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## Pondering Pauses: Experiencing Stillness in Scrolling Webcomics

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Pondering Pauses: Experiencing Stillness in Scrolling Webcomics

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## Abstract

This paper examines the evolution of comics and its form, and how this changing format influences how the reader experiences the narrative, specifically in moments of stillness.

Webtoons, a specific scrolling format for webcomics, have unique tools at their disposal due to their form. These prompt the reader to pause, allowing them to practice being still in order to experience the surrounding world, even if that world is fictional. After going through a brief history of webcomics and webtoons, this paper analyzes two specific webtoons, *Green & Gold* and *Seasons of Blossom*, to take a closer look at how these tools and techniques are used.

Pauses can offer us a moment to sit with our thoughts and to reflect on life. Yet, stillness, despite its importance and the benefits it offers us, is still very difficult to attain—especially in our busy world of today. Even in certain forms of storytelling, immersive stillness is difficult to achieve. Novels, for example, rely on the progression of the narrative to tell the story. A pause in these narratives is often one that takes the audience out of that world and back into their own. Comics have a unique way of portraying stillness that allows the reader to be drawn in deeper rather than being brought back to reality. This allows the reader to intimately experience the world as the character does.

Within the medium of comics, webcomics have their own history and techniques that have adapted and evolved from those used for print comics. Stillness in webcomics exists in ways that are unexpected, especially when those webcomics can be read on our phones, technology that usually promotes activity rather than stillness. Webtoons, a specific scrolling format for webcomics, have unique tools at their disposal due to their form. These prompt the reader to pause, allowing them to practice being still in order to experience the surrounding

world, even if that world is fictional. Through this webtoons can encourage the reader to reflect on their own life, possibly bringing healing through storytelling, just from a swipe of a finger.

This paper will first examine how experiencing stillness in comics differs from other forms of storytelling. Following that will be a look at the history of webcomics and the evolution of form both in North America and in South Korea, where the scrolling webtoon format originated. This paper will then examine the immersive experience of stillness in two webtoons—*Seasons of Blossom* and *Green & Gold*.

Although John Lamothe talks about silence in his essay *Speaking Silently: Comics' Silent Narratives as Immersive Experiences*, stillness often comes along with this silence. Of course, there are exceptions, as silence is not always still and stillness is not always silent. Yet stillness is portrayed similarly to silence and has much of the same drawbacks in certain mediums. In novels, the experience of stillness is quite different from comics. The author might be able to describe the stillness that occurs within the narrative, and there are also techniques that can be used to seemingly slow down time. Despite all this, the reader has no control over this passage of time. The reader might be able to read the novel and pause on a paragraph in order to think about it deeper, but simply by pausing they have broken from the story and “like someone abruptly awaking from a dream, [they] must return to reality once the forward progress of the narrative is paused.”<sup>1</sup> If the reader chooses to be still and to pause, it is a break from the story, not an immersive experience pulling them further in. The reader is taken back into their own world, and although the novel has prompted them to pause and reflect, it is quite unlike the experience of stillness that comics encourage.

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<sup>1</sup> Lamothe, *Speaking Silently*, 2.

When reading comics, the reader has “complete control to pause and have a deep and immersive experience without breaking from the narrative.”<sup>2</sup> Due to the nature of comics and the techniques at their disposal, the reader has greater control over the pacing of the story. Reading a comic is a collaboration between the author and the reader, a concept that this paper will go more in depth on later. It is this collaboration that allows the reader to sit with certain panels for as long as they want, while still being immersed in the narrative.

As of today, scholarship about comics is still fairly new, and although it is steadily growing, there is still a lack of comics criticism. This is even more true for webcomics. Not much has been said about the history of webcomics, and it is an area of study that deserves more attention. Because of this, the following section relies heavily on the writing of Sean Kleefeld in Bloomsbury Comics Studies’ *Webcomics*.

With the advent of the internet and the world wide web, artists started experimenting to see what this new technology meant for the future of comics. Webcomics, in this paper used to refer to any comic published and shared on the web,<sup>3</sup> at this time were experimental simply because the web itself was an experiment, but they “relied heavily on the forms and standards seen in the newspapers.”<sup>4</sup> Many authors were already creating comics for their local university papers.<sup>5</sup> *Dr. Fun*, created by David Farley and first launched in 1993, is commonly considered to be the first regular webcomic.<sup>6</sup> *Dr. Fun* is a funny and wacky single panel comic<sup>7</sup> published as a

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid, 16.

<sup>3</sup> The differentiation between webcomics and digital comics seems like a small one, but it is important. In this paper webcomics refers to any type of comic published on the web (many comics were published online before the advent of the world wide web but this paper does not get into that history). Digital comics may also refer to comics in a similar format as an ebook. These comics are digital files that the viewer can have rather than reading them off a website.

<sup>4</sup> Kleefeld, *Webcomics*, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>7</sup> There has been discussion about whether a single panel can be considered a comic. In *Understanding Comics* on page 20-21 Scott McCloud argues that these are in fact not comics as they are not sequential, a very important element making up the definition of comics. He views them as cartoons instead. Despite this discussion, *Dr. Death* was referenced as one of the first regular webcomics so this paper acknowledges this.

640x480 24-bit JPEG.<sup>8</sup> Farley himself talked about how the “irreverent, non-sequitur humor” found in *Dr. Fun* and inspired by Jim Unger’s *Herman* seemed fitting for the first regular webcomic that appeared on the web.<sup>9</sup> What the reader would find from *Dr. Fun* could be as unexpected as whatever they might find on the web by clicking through hypertext that day.<sup>10</sup> The distinction of the first *regular* webcomic is an important one, as there was another that came before. *NetBoy* was created by Stafford Huyler, but Huyler’s schedule was erratic at the beginning, as he too was simply experimenting with this new medium.

It was Mike Wean in 1994 that began to experiment with the form of these webcomics and how their presentation on the web could differ from print. His webcomic *Jax & Co.* did not show all four panels at once as a strip. Instead, each panel could be seen individually and the reader could click through them using a unique navigation system that Wean created using Javascript.<sup>11</sup> Wean began to break away from the conventions of print and adapt the standard practices of the printed strips to the web. Newspapers had established a standard form for gag-type strips: three to four squarish panels with a set up and punch-line in the final panel.<sup>12</sup> This standard format, one that had been used since around the 1950’s, was so common that readers had begun to expect it for these humorous comics.<sup>13</sup> Mike Wean explored how this standard form could be changed and evolved to fit the possibilities that webcomics presented outside of the printed page.

