Tampere University of Applied Sciences

Animation in Sequential Art

Effects of Animated Elements on Comics Through Will Eisner's Theory of Narrative Process

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Degree Programme in Media and Arts
Interactive Media

ABSTRACT

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The objective of this thesis is to answer the question of if and how cartoonist and comic analyst Will Eisner's theory of narrative process changes if animated elements are added to the equation. Its purpose is to ascertain how the methodology of sequential art has already been used to provide desirable results in webcomics and to add constructive material to the academic discussion of the possibilities of digital comics.

The research method is a mix of discursive and qualitative analysis of the updated editions of Eisner's book *Comics and the Sequential Arts* (1985) and eight webcomics by various artists. The primary sources are contextualized by cross referencing the material to relevant literature by Ian Hague (2014), Aaron Kashtan (2018) and Anastasia Salter (2014). Further cross references are made to prior bachelor's and master's theses by peers.

The major finding of this research is that while animation does not change Eisner's rhetoric, it adds to its perspective of the interaction between the artist and the reader. Using animation in a comic is acceptable as long as the reader knows how to react to it. Further research should be done on the symbolic language that animation can offer, as well as the ways in which the commercial comics industry could develop its platforms to promote animated comics.

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Key words: animation, comics, interactive media, narrative tools, sequential art

CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS

Digital comic	Comic that exists in a digital form and can be read on a digital device
Webcomic	Comic that is published to be read via the internet.
Hypercomic	Comic that utilises a level of programming as a mechanic for the reading experience and allows the reader to take different paths in the narrative.
Enhanced comic	A comic that uses animation, audio, labour inducive interactivity or other features provided by the possibilities of digital media.
GIF	The Graphics Interchange Format. The most commonly used image file type for individual animations in animated comics due to the possibility to create looping animations.
HTML5	5th edition of Hypertext Markup Language, code that describes web pages and is used to make web applications.
XHTML	Extensible Hypertext Markup Language, code that is based on HTML, but uses XML standards. It was created before HTML5 to work around the restrictions of HTML4.
Instance	Technical term for the current layout, for example the page or spread that is currently open and exists independent from other hypothetical pages.

Sidescroller

An interactive media product that uses a horizontal perspective and is based on a mechanic that moves the viewport back and forth.

Hadr vs. soft frame

A panel with clear lines that make up its borders vs. A panel where the borders are contextually implied by the composition of the pictorial elements.

Gutter

The space between panels in a comic.

1 INTRODUCTION

Will Eisner's work is often cited as foundational to the study of comics. However, due to technical advancements, comics as a form of storytelling have evolved past his definitions. This thesis explores if and how the application of animation changes Will Eisner's theory of the narrative process in sequential art.

This thesis was inspired by the quote from Will Eisner's book *Comics And The Sequential Art*:

> "As long as comics remain as a medium which does not have
> motions, sound or dimension, the narrative process is the same."
> (Eisner 1985, rev.ed. 2008, 170)

It rises a question, does the narrative process change with the application of animated elements, and if it does, how? The question is considered by examining of how animation has been used in comics and for what purposes by examining Eisner's principles to the methods that have been utilised by the independent webcomic artists who have not shied away from the potential of animated images. The effects of sound and dimension have been left out of this thesis to limit the scope.

The first chapter offers an introduction to the subject of comics and the state of their academic study. It gives a brief overview to the terminology that is being used for the scope of this thesis and how the comics medium has been studied up until now so that the previous studies can be used to further study the animated comics media as a part of a bigger whole.

The second chapter introduces Will Eisner's principles of sequential art as the primary source material. It continues to the discussion of how Eisner's rethoric has been applied to academic research. It further explains why it would be beneficial to use these principles to examine animated comics, and how they could be applied.

The third chapter serves as a case study where the information gained from the previous chapters is used to examine eight examples of webcomics with animation. It also discusses the tools and devices that have been used to produce the effects that appear in the examples.

The final chapter presents the conclusions that have been drawn from the earlier observations. It suggest what kind of further research into animated comics could benefit the commercial comics industry.

As a note, the research on this thesis is mostly based on information about North American comics industry, because most of the academic literature that has been written or translated into English comes from there. The various European and Asian comics industries are mentioned and touched upon, but due to limiting the scope, are not explored with the same attention to detail. The economic models and the monetisation of animated comics is not the focus of this thesis either.

1.1   Difficulty of defining "comics"

To start the groundwork for the discussion of animation in comics, there needs to be an understanding of what exactly is being discussed and how. Unfortunately, an answer that would seem simple from a first glance is anything but.

