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**Writing Visual Culture**

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## **Motion Comics: The Emergence of a Hybrid Medium**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines the recent emergence of the motion comic as part of a growing relationship between comic books, animation and new forms of digital entertainment and distribution. Motion comics typically appropriate the narrative and 'static' artwork of a comic book, which is then manipulated by animation software such as Adobe's After Effects to create an impression that is similar to paper-cut animation. Early examples of the motion comic form include the episodic web-based *Broken Saints* (Burgess 2001), as well as *Saw: Rebirth* (Shuter and Viney 2005). This article will reveal a number of motion comic aesthetics via a brief analysis of *Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbons 1987) (Hughes 2008). A number of interactive digital comic narratives are also explored, including *Pocom* (Gauld and Goodbrey 2003) and an overview of the app-based title, *CIA: Operation Ajax* (Burwen 2011).



## INTRODUCTION

The motion comic can be regarded as part of a broader movement, which has placed the comic book medium as one of the most influential narrative sources in popular film and animation. The advent and maturation of Computer Generated Imagery (CGI), Visual Effects (VFX), and sophisticated digital compositing, enables Hollywood filmmakers to create CGI comic book characters that blend almost seamlessly with live-action characters and real or imaginary environments. The twenty first century has witnessed a number of commercially successful film releases such as *Spider-Man* (Raimi 2002), and the more recent *Avengers Assemble* (Whedon 2012). Produced and distributed according to the Hollywood system, these 'blockbusters' have arguably created a greater demand for comic book derived narratives across various media platforms, such as film, television, the Internet and digital tablets and smartphones. Marvel's *Agents of Shield* (2014) and their upcoming *Defenders* Netflix series exemplify the influence of comic books and media convergence. While the comic book medium has already been adapted into various film franchises, televised cartoons, webcomics and interactive experiences, the emergence of the motion comic has further transformed the relationship between the comic book medium and moving image culture. It does so by directly appropriating the narrative and 'static' comic book artwork from the original source material (the hypotext), which is then manipulated by animation software such as Adobe's After Effects to create an impression that is similar to paper-cut animation. Early examples of the form include the episodic web-based *Broken Saints* (Burgess and Kirby 2001), as well as *Saw: Rebirth* (Shuter and Viney 2005), an adaptation from a one-off comic book title that acted as a prequel to the *Saw* narrative in the live-action films. The release of a motion comic adaptation of Dave Gibbons and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (Hughes 2008) on the iTunes store and DVD brought the motion comic field to public attention more than any other title up to that time. By adapting such a high profile graphic novel, it signified that the motion comic had become part of a broader effort to bring the comic book medium into new and emerging forms of digital media. To date, the series has been generally well received, despite some criticisms of the voiceover:



The dialogue, provided entirely by Tom Stechschulte, is really quite good, especially when voicing Dr. Manhattan, though there are a few major exceptions, namely the fact that he also provides the voices for the female characters (dvdtalk.com 2009).

The widespread influence of the motion comic also extends into contemporary transmedia practices, enabling content creators to extend existing franchises beyond their native mediums and distribution networks in a bid to reach a wider spectrum of consumers. Motion comic titles, such as the aforementioned *SAW: Rebirth* enable content producers to augment existing franchises with additional exposition, which often takes the form of a prequel to a popular film or television series. Furthermore, the accessibility of digital animation software has encouraged a growing number of amateur or 'fan-made' motion comics of popular titles. Recent adaptations include *The Death of Spiderman* (Bates 2011), which has achieved over 1,000,000 views on *YouTube*, and *Angry Birds: The Motion Comic* (Kareranta 2011), which has achieved over 800,000 views on *YouTube*. These figures indicate a growing acceptance of the field as a conduit for fan participation and remediation.

As with many new forms of moving image or digital culture, motion comics currently polarise opinion among comic book readers, animation critics, audiences and the popular press, as illustrated by some of the following comments and reviews:

I'm with you, dude. I'm an old comic book geek from way back and I think that "digital" or motion comics are for gomers. Gimme an old fashioned physical comic any day. Nothin' like crackin' open an old issue and smelling that aged newsprint!! Yeeeeaaaaaaah.....  
(FatFreddysCat 2012)

With Marvel Comics' new *Stephen King's N* joining DC's *Watchmen* and Image's *Invincible* series for MTV, everyone seems to be jumping on the animated adaptation bandwagon. We have only one question to ask: Has no-one told any of these people that these cut-price cartoons kind of suck? (McMillan 2008)

The previous statements, and many other online comments and discussions, obscure the motion comic field within a subjective area of public discourse. Many such comic book readers exhibit a fear or distrust of digital media and what it possibly means for the printed comic book medium. One could argue that their concerns are the equivalent of a rallying cry from a distinct subculture of comic book fans that oppose contemporary digital modes of comic book narrative



and entertainment. Their devotion to the analogue printed comic book medium lies in direct conflict with the commonly held perception of convergence culture, as posited by Henry Jenkins:

By convergence, I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want (Jenkins 2006, 2).

This article argues that the motion comic is part of a strategy to cross-pollinate new and existing comic book content with moving image culture via screen-based devices and digital distribution channels such *iTunes*, *YouTube* and mobile apps. The following section will consider the various forms of motion comic by analysing the distinct production practices that motion comic directors employ to adapt a comic book scene into a motion comic.

