Craig Smith

Motion comics: Modes of adaptation and the issue of authenticity

Craig Smith, Queen's University Belfast

Abstract

Motion comics can be considered as an emerging form of digital animation that typically appropriates and remediates an existing comic book narrative and artwork into a screen-based animated narrative. One such example of motion comic adaptation is *The Watchmen*, which was released on DVD and is also available on the iTunes online store as a digital download. This article argues that this new hybrid media raises unique considerations in terms of adaptation, and therefore provides a brief summary of key debates in adaptation studies, with a particular emphasis on the issue of authenticity. This is followed by a study of conventional adaptation practices from a comic book source and the emerging digital post-production approaches of animators and creative practitioners in the motion comic field, including a discussion on the importance of sound.

Keywords

Craig Smith

Introduction

Upon initial examination, the motion comic appears to be little more than a conventional form of animation practice that is reminiscent of paper-cut animation, as exemplified by *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (Reineger, 1926) and British television children's classic *Captain Pugwash* (1957–1966). Others have likened them to the Marvel television cartoons that appeared in the 1960s:

> As to the nigh unanswerable question of what does the emergence of motion comics means to the comic industry, both Jayatilleke and Granov offered their thoughts and opinions. 'This sort of animation technique has been around for a while. Inevitably, someone is going to point out that Marvel did this in the 1960s with the classic cartoons'. (Mahadeo 2010)

This article will not attempt to distance motion comics from any of these animation practices. Instead, it will posit that motion comics cannot be simply defined within a singular mode of animation practice. The variety of animation practices and approaches to the remediation of the original comic book hypotext is too diverse to place it within the finite boundaries of a specific form of animation. This article cannot present a truly comprehensive account of motion comic adaptation, however, it will provide a testimony to some of the practices that animators and studios are currently employing.

The question of authenticity

The subject of authenticity to an existing hypotext is an area of continued debate within adaptation studies that is of particular relevance to the field of motion comics. Robert Stam notes the reaction from certain elements within adaptation criticism regarding adaptation from a literary source to film:

> The conventional language of adaptation criticism has often been profoundly moralistic, rich in terms that imply that the cinema has somehow done a disservice to literature. Terms like 'infidelity,' 'betrayal,' 'deformation,' 'violation,' 'bastardization,' 'vulgarization,' and 'desecration' proliferate in adaptation discourse, each word carrying its specific charge of opprobrium. (Stam 2005: 3)

This sense of moral outrage and shock also invariably holds true in some quarters regarding comic book to motion comic adaptations. The following comment by film critic Adam Quigley on */Film* (www.slashfilm.com) illustrates this dilemma for some:

> *Watchmen* has been hailed as the greatest graphic novel ever written, a sentiment I wholeheartedly agree with. So here's an idea: read the graphic novel. What's the point of watching a barely animated version of it? […] If you're really that interested in seeing the story come to life, just watch the movie when it hits theaters this Friday. (Quigley 2009)

Craig Smith

On the basis of this statement, it would seem that for some there is a hierarchy, or primacy, of the original text to be considered. In this instance, it is the original graphic novel, then the live-action film. Other forms of adaptation are arguably perceived as being culturally inferior or even irrelevant. Pascal Lefèvre comments upon the subject of comic book to film adaptation with an observation on the readers' relationship with the hypotext, noting

> There is the issue of primacy: usually people prefer the first version of a story they encounter. When you first read a novel, you form a personal mental image of the fictive world and when you first read a comic, you have a kinetic visual aid as well. Any filmic adaptation has to deal with these first personal interpretations and images: it is extremely hard to exorcise those first impressions. (Lefèvre 2007: 2)

Although theoretical debates over fandom, audience reception or other related areas are clearly important to this topic, they are outside the scope of this article. It is, however, important to at least acknowledge that for the time being, the motion comic exemplifies aspects of adaptation that some readers of the original hypotext cannot readily accept. This sense of loss regularly threatens to overwhelm the reader/viewer when they confront certain adaptations.

> […] the standard rhetoric has often deployed an elegiac discourse of loss, lamenting what has been 'lost' in the translation from novel to film, while ignoring what has been 'gained'. (Stam 2005: 3)

I would argue that we can draw parallels between this quote from Robert Stam and the emergence of the motion comic. Depending on the approach taken by the animation director, a motion comic can reject the multi-panel design of the original comic book layout, converting the panel imagery instead into a familiar screen-based *mise-en-scène* devoid of panels and 'gutters'. The director may also choose to replace the speech balloons of the original comic book with a voice-over, and so on. Yet, as we begin to analyse what has been lost to such an adaptation process, we must also recognize what has been gained. The static images may have been imbued with some form of movement, and voice-overs and musical scores have the potential to elicit from viewers something different than may have been previously discerned from experiencing the same narrative in comic book form.

