Comics can have almost no mass and yet be the most mass of mass arts: Garfield has had up to 263 million readers a day. Comics constitute a new art, just over a century old, and usually an unusually accessible one. So what can evolution add to our understanding of comics?

Evolution lets us see comics, like almost anything human or even alive, in a panoramic context but also in extreme close-up, as close as a comics artist trying to grab readers’ attention in this frame or with that angle. And it can zoom smoothly between these two poles. Evolution offers a unified and naturalistic causal system from the general to the very particular. Far from reducing all to biology and then to chemistry and physics, it easily and eagerly plugs in more local factors—in a case like comics, historical, technological, social, artistic and individual factors, for instance—the closer we get to particulars. Evolution accepts multilevel explanations, from cells to societies, and allows full room for nature and culture, society and individuals.

In biology an adaptation is an evolved feature of body or behavior that offers a solution to a recurrent problem facing a species or a lineage, like binocular vision in primates, for judging distances in trees, or human manual dexterity, for tool manufacture and use. Problems emerge with life, and all life is problem solving (Bordwell, On the History; Gombrich; Popper). Evolution has itself evolved, as when it invented sexual reproduction and thereby vastly multiplied the possibilities of genetic variation from which natural selection could select (Dawkins). It can also evolve as a problem solver. Nervous systems, minds, and flexible intelligence permit animals to respond to particular problems too new, fleeting, or atypical for genetic evolution to address. Social learning and culture, especially in humans, allow the rapid uptake or the deliberate inculcation of solutions that others have found, so that individuals need not expend time and resources attempting to solve them again from scratch.

But solutions are not final. They have costs, as well as benefits, and they themselves transform the problem landscape. The series of nutritional, hygiene, and medical solutions, for instance, that allowed us to lower human death rates over the last century has posed us unprecedented problems of overpopulation, resource depletion, and climate change. Benefits impose costs, and as in the solu-
tions of natural selection, cultural traditions or individual inventions, benefits will always face trade-offs against costs.

Humans have evolved no special adaptation for reading comics. Comics on the other hand have been gradually designed, culturally, to appeal to evolved—gradually and naturally designed—cognitive preferences, and designed so well that they appeal across cultures, to Japanese and French, to Fijians and Americans. Comics appeal especially to our dominant sense, vision, including trichromatic color vision (a primate solution to the problem of object discrimination in the low light of an arboreal existence), to our capacity for language (a solution to problems of social communication), and our adaptive inclination for storytelling. Storytelling maximizes social cognition in a flexibly ultra-social species through a kind of play-training: compulsive, pleasurable, high-intensity, often-repeated, like all play, and therefore cumulatively highly effective as tuition in social understanding (Boyd, Origin). Since comics, like other arts, have been intricately designed by gifted designers to appeal to human minds, the comparative success of comics, against other narrative forms, other arts or entertainments, and other preferences for our disposable time, should offer rich data to psychology: evidence for what we find appealing and easy, for the proportionate strengths of human preferences.

Storytelling delivers multiple benefits, in terms not only of training in social cognition, but also of communicating shared values and opening up imaginative space. But the very fact that storytelling offers solutions creates new problems: how can its benefits be augmented or its costs reduced? One cost of storytelling is time. Language allows only the serial transmission of information along a single channel. Though it can compress events in time, it still takes time to tell them. But though they take time, orally transmitted narratives, the only option for most of the history of story, do not last. Writing and print solve problems of dissemination in time and space. But language, especially in written form, suffers from a lack of the sensory immediacy our minds have mostly evolved for. A visual form of narrative would solve this by telling stories in non-serial, sensorily rich, and durable forms.

Sequential images have therefore emerged independently as ways of telling stories, in, for example, the tomb frescoes of Thebes, the bas-reliefs of Assyria and Borobodur, the Bayeux tapestry, the stained-glass windows of Chartres, Giotto’s Arena Chapel frescoes and Ghiberti’s Baptistry doors. Such painstaking narratives require costly patronage, and although they can last centuries longer than throwaway comics, they can be seen in only one location. Moreover, though they can depict characters or scenes, they cannot efficiently tell stories without the support of language, but can only illustrate narratives already familiar from myth, legend or history. Creating complex new stories almost always requires words.

