

Storyworld Identity:

Investigating reader engagement with a graphic novel

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Contents

Abstract

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Methodology.....	12
3. Results.....	16
4. Discussion and Conclusions.....	33
5. References.....	42
6. Appendices.....	45

Abstract

Readers of fiction experience not only great pleasure, but also powerful psychological effects from engaging with a narrative. Particularly, the feeling of “being transported” into a story was in the focus of much research on narrative engagement. Such studies found this and other phenomena to play a crucial role in the reading process. A blending model by Martinez (2018) aims to illustrate the actual operations that seem to guide the narrative engagement. The model theorizes that two input spaces, the reader’s self-concept, and features of the storyworld character, become combined to a new construct, called the storyworld possible self, which allows the reader to take on a new perspective. The theory was tested by Herman and Martinez (2019), who applied the model to investigate students’ responses to a graphic novel. The present study replicated their research with a sample of 6 University students that were asked to engage with a graphic novel and to answer a number of open-ended questions. The aims of the data analysis were (1) to summarize the students’ general impression of the novel, (2) to identify self-concept features (self-schemas and possible selves) that the students had projected into their construal of the story, and (3) to reconstruct their responses, including emotional reactions, to the novel. The results show that the students generally interpreted the story’s course similarly with the most frequent associations being the traveling scenario, as well as the space (travel) scenario. The students’ self-concept features were in line with that. The reconstruction of the blending processes revealed individual responses. Emotional expressions did not differ significantly between the students. The findings generally imply that students generally interpreted the story as a traveling or space exploration scenario and provide further evidence for the functionality of the model. The results are similar to those of the previous study and seem to stress the need for further research to continue building a uniform coding-scheme to allow the comparison between studies that apply the same graphic novel.

1. Introduction

“[...] fiction is not just a slice of life, a not just entertainment, not just escape from the everyday. It often includes these but, at its center, it is a guided dream, a model that we readers and viewers construct in collaboration with the writer, which can enable us to see others and ourselves more clearly. The dream can offer us glimpses beneath the surface of the everyday world.”

(Oatley, 2011, p.xi)

The world of literature offers a wide range of opportunities for acquiring information, education and, in particular, entertainment. For centuries, authors have managed to create captivating fantasy worlds and thrilling storylines, and still, numerous novels are produced every year to satisfy the demands of fiction readers. People explain their excitement for novels with several reasons. In the quote by Oatley (2011), entertainment and escape are mentioned as two of them. Indeed, both of them are primary reasons for people to engage with fiction since they are associated with feelings of pleasure and enjoyment (Hansson, 1990). However, Oatley (2011) argues, that there is more to reading fiction than that. He refers to it as “a guided dream” which is constructed by the reader and the author in collaboration and offers us an insight “beneath the surface of the everyday world.”, which could be understood as a metaphor for a different perspective (Oatley, 2011, p.xi).

In respective studies, readers were indeed indicating their appreciation for not just the entertaining aspect of novels, but also for the opportunity of becoming acquainted with new perspectives (Ooi, 2008). And taking over this new perspective may even feel like one is slowly becoming part of the fictitious storyworld that was created by the author, a feeling that is commonly described as “being transported” into the narrative (Gerrig, 1993). The dream reference appears to emphasize the perceived intensity of this feeling, and researchers agree that the imaginative process involved in the narrative interaction can create a powerful experience for the reader.

Slater et al. (2014) found that readers believe to have greater freedom in literary simulations than they would find in most scenarios of the “real world”. The absence of the usual limitations of reality may result in a perceived “expansion” of social and physical boundaries. Challenging interactions with the social environment become easily achievable which promotes self-development and interaction with the self which may lead to growth of

the self-concept (Slater et al., 2014). Oatley (2016) adds that emotional engagement in a story can stimulate self-transformation as the reader gets confronted with novel circumstances and characters. Apparently, narrative engagement offers more than just entertainment. This is why the cognitive processes involved in the interaction have been part of the research in the field of psychology.

1.2. The psychology of narrative engagement

Psychology is already applying the benefits of narratives in practice. Narrative psychology assumes human life itself to possess a structure similar to that of a narrative, and therapeutic approaches treat experiences like stories to make them more understandable to the client. The language that clients use is assumed to be reflecting their problems. Therefore, the clients interpretation of their experiences in life is at the center of the narrative approach (White and Epsom, 1990; Cowley & Springen, 1995).

The way that readers interpret their narrative experience will determine its outcome. Authors of fiction have an impact on that as well. However, to stimulate narrative engagement in the reader, several requirements are necessary. For example, first-person narratives are said to be especially powerful in promoting reader immersion as it facilitates identification with the protagonist. While a third-person narrative or general “you” statements will make the reader feel rather disconnected from the context, first person-narratives imply to the reader that he is being part of the storyline which makes them feel closer to the focalizer, which is the storytelling perspective (Oatley, 1999).

Research suggests that the reader occupies the deictic parameters of the focalizer during the narrative experience, meaning that they will align their perspective with that of the focalizing character. This is known as deictic center shifting and is thought to promote identification with the focalizer, which plays another major role in the process. In identification, the reader adopts the focalizer’s goals and intentions. He or she will feel emotions when the focalizer succeeds or fails (Martínez, 2018a; Oatley, 1999). Empathy allows the reader to take on the perspective of the character. Feeling empathy for the focalizer means to understand and share their feelings. It facilitates the feeling of transportation into the storyworld (Mangen & Kuiken, 2014) The extent to which readers experience transportation influences the extent to which they apply the reading experience to their own life (Gerrig & Rapp, 2004).

Transportation is also crucial for triggering emotional responses to a story (Martinez, 2018b). While some emotions result from feeling empathy for the character, others are felt by

the reader in response to the story without being triggered by the character's feelings. Those are called fresh emotions and are known to be another strong promoter of engagement with a narrative (Miall & Kuiken 2002).

The last crucial aspect of reader engagement is self-transformation. It is defined as the demanding cognitive process of regulating one's identity, that people almost constantly engage in (Slater et al., 2014; Siegel, 1999). Readers will self-transform in response to narrative engagement, only if they experience transportation. This is necessary as it allows them to integrate parts of their identity into their construal of the narrative. Readers tend to project their own beliefs and habits onto their representation of the focalizer during narrative engagement (Holland, 1975; Oatley, 1999).

This combination, or "blending", of reader and focalizer has been in the focus of research which intended to clarify the involved mechanisms. However, a theoretical model is thought to be necessary to outline the operations that regulate the process. A generalized blending theory has been summarized from a selection of previous models of conceptual projection (Fauconier and Turner, 2008). The researchers argue that different input spaces can become combined if part of their features get projected into a fresh mental space, where they merge into a conceptual "blend", or mental projection that has novel structures built from the input structures. In the case of the fiction interaction, there would be two input spaces, the reader's self-concept and their mental model of the focalizer.

Martínez (2018a) continued this theory and introduced the term storyworld possible self (SPS) to refer to the blurring of boundaries between the story's focalizer and the reader's self-concept. Her version of the model will be further described in the following.

1.3. The Blending Process

The model by Martínez (2018a) suggests that the storyworld serves as a generic space, an overall structure where the encounter of the readers identity and the story's focalizer can take place (see Figure 1). Some features from the two input spaces then get activated by cues in the storyworld and are then projected into a newly occurring space which Martinez (2018a) refers to as the SPS blend. Its structure is thought to be determined by the structure of the generic space, whilst possessing an entirely new structure as a result of the blending between the input spaces.

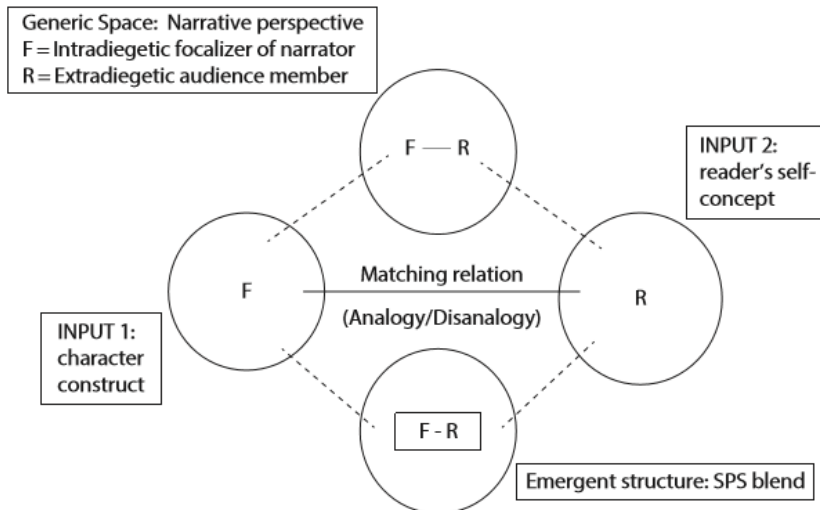


Figure 1. Basic SPS blending network (Martinez, 2018a, p.257)

The blending process is said to create perspectival alignment between the reader and the focalizing character, allowing the reader to view the story from the focalizer's perspective. The reader may experience this as a chance to "try out" certain behaviors in an unfamiliar situation or environment, as presented by the storyworld. The theory argues that features that got projected into the blend may be projected back into one or either of the input spaces, even if those features were not originally present in them (Martinez, 2018a). This backwards feature projection may implement new features in either the reader's self-concept or in the character construct, or even both. This will either cause positive emotions and potential self-transformation or negative emotions due to the perceived approach of an undesired self-concept feature. The self-concept theory conceptualizes identity as a system of various competing selves to illustrate the constant self-regulation in every individual and explains how traces of the identity get transported into a storyworld.

