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” Scott Pilgrims” Fabricated Reality Explored Via Object Focalization

Abstract

In the world of Bryan Lee O'Malley's “Scott Pilgrim” videogame mechanics for everyday actions, people turning into coins, and evil exes are a part of the everyday norm. And while most people who would pick up the book and simply just read it without asking why this is, I will break down how this world can be read as a fabricated reality by narcissist, slacker, gamer protagonist Scott Pilgrim. Based upon Scott's personality of being stuck within his childish ways and showing zero commitment to mature as a person, as well as being the character readers follow throughout the story, his perception of reality is incredibly unbiased and applies to his immature and fragile personality. With the main plot and conflict involving Scott attempting to establish a relationship whilst also growing as a person, he perceives the hurdles he jumps through via his own fantastical reality by doing things such as fighting evil exes or gaining points for getting a job. Scott while on a journey of maturity is still childish and flawed, and to best get cope with the incoming changes he is challenging head on, he chooses to gamify everying coming his way to deal with it the best way he can. His Focalization not only aids him but also embodies a great flaw of his personality as it is also shown to have been a part of him pre becoming an adult and lessened any type of growth that he could have developed.

Introduction

Focalization, in the general terminology regarding Narratology, is the selective and restricted information that the audience is exposed to through the narrator. But focalization is much more than the information given to us by the narrator; when studied closely it can be analyzed as peer into the narrator's mental state and psyche, giving more insight into their character and how they view the world around them. Sometimes hinted at and sometimes never at all, the focalization of a narrator or central character can never truly be trusted in full by the words written. But what about a written form of media that provides form and visual context to the narrator's perception? How can focalization be applied in a graphic novel setting where evil exes, people disintegrating into pocket change, doors leading through dreams, and supernatural fights seem to be the norm? Written by author Bryan Lee O' Malley in 2004, the Canadian based and centered graphic novel series "Scott Pilgrim" is a story of many titular themes from letting go of the known past and embracing the unknown future, to personal growth and the reflection of one's past actions and self. But for a story with such deep themes the plot surrounding them is very eccentric to say the least, featuring everything just mentioned prior, in a unique fantastical video game aesthetic setting. And while various characters in the setting interact with one another and do not seem to pay any mind to these out of the ordinary happenings in their world; it could be deduced with how this narrative is established, that it is an extension of main protagonist Scott Pilgrims perception. Taking into consideration his personality, character traits, and revealed past actions over the course of the story: the world around him acts as a reflection of his immature and dethatched frame of mind, coping in response to real life personal external and internal conflicts.



All six volumes of Scott Pilgrim. Volume 1(8/18/04) -Volume 6(7/20/10)

Synopsis

Now in order to understand how the world of “Scott Pilgrim” reflects Scott's personality and mental state, we need to first need to know the essential main plot of the series. Taking place in Toronto Canada, our story follows charming freeloading slacker Scott Pilgrim, a 23-year-old unemployed bass player who seems to coast through life whilst avoiding any sense responsibility. Coming off a recent breakup Scott enters a causal one-sided relationship with 17-year-old highschooler Knives Chau, much to the obvious dismay of those around him who question if this problematic relationship is Scott even looking for genuine love at all given his past relationships. Now this barley established relationship quickly comes to an end though when Scott comes into contact and becomes infatuated with Ramona Flowers, an American delivery girl whom he sets his sight on dating. The main problem that lies though is that in order for him

to official date Ramona; Scott must defeat all seven of her evil Ex's. Now if you are not new to Scott Pilgrim then you know this whole song and dance, but for those new to the graphic novel the end of this plot synopsis takes an incredible turn from what seemed like a story about a young adult with terrible morals; but be aware there is a reason for this out of nowhere conflict within this plot. Harking back to the intro, "Scott Pilgrims" themes revolve around that of growing up and maturing as a person be it coming to grips with one's past mistakes and self or working to maintain new responsibilities; things that our protagonist Scott based off his description greatly struggles with. Scott, while portrayed as witty and an enduring charmer, is incredibly flawed if you could not tell by the synopsis. Throughout the story he is consistently called out and shown to be a liar, selfish manipulative, a deadbeat, a serial cheater and so on; but in Scott's mind he is none of these things, he perceives himself to be this protagonist where everything revolves around him and goes his way, and thus we the readers are set up to see the world as how he sees it. But how reliable is this perception of reality when it comes from the mind of an overall lay about narcissist?



An example from Volume 3, of Scott being called out for his persistent cheating; with him making up an excuse for each instance.

