

Stuart Moore's A Thousand Flowers: Compression, Decompression



A THOUSAND FLOWERS Comics, Pop Culture, and the World Outside Installment 27 by Stuart Moore

In the Old Days, It Woulda Been Eight Pages!

There's a lot of debate these days about the pacing of modern comics. Many mainstream books today move their plots along more slowly than fans are used to. This can play out in different ways: extended, realistically-paced dialogue scenes; long, cinematic action sequences; slow buildups to establish a protagonist's origins and motivations.

Proponents of this new pacing call it "decompression" and argue that it allows for greater depth of character and mood. Opponents denounce it as mere padding, and argue that the rise of the trade paperback format has led writers to stretch out stories beyond their natural length.

The compression/decompression argument isn't as new as it seems. Yes, for the first twenty-five years or so -- say, until the late '50s -- most American comics stories were pretty compact. The major reason is simple: the anthology nature of most comics meant that stories were short -- usually between six and thirteen pages. And most were self-contained.

This meant that a plot had to be set up fairly quickly and moved along swiftly to its resolution. No room for your Brian Bendis-style clever dialogue here; no twenty pages to spare for an extended swordfight. When you think about these limitations, it makes the achievements of masters like Harvey Kurtzman and Will Eisner even more impressive.

(Yes, I realize there were exceptions to the length and pacing described above. We'll get into this more next time, when we begin a SENSES-SHATTERING MULTI-PART THOUSAND FLOWERS EPIC on the various comic book formats over time. Be here, Pilgrim; it won't be a party without you. Well, okay, yeah it will. But it won't be **your** party.)



FF #9

Early Marvel comics generally featured longer single stories than their predecessors -- 19 to 24 pages -- and a greater mix of soap opera and interpersonal dynamics. But their pacing was pretty much the same, and most stories were self-contained or, in rare cases, clean two-parters. That started to change as the '60s went on -- due in large part to the efforts of Jack Kirby.

The early **Fantastic Four** consisted of self-contained stories laid out on a traditional grid -- usually six to nine panels per

page. But by the late '60s, Kirby had largely switched over to a looser, more action-oriented style, incorporating more full-page panels and three- to four-panel pages. Rumor has it he asked for a raise, was refused, and Stan told him to draw fewer panels instead.

Another possible factor: In the mid-'60s, the American comics industry switched to a smaller standard original art size. Before, artists had usually drawn at roughly twice printed size; the new standard was only about 1 1/2 times printed size. This led to less detailed pages but encouraged a more intimate look -- and fewer panels.

In any case...compare **Fantastic Four #9**, "The End of the Fantastic Four!" (1962) to issue #93, "At the Mercy of Torgo!" (1969). The first story tosses a dizzying sequence of events at the reader: the FF is bankrupt, people have turned against them, the Sub-Mariner decides to defeat them by offering them the chance to star in their own movie, he lures them to Hollywood, he proposes to Sue Storm, she refuses, the movie gets made and the FF are on top of the world again. Yes, it's kind of a silly plot -- but the point is, events come and go at a rapid-fire pace.

On the other hand, here's the plot of "At the Mercy of Torgo!": The Thing, who has been kidnapped and taken to a planet of gangster-gladiators (in a previous issue), fights a couple of rounds and teaches a slave the meaning of honor, then the others come and rescue him. There **is** a self-contained story involving the slave and the Thing, but it's much simpler and more action-oriented. In today's lingo, it's decompressed.

(Gangster-gladiators? Actually, that's another pretty silly plot. Kind of like a couple of different *Star Trek* episodes mixed up in a blender.)



Stan Lee printed a few complaints about this change of pace -- or, rather, pacing -- in the FF letter columns of the time. But for the most part, fans liked it because Kirby's storytelling abilities were at their peak, and the added room allowed for more of his innovative cosmic vistas -- as well as Stan's patented overblown, fun dialogue.

Stan, who was letting Kirby control most of the pacing, also let him evolve as an artist. As a result, the book worked in a different way than it had, but it still worked. I've found, as an editor, that this is often the case when you let talented people experiment, rather than insisting they stick with what's worked in the past.

Today, readers' reactions to the changes in comics pacing depend largely on when they started reading comics. Most of us are "imprinted" with stories and images that struck us at early points in our lives, including comics. In the '70s, economics chipped away at the page counts of most comics, which reached a low when the 17-page comic became standard. Some writers and artists compensated by, er, "re-compressing" their books to fit a lot of story -- or, in some cases, just a lot of words -- into the new, smaller space.

Amazing Adventures - Killraven

If you were imprinted with, say, Jim Shooter and George Perez's **Avengers**, you're likely to be disappointed with a story that moves too slowly to accommodate a dozen or more characters in nine-panel pages. Other titles of the period, like Don McGregor and P. Craig Russell's **Killraven/War Of The Worlds**, crammed a lot in, too, to a more literary effect. Today, these comics look crowded and distracting, regardless of their artistic virtues.

