move and
the story ends!



Nested flaps
hard-wire a binary
calculator.



Ridged wheel snaps to legal positions.
The mechanics ensure correct operation.



Engineered object	Constraint mechanism	Reader effort	Authorial exchange
Meanwhile	Edge straps restrict exits	Follow the pipes, turn the page at the tab	Choose next branch
Hello World	Split tiers enforce loop logic	Turn upper page/ Turn lower page	Program execution path
Paper Calculator	Nested flaps hard-wire binary adder	Set inputs, fold, trace the line	Generate unseen digits
Theatre Eroïka	Ridged wheels	Dial, feel notch, read	Mentally assemble a bespoke montage

Three Strands

AUTHORITY

Who is in charge -
Creator, Reader or Mechanism ?

WORK

What must the reader do?
Pathfinding, Memory, Playing, Operating

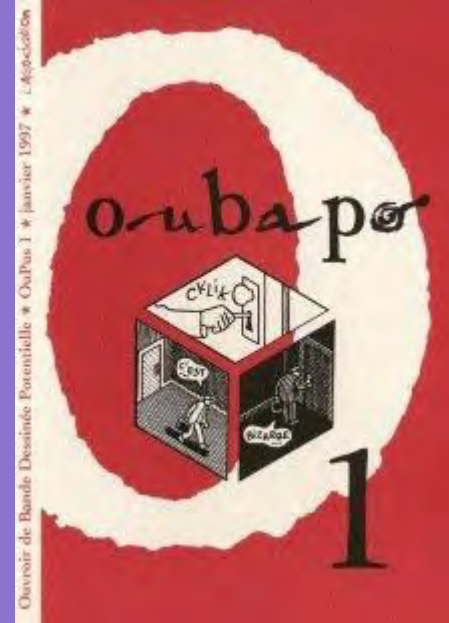
MECHANISM

How structure steers meaning
Amplification, Masking, Redirecting, Wheels, Tiles, Dice...



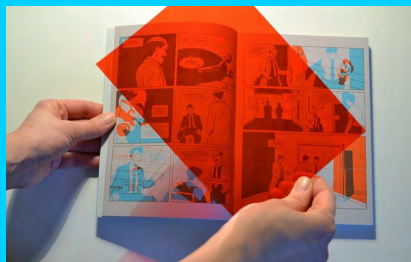
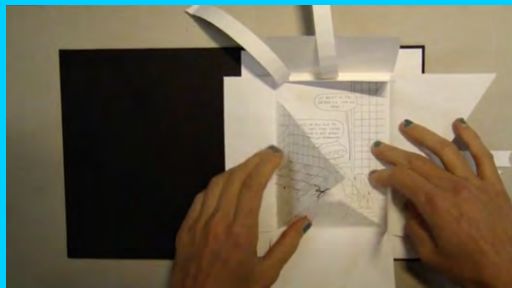
OuBaPo

- A French experimental comics group.
- Short for "Ouvroir de bande dessinée potentielle".
 - (Workshop of Potential Comics.)
- Constraint is a generator, not a limit





What's the
mechanism?

