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ARTICLE

Collecting for Closure

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Abstract
In this paper, I consider a peculiar feature of the aesthetics of collecting comics: collecting to complete a narrative. Unlike other forms of narrative engagement, comics are often read out of narrative sequence, and so collectors hunt for missing issues to fill in an incomplete story, leading to a "gappy" experience of the narrative. This "gappy" experience, I argue, has its own aesthetic quality and value, and I connect my analysis of the experience to both classical Kantian aesthetics and contemporary neuropsychology.

Keywords: aesthetics; comics; collecting; closure; neuropsychology; SEARCHING

1. *New Mutants* #45

Although, like most kids, I had read a comic here or there, the comic that turned me into a *collector* was *New Mutants* #45. I bought that comic sometime in the last week of July or the first week of August, 1986, on a ferry between Vancouver and Vancouver Island. I was 11 years old. It is funny, because *New Mutants* #45 is a pretty low-key story—not the sort of thing you expect will turn a kid into a diehard lifelong collector. The story is about a group of superpowered teenagers who go to a dance at another high school, where they meet Larry. Larry seems shy, but nice, but then he makes a derogatory joke about mutants, not knowing his new acquaintances *are* mutants. In the Marvel Universe, anti-mutant sentiment is a stand-in for homophobia and racism. So, Larry's stuck his foot in his mouth. The thing is, *Larry* is a mutant, too, and only told the joke to try to seem cool. The New Mutants do not know this, so they shun him. Some other students from Larry's school target him with some bullying, calling him a mutant and threatening him. They did not know Larry was a mutant, either—they were just messing with him—but the threat hits home, and Larry kills himself.

Again, I was 11 years old. I did not know comics could be like this.[1] I also did not know anything about mutants. I might have heard of the *X-Men*, of which *The New Mutants* was a spin-off, but this was all pretty new to me. Who were these characters, who seemed so much like ordinary people? This was a self-contained little story, but it raised so many questions, and I needed to know more. So, I picked up the next issue, which brought in the X-Men and a host of other characters—Moira MacTaggart, the Morlocks, Magus—and so more questions. In search of answers, I started reading backward, picking up what back issues I could find and afford while continuing to buy each new copy of *The New Mutants* that came out.

This paper is about the aesthetics of collecting—and, in particular, a feature of collecting *comics*. There has not been a lot written about the aesthetics of collecting, and what little *has* been written has mostly focused on the aesthetics of a *collection*. I am interested, instead, in something aesthetic in the *act* of collecting.

[1]Among other things, Kitty Pryde drops the N-word. It turns out, she does that a fair bit, as I would eventually discover in *Uncanny X-Men* #196 and the X-Men graphic novel, *God Loves, Man Kills*.

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Like most comics of its time, *The New Mutants* was a serialized story, told in mostly, monthly installments.[2] You could pick up new issues off the news stand, at a corner store, or—apparently—on a ferry. Or, if you had one nearby, you could go to your local comic store. And if you wanted *older* issues, from months or years past, the comic store is usually where you *had* to go. But the back-issue selection of any comic store is inevitably spotty (and an 11-year-old's allowance is scant), so I had to fill in that story in pieces. Perhaps I bought another recent issue of the series, or maybe I went back to the beginning, if I could find some early issues—I cannot actually remember the order I did all of this in, but it was piecemeal. The series had, at that point, been running for about 4 years, and I had a lot of catching up to do. I would compare the experience to starting a lengthy novel at Chapter 45, and continuing to read forward in the book, but also reading randomly from Chapters 1 to 44 until you had read them all. This is a process that took *years*.

Of course, just as one does not just watch a single show on television, I started collecting other comics as well. I bought *The Justice League of America* just as the original series was coming to an end. I bought *The All-Star Squadron*, a series based on nostalgia for an era in comics decades before I was born.