## **MOTION COMIC AESTHETICS**

A motion comic appropriates original comic book narrative and artwork as the primary source of visual material for its creation. The unique hand-drawn artwork of the comic book artist is typically scanned and converted into a digital image format. The artwork from each panel is often separated into distinct visual layers, which can be animated separately from one another to give an impression of speed/time, camera movement and spatial depth. A variable combination of comic book speech balloons, narrated voiceover, individual character voiceover and soundtrack score typically accompany the moving image.

### *Comic book panels*

The narrative flow of the comic book occurs within an overall system of panels, individual panels that depict scenes, and the artwork within those panels. This system is designed to aid the sequential flow of the narrative. Motion comics adapt this visual layout into a screen-based format, which is typically landscape in aspect ratio, compared to the portrait aspect ratio of the comic book. This adaptation appears as part of a time-based moving image. This can occur in the following ways within a screen-based image:

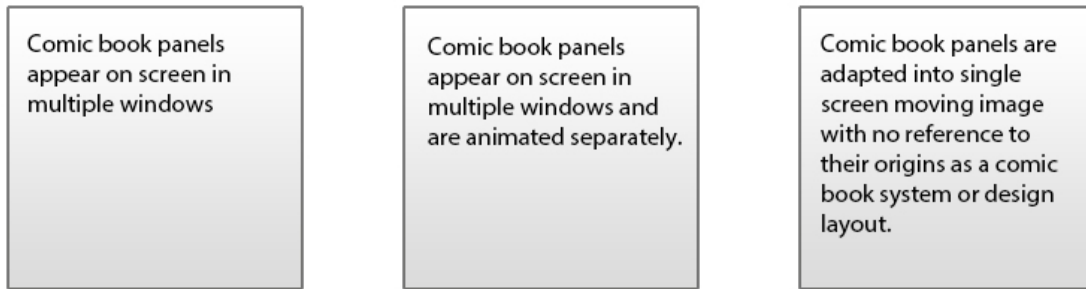


Fig.1. Motion comic definitions - comic book panels.

### Motion

There are three distinct aspects of animated motion within the field of motion comics. These include: Separate layers of individually animated characters or objects within the screen-based image, static characters and backgrounds with animated effects, a roving camera which pans or zooms around the panel/panels, or a combination of these approaches.

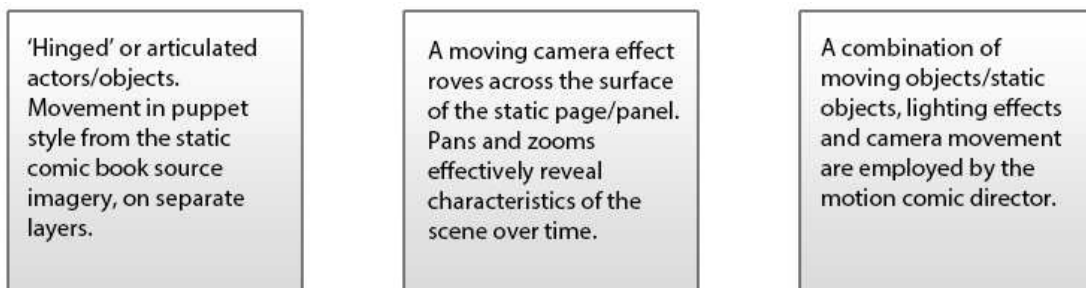


Fig.2. Motion comic definitions – motion.

### Audio/Literary elements

The comic book can be regarded as a visual system that combines both word and image. Motion comic adaptations can combine the visual aspects of the speech balloon within the moving image, or replace the written dialogue with character voiceovers and combine a soundtrack score. Once again, a combination of these particular scenarios is possible within the motion comic.

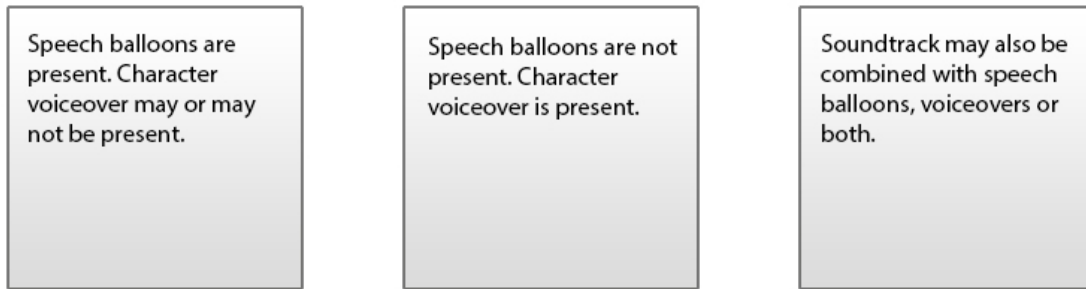


Fig.3. Motion comic definitions – audio/literary elements.

### Narrative fidelity

The motion comic may replicate the original narrative of a comic book story in its entirety. Other examples adapt the comic book narrative to create an abridged version, or the story may be created from an original script for the specific purposes of using the medium of motion comics as a marketing tool that draws attention to a new television series, videogame or film tie-in.