In the course of both natural selection and cultural evolution, new forms often emerge that could persist and proliferate, but die out because conditions are unpropitious or chance eliminates the novelties before they can spread. While some of the sequential visual narrative traditions just mentioned have endured, none thrives as a continuous live art. And despite eighteenth- and nineteenth-century developments like the series paintings of William Hogarth, the cartoons of Thomas Rowlandson, the illustrations of Phiz or George Cruikshank, the comic sketches of Hokusai or the captioned picture-stories of Rodolphe Töpffer, sequential visual narrative did not emerge in a way that would flourish around the world until the mid-1890s.

Why then and not before? Art Spiegelman, to my mind the greatest of comics artists, calls comics “co-mix,” a mix of pictures and words (Spiegelman, Maus to Now 74). Richard Outcault’s Yellow Kid images for the New York World and the New York Journal combined drawing and words within the drawing, rather than only in captions, in a way that would soon explode into full-fledged comic strips (Ohio).

Often solutions to problems in one area will change conditions in other apparently remote areas. Elaborate technologies derive ultimately from nature’s evolving social learning and enable cumulative social problem solving. Language emerged socially and cumulatively to solve problems of social communication—and nature selected for those who could deploy language better. Writing too emerged socially and cumulatively to allow messages to be transmitted accurately across space and time. Printing allowed written messages and images to be disseminated indefinitely. High-speed printing in the nineteenth-century opened up a new problem:
how to maximize the power of writing and printing for as many as possible. Near-universal education solved that problem, but as education became more nearly universal in industrialized countries, a new problem arose for publishers: how to maximize the large market for reading now available. Stained-glass windows had reinforced hallowed stories to a population largely illiterate. Now the population was mostly literate, how could those with presses at their disposal make the most of this very different situation?

One solution for the newspaper press lay in the compulsiveness of fiction. Serialized fiction featured widely in nineteenth-century periodicals. But fiction serials posed a problem. While they might attract readers and lure back those wishing for the next installment, they took time to read, and many with the interest in current affairs that newspapers satisfied did not wish to devote their newspaper-reading time to something as untrue and uncurrent as fiction. But a story with the almost immediate comprehensibility of an image, and the guarantee of humor that has dominated comics strips early and late, would add reliably to the value of any newspaper, as the New York newspaper barons Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, locked in a circulation war, swiftly recognized in the mid- and late-1890s.

When Pulitzer launched a Sunday color supplement for the New York World in 1893, he had hoped to feature reproductions of great art, but found his new printing process could cope with no more than color cartoons (Spiegelman, Towers 24). It is no accident that the history of comics begins with humor, and that although comics have since shown they can be unflinchingly serious, humorous comic strips remain by far the most widely read form of comics. The health benefits of laughter—their ultimate function, in evolutionary biological terms—have been analyzed scientifically. But natural selection, as it does, tracked them first. It ensured what biologists call the proximate mechanism for laughter: the pleasure we feel in laughter, the motivation to produce it or to seek it out, in casual conversation and play, and in a continuous proliferation of cultural elaborations like comedy, pantomime, music halls, comic strips, sitcoms, standup, and comedy festivals. By 1902, within a decade of the first Sunday color supplement, readers across America and beyond impatiently awaited every Sunday what had become the comic supplement (Blackbeard and Crain 46).

Art craves attention, and, if successful, ensures it. Without intending to launch a new form, merely seeking to capitalize on what was attracting his audience most, illustrator Richard Outcault set comics in motion. In 1895 he drew for the New York World the first of a series of amusing images of urchins causing mayhem in New York tenement districts. He lowered his own invention costs and his readers’ comprehension costs by availing himself of three ready-made solutions, the nineteenth-century illustrator’s realistic, crowded, only slightly simplified drawing style, familiar from illustrations of Dickens; the gag cartoon, familiar from Punch and elsewhere; and the juxtaposition of the poor and the comfortable or wealthy, familiar from Dickens or Twain’s The Prince and the Pauper, or in visual form, from iconic paintings like Ford Madox Brown’s Work or William Frith’s Derby Day.

In a single panoramic image per issue, Outcault would exaggerate the antics of his street kids for comedic effect. Each drawing had a central theme (“Golf—The Great Society Sport as Played in Hogan’s Alley”; “A Hot Political Convention in Hogan’s Alley”) on which Outcault would offer multiple variations, a wild kinesis within the static setting, a series of simultaneous mini-stories, rather like a pictorial condensation of a Victorian novel, with its multiple sub-scenes, its parallels and connections between rich and poor.

