9 Many Spider-Men are better than one

Referencing as a narrative strategy

Dominik Mieth

Over the last 20 years, characters like Spider-Man, Batman, and Lara Croft have appeared in different iterations across several media such as comics, movies, and games. Usually, new iterations are introduced in the context of adaptation—e.g., via a new movie or videogame appearance. However, when characters have a long-running publication history, changes also take place in the medium of their origin, often to make the character more accessible for new audiences. Reiterating and recreating iconic characters for new and old audiences and adapting them for different media is a thin line to walk for creators, as their audience will include both long-term fans well-informed about previous appearances and potential new fans encountering the characters and their storyworlds for the first time.

Starting with theoretical perspectives on the elements that define a superhero character, I will outline a model of character components that should be applicable in both theory and practice. While this model should help us analyze several iterations of a character in comparison, it may also help creators to reflect on their decisions when working with similar IPs and hopefully to recreate a popular character successfully for a new comic book series, movie, or videogame. Using Spider-Man as an example, I will demonstrate how the comic books have dealt (or tried to deal) with the challenge of updating the character. While an attempt to introduce a new Spider-Man within the existing continuity failed, Marvel succeeded by establishing a multiplicity of Spider-Men across several comic book series and giving each iteration its own continuity. Next, I will look at cinematic iterations of Spider-Man since 2002. I will assess how these movies add to the multiplicity of the character while following the logic of adaptation. They choose different elements from the comic books as points of reference, creating different Spider-Men that share the same source material but present different elements from it. Lastly, I will look at some of the videogames featuring Spider-Man. I will demonstrate how the earlier games position themselves more or less clearly in relation to specific iterations of the character although they rarely reference complex events that would allow us to determine if they belong to the same storyworld. The newest installment ultimately applies an approach similar to the movies. In conclusion, I will emphasize the importance of continuity

to reach new audiences and the relevance of including carefully curated references to appeal to audiences already familiar with popular characters like Spider-Man.

Theoretical perspectives

Studies across a variety of disciplines have touched upon the subject of one recognizable character appearing in various iterations across multiple texts or media. This includes adaptation studies (Burke 2015; Heinze 2019), transmedia studies (Jenkins 2009; Pearson 2019), media studies concerned with branding and franchising (Freeman 2017; Johnson 2012, 2017; Proctor 2012a, 2012b, 2017b), narratology (Eder 2015; Ryan 2013; Thon 2019), and fan studies (Tosca and Klasttrup 2016). As expected, the focus of each of these studies varies depending on the discipline and its perspective on the subject. In the following, I will exclusively look at two specific aspects: What components define a character, and how are these components used in the creation of new iterations of the character?

In their seminal work on Batman, William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson summarize traits/attributes, events, recurrent characters, setting, and iconography as the five key components that define the core of the character (Uricchio and Pearson 2015, 209–210). They note that “without the presence of all five key components in some form, the Batman ceases to be the Batman, yet the primarily series nature of the character permits fairly wide variation in the treatment of these components across time and media” (Uricchio and Pearson 2015, 210). In the context of Spider-Man, the absence of events, recurrent characters, and setting draws a clear line between the superhero *character* that appears in comic books, movies, and videogames and a *figure* that is recognizable as a Spider-Man. One example might be the popular *YouTube* channel “Superhero-Spiderman-Frozen Compilations,” in which a man in a costume appears as Spiderman [*sic*] but hardly presents any references to the Spider-Man metatext beyond this appearance (Beaumec1988 2020). Compared to the Spider-Man presented in any of the Marvel movies, it is indeed more a man in a costume than a Spider-Man.

In her examination of television characters like CSI’s Gilbert Grissom, Pearson has developed a character template similar to the one she and Uricchio described for Batman. This template includes six key elements: psychological traits and habitual behaviors, physical traits and appearance, speech patterns and dialogue, interactions with other characters, environment, and biography (Pearson 2019, 150). These overlap with the five key components that Pearson and Uricchio constituted for the Batman but further specify attributes as psychological traits, habits, and powers and events into biographical events like the origin and events from popular storylines.

Henry Jenkins, commenting on Uricchio and Pearson, identifies three phases in the history of the superhero genre: the beginning as self-contained

stories, the shift toward serialization and continuity, and finally a period of multiplicity in which “readers may consume multiple versions of the same franchise, each with different conceptions of the character” (2009, 20). Jenkins describes both the superhero genre and its iconic characters as flexible and able to absorb new contexts. These contexts may serve various different purposes—e.g., responding to the growing multiculturalism of American society (Jenkins 2009, 24). In reply, Uricchio and Pearson acknowledge multiplicity as the “industry’s prime directive” (2015, 231) but add that the “multiplicity strategy requires key components as much if not more than did the continuity strategy; readers ignorant of a character’s basic building blocks would be unable to take pleasure in their permutations” (2015, 232). Thus, they remain convinced that the origin story is a central aspect of the Batman (Uricchio and Pearson 2015, 233). I would agree in so far as *a* Batman contradicting the origin story (e.g., a Batman whose parents never died) might not get as close to being *the* Batman as *a* Batman embracing the origin story. However, it might be close enough as we have seen other characters than Bruce Wayne taking the mantle of Batman. They are perfectly acceptable as *the* Batman as long they are not compared to a competing version and the judgment heavily depends on the knowledge of the character.

