1 Introduction

Comics and videogames

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In recent years, comics studies and game studies have each developed from marginal subfields into two of the most dynamic and vital areas of current humanistic scholarship. Increasingly, this entails not only an expanding corpus of in-depth studies on comics and videogames as aesthetic forms (e.g., Carrier 2000; Ensslin 2014; Etter 2020; Groensteen 2007; Juul 2019; Kirkpatrick 2011), their narrative potentials (e.g., Domsch 2013; Kukkonen 2013; Mikkonen 2017; Murray 2017; Postema 2013; Thon 2016), and their phenomenological appeal (e.g., Aldama 2012; Anable 2018; Hague 2014; Isbister 2016; Keogh 2018; Packard 2006) but also the codification of knowledge via a growing number of wide-ranging edited collections (e.g., Deterding and Zagal 2018; Meskin and Cook 2012; Perron and Schröter 2016; Ruberg and Shaw 2017; Stein and Thon 2013; Williams and Lyons 2010), field-defining handbooks (e.g., Bramlet et al. 2016; Hatfield and Beaty 2020; Raessens and Goldstein 2005; Sachs-Hombach and Thon 2015; Smith and Duncan 2017; Wolf and Perron 2014), and introductory textbooks (e.g., Abel and Klein 2016; Beil et al. 2017; Duncan and Smith 2009; Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2020; Newman 2013; Packard et al. 2019).

Despite the fact that comics and videogames have intersected frequently since the late 1970s and early 1980s, neither comics studies nor game studies have adequately addressed the various historical synergies between the two media or their increasing convergence in the current cultural landscape. Evidence of such synergies abounds: In 1979, Atari published a videogame based on DC's *Superman* comics; in 1982, a videogame developed by Parker Brothers based on Marvel's *Spider-Man* comics followed. Both videogames used abstract variations of stock scenes from the comic books and turned them into ludic standard situations for scrolling action games (Rauscher 2012, 2014). A few years later, a series of three adventure games—*Questprobe Featuring Hulk* (1984), *Questprobe Featuring Spider-Man* (1984), and *Questprobe Featuring Human Torch and Thing* (1985)—were published by Adventure International. In contrast to the earlier Atari action games that had focused on dexterity and capacity of reaction, these graphic adventures made an effort to adapt the narrative patterns of superhero comics. Instead of exercising skill-based movements, players had to collect

clues and solve puzzles to free the superheroes' friends and battle their foes. Moreover, comic tie-ins accompanied these videogames in an early example of transmediality until Adventure International's bankruptcy in 1985.

Videogames produced for the Atari home consoles like *Yar's Revenge* (1982) and *Centipede* (1983) were accompanied by comics that were included in the videogame boxes and written by popular comics authors such as Gerry Conway and Roy Thomas (see also the contribution by Labarre in the present volume). Comparable to the popular 1980s toy franchise *Masters of the Universe*, which featured comics as a special gimmick for every action figure, the comics accompanying these early videogames added background stories that helped "color" the gameplay. The images in the comics thus provided narrative and visual details to the videogames' storyworld that, due to limitations in processing power and graphic capacities, could not be represented within the videogames themselves. Often, these comics also integrated more extensive intermedial references. To take just one example: The 3D-comic *The Adventures of Lane Mastodon*, which accompanied the Infocom adventure *Leather Goddesses of Phobos* (1986), contained not just information necessary to completing the game (and thus acted as a form of copy protection) but also offered a wealth of references to the iconography of science-fiction B-pictures that further enriched the peculiar humor of the largely text-based videogame. By the early 1990s, stand-alone comics series based upon successful videogames such as *Double Dragon* (1991), *Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis* (1991), or *Street Fighter* (1993) sold separately, while comic tie-ins have also increasingly been used to bridge the narrative gap between videogame sequels and to add detail to an expanding storyworld (see below).