In all this, Outcault’s first New York World images look back to the nineteenth century rather than forward to comics. But he also loved verbal as well as visual humor, and crammed jokes into street signs, advertisements, blackboards, labels, flags, homemade notices (on a cart at the ball game: “Ambulantz. We don’t go till we git a load”; Figure 1).
1), even deflated speech balloons inconspicuous within the welter. This profusion anticipates both the mix of word and image that define comics, and their delight in the demotic, from the accents of The Katzenjammer Kids to cosy Disneyesque and crazy Herriman-esque forms and beyond.

Nevertheless the multiple visual sub-scenes and multiple verbal jokes in the Hogan’s Alley images produce a slow and uncertain reading experience as we search out another visual or verbal detail within the comic clutter. Again this recalls Victorian triple-decker novels, except that they at least have the linearity of language as a rail along which attention runs. Outcault’s early images are crowded with laughs but frustrating because our curiosity can wander anywhere and not be sure when to stop the search. As psychologists have discovered, human attention is severely limited, able to hold only about seven items at any moment. And human minds prefer information we can assimilate rapidly. Unlike early Outcault, where we need to search locus after locus, modern comics have mastered the knack of catching, directing and redirecting our visual attention and therefore lowering our comprehension costs.

More promising as a precursor to comics than Outcault’s panoramas, more attention-catchng then and now, was the Yellow Kid he began to place at their center. A precursor, a child in a smock smeared with a handprint, features in Outcault’s earliest Hogan’s Alley image (May 5, 1895). Early in 1896, Outcault works this up into the figure who will launch comics: the Yellow Kid, hairless, jug ears, with two front teeth, in a bright yellow smock, looking at us from center stage and pointing gleefully at the mayhem around him. He stands out by his simplified outline, by his direct invitation to us to play, and by his yellow nightshirt. Color vision evolved so that objects have a pop-out effect on visual attention. In his color supplements Pulitzer wanted to take full advantage of color’s fast track to human attention, but Outcault achieved nothing memorable with color until he offered the Yellow Kid as an instant focus and invitation for each of his panoramic images.

Outcault first inscribes a single word, “Artillery,” on the Yellow Kid’s smock when the boy shows off the troops in “The War Scare in Hogan’s Alley” (March 15, 1896). A month later Outcault attaches a pin-on label to the smock to carry a longer message. Later still he writes on the smock a sentence or two that could be the boy’s speech or thoughts or still a kind of label (in the earliest example: “Ain’t I de Maine Guy in dis parade? Well I guess dat’s Right”). More clearly than the speech balloons lost in the glut of words in some of Outcault’s earliest images, this inscribed attire foreshadows the speech balloons of later comics.

No less important for comics to come is Outcault’s deployment of a recurrent character. From The Katzenjammer Kids to Calvin and Hobbes, recurrent characters have provided emotional engagement, instant identification, and a prefocusing of expectations that reduce the comprehension costs of each new instalment. The Yellow Kid’s color and bold outline, thrown into relief against the more realistic drawing of the other characters, incorporate elements other comic-makers will develop. The simplified, almost iconic face makes it easier for us to project ourselves into the character (McCloud). The Yellow Kid seems uncertain in age, sometimes a seven-year-old yet in an infant’s smock. Comics not only appeal to children but tend to exaggerate the childlike nature of their characters—to neotonize them, as Stephen Jay Gould explains, because we have evolved to feel a special tenderness toward young features (other comics artists will later make still more of the proportionately enlarged head and eyes and rounded features of infants) (Gould; Lorenz). Comics, like other story forms, favor characters who cross ontological boundaries, because we have evolved to notice and remember agents who violate expectations yet in minimally confusing ways (Boyer; Atran). The Yellow Kid seems not quite infant, toddler or boy, and not quite actor or presenter. Later comics will focus again and again on animals who speak or superheroes who step or fly over the line between human and superhuman.