It became clear to my parents that this was my thing, and for Christmas in 1989, they gave me a book—*Comic Book Collecting for Fun and Profit*, by Mike Benton. In the opening chapter, Benton makes some passing mention of collecting comics for something like *aesthetic* reasons—"to study the works of these individual creators," to "read the latest exploits of a favorite comic character and share in his growth and development" (Benton, 1985, p. 3). Under the heading, "What This Book Is All About," Benton begins:

> Collecting comics should always be done first for the personal pleasure and satisfaction it gives. Yet comics can be bought, sold, and traded as investment items, just like any other collectible. (Benton, 1985, p. 7)

With that, the "fun" part of collecting is put aside, and the next 140 pages are spent on the "profit" part. Then-14-year-old me was not interested in the profit part. I collected because I wanted to know the rest of the story. I bought new issues to keep up, and I bought back issues to fill in gaps in the narrative told so far.[3] And I do not think my experience was unusual in this regard.

2. Gappy Narratives

The gappy experience of narratives is not itself altogether unusual. Back in the day, if you missed an episode of your favorite television series, you might have to wait around for a rerun to catch up. You might have seen *Aliens* in the theatre, not knowing it was a sequel, and then had to rent *Alien* to fill in what you were missing. You might pick up Michael Connelly's novel *The Last Coyote* at the airport, only to discover that it was the fourth Harry Bosch novel, making several references to events and characters in the earlier books. A trip to your local library might be in order.

Whenever a story is told serially, you can, of course, read the parts out of order. But two things made reading comics out of order different from other gappy experiences of narratives: the sheer number of potential back issues, and the scarcity of copies. There might be a lot to catch up on, and they might have very limited availability. But, unlike missing episodes of a TV show, it was at least *possible* to hunt down these issues.

[2]Annuals and Special Editions would be added to the count.

[3]Benton identifies several other reasons for collecting comics, including a simple impulse to collect and collecting for nostalgia. Others have identified consumerism and a desire for immortality as the impulses that drive collectors (see Blom, 2003; Muensterberger, 1994, respectively). Kevin Melchionne (1999) argues that some collectors collect to cultivate their aesthetic tastes. Importantly, several of these writers are talking about collecting in terms of *building a collection*, where I am talking about the more primary *act of collecting*.

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New Mutants #45 had a cover date of November 1986. This is not the month that it was published, but about 3 months after that. Back in the day, if a newsstand did not sell a comic by the cover date, the proprietor could tear off the cover and send *that* back to the publisher for credit. Coverless comics were supposed to be pulped, creating a long-term scarcity effect.[4] Eventually, comics specialty stores started holding on to their unsold issues, building the familiar back-issue bins.

Like most comics of its time, *New Mutants* #45 was written with the assumption that it might be picked up by readers unfamiliar with the series or its characters. The first panel of the story lays out the basics. Then, within the next few pages, each of our major characters is named, along with some little tidbit about them. Illyana Rasputin is "Magik," a teleporter and ruler of "Limbo." Sam Guthrie is "Cannonball"—he can fly, and he is dating a rock star. Some of this happens in dialogue. Some of it is internal monologue. Some of it comes from our narrator. There is a lot of set-up weaved into the story, but more questions inevitably accumulate as we read the issue, hinting at the 4 years of story the new reader has missed.

Collecting and reading a given comics series—like *The New Mutants*—in this gappy way had a promised conclusion: eventually getting to close that last narrative gap, finishing the puzzle. But the fictional world of Marvel Comics also promised the near-*im*possibility of filling all of those gaps—of reading *the whole story*. In an important sense, *The New Mutants* is not a stand-alone series—indeed, very, very few Marvel series are.

