Description, Dialogue or Debate? Examining the role of narrative in the visualisation of archaeology.

York Heritage Research Seminars,
York University, Feb. 26 2013

Summary:

Archaeological visualisation tends to rely on “snapshot” images depicting single events or phenomena, but even these images contain implicit narrative elements. How might *explicitly* narrative images be used to create opportunities for multi-layered description, a forum of visual dialogue, or a focus for debating alternative readings of archaeological practice or interpretations of the past?

The focus of my presentation today is the role of narrative in the visualisation of archaeology, and how it can be developed as a response to the changing demands of visualising archaeological work, research and presentation.

In particular, I'd like to take a look at the research I've done over the past six years into the use of comics in archaeology, and examine how this medium has opened up new possibilities for the development and exploitation of narrative within archaeological visualisation.

I'd like to begin with a look at how my interest in this field started, at the site of Çatalhöyük, in Turkey, and the development of this into a research interest in the context of a non-archaeological comic project. I'd then like to examine some methodological issues: look at some analysis of archaeological visualisations in general, ask some questions about the quality of narrative, and suggest some of its effects in terms of response and interaction to visualisations of archaeology.

I did my degree in the Archaeology of the Eastern Mediterranean at Liverpool University and, after graduating, started work both as an excavator and an illustrator in the UK and abroad. In 1997 I joined the Çatalhöyük Research Project working at the neolithic tell site of Çatalhöyük in central Anatolia. As site illustrator, I was expected to produce a wide range of illustrations for the various survey, excavation and ethnographical teams working at the site. In addition, I became involved with the teams working on publication and presentation of the archaeology on the site, around Turkey, and in books, magazines,

television programmes and exhibitions in Europe and the United States. The range of visualisation projects I worked on for the next ten years was extremely diverse. From costume design for television documentaries to artefact illustrations for academic journals, from chapter illustrations for popular accounts to educational images for scholastic publications, from animations and cgi models to paintings and line-drawings.

But despite the variety of these image types, I became aware of certain common deficiencies in their ability to represent the visual context of the data, interpretations, practice or process under discussion. At the time, I was unable to articulate this contextual gap with any clarity.

During the 2005 season, it was decided to hold an open day at the site for local village families to give them an opportunity to meet the archaeological team and watch them at work. Sonya Atalay, who at that point was doing ethnoarchaeological field work at the site, suggested that it would be a nice idea to have something which the visiting local families could take away with them - something analogous to the guidebooks, leaflets or postcards aimed at tourists.

An information sheet seemed an obvious idea, but was hampered by the widely varying ages and literacy skills among the families, and their unfamiliarity with much of what we wanted such a sheet to cover. I suggested to Sonya and her team that a comic-book format might be a workable approach, and so I designed and illustrated a short, two-page comic which covered some basic information about the site, the project and the archaeologists working there. This approach worked extremely well. It became clear that the format had been accessible, informative and immediate, enabling us to communicate effectively with a varied audience with a range of literacy ability and familiarity with archaeology. The particular characteristics of the medium made it perfect for use in such an educational context. At the time, however, I didn't actually identify what I believe now to be the medium's key characteristic, that of *narrative.*

In 2010, I took on a non-archaeological commission to do illustrations for a training and informational publication which addressed the issue of talking to children with adult relatives who had been diagnosed with autism. It was designed to fit a particular niche - as there was a lack of information aimed at a younger audience. As the project evolved, it became clear that attempting to engage an audience of 8 - 12 year olds and address highly complex issues and describe very specific coping and handling strategies in an illustrated text would be very difficult. So the “illustrated text” gradually morphed into a comic book. Once again, the comic format proved extremely effective at getting across a complex message, and at mixing together dense informational content with a more subjective context.

Unbeknownst to me, there existed a new but flourishing genre of “Graphic Medicine” within the field of medical humanities. Within that genre, medical professionals, patients, carers and collaborative illustrators were producing comics on every possible aspect of medicine. I gave a paper on the writing of “Something Different About Dad” at the second Comics and Medicine conference in Chicago in 2011, and while there, met comics creators from both the US and the UK who were actively working in this emerging genre. Their experiences - the experiences of researchers and professionals actively embracing a new kind of visualisation, and in the process unlocking new avenues of communication in medicine - made me look more closely at the whole question of comics in archaeology.