Later, in 1995, Charley Parker created *Argon Zark!*, one of the earliest ‘long form’ webcomics. This type of storytelling meant that each installment was treated “as the page of a

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<sup>8</sup> Kleefeld, *Webcomics*, 21.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

graphic novel, rather than as a stand-alone joke or gag” as many of the webcomics before.<sup>14</sup> Not only was it one of the earliest long form webcomics, but it was also one of the first to utilize on-page navigation. This allowed readers to click through the comic one page at a time, similar to a printed comic.<sup>15</sup> Parker also experimented with the digital technology available to him, taking advantage of what Photoshop and other programs could do relative to what was possible with printed paper.<sup>16</sup> Parker might not have changed the form much from a printed standard, but *Argon Zark!* was a testament to what could be achieved visually through the digital tools available.

Tyler Martin created a WordPress theme in 2005 that helped create a standard format for webcomics “that utilized a lot of the best practices that had been accepted.”<sup>17</sup> This theme included many of the basic functions like the forward and back buttons, the first and last buttons, and an archive page. Artists no longer had to be programmers or create their own format to showcase their webcomic, and could instead use this template and customize it as they wanted. Readers also could now be familiar with how navigation was formatted, no matter how much the artist customized the graphics. This format was widely accepted for those creating non-experimental webcomics and helped reduce the barriers to readers due to its standardization.<sup>18</sup> However, this format still heavily relied on the conventions of the printed page, and did not seek to change or evolve them into something new and unique for the web.

Many webcomics, then and now, come in one of two formats. They resemble either the size and shape of a newspaper strip or a click through format of a printed comic book page.<sup>19</sup> The format that an author chooses is often dictated by the material. Those who are creating long form

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 22-23.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 90.

narratives like *Argon Zark!* might gravitate towards the page by page click through format whereas newspapers had established the standard form for gag-type strips that many artists continued when comics were brought to the web. Looking past format to the content of comics, Scott McCloud comments that the North American “comics have long been confined to short periodical installments and have dutifully adapted an efficient ‘just the facts Ma’am’ approach to storytelling.”<sup>20</sup> This has influenced not only how printed comic books are formatted, but also webcomics and how artists approached this new medium. North American comics tend to utilize different panel transitions that prioritize action over stillness in order to keep the plot moving. This way of pacing still has influence over comics today, both in web and print. These panel transitions along with other techniques will be touched upon in greater detail later.

Many recognized that the web offered new possibilities for comics and became interested in how comics could change and evolve. In 2000, in his book *Reinventing Comics: The Evolution of an Art Form*, Scott McCloud looked ahead to what he saw as the possibilities of what webcomics could become. He observed the many webcomics being created at that time and noted that although many of them were technically digital, they really were “no more than ‘repurposed’ print at heart.”<sup>21</sup> Many webcomics were still structured in a strip format as if they were being printed in a newspaper. Others, like *Argon Zark!* fit within the structure of a printed page. McCloud suggested that instead of thinking of the screen like a page, or even a strip, artists should instead think of the screen as a window.<sup>22</sup>

In the digital environment of the web, comics could be virtually any shape or size that the artist desired. There was no reason that a comic couldn’t be a vertical canvas, or a horizontal one, a circle, or one that descends or ascends like a staircase. A webcomic could take virtually any

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<sup>20</sup> McCloud, *Reinventing Comics*, 37.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 203.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 222.



size or shape an artist could imagine.<sup>23</sup> The possibilities of webcomics could be endless, and so too could the canvas. Many have since experimented with and theorized about this infinite canvas. The infinite canvas offers a technical challenge to the artist, making the reality of creating more difficult to achieve than the initial idea. These new possibilities often require additional skills. Although it is not impossible for the artist to acquire these, the process is “not unlike having a movie director also have to design the costumes, rig up lighting, and then sit down at the computer to develop all the special effects.”<sup>24</sup> Each step of the process requires specialized skills, so while the artist might have many ideas on new ways of formatting their comic and exploring the possibilities that the web presents, they might lack the ability to see those possibilities through.

We will now move on to a historical look at webcomics in South Korea and the origins of the webtoon format. Similarly to the history of webcomics in North America, not much study has been done about the history of webtoons. The webtoon format deserves more academic focus. This section relies on the work of Brian Yecies and Ae-Gyung Shim in their book *South Korea's Webtooniverse and the Digital Comic Revolution*, which, at the time of writing this essay, was published last year, 2021.

The year 2003 marks the birth of the webtoon format as we know it today, but many webcomics were being distributed and consumed online before then.<sup>25</sup> In South Korea, many internet service providers (IPS) offered scanned comics as part of their services. Companies like Nowcom and Chollian began offering this service in 1995 alongside other regular features like the news, weather, games, travel advice, and discussion forums.<sup>26</sup> The IPS Interpia launched a

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 223.

<sup>24</sup> Kleefeld, *Webcomics*, 97.

<sup>25</sup> Yecies and Shim, *South Korea's Webtooniverse*, 67.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 69.

new online *manhwa*, or comics, service soon after in 1996.<sup>27</sup> In 1999, Shinbiro introduced a day pass for comics. Using this day pass, a user could have access to 900 digitized comics for 1,000 WON, about \$1.00 USD.<sup>28</sup> Not wanting to be outdone, Chollian offered a new comics service in 2000 for the reduced price of 1,000 WON per month.<sup>29</sup> Other publishers did not want to be left behind, and many created their own cyber-*manhwabang*.<sup>30</sup> These digital versions of the *manhwabang*, or comics rental shop, were “cheaper, safer to access in the confines of one’s own home, and convenient.”<sup>31</sup> With the “turn of the millennium, a new audience for digital and online comics made an appearance.”<sup>32</sup> These scanned comics were similar in format to print, just digitized files.

It was in this environment that Daum communications launched a new webtoon section called Comic World in 2003. It was this launch that “unveiled the media format and industry standards with which we are familiar today.”<sup>33</sup> To assist with the launch, artist Kang Full created *Love Story*, one of the earliest, if not the first, serialized webtoon.<sup>34</sup> This webtoon was made up of 20 images that were all vertically arranged to form the story, and at this time a fairly lengthy one. It was well received and “locked in the conventional webtoon format of today.”<sup>35</sup> This format showcased “serialized, vertical scrolling color comics with a complete story arc broken into single weekly episodes,”<sup>36</sup> and so this new scrolling format, evolved from print, became a standard practice.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 73.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

Now let us move into the techniques and tools that comics use to convey immersive stillness. This paper will look at these techniques and how they have evolved by first looking at a brief selection of the experience of stillness in printed comics and then move on to analyzing two webtoons—*Green & Gold* and *Seasons of Blossom*.

