2 Of Pac-Men and Star Raiders

Early mutual representations between comics and videogames (1981–1983)

Nicolas Labarre

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the increasingly visible success of videogames across their various incarnations triggered a self-reinforcing feedback loop: Other media took notice of the phenomenon and started to discuss these games as a set of distinct and novel cultural practices, which in turn helped give shape to these practices. While the various forms of videogames had hitherto been inscribed in the history of other media and cultural practices—such as stereoscopes, penny arcade machines, TV extensions, or toys (Huhtamo 2005, 2012; Newman 2017)—they became recognized as a new cultural form and a new medium. In *Atari Age*, Michael Newman points out that by 1982/1983, “the flexibility of [the] meanings [of videogames] was closed off” (2017, 2), as opposed to a period of emergence during which they were “without a fixed meaning, without a clear identity” (2017, 8). In that period, *videogames* appeared to have morphed into *videogames*.

In addition to the well-known cycle of videogame-themed movies that appeared from July 1982 to June 1983 (*Tron* [1982], *Joysticks* [1983], *WarGames* [1983]), the content of popular magazines, especially when full-text indexes are available, confirms Newman’s dating of the phenomenon. To cite a few examples: *Time Magazine* used its first videogame covers in January and then in October 1982; *Playboy*, which had advertised videogames sporadically until 1981, contained no less than three different ads in December of that year, along with a videogame illustration for an unrelated short story; the *National Lampoon* published its only videogame cover story in November 1981. Though these magazines had carried ads for videogames before, notably during an advertising blitz for the Atari 2600 in late 1978, this marked a significant and sudden spike in interest, which was replicated across numerous publications, including comic books, the subject of this chapter.

As indicated above, these mentions in other media do not merely attest to the popularity of games: They also helped frame them, as well as the cultural practices with which they were now associated. In particular, these representations and remediations (Bolter and Grusin 1999) allow us to examine the ways in which the aesthetics and mechanisms of videogames

were becoming understood at the time. While gaming magazines were inventing and codifying gaming culture from the *inside* (Kirkpatrick 2015), the boundary setting process was also happening from the *outside*, in other media. Comics¹ are an especially fertile ground for such a study, for they had virtually no interaction with videogames at all until the early 1980s, only to become closely associated with them from this point onwards. This suggests the existence of a sustained and efficient process of domestication through remediation over a limited time span. The following study aims at charting this process and its modalities.

As befits a cultural object whose status was still in flux, videogames were depicted in comics in at least three different ways: as a catalogue of icons, as potential yet incomplete narratives akin to toys, and finally as a possible new aesthetic to be embraced, with various possible combinations between these approaches. I will focus in turn on these three different remediation strategies, using a corpus of comics mostly published between 1981 and 1983.²

Videogames as untethered icons, using icons without remediation

Archie offers a good starting point for any study of social and cultural changes as represented in comics. The mostly nonfantastic—“realistic” would hardly be an appropriate description—adventures of Archie and the other Riverdale teenagers have been published continuously since the mid-1950s, and they offer a partial, mildly conservative but extensive chronicle of social and cultural evolutions in the second half of the twentieth century (Beaty 2015; Miller 2018).

Unsurprisingly, *Archie* comics feature video and electronic games as early as 1980. One of the earliest examples is the one-page story “Game Blame” (Gladir et al. 1980), whose twist relies on the fact that *Pong* exists as a console *and* an arcade game. After 1981, videogames are featured regularly on covers and in stories, which typically depict them as a social practice, with little attempts at remediating the games themselves. A typical story is entitled “Video Vengeance” (Doyle et al. 1982), during which Veronica convinces her father to buy all of Riverdale’s ubiquitous arcade machines, described as “silly” and “miserable machine-merchants of mindless militaristic mayhem” (Doyle et al. 1982, n.p.), as they have been distracting the boys from their romance. As usual, the story ends with a minor twist: Veronica’s father and his butler are captivated by the confiscated games. The games themselves (“Pac-O-M...,” “Space War,” “Monster Muncher,” “Lunar Launch,” and “Bomb Away”) are only glimpsed in the final panel. A story like “The Ace of Space” (Gladir et al. 1983) is at once entirely about videogames—as Jughead unwittingly repels an alien invasion by impressing them with their skills at “Space Invader” [*sic*]*—and devoid of any representation of what happens on the screen.*

