

SYNÆSTHESIA

COMMUNICATION ACROSS CULTURES

Communications Journal
ISSN 1883-5953

Dan Jurgens
interviewed by Jeffery Klaehn
Spring 2014
pp. 191 – 196

published by



Information concerning announcements
and services can be found at:

- scholarly journal: www.synaesthesiajournal.com
- contact editors: editors.synaesthesia@gmail.com

This work is published under a Creative Commons [license](#).
Permission is granted to forward electronically to others and
to post Journal texts for non-commercial purposes following
Open Source guidelines, provided they are reproduced intact
and the source indicated and linked. To publish SCAS Journal
text in electronic, print and/or other forms, contact the editors.

An Interview with Comic Book Writer/Artist Dan Jurgens

Jeffery Klaehn
Independent Scholar | Canada

Writer/artist Dan Jurgens first entered the comic industry in 1982, penciling *Warlord* no. 63 for DC Comics. His first writing credit followed three years later on DC's *Sun Devils* maxi-series (1985). Over the three decades since then he has produced a wide variety of creative work for a range of publishers. For DC Comics, in addition to creating popular new characters, including Booster Gold and Doomsday, his credits include *The New 52: Futures End*, *Aquaman and the Others*, *Green Arrow*, *Superman*, *Justice League*, *Booster Gold*, *Firestorm*, *Time Masters: Vanishing Point*, and many more – and for Marvel Comics *The Mighty Thor* as well as *Captain America* and *The Sensational Spider-Man*. In this comprehensive, career-spanning interview, he discusses his work and artistic process, the influence of new technologies on how comics are produced and solicited, ways in which the comic industry and reader expectations have changed over time, and what continues to inspire him about working in comics today.

comic books | superheroes | Superman
comic book creators | art process (comics)

Jeffery Klaehn: What initially drew you into the world of comic books? Do you remember the first comic book you ever read?

Dan Jurgens: The first comic I ever bought was *Superman* no. 189. I went to the store looking for a *Batman* comic but, since they were out, had to settle for *Superman* instead. Of course, that was in the midst of the *Batman* TV craze and wonderful DC 'Go-Go Checks' era.

JK: What artists in and outside of comics have most influenced you?

DJ: In comics, Neal Adams, Jack Kirby, John Buscema, Dave Cockrum, Mike Grell, Walt Simonson, Steranko, Gil Kane, Curt Swan and many, many more. In terms of outside of comics, my major is actually in graphic design, so there a lot of compositional elements that influence my work.

JK: What elements do you think make for a great superhero comic?

DJ: Drama. In some cases that can mean action, while in other cases it can mean character development. I'd also add the idea that we can show things above and beyond what we see in real life, like Superman throwing a tank across a city, for example, that is, to me, a strong aspect of superhero comics.

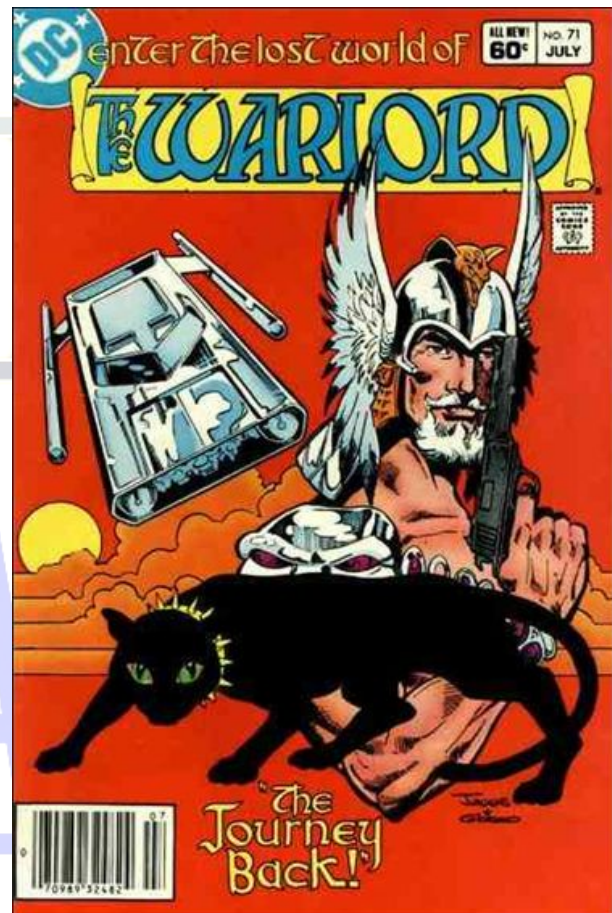
JK: In what ways do you think the superhero concept has changed or evolved over time?

