Palau is a small island nation in the Pacific Ocean, about 600km west of the Philippines, part of the larger spread of islands between Indonesia and Papua New Guinea known as Micronesia. Palau consists of a large barrier reef complex with over 250 islands; only the four largest - Babeldoab, Koror, Angaur and Peleliu - are inhabited. The islands were first settled sometime before the start of the present millennium, and developed a distinctive and sophisticated indigenous culture, characterised by large village settlements linked by stone roadways, extensive agricultural and defensive terracing of inland hills, and highly decorative sculptural arts. The Palauans developed a complex trading relationship with islanders from Yap, permitting the Yap islanders to mine the distinctive Aragonite limestone from the islands of Palau in the form of massive stone discs - known as “stone money” - which were used on Yap as a form of high-status exchange token. In the 1700s, European traders in copra - dried coconut, came to Palau to establish plantations, and Palau quickly became part of extensive German and Japanese colonial dominions in the Pacific. During the Second World War, Palau was militarised by the Japanese, and attacked by US forces on their way to the Philippines. The deadliest battle of the Pacific theatre was fought on the island of Peleliu, where over 20,000 US and Japanese troops were killed in a pitched 2-month battle over the 5-square mile island. In the last sixty years, Palau has become favourite destination for tourists from Korea, China and Taiwan and the USA. Its reefs have become a mecca for sport divers and marine biologists alike (the reefs of the Rock Islands have been described as “the underwater Galapagos of the Pacific”).

Palau has also become an unhappy pawn in geopolitical posturing between Japan and the US, Japan and China, China and Taiwan, and China and the US. As a result of its history and its present strategic significance in the Pacific, Palau is a melting-pot of cultural influences from the United States, Japan, China, Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, the Philippines and other Micronesian islands. “Multicultural” sometimes seems a barely adequate descriptive term.

This past summer, I began work as site illustrator for a long-term archaeological field project on Palau with the University of Oregon. This survey and excavation project will be looking at prehistoric settlement and occupation sites across the island of Babeldoab and the small islands just off its coast. This year, we concentrated on excavations of prehistoric cave burials alongside a stone money quarry on the small, uninhabited island of Orrak. And – as you can see – I decided to keep my field journal for the two-month season in the form of a comic.

Archaeology and comics are not natural companions. The academic culture of archaeology is by and large, conservative, and the discourse surrounding the recording, transmission and presentation of archaeological knowledge is heavily biased towards “traditional” modes of publication: primarily text-based with minimal illustration.

And yet, archaeology is a visual science. We describe excavated features in terms of complex
spatial relationships, we describe soils in terms of colour, texture and inclusions, we describe the landscapes that we survey in terms of viewsheds, lines of sight and the prominence of monuments and sites within an observed environment. Not only that, but the archaeological record is made up to a great extent of visual documents: photographs, drawings, maps, and videos.

Archaeology is also a narrative science. We build up arguments forensically, describing a chain of logic based on our data to support a narrative conclusion. What's more, our field notebooks, single context sheets, academic papers and press-releases are all structured in narrative terms. Watch Tony Robinson leaping around a soggy field on Time Team and you will see how the narrative science and the visual record come together. “Look over there,” Tony will say. “See the Roman ditch cutting across the remains of the prehistoric enclosure. And then over there, the mediaeval wall sitting on top of the infilled Roman ditch.” This is the narrative context of archaeological fieldwork.

As an archaeological illustrator, my job has always involved working with the extensive visual record produced by excavation and survey. From artefact illustrations and photographs, plans and sections of archaeological features - including buildings and burials, to diagrams, charts and reconstruction illustrations, the range of the visual record is extremely diverse. And yet, frustratingly, official and academic publications remain visually impoverished, restricted - even with recent technological developments - to a narrow selection of image types that has changed little since the eighteenth century.

I have always been interested in comics - I grew up on Tintin and Asterix and went on from there. My introduction to drawing and writing comics, however, only came two years ago when I took on a non-archaeological commission to illustrate and co-write a comic book about Asperger Syndrome entitled “Something Different About Dad”. This brought me into contact with Ian Williams and the whole genre of “graphic medicine”, and - following the Comics & Medicine conference in Chicago last year - started me thinking about ways in which comics could be used in archaeology.

I had already experimented with comics as a medium for presenting archaeology to the public. Back in 2005, working on a large international project out in Turkey, I produced a short series of comic-format leaflets for children introducing the site and the archaeological work we were doing there. And in 2010-2011 I started work on a serialised newspaper comic in the Caribbean outlining what archaeologists were doing on various Caribbean islands, why archaeology was important to the islands, and what it could mean for tourism, education, the economy, etc. As a medium for communicating with archeology's “external” audience, comics have proven to be ideally suited. Engaging and accessible, they have the advantage of being able to overcome differences in literary skills, and can contain complex information within a simple framework.