The games themselves make a rare appearance on the cover of *Everything’s Archie* #106 (Goldwater 1983), as Archie dreams that

he is being pursued and attacked by a green Pac-Man, two ghosts, two spaceships from *Omega Race* (1981), and Donkey Kong. Given *Archie*'s enduring connection to popular music, the title and the theme of the cover likely refer to *Pac Man Fever*, a 1981 LP that had gone on to sell one million copies (Donovan 2010, 88–89), and the composition may contain a critical allusion to Goya's *The Sleep of Reason* (1797–1799). The representation eschews any technical approach—there is no pixel, no joystick, no machine—and treats videogames as a collection of iconic characters. This reduction of the games to a flat surface is made even more conspicuous by the fact that this cover does not announce any story within the issue.

This image points to a strategy often found in the drawn ads of the period, and to some extent, in the packaging of videogames: using characters or situations from the games as icons untethered to a specific medium. As characters like Pac-Man or Donkey Kong proliferated across media, they became part of a global lexicon of popular icons with little connection to their point of origin: The animated television cartoons in which Pac-Man rubbed elbows with the Smurfs in an entirely compatible visual style serves as proper example of this intermedial syncretism. Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost point to the release of the Atari 2600 version of *Pac-Man* (1982) as a key moment of “cross-media consolidation” (2009, 78), which is consistent with the aforementioned examples as well as with Michael Newman's chronology. The cover to *Everything's Archie* #106 suggests that this consolidation was also taking place in media that had been hitherto little preoccupied with videogames, and in the absence of a direct commercial incentive.

As indicated above, this strategy was on full display in many of the videogame ads present in comic books, with drawn, cartoony representations eclipsing the more abstract forms of representations to be found in the actual games. The pixelated point of origin became in this case barely more than a historical accident, likely to be entirely erased if the property became successful enough. Indeed, there is little difference in composition or in representational strategies between these indigenous videogame characters, such as Frogger or Mario, and those adapted from other visual media, in the context of the adaptation boom of the early 1980s (Aldred 2012; Blanchet 2010). Although these ads were typically for console games, their scope also included arcade games through the numerous coin-op conversions. They thus represented a vast segment of videogame culture—with the exception of computer games—and positioned the most successful characters as reusable icons, untethered to a specific medium.³

Remediation as a narrative supplement

A second paradigm emphasized the similarities between videogames and toys. In this conception, comics could be used to supplement videogames and to provide them with a narrative, which they were unable to sustain on their own. To a certain extent, this conception echoed Caillois's assertion

that games can have either rules or fiction.⁴ In her work on early comics adaptations, Jessica Aldred notes that the manuals were called upon to “fill in” the narrative (2012, 92), and this is precisely what seems to be happening here, whether the comics were sold alongside the cartridges or not.

One of the most striking cases in point, which corresponds with some notable variations to Aldred’s observations, is the series of mini-comics produced by DC Comics for Atari⁵ in 1982/1983, which were all packaged with high-profile games: five volumes of *Atari Force*, three of *Swordquest*, one of *Centipede*, and one of *Yar’s Revenge*. Most of these were scripted by Gerry Conway and adaptation specialist Roy Thomas, whose work ranged from popular fiction to classics to Hollywood movies, with illustrations by such experienced pencillers as Ross Andru and Gil Kane. Tim Lapetino, in the recent *Art of Atari*, and Raiford Guins, in *Games After*, have both argued that Atari possessed a distinct graphic culture, but *Atari Force* displays little of that culture and appears as a generic well-crafted series from that period (Guins 2014; Lapetino 2016).