At this point I'd like to take a look at some of the methodological issues and aspects of "narrative" that began to arise as I explored comics as an visual medium. Although the starting point for much of this was the work I did in comics and medicine, it very much fed into the subsequent comic work I did in archaeology. As such, I am going to look at these issues very much from the point of view of *archaeological* visualisation, and in terms of three methodological tools which offer a useful analysis of the place and role of narrative in archaeology - and which are shaping the use I am making of comics and other graphic narrative formats. I'd like to start, however, by briefly considering a matter of definition.

What exactly do we mean by "archaeological visualisation"? This term has come to cover a number of other older and related terms: *archaeological representation, archaeological imaging, archaeological illustration.* Essentially, these terms mean the same thing: the visual depiction of data, interpretation, practice or process in archaeology in finds illustrations, maps, charts, diagrams, plans, sections, architectural elevations, reconstructions, photographs, etc. And if I can paraphrase from Gary Gibbon's summary of the Visualisation in Archaeology project, archaeological visualisation also addresses: the framing and definition of visual ideas which determine particular ideas of the past. (paraphrased from *Assessing the Visual Represesentation of Data in Archaeology - The Visualisation in Archaeology Project (EH: MAIN1572),* March 2012).

With that in mind, it can be useful to analyse visualisations in a number of ways with regard to this process of framing: who creates them and who uses them, and how that interrelationship is managed in both production and consumption. It is these analytical tools which reveal both the nature of narrative in archaeological visualisation and begin to suggest some ways in which it shapes responses to them.

Firstly, archaeological visualisations can be analysed in terms of the framing of their direction. There are those created primarily by archaeologists for use by other archaeologists in specialist contexts - site reports, journals, etc. - and we can describe these as being produced *by internal creators, for an internal audience.* There are those created primarily by archaeologists for use by non-archaeologists or non-archaeological specialists in non-specialist contexts, and we can describe these as being produced *by internal creators, for an external audience.* Finally, there are those created primarily by non-archaeologists for consumption in non-archaeological contexts by an external audience, and these we can describe as being produced *by external creators, for an external audience.*

Obviously, these groupings are relatively simplistic, and this break-down fudges the fact that archaeology as a profession has somewhat blurred boundaries and flexible working relationships with visualisers. An "internal" creator may not strictly speaking also be an "internal" consumer - a contract excavator producing plans and sections on site may never read site reports, for example; and end-use is likewise fungible - what archaeologist does not watch *Indiana Jones* or *Time Team*. That aside, analysis of framing practice provides a useful starting point for understanding the role of narrative in the visualisation of archaeology.

Secondly, visualisations can be analysed in terms of a three-way relationship between distinct elements that both shape and are shaped by practices of consumption and production. They embody a set of interrelated framing methodologies drawn from explicit choices made by the creator or collaborating creators. Each element in this model is

dependent upon the other two. So, for example, the appearance, medium and “look” of a visualisation - what I'm calling the “style” - is influenced by considerations regarding the content of the visualisation and its audience. Likewise the content of a visualisation - what kind of data or interpretations it is possible to represent in an image - will be shaped by the mechanics of the medium chosen to produce the image - the “style” - and the audience. And finally the chosen audience for an image will reflect the nature of the image content and the style.

From this sort of analysis - and there are other, similar kinds - we can start to understand concepts of tradition, convention and “appropriateness” in the visualisation of archaeology, and importantly determine hierarchies of priority impacting both consumption and production practice. Variations of these analytical approaches have been part of archaeological visualisation for some time now. Reconstructions, charts, diagrams, finds illustrations - these can all be subject to this kind of analysis. Developing such analytical tools have allowed both creators and users to shape the way in which they frame their visual representation of archaeological data, interpretation and practice.