In working toward a typology of transmedia characters, Paolo Bertetti argues against a “direct correspondence (or mutual implication) between transmedia worlds and transmedia characters” (2014, 2346). Using Conan the Barbarian as an example, he notes that the “identity of characters is a fuzzy concept, and some characters’ occurrences are more typical than others” (Bertetti 2014, 2348). Bertetti identifies fictional identity (the character as actor inside a story) and existential identity (the character as being) as “two different main types of identity” (2014, 2348). He further divides existential identity into proper identity (as semantic identity consisting of elements that define the character’s being) and relational identity (as syntactic identity based on the relationship to the world surrounding the character). Proper identity is divided into figurative identity (including the name and image) and thematic identity (including the roles a character plays, such as superhero or student) (Bertetti 2014, 2349). Finally, fictional identity is differentiated into actantial identity (e.g., hero of the story), modal identity (e.g., motivations, skills, knowledge in contrast to actions taken), and axiological identity (deep values that inspire actions taken) (Bertetti 2014, 2349)—and connected to actorial, temporal, and special variations on the relational levels of a character’s identity (Bertetti 2014, 2356).

The components discussed by Uricchio and Pearson (2015) and Pearson (2019) can be allocated within Bertetti’s model—think of iconography as part of the figurative identity or recurring characters as part of the relational identity. It is interesting to note that most of the components they describe (attributes, traits, events, biography) are part of what Bertetti describes as modal and relational aspects of a character’s identity, which indicates that

some parts of Bertetti's model are more likely to inspire creators. Vice versa, what Bertetti describes as actantial and axiological is hardly considered by Urrichio and Pearson, posing the question if and how these could be used by creators to fashion interesting new iterations of a character.

Discussing the appearance of Frankenstein's Monster in Marvel comic books, Shane Denson points out that new installments of iconic characters like Batman or Spider-Man "carry traces of their previous incarnations into their new worlds, where the strata of their previous lives accrue in a non-linear, non-diegetic manner" (2011, 537). He defines serial figures like Spider-Man in contrast to a series character that might never move beyond a single continuity, e.g., a character in a soap opera that is never rebooted or adapted to other media. Denson points out further that a serial figure extends beyond its diegetic domain via an "extra-diegetic link" (2011, 537). In other words: The existence of various Spider-Men (including the "Superhero-Spiderman-Frozen Compilations" channel's man in a costume; Beaumec1988 2020) thus frames Spider-Man as a serial figure as each new appearance makes its connection to other appearances transparent (e.g., by the man in the *YouTube* video wearing a costume designed after a specific version of Spider-Man). This means that while *a* Batman might be clearly identified as not being *the* Batman, he still strengthens Batman as a serial figure. The relevance of a single Batman or Spider-Man might then rather be determined by its reception—e.g., its popularity and the size of its audience, or justification, e.g., via canonicity (Proctor 2017a).

Pearson (2019) discusses transmedia characters, employing the concept of transfictionality introduced by Marie-Laure Ryan as the "migration of fictional entities across different texts" (2013, 383). Pearson analyzes transmedia characters in dimensions of additionality and cohesion. As she points out, additionality might not necessarily equal an expansion by introducing new settings or characters, but it might instead be a modification, e.g., reworking events, settings, or character details. Pearson discusses expansion and modification by the "points of contact" (2019, 149) on the fictional layer. She proposes a taxonomy consisting of "three structuring factors" (Pearson 2019, 149) by first separating time/place transfictions (e.g., a change of the setting) from character transfictions (e.g., a change of character traits), then realist from fantastic transfictions, and finally public domain (e.g., Sherlock Holmes) from proprietary (e.g., Batman) transfictions (Pearson 2019, 149–151). While Spider-Man is easily classified as proprietary and fantastic, I would argue that a new iteration of Spider-Man can introduce modifications on both the character and time/place domain at the same time. The notion of cohesion as quality that can be stronger/weaker seems to fit the evaluation of two or more versions of the same character in comparison.

Pearson's points of contact follow an idea similar to Jan-Noël Thon's (2019, 379) comparison of two single narratives within a transmedial franchise in terms of redundancy (both narratives present the same elements

of a storyworld), expansion (one narrative adds previously unrepresented elements without leading to contradiction between both narratives), and modification (one narrative adds previously unrepresented elements, which leads to contradiction between both narratives, thus indicating them to be different storyworlds). Like storyworlds or narratives, two iterations of a single character like Spider-Man can be compared in these terms. From a creator's perspective, redundancy results in a possibly exact copy of an original. Modification makes sense in the context of transmedia storytelling, e.g., by filling in possible gaps left by another narrative, as many of the games developed with a movie license demonstrate by adding scenes that might take place between scenes in the movie. Finally, modification appears to be the strategy suggested by most recent appearances of Spider-Man, as the contradictions they create help turning what Denson describes as a series character into a serial figure.