The Atari Force mini-comics were all inserted into science-fiction-themed cartridges between March 1982 and January 1983: *Defender* (1982), *Berzerk* (1982), *Star Raiders* (1982), *Phoenix* (1982), and *Galaxian* (1983), though there were initially plans to package them with other types of games (Helfer 1982). Accordingly, they tell the story of a science-fiction super team whose adventures mirror the themes and setups of the games to a certain extent. The *Star Raiders* and *Galaxian* comics, in particular, take pains to integrate familiar representations in the comics narrative, while weaving them into an overarching storyline with recurring heroes and a villain, the Lovecraftian Dark Destroyer. This strategy could be described as a *posteriori* transmedia storytelling, in that a fictional universe was superimposed on existing playable moments to supply them with a continuity. The universe is not only constructed after the fact, from hitherto unrelated scenarios (*Star Raiders* was an Atari game, but the others were arcade conversions from various companies), but it is also secondary to the playable moments themselves. The process is to a large extent the mirror image of the reduction of characters to function which Aldred identifies.

This is perhaps best demonstrated by the fate of the *Liberator* mini-comic (20 pages, as opposed to 52 for the other issues). It was created to promote that fairly obscure coin-op (which featured the Atari Force), and it contained a detailed account of its gameplay, down to strategy tips and a presentation of the enemies. That version was used as a supplement in regular comic books, *New Teen Titans* #27 (Giordano et al. 1983b) and *DC Comics Presents* #53 (Giordano et al. 1983a). However, the very same comic was also used at about the same time to accompany *Phoenix*, another shoot ’em up. Only a few mentions of the *Phoenix* name had to be changed for the effort to fit, and the numerous traces of the original story, such as the names of the enemies (the Malaglon), do not hinder this reassignment. An

example of an ambitious crossmedia synergy was thus turned into a minimal narrative supplement.

This approach to videogames as playable proto-narratives is reminiscent of the strategy pursued by toy-makers after the success of Kenner's licensed *Star Wars* toys. Indeed, the idea of using comics as a narrative supplement was likely an attempt at replicating a strategy implemented by Mattel in 1981, which had started shipping the first *Masters of the Universe* figures with narrative booklets written by Don Glut and illustrated by Marvel regular Alfredo Alcala. The series started with illustrated stories, which were quickly followed by actual mini-comics.⁶ While the continuity of these inserts was superseded by the 1983 animated cartoon, they served as a prototype for this form of *a posteriori* transmedia continuity, which would become a staple for toy lines throughout the 1980s and very often involved either DC Comics or Marvel (*GI Joe*, *Transformers*, etc.) (Bainbridge 2010). It is difficult to ascertain whether Atari directly imitated Mattel, but the *Masters of the Universe* line was an instant success, and as such highly visible. Furthermore, by 1982, the production of these mini-comics had switched to DC Comics, Atari's ally and sister company. Finally, *Atari Age* describes the Atari mini-comics as having been rushed into production, which would fit with the timeline (Helfer 1982). Whether through inspiration or imitation, this strategy aligned videogames with toys, user-oriented rather than story-oriented media texts that could be repurposed in the context of a transmedia project thanks to the cheap narrative form of the comics.⁷

The non-*Atari Force* mini-comics present variations on these strategies, leaning more toward game instructions (*Yar's Revenge* [1982]) or pure narrative (*Centipede* [1983]), but they do not display the same level of ambition or the same attempt at creating a shared universe. The three *Swordquest* minis would warrant a more thorough study, especially in light of their recent nostalgic reexamination in comics (Bowers et al. 2018), but unlike *Atari Force* or *Star Raiders*, they contain little to no attempt at specific remediation. They appear as a supplement to the games, providing them with a fully realized graphic representation but also with clues to solving the various puzzles. Thus, they function like the supplementary material or "feelies" to be found in many games of the time (Kocurek 2013), from maps to bestiaries.

