

## What is so super about motion comics?

Exploring the potential of motion comics about comic book superheroes and heroes of popular culture

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### Abstract

This article explores motion comics through theoretical review of relevant academic work and unique analysis of three sampled motion comic cases. The article intends to illuminate and answer the research question: What is the quality of superhero motion comics if we consider both the medium aesthetics and the opportunities which digital technology provide for a cultural practice exploring new or other ways to tell stories about superheroes and characters in popular culture. We explore this question through an analysis of a series of past and contemporary motion comic productions, pro-

duced both from professional media producers, as well as fan-made motion comic productions\*.

**Keywords** Comic book superheroes, motion comics, animation, adaptation, transmedia storytelling

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## Introduction

The evolution of the comic book has been described as visual narrative material dating back centuries (McCloud 1994, Magnussen & Christiansen 2000, Kukkonen 2013, Babic 2014, Mazur & Danner 2014). However, comics took shape with the technological developments in print and distribution, and later remediated into the digital, interactive and online forms (Kukkonen 2013). The remediations never proved any threat to the printed comic book form, because the new digital and interactive forms supported new ways of distributing the comic book content. However, what changed was the expectations of the readers and the possibilities of the fans to re-create and re-affirm the universe of comic books.

Motion comics have existed for more than four decades, but, are still broadly seen as an emerging phenomenon (Smith 2011, 2015). While some have proposed broad inclusive definitions of the genre as a hybrid format (e.g. Smith 2011), others have argued that the genre is ill-definable due to its multiple dimensions of e.g. motion types, levels of interactivity, narrative structures, sound modalities, and production overlaps with film and animation (Morton 2015). Furthermore, the genre has been criticized for lacking the spatiotemporal reflection of the reader, due to the addition of sound and movement synchronization mediating the traditional comics gaps between the multiframe pictures (Groensteen 2013). Thus, the current discourse has focused mainly on either discussing whether motion comics can be attributed the label of “comics”, as well as mapping how the different aesthetics of the genre can be described and combined.

In the 1960s the Marvel Group produced a series of superhero “cartoons” portraying the most popular Marvel characters (Coogan 2006, Patton 2018). Two decades before Marvel Group released the Saturday morning cartoons portraying their comic book superheroes as motion comics, the DC comic book character *Superman* was portrayed in Max Fleischer’s cartoon animated version (1941-43). Compared to Fleischer’s animated work the Marvel motion comics represented a clear lowering of visual and temporal quality. Only the voice acting in the Marvel motion comics gave sufficient quality to merit the attention of the comic book fan. The movement of the body parts of the characters were crude and comical. But this was exactly the point for Marvel Comics Group. The motion comics were supposed to be a cheap way of showcasing and remediating the comic books to increase sales and product loyalty.



Figure 1: Marvel Group’s 1966s version of the comic book superhero Captain America as motion comic.

Comic book superheroes have been constantly present across media formats since the 1940s, and the popularity (Arnaudo 2013, Bahlmann 2016, Beaty & Woo 2016) of comic book superheroes may explain the emergence of the superhero motion comics (Smith 2011). Paraphrasing comic book scholar Peter Coogan’s conclusion: Com-

ic book superheroes are the “golden boys” of big cross media franchise productions. Now, the recent version of motion comics featuring comic book superheroes emerged in the 2000s, and was marked with the production and release of *Watchmen: Motion Comic* with the marketing caption: *The Graphic Novel comes to Life page by page* (Gibbons & Moore 2008). These productions of motion comics represent a merge or link between new technological developments (the digitization of comic book content) and business opportunities resulting in a viable bi-product, that for the franchises of both the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and the DC Cinematic Universe (DCU). The business aspect of motion comics is not part of the research interest of this article. The interest in motion comics follows the lines of the critical academic studies sparked by *Watchmen: The Motion Comic* (Morton 2015, 2017). The critique (motion comic is a “bastard” medium) was aimed not at the business ambitions, but rather the formal attributes of motion comics and the medium aesthetic incompatibility of comic books, animation and movies (Morton 2017).

The research motivation behind this study in motion comics emerged from a scholarly interest in animation, comic books and superhero origin stories (Vistisen 2016, Andersen 2017). A brief look at the market or online presence of superhero motion comics reveals quite a diversity in the quality of the materials shared on social media platforms such as YouTube. The academic interest in comic book superheroes across media and platforms can be explained by drawing attention to the substantial scholarly work on the subject (e.g. Coogan 2006, Romagnoli & Pagnucci 2013, Duncan et al. 2015).