A character component model

Building upon these distinctions, I suggest the following model that combines the components sorted by their importance regarding their cohesion to what could be considered a definitive version of the character. The order starts with cursory components like iconography, name, and license that can be judged more or less at a glance and moves on to more substantial and comprehensive components like canonicity, characteristics, settings, characters, and events that cannot be compared without a closer examination or previous knowledge of the character.

The deeper within a single component deviations or modifications appear in comparison to previous iterations of the character, the closer the character could be considered to the idea of a definitive Spider-Man rather than just being *a* Spider-Man, and the closer the iteration that serves as a benchmark in this comparison could be considered as the definitive Spider-Man. While definitive might suggest some sort of exclusivity, it is in fact possible that several Spider-Men might share this status, e.g., all four movie Spider-Men are perfectly acceptable as *the* Spider-Man as long as there is only one Spider-Man in the specific narrative.

The model takes into account that different recipients might compare a specific Spider-Man to different conceptions of the character depending on their previous exposure to Spider-Man fiction. While a truly definitive version of the character thus cannot exist, the question of definitiveness becomes a question of collective overlap between individual conceptions of the character. This resembles Jan-Noël Thon's observation that transmedial narratology can distinguish between the medial representation of a storyworld, its mental representation that is constructed during the reception by a single reader, and the storyworld as "intersubjective communicative construct" (2019, 376). Naturally, this collective overlap concurs with the popularity and spread of certain representations of the character. The clearer this

collective overlap between the various Spider-Men becomes, the more cohesive the concept of Spider-Man becomes as a whole. These observations culminate in the following character component model:

Cursory components (requiring only superficial familiarity with the character):

1. *Iconography* (E.g., costume, recognizable pose or gesture: Does it look like Spider-Man?)
2. *Name* (Is it referred to as Spider-Man?)
3. *License* (Is it officially sanctioned by the holder of the franchise?)

Comprehensive components (requiring knowledge of existing narratives):

4. *Canonicity* (Is it part of an existing fictional world or timeline?)
5. *Characteristics*
 - a. physical traits / powers (Can he/she do what Spider-Man can do?)
 - b. psychological traits / habits (Does he/she behave like Spider-Man?)
 - c. biography / origin (Has he/she experienced what Spider-Man has experienced?)
 - d. speech patterns / dialogue (Does he/she talk like Spider-Man?)
6. *Setting* (Does it appear in a fictional world that evokes recognizable events from existing narratives? E.g., New York City)
7. *Supporting characters* (Do other characters related to events from existing narratives appear? E.g., Gwen Stacy)
8. *Events* (Does the narrative re-create or hint at events from existing narratives? E.g., the death of Gwen Stacy)

From a creator's perspective, the questions above can easily be reformulated, e.g., which supporting characters should a new iteration include and why? Such questions can lead not only toward a conscious decision regarding the selection of elements from existing iterations (e.g., who to include as Peter Parker's love interest and why) but also toward its potential benefits over other alternatives (e.g., the popularity of an element with an existing audience).

The comic books

Examining differences between Marvel and DC Comics, William Proctor notes that Marvel places greater emphasis on "continuity and ontological order," which offers a "vital component for many readers who enter the multiverse and demand rationality, cohesion, and consistency" (2017b, 344).

Reed Tucker echoes this in his history of the competition between Marvel and DC Comics. Developing a unified continuity between the different superheroes of the Marvel universe turned into one major advantage over the competition. The setup of their superheroes in a single universe “did not cause readers to abandon Marvel; in fact, they were being drawn deeper into this burgeoning fictional world, in some cases buying every title the company produced” (Tucker 2017, position 719 of 6685 Kindle eBook).

A character like Spider-Man, created in 1962, poses certain problems for creators, some of which Umberto Eco (1972) discusses in dissecting Superman. While a traditional mythological character like Hercules is defined by his “irreversible destiny,” superheroes follow the logic of the modern novel, “in which the reader’s main interest is transferred to the unpredictable nature of *what will happen* [emphasis in original] and, therefore, to the plot invention” (Eco 1972, 15). In addition, the “mythological character of comic strips [...] must be an archetype, the totality of certain collective aspirations, and therefore, he must necessarily become immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature, which renders him easily recognizable” (Eco 1972, 15). On the one hand, writers of superhero narratives have to introduce unpredictable changes in the form of a plot twist; on the other hand, writers have to preserve the character resulting in a “narrative paradox” (Eco 1972, 16). Eco is still concerned with the Superman of the self-contained story area, which Jenkins (see above) refers to as the first phase of the superhero genre. Still, this observation holds true for characters like Spider-Man. As Sean Howe points out in his retelling of the competition between Marvel and DC Comics, the “average age of the monthly Marvel comic consumer now hovers at around thirty, which means that most readers have watched the narrative cycles repeat multiple times” (2013, position 7701 of 11016 Kindle eBook). Obviously, these readers seem to derive pleasure from the character staying the same.