Archaeology, like many other sciences, is increasingly being asked to re-present arguments for the value of its research and justification for its funding. Recent work in the field of science communication confirms that many of the sciences have evolved unhelpfully opaque languages of presentation which increasingly no longer effectively inform non-specialist audiences. Comics offer archaeology a communications toolset with which to speak in a new and accessible way to a far wider spectrum of its external audience. Something I am no longer alone in arguing, as this image from a recent issue of National Geographic demonstrates. But I have been keen to try and use comics as a medium for communicating with archaeology's “internal” audience - that is: with other
archaeologists. I have wanted to try and present part of the professional archaeological record in such a way as to preserve some of the narrative complexity and visual richness that I have felt is missing from "traditional" text-based professional presentation.

Earlier this year, I suggested to the Society for American Archaeology that a field journal might be just such a professional document which could benefit from being presented in comic format. And so, in June, I headed off for Palau, as much sketching as writing my field journal.

My Palau field journal was designed as much an attempt to present the visual influences and visual experiences which shape my understanding of the material I work with as it was an attempt to document the practice of my work. As you might have gathered, I found the format worked extremely well. Its unique combination of visual and textual dynamics enabled me to create a substantially more complete and detailed record of my work. It allowed me to present my professional experience as it actually occurred - as a series of gradually unfolding narrative threads across the course of an entire excavation season. It allowed me to bring in colleagues and students as contributory narrative agents, and also allowed me to consistently reference the island, its landscape, architecture and people as a rich and specific visual environment playing its own part in shaping the ongoing narrative.

Developing my journal in a graphic format has allowed me for the first time in twenty years to record the multi-layered visual and narrative context informing my work in the field - a context which has never been fully previously articulated in text-based journal articles or site reports. As a result, the journal has been an opportunity for me to re-engage students and colleagues with the practice and methodology of archaeological illustration, and to generate new interest in the recording and presentation techniques of the discipline. And while my work is only one facet of the collaborative, team-lead process of creating archaeological knowledge, making it visible is also a step towards building informed communication with the non-specialist audience that increasingly directs the funding - and thus the direction and nature - of archaeological research.

Writing and drawing this comic field journal has suggested to me new ways for archaeology to communicate the complexities of its academic, social and cultural context - the hidden narratives of its field practice. In other words, enabling me to answer clearly for the first time in twenty years the question: “Archaeological Illustrator, huh? What exactly do you do?” But there are other levels of complexity in archaeological field practice which remain equally hidden, and which - I have discovered - are potentially equally well served by the sequential arts.

In 1929, during the Japanese administration of Palau, a Japanese artist, ethnographer and folklorist called Hisakatsu Hijikata came to Palau to record the lifeways of the indigenous Palauans. He became particularly interested in the carvings which decorated their traditional “mens’ house” - or Bai - which sat at the heart of each Palauan village. By the 1920s, these wooden houses were falling into disuse. Made of wood, they required regular maintenance, repair and replacement in the face of depredation by termites and rot. Social and cultural fragmentation had taken its toll - the inevitable result of a hundred and fifty years of German and Japanese colonial economics and cultural politics. The painted carvings on the inside and outside of each Bai were narrative sequences which recounted Palauan history and cosmology. There were creation stories, tales of the gods, demigods and heroes, stories about greed and selfishness, courage and resourcefulness, love, sex and death - in short, the narratives which underpinned Palauan social
organisation and cultural identity.

Hijikata convinced the elders of many villages that in order to preserve the unique stories carved into their Bais, they would need to rethink the way these carved narratives were created and displayed. Together with a group of local students, Hijikata painstakingly copied traditional scenes onto smaller panels of carved wood - “storyboards”. In doing so, not only did he preserve the vanishing corpus of Palauan myths, legends and symbols - but he brought them out of the private world of the Bai and into the public domain. And by making storyboards that were portable and easier to look after, he preserved cultural lifeways on the verge of extinction - physically embedding these traditional social and cultural narratives within the community's emerging twentieth-century identity. It was not long before Hijikata's storyboards were being purchased by Japanese administrators and settlers first as curios, then as souvenirs. By the end of the Second World War, the “Palauan Storyboard” had become firmly established as a souvenir item among returning American G.I.s, with inevitable shifts in styles moulded by the demands of this new market.

Although it's easy to dismiss the contemporary Palauan Storyboard as mere "airport art”, the development of the Storyboard has had a significant impact on the wider visual arts on Palau. It has introduced a syncretic dimension which has ensured that traditional modes of presentation have adapted easily to contemporary applications, contemporary materials and contemporary expression.

