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5

Lost in the Static? Comics in Video Games

Armin Lippitz

Comics have attracted more and more attention in mainstream culture. As a result, the estimated market size of the medium in North America has doubled since 1997.¹ One reason for this growing interest in the medium is, without a doubt, the success of cinematic adaptations of comic books. However, video games have experienced an even bigger boom in popularity in recent years. Indeed, global games revenues have been growing and have effectively caught up with the movie industry. A cause for, as much as a result of, the increased success of these two media is their integration into transmedia storyworlds. These networks of texts, which collectively tell a continuous story distributed over various media outlets, have become routine for most mainstream, blockbuster titles, regardless of the initial core text's medium. Comics and video games seem to be particularly well suited for transmedia explorations because they have always tapped into the potentials of expanding their storyworlds and extending their experiences across media, as Hans-Joachim Backe has argued.² In addition, the comics/graphic novel-esque style employed by video games such as *Max Payne* (Remedy Entertainment, 2001) has been frequently highlighted in reviews etc. Even though reviewers and popular critics have understood the interrelations between these two media, scholars have been slow to embrace the potentials opened up by the intersections between comics and video games.

This chapter will provide an overview of the ways in which comics have been incorporated into video games. I will focus on games using visual and other elements of comics and how these features are integrated into the

games' aesthetics as well as gameplay mechanics, thereby explaining the translation of comics elements into video games. The examples I will discuss testify to a gradual progression in terms of the interrelatedness between the two media in question, from aesthetic similarities in cut-scenes and animations to the integration of comics elements into gameplay. In this context, Backe has developed a typology which differentiates between nine types of intermedial relationships between comics and video games.³ While his model primarily highlights aesthetic and narrative correlations, my chapter will focus on operational links between the two media. Accordingly, Backe's final type, "appropriation" is particularly relevant for my chapter, as it explores one medium's systemic influences on the other. As I will demonstrate by primarily focusing on comics' influence on video games, the interconnectedness between the two media is characterized by constant intermedial exchange.

To be sure, there are numerous examples of video games incorporating aesthetics and/or other elements of comics. Some video games, such as *Max Payne*, present the majority of their cut-scenes in comics strip form. Between each chapter, the third-person shooter gameplay is interrupted by narrative expositions displayed in an aesthetic style reminiscent of comics. Visually, static pictures arranged as comic strips, including captions and speech bubbles, replace the regular, animated in-game graphics. Voice actors, accompanied by sound effects and music which accentuate the verbal dimension, present the panels' textual content to the players on the sonic level.

Comics, in the traditional sense, is a medium presented on paper and therefore restricted by its material dimension. A change in platform, such as the remediation of a comic strip onto a computer screen, transforms the verbo-visual, paper-bound text into something new.⁴ Accordingly, to echo Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum that "the medium is the message," the platform the imagetext is presented on impacts reader-viewers' encounter with, and experience of, a given comic.⁵ *Max Payne's* merging of comic strips' visual features with the cinematic elements of sound and music on a computer screen hence creates a distinct experience, which is radically different from simply seeing these panels printed on paper. Players do not see a comic in the conventional sense during the cut-scenes, but a digital interpretation of a comic that includes music and sound for dramatic effect, thus "embedding . . . comics into the game-internal multimedia system."⁶

The elements this new form takes over from traditional printed comics (i.e., primarily the visuals) are adapted to the computer screen without interfering with the mechanics of the source medium, as the visual information in the digital comic strip operates in the same way as in a printed version (aside from specific changes to the reading experience in the new graphic display, such as the fixed duration of time the strips are displayed and the inability to return to

previous pages). The added sounds constitute the most drastic changes to the experience and intensify the story's impact by enhancing the text's meaning with an additional layer. No new reading conventions have to be learned or established to follow the fiction. One could use a printed remediation of the cut-scenes in *Max Payne* without the voiceover, music, and sound effects and would still be able to understand the narrative progression.