Fig.4. Motion comic definitions – narrative fidelity.

### Spatial depth

Motion comics often display a heightened sense of spatial depth compared to the original comic book artwork. This is accomplished via software such as After Effects, which enables the animator to composite different layers of visual information at different distances from a virtual camera.

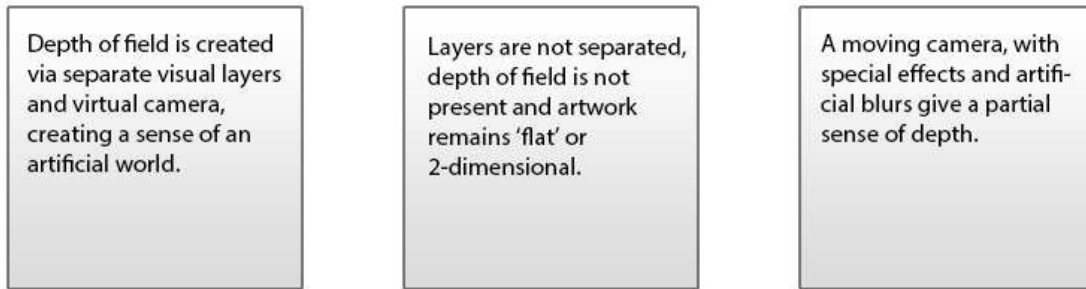


Fig.5. Motion comic definitions – spatial depth.

### Adaptation

Motion comics display various approaches to the challenge of adapting static comic book artwork into a digital moving image format. The majority of motion comic adaptations favour a cinematic approach that effectively discards many aspects of the comic book language, such as panels and gutters, for a moving image format that attempts to emulate orthodox animation or film. Other motion comic examples favour retaining many aspects of the comic book language, such as speech balloons or acknowledging the presence of multiple comic book panels within the screen-based format. Finally, more experimental interactive approaches exhibit comic book artwork within an interactive digital narrative.

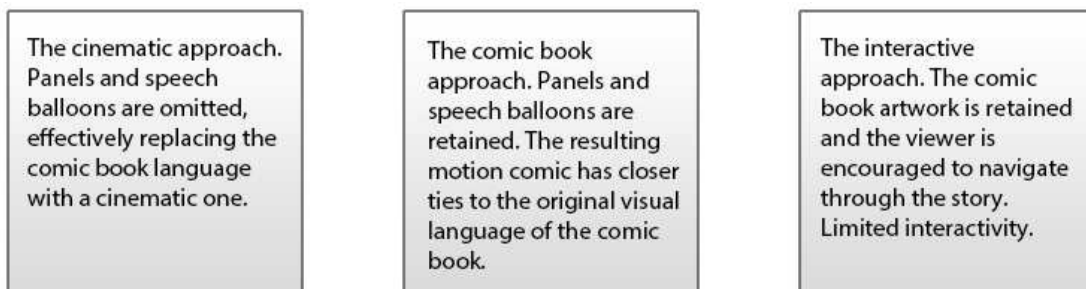


Fig.6. Motion comic definitions – adaptation.

### Genres

The dominance of the superhero genre in the U.S. has arguably clouded perceptions of the comic book medium over the years. The motion comic shares this particular genre affiliation, as Marvel and other publishers in the U.S are currently the dominant players in its recent emergence.





Fig.7. Motion comic definitions – genres.

Distribution and formats

The motion comic exemplifies the new forms of digital distribution that have become almost ubiquitous in the developed world in recent years. Content can be downloaded to personal computers and mobile devices, or streamed over the Internet. More established forms of distribution, such as the DVD, are also used to provide a 'real-life' artefact that the motion comic spectator can view in the comfort of their living room. The digital nature of the motion comic also revolutionises the way in which comic book narratives are accessed and 'collected' by readers/viewers.



Fig.8. Motion comic definitions – distribution and formats.

This section has demonstrated that the medium of motion comics exhibits a variety of comic book, film and animated forms of visual, textual and auditory narrative, in proportions that vary from project to project and production house to individual. It has also noted the various genres and modes of distribution that currently dominate the medium. Fortunately, through these diverse and sometimes conflicting schemata, there does appear to be one common factor that spans across the multitude of styles and genres; namely the appropriation of an existing static artwork that can be placed within digital animation software. This is in stark contrast to conventional animation practices, which typically render new character poses frame-by-frame



and do not venerate a static drawing. The field of 'motion graphics' shares a similar approach to the manipulation of static typography, design and imagery. There may be some instances in a motion comic production where frame-by-frame animation is used, however the status of the static comic book image takes precedence. Therefore this article defines the medium of motion comics as:

The appropriation of static comic book or illustrated artwork that is situated within the temporal form of an animated film or digital environment (Smith 2013). [1]

The transferral of visual narrative from one medium to another is a challenging one particularly when moving from a printed medium into a screen-based environment, which has different aspect ratios and physical dimensions. The following diagram illustrates the various approaches to motion comic production.