Marvel Comics had, since Stan Lee helmed the ship, been built on the idea that this was all one big story. From the 1960s onward, Marvel's marketing was very much grounded in what the kids now call FOMO: *fear of missing out*. Comics scholar Douglas Wolk, who set out to read every Marvel Comic ever printed—all 540,000+ pages—notes that the Marvel creators from the 1960s and 1970s "figured out how to make the individual narrative melodies of all of their comics harmonize with one another, turning each episode into a component of a gigantic epic" (Wolk, 2023, p. 4). Since all of the characters existed in the same fictional world—and most of them in the same fictional version of New York City—Marvel heroes bumped into each other all the time (often with their fists). Comics scholars Jordan Raphael and Tom Spurgeon suggest, "Marvel was creating brand loyalty by paying attention to a wider Marvel tale, offering crucial details of a continuing and interconnected story to those fans who cared enough to look closely" (Raphael & Spurgeon, 2003, p. 118). All of those stories were in one way or another intertwined. Characters in one series referred to characters and events from others.[5] The impacts of important events carried across titles. Eventually, the writers and editors started dropping little footnotes into comics panels, so readers would know exactly which current or back issues they needed to hunt down to connect all the pieces together. Since all of the stories were connected, if you missed an issue of *Captain America* or *Black Panther* or *Man-Thing*, you risked forever missing a piece of the puzzle, and (thanks to those footnotes and in-text references) you knew it. So, Marvel Fanatics did not *just* buy *The Fantastic Four* or *The Avengers*. They bought *everything*. At least, that was the idea.

New Mutants #46 follows from *New Mutants* #45, but it *also* follows from *Uncanny X-Men* #211, helping to kick off the "Mutant Massacre" storyline, which would also spill over into *X-Factor*, *Power Pack*, and *Thor*, and set up narrative echoes that still reverberate today. "Crossovers" like this —where the narrative thread of one comic weave through those of another—became more and more common, promising more and more FOMO for continuing readers. In other words, comics

[4]Prior to the era of comic book collecting, comics were largely treated as disposable, thrown out like the Sunday funnies, leading to extreme scarcity of pre-1970s comics.

[5]The Marvel Cinematic Universe follows precisely the same model.

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creators wrote their stories to account for—and to *exploit*—exactly this "gappy" sort of experience of the story.[6]

The primary feature of this gappy experience, I would suggest, is a certain sort of *wonder*: *wonder* about who these characters are, about their relationships to each other, about how they fit into this much, much bigger story. The English "wonder" comes from the Old English *wundor*, probably derived from the German *Wunde* or *wound*: an opening, a gap (Parsons, 1969, p. 85). If I next picked up *New Mutants* #1, I would learn that the team originally had five members, and not all eight we find in issue #45.[7] So, when did the others join the team? I would also learn that the story of the New Mutants *actually* starts in *Marvel Graphic Novel #4*, which would prove even more elusive—it would have had a smaller print run, and did not fit in back-issue boxes, so it was more of a pain for stores to stock.[8] Reading *New Mutants* #1 answers some of the questions raised in reading issue #45, but inevitably raises others. As gaps are filled, the field of possibilities—of what happens in those remaining narrative gaps—narrows, leading to more precise questions, a more directed kind of wonder. Unlike other gaps in my knowledge—*when was Saskatchewan founded? why are there only two kinds of egg-laying mammals?*—the wonder that I feel about these narrative gaps is something *occurrent*: something I *experience*. These are questions that I actively *wonder* about. Re-reading the comics in my collection refreshes the questions, should they drift to the background.

3. Closure and SEARCHING

Discussing reading in terms of questions and answers might bring to mind Noël Carroll's theory of *erotetic narration*—a theory he first introduced in 1984, and spent the next several decades expanding and refining.[9] Erotetic narration is the telling of a story in a way that earlier and later scenes and events are related to one another as questions are related to answers. "Such narration," Carroll says, "which is at the core of popular narration, proceeds by generating a series of questions that the plot then goes on to answer" (Carroll, 1990, p. 130). This sort of narrative structure might be most obvious in whodunits—and, indeed, Carroll originally introduces his theory as a theory of *suspense*—but Carroll eventually expands his theory to take in a much broader range of narratives. "Page turners" are those that keep their readers entranced in this question-and-answer format. Cliffhanger serials depend on it.