This effect would be more difficult to achieve with the cut-scenes in *inFAMOUS* (Sucker Punch Productions, 2009), as they include moving images. The creators of this third-person action adventure incorporate a style that has come to be known as "motion comics." This technique uses three-dimensional backgrounds and two-dimensional drawings which create a pseudo-3D effect that allows for the manipulation of perspectives in a way that the 2D images appear to be moving. The starting point for the creative process of producing a motion comic, however, is still an ordinary, static comic. Similar to a storyboard for film, which outlines the most important moments in the plot arranged in a sequence of still images, this regular comic serves as a template for the final work of art. Computer software isolates certain details in the images and creates separate layers for them. These layers are added and subtracted from the panels and the 3D environment at appropriate times and the camera dynamically shows them from various angles, which makes the overall picture seem to be in motion (see Figure 5.1a and b). Of course, this is a dramatically simplified description of the process. Nonetheless, the added movement creates an effect that is different from a regular, static comic.

However, the influence of the comics medium remains palpable in these motion comics. In contrast to *Max Payne*, the cut-scenes in *inFAMOUS* rely on audible narration and dialog without the textual input provided by captions and/or speech bubbles. A printed remediation would therefore be silent and make it hard or even impossible for reader-viewers to understand what is going on in the story. Transcribing the voiceovers and including them in the text as captions would potentially take away important visual information from the images and thus alter the work significantly. Since many video game designers work from a storyboard to sketch their stories, and the production of motion comics is comparatively cheap, they are a popular alternative to full-scale 3D animation.

Nonetheless, some video games incorporate comics aesthetics in their animated cut-scenes as well. For example, the interactive drama/action-adventure *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2010) starts with a black screen which gradually fills up with animated images of a bedroom from different angles until they form a grid of six panels. The content of these panels is moving and changing before they depict one final image of the protagonist sleeping in his

FIGURE 5.1a and b Screenshots from inFAMOUS showing a motion comics sequence (*Sucker Punch*, 2009).

bed, divided by the grid-like, black border. Admittedly, in cinematographic terms, this style is called “split screen” or “multi-dynamic image technique,” but the grid-like composition of the images is strongly reminiscent of comic strips and one could call this sequence an “animated comic” (see Figure 5.2).

Later cut-scenes in the game also make use of the same style, and certain passages even include it during gameplay, most memorably the episode in which one of the player characters (PC for short), Scott Shelby, has to foil a

FIGURE 5.2 *The grid-like arrangement of the moving images is reminiscent of a comic strip. Screenshot from Heavy Rain (Quantic Dream, 2010).*

robbery. In this part of the game, the action is shown from three different angles. Two smaller frames on the left side of the screen show the shop's counter from the store's security cameras in a grainy, black and white aesthetic. The biggest panel on the right side of the screen displays regular in-game graphics. The players have to navigate their avatar through the store in order to prevent the robbery. The action is shown simultaneously in all three panels and the various perspectives make orientation within the gamespace easier. In addition, the music, along with the robber's vocal requests, adds a sense of urgency and drama to the episode. While the cinematic aesthetic of the entire game suggests that the creators of *Heavy Rain* rather drew on split-screen techniques than animated comics, the similarities to the static medium, especially the grid-like introduction sequence, cannot be denied. Indeed, *Heavy Rain* presents a textbook example of a "simulation of aesthetic qualities" without "reference to the system of comics" Backe considers characteristic of pastiche.⁷

The 2003 first-person shooter *XIII* by Ubisoft Paris more explicitly seeks to emulate comics. The game's visual dimension echoes the comic book aesthetic, not least because the game is based on a comic book series of the same name, created by the Belgian writer-artist duo Jean Van Hamme and William Vance. Numerous aesthetic and other design choices reinforce the connection to the comics series: The chapter selection and other menus in the video game are presented as comics pages, as each of the available options

is represented by a panel with dark borders over a white background. The images are drawn in a style called “cel shading,” which emphasizes their contours with thick, black borders, and makes the three-dimensional pictures appear flat. This technique calls to mind comic book-style drawings and, in the case of *XIII*, exemplifies an amalgamation of photorealism (restricted by the technological limitations at the time) and “caricaturism.”⁸