This article approaches superhero motion comics from a perspective of media studies. The article intends to answer the research question: What is the quality of hero-themed motion comics if we consider both the medium aesthetics and the opportunities which digital technology provides for a cultural practice exploring new or other ways to tell stories about superheroes and characters in popular culture.

We review the positions within the current academic discourse of motion comics, and propose a framing based on the contexts motion comics can rise from and be utilized within. We present an analysis of three cases of motion comics. We seek to show the range of cultural productions motion comics might arise from - from the professional adaption to the fan-made sub-creations. The final claim of the

paper is that the interest for creating motion comics will persist because of the need for retelling the stories of comic book superheroes in both semi-fi and low-fi fan versions comparable to the audio book, and the micro-level contribution to the ongoing sub creations of the franchises through a co-creative transmedia storytelling.

### Theoretical elements of motion comics

As mentioned, the link between comic book superheroes and motion comics is strong (Coogan 2006, Smith 2011, Morton 2015). This may be the case partially because comic book superheroes currently are dominantly present in both the conventional comic book market and the broader popular culture (the cinematic superhero franchises, Comic Con fan culture). It needs to be noted, that Oriental comic book culture (e.g. anime, manga) may very well represent an equally strong source of influence, just as motion comics enacting *My Little Pony* is also part of the big picture of motion comic. But that question, the diversity of the motion comics themes and characters viewed globally, is a matter for another study. But it is fair to claim that comic book production is a global and culturally diverse business (Romagnoli & Pagnucci 2013, Beaty & Woo 2016).

The study of motion comics is a relatively small area of academic inquiry within the field of comic books/graphic novels studies and cinema/movies studies. Research into the academic publications on the subject reveals that two scholars are uniquely accredited to the keywords *motion comics*: Craig Smith and Drew Morton (Smith 2011, Smith 2015, Morton 2015, 2017). Craig Smith claims that motion comics is a *hybrid media format* that is neither comic book, animation, nor cartoon. Defining the object of study in this way is a non-definition as Drew Morton points out (Morton 2015). Both Smith and Morton list different sets of format qualities in order to define motion comics as a multimodal medium. It is clear that Smith and Morton in their work are not in any direct way considering an audience or fan approach to the phenomenon. However, Smith acknowledges: "that for the time being, the motion comic exemplifies aspects of adaptation that some readers of the original hypotext cannot readily accept." [Smith 2011, 359]

Further, Smith envisions that the professional production of motion comics still can be considered a genuine innovation within this particular field of popular culture, and thus opening for a possible

understanding of motion comics as something created by fans as well. Smith states, “(...) *motion comics is part of a strategy to cross-pollinate new and existing comic book content with moving image culture via screen-based devices and digital disruption channels (...).*” (Smith 2015, 4)

In the academic discussion between Smith and Morton, the latter acknowledges the claim, that motion comics *is* a new medium, but with the caveat that motion comics have both risen, fallen and failed due to an inherent inconsistency in the formal medium qualities, the relative low contribution to the overall business value creation, and poor reception among comic book and animation professionals (Morton 2015, Morton 2017). Both scholars provide sets of formal qualities or a formal taxonomy of motion comics aesthetics. The two sets of format qualities are presented visually below, but for further presentation of the singular format qualities we refer to Smith and Morton’s work.

Following Smith’s conceptualization of motion comics, it becomes possible to include conventional comic book features such as panels, genres and spatial depth. Smith adds to this list other fea-