1.4. Possible Selves, Self-Schemas, and the Self-Concept

In their research, Markus and Nurius (1986) introduce the possible selves which represent a person's ideas about who they were in the past and what they could potentially become in the future. They are sensitive to changes, as they have not been confirmed by social experience (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible selves impact people's behavior by representing the selves they aim to become and the selves they prefer to avoid. Therefore, the theory distinguishes between desired and undesired possible selves. A desired possible self represents a self that we strive for, such as the loved self which may include the notion: "In my social environment I have people who love and support me." (Markus and Nurius, 1986).

In contrast, a feared possible self may be the lonely self which could be linked to the fact that “As a kid, I hardly found any friends in school.” By engaging appropriate behaviors, people constantly intend to approach desired possible selves and avoid undesired ones. Even past possible selves can continue to guide one’s behavior provided that they get reactivated by corresponding environmental stimuli. For example, a past “traveler self” may be reactivated by environmental cues that trigger the recall of memories related to a traveling experience (Markus and Nurius 1986).

Furthermore, self-schemas constitute the coherent knowledge about the self that has been confirmed by relevant social experience. They are structured cognitive representations of the self-knowledge that are built from past social experiences (Markus, 1977). A self-schema has a constant impact on the processing of knowledge about the self by selecting the stimuli that will be attended to and determining how they will be interpreted and approached. Self-schemas are self-related knowledge that has continuous relevance (e.g. the self as a dancer or as an artistic person) and results in a perceived category membership based on the evaluation by oneself and others. Self-schemas may include gender, social and professional roles, physical characteristics, interests, or personality traits (Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984; Markus & Sentic, 1982 as cited in Markus & Nurius, 1986).

The combination of the self-schemas and the possible selves constitutes the self-concept. The dynamic nature of the possible selves is constantly challenging existing self-schemas by regulating the application of behavioral strategies to transform their self-concept in a desirable way. Success will lead to positive emotions while failure generates negative feelings (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Mental representations of real individuals appear to have similar internal structures as representations of fictional characters, meaning they are isomorphic. This allows conceptual integration of the self-concept with mental representations of storyworld characters during narrative engagement, and may, therefore, result in a storyworld possible self (Martinez, 2018b).

1.5. Storyworld Possible Selves

During narrative engagement, a reader will possibly find matches between features that are present in their self-concept, but also in their mental representation of the focalizer. Relevant cues in the story will activate related self-schemas or possible selves and thereby stimulate the emergence of mental models that represent a merge of the reader’s self-concept and his mental representation of the fictional character. Those are called storyworld possible selves (SPS). However, the projection will only take place if at least one feature of the mental model

of the focalizer matches with a feature of the reader's self-concept. Otherwise, the reader will perceive no relevance in engaging with the focalizer, which decreases general interest in the narrative experience. (Martínez, 2018b).

According to Martínez (2018b), there are different types of SPSs that derive from Input 1 (reader's self-concept network), Input 2 (character constructs), the blending operation or the cultural predictability. However, the present study will be focusing on three types of SPSs: the past SPSs, the primary SPSs and the SPS slipnets since those were assumed to be most relevant for the study's purpose. A past SPS is an example of an input 1 SPS. It is grounded on a preceding narrative experience, that continues to impact the reader's construal of narrative experiences. It may, therefore, lead readers to interpret the same story differently due to the differences in their past reading experience (Martínez, 2018b).

Primary SPSs and SPS slipnets both derive from cultural predictability and were included to illustrate the possible variety of responses to a narrative discourse. Primary SPSs are SPS blends which most readers will easily engage in as they represent scenarios that are familiar to a large group of people which makes them highly predictable. In contrast, SPS slipnets are strongly idiosyncratic which makes them rather unpredictable. They derive from a unique previous experience of the reader, leading to, for example, the activation of personal unpleasant memories in response to a scenario that most readers would associate with peace and relaxation. The uniqueness of the experience may lead the reader to project strongly personal, unpredicted responses into the SPS blend (Martínez, 2018b).

1.6. Importance of the Model

According to Fauconier and Turner (2008) the blending experience is necessary for the reader to establish conclusions and to feel emotions in response to fiction. However, Martínez (2018b) suggests, that the previous blending models have failed to illustrate the operations that guide the psychological processes and effects in readers during engagement with a narrative. She argues that a more sophisticated model, which takes into account the emergence of a storyworld possible self, may serve this purpose.

According to Martínez (2018b) an SPS blend can assist in comprehending the collective sensemaking process and “perspectival alignment” between the reader and their mental representation of the focalizer. It may also explain the emergence of individual as well as of collectively shared reader experiences and could illustrate how specific narrative cues induce the blending experience. Moreover, the model is considered a potential tool for explaining the occurrence of fresh emotions in response to certain features in the input spaces.

Lastly, the model could provide insight into the self-transformation that people may engage in as a consequence of the blending experience.

The just mentioned functions of the model illustrate the relevance of its application in psychological research. However, the blending theory by Martinez (2018b) can still be considered a novelty and needs scientific evidence to demonstrate its functionality. This requires empirical research, which is why Herman and Martinez (2019) recently tested the model with a sample of 15 University students. The participants were asked to engage with a graphic novel and to indicate their response to the narrative by answering several open-ended questions. Their study was applying the graphic novel “City” by Wasco. The findings show that the students interpreted the novel as showing a traveling situation which they also partly associated with space travel. The researchers identified a variety of self-concept features from the answers to the questionnaire, most of them were self-schemas. Again, many of the most frequently occurring self-concept features were associated with traveling and/or space travel.

A reconstruction of the readers’ blending processes was done with the help of the model, which revealed great differences in the students’ construal of the story as they projected different features onto the character. Their responses to the blending experience were rather individual and partly very emotional. The researchers concluded that the students generally interpreted the story as showing an alien or human creature who is experiencing either a tourism or space exploration scenario. Lastly, their results imply that model was indeed applicable as a tool for reconstructing the individual reading experience which is shown in the specificity of the students’ responses to the graphic novel. The reasons for the application of a graphic narrative will be explained in the following.

1.7. The graphic novel

In contrast to a written novel, the graphic novel is a story that is told by using only images. It guides the reader by using graphic illustrations of characters that communicate thoughts and feelings through facial expressions and posture. Readers will make sense of those by allocating meanings and intentions to the objects and characters in the novel. People naturally make sense of objects, even vague ones, by comparing them to real-world experiences. Conclusions are drawn depending on similarities and differences with the previous experience, even when those graphic elements are not depicting real-world objects in real time and space (Petersen, 2011).

Furthermore, the course of a graphic novel tends to be easily comprehensible as readers are naturally able to determine the expression of story characters by observing their

faces and body language. If an expression is not understood entirely, readers will intentionally fill the gaps by projecting their self-image onto suggestive images of characters to make sense of them. Ultimately, this will lead every reader to their individual interpretation of the story (McCloud & Manning, 1998).

1.8. The present study

The current study is a follow-up study of the research project by Herman and Martinez (2019). The research aims to replicate the study design of the research project by Herman and Martinez (2019), albeit with a different sample.

The study has two main objectives. First, it aims to provide further insight into the way that students' respond to a graphic novel. A new sample will very likely elicit new reader responses to the novel since the sample used in the present research consisted of students from a different country and academic background than the previous sample, which may lead them to interpret the story differently. Applying the methodology of the previous study will enable a comparison of the results of both studies.

Second, the study aims to empirically test, to what extent the blending model by Martinez (2018a) can work as a tool for explaining a narrative experience and for providing insights into effects such as emotions and the engagement into self-transformation. Empirical application of the model is expected to allow a re-evaluation of the model's functionality from a different perspective which may even elicit potential ideas for further improvement. To do so, the focus was on the following research question: In what way do students respond to a graphic novel?

To specify the objectives of the research, the research question was divided into the following three subquestions:

1. What are the students' general impressions of the graphic novel?
2. To what extent can features of the students' self-concept be found in the answers?
3. What will the data reveal about the students' responses to their engagement with the novel?

The results are expected to give an impression of how the students perceive the story and what self-concept features they project into it. The identified features may differ from the ones of the previous study, due to the different sample.

In addition, an attempt to reconstruct the blending process will be made which is expected to illustrate how the students generate their individual interpretations of the same

story, and how they lead to specific reader responses. The design of the study will be described in the following.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants and recruitment

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling. Recruitment took place by approaching people in the available social environment and asking them to participate. Participants were only included in the research if they were students over the age of 18 as this study is focusing on adult readers at a University education level. The use of University students intended to avoid misunderstandings since the questionnaire is only known to be applicable to participants with this education level and advanced knowledge of the English language. The student sample also guaranteed that the outcomes are comparable to the findings of Herman and Martinez (2019).

In total, 16 people were approached via electronic media, 13 of them gave a positive reply and agreed to participate. However, one of them canceled their participation due to health reasons. Eventually, there was a sample of 12 students which consisted of six males and six females. Since there were two researchers, each of them supervised the participation of one half of the sample. The present paper will, therefore, be dealing with three male and three female students from the sample, all of which were German. Five of the participants were Psychology students, one was studying technical orthopedics. Participants were between 23 and 30 and the mean age in the sample was 25.

Ethical standards of the research project were assessed and approved by the BMS Ethics committee of the University of Twente. Verification of that approval can be found with the help of the following request number: 191219.

2.2. Procedure, Measures, Materials

The study was conducted either in a quiet study room at a library or in the participants' homes, whereby in the latter case the participation was always implemented in a calm room at a time when no disturbances had to be expected.