Despite the fact that both videogames based on successful comics series and comics based on successful videogame franchises have been in production for several decades, the examination of their synergies and interactions remains largely uncharted territory in both comics studies and game studies (with the scope of existing studies focusing on comics and videogames [e.g., Backe 2012; Goodbrey 2015; Lippitz 2019] remaining considerably more limited than those focusing on comics and film [e.g., Burke 2015; Davis 2016; Gordon et al. 2007] or on videogames and film [e.g., Brookey 2010; Kallay 2013; Lenhardt and Rauscher 2015]). This is even more surprising since the two media forms' move from the margins to the mainstream of current media culture and the considerable rise in associated fan activities (Bolling and Smith 2014; Scott 2019; Tosca and Klastrup 2019) have made their complex interrelations ever more visible. Among the plethora of potentially productive avenues of inquiry that are thus opened up, we highlight two different, and arguably complementary, kinds of interrelations between comics and videogames. On the one hand, it is possible to frame the ways in which comics and videogames borrow, adapt, and transform a diverse range of aesthetic, ludic, and narrative strategies conventionally associated with the "other" medium in terms of *hybrid medialities*, which are realized in a

broad range of examples such as *Comix Zone* (1995), *Homestuck* (2009–2016), *A Duck Has an Adventure* (2012), or *Framed* (2014) (see also the contributions by Backe, Eckhoff-Heindl, Goodbrey, Glaser, and Ng in the present volume).

On the other hand, both comics and videogames often function as *transmedia expansions* of existing media products, whether as adaptations of specific stories (e.g., Hassler-Forest and Nicklas 2015; Hutcheon and O’Flynn 2013; Parody 2011) or as more dispersed contributions to the kinds of transmedia franchises that have increasingly come to define our current media environments (e.g., Freeman and Gambarato 2018; Jenkins 2006; Johnson 2013). Parallel to the recent rise of superhero blockbusters based on intellectual property originating in the realm of comics (e.g., Burke 2015; McEniry et al. 2016; Yockey 2017), popular videogames from very different genres contribute to a variety of comics-based franchises from those built on Bill Willingham’s *Fables* series (2002–2015) or Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* series (1986) to DC’s *Batman* comics or Marvel’s *Spider-Man* comics (see also the contributions by Brookey and Zhang, Fleury, Mieth, and Uricchio in the present volume). Similarly, videogame-based franchises from *Metal Gear Solid* or *Persona 5* to *Tomb Raider* or *Warcraft* have included comics of various kinds amongst their more prominent installments (see also the contributions by Blom, Much, and Stemmler in the present volume). While it goes without saying that the centripetal force of hybrid medialities and the centrifugal force of transmedia expansions are not mutually exclusive, distinguishing between them may still be a helpful first step toward coming to terms with the complex synergies, interactions, and interrelations between comics and videogames.

From hybrid medialities to transmedia expansions

The notions of hybrid medialities and transmedia expansions both draw on a more fundamental conceptualization of comics and videogames as media. While it would go beyond the scope of this brief introduction to reconstruct the many different and partially contradictory conceptualizations of the term *medium* and the development of its different forms in any detail (e.g., Bolter and Grusin 1999; Manovich 2001; McLuhan 1964; Murray 2012; Ryan 2006; Schmidt 2000), we would still suggest that “newspapers,” “novels,” “photographic pictures,” “films,” or indeed “comics” and “videogames” may be best understood as *conventionally distinct media*, “which can be distinguished not only by way of the technological or material base and/or the semiotic system(s) they use but also by way of the ‘social fact’ that they are conventionally treated as distinct media” (Thon 2014, 335; see also Rajewsky 2010; Ryan 2006; Thon 2016; Wilde 2015; Wolf 1999). *Mediality* would then, at least in principle, refer not just to “transmedial notions of ‘mediumness’” but also “to the set of prototypical properties that can be considered constitutive for a conventionally distinct medium” (Thon 2014, 335), even

though “the dynamic processes shaping, modifying and transforming the conventions of this distinct medium” (Wilde 2015, 2) are often complex and may put the always already remediated mediality of a specific manifestation of what we might consider a comic or a videogame into sharp relief only if we attempt to differentiate it from another media form.

