"Anti-cedent Genre": The Television Edition

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Laura Skokan has a complicated story to tell. Telling it begins with finding the right medium for it and ends with finding a new approach to a second draft of a graphic novel. In between, Skokan gets some perplexing criticism and attempts to use genre research—only to find the research method she uses is shortsighted. She ultimately has to re-examine her antecedent genre (television), consider production, and take apart the very thing she thought she knew so well.

The more I explain about the graphic novel I'm writing, the more insane I sound. I keep waiting for the moment when people mentally check out of the conversation and start seriously considering hospitalization. For this reason, I won't be describing the project very fully here. What I will say is that it intentionally plays with genres. Not only am I crossing genres (horror and romantic comedy) and combining mediums (a graphic novel and a website), but I am also purposefully thwarting some genre conventions.

At best, I hope it will turn out to be something like Frankenstein's monster. (That guy got around, right? Even with all those different body parts, he learned to speak, smelled a flower, had the motor skills to run with a bunch of people holding torches. That's a pretty good goal.) At worst, it might be a piece of poop with a bunch of jelly beans sprinkled on it, wearing a ball gown . . . it remains to be seen.

Back when I finished the first draft of my graphic novel, I sent it off to two trusted friends and anxiously awaited their feedback.

What I Suspected; or, My First Round of Research

I suspected I'd get a lot of criticism on all the genres I was using, but I was prepared for this. At first, I didn't know what medium would be best to tell my story in—I kind of defaulted to writing it as a screenplay. So I did a lot of genre research and found that screenplays were actually more constricting than what I needed. This happens because movies cost so much to make (a $2 million film budget is considered laughably small) that they have to do extremely well commercially. The result of this **production** element (the tools needed to create a genre) is that movies are formulaic: they are very similarly structured regardless of their genre.[1] When I was looking for other mediums, I found that graphic novels do not cost as much to make or advertise, so even the independent ones can still bring in a profit. As such, there is no profit-driven industry standard for them yet.

The result of this is something like the graphic novel *Scott Pilgrim*. Scott deals with some pretty complicated psychological issues, like realizing he wasn't the wronged party in his past relationships but was actually the wrongdoer and navigating his current girlfriend's trauma from a mentally abusive ex. Normally in a psychological piece, the humor (if there is any) is dark or sarcastic. But in *Pilgrim*, a lot of the humor comes from Scott's airheadedness; a source of humor usually found in sillier genres (think Peter Griffin from *Family Guy*). And the genre mixing doesn't end there. *Pilgrim* uses video game grammar while borrowing from Manga. The pacing is slow, even though it's modeled after Kung Fu action films; it devotes several scenes to characters just hanging out and decidedly not to advancing the plot. It's really kind of all over the place, but it still works.

As for my own genre-crossing, I borrowed a lot from TV. There is a danger, I think, in combining techniques from different genres and, in this case, different mediums (TV and graphic novels). Nevertheless, graphic novels tend to borrow a lot of techniques from film and television already, and as long as one consciously translates between the mediums, there is a lot of rich material that can be mined from this kind of crossover. In my case, television shows tell stories similarly to how I wanted to approach my piece.

The "Golden Age of Television" we're in right now has come about from the breaking of conventions. Episodic shows (shows that don't advance the plot from week to week, wrapping things up by the end of the episode) have started to become unfashionable, whereas serialized shows are rising in popularity.[2]

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[1] If you're at all interested in this (and I personally find it fascinating), look up a film Beat Sheet, which is a basic breakdown for each major change over a film's three acts. Some Beat Sheets even state on what page each change needs to happen: the "Inciting Incident," for example, should occur around page ten. It's kind of like the five-paragraph essay can be on any topic, but its structure is predetermined in that three paragraphs are supposed to be used to back up the main point.

Because serialized shows develop the plot over a season, they don't have a standard structure to fall back on for each episode. So you can get characters that have the freedom to evolve because the structure isn't dependent on them always returning to their comfort zone. This was taken to an extreme in *Breaking Bad*, where according to creator Vince Gilligan, the main character, Walter White, "transforms himself from Mr. Chips[3] to Scarface" (MacInnes). Walter's journey from teacher to drug kingpin happened not over a season, but over the entire series, a timeframe that hadn't been executed on television before. What's more, the pathetic teacher figure isn't conventionally the lead in a crime genre; it's such an absurd idea that it would be more likely in a parody of the crime genre. And *Breaking Bad*, while occasionally funny, is anything but a parody. The show thwarted conventions just by using a character that doesn't belong in this genre.