At the beginning of the procedure, each participant gave their informed consent, while also indicating their age, gender, and nationality. Then they received quick instructions. First, they were informed that their participation was completely voluntary and that they were free to leave at any time. They were also told that there would be no time limit and that answering

the questions was going to take about 45 to 60 minutes, depending on the length of the participant's answers. Lastly, participants were informed that the study was about students' responses to a graphic novel. They were not told that the evaluation of the data would involve the analysis of indications for self-schemas and possible selves. The explanation of the study's purpose was kept vague in order to avoid biased responses. However, after finishing all the tasks, participants were informed about the real purpose of the study.

Furthermore, participants were asked to look closely at a colored printed version of the graphic novel "City" by the Author Wasco, which consists of 20 panels and was presented in the size of an A4 sheet (see Appendix A). Next to that, participants had to work through 5 tasks, some of which consisted of open-ended sub-questions. The answers to the questions were written down by the participants in a Word document on a laptop.

The questionnaire intended to gain insight into the participants' understanding and interpretation of the graphic novel. Therefore, the first task was to just retell the story in their own words while adhering to the limit of 250 words. Second, the participants were asked to think of possible speech bubbles for panel 1 to 18. Task 3 required the participants to answer 8 open-ended questions such as, for example: "Has the story triggered any sort of unexpected awareness/realization in you?" or "Write two sentences containing the word 'should' that come to your mind after reading the story.".

Another question in Task 3 asked the participants to indicate the emotions felt by the character in panels 6, 7, 16 and 17. This was done for only a small number of panels in order to limit the cognitive effort to a minimum. The fourth task was to rank the likelihood of different scenarios (for example space exploration) being addressed in the story on a Likert scale from 1 to 5. Finally, the fifth task asked the participants to complete three sentences regarding their expectations for the future, for example, "In the near future, I expect humans to..." (Herman & Martinez, 2019). The methodology of the present study was entirely taken over from the research by Herman and Martinez (2019). A time limit for the completion of the tasks was not given. On average, participants needed approximately 70 minutes to respond to all tasks.

2.3. Data Analysis

As in the original study, the participants' answers to the questionnaire were evaluated regarding indications of self-schemas and possible selves, as well as storyworld possible selves (SPS), which were then used to reconstruct each students' reading experience and

response to the novel. Since two researchers were analyzing the sample, the answers of one student were coded by both of coding.

The actual analysis was divided into three steps that follow the order of the three subquestions. In the first step, the character input space was reconstructed by summarizing the participants' general impressions of the narrative. The second step was the reconstruction of the reader input space by coding and the answers to identify cues of the students' self-concept features. The third and final step was the reconstruction of the blending process, which involved an outline of every individual reader response, including emotional responses, to the novel. The first two steps were thought to enable conclusions on a cross-case level while the third step was expected to provide insights on a within-case level.

The first step aimed to answer the first research question. To execute step 1, the first input space was considered as participants' general impressions of the graphic novel. For its reconstruction, participants' answers to the first task of the story were briefly summarized with regard to similarities and differences in their construal of the story.

In step 2, the second input space was summarized by coding the answers to the questionnaire for cues of self-concept features of the participants. This was done to answer the second research question. To do so, this study was using a coding procedure that was inspired by the original study. It consisted of categories determined by specific criteria that helped to scan the students' answers for linguistic realizations that were most probably indicative of the presence of a self-schema and possible self. A linguistic realization is a specific language cue that represents an underlying abstract construct. Linguistic realizations of self-schemas were thought to be statements written in present tense that contained "I", "one" or "we" assertions. In addition, clear general assumptions about the focalizer's character mentioned by participants were also assumed to be implications of the participants' self-schemas. An example of the latter could be the sentence "The little man is quite adventurous [...]".

Furthermore, the desired possible selves were assumed to be indicated by statements that clearly mentioned an absent but desired feature or character trait. Assertions containing the word "should" assertions were counted as especially strong indicators for desired possible selves. An example of that would be "[...] humans should start to use their mind, recognize how the world functions and then change their behaviour.". Undesired possible selves were assumed to be indicated by statements written in present tense that gave indications of projections which do not match participants' preferences regarding their own identity, for example: "I would find it really confusing and I would feel lonely and as if there was something wrong because there is no one else there."

Moreover, statements written in past tense were assumed to imply the presence of past possible selves, for example: “[...] when I was traveling in a different country. At the beginning, I was very excited and couldn’t wait to explore the new city [...]”. Lastly, clear references to the story’s focalizer, especially names or labels that were assigned to him, were categorized as evidence for past SPSs, such as “the last human being” to refer to the story character.

When a statement did not clearly fall into one of the categories, for example, when a feature was neither clearly framed as desired or undesired, the remaining answers of the respective participant were used as a frame of reference for proving or disproving the presence of the assumed possible self. For instance, student 6 gave clear indications of a “troubled earth inhabitant” self but never clearly labeled it as something he feared which is why it could not be clearly labeled as an undesired possible self at first. However, in the remaining answers that the student expressed his worries about the environment which is why the “troubled earth inhabitant” self was finally identified as an undesired possible self.

Simultaneously to the coding procedure, a list of all identified selves with a brief description and examples of linguistic realizations was developed to provide a better understanding of why a certain “self” label was chosen. Examples of linguistic realizations were included to illustrate what kind of language cues the analysis was looking for. The identified selves were organized into seven different clusters. Several types of selves were combined to a cluster if they had one overarching feature in common. The “Explorer selves” cluster summarizes all selves that express a high level of openness and a risk-taking attitude. The second category consists of the “sensitive selves”, which are all similar in their indication of remarkable emotional reactions to some kind of situation or life event. The third category summarizes the “resilient selves” which express attitudes that help to counteract stressful and burdensome situations.

The fourth cluster summarizes the “thoughtful selves”. Those have in common that they express an ambition to question concepts and behaviors, as well as to consider the consequences of their actions with the goal to live a life that is guided by mindful decisions. The “caring” selves are connected by the fact that all of them express the desire to take care of other beings in some way. Finally, the reader selves mainly illustrate different types of past SPSs. Two of the identified selves could neither be assigned to any of the existing clusters, nor build a new one, and were summarized in the “other” category”.

In the third and last step, the third research question was approached by reconstructing the blending process for each participant with the help of their most salient self-concept

features found their answers. The reconstruction procedure was started by summarizing every student's most salient self-concept features that they seemed to have projected into the blend. A feature was considered as "salient" if it clearly dominated a student's answers, for example, though frequent occurrence or the association with intense memories or emotions that affected the entire course of their construal of the story.

In the third and last step, the blending process was reconstructed for each participant with the help of their most salient self-concept features found their answers. The reconstruction began with a summary of every student's most salient self-concept features that they seemed to have projected into the blend. A feature was considered as "salient" if it clearly dominated a student's answers, for example, though frequent occurrence or the association with intense memories or emotions that affected the entire course of their construal of the story. The reconstruction further involved an outline of how features, that were projected backwards from the SPS blend into the character input space, became visible in the students' description of the focalizer. Lastly, all readers' responses to the blending experience were outlined by highlighting the features that represented the outcome of their reading experience, such as self-concept featured that seemed to emerge in response to memories activated by the story, but also emotional responses to the blend.

3. Results

The results will be presented in three different sections which correspond with the three analysis steps. The first section summarizes the students' general impressions of the narrative by outlining the reconstruction of the first input space. In the second section, the reconstruction of the second input space is displayed. Finally, the third section summarizes the reproduction of the blending process and reader response, including emotional responses, of each individual participant. All results will be explained further in the discussion section below.

3.1. Reconstruction of character input space

To answer the first research question, the first input space was summarized from the participants' general impressions of the novel which were mainly gained from their answers to tasks 1 and 2. The description outlines similarities and differences in the students' perception of the character to display their individual interpretation of the focalizer and was therefore summarized as follows: A person, who is identified as

human by students 3 and 4, arrives in a city with a white dog. Presumably, they are on another planet where, according to S2 to S5, they went with their “UFO”, which is labelled a “spaceship” by student 6. Some participants point out that the person, whose gender is not clearly defined, is wearing a red robe and hat. Student 4 highlights the “strange geometrical shapes” of the city’s buildings, while student 5 mentions the “different shades of pink and purple”.

The person and the dog take a walk through the city, where the students 2, 3, 4 and 6 saw a yellow bird which looked like a white bird to student 5. Student 5 also made a very unique discovery since she described that the buildings in the seventh panel looked like a “pyramid with a fish face”.

Furthermore, most of the students mention that the character is walking over the bridge. To student 1, it looks like this bridge is leading to another city. While student 2 described the general atmosphere of the story as “peaceful”, student 3 and 4 noticed a lack of people in the city which lead to uncomfortable feelings in student 3. Furthermore, a chair that is placed on one of the rooftops in panel 10, looked like a “throne” to student 2, while student 3, 4 and 6 saw an “electric chair”.

Afterwards, the person finds a place where “sculptures” or “statues” are being displayed, which were described as “spooky figures” by student 2 who described the character as enjoying the art, while in the perception of student 1 the character did not like the art and felt rather overwhelmed by all the impressions. Students 3 and 4 described the statues and paintings as “odd” and the answers of students 3 and 5 gave references to psychedelic substances to explain the strangeness of the scenery.

Afterwards, the person and the dog find a stream that student 4 and 6 described as a “river”, although 4 also assumed it to be “sewage” and 2 saw “dirty mud”. Then they visit a place that most students recognize as a graveyard. Afterwards, the person sits down on a bench, supposedly to rest. Afterwards, the person and the dog probably return to the UFO or spaceship and leave the place, although student 2 saw them walking into two different ways, and only the person flying away. Lastly, student 3 was the only one who saw “something like an eye” coming “out of the ground” in panel 19.

The answers to the Likert scale task gave further indications that both the tourism and the space exploration scenario were perceived as likely. The average score of the tourism situation was 3.6, whereby only 5 of 6 students scored this scenario. The space exploration got an average score of 3.5. The “other” option was not used at all by the majority of the students.

