

# **The Transmediation of the Comic Book Visual Rhetoric through Madefire Motion Books.**

~\*\*\*~A study into the evolution of the Visual Rhetoric of Comic Books~\*\*\*~

“A New Kind of Grammar” – Dave Gibbons

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## **Declaration**

I, Damien Rinaldo Tomaselli, do declare that this dissertation is my own original work, and that all assistance is duly acknowledged. To my knowledge, this work does not contain any plagiarised material, and all sources have been duly referenced.

Signature:

Date:

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## **Chapter One:**

### **Introduction and Methodology**

#### **Hi, my name is Damien and I'm a comicholic.**

I have always been fascinated with the art of storytelling. Since I was young I have wondered why stories were so important to me. I didn't see them as an optional way to use my time; they were like physical activity, something that had to be engaged with. As I grew up, I explored different mediums of storytelling; many of which were not engaged with by those around me, such as interactive CD-roms, video games and comic books. The older I got, the more I engaged with these mediums, consistently increasing my analytical understanding of narrative execution. I studied Drama though to an Honours level, providing an understanding of narrative, live direction, acting and effective execution of the narrative through the medium of theatre. A similar approach was then applied to film and the mediums associated thereof, video, digital film etc. Recently, I have implemented the same process with comic books creating my own series entitled Children of Xaphan<sup>1</sup> and the Motion Book, Ruins of Gold.

All narrative mediums have physical characteristics which can potentially be utilised by the storyteller to execute their vision. Films have sound, shot sizes, movements. Books have the ability to exploit nouns, alliteration. The characteristics of pacing are evident in books and film but are both treated differently. Books may be written with the intention of being read over multiple sessions while film typically has to consider the patience of the audience to absorb the story in one uninterrupted sequence. It is my opinion that the medium itself, i.e. the physical parameters of the page, screen or theatre are intrinsically linked to the method or way in which the story is made accessible to the participant. Thus I submit that medium becomes an unavoidable narrative device in itself. One which is methodically exploited in the storytelling process. Established trends have developed all storytelling

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<sup>1</sup>. Source: Children of Xaphan, FaceBook: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Children-of-Xaphan/235143729872622>; Deviant Art <http://xxxdesmodusxxx.deviantart.com/>

mediums since their respective inceptions and formed a certain kind of literacy in the process. One particular medium which arguably has been relatively neglected by the academic community in this regards concerns that of the comic book.

Although there has been some research conducted into the language of comic books and the execution thereof, it is my opinion that a lack of literature in the academic community, still exists. I suspect this is partly associated with the stigma surrounding comic books as ‘non-serious’ literary material, substandard to its narrative medium cousins – a point highlighted in discussion by my Cultural Media Professor father who told me graphic novels are for fun, more akin to a hobby than academic study. However, the fact that they have not always been taken seriously within some sectors of the academic community is all the more reason why this study is necessary.

It is not however the comic book which I am most interested in attempting to understand. Specifically I wish to discover the way that the comic book produces meaning and how that meaning is directed in its service of the story. At least this was my initial intension. However as I began this process I was struck by a newly emerging medium, which seemed to push the established boundaries of the comic book in new ways, in the production of a different kind of comic book, one intended to be read on the screen. I am referring to Madefire’s Motion Books. I was already aware of digital comics, however from what I had experienced the majority of digital comics were conceptualised in their design to work within the print medium and then merely transferred to the screen with little thought of how the medium of the digital information could be used as a device to promote narrative objectives. What captivated me the most was how the content of the motion books I had sampled utilised the benefits of digital platforms while clearly embracing many of the core elements of comic book grammar and literacy.

I believe that both the grammar of any narrative medium works within the rhetoric of said medium. A belief I intend to substantiate. In many instances the ‘..new kind of grammar’ and the visual rhetoric are one and the same. There are however some differences between the two. The grammar concerns the way meaning is constructed with semiotic elements while the visual rhetoric concerns a wider scope in so far as how intended meaning is derived through words and images, which I will argue may be considered as codes of meaning. This extends the boundaries of meaning to include cultural, technical and social factors. It is in reference to this visual rhetoric that I intend to analyse my findings.

I intend to discuss how the literacy of specifically sampled Motion Book titles have made use of the visual rhetoric.

In attempting to achieve the above the project will briefly explore the progression of print-version comic books and how they have been adapted into new media. In this I will

consider how the technical constraints of digital affect the creative approaches employed by Motion Book creators.

The origins of comics started with a relatively obscure audience and have since evolved with society as it has undergone numerous changes socially, culturally, and technologically (Cavangh, 1949; Kunzle, 1973; Meskin, 2007). Comics continue to exist due to their efforts to remain relevant to their audience. This adaptation has taken many directions and continues to evolve within an ever-changing society and media environment. The way stories have been told, illustrated and plotted have corresponded with this change and continue to push the boundaries of how stories can be told.

Comic books are no longer seen as an inferior means of conveying a narrative (McCloud, 1994; 2006; Hayman and Pratt, 2005). They have now evolved to a stage in which they explore their own sets of rules and dynamics in the art of telling a story, some of which will be explored in literature review chapter of this dissertation. However, the initial problem with the pursuit of this idea from an academic standpoint is that the topic stretches across many disciplines, from Drama, Literary theory, New Media Studies, Media Studies, Semiotics, to Cultural Studies, just to name a few.

## **Research Objectives and Questions to be Asked**

The primary objective of this study is to consider how the parameters of the medium affect the comic book visual rhetoric with reference to the print and digital media.

In order to achieve the overall objective, the dissertation aims to:

- Gain insight into the inner workings of the visual rhetoric when applied to commercially viable traditional print comic books. To identify the intricacies of narrative structures and the effect they have on plot interpretation within the framework of a larger series and or universe. In other words, to explore the impact an overall series lends to the narrative structure of smaller narrative components and subsequently the impact the plot has on the illustration of the comic book. To analyse directional rules of composition with regards to the visual manifestation of the script and its creative considerations with regard to tension structures and provocation of audience anticipation between the two mediums.
- Explore the adaptation the rhetoric will endure in its transcendence when applied to new digital media with specific reference to motion books. The differences and similarities concerning semiotic engagement of narrative in the mediums of print and digital comic book will be explored using two **medium** case studies – X-Men (print, analogue), and Madefire (Internet based, digital).

These objectives are aligned to the following research questions:

1. What criteria are necessary for the existence of the comic book visual rhetoric?

2. How can the visual rhetoric be manipulated by comic book creators for purposes of narrative engagement of their readers in the print medium?
3. What adaptive processes are necessary for the comic book visual rhetoric to transcend from the print to digital medium?
4. How can the visual rhetoric be manipulated by comic book creators for purposes of narrative engagement of their readers in the digital medium?
5. How the above questions relate to the 2 respective **medium** case studies.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study are that due to the rapid development of new media, the observations submitted by industry and academic experts are for a large part unsubstantiated as well as subjective, providing difficulties in widespread research in the area. The area of the visual rhetoric in comic books, specifically with regards to digital comics, is one which requires experts in different fields requiring cross correlation of philosophical discourses. These observations are however based on trends indicating a definite pattern of both practice and social reception of the comic book visual rhetoric in conjunction with advancing technology.

There is almost no academic material printed with regards to Madefire's Motion Books. The development itself is so recent that I have found difficult to analyse without resorting to subjective hypothesis, which may come off as a 'magnum opus'. These are merely my own observations I have attempted to substantiate and by no means do I consider them a grand finished work. McCloud insists that the definition of Comics is open to be challenged "insert reference" In a similar light I am attempting to present my own observations of the comic book visual rhetoric. The issues discussed in the thesis will continue to be shaped upon conclusion of its final hand in. This specific thesis shall be abandoned in the interests of deadline as such, I do not consider it the final word on the subject or development thereof.

### **Methodology**

The methodological approach to a research project must always be aligned to the paradigm within which the broader study it is located. Paradigms, according to Thomas Kuhn, are "universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide a model for problems and solutions to a community of practitioners" (Kuhn 1970: viii).

### **Paradigms**

In common parlance, a paradigm has "come to mean simply a coherent set of assumptive beliefs, theoretical propositions, constructs, modes of inference and domains of subject matter" (Lindlof 1995:29-30). Lindoff also refers to the viewpoint of science becoming "revolutionary" in times of crisis as they challenge the dominant theory when "conflict over basic matters of epistemology surface in the community" arises (Lindoff, 1995:30). The translation of printed comic book grammar into the digital environment could constitute a

crisis for the grammatical discourse that is forced to undergo behavioural changes. New paradigms may emerge from this and while they may not be a “complete or accurate representation, they may produce a ‘better science’ that explains the available data more satisfactorily and inventively” (Kuhn: ix). While Kuhn has been criticised for his **irrational** approach to scientific data, his explanations have been so observant they have been widely applied to the field of communication, such as those stemming from the context of words, images and other related codes.

## **Hermeneutics**

The study will use an interpretative/ hermeneutic approach applied to a textual analysis. Hermeneutics originally concerned itself with interpreting ancient scripture, but was ‘re-purposed’ for use in the social sciences by Hans Gadamer, who formalised the techniques and broadened the scope of textual study. The hermeneutical method involves interpreting the meaning of a text through continual reference to its context. The requirements for a hermeneutic analysis demand that a researcher read a text in detail and understand that text in terms of the historical specifics in which it is embedded. For example, hard copy print comics were designed and produced in a pre-digital historical context, and this needs to be acknowledged in order to ‘make sense’ of their form; whereas digital comics relied on a different logic in response to its assimilation into an alternative digital framework. In order to understand these productions, it is necessary to trace both the continuities between print media and the digital environment. One cannot understand the text in isolation from the context in which it is produced and consumed. The hermeneutic method involves interpreting the meaning of a text through continual reference to its context. It makes sense then for the purposes of this dissertation to isolate a specific context of case studies in both print and digital iterations as these will serve as tangible examples to illustrate the grammatical effect the print comic has served for the adaptation by the digital, illustrating both the grammatical similarities and differences between the two formats. While ‘hermeneutical method can be used in any situation to recover historical meaning’ (Lindlof 1995, p 31), because of its strong connection with context it may be equally applicable in moments of contextual change such as those accompanied with the move from print to digital comics and ultimately that of the motion book.

The notion of the visual rhetoric is ideal for the explanation of this context. Upon application of analysing the visual rhetoric, we can find that the prevailing contextual parameters responsible for the establishment of intended meaning become apparent. Thus if we understand the visual rhetoric, we may begin to understand the unique properties, methods, objectives and grammar that comics engage with in order to tell stories, in both the cases of the printed book and those concerned with digital.

The interpretative paradigm draws on the hermeneutic tradition and favours an inductive mode of enquiry. Induction is the inference of a general principle from the evidence provided by particular instances. It is diametrically opposed to ‘deduction’, which begins by stating the principle and then concludes with the outcome in particular cases. Using the inductive approach, the researcher examines specific case studies, and draws out the rules of engagement that become evident through enquiry. For example, in the present study, the researcher does not apply ‘the rules of visual rhetoric’ to comic books; rather he examines comic books in order to formulate the nature of the visual rhetoric.

Qualitative research relies on inductive inquiry where data slowly evolves involves into concepts and researchers' propositions which are built as the researchers' own skill and understanding increases. The process occurs through the reading of literature and then testing them in the field of experience and may result in the analysis of a single case, or perhaps a few cases. In turn the researcher turns attention their own logic and the kind of evidence, they consider to be relevant (Lindlof 1995, p57). Lindlof (1995, pp 56-57) notes that

data slowly resolves into concepts and specific research propositions through the investigator's own increasing skill at understanding. [...] However, just as objectivist science cannot be exclusively deductive, qualitative analysis is not wholly inductive in its inferential processes. The researcher begins to organise a study by reading certain literatures, and later engages in testing the concepts and propositions suggested by the field experience.

The current research has used textual analysis as its point of departure. A textual analysis has been defined as “a method of analysing the content of documents that uses qualitative procedures for assigning the significance of particular ideas or meanings in the document” (Scott 2006, p 298). Specially, the study draws on the concept of the ‘visual rhetoric’, which considers how and why words images, and other related signifiers work together to establish intended meaning. The visual rhetoric integrates both narrative theory and semiotics. Daniel Chandler notes that while de Saussure’s term ‘semiology’ is frequently used in the linguistic tradition, “nowadays the term ‘semiotics’ is widely used as an umbrella term” to embrace the various traditions of studying codes, signifiers and sign systems (Chandler 2002:6). This is particularly so in Cultural Studies (Fiske 1997; Hodge and Tripp 1986; and Hall 1973/1980; 1996 among others.) Today semiotics is regarded as an all-encompassing science of cultural forms. Saussure discuss that signs can only be understood within a language system. This dissertation needs to explore the contextual ‘language’ system of comics before we can denote the individual signs in whatever form they may take, visual, words, panel, narrative objective et cetera.

Narrative theory explains the way in which ‘stories are told’, and uncovers the deep structure of narrative conventions within story telling. This is applied specifically to the story telling within issue based printed comics and motion comic books (in particular). The literature review section of the dissertation explores the writings of authors using these theoretical rubrics, while the data analysis chapter applies their insights to the texts under study.

## **Models**

In concrete terms, models derived from the writings of key authors, notably, Roland Barthes (1972, 1977), Tzvetan Todorov (1971), Laos, Robert Mckee (1997), Gustav Freytag (1984), Will Eisner (1990) and Scott McCloud (1994; 2000; 2006) have been utilized to explore the chosen case studies. These explore the intricacies the visual rhetoric aims to achieve,

particularly in terms of narrative as well as grammatical considerations. These categories provide schematic models through which the case study material can be analysed, and understandings can be inductively drawn.

The structural flow of argument involves the isolation of pulling the key concepts out of the theory of the comic book visual rhetoric and then applying them to the contextually rich case studies.

## **Case studies**

Two cases studies were chosen for this study. The sample was purposive, in so far as it was not determined by chance (Deacon et al 2007, p 52), but rather chosen to illustrate the differences within the visual rhetoric between analogue and digital comic books. The sampling procedure was guided by a ‘critical case’ sample (Lindlof, 1995: 130; Deacon 2007, p 55), which is described as “a person, event, activity, setting or to time period that displays the credible, dramatic properties of a ‘test case’. [...] A critical case should demonstrate a claim so strikingly that it will have implications for other, less unusual cases (Lindlof 1995, 130).

X-Men exemplifies in an analogue provides a suitable example for the implementation of print grammar in the environment in which printed comics must exist. *It is worth nothing that this only offers one particular example of the printed comic among many. However based on the style of the comic, I believe it serves as a suitable comparison with the sample of Motion Books chosen.* Similarly Madefire’s motion books provide this example in digital motion book reiterations.

Validation of the observations will be reiterated or alternatively contrasted with information from interviews from key creatives and influential members from Madefire, specifically Madefire’s CCO Liam Sharp and Madefire editorial director, Ben Abernathy. *Sharp is a long time comic book practitioner and has a history with Marvel Comics, the same company who produced the X-Men comic I refer to in the case study.*

Both print and digital case studies are necessary in this dissertation as the digital comic book visual rhetoric remains loyal to its printed counterpart in many respects. While they are two different methods of storytelling, digital comics in general and motion books in particular are concerned with furthering, or at least adapting, the visual rhetoric evident in printed comics to the digital architecture. While the physical parameters are drastically different, similarities are evident in terms of the unique storytelling experience the comic book aims to achieve. When analysing a comparison of the two digital media, it becomes apparent that this unique objective of the unique comic book story experience, whatever it may be, exists in a reciprocal relationship to the medium it interacts with, and while it is bound to it through a particular manifestation, *much of* the visual rhetoric unique to comic books may also be applied to digital media as well. Whether an inferior or superior manifestation the essence of

the comic book visual rhetoric remains in both the print and digital media. The adaptation of the comic book visual rhetoric is a result of a creative conformity in response to an alternative medium. The visual rhetoric utilised in comic books ideally and consciously exploits the parameters of the medium in order to fulfil the objectives of narrative progression. In print comic books this would concern its interaction within the physical design of the page while in digital media it would concern those such as hardware concerns such as the screen, and software concerns such as programme ideology as well as the cultural lag often associated with the rapid advancement of technology which affects literacy concerns thus impact on the intended meaning of the end user.

The comic book visual rhetoric is trying to achieve something in print – a unique story telling experience. Just because we have gone to digital, doesn't mean we have completely negated the print experience as both reiterations purpose similar aims, to present a narrative in the unique form associated with the grammatical and narrative considerations the comic engages with. While the characteristics of the medium are applicable here, it is more important to look at the characteristics of the comic book and how this has adapted to the medium. In other words the analysis must be driven by the comic book story (narrative) in conjunction with the possibilities offered by technology.

A criticism of the interpretative approach is that it is low on reliability and validity, since it is based largely on the inductive processes of the researcher. In order to go some way to countering this criticism, the present research has included responses gleaned from a number of creative personnel directly involved in various Madefire digital comic productions, including CCO Liam Sharp and editorial director, Ben Abernathy.

While I have met with both of these individuals and discussed these ideas with them in detail, the modality of the interviews was through email correspondence. A set of questions was addressed to the respondents, acting as a provocation to discuss issues and opinions. Similar information has also been accessed from interviews conducted by other parties than myself. Information gleaned from these respondents has been interwoven in the data analysis where appropriate. My own self entitled comic book *Children of Xaphan*, as well as my own Motion Book, made with Madefire's software, *Ruins of Gold*, where appropriate may serve as an illustration of some of the ideas discussed. Schematically, the methodical approach can be summarised in the Figure 1.1:



**Figure 1.1 Schematic flow of Paradigm, Theory and Method.**

Source: Author's own contribution.

| In the next chapter, I shall attempt to explain the visual rhetoric in more detail.

## 1. Chapter Two:

### Literature Review - The Visual Rhetoric

The visual rhetoric refers to how visual images communicate with an audience. Any visual information supplied by any visual presentation is only relevant in the field of the visual rhetoric in so far as how it relates to the communication of the visual. *At this stage my aim is only to explain the concept of the visual rhetoric, which could be applied to any media, after which I will consider how it relates specially to the comic book.*

“The simplest definition for the visual rhetoric is how/why visual images communicate meaning. Note that visual rhetoric is not just about superior design and aesthetics but also about how culture and meaning are reflected, communicated, and altered by images.”<sup>2</sup> Subsequently this means that visual rhetoric involves a contextual interpretation on the part of the reader. In order for the visual rhetoric to enact effectiveness, the intended meaning of the creator of the visual message is required to be translated by the receiver, leaving little room for ambiguity, unless such ambiguity is the intention of the message. ‘Visual literacy involves all the processes of knowing and responding to a visual image, as well as all the thought that might go into constructing or manipulating an image’.<sup>3</sup>

Kenneth Smith argues further that the ‘thought or construction’ that goes into the image is designed for the intention of interpretation of a focused, specified audience as well as the necessity of the involvement of symbolism in the image, as pointed out by Kenneth Smith:

Not every visual object is visual rhetoric. What turns a visual object into a communicative artefact – a symbol that communicates and can be studied as rhetoric – is the presence of three characteristics. The image must be symbolic, involve human intervention, and be presented to an audience for the purpose of communicating with that audience. (Smith 2005:np)

The structuralist criteria of the visual rhetoric begins to take form revealing its anatomic framework. Similarities of the above observations are mirrored with Todorov’s perception of poetics, linking the notions of discourse with the sign. As Todorov (1971:2) indicates in the work on *Language of Poetics*:

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<sup>2</sup> <http://twp.duke.edu/uploads/assets/comics.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

“Its closest relatives will be the other disciplines that deal with discourse – the group forming the field of rhetoric, understood in the broadest sense as a general science of discourses. It is here that poetics participates in the general semiotic project that unites all investigations whose point of departure is the sign.”

Discourse follows suit with the argument of the image, symbolic in nature, as does the sign with the constructed visual symbolism. Perhaps we could consider the visual rhetoric a visual extension of Todorov’s definition of Poetics.

To briefly summarise the argument for qualifying criteria of the visual rhetoric, the image would need to conform to the following:

- The presentation of an image (which may be accompanied by words);
- The message encoded is designed by a human being for the purpose of being decoded in a specific way by a specific audience;
- The intended message is encoded through use of symbolism; and
- The message will be interpreted through a process of contextual understanding on the part of the decoder (**not necessarily by the intended decoder**). The message must be presented through a medium and as such all symbolism, contextual understanding and any other encoded meaning on the part of the human must conform to the parameters of the medium through which the message is filtered.

In light of the above, the images (or combination thereof) need to be subjected to a process of critical analysis on the part of the audience. Context refers to the perception of an element in relation to its surrounding environment. For example consider that an image of two people in a head and shoulder frame. A subjective interpretation may indicate that they are not lonely, however when the same subject is portrayed in a long frame revealing an absence of social interactions, the perception of the subjects’ social relationship on the part of the interpreter may change. Thus the critical analysis aids in shaping perception of the image.



language. The same logic applies to symbols relating to visual senses. “Comprehension of an image requires a commonality of experience” (Eisner 1985, p 15). Despite the existence of scientifically factual evidence, the encoding of colour is still shaped by social context, shading the perceived reference of the same existing information. Arguably any presented theoretical information pertaining to discourse will evoke an even greater variety of social perceptions when applied to different social contingencies; cultural, religious, language etc. In order for the message of the visual rhetoric to be effective it would need to be encoded specifically for an intended social and cultural group.

As previously established, a requirement for an image to conform to the nature of visual rhetoric is the intention of a message to be understood in a specific way by a targeted audience. In other words, the visual rhetoric is not intended to be highly ambiguous in so far as the recognition of meaning is concerned. “In analyzing images in this way, what you're doing is analyzing the way the images work on their own and collaborate with written text to create an argument designed to move a specific audience.” (Alfano 2013, np) This indicates that the cultural perceptions, discussed above, which are inherent in the intended audience, should be taken into account by the encoder in the establishment of the visual rhetoric.

Despite the fact that audiences may comprise diverse ages and backgrounds which could alter the interpretation of the visual argument presented, the notion of the visual rhetoric indicates that there is an intentional message designed for a specified audience in the hopes that this message will be interpreted in a clear and unambiguous manner by the decoder in the way it was intended by the creator/s of the message. There are of course some exceptions concerning intentional ambiguity of the interpretation. In some cases the decoder is meant to be confused regarding the meaning of the message. This is often an inductive tactic used to get the decoder to consider why the message has been presented in a certain way, the intention on the part of the encoder however, is still evident.

Another criterium for an image to conform to the visual rhetoric is the necessity of symbolism in the visual. In semiotic terms, a ‘symbol’ is a sign category that is the most arbitrary, as opposed to motivated; and the most open to connotation, as opposed to denotation. Let us consider the following example as a brief case study: The following image was scanned from *Computer Gaming World Magazine*.

I will attempt to analyse the image below in relation to its qualities of the visual rhetoric. Please note that this analysis is subject to my individual interpretation.



**Figure 2:2. Computer Gaming World Magazine, December 1997, No. 161 ,Pg 162- pg 163**

Visual Rhetoric criteria list:

- An image is presented. The image is accompanied with words, symbols and other images.
- The message encoded is designed for the purpose of being decoded in a specific way by a specific audience. The specified audience would be the target market of the product being advertised. Because this is an advertisement, the design of the message would ultimately be made for the purposes of persuading the intended audience to purchase the product.
- The message makes use of symbolism to establish meaning.
- The message will be interpreted through a process of contextual understanding on the part of the decoder (not necessarily by the intended decoder).
- The message needs to be presented through the print medium of a magazine.

Although I am not currently part of the intended target market I can still attempt to decode the meaning of the visual. The product itself is outdated and no longer in circulation,

rendering the intended market redundant. This redundancy is immediately apparent to me from the recognition of the symbols present in the *Windows 95* and 'SEGA' *tm* logos. The birth of the *Sega Genesis* is further from my age than that of the moon landing. This is difficult for me to comprehend as the *Genesis* was a video game console which I utilised in my childhood and the moon landing was something that occurred before I was born. This then serves as an example of how this message can be perceived as relative to my personal interpretation which is dependent of my personal experience or personal frame of reference.

Symbolism is presented in the use of colour and acts as a method to establish meaning, particularly the relationships of the subjects in the image to each other. There is a general triadic colour scheme to the image - blue, red, and brown and to a lesser extent green. This makes it easy for the eye to decipher images and various subjects in relation to each other. There is a designed association of the blue car being driven by the driver in the blue racing attire. The same assumption would apply for the association of the red car to the driver in the red jumpsuit. It is also apparent to me that the female in the red suit has a common association and objective as her now assumed red-kitted counterpart. I also assume that the male driver of the red team is not in the eye line of the blue driver and is engaging in malicious behaviour, which is also reiterated in his body language, particularly the mischievous smirk on his face. I understand that this is a situation where the blue and red drivers are in a competitive race situation and that the potatoes in the exhaust pipe will negatively impact on the blue driver. It is also obvious that the attractive young female is deceiving the blue race car driver by insinuating that she is engaging in conversation for the purposes of flirtation while her association with the red driver implies that she is only there for purposes of distraction. The humour is amplified in the bright saturated use of colour.

I was momentarily thrown by the words 'auto repair' as I thought that the red car may have been present for the purposes of repair but realised that this was a form of fictional advertising on the car, as there would be legal implications if there was a legitimate auto repair company advertised. All these perceptions were decoded relative to my personal experience.

The above image thus conforms to the criteria required to be included as an image where there is evidence of the visual rhetoric. There many different types of visual rhetorics, such as the visual rhetorics of advertising and those of poetry. I shall now attempt to define the visual rhetoric as it relates to comic books.

## **Comic Book Specific Visual Rhetoric**

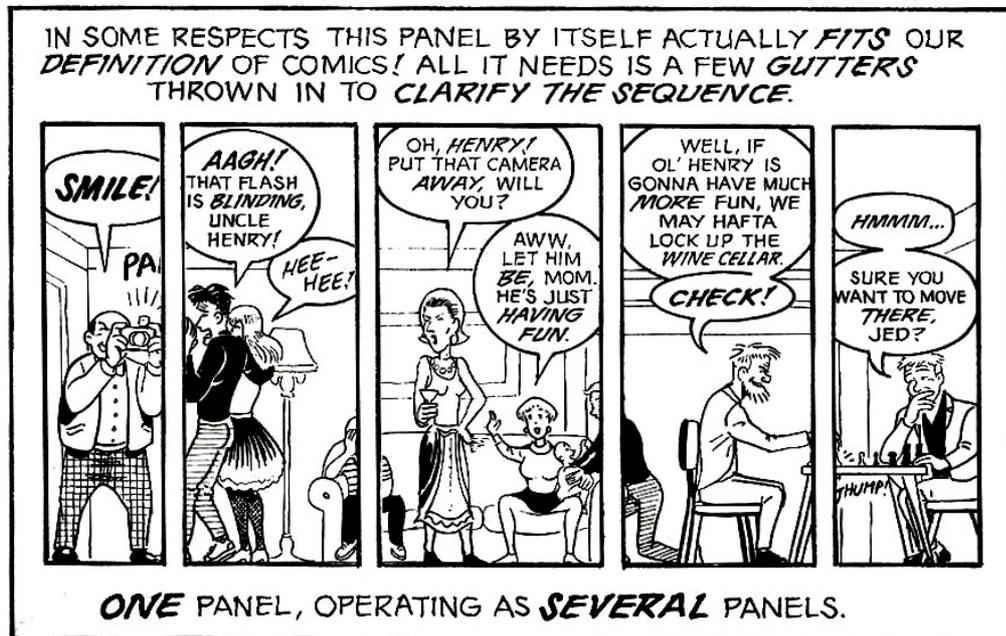
Because the way in which the rhetoric exists when applied to comic books is specific, I will suggest this be qualified by the term 'comic book visual rhetoric', and acronymised as CBVR. In order for us to dive into the task of defining the CBVR we must decide what we mean when we refer to the terms 'comic book'. This label is not an uncontested notion, "Our

attempts to define comics are an on-going process which won't end any time soon. A new generation will no doubt reject whatever this one finally decides to accept and try once more to reinvent comics." (McCloud 1994, p 23).

Will Eisner notes that comic books involve the process of reading and decoding symbols, "[t]he format of the comic book presents a montage of both word and image and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills" (Eisner 1985, p 9). Eisner acknowledges the fusion of art and literature contained within comic books. "The regimens of art (eg perspective, symmetry, brush stroke) and the regimens of literature (e.g. grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed on each other" Eisner 1985, p 10). Eisner (1985:11) discerns that the act of reading comics books is defined in the medium, noting that "[t]he reading of the comic book is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit". Ultimately Eisner offers the following definition for comic books: "...the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea" (Eisner 1990, p 45). The definition includes the narrative objective comic books achieve. **This is important as it validates the storytelling purpose of comic books, The visual rhetoric is aligned with the same purpose, a point to be explored later after a working comic book definition has been achieved.** As noted by Shaw (2012, p 16), a shortcoming in Eisner's definition concerns the lack of separation of the comic from other forms of media such as film or most other kind of visual storytelling. A similar definition is offered by McCloud (1994, p 9) who states that comic books are "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer". McCloud's definition offers the notion of aesthetic response and identifies the need to convey information but does not conclude that the information needs to be structured in a narrative.

Meskin questions whether narrative need be included at all, let alone be a focal point of the comic book. Meskin's postulates that while comic books may be predominantly narrative, it is unrealistic that all comics should conform to this criteria, and thus narrative should be omitted from the definition. Focus should rather **concern** the McCloud's emphatic notion of looking at the closure between the panels. "What is crucial is that there is some significant connection between the panels of the putative comic. But this connection need not be narrative it could, for example, be thematic or character based" (Meskin 2007, p 372). If we were to be as critical as Meskin, we could conclude that if it is conceivable for a comic to be produced with the absence of narrative, then it is also possible for comics to be produced with the absence of panels, in which case 'closure' would be difficult to achieve between panels. Furthermore, 'closure' in the sense that it is referred to by McCloud whom Meskin quotes is not confined to panels, but can potentially be extended to any scenario where 'faith' assumptions are applied with the aid of existing information. This brings us back to our original critique of comic book definitions: because Meskin's notion of between panel

closure as a part from the panel debacle, closure is not specific to comics. The same could be said of any existing artwork or narrative form. See Figure below.



**Figure: 2.3 The Grammar of Comics: Closure, Panels and Gutters**

Source: McCloud, 1994, p 48

David Carrier (2000), in his seminal work *The Aesthetics of Comics*, identifies the recognition of the medium with regards to **the** comic. Although this is not carried over in his ultimate definition, he argues that his definition is based on David Kunzle's (1973) work on early comics that states that comics are "a sequence of separate images, a preponderance of image over text, a mass medium, and the sequence must tell a story that is both moral and topical" (Carrier, 2000, p 8). Carrier also acknowledges the hybridity involved with comics, a point also noted by Shaw (2012, p16). Shaw notes that what Carrier "is trying to imply is that what gives comics their unique identity is that comics are neither a purely verbal nor a purely visual medium but a unique hybrid of the two. It is a medium where text and pictures can both exist in the same space but be apart at the same time." (Shaw 2012, p 16). I believe Carrier identifies an important notion in our definition quest, in that I suspect the answer lies in the unique way in which comic books assign contextual meaning to the signs they utilise. I personally disagree however, with the manner in which Carrier automatically associates the word medium with the language of comic books. While the term 'book' may indicate that the language and the medium are one and the same I believe that the 'language' exists as an intangible conceptual form that has been assigned to paper or books; but it should be recognised that while the two separate forms (words and comic book language) work and exist hand in hand, they are in fact separate. Nonetheless, we have identified that there is something about the medium of the 'book' that presents a flexibility that facilitates the language of comic books.

Shaw acknowledges the ability of comic books to exist outside of ‘actual books’, and offers the following definition: “comics are made up of primarily static sequential images that drive a narrative with the intent to be advanced at the reader’s own pace.” (Shaw 2012, p 16). Shaw’s definition is predicated on two pillars, one of which we have already seen is the construction of static images, and the other, also a commonly identified comic book characteristic, is the recognition of pace controlled by the reader. The latter is applicable to any form of reading, keeping comic books as connected with a reading experience as opposed for example to theatre, film and animation which all prescribe to a pace determined by the content creators of those respective media.

Apart from the inclusion of the words ‘mass media’ from Carrier, we have not seen adequate reference to the term ‘medium’ in the definition. It is important to mention the medium because it acts as a container for comic books. Perhaps it has been largely neglected as it is assumed that the visual rhetoric of comic books is the same as that of print. I argue that this definition needs to be updated as this is no longer the case. Aaron Meskin (2007) notes a similar problem when referencing popular comic book definitions. In his article *Defining Comics*, Meskin contends that the definitions concerning ‘pictorial narrative’ offered by Greg Hayman and Henry John Pratt (2005) in their essay “What are Comics?” fall short when acknowledging characteristics unique to comic books. As Meskin (2007, p 2) states, “[m]ost noticeably, Hayman and Pratto offer an ahistorical account of comics, which leaves their account open to plausible counter examples from the prehistory of comics. This flaw is found in all other extant attempts to define comics”. I have largely ignored the historical development of comic books so far in this dissertation; however it would serve to illustrate the vital component the medium plays in shaping the context the above definitions all work within. Clearly we must acknowledge that the definition for comic books needs to recognise the difference between the content or form of the comic book and their respective historic and future media. If we continue to make the mistake of not acknowledging that they exist in a mutual relationship and believe that they are separate to each other, we will constantly have a problem when trying to define comic books as the media develops from print or digital. Shaw does not necessarily acknowledge that the medium and the content are separate to each other, but does acknowledge that the medium is built up from the content:

The term comics does not imply any sort of sense of place, the definition is independent of comic books, graphic novels, painted walls, or websites. Comics are the formal elements that make up a medium. (Shaw 2012, p16).

It is not only the pre-history which opens the possibility of counter arguments, as noted by Meskin (2007), but the current and future development of comics as well. The emergence of new media requires this definition to be re-considered and break away from images, words and print media only. I submit that the new definition include the use of the word ‘codes’ or at least ‘symbols’ because these could represent the information offered by the comic from the historical offerings of comic books through those of future comics, and

generally relate to more than only the visual. Digital comics, for example, offer the symbolic representation of sounds broken down not visually, but through binary code and then exhibited through a digital medium to represent information presented by the CBVR. Movement follows suit, and must undergo interface adaptation when accessed digitally. Likewise, the definition of animation should also then be updated as it is no longer acceptable to apply only the physical attributes applied by the medium. We also have to consider how the medium heightens or limits the ability of the rhetoric to meet its objective, and recognise this as separate to the parameters limited to it by the medium. We have to consider both the purpose and application of the objectives of new art forms in all technological fields. With consistent technological upgrades within various artistic fields we are able to witness a hybridisation of various technologies and narratives. It has, and will continue to, become increasingly ambiguous when defining artistic disciplines without adequate recognition of the differences between content and form. As new media continues to develop, we shall see the consistent adaptation of the CBVR indicating the separation of medium and rhetoric.

To strengthen our understanding of the comic book we may exclude similar but different visual narrative genres. In order to understand what comics are not, “we must examine the words we use to refer to our use of media. One “watches” a movie, one “plays” a game, and finally one “reads” a comic. A comic is something that is meant to be read, the word “reader” in my definition is imperative.” (Shaw 2012, p16). Shaw continues to dissociate cartoons and illustrated storybooks from comic books. Illustrated storybooks are excluded due to their imagery existing in supplementation to narrative rather than being essential to it. Shaw explains that “[b]ooks with illustrations are excluded because they are not generally pictorially driven” (Shaw 2012, p16).

The term ‘graphic novel’ is often used in reference to many popular works from those who are also referred to as ‘comic book artists’. A common account for the differences between the two seem only to be based in the choice of words applied to the book. The previous statement of Shaw fails to recognise any content divisions between the two media. A difference is acknowledged by Will Eisner (1985, p141) who notes that the graphic novel is a form of comic book, but argues that the graphic novel is still a developing narrative form and are generally aimed at adult readers, with longer developed narratives, while comic books “have been confined to short narrations or depictions of episodes of brief but intense duration”.

The latter notion of narrative development is also in effect in comic books and cartoons, with the narrative development in cartoons being characteristically shorter than comic books. A fuller discussion of associative narrative concerns will be discussed at length later in this dissertation. These concerns include the theme, pacing and overall structure of each narrative form. McCloud identifies further differences in regard to representation, whereupon comics conform to abstract representations of their signifier. As McCloud states,

“amplification through simplification” (McCloud 1994, p30). In my estimation the same observation serves true for the narrative approach to cartoons.

The working definition of comic books will be revisited before the conclusion of this dissertation, but for now we shall work from the following: *“A book containing the encoding of signs composed of juxtaposed sequential, visual symbolism, the meaning of which is intended to be contextually decoded through the combinative result of the hybridity of its present culturally agreed codes, for purposes of a progressive state of narrative and or aesthetic engagement.”* I believe this definition focuses less on the medium and more on the unique experience of comic books than the previously offered definitions. The length of the definition is testament to the extensive influence comics permit in their construction.

In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud (1994) outlines the difference between content and form of comics. Form being the medium the content is carried through, such as a printed book, or digital device, while content concerns the actual message carried within the medium. McCloud illustrates that the ‘content’ of comics is comprised of a mixture of a number of ideas influenced by various interests, including creative contributions from, writers, artists, trends, genres, styles, subject matter and themes (McCloud, 1994, p 6). We could extend this list to include all other elements relating to the visual: colour, colour space, canvas, and the like. Therefore, if medium and form exist on two separate levels we should refer to them as such. I feel form is too narrow for our purposes and have already established the notion of the CBVR, which we shall need to explore in detail in order to find a suitable working definition for this research. The definition of CBVR will be revisited before the conclusion of this dissertation, but for now we shall work from the following: *“The comic book visual rhetoric concerns both the*

*1) motivation behind and;*

*2) manner in which the intangible conceptual intended message is constructed to meet its narrative objectives in its tangible translation when applied to a medium, utilising comic language.”*

Production of meaning is a result of all symbolic elements working together to achieve an overall argument. The argument in the case of the CBVR is derived from the aim that the comic is designed to achieve. More importantly, it predominantly concerns the narrative process in an attempt to initiate, hold and simultaneously provoke the readers’ attention for purposes of heightening the narrative experience. This point is vital in our understanding of the CBVR as it will shape and focus the way the images, words and any other symbolic objects work. It also help serve as a standard from which comic books draw their anatomical structure. If the intention behind the creation of the comic differed from narrative engagement, the CBVR would compensate by substituting its purpose of the narrative experience for the alternative objective. This may be reminiscent of McCloud’s

notion of aesthetic appreciation or Meskin's suggestion of thematic or character based message, however the way in which the CBVR works would still be derivative for the aim of achieving that specific objective. For the remainder of this thesis I will work on the assumption the CBVR objective conforms to the narrative experience.

The notion of the CBVR holds close to McCloud's take on form, seemingly interchangeable in many circumstances with the content of the comic. In most ways the CBVR could complete the trinity of synonyms, however despite the slight variation in the CBVR there are differences, at least in the formulation of the criteria associated with the term. Our definition could perhaps achieve bolder differentiation when considering differences of this type of rhetoric when compared to other rhetorics.

Comic books serve one overarching objective – to tell a story that is emotionally engaging to the reader of a specific target audience through use of a specific medium. The previous example of *SEGA's Daytona USA* advert looked at the visual rhetoric for the purpose of advertising and in doing so, how it aimed to persuade their target public to change their behaviour for purposes of selling a product. In *Advertising and Popular Culture*, Jib Fowles (1996, p 85) refers to advertising as “paid for messages that attempt to transfer symbols onto commodities to increase the likelihood that the commodities will be found appealing and be purchased”.

We shall now look at the visual rhetoric in relation to comic books. The CBVR differs from other forms of visual rhetoric because the presentation of an ‘argument’ in comic books, is the narrative itself.

### **The parameters of the medium**

For the purposes of this dissertation I will assume that narrative engagement is the common objective set out by comic books. It is the concept of the narrative engagement which defines the difference between the way audiences react to comic books in relation to other narrative driven media. Apart from narrative, the other major component that differentiates the visual rhetoric when applied specifically to comic books is the manner in which symbolism is utilised. Symbolism must serve the purpose of:

- 1) exposition of the narrative; and
- 2) the manner or form in which the exposition is made available to the reader.

The first point is necessary for continuity and coherence of narrative structure to unfold, while the latter is necessary for the emotional exploitation associated with the symbolic information contextualized by the reader. As the narrative determines what happens in terms of story progression, the comic book author/creator/illustrator has to consider how this happens. The ‘how’ is achieved through the plotting of symbolism that correlates to work

within the narrative structure. It is the fusion of the narrative and symbolic components in which the existence of the CBVR is formulated, at least in an intangible manner.

The tangible fusion of narrative and symbolism can only occur when applied to a medium, which acts as a physical vehicle or a container in which the visual rhetoric is encoded. Historically various media have been used as tangible canvases in which the encoding of visuals encompassing narratives have been produced; hieroglyphics, sequential paintings, mountainsides, or even bathroom cubicles are random examples. Based on the above, the CBVR can only work within the parameters of a given medium, thus affecting the way the visual rhetoric behaves in order for the narrative engagement of the reader to be met. Therefore, these parameters help define the advantages and disadvantages of how comic book stories can be told.

The parameters of the medium become **an intricate** component creative tool in the construction of the CBVR. When the parameters of the medium are combined with the narrative and symbolism of a comic book, the opportunity for further meaning or codes are presented. Symbolism has the ability to generate increasing levels of meaning and the multiplication of third images resulting from juxtaposed images may create multitude of symbols that may generate further hierarchal layers of meaning in the mind of the reader established from the original layer of symbolism. Indeed, the overall construction of the symbol is riddled with a multiplicity of resultant codes, which when executed properly should follow one overall direction. **For example the A4 page is divided into panels which are composed of various symbols with intended meaning. While each symbol indicates some kind of meaning, the actual page containing the frames becomes a symbol of meaning in itself, producing a duality of symbolism.** Further examples of this will be discussed as the dissertation progresses.

The resulting characteristics of the medium give way to a certain set of rules which comics tend to adhere to in order for their objectives to be met within restrictions of the medium. These rules ultimately affect how the visual rhetoric of comic books unfold. Therefore, it is this element that gives comics its unique identity. The ‘content’ as referred to by McCloud (1994) identifies what form the comic book takes with regard to language and hybridization, while the CBVR analyses how and why the hybridized form is achieved. Therefore, in order for us to achieve a greater understanding of the CBVR, we must identify the anatomy of comic book language to explain both the narrative and aesthetic level.

In drawing together this chapter together, I have briefly summarise the the differences between audience reaction to comic books and other narrative driven media, and then suggested how this impacts on the comic book visual rhetoric (CBVR). The CBVR antonymy of the CBVR will be the subject of the following chapter.

## 2. Chapter Three

### Theoretical Overview

#### Setting up tools for a Comic Book Visual Rhetoric: Narrative Theory, Symbolism and Freytag's Tension Structures

##### Scope of the Chapter

In this chapter I will attempt to illustrate how the anatomical structure of the comic book visual rhetoric (CBVR) interrelates with its narrative and symbolic components. The chapter will consider four main areas, drawn from the literature:

- Narrative Structure;
- Symbolic Structure;
- The dynamics concerning fusion of narrative and symbolic structures through the application of Gustav Freytag's 'tension structures'; and
- The the symbiotic fusion or synthesis of narrative and symbolic structures when applied to a specific medium.

In this way, the chapter will outline how narrative theory, symbolic theory (mainly drawn from semiotics) and Freytag's (1984) theory of tension structures can usefully be applied to the concept of the CBVR. The way information is conveyed relies heavily on symbolism to disseminate the meaning of the narrative on the reader. I will argue that for the purpose of comic books, plot variations are also variations of symbolism, because all information presented – even the actual text – are forms of symbolic representation. However, it must be noted that while the plot is subservient to the larger narrative design, it continues to play a vital role in so far as the maintenance and building of tension for the audience.

