

Figure 3.1: Koj, Jarek and Serra, from the ten-issue *Tellos*, created by Todd Dezago and Mike Wieringo.

I LIKE MY STORIES
TO BE AS CLEAR
AS POSSIBLE...
I SACRIFICE
SUPERHERO DYNAMIC
BY DOING CLEAR
STORYTELLING.

—
Mike Wieringo



CHAPTER THREE

A perennial fan favorite, Mike Wieringo made a name for himself in the comic industry during the 1990s. Even as a child, he always had a strong interest in the comic book art form; he was constantly making up stories. He obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Illustration from Virginia Commonwealth University under Donald Early, who Wieringo says taught him more than he would have learned on his own. Wieringo cites college as a "catalyst for me getting into comics. Everyday, I'm thankful for the experience."

Wieringo is known for his control over the exaggerated heroic form, though it was his mentor who pushed for him to be well-grounded in the traditional human form. "Early made me break all of the comic book figure drawing habits I had formed and made me learn from scratch. A lot of people say that an artist needs to learn the rules before you break them." He works primarily in pencils and is known for his work on such titles as *The Flash* (his first major work in comics), *Robin*, *The Sensational Spider-Man*, *Rogue*, *She-Hulk/Thing*, *Superman* and the *Fantastic Four*. He enjoys developing characters and stories for his own projects and is best known for co-creating *Tellos*.

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MARVEL METHOD

When approaching a project, Wieringo feels that he is not just the penciler; he's a part of the creative team. The majority of work Wieringo has received over the years has been from Marvel Comics due to his teamwork mentality that the Marvel method inspires. "The difference between storytelling and being a writer/artist is that I do the storytelling with the visuals but I don't do the overall storytelling of the comic book. It's more of a collaborative thing. That way I'm more able to be a part of the team. I'm more of a collaborator; I'm the visual end of the collaboration."

Much has been said about the Marvel method of creating comics. The Marvel way is a departure from traditional script form; the writer controls every aspect of the storytelling environment. Wieringo enjoys the challenges of working within a plot system: "There are two methods—DC and Marvel. DC involves a full script where the writer gives you everything: dialogue and often times camera angles, whether it's a down shot or a shot from above, a long shot, or whatever. Depending on how complete they want to be, [the writer] sometimes will write a 10-page description for one panel. The Marvel method is where you get a plot outline. Usually we get the story page by page."

Each written and outlined page translates into a page of artwork. In a bare bones system like the Marvel method, it's the artist's responsibility to flesh out the characters, environment and solve pacing issues. The completeness of the final story is determined by the strength of the artist. The artist has the opportunity to augment the story because it is not held fast by a deadline-determined script. With the Marvel method, there is room to play around with the pacing of the story. "If you think, well, this could use a couple of extra panels, you're free to throw in a couple of extra beats in this particular scene and stretch out a moment in time," Wieringo explains.

"The story structure is given to me, I just get to pace it in a way that feels comfortable for me: emphasize certain panels by making them bigger, add panels if I think that I can stretch out among them to make it more of an impact visually, that kind of thing. You're given props and backgrounds and sometimes the postures of the characters. Working [within] the Marvel method, the writer suggest actions, character motivations... and it's up to the penciler to convey them. I prefer using the Marvel method because it gives me more input as opposed to DC's full script method where you're sort of just a hired hand asked to draw the writer's vision and not able to put any of your own in it."

At all stages of production, successful comic book creation is about teamwork. Sometimes working with a writer who may not understand the importance of storytelling can be difficult, especially in the Marvel method, the structure is so loose that a writer with real storytelling experience must be able to be visual enough to get production rolling.

"Sometimes I wish I could work with a writer who started out as just a penciler and understands not to smash so much into one script. But so far I've worked

the sensational spider-man #23
"the spirit is willing..." plot

PAGE THREE

Cutting back to SPIDEY, we find that BUEL is finishing his statement from page one, punctuating it with a magikal blast at our most agile WallCrawler!

As SPIDEY dodges the bolt of energy, BUEL'S shot accidentally hits one of his GREMLYN Minions...