3.2. Reconstruction of reader input space

The reconstruction of the reader input space aimed to answer the second research question. The coding of the students' answers gave insight into the participants' self-concept, which is the second input space of the blending model. The results show a variety of self-schemas and possible selves that were identified in the procedure. Table 1 displays the identified selves along with definitions and examples of linguistic realizations. With each linguistic realization it is indicated, whether it led to the identification of either a self-schema (SS) or a possible self (PS). Note that all of "selves" can be either self-schemas or possible selves (see the methods section for the distinction). The study identified 26 different types of selves in the answers of the participant which were ordered into seven clusters. Of all the selves displayed in this table, 13 were not identified in the previous study. The table shows that the identified selves are of great variety, especially the "explorer selves" and the "sensitive selves" clusters contribute the greatest variety of self types.

Table 1

Selves Definitions

Cluster/selves	Definition	Linguistic realization
EXPLORER SELVES		
The "traveler" self	any expressions of motivation for visiting other cities, countries or even planets and engage with an unknown place and its culture	"The little man is always looking for other being in new cities to learn as much about them and their culture." (S5: Q1) (SS)
The "curious" self	Someone who expresses a desire to know or learn (more) about something	"The character looks happy with a childlike curiosity. He seems to look forward to experience something new and fun." (S2: Q1) (SS)
The "discoverer" self*	A person full of curiosity and excitement about new things and places, acts of purposefully searching for them	"The character in red is a human being on his way to discover a planet with another civilization." (S3: Q1) (SS)
The "spontaneous" self	A person who does not think much about one's actions before	"He is very spontaneous and does not think a lot

	doing them, for example, not making detailed plans before a city trip	about his actions or decisions, as he just does whatever he wants to at the moment.” (S1: Q1) (SS)
The “adventurous” self	Being open-minded towards novel/unknown experiences that may involve discomfort or risk (financial, physical, etc.)	“The little man is quite adventurous, and his best friend ‘dog’ comes everywhere with him.” (S5: Q1) (SS)
The “brave” self	A person who is able to face a (potentially) dangerous or risky situation without feeling intimidated by the risk of getting harmed (physically, financially, etc.)	“You should always be brave enough to follow your dreams.” (S1: Q7) (PS)

SENSITIVE SELVES

The “lonely” self	Somebody who mostly spends time alone, expressions of recognizing being alone as a remarkable situation, either undesired (loneliness as a negative consequence of behavior) or desired (loneliness as a comfortable situation, associated with safety, calmness)	“[...] on the other hand, I would find it really confusing and I would feel lonely and as if there was something wrong because there is no one else there.” (S3: Q4) (PS)
The “sympathetic” self*	Being someone who genuinely feels affected by another person’s feelings (both positive and negative ones), feeling what the other person feels	“She looks as a sympathetic person together with her dog, which shows her love to animals.” (S6: Q1) (SS)
The “overwhelmed” self*	any expressions of feeling exhausted and overchallenged from engaging with a great number of novel stimuli or impressions, for example in a new city or country, at a loud party, etc.	“[...] when I arrived, I was a little shocked because everything was so different and I was overwhelmed by all the impressions I got and all the feelings inside me. So that made me “mentally tired” and I wanted to just go back home because that is easier than dealing with everything that comes up in that new country, especially the feeling of uncertainty

		and now knowing.” (S1: Q3) (PS)
The “lost” self*	Someone who feels clueless and nervous (or even anxious) in an uncomfortable and confusing situation, feeling like one cannot easily escape	“[...] I think It would rather make me nervous and anxious because it would probably be very quiet and it would feel weird to be somewhere that alone. I would feel lost and wonder if there is something (dangerous) hiding (from me?).” (S3: Q4) (PS)
The “worrier” self*	People with a tendency for rumination, insecurity, expectations of certain consequences	“And I also ruminated, was sad and tired before in situations that did not make sense to me (worrier self).” (S3: Q3) (PS)
The “failing” self	A person who is sensitive to failure, who thinks of him or herself as someone who generally fails a lot	“I would feel excited and disappointed when I tried to catch something or reach a goal but then I have to see that I can’t – like in the situation when the bird flew away.” (S3: Q3)
The “avoidant” self*	Someone who deliberately denies and ignores or seeks distraction from an uncomfortable truth to justify the refusal of behavioral change and to avoid dealing with negative feelings, negative emotions are being suppressed instead of processed	“When he starts realizing that the world is looking awful, he simply walks away and continues to have fun with something else he feels comfortable with. At the end of the day he is happy because he had his fun and forgot that the world looks awful and is probably full of problems.” (S2: Q5) (SS)
RESILIENT SELVES		
The “optimistic” self	A person who is able to see the positive aspects in every kind of situation, even after setbacks	“You should always try to see the positive of everything.” (S1: Q7) (PS)
The “achiever” self	A person who expresses ambitions to be successful (mainly in academic context)	“I should really get started with studying for my tests.” (S3: Q7) (PS)

The “perseverant” self	expressions of working towards a goal in a very persistent way, not giving up on something	“The person should have tried something else to see if they could find other life on the planet.” (S3: Q7) (PS)
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THOUGHTFUL SELVES

The “reflective” self*	People who think about what is right and what is wrong, evaluate one’s own behavior, and change it if that is necessary to act upon their beliefs and values, opposite of denial	“At first I am happy with something that I do or experience but then there comes a disillusioning moment in which I recognize that what I am doing might be wrong.” (S2: Q3) (SS)
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The “aware” self	Being in a state of understanding and insight about the true conditions of something, the ability to constantly observe one’s behavior and guide it in a way that matches their beliefs and values, the complete absence of denial and ignorance	“In a far future I expect humans to realize how important our world is and that we did a huge mistake in our current time in the ways how we treat it. (Also, I expect everyone to realize that veganism rocks.)” (S5: Task 5) (PS)
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The “troubled earth inhabitant” self*	People who live on an earth full of problems and catastrophes regarding wars and/or climate change	“I the near future I expect humans to go extinct if we don’t change our behavior regarding the environment or the way we treat each other and other beings.” (S5: Task 5) (PS)
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CARING SELVES

The “cherishing” self*	Wanting to show appreciation towards loved ones, such as family members, life partner and friends	“I should treasure the ones that I love before they’re gone.” (S4: Q7) (PS)
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The “animal-lover” self*	The self as someone who experiences joy and relaxation when being surrounded by animals	“She looks as a sympathetic person together with her dog, which shows her love to animals.” (S6: Q1) (SS)
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The “dog owner” self*	Someone who shares their life with a dog	“Everyone should have a dog by their side.” (S5: Q7) (PS)
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READER SELVES

The “reader of space novels” self*	A person who has previously engaged with a story that takes place in space or deals with the topic of space travel in some way	“In a violet alien town with strange geometrical shapes for its streets and buildings, the hatch of a little blue UFO opens.” (S4: Task 1)
The “reader of post-apocalyptic novels” self*	A person who has previously engaged with a story, that deals with the “apocalypse” or some kind of destroyed world scenario including, for example, the extinction of humanity	“On another planet in another city landed a UFO steered by the last human being with his dog.” (S3: Task1)

OTHER

The “creative” self*	Expressions of enjoyment and passion regarding creative activities, such as writing, painting, doing crafts etc.	“I saw that I enjoyed writing a story about it and it reminded me that I enjoy creative tasks.” (S3: Q6) (SS)
The “villager-alien” self*	Someone who feels like a stranger in a big city after growing up in a village	“As a villager, I also tend to feel quite alien in larger cities.” (S4: Q1) (SS)

Note: The selves marked with an asterisk (*) were not identified in the previous study.

Table 2 displays the frequencies of the identified selves, as well as their distribution between the different self-concept features. It stands out that some clusters seem to be dominated by one specific self-concept feature. As the table shows, most of the identified selves, belong to the “explorer selves” category, the majority of them being self-schemas. Desired possible selves, were found in this category as well, the most frequent one was the “traveler” self with 4 occurrences. Two past SPS were also found in this category, but no undesired PS or past SPS. The “sensitive selves” formed the category with the second highest number of selves, which were found in the form of self-schemas, undesired and past PS.

The “thoughtful” selves cluster consisted of eight selves which were desired and undesired selves but also one self-schema. The two “Reader selves” occurred in past SPSs, whereby the “reader of space novels” self was the one that occurred most frequently of all selves, namely five times. The “resilient selves” were only found in the form of four desired selves in the sample. Finally, the “Caring” selves were present in the form of self-schemas and desired possible selves and the two remaining self-schemas were summarized in the “other” category.

Table 2

Frequencies and distributions of selves

Selves/ Clusters of Selves	Self-schemas	Desired PS	Undesired PS	Past PS	Past SPS	Totals
➤ Explorer selves	8	6	0	2	0	16
The “traveler” self	1	4				
The “curious” self	1			2		
The “discoverer” self*	2	1				
The “spontaneous” self	2					
The “adventurous” self	1					
The “brave” self	1	1				
➤ Sensitive selves	3	0	4	3	0	10
The “lonely” self			1	1		
The “sympathetic” self*	1					
The “overwhelmed” self*	1			1		
The “lost” self*			1			
The “worrier” self*				1		
The “failing” self			1			
The “avoidant” self*	1		1			
➤ Thoughtful selves	1	4	3	0	0	8
The “reflective” self*	1	2				
The “aware” self		2	3			
The “troubled earth” self*						
➤ Reader selves	0	0	0	0	6	6

The “reader of space novels” self*						5
The “reader of post-apocalyptic novels/ last human being” self*						1
➤ Resilient selves		4	0	0	0	4
The “optimistic” self		1				
The “achiever” self		1				
The “perseverant” self		2				
➤ Caring selves	1	2	0	0	0	3
The “cherishing” self*	1	1				
The “animal lover” self*						
The “dog owner” self*		1				
➤ Other	2	0	0	0	0	2
The “creative” self*	1					
The “villager alien” self*	1					

Note: The selves marked with an asterisk (*) were not identified in the previous study.