To understand comics, one must understand how to read comics and the collaboration that occurs between the reader and author. A comic is made up of two important parts: the panel and the gutter. By using closure, the reader is able to create meaning. McCloud describes closure as “observing the parts but perceiving the whole.”<sup>37</sup> In comics, the reader only perceives parts of the narrative, whatever is shown in the panels. The gutter, or the space between panels, ‘shows’ what the reader cannot see and through closure the reader can piece together what occurs. It is between these panels that the reader engages and collaborates to create the narrative along with the author.

McCloud discusses many different panel transitions, but this paper will focus on one—aspect-to-aspect. This transition is often used to “establish a mood or a sense of place” and it is in these quiet and thoughtful moments where time seems to stop.<sup>38</sup> These transitions help us find the “moments between moments,”<sup>39</sup> as McCloud calls them. They not only convey stillness, but also invite the reader to engage and be immersed in it.

Tillie Walden’s graphic novel *Are You Listening?* utilizes these aspect-to-aspect transitions frequently throughout the narrative, and, when paired with silent moments, prompts

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<sup>37</sup> McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 63

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 79.

<sup>39</sup> McCloud, *Reinventing Comics*, 37.

the reader to take a pause with the character.



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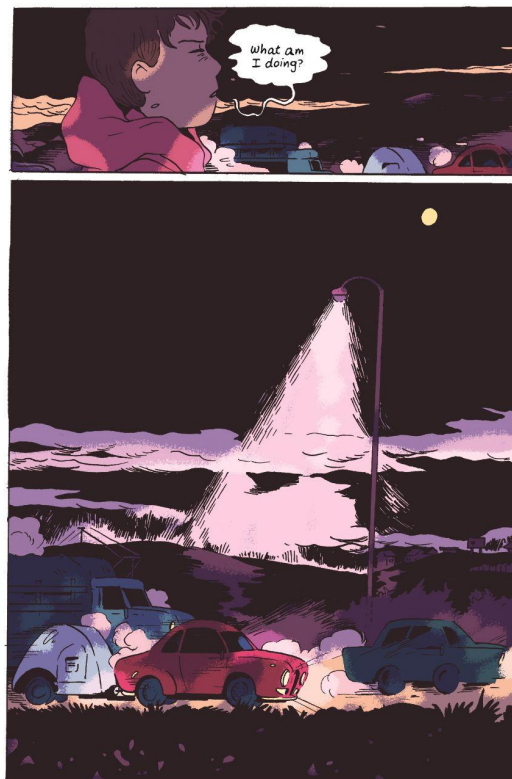
At the start of the story the reader sees Bea waiting at a bus stop. The bus comes and goes and Bea decides not to get on, despite seeming like she's going somewhere. Next, on pages six and seven, pictured above,<sup>40</sup> we see Bea walk away from the bus stop. Three panels are lined up at the top of the page. The fourth panel on this page is a long horizontal strip, setting the scene of the changing environment. Then, through an aspect-to-aspect transition, the reader sees the final panel on this page. This one is larger, taking up the lower half, and due to the size of the panel, the reader is prompted to pause and take a longer time on this moment. Though the reader might pause for a bit, they are also taking in information from all surrounding panels, even unconsciously moving onto the next. The stillness here is not complete.

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<sup>40</sup>Walden, *Are You Listening?*, 6-7.



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On the following pages eight and nine, pictured above,<sup>41</sup> the reader continues to follow Bea. Here on page nine there are only two panels. A thin horizontal strip of Bea asking herself, “What am I doing?” followed by a large panel taking up the rest of the page. Yet again the reader is prompted to pause, but this stillness is more complete. This panel is at the end of a page. In order to move from this moment the reader needs to physically move to flip the page, thus breaking from stillness and moving on from the pause. Sure, they are able to return backwards and revisit the previous panels, but by having this large panel at the end of the spread, the reader is prompted to pause and linger in this moment of stillness for longer.

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid, 8-9.

Time passes differently in comics, and panels are often an indication of how that time is being divided and changed. The duration of the time passing is often dependent on the content of the panels themselves. If someone is washing their hands, throwing something away, or turning on a light, we have a pretty good idea of how long these actions take. Readers learn to “perceive time spatially, for in the world of comics, time and space are one and the same.”<sup>42</sup> This time can be controlled by altering the panels. The content of the panels, the number of panels on a page, the size, and the shape of a panel all have different ways of portraying time. Timelessness or a sense of stillness can be achieved by borderless panels since they are not confined to a space. Panels that bleed off of the page, or ‘bleeds,’ also have this effect as well. Larger panels can slow down the reader, even to a pause, especially when they come after smaller panels, thus further emphasizing the moment that happens in the bigger one. When the content of a panel seems timeless or it is part of an aspect-to-aspect transition, it can set a mood and have a lingering effect.<sup>43</sup>

*Bloom* by Kevin Panetta and Savanna Ganucheau use many of these techniques as well. It can best be seen in the sequence of pages 135-139.<sup>44</sup> On page 135 Ari and Hector, the main characters of the graphic novel, climb up to the top of a look out. The final panel depicts Ari pushing Hector to turn and look at the view to see where they are. After a page turn, the following spread, pages 136-37, showcases a splash page of Ari and Hector looking out at the seaside town below. This splash bleeds off the page, not confined by any panel outline like the panels on the previous page. The reader is invited to sit and pause along with Ari and Hector to take in the sights. Just like one might be still while overlooking the landscape before them, the reader is immersed in a similar experience within the narrative. By pausing on this moment, the

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<sup>42</sup> McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 100.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 103.

<sup>44</sup> Panetta and Ganucheau, *Bloom*, 135-39.

reader joins Ari and Hector. It is only by the conscious choice of returning to action in order to turn the page that the story continues, thus breaking from stillness. On page 138 Ari and Hector get ready to watch the firework show from their lookout spot and the following page 139 is another bleed. This time the entire page depicts a firework in the night sky. Yet again the reader is prompted to pause and be immersed in the moment. They are asked to join Ari and Hector in being still and watching the firework show. By once again making the conscious choice of breaking from the stillness, the reader returns to action by flipping the page and continuing the narrative.