...and turns him into a puddle of gooey flesh...

...while a shocked SPIDEY and the other

GREMLYNS look on!

Wide shot as SPIDEY, ducking another blast, realizes that he's gotta get outta there but that BUEL is between him and that glowing door... Uh oh! SPIDEY'S the coolest, but he's still in trouble! (MIKE - if ya can, also put in the other door BEHIND SPIDEY that he came through from the previous Snowscape. Thanks. t.)

Figure 3.2: Example of a plot-first script (also known as Marvel Style Script).

Above: In this unique comic book creation style, a short plot synopsis without dialog is written. Script for page 3, The Sensational Spider-Man #23, written by Todd DeZago.

Below: The artist then takes the plot (usually a paragraph) and creates an entire page. The page will then go back to the writer who creates dialog to fit the art.

Pencils by Mike Wieringo, inks by Richard Case.



Spider-Man and all related characters © Marvel Characters, Inc.

only with writers who aren't visual storytellers. They have all these things going on in their minds that they want to see down on a page—this would be great and this would be great and that would be great. They don't realize they have a guy who has to draw all that. Sometimes it's too much to draw, but I want to put it all in and I feel bad about not being able to put it all in. That's the frustration of working with someone else instead of writing and drawing it yourself. [If the artist writes the story he] knows how to pace something and stretch the moment... or make people flip through the pages very quickly. You're not of one mind with this other person. They have their ideas and you have your ideas and it has to hopefully come together smoothly."

"Every different situation calls for a different solution. Sometimes I can talk to the writer and say, "Can we cut this out? You know this isn't necessary, this seems kind of superfluous, I think we can do without this." Sometimes if you really like the scene you'll add a page and stretch it out."

Working with Todd DeZago on *The Sensational Spider-Man* made Wieringo really feel like a part of a team and they were able to concentrate on producing good stories. "Instead of doing a 22-page comic, Todd and I, working together on Spider-Man, did 23- and even 24-page stories. We just told the editor to cut some ads out or some editorial space and they're usually fine with that. Sometimes, if I don't think a scene or plot works visually, I will call the writer and think of a tactful way to say 'we don't need this.' Todd's an easy guy to talk to and is always amenable to making changes. But I would never make changes without consulting the writer. When you are working with a writer, it's best to communicate and not make arbitrary decisions—it's part of the collaborative process."

THE GRID

The grid is one of the standard sequential art conventions that Wieringo utilizes. Relying on the grid helps him keep the story straight and flowing and allows him the freedom to utilize his time in the pencil stage. "I usually end up going by the traditional grid system just so that I can get the layout done in a decent amount of time. I mean it's all about time. When you're doing monthly comics unfortunately it's all about getting a page done a day."

By dividing the layout into even levels of information, Wieringo is able to emphasize only the panels that need to jump out. Great emotion or action merits emphasis, and Wieringo creates the panels in such a way that involves the reader. In a collaborative effort, there are discussions with the writer over which panels need to jump out for attention. "When I was working with Mark Waid on *The Flash*, every panel that he wrote... was so powerful and deserved to be emphasized. I wanted every panel to be the biggest panel. But some of them had to be smaller... that's where I got into the grid system, working with Mark. Because every panel was so powerful that I ended up



Gen 13 and all related characters © Archa Entertainment, Inc. & WildStorm Productions

Figure 3.3: By utilizing the grid and dividing the panels into even moments of time, it becomes easy to generate a focus panel. Here, in Gen 13 Bootleg, Wieringo opens up the last panel so that the pace slows down and the reader enjoys Grunge's excuses.

doing a kind of a standardized grid so that they would all be the same size. Sometimes I'd do a big close up for one, sometimes I'd do a long shot but every panel ended up being kind of the same size because they all had something in there that I thought needed to be shown as clearly as possible. So sometimes you get into that situation and sometimes you get into a situation where I know what I want. And sometimes I get lazy. All right, this page has to go fast so the closeup's going to be the biggest thing on the page and everything else will be really small because I have to get this page done today. Sometimes you have to compromise because of that."