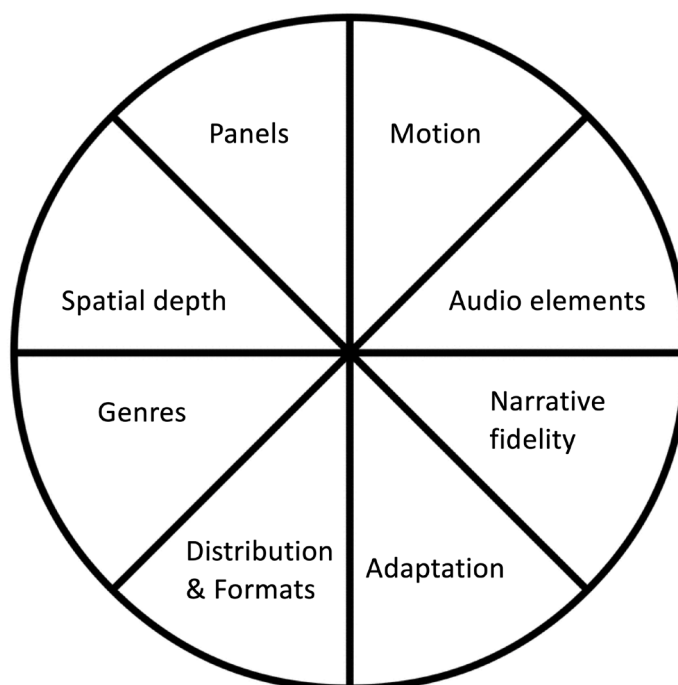


Figure 2: Model of the motion comic aesthetics, Craig Smith, 2015 (authors’ visualization).

tures related to animation and movies: Motion, audio elements, adaptation, narrative fidelity, distribution and formats. These formal qualities are not to be understood in any hierarchical or sequential structure, and the reason Smith himself begins his analysis of motion comics aesthetics with “comic book panels” can be explained by his comic book study background, which becomes clear from the beginning of Smith’s analysis: “A motion comic appropriates original comic book narrative and artwork as the primary source of visual material for its creation.” (Smith 2015, 4)

Smith does not give any explanation for the interrelatedness of these aesthetic elements. One question could be whether the mode of adaptation determines how panels, motion, narrative and audio elements are created. Or if motion comics are not a remediation how does the comic book qualities translate into a hybrid format?

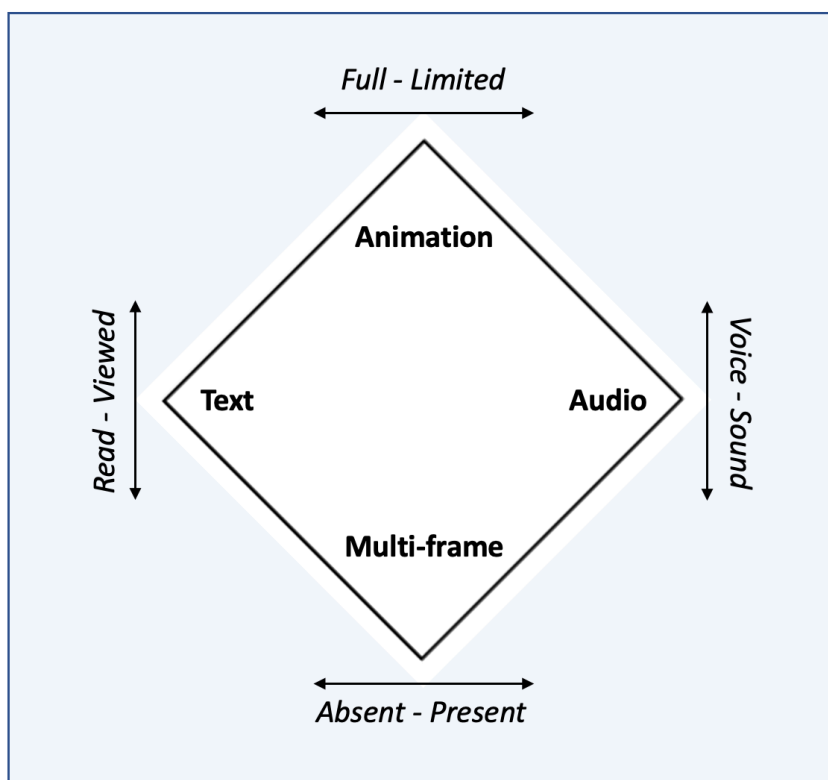


Figure 3: Formal Taxonomy of motion comics based on Drew Morton (authors’ visualization).

This question of interrelatedness of the motion comic aesthetic elements is worth an independent study. In contrast to Smith's motion comics aesthetics, Morton argues that adaptation cannot be a defining quality of the medium (Morton 2015, 349). Morton proposes his own taxonomy of motion comics by pointing to four medium specific elements, and further gives these elements a range of degree.

