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## How Will We Manage the Alt Text?

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# How Will We Manage the Alt Text?

My interest in comics from an academic standpoint is how language codes function. Mostly I examine how dialogue is structured and how characters build their relationships and identities through their talk. This approach blends tenets of conversation analysis, discourse analysis, and pragmatics. (For an example of this kind of research, see my article on [The Rawhide Kid](http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v5_1/bramlett/) (<http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/>).

One methodological concern for analysts who do similar work is this: how is the language in the comic best prepared for analysis? To analyze dialogue, we can create a transcript to account for typical features of conversation. For grammatical analysis, we can track the relative distribution of features—for example, comparing simple past tense verbs with past perfect verbs ('walked' vs 'had walked'). In most cases, linguists need to examine 100% of the language in the comic to make sure that whatever analysis they're doing is complete. In some cases, only a sample of the language is needed, but that requires asking the right research question and setting parameters effectively.

Web comics present an interesting challenge. Some web comics, like [Penny Arcade](http://penny-arcade.com/comic) (<http://penny-arcade.com/comic>), are structured in a familiar three-panel or four-panel strip. All the language is present: it is visible, it is easily accessed. However, many web comics feature alt text, language that pops up when the reader mouses over the image.

[Scenes from a Multiverse](http://amultiverse.com/) (<http://amultiverse.com/>) is one such comic that uses alt text (a.k.a., easter egg). Without the alt text, the comic itself is ostensibly complete. However, the alt text adds a dimension to the comic. It might extend the humor, it might extend the narrative action, it might twist the perspective, and it might provide editorial commentary by the author.

Similar to the notion of alt text is the hidden comic. A hidden comic is one that appears either when the reader mouses over it or, in the case of [Amazing Super Powers](http://www.amazingsuperpowers.com/) (<http://www.amazingsuperpowers.com/>), appears when the reader clicks on an icon. As a typical comic strip, ASP usually comprises three panels, but just to the right of the comic strip, there is a large question mark icon, visible only when a mouse/cursor hovers over it. Clicking on the question mark opens a new web page, giving the reader an 'extra' panel, extending the strip in often surprising and humorous ways.

Comics scholars who are working in web comics have to manage the alt text and, in some cases, the hidden comic. We need to account for the 'extra' comic material in our analyses. I'm not sure yet how to do this. In extracting dialogue from a web comic for analysis, I feel comfortable creating a transcription in the style of conversation analysis. How should I include the alt text?



<https://pencilpanelpage.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/2012-02-20-eviscerator.jpg>

Hidden Comic from Amazing Super Powers

Should it be offset from the 'main' comic, using spacing and indentation to demarcate it entirely? Should it be formatted as if it were part of the 'main' comic and noted as alt text only if necessary?

I think these questions are in some ways related to Roy Cook's earlier series, "[When are two comics the same comic? \(https://pencilpanelpage.wordpress.com/2012/02/09/when-are-two-comics-the-same-comic-part-iii/\)](https://pencilpanelpage.wordpress.com/2012/02/09/when-are-two-comics-the-same-comic-part-iii/)" If one reader sees only the 'main' web comic but another reader sees both the 'main' comic and the alt text and the hidden comic, are they reading the same comic?

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Posted by [Frank Bramlett](#) on [February 23, 2012](#) in [Comic Strip](#), [Web comics](#).

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## About Frank Bramlett

Until June 2014, I am a visiting lecturer in the English Department at Stockholm University, where I offer seminars in Sociolinguistics; Language and Gender; and Language and Comics; among others. For Fall 2014, I will return to the English Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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