The question of how to define the narrative medium that is called "comics" has perplexed comics studies ever since the subject was separated from being a sub study under literature or art studies into its own independent field. The inaccurate and associative terminology that the English speaking field of academic studies of comics suffers greatly from has been acknowledged and debated by both comic creators and scholars alike. (Hague 2014, 11)

There have been a number of attempts to find an accurate and all encompassing definition that would cover everything comics have been so far

without limiting the potential of what they can be. Most attempts that have succeeded in one of these two ways have failed in the other one.

In his web article *Defining Comics?* (2007) Aaron Meskin criticizes some of the most popular definitions in the academic discussion. Meskin uses G. Hayman and J. Pratt's definition from 2005 "x is a comic if x is a sequence of discrete, juxtaposed pictures that comprise a narrative, either in their own right or when combined with text," as an example.

The Hayman-Pratt definition lists components like "sequence", "juxtaposed", "pictures" and "narrative" as such elements that all comics have in common, but as Meskin points out, this is an invalid assessment. (Meskin 2007)

Sequence and juxtaposition centric definititions rule out the single panel comic format where either one panel may tell an entire story or the comic is published one panel at a time. Pictoral definition rules out the comics that cater to other senses than the sight, for example touch based braille comics. The aspect of absolute narrtive on the other hand is subjective and like any and all forms of art, depends on the reader's inerpretation.

In his book *Comics and the Senses* (2014), doctor of cultural science Ian Hague poses the reason for this as a failing in the perspective of the question behind the identification inquiry. He agrees with Meskin and proposes that instead of asking *what* comics are or are not, the goal should instead be to find out *how* comics can be identified. (Hague 2014,12)

Hague's approach is a discursive analysis on the definition project It divides various pre-existing definitions into three categories: elemental, knowingly incomplete and social definitions. (Hague 2014, 12 – 18)

- Elemental definition

    Attempted definitive and complete collection of universally constant qualities that can be observed and answers the question "What is it

and what is it not?"

Example: "All comics are visible"

- Knowingly incomplete definition

  A collection of constant observable qualities that are purposefully limited to finding the answer to the question "What can a component of a comic be?"

  Example: "All printed comics are visible"

- Social definition

  Description based on the purpose for which the observable subject is made and how it is interacted with when it reaches its purpose.

  Example: "A visible thing is a comic if it is meant to be a comic and/or if it is read as a comic"

As mentioned before, none of the definitions are flawless. Elemental definitions are too limiting, incomplete definitions are incomplete by their nature and social definitions, while being closest to factual statements, offer no concrete identifiable traits what so ever.

The closest to an accurate definition would be something that acknowledges all three categories. Unfortunately a simple way of doing so has not been discovered as of yet.

In the case of this thesis, since there is no satisfactory elemental definition of what comics are, we must at least try to understand the limited components known as "animated comics" and "sequential art".

1.2 "Animated comics"

The term "animated comic" can refer to a variety of works that may appear vastly different at first glance, both visually and functionally. Although many terms, such as *hyper comics* (Nelson 1974 according to Goodbrey 2017)*, motion comics* (Albrecht 2008), *smart toons* (Ko 2015), *enhanced comics*

(Batinić 2016), or *electric comics* (Goodbrey 2017)*,* have arisen to describe a similar phenomenon from different angles, it is difficult to conclude which exact term would fit the best.

The term "animated comics" was chosen as adequate for this thesis. It is not an official term, because there was no established terminology as of when this research was conducted. It was chosen because it has at least somewhat less of an immediate association to any specific form of animated comic media (as opposed to *motion comic*), while emphasising on the two common features that each form has; the animation and the comic.

To put the term into a useful context, the animated comics that I am referring to in this case share the following characteristics.

- Most often pictorial, and thus visual
- Sequentially related combination of literal stillness and motion
- Include animation or animated effects
- Distributed digitally via internet
- Considered by the creator and/or the community that consumes it as a "comic"

2   SEQUENTIAL ART

This chapter focuses on providing familarization to the theory of sequential art. The primary source is the 2008 edition of Will Eisner's rethorical textbook *Comics and Sequential Art,* which was originally published in 1985. This edition was published after Eisner's death (2005) by Dennis Kitchen with the guidance and approval of Eisner's estate.

As a note, *Comics and Sequential Art* has gone through numerous revisions and reprints throughout the years. Although the 2008 edition is the primary source for this thesis, there are references to the 2000 edition as well for two convinience based reasons: Eisner's explanation of what he means by "elements" was edited out of the 2008 edition, and Eisner's visual examples were composed to a different paper aspect ratio.

