Demystifying the Penny Valley Files

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Comics scholar Ivan Brunetti defines cartooning as: “the process (of making cartoons) itself, as well as a language and an art form”, and that cartoons are what the cartoonist creates. He additionally espouses that the process is built upon five pillars which define its form and function: calligraphy, composition, clarity, consistency, and communication. These elements are visible whenever one encounters a cartoon, like this example of Bill Watterson’s daily strip Calvin and Hobbes as found in the compilation The Days Are Just Packed, published in September of 1993 by Andrew McNeels Publishing: While these elements do not have to be in strip or book format to be identifiably cartoons, it helps to see images in sequence to aid understanding.

Calligraphy manifests as the expression of text as well as the energy of the line and the communication therein. In Watterson’s case we see this employed in the variations between text to convey mood and tone, as well as the muddying of lines as the character himself becomes covered in filth. Composition is essential to the reading of a cartoon, guiding the eye across the image, absorbing all its necessary components. In our example here, the cartoonist gives ample space to depict the elements critical to the narrative: Calvin, the mud, and the text. In a sequential form composition extends to how the cartoonist alters composition between panels to affect the narrative. For example: Between panels one and two of this strip, Watterson budgets more space for the “eww!” text, allowing for it to warp for effect, while removing the speech bubble to further emphasize its importance. These nuances of composition carry directly over to the other “Cs” of consistency and clarity. Consistency manifests in our example in two ways: One, as the design of Calvin and the world around him in which the visual language is depicted repeatedly in the same manner, reinforcing how the reader identifies the character and surroundings visually. This is especially important in the sequential presentation of a cartoon, as without consistency the sequence would unravel into a series of non sequiturs or abstract representation of the narrative’s events. This similarly goes to speak about clarity, which influences choices...
made in the drawing of a cartoon (such as the instantly recognizable silhouette of Calvin’s hair style, or omission of an environment beyond the mud), to the purposeful management of text. These choices affect the ability to assess the image, unifying its constituent parts to create a whole which communicates with the viewer, projecting character or narrative. In a successful cartoon, these five Cs are working together in harmony as they so efficiently do in our Calvin and Hobbes example.

Gary Larson’s landmark strip The Far Side does immense work with a single panel and caption. Cartoon drawing that has very specific goals and outcomes. Larson and Watterson’s strips are certainly helpful in establishing what goes into making a cartoon tick, the conveyance of a story, sometimes accompanied by a joke or quip to tie it together. It is Brunetti’s five Cs that combine to achieve this goal with such efficiency that often the viewer is unaware that all are working in tandem. The Penny Valley Files is preoccupied with telling a narrative based around the pillars of cartooning, and thus decides to manifest in a comic book format. This decision is based upon an inherent recognition of the system’s efficacy but also by directly observing this efficacy in various other projects.

Other works have impacted the development of The Penny Valley Files in various regards, from narrative to world and character design to color systems. Evan Dorkin’s The Eltingville Club, compiled and published by Dark Horse in 2016 is notable for its impact upon writing the character of Hank, (Penny Valley’s resident pariah and paranormal enthusiast) while also influencing the approach to character. Dorkin’s designs are perhaps slightly edgier than those found in Penny Valley with the frenetic dance the artist plays with line weight, but a similar ethic is carried over of loud and boisterous people you probably would not want to befriend.

A panel such as the one below showcases the broad array of unflattering characters that Dorkin is able to squeeze into each design. This manifests in the costuming which demonstrates the individual interests or niches of the group, down to the exaggerated body language and proportions of the club’s members. Leaving the text aside the viewer is already being keyed into what makes each character tick or perhaps how they even perceive one another. This is both a great example of consistency and clarity in action, from this panel alone we have an established set of signs to demarcate the club members and how they might behave. Additionally, Dorkin is thoroughly invested in the “texture” of the world he draws. While the characters might be over-the-top in their cartoonishness, the amount of detritus and environmental detail that the cartoonist packs into each panel lends the world a significant amount of authenticity, as if it was lived-in. This is a quality that carries over to Daniel Clowes’ Ice Haven published by Pantheon in 2005, another significant source of influence on this project on a visual and narrative level.

