

# Axis Storytelling Platform (for Web Comics)

## Abstract

The Axis platform for web comics allows a story to be told from a variety of perspectives at the same time, while giving the reader the ability to instantly shift to any of these perspectives at any time.

## Introduction

The events of any given story occur within a specific timeframe, and in most cases, the story is told from the beginning to the end of said timeframe. Sometimes the author will show the reader things that happened in the past or future using flashbacks or flashforwards, but the story is still read in a linear fashion, and the reader must view these scenes when the author chooses to present them . . . he has no choice in the matter.

Along those same lines, the story may be told from many different perspectives, but the author usually chooses one and tells the story from that angle. Oftentimes the author will switch perspectives throughout the story, but again, the reader reads in a linear fashion, and must take these different perspectives when and how they are offered.

The Axis platform changes all this, enabling the reader to dynamically shift the perspective by character, location, time and story. With this knowledge of the reader's ability, and the extended interactive capabilities of the Axis platform, many new avenues of storytelling will open up to the author.

## Methods

Pre-discussion notes:

- The term 'story' in this paper will be defined as "a specific set of pages with the same subject, that together tell a portion of the overall narrative". Think of it this way: 'narrative = book', and 'story = chapter'.
- The term 'page' in this paper will be defined as 'a set of panels that together comprise a single page of content within the viewing frame'.
- This platform was designed specifically for web comics, so even though it may work for other genres of storytelling, this paper will focus on web comics in particular.

Here's how Axis works: Instead of laying out pages in HTML, and giving the reader the ability to move forward/back one page, or to the first/last page in a linear order, Axis databases every page and incorporates a framework that allows the reader to display the pages in any one of many available perspectives. For instance, in a story about Superman, the story could be showing a scene where Lois and Clark Kent have an argument, and Lois runs away crying. As the reader reads this scene, and then passes that point in the story, he could choose to go back to that argument (either by using the calendar function or by going backwards in the story he's reading), and then shift to Lois' perspective at that time. Now he'll be seeing the same panel (the argument), but when he advances the pages, he'll be seeing the narrative from Lois' perspective. He may be able to find out some additional information about where she ran after the argument. Or, if there's no more pages concerning her in that scene, he'll advance to the next page involving Lois.

Time is the solid ground that every page stays fixed to in Axis. Apart from some time-bending stories that will undoubtedly pop up in this framework, every page lives at one specific point in time, and this is our starting point for the database portion of this system. When a page is written, drawn and uploaded into Axis, the author can assign an absolute timestamp to it, thereby cementing its place on the overall narrative timeline. Once the system knows *when* a page occurs, the rest is pretty easy. After placing a timestamp on the uploaded page, the author can further assign the following other pieces of information to the page: characters involved, locations involved, and stories involved. On the back end, the data structure looks something like this:

Element Attribute: Value Attribute: Value Attribute: Value Attribute: Value	Page 602 Timestamp: 2008.07.22.1430.00 Story: The Argument Character: Clark, Lois Location: Metropolis
Element Attribute: Value Attribute: Value	Page 603 Timestamp: 2008.07.22.1432.00 Story: The Argument Character: Clark, Lois, Lex Location: Metropolis
Element Attribute: Value Attribute: Value Attribute: Value	Page 604 Timestamp: 2003.07.04.2230.00 Story: Fireworks, The Argument Character: Clark, Lois, Lex Location: Smallville

This may look a bit uninteresting to the casual observer, but what it allows the reader to do with the narrative is intriguing. On Page 602, Clark and Lois are arguing about something that happened about 5 years ago, on the night of the 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration back in Smallville. The argument continues through Page 603, at which point Lex joins them and says, "Yeah, I remember that – it happened like this...", and then when the reader advances the Argument story, Page 604 shows a flashback to the night of July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

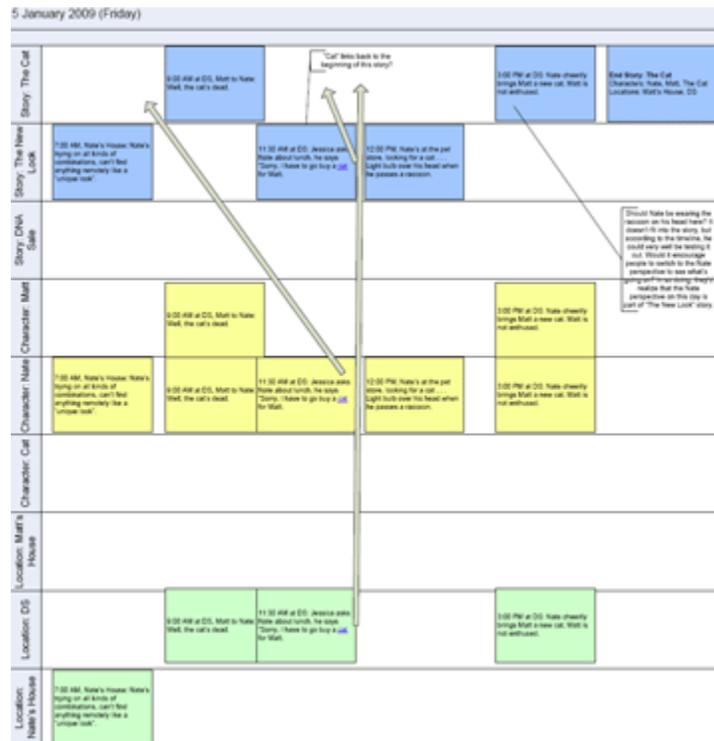
Here's where it gets interesting. Since we're viewing this scene from the perspective of the "Argument" story, clicking the "Next" arrow will bring us to Page 605, which will have the three characters continuing the argument back in Metropolis. But let's say that while we're back in Smallville on Page 604, we want to see if Lex is telling the truth about what happened that night. Instead of taking his word for it, we could switch to the "Fireworks" story that's available at that time, and see how the whole night actually played out. Or, if Lex specifically mentioned something that Clark did that night, we can switch our perspective to the "Clark" character on that night, follow him for a few pages, and see what he did. On the other hand, if Lex mentioned that something specific happened in Smallville that night (or the previous day or whatever), we can switch to the "Smallville" location perspective for that point on the timeline, and then go back and forth a bit to see how things played out back in town around July 4<sup>th</sup>.

