



## Understanding PowerPoint: Q&A with Scott McCloud

By Cliff Atkinson

*Few people can paint as clear a picture of visual communications as **Scott McCloud**, whose classic book **Understanding Comics** maps out a systematic understanding of media theory in a comic-book form. His thinking has influenced many fields beyond his own profession of comics -- the book and its sequel **Reinventing Comics** are included on the must-read lists of people who teach information and web design, media studies, writing, sociology and philosophy. What vision does Scott see as the function and future of PowerPoint as a form of media?*

**Cliff Atkinson:** *Scott, what has been your personal experience of PowerPoint?*

**Scott McCloud:** The first time I spoke at Microsoft in 1999, they gave me a copy of PowerPoint as a thank-you gift. I had avoided it like the plague, because I had seen all those dreadful examples of sleep-inducing bulleted lists and thrice-redundant presentations. I was going to give a talk at AOL that fall, and I took PowerPoint out of the box on the Tuesday and used it for the presentation on Friday. It doesn't have a "learning curve" -- it has a "learning wheelchair ramp" because it's so easy to use. It was very natural for talks.

**CA:** *As you started using it for your talks, what did you find useful about it?*

**SM:** I was coming from that culture of the early 90s of the slide carousel, which was my first metaphor. PowerPoint makes short work of a slide carousel -- you'd never want to go back to using those carousels again. I began to see its unique possibilities. I love the speed of it. I rarely see a slide that stays on the screen for less than a second, yet I often do that. I've tried to summarize my life in 80 frames in about a minute and a half, but because I'm using just images, I have very few words on the screen. I'm creating visual sentences -- those individual slides are words and noun phrases. I'm not attaching a paragraph to each one -- it's entirely unnecessary, because I'm not waiting for somebody to copy it down. Obviously it would depend on the occasion -- I was a fast and loose talker when I first began doing that.

**CA:** *The "slide carousel" metaphor is a very important one, because that's how many people still see PowerPoint. But at any point in a presentation you can show a full-screen video or display path-based animations, or print handouts, and suddenly they're not "slides" anymore.*

**SM:** Clearly we have to transcend that metaphor. If we think of PowerPoint as 35mm slides, we think that it took a while to put these slides together, and we don't want to mess it all up. But I've added 10 slides in 10 minutes, or I took a picture in the parking lot and put it in on the way to the talk. The slide precedent also affects our sense of pacing. There's the sense of variable pacing that we've had to discover -- these things don't have to march in one at a time like Olympic contestants and be given their full due. Some of them may go by very quickly. And it can be the reverse: sometimes it becomes the stage and the duration can fade into the background. I do something where I divide the screen into quadrants, and I'm talking about four different tribes of comics culture. If the screen is large and low to the stage, I will often inhabit a pair of those cultures, walking back and forth between them. Where one image may be very fleeting, another image may last 30 minutes while I'm explaining this idea. And suddenly the figure-ground relationship has changed, and instead of commenting on it, I'm the figure and the slide is the background.

**CA:** *What sort of pacing works for you?*

**SM:** I really like to keep up with the speed of thought. I would much rather my audience be a half-second behind than five minutes ahead. PowerPoint gives me that ability if I want to really load that

visual carousel and zap through them as fast as I can.

**CA:** *What kind of medium is PowerPoint? Where does it fit in the range of other media including film, TV, comics, websites, and print?*

**SM:** That's a good question. Being a formalist I like to be a compartmentalist, and it bothers me that anything might just be hanging out there that hasn't been fully tagged, boxed, and put into its little slot. I don't really know. It's a form of visual communication certainly. It's hard to think of it as its own discreet "capital A" art form, like motion picture, prose, theater. Hmm...(Silence). Interesting. *I don't know.* It's theater of a sort, isn't it? I suppose it belongs to the family of theater. At its best it has those elements of spectacle, of real-time interaction. If you were to download a PowerPoint presentation, or see it in a web show version without the commentary, it wouldn't really be PowerPoint. PowerPoint is one of many things I can't reduce down to a handy-dandy box, which keeps me up at night.