Importantly, the designers of *XIII* did not fall into a common trap described by Andrew Rollings and Ernest Adams: “In general, far too much time is spent on getting the look of a game right at the expense of tuning its gameplay.”⁹ Whereas graphics are often little more than “lures with which the industry sells new titles,” in the case of *XIII*, the visual style emphasizes the connection to its source text.¹⁰ Moreover, sound effects are not only audible but also visualized through textual references, while some of the dialogs are represented in the form of speech bubbles. In addition, during the first-person-perspective gameplay, smaller pop-up panels sometimes appear on screen to provide additional information (see Figure 5.3). The cut-scenes show an animation of a comic book, in which the camera zooms in on certain panels and then shows the action as an animated clip before freezing in the final still image again and continuing with the comic book story.

Unlike motion comics, where static 2D drawings are rendered in a 3D environment and presented from dynamic perspectives to make them appear moving, some of the panels in *XIII* are fully animated and show the immediate action leading up to a static image encapsulating the performance. This

FIGURE 5.3 Pop-up panels are a recurrent design element in *XIII*. Screenshot from *XIII* (Ubisoft Paris, 2003).

technique influences the players' experience, especially in terms of their perception of the narrative. Because of their physical manifestation on paper, traditional comics display motionless, fixed images next to one another. The empty space between these pictures or panels is called "the gutter" and the reason why Scott McCloud dubbed the medium "The Invisible Art."¹¹ For him, the gutter represents the most unique and important aspect of comics because it does not simply indicate a sequence of images, but rather asks the reader-viewer to become "an *equal partner in crime*," as the reader-viewer (co-)creates meaning by deciphering the panel sequence and the implicit narrative sequence (including the gaps, visually represented by the gutter).¹² As a result, the conclusions drawn from two pictures presented side-by-side are different for each reader-viewer. In other words, every reader-viewer chooses what happens between the panels. McCloud poetically says that "to kill a man between panels is to condemn him to a thousand deaths."¹³

An animated comic, like the cut-scenes in *XIII*, takes away some of that interpretative power, because the animations provide additional information that in a static comic would not be available to reader-viewers. In other words, the gutter effectively disappears, because the narrative gaps traditionally hidden in the gutter are revealed during the animation. On the other hand, the story might become less ambiguous than in a regular comic. Accordingly, one of the most essential mechanics in comics, the gutter and the power to mentally fill the gaps it leaves in the narrative, is diminished because the information is provided, at least partially, by the animations. Closure is, in some measure, established by the moving images and thus forced onto the reader-viewers (players).

The transitions between the cut-scenes are seamless to create the impression that players are moving through the space of the comic. This illusion is accomplished by focusing on one panel, which represents the first-person view of the players, while the other panels and panel borders disappear. During gameplay, captions, speech bubbles, visible sound effects, and pop-up panels showing the details of an action, usually a violent confrontation with a non-player character (NPC), reinforce the theme and the notion that the entire action is taking place inside a comic book. Indeed, the whole game is an interactive, animated comic, thereby blurring the lines between Backe's single-text transcreation and imitation categories.¹⁴

The same is true for *Comix Zone*, a 1995 arcade-style action platformer produced by Sega. In contrast to *XIII*, *Comix Zone* does not adapt a particular source text; instead, the video game draws on iconic brawler (super/anti) heroes such as Luke Cage, Midnighter, Colossus, and Iron Fist. In the short introductory animation, a comics artist named Sketch Turner is pulled into his illustration by one of his creations. Sketch then has to fight his way through

the pages of his own text. From a narrative point of view, there are two distinct worlds to be observed here: (a) the protagonist's plane of existence (i.e., his apartment and the drawing desk he works at) and (b) the fictional comic book he is transported into. In narratology, this transgression of diegetic levels is referred to as "metalepsis," a term introduced by Gérard Genette (see Figure 5.4).¹⁵ The concept has undergone a renaissance in recent years, with numerous scholars providing their definitions and elaborating on their conceptualizations of the phenomenon. Approaching the topic from a transmedial perspective, Jeff Thoss has arguably provided one of the most inclusive definitions, suggesting that metalepsis "always involves and affects a storyworld," as "the line that separates what is inside and outside of it . . . is violated by metalepsis in a paradoxical way."¹⁶