But I think it is only when one starts to apply a third analytical approach that it really becomes clear how images like comics can be very different from other kinds of archaeological visualisation. Let me start with two images by one of my favourite archaeological illustrators - a view of Troy by the late, great Peter Connolly. Let me then put up next to them an image from *Age of Bronze*, by Eric Shanower. All three of these images are of late bronze age Troy, and all can be analysed in terms of the first two approaches I've outlined - but one can also look at these images in another way - one can look at them in terms of their narrative quality.

The first set of images all share the same narrative quality: they give no indication of the enacting of events or the passage of any kind of time. The account given of Troy here is essentially descriptive, projections of an a-temporal moment. Objects, structures, environments - even people, are signifiers, rather than actors. The images are *static* - not in the sense that they are not lively or engaging; but they are static because they have no explicit narrative content. Conolly's second image is different: it is not static. It is still descriptive, but the description is focused on a distinct temporal instant. The account given of Troy here is a vignette, a snapshot of a particular moment. The image is *historical* - in the sense that the structure of its components shows that something is happening, and by implication, suggests that something has happened and that something *will* happen. This image has narrative content - objects, environments and people exist as temporal objects, with clear visual cues as to what has happened before and what may happen afterwards. But even so, the past and the future are implied, not made explicit.

Narrative is an account which is given through a sequence of connected events. Narrative exists not within implied time, but within explicit time. When the narrative content of an image is explicit, its narrative quality becomes *active.* Human elements become agents, artefacts and structures have life-histories, environments are dynamic networks of change. Shanower's work is predicated upon exploiting these active elements. When explicit temporality is embraced within a visualisation, the implication of movement becomes the depiction of movement: adaptation, evolution, development - these can be explicitly represented. Life and death become not abstract terminal points, ultimately located outside the framing of an image, but aspects of much larger and involved biological, social and

cultural cycles which themselves can be explicitly depicted. Archaeology has long since explored this dynamism in text. The life-history of objects, social and cultural cycles, shifting environmental patterns, humans as agents of change - these are all subjects familiar to archaeological writing. But without images in which the narrative quality is active rather than static or historic, those subjects are difficult - if not impossible - to visualise. Narrative is therefore a key component in matching the content in archaeological text to the content in archaeological visualisations.

Let me suggest one further analytical step which I think also has a bearing. I used this set of terms in the title of my presentation to suggest what I think is the critical potential of narrative imagery. Narrative is a vernacular language. We describe our world and our place in it in day-to-day contexts in terms of narrative. We tell stories about who we are, what we do, what happened to us on holiday, how much we hate our jobs, and so on. We build up pictures of ourselves and the people, events and places that make up our world through a narrative process. In archaeological visualisation, *historic* images tap into this vernacular language, and as narrative quality increases, so familiarity with the image's visual language increases. And with that increased familiarity comes - I strongly suspect - an increased ability to communicate *with that image*.

Static images are essentially descriptive: information and interpretation flows one-way, from the image and its creators out towards its audience. This is because the visual language of a static image is often highly specialised and highly stylised. Such stylised semiotics are not generally part of “vernacular” visual language. Where they are used in vernacular context, they tend to be highly didactic and authoritative.

If I ask *“What would you change in this picture?”* of the *static* Peter Conolly images, there's not much you can say by way of a reply. We assume that the highly stylised images are based on specific datasets and interpretations, and - I would suggest - most bar a specialised audience would lack the substantial context required to challenge that data, and by extension, these images. If I ask *“What would you change in this picture?”* of the second Peter Conolly image, the narrative quality of the image allows us to engage more directly. Can you really hold a spear like that? Would everyone have had the same kind of hairstyle? Can you lift a shield that high? and so on. The questions we can ask are prompted by the narrative quality of the image, and based on our own understanding of how objects behave and events unfold in time. I would suggest that historic images such as these allow an audience without undue specialised knowledge to engage in a limited form of *dialogue* with the image, and through the image, with its creators and the data and interpretations contained within the image. Finally, if I ask *“What would you change in this picture?”* of the page from Eric Shanower's *Age of Bronze*, I suggest that we can see how an audience can significantly interact with an image and its creators. One can query the actions, the movement, the reasoning, the dialogue, the motivations and the emotions of the human agents within the image, one can query the use and function of space, the nature of light and dark, the quality of construction, and so on. This engagement now begins to take on all the characteristics of a *debate* - a true conversation where information flows back and forth between creator and audience, testing the data and interpretations within the image.