These same techniques are used in webtoons, although they have evolved and changed, resulting in a different immersive experience of stillness. The examples used in this paper can be found on the WEBTOON platform. Launched globally as Line Webtoon in 2014 and then rebranded as simply WEBTOON in 2019, this platform, run by South Korean company Naver, is one of the largest webtoon operations.<sup>45</sup> WEBTOON offers both a website and a mobile app for convenient reading on the go. The vertical screen of the phone is a good ‘window’ to look at the scrolling canvas through, further encouraging people to read webtoons on mobile devices. Although the platform is called WEBTOON, the term “webtoon” is also considered to be its own format, and there are many different platforms that host stories created in this format.

*Green & Gold* is an ongoing webtoon created by Lisa Brenner<sup>46</sup>. This coming-of-age story focuses on characters Piet and Tim as they attend Tannenberg Boarding School set in Germany. At this school each 10th grader gets a 7th grade mentee. Together they create a project over the course of the year that they then present at the end. The story follows Piet and Tim as they navigate through their emotions and relationships throughout their year at Tannenberg.

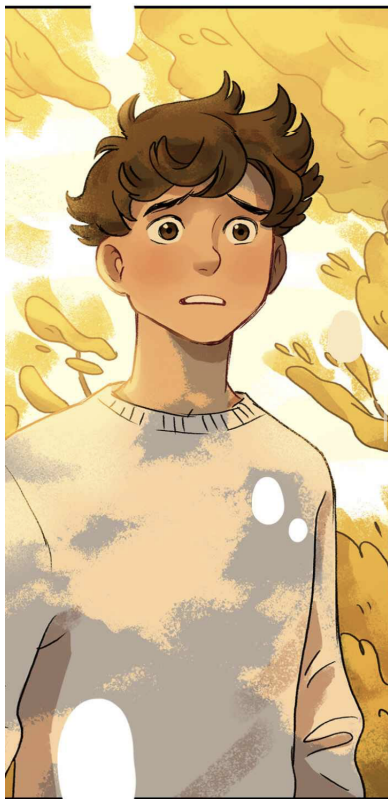
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<sup>45</sup>Yecies and Shim, *South Korea's Webtooniverse*, 92.

<sup>46</sup> Ongoing as of May 11, 2022.



First created in the comic book format, each page was then cut and reformatted to be a webtoon. It is important to note that *Green & Gold* was not created as a webtoon but rather adapted to fit this format. The difference, though seemingly small, is important since both formats are quite different, and the reader reads them in different ways, though rather unconsciously. Despite these differences, many artists often adapt from print to webtoon or webtoon to print. In this paper, however, we will be analyzing *Green & Gold* as a webtoon.



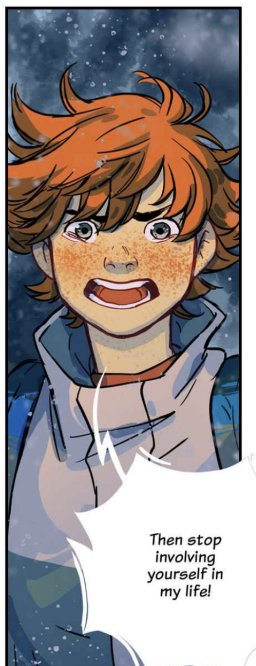
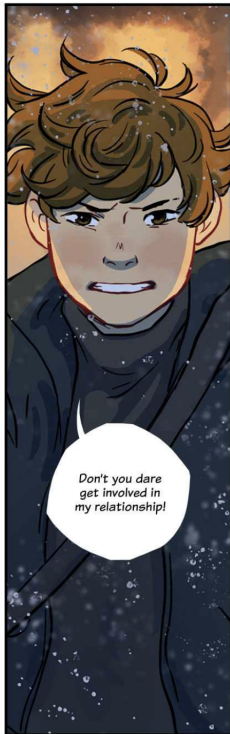
The first example comes from the episode entitled 05 216-218.<sup>47</sup> Due to the fact that the webtoon is an adaptation from print, the naming of the episode signals what chapter, in this case chapter 5, and what page, 216-18, that this update corresponds to. Depicted here on the left are two longer scrolling panels. Although seemingly small in this paper, the first panel fills up the whole phone screen and the second requires scrolling to see the whole image. Piet, pictured in the second panel, freezes for a moment after he runs into an old friend unexpectedly. The panel of Piet bleeds off of the screen on the sides and due to its larger size, the reader spends more time on the image. The reader pauses and experiences this moment with Piet. They sit with his emotions especially when they move onto the speech box below.

Are you for real?

<sup>47</sup> Brenner, *Green & Gold*, 05 216-218.



The speech box, although connected to the panel above due to the implication that this is Piet's thought, is also alone. In print comics, text is usually explicitly paired with a panel by being contained in it, overlapping it, or breaking out of the panel structure. The panel and text are often visually connected. In the webtoon format this is not always the case. Text can act similarly as a stand alone panel and can also encourage the reader to pause simply on a screen of text. Yet due to the nature of comics and the lingering image of the previous panel in the reader's mind, this pause is still an immersive experience further into the story



despite it being prompted by text. Here the pause not only allows the reader to be immersed in the emotional undertone of the scene, but also emphasizes the drama and tension in this moment as well. Stillness allows these to be noticed by the reader and gives them a chance to digest and reflect on the emotional moments of the narrative. In this next example, pictured to the left, Tim and Piet have gotten into a fight.<sup>48</sup> At the climax of this emotional moment both characters start yelling at the other.

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid, 07 343-352.

Each character is showcased in a long scrolling panel, too long to be perfectly seen all at once. This length emphasizes these moments, bringing attention to each of the characters, what they are feeling, and the tension between the two that has been brewing underneath the surface up until this moment.

It all culminates to a moment of stillness in the silent aftermath of the shouting match. Here, in the longest scrolling panel of the three, the reader is prompted to pause and sit in the moment after the fight. They are able to experience the emotionally charged stillness, sitting with the characters until the conscious choice of returning to action, in this case scrolling, resumes the forward progression of the narrative.