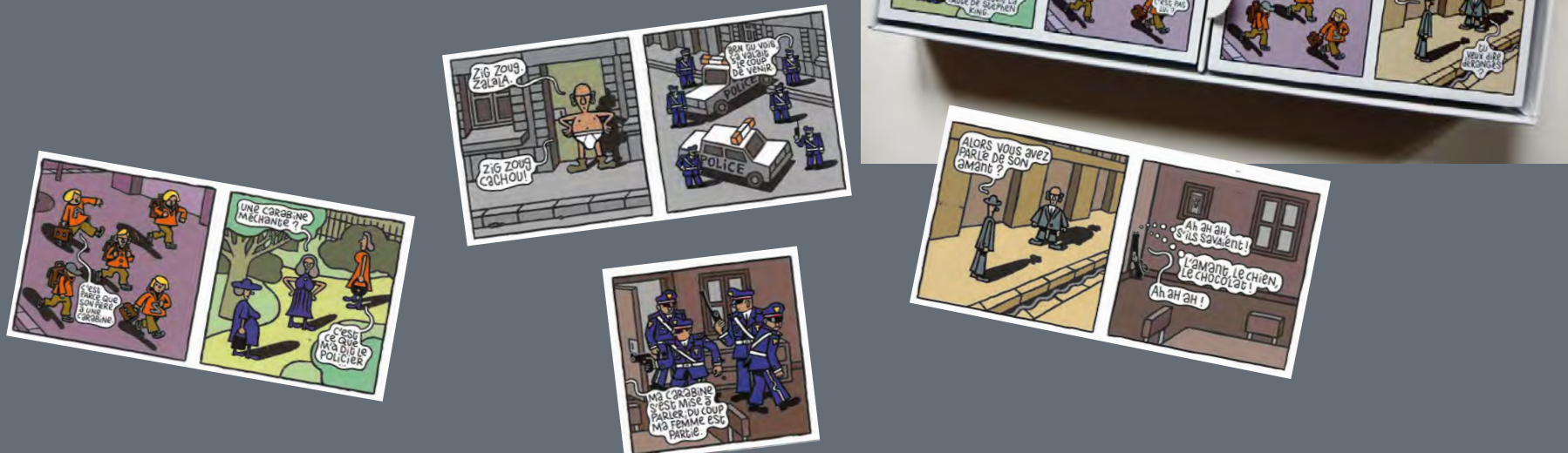


Domino style tiles (28 tiles, two panels on each, double sided).

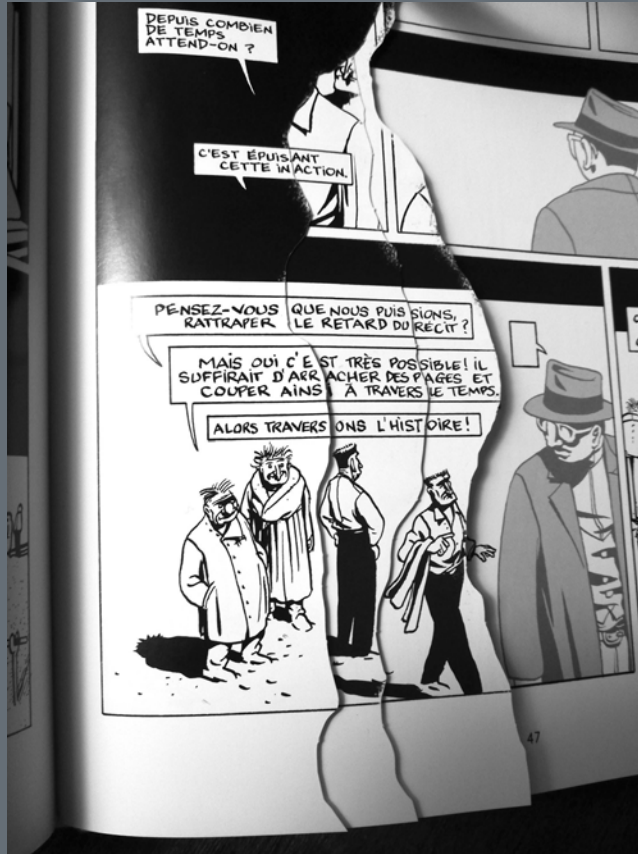
7 unique illustrations. Lots of french word play.

Placed by players at their choosing. Player choice becomes authorship.

It is 'read' when assembled.



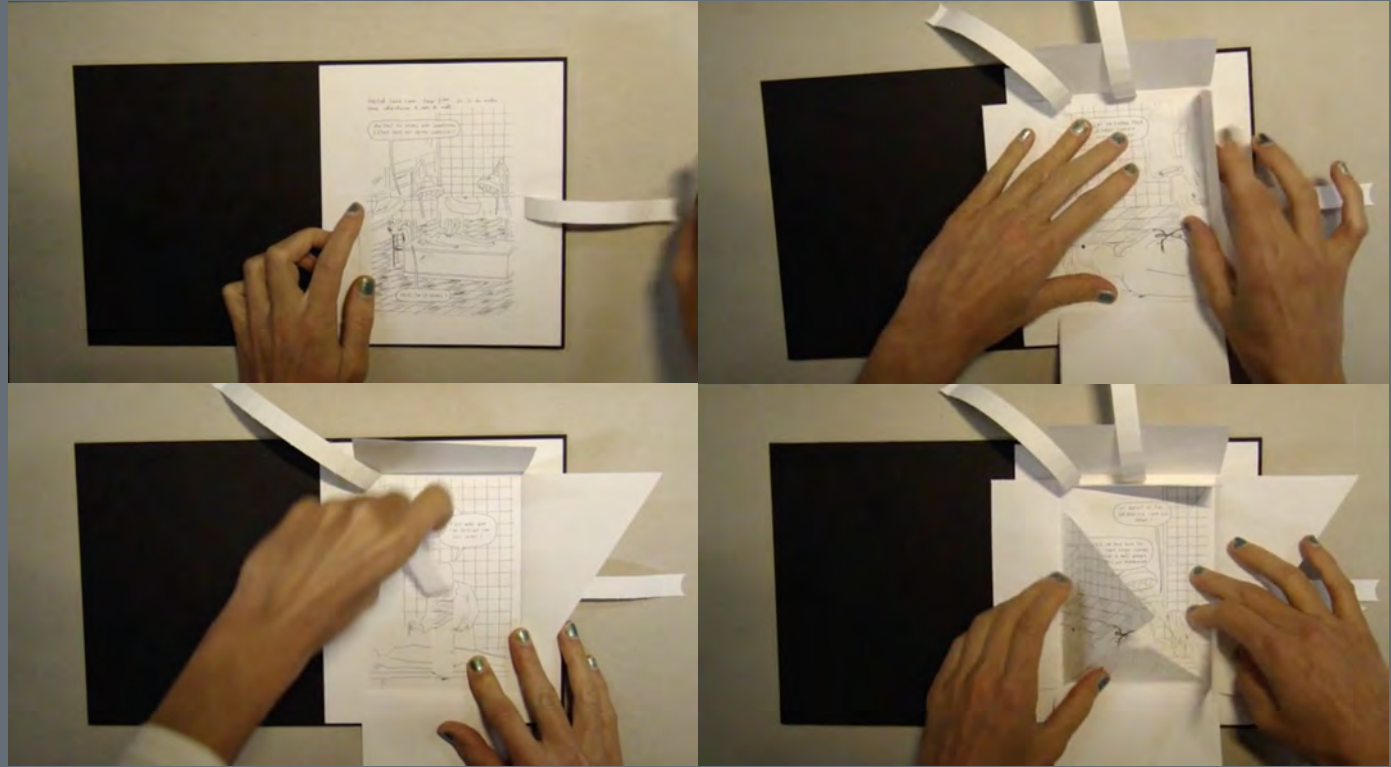
Pre-torn pages block page content (with different images strategically revealed beneath)