We must also consider the spatial aspects of the adaptation in relation to the existing hypotext: Characters and objects may be separated into different layers. A 'third space' that creates spatial depth is potentially formed, which reassembles the static comic book object/character into z-depth space with the aid of a digital 'virtual camera'. Finally, some examples of interactive motion comics also hold the potential to change our perspective on an existing story, or to augment it with additional multimedia information, such as imagery, sounds

or text. Thomas Leitch approaches the subject of authenticity by changing the focus of the question:

> Instead of constantly seeking answers to the question 'Why are so many adaptations unfaithful to perfectly good sources?' adaptation studies would be better advised to ask the question, 'Why does this particular adaptation aim to be faithful?' (Leitch 2007: 127)

To answer the latter part of Leitch's question, we must consider some of driving factors in motion comic adaptation. The emergence of motion comics rose out of a number of cultural, technological and commercial factors, which have begun to emerge in recent years, with the growth of digital culture. Ian Kirby, animation director of the *Batman: Black and White* (2008–2009) motion comic series and an early pioneer of flash animation on the Internet, cites the potential of digital distribution as a key factor in motion comic adaptations.

> The studios are trying to make money for less money invested and they're also trying to play with their digital divisions. Warner Brothers has Warner Premiere as their digital division […] They've got thousands and thousands of DC comic libraries they own. They're written, they've got the artwork, everything is there for them, so they can pitch them to their internal divisions. As opposed to saying 'Here, read this script,' instead it's like, 'Hey here's a comic book! We've already got the rights, we can convert this into an animation for much less than an animated feature, sell it on iTunes and see if the distribution model works.' (Kirby, Personal communication, 19 November 2010)

Kirby highlights the existing archives of material that are available to comic book publishers in a manner that seems to indicate a re-purposing of the printed comic book into new material that can be accessed via the Internet and other channels. The notion of a pre-existing artform that is suitable for adaptation into a moving image format with a lower production cost than conventional animation must be of significant interest to comic book publishers and the entertainment industry in general. It is of course difficult to fully ascertain the motives behind such projects, and comic book publishers are often reticent to reveal sales/viewing figures, but we can surmise that the availability of the original hypotext and the lower production costs of the motion comic are significant factors. Kirby's statement also highlights the role of technology and the accessibility of digital formats. Comic books have a rich legacy and language that can now be unlocked by new media practices, digital distribution and the conversion of traditional print into digital image formats such as PDF files and mobile phone software applications (apps). The 'back catalogue' has essentially been liberated from the paper-based, physical object which must typically be ordered online or bought in a specialist comic book store. This article does not advocate a replacement of those comic book traditions, but it does intend to illustrate how the medium of the comic book is changing and evolving and how new animation practices are remediating comic book narratives to make use of modern digital distribution formats.

Craig Smith

The question of authenticity within the motion comic field has been shaped by such factors, especially when we consider the role of the animation director in the adaptation process. It is their responsibility to create a believable narrative from the original comic book hypotext, while retaining the existing artwork to a much greater degree than any other moving image genre. Furthermore, it is almost certainly a useful marketing tool to leverage the name of a successful artist or writer to promote the motion comic. Ian Kirby describes this sense of responsibility as a challenge when adapting for motion comics,

> Another big challenge is you've got to respect the original artwork if it's a printed book, because it's extremely important to us that that artist doesn't feel that his work has been bastardised if we've drawn all these new panels and characters that don't even match. It's very important that we respect that, and our artists actually redraw it and extend it and make sure it resembles the original. It's extremely important. We've also got to be respectful to the writing. (Kirby, personal communication, 19 November 2010 interview)

Kirby's sense of respect is such that it requires artists to redraw areas in the stylistic approach of the original artist in an attempt to provide a sense of artistic authenticity. The static, fixed-perspective, panel drawing from a comic book source resists movement, unless it is in the form of simple camera pans and zooms. However, once a comic book character or object moves in relation to a static background, visual gaps appear where they once stood, hence the need to replicate artwork as close to the original as possible. It could be argued that the motion comic involves a system of digital visual restoration and illusion that attempts to provide a seamless visual landscape of virtual imagery that seems holistic and in keeping with the artistic vision of the hypotext. Furthermore, the authenticity of the adaptation is not only an issue for readers of the original comic book, it appears to be an issue of respect to the original creators of the work and indeed the comic book medium itself. The artist/writer of the hypotext is often acknowledged with great care throughout the adaptation process, either contributing to or approving the resulting hypertext. The following section will examine motion comic production in more detail, including image appropriation, contrasting approaches and the impact of technology in determining new approaches to motion comic adaptation.

Motion comic production

As we consider the various approaches towards adaptation in the field of motion comics, in particular the contentious issue of authenticity, a pattern begins to emerge as practicing animators and creators discuss their work and the challenges and opportunities that motion comic adaptation presents. The impetus to faithfully reproduce the comic book into a digital time-based medium necessitates that the animator must utilize the original comic book artwork to such an extent that

Craig Smith

conventional frame-by-frame drawn animation would be extremely cost-prohibitive, or virtually impossible, if we consider the unique mark-making techniques of a particular artist. When we also consider the fact that a comic book artist rarely has the time, inclination or technical knowledge of a skilled animator, or that a division of labour would be almost impossible without large studio production values, the unique aesthetics of the motion comic become distilled into a production method that allows the motion comic animator to digitally appropriate, manipulate and augment the original hypotext. Although the adaptation process varies from studio to studio, and the individual animator, certain procedures can be found in the majority of motion comic production. This section highlights some of the fundamental processes in detail before accounting for additional techniques, approaches or advances in motion comic adaptation.