With all this writing research under my belt, I felt pretty secure in how I was working with genre. Unconventional, sure, but not unprecedented. And, most importantly, not genre-inappropriate. But all that work didn't get me very far. When I got the feedback, I found that both of my friends were confused. Basically, my graphic novel *was* an elegantly dressed jelly bean turd.

What Their Feedback Actually Was; or, Quick and Dirty Genre Research

I was so ready to talk about genre-mixing, but that wasn't my friends' problem. Instead, they both said they felt overwhelmed by the number of characters. This kind of stopped me in my tracks.

Finally, though, I put on my big kid pants and my writing researcher hat and got down to investigating. In my graphic novel, there were twenty-five characters. By the end of *Scott Pilgrim, Vol. 1*, there are twenty-six characters. I looked at more mainstream graphic novels, and in most of the examples I found, there were between fifteen to thirty characters. As such, I must be correct. Graphic novels have a lot of characters, so I am upholding a convention of the genre!

Not So Fast, Tiger

You know how in statistics, you can skew data to make it seem like whatever outcome you want? Like, how do *all* toothpaste brands have 4 out of 5 dentists recommending them? That can't be true for all of them, and yet, each has . . . not exactly the facts, but a mathematical manipulation of the facts that implies

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[2]A result of production elements like DVDs and streaming—viewers can watch episodes back-to-back and so can follow more complicated stories.

[3]Yeah. I don't know who Mr. Chips is either. From what I just found on Wikipedia, he's a pathetic schoolteacher, obsessed with rules and Latin, which are no longer valued by the students or the administration. He's becoming obsolete.

such a statement. What if the question they're asking dentists is, "Would you recommend our brand over using no toothpaste?" Then the answer would have to be, "Unless yours is made of candy, consider it recommended."

This is to say, I asked the wrong question. My data on the number of characters was factual, but my investigation was shortsighted. What I was missing when my friends said they felt there were too many characters wasn't the number of characters exactly. It was that it *felt* like there were too many. A rather subtle distinction.

I returned to *Scott Pilgrim*, since it had more characters than mine. As I started to look through the whole series, I realized that almost every scene has Scott in it, and the things that drive the plot are either his actions or his response to others' actions. In the first volume, he is in every scene.

What this does is set up a situation where everything is oriented around Scott. When there is a note that says his girlfriend's age is "unknown," we don't take that to mean no one (including her) knows, but rather, that it is unknown *to Scott* (O'Malley, Vol. 4, i). Because this dynamic is set up in the first volume, when we get to scenes later on without Scott, we know A) who these people are, B) how Scott knows them, and C) how their actions affect Scott.

I had a very different structure for my graphic novel. I alternated the scenes of my main character, Haley, with scenes of other characters (Figure 1). Because I had a bunch of people to introduce, I used the non-Haley scenes to bring the new characters in. This alternating structure felt very familiar to me. I was especially resistant to having Haley in every scene, like *Scott Pilgrim* does, even though that is obviously one of my influences. My style of storytelling was a given from the outset—I didn't even consider doing otherwise.

SCENE	CHARACTERS
1	Haley
2	The Priests
3	Haley
4	L. Boes and The Halt
5	Haley
6	Willie
7	Haley, L. Boes, and The Halt
8	Brenda

Figure 1: Character breakdown for the first eight scenes of the author's graphic novel.

Since I didn't learn this from *Scott Pilgrim*, I wanted to figure out if I was being influenced by an **antecedent genre**. Antecedent genres are the things we are so used to that we default to them even in new situations (writing or otherwise). In many ways, antecedent genre puts the "historical" in **cultural-historical activity theory** (CHAT)[4]. It's how the past influences our understanding of the new—what's good vs. what's bad, what's necessary vs. what's incomprehensible. These aren't hard-and-fast rules, but markers of evolution as a genre is developing. Think about all the weird things your parents did when they first started to text or use Facebook, like ending a comment on your wall with "Love, Mom." Or you know that really nagging feeling when you're finishing a paper and you want to do your "wrap up" move, like restating everything that you've said before or describing how much you learned? How it just doesn't feel finished until you do that thing, even if somewhere in your head you know that this kind of paper shouldn't end like that? That's an antecedent genre at work. I've learned enough from genre studies to know that when I feel that way, I need to take note. It might be a huge breakthrough.