DJ: Well, clearly, we're now doing more adult type of stories. The simplistic 'Oh, no! Azure Kryptonite has changed me into

a giant butterfly!' stories have become much more adult in nature, including some fairly substantial exploration of characters' sex lives. At the same time, stories have obviously gotten longer and deeper, as they transition more the trade paperback end of things.

JK: How did you initially break into the comic book industry?

DJ: I was able to get my work in front of Mike Grell who, at the time, was writing *The Warlord*, which he had created for DC. They were looking for an artist, one thing led to another and I got the gig.



Warlord no. 71 (July 1983) cover, Dan Jurgens pencils, Dick Giordano inks, © and ™ DC Comics.

JK: In working on characters that have existed since the 1930s and 1940s, to what extent are you influenced by the original creators' vision of the character(s) and/or by earlier creative teams? How much research do you typically undertake when approaching a new title or character, or does it vary from project to project?

DJ: That depends entirely on the character and concept. Typically, I think you can find the clearest blueprint for a

character in his first 20 issues or so. That's when the creator has made his most definitive stamp on the book. However, over that amount of time, it's also possible with some characters that they moved far beyond that point, which means a different approach is required. In short, each problem has its own solution.

JK: What made you want to pursue a career as an artist and writer?

DJ: It's a very unique form of creative expression. The fusion of words and imagery is unlike any other and I love it.

JK: How would you describe your art process?

DJ: Conceive the scene, sketch the scene in rough format, making adjustments where necessary and then move into final drawing. Of course, when I describe that, it's necessary to make it clear that it goes beyond the simple quality of drawing as it's all about telling a story.

JK: Has your approach changed over time?

DJ: I don't know that my approach has changed as much as it's shifted a bit. Being a writer has made me a better visual storyteller. I consider telling the story job one, as opposed to many who are just trying to create a page that satisfies their interests ahead of the story.

JK: Have new technologies changed how you create comics?

DJ: I don't feel that it's changed the way I create comics as much as it changes the opportunity for feedback along the way. Inkers and colorists are now able to show me pages mid-production that enable me to get necessary changes. That helps the final book. Same with lettering. The ability to mold all aspects of a book's production along the way is helpful, though sometimes nerve rattling.

JK: How do you see form and content as being interconnected?

DJ: You certainly can't separate the two. All aspects of a book influence the other in circular form. One can't succeed without the other.

JK: How might you explain image/text relationships in comics to someone completely new to comic art and the comic book medium? What do the words and pictures do, within comic book narratives?

DJ: The words and pictures move the story along in rhythmic fashion, generally highlighting the most important aspects of the action as they do so. Most visual information is actually left out. The idea is to give the reader enough information to bridge the gap.

JK: As a writer, how do you approach superhero comics, in terms of structure?

DJ: This depends on the story, and the needs of the story. Ultimately, I tend to believe that there should be some sense of victory for the hero in question. I also believe that the hero should generally overcome some obstacle – not the villain, but something in his/her personal life – that causes the hero to lose something. A hero is much more a hero when s/he sacrifices some aspect of their own life in order to do the right thing.

JK: As an artist, what's your process when composing comic book pages?

DJ: Again, this depends on the needs of the story – it's the job of the artist to serve and enhance the story, to build its sense of drama with proper pacing and conveyance of message.

JK: What influences your decision-making regarding panels and panel arrangements?

DJ: Here again, it's somewhat hard to address without specifics but, in general, I like to build to big moments. I like to play with time on the page – using more panels to move into 'slow motion' or fewer panels to speed things up. I like to pull way, way back on a panel to show the environment and make it a character in the story. One of the biggest mistakes I see artists make is that to them, backgrounds are backgrounds. They are environments, and should be treated as importantly as any character in the book.

JK: In your experience, how much collaboration and creative synergy typically takes place between writers and artists in realizing scripts?

DJ: Not nearly as much as there used to be. There are a number of reasons for this. Writers are intent on exercising more control. More and more writers want their artists to be 'wrists,' visualizing what the writer has in mind, as opposed to truly collaborating. Then, in addition, with a global workforce, we tend to have more barriers to communication and such. It's just tougher because of the logistics. Many writers end up scripting a book without even knowing who's going to draw it, which is a real disadvantage. In addition, we've done an incredibly poor job of teaching new artists how to tell a story. If storytelling is an artist's weakness, and that's rampant right now, few writers would want to engage that artist as a true collaborator.

JK: In terms of craft, how do you actually set about composing a comic book cover? What elements are most important?

DJ: Drama. More than anything, there needs to be some kind of dramatic image or graphic that intrigues the potential reader.



Time Masters: Vanishing Point no. 4 cover (December 2010), Dan Jurgens pencils, Norm Rapmund inks, © and ™ DC Comics.