Eisner, born in 1917 and died in 2005, was one of the most influential cartoonists in North American history. He is known for his work as a creator of the popular *Spirit* comics, as a pioneer towards getting comics media recognized as a reputable form of art and literature, and as an educator in what has become known as comics studies. His works are still used in both practical and theoretical education on a global scale. (Schumacher 2010)

The term "Sequential Art" was invented by Eisner, specifically to describe the narrative art form of comics. This methodology of narrative process is most effectively explained in his own words. He defines it as :

> "– [M]eans of creative expression, a distinctive discipline, an art and literary form that deals with the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate as story or dramatize an idea" (Eisner 1985, rev.ed. 2008, foreword, page XI)

As elaborated by Hague, Eisner does not speak of everything that comics are as a concept, but about the identifiable sequential features of *comics* that he

has observed to be essential to their narrative expression. (Hague 2014, 14 – 15)

In other words, Eisner's "principles of sequential art" refers to a descriptive list of visual narrative techniques that are commonly used in the comics medium that emphasise the communication between the creator and the reader.

2.1   Narrative tools

To understand the way that Eisner's theory of sequential art works, it must be inspected in the juxtaposition with the list of two point of views; the essential themes and fundamental requirements.

In his book *Comics And Sequential Art* (1985) Eisner has divided the main aspects of sequential art into five thematic chapters:

- IMAGERY (The language of images without words)

- TIMING (The visualisation of the sense and the expression of time)

- FRAME (container, window, panel, outline, platform)

- EXPRESSIVE ANATOMY (physical expression, empathetic communication based on physical symbology, how things work mechanically)

- WRITING ("what can be read", the story, the symbolic language and what it is trying to convey, what happens literally or figuratively.)

These serve as the essential themes of narrative process. The first and the last chapter, *IMAGERY* and *WRITING,* are two halves of what Eisner considers as the fundamental method of communication in comics, so in this thesis they shall be considered one theme: symbology. (Eisner 1985, rev.ed. 2008, 8)

In the newer editions of the book there is an additional chapter, *Application Of Sequential Arts,* where Eisner lists the following as the fundamental requirements of the sequential arts, which should remain the same as long as animation, sound or dimension are not used in the comic:

- NARRATIVE ("The story must adhere to a common reading convention")

- COMPOSITION ("Panel and page must be composed for narrative purposes")

- CHARACTERS ("The skillful creation of "actors"")

- DRAFTMANSHIP ("The rendering of the elements") (Eisner 1985, rev.ed. 2008, 170)

Essentially, Eisner's methodology of narrative process comes from the dialogue of the principal themes and the fundamental requirements, where the issue that the themes present is answered by considering each requirement individually, as summarised on Table 1.

	Narrative (story)	Composition (page)	Characters (actors)	Draftmanship (elements)
Timing ("Passing of time", pacing, change)	Passing of time is shown through the pacing in the narration of the "story"	Passing of time is shown through the shapes, sizes and arrangements on the "page"	Passing of time is shown through the relative changes in the "actors"	Passing of time is shown through the changes in the "elements" and background things
Frame ("Panels", Container vs. window, what is included and what is cut out)	The "panels" are shaped to mirror the "story" aesthetically	The "panels" are arranged to guide the reader through the "page"	The "panels" are constructed to focus on the "acting"	The "panels" provide space or the lack thereof for the "elements"
Expressive Anatomy ("physical expression", mechanical consideration, How the focused things work)	The physical expression moves the "story" forward	The physical expression is used as a guide for the "page"	The physical expression is used as an identification factor for the "actors"	The physical expression is honed for the appropriate purpose by the level of detail, exaggeration or intensity of its "elements"
Symbology (Writing, imagery, what is being read)	The literal text or symbolism is tied together to a "story"	The literal writing or symbolism is arranged to form the "page"	The literal writing or symbolism explains the purpose, motivation and identity of the "actors"	The literal writing or symbolism determines the elements that are being used

TABLE 1.The juxtaposition of themes and fundamental requirements of narrative process.

Each aspect of the methodology of sequential art is closely knit to the others. The two provided lists are remarkably similar, as the themes represent more ambiguous aspects of narrative elements in general and the fundamental requirements lean closer towards them in sequential art specifically.

Ultimately, the narrative tools of sequential art as Eisner describes them, are tools which the author can use to communicate something for the reader to interpret.