This analysis does nothing to lessen the quality or value of the first two images - but I think that as narrative quality increases from *static* to *historic* to *active*, the presence of narrative

acts as an “in” for non-specialist audiences to engage with an image. And what is more, I think that it is this shift in narrative quality - not shifts in production/consumption models or in style, content or intended audience - that is key to stimulating debate through the use of archaeological visualisation.

Much of this methodological consideration was suggested by the work I did on *Something Different About Dad* and interaction with other graphic medicine writers and illustrators at the Comics and Medicine Conference in Chicago in 2011. But inevitably, as I've suggested, it prompted me to look again at the comic I had created at Çatalhöyük, this time in the context of fieldwork on the island of Carriacou in the West Indies. The Carriacou project is a long-running field school and research project centred on survey and excavation of Caribbean Amerindian settlement sites on the small island of Carriacou, just north of Grenada in the Lesser Antilles. The settlement sites, all located along the island's coastline, are under threat from seawater erosion caused by the mining of beach sand for construction. To help protect these sites, the project needed to create a public outreach programme that would make a wide-ranging argument for the preservation of these sites - pointing out their economic value to tourism and science tourism, their social and cultural value to education and national identity, and their links with environmental aspirations such as eco-tourism, bio-stewardship, etc. I proposed that in order to address similar issues to do with accessibility and literacy, and to engage an audience essentially unfamiliar with archaeology - much as we had at Çatalhöyük - we should look at producing a comic distributed through local island newspapers. The resulting twelve-part work will be a central component to what is now a much wider NSF-funded archaeological research and outreach programme across the Grenadines. Each instalment of the comic mixes together the science and practice of archaeology in the field, reconstructed Amerindian lifeways based on archaeological evidence, and some explanation of the economic, social and cultural value of archaeology to present-day island communities. The comic panels utilise staff and students as narrators, real-life locations and excavated objects currently on display in local museums. The concluding six weekly instalments are to be produced during the course of a field season, and will feature local government officials, historical society members and community leaders as narrators and characters within the narrative, embedding the arguments being made firmly within a local context.

From a creator's point of view, the medium enabled me to exploit a number of key semiotic and ontological features particular to comics, and narrative mechanics unique to the medium:

- the use of an ongoing story to connect separately-published instalments,
- the breakdown of the information content into “bite-sized pieces” through the use of individual panels,
- the introduction of a “personal” spoken narration through word balloons
- use of narrators as distinctive “characters” with recognisable personalities,
- particular design references - in this case to national colours
- the use of a part-work publication format to create an engaged sense of “delivered discovery” as information is unfolded to the viewer.

- the integration of text and visual priming the reader to a wider and more diverse ontology

Structural analysis demonstrates how the active narrative quality of the medium unlocks the use of these features - a toolset which can reshape a potentially dry and didactic content into something highly accessible, and which - despite some delays as the scope of the project has evolved - has proven to be successful at engaging not just its intended audience, but students and other illustrators and researchers as well. In presenting the results to the Society for American Archaeology at their annual conference last year, I noted that - as successful as the comic was - it still represented a fairly standard type of visualisation for an external audience - the archaeological comic as educational, informative; something we're not unused to seeing in museums, for example. Here, the comic format is still very much a stylistic, rather than methodological choice.

But there are other ways in which comics could be used in archaeology - other types of visualisation which could be similarly transformed if rendered in this *active* rather than *static* medium. Indeed, it might be possible to visualise aspects of archaeological data, interpretation or practice that *only* exist as narrative. I wanted to look at ways in which the operation of that methodological choice affected a visualisation directed at an *internal* audience: an archaeological comic for archaeologists. And so, I decided last summer to try another comic - this time based on a type of archaeological document which is key to field practice, but is rarely considered for publication: the site notebook or field journal.