The text is not the only tool used to establish meaning. The CBVR is comprised of many 'codes', with the intention of producing a message for purposes of narrative engagement. (The current study is not an audience reception study, so it is not possible to test the extent to which comic creators are successful in this endeavour.) Where film will use sound, lighting, frame sizes, wardrobe, and music as a form of its visual rhetoric, comics have their own set of tools at their disposal to develop their own symbolism. The symbolic

signs are used to amplify the narrative so that when the audience identifies them, it will prompt certain stimuli to provoke a intended reaction. In Chapter Four, these theoretical positions will be applied to an analysis of the tangible fusion of the inner workings of the CBVR by applying insights drawn from the literature to a case study of an issue of X-Men 328.

One of the most difficult aspects of this thesis is how to structure the textual analysis of the chosen case study. The nature of the CBVR is highly complex in the way in which it works. To discuss narrative, semiotic symbolism and the synthesis between the two in isolation, as originally intended, proved problematic due to the dichotomy of narrative structure and symbolism. This analytical approach did not allow me to make direct correlations between different theoretical discourses, such as the narrative structural link of Freytag's identification of the climax or how that may be symbolically reiterated through an example of Barthes' semiotic code. This notion became further complicated when cross referencing these schools of thought, as the complexity of the CBVR doesn't adhere to structuralism or symbolism but to all, simultaneously. Schools of thought touch on both narrative and symbolic simultaneously, as is the nature of the CBVR.

It is vital for this dissertation to remember that the CBVR works within the contextual framework of the overall narrative and objective of narrative engagement. For the purposes of an analytical literature review this is challenging in terms of singling out and analysing separate contributing components in relation to the CBVR. While the theoretical frameworks can be discussed and explained in isolation, it is very difficult to apply them to an isolated case study because their meanings are formed when working in combination with multiple codes. It is predominantly the combination of all relevant codes which result in the overall meaning of the CBVR. Therefore, I will establish and explain the individual theoretical components for theoretical purposes only; and will apply these theories in the context in which they present themselves in the specific case study. Furthermore, I will argue that not all contributing codes necessarily conform to one meaning. One code may be able to serve multi-purposes in their meaning to the CBVR. This will also be discussed in the literature analysis. The design of the CBVR considers how the 'tools' of storytelling play off of each other with a common goal in mind. In broader terms these can be summarised through its combination of narrative structure, symbology and the technological and creative parameters of the comic book medium.

There is a third component which falls under the two identified above, that of socio-cultural response. This is a vital component of any communication theory, and one from which the CBVR is not exempt. The reason I have neglected to discuss this component under its own heading is twofold.

Firstly, the focus of my dissertation is in determining how the *construction* or the *encoding* of the CBVR takes place from the perspective of comic book creators. Therefore,

an in-depth analysis of the social response thereof is a complex enough area to warrant discussion in a separate dissertation. For the purposes of this research, we will assume that comics are created with a target audience in mind, who conform to a set of assumptions on the part of the comic book creator.

Secondly, the social-cultural response is always evident to some degree and thus is more practical to include this discourse where necessary. However, it will only be discussed if it is thought to directly affect the encoding of the CBVR. An example of this would be the narrative concern of topicality. Marvel comics, for instance, tend to write story-lines that have strong social relevance for specific time periods, indicating that social response directly affects the topic and subsequently the storyline, and ultimately the CBVR. It also serves to highlight the reciprocal relationship evident between the comic book creators and the social response thereof. Social cultural theory is also evident in the symbolism as recognition and identification of the meaning of signs is culturally based. I acknowledge that meaning is generated through both narrative and symbolic discourse, and that in the overall understanding of the CBVR, social-cultural theory plays an essential role in the deconstruction of meaning and the message the CBVR presents.

The component of ‘narratology’ concerns the field of storytelling. As this component develops, its focus will align with its symbolic counterpart in the comic specific medium of storytelling, but in order to understand this we must firstly consider general narratology theory without specific reference to any particular medium.

## **Conventional Narrative Structure**

Narratives have a long-term design structure, directing information sent from the encoder to the decoder or audience in order to progress a story. The progression of a narrative involves long-term investment with regard to the emotional engagement of the events that are set to occur. This can be illustrated, for example, by comparing the short-term concerns of the cartoon, as opposed to the long-term narrative progression typically found in comics. The term ‘cartoons’, applies to a single panel designed to catch the fleeting attention of a reader with a general disregard for long term narrative or character development. “Comics may or may not incorporate text, and differ from single cartoons by producing a more complicated pattern (most often narrative) through sequential spatial arrangement.”(Duke University, nd;np) . Comic books are opposed to cartoons in the structuring of narrative principals which are evident in the final result.

In Bill Watterson’s classic <sup>4</sup>cartoon strip *Calvin and Hobbes*, for example, Calvin will always remain a 12 year old boy with a pet tiger (Figure 3.1). The strip repeats the same

concerns that Calvin has to constantly deal with: Spaceman Spiff, repetitive confrontation with his parents, and his confusing aggressive-affectionate behaviour around Susie. The issues of the narrative in these cases are not primarily concerned with future developments, whereas comic books may be mindful of long-term narrative progression. Often comic books are developed with long-term narrative and character progression in mind. It is my opinion that cartoons do not engage significant narrative progression.



**Figure 3. 1. Calvin and Hobbes flight as Spaceman Spiff.**

Source: <http://www.gocomics.com/calvinandhobbs> Accessed 18.04.2014

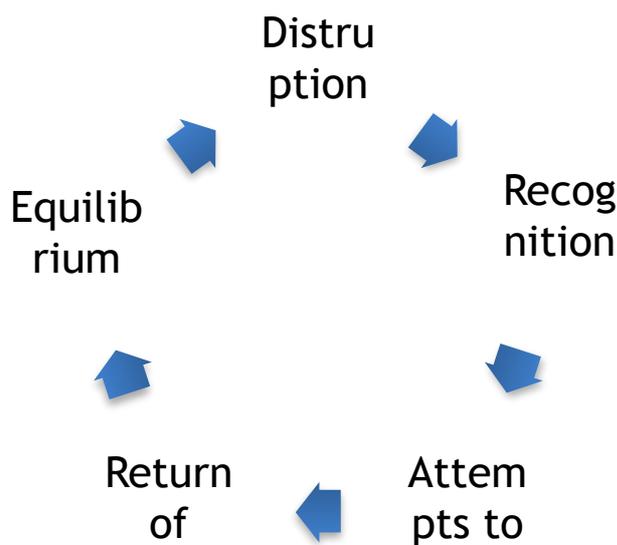
‘Narratology’ concerns the science of narrative. While there are many popular mainstream theories to which I could refer, the primary theorists I will draw on will be Tzvetan Todorov (1971), Gustav Freytag (1984), Roland Barthes (1972; 1977) and Joseph Campbell. Other contributions to the body of theory have been indicated in the table below. For purposes of chronological structure and the ‘what’ I will only focus Todorov’s basic narrative structure. This is because Todorov’s theories, in my opinion, are the most applicable to the majority of stories in any medium. No narrative manages to escape his **basic** conceptual framework. For the purposes of how I will focus on Gustav Freytag. This theory was formulated in his 1863 book, *Technique of the Drama*, translated by Elias J. MacEwan in 1984. I will also consider the contributions of Barthes’ (1977) five codes. It will also be necessary to consider narrative structure and narrative execution with specific application to comic books. I will introduce these codes now and then later in an attempt to illustrate them in the context of a case study. **The purpose of this section is to draw parallels between the basics of narratology and present general narrative objectives of storytelling in order to establish the framework for later referencing.**

As in all theories of narrative, the formulations observed are pervasive to a multiplicity of narrative disciplines. The detailed treatment of comic books may deviate somewhat from the general predicted formulae of other narrative mediums, but the influence of the notions discussed previously will most likely penetrate any comic book or graphic

novel. A general structural observation shall be observed. Similarities of prominent narratologists have been summarised into a developmental sequence below.

## The Narrative Cycle

Tzvetan Todorov's **structural schema** is a series of chronological stages of the **linear narrative**. It was chosen to open the discussion in this dissertation because it is archetypal, and an excellent point of departure from which we can examine the contributions of other theorists. Succinctly, Todorov (1971) theorises that all stories begin in a space of 'equilibrium', followed by 'disruption', the 'recognition of distribution', one or more 'attempts to repair the damage', 'returned order' that then leads to a new state of 'equilibrium' (Figure 3.2). The story can be complicated by repeated secondary or even tertiary acts of disruption, which then have to be resolved in order to reach the final state of 'equilibrium'. The reiterative nature of this narrative schema allows the action to continue for as long – or as short – as the author requires (Todorov 1971). This schema has been summarised graphically in Figure 3.2.



**Figure 3.2 Schematic Representation of Tzvetan Todorov – the narrative cycle**

Source: Adapted from Todorov 1971.

Todorov's concept of 'equilibrium', which is indicative of a state of balance, is similar to Campbell's (1949) first of ten steps contained in *The Ordinary World*, which reiterates the notion of balance and equilibrium. Gustav Freytag refers to the first of five stages of the 'exposition', in which necessary information is made available to establish the context of the narrative, thus allowing for narrative continuity. As with Todorov's schema, all of these components are chronological, although not necessarily sequential, and occur before the introduction of the next phase. Todorov's 'disruption' to the established state of balance

aligns with Freytag's 'exciting force' described as when "[t]he beginning of the excited action (complication) occurs at a point where, in the soul of the hero, there arises a feeling or violation which becomes the occasion of what follows" (Freytag 1984, p13). Both these notions motivate the characters to seek a solution to the complication through some form of action, to which great obstacles exist. Campbell recognises this development as 'a call to adventure' shortly followed by a conflicting obstacle in the path of the hero that results in a degree of reluctance on their part. This often stimulates emotional investment in the character provoking sympathy from the audience, as well as an opportunity for conflict inclusion, an important narrative device which shall be discussed in more detail later.

The variously denoted stages following from this concern is the body of the story, depending on the narratives' length, as well as the series of continued complications of various conflicts faced the protagonist, or in some cases multi protagonists. These often form modular sub-structures of narrative sequencing, introducing immediate disruptions followed by their climatic resolutions. Todorov indicates the attempts to resolve the disruption. Freytag refers to these as 'The rising moment': "The action has been started; the chief persons have shown what they are; the interest has been awakened. Mood, passion, involution have received an impulse in a given direction" (Todorov 1971, p 125).

The recognition of the climax follows. Freytag discusses climax under the suggestion of 'The Tragic Force' which he explains as "the closing catastrophe [that] requires a manly heart and an exalted power of deliberation" (Freytag 1984, p 14). This maturation often coincides with Campbell's 'in most cave', where the protagonist/s are physically or metaphorically the furthest from their comfort zone established in the exposition/ordinary word stage. The climax culminates in the resolution of the previously established disruption and the realisation of the objectives of a specific narrative component.

The final sequential phase is described by Freytag as the most difficult to achieve. He refers to this as 'The Downward Movement or Return'. This is considered "[t]he most difficult part of the drama [because] the sequence of scenes [is] in the downward movement" (Freytag 1984, p 133). Todorov identifies the restoration to a newly established equilibrium, returning the narrative to a state of balance. Campbell refers, in line with the physical proxemic structures of proposed steps, the return to the elixir, effectively reverting to a comfort zone. All observations recognise the fulfilment of hermeneutic set ups and resolutions in relation to established objectives **which were set out for the overall narrative and subsequent branchings thereof**. The recent popularity of franchising has induced trends of hermeneutic teasers for subsequent narrative components.

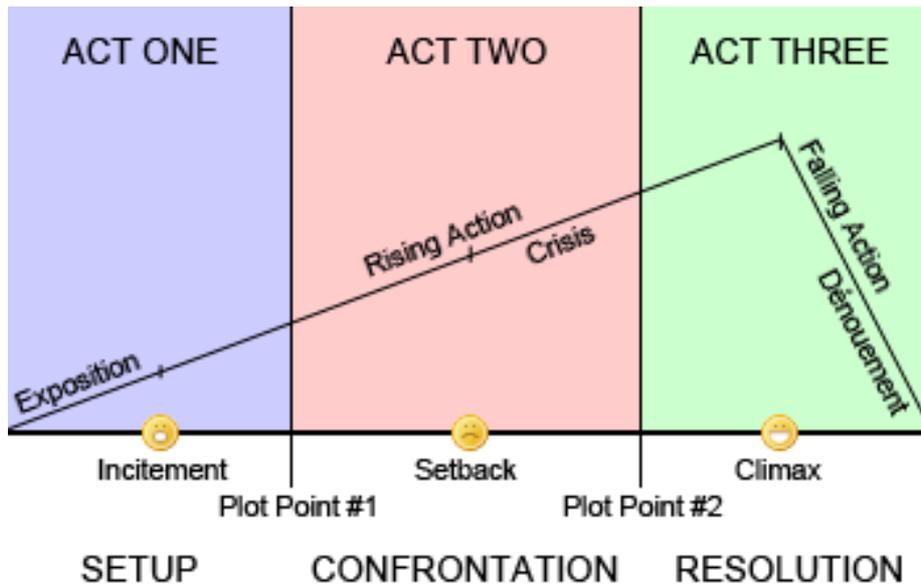
Lajos Egri simplifies the process to the extent of prescribing three stages: crisis, climax and resolution. We again see the commonality of structural transitions between equilibrium, disruption, **and return to a newly restored equilibrium**, in response to a problem which needs to be solved (Figure 3.4). "A novel, play or any type of writing, really is a

crisis from beginning to end growing to its necessary conclusion” (Egri 1942/2008, p 117). The various positions of different authors are presented in Figure 3.3 below.

<b>McKee</b>	<b>Todorov</b>	<b>Campbell</b>	<b>ETB</b>	<b>Freytag</b>	<b>General Act Placement</b>
<b>Crisis</b>	Equilibrium	The Ordinary World	Establishment (EPSPO)	Exposition	Act 1
	Disruption	A call to adventure	Explosion	Inciting incident / Exciting Force	Act 2
		The Reluctant Hero	Vacuum	Rising Action / Rising Moment / Ascent	
		Test, Allies, Enemies	Attraction / Potential Solution		
		The Ultimate Ordeal	Potential Solution	False Climax	Act 3
			New PSPO (NPSPO)		
		The In Most Cave	Explosion and urgent vacuum		
<b>Climax</b>		Seizing the sword.	Climax: Reassess and rearrange in an enclosed space to form an effective FPSPO	Climax / Tragic Force	
<b>Resolution</b>	Newly Restored Equilibrium	Return to the Elixar	Fulfilment	Falling Action / Denouncement / Downward Movement / Return	

**Figure 3.3. Comparative table of narrative structures by selected authors.**

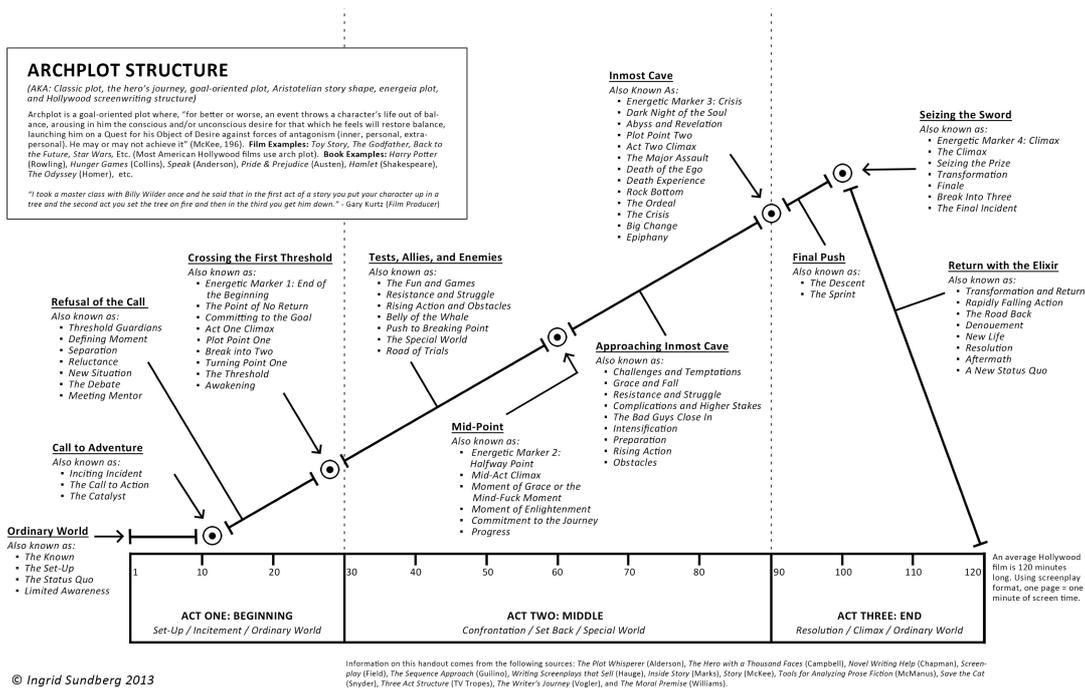
Source: D. R. Tomaselli



**Figure 3.4: Basic Three Act Structure, showing Tension Structure**

Source: <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ThreeActStructure>

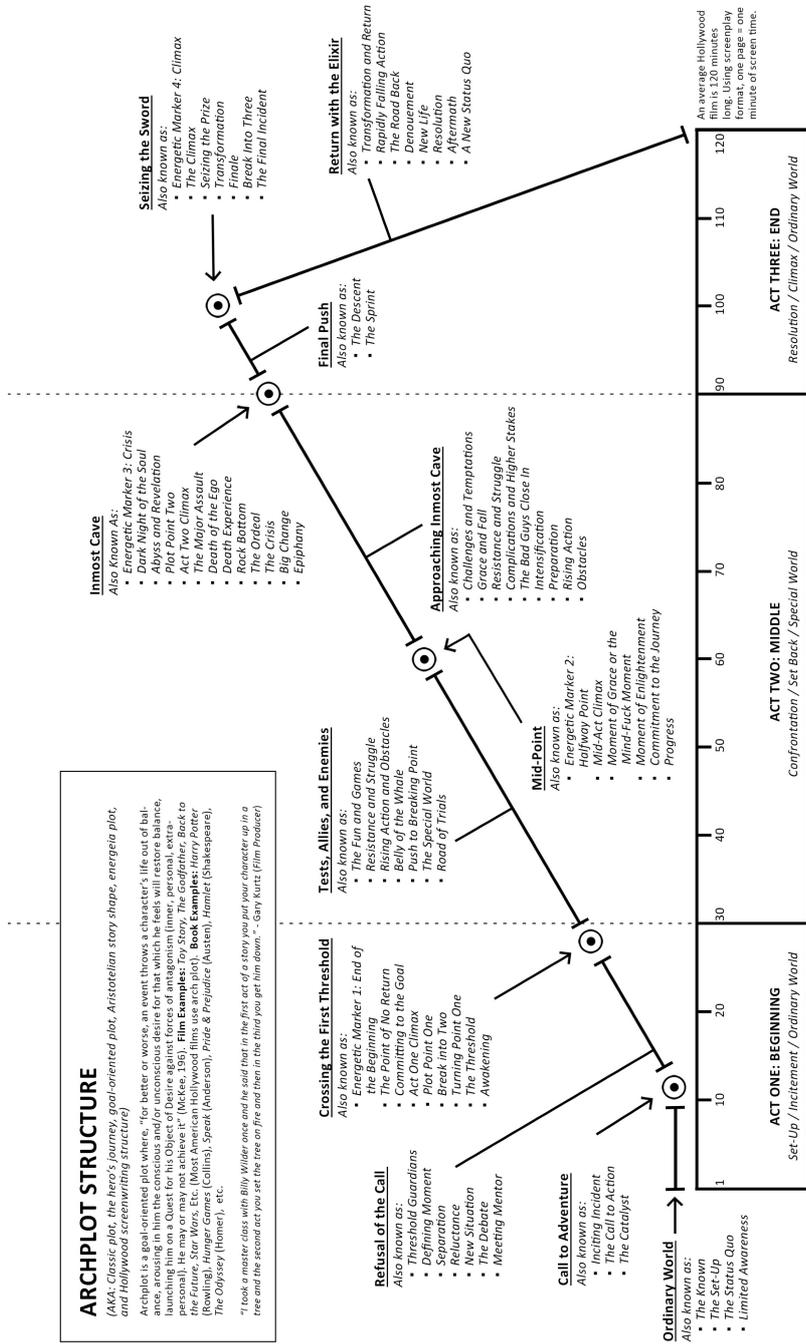
accessed 1 May, 2014.



**Figure 3.5: Aristotelian Archplot Structure, showing Tension Structure**

Source: <https://ingridsnotes.wordpress.com>

accessed 14 May, 2015.



Information on this handout comes from the following sources: *The Plot Whisperer* (Alderson), *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell), *Novel Writing Help* (Chapman), *Screenplay* (Feld), *The Screenwriter's Bible* (Trotter), *Writing Screenplays that Sell* (Lasker), *These Story Wars* (McKee), *Story Wars* (McKee), *Tools for Analyzing Prose Fiction* (McKee), *Save the Cat* (Campbell), *Three-Act Structure* (TV Tropes), *The Writer's Journey* (Vogler), and *The World Famous* (Williams).

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**Figure 3.6: Aristotelian Archplot Structure, showing Tension Structure**

Source: <https://ingridsnotes.wordpress.com>  
accessed 14 May, 2015.

## Roland Barthes and the 'Five Codes'

The five codes presented by Roland Barthes differ somewhat in nature to the other narrative theories discussed already because they do not structure the premise of their narratology on the chronological structure. Instead he is concerned with five codes or observations of elements commonly used in storytelling. Due to the nature of **the majority of frequently issue based** comics, these five elements unfold in a relatively short space of time. The nature of these codes lend themselves to both narrative and symbolic occurrences and are commonly referenced in this thesis.



Figure 3.7: Marvel Comics Group Magazine featuring Roland Barthes.

Source: <http://zannahbot.com/>  
accessed 14 May, 2015.

Barthes five codes include:

- The Hermeneutic Code (Chronology-Structure)
- The Proairetic Code (Chronology-Structure)
- The Semantic Code
- The Symbolic Code
- The Referential / Cultural Code

The two codes specifically related to the chronological structure include the hermeneutic and proairetic codes (See Figure 3.5 below).

### **The Hermeneutic Code**

The hermeneutic code, is utilised to set-up various elements of a story which then need to be concluded later. It is often referred to as the ‘enigma code’ because this can also be used as a tease factor, provoking curiosity from the reader and prompting psychological engagement with the story. This element potentially holds the reader in suspense while trying to find the answer to the enigma that is presented, thus stimulating anticipation and engagement on the part of the reader. This engagement links into the idea that a story should be experienced rather than simply retold, hence the nomenclature borrowed from the hermeneutic paradigm. “Let us designate as hermeneutic code . . . all the units whose function it is to articulate in various ways a question, its response, and the variety of chance events which can either formulate the question or delay its answer; or even, constitute an enigma and lead to its solution.” (Barthes 1974, p 17)

General storytelling rules suggest that if an idea, expectation or enigma is to be established it should be answered. In other words, set-ups should be paid off so as not to frustrate the audience. The general rule of scriptwriting is that if information included is not necessary in furthering the plot, or if it does not significantly aid the narrative, it should be cut out. This device is often used in Marvel’s comic books and was translated from Marvel Comics to Marvel Studios, when a hanging plot point was included in Marvel’s *Iron Man 2* when Sergeant Nick Fury exclaimed to Iron Man’s alter ego, Nick Stark that he had “a much bigger situation to deal with in Mexico right now”. Lost plot points are often indicative of script rewrites that are neglected to be written out later on. In this particular example however, the pay-off was scripted as a teaser for another film in the Marvel franchise – the then upcoming *Thor* film.

A tactical device the use of the hermeneutic codes allows, is the ability to undercut established audience anticipation. As with many other labels referred to in this dissertation, the term is variously considered under differing constitutions. The common thread of theoretical discourse surrounding this concept is the constant readjustment of audience

position. This works on the idea that engaging narratives rely on developments that provoke an attitudinal, and subsequently, an emotional re-evaluation of establishments. All forms of misdirection involve a contradiction of established suggestive developments and are usually created by any unexpected development in the narrative. The device relies on a suggestion or set-up and thus, is interwoven into the hermeneutic function. Ultimately, the suggestions created by misdirection need to infer that the opposite is happening in order to conceal the eventual development from the audience. Colloquially, this could be referred to as a roller-coaster function, with metaphorical twists and turns in the opposite direction of built up momentum. This keeps the audience involved with, and in anticipation of, future developments. The *X-Men Age of Apocalypse* series is premised on this notion in the reiteration of an alternative reality in which all established characters and story-lines contradict previous developments. In this example, our later character referent, Sabertooth, is portrayed as embracing his humanity which in the standard timeline is sub-textually suggested although consistently denied.

### **The Proairetic code**

The proairetic code furthers the notion of set-ups by engaging the reader through suggestions of unfolding action. This concept alludes to the fact that there are some narrative elements which are withheld from the reader. If the reader can conceive that there is more to the story, it may again provoke curiosity, and engagement by the reader.

The rhythm of suggestion needs to be balanced in terms of how the narrative unfolds in relation to those elements in the story which are withheld. Barthes (1974, p 19) indicates that this is a well-managed code because the audience needs to remain in constant anticipation of narrative development. Should this anticipation diminish then there is a lack of incentive for the audience to actively engage in the **immediate** story. The audience or readers should be treated as fickle children with limited attention spans. The only chance for engagement to be substantiated for any significant length of time is to ensure successive consistency in said engagement. The proairetic code serves to fulfil this aim.

Many comic series, are unique though, and have the problem of not knowing where to go. They keep raising the stakes while the audience almost ‘forget’ the previous developments of the narrative. For example, the X-Men have saved the world seventeen times to date while, notions of parallel universes exist, with multiple characters, who are symbolically reinterpreted and recontextualized in an ever changing society. They do however, have the advantage that their characters are immortal (to a certain degree) and the stories can be retold, or con-temporised with new contextual relevance. Nolan compares the film interpretation of his recent Batman movie franchise as definitive in its narrative development as **negating a continuous nature, that is** associated with comics.

Without getting into specifics, the key thing that makes the third film a great possibility for us is that we want to finish our story. And in viewing it as the

finishing of a story rather than infinitely blowing up the balloon and expanding the story ... unlike the comics, these things don't go on forever in film and viewing it as a story with an end is useful." (Comic Book Movie nd, np)<sup>5</sup>

Comic book characters retain relevance outlasting actors and time frames.

### **The Semantic Code**

The semantic code has been dubbed the 'connotative code' and concerns the 'accumulation of connotations' otherwise referred to as semes (Barthes 1974, p24). In comic books these would concern the narrative and symbolic connotative elements which when contextually analysed in totality serve to signify overall meaning. In this manner all elements are compromised by connotative or semic codes and thus all components of the comic book are semic in nature. For example, various connotations of visual stimulations to be discussed in detail, such as the use of lighting and panel borders work together with text and other images, to make up the contents of the panel. The culmination of panels then formulates the page, the page the issue, and ultimately the series. In this scenario the entire issue itself is semic of the series development.

### **The Referential/Cultural Code**

The referential, or 'cultural code', explains how an outside referent or existing system of knowledge lends itself to meaning construction and social identification of characters that embody socially constructed value systems. "Though all codes are cultural we reserve this designation for the storehouse of knowledge we use in interpreting everyday experience." (Barthes 1977, pg 38). In comic books, this code is always present to some degree, retaining responsibility for visual, audio and scripted literacy. The western reading patterns of top to bottom, left to right are indicative of this code, as well as the majority of value systems, ideologies and thematic concerns inherent in comic book story-lines. The code influences reception of meaning and also lends itself to meaning construction. For example, the recent inclusion of Marvel's first homosexual marriage can be seen as an effort to remain relevant to contemporary society. The code would extend to the choice of art style of the comic book. The **cultural** differences between western and Japanese comics **further** highlight the practical manifestation of the referential code.

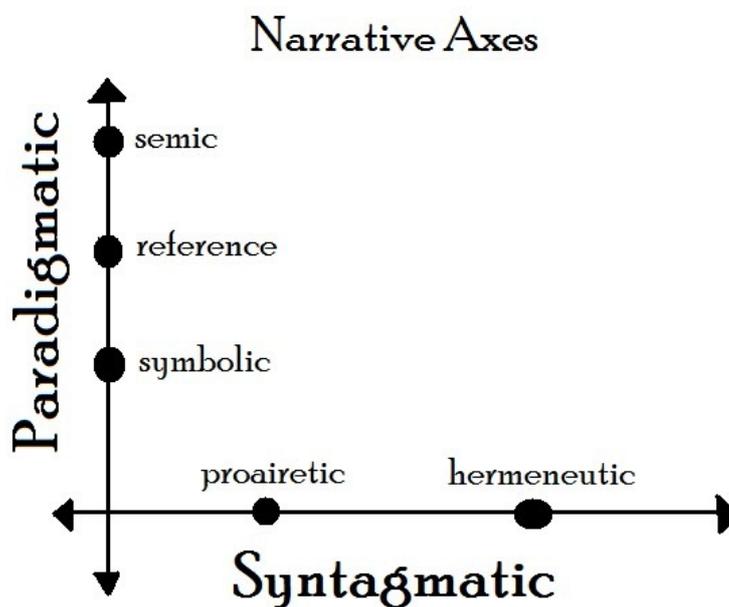
### **The Symbolic Code**

Also known as the 'voice of the symbol', the symbolic codes rely on forms of symbolism to represent meanings which form in social systems of belief, such as culture (Barthes 1974, p 25). Road signs work in this way, for example. Through symbolic iconography in the presentation of socially agreed symbolic representation, the nature of this

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<sup>5</sup><http://www.comicbookmovie.com/fansites/nailbiter111/news/?a=58737#6PB10zY5tMB4fu5s.99>. (Accessed April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2014)

code allows the flow of symbolic structures to manifest in various forms, such as use of iconography and binary opposites, that most citizens are able to understand. In turn, the multiplicity of symbols may accumulate to identify a theme within the narrative that forms a multitude of simultaneous functions. These symbols conform to the description for the semic code as well as the thematic association which can be indicative of the referential code. In comic books the symbolic code may be the result of several semic contributions that form meaning in relation to one other, embodying an overall composition or, it may be the result of the arrangement of several compositions that create a symbolic relationship between the two, such as those produced by binary oppositions.



**Figure 3.8. Synoptic Illustration of Barthes' Five Codes on the Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Axes**

source: <http://syntaxzine.com> accessed 23 April, 2014

### Narrative versus Plot

Examples of chronological structuring of plot points are plentiful in various films. In recent years it has become common practice to display opening acts that chronicle later narrative occurrences. Here again we see how the plot functions because no matter the order of the sequential information the actual narrative progression remains intact. However, it is generally the case that by the second or third scene, the presentation of the narrative reverts to

a traditional chronological sequence, using the plot structure as a form of hermeneutic code in an attempt to emotionally ‘hook’ the audience.

In the case of comic books, the plot will be affected by symbolic representations because this conforms to the notion of the ‘how’ the story is shown to the audience. Narrative structure is then infused with the physical representation of how the story is shown. The notion of furthering the plot refers to the way in which the information of the narrative unravels to the audience and makes apparent the complexity of the design of narrative structure. In comic books this could be achieved through the visual rhetoric. The next section discusses specific examples of visual interplay between codes present in the imagery suggesting how this furthers the narrative and builds up audience anticipation. The visual rhetoric thus becomes an integral component of the active storytelling process.

Storytelling in most forms share a commonality of almost unspoken yet agreed approaches in their realisations. One which has always fascinated me is the design of storytelling in so far as its invisibility to the audience. This concerns the ability to construct a complex narrative design which in the eyes of the audience is presented in a seemingly random and sometimes unconnected series of events. Field suggests that the design achieves such complexity that even the writer is susceptible to becoming lost in its intricacies: “When you’re in the paradigm you can’t see the paradigm” (Field, 2005, p 143). While ultimately the writers should understand the paradigm they have created, the audience is supposed to remain unaware of such designs on a conceptual level, but should be receptive to the results on an emotional one. This concerns the structuring of events for audience or reader exploitation.

The following paragraphs concern how the individual narrative component of the Comic Book Visual Rhetoric (CBVR) anatomy uses commonly practiced narrative approaches, and how the nature of which outline the story design structure. The use of such design would need to work within the options available of the chosen medium of implementation. In the case of comic books these designs would need to be exposed through the symbolic text, images and any other signifiers utilised by the CBVR.

A basic, yet often misunderstood notion, in narrative understanding is the difference between *plot* and the actual *narrative*. Both are concerned with narrative structure but focus on different elements. *Narrative* refers to the actual story in terms of the structural sequence of events. A story is the chronological exposition of a series of events linked to each other through cause and effect which eventually solves a problem. Comic books are a form of storytelling of which its qualities adhere to the above definition.

While narrative refers to the story, the *plot* refers to how that information is made available or exposed to the audience. In other words the narrative is what transpires while the plot is how that story is exposed to the audience. Syd Field describes a plot in stating that it is a, “direction – a line of development leading from beginning to end” (Field 2005, p 142). The

exposition of information is made available through the plot. This may occur through text, dialogue, symbolism, action or the combination of events thereof. Chronological structuring is another way in which information is made available to the audience, and thus also exists under the umbrella of plot.

When a single narrative exists but has multiple possible interpretations, it is the plot that changes how the information of the narrative is presented. Narrative is typically associated with thematic and character concerns, while the audience is generally expected to learn from the end result and is not susceptible to analytical structure. How that specific structure unfolds is what we understand as *plot*. Examples of this can be understood with the adaptation of Shakespearian films such as *Romeo and Juliet* (1996) and its more contemporary interpretations when compared with Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 interpretation (See Figure 3.10). The dialogue, overall sequence of events, characters and thematic resonance of forbidden tragic love, all remain true to the same as the original Shakespearian script, however, the way information is conveyed through the manner in which events unfold, including substituting horses for cars for example, concerns plot. In this example the means of narrative development may be different, but the ends remain consistent.



**Figure 3.9: Romeo Juliet 1996, illustrates a reinvention of the execution of the kiss on the balcony scene.**

source: <http://jacquettertp841.sourceforge.net> Accessed 29 April, 2014.



**Figure 3.10: Romeo & Juliet, 1968, Franco Zeffirelli, illustrates Zeffirelli's vision of the balcony scene.**

Source: [www.spot.ph](http://www.spot.ph) Accessed 29 Aril, 2014.

Examples of chronological structuring of plot points are plentiful in various films. In recent years it has become common practice to display opening acts that chronicle later narrative occurrences. Here again we see how the plot functions because no matter the order of the sequential information the actual narrative progression remains intact. However, it is generally the case that by the second or third scene, the presentation of the narrative reverts to a traditional chronological sequence, using the plot structure as a form of hermeneutic code in an attempt to emotionally 'hook' the audience.

In the case of comic books, the plot will be affected by symbolic representations because this conforms to the notion of the 'how' the story is shown to the audience. Narrative structure is then infused with the physical representation of how the story is shown. The notion of 'furthering the plot' refers to the way in which the information of the narrative unfolds to the audience and makes apparent the complexity of the design of narrative structure. In comic books this could be achieved through the visual rhetoric. The visual rhetoric thus becomes an integral component of the active storytelling process. Specific examples of visual interplay between codes present in the imagery suggesting how this **develops dynamics and promotes** anticipation are discussed later in this chapter.

## Narrative Duality

Narrative engagement is the process of immersing the reader **into the sequence of increasingly developing problems** and engaging with the characters on an emotional level. It is not enough to tell a story that adheres to structure and continuity alone. Readers will not emotionally invest in a story just because it exists. Readers wish to experience an emotional rollercoaster ride, hence the need for engagement. Narrative engagement is achieved by two broad interrelated structures concerning specification. The *'what'* is identifiable in the sequentially constructed chronological structure of narrative; the *'how'* concerns the method of narrative execution of the said structure. Thus, we identify the conceptual separation of the narrative not only between structure and plot but between structure and execution. The notion of execution, as I refer to it, shares multiple similarities with that of plot. Both concepts concern the ways in which the expository information necessary for narrative progression is made available to the reader for purposes of continuity. Execution, however, focuses on narrative exposition for purposes, not only of continuity, but for emotional engagement as well. Therefore, emotional engagement shares similar conceptual structures with execution, plot and engagement while chronological narrative structure shares similarities with coherence and continuity.

This identification has been reiterated in many literary works albeit under different terminology. Szilas and Richie (2013, np) make reference to transmission and manifestation and explains that “the structure of narrative transmission-and its manifestation” reiterates the ‘what’ of the narrative’s presentation and the ‘how’ of the way information is made available. Eisner separates these notions as structure and entertainment, suggesting that both need to exist simultaneously. While structure is necessary for “technical ballistics information needed for reader comprehension, it is imparted subtly enough that it does not detract from the forward motion of the plot” (Eisner 1990, p 139). McCloud identifies two similar concepts indicating that experience is defined by two realms, “the realm of the concept and the realm of the senses” (McCloud 2006, p 39). The concept resembles the notion of understanding ideas, similar to that of continuity, coherence and those senses associated with emotional experiences. While McCloud does not specially forge this link in his own work, his observations are uncannily in line with what the others note here. Barthes’ division of denotation and connotation echo these two broad concepts, with denotation forging a conceptual understandings of signs, while connotation is relevant to the individual associations the sign bears, appealing to emotional senses. “The term 'connotation' is used to refer to the socio-cultural and 'personal' associations (ideological, emotional etc.) of the sign” (Barthes 1972, p 102). Thus when I refer to the approaches of the ‘what’ and the ‘how’, I am attempting to encapsulate the notions discussed above, and summarised in tabular form below.

WHAT	HOW
Idea	Aesthetic
Continuity	Plot
Coherence	Emotional Engagement
Transmission	Manifestation (Szilas, Richie)
Concept (McCloud)	Senses (McCloud)
Structure (Eisner)	Entertainment (Eisner)
Denotation (Barthes)	Connotation (Barthes)
Fabula (Propp)	Sjuzet (Propp)
Chronological Structure	Execution

**Figure 3.10 Tabular comparison of ‘What’ and ‘How’ as expressed by selected authors.**

Source: D. R. Tomaselli

These concepts are employed with constant effect, working hand in hand throughout the various stages of production of the storytelling process. In a novel the production phase begins and ends with the printed words on a page. In visual storytelling there are more phases and hence more disciplines the notions must extend to.

One way to conceptualise the difference between ‘what’ and ‘how’ would be to consider the disciplines of scriptwriting and directing. While the scriptwriter lays down the narrative structures, employing both the considerations of coherent expository continuity and the manifestation of narrative exposition for purposes of emotional engagement, it is the director’s job to execute these objectives effectively for the particular medium the script was intended. In film, the execution of the narrative extends to various audio visual disciplines which are submissive to the director’s narrative interpretation. The disciplines themselves serve to execute the intentions of the narrative to which they are theoretically submissive, once again for purposes of continuity and emotional engagement. In comics this could

concern, depending on the approach, the method or technique of illustration and the narrative development, both of which must reflect on both transmission and manifestation in order to effectively engage with the reader.

The above discussion serves to illustrate that in any narrative medium the occurrence of the two concepts are executed simultaneously, and that while the story must adhere to structures of coherence and continuity it must, at the same time, reflect the necessary degree of emotional intensity to achieve two separate, yet interdependent objectives within its signification; thus creating a narrative duality. We shall discuss later, when considering methods of fusing the semiotic illustration with narrative, how emotional intensity is related to notions of rhythm, conflict, hermeneutic and proairetic devices. All of these elements must systematically align successfully for an effective coherent and emotionally provoking narrative comic book experience.

## **Character Development in Narrative**

A significant aspect of storytelling, fundamental to the construction of *emotional investment*, concerns the ability the storyteller retains for character construction. This is again a generic narrative rule applicable to any narrative medium; “[r]egardless of the medium in which you are working, you must know your characters thoroughly” (Egri, 1942/2008, p 110). Characters serve the purpose of facilitating narrative progression, viewer identification and subsequently, they serve as an avenue of narrative accessibility for the consumer.

## **Emotional engagement and emotional investment**

While *emotional engagement* relies on the process of narrative execution to provoke an emotional response, *emotional investment* refers to the degree of emotional intensity the viewer is prepared to submit to the signified reality of the narrative. Emotional investment is a necessary requirement for emotional engagement to occur. Apart from conventions already discussed, such as implantation of the proairetic and hermeneutic codes for suspense and anticipation, numerous other structural devices lend themselves to extra layers of emotional engagement. Some of these may include what Richard Walter (1988, 35) refers to as ‘timelock’ which is “a structural device requiring some specific event to occur, or some particular problem to be resolved within a pre-determined period of time. This serves to compress the story's tension.” John Carpenter’s *Escape from New York* engages this tactic, where the protagonist, Snake Pliskin, a reluctant hero, is implanted with a life threatening bomb which will only be diffused on the completion of his mission. See Figure 3.9 below.



**Figure 3.11 : Escape From New York, Timelock Tactic**

Source: [www.therpf.com](http://www.therpf.com) Accessed 20 February, 2013.

The first three *Terminator* films rely on a similar use of tension because the Terminator cannot be put down, and will only desist upon termination of target, Sarah Conner. Many of the sub-objectives in these types of stories involve **survival**, while simultaneously **seeking** a solution to the main problem and consequently, a resolution. Horror films are often predicated on similar structures. These are only a few examples of how the strategic treatment of structure can manifest in engagement. Other methods will be discussed in character development because it is the characters who determine how invested and engaged the progression tactics assigned to the narrative are.

### **Character as a tool for Narrative Progression**

Narrative is driven forward by the character. Most narratology theorists acknowledge that the overall objective of the narrative will coincide on a significant level with the action driven by the protagonist. Narratology theorist Joseph Campbell's (1972) entire theory hinges on this assumption. In the plotting of his ten step process, he refers to 'A Hero's Journey' instead of 'A journey of heroes'. This assumes that there is always the dominance of only one central character's journey above any other in overall narrative progression. "The pivotal character is the one who creates conflict and makes the play move forward. The pivotal character knows what he wants. Without him the story flounders...in fact, there is no story" (Egri 1942/2008, pg 110). Furthermore, and in line with the structure of the overall narrative, the individual character may have an overall objective, as well as various short term objectives, which need to conform to the objective of the overall narrative. In constructions which depict multiple protagonists, the narrative structure must make allowances to facilitate multiple individual journeys, usually by providing a resolution achieved through the realisation of a common objective. The plotting of this often forms a relay of various protagonists individual narratives, transpiring in deliberate sequential order, often stemming to various sub-plots before uniting together, and coinciding with a common climatic resolution. The case study to be referenced in X-Men 328 illustrates this clearly. Characters are evidently an essential device for narrative progression.

It is also generally agreed that emotional investment is proportional to the importance of the character in the narrative. Lajos Egri (1942/2008, p 110) goes so far as to suggest that “[a] pivotal character must not merely desire something. He must want it so badly that he will destroy or be destroyed in the effort to attain his goal”. Despite this colourful hyperbole, the word ‘desire’ will suffice for this dissertation because it applies directly to the problem applicable to the characters, and serves as motivation for their individual progression within the narrative. For this convention to work however, it is necessary for the audience to be able to relate to the necessity of the objective. In order for the translation of the character’s individual problem, and those posed by the overall narrative, to resonate emotionally with the consumers, audience identification with characters needs to be achieved.

The consumer should relate to the character’s situation, physical appearance, personal objective and value systems. If character identification is achieved, then emotional investment from the consumer is potentially applicable. It is for this reason that the establishment of this identification needs to transpire during the early stages of the narrative so that emotional investment of the consumer coincide with the character’s own emotional development, facilitated and exposed through narrative development.

A general example how a narrative progresses based on character investment is derived from identifying positive character traits exemplified through the character’s value systems. Cultural, religious and other social value systems that reinforce audience’s normative standpoints are more likely to be received in a positive light. Some characters and situational premises exhibit a strong challenge to achieving this. For example, the series *Dexter* is premised on a serial killer protagonist, foreign from general social affinity and suffering from social autism. Dexter must engage in a character charade with all in his social circle. But, as in accordance with Vladimir’s Propp’s identification of the hero, the audience are still expected to identify with his value system (Propp, 1968). The technique the series uses to counteract this issue is the practice of a moral code prescribed to him by his deceased father, and a character with whom he constantly interacts with as a manifestation of his conscience. In a similar manner, the intended audience of *He-Man* and *The Masters of The Universe* are expected to identify with He-man’s positive value systems to the extent where even violence is presented as a favourable attribute (See Figure 3.10). In any case, whether empathetic acceptance is achieved or not, an event must occur to effectively provide evidence of such character values. Thus, the narrative is developed in an attempt to highlight characters who in turn, develop the progression of the narrative.