So storyboards are now formed in the shapes familiar to modern sport divers, a painted mural of traditional Bai decoration and stories on the walls of the Community College incorporates a figure of Justice, traditional Bai stories are now painted with a “western” sense of perspective, and the Germans administrators present during the typhoon of 1908 are identified here on the interior uchtem beam inside a Bai with an anachronistic Nazi swastika. Following Hijikata's example, visual narrative has continued to find widespread public expression on Palau. This is an island steeped in the language of sequential art as a medium for education and public information as much as cultural identity. This adaptation to contemporary materials, applications and expressions is importantly, very much a two-way street - a genuine process of the sharing of visual cultures.

This mixture of old and new, this coming together of traditional and imported is understood to be less a process of cultural appropriation or diminution, than cultural participation and growth - a reaffirmation of the living strength and importance of visual narrative on Palau through hybridity, synthesis and integration. This is nothing less than the discourse of multiculturalism negotiated through sequential art.

Given such a visual context, I felt that it was important that my field journal - as a work of sequential art - participated in this syncretic, sharing process. I felt it was important to allow the panels and pages of my comic to try and absorb and adapt the visual language of Palau.

I felt that to try and tell my story without reference to the visual culture of the place where I was working would be to once again step back from acknowledging the actual visual and narrative context of our field practice. That to pretend an “objective” distance from the rich mixture of visual traditions on Palau would be to perpetuate an artificial disconnect at odds with my intention to bring the hidden detail of professional narratives into clearer focus. A syncretic approach - something the comic was uniquely suited to accommodating - was a more accurate reflection of the visual context
of that professional narrative.

And it turns out that I’m not the only person who sees comics as uniquely suited to this syncretic visual role. Just a few weeks ago, while doing some research for this paper, I came across a reference to “Haida Manga” - comics that blend together Japanese manga-style artwork with the traditional mythologies of the Haida peoples of British Columbia, Canada and the US, a fusion artform developed by the artist and writer Michael Nicholl Yahgulanaas.

On Palau, we are getting carbon-14 results from our excavated prehistoric burials on the island of Orrak which have pushed back the date for the earliest settlement of the islands by some one thousand years. We stand a good chance too of recovering DNA which we may be able use to establish where these original settlers came from.

But in digging up the ancestral bones of living Palauan clans and families, we are potentially re-writing the traditional histories and lifeways of an entire descendant people - a community which, having already suffered generations of colonial power-politics, now feel increasingly under threat from a new cycle of economic, cultural and geopolitical realities.

Archaeologists and indigenous, descendant and local communities have an unfortunate history of conflict and tension arising through their different readings of the past. Under such circumstances, bringing together the values and expectations of archaeologists and indigenous communities requires sensitivity, consideration and also, perhaps, innovation.

My colleague Sonya Atalay has written that such tensions present opportunities to develop new methodological approaches to issues such as communication and presentation. Archaeologists, she argues, need to be ready to explore the potential opportunities that critical examination of these tensions generates. Perhaps, in the Palauan Storyboards, there is an example of just such an opportunity - of how sequential art might be a medium capable of bringing together variant readings of the past, the deep past and the present. Multiculturalism is about more than differences in ethnicity or national identity, it is fundamentally about differences in values and expectations. Could sequential art model how archaeology might negotiate those differences in values and expectations?

I came to Palau looking for a way to write an archaeological comic - to use the storytelling techniques developed for graphic biography, reportage and education to create a professional and academic graphic narrative. I think using comics allowed me to get all that, but in the words of Marty DeBergi, “I got more... a lot more.” What I got was an insight into the way in which comics can absorb and reflect forms of visual expression in a way that can bridge cultural divisions. As a result, I am now looking at the issue of comics in archaeology in terms of two distinct methodological approaches. Firstly, as I originally intended: as a way of capturing the neglected visual narrative of archaeological fieldwork, but secondly, now, as a way of examining and negotiating some of the critical tensions between the archaeological past and the cultural present.

In both instances the medium itself and its particular virtues is fundamental to moving towards what Sonya Atalay describes as that “open communication [which] is a key part of the basic research ethics of working with communities.” [Atalay, 2012, p. 239]

I’m still writing and drawing “Palau: An Archaeological Field Journal”, and will be for the next six
months or so as I look for a publisher. I'm giving further papers on my work this year, and I will be working to collect feedback from students, colleagues and the wider archaeological and non-archaeological community involved in the excavations on Palau - and the social and cultural context of archaeological fieldwork in general.

It is my hope that comics and sequential art can genuinely bring something new to archaeological publication and presentation. A new way - yes - of accessing some of the hidden narratives of its practice, but perhaps more interestingly, a new way of addressing the multicultural context of its fieldwork not just in exotic, faraway places like Palau, the Caribbean or Turkey, but even, perhaps, exploring the tensions between past and present and the cultural context of archaeological science and field work that exist closer to home.

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