Scott McCloud, for example, notes that “the basic difference [between animation and comics] is that animation is sequential in time but not spatially juxtaposed as comics are” (1993, 7; see also, once more, Wilde 2015). While many action adventures and platformers do indeed appear much closer to animation than to traditional comics, one can also find more than a few videogames that do not just draw on stories told by comics but also (or primarily) work to evoke the combination of words and pictures in panels and panel sequences that defines comics’ mediality. As mentioned above, an early example of this kind of hybrid mediality is the 1995 beat ‘em up *Comix Zone*, which presents its game spaces much like a comics page, with several panels to be traversed by the protagonist as he fights the evil mutant Mortus. More recently, the 2014 puzzle game *Framed* tasks the player with (re)arranging different comics panels represented on the screen in order to allow the player-controlled character to escape from his relentless pursuers in the videogame’s heavily noir-inspired storyworld. Evidently, both *Comix Zone* and *Framed* foreground their remediation of comics elements, but it is worth stressing that one can also find numerous less pronounced—but certainly no less important—examples of this kind of remediation, including the third-person shooter *Max Payne* (2001), which employs cutscenes that take the form of comics, and the first-person shooter *XIII* (2003), which is based on a successful comics series with the same title and uses a cel-shading technique that results in a graphic style reminiscent of “hand-drawn” comics, while also employing a panel-like structure to represent part of its gameplay.

While videogames can reproduce the verbal-pictorial form of comics quite easily, then, the situation is slightly more complicated when print comics attempt to remediate the interactivity and nonlinearity of videogames. While there are well-known examples such as Bryan Lee O’Malley’s *Scott Pilgrim* series (2004–2010) that evoke videogame tropes, print comics that launch more ambitious attempts to integrate ludic elements tend to draw on the realm of nondigital games. The resulting processes of remediation are still quite diverse, however, ranging from the nonlinear narrative structure in comics such as *The Unwritten* #17 (Carey and Gross 2010) and *Adventure Time* #10 (North et al. 2012), both of which are clearly inspired by the *Choose Your Own Adventure* book series, to the integration of board game elements in Chris Ware’s experimental “‘Fairy Tale’ Road Rage” (Ware 2000) and *Building Stories* (Ware 2012) (see also the contribution by Eckhoff-Heindl in the present volume). While not as common as videogames’ remediation of comics’ mediality, the fact that this integration of elements from nondigital games into print comics has recently even been taken up by an entry in Marvel’s *Deadpool* franchise would indicate that it

is anything but marginal. Indeed, *You Are Deadpool* (Ewing et al. 2018) not only includes a pair of *Deadpool*-branded dice and pencils that allow the reader/player to follow the many different “forking paths” that the comic’s nonlinear narrative structure affords. It also employs even more pronounced forms of metareferentiality and metalepsis than the above-mentioned examples (which is, of course, very much on brand for the *Deadpool* franchise [e.g., Darowski 2009; Thon 2017; Wolf 2009]). Repeatedly switching between graphic styles, narrative frames, and ludic references, the comic’s self-reflexive approach to its hybrid mediality is established early on, when *Deadpool* (the character) encourages the reader/player to build a dice from a punch-out-sheet, only to be killed by the scissors on the next page if the reader/player follows his instructions.