**CA:** *Are there similarities between PowerPoint and comics?*

**SM:** Comics and PowerPoint do have something in common – the fragmented *call-and-response* rhythm that distinguishes comics from prose or motion pictures where it's more of a continuous experience. It happens in stages – like baseball or football. We have a sense there's a change in space from one image to the next. It's terraced – there's not a continuous flow. But each time we change image, we change mode. So we're on a horizontal plane, then we're on the next horizontal plane, which is very different from the ephemeral quality of the moving image.

**CA:** *What state does film bring about?*

**SM:** You're a buoy floating in the *now*, and you're not so much looking around you as you are being carried along in the current of that form. In PowerPoint and comics, we drop you down into that moment, and then ask you to look around and reflect on the moment.

**CA:** *It sounds almost like a state of contemplation.*

**SM:** I think to some extent it is. Not that film or other media are not capable of provoking contemplation. But there is that sense of *receive* and *consider*. That's sort of the rhythm involved – receive and consider, and then receive anew; rather than to be continually receiving. With something like film you have more of a cognitive metabolism going, where nutrients are coming in constantly and being processed by the mind. And as you're processing the last thing you just saw, you're receiving the next thing. But it's not quite that way with a parade of static images. When you're looking at Slide Sorter view, you're looking at something very much like comics. There are superficial linkages there, but those superficial links are probably related to more substantial links as well.

**CA:** *That's interesting that you bring up Slide Sorter view. PowerPoint's default view is on individual slides, so it's not so common for people to spend much time in Slide Sorter.*

**SM:** It's certainly my favorite mode. It's my language. It gives me a sense of the whole. I love to have a sense of the whole – I love to rise above something and look down on it; it's the desire to represent as much information as possible. With Slide Sorter, PowerPoint has given us something we didn't have before. I suppose that with 35mm slides we could sort them on a light table, but I always had to hold them up to the light.

**CA:** *In Understanding Comics, you refer to a creative process where the visual surfaces are the last stage of a 6-part process. Yet when we start in PowerPoint by designing the visual surfaces of slides, we've missed out on the other 5 parts you describe – idea, form, idiom, structure, and craft.*

**SM:** We haven't found PowerPoint's center of gravity. We're still drawing from where we've come from.

**CA:** *What is your impression of the PowerPoint presentations you've seen?*

**SM:** The aspects of PowerPoint that tend to bore are rampant, like redundancy and pure text. But it's forgivable when most people don't have access to a great visual library of the work of still photographers and other artists – we can hardly blame them. And there's the re-purposing of an

outline. As a formalist, I have a general philosophical dislike of re-purposing. I like to see works which are created with the form in mind. Basically what you're seeing in PowerPoint is re-purposing – you're seeing their notes. You're seeing what they would've had on those over-sized note cards on the podium in 1976, except now it's sitting up there in front of you onscreen.

**CA:** *It's almost like cutting passages from a Word document and pasting them onscreen.*

**SM:** I'm worried about my predisposition to knock text, since I'm addicted to images. I know that not everybody is.

**CA:** *Rich Gold of Xerox PARC distinguished between group reading and group writing, and said that the things that a group reads together on a wall, will necessarily look different from the things an individual reads alone. Since PowerPoint is aided by a person, there's not the need to use as much text.*

**SM:** I agree, as someone who will use five written words onscreen during in a one-hour presentation, and all the rest is images. In comics we have an unofficial motto or creed, to try to make the words and pictures as interdependent as possible:

*If you say it with words, don't bother to say it with pictures; and if you can say it with pictures, don't bother to say it with words.*

Redundancy is for computer user interfaces, not for presentations. I'm a great believer in redundancy when it comes to interfaces. I'm very grateful that I have three different ways of doing everything on my Mac.

