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Examining Methectic Technical Communication in an Urban Planning Comic Book

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ABSTRACT

Technical communication research has relied heavily on participatory, user-focused strategies as well as "participative", posthuman frameworks. Both research methodologies have various strengths, yet also have been critiqued for underplaying the role of human and non-human agency (respectively) in rhetorical situations. Through an analysis of an urban planning comic book, I suggest that turning to the Greek concept of *methexis* – or "participation" – may help technical communication researchers bridge posthuman and user-centered investigative approaches.

KEYWORDS

Visual rhetoric/visualization techniques; Posthuman agency; service Learning; research methods; methexis

Introduction

In this article, I demonstrate how turning to the Greek concept of *methexis* can help bridge two research approaches within technical communication. Because *methexis* has most often been connoted as "participation" (Mautner, 2005; Peters, 1967), I consider the term as essential for bringing together conversations in the field that straddle participatory and (what I am referring to as) "participative" research methodologies to studying technical communication. Participatory frameworks have long been valued in technical communication for creating documents, products, and policies with user input and engagement throughout design and drafting processes (Dilger, 2006; Johnson, 1998; Simmons, 2007; Sullivan, 1989). More recently, technical communication researchers have employed posthuman approaches to study how nonhuman and human agents each participate in technical processes. In other words, by studying the "participative" elements of ecologies and networks, researchers can better track user workarounds and breakdowns. As I discuss in more detail below, participatory and participative frameworks are distinct from one another in that the former encompasses approaches to technical communication that focus on human agency and stress the importance of making artifacts that can be accessible to individuals. Participative frameworks, on the other hand, focus more on the shared agency between human and nonhuman elements ranging from technologies, biological and physiological factors, and spatial constraints. While both of these research models offer rich opportunities to engage in meaningful inquiry for the purpose of creating more usable technical tools and texts, putting the two frameworks into conversation with each other through *methexis* can help researchers fill gaps that arise from utilizing solely participatory or participative frameworks. Through a case study of the *SMAPL* (Small Area Plan) comic book that the Frogtown neighborhood of Saint Paul collaboratively constructed with community input to drive urban policy, I show how technical communicators can create participatory documents that also have agency to participate in public policy.

SMAPL

In Minnesota, city and local governments within the Minneapolis/St. Paul region must have a 20-year comprehensive plan in place to articulate city-wide policies for the proceeding two decades in

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areas such as land use, transportation, recreation, and housing. These comprehensive plans typically require small area plans, created via input from municipal neighborhoods on policy recommendations regarding local, on-the-ground conditions submitted by neighborhood and community associations. In one such case, the Frogtown Neighborhood Association conducted research with "an estimated 2,500 Frogtown residents through community healing meals, Frogtown forums, steering committee meetings, neighborhood events, surveys, voice recordings and social media" (Saint Paul Neighborhood and Community Planning Committee [NCPC], 2019, p. 1) to create its small area plan in preparation for the 2040 Comprehensive Plan. This extended work with residents resulted in the creation of Frogtown's *SMAPL* comic in 2018.

According to the creators of *SMAPL*, the comic's purpose is to "demystify often times [sic] complex planning processes, by creating a document that the community could relate to and see themselves presented in" (NCPC, 2019, p. 1). The comic itself, once submitted and reviewed by the city council, would become a part of Saint Paul's Comprehensive Plan. Like most neighborhood area plans, *SMAPL* therefore contains sections that echo the policy chapters in Saint Paul's Comprehensive Plan (for example, "Land Use" and "Transportation"). Unlike other area plans, however, *SMAPL* presents priorities in two forms: first, as lists of policy recommendations/priorities; and second, as a comic with individual chapters through character dialogs and visual displays.

SMAPL is divided into three parts. "This Is Home" familiarizes readers with community planning in Frogtown. Next, "The Dream" presents four chapters tied to planning policy (Land Use, Transportation, Housing, and Arts & Education). Each is introduced by a different "SMAPLite," a cartoon-style representation of a member of Frogtown who is invested in the community. Although the SMAPLites are not based on any one real Frogtown resident, during the introductions that they provide, we recognize how they act as composites of local community members, voicing concerns over specific policy and planning issues in Frogtown. For example, Sayama, the self-proclaimed "Original Frogtown Granny," voices her displeasure over the changes to living conditions in Saint Paul through the years as she introduces the Transportation chapter. Finally, the "Machine" section (discussed in detail later in this piece) contains a more typical area plan meant to put the conversations presented in "The Dream" into policy language.

Certainly, *SMAPL* highlights how comics can convey technical information to lay and culturally diverse publics (Boykin, 2019; Faris, 2019; Ryerson, 2019; Scanlon, 2015; Yu, 2015). For example, Faris notes how comics can effecitvely enhance readers' sex education literacy and sense of agency in making healthy decisions regarding intimacy. Similarly, in her overview of the different edifying roles that comics can serve, Yu (2015) observes that comics can be and have been used to instruct individuals on issues ranging from family planning to environmental and agricultural stewardship in a variety of languages (pp. 135–142). This recent literature makes clear that diverse publics benefit from comics with educational content, particularly if readers can identify themselves within those pages. Comics, however, as I will show, do not simply convey technical information to publics; they can also "embody" publics in technical and policy contexts.