Accordingly, in the mid-1990s, editor Terry Kavanagh argued that the writers had written Spider-Man “away from [their] audience” (Howe 2013, position 66562 of 11016 Kindle eBook) by getting him married and setting him up to become a father. He requested to bring the character “back to his essence” (Howe 2013, position 66562 of 11016 Kindle eBook). As a result, Marvel prepared a storyline in 1994 that would later be referred to as the “Clone Saga.” The convoluted storyline and its production have been well documented by Goletz (2008). The “Clone Saga” went back to a storyline that concluded in *Amazing Spider-Man* Vol. 1 #149 (Conway and Andru 1975), in which Spider-Man fights a clone of himself that makes him doubt whether he himself is a clone. Marvel’s intention was to reveal that clone to be the real Peter Parker and to install him as new Spider-Man under the name Ben Reilly. Sales dropped, and Marvel eventually decided to reinstall Peter Parker as Spider-Man by killing off Ben Reilly, revealing him to be the actual clone and leaving no room for any doubts that Peter was indeed the original Spider-Man.

Can the character component model explain why the audience rejected Ben Reilly? First of all, the obvious problem is the co-existence of two Spider-Men competing for the status of being *the* Spider-Man within a single continuity. Second, the fact that Ben Reilly is also competing with Peter Parker sharpens the conflict between the two Spider-Men. Marvel has indeed a hard time establishing the character as different from the previous Peter Parker. In *The Sensational Spider-Man #0* (Jurgens and Janson 1996), in order to differentiate himself from the previous Spider-Man, Ben changes his costume and dyes his hair blond to prevent being confused with Peter Parker. Marvel also sets Ben Reilly up with new villains and a new cast of supporting characters. Nevertheless, a common situation in the narratives of the Ben Reilly storylines turns out to be Ben encountering characters whom Peter Parker has met and with whom he has grown familiar, and exploring the confusion resulting from their interaction. This serves as a constant reminder of the absence of Peter Parker. The changes made to set Ben Reilly apart from Peter Parker retain a constant reference to Peter Parker.

The “Clone Saga” storyline appears to be an example of a general pattern Marvel follows in the comic books to preserve what Eco described as “inexhaustible characters” (1972, 20). An impactful event triggers change (e.g., Peter being revealed to be the clone in 1995, Aunt May dying 1994), but the new status quo is only temporary and ultimately reverted after a certain time (Peter revealed to be the original in 1996, Aunt May revealed to be alive in 1998). It is important to note that in the case of Spider-Man, impactful events are in most cases events with consequences for the life of Peter Parker. Changes to his Spider-Man persona are less common but follow a similar pattern (e.g., his powers being extended as a result of the “The Other” storyline in 2005/2006, later repealed in the “One More Day” storyline in 2007/2008). Furthermore, the changes usually eliminate the occurrence of events that could be considered as bringing out “essential” components of the character (e.g., Aunt May lying in the hospital thus providing conflict between Peter’s responsibilities as her nephew and being Spider-Man); thus, taking the changes back allows reintroducing what Eco describes as “recurrent stock situations” (1972, 20).

This pattern of reverting changes can also be interpreted in the context of conflicting concepts that form the characters and their relative importance. Using the character component model, this pattern can be discussed in terms of the aspects of the character that are involved. Is it more “essential” to Spider-Man that Peter Parker is married or that he is dating? How relevant are specific supporting characters like Mary Jane to bring out the “essence” of the character? Is making a deal with the devil to exchange his marriage with Mary Jane for the survival of Aunt May in line with the values and principles of Spider-Man?

Conflicts regarding these questions might arise between the various writers handling the books, their editors or other stakeholders involved in the franchise as a whole, as well as their audience. It is important to

note that Marvel faced direct criticism from their audience through their letter columns long before fans had online media channels like *Twitter*. As one reaction, Marvel developed a practice to accommodate critics through additional publications. In 1997, they released a comic book with the title *Spider-Man: 101 Ways to End the Clone Saga* to assuage critics of the saga (Bernardo and Herrera 1997). This comic book presents the discussions of the various writers involved in the storyline as they are dealing with wrapping up the story, and it reveals some of the narrative strategies they considered. This story offered contemporary readers who felt invested in the discussion some form of acknowledgement and additional insights into the comic book industry.