So I took note of this. I wanted to figure out where my default story structure came from. And if it worked in a different medium, maybe there was a way to make it work in this one. After all, my piece *does* cross genres. Maybe this was another convention I could play around with.

Back to the Books . . . and By "Books," I Mean Television

There's an episode of *The Simpsons* where Lisa, Bart, and Maggie hug the television. Lovingly. Instead of their parents. I, too, suckled at the teat of TV (much easier to do when the sets had knobs). It was my babysitter, my companion, my dearest confidant. As I grew older, it became my textbook. I want to write TV shows. So I study. I watch episodes repeatedly. I listen to audio commentaries and podcasts to hear writers explain their process. At this point I have a deep familiarity with television's conventions, both as a viewer and as something almost like an apprentice. This would be the most likely source for any antecedent genre that crops up.

Here's what I know about TV's story structure. (There are several exceptions to how I'm presenting this, but let me use a fairly straightforward, episodic example.) Most shows are divided up into at least an A and a B story. The A story usually follows the main character, the one who is really the heart of the show. On *30 Rock*, Liz Lemon is the main character, and Jack Donaghy

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[4]"Activity Theory is an exploration of how people, objects, and ideas work together to carry out objectives . . . [T]he 'Cultural' and 'Historical' part talks about how the objects, ideas, and genres we use reflect certain cultural values at a certain point in history" (Sheets 135).

is not exactly a secondary character, but his plot tends to support Liz's. Where Liz is the heart of the show, Jack is the brain (and, he'd be sure to point out, the hair).

The way the structure works is this. The episodes typically begin with Liz, the head writer of *TGS* (a *Saturday Night Live*-like show), coming to Jack (the Vice President of the network and her mentor) with her problems. Jack offers advice, usually something ruthless and business-minded, but because Jack is also pretty important to the show, his own storyline is introduced here—it will be the B story. Liz points out an ethical or emotional problem with what Jack is planning to do. Both ignore what the other says and they separate, going on different adventures. About two-thirds of the way through the episode, they reverse positions, realizing the wisdom in the other's advice—Liz becomes more business-savvy; Jack more compassionate—but they do this separately. Their stories only intersect again at the end. Because they go on separate adventures (and so need to have two distinctly lettered storylines), one scene will be with Liz and then the next will be with Jack. The other characters (who *are* secondary) get sprinkled in there with C and D storylines[5], but most of the back and forth is on Liz and Jack (Figure 2).
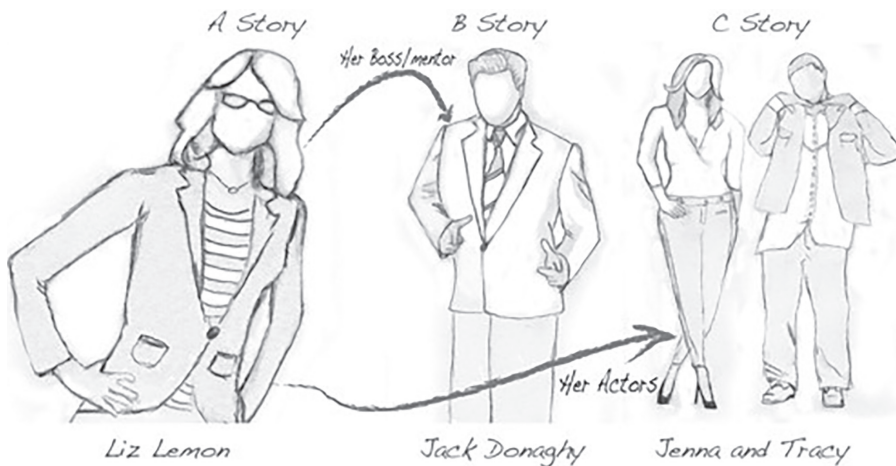

Figure 2: Author illustration of *30 Rock* characters and their place in the lettered storytelling as it relates to Liz Lemon.