Carroll's theory is ultimately a theory of *closure*. And in literary terms, closure is discussed almost exclusively in terms of endings. The presumption is that the ending is where everything comes together—where all of the questions have ideally been answered. Carroll notes:

[6]At right around the same time that Marvel Comics was leaning into its one-big-story strategy, DC Comics was trying to get a handle on its own. Veteran comics writer Marv Wolfman was pegged by DC to write the 12-part limited series, *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, which would spill across nearly every series that DC published. The idea was that *Crisis* would clean things up—trim the unwieldiness of what Roy T. Cook (2013) calls a *massive, serialized, collaborative fiction*. Wolfman recalls: "DC continuity was so confusing, no new reader could easily understand it, while older readers had to keep miles-long lists to set things straight. And the writers … well, we were always stumbling over each other trying to figure out simple answers to difficult questions" (Greenberger, 2005, p. 5). But *Crisis*, which resulted in the cancellation of many comics series and the rebooting of most of the others, was as much a marketing ploy as a narrative solution. Wolfman recalls: "I felt, as did many, that although DC fans understood the multiple Earths perfectly and without trouble, it was a problem to attract new readers … By simplifying the DC universe I believed we could attract new readers, which we did" (Figueiredo & Aragão, 2009, n.p.). The last issue of *Crisis* was published in December of 1985 (cover date March 1986), so I would have just missed that. But, as the repercussions of the Crisis story spread into just about every series that DC published, including *Justice League of America* and *All-Star Squadron*, my own imagination was being opened to an entire fictional universe just as DC was working to collapse it.

[7]One member, Xi-an Coy Manh—"Karma"—does not appear in issue #45, but plays a central role in #46.

[8]It was a good deal more expensive than the average comic book, so specialty stores would have been more conservative in ordering it, and it would not have been available on spinner racks at convenience stores or on ferries.

[9]See Carroll (1984, pp. 65–89).

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> The notion of closure refers to the sense of finality with which a piece of music, a poem, or a story concludes. … Closure is a matter of concluding rather than merely stopping or ceasing or coming to a halt or crashing. When an artist effects closure, then we feel that there is nothing remaining for her to do. There is nothing left to be done that hasn't already been discharged. Closure yields a feeling of completeness. (Carroll, 2007, p. 2)

Porter Abbott centers such closure in terms of conflict: "When a narrative resolves a conflict, it achieves closure, and this usually comes at the end of the narrative. We expect stories to end" (Abbott, 2008, p. 56).

Carroll is careful to distinguish his *erotetic* theory from another theory of closure tracing back to Aristotle: that narrative satisfaction is tied to the *causal chains* traced through the story.[10] Aristotle contends:

> The object of the imitation [in tragedy] is not only a complete action but such things as stir up pity and fear, and this is best achieved when the events are unexpectedly interconnected. This, more than what happens accidentally and by chance, will arouse wonder. (Aristotle, 1989, p. 1452a)

Edward Branigan gives the modern version:

> A narrative ends when its cause and effect chains are judged to be totally delineated. There is a reversibility in that the ending situation can be traced back to the beginning; or, to state it another way, the ending is seemingly entailed by the beginning. This is the feature of narrative often referred to as closure. (Branigan, 1992, p. 20)[11]

Although an individual *issue* of a comic might provide closure in either the causal or erotetic sense, comic book *series* rarely wrap up so neatly. Series typically rattle on—for years, sometimes for decades—until they are cancelled, often swapping out writers, all the time trailing new narrative threads behind them.[12] Carroll notes something similar with soap operas, which he describes as having "indefinitely large, expanding, and wide-open middles":

> Even if *All My Children* and *The Guiding Light*—which began life on the radio and then sprawled onto television—ever go off the air, they would never be able to tie up into a tidy package all the plot lines they have set in motion. (Carroll, 2007, p. 2)

Soap operas "lack closure," Carroll says, and presumably he would say the same for the majority of comic series.