Image appropriation

The process of acquiring the static artwork from a comic book can take various forms. The original artist may be called upon to provide high-quality samples of the original artwork for scanning purposes. This is preferable to scanning from an existing printed comic book, as the quality of paper and printing methods will reveal marks or minute patterns such as creases, discolouration or 'Ben Day' dots. Increasingly in this digital era, artists may provide the artwork in a digital format, either from scans, or in some cases, from a digital drawing created by the artist with the aid of digital drawing hardware 'tablet and pen'. Daniel J. Kramer, animation director of Dean Haspiel's *The Angel* (2011), acknowledges the passing of artwork from the artist in the form of a digital scan, and mentions the process of cutting foreground elements from backgrounds in Photoshop before moving to animation software to begin the animation process. Kramer also suggests that additional artwork must be created to fill any visual gaps in information as either the character, camera or scene may move during the course of the animated sequence.

> Dean gave me a scanned A4 sheet of paper with the comics on it, and I had to cut out all the images I wanted to move and rebuild the background. So when things moved you wouldn't have a hole in the background. I basically processed each panel in Photoshop. (Kramer, personal communication, 15 November 2010)

Producer and director Jake S. Hughes was able to call upon artist Dave Gibbons to supply additional artwork and approve the production team's 'fill-in' artwork for *The Watchmen* motion comic. In one instance Gibbons was asked to provide a complete image of the iconic 'Minutemen' photograph that appears in the comic book.

Craig Smith

> If you look at the comic, you never get a full shot of the Minutemen photo. It's always at an angle, or seen on the left-hand side or the right-hand side. So we tried to take every single panel and glue them all together to make a full one, but it didn't work. So he happily drew one for us […] We did have to do all the art fill-in ourselves, and he was always making sure that it looked right. (watchmencomicmovie.com 2009)

This attention to detail and the inherent authenticity to the hypotext is an important consideration in motion comic production. It could be argued that the comic book artist creates artwork in the form of punctuated moments in time, and in the process, may omit certain features from a scene or landscape as part of his composition. However, if we imagine the sheer number of panels in a narrative as complex and lengthy (the comic book resulted in almost five hours of motion comic footage) as the *Watchmen*, a studio-based production 'assembly' appears necessary to produce a sustained volume of work, with the accompanying image layers and additional artwork required.[1] Animation director Ian Kirby alludes to the approximate number of people working on his adaptations of the *Batman: Black and White* series, despite the 'tight' budgets:

> There was a lot of overlap on the production of those, we'd be doing a couple at a time. […] I'd say between five and ten per episode. They were very low budget, very tight. We recorded the voices in a friend's closet. Despite the fact it's got a Warner signature on it, they were tight. (Kirby, Personal communication, 19 November 2010 interview)

If we compare Kirby's budget and crew with a popular television superhero animated series such as *Wolverine and The X-Men* (Kirkland 2008), the difference in cast and production crew is noticeably different. There are 87 members of cast and crew, plus an unknown number of animators from Noxxon Enterprises Inc., for a twenty-two-minute episode. However, it must be noted that Kirby's productions were much shorter, approximately four minutes each. Furthermore, motion comics appropriate the majority of visual information from a pre-existing, pre-composed image, which must be visually cut into separate parts in software such as Photoshop, augmented with additional artwork, then reformed in a digital animation environment such as after effects, where the process of animation begins. The digital severance and reconstitution of the *mise-en-scène* is often the most time intensive component of motion comic production. Afterwards, the process of animation is typically created in software rather than drawn frame-by-frame by an animation team. Keyframes are created in software, rather than by hand, and the computer interpolates the frames in-between automatically. Nuances of character motion effects and camera movement may be manipulated by the animator to further enhance each scene.

Craig Smith

Approaches to narrative and the question of authorship

The original artist and writer may have a limited role in the production of a motion comic, possibly contributing a limited amount of additional background artwork, approving cuts to dialogue or approving the additional artwork of the production team. The narrative of a motion comic is typically lifted verbatim from the comic book source, however there are occasions when the amount of comic book dialogue in an individual panel scene hypotext can overwhelm the scene in the resulting motion comic. *Batman: Black and White* director Ian Kirby notes this challenge:

> We've also got to be respectful to the writing. Sometimes we do cut a lot just to make it play well with the time we have. Sometimes the writer can be quite heavy-handed and there's too much dialogue, there's 30 seconds of dialogue in one panel. So how do we make that work, and keep it interesting? Sometimes we'll be allowed to cut, sometimes DC doesn't like us to cut, so we've got to find a way to cut with the shots we have, but not draw too many new ones from scratch because then it's not really authentic. (Kirby, Personal communication, 19 November 2010)