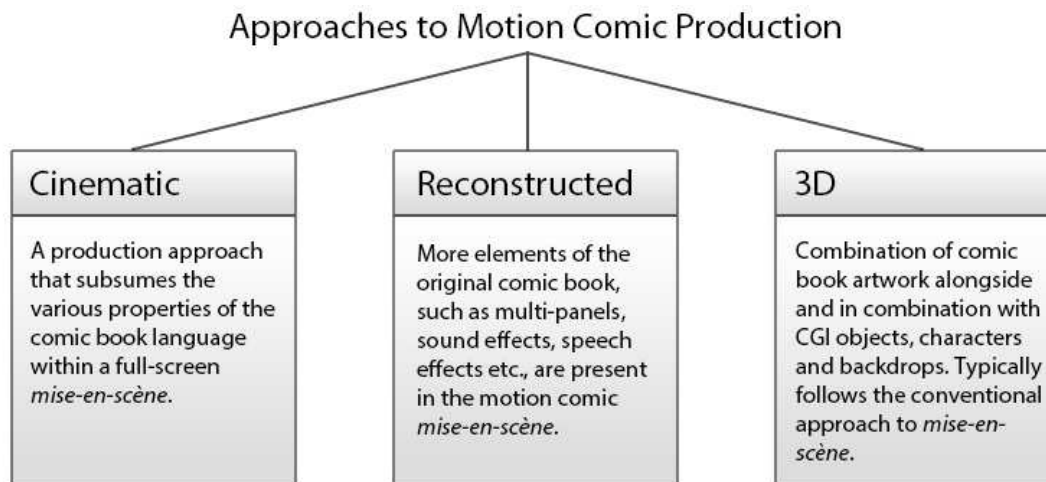


Fig.9. Approaches to motion comic production.

The following section will provide a brief case study of the *Watchmen* motion comic, in order to reveal some of the cinematic techniques employed to create the series.

### **WATCHMEN CASE STUDY**

*Watchmen* motion comic director Jake S. Hughes began his career in videogame development and slowly developed an interest in After Effects to construct opening titles for videogames such as *Tomb Raider Legend*. His work on the motion comic series of *Watchmen*, exemplifies the



cinematic approach to motion comic production. The comic book panels become subsumed within a screen-based *mise en scène* that attempts to convey the narrative through cinematic techniques, such as tracking, panning, zooming, pull focus and a range of editing techniques. Page 19 of Chapter seven in the comic book reveals Dan Dreiberg (Nite Owl) in his basement workshop. He has awoken from an apocalyptic nightmare and has placed his night vision glasses on his head, which reveal his flying craft. Laurie Juspeczyk (Silk Spectre) joins him, sensing his unease. Dan's detachment and feelings of impotence threaten to overwhelm him and he half-heartedly suggests taking his ship out into the night to, "get myself straight". Laurie encourages Dan, and he dons his Nite Owl costume. The chapter eventually culminates in Dan and Laurie consummating their relationship, which had previously faltered in light of Dan's anxiety and self-doubt.

The resulting motion comic adaptation alters this initial scene by employing cinematic effects to isolate Dan, thereby heightening the sense of his detachment and anxiety. Dan places his Nite Owl goggles on his head. The image is somewhat cropped compared to the original comic book panel. His ship is revealed in the gloom of the basement and the camera tracks across the scene in an attempt to mimic Dan's head movement. Director Jake S. Hughes ignores Laurie's gradual descent into the basement, opting to introduce her from a darkened doorway instead. Her blurred image is visible behind that of the dejected figure of Dan. The camera slowly tracks across as Dan relays his feelings of being powerless. Hughes alters our perception of spatial depth (and the static comic book image), by employing this particular form of camera movement and depth of field. The camera eventually stops to reveal a composition that matches closely with that of the final image panel on page 19. Pull focus is employed later on to draw our attention to Laurie's suggestion to take the ship out for a flight.

While the adaptation utilises voiceover as well as speech balloons (a trait of the 'reconstructed' motion comic), the dominance of the full screen *mise en scène* arguably places *Watchmen* in the 'cinematic' trope of motion comic production. The separation of comic book artwork into distinct visual layers enables directors such as Hughes to use camera techniques such as tracking shots, zooms and even pull focus, to change our relationship with the original comic book material. These techniques, combined with some editing techniques and abridged scenes, effectively provide sufficient visual stimuli for the motion comic viewer, particularly in scenes where there is little motion. The viewer cannot dictate the pace as they would when reading a comic book. The following section will examine emerging forms of comic book narrative, that



also involve motion but are clearly influenced by new media, the internet, and non-linear storytelling.

## INTERACTIVE MULTI-BRANCHING DIGITAL COMICS – THE HYPERCOMIC

“A hypercomic can be thought of as a webcomic with a multi-cursal narrative structure. In a hypercomic the choices made by the reader may influence the sequence of events, the outcome of events or the point of view through which events are seen... it's that element of reader choice and interaction that makes a hypercomic a hypercomic.”

(Paulgravett.com 2010)

Digital media offers other ways to integrate motion within comics using interactivity as a means to introduce zooms, pans and panels over time. The emergence of digital forms of narrative, which exhibit various forms of hyperlinks or ways to navigate information via mouse or touch response, enables a form of limited viewer control. The interactive digital comic, or hypercomic, facilitates a range of control and narrative complexity that would be difficult to achieve via traditional forms of media. The term hypercomic, can be associated with hypertext or hypermedia, which will be investigated further in this article.