So I must have picked up on this technique of separated storylines, and the reason it felt weird to me to stay with Haley for every scene is because I'm used to TV's story structure. That doesn't mean it's out of place in graphic

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[5]*Arrested Development* goes all the way to a G story. Famously, the show ties all the stories up when the characters come together in the final scene—a reflection on its creator's antecedent genre. He used to write for *The Golden Girls*, and the "Cheesecake Scene" toward the end of the episode was a moment where all the girls' stories came together.

novels—they often use A and B plots. So that means, again, that I am genre-appropriate, and my friends' confusion must be their own.

. . . Here's the thing, though. One of these friends is even more obsessed with TV than I am. If it felt strange to him, then what gives?

What Gave

Mad Men is an ensemble show with a clear main character, Don Draper. It's pretty similar to my graphic novel, where Haley is the protagonist but the other characters have their own plotlines. What I needed to know was how *Mad Men* balanced scenes between Don and the other characters. Because if my structure was pretty much like this ensemble show, then maybe this particular aspect of my antecedent genre just doesn't work in a graphic novel.

So I dove into the first episode of *Mad Men*. Much to my surprise, it unfolded very differently than how I remembered (Figure 3). The first three scenes did not, in fact, alternate between characters. Kind of like *Scott Pilgrim*, Don is in all three and he is driving the action. We only leave Don in the fourth scene, where we find a group of characters on an elevator, none of whom we know. We've been cued that Don works at an ad agency and this elevator seems to be in an agency. As the audience, we're expected to make the connection that this must be where Don works. So while we don't know these characters, we do know they're connected to Don.

SCENE	CHARACTERS	LOCATIONS
1	Don	Bar
2	Don and Midge	Midge's Apartment
3	Don and Midge	Midge's Bed, the next morning
4	Peggy, Paul, Ken, and Harry	Elevator, Ad Agency
5	Pete, Paul, Ken, and Harry	Pete's Office, Ad Agency
6	Peggy and Joan	Around the Ad Agency
7	Don, Peggy, and Joan	Don's Secretary's Desk, Ad Agency
8	Don and Roger	Don's Office, Ad Agency

Figure 3: Character breakdown of the first eight scenes of the *Mad Men* pilot.

The group on the elevator branches off into two camps—the men and the women. In the men's scenes, we learn more about their characters and their social hierarchy. With the women, we learn how the agency works (and loads of terrifying gender politicky things). Both of these are relevant to Don, as they're filling out his world, even in his absence.

Finally, Don enters the office. We discover from the women that Don (unlike the men from the elevator) is to be treated with respect. So we piece together that Don must be a pretty big deal there and the people we've just met are his subordinates—whatever the hierarchy is between the men, Don is at the top.

What I started to see from this analysis is that the information we're getting, even when Don isn't in the scene, can be applied to Don. So even if we don't know who these people are immediately, we collect clues as to how they're connected to the main character.

This is remarkably different from the way I set up my graphic novel. The intermittent characters did not have any clear connection to Haley for several scenes. Their locations didn't even help (like the agency does in *Mad Men*), as they were in their own homes or at work—places Haley doesn't have anything to do with. The connection is only revealed once we've gotten involved in their storyline, and so, farther away from Haley's.

They mention Haley...ominously...

SCENE	CHARACTERS	LOCATIONS
1	Haley	Stand-up Club
2	The Priests	A Fast Food Joint
3	Haley	Haley's Apartment
4	L. Boes and The Halt	L. Boes and The Halt's Apartment
5	Haley	Haley's Apartment
6	Willie	Demolition Site
7	Haley, L. Boes, and The Halt	Golf Course
8	Brenda	Hospital

Oh, they all work together

Figure 4: First eight scenes of the author's graphic novel, with locations and connections to Haley.

People want to make connections. That's what our brains are designed to do. It's how our species first made tools, and it's how we remember someone's name better once we associate it with something special about them. When we see a story, we're trained to want to know who to follow and then we try to see how everyone else fits into that character's story. So when I structured my story around Haley only to introduce gobs of new people with no apparent connection to her, it created tension and confusion. That can be an effective tool (it's used in movies where we follow a cop and a killer but don't realize that one's the killer until halfway through), but that wasn't what I was going for. What I did was create a situation where the audience had to reset every

time a new character came in, only to get pulled back in, inexplicably, to Haley's world. There was no push forward. The reason my friends felt like there were too many characters was because it was hard to keep track of so many people who didn't have an obvious connection to Haley. It felt aimless because we, as readers/viewers, expect to keep learning more about our main character, even if it's indirect. That's a byproduct of *our* antecedent genres.