Table 3 shows how many different types of selves were found in each self-concept feature category and compares how often a type occurred in general to the number of students they occurred in. It further provides an overview of the selves that constitute inputs for primary SPSs and for SPSs slipnets. The table displays the 13 self-schemas, 10 desired possible selves, 5 undesired possible selves and 4 past possible selves that were identified in the analysis. Two types of past SPSs were also identified. The data shows that most of the features were present in the majority of students. There were significantly more types of self-schemas per student than any other self-concept feature. The identified self-schemas were the most varied, followed by desired PS and then the undesired PS. Self-schemas and desired PS also occurred most frequently and were found in all six students. The five undesired PS were distributed between five students, whereas, past PS were found in three students. Lastly, the two past SPS were distributed between five students.

The table further shows that the most frequently occurring primary SPS input was the “space travel” past SPS, which was found in five of six participants. It stands out that primary SPS inputs were mostly present in the form of self-schemas, such as the “traveler” self. The desired “traveler” self and the past “space travel” SPS stand out as they occurred more

frequently than any other self type. In addition, the “traveler” self seems to dominate the table as it can be found in three of the self-concept features where it always constituted the most frequently present self. Inputs for SPSs slipnets were more distributed over the different self-concept features but still occurred more frequently as self-schemas. A great number also occurred as desired possible selves, only one was identified in the form of a past SPS. Generally, there were significantly more idiosyncratic SPS slipnets than primary SPS inputs.

Table 3

Distribution, Inputs for primary SPSs and SPS slipnets

Idiosyncrasy +/-	Self-schemas +++	Desired PS	Undesired PS	Past PS	Past SPS ---
Different Types	13	10	5	4	2
Number of students	6	6	5	3	5
Inputs for primary SPSs (most frequently occurring)	Traveler self (2) Spontaneous self (2) Discoverer self (2) Overwhelmed self (2)	Traveler self (4)	Troubled earth Self (3)	Traveler self (2)	Space travel self (5)
Inputs for SPSs slipnets (one occurrence)	Curious self Avoidant self Reflective self Creative self Villager-alien self Adventurous self Sympathetic self Overwhelmed self	Brave self Optimistic self Discoverer self Achiever self Cherishing self Dog-owner self	Avoidant self Lonely self Failing self Lost self	overwhelmed self Lonely self Worrier self	Last human being self

Table 4 displays the emotions that each student indicated as being felt by the character in panel 6, 7, 16 and 17 and reveals which panel each student perceived as the most striking one. It stands out that the students did mainly agree on the emotions felt in response to the panels, however, they did not agree on the most striking panel. Another remarkable aspect of those results is that emotions indicated for panels 6 and 7 were rather positive and expressed high levels of excitement or energy, while emotions indicated for panels 16 and 17 were more negative and less energetic.

Regarding panel 6, the emotions that students perceived in the character were quite similar. Emotions indicated for this panel were “excited” and “enthusiastic”, other students described the character as “happy” or “wondrous”. Two others mentioned that the person looks curious. In panel 7 it was also indicated three times that the character was feeling “excited”, others described the emotion as “thrilled” or “lively”. All of these emotions, again, express a high level of excitement and general positivity. Therefore, the emotion indicated by student 4 stood out the most, as he described the character as feeling “content”.

In panel 16, the indicated emotions were more varied. While some students described the character as feeling “overwhelmed”, “angry” or “startled”, one of them indicated that the character was feeling “relaxed”. The last two students used the words “lonely and “mourning” to describe the emotions in this panel. The emotions indicated for panel 17 have in common that the character is depicted as feeling either “tired”, “exhausted” or “resting”, with the latter being a common reaction to tiredness or exhaustion. However, while students 3 and 5 indicated a slightly negative emotional response by mentioning sadness and the assumed death of the city’s residents, student 2 described the character as feeling “satisfied” due to the novel experience. Furthermore, students 1, 3 and 4 indicated some kind of thinking process going on in the character by mentioning that they were either “process[ing]”, “ruminating”, or “contemplating”.

Regarding the most striking panel, the answers differed significantly more. Two of six students mentioned panel 10 as the one that stood out the most, which is due to different reasons. Student 1 indicated that the character is taking a break and his emotions were unclear in that panel, whereas student 3 expressed her strong confusion about the electric chair that she saw in panel 10. Panel 11 was chosen by student 2 since it looks like a moment of “realization” to him, which reveals “how awful the world is”. Student 4 chose panel 17 due to

the moment of “silent contemplation” which he perceives as a positive aspect of the character. Student 5 found panel 7 to be the most striking one since she saw a building in there that, in her opinion, has a rather unusual shape. Finally, student 6 selected panel 12 because of the sculptures which he thought to be “impressive”.

Table 4

Students’ emotional response to the panels from task 3

Student	P6	P7	P16	P17	Most striking panel
S1	Excited and surprised, discovered a bridge	Excited and motivated	Overwhelmed, saw many new things and wants to leave	Needs time to process, tired, relieved	P10, character is taking a break from walking over the bridge, emotions not clear
S2	Curious, sees a bird	Lively, trying to follow the bird	Angry, dog urinates at gravestone	Satisfied (got to know something new), tired	P11, realizes how awful the world is, continues his walk and gets distracted
S3	Happy, discovered the first living creature in the new place	Excited, a little disappointed, he was too slow to follow the bird	Lonely, puzzled, cannot find anybody	Ruminating, sad, tired (did not find any people, wondering where they are)	P10, wondering about the electric chair
S4	Wondrous, gentle, curious	Content	Mourning reminiscent	Contemplating, resting	P17, quiet moment to rest and reflect, gives the character depths, silent contemplation
S5	Excited, discovered other living being	Thrilled, tries to follow the bird	Startled, realizes that all beings in the city are dead	Exhausted (from impressions and deaths of people)	P7, corner and building look like a pyramid with a fish face and an antenna hat

S6	Enthusiastic, because of the yellow bird	Excited, because of the city and the sculptures	Relaxed, because of the silence on the graveyard	Tired (from the long walk)	P12, because of the impressive shapes of the sculptures
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3.3. Reconstruction of the blend and reader responses

Each students' answers were analyzed again with regard to the reconstruction of their blending experience and their individual response to the narrative. This was done to provide an answer to the third research question. The following section will provide an outline of the most salient self-concept features that each student projected into the SPS and will describe how the students' blend projected features back into the character input space. Lastly, each students' individual response to the narrative experience will be summarized, including the emotions that the students felt in response to the novel.

Student 1: Female, 23, German, Psychology Student

The first student gave a rather short and simple description of the novel compared to the other participants. She generally described the character's experience as a great challenge due to a sensitivity towards a high number of novel impressions. The salient self-concept features that the student projected into the SPS blend were a "discoverer" self-schema, a "spontaneous" self-schema, a past "overwhelmed" self, as well as a past "traveler" self and a desired "optimistic" self.

The first one as identified since the student described the character as "really brave and interested in exploring new things/places." (Q1). The second feature showed in the sentence "He is very spontaneous and does not think a lot about his actions or decisions, as he just does whatever he wants to at the moment." (Q1). The character's emotions related to the experience are further described as "excited" and "surprised", which implies a strong reaction to novel experience like this one. Furthermore, the character is described as feeling "overwhelmed" due to the high number of novel impressions. Specifically, she wrote "He feels overwhelmed because he saw so many new things and he wants to leave this place and go home." (Q2).

The graphic novel seems to have activated a memory of a past travelling experience in the student. The past "traveler" self showed in her description of previous visits to foreign countries and her excitement about new impressions (Q3). However, she also mentioned a sensitivity towards great numbers of novel impressions, which became apparent in her

description of the travelling experience and led to the identification of a past “overwhelmed” self. She explained that this experience has caused her to feel “shocked”, “overwhelmed” and “mentally tired”, resulting in the desire to go home (Q3). Her engagement with the graphic novel seems to have activated this memory along with the emotions connected to it.

In addition to that, she described the character’s feelings in panel 17 as follows: ““He needs time to deal with all the impressions he just got and he feels tired from walking, but he is glad that they made it out of that weird place, he feels relieved.” (Q2). This implies the projection of her past possible self into the storyworld character. As the “overwhelmed” self dominated most of the students’ answers to the questionnaire, it became clear, that this is a very outstanding feature of her self-concept. However, her answers also gave indications of a desire for more of such experiences which was interpreted as a desired “traveler” possible self. She explains this desire with the perceived self-growth and being able to change “in a positive way” that is associated with this kind of experience (Q4). She further gave indications of a desired “optimistic” possible self, which might help her to focus on the positive side of all experiences, even uncomfortable ones.

Student 2: Male, 30, German, Psychology Student

The second participant generally described the scene in the novel as showing a “peaceful” place with the “friendly looking” character exploring the city with a dog. The salient self-concept features in the SPS blend were a “curious” self-schema, a “reflective” self-schema and an “avoidant” self-schema. Additionally, there was a salient desired “reflective” possible self and an undesired “avoidant” possible self.