Unlike *XIII*, which shows a first-person view without panel borders during gameplay, *Comix Zone* provides a level 2D view—familiar from many arcade-style fighter or brawler games such as *Bad Dudes Vs DragonNinja* (Data East, 1988)—of parts of a comics page, which always includes panel borders, the gutter, and parts of neighboring panels. Thus, players are always aware that their avatar is trapped in a comic book, which helps immersion into the game and its, admittedly trite, storyline. Each panel the PC reaches either offers a puzzle for players to solve or needs to be cleared of enemies in order for the protagonist to progress to the next section of the level. Once the conditions to advance are fulfilled, yellow arrows indicate the way (or ways) the avatar can take to advance. In regular comic books, such pointers traditionally show

FIGURE 5.4 *Comix Zone* frequently breaches the boundaries between two traditionally separate diegetic levels. Screenshot from *Comix Zone* (Sega, 1995).

the order the panels are supposed to be read and viewed in. Here, they reveal the possible paths the PC can take to traverse the page. Certain panels offer multiple options to progress. These choices are mutually exclusive and therefore constitute a non-linear level structure. Accordingly, the embedded narrative changes depending on the route players take.¹⁷ In contrast to a printed comics page, which can be looked at in its entirety, in *Comix Zone* only the current passage is visible and, depending on the route the players choose to take, only those panels the avatar visits are on display (including partial glimpses of neighboring panels). In other words, players never get an overview of the whole level as reader-viewers of a regular comic would. Because certain places of the level can never be reached in one playthrough, from a narrative point of view, some of the story of the in-game comic is withheld from the players.

In *XIII* the gameplay screen constitutes an interactive, animated panel as part of a comic book. The story of the comic progresses through the enacted narrative which takes place in said comic book. Together with the cut-scenes, which are non-interactive representations of the same story, the entire narrative is pre-fabricated and shown to the players. In *Comix Zone*, on the other hand, only those parts of the in-game comic book the PC traverses are integrated in the overall narrative, because alternative paths through the level or the page remain hidden from view. Since the players always get partial glimpses of neighboring panels, they are aware of potential other routes they could have taken, and, after choosing a path, they are conscious about missing (embedded) narrative information. In other words, the story, at least of the fictional comic book the PC is running, jumping, and fighting through, is incomplete.

While traversing the level/page, the avatar has to overcome the panel borders of the in-game comic book he is trapped in. The white strips separating each panel, representing the gutter, are depicted as if they were superimposed over the background of the pictures. Every time players progress to the next panel, the avatar jumps out of the page and over the panel border.

Even if the pictures would support a way from one panel to the next, like a door or a sewer pipe, the PC grabs hold of the panel border and vaults himself over into the next image. Additionally, sometimes a large black-and-white hand holding a pencil appears from somewhere outside of the comic and draws an enemy into the panel. Significantly, all of the metaleptic transgressions take place between the hypodiegesis of the in-game comic book and the diegesis of the protagonist's apartment. The players are only spectators to them on a meta-level.

Another important element in comics are sound effects. Of course, for a print medium, this is an arbitrary term. In comics, it refers to the synesthesia

of visual and auditory experience.¹⁸ Synesthesia, the union of senses, means that the experience of one sense (in comics: visual input via language) is also experienced by a second sense (in comics: sound). McCloud uses the term “synaesthetics” to highlight the difference between “reading” a sound (and other sensual responses, like touch, smell, or even emotions, such as anger, or joy) and actually hearing it (experiencing them).¹⁹ “Soundwords” and other sound effects in comics may only evoke certain sensory reactions, but cannot produce the actual experience. In other words, comics use written language to stand in for sounds. Written language accordingly imitates sound.