Daniel Merlin Goodbrey is a new media artist, lecturer and comic creator who has created a number of hypercomics, which can be navigated in various ways. Goodbrey and Tom Gauld's interactive narrative *Pocom* (2003) is an exemplar of not only a multi-panel, multi-branching comic strip, it also exhibits a strong sense of spatiality through the manner in which the viewer can access and control the flow of the story. Unlike many other multi-branching interactive experiences, *Pocom* allows the viewer to interact with different narrative strands while retaining a sense of location amidst a large-scale spatial structure or map. *Pocom*'s interface enables a form of motion via a zoom effect as the viewer clicks on different areas of the map. By creating a central horizontal narrative 'spine', Gauld and Goodbrey's spatial map aids the reader in navigating the dozens of pathways that branch off at regular intervals from the main story. Goodbrey argues that the seeming complexity of the various pathways have been effectively contained within *Pocom*'s binding spatial structure, enabling the reader to retain an overall sense of narrative meaning:



“In terms of demonstrating the potential of hypercomics, that piece is always the one that shows how complex it can be without becoming lost in the narrative. That’s part of the strength of making hypercomics that way. You’re creating a branching piece but you’re keeping that physical relationship between all the parts so it’s like Groensteen’s comics as network or structure.” (Goodbrey 2012)

*Pocom* exhibits a narrative and visual system that is reminiscent of Thierry Groensteen’s work in *The System of Comics* (2007), whereby the overall system or structure of a comic book narrative is as important as each individual panel. As the user clicks on the opening panel, a navigational map of the entire story structure appears. Although this schematic is too small to decipher any real meaning contained in each panel, the viewer instantly recognises the scale and scope of the interactive piece they are about to engage with. It could be argued that Gauld and Goodbrey’s creation essentially provides a visual introduction into a complex multi-branching narrative, forming a type of navigational chart to aid and prepare the viewer on their journey through the narrative.

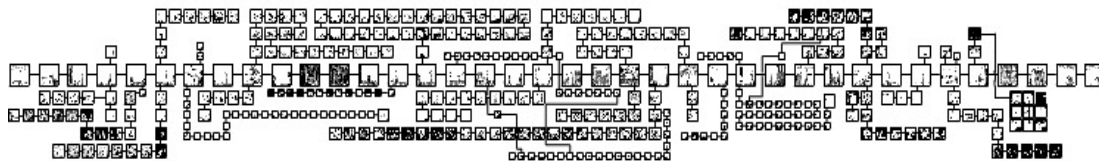


Fig.10. Tom Gauld and Daniel Goodbrey, *Pocom*, 2003, hypercomic.

Permission granted by the creator.

The protagonist’s journey begins on the right-hand side of the screen. By clicking on the individual panels, the equivalent of a rapid camera zoom takes the viewer into the map and onto a specific panel. To zoom out of the close-up panel shot, the viewer simply clicks on the white space between each panel. Once the viewer has familiarised themselves with the navigational elements of the map, the reading process becomes a simple matter of clicking on the next sequential panel, or divergent path in the narrative. This process differs from reading a comic book in a number of ways. Firstly, comic book readers cannot normally view a map of the entire narrative structure of a comic book in a single image. Secondly, comic book pages typically contain a number of panels, without an emphasis on one in particular (unless the writer/artist decides to enlarge or draw attention to one specific panel). Finally, comics are traditionally



consumed in a linear page order, whereas *Pocom* exhibits a number of separate narrative strands that can be explored by the viewer.

The following analysis of the *PoCom-UK-001* hypercomic, highlights some of the features and micro-narratives contained within it.