The student described the character as someone with a “childlike curiosity”. While walking through the city, the character is described as being interested in new impressions. He seems to be enjoying the experience since he is looking at the figures “with a smile on his face” (Task 1). However, in panel 10 the character is saying “this place is confusing. From this point of view the city looks very ugly. [...]” (Task 2), which implies a slight rejection of some parts of the city. The student further indicated that the character feels “disappointed” when he is starting to realize “how ugly the reality is” (Q2). This led to the identification of a “reflective” self-schema, as he seems to putting into question what he is seeing. The “avoidant” self-schema then showed in the following sentence: “When he starts realizing that the world is looking awful, he simply walks away and continues to have fun with something else he feels comfortable with. At the end of the day he is happy because he had his fun and forgot that the world looks awful and is probably full of problems.” (Q5). In reaction to panel

17 the character was described as feeling “satisfied” since he “got to know something new” (Q2).

The story clearly triggered memories in the student since he explained that he has noticed the same kind of behavior in himself (Q3). He described having experienced a “disillusioning moment” before, that made him recognize his inappropriate behavior. However, he then mentioned having distracted himself from that insight, in order to forget about his wrong behavior so he can continue as he used to without feeling guilty (Q3). The student’s response to the story was therefore defined as an undesired “avoidant” self which was believed to be undesired, due to his disapproval of the character’s behavior. Specifically, he answered Q4 by stating “[...] my answer would be ‘No’. Not because he experienced something bad, but even more because he did not change his behavior after experiencing something bad. Experiencing the same story means that I would recognize how ugly the world is but it also means that I would carry on with my previous behavior.”.

In his answer to Q5 he mentioned the issue of climate change to this kind of behavior, as he is predicting “trouble” for the future of the world. He still expresses his hope for an “aware self” by expressing that people can develop a consciousness about what they are doing”. It seems like the student is trying to move away from the undesired avoidant self and towards the desired “reflective” or “aware” self. The latter became apparent when the student expressed a desire for humans to “use their mind” and “change their behavior” (Q7).

Student 3: Female, 26, German, Psychology Student

Student 3 labelled the focalizer of the novel “the last human being” who is visiting a different planet. She perceived the scenery as “odd” and described it in a rather detailed way, for example, by mentioning the “thorns” that are “sticking out of the ground and the “thick and brown fluid”. Salient self-concept features that were projected into the storyworld by the student were a “discoverer” self-schema, as well as an undesired “lonely” self, an undesired “lost” self and a “last human being” past SPS.

The “discoverer” self-schema, became apparent since the character is described as a person who enjoys discovering places and he feels “excited” about seeing a bird, which is “the first living creature” he could find on the planet (Q2). The character is also described as perceiving the situation as “exciting and interesting” because he “discovers a whole new place.” (Q4). However, the character feels “lonely” and “puzzled” since “all the streets and places are empty and he wonders how this could happen that there is a city but no soul anywhere.” (Q2). It stood out that the student labelled the character as “the last human being”

which gives the story a guiding thread and seems to explain their motivation to look for life on another planet.

The student's response to the story was became apparent when she mentioned an aversion of having a similar experience as she would "feel lonely and as if there was something wrong [...]" (Q4) if no other people were visible. An undesired "lonely" self was identified due to her expressions of fearing loneliness. She also explained that she would expect to feel "anxious" and "lost" if she was in the situation of the protagonist (Q4), leading to the identification of a "lost" self. The story further left her with an "unsatisfactory feeling" but also with "hope" (Q6). Generally, she perceived the characters experience as uncomfortable since she reacted with negative emotions. She even seems to fear being in a similar situation, leading her to avoid approaching the undesired "lonely" possible self.

Furthermore, the student also gave indications of an undesired "failing" self, in response to the character who failed to follow the bird. She then expressed a desire for a "perseverant" self which she perceived to help continuing to strive for a goal. Her answers also showed a rediscovery of a "creative writer" self-schema, which was triggered by the first task which asked students to retell the story.

Student 4: Male, 24, German, Psychology Student

The fourth student describes the scenery in the story in a rather detailed way, while highlighting the unusual shapes of the buildings. He describes the landscape as "surreal" and perceives the story to have a "dark undertone" (Task 1, Q5). His answers gave indications of a salient "spontaneous" self-schema and a desired traveler as well as a desired "cherishing" self.

The character is described as a "small" and "human-looking traveler" who is "going into the big town minding his business and admiring the city". He is further described as "dwarf-like" and as looking "silly" and "adorable" (Task 1). The student also described the protagonist as a "blank character" which helped the student to identify with him. The story seems to have triggered memories of past travelling experiences in the student, since he mentioned past visits to new cities. He describes his way of travelling as follows: "I love to travel by myself and let the day decide what it brings. (Q4)" which led to the identification of a "spontaneous" self-schema. His answers also gave cues of a desired "traveler" self, as he indicated the wish to visit an unknown city soon.

Moreover, it stood out that the student interpreted the story in a way that highlights his thoughtfulness. This became apparent, for example, in the following sentence: "I like this quiet moment at the end after all has been done to rest and to reflect. It gives the character

some depths and I like these moments of silent contemplation.” (Q8). This matches the emotions he associated with the character in panel 16. He stated, the protagonist was feeling “reminiscent” and mourning” (Q2). In his answers, the issue of death seemed to be quite outstanding to the student. He responds to the story with a desire to “treasure” his loved ones “before they are gone.”, which resulted in the identification of a “cherishing” self” (Q7). Regarding the general message of the story, he stated: “Perhaps it’s about the strangeness of life in general, how strange art can be, how strange buildings can be, and how strange death and living can be. (Q5)”.

Student 5: Female, 24, German, Psychology student

Student five also highlighted the “abstract forms” of the buildings which she also described as “surreal”. She further points out the “different shades of pink and purple” in the scenery of the story. However, a presumed disaster, which she expects to have occurred in the city, seemed to have a great impact on her construal of the story. The student’s responses gave indications of a “traveler” self-schema and an “adventurous” self-schema. Furthermore, there are cues for a desired “traveler” possible self and a desired “perseverant” possible self as well as a desired “aware” self.

The character is described as someone who is “quite adventurous” and enjoys travelling, which was further acknowledged in the following sentence: “The little man is always looking for other beings in new cities to learn as much about them and their culture.” (Q1). He is further described as feeling “excited” and “thrilled” in panels 6 and 7, due to his discovery of the bird. However, his expectations do not get satisfied which leaves him “startled”, especially when “[...] he realizes that all the beings in this city died and that is the reason for a missing sign of life” (Q2).

The student’s response shows a desired “traveler” possible self due to the wish for another travelling experience. However, she would not necessarily enjoy a similar experience as shown in the story. It seems to have reminded her of situations in which one “wants to discover or explore certain things but doesn’t get the wished result.” (Q5). This becomes apparent in her description of the character’s experience, which she perceived to realize that the absence of living beings must be due to a disaster that happened in the past.

On the other hand, the student appears to take an impression from the story that leads her to give indications of a desired “perseverant” self. Specifically, she states that “we should not give up, even after setbacks.” (Q7). Finally, the students related the story to the issue of climate change by stating “In a far future I expect humans to realize how important our world

is and that we did a huge mistake in our current time in the ways how we treat it [...]” (Task 5). A desired “aware” self was identified to summarize the student’s wish for a more sustainable society.

Participant 6: Male, 25, German, technical orthopedics student

The last participant perceived the story as showing a tourism situation, in which a girl is visiting another planet. The character is described as having an enjoyable experience. She even seems to like the graveyard as she likes the silence. The student further highlighted the “unconventional style of drawing” that stood out to him (Q5). The student’s answers revealed a “sympathetic” self-schema and a “reflective” self-schema, a desired “traveler” self and an undesired “troubled earth inhabitant” self.

The character is described by the student as a “sympathetic” female who owns a dog, “which shows her love to animals.” (Q1). The character is further described as being “excited” (Q6) about the city trip but she also enjoys the silence while resting on the graveyard (“A graveyard! I really like the silence on it [...]”) (Task 3).

The student describes having felt the same emotions, such as “enthusiasm” about “new things”, before, which reminds him of a past travelling experiences and led to the identification of a past “traveler” self. On the other hand, the travelling issue reminded him of the impact that tourism may have in “the environment” (Q5). This becomes even more clear in his perception of panel 14, in which he saw a “river”, that is “polluted” (Task 2). Nevertheless, his answers gave indications of a desired “traveler” self as he thinks, that everyone should “discover the world” (Q7). The student reacted to the issue with an undesired “troubled earth inhabitant” self which shows in his expectation that humans will have to live on “other planets” in the future (Task 5). He expressed a wish for humans to adopt a more “careful” and “thoughtful” approach of travelling, in order to protect the “environment” (Q7). This desired “reflective” self seems to show his hope for a more sustainable future.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

4.1. Overview of the findings

The present paper was investigating how students respond to the graphic novel “City” by Wasco. The generated data was used to reconstruct the two input spaces and the blending procedures for each participant to draw conclusions about their individual responses to the novel and about the functionality of the blending theory. The following section will discuss the findings of the study and will provide answers to the research questions.

The character input space

The first research question asked for the readers' general impressions of the graphic novel which were considered to be expressed in their interpretations of the narrative and its characters.

There were many similarities in the ways in which the students construed the course of the story. All students interpreted the story as some kind of traveling or tourism situation in which a person and a dog are walking through an unfamiliar, unusual-looking city, which is located on another planet, according to most of the students. The space scenario mainly occurred in response to the little U.F.O. in panel 1. Some students described the main character as having a somewhat reflective realization when he is sitting on a bench in panel 17, which mostly had to do with the absence of other people. The dog played a subordinate role for all students, although it was mostly treated like a dear companion. In the end, the story seemed to have left all of the students with mainly positive impressions, whilst also being thought-provoking.

While perceiving the story generally in a similar way, the students partly seemed to be focusing on different parts in the story which caused them to recall different elements and may have led them to slightly different perspectives on the novel. As mentioned before, people naturally make sense of vague stimuli by comparing them to personal experiences (Petersen, 2011). This may also cause a reader to focus only on the elements of the story that they consider as relevant due to their past experience.