Curiously, however, one of the first to introduce the notion of closure into literary studies, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, is quick to note that closure is not merely a matter of endings:

> [T]he occurrence of the terminal event is a confirmation of expectations that have been established by the structure of the sequence, and is usually distinctly gratifying. […] Closure need not, however, be temporal; that is, it is not always a matter of endings. […] [A]lthough

[10]"[T]he scene [in *Misery*] where Annie confronts Paul with her knowledge flows quite coherently, though not by causal entailment, from earlier scenes in the story. The basis of that coherence is not causal; rather it is erotetic" (Carroll, 1990, pp. 131–132).

[11]See also, for example, Richter (1974) and Gerlach (1985).

[12]It is unusual for a comic series of any length to retain the same writer for its duration. Chris Claremont wrote the *New Mutants* up to issue #54, when the series was handed off to Louise Simonson. Simonson wrote the series up to issue #97, handing it over to Rob Liefeld and Fabian Nicieza, who ended the series run with #100, continuing the story in *X-Force* #1. Nicieza co-writes issue #91 with Simonson, and Dwight Zimmerman fills in as the writer for issue #92. Nicieza writes *New Mutants* Annual #5, published after the end of the series. Even Claremont's and Simonson's runs are unusually long.

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> one can speak of closure in works of spatial art it is obviously inappropriate to speak of it there as a quality of finality or conclusiveness. Whether spatially or temporally perceived, a structure appears "closed" when it is experienced as integral: coherent, complete, and stable. (Smith, 1968, p. 2)

We associate closure with the satisfaction of a "proper ending" (Holland, 2009, p. 164). But, of course, we associate closure with endings because we tend to engage with stories *linearly*. The association of closure with endings is really just an accident of how we normally take in stories. If we read story-parts out of order, closure will be achieved as the narrative gaps are closed, and the story is completed from the outward in.

Smith's explanation suggests that closure is as much a psychological state as it is a formal literary one, and theorists tend to muddy the waters by describing closure in both senses, oscillating between them freely.[13] Certainly, closure is typically associated with narrative structure, and is often described as a sense of satisfaction found in the completeness of the story. Norman Holland writes: "We need to have the loose ends tied up, with no dangling entanglements and no annoying whys left over… We need closure" (Holland, 2009, p. 166).

Carolyn Korsmeyer makes some similar observations about *curiosity*—the sort of engagement one feels with an artwork, which drives active search for discovery. Korsmeyer notes that "the *satisfaction* of curiosity is an artistic virtue" (Korsmeyer, 2023, n.p.). That is to say that it is *good*—artistically—when the artist rewards curiosity. And, where the questions raised by a story are in principle unanswerable, or where the story provides an answer that actually reduces active engagement, Korsmeyer suggests a negative aesthetic outcome.

Sometimes the gappy experience of narrative is the deliberate effect of a work's formal structure. A story may begin *in media res*—in the middle of the action—and require backtracking to complete the story. A story may leave out a chunk of narrative completely. Robert Rodriguez's 2007 film *Planet Terror* (making up part of the Rodriguez/Tarantino double-feature, *Grindhouse*) leaned into its vintage aesthetic by introducing a "missing reel" at the height of the story's dramatic action. There was an awful lot in that missing reel, apparently: several separate storylines have come together as unconnected characters have found their way together to the Bone Shack diner, Sheriff Hague has been shot, El Wray's mysterious origins have been revealed, and the diner has caught on fire. It is a gag, of course, because there is no missing reel to be found, and so that bit of missing middle—that narrative wound—is really a *part* of the work. The gappiness in comics collecting is not really a part of the *work*, but of how the work is *encountered.* And the issues that would fill those narrative gaps and complete the story *are* out there to be found. And so we hunt.[14]