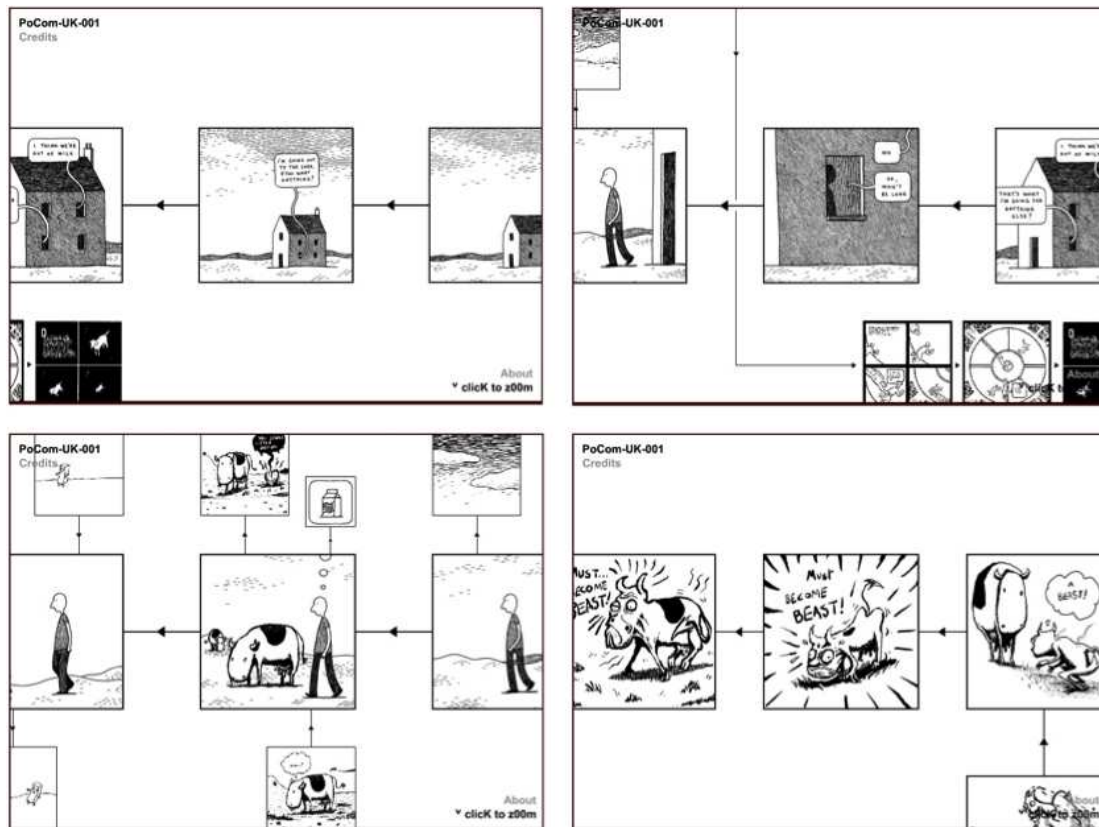


Fig.11. Tom Gauld and Daniel Goodbrey, *Pocom*, 2003, hypercomic.

Permission granted by the creator.

The protagonist announces that he is “going out to the shops”. By clicking on other panels, the scene/camera shifts to that panel, aligning it in a central position on the computer screen. The central character’s journey begins on the right-hand side of the map (see above). Other micro-narratives can be accessed via panels that are either above or below this horizontal linear narrative. One of these micro-narratives involves a small demon that has been instructed by the devil to change into a beast and kill the first person it sees. Goodbrey has also released the *Tarquin Engine*, which enables comic book artists to use this particular mode of interactive storytelling via software. An excerpt from the *Webcomics Nation* website describes it as:





a tool for the creation and delivery of zooming infinite canvas webcomics. In its current form it exists as a series of Action Script routines within a Macromedia Flash FLA file. Users can customise this template file through a simple drag-and-drop process in order to create their own original infinite canvas narrative (Goodbrey 2005).

The navigational flexibility of the *Tarquin Engine* facilitates the flow of numerous sub-narratives and divergent narrative pathways. By utilising the spatial qualities of a pictorial map, *Pocom's* hyperfiction, or multi-linear, narratives partially mirror some of the aesthetics of multi-panel comic book layouts. Where they inevitably differ however, are the choices and manner whereby the viewer can access or control the flow of the narrative elements; as suggested by the following statement by Goodbrey:

Having come from a background in hyperfiction, I've always been very comfortable with writing work in little 'packets' of narrative. So they can be experienced in lots of different ways and the reader can reassemble it themselves. I find it a much more natural way of writing than writing a fixed narrative because it means I can concentrate on smaller moments and let the reader assemble them. (Goodbrey 2012)

It should be noted that there are many other ways to control the flow of information and navigation within a digitally constructed narrative, some of which will be examined in the next section. Advancements in digital interactive culture have resulted in different forms of interactive content, representation and user control. The following section will examine the emerging field of interactive motion comics, with a case study of *CIA: Operation Ajax* (Burwen 2011).

## **INTERACTIVE MOTION COMICS**

Initial research into the area of the interactive motion comic has revealed areas of crossover between the more established forms of webcomic production, animation and the recent emergence of the interactive digital 'e-book'. The growing popularity of mobile platforms such as smartphones, and digital tablets such as the iPad, has encouraged a degree of experimentation toward the production of interactive narratives in recent years. These 'touch-based' devices enable audiences to interact with narratives in new and innovative ways, including; touching the screen to interact with a character or user menu, touching and dragging elements to interact



with other digital elements, tilting the device to initiate a response, shaking the device to interact with a digital element, 'pinching' areas of the screen to magnify or zoom out.

Subsequently, it is important to consider a definition of what constitutes an interactive motion comic, before a greater analysis of this sub-genre can be realised. Our existing definition is suitable for motion comics which can be distributed and presented in a conventional moving image format. These motion comics can therefore be displayed on both 'older' forms of media such as television, as well as the emerging forms of new media such as computer monitors, smartphones and digital tablets. However, the introduction of digital interactivity forces us to reconsider the definition of the emerging field of interactive motion comics with the following: An interactive motion comic appropriates static comic book artwork and situates it within a user-controlled digital environment; motion is present in either navigational transitions or as specific moments of moving image that complement the static interactive elements. Both of the definitions rely upon the appropriation of static comic book artwork, however the production of an interactive motion comic differs from conventional forms of motion comics by adding additional modes of control-based interaction to further the narrative.