In the '80s, two major factors contributed to the decompression of mainstream comics. The first was the shift back to a 22-page format for most books, allowing for a more leisurely pace. (DC's titles were often even longer, between 24 and 27 pages.) And the second was the beginnings of the manga influence -- seen most dramatically, for many of us, in Frank Miller's **Ronin**.

Ronin isn't Miller's finest comic, but it might be his most revolutionary. Freed from the constraints of the monthly 22-page format, he incorporated a number of Eastern techniques (and subject matter) into his first major, original work. In an early '80s interview, he discussed his decision to depict a four-page sequence where the main character merely lies, beaten, in a pile of trash, for greater emotional impact. At the time, that kind of "waste of space" was unheard-of in American comics. Now it's common.

So, thanks largely to Frank Miller, comics gradually decompressed. This trend reached one extreme in the early books by the original Image creators, first at Marvel and then at Image. These books emphasized style and action over plot and character, and were about as decompressed as you get.



(One rarely-credited precursor to the Image style was Mike Grell's testosterone-fueled fantasy epic **The Warlord**. In the late '70s, this book was like nothing else on the stands: lots of full-page shots, very few panels per page, totally design-oriented pages built around one large figure. No compression here. Racked between **Secret Society Of Super-Villains** and David V. Reed's **Batman, Warlord** looked like a visitor from another planet.)

In the '90s, manga hadn't yet conquered American bookstores -- but writers and artists were paying close attention, and comics started to change. As editors, we worried about how much decompression our readership would accept. When I passed along editorship of **Preacher** to Axel Alonso in 1995, we were both worried about issue #12 because it was basically one long fight scene, with very little dialogue. But it worked because of the emotional content Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon put into it, and because readers were beginning to realize that **Preacher** was a very special book. Even if an occasional issue, like this one, couldn't be fully appreciated in a vacuum, the readers accepted it as the climax of a longer storyline.



Garth was writing for the trade, or for the reader who liked to pile up recent issues and reread whole storylines. Now that's become the norm, especially at Marvel. And while it's allowed writers like Garth, Brian Bendis, and Greg Rucka to play on a larger canvas, it's brought along its own problems. For instance:

Readers who complain about lack of content are sometimes really complaining about lack of clarity. As comics embrace more extended plotlines, many writers have found it increasingly awkward to work in the kind of expository dialogue that catches readers up at the beginning of every issue -- which can cause problems if you don't remember every page of the issue you read a month ago. (And if you think it's tough to write that stuff month after month, it's five times as tough to write it so that, when a storyline is collected, the exposition doesn't turn into a giant speed bump every 22 pages.)

Marvel's decision to add recap pages to its books is a crucial element in making decompressed storytelling work. Recaps catch the reader up without the writer having to use expository dialogue or flashbacks that become superfluous in the trade paperback. The only problem is making room for the recaps around the ad pages. DC has been a little more uneven about this practice, but many Vertigo miniseries, in particular, have also made use of the device.

Not all books need recap pages, of course. **Preacher**, again, nearly always featured a simple through-line plot that could be grasped instantly, while the subtleties orbited around it. (Garth is also a master of unobtrusive exposition -- a very rare talent.) It all comes back to what works for a particular story, a particular combination of writer, artist, and character.

And the same goes for modern comics pacing. You wouldn't want Brian Bendis to have to hurry up his **Daredevil** plotline and miss the great interchanges between Foggy and Matt, or the Kingpin's wife and son. But other writers are more at home with a faster pace, a bouncier step from scene to scene. Kurt Busiek is currently writing wonderful self-contained stories in the new **Astro City** series. Gilbert Hernandez, hardly an old-school superhero hack, fits a hell of a lot of story into very little space, particularly in graphic novels like **Poison River** and **Love and Rockets X**.

Just like in movies, TV, or novels, one size does not fit all. When it's working, you don't screw around with it. Or, as a creative person, sometimes you do. After all, that's how you find the next thing.

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My current comics work: **LONE #1**, a new future-western series from Dark Horse/Rocket Comics, is on sale now. It's

getting some nice reviews, including <http://www.thefourthrail.com/review...503/lone1.shtml> and <http://www.thefourthrail.com/review...503/lone1.shtml> . It's drawn by Jerome Opena, this year's Russ Manning Award-winner for best newcomer, and you can read half the first issue, free, right now at <http://www.rocketcomics.net/downloa...ediatype=ecomic> . (If you get the solicitation page, just click the link labelled "e-comic.")

Details on LONE and other new projects, including VAMPIRELLA and PARA, at: <http://www.silverbulletcomicbooks.c...84489322456.htm> and <http://www.popimage.com/content/vie...58854264.10752> .

Next time: It begins...!