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Who, Where, and When: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Situational Changes in Comics

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Abstract

Understanding visual narratives requires readers to track dimensions of time, spatial location, and characters across a sequence. Previous work found cross-cultural differences for situational changes across adjacent panels, but few works have examined situational dimensions across extended sequences. We therefore investigated situational “runs” – uninterrupted sequences of the situational dimensions (time, space, characters) – in a corpus of 300+ annotated comics from the United States, Europe, and Asia. We compared runs’ proportion and average lengths and found that across books, semantic information changed frequently and run length correlated with proportion. Yet, cross-cultural patterns arose, with American and European comics using more continuous runs than Asian comics. American and European comics used more and longer temporal and character continuity, while Asian comics used more spatial continuity. These findings raise questions about comprehenders’ processing strategies for visual narratives across cultures and how general frameworks of visual narrative comprehension account for variations in situational (dis)continuity.