As seen in the following examples, Clowes is particularly deft with the practice of calling back to previous characters and concepts through environmental details or simply placing them in the background. This allows for a more holistic reading of each character as they are woven in

Above: Panel from Evan Dorkin’s The Eltingville Club showcasing the variety of character designs and personalities of the protagonists. Opposite: Bill Dickey, a heavy inspiration for the character of Hank in The Penny Valley Files.
"THIS FAN... THIS MONSTER!"

featuring the
ELTINGVILLE COMIC BOOK, SCIENCE-FICTION, FANTASY, HORROR, and ROLE-PLAYING CLUB!
The various denizens of Daniel Clowes' *Ice Haven* throughout the narrative each character is given their own vignettes to explore their motivations and background. This was a major source of inspiration for the narrative structure of *The Penny Valley Files*. 
He'd kind of a weird kid...

Anyway, the whole town has been going nuts!

Even the girl from the stationery store, formerly known as Tootie Fathelkonten, whose real name it turns out is Julie Ritskan and who is actually not so bad, was smiling.

Hello Mrs. Wentz!

Oh, Mr. Wilder, I'm having such fun! My granddaughter is coming tomorrow and I spent the day baking cookies!

How lovely.

Cookies? Are they as half-baked as your poems?

You will come by to visit us, won't you Mr. Wilder? She loves poetry!

I'd be delighted!

I'd sooner visit the gas chamber!

Oh, and did I tell you the good news about my poem? They're giving me some sort of prize!

If the public only had a chance to read my poems... how could they ever again find merit in the lives of Mrs. Wentz and her tiresome begonias?

Which one shall I watch tonight?

Whaddy'a have to be, an Einstein to open up a hot dog stand? It runs by itself!

Listen, Ralph...

Sheer perfection!
and out of various narratives and reflected upon by distinct characters with their own unique perspectives. It has the effect of making even the most tertiary characters feel like they exist in a real space where their presence (or absence in the case of David Goldberg) is of consequence beyond the machinations of our various narrators.

The graphic novel, *Wimbledon Green* published by Drawn and Quarterly in 2003 by the cartoonist Seth works towards similar ends: painting the portrait of one character through the many lenses of many characters. However, its value was significantly demonstrated in the color system established by Seth, a limited two-color system with stark efficiency.

Particularly, Seth’s approach to designing his environments and simple manipulation of the knobs that are saturation, hue, and value were a significant influence upon the system established for this project. In this system, Seth only ever employs one color per page (or really per story, with colors alternating depending on the chapter) yet is still able to create an image with the required depth and scale of truly comprehensive environmental drawing. Supplemented by thick outline and strong silhouette, the picture is instantly readable, with its objects similar and yet distinct from one another. In the leftmost example, Seth is careful with his usage of darker values, layering the color to activate stretches of space where need be, or removing it entirely for rim lighting and highlights. In this manner, Seth is doing a lot with very little.

Brian Ralph applies a similar approach in his Japanese-mecha-sendup, *Reggie 12*, published by Drawn and Quarterly in 2013 works with a similarly limited palette. Ralph’s work however is closer to the rightmost example from *Wimbledon Green* in which there are only three values: black, white, and a midtone. Ralph, applies black more liberally than Seth, to great effect. *The Penny Valley Files* seeks to learn from both of these approaches to a limited color system, often playing with the intricate layering of values to create a denser system, and also employing the strong use of black as silhouette to communicate background details or patches of darkness. All of the influence of these sources coalesced to inform the methodology for *The Penny Valley Files*. 

Above: Differing examples of the Cartoonist Seth’s approach to a two-color system in *Wimbledon Green*, note the differences in saturation and use of whites and midtones to activate the space of the image.