To wit, I extend scholarship on comics and technical communication by showing how comics can act as an example of methectic technical communication. The Greek concept of *methexis*, or "participation," can be particularly useful in current discussions of technical communication research given that its connotations combine the participatory with the participative. Current research in technical communication has looked at participatory elements (such as working with community members to create inclusive documents, artifacts, and systems)[1] as well as participative elements (those that describe how objects exert agency in particular technical processes).[2] Yet, as I discuss below, researchers have noted shortcomings to each approach regarding human and nonhuman agency. By introducing the Greek concept of *methexis* into technical communication vis-à-vis *SMAPL*, I offer a way of bridging these two lines of research inquiry. In doing so, my goal is for technical communication researchers to recognize how artifacts that are designed through participatory means can subsume the agency to work or participate in various contexts on their own. In that way, because of their participatory and participative functions, these types of artifacts

embody a methectic approach to technical communication, opening opportunities to bridge user-centered, community-based approaches with posthuman frameworks moving forward.

Participatory and participative research in technical communication

Participatory approaches

Over the last several decades, many researchers in technical communication have emphasized the importance of including participatory mechanisms in the creation of technical documents and processes (Johnson, 1998; Grabill & Simmons, 1998; Mara, 2006; Simmons, 2007; Spinuzzi, 2005; Waddell, 1996). Participatory mechanisms allow for more input from community members and stakeholders who would be most impacted by policies, and therefore mitigate top-down consequences that do not take into account the lived experiences of community members. More than simply seeking input however, participatory mechanisms bring in participants to change the mode, deliverables, and trajectory of the research or policy itself (Kirsch & Ritchie, 1995; Middleton, Hess, Endres, & Senda-Cook, 2015; Moore & Elliott, 2016). In other words, participatory design allows for participants to become, as Scanlon (2015) notes, co-collaborators in the design and implementation of technical documents and processes.

The work that Evia and Patriarca (2012) – in conjunction with others (refer to Brunette, Evia, & Thorkelson, 2009a, 2009b for example) – have undertaken with Latino construction workers is a good example of how sustained collaborations with participants can create important changes with long-lasting impacts in workplace settings. In their study of safety instructions used by Latino construction workers, Evia and Patriarca (2012) note that mere translation is not enough to communicate technical information across cultures. Rather, a participatory methodology in co-constructing documents can help create inclusive products and practices at work sites (pp. 350–351). For instance, to help promote safety in construction sites, the researchers conducted individual and group interviews, observed workplace practices, and attended regular meetings with Latino construction workers at the site. Based on these engagements, the worksite incorporated numerous interventions to help communicate a culture of safety, including incorporating a version of the *Loteria* or "Mexican bingo" on site with specially made cards and boards comprised of "visual representations of everyday items and situations … representing what workers perceived as main workplace hazards" (p. 355). Workers themselves also contributed various designs of risks to "create a common visual language to represent those hazardous situations without depending on words in English or Spanish" (p. 355).

One of workers' suggestions to researchers was that creating a comic book would help workers better understand the different risks and safety protocols on the job. Within a few years, Brunette et al. (2009a, 2009b) collaboratively created three comics that featured the main character, Cheo, in a variety of hazardous workplace conditions and depicted proper safety protocols. This attention to comics as a vehicle for communicating instructions and informational directives is not new, of course (refer to Farris, 2019; Ryerson, 2019; Yu, 2015). What makes the *Cheo* comics unique, however, is that they were created through various participatory processes that included the Latino construction workers who would be the target audience for the comic itself. For instance, panels were redrawn and reworded based on feedback provided by individuals who would use these safety protocols for clarity and to better represent their contexts. In the original drafts of the comic, workers expressed confusion over the first panel which showed Cheo saying goodbye to his family before going work at the construction site. The workers who previewed the comic wondered why Cheo would wear his construction clothing at home, even if he was headed to work; some others had skipped the contextualized dialogue and incorrectly assumed that Cheo had brought his family to work. The creators of the comic, thus, decided to dress Cheo in civilian clothes in the first panel, as he boarded a bus to work, and then show him in his uniform in the next panel, which showcased a construction site background (Scanlon, 2015, p. 113).

Outside of comics, technical communication has turned toward participatory frameworks in design and usability (Alexander, 2013; Bacha, 2012; Salvo, 2001; Walton, 2013) as well as in policy-making (Card, 2019; Katz & Miller, 1996; Margaret & Lindeman, 2005; Moore & Elliot, 2016; Simmons, 2007). Indeed, the move toward participatory action is so commonplace in technical communication that Hart-Davidson (2013) includes "user advocacy" as one of three primary work patterns for technical communicators. While participatory action may look different in various contexts, the main focus of taking user data and ensuring that design features meet the needs of constituents remains the same.

Yet, these participatory approaches are insufficient in capturing the larger, systemic issues that play a role in user-driven changes in design or policy. Frequently, participatory research projects appear as service learning and community-engaged projects with outside entities and organizations – either as part of a course (Bourelle, 2014; Hea & Shah, 2016; Swacha, 2018) or as independent projects taken on by technical communication researchers (Blythe, Grabill, & Riley, 2008; Walton, Zraly, & Mugengana, 2015). Yet such engagement can be problematic when the focus of these projects rests primarily on a deliverable. For example, Leon and Sura (2013) have noted the strain that participatory projects have on partners and how final deliverables may not necessarily meet their needs (p. 60). This tension leads the authors to advocate for an approach to community engagement that focuses more on systematic overviews of organizations, working "to make visible the infrastructure that supports community partners' rhetorical work" (p. 64). Similarly, in Grabill's (2007, 2010) work with the pseudonymous town of Harbor, he notes how his infrastructure research matters in addressing larger community issues. To be of use to communities, he writes, community-based researchers need to wrestle with how to define community and what constituents to study (2010, p. 196). Grabill encourages researchers who engage in participatory community work to move beyond supporting the writing of one individual and instead to focus on larger issues of infrastructure, mapping out the key human and nonhuman co-mingling of agents in rhetorical situations. In this way, technical communicators can better capture the larger scope of who and what are involved in a situation and how they are connected before producing artifacts that might not necessarily fit into such a context.