This conflict between the hypotext and hypertext is of key concern to motion comic creators. By highlighting the creators of the original comic book in many of their marketing materials, comic book publishers must tread a careful line when adapting the work of a particular artist and writer. They must strike a balance between being faithful to the hypotext, while creating a motion comic that is both successful and creative in its own right. Animation director and producer Jake S. Hughes comments on the challenges of retaining or cutting elements, such as dialogue, out of the resulting *Watchmen* motion comic in an interview on the official Warner Bros. *Watchmen* movie website. Hughes is concerned with staying faithful to the work of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons and omits any reference to the original comic book publishers or Warner Bros.,

> It was one of the worst things. Honestly – say, for one page, we only would have seven to nine images that we could use. And some scenes would be pretty text-heavy. So we were trying to find the balance of making sure that the story and the information was being told. Look, no one ever would want to try and hit at Alan Moore's text, so it was hard for us. But we had Dave Gibbons making sure we kept everything in order. So he read everything that we had to snip. (watchmencomicmovie.com 2009)

Alan Moore's reticence to work on or acknowledge any adapted form of his comic book work is well known, yet the issue of authenticity is one of such significance to a high profile project, such as *The Watchmen*, that Dave Gibbons was drafted in as a consultant on the live-action film and the motion comic.

Craig Smith

The question of narrative and authorship also appears in Mark Brooks' response to the issue of narrative 'editing', in particular what he felt he had contributed to the adaptation process in the *Black Panther* (Brooks 2010) motion comics and television series:

> I think my biggest contribution was to keep the story tracking and pacing correctly. If you compare the book with the show, there were quite a few changes in order to make it play like a television show. (New storylines, characters etc.). (Brooks, Personal communication, 24 February 2010)

Brooks' response to the issue of authenticity and authorship attempts to provide a sense of balance in the form of adaptation approach he and his team have taken. Brooks suggests that the adaptation will only be successful as a televised series if it follows a more conventional approach to animation and narrative, and clearly states his preferred method of conventional animation over one that alludes to comic book form: 'I prefer to go the cinematic approach than the comic book approach (word balloons etc.) because that stuff comes off pretty kitsch' (Brooks, Personal communication, 24 February 2010). Furthermore, Brooks' professional background is clearly informed with a reference to conventional frame-by-frame drawn animation as well as his work in the digital field.

> Actually I found it much more difficult to produce than typical animation because we weren't using *character* turnarounds […] Also, it was difficult to thread panels from the book together due to color shifts, sizing issues, characters remaining on model etc. (Brooks, personal communication, 24 February 2010)

This attention to the visual detail of the motion comic ably demonstrates the fundamental concern of motion comic adaptation in regard to the verisimilitude to the artwork of the hypotext and retaining a holistic visual aesthetic in the resulting moving image adaptation. This concern appears to take precedence over some of the narrative elements of the hypotext and indeed the comic book language that provides the panels, speech balloons and other signifying elements. Subsequently, if we split the comic book hypotext into distinct areas of artwork, narrative and comic book aesthetics, we can ascertain in this example that the artwork is of primary importance, followed by the narrative and finally the comic book aesthetics, such as speech balloons and panels. The animation director therefore has some authorial responsibilities in relation to the narrative, i.e. what is omitted/retained from the hypotext in terms of dialogue and story. It could be argued however, that the major authorial role of the animation director is to determine a filmic language that either, signals the comic book aesthetic via the various signs and symbols of the comic book language, or suppresses it in favour of a more conventional cinematic *mise-en-scène*. These are fundamental choices either the animation director or publishing studio must take before beginning production as they inform the general adaptation approach, acting as a

form of style guide for the project. The following section will concentrate on elements of motion comic production that do not follow conventional animation practices and in some cases provide alternative forms of narrative.

Adaptation and the 'exotic' elements of motion comic production

The panel is one of the most significant elements of comic book aesthetics. It provides a visual framework for the artwork, dialogue and narrative to relay information in a regulated sequential manner. Scott McCloud argues however that it is the gutter, the space between panels, which enables the reader to bring their imagination to the fore:

> Nothing is seen between the two panels, but experience tells you something must be there! […] Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality. (McCloud 1993: 67)

Similarly, Paul Wells notes that the late Norman McLaren posited that in animation, 'What happens between each frame is more important than what happens on each frame' (Wells 1998: 10). McLaren alludes to the essence of animation that sets it apart from more conventional forms of moving image formats, such as live-action. The space between each frame is virtually imperceptible by the human eye, yet McLaren suggests that the animator has somehow created more than a series of drawn moments in time; they have already created the essence of animation before it has been photographed or recorded (Wells 1998:10). Similarly, if we again look to the field of motion comics, the employment of visual panels and its accompanying gutters raise the possibility of alternative forms of narrative. If we also consider the addition of spatial depth, further areas of narrative possibilities arise, which can be explored by the motion comic animator.

