Random Thoughts on Story Chronology:

Most introductory discussions of storytelling (whether in reference to comics, written fiction, film, or anything else) emphasize the role of conflict in the structuring of plot. Usually this is framed in terms of a three or five part structure which follows roughly this outline: Some incident occurs which disrupts the status quo, builds to a crisis, then is resolved by a protagonist who, by doing so is changed in some fundamental way. For example:

> A woman sits at her computer working against a deadline on a term paper. Her machine crashes and she is unable to retrieve the file. This builds to a crisis as the deadline rapidly approaches, but after searching the house she finds that her roommate had recently backed up the hard drive to disc. She completes the paper before deadline and the status quo has been restored. In the process, her attitudes toward timely backing up of data have been changed.

Exciting, eh? Hardly.

This is because the traditional status quo/crisis/resolution series of events is (arguably) *necessary* but definitely not *sufficient* to craft an engaging narrative. *At least as important as the events themselves, if not more so, is* ***what*** *is revealed and* ***when*** *it is revealed.*

There are myriad problems with the above story, particularly as applied to a visual medium (how do you *show* a deadline approaching, anyway?) but part of the problem is that the interesting section of the story, the *dilemma* (post computer crash: Does she lie to her teacher? Maybe plagiarize someone else's paper?) is at the beginning, and the mundane events, like searching the house, finding the disc, etc. is occupying end of the story, where the good stuff should be.

David Mamet says in <u>On Directing Film</u>, "The solution of the problem posited at the beginning of the experience is the end of the story." But it is important to note that the beginning of the audience/reader experience need not be the chronological beginning of story being told. A perfect example of this is the film *Pulp Fiction*. Much of the interest (some would say, *all* of the interest) generated by this movie is in the sequence in which actions are revealed to the viewer. Here are the events of the film, not as they occur on screen, but as they would occur in "real time:"

1) Vince and Jules, two hit men, retrieve a briefcase which has been stolen from their employer. After narrowly avoiding being shot, Jules vows to give up his life of crime.
2) While in a moving vehicle and in broad daylight, they accidentally shoot an acquaintance, Marvin, and must dispose of the evidence.
3) En route to delivering the briefcase they stop for breakfast at a diner. While eating, the diner is held up. In the course of extricating themselves from the situation, Jules spares the life of the burglars, thus beginning his new life.
4) Jules and Vince deliver the briefcase. Aging boxer, Butch, introduced.
5) Vince goes on a disastrous date with Mia, the wife of his boss.
6) Butch refuses to throw a fight for a local gangster, goes on the lamb,

shoots Vince in the process, and escapes .

Notice the inherent problems with the events as ordered: the story's climax (scene 3) occurs near the beginning and revolves around two characters (the robbers) who have not appeared before and are never seen again; the "Butch" subplot (scene 6) appears almost out of nowhere and, coming at the end of the story, makes an odd climax; one of the main characters leaves the story early on (scene 4), the other is killed in a noticeably anticlimactic way halfway through scene 6; scenes 2 and 5 seem to serve no purpose whatsoever.

The writers (Quentin Tarantino and Roger Avary) solve a number of these problems by rearranging the sequence of events in the final script. The film begins with a small snippet of scene 3 (the climax) and repositions the rest of the scene (when the main characters we have been following since then have arrived in it) as the final sequence of the film. The "Butch" sequence (scene 5) is now the penultimate scene -- a good place for the resolution of a subplot. Additionally, scene 4 has been pushed forward so that the subplot is introduced fairly early and can then be crosscut with action of the main story.

Just as noteworthy as how some of the story's problems have been solved through a non-chronological sequence is how a number of them have *not* been solved, but rather have simply been *disguised*. Take, for example scenes 2 and 5; neither of these scenes have any real bearing on the other events in the story, nor do they serve to reveal the true character of any of the main players. They are for the most part an indulgent excuse for the director to film scenes that he wanted to film. What value they have is derived exclusively from the way they are juxtaposed to the scenes that surround them, and even then mainly on a visceral experience level.

Directing and screenwriting "how-to" books like On Directing Film by David Mamet and Story by Robert McKee contain detailed and well-argued sections which describe each author's ideas about when to include and when not to include various story elements. But the basic idea that these and many other authors are espousing is neither novel nor particularly complex; Aristotle, writing on drama in 350 BC argued:

> "The story...must represent one action, a complete whole, with its several incidents so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole." (Poetics, 4:15)

Do the scenes mentioned above, as they appear in *Pulp Fiction*, pass the "Aristotle test?" Would they pass if told in straight chronological sequence?

For another, more concise, example of the point above, watch the chronological cut of the film *Memento* on disc 2 of the special edition DVD. It's composed of the exact same scenes as the theatrical cut, but when told in chronological order, rather than reverse order as in the original theatrical cut, it is completely uninteresting. The process of gradual revelation is what drives the plot, and since the payoff/final revelation occurs at the beginning of the story chronologically, the events of the story had to be restructured in order for the film to work.

That being said, the above examples are all from movies. What of comic books? While many works in the comics medium make use of the storyteller's basic chronological tools such as flashbacks and flash-forwards, few undertake the sort of complex and purposeful chronological restructuring as the above films. Fewer still do so in a unique way that exploits comics' particular formal narrative properties -- Chris Ware's Jimmy Corrigan is the only work that comes immediately to mind.

Why is this so? Most likely because comics have only begun relatively recently to be made as long-form works. Other than Maus and a few works from Will Eisner, only in the last decade or so have creators begun to craft works not intended for episodic publication. Episodic stories are not inherently bad, (Great Expectations, for example, is justly considered a classic) but the practical restraints imposed on such stories make them ill-suited for a chronologically complex story structure. A 24-page comic book takes about 20 minutes to read. You are as unlikely to see a story with a complicated time structure in this format as you are to see such a story as the plot of a half hour sitcom (other than *The Simpsons*, of course).