While the *101 Ways to End the Clone Saga* book addressed the topic on a meta level, Marvel also launched new books to provide the audience with alternatives on a diegetic level. In 1998, Marvel explored the question of what could have happened if Peter and MJ's baby daughter had been born in *What If?* Vol. 2 #105 (DeFalco and Frenz 1998) by introducing May Parker as Spider-Girl. The adventures of Spider-Girl then continued in her own books published until 2010 (DeFalco and Frenz 2010). In 2000, a new iteration of Spider-Man was created in the *Ultimate* line of comic books, in which Peter Parker is again a teenager gaining his powers for the first time (Bendis and Bagley 2000). This way, readers who had quit reading the main Spider-Man books in disagreement with the events that resolved the "Clone Saga" could pick and choose between two other iterations. Both Spider-Girl and the Ultimate Spider-Man referenced narratives from the original comic book continuity, either by adapting them as experiences of a young Peter Parker or as continuation of a shared past with a different future in the alternative universe of Spider-Girl. This way, Marvel was able to not only dodge the controversy caused by the two Spider-Men competing in a single continuity but also to keep their original Peter Parker relevant by following the logic of the serial figure described above. Introducing two new Peter Parkers in the father of Spider-Girl and the contemporary teenage Peter of the Ultimate continuity strengthened the original Peter Parker's status as the point of origin for these new iterations, while the stabilization of Peter Parker in the main continuity ultimately made the other two Peter Parkers obsolete. As a result, their books were canceled.

In spite of the controversy, the "Clone Saga" remains one of the staple storylines in the Spider-Man mythos and thus is one of the events that help define potential new iterations of Spider-Man. It was included in other iterations of Spider-Man, such as the *Ultimate Spider-Man* comic books and *Spider-Man: The Animated Series* (1994–1998). Writer Dan Slot picked up the "Clone Saga" in 2016 with the "Dead No More: The Clone Conspiracy" (Slott et al. 2017) storyline. This demonstrates that the quality of the storytelling is not as important as the notoriety of the story and its probability to be recognized by the audience. It is interesting to note that there is a similar timeframe between the original "Clone Saga" in the 1970s, its continuation

in the 1990s, and its continuation in the 2010s. Of course, each storyline has provided Marvel with the chance to publish paperbacks of the older storylines. This recurrence of events not only satisfies what Eco describes as “pleasure from the non-story” (1972, 20) in audiences already familiar with the storylines. It also offers new readers an entry point to become familiar with the character and establishes links they can follow on their way to becoming expert audiences.

The concept of a multiverse allowing various versions of the characters to coexist not only in the comics but also across several media turned into another positive distinction for Marvel. Russell Backman describes the multiverse as “an established characteristic in Marvel’s intellectual property” (2014, 206) that provides “a narrative principle that models the same type of processing required for transitioning between media forms” (2014, 218). It seems that somewhat controversial storylines like the “Clone Saga” inspire the creation of alternate realities and thus prepare audiences for the appearances of more Spider-Men across other media, to the point where the original Spider-Man from the comic books is no longer considered the definitive version of the character.

The movies

Writing about *Spider-Man: The Animated Series*, David Ray Carter comments on the “strength in its ability to take the best parts of the Spider-Man mythos and present them in a manner that still feels original” (2012, 212). The series loosely follows the timeline of the comic books but in recreating classic villains like the Lizard considers both classic and contemporary depictions in the comics. As Carter puts it, the show “privileged neither version over the other and operated with the realization that die-hard fans of Spider-Man would be familiar with both” (2012, 212). In some regards, *Spider-Man: The Animated Series* introduced the logic that the movies apply to the character in their adaptation of the comic books, although the movies further distance themselves from the continuity of the comic book as they pick from its material more freely.

Rebooting Spider-Man for the cinema with *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) only five years after the last movie in the Sam Raimi trilogy demonstrates the variety possible due to the vast extent of source material from comic books. While Tobey Maguire’s Peter Parker is initially driven by his desire to impress the beautiful girl next door, Andrew Garfield’s Peter Parker is initially driven by the mystery surrounding his parents’ death and the feeling of being left behind. For the relationship between Peter and MJ, the Raimi trilogy seems to follow the logic of the comic books of the 1970s and 1980s. Marc Webb’s Peter is allowed to explore different possibilities in the narration as he reveals his secret to Gwen Stacy on their first proper date, in turn allowing Gwen to support Spider-Man similar to the

MJ married to Peter Parker in the comic book storylines following their marriage in the 1990s.

The introduction of Spider-Man to the Marvel Cinematic Universe skips the origin story by introducing Peter as a supporting cast member in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). Tom Holland's Peter Parker has Tony Stark and school friend Ned Leeds ask the necessary questions that are usually answered through the origin, including how he gained his powers and why he puts on the mask. The relationship between Peter and Tony Stark as his mentor echoes aspects of their relationship in the comic books of the mid-2000s.

Examining the various X-Men movies from the perspective of adaptation studies, Martin Zeller-Jacques points out that "references to the wider X-Men metatext [...] are included [...] to create a sense of density, of unexplored territory within the franchise" (2012, 155–156). Following this logic, all Spider-Man movies use references to various sources of the Spider-Man cosmos. The most obvious (and easily implemented) is namedropping to reference characters and locations that have been relevant throughout the history of Spider-Man, thus hinting at a larger world and potential events to be revealed for viewers familiar with the source material.