**Figure 3.12: He Man and the Masters of the Universe**

Source: [www.madman.com.au](http://www.madman.com.au) Accessed 10 February, 2013

The sitcom *Friends* relied heavily on character development quite effectively, to the extent that all six main cast members commanded one million dollars an episode, in order to show up to work.<sup>6</sup> The characters forged such a significant role in the development of the narrative that the show ran for ten years consequently, outgrowing the original premise of the plot. No longer could the actors pass for their originally scripted characters of 20-somethings trying to find their way in New York.

Character identification also serves as an accessibility function, acting as a point of entry for narrative. By nature, people identify with other people, thus the personification of characters is necessary for identification to occur. Therefore, the need for in-depth ‘three dimensional’ characters are required for the audience to accept the authenticity of the narrative. Various methods of execution of such characters are practiced by directors and actors in an attempt to achieve believability of the constructed characters. The convention can be seen more easily in animation where human resemblance of character becomes essential to the success of identification. This does not denote that character resemblance need be realistic, but rather, that kinesic information conveying human emotion is achievable. The design for Nemo, in the animated Pixar feature *Finding Nemo*, would have to **adhere** to a facial resemblance closer to a human form than to a real clown fish which would limit the

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/news/ni0070117/> (Accessed 23 April, 2014)

potential for human identification and investment allowing for reaction of human emotions. The final version portrays larger more rounded eyes, allowing detailed facial information to translate to viewers. See comparative Figures 3.13 and 3.14 below.



**Figure: 3.13 and 3.14 A Clownfish and the animated characters with large rounded eyes.**

Source: [www.greatbarrierreefs.com.au](http://www.greatbarrierreefs.com.au) and [www.disneystore.com](http://www.disneystore.com)

Accessed 2 April, 2014.

In the case of *Transformers*, the animated protagonist of Optimus Prime is considered as insufficient for identification purposes, at least when applied to a mass audience, hence the reason that the human character Sam was included. See Figure 3.15 below. The current still to be released rendition of *The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, will no doubt follow a similar device with the human identification of April O Neil.



**Figure: 3.15 Transformers**

source: [www.hdwallpapers.in](http://www.hdwallpapers.in)

Both the characters themselves, as well as the situation they are presented, are reliant on a process of identification; and both propose an opportunity to progress the narrative. Situational relevance is once again subject to the relevance of human concerns or needs, of which Maslow outlines five: physical, security, social, esteem and self-actualisation (Maslow et al. 1954) These needs are largely culturally, age and position based, and thus certain needs may be more relevant and thus more marketable to certain audiences.

The characters situation is once again synonymous with the essence of disequilibrium, or an issue based problem. The nature of this also needs to be audience relatable. These very often consider socially relevant issues that concerns a society of a specific time and place, often forming the basis of thematic concerns investigated by the narrative. Socially thematic films such as *Blade Runner* have been associated structures of Fordism and capitalism (Harvey 1991), while closer to home, on the comic book side, many socially motivated adaptations have transpired over the years such as those in the *Batman* series, *X-Men* series, *Superman* and many others. The representational code is often in effect in these instances as comic book iconography in itself becomes symbolically representative of the social context that influences the thematic consideration of the time and place. For example, in the 90's **comic book and** animated series, *The X-Men: The Phalanx Covenant*, the storyline has been influenced by social conventions surrounding the Human Immune Virus (HIV). (See Figure Below)



**Figure 3.16: S5 E1 – X-Men The Animated Series The Phalanx Covenant (Part1)**

Source: Left: [www.ovguide.com](http://www.ovguide.com) Right: [www.blastfromthepasttv.com](http://www.blastfromthepasttv.com)

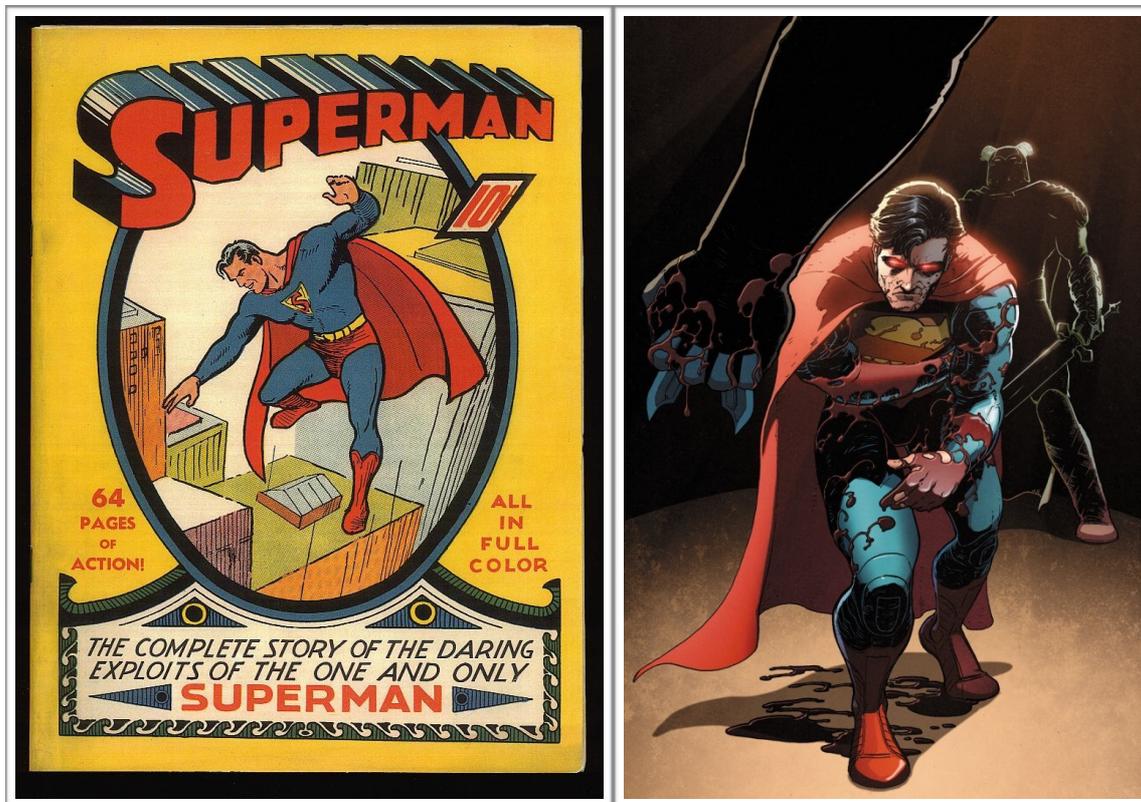
Accessed 15 February, 2014

In other instances, many comic book characters have been influenced by social values promoted in their time, such as those of traditional family values evident in the original Superman who appealed to the working class masses being exploited by their own Lex Luthers. ‘Kent’ was the downtrodden ‘everyman’, while Superman personified physical power O’Neil, D. 2009b.. Superman was an unabashed intimidator you could cheer for, a figure of hope when many Americans felt hopeless. Readers found in Superman a hero who represented “truth, justice, and the American way,” and his colorful escapades, told in the vibrant new medium of comic books, captured their imaginations.” (Misiroglu 2004, P 539).



**Figure 3.17: Superman Represents American Capitalism through the Years**

Source: <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/SHOWBIZ/04/25/superman.anniversary.go/>  
Accessed 15 February, 2014.



**Figure 3.18: Great Depression Superman vs Darker Influence Superman|**

Source: Left: [http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Superman\\_Vol\\_1\\_1](http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Superman_Vol_1_1)

Right: Copyright DC Comics Accessed 15 February, 2013.

The original premise of the *Superman* character was highly simplistic and developed by two high schoolers in the 1940s “Throughout the early 1930s, his creators, author Jerry Siegel and illustrator Joe Shuster, high-school chums from Cleveland, Ohio, were habitually rejected by professional publishers. (Misiroglu 2004, P 539). The relevance of the symbolic values exhibited by Superman capitalised on the vulnerabilities of the baby-boomer generation, hailing a self-imposed optimism. The character, formed out of Fordist society, the Great Depression and the psychological vulnerability accompanied by the Second World War, presented an ideal climate for the symbolic aspirations of the original Superman (O’ Neil 2009b). The comic prospered in its fantastical ideology, reflecting the values, concerns and fantasies which were susceptible to the context of the time and place. The invincible, indestructible character, proudly flying his red, white and blue outfit, the colours of the American flag, fulfilled the ultimate fantasy in the realisation of the fragility of human life and the defence of western values to protect that life. The symbolic development was so clearly influenced by the social values of the time that it has had to be re-contextualised to reflect contemporary value systems and social consciousness. This is evident in the remake

remake, in which Lois Lane is a single parent who smokes, and in the even more recent version, *Man of Steel*, in which Superman severely damages Metropolis, albeit in an attempt to save the city. The franchise does however present a more morally questionable character, a direction largely provoked by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's best-selling graphic novel and subsequent filmic interpretation *Watchman*, which is premised on the hypothesis of considering social ramifications of individuals with superpowers in 'the real world'. The darker premise seems to be more relevant to current social consciousness as is evident in the popularity of characters such as DC Comics' *Batman*, who is morally conflicted in his pursuit for justice. These darker sentiments have also come to the surface through many comics produced in the 90's such as *Spawn*, *The Sandman* and the *Marvel Civil War Series*, in which the latter pits superheros in a political standoff against each other. This trend initiated by *Watchmen*, followed suit into the DC universe in their *Injustice* series, continuing to be exploited in the comic book universe, resonating the social connection associated with political discourse. References of contemporary social consciousness is further indicated in *X-Men* which has been socially reconstructed to consider the feminist movement by increasing the number and prominence of female X-Men. The series originally saw Jean Grey as the only female on the team and whose involvement was largely a source of submissive companionship and sexual frustration for her male counterparts. In more recent issues, one of which will be analysed later, the climatic event is carried by a female protagonist, Psychlocke.

While this chapter considers the broader spectrum of cultural and representational codes of popular comic books, the following chapter analyses the specific textual meaning concerning grammatical elements which make up comic book vocabulary.

## Chapter Four

### Comic Book Vocabulary

The orthodox structural devices of the previous discussion on narrative, as well as those to follow, may be applicable to a variety of narrative formats, but would need a **unique** method of coding to include them into a specific medium. The filmic adaptation of JRR Tolkien's 1954 fantasy novel *Lord of the Rings*, for example, supplemented the descriptive information of the novel for the purposes of visual reconstructions in an attempt to structure the narrative through the alternative medium. In order for these structural objectives to be recognised in the medium of the comic book, the creators must write in the vocabulary practiced by the medium. We must then examine and understand comic book vocabulary before we focus on the fusion process of narrative and symbolism.

The vocabulary of comic books is vast, unique and should be understood in terms of its hybrid nature. Text has been substituted for a variety of interrelated codes that contribute to the meaning of being understood in both the singular sign and the structure of the overall narrative objective. I have found it useful for my own construction to refer to such vocabulary under the three codes outlined by Barthes (1977), namely, the symbolic, semantic and referential codes. The advantages of referencing Barthes are his unique stance in linking theoretical discourse in both structural narratives as well as in the study of the sign – **arguably** two of the three most influential components in the manifestation of the CBVR. (The third concerning the fusion of the two). It comes as a surprise then that there are so few texts that reference his theories when analysing the language of a medium that are intrinsically linked to such notions.

Apart from the chronological arrangements of events, as referred to above, I will also analyse the codes of plot or 'how' this information is made available to the reader. As previously mentioned, the nature of the CBVR is such that it exhibits a dichotomy of interrelated codes working in combination in a common direction for a dramatic narrative experience.

Barthes' codes are equally applicable to the current section. As a result of the dichotomous relationship inherent in the hybrid signifier, many of the codes explained below resonate with much of the previously discussed narrative structural makeup. The only difference between these and the codes previously considered is their implementation into the *narrative framework* rather than the symbolic *framework*. The codes in discussion may not be a necessity in terms of the development of comic book language, but they are associated with forms of narrative and therefore are an important notion to consider in the language of comic

books which are narrative based. It is important to note that the actual sign need not exclusively conform to any one of the five codes, since one sign may simultaneously exist in unison with multiple codes. That is, the sign or hybrid signifier may represent multiple layers of meaning. For example, the symbolic code could be broken down into various components of the semic code. The symbolic code concerns symbolism within the text, or in Barthes' (1977:110) terms, the symbolic is concerned with "[d]etails in the story that are interpreted on a figurative level". In this case, the text reverts to the hybridity of interrelated codes; the make-up of which would be semic in nature, and the referential code is always in effect to some degree.

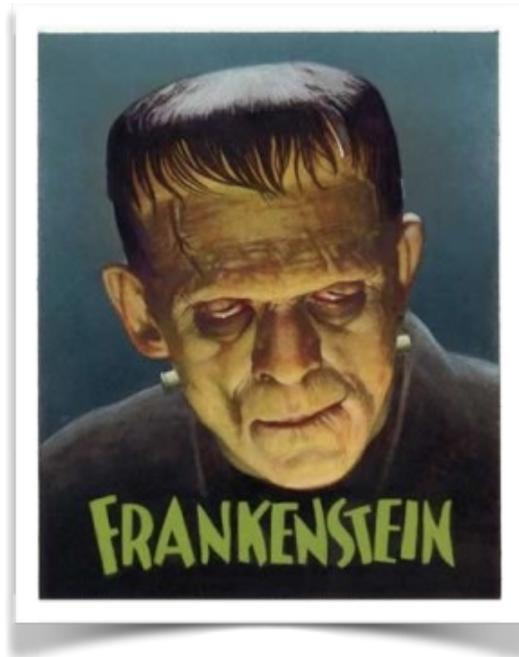
The symbolic code works within the framework of the cultural or referential code and provides the foundation for the semic code. While the symbolic codes concerns figurative interpretation on a larger contextual layer, it is the semic code we need to look at when deconstructing the signs of comic books because this code concerns the actual comic book text. In the context of comic book vocabulary, the actual physical individual hybrid signs themselves are then 'semes', and it is only in their contextual application that they may also extend to other codes as well.

## **Medium as a Container**

The medium of the comic book confines the visual rhetoric into a specified framework which, depending on how it is used, can potentially aid or detract from narrative engagement. The medium can be considered as a container in which the elements of the visual rhetoric of comic books are forced to interact. If the medium of the comic book were to change, the visual rhetoric would be forced to change with it. In the case of traditional comic books this, for example, could be in the form of an A4 page which for commercial purposes would be limited to 21 pages. This page limitation means that all narrative progression for the issue would have to work within that many pages. The choice of medium therefore, has narrative implications because all checkpoints of the story need to be met within these parameters, thus being confined by space and time. The physical size of the presented symbolism in which the narrative is expected to work is then also affected in relation what symbolic details can or cannot be included.

When considering answers as to why and how meaning is generated, we must also consider other factors apart from the physical, such as the socio-economic. The need for profit in a capitalistic society has played a part in influencing the development of comic books and consequently, it is also an influential factor in the existence of the CBVR. This influence has a direct impact on the CBVR, denoting the physical platform the messages exist on. For example, the type of paper used for printing, as well as the creative framework applicable to comics, is primarily an attempt used to maximise profits. To illustrate both of these points we should consider Marvel's character, *The Hulk*. Creative influences may have been both profit driven, as well as conformist to physical reproduction issues, but the vision

of the Hulk was created with the intent to encapsulate three already popular, and profit producing characters, namely, *Fantastic Four*'s, *The Thing*, Mary Shelley's, *Frankenstein* and Robert Stevenson's, *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. (Misiroglu 2004, P 257). See Figures 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 below.



**Figure 4.1: Frankenstein**

Source: [tvtropes.org](http://tvtropes.org) Accessed 15 March, 2014.



**Figure 4.2: Fantastic Four's The Thing and The Hulk**

Source: [comicvine.com](http://comicvine.com) Accessed 15 March, 2014.



**Figure 4.3 : Dr Jekyll Mr Hyde Influence**

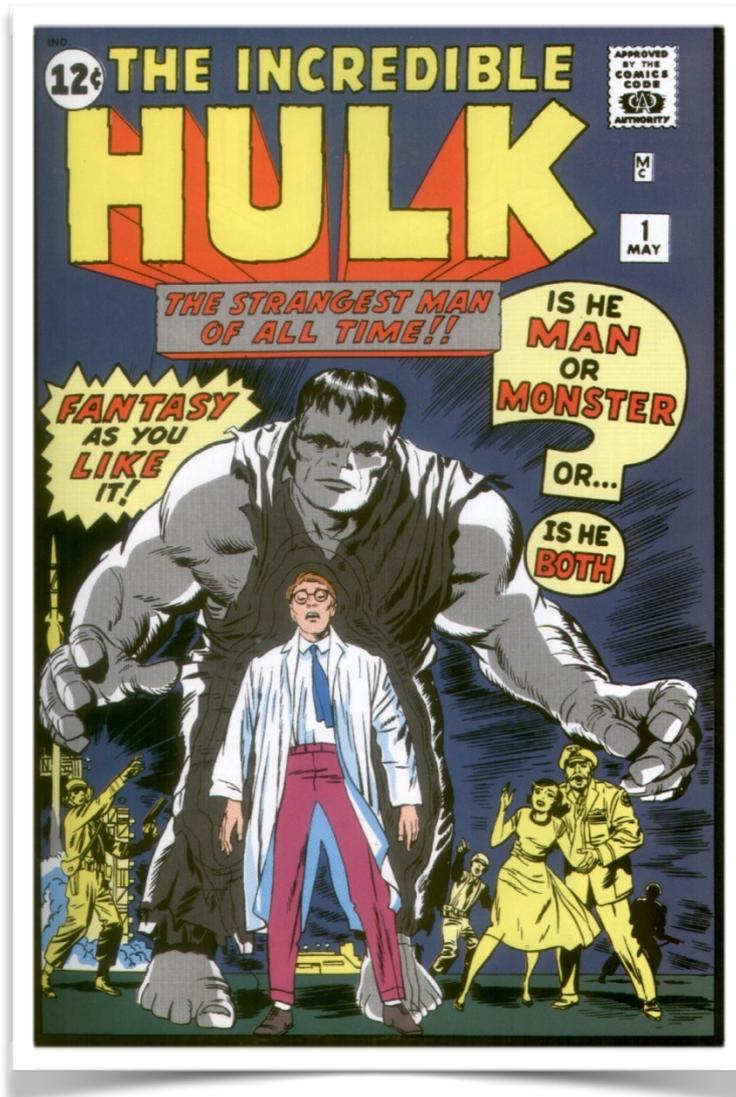
Source Left: [www.horrormovieproject.net](http://www.horrormovieproject.net) Right: [www.camisetaherois.tumblr.com](http://www.camisetaherois.tumblr.com)

Accessed 4 April, 2014.

The physical printing process influenced a change in the original colour of Hulk's skin from the originally intended grey to green, which in turn was influential in the creation of further creative decisions for the treatment of *The Hulk* (see Figure 4.3 and 4.4).

‘Unfortunately,’ Lee recalled, ‘in our first issue the printer had trouble keeping the shade of gray consistent from page to page. On some pages his skin was light gray, on others it was dark gray, and on some it looked black. Too confusing. So for the next issue I changed his skin color to green, a color the printer had less trouble with. Although it was done on a whim, it turned out to be a fortuitous choice because it gave rise to many memorable nicknames for me to employ, such as the Jolly GreenGiant, Ol’ Greenskin, the Green Goliath, etc. (Misiroglu 2004, P 259).

The above example also indicates how creative decisions can manifest in response to a technological impediment, or how technological limitations of a medium can spur contingency approach to the creative formulation of end result.



**Figure 4.4. : Incredible Hulk Issue Source:** [http://marvel.com/comics/issue/8906/incredible\\_hulk\\_1962\\_1](http://marvel.com/comics/issue/8906/incredible_hulk_1962_1)

Accessed 15 March, 2014

One of the characteristics of the information age is that the medium itself exists for purposes of being utilised for profit. Ultimately, any profit-driven comic book, and certainly those involved in the case studies of this work, are controlled by capitalistic incentives. Consequently, the creative approaches and even the language used feel this presence. The structure of the narrative and the execution thereof is therefore aimed to capitalise on the profits associated with the purchasing multiple comic books that help to extend the narrative. In turn, this would be determined by market demand for comic books at a market related price. These factors would inevitably affect profit projections for printing, specs, ink etc, *factors which perpetuate the creative decisions of the comic book.*

## Symbolic Structures

Until this point semiotic theory has managed to elude theoretical focus, avoiding an involved discussion. Without transgressing into a tremendous amount of detail we can consider the basic semiotic understanding which will provide the conceptual framework which the codes in question work within.

Embedded in the theory of structuralism, Ferdinand de Saussure (1974) identified existence of the sign on three levels:

- 1) signifier (word);
- 2) signified (meaning); and
- 3) Referent (example).

For de Saussure, ‘denotation’ concerns the literal meaning while connotation relies on the personal meaning associated with the reader. In comic books, the signifier would concern the resultant hybridity of codes not the words or text alone. Julia Round defines the ‘hybrid signifier’ as something in which “multiple signifiers interact to create a single unified signifier (such as words and pictures within a comic book panel)” (Round 2007, p 321). The concept is reiterated by others under different descriptions. Eisner refers to emergence of meaning through the constitution of the final image and words. He argues that “[t]he format of the comic book presents both word and image and the reader is required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. The regimens of art (e.g. perspective, symmetry, brushstroke) and the regimens of literature (e.g. grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed on each other” (Eisner 1990, pg 41). Gluibizzi reiterates the observation of dually driven meanings as opposed to over a supported meaning concerning the relationship of the text and image. “Graphic novels and comics push beyond the boundaries of illustrated books to the point where illustrations and text are equivalent, each driving the other, rather than the illustrations supporting or attempting to explain the text.” (Gluibizzi 2007, 41). Pratt refers to the hybridity required in writing a narrative with pictures, but also extends the hybrid nature to include the previously discussed component of narrative. “The pictures are crucial to the narrative construction of comics: words alone will not do all the narrative work. This suggests that comics have both literary and pictorial narrative dimensions: it is a hybrid art form that employs narrative strategies closely connected to literature” (Pratt, 2009, p 1).

The concept is referred to by Eisner as a ‘mix’: “[w]hen the two are ‘mixed’ the words become welded to the image and no longer serve to describe but rather to provide sound, dialogue and connective passages” (Eisner 1990, pg 122). Eisner indicates that upon the merging of text and image a “precise statement” (Eisner 1990, p 122) is pronounced and therefore no further interpretation is necessary. I personally disagree with the notion that the words and images offer no further descriptions having already made the case for the

provisions of the potentially simultaneous placement of symbolic, referential, proairetic and hermeneutic functions; all of which require deconstructive and contextual interpretative processes. The layering of information refers to the encoding of meaning onto various levels of denotative sophistication. The top layer, for example, may serve the purpose of exposition, while increasingly subtle levels of meaning may reinforce hermeneutic or thematic references. The possibility of layering indicates the necessity of a critically interpretive engagement indicating that depending on the layering sophistication written into the comic, Eisner's statement may not apply to certain comics.

In light of this we should redefine the Comic Book Visual Rhetoric to *'how and why the hybrid signifier communicates meaning'*. Consequently, we shall utilize Round's (2007) concept of the 'hybrid signifier' throughout the rest of this dissertation because this renders pervasive signification as permissible. Meaning is constructed through more than words and images when considering narrative structure, as will be explored in the section on the evolution of comic books and new media. Standard reading practice involves the recognition of a word in its entirety. In learning to read however, it is not uncommon for the reader to identify separate letters which require mental piecing together in a discovery, rather than recognition process. A similar logic applies to the comic book. We see or visually read the end result of the hybrid codes. It is only on closer analytical inspection that we see the constitution of the individual contributions of the codes, as much as after learning to read we stop spelling the words out and see only the word itself.

Writing of the comic book occurs through the combination of both words and images attempting to communicate an idea and simultaneous aesthetic. Eisner reflects on this and argues that, "[i]n sequential art the two functions [words and images] are irrevocably interwoven. Sequential art is the act of weaving a fabric" (Eisner 1990, p 122). It is my argument that the hybrid signifier exists on at least two levels; that of the unified sum of its parts, as well as the individual semes themselves. Similar to the notion discussed later in the dissertation regarding Manovich's (2001) view on modularity, the independent signifiers that combine to form the hybrid signifier work to form the overall hybrid signifier of the final product inside the panel. The modular nature of the hybrid sign would then continue to formulate the arrangement of the panels on the page, which would then be a hybrid signifier in itself. This is a characteristic *is* unique to print in so far as the physical platform only allows for a certain amount of printed information to appear on paper.

Jacques Derrida (1993) observed that signs are understood through context and thus, because contextual situations are dynamic and unique, meaning can only be deferred not contained. Therefore, there is a dichotomous relationship between denotation and connotation. This implies that since the language of comic books is contextual with regard to the dynamics of the narrative, culture, society and medium, the language of comics will develop, constantly evolving and re-establishing itself alongside these elements. As Scott McCloud observes, "[i]f comics spectacularly varied past is any indication, comics future

will be virtually impossible to predict using the standards of the present” (McCloud 1994, p 21). Of course this observation is not exclusively applicable to the language of comic books, but to all languages. It could be argued that it is responsible for the development of the signified semes you, as reader of this dissertation, are currently reading, and in a larger sense of the establishment and continued development of the English language. For example, the word ‘D’oh’, popularised by the social icon Homer Simpson, is now officially recognised as part of the English language, along with numerous other words created from new arising social contexts. This is indicative with terms such as ‘Google it’ or ‘tweeting’, and numerous other examples. Contextual re-establishment of language is not only introduced by new additions, but also through the re-contextualisation of existing words.

The English language is different to what it used to be in earlier centuries. Take for instance the word ‘verbal’, associated in contemporary reference concerning words which are oral in nature. The origins, however are rooted in the late 15th century and “describ[e] a person who deals with words rather than things” (Apple Dictionary, np). This demonstrates that the signified referred to the signifier without specifying a medium. In other words, the word ‘verbal’ referred to the form of words, *including those handwritten*. However, due to popular use, the word has been re-contextualised, often referred to as oral or spoken, in nature.

As with spoken language, comics will also continue to undergo a similar re-contextualisation as far as language is concerned. McCloud (1994) refers to meaning established through contextualisation in the process he refers to as ‘closure’, which involves observing part but perceiving the whole. McCloud (1994, p 60) goes on to explain that as comics themselves provide constant closure as their method of language, “[c]omics [are] closure”. The way in which comics provide closure helps to contribute to their language; however, McCloud’s notion of closure would extend to most forms of narrative and language. In a novel, for example, the juxtaposition of two words indicates meaning. This notion also happens in film, as noted in the theory of montage by Eisenstein, where two separately juxtaposed images provide the basis for a third implied meaning. This thought process is still, however, in line with meaning being formed from within specific contextual frameworks as noted by de Saussure and Derrida. This provides us with an example of how both contextual layering can manifest in terms of the visual literacy of a comic books’ approach, as well as how the transitions of panels indicate contextual meaning through the eyes of the reader. While context is always a factor in any meaning system, including all semic signifiers involved in the composition of the panel, the actual seme of the panel is important due to the implications it resonates on meaning. While semic comic book codes are to be discussed later, I have pre-empted the discussion for ‘gutters’ and ‘panels’ because the context in which they are referred to by renowned comic book theorists Scott McCloud and Will Eisner borders closely with this section of meaning production processed through contextual frameworks and thus validate a sooner discussion.

Eisner (1990, 45) defines gutters as “[t]he space between panels”; an observation reiterated by Damian Duffy who explains that “[t]he structure, images placed in frames called ‘panels,’ [are] separated by white space called ‘gutters’” (Duffy 2009, p 4). The semic code of the gutter is the space that occurs between panels in comic books and, according to McCloud, essential to the functioning of comic book vocabulary because it requires the reader to engage with McCloud’s notion of ‘closure’, presented by the visuals and iconography. “Comic panels fracture both time and space offering a jagged staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality.” (Eisner 1990, p 67) McCloud’s understanding that gutters help form meaning is closely related to Sergei Eisenstein’s notion of montage and third meaning. As reiterated by Pratt, “Greg Cwiklik contends that all of McCloud’s illustrations of the operation of closure in comics could just as easily be done with film: ‘closure is essentially what is referred to in film as montage’” (Pratt 2009, p 114). Pratt’s own view of this interconnection is again noted in relation to film language in which “the notion of suture, wherein the viewer brings order and unity to perception through an unconscious process of mentally ‘sewing’ the film together from disparate element” (Pratt 2009, p 111). Eisner refers to this process by emphasising the role recognition and projection based on the experience of the reader: “[t]he sequential artist ‘sees’ for the reader because it is inherent to narrative art that the requirement on the viewer is not so much analysis as recognition. The task then is to arrange the sequence of events (or pictures) so as to bridge the gaps in action. Given these the reader may fill the intervening events from experience.” (Eisner 1990, p 40).

The common thread between all of this is the method of arranging the images that simulate meaning in the minds of the observers. One must question the emphasis put on the actual ‘gutter’ though, because they seem to resemble a symptom rather than the cause of how meaning is constructed. McCloud notes that it is the element of closure which is the powerful contributor to the experience, and indicates that “it is the space between the panels where the magic lies. It is rather the separation of images provoking the reader to hypothesize the missing narrative.” Indeed, in some applications of the frame, the outline of the box is eliminated entirely with equal effect. The act of framing separates the scenes and acts as a punctuator” (McCloud 1994, p 65). Separation need not only conform to the physical parameters of panels, as we shall see later when considering motion books and McCloud’s own idea of the infinite canvas that various methods of separation exist. The gutter may be representative of closure, but they are not necessarily the same thing as there are multiple ways of both separation and closure within comics. However, all semes of comic book vocabulary rely on ‘closure’ in some sense.

Gutters are associated with the transitions between panels which further aid the application of meaning. As Pratt notes “the sequence of panels that constitute a comic, combined with the reader’s ability to use closure, can convey far more narrative information than can be achieved through a single picture” (Pratt 2009, p 111). McCloud identifies six methods of panel to panel transitions:

1. Moment to moment, requiring limited imagination for contextual engagement;
2. Action to action, indicating moments just before and after the exercise of a particular action;
3. Subject to subject, described by McCloud as ‘staying within a scene or idea’;
4. Scene to scene, which indicates relationships between different locations;
5. Aspect to aspect described by McCloud as bypassing time and “sets the wandering eye on different aspects of a place idea or mood”; and
6. The non-sequiter, offering no relationship between panels (McCloud 1994, p 72).

Drawing on the previous statement, and indicating that a comic book contains its own culture of language, we see that these transitions indicate a distinct pattern in Western culture when contrasted to those of Japanese comics. In a quantitative analysis undertaken by McCloud, he concludes that there is a corresponding rhythmical relationship in the frequency of panel transitions identifiable in western comics. His study concluded that 65% of comics were event or narrative driven (action to action); 20% (subject to action); and 15% (scene to scene). The breakdown for Japanese comics, according to McCloud, offer a higher affinity for establishment of mood or sense of place, where the sequence is often open to interpretation, exhibit a much greater ratio of moment to moment, aspect to aspect, and subject to subject transitions. These results indicate that the design of the narrative discerns the pattern of the hybrid signifier and serves as an example of how the narrative objective corresponds directly with the design of the CBVR.

The common observation of the semic nature of comic books is evident in the practice of comic book creators and theorists, Eisner and McCloud, who break down units of meaning in comic books which could be grouped in meaning forming within panels and in between panels. Meanings produced between panels include the use of gutters, transitions of panels, the arrangement of panels, montage, as well as the panel borders. Meanings produced within panels include methods of illustration, colour, lighting, lettering, speech bubbles, composition, blocking arrangements, framing, kinetics, speed-lines, perspective, and representation of the human form. Dichotomy exists in representation of elements such as that of space and time - an ever present seme in the manifestation of the CBVR to which all others contribute in some way to its representation.

## **Space - Time Continuum**

In comics, space and time are intrinsically and inextricably linked. “In learning to read comics we all learned to perceive time spatially, for in the world of comics, time and space are one and the same” (McCloud 1994, 92). This means that whenever we consider spatial relationships in comics, we are also considering chronological relationships. This also means that narrative execution factors involving rhythm and pacing of the CBVR, which will

be discussed later, are intrinsically linked in the proxemic properties and relationships of the hybrid signifier. The use of panels are referred to by both McCloud and Eisner as common methods of suggesting the capturing of the time and space dimensions of the event. “Once established and set in sequence the box or panel becomes the criterion by which to judge the illusion of time” (Eisner 1990, p 60). This does not mean that the panel itself is an indication of time any more than the actual gutter is responsible for closure; instead, time is not expressed by the actual panel, but rather the information suggested by the hybrid signifier contained within. As McCloud reiterates, “[t]he durations of that time and the dimensions of that space are defined more by the contents of the panel than by the panel itself” (1994, 93).

A single panel does not necessarily denote a single moment. As McCloud states, “[o]ur eyes have been well trained by the photograph and by representational art to see any single continuous image as a single instant in time. But the actions [...] we see occurring seemingly at the same time obviously can’t be” (McCloud 1994, p 96). The panel is rather a “general indicator of time and space being divided” (McCloud 1994, p 99). Eisner focuses on the nature of the construct as illusionary, designed in both the minds of the creator and reader. He opines that “[t]ime is more illusionary: we measure and perceive it through the memory of experience” (Eisner 1990, p 27).

We must take note of Barthes’ symbolic and semic codes when considering the content of the panel because the combination of individual semes influences the panel to adopt a symbolic nature in itself. The content or hybrid signifier depicts a suggested timeframe that indicates that various semes contribute to the duration of the panel, which may not necessarily all be of the same length. The individual semes provide a multitude of individual indications of time and space division. The codes are made available to the reader with the expectation that all combined contextual information presented to them through the combination of time-based signifiers will be considered. This is an example of where the comic book differs from art forms such as photography or film because in comic books, time is symbolically represented and subjective to contextual interpretation by the reader. A panel provides information to suggest a time frame, **but reader subjectivity determines the final interpretation**. This also serves as an example of where the comic book creator and the reader have to ‘meet’ in order for the CBVR to manifest.

This is practically achieved in traditional print comics through various methods of framing time. “[M]ovement or transitional occurrences deployed within the perimeter of these borders and depicted by recognizable symbols, become part of the vocabulary used in the expression of time.” (Eisner 1990, p 30). Some noted methods include the framing of action and the framing of sound. Eisner provides insight on how this is practically achieved in print comics “by the use of illusions and symbols and their arrangement” (Eisner 1990, p 28).

## Framing of Action

‘Framing’ refers to the containment of specific image-elements within a panel. When actions are framed the suggestion is that all events represented in the frame occur simultaneously, leaving it to the reader to hypothesize the duration, and to provide a general measure of the time framed in the composition. Eisner refers to an example of event based motion from a sequence in the comic book ‘The Spirit’ in which the villain attempts to burn evidence. “The time lapse is predicated on the knowledge of how long it takes for papers to ignite and burn” (Eisner 1990, p 31).

Although I have already mentioned that participation from the reader is a necessary requirement of time-based delineation, I personally believe the part it plays is undervalued in the process. Just as in narrative progression, *suspension of disbelief* is an important element. Unless wilful ignorance prevails, the reader has to constantly engage in order to both understand the time and space based signification, **and consciously accept it**. The reader has to want to engage with the subject. In many cases the actual time it would take for an occurrence of an event to take place is unrealistic. The reader then has a choice to either ignore, or concede, the suggestion of delineation. When we focus on narrative execution we should also consider that if the narrative is to be successful in engaging the reader, it should not detract from the readers’ current state of emotional engagement, **risking a decreased interconnected involvement**.

Actions that have been suggested to have occurred before or after a specific frame, but not actually illustrated in the frame itself, help to condense space and time. “There is an unquestioned relationship here between what the reader perceives as flow of event and what is frozen in time by the panel” (Eisner 1990, p 41). Suggestions of action affect the narrative rhythm which is interlocked with time (Eisner 1990, p 32). As the rhythm increases, time is compressed. This is often achieved by increasing the number of panels in a specified area so that “when there is a need to compress time, a greater number of panels are used” (Eisner 1990, p 32). Interestingly, a similar convention of increasing panels is used in film to indicate time patterns, such as time slowing down through the implementation of slow motion. Instead of panels however, film captures frames. The actual method of time delineation is enhanced through an increased rate of captured frames. Practically speaking, the more frames captured, the less visual information is lost in between frames, allowing for a smoother display of motion when the frames are played back at a slower projection. There is a connection between the two mediums which both subscribe to the rule that the narrative and contextual information connected to faster actions mean less time for the brain to process action. The processing time it takes to register the increased volume of information presented by the hybrid signifier in a shorter time, along with the associations one has with the experience thereof, is what affects the perceived rhythm associated with the perception of a given number of panels or frames.

Eisner identified that the rhythm is also signified by various patterns, shapes, panels and speech bubbles. For example, a jagged shape may be indicative of urgency, speeding up the rhythm, thereby suggesting time passes faster. A slower rhythm may be indicated in the lack of action producing, what McCloud refers to, a ‘sense of timelessness’. “Because of its unresolved nature such a panel may linger in the readers mind and its presence may be felt in the panels which follow it” (McCloud 1994, 110). This also considers the proairetic quality the scripting of this signifier may include and the structural interweaving it has on narrative execution.

Actions and motions are closely linked to one another and, just as is the case with sound, motion must be visually depicted in the print medium to depict time. This can be achieved by what Eisner refers to as ‘speed lines’ (Eisner 1990, p 25), while McCloud references ‘motion lines’ or ‘zip ribbons’ (McCloud 1994, p 111). Other methods depicted by McCloud refer to the ‘*polyptych*’ – a “moving figure or figures is imposed over various backgrounds” – and what McCloud refers to as ‘subjective motion’ which puts the reader in a point-of-view scenario. McCloud indicates that the reason for this is that subjective motion “operates on the assumption that if observing a moving object can be involving, being that object should be more so” (McCloud 1994, p 110).

McCloud identifies the manner in which that the alteration of the panel also alters the space time relationship. Even when a panel is applied over a continuous image the timeliness of the frame flourishes. Changing the framing of the panel alters the contextual information which either adds or subtracts available information in the scene and thus encapsulates the occurring events or action within the scene. The plotting of panels on the page is another factor indicative of time. McCloud notes that the current panel is always considered as the present, while the panels read before and after represent the past and future respectively. Practically however, the eye retains is in constant referral to both present and past, depending on the panel arrangement. Other forms of actions could concern more conventional forms of time association such as sun and moon positioning, sequential movement thereof, or more fixed time indicators such as the time on a clock.

## **Framing of Sound**

Apart from motion, sound also shares an intrinsic relationship with time. Representations of sound are therefore semic indicators of duration. Various methods presenting audio induced semes exist in comics. The limitations of the print medium render sound through graphic semes, with the objective of presenting a visual onomatopoeia. As we shall see later when investigating the adaption of the CBVR into digital media, audio semes are referenced with actual audio. Traditionally in print comics, these are captured through use of speech bubbles or graphically enhanced typology. Time is qualified through the inclusion of speech and sounds and “words introduce time by representing that which can only exist in time – sound (McCloud, 1994, p 95). Just as the lack of action is indicative of time slowing

down, a lack of sound also exhibits time duration properties. McCloud notes that sound accelerates the action by invoking a time frame the sound must occur within; conversely the absence of sound slows the passing of time. “[I]n an otherwise silent captioned panel, the single moment can actually be held” (McCloud 1994, p 98). Eisner references speech bubbles in this regard by indicating their ability to alter perceptions of time by changing the spatial position of the bubble “in relation to the reader, or the action, or their position with respect to the speaker” (Eisner 1990, p 28).

## **General Comic Book Literacy**

Artists constantly experiment with new methods of creating meaning in art. Comics follow suit, with certain artists or movements tinkering with the hybrid signifiers encapsulated under the CBVR. It is therefore quite a task to express all possible semes present in comic books that transmit meaning. There are however, a few more general rules besides space and time that are used in the art of visual narrative. These elements are used by the reader to establish visual comic book literacy; the development of which is reliant on mass exposure to literacy practices. This therefore, explains why, for example, comics in Japan have developed differently to comics in the West. We shall briefly consider some common features.

Illustration and representation of all semes offer an opportunity to fine-tune the hybrid signifier to achieve its semic symbolic aesthetic design for execution purposes of narrative exposition as well as engagement. For example, the method of illustration is extended not only to the content of the words and images, but also to the design structures necessary for translation and literacy purposes that can be manipulated by the comic book creator to extend to the aesthetic. Structures such as panels, text boxes, borders, fonts, and the like, all offer opportunities for such purposes.

A basic literacy convention of Western readers is that the eye scans from left to right when reading text and images. In most cases, concerning the print medium, the hybrid signification is contained within panels which assume the left to right pattern. “The (western culture) reader is trained to read each page independently from left to right, top to bottom. Panel arrangements on the page assume this” (Eisner 1990, p 43). This arguably, provides a weakness for the CBVR of the print medium because the page cannot vary its physical display once printed, and therefore, the reader’s eye can wander ahead of panels and view information that is not in line with the intended chronological structuring, [a potential hindrance for pacing concerns](#).

Panels are semic in themselves and further complicated by the panel arrangement. We assume, as mentioned, that panel structures are followed from left to right, but at times we would have to re-evaluate this depending on the relationship of the page. “As closure between panels becomes more intense reader interpretation becomes far more

elastic” (McCloud 1994, p 86). The arrangement of the panels form an overall expression in the structure of the page which acts in itself as an overall panel when printed, and the reading of which, in turn, would be influenced by the panel arrangement within.

Subjective associations of the reader are denoted, depending on the actual manner in which panels, text boxes, borders, fonts, are illustrated. “While there is no universally agreed upon convention for expressing tense through the outline of a frame, the ‘character’ of the line - as in the case of sound, emotion or thought creates a hieroglyphic” (Eisner 1990, p 46). The high contrast of patterns and acute sharp angles of a jagged illustrated line could, for example, be associated with a disequilibrium and emotionally interpreted in combination with the contextual information of the accompanying semes in the visual composition as unnerving, anxiety inducing or some other form of increased intensity of dramatic action. Eisner explains that “[t]he jagged outline implies an emotionally explosive action. It conveys a state of tension and is related to the crisp crackle associated with radio or television transmission of sound.” Eisner highlights the necessity of subjective interpretation on the part of the reader in the above quotation. McCloud references methods utilised by popular art works in an attempt to draw parallels between their method of illustration and their emotional signification. Among them, was the work of artist Kandinsky who conceptualised the notion of synaesthetics, which concerned the attempt to unite the senses by uniting art forms which appealed to the senses (McCloud 1990, p 123). McCloud goes on to suggest that the incorporation of some of these theories are seen in comic creation and outlined in various physical properties of line illustrations shared with their fine-art cousins (McCloud 1990, p 125). This ignites the notion of visual onomatopoeia, earlier discussed with regards to its symbolic representation of sound. McCloud refers to this symbol as a “visual metaphor” (McCloud 1990, p 125).

Basic contextual literacy concerning proxemic relationships needs to be conveyed for narrative continuity purposes, the manifestation of which also needs to coincide with the emotional and narrative execution due the nature of hybridity of the signifier. All purposes of the signifier need to combine in the same instance in print because they cannot be altered once published. Closure, or the third meaning, is unavoidably necessary for this occurrence, but enough contextual information needs to be made available in order for the link to be made by the reader. A requirement shared by the visual narrative of film, as Richard Stromgren and Martin Norden (1984, p 19) note, is that a “particular shot will be identified according to the relative distances of the other shots that make up a scene”. The manner of continuity in comics, while sharing some similarities with film, is often vastly different in its coverage. Panels encapsulate the story in unequal sizes and the symbolic nature of the composition represents a subjectively interpretive time span. The difference of the time-space continuum and its ability to manipulate its frame size are a unique advantage as a narrative device in comics because it allows these comics to venture into artistic areas of

graphical representation that film would not be able to do. “In other graphic arts, the limits of the frame are adjustable according to the content” (Stromgren and Norden 1984, p 31).