JK: Has the internet and ways in which comics are solicited today changed how you approach doing covers?

DJ: Yeah, that's fair to say. We're no longer trying to attract someone on the stands so much as we're trying to get their attention in a catalogue as they order their comics. Plus, we're generally working toward an older audience. That changes the approach as well.

JK: In terms of the actual production of superhero comics, what's different now compared to when you first began working in the industry in the early 1980s?

DJ: It's likely that we aren't moving the physical product around as much as we used to. In bygone days, the writer would send in a paper script, which would be given or mailed to the penciler, who would draw the pages and turn them into the editor, who'd give them to the letterer for lettering, on the boards themselves, and would then pass them along to the

inker. Lots of hands touched each and every page.

Now the page might be drawn and scanned, with the image being sent to the inker for digital inking. The inker might also print a blueline board and then ink it. Or, it might not get inked at all, but instead get sent straight to the colorist. In any case, the only person who actually touches that original, physical page is often the penciler. Everyone else sees the digital image only, thus building an even greater barrier between the editors and their worker bees. And, if you happen to be one of those who draws on a digital tablet with no paper at all, well . . . that's quite a difference.

JK: In what ways do you feel the audience for superhero comics has changed over time, if at all?

DJ: They've gotten older, more jaded, and more in need of seeing variations of the same characters over and over and over again.

JK: Have reader expectations changed over time?

DJ: As readers have gotten older they've certainly come to expect stories with more depth and exploration of character, as opposed to just plot. They also want to see their favorite characters age and progress with them, which can be a problem.

JK: What are your thoughts on the contributions, influence and legacy of Jack Kirby in relation to the comic industry as a whole?

DJ: Jack's contributions are pretty much impossible to overstate. Without him, I really don't think we'd have a comic book industry today. Certainly not in the way we know it, anyway.

JK: What inspired you to create Booster Gold?

DJ: I wanted to do the story of a hero who wanted the glory and celebrity access of life. He is not a hero for hire, but certainly someone who'll do the right thing and cash in on endorsements and such. He enjoys his notoriety and plays it for everything its worth.

JK: How would you describe the character's core concept?

DJ: Pretty much as I've just described, though you can also add the notion of being a time cop. I always tell people that Booster tries to do the right thing and tends to be successful. He just happens to get there in somewhat unconventional ways.

He's flawed. He has a criminal background and is trying to make up for that fact.

JK: The character has been embraced by generations of fans over the decades and continues to have wide currency within the current DCU –

DJ: Yes, and it's very nice to see.

JK: Have superhero comics changed since Booster Gold first debuted?

DJ: The entire industry has changed. Our readers are older and more mature. We have a lesser dependency on superheroes than we used to and there's a far wider variety of product on the market.

JK: The concept of time has played into many of your stories throughout your career –

DJ: Yeah. It's one of my favorite themes.

JK: You worked on the various Superman titles as a writer and artist for about ten years of your career. How did you initially come to work on Superman?

DJ: Mike Carlin, who was the character's editor at the time, called me up to ask if I'd like to draw the *Adventures of Superman Annual* that had just been written by Jim Starlin. That was either 1987 or 1988.

JK: To what extent do you feel the 'Death of Superman' influenced the trend toward event-driven narratives?

DJ: We were already pushing to be a more event-driven industry and that only helped push it to the next phase. It was a dynamic time that will never be replicated. You'll never get people lined up at stores the way we did then, nor will you have the whole world watching.

JK: Looking back, which of your own Superman stories and/or story arcs is your own personal favorite – outside of the 'Death of Superman' issues?

DJ: I am actually more proud of enduring on the character as long as I did, and also for the more individual stories I did, rather than the arcs. There was *Superman/Aliens*, for example, as well as a number of individual stories I did in the monthly books that had more personal meaning to Superman.

JK: What elements define Superman for you?

DJ: I've always said that, in many ways, Superman is defined by what he doesn't do. Since he has the power to do anything he wants, the fact that he doesn't overly insert himself in the world of politics, nations and such shows that

he's really there to help. It shows that he basically reflects the best in all of us.



Superman: Day of Doom no. 1, pg. 1 (January 2003), Dan Jurgens pencils, Bill Sienkiewicz inks, © and ™ DC Comics.

JK: Please tell me about how you created Doomsday – what inspired your visual design for the character?

DJ: Doomsday was conceived as a force of nature – a total, unthinking brute of sorts, acting on instinct, doing whatever he can to emerge victorious.

He was conceived and designed to be the total counterpoint to every other villain Superman was fighting.



Superman (1987 series) no. 75 (January 1993), Dan Jurgens pencils, Brett Breeding inks, © and ™ DC Comics.

JK: Your pick for the all-time greatest comic villain, and why?