When we're done poking around back in 2003, we can either navigate back to page 604, switch to the "Argument" point of view, which will then take us back to the present time upon the next advance, or, if we've gotten too far astray, we have a couple of other options. We can use the calendar function or timeline slider to get back to the present day, or we can use the search function or archive link to get back to the "Argument" story.

All of these options for perspective shifts are available for any given point on the timeline, which makes reading any narrative much more interesting. You can always just keep following the "stories", which function pretty much like chapters, but all along the way there are opportunities to shift perspective and learn more about the action. Wondering what a character does once they pop in and out of a scene in a story? Shift to their perspective and follow them out . . . see what they do. If it's interesting, follow the new story you'll probably find them involved in. If not, pick up the story you were following wherever you left off.

As I said before, the timeline is the permanent thing. Lying in arcs (groups of pages) on top of the timeline are the "story" perspectives, which are the presentational pieces that propel the reader through the narrative. The "character" and "location" perspectives will usually serve to add a greater layer of detail to any given story, but follow any one of these perspectives for any length of time, and you'll run into another story that intersects with the current one.

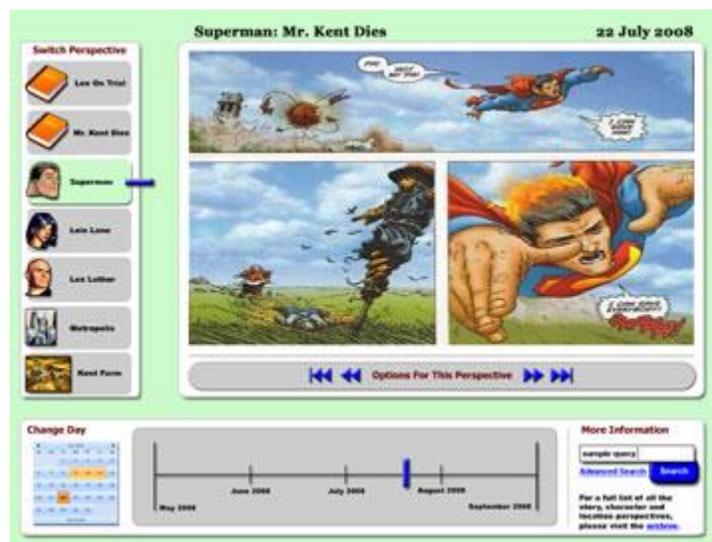
If you were to lay this out in a storyboard fashion, it would look something like this:



In this model, each block represents a page, and they are laid out horizontally by timestamp. The top three rows (in blue) are stories, the next three (in yellow) are characters, and the bottom three (in green) are locations. Any blocks that line up vertically are events that occur at the same time, but are told from different

perspectives. The arrows represent links (yes, hyperlinks contained in characters' speech bubbles) over to different events contained in different stories. In this case, we don't enter the past via a flashback, but we have the opportunity to follow a link to go see for ourselves the action referenced by one of the characters.

Hopefully the two figures and explanations above aren't too confusing, but just in case they are, please remember that the author is the only one who has to worry about that stuff. It's his job to put in all the wonderful detail that will add to the richness and complexity of his work, and all you have to do is sit back and enjoy it. Luckily for you, we've made it very easy for you to do that. The reader interface is very simple and straightforward, built with one goal in mind: to allow you quick, easy and intuitive navigation through all four perspectives. You'll see something like this:



In this interface, anything in blue will help you navigate through the story. Here's a rundown of the features.

- The standard forward/back and first/last arrows are present under the comic, and work as you've come to expect. If you want to change to a different perspective, simply slide the bar on the left up or down. Any perspectives available to you for the given point on the timeline will automatically show up in that left-side navigation bar.
- If you wish to move to a different point in time, select the year, month and day from the calendar on the lower-left, or slide the bar on the bottom to a different point on the timeline.
- If you ever completely lose track of a story you wanted to follow, visit the archive link on the lower-right for a complete listing of every story, character and location available to you throughout the narrative. Of course, you can always use the search box on the lower-right to search for your story, but why don't you save the search box for something even better?
- Every word from every character in every panel is indexed in the database, so if you remember a specific subject or phrase, type it in, and you'll be able to find and navigate to the exact page you're looking for.

- Use the Advanced Search link under the search box for a more robust query. For instance, want to see all the pages where Lex and Clark speak in Smallville? Or maybe you'd like to return all pages where Lois, Lex and Clark are together, anywhere *but* Smallville, during the two-year time period from 2005 to 2007? Be as creative as you like – Axis can handle it.

Learning how to use these new tools is very quick and painless. In minutes you'll be comfortable navigating forward, back, up and down through the narrative, and you can focus on all the new avenues this platform can offer . . .

**Possible Applications of This Model**

search function for recollecting and data gathering

2D storytelling

unreliable narrators

non-linear storytelling

mysteries

extensive reader control

limitless author options

sitcoms in print (instead of video) online