This is something unique to webtoons. In order for the story to proceed forward, constant bodily action, in the form of scrolling, is required. When reading a printed comic, the reader has a whole spread of information to digest. When this spread has multiple panels, each panel informs the other, even unconsciously, and the reader is able to continue with the progression of the narrative even without bodily action. They are able to do this for the whole spread until, once again, they have to turn the page. Although action here is required, it is quite different from the experience of reading a webtoon. In a webtoon, a moment of stillness is fully immersive since it requires a physical pause.

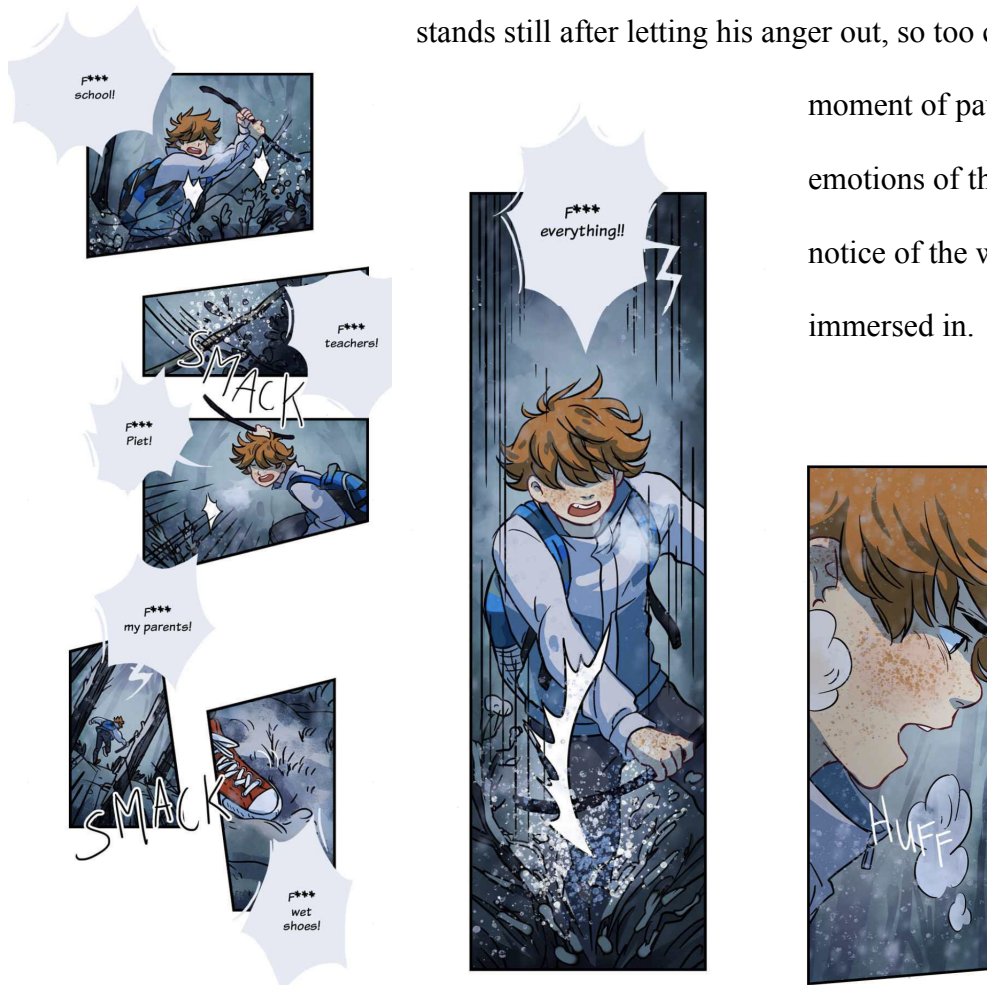
Webtoons also have the unique ability of having panels stand alone. The reader in this example can only see one panel at a time. Although the previous one might be lingering in their mind, future panels cannot be seen like they might in the print format. The reader is unaware of what is to come and can't be unconsciously moving ahead. This allows moments of stillness to

be more complete no matter where they are in the story since they are always right before a “page turn” or in this case a swipe of the finger.

The final example, pictured below, is an excerpt from the following update.<sup>49</sup> Unlike the other moments of stillness that have been set up by scrolling panels before, the final panel of this sequence occurs after many small, fast paced moments. Tim has run off into the woods angry, and the following panels reflect his anger and franticness through the overlapping spiky speech bubbles, the angular panel shapes, and the closeness of the panels. It all comes to a head with a large scrolling panel of Tim followed by a moment of stillness as he breathes heavily. Up to this moment the reader has been encouraged by the author to keep moving quickly through the panels, but the last panel slows things down to a pause. As Tim

stands still after letting his anger out, so too can the reader take a

moment of pause to reflect on the emotions of the scene and take notice of the world they are immersed in.



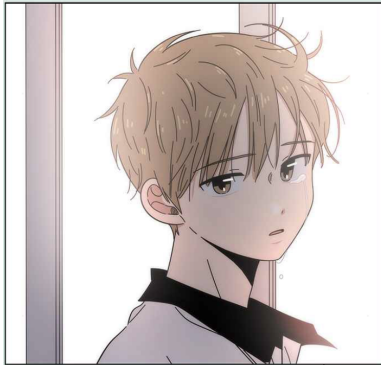
This next section analyzes the webtoon *Seasons of Blossom* and the immersive experiences of silence it portrays. Before going further, it must be said that this story explores topics of bullying, depression, self-harm, and suicide. If any of those topics are something that need to be skipped, feel free to move onto page 24 of the paper. As a quick summary in case this section is skipped, these examples of immersive stillness are closely linked with the characters' emotions. In these examples, these pauses often leave the reader with an emotional moment that needs to be digested and reflected on. These moments can even prompt the reader to reflect on their own world and life if they wish to do so. This experience can leave an emotional and even healing effect on the reader, as can be seen in the comments under these episodes.

*Seasons of Blossom* is a webtoon originally published in Korean that was then translated. The English translation of this webtoon will be referenced in this paper. This story, created by Hongduck and Nemone, centers around different characters for each season of the year and their love stories. Although the main characters are different for every season, they are all interconnected. The first main characters are later seen as side characters and previous side characters have their own moment to have their stories shared. The story starts out lighthearted with the two main characters pretending that they are dating each other, but as the story goes on and the reader learns more about surrounding characters, it soon explores topics of bullying,

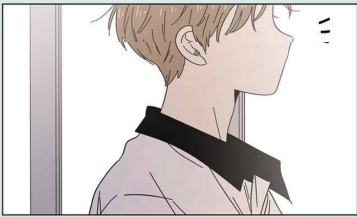


...THERE WAS  
NO WAY FOR ME  
TO KNOW...