Participative frameworks

Thus, researchers in technical communication have also turned to posthuman approaches[3] to analyze and interpret communication within a more systematic framework. Though disparate, these approaches de-center human agents within technical processes and instead flatten systems to showcase how both human and nonhuman objects are implicated in rhetorical and communicative exchanges. In that sense, posthumanism, as Halberstam and Livingston (1995) state, "does not necessitate the obsolescence of the human. Rather, it participates in re-distributions of difference and identity" (p. 10). Or, according to Boyle (2018), posthumanism should not be read as "'after the human' but, instead as 'after humanism' or perhaps, 'among humanism'" (p. 42). In that sense, posthumanism can capture "complex interplays among human intentions, organizational discourses, biological trajectories, and technological possibilities" (Mara & Hawk, 2010, p. 5). For example, human agency is already engaged with unconscious neurophysiological processes (Cooper, 2011) as well as with linguistic, technological, and organizational systems (Hayles, 1999).

Given technical communication's enmeshment with technological, organizational, and scientific discourse, it is not surprising that the field has found value in turning to posthuman frameworks that value the agency of both human and nonhuman actors. Mara and Hawk (2010) elaborate that conceptualizing human agency at the center of technical exchanges "do[es] not fully account for the complexities of living, writing, and working in a variety of biological and mechanical systems" (p. 2). Indeed, "humanistic heuristics for anticipating systemic complications – like audience analysis, user testing, and peer review – quickly become swamped when trying to account for the tendential forces

of nonhuman actors and activities" (p. 2). In that sense, it is more beneficial to examine how objects and other nonhuman agents are equally participative within rhetorical exchanges.

As an example of this kind of participative agency that posthumanism illuminates, we can look at how documents have been theorized as exerting their own agency in socio-technological exchanges. As Frohmann (2004) discusses, documentation necessitates some type of institutional authority before it can have power to act in situations. Once such authority is granted, documents can shape future practices within organizational settings (Longo & Fountain, 2013). Documents, then, exert agency in certain circumstances, or as Buckland (2017a) states, "documents' very existence and features have material consequences that enable outcomes and further actions" (n.p.).

As an example, Buckland (2017b) discusses his passport's embedded authority to allow his movement through borders:

> My passport is more powerful than I am, because I cannot cross frontiers without it, but it could cross them without me … It has multiple and often changing components. There is a photograph of me and my handwritten signature. There are marks for optical character recognition inside the front cover and a bar code inside the back cover, each of which make it a digital document capable of being read into computers. The pages became filled up with marker stamped by frontier officials that record my travels, and extra pages were added to accommodate more.
>
> …
>
> [T]he power of my passport does not arise simply from the document itself, but from more or less enforced social regulations within which passports are used as an evidentiary device within a system of controls embedded in complex bureaucratic systems. (pp. 6–7)

In other words, the document participates within an ecological assemblage of other objects, texts, and humans that control the surveillance of those entering a country's borders. Moreover, in this case, the passport itself contains the inscription,

> Her Britannic Majesty's Secretary of State requests and requires in the name of Her Majesty all those whom it may concern to allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance and to afford the bearer such assistance and protection as may be necessary. (p. 8)

Thus, the note makes salient that the passport document speaks for not only the citizen but also for the government which authorizes it when a representative cannot be there to vouch for individuals who travel. In this way then, documents participate in processes, particularly in that they carry forth the ethos of authorized individuals.

Given documents' agency in technical processes, technical and business communication research has focused on how documents and documentation co-mingle with social and political forces (Johnson & Johnson, 2018; Kolodziejski, 2014; Spinuzzi, 2011; Swarts, 2010). For example, Propen (2007) notes how maps guide debates about courses of action in scientific contexts. Maps and other documents therefore play a collaborative role alongside decisionmakers in moving actions forward.

However, despite the affordances of posthuman frameworks in technical communication research, some researchers have noted that decentering human agency can be problematic. As Miller (2007) has elaborated, "Rhetorical agency is important because it would give voice to the voiceless, empowering subaltern groups, and thus, presumably, weakening structures of institutional, corporate, and ideological domination" (p. 144). And, as posthuman frameworks have become more prevalent in technical communication, they have increasingly come into conflict with social justice approaches that have also become more widespread in the field. Rose and Walton (2018) have argued that by flattening all agents, posthuman approaches eliminate a hierarchy between human and object. In doing so, such frameworks have the potential to perpetuate human inequalities: "As scholars focusing on amplifying the agency of oppressed people, we resist the notion of ascribing equality to objects when it is denied to so many" (p. 94). Moreover, distributed agency among systems and objects may make it more difficult to ascribe responsibility to human agents, thus perpetuating systemic passivity in social injustices.[4]

Indeed, viewing *SMAPL* strictly from a posthuman, participative perspective may occlude the human work and hours that have gone in to creating the comic, and may de-prioritize the conversations that took place with individuals in the community who voiced real concerns about their current and potential lives in Frogtown – all of which led to the creation of the text and without which the document would not exist. In that regard, participatory frameworks may help to address such concerns. As I will discuss, a turn to *methexis* can help technical communication researchers bridge the epistemological gaps between participatory and participative methodologies in that it frames both as being important in discussions of "participation."