When analyzing this world that Scott has created, one must look at Scott himself first and foremost from a humane perspective. Based on plot synopsis and how he portrays himself, and others portray him, anything we see or hear from Scott is not to be trusted. Author Vera Nünning talks of the nature unreliable narrators and what exactly they want gain from lying to the audience, saying that “It is in the interest of human beings to manipulate others to make them behave in a way that ensures their own well-being (Nünning 1). Considering Scott overall is manipulative throughout the story, it can be taken that the focalization of this entire story is made to manipulate the audience into thinking that Scott lives this easy going but simultaneously wonderous life and that he is this all-around great protagonist. But in this story of a greatly flawed young adult that is out of touch with reality and struggles on the road of attempting to truly mature as a person, this allusion that Scott puts up of being the “good guy” protagonist in

his videogame setting is broken early on by those around him. So, who exactly is he manipulating and lying to with the rose-tinted lenses he wears, the simple answer is himself. Scott's character arc is leading up to him growing past his high school-college self and moving forward into adulthood and learning from past mistakes. But being the young and immature man, he is, he clearly struggles with this change from zero responsibility to all the responsibility, hence why his memories paint himself better than he is now, why mending past relationships or getting over an emotional hurdle prompts him to gain points or coins. Scott sees the world the way he does as a crutch of sorts, to process all these new changes coming into his life, as Andrew Barthel puts it, "It is a good way of representing how confused preadults haphazardly try and gain control of their new lives" (Barthel). To simulate and help him with gaining control of his life and he must lie to himself, to progress in any way possible without the harsh circumstances of reality overwhelming him. To further explore how Scott mentally copes with reality, I will explore his established universe plagued by video games like logic and format of plot within the story, as well as a critical moment within the series of his false fabrication of personal moments involving supporting characters in the past.

Videogame Logic and Plot Format

While "Scott Pilgrim" does not have a genuine set narrator, the story operates with Scott being the object of focalization; as stated by Charles Forceville, the object of focalization "can be accessible via sensory perception but can also constitute non-physical phenomena" (Forceville 184). In the case of the established focalization of "Scott Pilgrim" it boils down to, "what if the imaginary realities of the pop culture a generation grew up with were reflected in physical reality (Barthel); in this specific instance Scott, applying everything he goes through via the lens of videogame mechanics and progression. The central conflict of Scott having to fight his way

through Ramonas Ex's in a confined setting is set up in a liner video game style, with each volume acting as a level he traverses and levels up through eventually reaching and defeating the “boss” of said level. Now in terms of reality, the concept of fighting several of someone's past lovers in order to officially date them is outrageous, but for the immature Scott it is the only way he finds capable of processing the hurdles of establishing and committing to a true relationship.



The presented one on one style boss fight format of the central conflict in volume 1.

This framing of events in Scott's life can also be attributed to the various milestones of maturation on his adult journey outside combating the ex's, almost like side quest in an adventure style game. Things such as getting a simple dishwashing job or confessing and submitting his genuine love for Ramona earns him “experience points”. Obviously, these “points” that he is shown to obtain mean nothing in terms of physical value, but in the context of Scotts focalization of his journey into adult hood, it represents the progress he personally feels is being made whilst adulting. It is through this use of internal focalization that, "puts us the

audience, in the shoes of the focalizer, giving us access to their consciousness, or lets us see through their eyes” (Bruhns and Köppe). Scott is far from being a mature adult but the fact that in his mind he sees himself progressing to becoming better, shows us that there is a sign of genuine consistency and drive to reach his goal, encouraging empathy and support from the



Scott earning “experience points” upon being successful, earning a position at a fast-food restaurant in volume 4. readers to see him continue this path. But this personal framing of reality does entitle major flaws within his life, especially in the case of how he chooses to process not just the present but the past as well with personal mistakes, flaws, and real-life events being replaced unreliable perceptions of himself and others.

Fabricated Memories

Within “Scott Pilgrim” memory serves as a crucial recurring element to develop the character of Scott. As Josh Haas states in his personal analysis of the series “Scott’s memory is unreliable, and we slowly discover of the course of the books that this is one of his most

important character flaws” (Haas); a key moment of Scotts perception taking hold of and warping his view of himself is displayed in the beginning of volume two via a supposed flashback to his high school years. Now it is important to know that within the story of “Scott Pilgrim” Bryan lee O'Malley chooses to mess with readers sense of reality via the use of black gutters. In Tyler Crissman's analysis of flashbacks and dreams, he states that “the dreams and flashbacks in Scott Pilgrim are almost uniformly united in having black gutters (Crissman); meaning that when panels are surrounded by black gutters it implies a flashback or dream had by a character, the context usually implied by a character transitioning into or out of them. But in the case of Scotts high school “flashback” it is a tossup of if anything that happened truly happened due to his untrustworthy and narcissistic perception of himself and the lack of distinction. Volume two opens with Scott getting into a fight his first day of school against three other boys, a fight that he realistically is shown to lose.