2.2 Control through animation

Many scholars, like Eisner himself, have expressed scepticism towards adding animation into comics. The most often referred arguments on the field are:

1   Animation takes the control of the perception of time away from the reader. (McCloud 2000, 2010 and Kashtan 2018, 116)
2   Why add comics into the equation at all if animation already exists as its own medium? (McCloud 2000, 210)

Both of these concerns come down to the assumed role and the level of control that the reader has. For instance Eisner was himself a big proponent of the ideology where the role of the consumer is divided into an "active" or "passive" category based on the level of control that they have over the media they consume. (Eisner 1985, rev.ed. 2008, 41)

In her book What Is Your Quest(2014) Anastasia Salter describes the ultimate form of a passive consumer as the viewer, who does not have to take any independent action to progress in the consumption of the narrative. At the opposite end, the ultimate form of an active consumer is a player of a game whose actions are essential for the progression of the narrative. (Salter 20014, 8)

According to Salter, Batinić and Hague, this ideology is faulty by the very assumption that the role of a viewer is passive at all. For example, a viewer can participate in the process of watching a video by interpreting and processing the content that they watch, just as a reader can flip through a comic without consuming any of the content. (Salter 20014, 8, Batinic 2016, 9 and Hague 2014, 96)

When it comes to combining animation and comics, it only becomes a problem when the animation interrupts the reading experience too much and becomes distracting. (Larsson 2018, 7)

Eisner's theory of sequential art aims to shed light on how an artist can maintain connection with the reader in static comics. He claims that the theory does not necessarily apply if animation is added, but does not elaborate further. This is due to the technical limitations at the time, which is precisely why it should be put to closer scrutiny and further exploration now.

Some webcomic artists have already used animation in their comics in a manner that lines up with various aspects of Eisner's theory. By studying these examples a better understanding can be gained on how to apply animation into comics more naturally. Using animated effects can lead to distraction just as much as using discordant colours or compositions, but conversely a skillful use of animation can turn a mediocre comic into a great one, as discussed in chapter 3.

3   Case Study

In this chapter eight webcomics are presented as examples for how Eisner's methods of sequential art can and have been applied to comics with animated features.

The examples are listed in the same order as the essential themes and fundamental requirements are in chapter 2. They are examined alongside the animated feature that each case highlights; A moving timeline, moving panels, moving actors or moving symbology.

3.1   Timing, narration and a moving timeline

"Critical to the success of visual narrative is the ability to convey time.
It is this dimension of human understanding that enables us to
recognize and be empathetic to surprise, humor, terror, and the
whole range of human experience." (Eisner 1985, rev.ed. 2008, 24)

Eisner posits his theory of Sequential Art as a method of communication. One of the carrying themes of his book are the ways in which a skillful comic artist would be capable of controlling the reader's perception of time.

According to Eisner's theory, in a traditional, printed comic the timeline is experienced through association; an illusion of movement on a static medium, created with the changes that appear in the page composition, expressions of the actors and the shapes and styles of the elements. (Eisner 1985, rev.ed. 2008, 23-37)

 In a traditional animation or film timeline the frames are not composed into an arrangement of panels for an open view, but are instead shown one after the

other inside a singular panel, where the timeline moves forward in a linear fashion to reveal similar changes.

In Eisner's own words regarding narration:

> "The "story" must adhere to a common reading convention" (Eisner 1958, rev.ed. 2008, 171)

3.1.1 Comics in video format – Ava's Demon

Animating the timeline of a comic is less of a visual and more of a conceptual process. The most prominent and well known example of what animated timeline means is motion comics.

The 2008 GigaOm.com article *The Rise of Motion Comics Online* (Albrecht 2008) describes motion comics as comics presented in a video format where minimal animation, such as zooming and moving the panels, shifting parts of the characters and/or moving the background elements, and a soundscape of voice acting, sound effects and/or a musical score, are combined to present approximately one to five panels of a comic at the time in a single linear timeline.

In other words, a comic made into a video format akin to an animatic/screen test. Therefore what is being animated is less about the visual content on the screen and more about the format in which the comic is presented: a video with a physical timeline.

The North American comics industry has tried its hand in the potential of animated comics through motion comics, but the results have been mild at best. Marvel Comics, DC-comics and the Dark Horse comics have published some motion comic titles, but articles like the aforementioned GigaOm piece or the bleedingcool.com article, *Marvel Trying to Make Motion Comics Happen Again*

With "Video" Comics by Jude Terror, criticize them for lacking the production value of fully animated series or the freedom of interpretation that static comics provide. (Albrecht 2008, Terror 2016)

There are examples of webcomics that use motion comics as a tool to intensify an emotional scene that are used as a positive counterpoint in the academic discussion.

For instance, Michelle Czajkowski's webcomic Ava's Demon has been referred to by Rosa-Nina Rantila and Jouko Heinänen in their respective bachelor's theses as a positive example of animated comics that use a single frame format in order to control the reader's perception of time. (Rantila 2016, 27 & 29 and Heinänen 2016, 7)

Ava's Demon is not a motion comic. The majority of the story is told in still images that the reader can progress through by clicking forth, and there are no audio or animated elements present. However, it is clear through the style and the pacing of the comic that Czajkowski is a professional animator with a primarily cinematic eye.