Two points can be made of Morton's contribution to a formal taxonomy of motion comics. The first is that the narrative element is absent. Maybe because it is taken for granted (e.g. nothing can be a comic without a story), or because it is considered to be part of the text element. One possibility could be to put narrative (or "narrative fidelity" with Smith) in the center of the model. This would make the narrative key to the choices made in the production of motion comics. The second point has to do with understanding the part of the audience (and the fans), mentioned by Smith. Once again, the text element can be considered to include different modes of reception. Morton distinguishes between reading and viewing which in itself points to modes of reception.

Our review of the theoretical elements provides a rearticulation of the problem of cultural quality of motion comics. Are the qualities inherent in the "text", or in the reception and use of the text, or somewhere in-between. This article will provide an answer to this particular question. However, as a methodological reflection the following analysis will draw on the framework in a pragmatic and an eclectic manner, in order to answer the initial research question in focus.

### **Analysis: Signs of motion comic aesthetics and its significance**

For this article three motion comics have been selected. They are about popular comic book superheroes and from a popular video game detective series. The samples have been selected represent both official-professional production and an unofficial-fan productions.

We frame the analysis through the use of motion comic aesthetics and formal taxonomies from Morton and Smith, and links this to the notion of "bardic function" borrowed from cultural studies while finally seeing this through the larger picture of cultural production seen in e.g. fandom creations.



Title	<i>Spider-Woman</i>	<i>Spider Man Marvel Knights</i>	<i>Max Payne</i>
Producer	Marvel Animation	Thwip Studios (fan made production)	Remedy Games / Rock Star Studios
Time	00:50:00 (5 episodes)	00:42:29	01:02:17 (total)
Date	19.08.2018	02.07.2015	23.06.2001
Views (20.11.19)	19,329	87,511	32,476 (Youtube version)
URL	<a href="https://youtu.be/Cat335zknik">https://youtu.be/Cat335zknik</a>	<a href="https://youtu.be/YB6iitw-SNY">https://youtu.be/YB6iitw-SNY</a>	<a href="https://youtu.be/Nda_fiChSho">https://youtu.be/Nda_fiChSho</a>

Figure 4: Overview of the motion comic case samples.

### Case 1: *The Noir-Feel and the Noir-Sound of Spider-Woman’s mission*

*Spider-Woman: Agent of S.W.O.R.D* (2010) is an official Marvel Motion Comic adaptation from the comic book version “Spider-Woman” Vol. 4, issues 1-7 (2009-10). This is the type of motion comics both Smith and Morton focus on in their work; Professional franchise productions. The motion comic consists of five 10 minutes episodes, and for the purpose of this article material from the first episode will be used.

The narrative fidelity is high, even though all the frames and panels are not used in the motion comic version. It is the story of the superhero Spider-Woman / Jessica Drew, trying to find herself after her participation in battle with the superhero group Avengers. In the first episode of the motion comic Jessica Drew is approached and recruited by the secret counter terrorism organization S.W.O.R.D. This hurls Jessica into conflict with foes both human and alien.

Several features of Smith’s motion comic aesthetics are present in this case sample. It is based on a single screen movie format, no panels. The motion comic uses both panning (spinning) and smooth shifts between the single screen frames. The coloring is similar to that of the comic book version. It is dark, blurry and very moodfully. The shadows in the screen frame play an important part of the vis-

ual aesthetic and the perception of spatial depth. In this case no instance of moving mouth, eyes, or heads is found.

The two crucial motion comic elements in this case is the use of motion and audio. In the sequence the camera pans through a shot of the facade of the hotel where Jessica is staying. In the background a ferris wheel is spinning. Throughout this episode it rains, cars and some characters are moving ever so slightly. The movements are in no way abrupt creating a sense of natural flow, even in situations with action.



Figure 5: The first shot in Spider-Woman: Agent of S.W.O.R.D.

Motions are also employed in frames where Jessica reflects, thinks or dreams. In this case, a blank space in the background is changed with a sliding movement revealing a new image (see Figure 6). This kind of motion is different because something is replaced in the screen view. At the end of the first episode we find another example of this quick switch of images. In a hotel Jessica dozes off (the screen shot closes and turns black, like closing your eyes). Immediately after a series of images flashes by like a nightmare, and it ends abruptly with a screen image of Jessica with open eyes. In itself no figure or object have moved, but the rapid shift of images framed by the image of Jessica's face with closed eyes and then eyes wide open creates the sensation of motion. A further example of motion is found in a sequence where Jessica is browsing through her mission on the device she received from the S.W.O.R.D agent.