Methexis

In Plato's *Parmenides*, Socrates and Parmenides engage in philosophical debate regarding sensibles and forms – "sensibles" being the physical objects that we see, and "forms" the ideas and characteristics that we attribute to them. Throughout this engagement with Parmenides, Socrates conveys the connection between idea and appearance with the term "*methexis*," which has been translated as "sharing," "participating," or "partaking." This language also appears in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates discusses with Cebes how objects may participate with various forms via cognitive association. He gives the example of lovers and sentimental objects:

> Well, you know what happens to lovers: whenever they see a lyre, a garment or anything else that their beloved is accustomed to use, they know the lyre, and the image of the boy to whom it belongs comes into their mind. (Plato, 1892b, p. 214)

Such association is important for recognizing how we attribute characteristics like equality or beauty to objects. Objective forms exist, Socrates states, and we associate objects with those forms by how closely they participate in their ideal nature.

Attempting to convey that an object is beautiful by describing its color or shape is not convincing for Socrates. He notes that "nothing makes a thing beautiful but the presence and participation [*methexis*] of beauty in whatever way or manner obtained … but I stoutly contend that by beauty all beautiful things become beautiful" (Plato, 1892b, p. 246). For Socrates, there exists a sensible of beauty – an idea of beauty; as a result, examining how closely an object – a form – participates and shares in this idea of beauty is the only way to truly judge its appearance. In other words, *methexis* (participation) necessarily involves a comingling of object and idea or a comingling between multiple objects and people. When an object is methectic, it is participative on some level with another agent or in a larger idea.[5]

Scholars in performative studies have recently focused on *methexis'* participatory affordances, as examined through several dramatic works. For instance, Barnett (2015) elaborates that *methexis* closes the gap "between actor and an object to be acted upon [because] the two come into being through each other" (p. 113). We can recognize this participatory definition of *methexis* in play in performances that seek to build community, particularly within marginalized groups. For example, in her research on African American drama, Kimberly Benston (2000) points out that in the 1960s, certain Black playwrights moved away from producing theater that simply presented a story about the African American experience and instead created plays that were situated "*within* the black community" (emphasis in original). She writes:

> this movement is one from mimesis, or representation (whether of a condition, ideology, or character), to methexis, or communal "helping–out" of the action by all assembled. It is a process that could be alternatively described as a shift from display, the spectacle observed, to rite, the event which dissolves traditional divisions between actor and spectator, self and other, enacted text and material context. (pp. 28–29)

To illustrate, Benston evinces how Ron Milner's musical *Season's Reasons: Just a Natural Change* incorporates a call and response with his audience. This call and response, according to Benston, "motivates an affective dynamic of collective exchange" (2000, p. 43) in which performer and

audience "designate ever-shifting, ever available positions, each speaker or player being also a listener, each listener being always ready to reply" (p. 43). The audience thus becomes a part of the central work via its participation in the narrative.

Similarly, Azouz (2015) notes that the theatrical works of Paul Carter Harrison and Amiri Baraka, contemporaries of Milner, follow a similar thread of eliminating the divide between actors and spectators. For instance, Harrison experimented with including "activators and participators" (p. 26). As participators, audiences could be called upon to join in the drama at any time in an onstage production – both scripted and improvised. For Azouz these playwrights' works evoke the concept of *methexis* in that the term refers to "the collective keeping and continuation of the action. It stands for a joint effort to uphold the action; it is veering away from the imitation of the action to a direct participation in it" (p. 26). Here again, we recognize a very participatory-focused definition of the term. In this sense *methexis* is not merely associative, but also contagious (Foreman, 2011), as it blurs boundaries and compels one group to join another in completing a production on stage, evoking a "singular mobility" (Nancy, 2007, p. 5).

Aside from studies of performance, which have centered on the participatory elements of *methexis*, scholars in other fields have also keyed in on the material, participative aspects of methectic artifacts. Specifically, just like *methexis* works by associating objects, people, and ideas together, scholars of ancient Greek art note how divine sculptures were methectic in that they did not merely portray Greek deities mimetically, but carried an inherent piece of them. For instance, Alexandrakis (2002) asserts that statues depicting gods were often treated as real people. They may have been clothed or even bathed, as she states that

> The Greek believer couldn't tell his god apart from the image (statue) he saw in the temple. Thus, the statues and images were reminders of the gods, very much in the way that sensual objects are the copies and reminders of the Platonic Forms. The Platonic notion of 'participation' therefore prevailed in the theory of images: the image 'participates' in the figure it portrays. (p. 77)

Being methectic, these statues then could not only stand in for the gods themselves but could also embody them (Smith, 2011, p. 23). This is not surprising, given that most of the gods materially portrayed were based on concepts and ideas. Warner (1985) notes that "[t]he early Greek writers do not distinguish between personal gods and active principles," meaning that concepts and beings – even abstract beings such as gods – meld together and actively participate in calling one another to mind (p. 70).[6] As physical representations of principles, votive statues occupy an interesting realm wherein they are concepts made human only through a physical manipulation of stonework. In that way, the stone participates in bringing about the manifestation of what the gods might represent (Remes, 2014 p. 202; Schibille, 2016, pp. 199–200). For example, Strabo criticized Pheidias's statue of Zeus who is depicted sitting on his throne, stating: "If he were to stand up, he would take the roof off the temple" (Auffarth, 2010, p. 467). In effect, the artifact, as Auffarth proposes, "has life within it" given that at any moment, it could have the agency to move. It is only temporarily motionless.