Jeff Shuter, the animation director behind the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Season Eight* (2010) motion comic series, adopts a multi-panel approach in a number of scenes. One example has been adapted from a scene in Joss Whedon's comic book (Figure 1) which utilizes four panels to illustrate the passage of time as Buffy talks to her gigantic sister Dawn. Set in a Scottish castle, Buffy negotiates a stone stairwell, pausing to talk to Dawn in each of the panels. Dawn's gigantic body in contrast occupies all four panels as one distinct image, which is partly split by the gutters between each panel.

Craig Smith
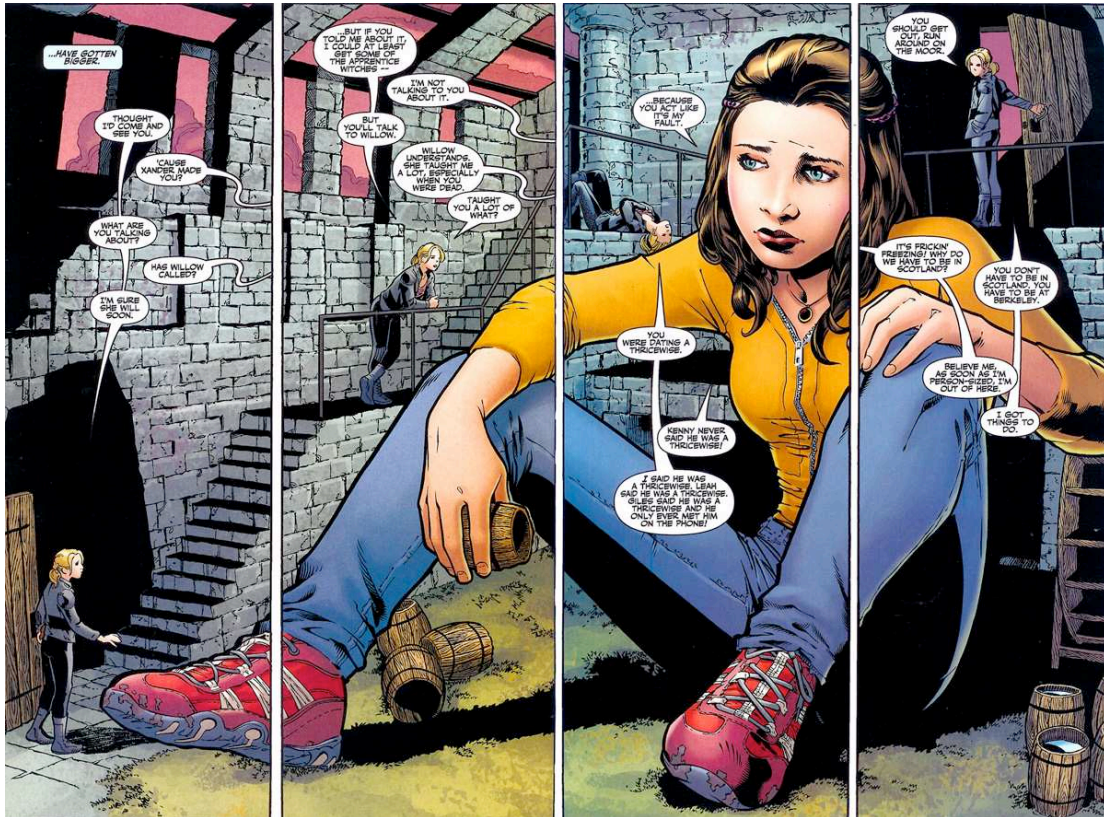
Figure 1: Whedon, J. and Jeanty, G. (2007), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Season 8, Issue 1, Dark Horse Comics.

The resulting motion comic adaptation (Shuter 2010) displays a series of animated panels that provide a sense of the fractured relationship between the sisters, illustrating their disconnection from one another (Figure 2). The camera slowly moves back and forth in relation to the castle walls as the sisters talk, which also changes our relation to the multiple panels that are overlaid on top of the background. Shuter effectively manages to create a coherent, yet visually complex narrative out of this bricolage of camera movement, panel animation, fractured space and plurality of imagery. Shuter has created a new visual backdrop that does not match the fixed perspective of the castle interior accurately and in doing so partially breaks from the comic book hypotext. By doing this however, he provides a visual environment that evokes the cavernous interior necessary to hold Dawn's body, while providing a minimal vista whereby the individual visual panels can be introduced to reveal the unfolding scene. Buffy's inner monologue, represented by a pale blue narrative box with black text, alludes to Dawn's problems, but they only become apparent as new panels appear throughout the duration of the scene. The remaining textual dialogue is replaced by a voice-over of the sister's conversation.

Craig Smith

1. Buffy's monologue provides a clue to her sister's predicament
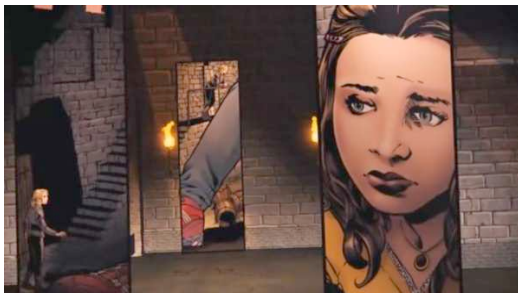

2. A single vertical panel appears against the castle background. Buffy enters the room.

3. We catch a glimpse of Dawn's shoe, then another panel appears as Dawn begins to talk.

4. The previous panels flip and move out of the shot, while a new panel appears. The virtual camera moves closer towards the interior wall of the castle.