As Atari ran into financial difficulties in late 1982, plans to package mini-comics with other cartridges did not materialize, and while *Atari Force* received its own ongoing comic book series, it retained very little videogame inspiration beyond its name.⁸ However, Atari and DC Comics partnered on a second and slightly different attempt to provide *Star Raiders*, one of their flagship titles, with a narrative in 1983.⁹ This took the form of a graphic novel, illustrated by José Luis García-López, who became the main artist on *Atari Force* the following year. As indicated by the promotional copy in *Atari Age*, the graphic novel intended to account for the gameplay—a very

early use of the word—of *Star Raiders* and not merely its narrative: “Writer Elliot S. Maggin and artist Jose Luis Garcia Lopez have taken the game-play of *Star Raiders* and expanded it into a deluxe 62-page epic, full of action, adventure, and breathtaking graphics” (Atari Clubs 1983, n.p., original emphasis). This “expansion” is again an explicit reversal of Aldred’s “reduction to function,” and it underlines the difference between such a project and the use of videogames as pre-remediated icons, described previously. The story also plays into the transmedia universe set-up in the mini-comics by alluding to what happened in the story packaged with the *Star Raider* cartridge (more precisely, it explains away this story, before reintroducing the “real” enemies).

The graphic novel is inspired by contemporary space adventure comics and by *Star Wars*, but it also attempts to recreate the interface of the game. This is most notable in the opening splash page, which overlays the pixelated Atari 2600 display on an elaborate space scene, inspired by Chris Foss paintings, and frames all of this into a command panel that looks very similar to an arcade cabinet. To show the pixels is unusual—games were redrawn using geometric displays in the *Atari Force* mini-comics, for instance—since it identifies videogames as a technologically constrained visual enunciation, which sets them clearly apart from toys. The result of this assemblage is visually similar to that of the overlays used in early videogames such as *Space Invaders* to add an evocative background to the game beyond the technological means of 1978.¹⁰ In doing so, the authors of the *Star Raiders* graphic novel emphasize the lacunary nature of the games, implying that comics can provide them with texture as well as fiction, but they also point to the specificity of videogames at a time when Atari had foregone its mini-comics strategy.

Beyond dedicated adaptations or supplements, publishers also used comics in videogame advertising. In addition to obvious candidates like *Spider-Man* (1982) or *Popeye* (1983), games such as *Solar Fox* (1983), *Battlezone* (1983), *Joust* (1983), *Mario Bros.* (1983), or *Moon Patrol* (1983) were all promoted through one-page comics, in comic books, but also in dedicated videogame magazines. These stories further affirm the usefulness of comics as a narrative form, used to frame the playable moments in the games themselves. In *The Formation of Gaming Culture*, Graeme Kirkpatrick argues that “a cultural practice judges its product by comparing them to each other and not with reference to things outside its domain” (2015, 65). Between 1981 and 1983, the recurrent use of comics and illustrations by game publishers suggests that even within this nascent field, actors felt the need to reference and use a better-established cultural field.

The perceived incompleteness of videogames was also on display, though in a different configuration, when they appeared in continuing comic book series, removed from a direct promotional purpose. A common storyline, found in *Weird War Tales* #102 (Wein and Barr 1981), *Wonder Woman* #294–296¹¹ (Giordano et al. 1982a, 1982b; Giordano and Wolfman 1982),

