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Two innovative graphic novels published within the past five years are, at their essence, works about the process of making comics. *Asterios Polyp*, by David Mazzucchelli, and *Wilson*, by Daniel Clowes, are texts in which the narrative is secondary to the arguments advanced by the formal qualities of the book. The didactic process of the comic's creation, and the deliberate interaction between the creator and the reader, are the true subject matter of each text.

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The use of the comics format to meditate on the formal qualities of the medium isn't new. Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* and its sequels<sup>1</sup> have shaped scholarly discourse on comics for two decades, and mainstream audiences know Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan* and the formal deconstructions which accompany the sad tale of dysfunctional fathers and sons.

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*Asterios Polyp* and *Wilson* exist in a space between McCloud and Ware, arguing in favor of the expansive formal possibilities of comics within a narrative framework. They don't break the fourth wall in the manner of *Understanding Comics* and admit their artifice, but they are unquestionably books about comic-making, not about their protagonists.

This growing direction in comics brings to mind a similar trend in video games, which designer and philosopher Ian Bogost has termed "proceduralism."<sup>2</sup> I argue that we can apply the concept of proceduralism to the creative impulse behind these works by Clowes and Mazzucchelli, which in turn provide a broader vocabulary when talking about the structure of comics in any incarnation.

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<sup>1</sup> Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperPerennial: 1993), followed by Scott McCloud, *Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology are Revolutionizing an Art Form* (New York: Perennial/HarperCollins: 2000) and *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga, and Graphic Novels* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Ian Bogost, *How To Do Things With Videogames* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 12.

A proceduralist game or text is one which makes an argument through procedural rhetoric, a concept also introduced by Bogost to describe the act of making an argument about a medium by modeling that argument through the medium's native environment.<sup>3</sup> Initially this concept only referred to computational programs. Bogost later applied the idea of procedural rhetoric to art forms, specifically videogames, in his 2011 book *How To Do Things With Videogames*. He identifies proceduralist games as those which utilize procedural rhetoric and in which "expression arises primarily from the player's interaction with the game's mechanics and dynamics."<sup>4</sup>

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One example of a proceduralist game is Jason Rohrer's game *Passage*,<sup>5</sup> which is a *memento mori* in digital form. As Rohrer explains, *Passage* "presents an entire life, from young adulthood through old age and death, in the span of five minutes."<sup>6</sup> The game display surface is a mere 100 pixels by 12 pixels. As the game progresses, the player character noticeably ages and his position shifts from the left to the right edge of the horizontal surface. After five minutes elapse, the game ends and the character dies, regardless of the score and the actions the player takes. Rohrer introduces obstacles and rewards which affect the game experience in meaningful ways. For example, if you team up with your spouse at the beginning, you move slower and your ability to navigate through the game's maze is limited, but you accumulate double the points along the way.

*Passage* was a way for Rohrer to reflect on his life and marriage. He makes an argument about how the decisions we make affect our lives in interesting and unforeseen ways, and reminds the player that, yes, one day you too will die.

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<sup>3</sup> Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Bogost, *How To Do Things With Videogames*, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Jason Rohrer, *Passage* Vers. 3. December 13, 2007, <http://hcsoftware.sourceforge.net/passage/>.

<sup>6</sup> Jason Rohrer, "Creator's Statement," last modified November 13, 2007, <http://hcsoftware.sourceforge.net/passage/statement.html>.

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Just as Bogost identified procedural rhetoric at work in a group of video games, I propose that procedural rhetoric describes the techniques used by David Mazzucchelli in *Asterios Polyp* and by Daniel Clowes in *Wilson* to make their claims about the process of creation within the native environment of comics.

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*Asterios Polyp*<sup>7</sup> was released in 2009, the first new work published by David Mazzucchelli in almost a decade. *Asterios Polyp* follows the life of a 50-year-old architect of the same name, who sets out on a journey of self-discovery after his apartment burns down. The story is presented in three distinct narrative modes. There is the straightforward tale of Asterios in the present day, images of Asterios's past narrated by his dead twin brother Ignazio, and Asterios's dreams, in which he and Ignazio interact.

However, while the narrative is about an architect and his adventures, the book is also a process-intensive survey on the structural aspects of comics. In recent years Mazzucchelli has worked as a professor of illustration, and *Asterios Polyp* should be read as a textbook. The creator's presence is foregrounded in the text, and the book's artifice constantly demands awareness.

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First and foremost, the book draws attention to its physicality. Its glossy dust jacket is slightly shorter than the actual book, revealing the hardbound cover underneath. That hard binding only extends halfway to the edges of the book. The outer edges of the front and back covers reveal the unexposed cardboard which comprises the binding's core.

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<sup>7</sup> David Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009).

On the page, *Asterios Polyp*, like most color comics, is printed using a CMYK color model, in which three primary colors - cyan, magenta, and yellow - are combined with black to create the visual spectrum. Mazzucchelli pushes this model to an extreme.

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The first three-quarters of the book are printed entirely in shades and tints of cyan, magenta, and yellow. Black is never utilized, with violet taking its place. Lighter secondary colors and tertiary colors don't appear until the final chapters.