The grid helps in Wieringo's storytelling because of the ease information can be taken in by the reader. He relies on the grid for speed and clarity of reading. "[Some] artists don't use the grid system and do panels that are set at an angle and another panel that's set at an opposite angle and sometimes the storytelling gets really confused. But that's where the grid system I think could help people. People who have these really wild, crazy layouts could benefit by starting out using the grid system and moving outward. But I've never been able to do those crazy layouts. I've tried but it usually ends up looking pretentious."

Storytelling clarity is terribly important to Wieringo. Even as early as the roughs stage, he is attuned to what the reader will take in and he always tries to ensure that the story will be a very clear one. "If you go to see a movie and you're enjoying it and the story is captivating and you're really enjoying it, you suspend your disbelief. It's the same when you read a comic book or a novel. If you're used to seeing something in a certain way and all of a sudden a monkey wrench is thrown in there or something that just changes it completely, you either have to find a new way of looking at it, a new way of seeing it to adjust to that, or you just give up. Most people don't want to invest the time or the mental effort in trying to figure something out. Especially with comic books."

ROUGHS AND PREPLANNING

The roughs stage is the most crucial stage for Wieringo when he starts visualizing the story. He takes time to peruse the story in its entirety before rushing out to create pages.

"I usually read the whole plot and get a feel for it. I start thinking about the beginning pages, how I'd like to get started. Every time I start on a new comic book I'm always dead cold and it takes me a good week or so to get a few pages done because I feel cold going into it. I'll read the whole plot and start getting some mental images and then I'll start from the beginning and just start laying out page one and usually that's the very hardest page."

During the roughs stage, Wieringo uses an interesting technique in creating his pages. He creates the layout on small premade, photocopied grids, each page reducing to about the size of a trading card (Figure 3.5). "I work this size so that I



Figure 3.1: Final pencils created for the Flash (above). The use of the grid keeps all of the chaotic action contained and manageable. When action breaks out of the panel, a focus is created. As the page printed in Flash #88 (below).



can get a feel of the overall page and it's a whole lot easier for me working small to do the anatomy than doing it full-sized. Starting with a head here and going all the way down to the feet. You'd be doing like a full-sized page, you may end up running out of room for the feet or thinking by the time your sketching up here and you get down there and say, 'Oh man, this layout sucks.' It's a whole lot easier to see it small. I take it to a Xerox machine and blow it up and put it on a light table."

While working in the smaller size, Wieringo worries about pacing and emotional issues rather than how great the figure looks on the page. The art of storytelling is demanding because it is not just about drawing. "I just think about the overall page and what I want to have on the page and how many panels I think it's going to take to tell the scene on that page. I think about which panel or expression, or whatever I want to emphasize, which panel I want to make the biggest, how do I want to break up a certain part of that scene into several little panels, etc. A lot of it is mental and there's a lot of erasing. I often start with something I think is a good idea, get halfway through the layout and say, well this isn't working and start over. Usually, by the time I get halfway through the story, I've got kind of a rhythm going and I'll just start going through the layouts and... do them a lot quicker. In the beginning it's very difficult. It's not very easy for me to do layouts. I doubt myself, my abilities, all of that."

"Sometimes it will take me a whole day just to do the layout. Sometimes I get it done in an hour. It all depends on how inspired I am." This process is the real work in creating comics. "I wish that I could just come in here and start working. If whatever I'm putting down is what I like, that's great. Whip out a page in a couple of hours and be done. But sometimes it's like pulling teeth. Sometimes it comes really easily and sometimes it doesn't. But I feel like I can't allow myself to just say O.K. this page isn't working and go on to the next one. I don't like to do them out of sequence. I try to do each page as it comes."

Breaking down a story visually tends to be a spontaneous process and Wieringo finds the physical act of drawing the page to be a breeze. "That's sort of mindless. Once I have the layout down that I want, then it's tweaking things here and there that aren't drawn in completely. But it's a whole lot easier tracing out the finishing pencil stage—the hardest stage is doing the layouts. The absolute hardest stage. I used to do it in actual size [11" x 17"] and I would draw everything pretty completely. Then by the time I traced it up I wasn't interested in drawing it again. I've already drawn this once and I don't want to do it again. So I'm doing it smaller, and every line is not complete. When I'm doing it smaller there are a lot of areas where they might be sketchy in part, where I'm not completely sure what I'm going to do with the background. I leave a little work for myself in the other stages."