Like many comic heroes to come, the Yellow Kid became a celebrity. Living ancestrally in small groups, we evolved to think that faces we see and focus on regularly belong to those who matter to us. By September 1896 the Yellow Kid, with his familiar cheeky face, was receiving more fan mail than he could handle (Ohio 1896-9-
at which point Hearst promptly poached Outcault for his New York Journal. The Yellow Kid also launched a flotilla of merchandise and images—as had already happened to Thomas Rowlandson’s Dr. Syntax in 1810 and would happen to Bonzo in the 1920s, to the Disney characters, Garfield, and many more. Our predisposition for social learning makes us feel that if many others show an interest in the same thing, it may be well worth our own interest and even worth sharing our interest with others. Celebrity can go viral.

In the first issue, Outcault drew for Hearst’s New York Journal, he included not only another panorama introduced by the grinning Yellow Kid, but something much closer to modern comics: a sequence of five drawings of the Yellow Kid and His New Phonograph. Here, Outcault still renders the Yellow Kid’s speech in writing on his nightshirt, but the words from the phonograph horn emerge in a speech balloon—in fact, the voice of the boy’s parrot inside, as he recognizes with astonishment, in his own speech balloon, in the last image. A dozen more Yellow Kid sequences followed. The most advanced, on May 23, 1897, not only has frames bordered in the modern manner but also even shifts perspective and jumps in time between frames.

If the Yellow Kid as well as the parrot spoke in speech balloons rather than in words inscribed on his nightshirt (Figure 2, next page) it would be hard to tell that this strip belongs only to the prehistory of comics.

Outcault moved by fits and starts from a high-Victorian illustration style to a precursor of modern comics. Like evolution itself, his style passed through incremental changes that did not immediately establish their dominance or announce a new direction. And like evolution in nature, Outcault’s evolution depended on selection by his environment. Survival and reproduction for his images depended on his capacity to earn the attention of his readers and his publishers.

Outcault created a recurring character who was mostly defined by colored outline, sequential action and in-frame speech, and with whom readers could repeatedly engage. Like many comics artists to come, he presented improbable physical mishaps in immediate physical—visual—form.

Appropriately, the Yellow Kid seems the very spirit of play, delightedly agog at the turmoil around him and eager to invite us to behold. In On the Origin of Stories I explain art as a kind of high play. Comics begin with the Yellow Kid in a gleefully populist, lowest-common-denominator low play. It seems fitting that Pulitzer’s attempt to introduce high art to the masses on Sundays should lead instead to Hearst’s succeeding in establishing for his mass audience, in democratized America, the ultimate mass art.

Outcault did not himself immediately recognize the power of his innovations, and continued to intersperse the strips with the rather more frequent older-style images of the Yellow Kid in scenes of panoramic chaos. Uncertain what he wanted to do with his hero, and often unsure how to develop the minimal story of a strip—unsure, in short, how to refresh attention—Outcault, like his audience, tired of the Yellow Kid and retired him by mid-1898.

If Outcault did not know how to capitalize on the solutions he had found for a new way to tell stories, in a sequence of drawn actions and spoken words, others did. Rudolph Dirks in 1898 introduced The Katzenjammer Kids and Frederick Oppfer, in 1900, Happy Hooligan. By 1902 the Sunday comics supplements offered a sumptuous smorgasbord of choice in comic series that lifted solutions from Outcault and one another.

Comics, as they established their language in the early 1900s, solved the problems of sequential narration in image and word in ways that appeal to deep human cognitive preferences. In modern comics each frame tends to create a single impression that can be taken in at a glance and a situation either visually explicit in instant icons or immediately clarified by prominent speech balloons. The sequence from frame to frame usually allows a brisk clear flow of attention and low-cost comprehension. Search time can be reduced to a second or two. Verse around the world uses controlled phrase lengths that in written form become line lengths, whereby poets shape the attention of their audience, releasing just as much at a time as our auditory present and the storage space of working memory can hold (Turner). In the same way, comics concentrate and reward comprehension within the clearly delineated
Figure 2. Richard Outcault, *New York Journal*, 23 May 1897
attention-sized units of the single simplified comic frame, without the superfluous detail or distracting multiple foci of Outcault’s panoramas.

Comics’ visual simplification can speed comprehension by working with features of the evolved mind. Because object detection matters so much for all animals dependent on sight, eyes have special edge detectors that make a simple outline richly informative (no wonder cavemen and children both begin visual representation with outline drawings; see Halverson). Our predisposition to attend to other agents means we are especially alert to what was once urgent information about the shape of animal bodies—even children in modern cities find animal shapes mesmerizing—and to the high-quality information in faces and orientation, posture, expression and gesture. All these indicators comics deploy and render swiftly, often with minimal distracting detail. Italian photo comics, with speech bubbles and posed photographs instead of drawings, have failed to take off around the world because they lack both the economy of comics—they cannot eliminate the visually inessential—and the multiple degrees of freedom of comics artists.