This sequence is by the way unique, since it is not part of the comic book version.



Figure 6: Jessica Drew remembers with unease her participation in battle.

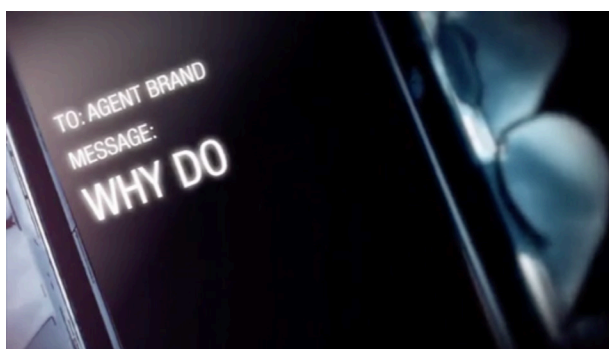


Figure 7: Jessica is texting Agent Brand after browsing through the mission file.

Finally, a 10 seconds scene depicts Jessica trying to fall asleep in her Mardripor hotel room. She closes her eyes, mimicked by a centering fadeout is a scene, and then a series of screen images flashes by,



Figure 8: Still images from the scene where Jessica experiences a nightmare, not a contemplation as in the comic book.

ending with the image of Jessica with eyes wide open. The speed and the background sound suggest that Jessica just had a nightmare. In the comic book version this “nightmare” is depicted as a “detective wall” with photos and notes posted on an ordinary apartment wall. The same images are there but displayed as a single frame more denotes a reflection, at least anything but a nightmare.

We claim that this is an example of a unique motion comic aesthetic. To borrow Morton’s taxonomy this element in the motion comic invites a viewing not a reading.

All the visual elements are accompanied by a professional track of both diegetic and non-diegetic sounds. Apart from a few examples of text displays like Jessica is reading something on her device, no speech balloons or text boxes are used. The narration is carried forward by the audio elements. The use of natural sounds (e.g. the sound of rain, a honking car, a helicopter rotor, a fired gun) and the use of both Jessica’s inner dialogue and the dialogue between the characters make the viewing a different experience than reading the comic book.

### **Case 2: *Having fun with Spider-Man and foes***

This motion comic is an amateur adaptation of Mark Millar’s comic book story arc “Marvel Knights: Spider-Man” (22 issues, first 12 used). The adaptation represents a middle level of narrative fidelity, but the flow of the story is the same as in the comic book version. The genre is all Marvel superheroes, but in contrast to *Spider-Woman’s case* it is clear that production is non-professional. It is a case of amateur or fan production, and at a genre level this is significant in understanding the cultural value and continuation of motion comics as an independent cultural form.

*Spider-Man Marvel Knights* uses single screen images with less smooth changes between the frames. The motion comic uses neither speech bubbles nor text boxes. These narrative elements are substituted by audio speech and the partial use of sounds. The use of spatial depth is absent as all the images are directly cut from the comic book material. This means that depth is achieved only by the direct use of the comic book materials. However, some use of background motion gives the impression of depth.

Motion as an aesthetic quality is used in *Spider-Man* in a limited number of ways. The first is dragging or swiping cutout elements



Figure 9: Spider-Man cut-out figures are dragged across the frame.

across the single screen image (Figure 9). In this dual illustration the figures are dragged from left to right in a static background. As a sign of the quality notice that Spider-Man's webbing is not attached to anything. There are many examples of cutout elements being dragged across the screen image (e.g. characters falling out of windows). Simple animation is employed in scenes like the example with Black Cat (Figure 10, static move of the thug's hand) and The Vulture (Figure 11, static moving background).

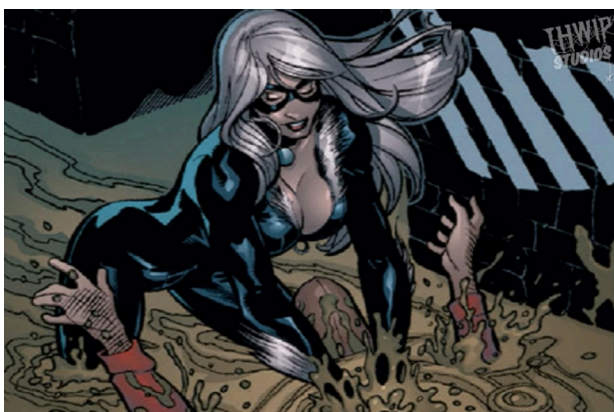


Figure 10: The hands of Black Cat's unfortunate thug are moving slightly.