In looking to explain the pleasure associated with literary closure, Norman Holland looks to the core structure of Jaak Panksepp's foundational theory of affective neuroscience, and in particular to one of the seven primary process command systems proposed by Panksepp—what he calls "the SEEKING system" (Panksepp, 1998). Panksepp isolated the seven primary emotional action systems by means of electrical stimulation of the mammalian (including the human) brain, locating the SEEKING system in the extended lateral hypothalamic corridor, running from the ventral tegmental area in the upper brain stem (which mediates dopamine release) to the nucleus accumbens (the neural interface between motivation and action). Panksepp refers to the SEEKING system as an "incentive or appetitive motivational system" engaging a number of behaviors, from

[13]Being this is a paper on comics, I would be remiss in failing to mention Scott McCloud's discussion of closure in Chapter 3 of *Understanding Comics.* McCloud takes more of a gestalt approach to closure than literary theorists tend to, calling it the "phenomenon of *observing the parts* but *perceiving the whole*" (McCloud, 1993, p. 63). Still, McCloud discusses our connecting the discrete panels of a comic together as a unified whole as a form of closure.

[14]Danet and Katriel (1989) discuss striving for closure in collecting, connecting the drive with the aim of the completist and the goal of perfection: to have an entire set, to fill those remaining gaps. But Danet and Katriel aren't talking about narrative gaps—simply missing issues in a series' run.

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hunting food to the philosophical search for higher meaning (Panksepp, 1998, p. 145, citing Robinson & Berridge, 1993). While the SEEKING system is found across mammal species—and perhaps beyond—in humans, Panksepp suggests, the feelings arising from SEEKING are "intense interest," "engaged curiosity," and "eager anticipation" (Panksepp, 1998, p. 149). Although SEEKING is activated by the presence of dopamine and, subjectively, activation of the SEEKING system feels introspectively like "liking," the "wanting" provoked by the SEEKING system arises from separate psychological processes and neural substrates.[15] Panksepp notes a distinction in the respective affects: "The affective state [of SEEKING] does not resemble the pleasurable feelings we normally experience when we indulge in various consummatory behaviors. Instead, it resembles the energization organisms feel when they are anticipating rewards" (Panksepp, 1998, p. 146). Think of this as the pleasure of the *hunt* rather than the pleasure of the *feast.*[16]

The collector who simply waits for the next issue is not *seeking*; he is *waiting*—and there is not much he can do but wait. The pleasure of seeking is not the pleasure of delayed satisfaction; it is the pleasure in the ongoing *act* of hunting. And there is a pleasure in the hunt *distinct* from the pleasure in consuming the missing piece—the satisfaction of completion normally associated with closure. When it comes to searching for that missing issue, the pleasure is not merely found in the closing of the gap. There is an active and distinct pleasure in the gap itself. Panksepp notes: "As the animal encounters a need-relevant reward object and shifts into the consummatory mode, the appetitive urge to move forward ceases temporarily." The pleasure of consuming the find temporarily replaces the pleasure of the hunt. But, for comics collectors, the hunt will resume.

4. Aesthetic Appreciation

Now, what about all of this makes it an *aesthetic* matter? Through the protracted process of seeking, the reader can only *wonder* about what is missing: wonder about the plot, wonder about the telling of the story, wonder about how character A got from where she was to where she is, wonder about character B's ultimate fate. The imagination is left to its own devices, and *this* sounds like it has the ingredients of Immanuel Kant's (1790/1987) aesthetic model.

At the core of Kant's aesthetics is the idea of free play of the imagination, in which the faculties of the imagination and understanding operate in harmony, but without the understanding driving the imagination toward some goal, as it tends to do in our engagement with the world. Essentially perceptual in nature, free play of the imagination involves the unstructured engagement with an aesthetic object.