BACK THEN...



...WHAT COULD  
HAVE EXHAUSTED  
A 17-YEAR-OLD  
SO MUCH.



depression, self-harm, and suicide. Throughout the narrative, the reader follows how these characters lean on one another during their struggles and how they heal from them.

In this example, pictured to the left, the creator utilizes the technique of the juxtaposition of standalone panels followed by stand alone speech boxes, back again.<sup>50</sup> Here the main character of this season, Somang is reflecting on her past memories of Hamin, visually represented by the light blue background. The back and forth of the narration and silent moments of the panels each slow down the reader and encourages them to reflect as Somang is doing. This reflection is gradual as each panel and each speech box is seen one at a time. The reader only gets bits and pieces of Somang's thoughts. It

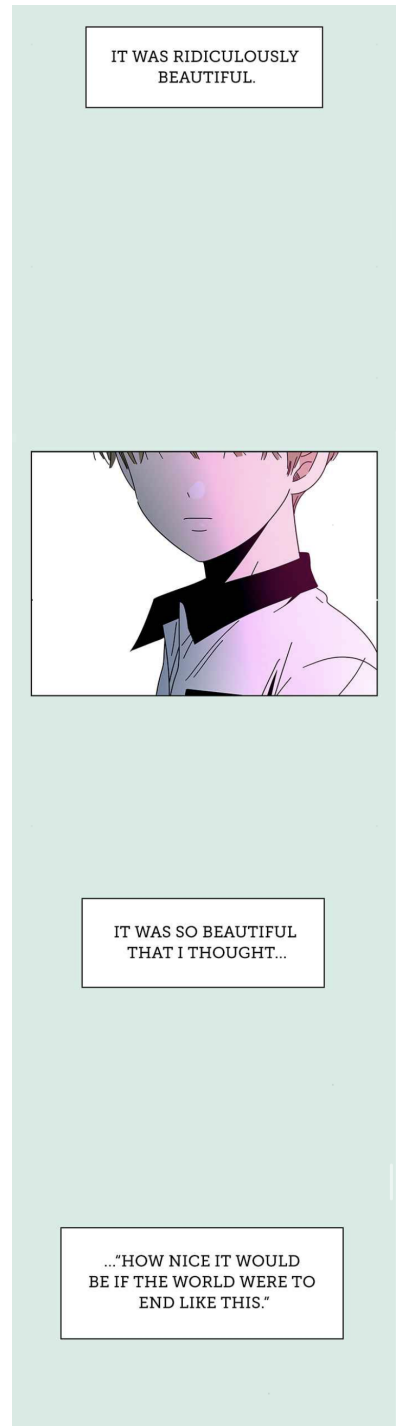
<sup>50</sup> Hongduck and Nemone, *Seasons of Blossom*, Season 2 Episode 34.

all leads up to the final text narration as the reader stops and contemplates what it must mean, the images of the previous panels still lingering in their mind. It hints to possible events to come, or in this case the inevitable end the reader already knows.

The next example, pictured below, uses a similar technique but this time relies more heavily on the text narration of Hamin's thoughts than the visuals of the panels.<sup>51</sup> The beginning and end thoughts are broken up in the middle by a large panel



that the reader has to scroll through in order to see the whole thing. There is no



<sup>51</sup> Ibid, Season 2 Episode 58.

indication of how long Hamin sits there and so the reader is invited to stay there with him and his thoughts. The scene continues until the final speech box. It is here that the reader realizes what Hamin is thinking and it is now that the reader recognizes this as the moment the season has building up towards, the last day of Hamin's life. It is this heavy realization, along with the lingering thoughts and visuals, that prompt the reader to pause and reflect. The reader reflects on the moments that have led up to this and the countless memories that they have seen, all from Somang's point of view up until now.

This episode is an emotional one. I cried reading it and I wasn't alone. With just a quick glance at the comments section under this episode it is easy to see that this one elicited an emotional response from many people.<sup>52</sup> It even prompted some to stop for a second and reflect on their own life. Many shared how they were able to relate to Hamin's struggle with depression and how this story helped them feel seen and heard through its accurate depiction.<sup>53</sup> This story, through its narrative, was able to offer them healing and I suggest that this is in part to its ability to encourage the reader to pause and reflect on their own experiences. Although not the same as the immersive stillness of the narrative, it is still an important ability that this webtoon can achieve. For even just a second the story encourages the reader to be still and reflect on their own life and what they care about.

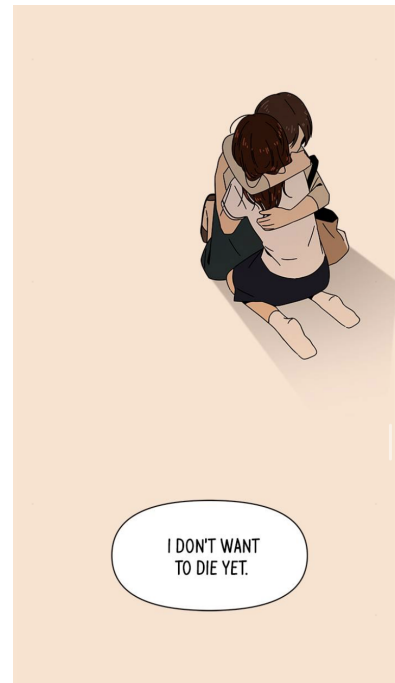
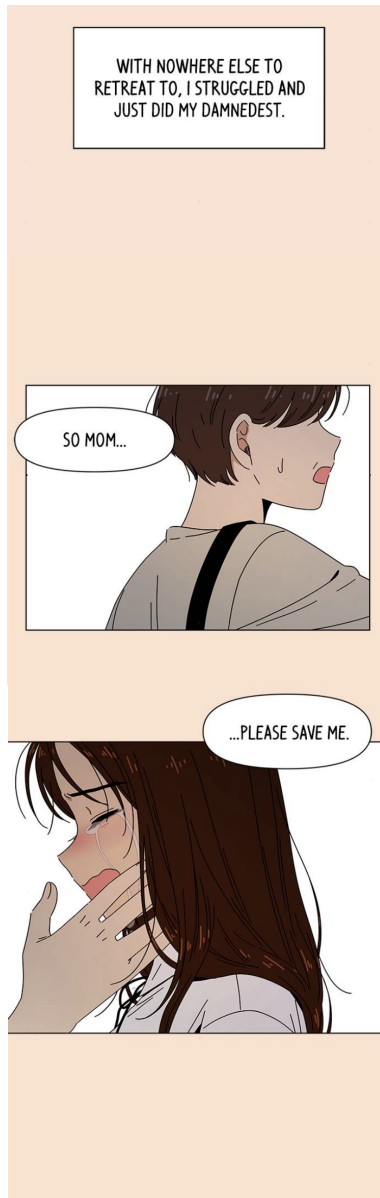
The final example, pictured on the following page, is another emotional moment, one that also made me and others cry.<sup>54</sup> This season follows Gael, Somang's best friend, and this episode depicts the moment when she decided that she needed to ask for help. In a flashback, the reader sees Gael reaching out to her mom, explaining the bullying and her struggles and the overwhelming feeling of wanting to die. After a panel of Gael crying to her mom to save her,