and *Thor* #328 (Gruenwald et al. 1983), features videogames coming to life or becoming the locus for a “real” fight; as a matter of fact, a similar storyline also featured in the ABC *Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends* animated cartoon in 1981 (Newman 2017, 178–180). The *Thor* story is perhaps the simplest of these three and, as a result, the most easily legible. During an electronics show, an industrial spy disguised as the main character for the *Megatak* videogame is caught in a short-circuit and “sucked into the very machine he has sought to plunder” (Gruenwald et al. 1983, 11). While the game is being demoed, he emerges from the screen and unleashes Pac-Men and flying saucers on the crowd, until Thor and Sif intervene to stop him. The multiplying Pac-Men in the story owe a lot to the iconic use I have outlined above, but the story also reads as a discourse on comics against videogames. Before the spy is absorbed into the game, he is pictured in three successive positions in red, green, and blue dots, in a transparent nod to print technology, and a caption ominously indicates: “What happens next is no game” (Gruenwald et al. 1983, 11). Later in the story, when the videogame villain has been vanquished, another caption announces: “Gregory Nettles, briefly a super-man named Megatak [...] collapses, now a mere industrial spy in a silly costume” (Gruenwald et al. 1983, 21). Throughout the story, Alan Kupperberg (pencil) and Vince Coletta (ink) contrast the dynamism of a graphic representation that quotes a lot from Jack Kirby, the paradigmatic superhero artist (in the poses, the character design, the abundant use of the distinctive “Kirby crackle”), with the flat graphics and the interchangeable characters of the videogames. A *Thor* story is “no game,” indeed, and though there may be something tongue-in-cheek about the description of the villain’s “silly costume,” videogames end up defeated and even exposed as a mere distraction since the major reveal of the episode hinges on Thor’s sentimental life.

Though the editors of the *Wonder Woman* story reference *Tron* in the letter column (Giordano and Wolfman 1983, n.p.), the celebration of the potential aesthetics of videogames to be found in that film is not replicated in the comics.

Remediation as engagement

While the aforementioned superhero comics served as an implicit cultural commentary, other comics publications offered a more overt cultural and aesthetic engagement with the form. John Holmstrom, working in magazines such as *Heavy Metal* and *Video Games*, produced a substantial body of work to that effect.

John Holmstrom was a key punk artist: He illustrated two of the early Ramones albums and was the founder of *PUNK* in 1976, then a contributor to its spiritual sibling, the *East Village Eye* (1979–1987) (Kelly 2016). In October 1981, he inaugurated a regular illustrated videogame column in *Heavy Metal*, which had at the time developed a keen interest in the popular

avant-garde, from Blondie to H. R. Giger to Françoise Mouly and Art Spiegelman's *RAW* (Labarre 2017). Holmstrom's column became a regular feature in July 1982, always with accompanying illustrations. At about the same time, in August 1982, he became a contributing editor to *Video Games*, yet another New York-based publication, edited by Steve Bloom, along with transplants from both *PUNK* and *Heavy Metal*.

Most of Holmstrom's chronicles are game or system reviews, accompanied by redrawn graphic elements. In his *Robotron* review (Holmstrom 1982b), for instance, the handwritten text surrounds a large panel in which all the main characters are redrawn in a hybrid style, which combines their original design with Holmstrom's energetic angular rendition. On other occasions, the system is more elaborate, as in his full-page article "Joey Ramone Reviews Imagic" (Holmstrom 1982a), in which views of the system, diagrams, and recreations of the graphic elements coexist with stylized depictions of the players themselves. The page offers a fine demonstration of Holmstrom's idiosyncratic, adjustable but careful examination of the medium. His is a polyphonic approach that encompasses cultural permutations and stresses the phatic and embodied dimension of videogame playing.

The most accomplished example of this polyphony appears in "Three Days in Heaven," an illustrated report of Holmstrom's visit to the 1982 AMOA (Amusement and Music Operators Association), published in the sixth issue of *Video Games* (Holmstrom 1983). After a *Mad*-inspired yet carefully documented splash page, Holmstrom redraws game screens or marquees, uses collage to suggest the specific technology of *Astron Belt*, the first laser-disc game, and concludes the piece with a personal and amusing anecdote.