**CA:** *How does that creed translate into presentations ?*

**SM:** Assuming my audience can both see and hear, I don't really have to appeal to both senses – I might as well get the message across using one or the other, and let the presentation do double duty; show them one thing while telling them another. I think I've only begun to scratch the surfaces of the possibilities for irony, which mean that my audience will be just a half-second behind, always just picking up the step a little, and staying awake. I'm giving many of these talks at 4 in the afternoon, and if I haven't brought doughnuts, so I better be compensating for the low blood sugar.

**CA:** *Are comics and presentations similar?*

**SM:** I may be more keenly aware of the differences between comics and presentations as opposed to the similarities, primary among them being the element of time. I'm representing time spatially in comics, whereas my presentations exist very much *in* time. You're showing one picture after another occupying the same space at different times. That's the opposite of comics.

**CA:** *Do you take techniques from comics and apply them to your presentations?*

**SM:** Yes, but it's very unconscious. Until you pose the question, I'm very blissfully unaware to what degree I'm applying the lessons of comics. I'm sure if I were to catalog the vocabulary of comics, I would realize that there were many elements I have yet to use. For example, the synaesthetics that we use in comics, like using line color or quality to evoke emotion or to evoke other senses, are something I haven't really touched – I'm using a fairly literal style. An example of that would be if I were presenting a photograph of a of a philosopher I disagreed with, and the picture would be aggressively colored. I've done nothing like that – it's something I haven't thought of before.

**CA:** *What about the role of images?*

**SM:** The power of a simple image is something that's not intrinsic to comics, but it's tightly related to the art of making comics. But the idea of boiling something down to a very simple and direct condensed image, that's something I use every day in both media. PowerPoint and comics are not obligated to take advantage of that *amplification through simplification* that we have in our arsenal of visual vocabulary. But it would serve us well to do so.

**CA:** *What can people do if they're faced with a large amount of information they want to simplify?*

**SM:** The purpose of my own presentations is so vastly different from many others – I want to showcase ideas that are by their nature visual, which makes it a lot easier. God knows how I would create a PowerPoint presentation if I were a poet, other than just drawing my poems on the screen. I think it's about as far as what I do from poetry as from a quarterly report, or talking about design options for a new hard drive. It really depends. My only advice, to the extent that I have license to give advice to anybody, is the same that applies to any endeavor in communication. That is to trust in those aspects of what you have to say that excite you. Trust that they will excite other people. And try to distill for yourself what it is that seems urgent and potent in your topic. Have faith in your own passion for the subject. And if you have none, then consider a change of career. If you can isolate the aspects of your subject which genuinely excite you, then that can be the fulcrum for any number of effective points.

**CA:** *Would you think most people have located that passion?*

**SM:** I think that most people measure the task based on a sense of obligation, not desire. There are very few professions on the planet that are organized around desire. Most are organized around obligation. I consider myself lucky that I can get up every morning and have my cereal and my Dr. Pepper, and actually move on to ask myself "What do I want to do today?"

**CA:** *Locating that passion can be tough.*

**SM:** Yes, and frequently the task falls on people to communicate the ideas of others, which makes it doubly hard. They don't even have the authority to draw our focus to one thing or another. That focus has been long-since determined by others.

**CA:** *It sounds like PowerPoint brings to the fore some fundamental communication issues.*

**SM:** PowerPoint is merciless. It exposes our levels of apathy. If your message entirely grows out of something about which you have no interest, it's going to show. PowerPoint will not forgive – it will expose you. It will show the true you. If your day is a tedious drone of facts and figures, I'm afraid that is what is going to hit the screen.

**CA:** *And pre-ordained corporate templates can ensure that people are constrained within a communication box.*

**SM:** The only loophole there is that there is no template for images by themselves. While there may be templates for bulleted lists, there are seldom prohibitions against text-less images. And if there are things you can legitimately communicate thorough images, you might be able to wake up the troops, at least momentarily.

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