As I have noted, technical communication researchers have relied on participatory and participative methodologies for various investigative purposes. Both have also been thought of as incomplete or insufficient because of their epistemological foci pertaining to agency – underplaying human or nonhuman agency. I have also discussed how the concept of *methexis* can be a good linkage between these two approaches in that it accounts for both participatory and participative elements in the creation and deployment of artifacts. In the following analysis, I will present a case study of how the SMAPL comic functions as an example of methectic technical communication.

I argue that the comic accomplishes this *methexis* in several ways. Firstly, I echo Benston and Azouz's respective claims about *methexis* necessitating a participatory component, which involves audience participation to complete a work. As such, SMAPL was created through participatory means, with community members' co-collaboration as central to the completion of the finished comic. In doing so, the comic "represents" the community members' interests in visual form. At the same time, because of such engagement with the community, the comic carries the same

participative function that the Greek statues mentioned above do. Namely, the visual "representations" of Frogtowners (and their textual exchanges) act as templates which abstractly correspond to the individuals in the community. In other words, the colors, shapes, and dialogs of the characters within the comic communicate and speak for residents in much the same way as the ancient wooden and stone votives did. Ergo, I put forth that the comic itself "has life within" and agency to act in various contexts, standing in for the Frogtowners themselves. Because the SMAPL comic deploys both a comic section ("The Dream") to help residents develop their planning literacy in planning terminology and processes and a policy section ("The Machine") which conveys to planners the Frogtown communities' priorities, it is legible across several audiences. In this way, the document itself participates in promoting a united vision of the Frogtown community's desires for their neighborhood.

SMAPL as methectic technical communication

In one sense, like the *Cheo* comics, the fact that the *SMAPL* plan was created with numerous checkpoints and methods for community outreach makes it participatory. And similar to the methectic performances that Benston and Azouz describe, it is only through this active participation by members of the community that the final product can come to fruition. The individuals depicted in the comic, thus, are created as stand-ins for the community, and much of what they say stems directly from the conversations that planners and the Frogtown neighborhood association had with residents.

Indeed, one of the main claims that *SMAPL* presents to readers is that this comic is an agentic Living Document. The Frogtown Neighborhood Association webpage introducing the comic heralds that "A Living Document is a dynamic document infused with the energy and pulse of the community, meaning it lives off the page …. [It] is ever evolving." This emphasis of *SMAPL* as a living document is carried forth in the comic itself, communicating its importance to readers. *SMAPL* was drawn by a local performance artist Mychal Batson, who goes by Myc Dazzle. As a result, the main narrator, Dazzle, who introduces *SMAPL*, is not an entirely a fictional creation given that he is modeled after the illustrator himself. Describing himself as a "concerned citizen of Frogtown" who has resided in Saint Paul for 15 years (Batson, 2017), Dazzle acts as our main guide through *SMAPL*, articulating what a small area plan is, why it is needed, and why it matters that SMAPL is a living document.

"A living document," he says, "has a pulse, meaning it lives off the page. Has arms.and legs. so it can move around and reach people. It's able to communicate. speaking for those who can't or won't"[7] (Batson, 2017, p. 24). Each panel in the layout shows the document taking on human characteristics like arms, legs, and a mouth as Dazzle describes it (Figure 1). And once it can speak, the document voices concerns that reflect the community's own. It acknowledges: "I need a nice neighborhood. with nice grass. I don't like where I live. it's messed up. 8 people in a small two bedroom apartment. it's crowded." And "Some of the jobs I've applied to didn't call me back because I don't speak English well, so it's hard to understand what people say. I could only find a low wage job working in Albert Lea[8] cutting meat" (Batson, 2017). There is a note beneath this word bubble that the statement has been translated from Karen – one of the residents that the Frogtown neighborhood association interviewed during their outreach process. This is an important note given that Frogtown remains one of the most racially and linguistically diverse neighborhoods in Saint Paul.

The focus on incorporating community voices continues as each chapter features actual comments from community members regarding policy elements. In the Land Use Chapter, Alli, speaking for the comic creators, states, "Keep in mind, we're a diverse bunch here in Frogtown, so I hope I did a decent enough job summarizing the variety of answers we heard during our community outreach" (p. 61). This summary, however, takes the form of simulated video-recorded comments from Frogtowners based on actual resident feedback. Figure 2 demonstrates a sample of some of the