5. This pattern of alternating panels entering and exiting the scene continues as the sisters converse. Dawn's size is becoming apparent.

6. The scene now resembles the double-page spread of the comic. Earlier panels are introduced back into the composition.

7. The scene draws to a close. Buffy opens the door at the top right of the room. The animosity between Buffy and Dawn is reaching a crescendo.

8. The camera zooms and focuses on this final confrontation, before we exit the scene.

Figure 2: Shuter, J. (2010), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Episode 1.

Craig Smith

The employment of interchangeable panels masks the limited range of movement and lack of motion in the two characters. Shuter introduces some subtle physical movements in this scene, such as eye movement and the tapping of Dawn's shoe, however the employment of the animated panels effectively provides a sufficient level of interest for the viewer throughout this uncomfortable interchange between the two sisters. This sense of a multi-image visual aesthetic is also echoed in one scene that defines the modern surveillance society via animated banks of flat-screen computer monitors, imagery from surveillance cameras, satellite imagery and computer simulations. The employment of multi-screens and multi-panels creates a sense of fractured time and displacement of viewing experience. It is symptomatic of our digital culture, which often employs a multi-window interface in our computer operating systems and media devices. The resulting digital montage of imagery and information has arguably become part of our visual language, and the multi-panel aesthetic appears both authentic and relevant to motion comic adaptation.

3D modelling and the textures of pen and ink

The advent of 3D animation software has effectively changed the visual aesthetic of animation in recent years, and the field of motion comics is no exception. There are several examples of 3D animation in motion comic titles such as *Batman: Black and White* (Kirby 2008) and *Iron Man: Extremis* (Gibbs and Halsey 2010). The employment of 3D imagery seems incongruous in the face of adaptation authenticity and the field of motion comics, when we consider that it is essentially a digital imaging approach that models, textures and lights a virtual object or scene. Conversely, the comic book hypotext is defined visually by the illustrated work of an artist. A great deal of care must be taken therefore, to integrate 3D imagery amongst hand-rendered artwork, to ensure that a holistic visual aesthetic is maintained throughout the adaptation process. Magnetic Dreams, a 3D and motion graphics production house, were responsible for the *Iron Man: Extremis* motion comic series. *Extremis* was jointly directed by Joel Gibbs and Mike Halsey, which possibly signifies some of the challenges that the animation team faced by choosing to incorporate 3D scenes within a motion comic project. Gibbs implies that 3D imaging was appropriate to the project, enabling action sequences to be filmed while using a texture that mimics the hypotext artwork. The natural tendency to apply a shiny metallic surface to the Iron Man suit was deemed unsuitable because of the original comic book artwork by Adi Granov, as animator Joel Gibbs noted that 'Iron Man was a good candidate for 3D […] but in general we tried to keep as much 2D as we could' (Marvel.com 2010). Halsey remarks on the unique aspect

Craig Smith

of the project, specifically the painted artwork. He reiterates Gibbs' opinions regarding the 'painted' artwork, namely that the realism and subtlety of comic book artwork has a unique aesthetic that is difficult to adapt into a moving image format:

> First thing you'd do would be to simplify it and move to solid spot colours. You'd never have this incredibly painted artwork. Dealing with something that is as realistically painted as the original artwork was in *Extremis* and adding motion that fits that realistic look has been our biggest hurdle. (Marvel.com 2010)

Other challenges mentioned by Gibbs and Halsey include having to work from specific static comic book imagery, which may not serve the flow of the animation, as well as lengthy pieces of dialogue that may appear in a single panel, as Halsey notes that 'you can indeed read twenty or thirty seconds worth of dialogue in a comic and not think anything of the fact that you're looking at one picture. But if you do that in motion it becomes boring quickly' (Marvel.com 2010).

The introduction of sound in the context of the motion comic cannot be understated, however, the issue of authenticity to a hypotext must be considered as we move from the medium of the comic book to a motion comic. The verisimilitude of the visual image is matched in many cases to the authenticity of the narrative. Internalized monologue, dialogue and sound effects are typically appropriated from the hypotext to such an extent that the viewer of a motion comic can refer back to the printed comic to ascertain if and where there are any discrepancies between the two. The following section will examine the importance of sound in its various forms in the context of the motion comic.