As instructive as these instances of print comics remediating elements of nondigital games are, we also find numerous and no less pertinent examples of webcomics remediating *videogame* elements, which sometimes leads to a noteworthy blurring of the (conventionally drawn) line between the two media forms: Andrew Hussie’s webcomics series *Homestuck*, for example, tells a story that focuses on a group of teenagers exploring the world of the upcoming videogame *Sburb*, which increasingly turns out to be closely integrated with the characters’ actual world. *Homestuck* also uses a complex combination of static pictures, animations, and interactive segments that commonly include the remediation of videogame elements—from the initial prompt to the reader/player to name the protagonist via the various battle commands that the characters can execute during so-called strife to the obnoxiously complex and unintuitive inventory system of the Sylladex—not just on the level of the represented storyworld but also on that of its multimodal representation (see also Glaser’s contribution in the present volume). Another example of this kind of hybrid mediality would be Daniel M. Goodbrey’s *A Duck Has an Adventure*, which employs a simpler, but also decidedly more nonlinear narrative structure to tell the story of a duck making a number of consequential choices. While the focus here is primarily on the agency of the reader/player in deciding which course of action the duck should take, *A Duck Has an Adventure* also integrates a videogame-inspired scoring system that keeps track of the number of endings the reader/player has explored, the number of hats they have successfully made the duck collect, and other assorted achievements they have attained (see also the contribution by Goodbrey in the present volume).

As this necessarily brief discussion of salient examples should already have illustrated, there is a rich tradition of comics and videogames “borrowing” formal elements conventionally attributed to the “other” medium, and while these processes of remediation may only very rarely push a given work beyond the boundaries of what we would still recognize as a “comic” or a “videogame,” they still create a continuum of what could be described as hybrid medialities (see also, again, Wilde 2015; and, for a critical perspective, the contribution by Backe in the present volume). As mentioned

above, however, it is important to note that the centripetal force of hybrid medialities is not all there is to the comics-videogames nexus, as the two conventionally distinct media also play an important part within the more or less encompassing transmedia franchises that have increasingly come to define our current media culture. Again, the resulting processes of transmedia expansions can take very different forms (Ryan 2008, 2015; Thon 2015, 2019), from the largely redundant “retelling” of a story previously told in the “other” medium (as is the case in comics such as *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed* [Blackman et al. 2008] and videogames such as *DC Infinite Crisis* [2015]) via a carefully tuned expansion of previously established storyworlds (as is the case in comics such as the *Batman: Arkham City* series [2011] and videogames such as *The Wolf Among Us* [2013]) to the modification of such previously established storyworlds in various kinds of reboots and reimaginings (as is the case in comics such as the *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* series [2006–2010] and videogames such as *LEGO Batman: The Videogame* [2008]). Accordingly, the chapters collected in the present volume aim to develop a more nuanced understanding of the theory, history, and current iterations of the synergies, interactions, and interrelations between comics and videogames by exploring both their potential to create hybrid medialities and their role in various kinds of transmedia expansions.

Part I: Hybrid medialities

In “Of Pac-Men and Star Raiders: Early mutual representations between comics and videogames (1981–1983),” Nicolas Labarre examines the moment in videogame history when the medium first attracted attention as an increasingly popular phenomenon beyond the realm of gaming culture. He suggests that, over a relatively short period of time in the early 1980s, comics not only recognized the possibilities of videogames but also discovered a number of synergies between the two media. According to Labarre, comics depicted videogames as a catalogue of icons, as potential yet incomplete narratives akin to toys, and as a new aesthetic that could impact future developments in comics storytelling and design. In addition, comics contributed to the formation of popular figures such as Pac-Man and Donkey Kong, which eventually became globally recognizable icons.

Carman Ng’s “Interfacing comics and games: A socio-affective multimodal approach” combines notions of socio-semiotic multimodality with an empirical orientation and a profound interest in theories of affect. Ng applies digital annotation and gameplay analysis to determine how videogames instantiate the aesthetics of different forms of audiovisual narrative. In order to do so, she develops a multifaceted approach to multimodality that favors fine-grained analysis of intermedial and transmedial elements and concentrates on the affective dimensions of three types of interactive audiovisual narrative: the digital graphic novel *Metal Gear Solid 2: Bande Dessinée* (2008), which adapts Hideo Kojima’s successful videogame *Metal*

Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty (2001), the comic-game hybrid *Gorogoa* (2017), and the gesture-based literary artwork *Breathing Room* (2014).