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Pictured: A page from Brian Ralph's *Reggie 12* showcasing the artist's approach to a two-color system. Note the presence of heavy blacks in contrast to Seth's system.
Creating *The Penny Valley Files* required a methodology for building its world. From the beginning I wanted to embrace the environment of the town, paying attention to the details that lend a fictional place its authenticity. I visited three southern Illinois towns, Effingham, Vandalia, and Greenup and documented each, leaving room for my own creative decisions to make it unique. As far as I could tell, none of these towns have a water tower. I chose them specifically as they varied in population size and area without this being particularly important in establishing the look of “anytown USA” without having to rely too heavily upon tropes which may not be wholly representative of actuality.

I created a map, drawn from satellite images of the three towns, overlaid in an effort to integrate their road systems in a similar manner, then partitioning individual “regions” based upon their function for example: residential, commercial etc. Once the key regions of the setting had been established and laid out, it was necessary to establish, design and place key landmarks and institutions for our town. I built a composite town designing the town’s highschool, library, and town hall. However, architecture and road systems are not what make a town feel alive, doing so requires the development of and design of likeable (or at the very least compelling) characters.

*The Penny Valley Files* is structured around an ensemble cast of characters. Each of its citizens was made to fit particular tropes: the self-righteous nerd, debased outsider, overly-aggressive cop etc. Thus, character design is one of its most essential components. Each character had to be developed to be identifiable by their physical characteristics which were more indicative of their personalities. I had developed an approach to character for a reportage project in March 2020, devoted to observation of a Magic the Gathering draft. This series of portraits was in conversation with principles established by Brunetti. Careful consideration was given to costuming of each subject, their gestures reflective of their personality and manner of speaking. Simplification of features and silhouette was critical to this process, both for speed of drawing but also to enhance the characters’ readability. Though the product of reportage, these drawings relied heavily upon the elements of cartooning. Body proportions, facial expressions, and quirks were emphasized to reflect the individual but also augment their presence to something instantly recognizable. This is visible especially in the design of the town’s resident pariah and social outcast, Hank. For example: Hank is an individual
Pictured: Examples of portraits from the *Magic the Gathering* reportage project. Note the emphasis on simplification of gestures, and facial features as well as the distinctions between costuming and character personality.

Prolly the nicest dude there (tho everyone was pretty nice).
with high regard for himself but is never taken seriously by those around him, prompting in somewhat of a Napoleon complex. This manifests in his short and squat stature and constant indignation.

In another instance, the porch pirate Clem is defined by his lack of facial features as obscured by his hood, essentially becoming his face. This gives the character an enigmatic quality representative of a thief or mischief-maker, accentuated by Clem's toothy grin and entirely-sclera eyeballs.

Such decisions were very conscious as in subsequent issues of *The Penny Valley Files*, Clem is positioned to appear frequently in the background of other vignettes as a frequent observer to the secrets that the town of Penny Valley holds. The character design approach of simple, clear qualities applies to every character that is the subject of a panel, from the burliest police officer to the recalcitrant neighborhood kids.

The writing process took two forms: the first longer and more thoughtful for the lengthier vignettes, a second, more spontaneous for the shorter narratives (often with minimal dialogue). This was done to strike a balance regarding the story’s pacing, giving care to flesh out the world with characters and settings that overlap without drowning it entirely in dialogue. The thumbnailing process would often go alongside the script to allow for the writing process to influence the drawings simultaneously before entering the penciling and inking phase. When it came to inking and penciling, the practice was rather standard, almost always conforming to a 2x3 grid of panels, deviating mostly during the more longform stories.

*The Penny Valley Files* makes use of a two-color system, inspired by *Wimbledon Green* and *Reggie 12*. I decided early in the project to avoid a full-color system both as a stylistic choice but also as an effort to streamline the coloring process as the project came down to the wire. I conducted a series of color tests, gradually tweaking the details of the system’s language until achieving a satisfactory result.