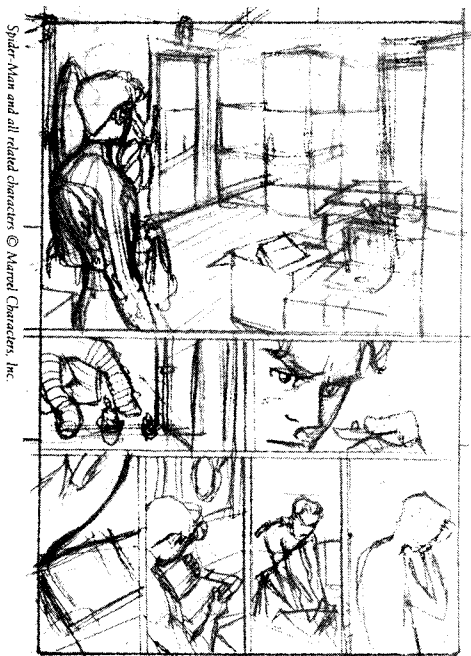


Figure 3.5: Example of roughs created for page 6, of *The Spectacular Spider-Man* #21. The roughs are baseball card-sized and have a good amount of detail. Once comfortable with the layout, Wieringo enlarged the roughs, applied a piece of bristol board on top of the photocopy, and cleaned up the art, using a light table.

SPIDEY

A good case in point is *The Sensational Spider-Man* #21. Written by Todd Dezago and penciled by Mike Wieringo, this issue continues the legend of everybody's favorite wall-crawler. This is not a big action scene—something that Marvel is most noted for—rather, it's a very introspective point in the story where Peter Parker searches his soul.

"It deals with Peter's feelings about his clone [which Peter considered himself to be] before the clone died. There was a time when Peter thought he himself was the clone so he started thinking of Ben Reilly, the real clone, as his big brother. And since they were the same person, they sort of really emotionally bonded and hung out together. In this revelation storyline, the clone ended up dying at the end. At the beginning of it they had sort of a quiet moment together in the attic of Peter's Aunt May's house. So this is a page where he's remembering they had played *Battleship*, they had some of their old toys out and were reminiscing. Peter, thinking he was the clone had said: 'I wish I had been alive or I'd been you at this time. I have these memories but not the actuality of it.' He's just remembering this and feeling really sad and missing his "big brother" as he called him. And I'm trying to get the emotional impact of it across. That was fun. Not every scene has to be about action and some of my favorite stuff is more character driven.

To begin the page, Wieringo digests the script to gain an understanding of the storytelling. The writer creates the script by describing the scenes that the penciler to translate into art.

"That's all every page of script is: a paragraph. Or the page is broken down into sentences of his idea for each panel, or the idea that he wants to get across. So basically this page information I was given is that Peter's taking his mask off on the previous page and he just scans the attic seeing boxes and some toys and in particular he pointed out he wanted the *Battleship* game because they were playing *Battleship* before they had to leave the house. Some other things that were established in the previous comic book. The tricycle hanging on the wall, that kind of thing. Setting up things like the mirror, because he wanted to have him look in the mirror on the next page and see Ben. Todd told me he wanted him to pick up a piece from the *Battleship*, look at some of the books that they had looked at together and then... I threw this in myself. I just thought that was a good way to end the page. He gave me about 5 or 6 sentences of what he wanted on the page and I just had to bring that out visually. And that pretty much goes for each plot, each page he gives me a paragraph of sentences of what he wants on a page. Sometimes if it's a real complicated fight scene he might ask for something more. Or he might give me more words."

After the plot has been mulled over, the roughs process begins. A lot of the meticulous details found in the final page can be seen in the roughs (Figure 3.5). But this does not leave things etched in stone. "Nothing's going to change as far as the content of what's on the page. But things do change [from roughs to pencils]. I realized



Figure 3.6: The finished inked page. At this stage, the page would be scanned and colored. At the end of the production process, a writer and editor placed the word balloons into the page and it went to press.