In “Game comics: Theory and design,” Daniel Merlin Goodbrey further explores the hybridity that may result when the verbal-pictorial form of comics and the ludic qualities of videogames intersect. Taking Jesper Juul’s (2005) classic game model as his starting point, Goodbrey argues that what he calls game comics combine key characteristics of videogames with key characteristics of comics in order to establish the basis for gameplay that highlights the productive interfaces between the two media forms. He tests this hypothesis by offering in-depth analyses of three game comic prototypes he designed as part of his own practice-as-research activities: the above-mentioned *A Duck Has an Adventure* as well as *Icarus Needs* (2013) and *Margaret Must Succeed* (2013).

Challenging the seemingly omnipresent notion of hybridity, Hans-Joachim Backe’s “Game-comics and comic-games: Against the concept of hybrids” argues that the complex relations between videogames and comics invalidate any attempt to frame these two media as coherent cultural phenomena. Criticizing previous research for its reliance on a priori assumptions of hybridity that would require clearly delineated characteristics rather than prevalent notions of prototypical features and family resemblances, Backe questions the supposed hybridity of a wide range of examples. While he acknowledges the existence of a broadly conceived comics-videogames nexus, he concludes that diagnoses of hybrid medialities generally do not hold up to close analyses of individual artifacts.

Turning to analogue synergies between ludic forms and comics in “Building stories: The interplay of comics and games in Chris Ware’s works,” Nina Eckhoff-Heindl shows how game structures shape graphic novelist Chris Ware’s artistic approach. Eckhoff-Heindl reads Ware’s board game “‘Fairy Tale’ Road Rage” (Ware 2000) as a critical take on fairy-tale and educational games, suggesting that the narratives of loneliness and depression that dominate Ware’s groundbreaking *Building Stories* (Ware 2012) are productively contrasted with the more playful board game. At the same time, *Building Stories* establishes a connection to board games through its materiality, size, and visual design, which readers must try to decode with the help of a manual that does not in fact prove to be very helpful, a potentially frustrating experience Eckhoff-Heindl identifies as a deconstruction of received knowledge about printed artifacts.

Tim Glaser’s “*Homestuck* as a game: A webcomic between playful participation, digital technostalgia, and irritating inventory systems” explores the hybrid medialities that may or may not emerge from the comics-videogames nexus. Glaser discusses Andrew Hussie’s webcomic *Homestuck* as a popular experiment and exercise in metareferential storytelling that offers playfully critical reflections on various elements of videogames, including their connection to fandom and participatory culture. Accordingly, Glaser reads *Homestuck* as an example of technostalgia that oscillates between an ironic

distancing from and a serious investigation of adolescence in the age of online communication and digital computation—and that, in doing so, routinely implicates the readers/players in the act of storytelling.

In “*Metal Gear Solid* and its comics adaptations,” Claudius Stemmler works against the grain of popular and scholarly inquiries into the interrelations between comics and videogames. Stemmler conducts a case study that looks at the adaptation of the well-known *Metal Gear Solid* stealth game series (1998–2015) into lesser-known comics formats, beginning with Konami’s release of *Metal Gear Solid: Digital Graphic Novel* (2006) for the PlayStation Portable. His comparison of the videogames and their comics adaptations reveals a concerted effort to retain certain core elements of the former’s aesthetics in the latter, while also modifying the stories being told in ways that privilege the affordances of comics in general and that of the digital graphic novel format in particular.

Part II: Transmedia expansions

Moving from the notion of hybrid medialities at the center of the chapters in the first part of the present volume to the notion of transmedia expansion that binds together those in the second part, Dominik Mieth’s “Many Spider-Men are better than one: Referencing as a narrative strategy” examines how serial superhero characters such as Spider-Man have tried to reconcile an incessant need to update with the expectations of long-term fans and followers of the properties. Looking at Spider-Man comics, blockbuster movies, and videogames, Mieth discerns a paradigm shift from earlier adaptations that sought to stay more or less true to canonical, or at least specific, versions of the character to more recent expansions that display a greater interest in multiplication and diversification.