'Reading' sound in a motion comic adaptation

Before we begin a further analysis of the impact of sound on a comic book hypotext, a brief examination of sound in comics seems appropriate. The comic book language has a number of methods in conveying sound to the reader. The most common form of such communication include speech balloons, narrative boxes and sound effects. Catherine Khordoc refers to Hérge's awareness of sound:

> I consider my stories to be films. Therefore, there is no narration, no description. It is to the image that I give most importance, but these films are talking films, naturally, so the words come out of characters' mouths graphically. (Khordoc 2001: 158)

Hérge's description of the process of sound in the comic book seems promising. However, we must also consider alternative forms of sound in the comic book medium. Shape, density, style and decoration of words, word balloons and non-verbal signs can affect the way in which we interpret all manner of sounds in the comic book language. Scott McCloud suggests that:

Craig Smith

> Variations in balloon shape are many and new ones are being invented every day. While inside those balloons, symbols are constantly being appropriated or even invented to cover the non-verbal. Even the variations of lettering styles, both in and out of balloons, speak of an ongoing struggle to capture the very essence of sound. (McCloud 1993: 134)

McCloud suggests that despite the myriad methods of introducing sound into a comic book narrative, it is debatable whether such textual or non-verbal images can ever truly capture the essence of sound. Sound as captured in a recording studio has a quantifiable presence that can be examined, stored, and, thanks to digital technology, can be played time after time with no loss in quality. But even in this context, we may question whether the sound we hear from a film on DVD is the sound intended by the composer of a film soundtrack. Subsequently, the sounds we hear or imagine in a comic book narrative are deeply subjective. There is no conceivable way to record or playback the experience of listening to comic book sound effects, or the literary elements that both novels and comic books display; but through a commonality of visual language and the signs and symbols employed by many comic book artists, it is possible to express these sounds in an audio format in a manner that seems consistent. Adaptation theorists would argue that this is one of the areas where the issue of authenticity arises, as Lefèvre suggests:

> As in novels in comics a reader can never hear the sound of the character's voices […] It seems that at least some readers who imagine a particular sound of the characters voices are shocked by the way an actor speaks when playing that character. (Lefèvre 2007: 11)

This may be an issue to some comic book readers, but it is an issue that is also present within comic book to live-action adaptation. It therefore seems more pertinent to examine how sound is specifically employed in motion comic adaptation.

Visualizing dialogue and sound

Comic books are a reader-centric medium, which makes the subsequent pacing of a motion comic particularly important. If the pace is too slow, the viewer will quickly lose interest in the narrative, too fast and important information (both visual and emotive) may well be missed by the viewer. Paul Wells suggests that 'sound principally creates the mood and atmosphere of a film, and also its pace and emphasis, but, most importantly, also creates a vocabulary by which the visual codes of the film are understood' (Wells 1998: 97). An analysis of my interviews with motion comic directors revealed the importance of the soundtrack to the adaptation process, with over half of the interviewees citing sound as an important factor in determining the pace of a

Craig Smith

motion comic. Ian Kirby cites his work on the *Inception* motion comic, which is featured on the film's DVD release.

> We did a test for Christopher Nolan and he was very particular. He doesn't want voices, he just wants word bubbles. It was actually really cool, because the music really drives you through it and you get to read it in your own voice. So you still have your imagination there, instead of being spoon fed everything. (Kirby, Personal communication, 19 November 2010)

Daniel J. Kramer's background as a sound artist informs his approach to working with sound in the context of motion comics,

> I've done a lot of documentaries for the BBC and so by editing sound and creating audio soundtracks you understand a rhythm and a pacing. And once you have your soundtrack then you start adding time to the visuals, but you come up from sound first. (Kramer, Personal communication, 15 November 2010)

The importance of the spoken word was a deciding factor in Gary Thomas's approach to his work on *Douglas Coupland's Generation A: Death of the Channel Three News Team* (2009); he notes 'the read (narration) dictated the flow. It had to move at a pace that worked with the spoken word' (Thomas, Personal Communication, 18 January 2010 interview). However, the amount of dialogue in a given comic book panel may prove to be problematic if a large amount of text is present in a panel with minimal visual imagery. The animation director is left with two distinct choices: cut the dialogue and run the risk of being unfaithful to the hypotext, spread the dialogue over more panels (if there is little or no text in the subsequent panels), or find an alternative way to animate the panel that is still of interest to the viewer. This could take the form of a close-up shot, pans, zooms or as cited earlier, employing an alternative visual aesthetic such as 3D to explore the static image in z-depth. The use of a multi-panel aesthetic may possibly allow for another form of extended dialogue, where a backdrop is used and separate panels are animated to follow the dialogue. If one panel has a lengthy piece of dialogue, the accompanying panels may provide additional areas of visual information to retain the interest of the viewer.

Jake S. Hughes employs this tactic upon adapting page nine, panel three of *The Watchmen* (Figure 3). It's a narrow portrait frame that centres on Hollis and Danny's conversation in front of an open fire. Danny indicates that it is late and he ought to leave for the night. Hollis replies by apologizing for losing track of time. The following double width comic book panel is a wide shot, revealing Hollis's collection of ornaments, figurines and published memoirs from his tenure as the costumed 'Nite Owl'. The men continue their conversation as Danny prepares to leave.

Craig Smith

Figure 3: Moore, A. and Gibbons, D. (1986), *Watchmen* Chapter 1, page 9.