Kant's notion of imagination is the faculty that allows one to project beyond given sensory data to probable sequels—to following a pattern and anticipating the next step. Kant centrally locates this sort of aesthetic judgment in the appreciation of nature, but allows that it might be extended to appreciating things like decorative wallpaper and instrumental music. In listening to Bach's *Fugue in G Minor*, we get a sense of the melody forming the spine of the work. The melody reappears in a different key, forming a sort of question-and-answer format, and we start to get a sense of harmonic relationships developing, and we start making predictions about what will happen next. This is free play of the imagination—the open engagement with the aesthetic object.

Kant does not say anything in the third *Critique* about engagement with narratives, and literature always makes for an uncomfortable subject of aesthetics, where aesthetics is focused on the sensory. Still, stories engage our imagination in the same way that Bach's composition does: we project how we think things will go based on how they have gone. And what is true in this way for the *next* issue

[15]See Robinson and Berridge (1993).

[16]Panksepp might disapprove of my use of "pleasure" in describing the feeling associated with *hunting*, as it risks conflating the feeling of the hunt with the feeling of consumption, but Panksepp himself suggests that arousal of this system will produce a "pleasant energy" (Panksepp, 1998, p. 150).

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of the comic would seem true for missed issues—narrative gaps. We, the collectors, project possibilities for how those gaps are filled. We *imagine* how the story might go. And when the gap *is* filled, we may be satisfied or dissatisfied with what we find. It may align with our projections, and it may not. If it does, we may be satisfied, but we may also be disappointed in its predictability. If we are surprised, we may likewise be satisfied or dissatisfied, depending on how well that surprise meshes with the story we already know. But *that* affect arises in the consummation, and is distinct from the pleasure arising in the free play of the imagination that accompanies the hunt itself.

To qualify as *pure* aesthetic judgment for Kant, free play of the imagination must be disinterested and non-conceptual. For my judgment to be pure, I cannot be judging what I perceive against some model of perfection (the perfect sunset, the perfect painting, the perfect story), and I cannot have a personal stake in the existence of the object being judged. Pure aesthetic judgment is characterized by its *purposiveness*—by having the *feel* of a goal-driven activity, but without any actual goal driving the process. As I have described it, however, comic collecting tends to be a *very* interested activity (I want to get my hands on that missing issue) and is associated with a goal (closure). However, the imaginative engagement with narrative gaps is not goal-driven in the way that, say, solving a math problem or trying to out-deduce Hercule Poirot might be. I am actively imagining the ways that narrative gap might be filled, but that experience will be more like *wonder* than trying to determine the "correct" answer.

The purity of aesthetic judgment for Kant is the necessary foundation for grounding the universality of claims of beauty. The impurity in our case would mean that universal claims are unjustified. This makes sense: the imaginative experience of narrative gaps would be *entirely* subjective, depending on what comics you collect, and what issues you are missing. Moreover, with hundreds of titles published each month, comics collectors are probably more aware than most that their tastes and preferences are personal. But we can all, I think, appreciate others' appreciation and engagement with the comics that appeal to them.

It may be that the pleasure arising from free play of the imagination comes from the SEEKING system, as Panksepp characterizes it, and it may not. Certainly, any collector hunting to fill a gap in a collection may expect to enjoy the pleasure of the hunt absent any imaginative engagement as I have described it. But it is hard to ignore how well the phenomenon maps onto the neuropsychological model. Although behaviors associated with the SEEKING system tend to be goal-driven, the system is also activated in open exploration behaviors. SEEKING need not even be conceptual in the rich sense that Kant has in mind—Panksepp's most famous studies are on rats. What makes pure aesthetic judgment of interest to Kant is not that it engages some special faculty in us, but that it uses our normal faculties in an interesting way.[17] Curiosity, Korsmeyer submits, "is a dynamic emotion that enjoins active participation in discovery"—and, I would suggest, *rewards* active participation in imaginative exploration.[18]

5. Modern Collecting

While many comics collectors will, I think, find something familiar in the account I've given, I expect that others will find that my account does not align with their own comic-collecting experience.