The torn pages from Le Décalage (Mathieu, 2013)



Perforated pages layered on top of each other force the reader to tear through the book to reveal the narrative.



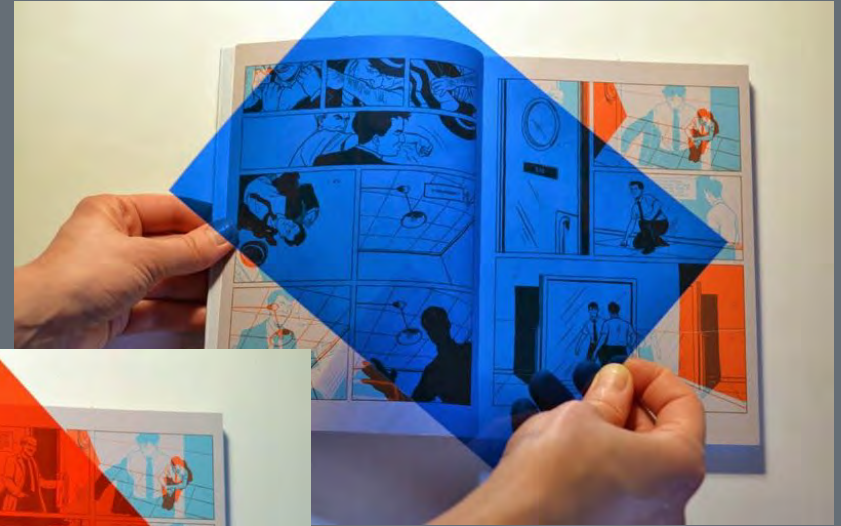
Contents and outer wrapper from Heavy Toast (Jeanneau, 2011)

30 loose cards - the reader determines the reading order.



A Polychromie spread under two different acetate sheets (Bernard et al., 2014)

Two acetate sheets power the book. Cyan reveals one strand. Magenta reveals another. Without them it's overprinted noise. With them stories snap into place.



Three dice with panel fragments.
One toss
gives a fresh
three-panel strip



Comic based on a
Sliding-block puzzle.

Any story can be
created from any
arrangement, with
speech relying on
interplay of text



Mechanisms as Authority

- Some devices let you choose, others force you to operate correctly.
- If you mis-operate, the story breaks.