In general, the strategy of the movies in configuring their references is to condense the source material by creating new connections between characters, places, and events in order to entangle both Peter Parker and Spider-Man in the plot. In *Spider-Man* (2002), Norman Osborn is introduced as the father of Peter's high school friend who recognizes many of his own traits in the young Peter, thus giving both Peter and Spider-Man a relationship to the Green Goblin. In *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Peter's wish to find out more about his father's research makes him reveal the formula necessary for Curt Connor's transformation into the Lizard, which makes the Lizard part of his responsibility. In *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), the Vulture turns out to be the father of Peter's love interest, a revelation that forces Spider-Man to choose between his moral obligation of stopping the bad guy and risking the bad guy's revenge. While the original comic books developed these villains without connection to Peter Parker, they did install some connections through retroactive continuity (e.g., Doctor Octopus dating Aunt May, the Green Goblin is revealed to be the father of Peter's best friend, scientist Curt Connor becoming a mentor to Peter Parker) in attempted retcons like *Spider-Man: Chapter One* (involving Doctor Octopus in Spider-Man's origin; Byrne 1998) or reboots like *Ultimate Spider-Man* (involving Norman Osborne in Spider-Man's origin; Bendis and Bagley 2000). The character constellation of a private relationship between Peter Parker and Spider-Man proved successful in the comic books, which is why it informed future versions of the character. As we will see, the most recent videogame also repeats this character constellation of the private relationship between Spider-Man and the main villain.

The movies also profit from the recognition of familiar events from the comic books, sometimes even toying with the expectations of viewers. When the Green Goblin kidnaps MJ in Raimi's *Spider-Man*, it is uncertain if this will result in the famous "The Night That Gwen Stacy Died" storyline. Vice versa, Captain Stacy's fate in *The Amazing Spider-Man* seems inevitable since he also died in the comic books, though until we see him die, we cannot be sure it will really happen. In *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, Jacob Batalon's character, who is clearly modeled after Ganke Lee from the *Ultimate Spider-Man* comics, is named after the comic book's Ned Leeds. In the comic books, Ned Leeds is revealed to be the Hobgoblin, one of Spider-Man's villains, upon his death, which is retroactively changed into him having been framed. This could imply that Jacob Batalon's character either dies, becomes a villain, or is framed to be a villain in further sequels. On the other hand, it also might lead to nothing. Again, it seems not as important how the reference is used as that it is obvious enough to be noted by long-term fans of the character. However, from a creator's perspective, this seems like a wasted opportunity.

The latest effort in recreating Spider-Man for the cinema is the animated movie *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), in which several Spider-Men and Spider-Women team up to prevent a catastrophic collapse of the multiverse caused by the Kingpin, who searches different realities to replace his dead wife and son. The story is loosely based on various sources. The comic book *Spider-Men II* (Bendis and Pichelli 2017) uses the same premise. A storyline from *Spider-Man: The Animated Series* that has several Spider-Men (including an actor without any superpowers who later introduces the "real" Spider-Man to Stan Lee) team up to prevent a similar event. The videogame *Spider-Man: Shattered Dimensions* (2010; see below) inspired an event in the Spider-Man comic books in 2014/2015 called "Spider-Verse," which includes several known Spider-Men (including Spider-Girl) and some newly created ones (Slott et al. 2014).

In his discussion of Batman, Jim Collins describes this as "narration by amalgamation" (2015, 166). According to Collins, the "popularity of these texts depends on their appeal not to a broad general audience, but a series of audiences varying in degrees of sophistication and stored cultural knowledge" (2015, 166). In this context it is of course relevant that a character like Spider-Man has been distributed long and broadly enough to be recognized by many audiences coming from different media and with different concepts of the character valuing (and acknowledging) different character components. Following this logic, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* implements access points from various sources across various media.

From a creator's perspective, the underlying logic here seems to be that the broader the web of references becomes, the more accessible a new iteration of Spider-Man becomes for novice readers who are at least somewhat familiar with the character. They are offered more points of reference to what they might already know about Spider-Man. At the same time, the

references make the adaptation more attractive to expert audiences that can trace the references back to their origin, recognize familiar patterns, and enjoy them as pleasure of the non-story (see above). Lastly, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* demonstrates that the idea of a multiverse with competing facts has evolved past the comic books into the mainstream media. Again, the fidelity of the adaptation is not relevant, but rather the points of contact to previous iterations of the character in the context of additionality and cohesion. The character of Peter B. Parker can be interpreted as both a reference to Tobey Maguire's Peter Parker (he is shown kissing MJ while hanging upside down and stopping a train, thus evoking scenes from Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* and *Spider-Man 2* [2004]) and as reference to the comic book Peter Parker who never got married and never had the child denied by the "Clone Saga." It does not matter which Spider-Man is referenced (though I'm sure it can be an interesting point of discussion for many fans) but that there are references that can be traced by comparing different versions of Spider-Men. The more the character appears across various media, the less important the relevance of the comic book becomes as point of origin. The fact that the comic books precede the other media appearances is more a historical sidenote than relevant to the conception of the character itself, even though tracing the steps in a chronological order might still help us understand the relationship of the different media appearances.