Comics can reduce visual complexity and lower comprehension costs further through sequence and series. Series carry inbuilt expectations—we know how a Charlie Brown or a Dagwood will look and might behave—and reduce search time: we know which strips we will wish to read. The words incorporated in each frame allow narrative clarifications through dialogue, sound effects (POW!), or micro-narration (“Meanwhile . . .”). The event comprehension systems in our cognitive architecture allow us to track continuities effortlessly: identities, trajectories, causes and effects, aims and obstacles, outcomes (Boyd, *Origin*). A Victorian narrative painting, wordless except for the clues a title can provide, takes time to decipher even though the genre limits itself to climactic situations. A comic, by contrast, can speed up comprehension not only through prior series knowledge and swiftly apprehended visual, verbal and narrative cues. It can also refocus each new frame to the most emotionally telling or informationally rich angle in order to prefocus readers’ comprehension and response, in a way that does not seem as intrusive as it can in, say, expressionistic emphases in film. Comics can mimic the saccades of the eyes and the imagination, the natural leap of attention to the details that matter.

Although vision offers our richest and most precise sensory information, language can often yield even more precise information. Comics take the most dramatic and emotionally engaging language, speech as social exchange, and incorporate it selectively in speech balloons and in the brief narrative captions that provide orientation in time, space or attitude much less obtrusively than movie voiceovers. Looking back at Outcault’s work we can see how many small solutions needed to fuse before the modern speech balloon became a seemingly natural convention. Outcault’s inscribing thoughts, speech or narration on clothes or other objects now seems bizarre, especially when he was already inserting rudimentary speech balloons. But his speech balloons were transparent, so that background colors showed through and diminished legibility; often at an angle, and therefore doubly hard to read; and sometimes not in the top-down then left-to-right sequence natural to those used to European alphabets. David Bordwell notes that conventions need not be arbitrary (*Narration; Poetics*). Even the Yellow Kid’s thoughts or speech appear on his clothes, after all, rather than someone else’s, which really would be arbitrary. An assortment of small solutions adopted after Outcault soon stabilized the form of speech balloons in a convention as natural and therefore as quickly processed as possible: placement near characters’ mouths, the source of the sound; contrast with their visual background by being colorless, as aural information differs in mode from visual; firm in outline to demarcate utterance from background; with the most economical contour around the written words, except for the pointer toward the speaker’s mouth; and variations on these standard patterns for local expressive purposes.1

Not only did comics work out ways to combine the high-quality information of vision, language and story for low comprehension costs, they also promised high benefits. We have already considered humor, which dominated most early comics and still saturates daily strips. Comics have also

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always tended to exploit their capacity to present physical extremes or improbabilities in immediate, now-you-see-it form. For low-comprehension cost they can therefore offer high-attention value. Because no change in state tends to catch eye and mind faster than one from normal to mishap, comics often opt for the comedy of slapstick, from the Yellow Kid’s bicycle mangled by a train while he emerges almost unscathed, to Mutt and Jeff having bricks or safes fall on their head, being squashed almost flat, then reviving in the next strip. And the easy presentation in a visual mode of a physical impossibility—costly to achieve in film, no more costly in a comic than unruffled normality—also explains comics’ predilection for superheroes. Hugo Hercules, as early as 1902, can accidentally kick a house off its foundations and high into the air but can catch it safely as it tumbles back to earth (Blackbeard). His big butt in pinstripe trousers, incidentally, helps explain the spandex superheroes of a later era, whose muscle definition makes them as much out of the ordinary in each frame, and therefore as attention-worthy, as Achilles, Hector or Ajax in Homer.

Although slapstick or superheroes can offer cheap thrills and settle into comics clichés, comics’ capacity to present the impossible in the immediate can also allow genius room to explore. Winsor McCay posed himself unique problems and, as early as 1905, introduced in Little Nemo in Slumberland (Figure 3, opposite page) fantastic dream visions, barely contained within the comics world of recurrent characters, framed drawings and speech bubbles (McCay 42).