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Figure 3.7: Page 6 as it finally appeared, from the *Sensation Spider-Man* #21.



at one point that I started to make the attic much too big. I ended up drawing it in so I extended the height of the door of it to make it closer, give it more of a claustrophobic feel. Because when I started I said 'Well I think it's a pretty big house, but I don't know of that many houses that have attics that big.' You see these slasher films where a lot of the ending takes place in the attic and it's huge, it's like a carnival tent it's so big. But I didn't think that they would have that big of a house. I drew it in a little bit, made it a little more claustrophobic so I extended these out a bit pulled things in a little bit. I did that in a stage when I was transferring out with the blue pencil. But everything else is pretty much the same." (Figure 3.6)

This is a rare occurrence considering the amount of planning at the roughs stage. But Wieringo constantly reevaluates the effectiveness of the visual

solution, even up to the finished pencils. "Sometimes the layout or the particular panel might be something I didn't like and I'll just change it completely in blue pencil. Sometimes I'll just draw right on the page. But very rarely."

Pacing issues are continually solved. Knowing when to add detail or leave out detail, knowing when to open a border or how to position a figure, all of these things can add visual interest and make for a more enjoyable story.

"It's just to make it a little more subtle. Yeah, it's for drama. I like a lot of things that are sometimes implied. I don't really get into the idea of drawing gratuitous violence. Sometimes if somebody is doing something particularly dastardly to someone like cutting them or something, I'll show it in a shadow on the wall. I'm not so much into selling the visceral you know—I'm stabbing you. I'd rather see violence implied rather than hitting somebody over the head with it time after time.

"As far as emotion goes, you can already see here that Peter's feeling a little sad or introspective, by the time you get here it's not necessary to do it every single panel. This let's the reader interpret it in their own way. You know he's putting these books back and it's like a simple beat right before he shows an emotion with his body language (Figure 3.8). It allows me to fill in the scene anyway I want to. He could be kind of stoic right here and then here he breaks down and starts to cry. Or his face can be starting to crack right here and then he starts to cry. It gives the reader some interaction. Also it was supposed to be dark. So I started just to indiscriminately throw in some shadows."

In panel six, the panel is borderless and stands out from the rest of the frames on the page. Wieringo speaks of pacing: "Again, I think for the effect of the beat. The beat between him looking at the book. It keeps the reader there on that panel for a beat longer before going on."

After the pencils are sent off, the inker, colorist and letterer bring the project to a close. When Wieringo receives a final copy of the book, not everything is always how he imagined.

"In [*The Sensational Spider-Man* #21], there were some thought balloons. I believe [the writer] was making some mental comments about Ben and how he missed him here (Figure 3.9). And then I think these were actually some silent panels and the thing that broke the flow for me, that I didn't like, was in this panel with an open silhouette of Peter. It's pretty clear he's distraught. He wrote in "God, I miss him." The biggest pet peeve I have about comic books is when the panel or the dialog that's in the panel is just echoing what's going on in there. It's just saying what is happening with the visual and that's not necessary. It's too much like the reader being spoon fed. Dialog should not echo what's going on in the panel."

"When I saw this page it was the finished product. I don't get to have final dialog approval over what gets done. And when I saw it I said 'Huh, well, you know...' That kind of cheapened the impact of the end of the page."



Figure 3.8: In this panel the border was left off to slow down the pacing. This gives the reader pause to connect with Peter's emotions. By obscuring the face, the reader participates in determining Peter's struggle with his identity.



Figure 3.9: (Bottom) Example of text restating the emotion in the panel and the original (Top) without text. Peter's pain still comes across in both treatments.

had to top the previous issue. I've never found that ideal situation where it's just fun from beginning to end. There were some intense parts working on this book that were a little frustrating but for the most part it was just a lot of fun.

"Having total creative control makes you appreciate what corporations do to put a comic book together. I wish we had an editor who handled all the business aspects of the book. It was difficult coordinating with the other parts of the creative team—like trying to get the inker to get his part of the job done within a certain period of time—because you had to get it to the colorist who then needed to get it to the film output people. Just trying to push it all through the pipeline was draining and took away from the creative side of things."