This article also argues that interactive motion comics can be differentiated from interactive webcomics through their supplemental instances of moving image, but clearly there are areas of overlap and hybrid forms that may pose problems for such clearly defined models. The term 'interactive motion comic' is not commonly found on the Internet or other digital platforms, however this article argues that the genre can and does exist. Research has uncovered examples where the authors of certain webcomics are now using the term 'interactive motion comics', in an attempt to distinguish their work from more conventional forms of comic book narrative on the Internet and to position themselves within an emerging field. [2] The following section will further illuminate the area of interactive motion comics via a brief analysis of *CIA: Operation Ajax*.

### ***CIA: OPERATION AJAX***

*CIA: Operation Ajax* departs from many motion comic productions in the sense that it is currently only available as an iPad app. It incorporates comic book artwork, authentic declassified documents, character dossiers, historical photos, and news reels from the era into an interactive narrative that depicts the complex and 'true-to-life' events which led to the





democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran, Mohammad Mosaddegh, being overthrown in 1953. The involvement of the United States and Britain, and in particular the role of the CIA in orchestrating the coup d'état, arguably led to years of anti-Western sentiment in the region which still reverberates today. Historical accuracy was of paramount concern for Daniel Burwen, Creative Director and founder of Cognito Comics, as indicated by their collaboration with writer Stephen Kinzer:

I was very lucky to have Stephen Kinzer join our team as editor from the outset, and he really helped guide us throughout the project, helping Mike and I vet every decision to find a balance between telling an engaging story while still keeping things historically accurate (NIACouncil.org 2012).

While other motion comic directors refer to the original hypotext of a comic book, and the resulting attempts to create an authentic adaptation into the moving image, Burwen's main concern seems to be directed towards the historical accuracy of Mosaddegh's downfall in 1953. However, it should be noted that Kinzer's role also included approving the comic book artwork for historical accuracy. Burwen also reveals a desire to embrace new digital technologies and platforms, which further augment the narrative with a combination of different auditory and visual forms:

*Ajax* started as a traditional print comic book. In early 2010, we had just finished the script and were gearing up for art production when the iPad was announced... ..I didn't realize just how powerful the iPad would be as a platform, being able to blend together games, comics, and film into new storytelling experiences (Donahoo 2011).

This article argues that new media and emerging digital devices and platforms, such as the iPad and Apple store, are altering the production methods and practices of media creators. *CIA: Operation Ajax* illustrates many of the benefits of this approach in enriching a narrative with additional literary, audio and moving image components. The application creates a multi-layered user-experience that enables the reader to drive the narrative forward at their own pace, via simple touch and swipe gestures on the surface of the screen. This form of touch control is more akin to the reading of a book or graphic novel, whereby the reader engages with the object as it rests in their hands. The opening page demonstrates the range of navigational controls available to the reader. Tap, or 'swipe' controls are central to the reading experience. A 'star' icon indicates additional content, such as television newsreel footage.

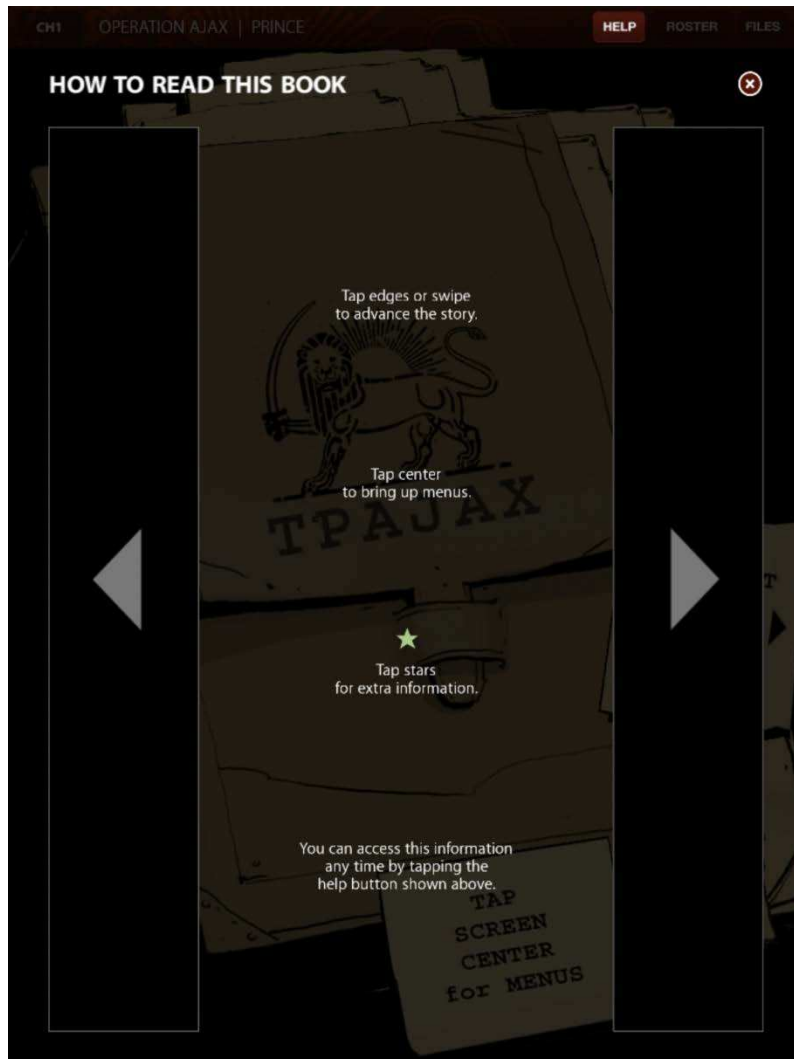


Fig.11. Help screen from Burwen, Daniel, *CIA: Operation Ajax*, 2011, interactive motion comic.  
Permission granted by the creator.