Unlike Outcault’s panoramas, McCay’s frames allow immediate impressions, quick clear changes of perspective, swift development, and add an invitation for us to pause and enjoy the painstaking realism of a surreal world we can almost instantly assimilate.

Comics tapped deep-rooted cognitive capacities and appealed to deep-rooted cognitive preferences as they discovered a whole series of ways to lower comprehension costs and raise the benefits of even a moment of reading time. They appeal to our craving for story, humor and surprise, for high-quality information in sight and speech, and for likely payoff at low cost. They prefocus expectations, reducing search and comprehension time through genre (comic strip funnies), series (Garfield), and therefore familiar characters (brazenly egotistical cat, blithely hapless owner, self-duping dog) and narrative contours (cat satisfies greed), so that hundreds of millions of readers can reach with minimum effort the promised hit of humor, the surprise of just where that comic trajectory will land today.

Comics artists, like novelists, filmmakers, and other artists, benefit from the solutions of past practitioners. Devices like the speech balloon, omniscient third-person narration, and shot-reverse-shot editing emerge through a succession of problems for earning and holding attention and of solutions that make the most of our cognitive makeup. In comics as a mass art, many of the problems of establishing the language of comics involved reducing comprehension costs for audiences. This means high composition costs for artists, who regularly bemoan the time they need to render even a single frame—which can be “read” as quickly as a short sentence—as immediately and engagingly as they can (Spiegelman, Towers).

Comics offer not only visual immediacy for their audience, but visual flexibility for the artist, allowing any degree of stylization or realism, iconicity or particularism. Comics styles can have even more degrees of freedom than written language (Boyd, “Art” 41-43). Stylistic individuality nevertheless was often muted by the dominance of major comics studios and the high time cost of composition. But new problems continue to emerge even from new solutions. The high printing costs of comics made them mostly a mass art until web-offset printing allowed small print runs at low prices. How could new comics artists make the most of what comics as a mass art excluded? The underground comics of the 1960s and 1970s worked out their answers: sex, drugs, subversion, psychosis.

Figure 3 (opposite page)
Winsor McCay, New York Herald, 29 September 1907
Comics artists could now experiment for much smaller audiences. Art Spiegelman became a leader of the avant-garde but faced the problem of dwindling audiences as his experiments pushed the boundaries of comics expression. Choosing which audience to appeal to—as powerful as possible? As ideologically sympathetic as possible? As discriminating as possible?—is a fundamental problem for any artist. Spiegelman posed himself two new problems: how to persuade a large audience convinced that comics offered little beyond funnies and superheroes that this art form could equal any other in expressiveness and scope; and how to tell the story of his parents’ Auschwitz experience so as to engage as many as possible as deeply as possible, removing the film of familiarity that now bedevils Holocaust themes. With *Maus* (in two parts, 1986 and 1991), depicting Jews as human mice and Germans as human cats, he solved these problems together, and as a result became the most acclaimed artist in comics history. He deployed to unprecedented effects the accessibility and immediacy of comics, and their capacity to make the impossible visible: different human “races” as different animal species, a visual metaphor that embodies and undermines racism in one move, because despite the animal heads the characters are unmistakably so fully human in their postures, gestures, expressions, speech, behavior, contexts and concerns. We see the animal heads but we see straight through them; we cannot help feeling deeply and instantly with the characters as human beings just like us.

But that solution posed a new problem that any artist faces after triumphant success: what next? What subject could demand anything like the intensity of his thirteen years’ hard labor on *Maus*? When the World Trade Center collapsed before his eyes, hard by the school where his daughter was in class, Spiegelman knew his next major challenge.

His wife, Françoise Mouly, then comics editor of the *New Yorker*, commissioned him to draw the cover cartoon for the issue immediately following 9/11. His unforgettable response showed the resources comics language can have in the hands of genius: instead of color or even the comics alternative of black on white, he chose black on black, the silhouette of the twin towers, intact, in glossy black, on a matte black background. Sombre, unpeopled, unflinching, lofty.

For a longer-term response Spiegelman pointedly turned in an opposite direction from *Maus’s* accessibility and immediacy. Comics have solved the problems of becoming a mass art better than any other to date. But they need not only reduce comprehension costs. They can take that and other past solutions to the problems of a sequential word-and-image narrative, and turn them into new problems confronting new situations.