In video games, on the other hand, sound effects are auditory. Thus, they do not rely on synchronized visual input and, depending on the quality of the sounds, they are usually unambiguous. Interestingly, both *Comix Zone* and *XIII* use visual language to either stand in for or complement sound effects in order to reinforce the intermedial connections to comic books. Sometimes enclosed in jagged speech bubbles and written in a soft, rounded font traditionally associated with comics, the additional information helps players immerse themselves in the game and increases the feeling of being in and interacting with a comic book.

The amalgamation of components and aesthetic elements from both comics and video games is especially powerful in *XIII*, even if the mechanics and functions of some comic-specific features are reduced, or even entirely absent. For example, the gutter’s power to draw readers into the comic becomes at least partially undermined when animations substitute some of the missing information (as in *XIII*) or when the panels cannot be viewed side by side (as in *Comix Zone*).

While the integration of the gutter into a video game is thus not easy, the puzzle adventure *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* (Ubisoft Montpellier, 2014) showcases how video games may remediate in innovative ways. *Valiant Hearts* presents colorful and stylized versions of various French theaters of war in the First World War. The character design is rather abstract, as the characters mostly feature straight lines and iconic faces. Although all playable characters have distinct voices, which can be heard during the cut-scenes, during gameplay, the player character’s communication with NPCs is visualized via icons and drawings which appear in speech bubbles, which even feature tails. In addition, the beginning of each chapter introduces the spatial and temporal setting in black writing located in rectangular, white boxes, clearly drawing on the visual grammar of comics captions. By tapping into well-established comics conventions, *Valiant Hearts* deemphasizes its serious subject matter, and thus makes it more accessible to a younger audience. Indeed, as the menu combines snippets of historical exposition (i.e., historical facts) with photographs and video footage from *Mission Centenaire 14–18*

(2012), a commemorative project, and the documentary *Apocalypse: World War I* (2014), the game suggests that it is even intended to be used for educational purposes.

Comics aesthetics do not only operate on *Valiant Hearts*' visual level, however. Indeed, the comics aesthetics are cleverly integrated into gameplay. For example, whenever the players confront off-screen enemies, a frame depicting the remote action covers part of the screen. The visual configuration evokes a comics panel (or at least parts of one), as a superimposed (moving) image with a white border hides parts of the immediate surroundings of the PC to show action taking place elsewhere, which has an impact on the current location (see Figure 5.5). The players encounter this visual setup for the first time during the storm of French troops in Crusnes. After the French leader has ordered his troops to charge, a white border suddenly cuts the screen in half, separating the two sides. The left-hand "panel" shows the French pressing forward (to the right of the screen), while the right-hand "panel" displays a German captain issuing orders. The right panel soon disappears again, as the main image again expands to the extent of the screen. As the French advance, another panel appears at one point, showing German howitzers blasting toward the attacking Frenchmen. The smaller panel vanishes after the animation has ended, but the players then face the falling shells and try to avoid them. The action displayed in the overlaid panel thus influences the main section of the screen. Similar to deciphering the connections between two

FIGURE 5.5 *Valiant Hearts* asks players to mentally connect two images (or, in this case, animations) separated by a visual gap (gutter). Screenshot from *Valiant Hearts* (Ubisoft Montpellier, 2014).

static images in a traditional comic book, the players are tasked to establish a connection between the overlay and the gamespace the PC inhabits, effectively bridging the gap of the gutter. If players fail to establish this connection, they will not be able to advance in the game. Here, a comics convention is thus appropriated as a game mechanic. The frequent use of this technique during the action sequences enhances the game's comic book feel.