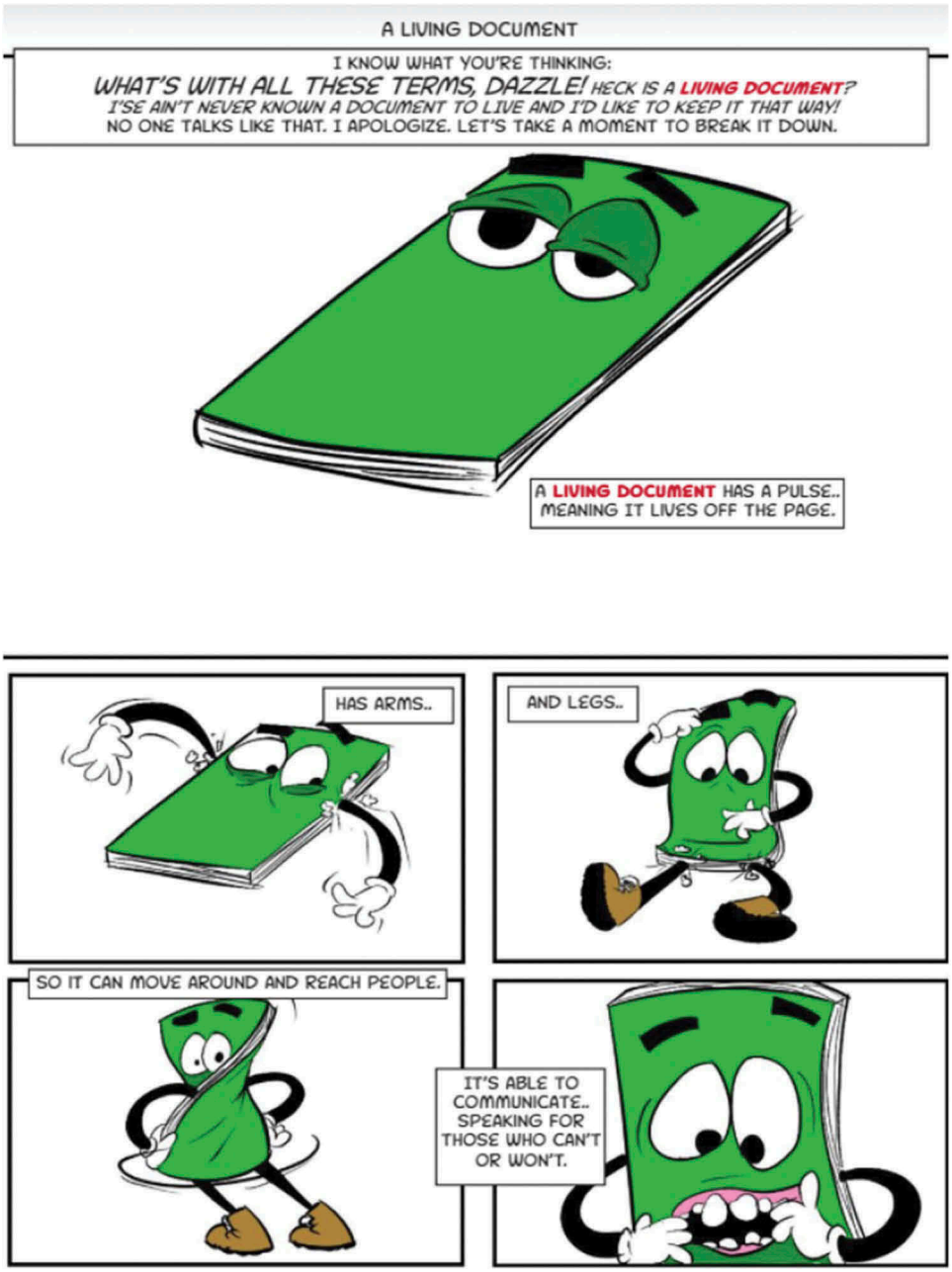

Figure 1. *SMAPL* as a "Living Document".

comments from Earl House's chapter on Housing. These comments capture some of the desires that residents have in terms of housing quality and mixed-purpose zoning. In this way, the authenticity of SMAPL's characters stem from direct quotations from residents as well from Batson's ethos as a Frogtowner.

Also, as evident from Figure 2, all of the characters who appear in the comic, including the SMAPLites, are drawn in more abstract, less-than-photorealistic ways – a choice that helps the comic foster a connection with the Frogtown audience. As McCloud (1994) notes, abstract drawings of