The games

Going through the list of Spider-Man's appearances in videogames, it becomes clear that the games published in the 1980s do work on the comic book license but do not really consider the comic book continuity. Comic books produced by Marvel were used to market games like *Questprobe Featuring Spider-Man* (1984) or *The Amazing Spider-Man and Captain America in Dr. Doom's Revenge* (1989) to appeal to the comic book audience but not to extend the comic book continuity. The storylines feature a prominent cast of heroes and villains from the comics, but the events displayed are without implications for the comic book continuity or the life of Peter Parker.

Many of the games released throughout the 1990s and beyond clearly represent adaptations of a specific license and narrative. Games like *Spider-Man: Return of the Sinister Six* (1992) or *Spider-Man and Venom: Maximum Carnage* (1994) are direct adaptations of storylines published in the comic books. Games like *Spider-Man: The Movie* (2002) or *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) are based on the specific movies. While the games based on the movies do expand the narration of their source, they hardly add to the narrative experience in a sense that might be considered as transmedia storytelling. They offer fans little reason to play them beyond the simple fact that they can engage in a game featuring the respective Spider-Man.

The game *Spider-Man* developed by Neversoft in 2000 marks a noteworthy exception. It toys with the comic book license by displaying comic book covers with the same layout as the contemporary books published by Marvel, including the Marvel Comics logo. The books presented start issue #1 as if the game had been a new comic book series. The opening cut scene shows Doctor Octopus giving a public presentation, and Eddie Brock aka Venom is planning to sell photos to the Daily Bugle newspaper. Both characters' configuration does not match the contemporary comic book continuity, while other facts, such as Peter being married to MJ and the Black Cat being familiar with his secret identity, do. The game also features the famous title song from the cartoon *Spider-Man* (1967–1970) and some of the voice actors from the contemporary *Spider-Man: The Animated Series* and *Spider-Man Unlimited* (1999–2001) for important roles like Spider-Man/Peter Parker and the Black Cat.

The game's first level comes with a voice-over from Stan Lee, who introduces himself as the creator of Spider-Man and welcomes "true-believers and newcomers alike," underlining the idea that the game considers both Spider-Man fans and players new to the character as its target audience. The game can be considered to present its own continuity (it is listed in the Marvel Database as Earth-TRN006), but the narrative presented is relatively straightforward and self-contained, and so it is difficult to describe it beyond its differences to other continuities presented by other Spider-Men.

The game extends its playtime beyond completing the story by allowing the player to collect additional suits for Spider-Man known from the comic books and TV shows. The player can collect covers of classic Spider-Man comic books that are easily recognized by avid readers and point newcomers to classic storylines and other iterations of Spider-Man, such as Spider-Man 2099. In many ways, the game provides a rough blueprint for modern superhero games like *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (2009) that introduce their own universe while referencing previous iterations across various media. However, *Batman: Arkham Asylum* does create a more complex and compelling universe by adding more relevant changes in contrast to other Batman media.

Ultimate Spider-Man, published by Activision in 2005, is an attempt to include a game into the continuity of the *Ultimate Spider-Man* comic book series. A making-of-video published by G4 advertised the game as including an unprecedented number of cameos from the comic book and entailing some Ultimate representations of characters that had not yet been introduced in the Ultimate comic books, like the villain Beetle and the mercenary Silver Sable. At the same time, Brian Michael Bendis, also writer of the *Ultimate Spider-Man* comic book, explained that the game would actually pick up the continuity of the book as a sequel to the "Ultimate Venom" storyline published in issues #33–38 throughout 2003. In 2006, Marvel advertised a storyline in the Ultimate comic book as a continuation of the game. In 2008, Bendis, however, decided to adapt the game into the comic book series and changed some events presented in the game, declaring

it noncanonical (Marvel Database 2019). The *Ultimate Spider-Man* game therefore constitutes one of the few attempts of transmedia storytelling while at the same time demonstrating the challenges it provides for the creators involved in coordinating their efforts. As a result, Marvel did not repeat a similar attempt. Instead, they chose other, less demanding strategies linking the games to the franchise.

In 2010 and 2011, Activision released two videogames developed by Beenox that seem to build upon the comic book and have Spider-Man team up with Spider-Men from other dimensions. The first game, *Spider-Man: Shattered Dimensions*, was supervised by Dan Slott, the writer of the Spider-Man comic books at that time. It may have inspired his comic book event “Spider-Verse,” published in 2014–2015, thus closing the circle of comics inspiring games back to the games inspiring new comic book storylines. While the presentation is much more elaborate, the storylines still are without implications for the comic book continuity and without events relevant to the life of Peter Parker and are thus hardly more relevant to fans attracted to the character through their interest in continuity as what happens next.