I've always keep one – a day-by-day series of notes on whatever I happen to be working on at the time. Out on field projects this inevitably become not just a professional record of a season's work, but a personal and contextual record as well. They are works of great narrative complexity, but because of the fragmented nature of this type of document, this complexity is winnowed and highly simplified when referenced during the writing of interim or site reports. Much of the contextual richness of archaeological field practice is lost and never makes it to publication. I was interested in using a comic as an *active* visualisation to make sense of such a fragmented record, and capture some of that lost narrative complexity. In fact, this kind of narrative visualisation has allowed me to capture a wide range of different narrative threads, reflecting once again the particular semiotic and ontological features of the medium:

The idea of a personal narrative as having a voice, or indeed, voices. And the idea that speakers become distinct characters within that narrative. This has allowed me to bring in colleagues, students and others who, as actors within the narrative, have unique contributions to make to the unfolding of events. And in so doing, these actors help clarify the historical context of my professional narrative as well as the historical context of the project. These actors also help give narrative shape and focus to the wider political context of archaeology, both contemporary and historical. Comic narrative is enacted within a visualisation of place, allowing the depiction of sites, excavation features and environment. Once again, giving the opportunity of establishing diverse real-world visual contexts of professional practice. It allows place to be used as a character, as a recognisable element of narrative, not simply a backdrop for it. And recognising the distinct visual identity of a place allows the depiction of the cultural context of that place - and on Palau, has allowed me to explore the ways in which that cultural context intersected both with the wider impact of the project as a whole and my own work in visualising the deep past and present

practice.

Palau: An Archaeological Field Journal has become a key point in my research into the use of comics in archaeology. Not only has it provided scope for bringing together the practical experience learned during the creation of my comics on Çatalhöyük and the archaeology of the Caribbean, it has provided a real focus for exploring the potential of the medium to cope with the wider narrative context of archaeology. Even unfinished, it demonstrates the ability of the medium to give voice to a complex narrative that mixes together archaeological experience, professional practice, data, interpretation and personal observation. And importantly, in so doing, seems to more completely and more accurately visualise the context of archaeological fieldwork. This has implications when considering the intended audience for such a work. Framed as a narrative aimed at an *internal* audience, it becomes a document of professional practice, providing context to undergraduates and postgraduates considering the project's field school programme, for example. It also helps place the *process* of my approach to visualising the archaeology and ethnographic context of Palau – rather than simply the end product (ie: the finds drawings, reconstructions, etc.) under peer scrutiny and review.

But judging by reaction from the comics community to whom I have already shown parts of this journal, I suspect that this work may also be read by an *external* audience – by non-archaeologists and non-specialist readers, both on Palau and elsewhere, giving them access to a professional narrative which they would otherwise have never encountered. In other words, creates the circumstances necessary for genuine debate. But the Palau field journal has also become key for my research in another way: it has unlocked the potential of the medium to look at other sorts of archaeological narratives. By demonstrating – at least to my own satisfaction, as creator – that the medium is able to visualise complex archaeological narratives, I have been exploring its further potential in a range of comics with different content, using different styles and aimed at different audiences.

So, in December last year, I was asked by a small literary 'zine to contribute a four-page comic dealing with an archaeological understanding and experience of "place". And in January I contributed a one-page comic called "The Truth Is" to the archaeological 'zine "Shovel Bum" all about a woman who came to a site I was working on all full of stories about how the place had been built by aliens. But the comic was also an opportunity to ask some questions about how archaeology deals – or perhaps doesn't deal; ignores - with such fringe views. I have also been working on a graphic novel called "Jima San: God of War", based on conversations with some of the people I met out on Palau last summer. The work deals with questions of conflicted ethnic and national identity, the idea of a "publicly-owned" past versus the idea of a personal past, and how archaeology intersects with that in small communities. It'll be serialised later this year online as a web-comic. I've also got another comics and medicine commission, a graphic novel dealing with issues around dependence on anti-depressants - which is flagging up some interesting issues to do with collaboration and the ethics of narrative which have direct implications for comics and archaeology. Each of these comics has explored a very different kind of archaeological narrative – experiential, anecdotal, fictional – in very different styles and have been aimed at very different audiences – some internal, some external. In each comic, style, content and audience have varied - but what they share is an exploitation of the unique methodological toolset of this visual approach. I would suggest that in these comics most of us will recognise aspects of archaeology with which we are familiar – but

have not often, if at all, seen visualised.