In addition to these fundamental navigation controls, the following analysis of a scene at the start of *CIA: Operation Ajax* reveals a number of character, panel and aesthetic display traits that were used to emphasise motion and the passage of time. *CIA: Operation Ajax* uses several elements from the 'reconstructed' motion comic aesthetic. New panels typically move in from right to left on the screen. Additional panels often build a more familiar full-page spread that resembles many comic book layouts. Characters are typically separated from the backdrops to allow for additional motion. The running figures scale down and move from left to right. The pavement and wall backdrop moves at a different speed from the running men to create a form



of parallax movement. Existing panels fade in opacity against the black background, emphasising the current panel in the sequence.



Fig.13. Burwen, Daniel, *CIA: Operation Ajax*, 2011, interactive motion comic.

Permission granted by the creator.

The range of motion is quite rudimentary in comparison with 'traditional' forms of motion comic, such as *Watchmen*, however there are several technical and memory-based restrictions that have to be taken into consideration for an app-based title. Similarly, the full page spread in [Fig. 14] reveals a score of individual elements that scroll and move independently of each other as the page opens. This creates the sense of a moving diorama that imbues the scene with movement as well as spatial depth. In the following scene, the men escape the crowd and enter a deserted alleyway. The previous crowd scene dims during a transition and the lead character appears to move forward. The men move vertically down the screen, without limb articulation.



Fig.14. Burwen, Daniel, *CIA: Operation Ajax*, 2011, interactive motion comic.

Permission granted by the creator.

*CIA: Operation Ajax* rarely employs character motion, however the transitional sequences between panels and the illusion of depth through the manipulation of layers and parallax scrolling are highly effective in creating a sense of movement beyond the conventional limitations of two dimensional artwork.

The following analysis of a chapter introduction within the story reveals the extent to which image manipulation and the separation of image assets into different layers informs much of the aesthetic approach to animation within *CIA: Operation Ajax*. The introductory page to Chapter 4 reveals a number of press photographers in front of President Truman and Iranian Prime Minister Mossadegh. Their flashbulbs create harsh intermittent white flashes, which provide a framework for the transition of additional images. At the end of this sequence the figures of Truman and Mossadegh stand side-by-side, with a further backdrop of Iranian and United States flags, newspapers and Time magazine. A third sequence at the start of this chapter removes the textural detail of the press photographers and replaces them with a black silhouette.



Fig.15. Burwen, Daniel, *CIA: Operation Ajax*, 2011, interactive motion comic.

Permission granted by the creator.

Additional textual information appears to provide further exposition of a key political figure. Additional video elements and 'dossiers', further enrich *CIA: Operation Ajax* adding to the historical authenticity and nature of the App.

## CONCLUSION

This article is a response to the need for an in-depth study of the field of motion comics, a field that has largely been ignored in academic circles to date. This dearth of informed research and debate has created a vacuum whereby the motion comic is critiqued by popular journalists, comic book readers and animation viewers, who have particular affinities with certain tropes of comic book and animation practice and whose enthusiasms are not always compatible with objective analysis. This article does not necessarily defend the motion comic from such criticisms; instead, it serves to illuminate through scholarship many of the characteristic properties of an emerging field of animation practice which has the potential for further innovation and development.

The influence of technology on the emergence of the motion comic is also considered. As digital media brings about new opportunities and challenges for comic book publishers, motion comics can be regarded as one of several attempts to bring comic book narratives to a new consumer demographic. This demographic does not hold on to the value of the printed comic book with much reverence or nostalgia for the past, and instead looks to new forms of digital media for its entertainment. Both *Pocom* and *CIA: Operation Ajax*, point to the growing interplay and



convergence between comics, animation, and interactive media in general. The relevance of motion comic processes, adaptation and visual aesthetics plays a pivotal role in the emergence of new forms of interactive comic book material. The recent emergence of app-based comic publishers *Madefire* also suggests the influence of motion comic aesthetics through their use of limited motion and spatial depth.

This expansion into new and diverse areas of comic book narratives suggests that the motion comic aesthetic is one that is well suited to the adaptation and remediation of comic book narratives. However, this very evolution of the form may result in motion comics becoming subsumed within new and emerging digital practice. Indeed, this paper may represent a transitory moment in the ongoing evolution of the comic book form. A moment where the motion comic aesthetic has been explored by numerous comic book publishers and independent producers to propel their comic book narratives into different time-based and interactive mediums. It is hoped that others will support, contest, and build upon this research in the future.

## NOTES

[1] It should be noted that there are examples of motion comics that are not adapted from existing comic books. As a result, a number of static illustrations/artworks have to be created before the animation process can begin.

[2] *Submarinechannel.com* published interactive animation series *The Killer* in 2001. The website recently stated “With misty-eyed nostalgia we sometimes look back at one of the (if not the) first interactive motion comics ever made, *The Killer*” (2014).

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