Figure 11: The background is moving circular making the supervillain Vulture fly.

In *Spider-Man* the voice-over and voice acting replaces speech bubbles and text boxes. In this case the use of background music is also employed. However, the use of these audio elements is all somewhat off key. The background music and diegetic sounds are either too low or too high. And the voice-acting, though evidently performed by different persons, vary in the same “grotesque” way. This indicates that the voice-acting has been recorded and distributed individually based on the technical facilities of the individual creator, and finally has been edited at one station. This mode of production has created a “mashup” bricolage that has not adjusted and adapted the sound level to a more coherent performance. We claim that this quality “flaw” is defining for the fan production and motion comics creativity. In all likelihood, this *Spider-man* motion comic is not intended to be distributed for revenue but for sharing amongst fellow fans. And in this type of circulation sharing itself is the capital value.

### **Case 3: *Telling a noir video game story through motion comics***

Our third case is the video game *Max Payne* (2001), a game set in a classic noir crime story, which uses motion comics instead of cinematics to convey the specific noir discourse in a way the third person shooting gameplay itself could not. To achieve both fast-paced action, and deep noir storytelling, *Max Payne*’s motion comic cutscenes relieves the gameplay sequences with storytelling, constantly reaffirming the story discourse despite the action gameplays diverging from it.

The *Max Payne* motion comic cutscenes are not an adaption or abridged from a previous original comic, cartoon or otherwise, but is created solely for the game itself as an artist choice of delivering the noir feel to an otherwise action packed third person shooting game. However, the panels faithfully adapt the traditional comic page structure, though gradually animating each frame as the story progresses, thus moving towards the audience anticipation of films. A very simple spatial manipulation is present in the motion comic cutscenes. The spatial manipulation diverges in a limited degree from static comics at times, as seen when the aesthetics are manipulated to mimic emotional elements of the story. This is seen e.g. when *Max Payne* wakes up after being knocked down, in which the

subsequent frames are blurry and gains clarity in sync with Max Payne's own narration getting clearer again. The overall spatiality, however, remains flat in 2D with no separated layers or other manipulations of the scene in each frame. Along the same lines, the user is constantly able to press a 'stop' button in the interface, enabling you to opt out of all motion elements and through interactivity 'stop' the motion comic, presenting all frames, and just read it as a regular comic with no motion, sounds etc.



Figure 12: The motion comic cutscenes of Max Payne (2001), with panels emerging synchronous with e.g. the voice acting (top) and diegetic sounds of the beating with a baseball bat (bottom).

The cutscenes use a full spectrum of audio elements, from a dark instrumental music score, diegetic sound effects, and full voice acting told both from Max Payne's inner dialogue as well as interac-

tions between actors in the scenes. Auditory cues are being reused throughout the entire game cutscenes, enabling the player to know when a motion comic cutscene relieves the gameplay, and what kind of scene will be presented. As such, the music cues are different depending on something being a motion comic cutscene introducing a new level or being an intermezzo inside the level.

Finally, what about the actual motion elements in the motion comic cutscenes? In Smith's (2015) categorization all motion comics must pr. definition have some degree of motion present in the frames. However, in Max Payne, there is little to none actual motion present in the individual frames, begging the question if the cutscenes can actually be regarded as a motion comic? Following Smith's (2015) definition of motion comics as illustrated artwork situated in a digital environment we might argue that even though there is no motion present, there is definitely a temporal form through other modalities (sound, voice, music and gameplay). As such, it is the non-visual temporal forms, which create the sense of motion in Max Payne - as when Max Payne gets hit by a baseball bat (figure 14), where the reveal of the (static) visual frame is carefully timed with the 'krakk!' sounds of the bat hitting him. This evokes a reaction in the audience to render their own mental rendition of the motion without the need for any more than what can visually be described as an animatic with absolute limited animated motion. In a sense, the sound animates the still image through the synchronization of the visual cut with the audio effect. As such, a limited animation use is still working as a motion comic due to the full spectrum of other modalities in use. While being an 'extra' element to the main game, the cutscenes can only be fully perceived alongside the game. On the other hand, the game's noir feel cannot easily be perceived without the motion comics cutscenes. As such, the bardic function of motion comics gives the game a form of communication which, at the time of the game production, would be hard to convey through gameplay agency or through traditional in-game cinematic cutscenes.

