

Critique of Max Brooke's Project

This six page manga drops us into the story “en media res,” a trick that allows the author to avoid the irritation of having to use three of the six pages to introduce the characters, but also puts a great deal of pressure on his ability to *demonstrate* their personalities and characterization because he cannot use any traditional introductory tropes to give the reader a proxy in this situation. The reader must simply accept that these two characters have a reason to be in a desert (and that that reason is to steal a giant robot from a rival faction infringing on their territory). As such, he relies heavily on the reader’s willingness to simply “go with the flow” while the characters establish themselves. If any of these factors go beyond the reader’s willing suspension of disbelief, there is a good chance that he or she will simply dismiss the whole piece since no blatant explanations are ever given to justify what is happening. A less than charitable reader might well find fault with the piece for the lack of establishment. On the other hand, eschewing establishing narration or explanation (narration by proxy, from the characters instead of an outside narrator) lets the author jump right into the relationship of the characters – which is a major focus of the piece – and the action. It also lets the author end the piece without specific resolution – since this is how it began, the piece is been a fragment from the start. The middle of a story, however, is often the best part. This is why it is popular to begin a story in the middle,

since the author has a chance to engage the reader and get them him or her interested in such details as how the universe actually works, or how the characters know each other.

Another, more specific example of this philosophy of leaving much to the reader can be found on the second page. The second half of the page is seen through the binoculars of one of the two main characters, but this is not explained with words, and it is left entirely to the reader to discern that the two are even holding binoculars, let alone that this is the perspective of those panels. Clearly, the author favors subtlety in certain regards throughout the piece, but the danger that always accompanies subtlety is that it will be missed entirely, and this will make the piece difficult to follow or understand even if it was not so in the author's mind.

Paradoxically, this piece tries to rest in many ways on the visual despite the artist's limitations in this regard. Much of the humor is dry and understated, and because many panels lack distinct visual cues to support this, it can go unnoticed. One example of this is on the first page, where Embrand points to what he believes is a particular constellation and Ararnes corrects him simply by pointing to the actual constellation. There is no witty dialogue to accompany this particular gag – just a visual beat panel – which, given the lack of detail in the art style, could easily go unnoticed.

Despite using small cues to differentiate the characters (the tattered edge of one's cloak versus the clean edge of the other's mantle, the slight difference in color between the two cloaks), the lack of faces is definitely a glaring weakness of this piece. While it might be better than the alternative of actually letting the author attempt to draw faces, manga does often rely heavily on the vocabulary of facial expressions, and while certain cues appear occasionally (popping veins, in the last panel, for instance), most of this is left to the reader's imagination. As

such, a to a manga reader, this will likely be much more of a piece of manga, whereas a reader with a background in other comics might see it as being more in the domain of their expertise. This projection of a background onto the piece isn't necessarily a good or bad thing, but it is worth noting that for any piece that relies so heavily on abstraction of key distinguishing features (and, for manga, faces are one such feature), people will apply more of what they are already familiar to the work.

Panel layout is clearly manga-influenced, but the pages were designed to be read one at a time instead of in a spread, like manga and American comics alike. This is probably a result of the author's design process beginning with single-page thumbnails instead of spread thumbnails, but it weakens the visual composition if the piece is read in two-page spreads. However, given that the distribution of the piece is entirely digital (where single-page images reign) and in sets of stapled leaves (and not bound books of any kind), it is relatively unlikely to be read in this way. One impact this has, however, is that it reduces the degree to which the pages can converse directly with one another, since the author never planned for it to be viewed more than a single page at a time. Whether this is a weakness of this writer's work or simply a flaw in modern manga distribution is up to the reader to decide.

The left-to-right orientation is an interesting choice on the writer's part. It suggests that he is grounded in western comics as well as in manga, and perhaps also that he prefers to visually scan images and words alike in a single direction. However, it may simply be an artifact of his earliest comics-reading experiences, which consisted almost entirely of newspaper comics. In any case, it may alienate certain people accustomed to traditional right-to-left oriented manga, but this is a fairly minor quibble with the piece. Typically, as long as the direction in which the

work is supposed to be read is clear (and it is, in this piece, thanks to an arrow explaining this at the start), even veteran manga readers are willing to forgive such foibles.