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Each primary color is associated with a primary character in the story. Ignazio, the narrator, only appears in dream chapters rendered almost entirely in yellow. Asterios is cyan, reflecting his calm, detached personality, while his artistic ex-wife Hana is magenta. Their wardrobes and residences reflect these color preferences...

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...and in moments of emotional distress, Mazzucchelli separates Asterios and Hana into their core colors. To further emphasize the difference in personalities between the two lovers in these moments, he illustrates each with distinct forms. The cerebral Asterios becomes comprised of geometric shapes, while the emotional Hana is shaded, crosshatched, and curvilinear. Each character within the text is also given his or her own font, reflecting their personality.

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Asterios's speech is written in square speech bubbles, which anchor to the edges of panels as if they were explanatory text. His primary antagonist, the playwright Willy Ilium, speaks in bold letters in an expansive speech bubble signifying his outsized personality. Mazzucchelli's methods are not subtle, and he uses every trick in the artist's toolbox to highlight his character's personalities, strengths, and faults.

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Mazzucchelli also acknowledges and challenges traditional means of depicting concepts and ideas. In one late chapter, he visualizes the disjointed act of memory through a haphazard accumulation of stand-alone images of previous encounters between Asterios and Hana, which surround a straightforward narrative progression of a mundane interaction that runs across the middle of the page.<sup>8</sup> Nothing shown is important, thereby imbuing the entire collection of memories with significance. The artist demonstrates new possibilities in the process of comics creation while showing awareness of tried and true techniques.

Whereas David Mazzucchelli takes a textbook approach to the procedural rhetoric of comics, Daniel Clowes is more limited in *Wilson*.

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Unlike Mazzucchelli, Clowes has been a prolific creator over the past few decades, with works such as *Ghost World*<sup>9</sup> appearing first in the fifteen-year run of his serial comic *Eightball*<sup>10</sup> before being collected in standalone volumes.

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*Wilson*,<sup>11</sup> which was published in 2010, was the artist's first graphic novel not to be previously serialized in another venue.

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Within *Wilson*, Clowes is primarily concerned with the procedural rhetoric of style and page structure. Each one of the book's 71 pages is a self-contained vignette, with a title at the top and a punch line or final beat in its last panel. The narrative strings across these vignettes, but Clowes treats each as a discrete unit, and shifts wildly between artistic styles across them, referencing mid-century newspaper and magazine cartoonists in addition to his own native style.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 232-243.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Clowes, *Ghost World* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Clowes, *Eightball* #1-23 (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics, 1989-2004).

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Clowes, *Wilson* (Montreal, QC: Drawn and Quarterly, 2010).

Like *Asterios Polyp*, *Wilson* the book picks up in the middle of the life of its namesake subject. Seemingly comfortable in his unexciting life, Wilson the man is shocked out of his complacency with the news of his father's terminal illness, which becomes the impetus for attempted journeys of reconciliation. What proceeds are scenes of deeply emotional encounters mollified by the protagonist's apathy and generally repulsive personality. Wilson also functions as the reader's point of entry into the narrative, thanks to his penchant for monologues.

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Within the text, Clowes experiments with the extent to which visual style affects or disrupts internal content. When Wilson collapses on a baseball field as he finally comprehends his father's death, Clowes illustrates the page in bright colors and cartoony forms. Meanwhile, a scene in which Wilson harasses another customer in a coffee house is rendered with muted tones and much more elaborate linework.

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Through the vignette construction of the book, *Wilson* also serves as an exploration of space and time within comics. Each page, with its title and punch line, is self-contained. As a result, the gutter, or gap, between the pages is of primary interest, rather than the gutter between the panels.

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*Wilson's* story proceeds chronologically, but interruptions persist in the temporal and narrative relationships between pages. For example, while a conversation with a taxi driver spans two pages in the middle of the book without missing a beat,<sup>12</sup> later on six years of Wilson's life are condensed into the space of six pages.<sup>13</sup> Clowes has stated that his goal was to encourage reader interaction by inviting them to fill in the gutters themselves,<sup>14</sup> and I would

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-32.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-59.

<sup>14</sup> Liz Ohanesian, "Interview: Daniel Clowes on the Evolution of *Wilson*," *LA Weekly*, May 13, 2010, accessed March 11, 2013, [http://blogs.laweekly.com/arts/2010/05/daniel\\_clowes\\_interview\\_wilson.php](http://blogs.laweekly.com/arts/2010/05/daniel_clowes_interview_wilson.php).

also suggest that his experimentation is an attempt to encourage those readers to think outside of the boundaries of this particular narrative and consider greater potentials for comic book structures at large.

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Through the creation of process-intensive and process-focused graphic novels, both Daniel Clowes and David Mazzucchelli have created works which question and explore the formal qualities of comic books. Therefore, it is entirely appropriate to use Ian Bogost's framework of procedural rhetoric and proceduralism to discuss this sub-genre. If a proceduralist text is one which makes a claim about how something works by modeling that claim's processes in its native environment, then *Asterios Polyp* and *Wilson* meet that definition. These texts foreground the deliberate presence of each creator through a forced reflection on each book's mechanical arrangement. In this way, Clowes and Mazzucchelli represent the ongoing growth of the medium of comics, and point toward an increase in the creation of works that present questions of form and structure in a published, long form manner.

Thank you.