Unlike the other examples cited in this chapter, there is very little at stake commercially for Holmstrom in these columns. They are in effect fan creations that display a user-oriented form of remediation, as opposed to the more policed intermedial circulations found in official adaptations, extensions, or advertisements. Holmstrom appeared intent to represent and help create a crossover culture encompassing comics, heavy metal, and videogames; this combination, which was well-suited to *Heavy Metal*, appears to have been a specifically New Yorker phenomenon. While the short-lived magazine *Vidiot* (1982–1983) was betting on the compatibility of pop music and videogames in its full-page photos of pop stars playing arcade games, Holmstrom was adding comics to the cultural mix. Beyond Holmstrom's work, *Video Games* highlighted this crossover potential: It included a serialized comics story,¹² referenced the appearance of videogames in syndicated comic strips, and generally chronicled every form of hybridization between comics and videogames. This distinct crossover culture was thus sufficiently formed to generate or sustain its own publishing institution, at least for a while. The magazine lasted for 18 issues, and Holmstrom as well as the other comic's authors left the title after #16.

Conclusion

In the early 1980s, comics were used to come to terms with videogames through a variety of remediation strategies, from minimal engagement (videogames as brands, comics as “feelies”) to more sustained examinations of the articulations between the two media. None of the approaches outlined in this chapter is inherently superior to the other, and, as a matter of fact, variations of these various strategies are still in use today, from Marvel-produced *Halo* tie-ins to one-page animated GIF comics of *Megaman*. These multiple attempts at overcoming the resisting difference between the two media provided consumers with multiple channels of engagement, braiding the two media, intertwining the two sets of cultural practices, and, in doing so, creating and refining the social and aesthetic position of videogames as a new medium.

Notes

- 1 I am deliberately using “comics” rather than “comic books”—a specific publishing format—so as not to exclude from this study the comics pages published in magazines.
- 2 This corpus was constructed using contemporary sources (references in *Atari Age* or *Video Games*, for instance), fan forums (www.atariage.com; accessed 31 January 2020), extensive readings of magazines containing comics (*Heavy Metal*, *Video Games*), and especially the indexation of stories and covers in the *Grand Comic Book Database* (www.comics.org; accessed 31 January 2020).
- 3 Noticeably, many of the ads published in comic books were bought by Parker Brothers, which joined the videogame market in 1982 on the back of coin-op conversions and games licensed from various media properties (Montfort and Bogost 2009). The visual strategies of the ads thus echoed the underlying industrial convergence.
- 4 Of course, that assertion has been strongly challenged by games theorists, notably by Jesper Juul (2005).
- 5 Though the two companies existed as separate entities, they were both part of the Warner conglomerate.
- 6 The mini-comics can be read at www.he-man.org/publishing/subsection.php?id=52&subid=20 (accessed 31 January 2020).
- 7 Montfort and Bogost suggest that while Atari was pushing back against the toy paradigm in their advertisement, videogames were considered as toys by the industry at large in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Montfort and Bogost 2009, 119). Later, Nintendo’s NES was famously positioned as a toy in the American market to avoid the stigma of the North-American videogame crash (Donovan 2010, 165–178).
- 8 Fittingly, the first issue contained ads for videogames but also for *Masters of the Universe* toys. The series was to be part of a broader line, Atari Comics, which did not materialize.
- 9 The collection also includes an adaptation of *Warlord*, another Atari game, but the game and the comics share very little beyond their title.

- 10 It is perhaps more than a coincidence that some of these overlays had been created by comics artists. For instance, Frank Brunner, who had worked for all the major comics publishers in the 1970s, designed the overlay for *Warriors* (1979) (Skelly 2012, 148–150).
- 11 This narrative arc was scripted by Roy Thomas around the same time as he was contributing to the *Atari Force* mini-comics.
- 12 “Zydroid Legion” by Matt Howarth and Lou Stathis, two *Heavy Metal* contributors, who used the already familiar trope of videogames as preparation for an actual science-fiction war.

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