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid, Comments section of Season 2 Episode 58.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, Season 3 Episode 86 and its comments section.



there is a borderless panel that depicts Gael and her mom on the ground hugging each other. The reader is invited to sit with them in this emotional moment along with Gael's following statement. There is no sense of confinement and no clue to the amount of time passing in this moment, so there is a timeless quality that invites the reader to become still, stop scrolling, and be with them. Especially in such a heavy scene, this is a time to digest and work through the emotions allowing others to be given the time to turn that reflection to themselves.



The webtoon format is unique and requires the reader to read it differently, even if they don't notice. This means that the artist creating a webtoon has different techniques that they need to keep in mind when creating a webtoon from the start or adapting one from print. This format has a lot of potential for further study, especially as its own medium separate from print or webcomics that fit within the print standard. This paper only scratched the surface of what this format has to offer and even this concept of stillness can be studied further. A look into the adaptation process, the convenience of reading on the go, and the fact that webtoons from all around the world can be accessed from almost anywhere would be great places to start for further research. That being said, webcomics as a whole need more academic focus as well.

In our busy world of today finding a moment of stillness can be hard. That makes webtoons that promote stillness even more important. By using certain techniques, artists can encourage readers to pause on certain moments within the narrative. It is these immersive experiences that allow the reader to practice stillness, even if they are immersed in a world that is not their own. These moments can even encourage the reader to reflect on their own life, possibly resulting in cathartic and emotional responses that bring healing, all from the convenience of a mobile device. In a world that is always on the go, on a device that promotes constant activity, stories that provide a breath of fresh air and a place to rest are not only important but essential for our wellbeing. Artists should continue to create stories that encourage readers to be still and readers should go and experience these stories for themselves. It's easy. They're only a few taps away.

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## Appendix

As the next part of the panel, I'll be looking at interpretation and meaning-making through the lens of webtoons and how this newer format creates new meaning for its narratives. Interpretation is an essential aspect of reading comics. This medium relies on the collaboration of the reader and author—the story progresses through the reader's interpretation. Webtoons, a specific scrolling format for webcomics, have unique techniques at their disposal that have been adapted and evolved from those used for print. These tools have subconsciously changed the way that viewers read, and therefore interpret, the story—also changing the way they derive meaning from these narratives.

Academic scholarship surrounding webcomics and webtoons is severely lacking. Not much has been said about their history and little to no scholarship exists analyzing this scrolling webtoon form. This project strives to add to a new area of study that deserves more attention.

For this project, I focus on stillness as experienced through the webtoon format. Stillness in webtoons exists in ways that are unexpected, especially when those webtoons are often read on our phones, technology that usually promotes activity rather than stillness. These experiences prompt the reader to pause, allowing them to practice being still in order to experience the surrounding world, even if that world is fictional. Through this webtoons can encourage the reader to reflect on their own life, possibly bringing healing through storytelling, just from a swipe of a finger.

In the fuller project I go into greater detail of the evolution of comic formats on the web but due to time I will give only a brief overview. With the advent of the internet and the world wide web, artists started experimenting to see what this new technology meant for the future of comics. Yet many artists still followed conventions of print by structuring their comic as either a

newspaper strip or a comic page. Webcomics here will refer to any type of comic published on the world wide web.

In 2000, in his book *Reinventing Comics: The Evolution of an Art Form*, Scott McCloud looked ahead to what he saw as the possibilities of what webcomics could become. It was here that he observed the many webcomics being created at that time and noted that although many of them were technically digital, they really were “no more than ‘repurposed’ print at heart.” McCloud suggested that instead of thinking of the screen like a page, or even a strip, artists should instead think of the screen as a window into the story.

A webcomic could take virtually any size or shape an artist could imagine due to the possibilities of the web. The possibilities could be endless and so too could the canvas. Many have since experimented with and theorized about this infinite canvas. However, the infinite canvas offers a technical challenge to the artist, making the reality of creating more difficult to achieve than the initial idea. This led to many artists sticking with the standard formats already established.

It was in South Korea in 2003 that the format of webtoons as we know it today was established. *Love Story*, the work of Kang Full, set the standard for these “serialized, vertical scrolling color comics” as said by Brian Yecies, and Ae-Gyung in their book *South Korea’s Webtooniverse and the Digital Comic Revolution*.

Before we go on, to understand comics, one must first understand how to read comics and the collaboration that occurs between the reader and author. A comic is made up of two important parts: the panel and the gutter. By using closure, the reader is able to create meaning. McCloud describes closure as “observing the parts but perceiving the whole” in his book *Understanding Comics*. In comics, the reader only perceives parts of the narrative, whatever is

shown in the panels. The gutter, or the space between panels, ‘shows’ what the reader cannot see and through closure the reader can interpret what occurs. It is in these panel transitions that the reader engages and collaborates to create the narrative along with the author.

McCloud discusses many different panel transitions. I will focus on one—aspect-to-aspect. This transition is often used to “establish a mood or a sense of place” and it is in these quiet and thoughtful moments that time seems to stop. These transitions help us find the “moments between moments,” as McCloud calls them in *Reinventing Comics*. They not only convey stillness, but also invite the reader to engage and be immersed in it.

Panels are often an indication of how that time is being divided and changed. The duration of the time passing is often dependent on the content of the panels themselves. If someone is washing their hands or throwing something away we have a pretty good idea of how long these actions take. Some actions don’t have a specific amount of time assigned to them though. For example if there is a panel of a character sitting in an armchair reading, we as the reader could understand that to take place for a few minutes or the whole day or anything in between.