If that is indeed so, then it may well be the case that creating visualisations with a more active quality actually allows us to create new kinds of visualisations, capturing new kinds of narratives. And if this can be done with archaeological experience or anecdote, can it also be done with archeological data and other areas of archaeological practice?

This is where my research is headed next. I have already started to look at other areas of archaeological practice, further exploring the potential of this medium to create new kinds of visualisations. Comics for this year's British Festival of Science in November should give me an opportunity to bring together archaeology and science in an educational context. “Ceramics and Polity” is exploring how a closer integration of existing text and image can re-narrate traditional presentations of archaeological data. The starting point is a paper published in a specialist journal earlier this year which I am re-presenting in a comic format. And this newspaper comic is being developed as part of a community initiative in Shropshire, looking to create a space for conflicting stakeholder voices in the ongoing development of an industrial heritage landscape. Finally, I am presenting the results of my Palau field journal in more detail in the form of a comic (a meta-comic?) as a poster presentation at the Society for American Archaeology's annual conference in April. Once again, presenting the results of this research as an active image allows me to make more sense of multiple visual contexts within the research narrative.

In all of these examples, the semiotics of comics bring the possibility of pushing the narrative visualisation of archaeology beyond academic journals, textbooks or interpretation boards - it moves such work us closer to what Dr. Muna Al-Jawad, a geriatrician who is a researcher in the field of comics and medicine, means when she writes of the research potential of comics to “explore difficult areas of practice”. There are many more aspects of the world of comics production which need to be more fully explored. In particular, the variant mechanisms which comics uses for distribution and publication – newspapers, webcomics, small-press and partworks, for example – which might provide archaeology with alternative modes of presentation for narrative visualisations, and even provide opportunities for the publication of narrative visualisations for which no current mode of presentation exists. The building of a community both online and offline of people who are interested in the use of comics in archaeology is also important - participation in events such as the Comics Forum conferences in Leeds, and discussions with people who are using comics in other areas of science communication: anthropology, criminal studies, language, architecture; professionals who are using comics to address some of the very same issues I have talked about here.

By way of conclusion, it's worth observing that over the past fifty years comics have matured significantly as a literary and artistic medium. Comics have long since secured their place as a legitimate art in their own right, distinct from but yet drawing upon both literature and the visual arts. Like poetry, film-making or theatre, comics are able to tackle difficult and complex material in unique and surprising ways. But at present, comics and archaeology is characterised predominantly by visualisers working outside the profession, and their works reflect an external understanding of the science and practice of archaeology. Often, the same, familiar tropes are enacted, reinforcing a distorted and unreal set of standard narratives. Yet the experience of comics and medicine clearly demonstrates how a specialist discipline can create a niche genre with distinctive

narratives drawn from *within* the discipline, narratives which not only more accurately reflect an insider's perspective, but which opens that perspective to new forms of communication and research. It should be noted that although still a niche and emerging genre, graphic medicine works have achieved not only commercial but critical successes. Medicine is not the only specialist discourse which is finding new voice in comics. Science communication in general is looking to the interaction between text and visualisation to bridge existing gaps in learning and communication.

But there is a danger that singly, or in isolation, comics in archaeology will remain a stylistic novelty, seen as either not capable of or not appropriate to the same level of academic rigour, scrutiny, review as text. Developing and applying a theoretical and methodological understanding, however creates the necessary critical underpinning - a solid reason - for using comics and other narrative imagery in archaeology. I think it can be demonstrated that by far the greatest potential of comics in archaeology is as a medium used by archaeologists themselves, utilising the unique narrative visual toolset to create new avenues of communication and new models of interaction, drawing on the visual context of the professional narratives we experience.

I have tried to suggest in this presentation that my work with comics and medicine should be very much seen as a journey. What the ultimate destination is remains unclear. I am heading into uncharted territory - seeing where use this narrative medium leads. My own research will continue for the foreseeable future, but I would like to hope that as interest in the use of comics in archaeology builds, I will not be travelling this road alone.