Framed (Loveshack, 2014) takes the integration of comics elements in a digital game even further. *Framed* is a mobile game for tablets and combines various elements of the comics medium with video game mechanics and narrative. The story follows a typical film noir template and revolves around two PCs that alternately carry a mysterious briefcase and try to avoid policemen. The game's visual design is reminiscent of noir comics such as the *Sin City* series (1991–2000), the *Blacksad* series (2000–13), and *Batman: Year One* (1987). Each level is presented as a page from a comic book with a varying number of panels and arrangements. The protagonist always starts in the upper left corner and has to traverse the entire page in order to reach the next level (see Figure 5.6). The images in the panels are static until the PC reaches them, then they become fully animated. When the avatar moves into

FIGURE 5.6 *The gutter, a functional comics element which makes reader-viewers interpret pictures in sequence, is the central gameplay element in Framed. Screenshot from Framed (Loveslack, 2014).*

the next picture, the previous panel depicts the altered state of the diegesis after the action in static fashion. Evidently, “the formal framework of the comic only allows for restricted and rudimentary potential for interactions,” which the video game has to work around, or play with.²⁰

To be sure, *Framed*'s gameplay is limited to changing the order and arrangement of the panels. Accordingly, most levels allow the players only to alter the sequence in which the PC passes through the images, while some also require players to rotate the pictures that the character can successfully traverse the screen. At the start of the game, the panels the avatar has already visited cannot be changed anymore, while later levels require players to alter the arrangement simultaneous to the action. The moving image the PC is located in can never be switched with later pictures in the series, though. Naturally, there are panels featuring obstacles or enemies the avatar cannot overcome in the original arrangement of each level. This is the puzzle element of the game, as players are asked to make assumptions about what will happen when their character enters a panel. Players have to account for the possible relations between the sequential images. Indeed, various scenarios may unfold inside a panel once the player character enters it, depending on what happened in previous panels.

Most levels feature square panels arranged in a straightforward grid. The reading pattern follows the Western comics tradition, from left to right and top to bottom (see Figure 5.7). However, some of the levels feature longer rectangular frames that may be aligned horizontally or vertically. Accordingly, these panels disrupt the grid, as they simply take up more space than the square images. In particular, their vertical arrangement challenges the traditional reading order and thus adds complexity to the puzzles (see Figure 5.8). Overall, the game thus relies on the players' mental and analytical powers to interpret the connections between two, or even more, pictures in a sequence. In this way, *Framed* uses the gutter as the core gameplay mechanic—the gutter is gamified.

In addition, the movement of the PC does not always follow the reading patterns, which adds even more complexity to the potential connections between the panels. The different reading patterns, fused with changing panel arrangements and the gutter, merges comics mechanics with gameplay. As a result, *Framed* is a wonderful example of how video games may adapt elements other than aesthetics from comics.

In this examination of the intermedial exchange between comics and video games, I have shown how much influence the former has on the latter. While video games can settle for remediating aesthetic or narrative qualities of comics, as described in Backe's typology, I have put emphasis on examples which integrate operational elements from the source medium and appropriate them

FIGURE 5.7 *Standard reading pattern in Western comics.*

FIGURE 5.8 *Potential “reading” pattern in Framed.*

for the target medium. Appropriating operational aspects of the static medium of comics into the interactive medium of video games bears the danger of petrifying the target medium. However, the examples above show that the dynamic visuals in cut-scenes and gameplay of video games subvert the static nature of images in sequence employed by the source medium, while still accommodating operative elements. In other words, video games, especially more recent ones, have found innovative ways to integrate comics functionalities into their gameplay as well as cut-scenes, shedding the shackles of static images, while retaining operational and aesthetic qualities. Video games are thus not lost in the static nature of comics, despite their strong influence.

To be sure, today's media landscape is characterized by constant intermedial exchange, and thus requires a high level of media literacy on both the production/creation and the consumption/reception end. As a result of this increased proficiency, it is easier, on the one hand, to integrate and, on the other, to decipher different functional elements from various media. As I have demonstrated, video games use the referential field offered by the contemporary mediascape in extremely creative ways.

Notes

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- 5 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Berkeley, CA: Gingko Press, 2013), 25.
- 6 Backe, "Yellow Kid," 148; my translation.
- 7 Ibid., 151; my translation.
- 8 For a discussion of these two styles, see Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca, *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 142–4.
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- 19 Ibid.
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