DJ: Probably Doctor Doom. He's powerful, capable of almost anything, yet acts out of a personal motivation we can all understand.

JK: When you think of definitive Superman stories, what particular creators, stories, ideas and/or possibilities immediately come to your mind? Whatever and/or whomever you might like to touch on or share here –

DJ: Oh, it's a wide range of things. I mean, sometimes, it's someone who's made an incredible contribution to the character that is easily identified, with one great story. I'm more drawn to those who helped build the character over time with a contribution that spans years – where they really added to the character's tapestry with a number of more subtle contributions. It's a question where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

JK: What are your thoughts on how Superman has changed over the decades, generally? Anything you might like to

touch upon here –

DJ: I think it's fair to say that Superman has changed less than a lot of characters, and I consider that to be a good thing.

When Grant Morrison re-launched Superman as part of the New 52, his first issue harkened all the way back to *Action Comics* no. 1 in 1938. I thought that was terrific, as it updated Superman somewhat for modern day readers, while also showing that he really still embodies the best notions that Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster gave him.

JK: Take us back to the early to mid-1990s. How was your career evolving throughout this window in time? What was happening? What did the industry look like to you then?

DJ: It's weird – in terms of sales, we're a smaller industry. More and more, we're preaching to the choir, selling to the hardcore readers. General and casual readers, which used to be the backbone of the industry, are essentially gone. We've created a product that is hard to access and tough to penetrate and understand. It also tends to be a product that might play well in some areas, but not others. Most suburban moms that I know are rather dismayed by comic stores. They don't see them as friendly to kids, particularly girls.

JK: Please share your thoughts on your overall approach to writing *The Mighty Thor* for Marvel. What did you set out to accomplish on the title?

DJ: I wanted to tell a rollicking good story with big, exciting visuals. After all, if Thor is a god, you have to push that angle. That's one of the things that make him unique.

JK: What was it like working with John Romita Jr. on *Thor*?

DJ: John is brilliant. I do believe that, in many ways, *Thor* was his very best work. The sense of power and presence he gave the character was truly reminiscent of Kirby's best stuff. No matter what I gave him, he managed to outdo what I possibly could have hoped for, which in turn, made me work even harder. I think we were challenging each other every step of the way.

JK: How did you come to work on *Captain America*?

DJ: Bobbie Chase, who was Cap's editor at the time, gave me a call and asked me if I'd like to do the book – I guess Mark Waid had just left the title. I told her I'd like to think about it for a while to see what I could come up with and then gave her a call to say yes. Of course, one of the main attractions, besides Cap himself, was that Andy Kubert was drawing it.

JK: What makes the DC Universe different from the Marvel Universe, in your view?

DJ: Marvel is one universe, with one continuous story. DC is a multiverse with many different variations of the same characters. Both versions are fine, but it is a key difference. Marvel characters tend to be more flawed, I think, and often more human, while DC's tend to be more noble.

JK: To what extent (if at all) does your anticipated audience influence characterization, plot, and the types of stories you tell?

DJ: Well, that's hard to say because the audience tends to vary from book to book and character to character.

I do think it's important for creators to try to break out of some of those expected norms.

JK: If you were again speaking to an imagined audience comprised mostly of non-comic fans, how would you characterize the mainstream comic book industry today?

DJ: I'd encourage them to first access the industry's product by picking up collected editions of some kind. It's far easier to comprehend what you see when you get the entire story, as opposed to the typical 'chapter 3 of 5' type of thing we often see.

JK: How do you envision the DCU today? Is it defined by the 'new' or by the legacy and rich tapestry of its history, or both perhaps?

DJ: It's defined by both. When the New 52 launched, some characters didn't change too much. Others changed a great deal. That really does make it quite a blend.

JK: Looking at your work in comics to date, what are you most proud of?

DJ: I would have to say that I'm most proud of the breadth of the work I've done over the years. I've managed to hit on quite a variety of books at different publishers.

I think I've done successful interpretations of other characters and I've also created a number of new characters. My contributions are evident and on the page.



Dan Jurgens Captain America pencil sketch (no date), © Marvel Characters, Inc.

JK: What most excites you about your work in comics, looking toward the future?

DJ: That I have no idea what the future will bring. Seriously. There's a certain sense of pulse and excitement within the industry right now that is undeniably strong. It feels vital. There are a number of creators doing some really interesting and provoking stuff, which in turn fuels that feeling of vitality. It's a great time to be working in comics!

Notes on contributor

Jeffery Klaehn holds a PhD in Communication from the University of Amsterdam (2007) and recently completed a second PhD, in Sociology, at the University of Strathclyde. More information about his work can be found at: <http://uva.academia.edu/JefferyKlaehn>.