Robert Alan Brooke and Nan Zhang employ a critical political economy approach in “The not-so *Fantastic Four* franchise: A critical history of the comic, the films, and the Disney/Fox merger” to question the notion of transmedia expansion. Different from the many stories of success about the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the fate of the *Fantastic Four* was marred by several troubled film adaptations, in addition to getting caught in the Disney takeover of Twentieth Century Fox. Brooke and Zhang thus critically examine the “dubious division” between political economy approaches to popular franchises and treatments of fan culture as they reassess the role of intellectual property considerations in Disney’s acquisition of Marvel. Instead of embracing an idealized view of participatory culture, they call for an increase in awareness of actual corporate practices among both scholars and fans.

Against the background of the crisis of the *Batman* brand that followed the release of Joel Schumacher’s notorious *Batman and Robin* (1997), James Fleury’s “The road to *Arkham Asylum: Batman: Dark Tomorrow* and transnational transmedia” zooms in on a part of the franchise’s transmedia history

that, in contrast to its more successful adaptations, has not yet garnered major scholarly attention. Fleury's case study of one of the lesser-known *Batman* videogames, *Batman: Dark Tomorrow* (2003), allows him to reconstruct a rarely explored aspect of the multiplicity of the many Batmen that are subsumed under the *Batman* brand and to highlight how *Batman: Dark Tomorrow* facilitated the emergence of the *Arkhamverse* transmedia franchise despite its limited multiplatform storytelling and less-than-stellar reception.

The rules associated with superhero storyworlds and the continuity "bibles" commonly employed to manage them inform William Uricchio's "When rules collide: Definitional strategies for superheroes across comic books and games." Uricchio shares Brookey and Zhang's interest in the commercial concerns behind transmedia franchises like *Batman* and *Spider-Man* when he argues that the diegetic rules of the comics' storyworlds and the financial rules that determine the fate of a franchise and limit its storytelling options often collide. Adding a third element—what he calls emerging media technologies, story-generating technologies in particular—to this equation, Uricchio ponders the potential of comics "bibles" and videogame rules for the development of algorithmically-generated stories.

In "The manifestations of game characters in a media mix strategy," Joleen Blom aims to complicate established notions of media convergence by complementing Western theories of transmedia characters in transmedia franchises with Japanese theories of *kyara* in what is more commonly called the media mix in Japanese media culture. Using the highly successful *Persona 5* franchise as a case study, Blom argues that, while the main characters do connect different parts of the franchise, including videogames and manga, they do not create coherence but rather proliferate—countering the emphasis on identity, continuity, and consistency that appears to be at the heart of many, if certainly not all, Western theories of transmedia characters and transmedia storytelling.

Josefa Much's "Creating Lara Croft: The meaning of the comic books for the *Tomb Raider* franchise" examines the productive tensions that tend to occur whenever videogame versions of Lara Croft are revisited and revised in comics spin-offs by different licensees. Much reconstructs in meticulous detail how the *Tomb Raider* videogame series (1996–) has become a salient point of reference for comics adaptations and expansions that may have their origins in videogames but still regularly take on "a life of their own." As Much shows, this leads to complex interactions not just between videogames and comics but also between officially licensed products and a broad variety of fan productions that add ever more interesting aspects to the official versions of Lara Croft.

In the concluding chapter of the present volume, "Beyond immersion: *Gin Tama* and palimpsestuous reception," Susana Tosca discusses the mix of genres and styles as well as the penchant for intertextuality, metareferentiality, and metalepsis that are the hallmarks of the manga series *Gin Tama* (2003–), the anime series of the same title (2006–2018), and other entries in the transmedia

franchise. Not limiting her analysis to *Gin Tama*'s substantial reflection on videogame tropes, Tosca explores the broader question whether fragmentation and immersion can coexist. Rather than maintaining this supposed opposition, she proposes the concept of "palimpsestuous reception" in order to more precisely describe how the various ways in which *Gin Tama* encourages its recipients to keep track of its myriad metareferential transgressions can itself lead to highly immersive processes of (re)interpretation and (re)appropriation.

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