Craig Smith

However, in the motion comic adaptation (Hughes 2008), the director employs a technique that splits the dialogue from panel three and incorporates it into the dialogue and setting of panel four (Figure 4).

1. Hughes places Hollis's dialogue into a close-up shot of his memorabilia

2. The camera pans across the shelf from left to right revealing his memoirs

3. The camera centres on a mid-shot of Danny and Hollis. There is a stark contrast between the two men in terms of their physical attributes.

4. Hughes emphasizes Hollis' advanced years by animating him, slowly shuffling from right to left.

5. Hollis expresses his sadness at Danny's 'early retirement' from the superhero business. (Model out of focus)

6. Hughes contrasts Hollis's shuffling gate, with that of a small model of him in his physical prime. (Pull Focus)

Figure 4: Hughes, J. (2008), *Watchmen*, Episode 1.

This innovative method employed by Hughes works on several levels. By splitting the textual elements from panel three into panel four, Hughes effectively spreads the dialogue into a more visually arresting panel, while simultaneously providing a complimentary layer of exposition into the scene. We are aware of the very distinct differences between these two men, who nonetheless share a common bond by their roles as the Nite Owl. Hollis's memories of his career as the original Nite Owl provides a nostalgic link to the past, mainly free of the socio-

Craig Smith

political issues faced by Danny and his cohorts. Hollis's memories and memorabilia also serve to emphasize the premature retirement of Danny who feels the loss of his dynamic career keenly. The employment of camera pans, close-ups and pull-focus provide a suitable range of cinematic techniques to explore the wide panel of the comic book in a manner that reveals minute visual clues to Hollis's career as a superhero and his subsequent predilection for nostalgia and reminiscence. It is debatable whether a fixed-camera aesthetic that only reveals changes in dialogue or moments of character-based movement would serve this scene as adequately. The effect of splitting the dialogue into this visually rich panel ultimately enables the viewer to share a sense of the nostalgia that Hollis and Danny both share.

Clearly, there is a challenge for motion comic animators to provide a certain degree of authenticity from the hypotext into the moving image hypertext. By using cinematic devices such as pans and zooms, as well as composite imagery that blends or merges separate panels into coherent time-based environments, animators such as Hughes can bridge the gap between static moments in time and the perpetual flow of moving image narrative. Shifting dialogue between the liminal gaps in such scenes enables the animator to control the flow of information in order to counteract lengthy monologues, or complex comic book layouts that would otherwise seem disharmonious to the viewer.

Conclusion

The process of comic book to motion comic adaptation is an area that offers a vast diversity of methods and approaches to the transference or replication of a comic book hypotext to a motion comic hypertext. Although this process shares some of the components of live-action and animation adaptation, motion comics exhibit certain traits that are unique to its form. The demands of authenticity far outstrip similar demands in live-action and animation, whereby the live-action form or animation production processes cannot hope to replicate the hand-drawn artwork with absolute verisimilitude. It could be argued that due to issues of computer/television screen size and resolution, motion comics cannot lay claim to absolute visual authenticity either. Then there is a question of aesthetics and comic book language. Both comic books and the animated film have established lexicons that have developed over an extended period of time, and although their respective fields are adapting and evolving with new approaches and technologies, it could be argued that critical discourse has established some essential footholds into both mediums. Motion comics, however, do not have such an established set of parameters. Furthermore, if we define motion comics as a hybrid medium, the very nature of the motion

19

Craig Smith

comic is fluid or amorphous. The nature of motion comics enables the animation director to appropriate imagery, sounds and textual elements and by a process of digital compositing and animation, evoke a postmodern audio/visual experience that is unique. However, at this early stage in the development of the motion comic, this amorphous bricolage of digital artefacts requires ongoing analysis in terms of a sustained canon of work. This article has highlighted some of the various ways in which the comic book medium may be adapted into a motion comic, however more research is required before a clearer picture can emerge. It may yet be too early to gauge how successful motion comic adaptations are in a cultural or commercial space, however as this chapter has clearly shown, we can begin to build a picture of the various methodologies, approaches and 'evolutionary', or technological advancements that pioneers in the field of motion comics can employ in their attempts to create the next mutation or adaptation in this hybrid medium.

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Craig Smith

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Contributor details
Craig believes that the emerging and contested field of digital 'Motion Comics', is one that is
currently lacking sustained academic analysis and critique. A Masters degree in 'Film and Visual
Studies', attained at Queens university Belfast in 2009, informed his decision to continue theory-
based research in comic book culture and the moving image at Ph.D. level, under the supervision
of Dr Daniel Martin and Dr Des O'Rawe. Craig is now lecturer in Canterbury Christ Church
University, teaching in the School of Media, Art & Design.

Contact E-mail: craig.smith@canterbury.ac.uk

Notes

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[1] *The Watchmen's* narrative complexity stems from a number of factors that include: flashbacks
to earlier incarnations of the Minutemen, Dr Manhattan's manipulation and abstraction of time
and space, and the sub-narrative of *The Black Freighter*, a secondary comic book subtext that a
minor character is reading.