In the study by Herman and Martinez (2019), the students' construal of the story was generally similar. They also mainly perceived it as a tourism and space exploration scenario. However, some of the associations differed from those of the current research. For example, their students partly assumed the main character to be an alien which was not the case in the present study.

The reader input space

To answer the second research question, the was using a coding procedure which led to a collection of 26 self-concept features. The self that occurred most frequently was the "traveler" self which seems to be in line with the students' impression of a traveling scenario. This was also the case in the study by Herman and Martinez (2019), who used the labels "tourist" or "(space) traveler" self. These selves could be explained with memories of past traveling experiences that were triggered by the novel. The "(space) traveler" self from the

previous study summarized both dominant scenarios in one self, whereas space travel references were partly also labelled as “Sci-Fi” past SPSs.

In contrast, all references to space travel in the present study were coded as “reader of space novels” past SPSs, since they were considered as resulting from past narrative experiences, such as the engagement with science fiction. Those occurred in almost all participants which supports the assumed predomination of the “space exploration” scenario.

Other prominent selves were the “troubled earth inhabitant” self and the “reflective” self, both of which were mostly associated with issues, such as climate change. Similarly, the previous study identified a “barren earth” self, to label worries and concerns regarding the state of the planet but, in contrast to the current study, it was also activated by associations with war. In both studies, those kinds of selves seemed to be triggered by cues that imply a disastrous incidence, such as the absence of people and the large number of tombstones.

Half of the selves from the present study, such as the “overwhelmed” self, were newly identified, compared to the previous study, while some of the previously identified selves did not occur in the present research, for example the “social” self (Herman & Martinez, 2019). Both studies identified more inputs for the idiosyncratic slipnets than for primary SPSs. In the pilot study, the inputs for primary SPS were mainly desired possible selves, while in the current study those were primarily self-schemas. The reason could be that there is no existing coding scheme which is why the researchers of both studies had to label the features themselves. With no guidelines available, one might easily overlook the actual similarity between selves and end up with a number of different labels for selves that are actually very similar in their meaning.

The “explorer selves” cluster, which contained the highest number of selves, which, again, shows the prevalence of travel-related interpretations of the novel. The “sensitive selves” cluster had the second highest number of selves which, except for one, were all found in the present study, but not in the previous one. This may be explained by the new participants who could have projected more “sensitive” selves onto the character than the previous sample.

The relatively high number of “thoughtful selves” is due to the frequent associations with disasters. The “resilient selves” were only found as desired possible selves in the current sample, which seems to imply the students’ desire for selves that help to cope with bothersome events. Those could also have occurred in response to the cues of disastrous incidences, which were mentioned earlier.

Less common selves were in the cluster of the “caring” selves, which mainly appeared in connection to the dog. Their occurrence might be explained with an activation of memories of a caregiving or supervising role. Their rare presence may be associated with the rather subordinate role of the dog and the absence of any other living beings in the story.

The clusters generally show that most selves could easily be summarized to a higher order category, only two selves were not allocated to any cluster. This also shows that the results are rather consistent than idiosyncratic, due to the similarities between the selves.

The clustering method is considered an advantage of the present study since they allow to evaluate the findings on a broader level, while not impairing the comparison with the previous study. Specifically, they summarize the selves that have an overriding common feature, which provides an overview of the sample’s most and least prevalent “higher level” features. This may help to detect unique patterns in a sample, which can be compared with those of other studies, and allow to draw conclusions. The current study recommends a continued improvement of the clustering scheme since the detection of patterns in the distribution of features could help to compare the findings of different studies on a broader level.

Furthermore, the list with explanations for the selves is thought to increase comprehensibility for laypeople and may simplify future evaluation of comparable data. In future studies, a uniform coding scheme may facilitate the coding procedure and increase comparability between results of different studies since they would be sharing the same understanding of what the “self” labels exactly mean.

The results of both studies are generally similar in the associations that the readers made with the elements in the story. However, slight differences seem show in the way they made sense of the story, which is probably due to the individual background of each sample and each student. While the original study was conducted with students in Madrid, the sample in the present research consisted mainly of psychology students, who study at a Dutch University.

The different backgrounds may influence the students’ perception and construal of stimuli. Ooi (2008) suggests that the reason why people read fiction may impact their selection of fiction books. This may as well influence a reader’s perspective on the reading experience itself. While some students may be used to reading fiction for mandatory academic assignments, just as literature students, others read fiction for leisure. In the former case, the students may be impacted by their expert knowledge on fiction which would lead them look at

narratives from a different perspective than people who do not have that knowledge. In addition, individual past experience may play a role as well.

To conclude, the students seemed to identify with the situation shown in the story. The neutrality of the novel may allow many different readers to easily relate to the character. The most common association in this sample was the traveling or tourism situation. At a time when moving around the planet is easier than ever before, and when technological progress is growing fast, it is not surprising that the readers could easily blend in with the (space) traveler self. The disastrous conditions that some students found in the storyworld were often associated with climate change, an issue that is currently dominating the media.

The students interpreted the general course of the novel similarly, but some answers did indeed reveal that all of them looked at the novel from their individual perspective. Several details were interpreted in very different ways, such as the “electric chair” that was detected as a “throne” by one student. Partly, they also paid attention to different elements of the novel. Some students were focusing on the experience and thoughts of the character, and were trying to attribute intentions to their actions. In contrast, other students were focusing on the surroundings, such as the shapes of the buildings, the colors or unusual objects they spotted in the city. The general scenery was perceived as rather strange by most students.

The reader responses and the blending process

To answer the third research question, the blending process and responses to the story were reconstructed for each participant, which gave insight into their individual reading experience.

In student 1 an uncomfortable past memory was triggered by the story, which was related to a great number of new impressions in response to the character visiting an unknown city. This may have resulted from an identification with the character that led to the activation of a past “overwhelmed” self. A desired “optimistic” self is supposed to help her view the experience as something that will not cause harm but will rather facilitate her self-growth.

In contrast, the second student’s response was dominated by a dissonance between an undesired “avoidant” possible self, which he encountered with strong disapproval, and a desired “reflective” self”, which he would like to see in himself, but also in other people. His thought process was influenced by the issue of climate change which he used as an example to illustrate avoidant behavior. His blending process seemed to indicate a potential for self-transformation.

Similarly, of student 3 was also focusing on the presumed consequences of some disaster, mainly on the absence of any living beings in the city, which implied the activation

of an undesired “lonely” self. Imagining being in the same situation as the focalizer triggered an undesired “lost” self, which shows her empathy for the character. She seemed to have responded to those undesired possible selves with strong refusal and discomfort.

Similarly, the answers of student 4 were also rather melancholic, as he implied a high significance of the issue of death, although he never made a direct reference to it. For instance, he reacted to the “graveyard” in panel 16 by saying the character was mourning. He also indicated a desired “cherishing” self, by saying he should “treasure” his loved ones “before they are gone”. This seems to be supported by his statement that the message of the story could be about the “strangeness” of life and death.

The answers of student 5 indicated a conception that one should not give up after setbacks. She had perceived the story as illustrating a situation in which a person gets disappointed by the experience which might have led her to the activation of a desired “perseverant” possible self. Just as student 3 she recognized the absence of other beings as something very striking and, like student 2, she related this to the consequences of climate change. She expressed her desire for more awareness in people regarding that issue.

Similarly, student 6 referred to his worries about the environment because of the impact of tourism. Although he views traveling as an important experience, he seems to be concerned about the impacts of people’s behaviors. His answers seemed to be dominated by this desire to be careful and to think about the consequences of one’s behavior.

The emotions indicated by the students for the selected panels were mainly similar. The most striking panel, however, was not the same for all participants. This may be due to their different past experiences which caused them to consider different kinds of events or stimuli as striking. Furthermore, positive emotions may be due to the approach of a desired possible self, whereas the negative emotions may have been triggered by the approach of an undesired possible self.

The reconstructed blends in the pilot study were partly similar, as some of the students also indicated the character to be mourning in response to the graveyard, while referring to some kind of dystopia and also mentioning loneliness. Traveling and tourism was also often in the focus of the story. However, part of their answers also addressed issues that did not play a role in the present findings, such as magic, boredom and homesickness (Herman & Martinez, 2019).

Furthermore, Herman and Martinez (2019) highlighted panel 17 as an “operator of mental activity” (Herman & Martinez, 2019; p.14) to put emphasis on the emotions that the students connected to it. In contrast, the current study also reported the emotions indicated for

panels 6, 7 and 16 as they were also considered as relevant for understanding the readers' narrative experience. Nevertheless, the present study does support the idea that panel 17 may have a special role in this regard, due to its great ambiguity which leaves much room for interpretation. It might be specifically powerful in triggering thinking processes as the character is shown in a resting position instead of engaging in any actions. The reduced physical activity of the character may be associated with higher mental activity, which may have caused the readers to perceive the character in a moment of "contemplation" or "processing".

Similar to the present study, the students in the previous study indicated the character as feeling "tired" or "reflective" in panel 17. However, some of them also stated the character was feeling "amazed" or "enthusiastic", which differ from the other answers. Such differences could be a result of the different sample. Different people may interpret the same image in different ways due to individual past experience.

To conclude, the findings show that the students did identify with the focalizer since they easily recognized emotions, which requires empathy and implies identification with the character (Mangen & Kuiken, 2014, Martínez, 2018a). The application of the model for reconstructing the blending processes seemed to facilitate comprehension of the students' sense-making process. The individuality of the responses imply that the model does work as a tool for reconstructing an individual blending process and partly demonstrated how stories may influence on self-transformation after narrative engagement.