*What happens when
paper behaves like a
device?*

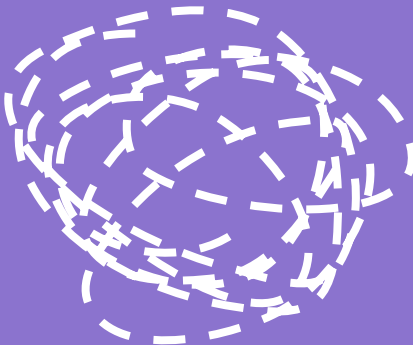
The Three Authors

THE CREATOR

controls & designs the
possibility space, the art, and
the rules

THE READER

navigates, assembles, and
performs actions to bring the
story to life



THE MECHANISM

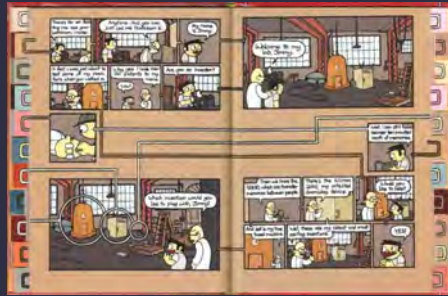
the physical object that
governs interaction and
enforces rules

When the 'book' behaves like a device, format re-allocates control and labour



Building Stories

You assemble the macro order from fourteen pieces while Ware still controls the rhythm inside each one.



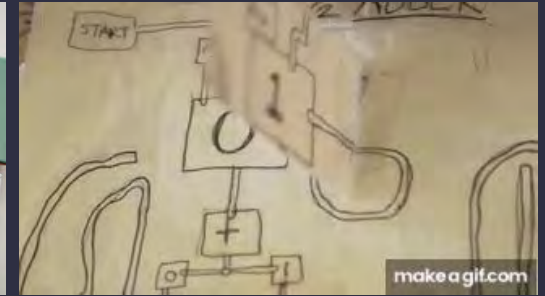
Meanwhile

You choose the route, and the book itself only opens the exits it supports, keeping you on track.



DOMIPO

At the table authorship circulates because each tile placement commits one face and the geometry decides what can connect next.



SHIGA DEVICES

Your job shifts from choosing to operating, and the device withholds the story unless you manage state correctly.

*What happens when
paper behaves like a
device?*

The impacts of book format on branching comics

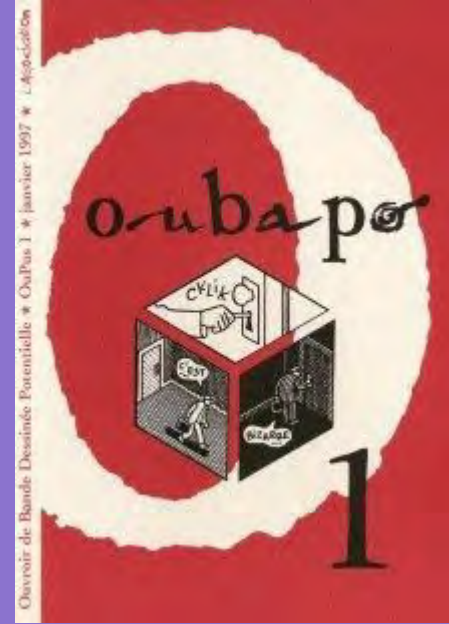
- Format can become an **active storytelling agent**
- Authority **circulates** - creator, reader, mechanism
- Agency costs **labour** - *navigation, memory, operation*
- Simple structures lower barriers - complex ones deepen interaction.
- Print is embodied - screens can simulate routes, not handling.

The background is a solid purple color. It is decorated with several large, stylized cyan stars of varying sizes and orientations. Interspersed among the stars are four cyan swirls, each with a unique, flowing, and somewhat abstract shape. The overall aesthetic is playful and celebratory.

thanks!

OuBaPo

- A French experimental comics group.
- Short for "Ouvroir de bande dessinée potentielle".
 - (Workshop of Potential Comics.)
- Constraint is a generator, not a limit



4 - 7
Sept

Illustration

&
the

Paper Artefact

**Benjamin Wright - The Impacts of Book Format
on the Creation & Reading of Branching
Narratives in Print Comics**

Senior lecturer and course leader BA (Hons)
Illustration, Arts University Plymouth,
Plymouth, UK

Physical branching narratives reveal new tensions when paper escapes traditional book formats. How do engineered structures—modular inserts, tabs, wheels, domino tiles, split-tier pages—shift narrative labour between author and reader? This paper examines commercially produced works like Chris Ware's Building Stories and Jason Shiga's Meanwhile, before exploring avant-garde cases including OuBaPo's DOMIPO and Shiga's unpublished "paper- computer" prototypes. Drawing on ergodic theory, artist-book scholarship, and multisensory studies, we argue that folds, slots, and rotations transform reading into spatial, embodied navigation. Through practice- based reflection and critical analysis, we consider how simple structures may lower creative barriers, while complex mechanisms demand more planning but offer deeper play. By foregrounding format as an active storytelling agent, this study situates branching comics within the wider discourse on paper artefacts and explores how the roles of reader and creator increasingly overlap.

www.benjaminography.com | Instagram

@benjaminography