Even though the experience was difficult, Wieringo maintains that the entire experience of creating *Tellos* was rewarding and important for his growth as a storyteller. Moreover, Wieringo was able to alter his artwork toward a style that was animated and freer. Not only was this important to the artist, but it was important to his readers.

"This is the one project that I would like to be remembered for more than anything else I've done... at least up to this point. *Tellos* is more indicative of what I'd like to do as far as opening up my work and being more cartoony.

"I know we got a lot of mail from people who were thanking us for putting out a book like that that they could read to their kids or that they could give to their kids. They just felt like it was something that adults could appreciate but kids could really enjoy too because it had the fantasy aspects. I just wanted to make *Tellos* something that the whole family could enjoy. I was surprised at how many fans we had that were children. I didn't think that many children were reading comics—what was really gratifying was that we had a lot of kids bringing us comics at shows to sign.

That was really nice. I guess that's why anthropomorphic characters appeal to me because animal characters appeal to kids. It brings out the child in me and I guess that's why I like to draw them.

"It was a wonderful experience and if I could still be doing it, if *Tellos* could pay my mortgage, I'd still be doing it. I haven't really enjoyed anything that I've worked on since. After having control over every aspect of a project, just going back to being hired pencil just doesn't have a lot of appeal."



Figure 3.11: After the quick staccato of the chase scene in the water sluices, Wieringo uses panel shape and length to slow the pace down. "The pace speeds up a little bit as Rikk falls through the hole. But then I slow things down as we pull back, pull back and pull back as he realizes that it's a floating city. This whole middle section is what I'm proudest of in this issue and I even got away from the grid."

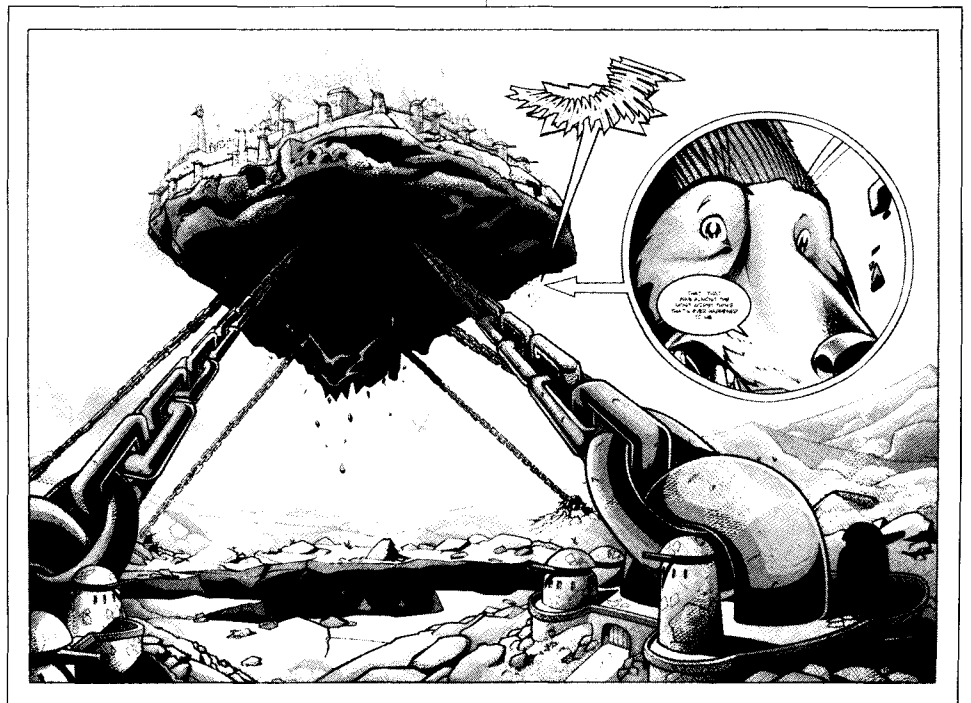


Figure 3.12: The panel grid in action.