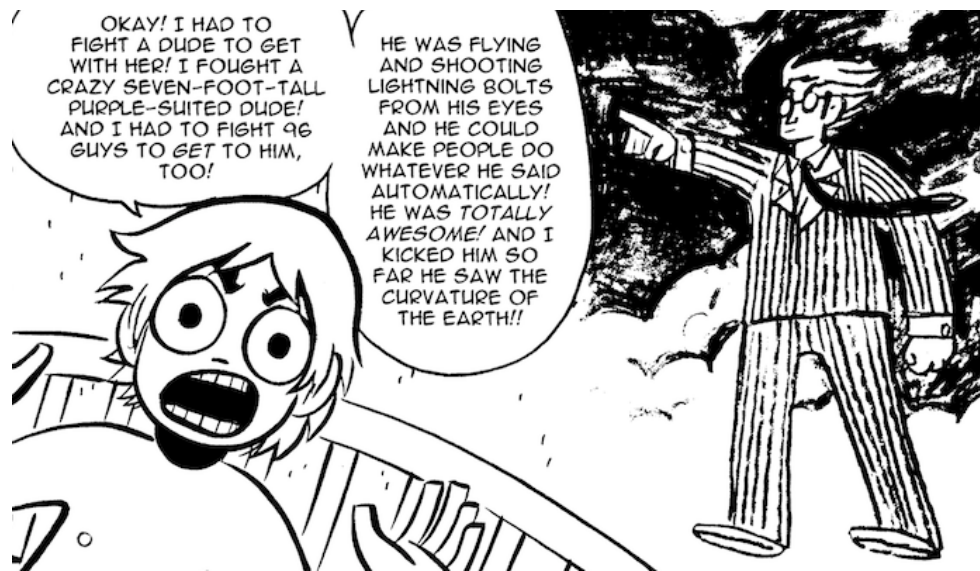
The beginning of volume 2 and flashback to Scott's first year of high school, confronted by three boys and initiating a fight, only to lose. (Take note of the black gutters)

From here the rest of the memory plays out like the standard high school experience, with him making friends, forming a band, and forming a friendship with future ex-girlfriend and side character Kim Pine. That is until the memory does a huge shift, into once again another video game set of circumstances, with Scott fighting through an entire school leading up to an over the top "final boss" fight to save Kim, à la River City Ransom or Double Dragon, overcoming her captor and beginning their young romance. Now in the world of "Scott Pilgrim" this memory would not be too farfetched to believe in, in fact it would simply be the norm. But it is a moment that Scott has with Kim in volume six, that it is revealed to not just the reader but Scott as well that the memory he has is not at all what happened, and that he in fact just punched a defenseless kid she happened to hold hands with. On top of this it completely contradicts the beginning of the memory, of Scott losing a three on one fight.



The reveal to Scott by his Ex Kim, about what *really* happened during their time dating in high school. Disproving his own fabricated “memory” of the event.

This is yet again this another case of his fabricated reality changing the story to fit his own narrative self-image; as Vera Nünning puts it, “aspects such as the sincerity, consistency, competence, and morality of a narrator are held to be of paramount importance” (Nünning 7) when it comes analyzing an narrators trustworthiness. Of these aspects, one that stands out is consistency, as in volume three Scott regals Ramona of this memory, but in an inconsistent manner playing up the memory shown to readers to be more fantastical than it was.



Scott retelling the same high school memory from volume 2, exaggerated and inconsistent to what was actually shown to the readers.

It is this one core memory, and the reveal of its fabrication that establishes the unreliable nature of Scott's character and perception of reality both for the audience and himself.

Conclusion

The storytelling of "Scott Pilgrim" is dictated by the focalization of the titular protagonist Scott. Factoring in his incredibly flawed and childish character, the world around Scott is a reflection of his struggle to grow and mature as a person and accept the harsh realism of reality. From the various videogame mechanics implemented within everyday events as well as the overall conflict to the fabrication of memories of past actions; Scott submerges readers and himself within a reality that allows him to be a protagonist of a game. It is through this that Scott is able to develop a system of coping and gamifying the trials of changing to become an adult, whilst also dealing with the process of learning of mistakes of the past.

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Multimodal Sources

[Dreams and Flashbacks in “Scott Pilgrim” \(a Formal Analysis\) – by Tyler Crissman – Art Ducko](#)

['Scott Pilgrim' Versus Itself - The Awl](#)

[Scott Pilgrim \(Comic Series\) : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

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