The basic exposition of continuity could include information that concerned the contextual establishment of information concerning such factors as:

- the proximity of characters in relation to each other,
- to the reader and the method of framing,
- continuity of eye-lines, vector room as well as contextual proxemic information such as time of day and location. See Figures Below



**Figure 4.5 : Left Children of Xaphan, Issue 5. Framing indicates Proxemic information of characters in relation to each other and their environment.**

**Figure 4.6: Right Children of Xaphan Issue 11**

Source: Children of Xaphan, Astrolabe Entertainment FaceBook: <https://www.facebook.com/astrolabeinorbit> Deviant Art <http://xxxdesmodusxxx.deviantart.com/>

The opportunities for emotional provocation of the reader may occur inside the panel composition, which then forms the semic notions of information presented with narrative bias. The manner in which this is illustrated presents an inherent bias in the portrayal of the characters and action, presenting opportunities for emotional exploitation of the image. We have established in determining *comic book literacy* that the functioning of comics is, *in its*

own way, a form of language and as such, it is important to remember that it is stimulated in the way that language is used *stimulating emotion from images and signifiers*.

While *emotional stimulation* could potentially be addressed by any of the various signifiers, there are common exploitations of certain semes that seem to lend themselves more usefully to the emotional reception of readers. Consequently, these factors have become common methods of provoking narrative based emotional connotations. This can be achieved in a variety of ways, such as methods of grading, blocking, perspective, and framing (Eisner 1990, p 61).

Framing subjects in relation to the composition and other characters and objects may lend to sub-textual associations intended at a specified point in narrative. Characters relationships to each other and their perspectives indicate compositional bias. (see Figures 4.5 and 4.6). Generally speaking, eye-line subject framing suggests neutrality while high angles highlight superiority and low angles, inferiority. *Images* with more than one character in the frame may represent some form of chronologically bound sub-textual relationship of the characters. Over the shoulder and point of view frames are generally associated with increased intensity and tend to put the reader into a subjective position. When these positions are combined with certain angles this may indicate, for example, antagonistic relationships (Eisner 1990, p 44). Close-ups, for example, offer opportunities to deal with detailed kinesic information, facilitating identification of character emotion: “[c]lose-ups carry the viewer into the scene [...], and uncover that which is indistinguishable in the longer view of things” (Stromgren and Norden 1984, p 22). The angles of the framing indicate a perceptive relationship between the subjects and the reader, a rule often practiced in film as well. “By controlling the perspective, the filmmaker can place the viewer in a variety of positions: involved participant in an unfolding drama, neutral observer, even an omniscient overseer looking down from on height, to name several” (Stromgren and Norden 1984, p 26). Control of the composition may work as an effective tool to provoke emotion, stimulate suspense and create anticipation which “helps build suspense, surprise or general viewer interest” (Stromgren and Norden 1984, p 32). In Figure 4.5 above, the character Mikajda (left) is on the same eye level as Basium (right), however she is placed in front of her indicating a superior power dynamic. The following frames however reveal Basium's size as larger in appearance, reestablishing the assumed power dynamic. A similar method is evident in the following frame on the right where the character Desmodus (middle top frame) is confronted by Angels Assero (Left) and Angelus Custos (Right), where the high angle framing convention suggests that Desmodus is looking down the angels, while the following frames incrementally suggest an adversarial relationship forming. By the third frame the proportion of the frame is dominated by the angels, indicating a shift in the power dynamic.

The grading of light and colour can also serve as a powerful tool for emotional reaction. On an aesthetic level, the type of light used may influence the tone of the narrative and characters. For example, ‘Rembrandt lighting’ offers high perceptions of dynamic range

and helps create seemingly three dimensional images, providing the illusion of depth while still adhering to the perception of realism. An even bolder contrast is evident in ‘chiaroscuro lighting’, characterised by its high levels of contrast between dark and light, lack of diffusion and the fast rate of change from light to dark generally associated with a sense of unease. Comic books have the advantage of maintaining hyper-realism in their illustrative process because they do not present the continuous reality of ‘real life’ that many film genres are bound to. This affords comic books the opportunity to use lighting inconsistencies while still acquiring reader acceptance, offering potential for emotionally evoking symbolic representation.

Another aspect of grading worth exploring concerns colour. “Photographers and other graphic artists have long demonstrated the important contributions of color to images of real or imagined settings of action” (Stromgren and Norden 1984, p 41). Colour is culturally linked to emotional responses when exploited in a certain context. *Children of Xaphan*, for example, exhibits high levels of desaturated colour in the comic’s panels which prompts a darker more bleak effect, while bolder saturated grading is reserved for the covers and character posters of most comics in an attempt to compensate for the lack of narrative involvement of the single image. Colour combinations, or colour schemes, can also provoke similar responses in their inclusion, with patterns such as complimentary, triad, or monochromatic. Colour associations may be culturally based and linked to character, for example, the colour purple and its associations with royalty or ‘earthy’ colours of green and brown. See Figures 4.7 and 4.8 below.



**Figure 4.7: Above. Children of Xaphan Issue 4, uses an earthy colour scheme reiterating the earthy, tribal feeling.**



**Figure 4.8: Right Children of Xaphan Issue 2, uses a ‘royal’ colour scheme, reinforcing formal associations.**

Source: Children of Xaphan, Astrolabe Entertainment, FaceBook: <https://www.facebook.com/astrolabeinorbit> ; Deviant Art <http://xxxdesmodusxxx.deviantart.com/>

Grading presents potential for plot progression as indicated in the common relay of colour and lighting differences encoded at strategic points in the narrative. This is often achieved through extreme opposite visual contrasts, for example, in the film version of *Lord of the Rings* (2001) the bright saturated colours presented at the equilibrium stage of narrative are substituted for a darker grimmer feel, disappearing at moments of disequilibrium as evident in once the characters reach the House of Elrond and the return to the Shire. See Figure Below.



**Figure 4.9: Lord of the Rings Fellowship of the Ring**



**Figure 4.10: Lord of the Rings; The Fellowship of the Ring**

A harsh shadow on the face of a character is another common technique to help build suspense by the withholding of information (Figures 4.9 and 4.10). It is generally accepted that representation of comics are symbolic, however the method of representation implemented, as a result of the illustrative approach, may be subject to an indexical relationship. McCloud makes reference to the degrees of iconic abstraction that refer to the level of resemblance a sign has with the signifier. One way this notion becomes significant is in the relationship it shares with the process of character identification which becomes another assailant concerning meaning construction of the CBVR. McCloud argues that the process of identification that audiences have with characters is directly related to the applied level of iconic abstraction. In other words, the more abstract and conceptual the representation, the more open the reader will be to identifying with characters, while the closer the character is to reality the less generic the identification process becomes. According to McCloud (2006, 38) the reasoning this happens is because the character limits the susceptibility of the message on the part of the reader. McCloud notes that a basic smiley face could represent any person, but that this representation still retains some degree of

resemblance to the original signifier, while words, for example bear no visual resemblance to their signified.

In Chapter Seven, we will cover notions of meta-realism which suggests that iconic levels of abstraction are socially and culturally specific and that it is becoming increasingly commonplace that digitally manipulated visual effects are accepted by the modern viewer. This movement is still however, considered by some to be in its infancy, the cultural provocation of which may be prompted by the character representations presented by digital comics such as *Children of Xaphan*, which incorporates a hybrid of iconically abstracted photographic representations, as does the *Ruins of Gold Motion Book*, adapted from the digitally shot short film of the same name.

### **Comic Book Specific Narrative**

As established, all narrative forms of expression are restricted by the physical constraints of the medium. Some basic limitations of the comic book, as already mentioned, concern limitations of space, often restricted to twenty-one A4 pages for all narrative development. Within this space all intended tension structure and character development is expected to occur. Other considerations concern technological methods of printing and distribution, stemming from ink type, colour, and paper choice to the available production technologies. Even the publishers inflict their signification into the final version of the CBVR because they stipulate many of the specifications required for publication to occur. “The artist’s work must be reproducible on the publisher’s specifications for it is the publisher who determines the final method of printing” notes Eisner (1990, p 153). The degree of input of the CBVR does not end there as publishers in turn may have agreements with various holding companies that are contracted to purchase certain machinery or types of ink or paper from various manufacturers; all of this ultimately trickles down to the printed semic dot on a specified type of paper, comprising its part to the overall illustration and finally, the CBVR.

These challenges hold true for the symbolic seme of the comic book narrative to which the writing process must adhere. In other words, the narrative must be written specifically for the medium and thus for the restrictions of the medium. If the language and CBVR of digital comics is vastly different from its print predecessor, it would be largely due to this reason. As the medium acts as a container for CBVR and its narrative subsidiary, narrative development and engagement must take place within these confined restrictions, to which all previously discussed narrative considerations must still apply. Eisner (1990, p 127) suggests this affects the actual writing process as well as the types of stories and topics covered in comics. “From the outset the conception and writing of a story is affected by the limitations of the medium. It is for this reason that stories and plots of simple, obvious action have long dominated comic book literature.” Eisner does recognise however, that the form is capable of sophisticated narration: “[a]ctually, from the viewpoint of art or literature, this medium can deal with subject matter and theme of great sophistication” (Eisner 1990, p 127).

A certain type writing process that considers plot, character, emotion, rhythm, and chronology need to be implemented in comics. The result of this combination generally creates a fast paced narrative with a high degree of action. The majority of narratives subscribe to the rule that redundant information must be excluded as it is thought that said information will detract from narrative engagement. The time frame allocated to the reader or viewer of a story shares a reciprocal relationship with the medium in terms of how much emotional and physical intensity is required by the reader or viewer. The expected timeframe the reader or viewer is expected to submit per 'session' of the narrative is demonstrated in the level of detail and pacing various narrative mediums exhibit. For instance, novels often have more descriptive detailed information, and a slower narrative pacing because they are not expected to be read in one prolonged sitting and if, on rare occasions, they are, they still allow the reader can get up and leave if necessary, and return to the same place in the narrative where they left off. This is reiterated in other narrative mediums such as video games where the pause and save button are applicable, or theatre which usually involves an intermission. The pacing of comics is allowed to be rhythmically powerful when based on a 21-24 page issue. Graphic novels such as DC Comics, *Watchmen* (Gibbons, Moore and Higgins 1987), or Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* (Gaiman 1989), series, among other examples, do not demonstrate the same pacing or intensity as the majority of issue based comics, for what I believe a similar reason.

The ability of the hybrid signifier to generate meaning becomes paramount in the writing process. When comics are being 'read' they are being read on a level of a contextual narrative based upon a culturally agreed upon meaning, equating the hybrid signifier to that the written word, in the structure of a paragraph. The illustration itself becomes a text within itself. The concept of the hybrid signifier has been dealt with extensively this this dissertation, and will not repeated here; suffice to say that the layering of narrative concerns various levels of meaning generation. The top layer may be for exposition purposes while subsequent increasingly subtle levels of meaning may be encoded into deeper layering. All of this opposes Eisner's suggestion that the descriptive function of words and images are not applicable. A point Eisner however, seems to acknowledge when discussing the notion of abstraction, is when he identifies images that also lend themselves to the writing process. He recognises their symbolic nature and the manipulation thereof for signification purposes. Eisner specifically notes scenery and action as lending themselves to his interpretation of abstraction; both of which aid in the exposition of information within the otherwise limited parameters of comic book narrative development (Eisner 1990, p 130).

Visual narrative media reserve the ability to 'tell the story with the picture'. This includes all 'codes' exhibited from the hybrid signifier and thus, all symbolic attributes of the hybrid signifier denote part of the 'writing' process. The writer is not only writing words or even just images. The writer is writing 'code', the nature of which requires multiple types, scripted to exist simultaneously and fused together syncing with narrative prescriptions. As

observed by Eisner, “each component pledges allegiance to the whole” (Eisner 1990, p 123). In relation to the development of the narrative specifically, this concerns structural submission to incorporate the individual pages, issue and overall series to adhere to the economic framework in which the industry operates. When one considers the execution of the signifier, meaning can be found in the inclusion, exclusion or in the manner in which semes, such as sound and text, alter meaning, forcing the writer to consider all elements in the final concoction. Eisner writes with regard to the encoding of sound and argues that “[t]he ‘control’ of the reader’s ear is vital if the meaning and intent of the dialogue is to remain as the writer intended it” (Eisner 1990, p 125). In the same way, the semic indicator of “text can (and has the freedom to) alter meaning or intent. It can also affect humor by adding a dimension of incongruity” (Eisner 1990, p 125).

Because the hybrid nature of the ‘writing’ or coding process relies on the fusion of both narrative and visually based comic book vocabulary, by both the artist and the writer, it stands to reason that the systematic approach of workflow between the two is an instrumental aspect of comic book writing. Eisner indicates that the writer should worry about the interpretation of the artist, and in turn the artist must convey art in accordance to the requirements of the story. Evidently, there exists a dynamic of creative control which measures its way into the creative process. Further complications may be exasperated by other creative members such as editors, pencillers, letters, inkers and colourists, artists, writers, not to mention profit driven concerns from publishers, copyright owners and anyone else I may have neglected to include.

From the creative side, a common objective and mutual understanding needs to exist between the writer and artist (who may or may not be one or more people). Both disciplines may be tempted to dominate, what Eisner refers to as, ‘a single identity’, and opt for creative preference in the expression of the narrative design. Eisner refers to an example that suggests that in some cases the artist may need to ‘recode’ a dummy version and provide initial conceptual layout to either enlarge or decrease panel sizing for pacing purposes.

The reader’s eye is caught by the visual appeal which is used as a point of entry into the narrative from which all narrative progression is built, indicating how the system of production potentially affects the writing process. The art may be rendered on the understanding of a general story for instance, but not necessarily the final draft of dialogue. Therefore, the art needs to be developed with a certain amount of flexibility in mind to accommodate this (Eisner 1990, p 124).

## **Binary Opposites**

The notion of binary opposites could have easily fallen under the previous narrative heading, but shares such a strong link with symbolism; consequently I decided to discuss it in line with both symbolism and narrative. A common method of meaning is created through the

use of binary opposites. Meaning is suggested in a similar process to montage in that the juxtaposition to two separate, yet contextually related, concepts suggest a third meaning. In the case of binary opposites, the concepts are juxtaposed in opposite extremes in order for closure to be more specific. This process allows meaning to transpire in a less ambiguous manner than other forms of montage. The term suggests the presentation of conceptual opposites, not only through the separation of images, but extends to opposites of ideas, ideologies, characters, values, objectives, and the like. These could be reiterated through symbolic images, character development, wardrobe, and narrative progression to name a few. This device is often applied by the writer to symbolically reiterate the characteristics of the hero and villain. Returning to our example of *He-Man*, we can identify the physical, colourful manly protagonist who exemplifies a positive aspirational personality through both his physical appearance and value system. These characteristics are reinforced when introduced to He-Man's nemesis and arch enemy Skeletor, who embodies the extreme opposite of the above factors. See Figure 4.11 below.



**Figure 4.11: He-Man vs Skeletor binary opposite**

Source: [nebezial.deviantart.com](http://nebezial.deviantart.com)495 × 750. He-man cover by JPRart

Accessed 25 March, 2014.

While the illustration of opposites, when applied to the hero and villain case above, may be symbolically obvious, the convention is a common application in narrative meaning generation. More subtle citations may be utilised depending on the level of sophistication of the intended audience. The nature of binary opposition lends itself not only to meaning generation but to the scriptwriter's tactical advantage of including conflict.

Conflict is the divine glue of narration, holding the audiences' attention from sequence to sequence, scene to scene and eventually moment to moment. Conflict potentially

exists on various levels and manifests itself in various ways. Narratologists may identify different terminology, but just as in the case with narrative structure there exists much overlap in their conceptions. In relation to conflict McKee (1997, pp 213-216) refers to ‘inner conflict’; ‘personal conflict’; and ‘extra-personal conflict’.

*Inner*, or internal conflict, has already been touched upon although not highlighted, and concerns the inner turmoil a character battles which usually manifests through some kind of action, e.g. dialogue, or physical engagement. Internal conflict may serve as a character’s motivation; This is a difficult establishment to achieve in print comics due to the time space considerations economically enforced on the the medium.

*Personal Conflict*, or conflict between characters, is probably the most obviously identifiable use of conflict and concerns the oppositional motivations characters portray in their individual objectives. This is a common element in printed comics as identified in the high rate of action to action progressions as identified by McCloud.

*Extra-Personal Conflict*, or conflict between a character and a situation, concerns the obstacles that the character attempts to overcome. As with conflict between characters, this form of conflict is relatively easily practically achievable within the comic book.

All of the above categories can be used as a strategic tool which can be applied within the narrative to engage or retain audience involvement. Subtext provides the audience with expectations that lead to suspense soon followed by anticipation and acts as another way of engaging, holding and provoking the audience’s attention. This technique can be credited with why the previously discussed proairetic and hermeneutic codes are so effective. **Following suit with** constant readjustment of the audience position. **A tactic** commonly engaged with by comic book series such as *X-Men* and *Children of Xaphan*. Again, this device may be employed throughout the narrative on various levels ranging from moment to moment emphasising the importance of the proairetic code to the overall narrative and series. In some cases this convention stems from the devices employed in the combination of the overall series in which, for example, the entire development of a first series may conform to an overall hermeneutic code as evident in television series such as *Dexter* and *Game of Thrones*, where developments in the first series manifest connotative results in later seasons.

The constant build-up of tension through this device can, however, provide the writer with difficulties in the development of the narrative development due to constant increase in tension structures. Comic books seem to have embraced these side effects by venturing into the fantastical. Series development in comic books have traditionally relied on building the suspension of disbelief on behalf of the reader in order to reinvent themselves in order to mitigate the inconsistencies that are often associated with the consistent build-up of tension (tension inducing events). The *X-Men*, for example, have saved the world a total of 17 times,

while *Superman* and *Spiderman* survive in multiple parallel universes in order to explain conflicting story-lines.

A commonly utilised system to develop tension is to adhere to the structures involved with that of rising, climatic and falling action. While Todorov's theory outlines narrative structure in terms of transmission (Todorov 1971/2005), Gustav Freytag's model of dramatic tension builds narrative through appearance and action. Freytag's (Freytag 1894/1984) model is useful in analysing the dynamic rhythmic momentum of the narrative journey unlike Todorov, who focuses on the path necessary to meet the destination. Freytag's model relies on the premise that while the narrative may entertain beats, or moments of impact, it is modelled to build tension until a climactic moment has been achieved. Freytag's model focuses on an emotional, rather than cognitive, audience understanding. "In dramaturgy and screenwriting, the concept of tension is associated with the dramatic curve, which describes dramatic tension as a function of time: dramatic tension increases up to the climax, occurring at approximately two thirds into the narrative and then decreases until the end of the narrative"(Szilias and Richle 2013).

A climax is the part of the scene which stimulates the highest emotional intensity. It is necessary that in order for the climax to stand out, the tension structures need to be manipulated to follow a rhythmic structure for the purposes of building up to a climactic moment. In doing so, tension structures characteristically alter to shift between rising and falling **patterns**. If, for example, the tension structures of a scene are elevated from the beginning, then it may be more difficult for a climax to be achieved because the structures are too high to begin with, thus making it difficult for the climax to stand out. When tension structures deviate towards this model they run the risk of losing the audience.

The tension structure discussed is an overall interpretation and must always be understood in the context of narrative development. The implementation of **such** structure may not be neatly achieved. Part of the art of storytelling is to work within a developed formula, even if it is the storyteller's own unique formula, while **subverting reader awareness of said structures allowing for reader manipulation. A haphazard approach to structural tension aid in this purpose**. Moments of tension can be referred to as 'beats' and translated through the visual rhetoric. These beats include simulations of tension which may stand out from the rest of the scene, but are not in themselves the climax, although they can be understood as a climatic beat or a moment of impact of tension. It is however, the overall arrangement of these moments which contribute to the experience of the perceived development of tension in the mind of the reader. In order for this to be read in its intended manner by the audience, the most effective way is to build up tension in a consistent manner **hidden through a seemingly random** dispersion of beats. Whatever the specific arrangement of elements, they should conform to an overall development of tension which increases in the building of momentum in order for the climax to erupt with intensity. If there were too many

breaks in the tension for too long it would affect the rhythm of the climax and it would have been built up only to dissipate *effect*.

Nicolas Szilas and Urs Richle (2013, p 258) refer to the implementation of two separate, yet interrelated, codes known as the *action generator*, which is “able to generate possible actions, based on a deep structure”; and the *narrative sequencer*, which is able to select the actions among the many that are generated by the action generator. The sequencing of the structure, as indicated by Todorov, needs to align with the execution of action, not only for structural considerations of continuity, but for effective emotional appeal. This task may, however, require the fusion of narratology theoretical discourses since “[t]his Narrative Sequencer is very challenging to build, because it is hard to find an agreement within narrative theories regarding the set of criteria that determine that a sequence of events is perceived as a narrative or not” (Szilas and Richle 2013, p 258). Although the field of narratology provides various structural guidelines, art is a separate craft at this stage, and depends on the intuitive skills of comic book creators’ directional ability to implement directional decisions that are often tested. There are no concrete rules on how to insert tension (Szilas and Richle 2013, p 258). Furthermore, there is no definitive formula for how this structure is expected to manifest in the CBVR. Szilas poses the question, “[b]ut what is it exactly that increases and then decreases during the typical drama? What makes the tension increase or decrease?” (Szilas and Richle 2013, p 258). It is my belief that the implementation of action stimulates various emotional responses and affects tension structures associated with narrative exposition. “Which criteria should be considered first, to guide the narrative generation? Closure, conflict, emotions, etc.?” (Szilas and Richle 2013, p 258). Potentially, every action implemented, or code utilised by the CBVR affects tension structures, either by raising them or dissipating them. This is where the creative instinct of the comic book creators is tested. When applying this notion to the CBVR, the ‘possible actions’ that are executed translate into creative decisions that need to be made by the creative powers responsible for creating the comic; thus at which stage a multitude of possibilities exist for the desired closure to transmit to the reader. As Szilas highlights, “modelling tension consists in evaluating the tension of generated actions” (Szilas and Richle 2013, p 258).

These tension structures often tend to have a correlating relationship with narrative development. As the narrative develops so then does the tension. A good comic creator will be able to ensure that these two points align. Narrative structure tends to break stories down into various segments. For example, narratives can be broken down into sequences, scenes, shots and frames. Each segment of the narrative will follow its own set of tension structures. These structures serve a modular purpose of aligning within the actual scene, as well as the overall arc of the narrative, and again within the arc of the overall series. In other words, the use of rising action, climax and falling action may repeat itself for every scene which builds up and contributes to the tension structures of an overall issue and then again in the overall series. As the narrative determines what happens in terms of story progression, the comic

book author/creator has to consider how this happens. The how is achieved through the use of symbolism and plot, which then in turn correlates to work within, and illustrate, the narrative structure.

## Conclusion

Freytag's (1984) dramatic tension structure theory is applicable to any form of narrative, but how it is utilised in X-Men is characteristically different from other media, which will be the subject of Chapter Five. In film, for example, each scene tends to drop tension in order for it to be built up again, while chronically raising the tension of a dual layer until the overall climax is achieved. At this point the climax of the scene, and overall climax of the narrative, should coincide. The X-Men series however, traditionally are likely to deviate from tension dropping at the end of the scene, relying rather on proairetic cliff-hangers which tend to be climatic in their visual appeal; thus suggesting a high tension with a lack of ease in narrative. This may be due to the differences in rhythmic pacing that result from the physical parameters of comic books. The narrative is shorter than that of other media, which allows the traditional 21-page comic book to engage in a high tension structure without exhausting the reader emotionally. Novels, or a 100 minute film, for example, would have to stretch out the overall tension arc to employ optimised pacing for the audience. This also allows comic books to work within the parameters of political economy of their industry by employing constant narrative suspension, stretching not only from beat to beat and scene to scene, but from issue to issue, aiding a consistent revenue stream for the publisher.

The execution of the tension in the CBVR also differs from other media due to the fact that the nature of reading and viewing, which relies on the intentional physical implementation of the reader to engage the narrative, results in a unique dynamic of rhythmic pacing of the CBVR. Film, for example, relies on the submissive engagement of the audience to receive narrative codes at a pace dictated by the filmmakers, whereas in comics, the reader has greater control over the intended pacing. "The imposition of the imagery within the frame of the panels acts as the catalyst. The fusing of symbols, images and balloons makes the statement." (Eisner 1990, p 30). A statement that is illusionary and hypothetical in nature is determined by a process of mutual agreement suggested by the comic book creator and subjectively determined by the reader. Rhythm structures in comics are dependent on reader co-operation. Frame rates are determined for the viewer in other visual media such as film, which is typically projected at 24 frames per second (fps), a pace to which the viewer is completely submissive. In comics, the reader can only be prompted to engage with the comic at a pace suggested by the CBVR. One method of achieving this is to practice various arrangements of the previously discussed time-based indicators of compositional arrangement. "The number and size of the panels also contribute to the story rhythm and passage of time" (Eisner 1990, p 32). When considering tension, we consider rhythm, and thus the 'timing' of the comic, which Eisner recognises as existing in mutual relation to, but

also separate from the time delineation of a comic. “In comics, timing and rhythm are interlocked” (Eisner 1990, p 33).

These principals governing how comic book vocabulary may be used to progress the CBVR shall now be analysed in detail in a case study considering Marvels *Uncanny X-Men* 328.

## Chapter Five

### Case Study and Data Analysis

#### Print Comics: X-Men Case Study

In this chapter, the visual rhetoric will be analysed in terms of how it works within the structure of an issue of *McKee Issue 328* (Marvel Comics, 1996, reprinted 2005, hereafter 1996/2005) and the overall series. This will be followed by an analysis of the motivation of the rhetoric. In other words, this section will examine the strategic use of images and text to fulfil narrative purposes. There are two general purposes which the visual rhetoric (VR) of comics need to engage: firstly, it needs to establish continuity in the storytelling process; while secondly, it is also required to engage with the audience on an emotional level to provide readers with an emotional experience.

The narrative manifestation is arguably more important than the transmission. Dennis O’Neil (2009a, np) argues that it is important not to let transmission of event override the quality of the experience, “[a]nd anything that doesn’t contribute to the quality of the story is a candidate for the dumpster. You don’t want to bore your readers with irrelevancies and you don’t want to distract them from narrative elements that are important”.

The required purpose of CBVR is that of emotional narrative engagement, therefore this analysis will focus on those elements that enhance this process; rather than to make sense of comic book grammar alone. This can be done using a range of tactics. Among them, anticipation and tension structures will be identified and discussed. Further tactics which the VR will engage with include methods of establishing objective, obstacles and conflict. It is my personal opinion that one of the primary tools the CBVR has in its arsenal is the stimulation of anticipation, as consistent interest from readers is required, limiting weak, unnecessary links. In Freytag’s (1984) theory, tension structures must drop in order for them to be built up again, however, there still needs to be some emotional incentive for the readers to continue on with the narrative. One particular method employed to achieve this is the implementation of *suspense* and *anticipation*, as such I will draw on these methods as well. I shall also draw on arrangement and composition of images and the resulting relationship. Furthermore, the comic book follows a full narrative structure, but it is also a micro component of a larger narrative structure. This means that the VR of these comic books also have to take into account the establishment of plot points which may develop later in the series.



Figure 5.1 The Uncanny X-Men Issue 328

Source: Marvel Comics 1996 Accessed 10 September, 2013.

## Cover Page

Although the cover page is not part of the actual plot of the story and is seen as outside the conventional *series of events*, covers still contribute to the framework of the visual rhetoric suggesting information as a projected hypothesis or idea of what is set to occur. Strict adherence to narrative continuity is overlooked at this stage.

See Figure 5.1 above. Generally, comic book covers are characteristically shown out of context and are not meant to be understood as part of the literal sequence of events of the story, but rather as a teaser for where the narrative is expected to progress. This establishes expectation and thus, as the narrative progresses, the cover becomes a tool that the storyteller can exploit for purposes of emotional engagement of the reader. This serves as our first of many examples of the hermeneutic code. In *Issue 328 of Uncanny McKee*, the cover indicates that the narrative shall progress to a climatic physical confrontation between the characters of Pshylock and Sabertooth. As the narrative unfolds, this information will be retained in the mind of the reader who has the set expectation of this showdown, thus providing our first example of how the CBVR works with codes in the contextual combination of meaning and engagement. The hermeneutic code is evident because this composition serves to build suspense in the presentation of an enigma, as well as provide a structural contribution of the proairetic code in the suspense stimulated by the physical confrontation exhibited between the characters of Psychlock and Sabertooth.



## Page One

See Figure 5.2 above. Further evidence of the combination of the hermeneutic and proairetic codes are evident in the illustration of the reflection of a character in the eye of Sabertooth. An unseen character is clearly opposite Sabertooth, but not clearly illustrated, prompting questions of not only who Sabertooth is looking at, but the suggested relationship and immediate situation at hand as a result of his angry facial expression. The enigma of the hermeneutic code offered by the unknown character is a result of a mystery which has been provoked by the proairetic action of the kinesic facial expression exhibited by Sabertooth. The combination of both these codes are applied in conjunction with another code specific to the print comic book – that of incorporating the physical structure of the entire A4 page to further enhance the CBVR's objective of suspension establishment; in other words, it serves as a cliff hanger for the page. The page must be physically turned in order for the reader to answer the question established by the CBVR in relation to who this mystery character is. The CBVR, in this instance, incorporates the physical constraints of the print medium as a way to build anticipation in the transition between pages. This technique could potentially be implemented as a counteractive technique to the technological impediment of the medium. In the process of turning the page, or perhaps the inclusion of an advertisement in the medium, serves as a break of engagement with the actual narrative progress, thus affecting both the readers' engagement and rhythmic pacing as the concentration of the content and the accompanied experience is momentarily lost. This example is evident in the bottom right panel on the fourth page where a transition panel appears at the bottom right of the page of a picturesque, serene, Disney-type environment.



Figure 5.3: The Uncanny X-Men Issue 328, Page 4

Source: Marvel Comics 1996/ 2005. Accessed 10 September, 2013.



Figure 5.4: The Uncanny X-Men Issue 328, Page 5

Source: Marvel Comics 1996/2005 Accessed 10 September, 2013.

See reference 5.3 and 5.4 above. Characteristically these transitions are more likely to occur early on at the top of the page or later at the bottom because this is where page turning is set to occur. The transition occurs at the bottom of the left page and is followed by a full page advertisement on the following page. As this panel is completely different from the rest of the comic it is used as a tool to provoke curiosity **prompting the reader to again** turn the page to see how the action unfolds. If the reader could spot this at a glance it would diminish the effect of progression. As this transition panel occurs on the left page, the inclusion of the advertisement on the right page, helps to achieve this goal. The juxtaposition of the advert on the right may not have been necessary in unfolding the plot, but in terms of rhythm, the reader would have to physically turn the page to engage further in the story. This also brings up the issue of how the visual rhetoric works within the scope of political economy. The advertisement is necessary to generate income and thus needs to be placed within the comic book. This can be problematic for storytellers because it constantly breaks the rhythm and tension of the story. This is an example **of how the comic utilises political structure as to hold attention through fragmented engagement**. The medium dictates that the page is turned physically for the plot to unfold. **This is a primary objective of the CBVR, which as will be discussed later is carried over to motion books in a unique way.**

Barthes notion of the semic code is evident in its application as a visual qualifier as evident in the close-up framing of page one (Figure 5.2), “Theorists have long recognized the power of close-ups of the human face in particular to communicate thoughts, moods, and feelings” (Campell 1949, p 21). This particular framing choice serves as a sub-textual exposition that exploits the emotional state and thought process of the character Sabertooth who is shown in a direct close-up. “Film theorist Bela Balazs suggested that such close-ups ‘are often the dramatic revelations of what is really happening under the surface of appearances’” (Campell 1949, p 21). The choice of composition serves as a visual advantage to comic books because they retain the reader’s perception of being closer to the subject, thus allowing for easier identification of kinesics. This allows the audience to empathise with a character due to the recognition of visuals, in this case of the teeth, saliva and creases in face that can be interpreted as anger.

The context of these separate pieces of data accompanied with the contextual clues of typography and the information supplied from the text work together to establish the narrative for the reader. There is a high contrast of shading and colour, increasing the perception of depth, providing the illusion of amplified contours associated with dramatic tension. The **inductive** choice of framing also hides information that could be made available, thus limiting the reader’s basic contextual understanding of proxemic information such as location, time of day, number of characters, and proximity of those characters in relation to each other. This provides an example of how the hermeneutic code stimulates anticipation and suspense through use of framing elements. The CBVR serves to disorientate readers intentionally by **withholding** contextual information to provoke curiosity. At some stage, the

exposition of the presented enigma needs to be provided in order not to frustrate the reader. The next page provides information for the reader in this instance and can be considered as a pay off of the previous set up, or fulfilment of the hermeneutic code.



Figure 5.5 The Uncanny X-Men Issue 328, Page 2-3

Source: Marvel Comics 1996 Accessed 10 September, 2013.

## Pages Two and Three

In Figure 5.5 above, the frame reveals extensive contextual information of the surrounding environment, the proximity of the subjects in relation to each other, as well as the immediate situation at hand. We are provided with an answer to the question posed on the previous page as to the identity of the person in the reflection of Sabretooth's eye. It is revealed to be Professor Xavier. This particular set-up has paid off and served its purpose of holding the reader's attention thus far. The CBVR needs to escalate a new objective at this point. in order to counteract its vulnerability after fulfilling the enigma it established. In other words, having provided an answer to the question it provoked, a new incentive for interest

would be of benefit. The degree of reader satisfaction obtained serves to both aid and endanger the reading experience. This can be overcome by introducing new hermeneutic and proairetic codes, of which the set-up can coincide with the pay-off of the previous page, thus allowing for a consistent flow of suspense and anticipation to occur. In this particular case, it is achieved through a combination of factors working in correlation with each other. One such method is the information provided in the text which provokes a new curiosity in terms of Xavier, who indicates that he is about to provide compelling information for Creed.

Xavier: “It may be years before you are ready to understand what I am about to say to you, Sabertooth ... if indeed, ever” (Marvel Comics 1996/2005, p 3).

This establishes that the timeframe for this the revelation will be immediate and the reader expects to have this question answered shortly. The reader now has a newly established motivation to progress through the narrative to find the answer to this question. The importance of the information being withheld is highlighted by the statement that Creed may not be able to understand the information explained which provokes further enigmatic qualities of *said statement*. This technique is utilised again providing more than one branch of the hermeneutic code to flourish in the dialogue provided by Sabertooth, although in this instance the pay-off is more immediate, and serves to aid curiosity in transition from one page to the next. Sabertooth ends off his dialogue on the second page with: “Did it ever occur to ya...” (Marvel Comics 1996/2005, p 2). This statement is deliberately left on a cliff-hanger to heighten anticipation. This indicates how the CBVR provides closure to previously established hermeneutic codes while simultaneously establishing new ones to provide consistent motivation for the curious reader to continue.

The interaction of the CBVR specifically within the print A4 page medium is also made apparent in the page two and three double A4 spread (Figure 5.5). By placing the image over the full double page, the comic illustrates a unique advantage of the print medium in relation to visual literacy. Unlike other mediums, such as film, the print medium can change ratio size and be accepted more easily by the audience. The presence of Barthes’ symbolic code manifests through the compositional proxemic relationship between the characters Xavier and Creed and is plotted in such a way that the subjects are almost at the same eye level. This indicates that the power dynamic between the characters is even. Sabertooth has a slightly higher eye level in the frame, but is also physically restrained. Sabertooth canvasses slightly more space on the page indicating his potential power as an adversary although a fairly even power dynamic exists at this stage.

The text in the yellow boxes indicates contextual information concerning the background of the X-Men and is used to help introduce Professor Xavier. This is important for first time readers who may be unfamiliar with the history of narrative development. The CBVR adheres to this practice due to the economic reliance of selling, and thus distributing

separate issues, with no guarantee that the previous contextual information established by the CBVR has been absorbed by the current reader.

## Page Four Onwards

An example of the combination of symbolic and referential codes is presented on the following page (Figure 5.3). The top left panel has a wider establishing **image** enhancing the communication of spatial relationships to the reader. The frame is longer which means less space for the facial expressions to be recognised however, this is made up for with the composition of the **panel**, and the newly established information allows us to see the massive restraining system behind Sabertooth. This point is reiterated with the use of the typography referential to social expectations **utilising** bold capital letters in literary environments. “I don’t want to be helped” Sabertooth says (Marvel Comics 1996/2005, p 4), **also identifying a common trait in Sabertooth’s character premise**. The text is coloured red, and is in bold on a white speech bubble. The characteristics of this text **exhibit** high contrast allowing them to stand out. The choice of juxtaposing red text outlined in black with a white border allows for heightened contrast, increasing the strain on the eye of the reader, and thus hopefully translates as the psychological tension of Sabertooth. The typography also supplements the recognition of the finer details associated with different media such as that of film or television where an obvious solution would be for **framing to close in**, highlighting kinesics information. Comics have the tools of typography to illustrate the intent of the rhetoric.

Evidence of the symbolic code is apparent through the lighting scheme and use of colour on this page, emphasising the binary opposition of light versus dark. The dark is characteristically indicated with the use of cooler colours largely associated with the moon as a motivational light source. Even though the moon is not suggested as the motivating light source in this case the association of darkness still stands. Night shots generally pose the difficulty of illustrating darkness while still allowing the reader to identify detail in the subject. The light in the **frame** is indicated with the use of warmer colours, in this example specifically that of yellow. These colours reinforce their own story within the context of the overall rhetoric established at this stage. The warmer yellow colours associated with light are also reiterated in the colour of Xavier’s wheelchair, which is also yellow, indicating hope for the soul of Sabertooth. Sabertooth, conversely, is scripted to have a darker character beyond repair, most often associated with evil. The general theme suggested is that of good versus evil. This particular frame is presented with more blue or darkness and could indicate the prevalence of Sabertooth’s darkness trumping Xavier’s hope for helping Sabertooth, which we find out later, does occur.

The symbolic use of binary oppositions is illustrated on pages four and five because they require the reader to engage closer to the alternative perceptions of Creed’s version of symbolically destructive discourse against the alternative harmonious Disney-style environment divided by pages. Just as complimentary colours are seen to stand out when

placed next to each other to **create a physical coinciding with some form of conflict or narrative contrast**, ideological contrast is used as a tool of the CBVR. The CBVR is not unbiased in its encoding of messages and this pressurises readers to emphasise with one of these two scenarios.

The establishment of this argument helps the audience to justify why they might have malicious thoughts toward Sabertooth. This maliciousness is something that the audience wants to engage with but needs to feel morally just in doing so. Freud's notion of the ego indicates that people have difficulty in self-criticism and need to adhere to a certain perception that they have about themselves in order to justify any behaviour which may be morally questionable. One of the tasks of the narrative is to help the readers understand, through exposition, how evil this character is by reiterating the previously established binary opposition.

The top of page five illustrates the same picture however, the context is completely different. We come to learn through dialogue that this is a representation of Phoenix's psycan, which is in itself a symbolic projection of her character, thus indicating the multilayer **compartmental layering**, characteristic exhibited by the CBVR.

The second panel on page five introduces a rifle being cocked in the side of the frame heightening the anticipation through the suggestion of an audio proairetic code. In terms of narrative progression, this utilises readjustment of reader positioning through **re-contextualisation**, pulling the **reader** deeper into the plot. In the same manner in which a roller coaster ride sustains attention through multiple unexpected twists and turns, the narrative employs its own ways of undermining **established plot expectations**. This is also a lead into the fourth frame, introducing readers to two more characters, Cyclops and Bishop, and reveals that they must have been spatially present through the entire scene with Phoenix. This again alters the perception of the reader as they piece this information together through closure, **again playing on reader expectation adjustment, only to be elevated once again** when the frame moves back to introduce the character Phoenix. Cyclops and Bishop are silhouetted in this shot with more full lighting on Jean Grey, throwing the emphasis of the scene onto her. The diversion of the gun serves a dual purpose in that it introduces a sub-plot of the series. The gun allows for a smooth transition of the reader's attention into the sub plot. The use of effective transitions is an important storytelling technique so as not to break the attention of the reader and limit opportunities of reader disengagement.



**Figure 5.6 The Uncanny X-Men Issue 328, Page 12, plays on reader anticipation hinting at Creeds remorsefulness.**

Source: Marvel Comics 1996 Accessed 10 September, 2013.

The proairetic code of *reader readjustment* is utilized again on page twelve (Figure 5.6) but in a different way, producing multiple layers of meaning. However, the depth of meaning is dependent on the familiarity of the reader with other established narratives in the series, thus indicating the transcendence of contextual information provided by completely separate narratives and their potential contribution into this narrative for those exposed to other narrative progressions. The interaction which takes place between Boomer and Creed later in the second sequence (Figure 5.6) also creates doubt, thus allowing the established technique of undermining established expectations, to apply again.

The first panel suggests that Creed could be genuinely remorseful on some level, even if he only has the briefest flashes of this. This morality works in combination with Xavier's repeated attempts to get through to Sabertooth. The effort untaken earlier on displays the sincerity of Xavier in finding some good in Sabertooth, establishing a level of doubt in the mind of the reader, albeit to a small degree. This would however, relate to the premise of Sabertooth's character, as evident in the role he played in the *X-Men Age of Apocalypse* series, (1995-1996), in which the characters engaged within the complexities of a parallel universe. In this scenario, Creed saves the life of the orphan *Blink*, who subsequently nurtures *Sabertooths*, paternal caring side and follows the path of good. *Both characters* becoming *core members* of the X-Men. *The issues of trust and fatherly neutering between Creed and Boomer bear uncanny resemblance between those of Creed and Blink in the previously issued in the Age of Apocalypse series.* This *reference* may only be picked up by more dedicated X-men fans that may be susceptible to the *narrative layering*. Even though some readers will not be privy to the contextual information of the *Age of Apocalypse* there is

still enough information in this issue to suggest that there is room for Creed to rehabilitate his values. It is however, possible that the CBVR can have two separate readers reading the same content with two separate contextual understandings presented by the CBVR and still arrive at a similar conclusion. On another level, this is indicative of the different ways in which symbolic code exist, and how it can be linked to the characters that have been established to represent certain ideologies, thus highlighting how these theoretical ideologies are used in narrative progression.

See Figure 5.4. Narrative exposition must occur while remaining true to character and narrative direction. Characters have both stay within the ethos of an already established personality developed by the story thus far as well as a platform to grow the character. In this case, this is achieved by conflicting viewpoints between Cyclops and Bishop that introduces the moral conundrum at hand. The personalities of Cyclops and Bishop allow this as Cyclops is typically the moral leader while Bishop is impulsive and ruthless. Bishop generally sees issues as black and white, thus his moral code allows him to execute convicts without question. This ties into the visual rhetoric because these are concepts that have been established outside the immediate realm of this particular comic book, but are still applicable in so far as the contextual understanding of how the encoding process of the visual rhetoric works. We also see the CBVR establish meaning through the use of the symbolic and referential codes in the interchange between Bishop and Cyclops.



**Figure 5.7: Cyclops symbolically represented by his trademark optical blast and Phoenix by her telepathic abilities.**

Source: Marvel Comics 1996 Accessed 10 September, 2013.

Symbolism is used to reinforce visual characterisations indicated by Cyclops's ruby quartz visor, as well as Phoenix's head symbol which appears to be catching and reflecting the light shining on them (See Figure 5.7) This could lead the reader to assume that the material is reflective and supports the reader's ability to accept the sudden transition from light to dark, although it could also be interpreted as somewhat unnatural. The stylised nature of the comic allows for a lack of realism to be accepted **allowing for a degree of hyper realism to be ensued**. The highlighted symbols have been personalised for the characters and are indicative of their special abilities and, by extension, their place within the group. Cyclops's mutant ability is the power to shoot from his eyes and Phoenix's ability her psyche telepathic powers. In the case of Cyclops, the name fits the character where 'Cyclops' adheres to the association of 'one', as in the one leader of the X-Men. He was also the first X-man to be officially enrolled into the group. His role within the group is used to expose narrative by enforcing Xavier's ideology. This device allows for the transcendence of information in the storyline even when Professor Xavier is not immediately present. This may be a useful component for the writers when this ideology needs to be presented and when the X-Men are in the field and physically away from Xavier's presence. This ideology indicates the underlying motivations for the establishment and continued existence of the X-Men and serves as the premise for their entity.