This time can be controlled further by altering the panels. The content, the number of panels on a page, the size, and the shape of a panel all have different ways of portraying time. Timelessness or a sense of stillness can be achieved by borderless panels since they are not confined to a space. Panels that bleed off of the page, or ‘bleeds,’ also have this effect as well. Larger panels can slow down the reader, even to a pause, especially when it comes after smaller panels, thus further emphasizing the moment that happens in the bigger one. When the content of a panel seems timeless or it is part of an aspect-to-aspect transition, it can set a mood and have a lingering effect.

The page turn also has great influence on how the reader will experience the stillness. Now we will take a look at two spreads from Tillie Walden's graphic novel *Are you Listening?* Here we can see examples of how stillness can feel more or less complete depending on where it is located on the page. In this first spread, pages six and seven, the reader is prompted to pause at the bottom of page six through an aspect-to-aspect transition that occurs between the fourth and fifth panel. However this stillness is not complete. Though the reader might pause here for a bit, they are still taking information from surrounding panels, even subconsciously moving onto the next page. On the following pages eight and nine we continue to follow the main character Bea. On page nine the reader is prompted to pause again but this is a more complete stillness. This larger panel is at the end of a spread. In order to move from this moment the reader needs to physically move to flip the page, thus breaking from stillness and moving on from the pause. Sure, the reader is able to return backwards and revisit the previous panels, but by having this large panel at the end of the spread, the reader is prompted to pause and linger in this moment of stillness for longer.

These same techniques are used in webtoons, although they have evolved and changed, resulting in a different immersive experience of stillness. The examples used in this project can be found on the WEBTOON platform. WEBTOON offers both a website and a mobile app for convenient reading on the go. The vertical screen of the phone is a good 'window' to look at the scrolling canvas through, further encouraging people to read webtoons on mobile devices. Although the platform is called WEBTOON, it is important to note that "webtoon" is also the name of the format itself, and there are many different platforms that host stories created in this format.

*Green & Gold* is an ongoing webtoon created by Lisa Brenner. This coming-of-age story focuses on characters Piet and Tim as they attend Tannenberg Boarding School set in Germany. The story follows Piet and Tim as they navigate through their emotions and relationships throughout their year at Tannenberg.

First created in the comic book format, each page was then cut and reformatted to be a webtoon. Although *Green & Gold* was not created as a webtoon but rather adapted to fit this format, we will be analyzing *Green & Gold* as a webtoon itself.

In the fuller project I offer a variety of examples from both *Green & Gold* along with the webtoon *Seasons of Blossom*, but I only have time to show two here today. Along with stills of the panels, I also have a video to showcase how one would encounter this scrolling format. Depicted here are two longer scrolling panels. The first panel fills up the whole phone screen and the second requires scrolling to see the whole image. Piet, pictured in the second panel, freezes for a moment after he runs into an old friend unexpectedly. The panel of Piet bleeds off of the screen on the sides and due to its larger size, the reader is prompted to spend more time on the image. The reader pauses and experiences this moment with Piet. They sit with his emotions especially when they move onto the speech box below.

The speech box, although connected to the panel above due to the implication that this is Piet's thought, is also alone. In print comics, text is explicitly paired with a panel by being contained in it, overlapping it, or breaking out of the panel structure. The panel and text are often visually connected. In the webtoon format this is not always the case. Text can act similarly as a stand alone panel and can also encourage the reader to pause simply on a screen of text. Yet due to the nature of comics and the lingering image of the previous panel in the reader's mind, this

pause is still an immersive experience further into the story despite it being prompted by text rather than images.

Here the pause not only allows the reader to be immersed in the emotional undertone of the scene, but also emphasizes the drama and tension in this moment as well. Stillness allows these nuances to be noticed by the reader and gives them a chance to digest and reflect on the emotional moments of the narrative.

For this example, Tim and Piet have gotten into a fight. At the climax of this emotional moment both characters start yelling at the other. Each character is showcased in a long scrolling panel, too long to be perfectly seen all at once. This length emphasizes these moments, bringing attention to each of the characters, what they are feeling, and the tension between the two that has been brewing underneath the surface up until this moment.

It all culminates to a moment of stillness, for both the reader and the characters, in the silent aftermath of the shouting match. Here, in the longest scrolling panel of the three, the reader is prompted to pause and sit in the moment after the fight. They are able to experience the emotionally charged stillness, pausing with the characters until the conscious choice of returning to action, in this case scrolling, resumes the forward progression of the narrative.

This is something unique to webtoons. In order for the story to proceed forward, constant bodily action, in the form of scrolling, is required. When reading a printed comic, as seen in *Are You Listening?* the reader has a whole spread of information to digest. The reader is able to continue with the progression of the narrative even without bodily action. They are able to do this for the whole spread until, once again, they have to turn the page. Although action here is required, it is quite different from the experience of reading a webtoon. In a webtoon, a moment of stillness is fully immersive since it requires a physical pause as well.



Webtoons also have the unique ability of having panels stand alone. The reader in this example can only see one panel at a time, and even then it is only a partial view. Although the previous one might be lingering in their mind, future panels cannot be seen like they might in the print format. The reader is unaware of what is to come and can't be subconsciously moving ahead. This allows moments of stillness to be more complete no matter where they are in the story since they are always right before a "page turn" or in this case a swipe of the finger.

The webtoon format is unique and requires the reader to read and interpret information differently, even if they don't notice. This means that the artist creating a webtoon has different techniques that they need to keep in mind when creating one from scratch or adapting one from print. This format has a lot of potential for further study, especially as its own medium separate from print or webcomics that fit within the print standard. This project only scratched the surface of what this format has to offer and even this concept of stillness can be studied further. A look into the adaptation process, the convenience of reading on the go, and the fact that webtoons from all around the world can be accessed from almost anywhere would be great places to start for further research.

In our busy world of today finding a moment of stillness can be hard. That makes webtoons that promote stillness even more important. By using certain techniques, artists can encourage readers to pause on certain moments within the narrative. It is these immersive experiences that allow the reader to practice stillness, even if they are immersed in a world that is not their own. These moments can even encourage the reader to reflect on their own life, possibly resulting in cathartic and emotional responses that bring healing, all from the convenience of a mobile device. In a world that is always on the go, on a device that promotes

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