### **Discussion: Motion comic production archetypes**

The case samples have demonstrated the diversity or range of motion comic features among three examples which differ in not only form, but also in context of production and scope. The Marvel Mo-



tion Comic production shows the established professional mode of production for motion comics, easily applicable through the lens of the formal frameworks of Morton and Smith both in terms of filmic and aesthetic dimensions, as well as the narrative fidelities and modes of distribution. However, the two latter examples of the fan made Marvel Knight, and the game integrated cutscene motion comics of Max Payne, complicate the analysis - not through the formal qualities of structure, narrative or aesthetics, but how their mode of production affects how the formal qualities have come to be.

One key element or observation is the difference in the degree of professionalism in the production of the motion comics. From our analysis we argue a series of archetypical modes of production can be synthesized, which each point towards different types of cultural value in the motion comic:

- As an adaption or an appropriation of existing media formats or modalities (most commonly traditional comics)
- As a relieving format for another media format or modality in the same production to express something the primary format cannot (e.g. a game like Max Payne)
- As an add-on in the context of multiple media productions in a transmedia storytelling
- As a fanmade subcreation, leveraging both adaption and add-on productions

Related to the transmedial archetype is the fourth, and final, which describes a mode of production in which the motion comic is not defined as being produced for the fan audience, but as a fan production itself. Though it is evidently hard to propose a strict formal definition and limitation of what a motion comic is, the contributions from Morton (2015) and Smith (2011, 2015) do point towards another way of addressing the importance of the 'form' of motion comics, compared to other types of mediated production due to its use of adaptations and reinterpretations of existing visual forms. Through their predominant use of limited animation techniques echoing early pre-Disney animation complexity, motion comics are a comparably easier format to master for the producing users - what scholars such as Sandvik (2018) would label these *prousers* in fan-

doms. In other words, the production complexity, and the media literacy required to produce motion comics sits in a fidelity sweet spot, comparable to how fandoms also remix video clips and graphics from tentpole mediums (e.g. Jensen & Vistisen 2013). While it could be argued that traditional comics (fanmade or professionally made) could accomplish the same storytelling for the *prouser* there is an important point to be made about what the addition of temporal information adds. While the traditional comic book format presents the viewer with the totality of the page frames, the motion comics enables the *prouser*s to interpret the pacing and rhythm of the events when transforming into a motion comics sequence (Vistisen 2016, Sandvik 2018). Perhaps most importantly, the addition of temporal information to the comics enables the formation of an audience anticipation and suspensefulness vastly different from that of the comic books page overview, and thus leaning more towards the expressive potential of cartoon movies. Thus, the format is *prouser*s friendly enough to enable a broad scope of co-creative consumers to reach an acceptable temporal fidelity when adapting, reinterpreting or remediating a story within their respective fandoms. As such, motion comics become a vehicle for the cultural production of fans to engage with the tentpoles of their fandom, and create not just content, but also form.

At this point in our study of motion comics it seems to indicate that fan made motion comics are taking over the scene of transmedia storytelling adaptations.

### **Endgame? Conclusion and new orientations for motion comics?**

Our study of motion comics has provided insight into the emerging academic framework. The study has pointed to different ways of conceptualizing a motion comic aesthetic or taxonomy. Our contribution to this academic discussion is the critique that formal medium aesthetics cannot explain why motion comics are still part of global popular comic culture and fandom. Further we have listed archetypal modes production indicating that fans are taking over the motion comics game. The size, circulation and support of this motion comics game is a matter for an independent study. This insight into fan production is in no way new to other areas of popular media culture, but in the case of motion comics it points to the ne-

cessity to reframe the study of motion comics in order to understand the quality and significance of this wave. The turn convergence is not news to scholars of fans and fan creativity, but in relation to studies of motion comics the cultural element - the bardic function - can provide an explanation why fans pick up where the businesses left motion comics and continue the cultural production and reproduction of low to middle fidelity motion comics about their favorite comic book superhero or other franchise heroes.

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