In 2018, the most recent game, *Marvel’s Spider-Man*, developed by Insomniac Games, demonstrates the first attempt at creating a self-reliant and consistent continuity for Spider-Man within a videogame by including Peter Parker as a character with equal importance as Spider-Man and by closing the gap between the quality of the cut scenes to the movies. To emphasize this quality, the game features a Stan Lee cameo like a real Marvel movie.

Again, the game references storylines from the comic book continuity: Peter’s Aunt May is working in a shelter for Martin Li, who is secretly the villain Mr. Negative, and the game’s ending reminisces Aunt May’s death in *The Amazing Spider-Man Vol. 1* #400 (DeMatteis and Bagley 1995). The game also toys with expectations of players already familiar with existing storylines as it teases the transformation of Doctor Octavius into Doctor Octopus, while referencing Sam Raimi’s *Spider-Man 2* in the relationship between Peter and Octavius. It also introduces another genetically altered spider alongside Miles Morales, indicating that he might become another Spider-Man as seen in the *Ultimate Spider-Man* comic books and then suggesting that it might bite Mary Jane instead. This toying with the expectations of the audience again parallels similar strategies of the movies described above.

Like previous Spider-Man games featuring open world segments, the game offers various landmarks of the Marvel universe like the Avengers’ tower. As such, it enables players to explore what other events and characters the storyworld might include. It often does not clarify whether the reference is just an Easter egg (e.g., a clock tower displaying the time of Gwen Stacy’s death in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2: Rise of Electro* [2014]) or a possible hint at further developments (e.g., the actual appearance of heroes like the Black Panther and Daredevil). The game also includes collectibles that can be explored in the inventory. Again, these hint at the existence of

other characters like Eddie Brock. These pieces offer long-term fans the opportunity to piece together the facts of the “Insomniverse” as distinct from other “Spider-Verses.” This interacts nicely with the fact that the game allows the players to explore the world at their own pace, and its playtime easily extends beyond the runtime of all Spider-Man movies put together for players willing to devote the necessary attention to the game.

While the linear storytelling and timeframe of a feature film limits referencing, games have greater opportunities to include references by tying them to the game mechanics. In fact, with the growing number of Spider-Man-themed games, mechanics like web-swinging across an open world and collecting items become part of the benchmark to which new games are compared, similar to the way the components that define the character on the diegetic level become part of a collective concept of Spider-Man. In many ways, the games seem to indicate that, from a creator’s perspective, the best strategy appears to create a new Spider-Man with its own continuity, both of which should be the result of careful curation of components from existing Spider-Men.

Conclusions

The title of this chapter itself is a reference. In 1963, Andy Warhol printed thirty black-and-white images of Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa onto a canvas and called the piece *Thirty Are Better than One*. Warhol clearly frames his art as a form of reproduction, and the selection of the images he reproduces is an important part of the process. His silk-screening of Marilyn Monroe raises the question why he selected this particular image for reproduction, and for a younger generation, Warhol’s Marylin may already have surpassed the original in relevance. Today, some might be more likely to see Warhol’s art than the movies that made the actress famous. Similar things can be said about a superhero like Spider-Man that might someday move beyond its existence as a character in a comic book and will then be defined by the selection of elements creators have taken from various sources.

What we can learn from the many lives of Spider-Man is the importance of the web that links these different iterations of the characters together across their publication history. This web presents new pleasures to audiences willing to follow its strings across their various interconnections. While some iterations of Spider-Man are easily exposed as shallow representations with few ties to the existing continuities beyond naming conventions and appearances, others prove to be rich in references to their predecessors and thus demonstrate that their creators were equally invested in the character and its history as the fans they are trying to entangle in their narrative webs.

My goal was to point out opportunities and best practices for creators working with similar IPs. While reaching this goal will ultimately require a more thorough study focused on the specifics required by media as different as comic books, movies, and videogames and an extended look

at the differences between the existing Spider-Man to identify recurrent components, a grounding principle has become clear: There is no definitive core concept of a character like Spider-Man, and its “essence” is subject to change as it depends on collective or individual interpretations of the character. However, a number of components are required in order to identify a character as Spider-Man, and they can be discussed using the model I have presented. While cursory components like iconography, name, and license are hardly a challenge to recreate, comprehensive components like characteristics, setting, characters, and events can be drawn from a large variety of material that creators can modify for their own iteration of the character.

Readers, viewers, or players encountering Spider-Man for the first time still need to be drawn in through compelling narratives until they have become acquainted with the character to the point where they are able to identify its differences from other superheroes on a substantial level. From there on out they are ready to navigate the tangled webs that link one iteration of the character to the others by comparing the different Spider-Men. At a time when mainstream audiences have learned to accept the multiplicity of a character like Spider-Man, these extradiegetic links have become as important as the intradiegetic narrative elements.

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