In this example, *Tellos #1*, page 18, Mike Wieringo uses the grid to keep the story's flow energetic. In panel 1, the chase is established. When Serra lands in panel 2, the pacing slows down because it is a wider panel than 1.

Moving to the 2nd tier of information, Wieringo chose to stretch the panel over the width of the page to show that the chase has moved onto the rooftops. Because the panel is much shorter than the others, the action happens quickly.

Finally, in the 3rd tier, the panel borders are stripped and the figure breaks out of the panel into the preceding panel. Even within rules defined by layout, you can break the occasional rule to emphasize a moment. If every panel on the page broke the grid, then the last panel couldn't stand out. This is the first time the reader gets to see Serra in action, so Wieringo has made it memorable.

All characters © Todd Dezago and Mike Wieringo



PANEL GRIDS

When a narrative becomes complex, good panel arrangement can create order. Good panel design is often an overlooked part of storytelling with many sequential artists. Abstract panel shapes, too many panels on an angle, and haphazard placement of panels can detract from the pacing and eye movement of the story. It can create confusion which can distract a reader.

Panel arrangements should never be arbitrary. Comics storytelling is designed around a finite number of pages. Within each page, many actions and plot points need organization. For Mike Wieringo (Figure 3.12), working within a grid layout is vital. Good panel grids allow the reader to easily follow the action. The story dictates the panel arrangement for an artist, and the artist strives to group many thoughts, actions, and scenes on a single page.

A common mistake is to place too many panels on a page. In doing so, visual clutter occurs with too many graphic devices or panels vying for the reader's attention. Five to seven panels per page is considered the *average* needed to clearly convey a section of storytelling. If more panels are used, more demand is placed on the artist's time and faculties to ensure that the page still communicates effectively.

Figure 3.13:
The grid used to
promote pacing.



The grid format allows the artist to assign value to panel information. In a basic 6-panel layout, for instance, there is a clear horizontal line that separates two sets of panels (Figure 3.13). All panels start off with equal importance (far left), but by simply moving the vertical gutters left or right, panel emphasis is spotlighted. Modulation of panel size effects how the story reader interacts with the story. The eye moves quickly over smaller panels and pauses when presented with a larger panel. If the action is of minor storytelling importance, make sure the panel reflects this. Only when a major plot point needs to be emphasized do you utilize the large panel.

Figure 3.14:
Tiers used to
group panels of
action, scene or
information
together.



The artist is given even more options with which to work when tiers of information are defined (Figure 3.14). Horizontal gutters serve to separate scenes, actions or thoughts. For this example, the three levels of information will be kept equal in height. To move from one scene to another, group the panels in as many tiers as possible. A scene can take place in two tiers, but as soon as there is a change of scene, the artist simply can start in the third tier.

When both the horizontal and vertical gutters move, this is when the magic happens. Panels now modulate in service to the story. So now groups of actions or certain scenes can be emphasized over others (Figure 3.15). Vertical gutters help to emphasize the actions while the horizontal tiers can group or separate these actions.

The grid format is successful because it is simple to follow. There is no confusion about moving from left to right, then top to bottom. Experimental layouts can may lend excitement to storytelling, but it takes a great deal more work to achieve clarity. A structured grid, whether six panels or some other number, promotes clear storytelling because the reader automatically knows which panel to read next. This allows the information to be told on its own merits.

Figure 3.15: The grid over a story. Horizontal gutters help to group moments together in tiers. The vertical gutters help create emphasis in the panels working in the grid system. With a clear layout, the action has the opportunity to breathe.



Page 1: The largest action happens in panel 1, so it is the largest. In the second tier, incidental action takes place. In the third tier, our new combatants observe the situation which is not as important as panel 1.

Page 2: The 1st tier establishes where all of the characters are. In the second tier, the missing actor shows up in a very small panel to promote speed. The last tier is dominated by red as the pacing hits a crescendo.



(see page 3 for color plate of this image)



Page 3: The pacing now becomes active. In the first tier, the action is broken down. In the second tier the spell is cast. In the third tier (most important) the spell didn't work and the heroes are still standing.

All characters © Todd Dezago and Mike Wieringo