**Figure 5.8: Illustrates the separation of Xavier from his X-Men, reinforcing his failure.**

Source: Marvel Comics 1996 Accessed 10 September, 2013.

See Figure 5.8 above. The last frame on page ten disassociates Xavier from Cyclops and Phoenix symbolically, as Cyclops and Phoenix represent Xavier's X-Men mantra, while Xavier distances himself from his own ideology by revealing his inner conflict in which he has to confront his inability to 'save' Sabertooth.



**Figure 5.9 Illustration of diagonal background lines, indicating movement.**

Source: Marvel Comics 1996 Accessed 10 September, 2013.

The use of movement through symbolic diagonal lines in the background of the frame is illustrated in panel four on page eleven (Figure 5.9). There is a lack of detail in the background which simplifies the images to exemplify the yellow or pain on the face. The diagonal represents an off axis stance similar to the use of a Dutch tilt, but with the characters still vertical. Movement also needs to be indicated. In this example, yellow could represent the connection between *Boomer* and *Creed* contextualised earlier because they both have what we assume is blond hair as indicative of the use of yellow while the effect of the 'slap'

is a brighter shade of yellow with a gradient into a darker one. The gradient indicative of the sharp pain wearing off serving a duality of representation. One the intensity of the slap and two the time indication of how long the pain of the slap took to diminish . This could be construed as associating the notion of pain with this warmer colour as indicated by the characters. The warmer colour is also indicated in the ‘Krack’ allowing for visual symmetry to materialise and not draw the reader’s eye away from the presented theme. The ‘Krack’ is also visualised to substitute for the lack of audio in the medium of print. The choice of typography is used to reiterate this point with the intensity of the font being directly related to the intensity of the audio.

This case study denotes the CBVR when applied to a print medium, the basic meaning establishments of which have been adapted to a process of digitisation when applied to digital comics. *These codes shall be revisited when referencing motion book case studies.* We shall now examine the adaptive process the CBVR may undergo in its digital manifestation.

## Chapter Six

### Evolution of the Digitised, Comic Book Visual Rhetoric

“The only thing that one really knows about human nature is that it changes. Change is the one quality we can predict of it. The systems that fail are those that rely on the permanency of human nature, and not its growth and development.” –Oscar Wilde, *Soul of Man under Socialism*. (Egri, 1942/2008,pg62)

#### The Conundrum of Comic Book Visual Rhetoric within the ‘New Media’.

This chapter will consider the application of the comic book specific visual rhetoric within the realm of the digital comic book visual rhetoric. The concept of new media needs to be qualified for the purposes of this chapter. I shall discuss the form comics have taken when merged with digital media. Although digital comic books so far have been seen as an alternative to their print counterparts, and in some respects are still somewhat of an underground movement, I believe that this is changing and that this chapter is a study of things to come.

The comic book language and associated grammar were born from the medium of print, and designed to work within this medium. Many top-selling websites for digital comics, such as comixology.com, sell digital comics that were originally intended for print, resulting in information to be ‘lost in translation’ as the method of consumption of new media involves a computer and not paper. Whatever the degree of affectivity of the translated language, the CBVR remains constant in its narrative objective. As the visual rhetoric concerns intended meaning, this point is crucial. In other words the CBVR is attempting to achieve a similar objective to its print counterpart. However as the medium has changed from print to the computer, the rhetoric must change with it, in order to stay true to its original intension.

Let us consider the following proposal of narrative engineering reduced to a pretend mathematical equation.

X = Overall Objective of the Comic Book Visual Rhetoric

Y = Overall Desired Result of the Comic Book Visual Rhetoric

Z= The Medium through which X must combine with in order to produce Y

In our equation X and Y remain constant

This leaves us with a conundrum, considering that we have 2 different versions of Z (Medium).

So scenario 1:  $Y = X \cdot Z$  (Print Comic)

While scenario 2:  $Y = X \cdot Z$  (Digital Comic)

Simply put, two different media are expected to produce the same general result of narrative engagement exemplified through the anatomical structures of the CBVR. The potential for difference will be attributed to those offered by the digital medium. Remember, the medium combines with the CBVR to produce Y. The CBVR is itself a complex series of cultural semiotics combined within a narrative objective for the purposes of plotting audience engagement. Although it is encoded within a certain medium, the nature of the CBVR allows it to adapt to a medium which meets its visual requirements. The immediate visual requirement is the ability for an image to be presented and manipulated by the author.

As all other factors in our equation remain constant; it is only the hybrid signification of the CBVR itself that has the ability to change as this is by nature is dynamic and flexible. There are multiple ways the CBVR can work in order to get a result, as evident in the practice of different comic book creators practicing different techniques and approaches. The decision comes down to a human one, naturally subjective and bias to individual preference or preferences of individuals. Therefore the combination of the VR and the way in which it interacts with the medium (Z) is the variable.

The answer is in the combination of the way the CBVR works to adapt:

[S]uch an opposition assumes that artwork's content is independent of its medium (in an art historical sense) or its code (in a semiotic sense). Situated in some idealized medium-free realm, content is assumed to exist before its material expression. But just as modern thinkers, from Whorf to Derrida, insisted on the 'nontransparency of a code' idea, modern artists assumed that content and form could not be separated. In fact, from the 1910's 'abstraction' to the 1960's 'process', artists kept inventing concepts and procedures to ensure that they could not paint some preexistent content. (Manovich 2001, p 78).

The content is then forced to adapt to the new medium. In this chapter, I will discuss this adaptation under two components:

- 1) Interface Adaptive CBVR Elements (IA)
- 2) Creative Formative Adaptive CBVR Elements (CFA)

These components are not without a direct reciprocal relationship. I may refer to these as bleeding elements or as Manovich (2001) refers to them 'interface dichotomy'. Unlike the first chapter, I will discuss the semiotic aspects involved with what shall be referred to as the 'new media' first. The fundamental notion of the narrative and

semiotic considerations, as well as their fundamental objectives, will still apply to this chapter; it is arguably the semiotic/symbolic differences which are pronounced differently more than the narrative. My reasoning for this is that although certain narrative differences may occur, the overall structures previously outlined with regard to narrative will still apply. Both narrative and symbolism/semiotics go through a narrative adaptation, however I feel that symbolism goes through more of a change whereas the narrative transcends the medium in terms of its overall structure, although the visual plot is largely affected. The visual plot as discussed earlier also affects semiotic concerns.

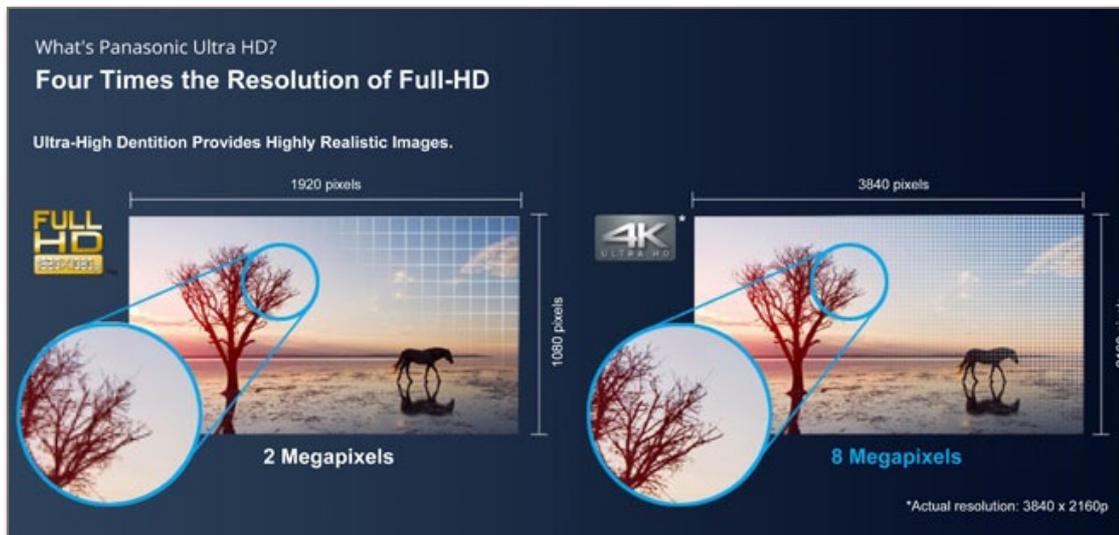
In order to discuss the Interface Adaptive CBVR Elements (IA) and Creative Narrative Engagement Adaptive CBVR Elements (CFA) within the realm of new media, the term 'new media' must be clarified.

### **Definition of New Media**

'New media' is characterised by a shift "from book to screen", from "traditional print based media to the new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)" (Kress 2005, p 5). The 'new media' are dominated by 'the screen' and 'the image': "[t]hese two together are producing a revolution in the uses and effects of literacy and of associated means for representing and communicating on every level and in every domain" (Kress 2005, p1).

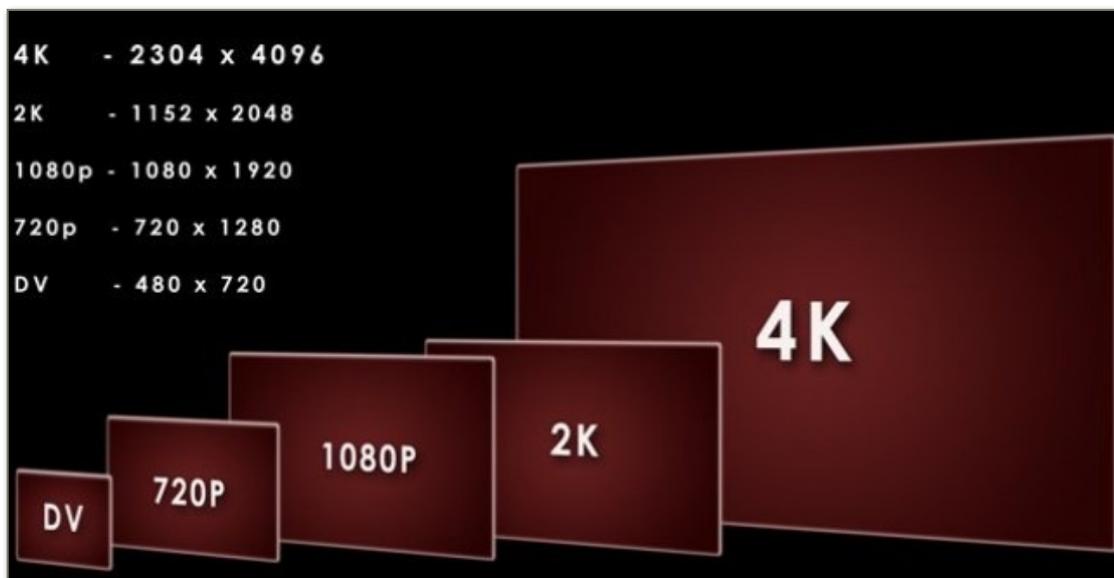
Traditionally, media was a neat package focusing on, print, radio broadcast and cinema. Attempts from advertisers for example, to filter messages to their target market were restricted to traditional media channels, predominantly print and broadcast. Digital formats sprung up quickly with multiple options in a variety of formats, mobile, internet, CD-Rom, even virtual advertising space in video games (Kress 2005, p 5; Manovich 2006, p 8). The social and economic ramifications of these changes were not fully appreciated at the time by many who did not involve themselves in the immediate relevance of science fiction, a genre which constantly re-evaluates the cultural assimilation of technology and the potential social interaction it presents. The irony is that the non-believers who shun this genre often do so with the reasoning that 'It can't happen' while the genre is characterised by the foresight that 'it' can and probably will happen, to some extent, in some way. The explosion of new media was so sudden and widespread that social understanding of it was limited, rendering any new or digital form of media lumped under the collective term 'new media'. In time, the differences, roles, functions and objectives of 'new media' have evolved, taken shape and become increasingly distinct. The term 'new media' has however stuck, despite its literal redundancy. Technological references often denote distinctions applicable to specific moments of their evolution which are not re-contextualised despite developments in their contemporary application. We are experiencing a similar scenario in the terminology often popularised by marketers with regards to resolution of display monitors in Standard Definition (SD), High Definition (HD), and Full High Definition (Full HD). The recent

attempt of 4K resolution to break into the market place has been dubbed by marketers as Ultra HD, when effectively Full HD has now become standard HD. Perhaps the eventual move to 8K will be regarded as ‘Super Fantastic Wonderful Expialiadotious HD’ (see Figures 6.1 and 6.2).



**Figure: 6.1 ‘Four Times the Resolution of Full-HD’**

Sourceshop.panasonic.com



**Figure 6.2 ‘Extreme Technology**

Source: [www.Extremetech.com](http://www.Extremetech.com) Accessed 20 March, 2014.

Manovich (2001) suggests that we step back to unpile, sift and sort through the jumbled bag that contains all which we refer to as new media and attempt to reorganise this

information into logical categories which flow into each other. He outlines two broad systems of analysis when attempting to unpick the notion on new media:

- 1) The emergence of the computer/Computerisation of Media
- 2) The stages of communication of old versus new media.

## **The Emergence of the Computer / Computerisation of Media**

Society and technology have always shared a symbiotic relationship. Although the term ‘media’ in new media suggests emphasis on the role of media, there is much to be said about the computerisation of the process, in so far as the characteristics of the genetic makeup of new media are considered. Effectively this refers to the ability of information to be converted into a numerical series of 1’s and 0’s transcoding data for palatable accessibility and programmability. A development made possible by Zuse’s invention of the binary code (Hollarth tabulator) (Manovich 2001, p 47). When considering a definition for new media it is important to remember that media can only exist within the realm of binary numbers and are thus subject to the properties and behaviour patterns thereof, hence the importance of understanding the Interface Adaptation (IA) and the resultant behaviour it professes which shapes the creative decisions. The link between these two factors ultimately are responsible for the adaptive process required for the realisation of the CBVR in the digital sphere and sets the grounding for a later discussion.

Immediately we turn our attention to the mergence of the computer and media, effectively digitising media. It is interesting when considering this theory to consider the iconic date in the evolution of new media, 2005, when as the legend goes, Steve Jobs reportedly walked into a meeting at Apple, put down the Creative Zen MP3 player on the table and announced that Apple was no longer a computer company and was now a ‘media company’, subsequently paying 100 million dollars to Creative for patency infringements.<sup>7</sup> The media reference was made in relation to Jobs’ idea to create media players, later coined the I-Pod, a device which received substantial development thereafter with large investments in Apple TV and I-tunes, a computer collection now commonly referred to as an ‘eco system’ Google are following suit with a string of their Android based applications and Nexus TV. The I-Pod itself was not the original MP3 player, fulfilling the role of innovators over inventors. Culturally and economically the table was set for the computer to transform into a multimedia platform, recognising their unique branding campaign of simplicity resonated though the minimalist presentation in design, navigation, and information management, to the relevant social concerns of the time, escalating the I-Pod to the top of the MP3 player hierarchal order. Apple’s conscious recognition of identifying itself as a media company signifies the inevitable merger of the computer and media, as reiterated in a multiplicity of

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<sup>7</sup> (<http://www.apple.com/pr/library/2006/08/23Apple-Creative-Announce-Broad-Settlement-Ending-Legal-Disputes-Between-the-Companies.html>).

predominantly technology-based companies assimilating their functions to incorporate media consumption: Youtube, Real player, X-box, Sony PlayStation, internet, smartphones are all indicative of this trend, otherwise referred to as convergence. Convergence has been described as a process that blurs “the lines between media, even between point-to-point communications, such as the post, telephone and telegraph, and mass communications, such as the press, radio and television” (de Sola Pools 1983). While convergence was apparent from the mid-1980s, the widespread digitalisation of media made it ubiquitous (Chon et al. 2003). Henry Jenkins noted that

[a] single physical means – be it wires, cables or airwaves – may carry service that in the past were provided in separate ways. Conversely, a service that was provided in the past by any one medium – be it broadcasting, the press or telephony – can now be provided in several different physical ways. So the one-to-one relationship that used to exist between a medium and its use is eroding. (Jenkins 2006)

“Zuse's film, with its strange superimposition of the binary code over the iconic code, anticipates the convergence which gets underway half a century later. The two separate historical trajectories finally meet. Media and computer - Daguerre's daguerreotype and Babbage's Analytical Engine, the Lumière Cinématographie and Hollerith's tabulator - merge into one.” (Manovich 2001, p 48). Originally formulated half a century apart the two separate technologies combined, the offspring of which can be considered as ‘new media’: “[t]he result: graphics, moving images, sounds, shapes, spaces and text become computable, i.e. simply another set of computer data. In short, ‘media’ becomes new ‘media’ [...] the computer became Jacquard's loom —a media synthesizer and manipulator” (Manovich 2001, p 48). These characteristics of new media is crucial when analysing the behaviour of the visual rhetoric and subsequently, the CBVR in this new medium because as previously discussed, CBVR does not waver in general objective **assimilating the above into its nature of meaning generation**. Effectively what this means for digital comics is how computer behaviour is affected and subsequently, how it affects the CBVR on the part of the reader.

## **The Stages of Communication**

Manovich considers the definition of new media in terms of its social identity when compared to that associated with traditional media. He argues that previous media inventions have affected singular types of cultural communication while new media involves several stages of communication, spanning from conception through to distribution. “In contrast, computer media revolution affects all stages of communication, including acquisition, manipulating, storage and distribution; it also affects all types of media -- text, still images, moving images, sound, and spatial constructions” (Manovich 2001, p 43). According to Manovich, the effect of photography, for example, stops after the still image has been captured, whereas the digital camera is designed in such a manner that the data is wrangled to meet the above mentioned requirements until it appears digitally on Facebook, Twitter,

Flicker, Deviant Art etc. When this notion is applied to *Children of Xaphan*, for example, acquisition refers to the process of capturing the visual information, while manipulation involves the encoding of metadata and artistic sculpting of the digital information. The [Madefire Motion Book Tool](#), to be briefly discussed later encompasses all of these stages from conception, acquisition, development as well as online distribution.

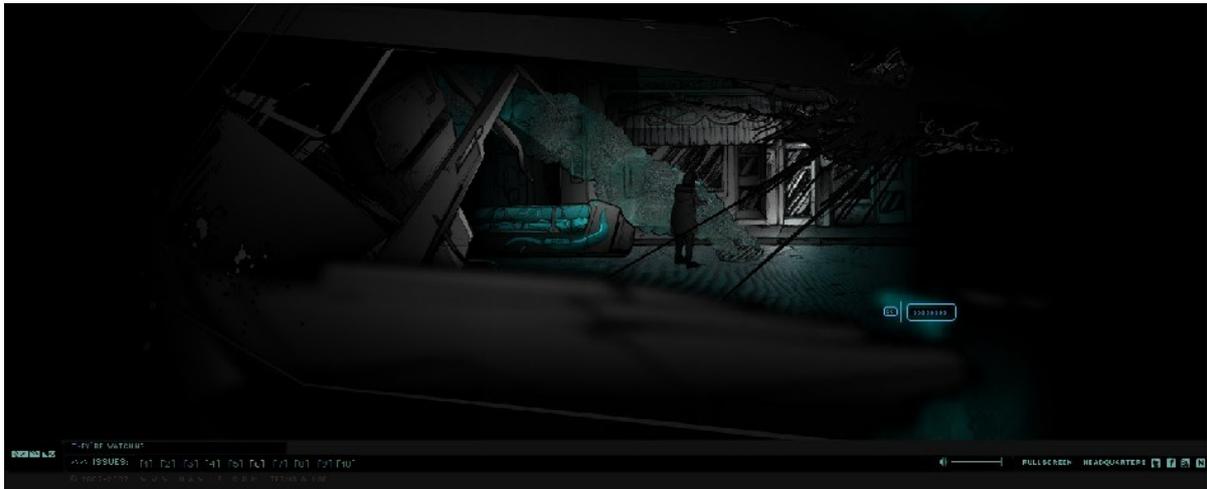
The plethora of digital information accessible through various ‘smart’ devices provides a suitable environment in which the visual rhetoric can thrive. It was only a matter of time until new media gave birth to the digital CBVR, which since its inception has gone through a rapid evolution as a result of adapting to its digital environment. “New Media technologies enabled the same content to flow through many different channels and assume many different forms at the point of reception. Pools [1983] was describing what Nicholas Negroponte calls the transformation of “atoms into bytes” or digitization.” (Jenkins 2006, p 11). Comic books have infiltrated the web and subsequently new media through digital comic book sub-genres. Excluding recognition of their new media cartoon cousins, digital comics take the forms of motion comics, web comics, and the format in which this dissertation is primarily interested, the new *motion book*. Please note that these definitions are in a stage of development by the comic book community and as such may be subject competing definition discourses. “Today the language of cultural interfaces is in its early stage, as was the language of cinema a hundred years ago. We don't know what the final result will be, or even if it will ever completely stabilize” cautions Lev Manovich (2001, p 98). Jenkins reiterates this idea, noting that Pools (1983) had predicated a period of prolonged transition, during which the various media systems competed and collaborated, searching for the stability that would always elude them: “Convergence does not mean ultimate stability or unity. It operates as a constant force for unification but always in dynamic tension with change.” (Jenkins 2006, p 11).

For clarification purposes I will offer some definitions of various categories and sub-categories of digital comics:

*Digital comics* refer to the digitising of a comic book, either converted from an existing print image into a readable format accessible by a computer, or created in a digital format utilising appropriate software. “Digital comics can easily transgress on the definition of comics as mostly ‘juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence’ (McCloud 1993, p 9), as they may contain moving images, be accompanied by audio tracks, or even are narratives in true multimedia, i.e. utilize an interdependency of media to tell a story (e.g Burwen 2011; Dittmar 2012, p 2).

Examples include numerous comics found from digital comic distributors, such as the recently Amazon purchased comixology.com, as well as others such as Comicsplus.com,

Panelfly.com, Dark Horse Comics etc.<sup>8</sup> Actual digital comics include for, example, Nawlz, see Figure 6.3 below.



**Figure 6.3: nawlz.com Season 2 Tab 6. (2008)**

Source: [www.nawlz.com](http://www.nawlz.com) Accessed 15 April, 2014.

*Motion comics* have been adapted to utilise movement and audio, but are often illustrated with traditional comic book style images that were originally designed for non-motion purposes. These comics follow language and meaning construction more closely linked with animation than of established comic book grammar as reiterated by industry professional Tom Breevort (Breevort 2011) opines that,

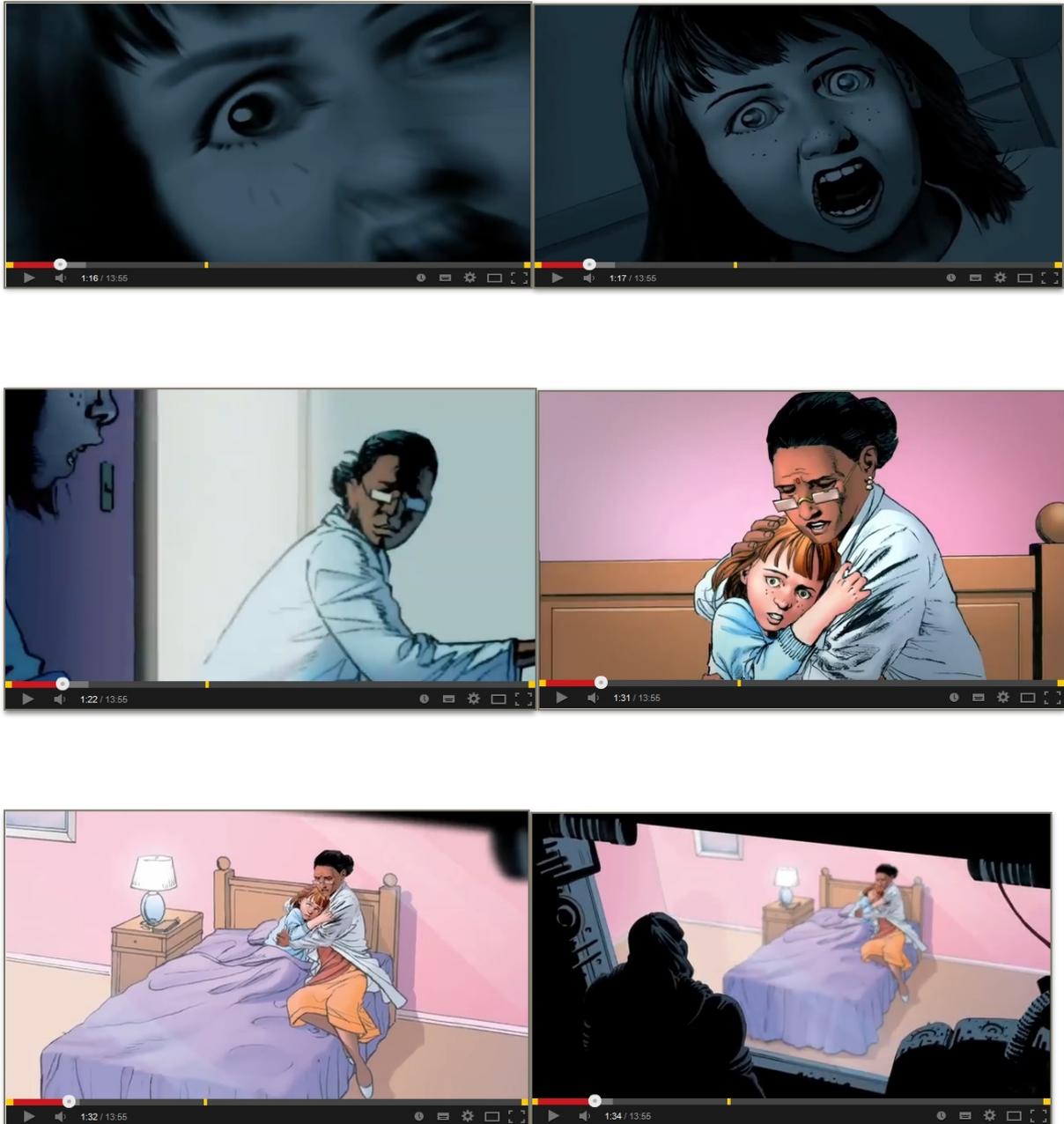
“Motion comics aren’t really inherently comics themselves. They’re some sort of intermediate step between a comic and an animated TV show. We’re trying to find out what that boundary is. Because you’re right: in a motion comic, you don’t tend to have one panel next to another panel. All of the closure that happens between moments happens from screenshot to screenshot, in camera pan to move to reverse. It’s directed like a film or a television show. Certainly the language of the motion comic aspect of digital is different than it is on the printed page and is much closer to anything that’s motion pictures or television. I don’t know how that affects how we do that in print. I don’t know how it necessarily affects how we do more direct translations from what we do in print to what we do digitally.”<sup>9</sup>

Marc Waid, proprietor of the online comic book publishing company, Thrillbent, excludes motion comics as a form of comics because it lacks the ability to allow the reader to control the pacing of the story. “[W]hat makes comics comics, what makes graphic novels a unique medium is that like any other form of reading, you are in control of the pace at which you

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.cnet.com/news/comixology-cuts-apple-google-out-of-digital-comics-kickback/>

<sup>9</sup> (<http://www.comicvine.com/articles/marvels-digital-comics-talk/1100-140700/> Tom Breevort)

absorb the story”.<sup>10</sup> Motion comics do not allow this. Image samples of the motion comic i found in the Astonishing X-Men Motion Comic (2009) (See Figure 6.3 above and 6.4 below).



**Figure 6.4 : Astonishing X-Men Motion Comic: Gifted – Episode 1.**

Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O490WDOoiuM> Accessed 10 December, 2013

<sup>10</sup> (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPikusZm2As> (4:35)).

*Web Comics* are also referred to as online or internet comics. They are similar to the print notion of a cartoon but are developed and displayed on the World Wide Web. Examples would include *Nimona* (2012) (see Figure 6.5 below).



**Figure 6.5: *Nimona* 2012**

Source: <http://gingerhaze.com/nimona/about> Accessed 18 December, 2013.

## Motion Books

Now that the framework of new media has been qualified along with the various categories of digital comics we can move on. The remaining focus of this chapter will be on motion books. Eisner defines the parameters of comics as “limited only to the requirements of the narrative and the constrictions of the page dimensions” (Eisner 1990, p 41). The parameters of Eisner’s definition do not disqualify the dimensions of digital pages or the pages digital equivalent, the Graphical User Interface (GUI). The previous digital categories identified above seem to conform to dimensions developed for print. Digital dimensions are different to that of traditional print page dimensions. The inclusion of the digital medium offers possibilities for comics too constricting for the print medium. What if the page dimensions were lifted from traditional print comics? What if they could involve moving pixels, and audio?” Moving pixels could become borders, colours could change, as could anything visual while the inclusion of audio would be an entirely new way to translate semic

indicators of the hybrid signifier. The juxtaposition of these elements working together would establish the third meaning which would correlate with the third meanings of for example the pixels juxtaposed next to each other to establish the overall CBVR. The new possibilities of this would require what has been referred to by Gibbons as a 'new kind of grammar'. As Abernathy states, "Dave Gibbons famously coined that Motion Books are a new 'grammar' for storytelling" (Abernathy 2013)

Currently, there has been little development in comic books designed specifically for digital dimensions. While the signification may remain the same, the expression thereof is open to new possibilities. The fact that various forms of digital platforms exist does not mean that comic book creators exploit the advantages of the medium to interact with the CBVR. Slowly though, comic book creators are beginning to understand how to merge comics with digital media. Thus far development has been limited to the digitisation of comics originally created for **application and benefit of** the print medium which, as mentioned, does not translate to the digital screen with the same effectiveness.

Ultimately, the language between the two needs to change in order for the comic book to manifest itself effectively. By altering the form of a comic to perform within the characteristics of the digital screen, the CBVR is able to achieve **similar** objective it aims to do in its printed form. Change is necessary in order for the objective to remain. Just as film has tried to find itself by constantly testing and experimenting with its own language, the development of comic books finds itself in a significant transitional period, with various approaches adopted to test the waters of the digital medium. Manovich offers an observation consistent with the idea that artistic expression is confined to a thought process developed for a previously established art form:

Yet, as it always happens with cultural languages, only a few of these possibilities actually appear viable in a given historical moment. Just as early fifteenth century Italian painters could only conceive of painting in a very particular way — quite different from, say, sixteenth century Dutch painters — today's digital designers and artists use a small set of action grammars and metaphors out of a much larger set of all possibilities. (Manovich 2001, p 81).

As observed by Liam Sharp, "[c]omics are all about the imagination. It is a place where new myths are birthed, and the universe is without limits. How funny, then, that so many people who share this medium have so little vision when it comes to digital storytelling".<sup>11</sup> The lack of adaptation to maximise the narrative within digital mediums limits the effectiveness of the digitised comic book visual rhetoric. As Manovich observes, "if we simply mimic the existing conventions of older cultural forms such as the printed word

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<sup>11</sup> ([http://techgnotic.deviantart.com/journal/Liam-Sharp-3-0-True-Talent-Never-Rests-393748367?utm\\_source=elnino&utm\\_medium=messagecenter&utm\\_campaign=081613\\_NET\\_LiamSharp&utm\\_term=button](http://techgnotic.deviantart.com/journal/Liam-Sharp-3-0-True-Talent-Never-Rests-393748367?utm_source=elnino&utm_medium=messagecenter&utm_campaign=081613_NET_LiamSharp&utm_term=button)). Accessed 14 December, 2013.

and cinema, we will not take advantage of all the new capacities offered by a computer: its flexibility in displaying and manipulating data, interactive control by the user, the ability to run simulations, etc.” (Manovich 2001, p 97). While there have been many movements, a notable, controversial one is McCloud’s (McCloud 2000) of the ‘infinite canvas’ which presents the idea that the limitations of the printed page has been replaced with an infinite canvas, eliminating the need for panels, viewing the screen as more of a ‘window’ scanning a larger canvass. “The monitor is just as limited as the page...but that’s only if you look at the monitor as a page, but not if you look at the monitor as a window”.<sup>12</sup> This is a fundamentally profound statement considering that McCloud places so much emphasis on panels for meaning to occur in comic books. Marc Waid’s online comic book publishing company, Thrillbent, have recognised the limitations that portrait style comics have on the ability to translate meaning to the reader when accessed through digital devices, and have therefore adapted its publications to fit the parameters laid out by the digital medium. While these conceptualisations consider language adaptability as an important factor for digital media, more sophisticated adaptations have been exhibited in other spheres. Marvel Comics and Madefire, for example, have taken the movement even further in comic book language development. Marvel Comics having developed their Infinite Comics Series. Arguably the most notable attempt to utilise digital conventions for digital comic book offerings would be Madefire Motion Books<sup>13</sup>, co-founded by Liam Sharp and Ben Wolsternholme.

## **Towards a Definition of Motion Books**

How the codes of motion books have engaged with Gibbons notion of ‘a new kind of grammar’ within digital space will be discussed in this chapter, under section devoted to ‘adaption’. The current section however, aims to contextualise the link between comic books, their language and motion books. We may be able to measure this by providing a definition for motion books; however it is difficult to provide a definition due their newness and because no official definition has been formally formulated. Attempts **at this** are further complicated by the ambiguity of terms in reference to digital comics and the motion book application tool, which refers to software currently under development by Madefire’s development team headed up by Eugene Waldon, **allowing** artists and writers to develop and submit their own motion book creations. In much the same way as Manovich steps back to **define** new media, we need to do the same thing to classify the term ‘motion books’. Following this exercise, I will offer my own definition which will only concern the previous reference of the **motion book product**, and not the actual motion book tool.

In formulating a definition let us consider the term ‘motion book’ and the context it pertains to in more detail. It is arguably a natural adaptation that the established notion of a comic book when translated into a digital comic should be termed a ‘digital comic book’, or

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<sup>12</sup> (RefTed Talks Scott McCloud 12:55 [www.ted.com/talks/scott\\_mccloud\\_on\\_comic](http://www.ted.com/talks/scott_mccloud_on_comic))

<sup>13</sup> [www.madefire.com](http://www.madefire.com) Accessed 18 December, 2013.

because of the inclusion of audio and motion, ‘motion comic’. Both of the above definitions are already accounted for so we return to the idea of books. Similar reading reminds us of terminology previously discussed such as ‘graphic novel’ reference books, and the term which has come back into play in the ‘motion book’.

The term ‘motion book’ was coined by renowned Marvel and DC, Wildstorm, Vertigo and others and current Madefire artist and writer, comic book artist, writer and publisher Liam Sharp and Dave Gibbons co creator with Alan Moore of Watchman fame, current artist and writer of Madefire Motion Book , *Tokyo Treatment* . Madefire co-founder Ben Wolstenholme insists that the word ‘book’ is necessary to highlight the reading experience, “[w]e’ve been calling them motion books. We were really passionate about staying within reading. We wanted to make sure it was a reading experience but how could we push to the edge of reading. Not watching, not playing but reading”<sup>14</sup> In conversation with Wolstenholme, he mentioned that prior to trademarking the term ‘motion book’, the name ‘fire-books’ was suggested. The term was however dropped as it didn’t emphasise the distinctions of motion and reading together.

The notion of the reading is emphasised further by Gibbons who argues that “[i]t is still a storytelling medium, it isn’t an animation, it’s me for instance telling you a story that you the reader participate in”.<sup>15</sup> While acknowledging that the content is consumed by a reader, Gibbons’ statement brings up the idea that this type of storytelling is separate to that of animation. While the difference in the language may be obvious to some, the labelling of language is needed to qualify the characteristics of the media over other aspects such as purpose, to help shape our understanding of the new storytelling art-form in light of other pre-existing visual art narrative forms, such as animation. As stated, motion comics are not considered by many to be actual comics because they conform to the functions and purposes of animation over those of comics, excluding the readers control over the pace of the narrative. Gibbons, who oversaw the adaptation of his and Alan Moore’s best-selling print graphic novel, *Watchman Motion Comic*, (2009), 12-episode motion comic, stated that he “was really interested in trying to extend the range of what you can do in a comic book. I had been involved in the *Watchman* motion comic which was a kind of cut and paste, pan and scan thing, and that solved a few problems and did part of what I thought it could do but it wasn’t completely satisfactory” (Gibbons). The suggestion of the established understanding of the words ‘reading’ and ‘book’ would then indicate that ‘motion books’ are not considered by these particular industry leaders and pioneers as animation. The reading experience also suggests that the creative work could be read more than once and exhibit a different experience both times, such as the control of pacing for example. As founder Ben Wolstenholme indicates, “We wanted to be reading not watching, and therefore we want a

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<sup>14</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=TEk70FFqIZc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TEk70FFqIZc) Accessed 10 December, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oJitbQ6jjs> Accessed 11 December, 2013.

book rather than video. There are some really amazing one-offs from ex-Pixar guys -- they're like short films, beautiful animations of books. But they are one-off. They're not something that can be repeated. They're very specific and bespoke executions of a book."<sup>16</sup>

A further reason why they cannot be considered as animation is that they require, what Gibbons has been said to describe as, a new kind of grammar: "we [Madefire] quickly established as Dave coined the phrase that we were in the process of creating a new grammar for essentially what is a new medium altogether".<sup>17</sup> There would be no need to establish a new grammar if this form of storytelling was the same as animation. Arguably however, the stop-start animation present in motion books push this concept into the realm of animation, and perhaps even digital cinema in some instances, as it exhibits the same lack of control, at least momentarily for the reader. As is evident and in accordance with Freytag's (1984) notion of narrative pacing, the animations are strategically placed to enhance the pace of the story. For example, the pace of the lettering appearing on screen can directly relate to the intended pace of the narrative. However, these intermittent animations must be activated by the reader and in that way play a similar role to the physical interaction of print. In both instances the brain sends a sensory message to the muscles which engage the motor neurons to click a button, or turn the page. I argue, therefore that the control of the pace is still, for the purposes of a comic book, in the hands of the reader.

Socially, this needs to be accepted as an understood reading device by the reader so as to not disengage the audience from controlling the reading experience. Manovich argues that societies are becoming increasingly socially and technologically aware in this area with his reference to 'meta-realism'. This notion will be discussed in more detail when considering social relationships with technology and the emerging language which it accompanies.

Many would argue that apart from movement, the inclusion of sound effects and music detracts from the realm of reading comic books. Personally, I disagree. If we revert to Eisner's (1990) definition for comic book parameters, specifically the "narrative constrictions", the inclusion of audio is yet another narrative code which can potentially be utilised to tell the story. The medium of print could not accommodate this device, however as evident in the previous chapter's case study, sound is clearly used as a story telling convention. The digital medium employs the same idea in a different way.

Interestingly the terminology 'motion book' refers to the visual and makes no mention of audio in this audio-visual medium. In subsequent chapters of this dissertation we will consider the vital contribution audio plays in the dissemination of information and the contribution it makes to the comic book visual rhetoric. This is indicative of how 'motion

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<sup>16</sup> ." Ben Wolstenholme <http://www.smartplanet.com/blog/pure-genius/qa-ben-wolstenholme-ceo-of-madefire-discusses-books-for-a-digital-age/> Accessed 10 December, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Sharp, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oJitbQ6jjs>. Accessed 15 December, 2013.

books' were adapted from print, even from the editorial director, Ben Abernathy, who openly indicates the neglect of incorporating sound in the initial inception of the concept. The inclusion of audio seemed to form as part of a natural transition in the wake of digital capacity. "The sound aspect came really late to our process, but we've found it to be a key ingredient for sure." (Abernathy, 2014). The afterthought process also references the basis the creators of the digital CBVR place on traditional print CBVR. Even the creators indicate that a new grammar needs, not only to be adapted from print effectively, but developed when creating for the digital medium as well. "Whats going to be really really interesting is just to see what people come up with. It's like give an intelligent man a tool and see what he does with it", suggests Gibbons in his YouTube interview.<sup>18</sup> Many of the rules and codes of comics specifically still hold true, albeit they undergo an adaptation with motion books in so far as their narrative structure and comic book visual rhetoric are concerned. This point will be expanded later in the chapter. Sharp makes reference to the traditional print medium comics and suggests that his current vision of motion books are digital reinterpretations of that print medium. Wolstenholme, Madefire's Chief Executive Officer, is of the opinion that "when we looked at the digital realm we were pretty sure that there was stuff that was being missed and wasn't being fully explored in a digital space. They [other digital comics] either treated it like a PDF, like a comic, basically like a piece of paper, or they went too far and created kind of like an animation".<sup>19</sup> This statement suggests that we should consider motion books as comics redesigned for a digital platform.

Taking the above points into consideration my definition stands as such: *Motion books consider a digitised hybrid signification, whose interface and narration design are constructed with the goal of engaging the consumer in a reading experience for consumption on a digital display platform, utilising audio and non-continuous motion among established printed and other narratology devices to tell a story.* Initially my definition referred to 'traditional comic book narratology' but altered to 'printed narratology' in response to Sharp's submission on the nature of motion books: "we're even producing straight prose-reads that we'll call 'Motion Books'. Motion Books are the brand of reading we're selling regardless if the DNA is obviously comic books or an adaptation of Sherlock Holmes or a Grimm's Fairy Tale ... although, someday, there could be sub-categories of Motion Books" (Abernathy 2014). The narrative ubiquity lends itself to motion books, in its current stage of development. "I think Motion Books are an entirely new medium created for the mobile digital space, but they also work on PCs and laptops. I think it's also a wide-open medium. Some of our stories - like 'Sherlock Holmes' or 'Metawhal Alpha' - are much more like illustrated prose, but I would still define them as Motion Books." (Sharp, 2014)

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<sup>18</sup> Gibbons, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oJitbQ6jis> Accessed 10 December, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Wolstenholme, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29CXG\\_ho5nA&feature=c4overview&list=UUc4hQ2O3LRVTJu4NRWNQqA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29CXG_ho5nA&feature=c4overview&list=UUc4hQ2O3LRVTJu4NRWNQqA) Accessed 12 December, 2013.

Examples of Motion Books include the Madefire Youtube Preview to Motion Book.<sup>20</sup> A clip from *The Crack in Everything* from the Madefire collection is reproduced in Figure 6.6.



**Figure 6.6. Darkness “The Crack in Everything” Part 3**

Source: <http://madfirestudios.deviantart.com/art/The-Darkness-Episode-3-436621310>

Accessed March 1 2014.

Although there are very few comics that are being developed *on* a digital platform *for* a digital platform, there are other offerings of this nature, such as Marvel’s Infinite Comic Series<sup>21</sup>. The decision to focus on motion books rather than any of the other forms of digital comics is largely personally motivated by the belief that motion books have made the most of the parameters made available by the digital medium in that they have adapted their CBVR the most efficiently and effectively to stimulate the desired result from their readership. Instead of adapting the medium to their product they have adapted their product to the medium, as all good narrative innovations manage to do. As Manovich observes, “professional designers are typically the ones who really push the language of new media forward by being engaged in systematic experimentation and also by creating new standards and conventions” (Manovich 2001, p 40). This statement, in my opinion, serves true when

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=oLFxfZ8Gjx4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=oLFxfZ8Gjx4) Accessed 10 December, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> [http://marvel.com/images/gallery/story/18266/images\\_from\\_marvel\\_infinite\\_comics\\_unveiled#0-909161](http://marvel.com/images/gallery/story/18266/images_from_marvel_infinite_comics_unveiled#0-909161) Accessed 15 December, 2013.

realising ‘designers’ are both narrative designers and those who are responsible for hardware and software designs. Time will tell whether or not I am correct, however, I do believe that motion books are to date the most evolved form of comic book. “Given that computer language is implemented in software, it can potentially keep on changing forever. But there is one thing we can be sure of. We are witnessing the emergence of a new cultural meta-language, something which will be at least as significant as the printed word and cinema before it” (Manovich 2001, p 98).

The problem of analysing content, at the initiation of this thesis was so recent is that there was limited content to be analysed and therefore, due to the limited production of motion books were also a limited number of motion book comic creators. Fortunately, this has been partly addressed by Madefire’s motion book series. Effectively, for comic book creators, this means that we have a new tool to utilise and new considerations regarding the language for comic book creation. The motion books which I will focus on specifically are those with strong comic book influences, essentially comics redesigned for the optimisation of storytelling on a digital platform thus requiring a redesign of comic book grammar and thus, a redesign concerning a digitised comic book visual rhetoric.

Let us consider what this new tool means for semiotic communication with regards to the visual rhetoric.

## **Digital Semiotics**

Semiotic representations of the signs discussed earlier examines the way meaning is presented through representations to the reader, specifically for the purposes of narrative engagement, in our case in the comic books. As evident in the print case study, the visual rhetoric is designed with the intention to manipulate the reader’s cognitive and emotional experience. It is fundamental to the understanding of this chapter that this principle transcends the print into new media. There are however, adaption considerations of the encoding of semiotic representations that must occur within the comic book visual rhetoric in its transference from the print to digital medium. I will refer to these as *adaptations*. In his analysis of language of new media, Manovich identifies the process of ‘*interface adaptation*’ (Manovich 2001, p 78); to which I add my own category, ‘*narrative engagement creative adaptation*’. These are similar to Manovich’s earlier distinction between ‘content’ and ‘form’ or ‘interface’, but go beyond this differentiation. Once explained, these concepts will then be applied to their use in the language of digital comics.

## **Interface Adaptation**

The form of the content is reliant on the physical characteristics of the medium through which it is published. This affects comics both at the level of creative content and interface. Effectively, the visual experience is modified by the characteristics of the new medium. Adaptivity exists through substitution. In the case of interface adaptation from print

to digital for example, the physical boundaries used to signify the colours presented to the reader are altered from the Cyan, Magenta, Yellow Black (CMYK) or subtractive colour system colour system used by print, to that of the Red, Green, Blue (RGB), or additive colour system, used by digital interfaces that represent colour through pixels and light. The printed comic and its scanned digital equivalent would exhibit differences in colour. The display of RGB colour spaces depends on the properties of the display monitor, and the applicable version of the RGB colour space (see Figure 6.7) affecting the interface of the programme. This substitution of codes has been described by Manovich as form, however I will refer to this process as the interface adaptive semiotic process. (IA)



**Figure 6.7 ‘Additive’ and ‘Subtractive’ Colour Values Explained**

Source: 2020pv.co.uk Accessed 28 April, 2014.

### **Creative Formative Adaption**

I will refer to any substitutions of human decision stemming from an artistic formative motivation as creative formative adaptation (CFA). Originally, I considered the terms ‘narrative engagement creative adaptive semiotic process’. I consider ‘form’ to be part of the objective of any signification and at this point I assume it taken for granted that the comic material in question is inextricably linked with the previous discussion of the CBVR in its conformity to the predominance of narrative objectives in both transmission and manifestation. It is also equally applicable in regard to the move from print to digital and the

applicable adaptations; therefore excluding the term ‘form’ from the label. We are currently experiencing a consistent trend in which comic book creators are slowly adapting to the adjusted semiotic framework of new media, for the purposes of optimising and enhancing the process of narrative engagement.

The attempt to separate adaptive components for the purposes of a dissertation is not without its own form of ‘noise’. It is important to note that both these categories share similar qualities in some respects. The hierarchy of the computer programme file systems, for example, will ultimately be generated by human design and thus subject to the inherent bias and ideological position established therein, influencing the tools made available to the digital artist. Creative data is modular in nature and often formulated using discrete data. Furthermore, creative adaptive components may manipulate discrete components for purposes of creative ends, such as automation. An intermittent animation which occurs in a motion book could be considered as discrete data, as well as an example of interface adaptation because it is programmed in finite coding; however, the way in which the end result may be exploited in the context of the narrative and available medium parameters also conforms to the description of continuous data and the CFA process. The artistic ability to effectively remove a character from a background when filing against a greenscreen for example, can only be as effective as the available technology allows for, thus limiting or enabling creative exploits of the artist. Thus the computer behaviour present in the functioning of the digital interfaces segments ideological and practical boundaries for the practice of creative design. Manovich (2001, p 78) refers to the two adaptations (content and form/interface) overlapping with each other:

In contrast to design, in art the connection between content and form (or, in the case of new media, content and interface) is motivated. That is, the choice of a particular interface is motivated by work’s content to such degree that it can no longer be thought of as a separate level. Content and interface merge into one entity, and no longer can be taken apart.

Manovich’s notion of representation concerns the way in which new media objects are deconstructed and understood by the end user. In doing so, it highlights the similarities this world shares with that of semiotics and consequently, his notion of ‘representation’ can be considered as a form of semiotic discourse. In reference to the discourse of representation with regards to new media, “any new media object – a Web site, a computer game, a digital image, and so on – represents, as well as helps to construct, some outside referent: a physically existing object, historical information presented in other documents, a system of categories currently employed by culture as a whole or by some social groups or interests” (Manovich 2001, p 40).

I submit that the reference to representation serves as a similar component to the visual rhetoric does to that of the semiotic discourse referred to in this research. I aim to

deconstruct how this semiotic or representational discourse relates to the visual rhetoric of motion books. Many observations pointed out by Manovich tie into the adaptive process of the semiotic characteristics from print to post medium, specifically with regards to the interface adaptive semiotic process. Adaptive semiotic transitions from print to new media are like many aspects of the rhetoric and an extensive enough area that could merit an entire dissertation in themselves. In the following section, I will however, point out a few basic differences to illustrate the process.

## **Interface Adaptive Semiotic Transitions**

According to Manovich (2001, p 42-44) there are five principles that can be used to identify the differences between new and old media when analysing the adaptive processes which can be applied to the digital comic book visual rhetoric:

- 1) numerical representation;
- 2) modularity;
- 3) automation;
- 4) variability; and
- 5) cultural transcoding

The numerical representation relies on the ability of media to become programmable, and is reliant on the implementation of discrete, quantifiable, numerical data. The digital landscape of new media is rendered as such by converting continuous data into numerical representations. Manovich refers to continuous data as representational information which lacks the sampling process that involves capturing segments of information at regular intervals as specified by the relevant sampling procedure, thus regulating the units of material as a quantified entity, referred to as discrete data. Manovich describes continuous data as “the axis or dimension that is measured [and] has no apparent indivisible unit from which it is composed” (Manovich 2001, p 49).

The majority of print processes would adhere to the description of discrete data over that of continuous data although, in all cases of digital comics, the visual rhetoric is represented through an adapted genetic make-up. We could disseminate the digital genetic make-up further under two categories of the interface adaptability. Data for digital comics that was originally designed on computers will have originated in numerical form whereas comics which were originally scanned from print and converted into digital code would have been created by analogue means. Motion books **could** be an example of digital content created for a digital medium and thus the rhetoric would exist in such framework.

Some of the interface adaptation of sampling can be seen in the following table, Figure 6.7.

PRINT	DIGITAL
Continuous Data	Discrete Data
Analogue Form	Digital Sample
Print Format Print Layout eg A4 Portrait	Display Format Aspect Ratio GUI eg Madefire App / Safari/Mobie Devices
Print Colour Space eg CMYK	Digital Colour Space eg RGB
Pages of a book (data occurring in distinct units)	Resolution (frequency of sampling of RGB values forming pixels)
Sample of orderly dots (although diameter and area of dots vary continuously) – this is significant as the samples in print may not be quantified as they are in digital (Dots per inch)	Samples quantified (assigned a numerical value eg 0-255 8 bit image) Resolution Bitrate

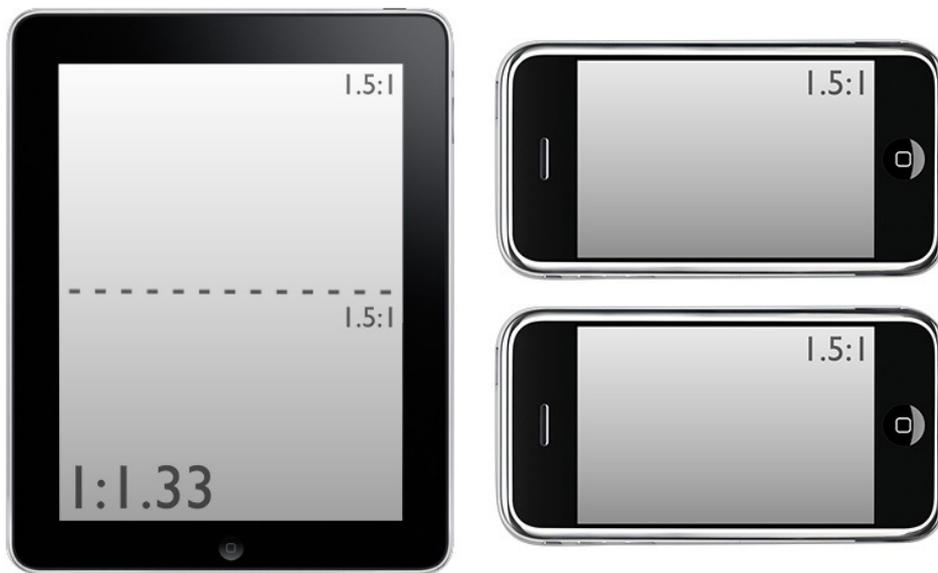
**Figure 6.8 Interface Adaptions between Print and Digital Motion Books**

Source: compiled by D. R. Tomaselli

Device	Screen	Max Playback	Max bitrate
iPad	1024 x 768	1280 x 720	35 Mbps
iPhone 4	960 x 640	1280 x 720	35 Mbps
H.264 video up to 720p (1280 x 720), 30 frames per second Motion JPEG (M-JPEG) up to 35 Mbps, 1280 by 720 pixels, 30 frames per second Support for 1024 by 768 pixels with Dock Connector to VGA Adapter			
iPhone 3, 2, 1	480 x 320	640 x 480	2.5 Mbps
iPod Touch	480 x 320	640 x 480	2.5 Mbps
H.264 video, up to 1.5 Mbps, 640 by 480 pixels, 30 frames per second MPEG-4 video, up to 2.5 Mbps, 640 by 480 pixels, 30 frames per second Support for 480p (640 x 480) and 576p component TV out			

**Figure 6.9 : Pixel Chart for a selection Apple™ products.**

Source: [www.computing.net](http://www.computing.net) Accessed 28 April, 2014.



**Figure 6.10 : Various Ipad/Iphone aspect ratios to which digitised content must adjust.**

Source: [www.gizmodo.com](http://www.gizmodo.com)

Manovich refers to computer systems as using their representational structure to organise a hierarchy of information. He also argues that interfaces, operating systems, as well as software applications, alter the way they represent information based on how they are used. He uses the example of two file system types, Mac's original 1994 Graphical User Interface (GUI), which assumes that there is a hierarchal file system and structure in which a logical and hierarchal order can be formed, and an oppositional ideology of information relationships which are relevant to browser navigation, and assume that every object has the

same level of importance (see Figures 6.8 and 6.9). These two different structures indicate that there is a difference in the value of information and the way in which it is represented in the GUI of the software.

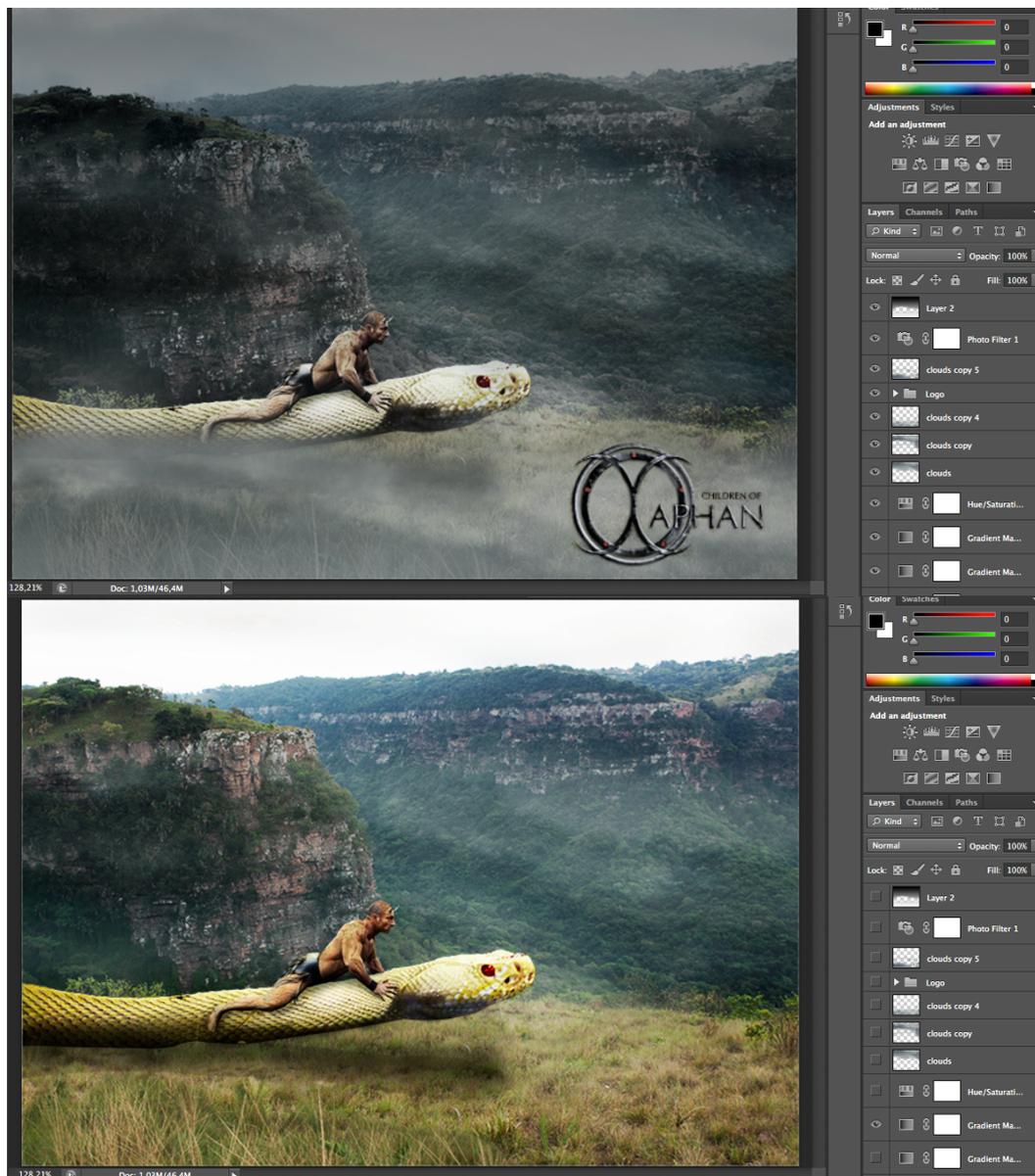
The adaptive process of semiotic interfacing between print and new media suggests that decisions made by computer programmers affect the hierarchy of semiotic discourse. File structures are encoded with inherit bias in their genetic make-up, and as Manovich points out, “[i]nterfaces also privilege particular modes of data access traditionally associated with particular arts and media technologies” (Manovich 2001, p 48). This notion of valuing information can however, still be understood under the headings of the interface adaptive and the **creative formative** adaptive process as an example of interface dichotomy because the bias contained in the way that information is presented could be manipulated for purposes of engaging the reader with the narrative process. Examples of this may very well be exemplified in the **recently** released Madefire motion book application tool in which programming is designed to suit writers and artists who need share the same digital, but not necessarily physical, space. **The logic and design of the application is purposed and optimised for collaboration between writers and artist for motion book production.**

Interface recognition exists in the same way as it does to print; paper has been replaced by the GUI. In both instances, they form a semiotic framework subject to a specific cultural response. In other words, the print layout also assumes a hierarchal order in the way it structures information. For example, the western convention of reading comics from left to right would indicate a directional hierarchy in terms of chronological implementation of plot progression. Both these mediums, namely print and digital, present an inherent cultural bias within their respective interfaces.

Manovich notes how the cultural bias evident in new media is shared with traditional mediums: “As it is the case with all cultural representations, new media representations are also always biased. They represent/construct some features of physical reality at the expenses of others, one world view among many, one possible system of categories among numerous others possible” (Manovich 2001, p 40). With regard to the digital space we can recognise that computer logic is imposed on the end user “[a]s a window of a Web browser comes to replace cinema and television screen, a wall in art gallery, a library and a book, all at once, the new situation manifest itself: all culture, past and present, is being filtered through a computer, with its particular human-computer interface” (Manovich 2001, p 76). Numerical representation also allows for the inclusion of audio as this data is also digitised and developed to be understood by the computer and thus, becomes a code to be incorporated into the digital comic book visual rhetoric; thus, when analysing the DCBVR audio becomes a significant inclusion into the IA and CFA.

## Modularity

In much the same way that the CBVR exists in relation to a larger contextual rhetoric, digital structures tend to exist and operate in the same way. Manovich refers to this as the compartmental structure of new media in which “the elements are assembled into larger scale objects but in doing so maintain their individual structure” (Manovich 2001, p 51). For example in *Children of Xaphan*, all layers in the Photoshop application contain digital information which may be composited on top of each other to form one overall merged image. While one overall image exists, the layers themselves retain their individual identity and can potentially be turned off or hidden. In the case of hidden layers the information is still accessible and built into the Photoshop (PSD) file. This example proves Manovich’s observation of modularity as the new media object is assembled into a larger scale object while still maintaining its individual structure. See Figures 6.11 below.



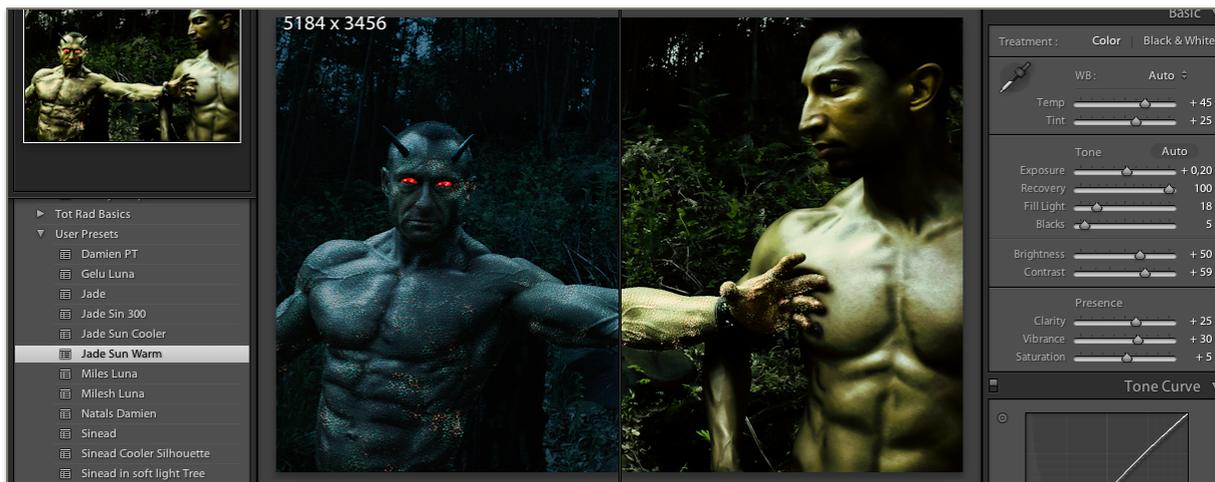
**Figure 6.11: The same photoshop file with the layers turned on in the top version while some of the same layers are hidden in the bottom.**

Source: Children of Xaphan, Astrolabe Entertainment, FaceBook: <https://www.facebook.com/astrolabeinorbit> ; Deviant Art <http://xxxdesmodusxxx.deviantart.com/>

## **Automation**

Automation refers to the process of removing the human from the creative process. Numerical coding of media (principle 1) and the modular structure of a media object (principle 2) allow one to automate many operations involved in media creation, manipulation and access. Thus, humans can be removed from the creative process, at least in part (Manovich 2001, p 53). This provides an example of how the CFA has to work within the framework offered by the IA. As mentioned, when searching for a definition of motion books, automation was considered in its implementation because of its intermittent animations.

Automation also exists in many computer processes. In the case of layouts for example, templates may be available which will shape the direction of the aesthetic and become a fundamental consideration of the rhetoric. For example, in *Children of Xaphan* the use of gradient maps is common. If we take the Desmodus versus Heavens Angels, scene, a gradient maps is the gradual change of the grade in an image (Figure 6.12). In this example the colours may have been pre-programmed by the user, although the Adobe RGB colour space is an automated default setting, so that the programming, storage of information and application thereof conforms to the notion of automation. Photoshop also contains ‘actions’ which are in themselves an automated set of commands applying automatic algorithms, which may or may not have been directed by the digital artist. “The emergence of new media coincides with this second stage of a media society, now concerned as much with accessing and re-using existing media as with creating new one” (Manovich 2001, p 55). See Figure Below.



**Figure 6.12: The automated presets on the left tab allow precoded grading information, such as that evident on the tab on the right hand side of the image, to be applied at the click of a button.**

Source: Children of Xaphan, Astrolabe Entertainment, FaceBook: <https://www.facebook.com/astrolabeinorbit> ; Deviant Art <http://xxxdesmodusxxx.deviantart.com/>

Again the equivalent occurs in the print medium where the ‘colour space’ of drawing apparatuses and speculatives were pre-determined by pencil manufacturers, effectively removing the artist from the creative process due to reliance on a technological apparatus. This adaptation has also followed its way into the digital realm and consequently, major technological developers, such as Adobe and Madefire, have made their way into the development of the digital CBVR. Along with new media creation, media access is also becoming automated and thus automation has become an adaptive process to the CBVR. The Madefire application for example, automatically links the user to Madefire content and updates and engages automatic commands for the downloading and management of content.

## Variability

As a consequence of numerical coding and the modular structure, it is possible for variable versions of a new media object to exist. For example, when mass copies of a book are printed, the content is immovable and exists as a singularly mass produced identity whereas in new media, the content can be customisable in its display and often its interaction. Unlike print, the display device used to view digital information varies from one reader to the next.

In fact motion books have the ability to update even after publishing, much the same as computer OS systems would when offering possible bug fixes and enhanced performance. In this way, potentially no motion book need be completed as much as abandoned, rendering the content as potentially indefinitely ubiquitous.

Motion books, can also, adapt to their display environment from mobile to television through Google Nexus Player, taking into account the parameters outlined by a device's colour space, aspect ratio, and the like. This is one element that digital media has that does not have a direct correlation with its print counterpart in which all media offerings are identical, although multiple versions of publications do exist.

The CBVR then, must exhibit an ability to translate onto various media display platforms. These platforms again emphasise their cultural value into the classification of media if identified by their purpose of function; “[i]n short, we are no longer interfacing to a computer but to culture encoded in digital form” (Manovich 2001, p 80). In the case of motion books the cultural consumption formulates the digital reading experience. The reading experience of motion books varies from reader to reader due and the subsequent semiotic effect they render between the reader and the display.

It is worth noting that variability also extends to compatibility, and in spirit with Manovich's notion of modularity, extends to the political economy. Not all new media objects are compatible with one another due to competing brands. Companies, like Apple for example, intentionally design their products to be incompatible with opposing brands, in an attempt to dominate the market, hence the consumer 'war' between Apple and Android ecosystems, The end result filters down to the comic book creators, the end user and ultimately, the digital CBVR.

When developing my first character poster of Letum for *Children of Xaphan*, I was challenged with the issue of compatibility. The raw file image of the actress was to be superimposed on a photograph taken in India's Red Mosque, but the raw image would not open in Adobe Photoshop CS5. This was the first asset that I tried to incorporate into my photo manipulation that had been taken with my Canon 60D camera. Upon further investigation I learned that the raw plug-in needed to be updated or alternatively, I needed to convert the Canon raw file into an Adobe DNG raw file, compatible with Photoshop CS5 (see Figure 6.13 below).

As with the above example problems such as bugs, fixes etc. often pop up requiring software updates and have led to what design practitioners have termed 'work arounds' in which solutions are designed by the end user who finds a way around the incompatibility and often shares this information with the online community.



**Figure 6.13 Letum, Children of Xaphan.**

Source: Children of Xaphan, Astrolabe Entertainment, FaceBook: <https://www.facebook.com/astrolabeinorbit> ; Deviant Art <http://xxxdesmodusxxx.deviantart.com/>

Compatibility issues concerning Madefire Motion Books would be that they **were originally** developed only for I-Pad, I-Pod Touch and Desktop Applications (Safari, Chrome, Firefox, Opera, and Internet Explorer). Transcoding however, helps to relieve some of the incompatibilities caused by continuous developments of hardware and software. It allows computer systems to decipher differently formatted data and access it as a unified language, in much the same way that Google Translate attempts to convert one spoken language into another. “As hardware and software keep evolving and as the computer is used for new tasks and in new ways, this layer is undergoing continuous transformation” (Manovich 2001, p 64). The entire development of motion books is an example of how this statement holds true for the Digital CBVR because it concerns the IA process and again the designs it offers artist for CFA.

This section concerns the technical adaptation of the medium effectively outlining the characteristic 'behaviour' of the differences between the print and digital mediums. The following chapter denotes how these technical differences may influence creative decisions when concerning the CBVR in its digitised format. This will be illustrated with examples from Madefire's Motion Books.

## Chapter Seven

### Digital Comics Adaptation & Madefire Motion Books

Chapter Six explored the emergence of ‘new media’, developed a definition of ‘motion books’ and explored ‘interface adaption’. The current chapter will continue the discussion by focussing on the ‘creative formative adaption’ transitions, and then proceed with the dissertation’s second case study, motion books.

#### Creative Formative Adaptation Transitions

The creative formative adaption of semiotic structures concerns the intentional manipulation of content. As much as the content is based on the principles of the printed comic, artists are experimenting with the limitations of the new tools and the potential of new behaviours by readers. It can therefore be argued that a new grammar is emerging. Some motion books, for example, show evidence of grammatical hybridity from other narrative visual art forms, such as film and interactive video games. In the specific instances of comic book adaptations such as *Mono*, the language however, arguably abides by the constructions applicable to comic books over any other visual art meaning system. In this instance specifically, comic book language has been adapted to embrace motion book language.

The previous case study focused on how the hybrid signifier in print existed, establishing how meaning is created through the arrangement of various signifiers in proxemic and semiotic relation to each other. This study examines similarities with the previous X-Men case study such as panel arrangement and rhythmic arrangement. The focus is to highlight how the same objectives can be achieved through the parameters offered by the motion book, specifically in relation to the encoding information through means unavailable in print. Possibilities extended though the digital process include movement and audio, both in terms of music and sound as well as other considerations such as marketing and distribution, including the five principals of new media as outlined by Manovich.

Many of the current Motion Books on offer are developed by well-known print comic creators illustrating a degree of creative influences being based on the conventions of traditional print comics. However, the recent first draft release of the web based Madefire development tool will have extended the possibilities of comic creation to the general public who will be empowered to create comics online.

The use of new technologies and alternative narrative art forms is bound to have some teething issues. Motion Books require an almost experimental approach within the medium as evident in not only the ‘Madefire originals’ but also many of the newer and ‘Indie’

versions. Many of which are created by individuals largely unfamiliar with the comic book industry, incorporating grammar from other narrative influences, such as self created 'Ruins of Gold' originally adapted from a short film, and 'Dark Chronicles' and 'Sherlock Holmes' with an obvious influence in storybook narrative. The Irons, although developed specifically for the motion book genre, offered key influence in the film adapted motion book of Ruins of Gold, incorporating influence by film techniques; the design of which translates directly into comic book language. Significations of this are suggested in reference to the content of The Irons which is episode based as opposed to issue based. As with references already made in this section, we consistently have to consider terminology such as reader/user, closure/montage, page/content etc which points to a multi-nodal visual narrative hybridity. Titles such as *Mono*, *Tokyo Treatment* and others, clearly maintain similarities from print language and pay homage to semic codes bound to traditional print structures, such as panels, and the traditional A4 page aspect ratios.

No doubt motion book trends will continue to experiment and grow. Much as film, for example, has evolved its grammar in the transition from silent film to speech, engaging a process of trial and error, comic books must now find their own methods to do the same. D.W Griffith, for example, popularised use of symbolism in film which was embraced by the public and appropriated by other popular filmmakers. It has now become commonplace. Comic books embrace a similar process. The grammar practised in Motion Books is limited because few titles exist however, the variation offered in the practice of Motion Book exhibits variability in its meaning generation. The rapid succession of technology and its resulting relationship with the arts opens windows for the development of visual literacy. We currently find ourselves in this situation with regards to the development of Motion Books, in which the grammar is still in its early stages of evolution, and testing the boundaries of its effectiveness in its new medium.

Both the developed content and future development of the comic book remain vastly untapped. The Electronic Arts, IOS application trailer for *Madness: Alice Returns*, exhibits basic video game elements in the solving of a problem in order for the narrative to progress (See Figures 7.1 and 7.2 below). A marriage of this type of visual rhetoric may have potential for the incorporation into future digital comic books, resulting in a potential tug of war between the language of video game narratives and digital comic book narratives. These questions will become increasingly relevant as these two mediums merge their visual narratives and accompanying language. I believe that the small sample discussed in this dissertation however, serves the purposes of both illustrating adaptability, as well as serving as a measure for future evolution.



**Figure: 7.1 Title Screens for the E-Book Alice: Madness Returns.**

Source: Left: [alice.wikia.com](http://alice.wikia.com) Alice\_Madness\_Returns\_Storybook Right [applenapps.com](http://applenapps.com)



**Figure 7.2 EA Games. The interactive book allows users to engage in the story progressing the plot by actively engaging with the interface. In this case by shaving Alice’s head.**

Source: Left: [gamingphanatic.com](http://gamingphanatic.com) Right: [gamesradar.com](http://gamesradar.com)

It will be difficult to predict the future direction of motion books and where they may draw or create grammar from, virtual reality, video games, film, animation etc. It remains to be seen how these creative influences will merge with the space-time dimension, reader pace control and other established conceptual grammatical practices that form the basis of comic book meaning. Illustrations will also be open to an equal number of varied interpretations such as, digital, 3D, animated, photo-manipulated, sketched, handdrawn, etc. The influences of which may evidence themselves in the prosumers targeted to develop their own titles. Madefire currently have no official statistic about the degrees of familiarity or influence the above rhetorics concern, although there have been some observations made. “, we do seem to bring in a high number of non-print comics people who find us through the App Store or word of mouth” (Sharp 2014). Abernathy estimates a fifty percent comic book reader base in

Madefire's consumption. "It seems fairly evenly split, based on the reader comments in the app store. Lots of our readers are not comic fans, but they love Madefire, so hopefully we will also be a bit of a gateway for people to start reading and loving comics who otherwise might not have." (Abernathy 2014).

### *The Irons*



**Figure 7.3. Motion Book title page where multiple layers move upon interaction of the interface.**

Source: [www.hadenblackman.com](http://www.hadenblackman.com)

The digital signification of the CBVR is exemplified in the first issue of *The Irons*, entitled *The Irons – Hybrids: Episode 1* (Figure 7.3). The digital dimension is immediately evident from the cover page where we notice a different method of interactivity between the content and user. The visuals seemingly move and shift perspective, depending on the physical touch of the user on the screen of the I-Pod, I-Phone, I-Pad or the manoeuvring of the mouse if viewed on the web. The interaction in this case is used in a differing context to conventional narratives, in which interaction refers to the mental and emotional involvement of the reader as they progress through the narrative. In this sense, the terminology extends to the physical interaction of the reader and the actual comic content. Arguably the two interpretations of physical interaction could suggest a third result in which physical

interaction serves the purpose of interaction of narrative progression, thus the separate references to ‘interaction’ share a symbiotic relationship.

Furthermore, Manovich argues that the interactive process of the reader such in the case of motion books, clicking the arrow to the turn of the page, incorporates the reader into the reading process. This action would serve to fulfil the objective of immersing the reader into the narrative process. Consequently, the interaction of human and computer are blended together to both engage and actively progress the reading experience. “By having periodically to complete the interactive text through active participation the subject is interpolated in it” (Manovich 2001, p 187). This is yet another example of how the CBVR works in its transcendence of mediums.

Emphasis on character prominence is indicated in the use of layering of the image, on which the front layer commands the greatest range of movement to tie into a seemingly realistic perspective. The use of layering allows images to be composited together in a hierarchal order, upon which the properties to each layer can be treated individually for the final composition. This serves as an example of Manovich’s observation of modularity in which individual components may exist in a manner whereby they maintain their unique identity while still comprising their inclusion into the whole. The interactivity is extended when we need to engage the narrative by physically interacting with the screen and in doing so, we retain control over the pace of the narrative. This example also serves to observe the how automation has been created by that which the programmer has encoded into the comic and then applied by the comic creator.

As previously indicated, the control of the pacing in motion books is largely retained by the reader, and provides a sense of mastery over the content encoded within the motion book. “In contrast, the new meta-realism is based on oscillation between illusion and its destruction, between immersing a viewer in illusion and directly addressing her. In fact, the user is even put in a much stronger position of mastery when she ever is by ‘auto-deconstructing’ commercials, newspaper reports of ‘scandals’, and other traditional non-interactive media” (Manovich 2001, p 188). Therefore, the audience know that when interacting with motion books, they have control over the medium. The familiarity of the interface allows the reader to master the actions of motion books in much the same way as they would have the ability to master their print predecessors. The reader understands that they need to click to progress the story, much the same that they would have to physically turn the page in print to achieve the same objective. Manovich states that “[d]uring one segment the computer screen presents the viewer with an engaging cinematic narrative. Suddenly the image freezes, menus and icons appear and the viewer is forced to act: make choices; click; push buttons” (Manovich 2001, p 186).

The ability to encode audio in motion books offers the digital CBVR advantages otherwise unattainable in print. The powerful devices of music and sound come into play,

borrowing techniques from audio visual mediums as a proairetic code before the scene visually unfolds. This is achieved by the non-verbal tempo and tone of the sound, in which it suggests that we are about to engage with a dark twisted plot. Arguably, the code could also be considered as hermeneutic because the presence of a sub-textual narrative suggests that it has been established for invested plot capitalisation; however, the mandate of a physically engaging plot progression renders all such instances as proairetic in nature. In the first instance, the visuals and music mount simultaneously, but upon interactive progression the visuals focus on a title placed on a black background – reminiscent of the silent film era. The music continues to play however, and thus continues to engage signification in the mind of the reader. This allows for a continuous relationship between the content and the reader that extends the visual boundary. The music ‘loops’ and therefore, reiterates the emotional stimulator it accompanies. The presence of audio has been credited with accounting for 80% of the communication experience and as such becomes a crucially important sense in the digital CBVR anatomical structure. The music characterises heavy reverbed instruments, with a heavy laden beat characteristic of the accompanied visuals to establish the premise of a technologically advanced, gloomy and dangerous society. Best described by the writer of *The Irons*, Hayden Blackman: “*The Irons* is a fusion of sci-fi and horror. Blade Runner meets *Se7en*, set on a quarantined slum planet where everyone dreams of only one thing: escape”.<sup>22</sup>

The modularity and automation work hand-in-hand to correlate with the pacing of the reading experience as depending on the time the reader spends on any particular scene, some of the sound/music will slow down, effectively slowing the pace of the narrative and thus, the overall pace of the comic. This illustrates a similarity between the reading of motion books with regard to the reader retaining control and print reading. Depending on the pace at which the episode is consumed the manifestation of the hybrid signifier is not bound to unilateral execution as it may occur in mediums such as film and animation. The narrative pacing adapts through sound to meet the requirements of the reader.

The reader must negotiate this relationship in a manner which cannot be achieved in print. For example, the brief flashing of the image which preceded the title screen, while not necessarily seen by the reader, is momentarily retained in the mind of the reader, thus extending through the displayed title. The title, visual and audio information is presented for a limited time, the contextual provision of which filters into the mind of the reader intermittently who is left with the task of piecing the clues together and progressing the narrative. While the controversial placing of automated intermittent animation hijacks pacing control, the reader has the option to replay the image, in which the reading experience may again vary in its execution of senses, as evident in the pace of the repeated audio and visual

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<sup>22</sup> Hayden Blackman interview: <http://www.hadenblackman.com/archives/category/the-irons>  
Accessed 20 December, 2013

materials. Each repeated viewing renders a variation of the original message and thus a varying experience on the part of the reader.



**Figure 7.4: Rhythmic quality of the story directed by frame changes.**

Source: <http://www.deviantart.com/art/The-Irons-Hybrids-Episode-1-362909529>

As we progress to engage with the narrative, the rhythmic quality of the story becomes apparent through movement, sound and frame changes. Multiple symbolic indicators interplay with movement and sound using zooms and cutaways to document the fall of an unidentified woman from a skyscraper, followed by fade-ins, sharp sound effects, speeding up of the rhythm. Again we see the influence of film in the climatic build-up with the correlation of tight shots, rapid movement of background, and additional sound effects which are juxtaposed with words reinforcing the severity of the desperation in the city and narrative premise (Figure 7.4). The rhythmic and tension structures, in accordance with those identified by Freytag (1984), carry into the next scene where tension is diminished through the accompanying visuals of the young blue-eyed blonde hair Muni, and her mother, waiting in a queue (Figure 7.5). Rhythm is slowed down significantly from the previous scene by implementing of the ambient noise of chattering and passing cars. This is reiterated through the words and frame of the image.



Figure: Shot of fast to slow pace in accordance to narrative tension structure design.

Sharp compares rhythmic concerns of motion books in general sharing similar considerations to print in terms of the dynamics between the reader and subject matter. “I think it's really down to the reader and the subject matter. Some stories you are bound to read with more urgency because they are fraught with suspense, drama, action... Others will be

more leisurely.” (Sharp 2014). With reference to major inclusion of motion and audio Sharp observes, “But I do think that the elements of sound and motion create the illusion of a faster experience because there's more going on in the same time-frame in a Motion Book. It would be interesting to see if you read the print version of Injustice and timed it against reading the motion book... I actually suspect that reading the motion book might even take a bit longer!” (Sharp 2014). Sharps’ suspicions about the increased rhythm of motion books, while still taking longer to read, may find some answer in terms of the narrative structures of each segmentation. While there is seeming more action taking place in a motion book the distribution methods differ vastly. The time-space dimensions applicable to motion books differ from their print cousins with regards to issue and thus narrative frequency and duration, at least in the case of the Western context. “They have a mere 20-22 pages to tell a MONTHLY story and keep readers hooked/interested, so the story tends to progress quickly to keep people invested” (Abernathy 2014). This point which plays out with regard to narrative rhythmic concerns, as outlined by Abernathy:

Further to the above, the American print comic book distribution encourages more rapid story progression due to the amount of books that come out monthly and how difficult it is to stand above the ‘noise’ of all the other publications, particularly if you’re producing second tier super hero titles. In a lot of ways, comics are produced (in particular with the Big Two) [Marvel Comics & DC Comics] for RETAILERS more than fans because of this disjointed business model. Digital distributions cut outs the awkward middle man to deliver content direct to consumer. (Abernathy 2014).

The print retail distribution model further affects the print CBVR due to the smaller window for character development to be established, as Abernathy states, “Character development definitely suffers because of this as does bigger world building. I would offer a counterbalance with manga (Japanese comics) where they produce/release weekly content and pacing tends to be more decompressed.” (Abernathy 2014).

The above statement correlates with Manoviches notion of new media characterised in terms of its stage of distribution differing from the analogue printed form and offers a scenario where such model encompassed on the CFA, creative adaption of the content.

Returning to Figure 7.xx, the interactivity of movement on this panel is similar to that described in the cover, further slowing down time by prompting the reader to explore the layout of the illustration. The angle of the image exploits the opportunity for perspective with various layers of grounds to enhance depth perception. This technique often utilised in print and film, and in motion books appears to offer new degrees of perspective with the ability to manoeuvre between the five layers of depth. This is further reiterated by blurring out the last two, seemingly further away, layers.



**Figure 7.5: Background characters and building layers blurred, heightening depth perception.**

Source: <http://www.deviantart.com/art/The-Irons-Hybrids-Episode-1-362909529>

The next frame zooms in, in a less automated manner. The same image is retained on screen but shown differently by blurring out all but one of our characters (Figure 7.5). Upon physical interaction the camera changes from a low to high angle shot, and there is a slight increase of volume of ambient sound (Figure 7.6). All of these elements help to build the tension of the narrative.



**Figure 7.6: Low to high angle shot.**

Source: <http://www.deviantart.com/art/The-Irons-Hybrids-Episode-1-362909529>

The result is that the reader may find themselves physically commanding the narrative to unfold at a faster rate, a possible substitution for the comic books ability to provoke hermeneutic or proairetic status by leaving the last panel on the right page on a cliffhanger. The additional layering of music becomes increasingly ominous in terms of the narrative, consistently developing its proairetic nature. This music gives an indication that an ‘evil’

action is about to unfold based on the nature of its melody. The added layer of ‘evil’ music does not repeat upon playback, and it could be argued that this is done to add even more tension. However, the effect would be better suited if it was preceded by a build-up of intensity because if replayed, the intensity of the scene is diminished in terms of tension momentum. Sharp comments on the incorporation of sound into motion books: “[t]he sound aspect came really late to our process, but we’ve found it to be a key ingredient for sure. The wrong kind of music can completely change the atmosphere of a scene, and it certainly helps immerse you in the story.” (Sharp 2014). A notion reiterated by Abernathy:

Well, no fancy metrics, but it’s a huge part of what we do—we have some silent Motion Books on the platform and they feel empty or half-finished. Funny enough, originally, there was no plan to include sound—it was a last minute addition! And what a smart move! But adding atmospheric sound and cultivated music really enhances the reading (and this coming from someone who can’t read a traditional book with music playing!) (Abernathy 2014).

Movement is indicated in a slight pan from right to left in the next frame (Figure 7.7). A literacy convention not often used in print reading patters, or in film patterns for that matter. **Breaking from traditional western conventions of movement emanation in a left to right direction**, may have been used to provide a slight disorientation to emphasise a sense of unease on the part of the reader. The arrows indicating movement are placed on the far right of the screen pointing in the same direction.



**Figure 7.7: Movement pans right to left in frame.**

Source: <http://www.deviantart.com/art/The-Irons-Hybrids-Episode-1-362909529>

The suggestion of Muni’s disappearance is evidenced through her rapid disappearance and reappearance, effectively ‘flickering’, and an illustrative possibility that is allowed by the digital medium to provoke anticipation from the reader.

We then see a flash of ‘lightning’ appear very quickly (Figure 7.8). Eisner makes reference to fixed time indicators, such as a clock, so the inclusion of lightning in a static image may help ‘freeze’ an important moment, but still imply that there is rapid movement to

emphasise the pacing of events. The next shot employs the use of two visual elements with a zoom in, while a vignette develops, which when combined helps to develop tension even further.



**Figure 7.8: Lightning/ No Lightning**

Source: <http://www.deviantart.com/art/The-Irons-Hybrids-Episode-1-362909529>

The next panels employ more nuances from film than traditional comic books by including a ‘focus pull’ from the mother to the previously identified turnstile, which is now used to set the proximity of the action (Figure 7.9). The relationship of the characters to their environment becomes a concern of greater prominence when compared to the previous case study of the X-men which exhibits higher degrees of stylisation and abstraction in its proxemic engineering.



**Figure 7.9 ‘Focus Pull’**

Source: <http://www.deviantart.com/art/The-Irons-Hybrids-Episode-1-362909529>

After Muni’s mother realises that Muni has disappeared, the shot zooms out while the intermittent flashing of a construction barrier heightens the tension. The suspension of disbelief necessary to continue engaging with the content is created by a border similar to those used in traditional comic books. The reason for this is that despite the animated nature of the flashing construction barrier, the hyper-stylized technique needs to be established early on in an animation in order for the audience is able to understand and accept the narrative device, whereas in the context of this comic, the device is presented with traditional tools so that it will be accepted by readers more easily (Figure 7.10). Panel based structure is not

included in *The Irons*, and consequently the canvas becomes shot based. A transition still occurs between frames so the canvas cannot be considered as, **McClouds notion of infinite** and still adheres to the notion of closure in the formulation of meaning. The transitions work as further indicators in meaning generation.



**Figure 7.10 Construction Barrier**

Source: <http://www.deviantart.com/art/The-Irons-Hybrids-Episode-1-362909529>

One particular transition from a view of the city scape fades to black, but retains a blue light while the rest of the image fades. The audio helps to shape meaning by repeating a ‘donging’ noise to create tension. These transitions also play a role in holding reader attention by addressing possible weak points of attention between beats. The interpretation of content is not only different based on the pace of the reader, but the choice of platform also plays a part in consumption. In line with Manoviches notion of content or at least cinema becoming slave to the computer (Manovich 2001, p 48), this content becomes submissive to the operating device.

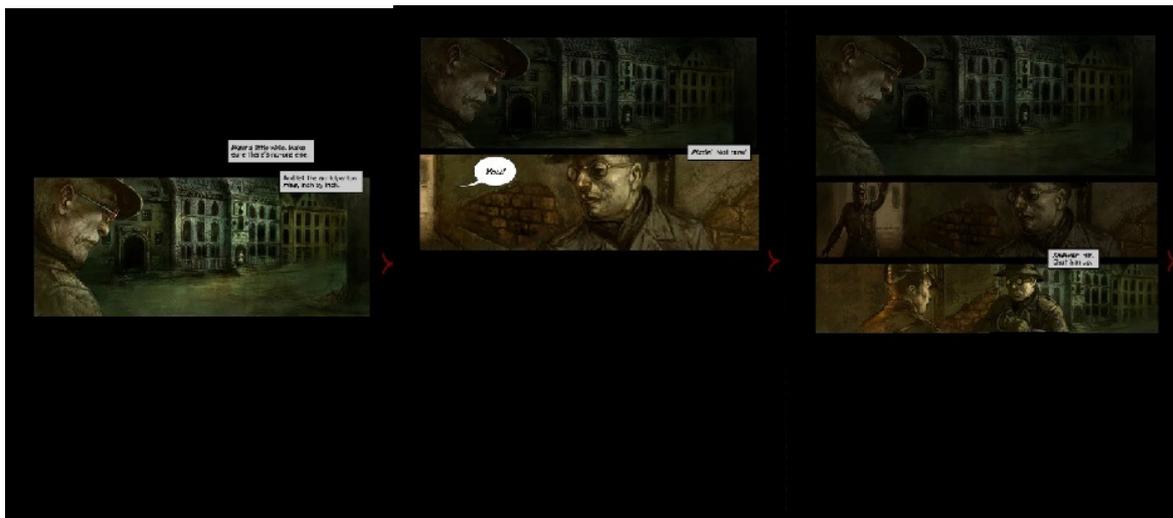
The comparison of grammar in *The Irons* highlights certain differences exemplified in other titles of the Motion Book series indicating auteurships. The action in *Tokyo Treatment* unfolds rather differently because the panels themselves do not necessarily exhibit bold borders but, they could grammatically be considered as a panel nonetheless because it ‘adds’ to the image as the narrative progresses and **building a collage** within the frame. Tension is built as blank space becomes increasingly busy and visually saturated. Much of the added illustration occurs in the non traditional western convention of left to right. This may be indicative of the eastern influence of reading from right to left (see Figure 7.11).



### Figure 7.11 Tokyo Treatment – Visual Saturation

Source: <http://www.madefire.com/motion-books/treatment-tokyo/>

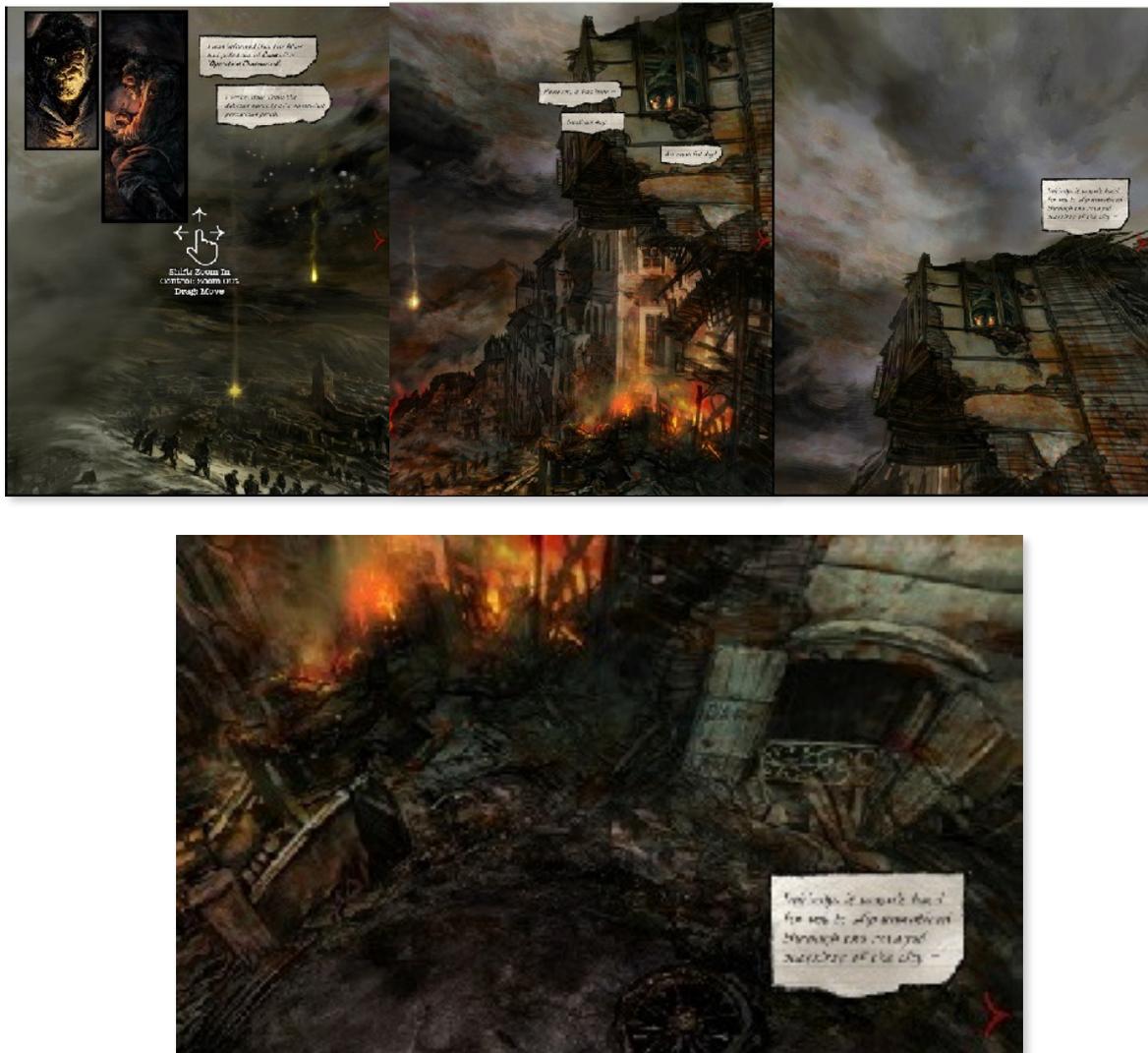
*Mono* and *Houses of the Holy* embrace traditional panel structures but offer a dynamic treatment of these structures by including both size and placement into their presentation. In *Mono*, we tend to jump from panel to panel within a page, with some panels ‘moving over’ to make space for others (see Figure 7.12). The grammatical effect provides a degree of prominence to certain panels at specific moments in the narrative. *Mono* also uses a 360 degree render when looking for the main character to demonstrate how time slows down and increases tension.



### Figure 7.12. Houses of The Holy – Complex use of Panels

Source: <http://www.deviantart.com/art/Houses-of-the-Holy-Episode-1-362909354>

This interaction in *Mono* borders on orchestration with the aforementioned *Alice* game, in terms of the similarities of solving a puzzle, and physically commanding interaction from the user to address a problem provided by the interface in order to progress the narrative. These details and the inclusion of action suggest the slow unfolding of time, emphasised by the stars in the sky. All of these elements slow down the pacing which is reinforced by exploring the 3D rendered 360 degree environment to identify our protagonist Mono amidst the high level of detail evident in the image (see Figure 7.13). The medium continues to adapt for the reader through panels which move horizontally, as in *Houses of the Holy*, so that the reader need not move their eyes because the panel moves for them by panning from right to left until reaching the intended position within the page. The next panels are left blank, so that readers are unable to glance ahead and spoil the chronology of the narrative, as is possible in traditional print comics. **In this way motion books can control the pacing in a way that print cannot, ironically through the use of movement.** The reader still retains the ability to look back but the prominence of the panel has diminished because it has been decreased size and placed off centre in comparison to its initial positioning.



**Figure 7.13:** Various images of the 360 degree panorama to be navigated by the reader in Mono. Source: <http://www.digitalspy.com/comics/news/a497366/mono-4-madefires-comic-visits-the-old-curiosity-shop-preview.html>

*Captain Stone* employs a technique of changing the background while an eagle in the foreground remains static. The panel remains the same but is framed differently, offering a varied treatment of the space and time dimensions in comics. This transition helps to establish of the landscape in the mind of the reader while then compensating for coherency and concerns pertaining to continuity. Space, time and tension structures are simultaneously progressed in the figure of *Charlotte Chance*, by occupying two separate panels seemingly placed in two places at once (Figure 7.14). This indicates her current and previous positions while the unmoving grass provides a fixed-time indication, thus suggesting that the movement of position is of the character alone. The overall effect is deliberately disorientating, suggesting a highly subjective interpretation considering space and time parameters. The seeming randomness of the visual structure is effective in conveying the idea of the hunting she is engaging in. The signifiers' spatial and sequential relationship

forms a sub-textual visual and audio metaphor to communicate the process. The suggested indications are confirmed in the next sequence in which she makes her kill, culminating in a climatic resolution reiterated by the separation and enhancement of the image through additional use of colour, as well as a 3D scrolling interactive effect. Interestingly, the same panel is responsible for the capitalisation of climatic tension, as well as the diminishing of tension through the reader's pacing control, and supplemented through the use of interactivity. The climatic sequence of the actual kill stands out from the rest of the 'scene' in its comparatively saturated colour scheme as well as the interactivity function of scrolling through the various layers of the image.

The idea of Charlotte portrayed in simultaneous spacial proximities makes me question how an equivalent expression might be portrayed in print, as conventionally the printed panel has trained readers to understand that the current panel is the present (MCCLoud Quote Here), . This scenario however for motion books provides reason to perceive a dual space time dimension, as the looking forward to the next panel unintentionally is prohibitive with the interface and the decision to 'look back' or not is clearly intentional by the creators.



## RUINS OF GOLD

<http://fav.me/d84shoc>

The Cover page offers a subtle yet similar hermeneutic suggestion to X-Men case study, where the narrative is expected to progress to with the Randlord clearly intoxicated and showering in falling golden particles. A notion reinforced by the following pages, built on by the inclusion of audio. The title page then becomes somewhat ubiquitous in this instance, despite its interruption by page one of the story. One particular commenter on the Deviant Art url, 'wildtraveller' which the motion book is embedded on web describes it as , 'The danger of Greed was present right from the word go.' Considered by structuralist purposes as a 'hook', establishing expectations to build onto, in a similar manner to the X-Men case study.



**Figure 7.15. Ruins of Gold Cover Page (Astrolabe Entertainment). Golden particles drop on the face of the Randlord in an interactive parallax.**

Source: <http://fav.me/d84shoc>

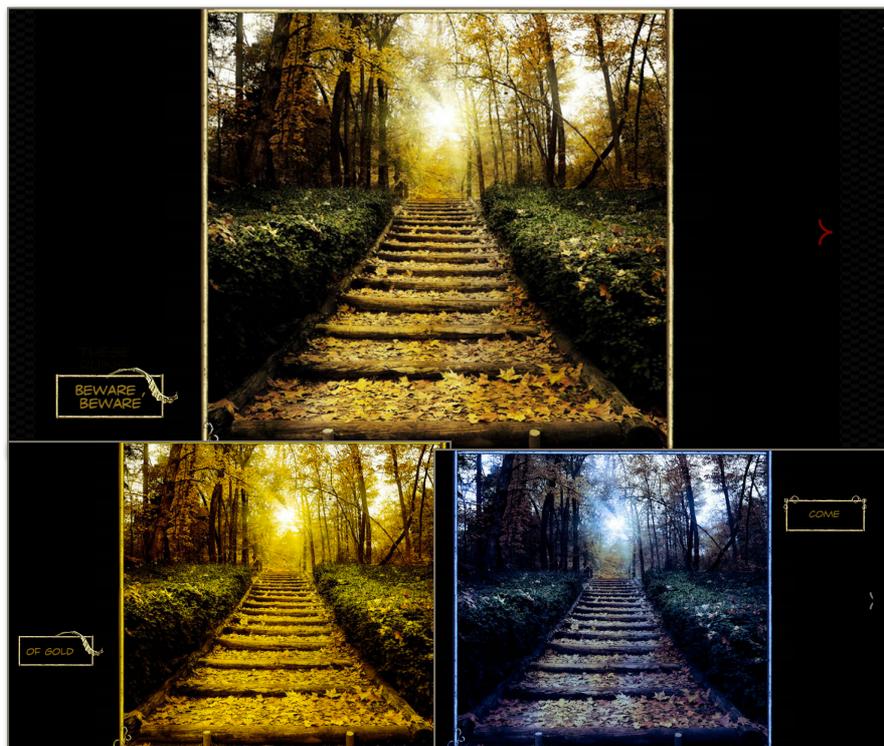
Accessed March 14 2015.

The borders on the first page appear as Golden Bars. Using the panel of the page to reinforce the thematic message. The music loops with the image of a path in a forest, with strong sounds of wind blowing and a variety of birds chirping. The text box, also gold is adorned with a golden leaf off the side. These semic indicators suggest an equilibrium of sorts or an example of 'the ordinary world' establishing a safe familiar environment. The inciting incident has yet to make itself known. These semic qualities are evident with the audio repeating , suggesting a continuous reflection in the moment. It is suggested that the time space indicator is an unidentifiable duration, indefinitely holding the moment. Upon the interaction of every tap point the forest becomes increasingly golden, altering space and time

by using a hyper-meta-realism aesthetic. There is an indication of the time of day rapidly increasing although the stylistic nature of the colours and general presentation suggests that it is not to be identified as absolute in its mimicking realism. The sun itself does not move in the development on this page and blends iconic abstraction with ‘real’ photography. In this way McClouds notion of abstraction is applied even if not in its usual iconic form but merged with photo manipulated meta-realism, but using hybrid signifiers as reference for meaning none the less. In this case the colours of the forest stand for a blend of rising tension development, proairetic, as action is suggested upon every tap point while simultaneously hermeneutic in the suggestion of later developments, and referential in its cultural associations of forest colour and sound, to be substituted with alternate codes further in. The characters are clearly travelling to somewhere, which based on the semic indicators holds pre-eminence of danger.

This phase of story development establishes the known elements to the unseen protagonists, conforming to the first act. The nature of the ‘short story’ as similar with many mostly printed comics delves almost immediately into the suggestion of an impending crisis and little time for reverence in the stage of equilibrium, upon the text, ‘Beware, Beware’.

The increased golden saturation seems to be building up, in line with Freytag’s tension structures to the next beat. Upon the 4th click, the golden path transforms into a blue tinted cold, upon which the text box appears on the right hand side, indicating ‘come’. The Golden borders, appear with circular designs around them. The text box moving from the left to right hand side of the screen conforms with the western convention of travelling to somewhere, rather than travelling backwards.



**Figure 7.16. Ruins of Gold Cover Page (Astrolabe Entertainment).Text boxes change from screen left to screen right, as colour changes.**

Source: <http://fav.me/d84shoc>

Accessed March 14 2015.

The entire POV quality of the narrative, reminiscent of the *Myst* computer game of the 90's, makes verbose use of the idea of interpolating the reader into the narrative by understanding, accepting and implementing the technological interface. This is reiterated at this point as the page transitions with *myst* and an interactive parallax page where the reader can manipulate the relative placement of the elements, to a degree on the page by touching the screen or ,if mobile, moving the device. It is highly unconventional for a POV to lead into a visual story in most mediums. Even video games which rely on this form of gameplay characteristically establish front on or profile views of their protagonists prior to the initiation of the game. Perhaps the reason that *Ruins of Gold* arguably seems to supersede this, is the suspension of disbelief associated with the motion book medium. The abstraction is a unique choice in the current motion book offerings as the form of illustration of digital photography currently stands alone in the Madefire reader. The use of photography also indicates the abstracted nature of the grammar of the motion book adheres to as even the photograph becomes an abstract referent when used in this context.



**Figure 7.17 Brøderbund. Myst screen grabs. Myst made use of POV user controlled interaction.**

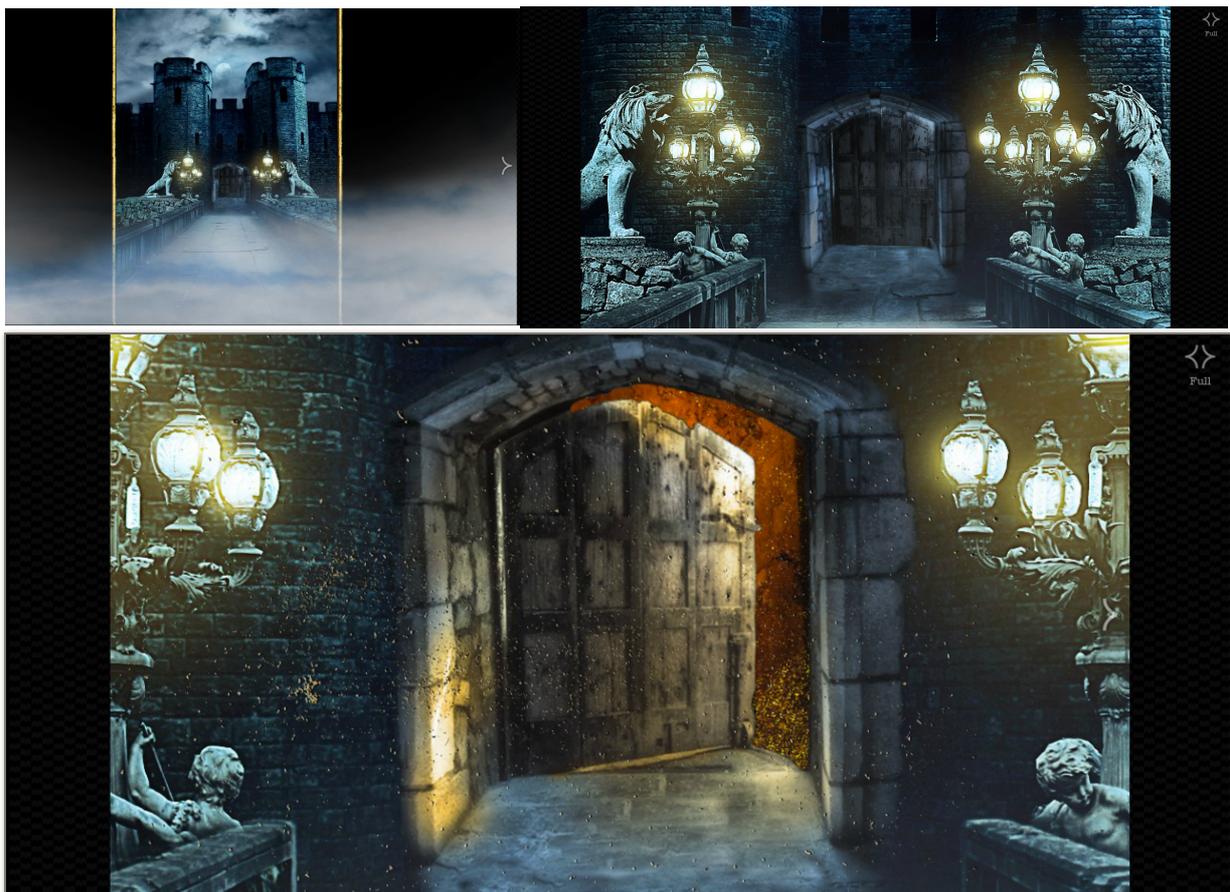
Source: Left: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myst> Middle:

[flavorwire.files.wordpress.com](http://flavorwire.files.wordpress.com) Right: <http://oyster.ignimgs.com>

In accordance with Campbell's notion of the ordinary world, coinciding with Todorov's equilibrium, the safe proxemic of being outside in the forest associated with daylight, is discarded for the journey into the unknown opposite signifier; the interior of a castle at night. The context of the narrative associates the former with safety and stability while the latter is the presence of a crisis and vulnerability. The constant interfacing with the tap points and intermittent animations established the proairetic nature as a characteristic of this titles method. The interface works with the hybrid signifier in such a way where this quality of consistent proairetic interpolation seems to become a trend, again referencing its cousin, the comic book. For example the inclusion of the tap point to illustrate the clouds and moon experiencing variations in luminosity, and the navigation of parallax through the mist are all suggestions of actions designed to structure plot points as well as interpolate the reader into

them. The darkening of the clouds and moon and sporadic bursts of lightning draw on the referential code as symbolic of the danger behind the castle doors.

A ‘zoom in ‘ effect brings up closer to the door frames in the dead centre with all lines of perspective were drawing to in the previous scene. The framing and lighting of the previous image prior to the zoom all focused on the centre point of the door. There is a slight glow presented through the cracks on the doors side. Conflict is evident in the the method the plot interacts with the interface as while the semic indicators suggest that danger lurks behind the door the audience is pushed toward it, playing on the curiosity and intrigue it offers. The sound effects strongly reiterate this reposition of the panel. The next click opens the door in which gold spills out, clearly leading us into something, and an example of the proairetic nature of the device. Effectively the sound signifies a referential function as the door opens, in a creaky manner, emphasising the strength and to a degree, when taken into the account with the visuals, the weathered history of such a withstanding artefact. The return to the title ‘ Ruins of Gold’ is climatic in its appearance, still increasing, in tension serving the function of a hook. Until we return the the original title screen with gold particles falling over the Randlord, This time with music, effectively completing a mini narrative arc in itself, in the introduction of our antihero protagonist.



**Figure 7.18 Ruins of Gold Cover Page (Astrolabe Entertainment). Interactive zoom and opening of door.**

Source: <http://fav.me/d84shoc> Accessed March 14 2015.

The following page (page 5), exhibits more neutrality in the frame with angle and frame dominance between Ora and the Randlord. The intent is supported by the unveiling of Ora indicating her safety in the castle, as well as the text, 'you're safe'. The Randlord still dominates the majority of the frame and retains the lead in superiority. The spacial real estate allocated to the character in the screen is reminiscent of the confrontation of power play between Sabertooth and Xavier in the X-Men case study. Rhythmically, this serves the function of slowing down the pacing and previously exalted tension structure from the previous page.



**Figure 7.19 Framing Techniques Comparison.**

**(Left) Ruins of Gold (Astrolabe Entertainment) & The Uncanny X-Men Issue 328, Page 2-3. Framing of character dominance in frame as compared with X-Men.**

Source Left: <http://fav.me/d84shoc> . Accessed March 14 2015.

Source Right: Marvel Comics 1996 Accessed 10 September, 2013.

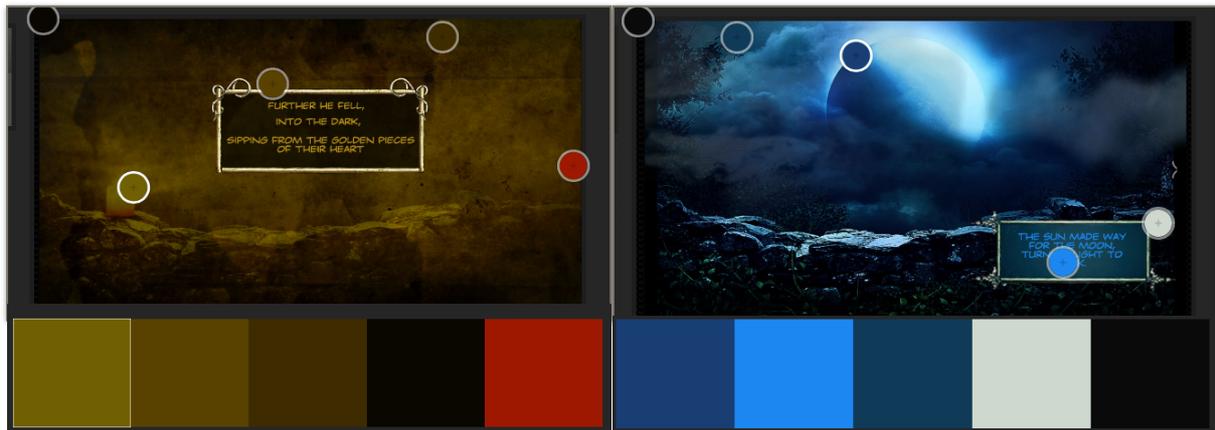
On page 11, short intermittent movements are employed in a low angle shot to illustrate the decent of madness of the Randlord. The low angle is to present the Randlord as exalted in power and to aid in the effectiveness of the audience readjustment position of his position of power by story completion.



**Figure 7.20 Ruins of Gold Cover Page (Astrolabe Entertainment). Low angle framing suggest exalted power dynamics.**

Source: <http://fav.me/d84shoc> Accessed March 14 2015.

The use of colour from a golden scheme to a cooler blue is used again in line with structural developments of story and tension patterns, effectively subtly providing the reader some breathing room in the process from monotony of the Randlords decent into gold lust. This is indicated in the turn of the page 12 to 13, where the music picks up with a significant increase in tempo and the use of a drum beat. It is accompanied with the text box of a still golden frame but one with sharp edgings on it.



**Figure 7.21 Ruins of Gold (Astrolabe Entertainment). Page 12 & 13 Narrative arcs plotted through music tempo and colour scheme.**

Source: <http://fav.me/d84shoc>  
Accessed March 14 2015.

On page 14, the text box, although in actuality the same size, seems to take more prominence in the next frame, building tension. The blend of hyper-meta-realism is again evident on this page as the Randlord, starts as a fully represented human form and ‘transforms’ into a blending of a silhouette of light in which altogether moves out from the frame. It isn't quite clear exactly what is ‘real’ in the book. The colour scheme of the page blends with the two overall colour palettes of warm gold and nocturnal blue. The significance at the stage of the narrative is the newly established norm of the crisis currently in action. Asante is being chased and tormented in the scene. She is granted a glimmer of hope or head-start, reiterated in the colour scheme with dark and light indicating the balances between hope and despair. The hope however is presented as false as ultimately she has no recourse from her tormentor at this stage again reiterated by the colder blue colour palette which has been contextualised in prior developments as ominous.

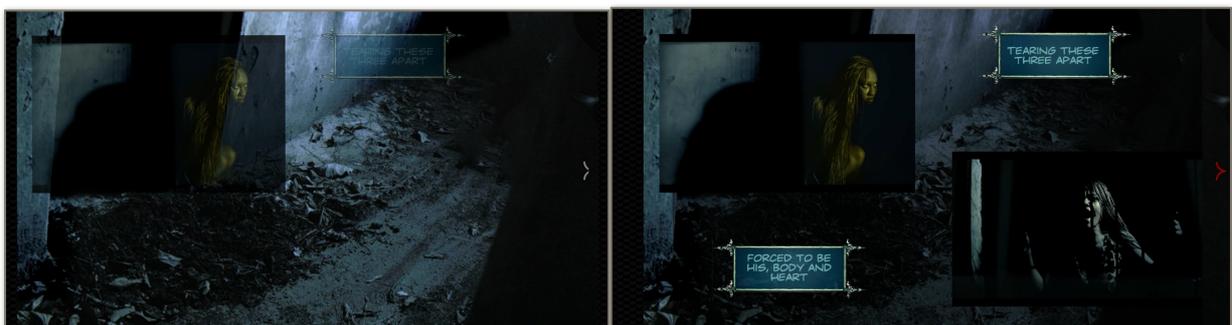


**Figure 7.22 Ruins of Gold (Astrolabe Entertainment). Page 14 blending hybrid signification in a form of hyper-meta-realism.**

Source: <http://fav.me/d84shoc>

Accessed March 14 2015.

On page 15, a text boxes slides in from the left to disappear with another appearing from the right. The spacial arrangement furthers the intent of the story, closing off from both sides enhancing the notion of captivity of the female prisoners. The feeling of captivity is signified though page composition, the framing of the subjects the closed off nature of the frame. High contrast lighting adhering to chiaroscuro lighting with a harsh 8:1 key to fill lighting ratio reinforces the life or death nature of events, perceptually increasing and heightening drama.



**Figure 7.23 Ruins of Gold (Astrolabe Entertainment). Page 15. Captivity enhanced through various semic indicators.**

Source: <http://fav.me/d84shoc>

Accessed March 14 2015.

The next page (pg 16) draws attention of the reader with the use of light. The background fades while panels are slid on the from the left and right, focusing the eye and rhythmically leading into the next page. This is strategic in order to captivate the attention span through the page turn, dangerous to reader engagement in its break of narrative.

The visual style adheres to a cinematic quality with use of a 16 x 9 screen ratio, similar to the Irons. The use of panels further on , specifically page 17, though also draws, on the comic book grammar to make use of notions of closure. In some ways the canvas is infinite as panels exhibit a window structure indicating sequences rather than pages. The screen real-estate becomes intrinsic in the palette of plot progression as opposed the the spatial parameters of the printed page.

14.INT. THE RANDLORD'S CHAMBER. NIGHT

The Camera zooms out of the Randlord's eyes. His body language is cool and calm but his eyes are furious. The Henchman stands in the middle of the room.

THE RANDLORD  
What do you mean she's gone?  
How is it than a young girl  
That I just had  
Chained to the floor,  
is gone?  
(pause)

He Pours himself some wine

She's gone.  
And you're standing here...

The Randlord takes a sip of the wine and closes his eyes as he says these next lines,

THE RANDLORD  
Telling me that she's gone.  
What would you like me to do with this useful piece of  
information?

The Randlord becomes livid, spitting the next words as he barks at the henchman, who stands in the middle of the room, sweat dripping down his face.

THE RANDLORD  
I KNOW SHES FUCKING GONE.  
SO GOOOOOOO AND FIND HER...

**Figure 7.24 Ruins of Gold (AFDA).**

Hassim, L. (2014) . Scene 14 script excerpt.



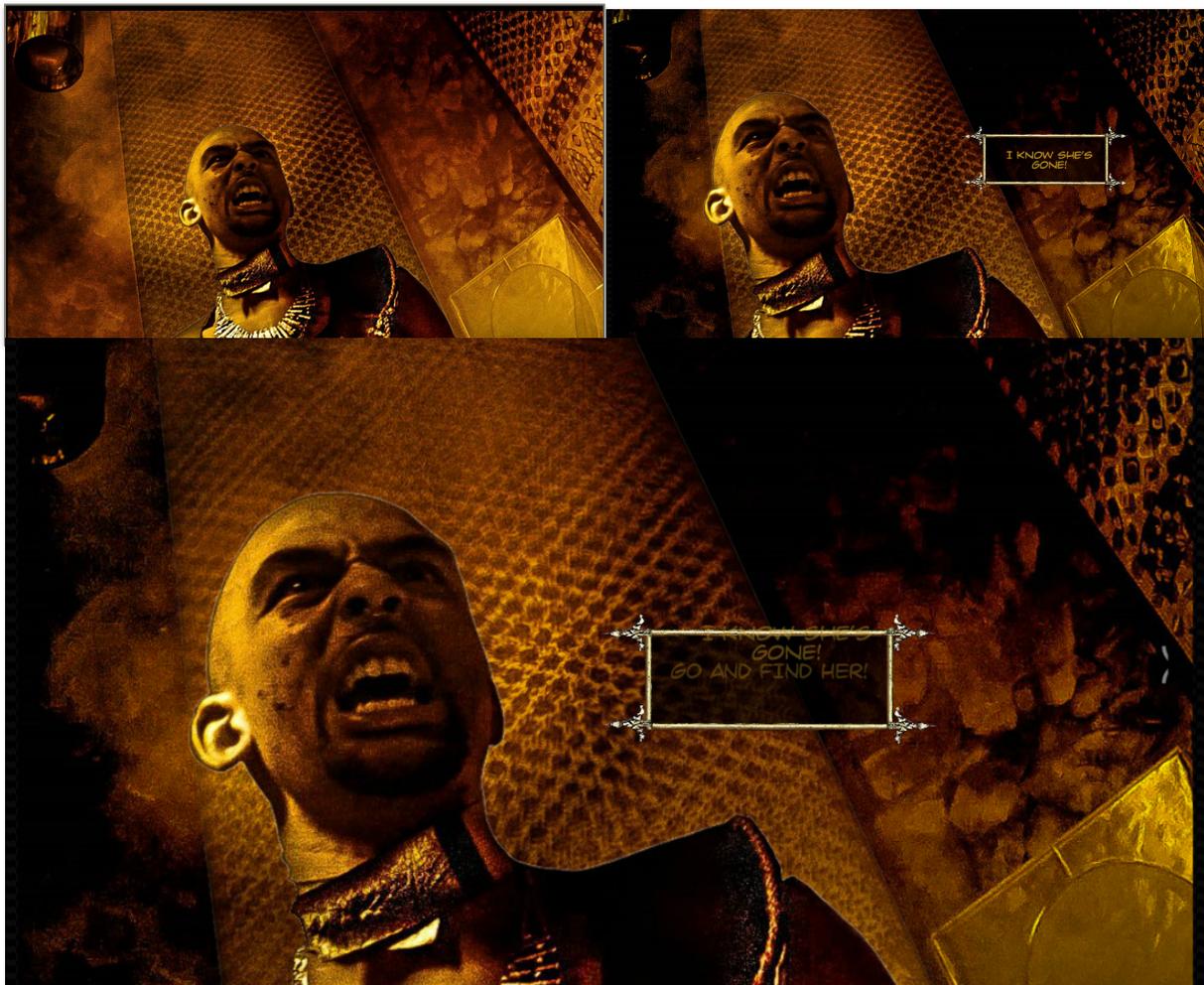
**Figure 7.25 Ruins of Gold (Astrolabe Entertainment). Page 17. Implementation of traditional comic book based grammar, rising and falling in tension tiers.**

Source: <http://fav.me/d84shoc>

Accessed March 14 2015.

The above figure 7.25, serves as too good an opportunity to analyse a full page of tension breakdown. The page starts with the dialogue, 'What do you mean she's gone?' This serves as exposition of the scene proving the Randlord but not visibly overtly upsetting him. The suggestion is that he should be in disbelief about the report of his missing captives and if were to reasonably understand then he should be visibly upset. The subtextual implications are opened to a degree of reader interpretation playing on the curiosity and anticipation of the readers who are meant to continue reading until they has their suspicious confirmed. The Randlord is also suggested to be intoxicated, and it it not entirely clear if he fully understand the severity of the event. This dynamic is built upon with hinting suggestions of the readers suspicions, as evident in the demeanour of the randlord becoming increasingly condescending to the henchman. It becomes increasingly clear that the Randlord does understand and the subtext is one suggesting impending aggression. The hermeneutic notion of rationality becomes increasingly obvious. The readers however may continue to engage to reveal the Randlords reaction. As the dynamics progress so does the tension rise. There is a break in tension in the pouring of wine, providing opportunity for subtextual suggestions of the Randlords expression at the henchman's approach. The pitch of the sound of the wine pouring is unnerving, providing opportunity for the displeasure of the Randlord to be emotionally identified although to blatantly demonstrated. Readjustment of reader position is enforced in the subtle yet obvious change in demeanour of the Randlord smiling, to a new panel upon clicking the tap point, in which his expression undermines the previous suggestion, of the light hearted smile. This also suggests that not only does the Randlord understand the situation, he is suggested to be toying with the henchman. It has already been established that his toying with people is associated with torment. The events hint at this demeanour perhaps being momentarily engaged. The impending rise in tension is momentarily plateaued in his drinking of wine. The Randlord acts as if almost embracing himself for his response, heightening the stakes of the expression. The rhythm builds up in a second tier upon the words, 'She's gone and you're standing here...' A similar interaction is played out, this time the sarcasm is more exclaimed, being reiterated with use of a closer panel and pronounced sarcastic expression, again showing the Randlord with a smile. The curls on the textbook reiterate the tone of the Randlord. The final tier of the sequence capitalises the rhythmic build up coinciding the climax of the narrative with that of the semic indicators on page 16, where upon 2 tiers of tension capitalise on the climax of the sequence. The tiers are engaged with on the click of two tap points. The music is heightened, from a dark yet harmonies hymn, to a heightening shrill and louder seemingly added voices in the soundtrack. A number of intermittent animations occur simultaneously. The frames increase in size from the seat of the page but not all elements increase at the same rate. The Randlords size increases at a faster rate than the background. The tilted tower strip behind the Randlord increases at a different rate to the Randlord, as does the rest of the background. The Randlord also moves in a slightly different direction to the other elements putting him off centre of the framed tower, with his ear now bridging the tower and the rest of the background. The curls of the text-box has been replaced with the sharper arrows, the colours increase in contrast with the background darkening adding to the already increased perceived spatial proximity

between the background and subject. The Randlords appearance is much harder in appearance than the previous page. Less pleasing and more jarring to the eye. The framing of all lines of perspective is off centre conforming to a dutch tilt. Overall the semic indicators work simultaneously to establish a more disjointed reiteration from the previous page. Upon clicking the second tap point the text is thrown out seemingly discarded while the new text replaces it, overlapping texts. The Randlord changes direction again and grows in the frame, as does the strip behind him which also becomes harder in appearance, blurring in its transition. The spiked text box also moves closer to the subjects face. The culmination of the page culminates towards the end of the second act of the issue significantly rising tension for the overall tier of the narrative.

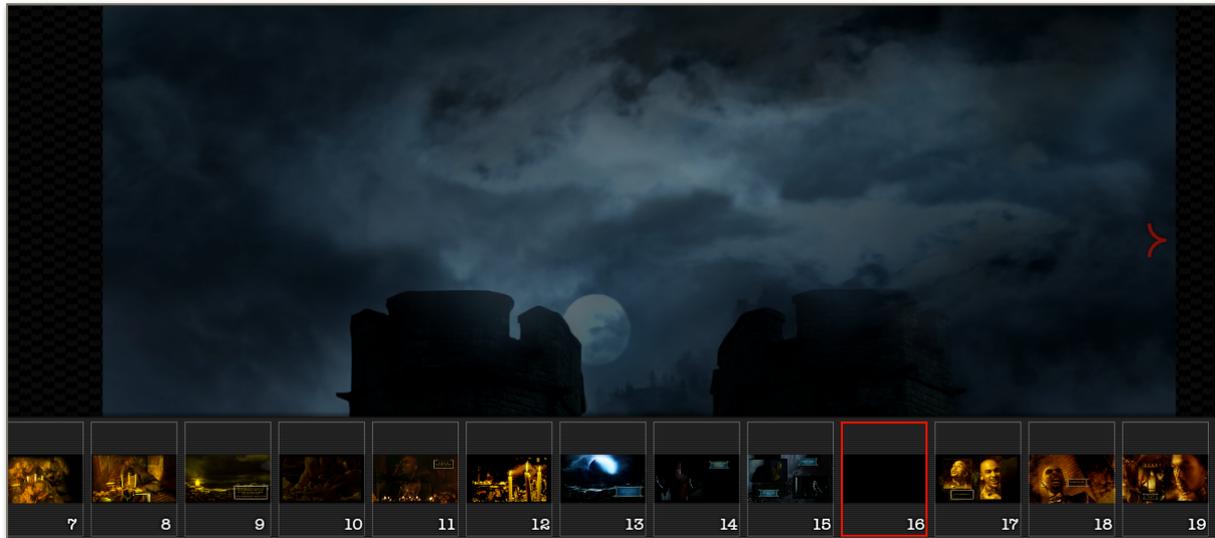


**Figure 7.26 Ruins of Gold (Astrolabe Entertainment). Page 18. Grammatical and narrative fusion of climatic sequences.**

Source: <http://fav.me/d84shoc> Accessed March 14 2015.

The logic and design though still indicates shades of printed progress as the breaks in narrative are managed by a page system, where the actions programmed conform to single pages indicated by the red arrow on the right of the screen, essentially momentarily breaking the narrative, the same as in print. Represented in the scrolling through of the motion book in

the Madefire Reader, where numbered pages appear as thumbnails rather than, a timecode as that would not apply in a reading experience.



**Figure 7.27 Ruins of Gold (Astrolabe Entertainment). Page 16 page numbers similar to the logic of a printed comic book.**

Source: <http://fav.me/d84shoc>  
Accessed March 14 2015.

Various examples of printed comic book grammar emerge through as well as transformation of the intentions through the added palettes of sound, audio and screen space. Two particular examples include a page where the Randlord knows that his captive is hunting him while he is too intoxicated to do anything significant about it, climaxing in his decent into madness. The page is collaged in its layout with multiple images of the Randlord and the captive Asante, seemingly randomly sequenced throughout the page. The page size is significantly larger than the screens framing, and scanned upon the click of tap points, in a disjointed fashion, with the text thrown in and out of the text boxes. A device previously unheard of in motion book grammar. There are no panels prominently exhibited, although a collage of sorts does break space to a degree, paying homage to Tokyo Treatment. Spacial placings of the characters and items involved are contained in other ways and employ closure or the events in between to be constantly interpreted by the reader. The novelty and uniqueness of the device in its hybrid signification, aids to build up to the following pages climatic moment. The hermetic suggestion being that the Randlord is being stalked by Asante and in danger of being murdered.



**Figure 7.28 Ruins of Gold (Astrolabe Entertainment). Page 19. Pan and scan collage navigation.**

Source: <http://fav.me/d84shoc>

Accessed March 14 2015.

The next page is perhaps even more intense as the suggestion of death is furthered by the systematic stalking of the Randlord with various images of this eventuality in a panorama page , where the reader can customise the navigation in a 360 degree environment, essentially piecing the narrative together in a suggestive manner rather than a dictated one, making use of the digital framework while maintaining the spirits of an image-reader based narrative. I find these two pages of the pan and scan window and panorama, most intriguing in terms of the unique ability shared by the comic book and motion book, whereupon tension is further tiered, heightening the readers senses as the suggestion of pacing is increased in accordance with the rise in tension while simultaneously suggesting the reader take their time in exploring the detail presented. The navigation of detailed elements is juxtaposed to the impending closure the plot. The reader is torn between the ability to appreciate detail while the tempo of the music and progression of the plot provokes them to turn the page, heightening emotional conflict within the reader plot as well as the structural chronological development of narrative. The motion book perhaps has a further advantage in this respect with the scope for perhaps more detail in its potentially infinite canvas that that of print. The panorama page specifically requires intense navigation while building up to a climatic arc.



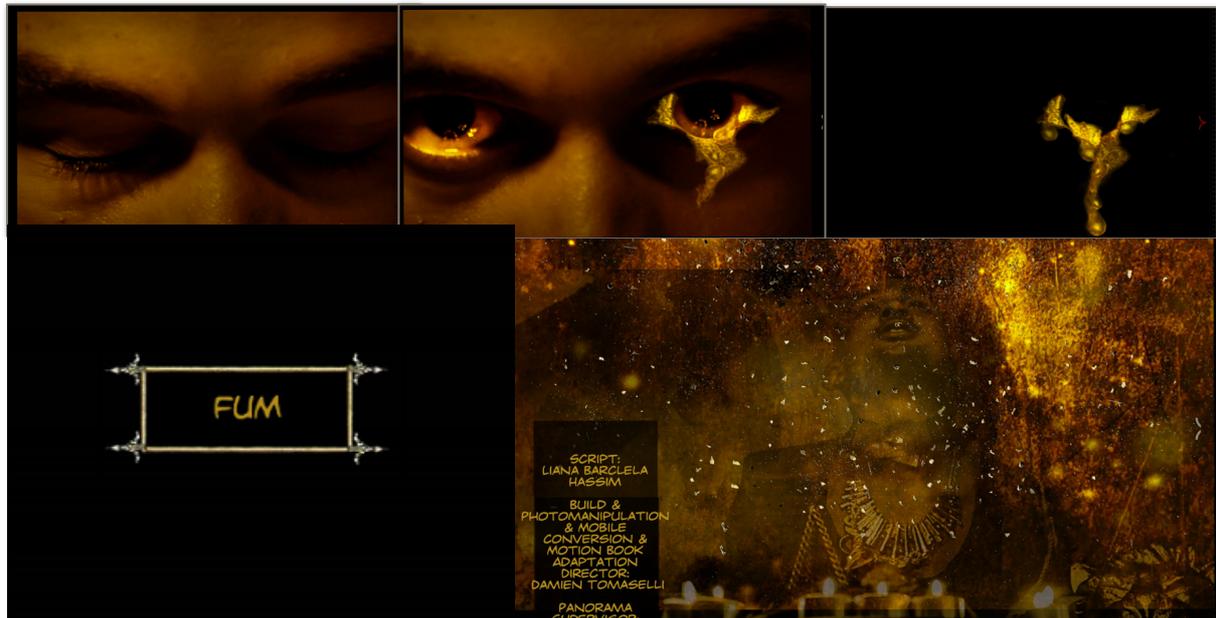
**Figure 7.29 Ruins of Gold (Astrolabe Entertainment). Page 20. Screen grab of pan and scan collage navigation.**

Source: <http://fav.me/d84shoc> . Accessed March 14 2015.

There is a strip of fast paced action on the next page which comic book loyalists may consider as a break from reading to watching, as a montage of images is rapidly displayed almost resembling a flash or sorts, the timing of which, the reader does not have the same level of control over. However the abstraction of the screen is intended in this case much as an abstraction on a page may be. The page is not meant to be easily absorbed and designed to read differently with ever re reading thereof. The intent of the meaning is similar to an abstracted image where meaning is not entirely clear requiring a degree of deciphering to contextualise an understood reference. In this way the device is similar to printed comics, in so far as intention of comic book meaning.

The close up on the last page mirrors the framing of X-Men case studies with the use of detailed kinesic information and strategically included to exploit the rhythmic intensity of a climatic moment. The framing compliments the established hermeneutic clue from the beginning of the books framing choice with the POV shot as the narrative closes, capitalising on the developing arcs previously put into motion. The readers were invited into a front seat when initially opening up to a POV entrance into experience, staring straight into the diegetic world. It is now the Randalph who stares straight into the eyes of the audience for the first time, as if finally facing his gluttonous fate. The device is indicative of the narrative arc momentarily realising its resolution. The background is darkened, illustrating a degree of abstraction although still largely, reminiscent of a real image, while the next tap point furthers the link of abstraction with the forming of a golden tear. The tear builds up to culminate in the floating narrative devices, also hermeneutic in its earlier suggestion of being all dominating. The motif of all else disappearing is reiterated from the previously established device of the earlier page with the Randalphs realisation of the truth of the golden tears is experienced in a similar fashion, with Ora disappearing from frame, with the tear remaining. The difference being that the tear has fallen from the Randalph, indicating the shift in vulnerability dynamics. The narrative progression has come full circle almost realising the return to a newly established equilibrium. The relatively realistic image unfolds to an abstracted one when the Randalphs face disappears while the golden tear remains. The suggestion of death has been suggested but not confirmed and only upon the text of 'Fum' is it clear narrative has achieved fruition. The short nature of the story holds true to the comic book plot device of fast paced narrative progression with Act 1 & 3 contributing less than the standard filmic 25 percent of structural plot allocation. Interestingly the climatic moment being built up to is the use of text on the top tension tier as opposed to the visual. It is only after 'fum' that the tension begins its decent prompting closure on the confirmation of the previously suggested imagery. The beginning of the credits signify the end of the resolution of narrative and effectively form the function of falling action, in this case occurring after the denouncement. The original credits were designed to to show exteriors the castle, in which multiple headstones from graves were present. This would have completed the spacial progression from exterior to interior and back again. This was ultimately decided against for a more abstracted approach to capitalise on the kicker of the narrative and reinforce the

thematic decent into madness. There is however a return to a scenic exterior with an easter egg teaser at the end of the credits for Children of Xaphan, another narrative entirely.



**Figure 7.30 Ruins of Gold (Astrolabe Entertainment). Page 23. Climatic Golden tear drop and text, leading to denouncement in the credits.**

Source: <http://fav.me/d84shoc> . Accessed March 14 2015.



**Figure 7.31 Ruins of Gold (Astrolabe Entertainment). Page 24. Children of Xaphan 'easter egg' at the end of credits.**

Source: <http://fav.me/d84shoc> . Accessed March 14 2015.

The development of rhetoric was indicative in more subtle forms of signification as well. The appearance of skin-tone of the Randlord for example, initially manipulated with an airbrushing technique to appear smoother and more porcelain, to be undercut at later points in the narrative to a much harder more grainy detailed skin, indicating the physical, mental and emotional strain on the Randlord. This later harder remembrance is also indicated on the cover page as well as pages 17 & 18. The inclusion of a harder grainer look on the cover is suggestive of where the narrative will build up to similar device to that used in the sampled X-Men case study.

Cultural and referential codes are evident in the intertextuality of Jack and the Beanstalk and a more subtle, 'decent down the rabbit hole' from Alice in Wonderland, both literature fantastical in nature.

The motion book Tool itself conforms to the characteristics of the Manovich's, five principals and distribution of new media. The digital nature suffices the numerical representation. The colour palette conforms to the choice of palette based on a numbered value system. Automation is evident in many respects, one example is the use of fade in, and various options for animating preset movement functions. Modularity is evident in the layering system evident in the interface including layer based operations. Distribution is a function directly from the application, with a 'publish' tool rather than an export media equivalent. The latter creating a digital file for ubiquitous use in digital storage while publishing distributes the information in a highly specific digital form which while is designed to permeate various devices is also highly controlled and cannot be accessed through any non official publishing channels. The pervasiveness of various devices can be attributed to the principal of variability with most IOS, Android operating systems as well as the web. This also serves as an example of the variability principal.

## Techno-Social Adaptation

The adaptations of the comic book visual rhetoric discussed above concern the adaptation of print to digital propagated by constantly evolving technological mediums. We have recognised the interconnectivity between the development of the computer and media in the emergence of a unified visual culture. The social decoding of messages in this medium should then be considered. While it is impractical to consider all aspects of reception, one factor intrinsically linked with social response considers the relationship of technology evolving tools and direction it promotes art. Constant advancement, combined with a growing digital literacy requires continuous adaptation and integration. As the digital CBVR is concerned with how and why signification constructs unambiguous meaning in a constantly evolving technological context, we must examine the social assimilation of signs this developing framework.

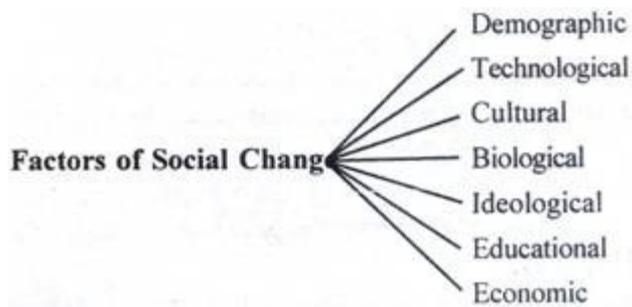
We need to consider:

- How society develops in relation with technology;
- The social implementation of the technology;
- The social acceptance of the digital visual rhetoric with specific regards to motion books.

If we look at the historical development of these relationships we start to see certain individual trends emerging which cumulatively impacted upon each other. The invention of the wheel for example, spurred on man's ability to transport large objects en masse, a feat which was previously difficult to achieve. Wider implementation of the wheel pressurised society to adapt and implement the technological advancement on a wide scale basis. Trading, for example, became so reliant on this invention that eventually the economy of the time shifted from utilising the wheel as a luxury benefit to a necessity in order to survive among increasingly efficient capitalistic competition. Thus we see the result of technology infiltrating cultural practice creating an inevitable social development and thus, ultimately social logic. This anecdote denotes cultural lag which will be discussed later in this chapter in accordance with its relevant progressive stages.

The progression of social logic has a reciprocal relationship with social behaviour. One does not occur without affecting the other. Cognitive dissonance indicates a change of attitude to reflect ideologically consistent behaviour. While there may initially be resistance to technology, once it is accepted into society, the innovation it offers can change the behaviour of society. This is in accordance with cognitive dissonance theory which states that the ego is reluctant to allow hypocrisy to enter the attitudinal logic involved in this social-technological transformation and so one will be forced to change either their attitude or

behaviour (Festinger 1957/1985). A person therefore either rejects social change, maintaining their original social attitude, or changes their social behaviour while adjusting their social attitude to compensate for such change (see Figure 7.15).



**Figure: 7.32 Factors Affecting Social Change.**

Source: [www.yourarticlelibrary.com/societysocial-change-characteristics-and-factors-5285-words6169](http://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/societysocial-change-characteristics-and-factors-5285-words6169)

Manovich refers to another example where social logic is reflected in the rise of technology and how it has created social change. In reference to industrial and post-industrial society, Manovich argues that industrial society evoked Fordism and provoked notions of conformity over that of individuality: “In industrial mass society everybody was supposed to enjoy the same goods -- and to have the same beliefs. This was also the logic of media technology” (Manovich 2001, p 60). As contemporary society has placed more emphasis on individuality so technology has adapted to embrace this, especially when we look at the development of social networks, online role playing games, and the increased ability to segment audiences for the purposes of niche marketing. Numerous other examples of media individuality exist. YouTube, for example, allows audiences to search for their own specific interests as opposed to mass broadcast programming that has little leeway for customisation in terms **content, choice of device**, when to watch, etc. According to Manovich the current social logic is reflective of **implemented** technological innovations as he references new media marketing: “Rather than pushing the same objects/information to a mass audience, marketing now tries to target each individual separately. The logic of new media technology reflects this new social logic” (Manovich 2001, p 60). This is much like the notion of the ‘exposure triangle’ applicable in digital photography, in which to maintain optimum exposure you require various methods of controlling the amount of light is needed. **The camera settings have the ability to adapt to the light as the audience and the computer may constantly adapt to each other.** “As hardware and software keep evolving and as the computer is used for new tasks and in new ways, this layer is undergoing continuous transformation” (Manovich 2001, p 64).

As already discussed, the progression technological developments in media and technology coincide at many points in history due this this techno-social-triangle. “In summary, the computer layer and media/culture layer influence each other. To use another

concept from new media, we can say that they are being composited together. The result of this composite is the new computer culture: a blend of human and computer meanings, of traditional ways human culture modeled the world and computer's own ways to represent it" (Manovich 2001, p 64). Representations of human culture have been reiterated throughout history in many forms that carry artistic merit: painting, sculptures and more importantly for the purposes of this research, forms of **sign based** narrative expression. As human cultural representations blend with technology by extension of the link between culture and art, the composition of the computer and art then also emerges. Film started because of the invention of the video camera which allowed artists to manipulate the available technology for narrative expression, **subsequently experimenting with various forms thereof**. In order for the technology to work, filmmakers had to test, apply and formulate an approach to capturing information and present it in a way that could be positively responded to by an audience through the available technological channels. As technology advanced, both the ability to manipulate stories in new ways as well as the literacy of the audience to understand the grammar of the medium grew. However, the development of grammar in terms of its inception by both narrative creators and the audience takes time. Changes to narrative employed through new methods and mediums is not without resistance from both audience and the broader society it was created for; thus, it is expected that there will be resistance for the adapted visual rhetoric which inevitably accompanies the 'new grammar' brought about by technological innovations in storytelling.

The mobile social networking site, Mxit had a similar problem as parents were apprehensive of the new ways in which their children were communicating.<sup>23</sup> Ironically, these are the same parents who only a few years later frequently communicate through Facebook, BBM and WhatsApp. This indicates how there is a lag time in the relationship between technology and its broader adoption into society. Arguably, one of the reasons Facebook succeeded Myspace as the largest social network was due the fact that Zuckerberg was a psychology student, and not only an IT expert, and thus had significant insight into the type of technology that society would accept at the time of Facebook's development. As technology and subsequently, audience technological literacy develop, I expect the complexity of social networks such as Facebook will increase in terms of interaction, customisation and overall general function within society. The understanding of the development of social trends will be of vital importance in the continued survival of all social networks, as well as any other technological innovation. Social attitude also blends with economic concerns which form a potential barrier for technological and social integration and ultimately, the cultural ideology which accompanies it. An example of this is how innovative 3D televisions have failed to become socially integrated into modern living severely impacting on the profit margins of companies such as Sony. All the above examples are not only affected by social attitude but also by practical factors such as

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/parents-go-to-war-over-mxit-1.412680#U2N-nqLNl6U>  
Accessed 21 December, 2013.

availability of content to populate a technology and if it is affordable to consumers. However, the lack of content for example, is also due to the unwillingness of audiences to invest in a technology that lacks content. This indicates how economic factors affect new media literacy.

Many other examples, past and present exist to support this trend. Economic barriers, social attitude toward the medium and technological literacy all serve as impediments to assimilate and develop social literacy. As this trend unfolds we often see that technological development, with all the accompanying latent social change, usually exists ahead of time in terms of its wider social implementation.

The gap between social acceptance and the implementation and assimilation of technology among society has been referred to by sociologist William F. Ogburn as cultural lag as noted in his 1922 book *Social Change With Respect to Culture and Original Nature*:<sup>24</sup> “Dr. James W. Woodward explained that when the material conditions change, changes are occasioned in the adaptive culture, but these changes in the adaptive culture do not synchronise exactly with the change in the material culture, this delay is the culture lag.” Cultural Lag Theory suggests that a period of maladjustment occurs when the non-material culture is struggling to adapt to new material conditions. Material culture includes all of the physical objects that people create and give meaning to. For example, cars, clothing, schools and computers.

I personally feel that cultural lag is too broad a term because cultural objects are vast, rendering any referent as in-descriptive. I considered using the terminology of ‘technological lag’ but this term too has connotations which extend outside of my objective, referring to monopolistic advances of companies. As in the case of the term ‘motion comic’ the terminology was already accounted for, I shall then, for the purposes of this research, refer to this phenomenon as the techno-cultural lag. The previous description of the more general term ‘cultural lag’ does however, recognise and quantify the role of the computer in social adaptation, “[a]n object only becomes part of culture after meanings have been given to it. A computer has no meaning until it is used as a tool”.<sup>25</sup> However, we must keep three points in mind

- 1) the mass social perceived role of the computer;
- 2) that it is in the application of the tool that this cultural lag exists; and
- 3) what meanings are assigned to the digital CBVR.

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<sup>24</sup> <https://sites.google.com/site/etec511/the-cultural-lag-theory> Accessed 2 December, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> <https://sites.google.com/site/etec511/the-cultural-lag-theory> Accessed 2 December, 2013.

## Techno-Social Lag Manifested in Storytelling

As the visual rhetoric focuses on the construction and deciphering of culturally recognised elements, the reception on the part of society is then relevant to the visual rhetoric. As these codes are adapted to the digital, the social acceptance of the digital then too becomes an important factor in deciphering the perceived meaning.

The techno-cultural lag of digital representation; **has been vilified in** various forms of visual storytelling. Digital cinema, 3D television, 3D cinema, visual effects, and even animation have all been met with resistance by society at some point. Even Quentin Tarantino has been resistant to technological change and was quoted as saying that “part of the reason I'm feeling [like retiring] is, I can't stand all this digital stuff. This is not what I signed up for”.<sup>26</sup> **Another example is the resistance to 3D film as some of** the script writing processes for 3D films **differ from their** 2D, in order to accommodate the visual intensity they add to the flow of the story.

The specific framework of digital storytelling concerned with in this chapter is to do with motion books, and thus I shall redirect my focus to such. At this stage I may consider re-evaluating the term techno-cultural lag to techno-cultural-comic-book lag or techno-cultural-motion-book-lag, but I think that in the spirit of the previous definition we shall stick with the term techno-cultural lag until such time that motion books become widely accessed. Technologies must however advance as well as their social implementation. We do not watch silent movies any more, as an example. Was the inclusion of sound, Technicolor, and voice acting the downfall of good cinema? We shall now consider the general social implementation of the visual rhetoric of motion books. This has already been discussed with references to its adaptive, semiotic, representational and narrative components, and shall now be considered with specific reference to techno-cultural lag, and its subsequent components: adjustment, maladjustment and ultimately, rejection or acceptance. We can further categorise these components through the development stages of invention, literacy, accumulation, qualifying, diffusion and adjustment. The stages of literacy and qualifying were not specifically outlined as separate elements by Ogburn although are in my opinion are distinct enough to warrant their own categorisation and upon further discussion I shall motivate why.

Invention concerns “the process by which new forms of technology are created”.<sup>27</sup> Invention is closely linked to my suggested notion of literacy which is outlined by Woodward as part of the requirement for invention to occur: “Inventions are collective contributions to an existing cultural base that cannot occur unless the society has already gained a certain

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.digitalspy.co.uk/movies/news/a441960/quentin-tarantino-i-cant-stand-digital-filmmaking-its-tv-in-public.html>

<sup>27</sup> <https://sites.google.com/site/etec511/the-cultural-lag-theory>

level of knowledge and expertise in the particular area”.<sup>28</sup> I argue that these inventions can occur but, may not prosper or gain social acceptance. Such as the previously discussed analytical engine developed by Babbage, which although formed the foundation for modern computing, was not fully embraced on a wide scale when initially invented. If the jump between a technological innovation and social understanding is too large it may be socially shunned and in some cases not even occur. As this is clearly separate from the notion of invention I argue it should be labelled as such.

Motion books qualify as an invention in themselves, or at least a reinvention of ways of reading and experiencing comic books. Literacy indicates that a certain amount of knowledge of the invention needs to be gained in order for society to have some frame of reference in which to draw their understanding of the new technology. When considering the literacy of motion books, we have already established how the grammatical adaptation associated with the word ‘book’, from stages of development through to intended reception, affect both the technology and the reader. As my focus is on the actual digital CBVR, I do not wish to focus on the medium in terms of audience literacy apart from acknowledging that the familiarity of such devices is increasing.

A major factor in this equation as far as literacy is concerned is the literacy involved with the actual digital visual rhetoric itself. Society cannot simply implement technological advances if they do not understand them. We can therefore consider literacy as it relates to the grammar of motion books and consequently, the techno-cultural lag thereof.

## **Literacy/Fordism**

Interestingly enough however, many of the readers of motion books seem to be new to comics having not read traditional print comics. The significance of this in terms of the digital CBVR is that these new comic book readers have a different frame of reference to traditional comic book readers and as such, have fewer preconceptions about the technology. This indicates that the development of the visual rhetoric of future motion books may be, to an extent, spurred on by this new generation as is evident in *Children of Xaphan*, and *Ruins of Gold*. Literacy is an ongoing development occurring through all stages of the cultural lag process, progressing through accumulation and diffusion.

## **Accumulation / Diffusion**

Diffusion of cultural ideology and its practice is a result of accumulation: “the growth of technology because new things are invented more rapidly than old ones are forgotten, and some inventions (such as writing) promote this accumulation process”.<sup>29</sup> In the digital comic

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<sup>28</sup> <https://sites.google.com/site/etec511/the-cultural-lag-theory>

<sup>29</sup> <https://sites.google.com/site/etec511/the-cultural-lag-theory>

space this would reference all categories of digital comic books and in the minds of some, would extend to many other digital storytelling platforms as well.

After receiving numerous invites to Facebook in 1997, I eventually submitted to social demand and joined the social network. I was initially resistant to this change as social networks were nothing new for me, having been a member of various others that offered me a greater scope for interface customisation, although were also more complex than the simple, neat, and easy to use Facebook. Sites such as Myspace scared away the mass society it needed for its own survival, failing to reach the social and economic needs of the time, and in some ways Myspace was too ahead of its time because internet literacy had not progressed fast enough for efficient cultural assimilation of the platform. The technologically-savvy members who joined the site in the first place then abandoned *en masse* while Facebook continued to grow at an exponential rate, accumulating thousands of new members every day. Cellular phones, communications, even religion are forced to respond to these cultural influences. Motion books, while still young, are still largely an alternative to the comic rather than the standard, and still require audience integration, although their overall progression is rapid. Perhaps by the final draft of this dissertation, the previous sentences validity may expire. As the audience creators, and technological innovations in the medium grow, so will the development of the digital CBVR and an emergence of meaning will prevail. The emergence of the CBVR will constantly evolve in conjunction with the above factors. The fact that there are a number of first time comic book readers taking part is also indicative of a new generation's lack of techno-phobic tendencies that compares to the majority of those of the older generations. Although the young are often easy targets for parents to condemn as socially unaware, the young are often at the forefront of technological innovation and have managed to find some degree of social relevance with new technologies that older generations refuse to acknowledge. It is often the younger generation who drive the implementation of technology; Facebook was spread by university students, as was the implementation of the World Wide Web, and most other social networking sites. The implementation of new technology on a mass scale relates to the notion of diffusion: "the spread of an idea from one cultural group to another, or from one field of activity to another, and as diffusion brings inventions together; they combine to form new inventions".<sup>30</sup> For example, the widespread implementation of Facebook was a result of online social interaction spreading from one demographic to others until social pressure pushed most social groups into assimilating the technology.

Personally, I would add other criteria between that of accumulation and diffusion, that of qualifying. Some technological inventions are embraced while others are discarded. Those embraced have been qualified to some extent due to specific variables such as technological literacy and affordability. Motion books are still in their infancy to conclude that they are a trend, however based on other forms of digital storytelling, if motion books are assimilated as

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<sup>30</sup> <https://sites.google.com/site/etec511/the-cultural-lag-theory>

the new comic book reading experience while other forms are discarded, we could consider them qualified. It remains to be seen whether or not the digital CBVR of motion books shall be qualified or not.

As literacy develops we move into the areas of qualification and adjustment.

### **Acceptance /Qualification / Adjustment**

Ultimately society either accepts, rejects or culturally lags in terms of adopting new technology. This part of the process is referred to by Woodward as adjustment: “the process by which the non-technical aspects of a culture respond to invention, and any retardation of this adjustment process causes cultural lag”.<sup>31</sup>

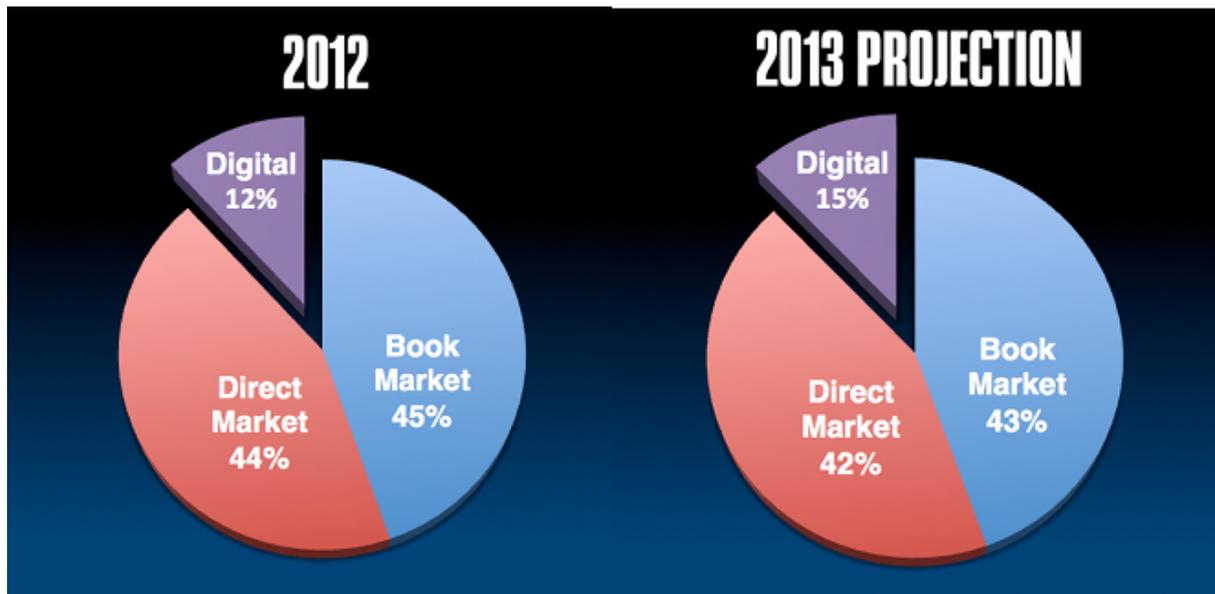
The next question we are posed with is whether or not the adapted established and emerging digital CBVR would be understood by the readers and to what extent technological lag exists when applied to the newly forming digital CBVR. The recentness of motion books once places it in a difficult position for this academic study as we await to see the results of audience acceptance. As Manovich observes, “[w]hile it is relatively easy to specify different interactive structures used in new media objects, it is much more difficult to theoretically deal with user experiences of these structures. This remains to be one of the most difficult theoretical questions raised by new media” (Manovich 2001, p 71). I observe that this interactive experience extends to the process of narrative engagement concerned with the development of motion books. While we do not know how some readers will respond to motion books, we can observe historical trends and attempt to project these in relation to what we do know about the relationship between society and the digital medium. Recently, sales of digital comics have sky rocketed. In September 2013, comiXology announced that “the company had surpassed 200 million downloads, just one year after celebrating the 100 million mark.”<sup>32</sup>, indicating positive audience assimilation of comics presented on a digital platform. The popularity of digital comics is becoming increasingly evident as publishers continue to explore digital distribution outlets. The popularity of comixology.com has secured its recent purchase by Amazon.com, indicative of the current trend of online consumed media.<sup>33</sup> (See Figure 7.16). Although the digital CBVR in many digital comics exhibit IA, they generally lacking any significant CFA employed by motion books, resulting in a lack of quantitative data to base conclusions on. More data is required to gauge audience acceptance of the product. We can however, reference how audiences respond to other various emergent digital CBVR (see Figure 7.16). In other words, we need to attempt to understand whether or not readers have adjusted to motion books’ digital CBVR.

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<sup>31</sup><https://sites.google.com/site/etec511/the-cultural-lag-theory>. Accessed 2 December, 2013.

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.bleedingcool.com/2013/10/10/comixology-shares-results-from-reader-survey/> Accessed 28 April, 2014

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.cnet.com/news/comixology-cuts-apple-google-out-of-digital-comics-kickback/> Accessed 28 April, 2014.



**Figure 7.33: The Move towards Online, Digital Book Marketing.**

Source: [www.comics.beat.com](http://www.comics.beat.com) indicating the growth in digital reading.

To reference our previous Madefire examples of *The Irons*, *Tokyo Treatment*, *Mono and House of Holies*, the possibilities offered by the new digital medium in terms of manipulation may be considered as a major jump in meaning construction as the inclusion of audio, is arguably, far removed from the original form of comic books; so much so, that some refer to it as a result of animation, and embrace the terminology and accompanied notions of meaning to animation. I argue, however, that the audience, familiar with both animation and motion books would be able to see the difference in the storytelling experience through what Manovich refers to as meta-realism. He describes meta-realism as a new realism, post analogue realism. In other words, audiences would have an understanding of semiotic meaning in the digital environment through their familiarity with digital interfaces and thus the symbolic fields represented in them. The familiarity which Manovich references in his work examines how society deconstructs information presented to them through the social ideological evolution of old to new realism. Old realism follows modernity and the blind hegemonic acceptance of information presented from authoritarian figures and sources: “Old realism corresponded to the functioning of ideology during modernity: totalization of a semiotic field, ‘false consciousness,’ complete illusion” (Manovich 2001, p 187). This is opposed to the new deconstructive social awareness employed by contemporary society, as Manovich points out: “[t]he ideology does not demand that the subject blindly believes it, as it did early in the twentieth century; rather, it puts the subject in a master position of somebody who knows very well that she is being fooled, and generously lets her be fooled” (Manovich 2001, p 188). An understanding of this extends into the digital realm by “[t]he periodic shifts between illusion and its suspension in interactive media, described here, can be seen as another example of the same general phenomenon” (Manovich 2001, p 188).

This indicates that the audience will be able to deconstruct the emerging digital CBVR through the process of meta-realism and generously allow themselves to be ‘fooled’ evoking their suspension of disbelief.

In accordance with Manovich’s notion of cultural transcoding, where an emergent culture is formed through the blend of human-computer interaction for multi-purpose tasks, a familiarity with the indexical relationship of digital icons and GUI’s allows the reader to understand the relationship the icon presents in terms of its function. The physical reality represented by the digital interface is accepted and is not seen as a barrier understanding or interaction of the reader. This acceptance allows the digital CBVR of motion books to be understood, deconstructed and accepted. The reader understands their role in the digital reading process in relation to the medium: “[t]he subject is forced to oscillate between the roles of viewer and user, shifting between perceiving and acting, between following the story and actively participating in it” (Manovich 2001, p 186). Once the medium itself is understood and familiar to the reader, the content can be engaged with. In the case of motion books, once the medium (I-Pod/I-Pad/Web interface/Iphone) is understood, the reader can begin engaging with the digital CBVR.

For example, with reference to audio, the reader is expected to understand that they are a reader and not a watcher, and that the digital CBVR they engage with has been designed specifically for the purposes of engaging with the information in that capacity. The result of which resonates with the transcendence of the CBVR from the print to digital medium relying on the reader to deconstruct the comic book grammar present in motion books and understand the distinction between the two.

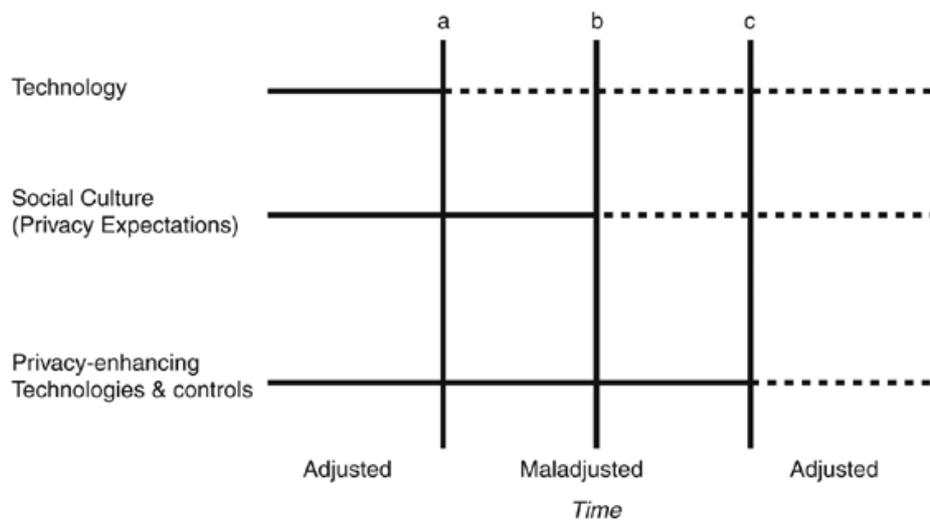
Recreation of absolute realism has never been the objective of the CBVR. Deconstruction on the part of the audience has always entered the comic book reading process and is not a new development of the digital CBVR. What is a new factor is what Manovich refers to as the “systematic ‘auto-deconstruction” (Manovich 2001, p 187) process which is incorporated into the reading experience by the computer itself. These processes concern the interpretive procedures that computer programmes have on the reading experience. In the case of motion books this would include all the digital processes of reading which were not available in the print comic book, such as using audio codes for representation as opposed to typographical representation, or the inclusion of movement on screen through the manipulation of pixels rather than manipulation of static printed ink.

Because this is a new invention the way CBVR behaves there is for a chance that techno-cultural lag will occur in terms of reader adoption. Manovich indicates however, that generally these applied techniques do not distract from the acceptance of the narrative engagement that technology plays in conveying “the systematic ‘auto-deconstruction’ performed by computer objects, applications, interfaces and hardware does not seem to distract the user from giving in to the reality effect” (Manovich 2001, p 187). The motion

book reader learns how to engage with the new medium and accepts this convention. This occurs in much the same way as pupils learn to read a book, moving their eyes from left to right, and then repeating the process from one line to the next eventually, turning the page. Thus the physical parameters of the book itself are understood and then taken for granted. A similar process occurs with the digital interface: “All in all, modern computing requires from a user intellectual problem solving, systematic experimentation and the quick learning of new tasks” (Manovich 2001, p 189).

The reader does not then let this process hinder the acceptance of the narrative experience of motion books despite their awareness of the computer processes incorporated into the motion book reading experience.

The above processes illustrate the acceptance and de-constructive processes played by digital media and the interpretive assimilation and acceptance on the part of the reader of the Digital CBVR (Figure 7.17). In short, readers should be able to understand the new grammar provided by motion books as long as they have a previous understanding of both the CBVR and GUI computer frameworks, or alternatively, that the reader is intuitive enough in these areas to deconstruct the semiotic representations encoded into the narrative process.



**Figure 7.34: The Technology // Privacy Matrix**

Source: [www.palgrave-journals.com/jdgjournal/v5n2figtabjdg20087f1](http://www.palgrave-journals.com/jdgjournal/v5n2figtabjdg20087f1)

## Chapter Eight

### Conclusion

#### Definitions of Comic Books

“Our attempt to define comics is an on-going process which won’t end any time soon. A new generation will no doubt reject whatever this one finally decides to accept and try once more to re-invent comics. And so they should (McCloud 1994, p 23).

The previously considered definition that I offered for comic books, I believe still holds true: *“A book or bounded printed paper, containing the encoding of signs composed of juxtaposed sequential, visual symbolism, the meaning of which is intended to be decoded through the combinative result of the contextualized hybridity of its presented culturally agreed codes, for purposes of a progressive state of narrative and or aesthetic engagement”*. The same general principles apply to the definition for motion books, except *‘[a] book or bounded printed paper;’* can be substituted for a digital manifestation. In the wake of further investigation the definition of CBVR has however, adapted to incorporate unique grammatical practices in terms of meaning construction as well as aesthetic and narrative tools used in a digital medium.

*‘The Comic book visual rhetoric concerns both the 1) motivation behind and 2) manner, in which the intangible conceptual intended message applying ‘comic book specific language’, is constructed to meet its narrative objectives in its tangible translation contained upon its application to a given medium, manipulating the physical parameters thereof, in the realisation of its expression.’*

In order for definitions of this research to work, we must rely on the understanding of ‘comic book specific language’, a notion which alternative denotations of ‘comic books’, attempted to include in their definition. I believe this is responsible for the wide variety of conceptual meanings the term ‘comic book’ provokes. It is, in my opinion, naive and even arrogant to assume that the unique meanings comic books can be worked so easily into a single definition and thus this needs to culminate in the simpler ‘comic book specific language’. Language is referenced in the proposed definition for ‘comic book’, but only in the broad principles attributed to it, ‘combinative result contextualised through the hybridity of its presented culturally agreed codes’.

The qualification of a comic book language works its way back into the definition for the CBVR because ‘comic book specific language’ exhibits levels of ubiquity in itself. At least two concerns arise from this. Firstly, the continued reinvention that emerges from all

progressions of languages, and secondly, the wide variety of meaning and literacy practices comic books exemplify. An obvious example of this is highlighted in the comparison of western and eastern comic book language practice, in which vast grammatical and narrative differences are exercised. In order for these definitions to stand, my aim is to identify the existence of such language, hopefully addressing at least its basic principles.

The following conclusion concerns the print and digital comic book encapsulation.

### **What makes a comic book a comic book?**

Through all the readings and theories offered to answer the above question there still seems to be a degree of uncertainty in encapsulating the exact essence of the comic book. We have identified certain unique characteristics of comics concerning those applicable to the medium and the language it has embraced.

I feel the anatomical component of the narrative needs to be addressed in this respect, partly due to the gross neglect in recognition of the essential direction and involvement the story provides to comic books. While capitalistic society may consider profit as one reason for narrative presentations, it is the value narratives hold in cultural practices which allow for it to be commodified; ultimately, it serves a social need. The universal cultural investment emphasised in various forms of narrative promulgation, is perhaps a point of separation of humans from other species. Arguably, I suppose, humans are the only species capable of examining their own brain and reflecting on the human condition in narrative expression. The summation of all possible human experiences both practical and fantastical is unachievable in a single lifetime. Narratives offer an escape into such experiences both mentally and emotionally. Ironically, the need for narrative expression reflects the notion of narrative duality of ‘what’ (practical) and ‘how’ (fantastical), in the mental understanding and emotional way we desire to narratively involve ourselves with. While narrative practice may not be unique in comic books alone, it is unique in so far as the way in which it unfolds therein.

As a narrative medium, comic books exploit their own parameters to generate meaning, subsequently giving rise to the practice of their unique language. While this is the case in their ‘ultimate expression’, the realisation of this is, to a certain extent, concealed by the medium itself as it overlaps with other storytelling mediums. Film literacy shares similarities in meaning as evident in the semblance of closure and montage, or in the harness of framing devices for exploiting emotions that result from varyingly detailed facial expressions. Novels exhibit similarities in the exploitation of semantics for a similar purpose. In the case of motion books, we noted influences from film, video games as well as traditional comic book language. The forms of medium are not then completely isolated however, the unique combination of its signification distinguishes it from other mediums. It is here, I suspect, the essence of the comic exists – a unique appeal in its reading process

unattainable in other mediums. The language of film may exemplify a powerful audio-visual experience at a prescribed pace, while to some, the language of French may exemplify romantic aesthetic arguably unrivalled by others. To mistake the language of comic books as weaker substitutes for novels, films, video games or any other form of narrative expression would be the equivalent of mistaking Russian for French.

Some argue that it is control of the visual pacing that exemplifies the medium, or the reliance of meaning understood through the exclaiming focus of images as exemplified in the panel based relationship. Indeed there is much to be said for the individualised grammatical formulation transcribed in comics that are susceptible to certain narrative conventions, such as optimised design that facilitates the proairetic code or its ability to accommodate elevated tension structures. From a production perspective, creativity is often fuelled by the limitations of the medium, often adhering to a form of narrative guerrilla warfare to use the technological impediments of the medium to its advantage.

The comic book exhibits a unique symmetry of suggested information provided by the comic and the imaginative fulfilment of information required by the reader to complete the puzzle. Persistence of vision, as utilised in film, relies on the inability of the human brain to discern the individually projected frames. In the case of comic books, the brain does not have the same amount of time to react to sequential elements. Another form of referencing the iconographic image in visually sequential narrative pays homage to Manovich's segmentation of discrete and continuous data. While films' visual projection rate limits the imaginative based closure necessary in the properties of time and space, the comic embraces the same exemplification but in a continuous format.

Another difference is identified in the process of engagement regarding the how comics empower the reader, while simultaneously stimulating sensory appreciation.

McCloud signifies that the reader must be a 'willing conspirator' (McCloud 1994, pp 68-69) in the process, while Eisner suggests that the reader needs to practice a 'leap of faith' (Eisner 1990, pp 122-139). Both points reflect the highly personalised process in evoking the imagination of the reader in order to engage with the narrative by physically engaging within the medium. The stimulation of ideas provoked by the comic's illustration and narrative act as a point of departure for the imagination, creating various degrees of abstraction and meta-realism that correlate with the reader's own degrees of conceptual internalisation. Imagination empowerment requires a degree of suspending the reader in disbelief. This metaphorical component is a mandatory exercise in the comic book reading process.

In terms of its economic situation, the comic book is possibly the pioneer of individual expression. The increased economical upsurge in technologies such as video cameras and computers brings with it new methods of individualised artistic expression, but

the comic book remains a key participant of such dissemination, as indicated by McCloud (1994, p 197): “[t]hose of us who tackle the business of comics have many obstacles to overcome, but they pale in comparison to what a filmmaker or playwright has to contend with. Comics welcome any writer or artist to step into its world A principle verifiable due to the imminent release of technologies such as The Madefire Development Tool.

### **Continued Evolvement of Comic Book Visual Rhetoric**

“The future of the graphic novel lies in the choice of worthwhile themes and the innovation of exposition [...] The future of this form awaits participants who truly believe that the application of sequential art, with its interweaving of words and pictures, could provide a dimension of communication that contributes – hopefully on a level never before attained”, notes Will Eisner (1990, p 141-142). In the case of the digital comic the physicality of the imagination reverts to computerised artificial intelligence for dissemination and reiteration. The evolution of the spoken language is contextually influenced by means other than that of the human, whereas in new media these physical characteristics concern consistent changes in its hardware and software. As a result, the evolution of language characterises different forms of influence but the actual language evolves nonetheless. Evolution concerns incremental adaptations over time rather than sudden complete changes. In the same way that English has accrued inflections from Latin, Greek and other languages, the current language established in comic books is also adapting to new contextual associations while maintaining its individualisation as a language. Derrida observes that signs are understood through the context in which they are found and that meaning can only be deferred not contained. The continued development of the CBVR was evident even before the disruption of new media. The original *X-Men* comics printed in the 1960’s, for example, exhibit a high frequency of wide framed compositions, a trend later abandoned for a richer variety, arguably to emotionally evoke the narrative. As such, I propose that the motion book reiterations of comics serve as an example of the adaptational evolution of its language in the incurred assimilations of other rhetorics, (i.e. animation, film, video games), rather than abandoning its essential grammatical rules. This is an easy mistake to make when lacking to account for necessary language adaptations imposed by other mediums. It is also a point taken for granted in verbally spoken languages, a fact complicated by the testing phases of language development.

Digital comics could easily negate the fundamentals essential of its established identity as argued in the case of motion comics and evolve into a completely different medium of grammatical practice. Potentially, the new technological environments offered in new media extend the ability for similar language infractions. The content and language of comic books could easily transgress in its entirety to the rhetoric of movies, video games, or animation, yet many, such as motion books remain true to the essential dimensions of the CBVR. The rapid evolution of the comic aids in the fabrication of seeming change over

adaptation. Again, if we consider spoken languages, which are comparatively slower in their physical and ideological development, we can see that this results in slower adaptation. We currently find ourselves in the wake of language evolution in relation to comic books, pioneers of which, Madefire and soon enough, as indicative of the prosumer movement, perhaps the kid next door. The comic book has consistently progressed in exploiting its content to react with the dimensions of its display canvass. When the display canvass changes, for example, from print to a screen, the above principle still remains. As the display canvass changes, so then the content must adapt in order to hold true to the essence of the CBVR.

Future manifestations of the CBVR will be subject to the same contextual modification as current and previous reiterations thereof. We cannot dismiss future artistic tools that harness individual or trending artistic styles. “As for the receptivity of the audience, this must (and will) change and become sympathetic as the product delivers more and becomes more relevant (Eisner 1990, p 142). The personalities of individual styles may progress evolution of the CBVR, as evidenced in technological innovations prompting, for example, the artistically photo-manipulated *Children of Xaphan* or any of the Madefire titles. The continuation of medium advancements is no doubt a significant factor in the continued development of the CBVR and future mediums may look to perforate its transcendence to include designs of wearable technology, virtual reality, robotics, 3D projection, etc. Motion Books extended the CBVR to include not only visual sensory appeal, but audio signification as well. Perhaps we will see the other three senses incorporated into the narrative experience. The initiation of prototypes in this field have already been established in ‘4D’ films, that involving the actual movement of viewer, such as Disney’s *Star Wars* ride, or its *Honey I Shrunk the Kids* 3D short film, that simulate rats running past the audiences feet by combining 3D representation and air that is blown at audiences’ feet. All of these devices will be subject to the social acceptance of the medium and there may be a potential cultural lag applicable to such mediums of the CBVR. It remains to be seen how these dynamics shall unfold. At least in the immediate case of motion books, I can argue that the essence of the CBVR has been interpolated into the digital comic formation, and in order for its continued survival, requires the consistent optimisation of the CBVR within the boundaries of developing hardware, software and cultural establishments.

Arguably, comics are the best example of a medium’s adaptation from print to digital in so far as the transcendence of its rhetoric is concerned. However, the ultimate capitalisation potential for rhetoric transcendence in its display and expression exists with the comic book. The fusion of its anatomical components offers greater possibilities for meaning and overall reading experience. Perhaps this complexity is the reason it has taken so long for motion books to surface while printed books transcended comparatively easily into e-book form. Perhaps printed text is void of the complexities of aligning hybrid signification in the arrangement and expression of various semes.

While the definition may hold true for now, the above meaning of motion books could alter. In the wake of evolution of movement and audio, the above concepts may be shunned, in which case, the codes for comic book language would fail to be ‘culturally accepted’. I have faith that for the most part this will not happen because there are those of us who have learnt to decipher and appreciate the essence of the magic practised in comic books and that whatever form this essence acquires, it will ultimately continue to manifest in its digitally adapted environment. Many spins offs of its nodal developmental nature will continue to be offered, but something tells me that the essence of comic book language will remain.

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