**Above:** Panels depicting the porch pirate, Clem.
Above: Final concept art for the character design of Hank. Note the evolution of the style established in the reportage project displayed previously. Similar tenets of simplification, and costuming are emphasized.
**Pictured:** Series of color tests applied to the third page of Hank’s Vignette. Note the gradual addition of grays added to activate the space and add depth to the image. This is getting close to the final color system but there is still an overemphasis on the presence of the purples, drawing the eye away from the figures.
Pictured: Two-page spread demonstrating the final color system with shadows in place in addition to finalized levels of saturation in purple and grey tones.
which would carry over to the rest of the book.

I discovered the significance of this project is held in its potential for growth. The development and refinement of its methodology is a strategy meant to be employed ever-forwards into the future, making further comics projects possible. It proves the ability to work on a longform project independently. I have learned to implement dialogue that feels natural and entertaining, designing characters that fit within the narrative and generally stretch world-building muscles. I aspire for the project to serve as a jumping-off point for a greater narrative, designed to accommodate for a nearly endless series of characters with their own interlocking stories and branching threads. This is significant as it results in a project that can continue to evolve with the artist as their skills in writing, drawing, and storytelling grow. This will almost certainly manifest in the form of subsequent issues of the book, providing myself with opportunities to continue promoting themself and becoming further integrated into the independent comics scene. This project has afforded me the opportunity to stretch my book designing skills, considering the audience and the dissemination of my work. I plan to involve myself in small press expos and independent comic conventions, getting the book directly in the hands of the comics community in an effort to establish relationships and get feedback from peers and potential consumers. As an emerging artist and comics illustrator I do not want to shoot for the moon out of the gate, avoiding the attempt to pitch Penny Valley to comics publishers for the time being as I want to cut my teeth selling and promoting my own work as I develop further as an artist. There is no doubt that as I continue the series, narrative threads may change, characters move to the background, the quality of drawing will improve, and my ambitions grow. I truly believe that this project of The Penny Valley Files and my time navigating its ins-and-outs has positioned me to be a stronger illustrator and storyteller on the whole.
Bibliography:


PZTT! The lights are back on, eyes are gone, Hank too. A mess of paper waste and opened burger are left at his place along w/ laptop & shitty cellphone.
+ MZ: "You smell something funny?"

- Hank rushes round the back of the Wendy's, past the drive-thru menu, huffing (he's in miserable shape).
  + "Holy shit! Holy FUCK!!"

- Hank struggles to hop the fence. It has a sign: FOR SALE, CARPENTER REALTY, Phone #.

- WUMP! He lands hard on his chin. The lot is a mix of overgrown grass, broken glass, chip bags, and asphalt. His hat flies off.

- the eyes appear again, this time outside the lot @ the opposite end.
  + Hank: "Are you kidding me? There's no way I'm jumping that again!"

- He spies aenery hole @ the bottom of the fence, cringes.

- Hank gets on all fours, exposing plumber's crack. His left hand squirts a dog turd. He doesn't notice.

- Hank squeezes thru the hole, lifts himself up. He is visibly dug up and looks (even more) like shit. The eyes are now at the base of the water tower.

- Big shot of the tower, emphasize the rust, scratched paint, "Woodsman Dairy" text & logo. Faded portrait of a missing kid.
  + CONT. —> NEXT PAGE

Above: Initial Script for page 3 of Hank's vignette (as depicted in the color studies).
Above: Thumbnails for page 3 of Hank’s Vignette (thumbnails and dialogue drawn on sticky notes).
Above: Initial color system for page 3 of Hank’s vignette.
Above: Final color system for page 3 of Hank's vignette.
Above: The first page of a cut story depicting Penny Valley’s only librarian (perhaps appearing in issue #2!).
Above: Page 2 of the cut story. Note the presence of our beloved weirdo, Hank.
Pictured: The final project! Look how nice it is on the wall and in book form. Hooray!