. . . So if I expect that as a viewer/reader, where did I come up with my graphic novel's structure?

Not Exactly Antecedent Genre

The structure I came up with felt so natural to me. In fact, doing otherwise felt like a mistake. However, from the writing research I've done on the matter, I've come to realize my structure is an anomaly. It's not the way most narratives are set up.

I think what happened is this: I saw the switching between characters in television (going from the A to the other lettered stories) and took that to be a healthy structure. What I missed, though, was *how* that got set up. How much context the audience needs to be given in order to feel like they can follow along, so they aren't just restarting every time a new character is introduced. I'd internalized the wrong message. Or, at least, internalized a partial message.

I am coining a term here to address this phenomenon: *anti-cedent genre*. It happens when we know a genre really well, have studied it enough to distinguish it from other closely-related genres, but have missed some fundamentals of how it works, such that, when we try to create our own version of the genre, aspects of it are way off. Our knowledge works against us because it is incomplete.

But What Does It *Do*

Identifying an anti-cedent genre is similar to other acts of writing research. The way I discovered mine was to research how an ensemble story was structured. However, because I was so familiar with the genre, I almost didn't see the differences. That's the trick about an anti-cedent genre—I needed to deconstruct what I thought I knew.

I sometimes find CHAT frustrating. It's a list of things, sure; I generally get what each means, like Production = tools. But how does that little equation

impact writing? It's not until I can actually *do* something with the components of CHAT that they become remotely useful. So if I'm in a Word document, I can create any genre I want, right? Well . . . no. It actually limits what I can do and even how I think about my creation. If I'm taking notes in a math class, I can't do equations very well in Word. Or if I want to include a freehand drawing, like I did for this article, I have to involve all sorts of additional tools (paper, pencil, scanner, and Photoshop). Then it has to fit onto my Word document, which might make it bigger or smaller than I intended. That changes my creation.

Recognizing this does two things for me. First, it changes how I look at others' writing. If I'm watching a show from the '70s and the super hammy acting bugs me, I can realize that they've been influenced by the tools they're using. Cameras weren't as portable, so a lot of the shots had to be done from far away, which meant the writers had to have the characters explicitly state their emotions, rather than wordlessly use a close-up of a subtle facial reaction, as we're more used to now. The second thing this recognition does is to help me when I'm analyzing my own work. There are a lot of choices I consciously made when I did my drawing (Figure 2) because of the medium. For instance, I could have done it in color, but I know the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* prints in black and white. But maybe there were other, better choices I could have made, like putting the characters on the side of the text and having arrows connecting the relevant words. This could have made my point clear and would have looked cooler, but Word doesn't make violating its margins easy. The result is that I didn't think of it until just now. So the tools I used changed even how I subconsciously thought about my creation.

What a writing research approach has given me is a way to investigate those subconscious spaces, because even understanding is a tool. Despite my conscious, active study of TV, I was still left with partial knowledge. Without writing research, I might have just cut a bunch of characters because that's what the feedback indicated I should do. However, because I did genre research on graphic novels, I realized that the number wasn't really the problem. The next writing research tool was to study a genre that dealt with multiple characters. Rather than trying to take the genre of a television show and identify all of its conventions, I focused on a specific one: how it *introduced* characters in multiple storylines.

By looking to my antecedent genre, I could then compare it to my own work. What I found was a glaring difference between my storytelling (my impression of how to do narrative structure) and the way stories are actually told on television. Not only did I do genre research on how *Mad Men* introduced characters, what I'd effectively done was research my own writing as well.

That's what this tool can do.

As a final note, I've completed a second draft of my graphic novel since doing this research. There are thirty-seven characters now (twelve *more* than before). I gave this draft to the original two friends and also to a new group who'd never seen it before. The number of characters did not come up as an issue for anyone . . . there may have been other issues, but those will have to wait for the next episode.

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Acknowledgements

Friend?

Laura Skokan maintains that having a life is for chumps and would prefer to rot her brain out watching TV.