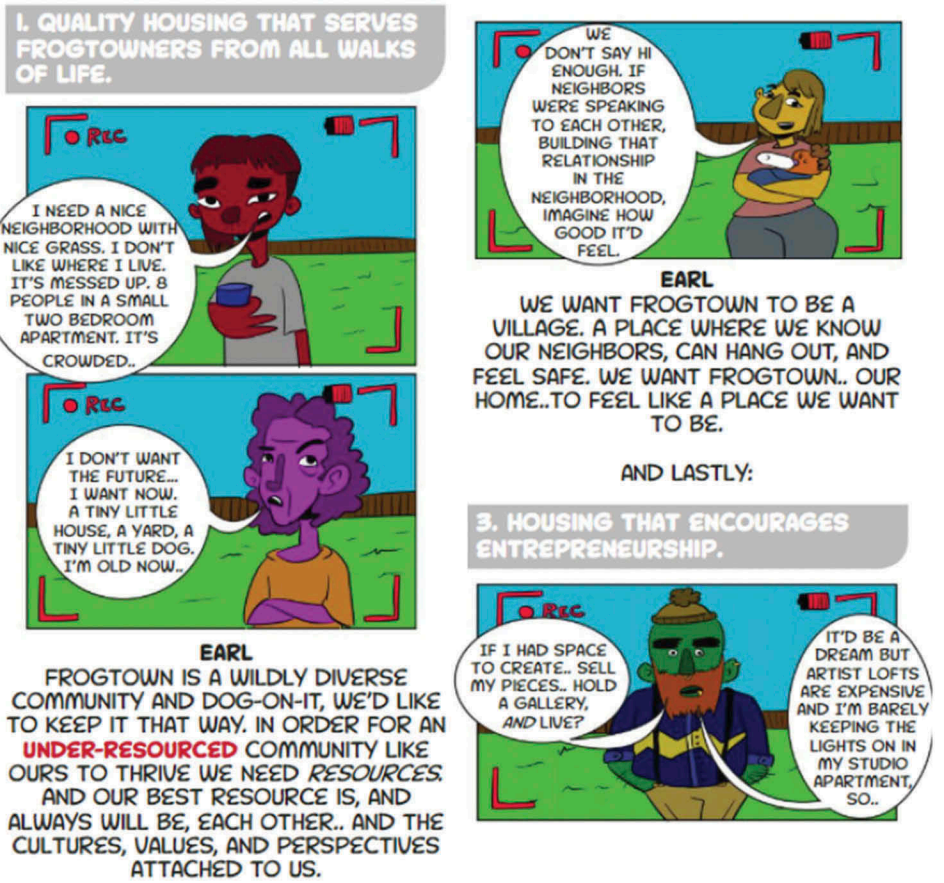

Figure 2. Frogtowners' desires for housing.

people help to build universal identification. The more realistic a drawing is, the more that image will come to represent a particular person, but cartoonish figures can be more inclusive as we can recognize ourselves reflected in simpler human-like designs (pp. 30–59). As Batson makes clear, because Frogtown is so diverse to the degree that "within five blocks you see six different cultures" (Rupersburg, 2017), he purposefully ensured that the cartoon design captured what McCloud (1994) refers to as a vacuum into which Frogtowners' identities could be pulled (p. 36). By creating SMAPLites of all shapes, sizes, and skin tones (purple, green, blue, etc.), we come to understand the diversity of Frogtown without the barrier of realistically rendered individuals who would be misconstrued as actual individuals in Frogtown.

Even the way that SMAPLites speak comes from Batson's own experiences as a Frogtowner (Rupersburg, 2017). In this way, the SMAPLites and other characters found in the comic participate in visually and vocally carrying forth the experiences of residents in the community. One of the SMAPLites, Alli, who introduces the Land Use chapter, even stands in for new young residents who contribute to the neighborhoods' gentrification concerns. Though Alli is at times villainized for her naivete and certainly comes into conflict with other SMAPLite, she is as much a member of the community as her peers (Figure 3). This move allows for more Frogtowners to recognize themselves reflected in the comic, even when they may not necessarily share similar experiences of Frogtown.

Moving beyond the content of *SMAPL*, focusing on the comic's form foregrounds what allows it to gain authority in different contexts. As I mentioned, *SMAPL* is divided into three parts. The last

Figure 3. Alli–referred to as "Gentry"– has her "outsider" moments.

two parts – "The Dream" and "The Machine," respectively – function in similar ways but are geared toward different audiences. While the former maintains the graphic storytelling elements of the introduction, "The Machine" quickly shifts genres and instead presents lists of policy information in technical language. This shift is important methectically as it allows the document to carry on conversations in two different settings.

The comic creators were aware that the *SMAPL* needs to function in two different spaces at once. While edifying neighborhood residents about the different goals and solutions that the community has is certainly a key priority for the document, it will also be read by the decision-makers within Saint Paul's urban planning commissions and city council. As a result, the last part of the comic, the "Machine" section, as Dazzle explains, crafts policy and puts all of the ideas that were presented in

the " Dream" section of the comic "into a language that city planners and officials can understand." In effect *SMAPL* contains both an officially sanctioned policy plan and a comics portion reflecting community members' desires for these plans in their own voices.

Certainly, the SMAPL comic received much praise throughout the proposal process for its inclusiveness and innovativeness. At a public Planning Commission meeting held in Saint Paul on June 28, 2019, commission members lauded the plan for "being a unique example of what communities can do when they work with planners," alluding to the plan's graphic modality. One member noted the benefits of creating a comic that acted as a plan, stating, "This is a plan that I could sit down and read with my granddaughter. You can't really say that about most plans – or any plans. But she would love this."[9] In this setting, the committee members focused on the plan's accessible language and visual modality, perhaps because this particular meeting served as a precursor to opening the plan up to public comments. In that way, the purpose dictated what parts of *SMAPL* audiences might be more drawn to.

That said, although the comic book interface allows the *SMAPL* plan to participate in discussions of planning with residents and committee members, once the plan moved up to the Neighborhood and Community Planning Committee (CNPC) for debate, the discussion focused not on the language from or the design of the "Dream" section, but solely on the text found in the "Machine" section of *SMAPL*. Much as Dazzle and Maria and Nick Chase, who introduce the Machine section, noted in the comic itself, the "Machine" section would be most legible to planning committee officials given that it contains more granular-level policy details. This other modality presents the comic in a different version, thus impacting the material affordances of the document.

To illustrate, although the CNPC committee members overwhelmingly approved of *SMAPL* as a comprehensive plan, they raised a few questions during a meeting on September 4, 2019, regarding three elements of the plan. Interestingly, these questions were all rooted in language from the "Machine" section of *SMAPL* and committee members used that wording with no mention of how the "Dream" section treated these same issues. For example, one question regarded point L9 in "The Machine" that emphasizes efforts to minimize displacement of residents and businesses. Such points are elaborated on in Solutions 1 and 3 of the "Dream's" Housing chapter ("Construct Micro Communities Throughout Frogtown" and "Dormitory Style Public Housing with Local and/or Resident Occupied Shops Beneath") and Solution 3 of the Transportation chapter ("Pump Up the Zoning Diversity of the interior of Frogtown"). In other words, the NCPC committee members' questions stemmed only from the content in the "Machine" section even though the answers to their questions were addressed in the comic portion of *SMAPL*. Although the two sections are similar in that they stem from community participation, they are, ostensibly not identical, with each going into different types of details for the different plannning priorities that make up the individual chapters.