However, this study still provides limited information about the participants' emotions since the questionnaire only asks for emotions felt by the character in four selected panels. Future research could ask participants to indicate the character's emotions for more, or even all panels. Also, from the present study it does not become clear how exactly the theory can help to understand the emergence of fresh emotions since participants were only asked to indicate the character's feelings. Since emotions play an important role in the way that people respond to fiction, it seems relevant to ask participants of future studies to indicate emotions they experience during or after reading the novel (Djikic et al., 2009). Their answers could be compared to the emotions they indicated for the character and differences may imply the occurrence of fresh emotions.

4.2. Limitations and further recommendations

It should be highlighted that the study only tested how University students between 23 and 30 years respond to the graphic novel, which limits the generalizability of the results to this

group of readers. Since the population of fiction readers goes far beyond University students, future research could generate reader responses to the same novel with readers of a different age group or educational background. Their responses may reveal new aspects of reader engagement since they may interpret the story from a different perspective. The measurement method would have to be adjusted in a way that allows those reader groups to understand the tasks and provide useful answers.

Furthermore, the analysis procedure of the present research required the evaluation of the data by only one researcher. Results of this kind are generally difficult to categorize which limits the potential of accurate construal. Therefore, differences in the two researchers' interpretation of the data may occur, despite testing intersubjective agreement prior to the analysis. This is indicated by, for example, the differences in the clusters of the first and the second researcher. The differences between their clustering schemes do not facilitate the comparison between the results, which seems to stress the relevance of a uniform clustering scheme, to allow the comparison of different studies.

Future research might also want to apply the model to other graphic novels or even to other kinds of narratives. The application of Wasco's "City" already led to a set of manifold and complex results. This raises the question of how a similar group of participants would respond to different types of narratives, such as a whole book or even a TV series. Martinez (2018b) herself indicated, that the storyworld may not only be a written or graphical story but may as well be a film, a play or a song. Studies could apply the model to those types of narratives and investigate how reader responses differ in comparison with the existing research.

Lastly, this paper aims to highlight the relevance of narrative engagement for psychology. The study and the pilot study have shown that a story can trigger responses that reveal how readers see themselves and the world around them. They also provided evidence that the blending model can provide better comprehension of how those responses were generated and how they may lead to effects in the reader, such as self-transformation which may occur from the activation of desired and undesired possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Activation of a desired possible self stimulates selective information processing that will provoke the use of necessary strategies (Markus and Ruvolo, 1989). The storyworld possible self appears to add an opportunity for trying out potential new strategies that may lead to the desired state.

Earlier research already found that narrative engagement can have a positive impact on one's self-image and other variables. For example, studies show that fiction can change the

way that people report their personality traits in a Big-5 inventory (Djikic et al., 2009; Djikic et al., 2006). Narrative psychology is already using the story element for transforming the self-image of clients, by treating life events like a story. It seems reasonable to assume that the blending model could even work as a tool for explaining how people construe their own story and how their responses to it are developed. An appropriate questionnaire could allow the client an outside perspective on their personal story and may help the therapist to detect the clients' desires and fears.

This type of research seems to provide a new perspective on fiction, one that combines narrative experience with knowledge of psychology. Being familiar with the approach by Martinez (2018), one may look at novels differently, or may even pay attention to their personal identification process with the focalizer and its ability to transform one's self-concept. The possible outcome is, undoubtedly, one of great potential and will hopefully encourage fiction readers to acknowledge the power of narrative engagement, regardless of whether they do so in an academic context or in their leisure time.

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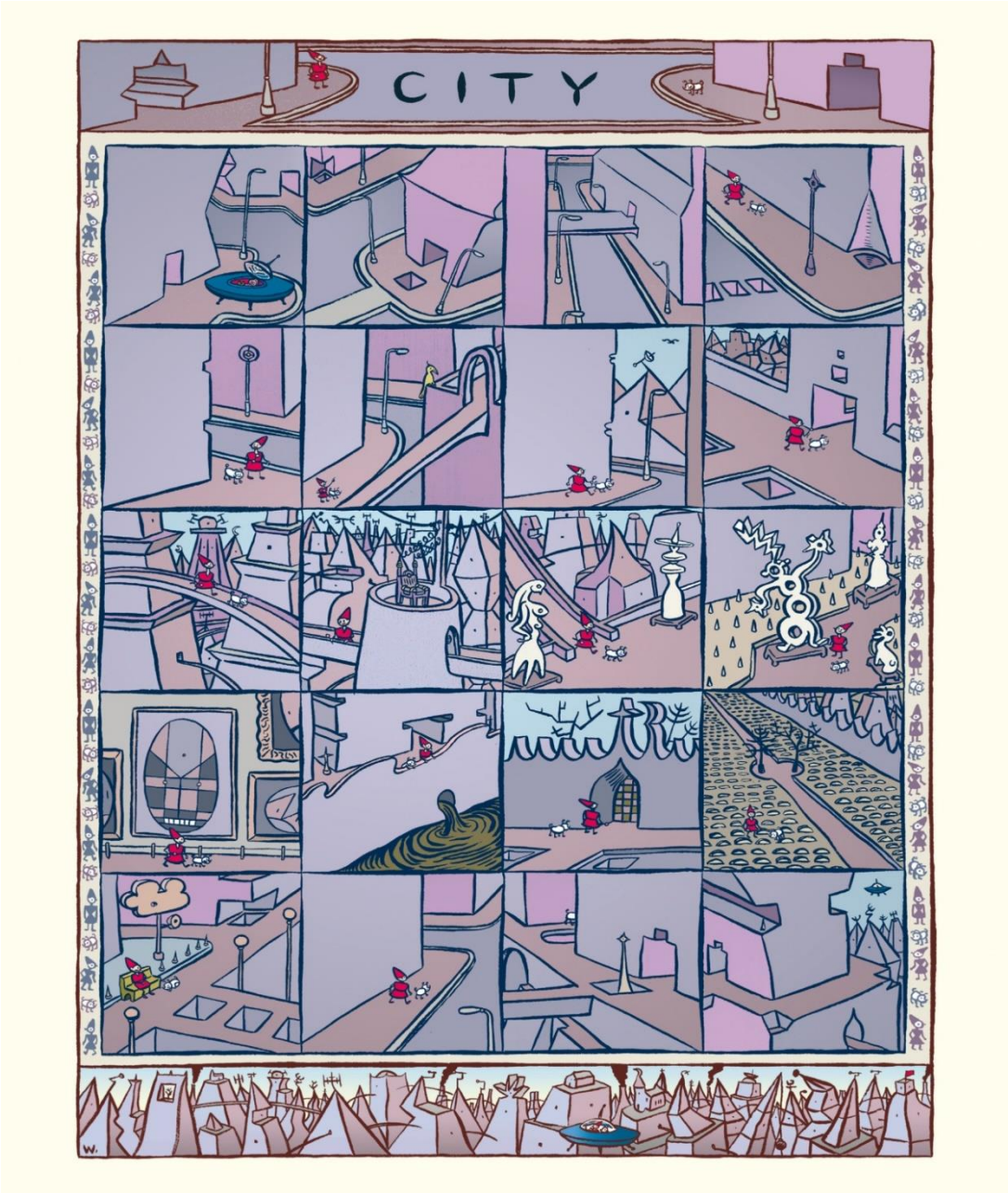
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Appendices

Appendix A: Graphic narrative “City” by Wasco



Appendix B: Questionnaire

TASK 1: RETELL

Look at the story carefully and retell it using your own words. Length: 50-250 words.

TASK 2: INSERT SPEECH BUBBLES

Look at the story again. If you could insert speech bubbles, what would you write in them?

(P1 = Panel 1), etc. Line length is just orientative. You may stop at P18 if you wish.

P1: " _____ " “

TASK 3: OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

1. Briefly comment on the character in red.
2. Use an adjective to describe how the character in red feels in the following panels:

Slot	Feeling	Reason
P6		
P7		
P16		
P17		
Other		

3. Have you ever felt like this? Explain.
4. Would you like to have a similar experience? Why? Why not?
5. Does the story remind you of any sort of human activity? If so, what do you think the point/message of the story is?
6. Has the story triggered any sort of unexpected awareness/realizations in you?
7. Write two sentences containing the word “should” that come to your mind after reading the story.
8. Describe the panel that you found most striking, and briefly explain why.

TASK 4: LIKERT SCALE

Looking at the story, rank the likelihood of the following scenarios from 1 to 5, 1 being the least likely, and 5 the most:

Scenario	1	2	3	4	5
Tourism					
Space exploration					
Other					

TASK 5: PERSONAL EXPECTATIONS

Bearing the story in mind, complete the following sentences with something that you believe to be true. Be as specific as you can:

- *In the near future I expect humans...*
- *In the near future I expect the world...*
- *In a far future I expect...*

and briefly explain why.

Appendix C: Informed Consent

Informed Consent

Dear participant,

Thank you for your participation!

This study intends to investigate how students respond to a graphic novel. Therefore, you will be asked to closely look at the comic “City” by Wasco. Afterwards you will be asked to do 5 tasks which partly contain open-ended questions. This will take about 30- 45 minutes but there is no set time limit. In addition, the questions require you to portray your personal impression, there is no right or wrong.

Be aware that your participation is fully voluntary which means that you are free to leave at any time if you wish to. Your answers will be treated confidentially. Your responses will be used only for the purpose of providing insight into the topic of the present study.

If you still have any questions left or if you wish to hear more about the outcomes of the study, you can email me at: c.m.bohler@student.utwente.nl

With your signature you confirm that you have read the informed consent and agree to the conditions of the present study. You declare in a manner obvious to you, to be informed about the nature, method and target of the investigation.

(Date, Name)

(Signature)

Gender:

Age:

Nationality: