All click and no play? Game comics, comic games, and user agency

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This contribution examines game-like digital comics, departing from Daniel Merlin Goodbrey's concept of "game comics" (2017, 2020). Game comics, as the name suggests, would be interactive objects, closely related to video games. In Goodbrey's words, they are "a type of hypercomic that presents some of the key features of a game and uses some of the key features of the comic form as the basis for its gameplay" (2020: 45).

Firstly, the article defines comics, establishing a new taxonomy of digital comics (distinguishing between 'homothetic,' 'linked,' and 'expanded') and positioning game comics as belonging to digital ones, yet as much more fluid objects than Goodbrey's. Secondly, it reframes the concept of interactivity within a novel framework, envisioning four types of user agency (narrative, interpretive, material, and social) that a semiotic text encourages or hinders. Lastly, it discusses a selection of game comics as opposed to comic games (Backe 2020) - video games remediating comics' affordances, seen as game comics' hypothetical reverse. In interrogating the specifics of these objects and reflecting on the different types of user agency they prompt, the article concludes that the space between comics and games is fuzzier than taxonomies considering media in isolation would suggest.

Keywords: digital comics; game comics; interactivity; hypermedia; transmedial narratology; comics studies; video games.

Introduction[1]

This article moves from investigating a subcategory of digital comics that allegedly foregrounds their hypermedial, interactive, and ludic features. Notably, this has been discussed by Daniel Merlin Goodbrey through the concept of "game comics" (2017, 2020), in his words, "a type of hypercomic that presents some of the key features of a

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game and uses some of the key features of the comic form as the basis for its gameplay" (2020, p. 45). By drawing on a framework that intersects transmedial narratology, comics studies, and game studies, this paper aims to rethink the idea of game comics within the larger framework of digital comics.

This research situates itself at the crossroads of these disciplines for a triad of reasons. Firstly, concerning comics: digital comics deviate from prototypical ones, and it will be necessary to unpack and conceptualise them. Secondly, concerning Goodbrey's idea of game comics: while being a brilliant, pioneering work accompanied by an extensive creation of digital comics that tested and challenged his theoretical framework, Goodbrey's understanding of game comics is rather restrictive (the difficulty of such an endeavour has already been discussed by Backe, 2020), and I believe that reassessing the concept requires rethinking the theoretical framework of reference at large. To do so, this paper will move from existing conceptualisations of interactivity in narrative artefacts (notably Ryan, 2006, 2011), reframing the concept as one of the subtypes of user[2] agency. The article argues that widening our attention to consider all types of agency enabled by semiotic texts – in my taxonomy, narrative, interpretive, material, and social – allows for a broader understanding of the possible ways users interact with medial objects - at least, with those displaying a salient narrative component, which may, as in this case, intersect with a ludic disposition. In doing so, it will appeal to an idea of interaction centred on user experience, integrating insights from game design (Salen Tekinbas and Zimmerman, 2003) within a framework grounded in transmedial narratology.

[2] Since I am talking of different kinds of interactions with diverse texts, I will adopt the umbrella term "users", while keeping "players", "readers", "viewers" when quoting specific sources.

Before engaging with the nature of these dynamics, it is essential to introduce the object under discussion, exploring digital comics and their intersection with video games.

Sheets and screens: prototypical comics and the digital

"Digital comics" is an umbrella term that covers heterogeneous objects, which complicates their analysis, especially when considering their relation to prototypical comics (notably, print ones), as the former may incorporate multimedia, interactive, or hypertextual elements, and break free from the orderly limit print imposes on page layout. Indeed, several scholars and practitioners believe, consequently, that digital comics are too different from prototypical comics to be considered *comics*, as some of their potential affordances are seen as subverting the core meaning-making mechanisms of comics. To answer this objection, we should examine comics both through a formal and a socio-cultural lens, looking for their "impossible definition" (Groensteen, 1999, p. 14).

In the first sense, most definitions of comics*ness* point to two fundamental characteristics: the combination of words and images (Rey, 1978, pp. 104, 200; Harvey, 2009, p. 26) and/or sequentiality (McCloud, 1993, p. 9; Miller, 2007, p. 75). However, adopting such criteria leaves room for various objections: what about wordless comics? What about comics composed of a single panel? Several scholars (e.g., Kirchoff, 2013; Goodbrey, 2017) have tried to solve the problem by expanding the definition to encompass more features; oppositely, yet similarly, Lefèvre and Dierick have formulated a very broad prototypical definition of comics as "the juxtaposition of fixed (mostly drawn) pictures on a support as a communicative act" (1998, p. 12). Nonetheless, purely formal definitions risk being too restrictive or generic, hypostatising medial affordances and building an implied canon that reads historically and culturally situated developments as absolute features of the medium (see Wilde, 2015; Busi Rizzi, 2023).

I propose that we refer to prototype theory differently - first, by anchoring comics to a socio-cultural definition, as "what is produced or consumed as a comic" (Hague, 2014, p. 27). For how tautological it may sound, this definition allows us to consider comicsness as "a historically contingent and evolving set of reading protocols that are applied to texts" (Witek, 2009, p. 149), looking at the "political economy" of comics "as a cultural institution tied to concrete historical circumstances, not a form in the abstract" (Gordon, 2020, p. 23). This definition of the class of comics can nonetheless be combined with a survey of the prototypical formal features of comics in a determinate historical and cultural position. While considering Western comics of the Twenty-first century, I will look for their prototypical features as a set of parameters that may be more or less prominent and discernible (they can even be completely absent), provided that the general balance is sufficient to keep the resulting object within the periphery of (contemporary) comicsness, and maintaining the simultaneous need for these objects to be communally recognised as comics. Objects displaying all these features at their highest gradient would sit at the core of the accepted definition of comics, as they have been considered in the last years in the Western world.

The parameters I suggest to identify contemporary, Western, prototypical comics, are: the interplay of written words and drawn images (their multimodality); a paper support (which implies a static nature); the fact of being hand-drawn, which in turn implies a certain degree of iconicity (the visual simplification based on the degree of selection and distortion of visual details); a high degree of narrativity, leveraging a sequential succession of panels; a layout based on the panel/grid framing; the establishment of a cognitive network between panels/images (generating closure, tabularity, and arthrology: see McCloud, 1993; Groensteen, 1999); the expression of temporality through spatiality; and the reader's ultimate freedom in terms of pace (what

Marion calls "heterochrony": 1997) and direction of their reading (I propose to call the latter 'browsability')[3].

In light of this, digital comics are then non-prototypical comics, resting on a different materiality (the digital support), which entails crucial processes of hybridisation, remediation and convergence with other medial objects (animations, hypertexts, and indeed video games). This has given birth to different formats and reading protocols, tied to affordances dissimilar from those of print comics: digital comics may include sounds and animations (multimediality), and sounds may include voices redoubling or replacing the written text; the screen(s) may isolate one panel at a time, connecting it to other panels through protocols coming from the digital environment at large (e.g., hyperlinks), or from cinema, video games, etc.; they may dictate their reading pace, resulting in a (sometimes partially) homochronous mode and opening to a potentially twofold temporality (spatial and/or chronological); finally, they may allow for a certain degree of interactivity and what I propose to call 'explorability', in contrast with paper comics' 'browsability'. As said, what keeps digital comics together with *comics* is the combination of being identified as such, and the fact that the overall balance remains close enough to the conceptual centre of comicsness. This implies that digital comics displaying most of these non-prototypical affordances and being at the same time, for example, wordless or

[3] To give an example of how these characteristics are historically and culturally bound, "seriality" would certainly have been one of these prototypical parameters up until the end of the Twentieth century, but its inclusion now, in light of the centrality of the graphic novel format, would certainly be more contentious. A media archaeological survey of the different parameters throughout the historical unfolding of comics' traditions would certainly be a much-needed study.

abstract, would be fuzzier objects. This article will explore the fuzzy periphery of digital comics that borders with video games; but before doing so, a short classification of digital comics themselves is needed.

Multimedial, hypermedial, interactive: digital comics and game comics

I propose distinguishing three fundamental categories of digital comics based on their reading protocols, which I see as the crucial constitutive element in their meaning-making. I will call the first (and most common) type "homothetic digital comics," comprising both digitised comics and those adopting a skeuomorphic digital form, analogous to their print counterparts. These comics are static and preserve the panel/strip/page structure characteristic of print ones, either maintaining or emulating the format of traditional comics.

The second category, *linked* digital comics, encompasses those characterised by an inter-panel succession based on the scrolling mechanism and those based on panel delivery. The first subtype leverages the screen(s) as a window onto a broader, potentially boundless space, to be navigated as an unfolding scroll. Scott McCloud influentially called "infinite canvas" (2000) the works that exploited the digital capacity to expand comics layout and reading progression besides the physical constraints of the printed page, enabling a multi-directional exploration of their narrative space. In contrast, comics of the second subtype - based on panel delivery - isolate individual panels and reveal subsequent ones through user interaction (typically, clicks or taps). Within this category – and relying on both progression mechanisms - we find hypercomics with branched narratives, where advancement from one panel to another is contingent on users' choices.

The third category, which I propose to call *expanded* digital comics, consists of comics that incorporate intra-panel expansions, thus allowing for a different experience

(in terms of perception and navigation) of the storyworld compared to traditional comics. This can be further divided into two groups: comics featuring *enhanced* panels, such as motion comics, augmented reality (AR) comics, and those that add multimedia elements to the static presentation of the narrative; and those featuring *explorable* panels, such as playable comics and virtual reality (VR) comics, which allow users to navigate and interact with their storyworlds.

This taxonomy provides a different understanding of game comics. Goodbrey positions game comics as a subtype of hypercomics, that he considers a self-standing category within digital comics. According to him, game comics combine key features of both prototypical comics and games, retaining the structural aspects of the former while incorporating game elements and mechanics. Goodbrey borrows from Juul a list of salient features of games: being rule-based; possessing variable and quantifiable outcomes; valorising said outcomes; needing users' effort and choices to influence the outcome, and be emotionally attached to it; and negotiating real-life consequences (Juul, 2005, p. 36; Goodbrey, 2020, pp. 46-47). Goodbrey then presents a list of characteristics that he considers distinctive of comics (space as time, simultaneous juxtaposition of images, closure between images, spatial networks, reader control of pacing, tablodic images, and word and image blending: pp. 47-48), and proposes that game comics are hybrids belonging to the category of hypercomics – seen, in turn, as particular kinds of hypermedia. The concept of interactivity is central in Goodbrey's idea of 'game comics'; I argue, however, that this engenders some shortcomings.

While hypermedia and hypertexts certainly require some kind of interaction to be traversed, the types and degrees of interaction they enliven are still a matter of debate. Espen Aarseth considers hypertexts to be *ergodic* (an idea Goodbrey picks up): that is, he believes that their interactivity engenders a tangible sense of agency, where user actions

are meaningful and require a non-trivial effort, beyond simple interpretation, to be performed (1997). Conversely, Marie-Laure Ryan, by drawing on Roger Caillois' dichotomy between *ludus* and *paideia*, distinguishes between "narrative games," in which "narrative meaning is subordinated to the player's actions," and "playable stories," which "induce a much more aesthetic pleasure than narrative games because the player is not narrowly focused on goals" (2009, pp. 45-47). Ryan places hypertext fiction in the latter category, asserting that such texts limit user agency to choosing from a predetermined set of options (p. 44)[4]. While the degree of interactivity and ergodicity of hypercomics is contentious, I also believe that the concept of interactivity in its narrow sense does not cover all types of (ludic) interactions users may have with a medial artefact.

Moreover, I believe that objects that can be considered 'game comics' stem from both what I called branched and playable comics – two different subcategories in my taxonomy. To prove it, I will perform an overview of a small corpus of game-like digital comics, to which I will side a subcategory of video games that I will provisionally and specularly call, echoing Hans-Joachim Backe (2020), 'comic games'. Comic games would be those that remediate (Bolter and Grusin, 1999) the visual and semantic characteristics of comics (the parameters that I discussed in the previous section),

[4] I will not engage here with the concept of Interactive Digital Narratives (IDNs), that Hartmut Koenitz defines as "narrative expression in various forms, implemented as a multimodal computational system […] and experienced through a participatory process in which interactors have a non- trivial influence on progress, perspective, content, and/or outcome" (2023, p. 71). While extremely refined, the idea of IDNs partially conflicts with that of video games, and would open to a much wider discussion than this article can cover. I leave to a future study the analysis of the possible intersection between digital comics and IDNs.

standing in a more salient relation with digital comics in reason of the common digital mediation. Their narrative component would be quite salient – although they may occupy various positions between Ryan's narrative games and playable stories; following what I have argued about comics, they can be considered video games since a community of users and creators consensually recognises them as such. On a formal level, they are playable, rule-based, goal-oriented multimedial digital objects, that rely on (meaningful, non-trivial) user interaction to progress their story[5].

My discussion of this corpus aims to show that the space between digital comics and games is fuzzier than the formal impetus of my premises may suggest, and that this becomes clearer if we let go of a narrow idea of interactivity to focus, instead, on the broader concept of user agency. To do so, however, it is first necessary to define the very idea of interactivity.

Reframing interactivity: from interaction to user agency

As Landay observes, "the definition of interactivity has historically been contested, with scholars from different fields emphasising either technology, the communication setting, or the perceiver, yielding different insights and interests". Interactivity has been seen "as a property of the system, the medium, the user, or a combination of two or all three" (Landay, 2023, pp. 243-44; see the whole entry for an overview of the concept). Here, I will argue that interactivity results firstly from the qualities of the system (the specific medial object) and the processes it allows for, although the latter depend in turn on the

[5] Again, each of these parameters may be low or not present in less prototypical games. For an articulate discussion of video games definitions, see Tavinor (2008).

affordances of the medium and eventually need users to play a crucial, active role in exchanging information with the system itself.

Since my perspective is grounded on transmedial narratology, my understanding of interactivity fundamentally owes to the work of Marie-Laure Ryan. Ryan establishes two different classifications of the interactivity of a narrative text, by types and levels. However, rather than complementing each other, the two classifications partially conflate. I will incorporate in my analysis the former classification, but will quickly review the latter, as several insights will resurface in my taxonomy.

Ryan's first classification (2006) is qualitative and follows two axes: internal/external and exploratory/ontological. In internal interactivity, users project themselves as an integral part of the fictional universe through an avatar or a first-person perspective; in external interactivity, they are situated outside the virtual world, in an impersonal top-down position. The other axis goes from exploratory interactivity, where users are free to move around the virtual world, but their activity does not influence the storyline, to ontological interactivity, where the story develops from, and because of, users' actions. Four prototypes of interactivity derive from these axes (to these, Ryan adds various intermediate combinations that will not be discussed here): *internal/exploratory* (such as mystery-solving games), where users are immersed in the narrative through a virtual body, but their role is limited to actions that have little or no bearing on the narrative events per se; *external/exploratory* (hypertext fiction), in which users stand outside of the geography of a fictional world, choosing between predetermined narrative paths by navigating a network of lexia; *external/ontological* (simulators), in which users are outside the virtual world, but their decisions exert an influence on the story and the fates of the characters; and *internal/ontological* (adventure games, CYOA stories,

MMOGs), in which users move through the diegetic space, making decisions that follow the laws of (and have repercussions on) the storyworld.

Although Ryan's taxonomy does account for multimodal media, I argue that my case studies show how visuality complicates the division between external and internal interactivity, since it is contentious to assess when users adopt a detached authorial/God-mode stance and when they consider characters to be their embodied avatars. Comics, in particular, rarely adopt POV shots; this suggests that the simple visual closeness to characters throughout the story entails aligning to their focalisation and ocularisation (that is, roughly, their visual focalisation: see Mikkonen 2017, pp. 150-173; on this alignment, see Eder 2010). This would imply making choices *on their behalf*, and internal interactivity despite the lack of an avatar *strictu sensu*.

Some years later (2011), Ryan proposed a different classification, dividing interactivity into four levels: the first ('peripheral interactivity') concerns simple gestures, such as clicking on hyperlinks to progress through the story; the second, affecting narrative discourse and story presentation, is that of hypertexts and branching narratives; the third, engendering variations in a partially predefined story, occurs in (most) video games. The fourth level is, so far, still hypothetical - although generative AIs seem to anticipate possible evolutions in this sense - and envisions real-time story generation, as that of the Holodeck imagined by the *Star Trek* screenwriters and metaphorically referred to by Janet Murray (2016). To this, Ryan adds what she calls "meta-interactivity," the interaction carried on by active users when "designing a new level for a computer game, creating new costumes for an avatar, [...] and generally expanding the possibilities of action offered by the storyworld" (2011, p. 59).

Ryan's taxonomy is quite interesting for two reasons: first, both edges (that is, "peripheral interactivity" and "meta-interactivity") refer to something else from proper

interactivity, yet still configure some clear type of *interaction* with texts, which presupposes some kind of behaviour from the users, in turn implying some type of agency on their part. Second, whether the two intermediate levels of interactivity entail meaningful choices made by the users is less commonsensical and unanimous than it may seem: Alec Charles affirms that video games' "demands for functional reactivity promote an illusion of agency which lulls the player into an interpretative passivity" (2009, p. 289; also in Stang, 2019, n.p.).

Departing from Ryan, I propose a switch to a broader perspective, centred on four types of user agency, envisioning a more holistic idea of how users interact with a text. The theoretical shift I suggest is grounded in the historical unfolding of comics practices: comics are a medium that is deeply connected to interactive behaviour encompassing both social dynamics, such as fan practices and exchanges, and cognitive experiences, such as reading strategies. These dimensions of interactivity are foundational to the medium, though they may be obscured when only considering interactivity in its limited sense. This also echoes Sarah Stang's argument that "true player agency lies not within pre-scripted videogame narratives, but in the players' interpretations of the game text, their engagement with fan communities, and the exchanges between fans and developers" (2019).

Similar perspectives exist: for example, Frank Serafini's idea that users assume four roles when faced with multimodal texts (navigator, interpreter, designer, and interrogator: 2012), and Marc Fourmentraux's four different types of relations that can be established with interactive art (exploratory, contributing, alterating, and *alteracting* interaction: 2005). Eventually, my proposal is remarkably similar to that established by Katie Salen Tekinbas and Eric Zimmerman in *Rules of Play*, where they envision four modes of interactivity: interpretive participation, functional interactivity, explicit

interactivity, and beyond-the-object interactivity (2003, pp. 58-69). I propose reframing interactivity to become part of a broader set of interactions with texts, which implies four types of user agency: narrative, material, interpretive, and social.

1) *Narrative* agency encapsulates the core property traditionally ascribed to interactivity; it encompasses both Ryan's second and third levels (2011), and can be unpacked and better examined through the internal/external and exploratory/ontological axes she conceptualised (2006). The key variable for narrative agency is the semantic salience of the users' interaction – that is, the impact of their choices on the story.

2) *Material* agency, close to Ryan's idea of peripheral interactivity, relates to the physical actions and gestures users choose (and are allowed) to undertake, emerging from the materiality and design of the supports, platforms and interfaces that host and mediate users' interaction, and the affordances they configure. While Crucifix and Dozo observe that e-comics' users are often given "the role of the 'animator' through clicking, scrolling, swiping, and other movements" (2018, p. 584), these variables entail different cognitive demands, affecting absorption, embodiment, and agency. We can more clearly identify four issues at stake: (1) the extent to which these material interactions are semantically charged - that is, imbued with meaning and intertwined with narrative progression, which determines how saliently is the users' embodied perception activated, and how much is material agency related to narrative agency; (2) whether the gestures requested to users are (de) naturalised, ranging from everyday ones (like turning a paper page, scrolling, or clicking on an arrow to progress the narration) to idiosyncratic, more demanding or conscious ones, such as finding and activating hidden hyperlinks or reassembling scattered, loose narrative or visual threads; (3) whether users have the control of the story's pace; and (4) whether they can see the whole scene and/or zoom in and out.

Interpretive agency involves the cognitive and hermeneutic processes, in this case concerning the textual and visual levels of comics and comics-like artefacts. Continuously intertwining with the linear experience of the story as presented, these processes are twofold: on the one hand, users fill various types of textual lacunae; on the other, they weave connections between different elements in the text. In the first sense, users are required to activate the network of semiotic, intertextual, and real-life references that Iser called 'repertoire' to process three types of gaps: narrative - that is, ellipses concerning events that are not explicitly presented in the narrative, but whose occurrence should be inferred (Iser, 1978); sequential, notably those between panels, that Mc Cloud calls 'gutters', and that give origin to comics' patchy structure, requiring users to mentally supplement and project missing details and events to achieve narrative continuity and 'closure' (1993, p. 60-93); and visual ones, related to variations in details ('iconicity', according to McCloud), deformation and (visual) abstraction (1993, p. 24-59). In the second sense, comics always invite a reading that is not just linear and sequential. This is due to their tabularity - the holistic effect provided by page layout (Fresnault-Deruelle, 1976[6]) – and to what Groensteen calls 'braiding' (1999, p. 171-186), that is, the interplay of "iconic, plastic or semantic correspondences", rhymes and echoes (Groensteen, 1999, p. 146), that tie together non-successive panels[7]. This series of processes has both a hermeneutic and a ludic component, which bears a considerable toll on the interaction with a text despite not resulting in a material change of state of the latter.

[6] On the narrative implications of page layout, see Peeters (1998).

[7] An important supplement to Groensteen's braiding is Postema's idea of 'weaving' (2013, pp. 112-115), which stresses narrative links and echoes and the users' action of going back and forth to reconstruct them.

Finally, *social* agency concerns all social behaviours and practices enacted by users. Stang emphasises how, in video games, players assert their agency not just through the gameplay, but also by exercising "collective agency through participation in fan communities, which often engage in dialogue with developers and help to shape a game's paratext, which is itself integral to the experience of play" (2019; I would add to this all practices meant to expand the design of a storyworld - what Ryan calls "meta-interactivity"). Similarly, several participatory practices existed in comics culture way before the digital turn, although the latter has accelerated, expanded geographically, and disintermediated most of them: exchanging ideas with the authors, rewriting, speculating, commenting, sharing interpretations, 'shipping' characters, and so on. To this, new practices added, forming what Shivener calls the 'extensive agency' of digital (comics) users, their capacity for "downloading, reprogramming, editing, rescaling, redistributing, and circulating" (2019, p. 57) those objects – and one may add to this list liking, reposting, and all similar activities through social media (on the topic, see Antonini, Brooker and Benatti, 2020).

User agency in game comics: taxonomies and fuzzy set

I will apply this theoretical framework to a corpus of objects occupying a fuzzy space between (digital) comics and (narrative) video games. Of course, while this article focuses on this particular intersection, digital comics establish numerous other fuzzy peripheries, bordering animation, e-lit, websites, and so on. While the list is in no way intended to cover all possibilities exhaustively, I have picked up what I believe to be most interesting examples of specific (proto)types: Andrew Hussie's *Homestuck* (2009-16), a long-serialised, transmedially-expanded webcomic; Daniel Merlin Goodbrey's *Icarus Needs* (2013), one of the hypercomics the author created in his art-based PhD research; Jason Shiga and Andrew Plotkin's *Meanwhile* (2018), a CYOA/hypermedia app; Randall

Munroe's *Hoverboard* special episode (2015), hosted by (and in many ways dissimilar from) his *XKCD* webcomic series (2005-); and one video game remediating several comics affordances: Walkabout Games' *Liberated* (2020)[8]. As Backe contends while warning against the unexamined idea of hybrids, "instead of assuming that hybridisation between digital games and comics is a stable category that constitutes the basis for a specific approach to these phenomena, the coincidence of perceived traits of both forms should prompt the granular analysis of artefacts as complex objects in their own right" (2020, p. 76). Thus, let us try to unpack these hybrid objects one by one.

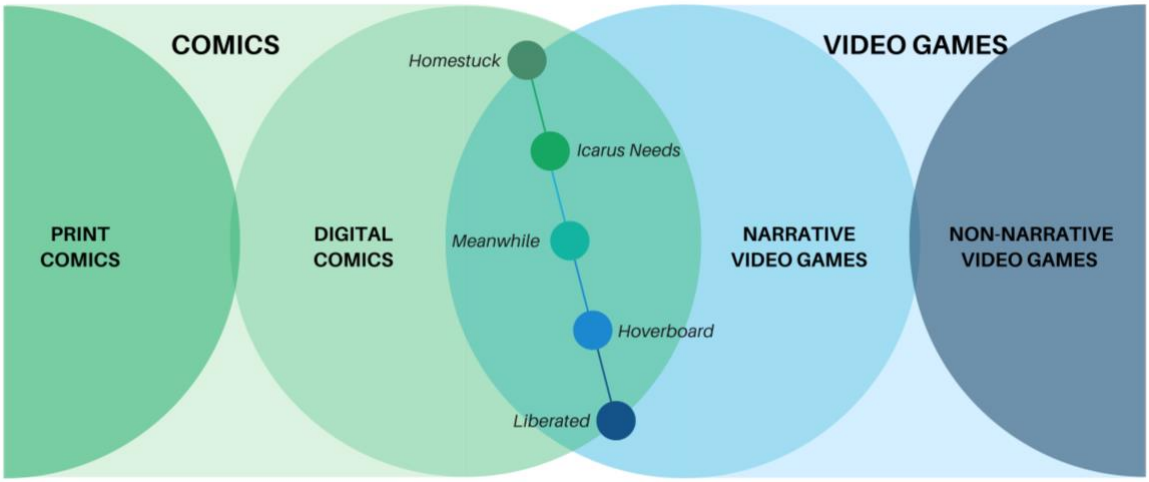

Figure 1. The game comics/comic games' fuzzy space.

[8] In my contribution to the proceedings of the HT23 conference (and a previous version of this article), my sample also encompassed Exaheva's *Still Heroes* (2022) and Mountain Studio's *Florence* (2018), but the space was insufficient to allow a thorough discussion of all texts. Similarly, I have chosen *Liberated* as the most interesting example of games engaging with the comic language, expunging other examples, such as *Framed* (2014), that I initially wanted to discuss as well.

a) *Homestuck* by Andrew Hussie is an extensive serial webcomic, hosted on a dedicated website[9], published over seven years; the webcomic comes in at over 8000 pages, weaving together a multimedia tapestry of GIFs, Flash animations, a musical soundtrack (mostly 8-bit songs) and games. The reading progression, provided that one has the link, may start from any page – which is not the case for most objects examined here. Since it also relies on a panel-to-panel progression that unfolds by clicking on hyperlinks (the plot progression occasionally features some branching paths, but they eventually only allow one way through), it is a hybrid between my second and third categories of digital comics. The story concerns a group of teenagers who unintentionally trigger apocalyptic events by playing a video game. *Homestuck* frames its meta-referential narrative through the remediation of two digital interfaces, which also house almost the entirety of its dialogues – peculiarly, *Homestuck* has practically no speech or thought balloons: a chatlog and a retro text-based adventure game, equipped with an extremely convoluted inventory system called Sylladex and with embedded minigames, only allowing for a limited range of (very odd) actions (see Glaser 2020). This approach, described by Veale as "metamedia storytelling" (2019), invites self-reflective inquiry into the concepts and mechanics of video games and interactive narratives, which also manifests through metaleptic breaches within the story; at the same time, it makes for a very eccentric kind of comic.

However, the interactivity that *Homestuck* stages and foregrounds is mostly apparent, eventually being confined to trivial, contained sites of the story: the comic starts by mimicking an internal/ontological interactivity, yet quickly reveals as only allowing an external/exploratory one. While, then, apparently confirming Groensteen's remark on

[9] https://www.homestuck.com/. Retrieved 15/10/2023.

digital comics only offering a surface playability (2013, p. 56), *Homestuck* stands out, instead, for its high material, interpretive, and social agency. Indeed, the whole experience of the comic is contingent upon the users' ability to decode its intricate discourse, which implies going back and forth in the webcomic to retrieve references (Postema's weaving, combining material and interpretive agency). Moreover, the users' community coalescing around the webcomic curated a very long and detailed Wiki, without which its countless second-degree in-jokes would be virtually impossible to decipher. These in-jokes, in turn, are deeply enmeshed with *Homestuck's* socially participated creation process: initially, Hussie developed the story in direct response to suggestions from the comic's forum. Over time, as the community burgeoned, it became a crucible for users' interaction and input, integrating ongoing dialogue, interpretations, and plot desiderata into the unfolding comic. Furthermore, *Homestuck* stands out for the extent of its transmedia expansion and fantext, both of which owe to the fundamental role of fans. Hussie acknowledged and embraced fan contributions, incorporating them into the comic's creative process and later in the conceptualisation of the video games derived from the comic (see Busi Rizzi, 2020). This intricate web of material, interpretive and social agency thus integrates the relatively low narrative agency elicited by *Homestuck*.

b) *Icarus Needs*, by theorist-practitioner Daniel Merlin Goodbrey, is a webcomic hosted on a dedicated website[10] that exemplifies his idea of "game comics" as a subcategory of hypercomics. Following adjacent panels, users guide the main character's progression through an oneiric adventure whose ultimate aim is to wake up, and that visually reminds of the succession of pipes to explore in classic adventure video games. The comic features a combination of hand-drawn images and written text, and is clearly

[10] https://e-merl.com/icneeds.html. Retrieved 15/10/2023.

narrative-based; it is accompanied by a musical soundtrack that marks the passages of state while progressing through the story, yet does not interfere with the users' freedom in terms of pace. Its game-like side is evident, since it is based on a series of riddles to solve and tasks to perform, visually featuring, alongside the comic body, a small inventory system and the unfolding succession of quests to accomplish.

Coherently with the functioning of hypermedia, the interaction is less about properly moving the character and more about traversing separate lexia of the comic's storyworld: the users' input reveals a limited subset of panels at a time (forming a grid of no more than 3x3 panels), surrounding the protagonist's position. Technically, then, rather than having Icarus walk through the panels, each time users press the direction arrows they reconfigure the whole set of visible panels, activating a different central panel where the protagonist stand, which keeps the staticity of paper comics intact while allowing for a navigation of the storyworld. Nonetheless, this mechanic entails that the character's movement is not autonomous, but guided by the webcomic's design that continuously, phantasmally reiterates the comics' grid-like configuration.

This structure aims to preserve the user's interpretive agency and freedom in terms of reading directions (which is confirmed by the possibility of retracing one's steps); nonetheless, to fully realize this purpose, the comic should have provided its users with the possibility of freely navigating and having an overview of its entire body (thus activating the entire cognitive network connecting distant panels). At the same time, while the comic allows for a certain level of material agency and freedom (users can retrace the character's steps or explore incorrect paths), and while simulating an internal/ontological progression, the interactivity configured is rather internal/exploratory, as narrative agency is only superficial. The comic is a standalone experimental object (along with several other fascinating experiments by the same author), and although the interface offered by

Goodbrey's website does propose a forum and chat for engagement, accessing these features is not immediate, hindering social agency (interactions are indeed quite scarce).

c) Jason Shiga's *Meanwhile* is a choose-your-own-adventure story in (hyper)comic form, designed (with Andrew Plotkin) as a mobile app (iOS, Steam) and yet interestingly marketed as "an interactive comic book". On the one hand, it largely adopts the language of comics (static, hand-drawn panels in a sequence, expressing temporality through spatiality). On the other, it intensely dialogues with the idea of hypermedia (see Lombard-Cook, 2015), advancing from one panel to the next through user clicks (this assigns *Meanwhile* to my second category, that of linked digital comics). This mechanism guides the reader's navigation, frequently (but not invariably) offering multiple pathways. Users thus guide the protagonist panel by panel through a series of choices, ostensibly trivial at the beginning, that burgeon into a complex sci-fi plot encompassing time travel, apocalyptic scenarios, and telepathy, offering multicursal paths ostensibly offering 3,856 possible narrative permutations.

Following what I said about comics and focalisation, interactivity can be considered rather internal than external – also because the CYOA functioning clearly takes over the hypermedial structuring, which means that, while *Meanwhile* can be placed in a somewhat hybrid position between Ryan's internal/exploratory and internal/ontological categories, the latter is clearly predominant. In addition to this, the app leverages a delicate balance between interpretive and material agency. It keeps inactive panels visible but desaturated, offering a holistic view of the story path (that can thus be virtually navigated before being activated) and allowing for zooming in and out. This opens to a sort of safe mode juxtaposed to the primary progression, phantasmally recreating a grid-like path and letting users foresee and retrace their steps (although the

app does not allow for backwards steps) – both strategies stressing their interpretive agency.

Meanwhile was born as a semi-independent book with a parallel life as a Javascript-based webcomic in 2005 (the webpage is no longer retrievable), realised by Jason Shiga alone. It then became known in its enhanced version in print form (2010), which is peculiar, since, while inventive, as a book it is quite a complicated read. Indeed, it presents considerable challenges in navigability due to the overabundance of non-related panels jumbled in the small space of a page, hindering material agency, and complicating interpretive agency – notably, the users' ability to parse the narrative flow and follow its unfolding.

d) Randall Munroe's *Hoverboard* is a standalone episode from the long-running webcomic *XKCD* that presents a fascinating divergence both from the usual content of its parent webcomic and from what we have seen so far. Standard *XKCD* strips are homothetic to print ones - predominantly four-panel humour strips (although several are narrative infographics), drawn with an essential, naïve trait, featuring unnamed stick figures, revealing an additional punchline via hover text. The strips are self-conclusive and periodically issued; the visual style, the themes (a humorous approach to geek culture) and the dedicated website[11] act as symbolic containers, keeping together the occasional heterogeneous instalments. Indeed, special XKCD episodes often experiment with the affordances of the digital (see the episodes *Right Click*, *Throw Calculator*, and especially the very famous *Click and Drag*, an explorable panel consisting of 2592 sections of 2048x2048 pixels).

[11] https://xkcd.com/1608/. Retrieved 15/10/2023.

Explicitly presented as a "little game" to commemorate the author's latest book release, *Hoverboard's* conceptual operation is extremely refined. The episode begins with what looks like a single-panel space, seemingly plunging users into a retro video game playground, rendered in XKCD's signature minimalist, cartoonish style. Users are tasked with controlling the unnamed protagonist on a coin-collecting quest. Completing this task elicits a message notifying them how many coins they have obtained in which time, congratulating them on their "great job." If users try to exit the play area, a message appears inviting them, rather forcefully, to return to it. The design imparts a form of internal/ontological interactivity that, at first glance, seems to clearly prioritise video game mechanics over the traditional interpretive agency of comics.

However, if users keep venturing beyond, moving away from the playground and defying what seem to be explicit rules, they are ushered into a much broader space. This vast, navigable storyworld is static, punctuated with textual dialogues, and non-interactive, displaying numerous references to pop culture and nerd subculture, as in *XKCD*'s trademark; referring to my taxonomy, it can be considered an expanded digital comic featuring a single enhanced panel. Material agency, which seemed limited by the game's deceptively simple mechanics, becomes thus the catalyst for subverting the interaction with and perception of the very nature of *Hoverboard*. Hence, *Hoverboard* reveals itself not as a retro game in comic form; its initial attire is only a disguise, embedded into an extremely broader comic storyworld, to be explored following the stick figure avatar, the only dynamic element in a universe of still figures. This turns the comic into a quest centred on interpretive agency, and its narrative agency into an internal/exploratory endeavour, reminiscent of walking simulators. One could argue that, despite the fact the comic can only be navigated by moving – and following – the stick figure avatar, the latter turns into a mere vector for an external/exploratory traversal of

the comic's storyworld; at the same time, once out of the gameplay, the ontological contrast between moving (the avatar) and static (the rest of the comics) creates a weird friction, giving it a unique quality.

Xkcd is accompanied by a Wiki curated by its users, contextualising its many intertextual references, expanding on the scientific themes that often appear in its episodes, and explaining their mechanics in the case of special episodes. Munroe consistently engages with recurring motifs that spark ongoing community dialogue, despite being relatively elusive, which leaves the precise influence on his work of its fanbase (the effect of their social agency) somewhat enigmatic.

e) *Liberated* is the only object discussed here that does not identify as a digital comic. Instead, it is an action-adventure game narrating a dark, cyberpunk tale of a society on the brink of authoritarianism. More than by the fact that the game is sold on the Steam platform, the passage from game comics to comic-like games is first signalled by a turn in authorship, pointing to studios rather than single artists: the work is credited to Atomic Wolf (developer) and Walkabout Games (publisher).

Liberated's visual interface remediates a black-and-white noir comic style, featuring the division into panels and the coexistence of images and written text that characterises the latter. Nonetheless, captions are resignified as the loci for explanations and suggestions to the users, balloons and onomatopoeia appear and disappear and are doubled by voiceovers, and animations and sounds are featured. The game begins with a menu asking whether users want to engage as players (stressing challenges and task completion, that is, narrative agency) or readers (foregrounding the advancing of the story, hence, interpretive agency). Once past an imaginary comic book cover, the game unfolds across four chapters (disguised as comic issues), presenting users with pages that

eventually spring life to still panels. The plot progresses both between panels (especially in scene changes) and within panels, but most of the gameplay happens within single panels, which become screens to an explorable diegetic space. The gameplay mainly involves action and puzzle-solving.

While on a formal level it could be counted as a hybrid touching the category of expanded (enhanced) digital comics, eventually *Liberated* never manages to reach a convincing comicsness. Part of it may be because it is only available for the Windows environment, which strays away from the prototypical reading practices of comics, even digital ones (which typically take place on a tablet or smartphone). Another reason lies in its inability to seamlessly merge the languages of comics and games and meaningfully integrate the gameplay into its overarching narrative, showcasing several sites of limited (internal/ontological) interactivity, which has earned the game very mild reviews. Additionally, technical issues and the use of time-sensitive playable sequences, frequently brought up in user comments, have affected the gameplay experience, leading to a limited, dissatisfactory material agency.

Conclusions

Analysing game comics in relation to hypermediality and interactivity illuminates the complex interplay between digital objects and their users. In his examination of electronic literature, James O'Sullivan warns against what he calls "the rhetoric of interaction, the idea that there is something to be automatically gained from presenting what we read in particular structures" (2019, p. 78). Electronic literature, he says, is not "the epitome of the Barthesian writable text"; on the contrary, it is "entirely based on platform-enabled illusions" (p. 78); and hypertextual fiction, despite suggestions of freedom, cannot escape its inherent fixity, since the narrative options available to users are ultimately finite (p.

81). Moreover, as Lev Manovich reminds us, all art "is 'interactive' in several ways. Ellipses in literary narration, missing details of objects in visual art, and other representational 'shortcuts' require the user to fill in missing information" (2001, p. 56; see also Mikkonen, 2017, pp. 18-20). Considering game comics helps rethink interactivity as part of the larger framework of interactions that take place between, and connect, texts and their users, acknowledging that agency is not just about the direct repercussions of users' actions in terms of explicit/apparent choice or control, but also about the seemingly trivial actions that a text may require its users to perform, and the interpretive and participatory dimensions inherent in users' engagement with narratives.

At the same time, referencing a multifactorial framework of different types of user agency leads to reconsider the assumption that game comics are generic "hybrids", widening the perspective offered by Goodbrey's hypercomics. It also suggests abandoning the illusion of arranging these objects along a discrete linear continuum, as, for example, does Astrid Ensslin's nonetheless brilliant work (2014). The conclusion of this article, then, is anything but conclusive: it is a push to further map out the fuzzy spaces that are generated in the intersections between digital comics and video games, as well as other digital objects, to take a closer look at the intriguing details of the processes of media hybridisation and contamination.

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