In late 2001, Spiegelman faced a unique problem situation that included both his own fame as a comics artist and the recency and enormity of 9/11. In *In Search of No Towers*, he focuses on the history of comics as his personal refuge from the strain of the present, and on the expressive freedom of comics, and on the different hysterias in himself and his country. He makes the intensity of his own reaction part of his problem and solution, transferring his jitteriness to the funny but furious uncomfortableness of reading his new strip.

Because of his fame, Spiegelman could make demands on a wide audience that would have been fatal for *Maus*. In *Maus* he made the story seemingly transparent by a deliberate self-limitation to the conventional language of comics at their most accessible. In *In Search of No Towers* he made the search for comics languages adequate to his inner discords central to the story (see Figure 4, opposite page). He could showcase the history and the technical possibilities of comics (he even reproduces Outcault’s first *Yellow Kid* image with inscribed word), and set one style against another—funnies, expressionism, photographs, maps, diagrams, advertisements, the styles of *Blondie*, *Little Nemo*...
In the Shadow of No Towers

Revealed: 19th Century Source for 21st Century’s Dominant Metaphor!

These crumbling towers burned their way into every brain, but I live on the outskirts of Ground Zero and first saw it all live—unmediated.

Maybe its just a question of scale. Bin Laden on a large TV, tiny towers aren’t much bigger than, say, Dan Rather’s head...

Logos, on the other hand, look enormous on television; it is a medium almost as well suited as comics for dealing in abstractions.

Many months have passed. It’s time to move on... I guess I’m finally up to about September 20th.

Okay! Let’s say it’s NOT September anymore...

I’m hunched over the drafting table in my lower Manhattan studio, with my fingers lightly crossed...

...it’s hard to hold a pen this way...

...but I’d feel like such a jerk if I did a new disaster sketch while I’m still zip-feeding at the last one...

I was sure we were going to die! I’ve always lived suspected it, but that morning really convinced me...

I still see the glowing tower. It’s there as it collapses...

NEMI IMPROVISED!
JIHAD BRAND FOOTWARE
(1-800-JIHAD-FOOT
(1-800-JIHAD-Foot
(1-800-JIHAD-FOOT
Hi there, looks like you're starting a comic strip! It seems like you're exploring themes related to September 11th and the media's role in shaping public perception. The comic is rich with visual elements and dialogue that reflect on the immediate aftermath and ongoing impact of the event. Your description captures the essence of the strip, highlighting the fragility of human perception and the role of media in what we see and believe. Keep up the great work!
in *Slumberland*, *Krazy Kat*, *The Katzenjammer Kids*, the Spiegelman of *Maus* or the sly soft-edged realism of his usual *New Yorker* covers, or the computer-generated graphics he invented to recreate the haunting intensity of color he remembered from the glowing frames of the towers just before their collapse.

He overlays as many as six comic styles in a single strip, and deconstructs or recombines styles even within a single frame. The format of the strip, taller than it is wide, reflects the height of the towers themselves, which burn, glow and buckle the full length of the strip or in obsessive peep-through. The competing storylines also echo the jostling for attention in adjacent newspaper columns, to become a metaphor for the irruption of the topical into the poise of art.

Like Outcault’s panoramas, but with resolute deliberateness, Spiegelman’s *In Search of No Towers* can be a difficult read. Spiegelman takes advantage both of the accessibility, immediacy, and natural flow of comics language, and the possibility of disrupting those features with his palimpsest of comics styles and the fractured and uncertain reading experience the pages necessitate. In each installment he poses problems comics artists have never posed before, and solves them by recombining or undermining past solutions or finding new ones even he had to seek hard to find.

Comics, like any other art, had to discover how best to appeal to evolved human capacities and preferences within the resources the medium allows. Its most effective options now seem so natural that they have become transparent and almost invisible: we forget the history of problem solving behind them. Yet we intuitively understand others’ actions, including the creation of works of art, in terms of the problems their actions attempt to solve, in so far as we see these problems. The better we understand the history and resources of artists’ chosen modes, the better we can understand their solutions and their individual novelty. At their best, artists of genius like Spiegelman inspire us by their boldness in surpassing ready-made solutions and posing and solving unprecedented new problems. They epitomize, and inspire us with, culture’s power to extend the problem solving that evolution implanted in us all.

**REFERENCES**


**NOTE**

1. See Bordwell, *Style*, for a penetrating discussion of film (and by implication other artistic) style in terms of problems and solutions.