A Case For Comics
Why Art Programs Should Explore
a Sequential Art Curriculum
by James Sturm

I. An Emerging Medium

Sequential Art is pictorial storytelling. Its most widely recognized form is comics. Although comics have been traditionally associated with light diverting children's fare, an ever growing body of work argues otherwise.

Over the past two decades comics have been going through an exciting transformation. From the 1940s through the 1960s comics were the medium best suited to deliver action, adventure and fantasy. With the aid of new digital technologies, film, video and computer games are now much more adept at providing visceral adventures to our country's thrill seekers.

Freed from being the primary medium of adolescent entertainment, comics have reinvented themselves. Sequential Artists are exploring new genres, using the medium subtly and powerfully. Great works like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* have been celebrated, and artists like Ben Katchor, Chris Ware, and R. Crumb are widely acclaimed.

Sequential art classes are now being offered at a small handful of colleges and universities. Their success is a strong case for a more comprehensive sequential art curriculum in other schools.

II. A Well-Rounded Student

As of the time of this writing, there is only one art college or university, the Savannah College of Art and Design, that offers an undergraduate degree and graduate degree in Sequential Art. The program, where I currently teach, began in 1992 with six students who transferred from other departments. Seven years later this Sequential Art program has grown to more than 250 students. The students come from all of the United States and abroad.

In the department's first years many faculty members had their doubts. Taking comics seriously? Isn't this an oxymoron? These doubts have have been put to rest as sequential art students receive the highest accolades from my colleagues. Foundation professors applaud their love of drawing and enthusiasm in the classroom.

Consider the skills a successful cartoonist must possess: life drawing, perspective, design, typography, color, writing, editing, acting. From lighting and costuming to researching a script and finding visual references, creating a comic is like staging your own play. The cartoonist must create a believable, cohesive world.

The sequential art department prides itself in helping to educate the college's most well-rounded artists.

III. Passion

I make it a point each year to go into local public schools with my college students and conduct comic art workshops. Whether it's elementary school or high school students, they are incredibly enthusiastic. The public school teachers I work with tell me that these classroom visits are the most anticipated events of the year.

When living in Seattle I spent a week working with kids at a school for homeless children teaching them how to make a comic. Before I started their teacher warned me that they had extremely low attention spans and that I should not be insulted if they acted out or drifted off. By week's end each child had produced a marvelous picture story. Tales of lost parents, gangsters, bunny birthday parties, and Shaquille O'Neal were told. The teacher was astonished by the energy and enthusiasm her students were able to maintain throughout the week.

My Sequential Art students are no different. Comics afford them the opportunity to incorporate their own narratives and interests with their art. They bring great passion to the classroom, making it easy to teach.

IV. Sequential Courses Enrich Multi-Media Curriculum

The tools that today's computer artists have at their fingertips are miraculous and overwhelming. Sequential art classes, however, offer computer art students the challenge of juggling a multitude of elements and effects without monopolizing limited terminal space. What need do animation students have for computers before they can fashion workable storyboards?

By integrating the varied elements that it takes to create a successful comic book, computer art students develop crucial skills before sitting down in front of the computer. Sequential Art is the original multi-media. Its practitioners must orchestrate several varying elements in order to produce a cohesive whole.

As New Media and Computer Art departments continue to grow, the case for comics becomes stronger.

V. Content Provider

My introduction to Sequential Art class fills up every quarter. It consists of sophomore sequential art students who, after a year of foundation courses, are eager to get going with classes in their major.

It also contains a large percentage of frustrated senior video and computer art majors. These students have learned all the bells and whistles and can conjure and manipulate countless images with a click of the mouse. They want to transform these images into ideas and narratives.

It is the organization of images that shapes meaning. At the heart of Sequential Art is the editing of images to tell a story. Pictorial Storytelling is Sequential Art.

VI. Marketable Skills

Most students who enter SCAD's sequential art program have known for years that they wanted to be cartoonists. Their only question is, "When do I start?" Parents have different concerns. The most frequently asked question is, "Can my child make a decent living drawing comics?"

This question is unanswerable. Success in one's chosen field is decided by determination and talent. What I tell the parents is that the diverse array of skills students learn creating comics provides them with many choices in today's marketplace. Our graduates work in the field of computer gaming, video and film storyboarding. They have become art directors, journalists, illustrators, teachers and, of course, comic book artists.

VII. Bottom Line

Sequential art courses are inexpensive to implement. They attract students, boosting enrollment, and they complement existing curriculum like computer art, animation, and illustration. They produce well-rounded graduates with marketable skills.

The economic benefits to a school are obvious. But more importantly, with a sequential art program, an institution nurtures the intellectual stimulation of an art form and provides a sympathetic climate for its future practitioners.

This is an ideal moment in time for colleges and universities to explore a sequential art curriculum.