[17]As Kant describes aesthetic engagement in terms of free play of the imagination, we might think of Panksepp's PLAY system rather than the SEEKING system. But the PLAY system is specifically activated in social activities. The SEEKING and PLAY systems "appear to be independent and at times mutually exclusive" (Panksepp, 1998, p. 283). Kant's free play, a solitary activity, seems to align more closely with the pleasure of the SEEKING system than that of the PLAY system.

[18]This will be distinct from what C. Thi Nguyen (2020) calls *striving play*, an activity in gameplay (and elsewhere in life) where one takes up a goal for the sake of the activity of struggling for it. The hunt to fill the gap may well be a struggle, but the imaginative play in that gap is not. Perhaps one might engage in such play for its own sake, but then one would have little reason to continue the hunt.

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Many comics collectors are, as Mike Benton predicted, collecting for profit—or, at the very least, for building a collection of rare and valuable objects.[19] Back in the 1980s, back-issue bins were stuffed with comics in plastic "poly" bags sealed with tape, and supported with stiff cardboard sheets to keep them from bending. Behind the cash register of every comic store were some of the store's *really* special issues—high-priced and rare, perhaps sealed in specialty "mylar" bags—stiffer plastic sleeves designed for archival storage, each bag costing as much as a new comic book. You might open up one of those "poly" bags to get at the goodies within, but you probably did not pull your *Incredible Hulk* #181 out of its mylar bag and leaf through it while you ate your Captain Crunch.[20] Today, those high-end comics are sold in sealed CGC "slabs" with a sort of guaranteed grade of its condition.[21] These slabs are not intended to be opened again. Certainly, those comics collectors looking for rare issues like these, or simply to complete their collections, will engage the SEARCHING system, but have no particular interest in the narratives those comics contain.

Other collectors who *are* interested in the stories, and who are looking to fill their narrative gaps, will find it much easier to do than I have described. I've never read *Justice League of America* #205, a curious gap in my collection, the third part in a three-issue arc featuring the Royal Flush Gang. I have been wondering for years about the story. I never managed to stumble across it in a back-issue bin when I was actively collecting. I could go online today and buy a copy for about $8, but I probably won't. It's too… easy. Alternatively, the issue would be included in *The Justice League of America Bronze Age Omnibus*, Vol. 4, if DC ever gets around to publishing it. Those hardcover collections tend to run about $100. So, there are options, but they are not as appealing as the hunt used to be. Back in 1986, there was no Internet, and comics publishers had not yet made a habit of collecting stories together and selling them as "trade paperbacks" or prestige hardcover volumes. Today, it is pretty easy to fill those narrative gaps. Closure is easy. There is no need to hunt anymore. And I think we are missing something as a result. And I think that's a shame.[22]

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[19]Collectors collect for all manner of reasons, of course. Some comic collectors will collect the output of a given creator regardless of where it fits into a narrative. Some will collect simply because they are "completists." And, yes, many will collect for profit, though this practice nearly destroyed the comic-book industry in the 1990s (see Dallas & Sacks, 2018).

[20]A copy of this comic—the first "full" appearance of Wolverine—in near-mint condition was worth $24 in 1986. Near-mint copies today regularly sell for tens of thousands of dollars. One copy CGC-certified at 9.8/10 condition sold at auction in 2022 for $146,000 (https://www.cgccomics.com/news/article/10827/hulk-181-wolverine/).

[21]"CGC" is short for Certified Guaranty Company.

[22]I would not be at all surprised if the same sort of phenomenon will be found in other forms of collecting, where an experience of gappiness pervades the activity. I am thinking in particular of vinyl album collecting, which suffers the same sort of scarcity issues as comics, but which usually lacks the literal narrative running through a band's oeuvre, or another series of records. Still, there are definite gaps in my growing vinyl collection—particularly in my runs of early 1960s audiophile lounge jazz—and someone with a better honed musical imagination than my own might well actively wonder at the musical content in those gaps in something analogous to my examples of narrative wondering, in a way that engages free play of the imagination.

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