That the focus at the NCPC was on the policy language is not to say that members of the committee ignored the "Dream" content or were unfamiliar with it. After all, the comic had been circulating within the planning process for months, and several of the members on the Planning Commission are also on the NCPC. Rather, in this context, only the "Machine" section of the document was authorized to speak, as it were. Much like only the comic portions of the document were mentioned in the Planning Commission Meetings in order to highlight the uniqueness of the plan, only the text strictly based in policy language acted on the meeting's agenda. The fact that the material identity of SMAPL as a comic was praised in one setting for certain purposes and audiences and was so immediately forgotten because it did not look like it fit the context of a more policy-driven context speaks to the importance of the comics' multiple physical and visual modalities.

This difference in engagement is reminiscent of Kashtan's (2018)'s assertion that a comic, when remediated into different versions, necessarily changes identity of a text. As he notes, a collected edition is not the same book as twelve individual issues of a story. Digitizing a comic does not just deliver the same comic with a new medium. Rather, meaning is made via the media. The way we come to understand the comic shifts because the comic's identity is tied closely to

what it presents and how it presents it. Or in this case, embedding a remediated version of the comic that can be understood by planners *within* the comic itself changes the identity of the comic and opens opportunities for the comic to function with a new identity during the NCPC meeting.

SMAPL creators, understanding that the "Machine section" functions in more authorized settings more than the graphical section of the book, thus expect readers to engage with both of these major sections of the document. Maria Chase tells readers that they should carefully read through the policy recommendations in the "Machine" because "it's imperative you learn the language the government uses to shape our collective reality" (p. 99). In effect, this signals to readers that while it is important for them to understand the planning process in terms that are accessible, which is what the "Dream" section does, much as Grabill (2007) argues, the only way to truly participate in the actual process is to develop a literacy for the direct language and genres used in official planning contexts.

Conclusion

As a methectic text, SMAPL is both a participatory and participative document. The process for creating the comic involved engaged participation with community members, taking three years to complete. This work revealed the numerous voices and priorities of the residents in the Frogtown neighborhood, which were used to craft various elements of the *SMAPL* document. Additionally, that the policy language of the "Machine" section stems from the pages of the "Dream" section allows the comic to act as a policy document as well. Therefore, the document can participate as an extension of Frogtowners' priorities for their community whether it be as a narrative a girl reads with her grandmother or as a plan which will govern the boundaries of the local district as part of Saint Paul's Comprehensive City Plan. Thus, the document is able to produce what Kallinikos (1995) describes as "action at a distance" (p.118).

As with *SMAPL*, a turn to *methexis* can help technical communication researchers and practitioners recognize how participatory documents and products might also be participative in that they carry forth an ethos that is tied to the voices who helped create them. As such, these artifacts are imbued with agency to act in situations on their own precisely because they are created and embedded with the concerns and voices of those who helped to create them. It becomes imperative then to ensure that if a document or a product is associated with a community, it reflects the values of that community because the two are tied closely together. At the same time, as we explore how objects' various agencies are implicated within rhetorical interactions and situations, we should study how systems and procedures succeed or fail due to individuals', communities', and users' representation in those objects.

Methexis provides technical communicators and TC researchers an opportunity to expand the attention placed on the connection between individuals and objects. Artifacts such as policy documents, technologies, and even zip ties (Johnson & Johnson, 2018) all play various roles in technical processes. What is important is to discuss who was included in the creation and use of these artifacts and for what purpose. In other words, researchers can study how objects carry more participative weight – acting on behalf of a group and for a group – if they represent the values and needs of a group accurately; hence why participatory mechanisms are important in their use and creation. The more that individuals participate in the creation of objects and policies, the more effectively those objects and policies can participate in technical processes to serve individuals' needs.

Notes

1. Kim et al., (2008), Sauer (2018), Scott (2008), Sun (2006).
2. Clinkenbeard (2020), Henry (2009), Mara and Hawk (2010).

3. For instance, posthuman lenses such as actor-network theory, assemblage theory, and new materialism all showcase how human and nonhuman agents comingle within networks.
4. I should stress that Rose and Walton present both concerns as well as opportunities with regard to post-humanism and social justice research.
5. In Plato's (1892a) Parmenides, Socrates also asserts that things can be similar or dissimilar to one another by the degree they "participate" or "partake" in being "like" or "unlike." For example, Socrates notes that his right side is different from his left side, his front different from his back, and his upper body different from his lower body; yet they are similar in that these disparate pieces participate in the makeup of a human body (p. 48).
6. Warner (1985) asserts that the Greeks did not distinguish "between Styx as a waterfall by whom the gods swear their oaths, Styx as the daughter of Oceanus the river and of Tethys, who lives in the sea, or Styx as the mother of Nike, goddess of victory and of Bia (Force)" (p. 70).
7. Characters' speech in *SMAPL* is often punctuated by two periods.
8. Albert Lea is a small town about 110 miles from the Frogtown neighborhood of Saint Paul.
9. This sentiment echoes precisely what Batson voiced as being his top priority when helping to create the document, insisting that "I wanted the *SMAPL* to connect with everyone from ages 8 to 80" (as quoted in Rupersburg, 2017). In this way, much as Jacobs (2013, 2007a, 2007b) and Yu (2015) have noted, comics can act as sponsors of literacy.

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