In Ava's Demon, the reader has the freedom of going back and forth at their own pace, but they move on a linear timeline. The transition between panels can be accessed either by just clicking the panel itself (which leads to the automatic forward progression,) or by the "back" and "next" buttons presented at the bottom of the screen, as illustrated in Picture 1.
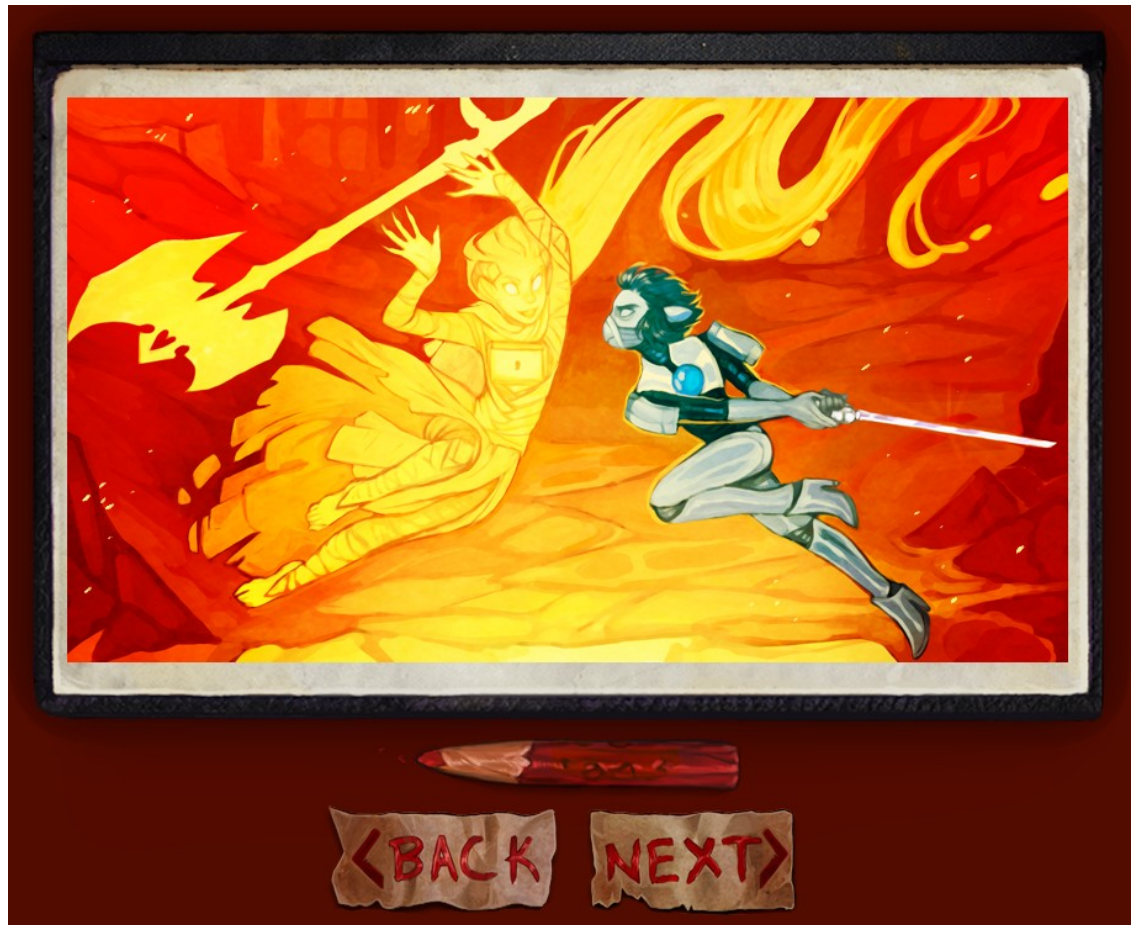
Picture 1. First in a sequence of 3 concerning Ava's Demon
https://www.avasdemon.com/pages.php#1545 (Czajkowski 2012 – 2020, 1545)

Sometimes, when a narrative climax warrants it, the reader is presented with an atmospheric animated cutscene, which requires the reader to give over their control of the timeline.

Each video is indicated and introduced by a special panel that hints at the contents of the video, building up the anticipation. When the artist requests more control, the reader has an extra step of clicking the panel to trigger the video and is rewarded for their efforts with an emotional payoff in the form of an experience that is exactly as the author wants it to be experienced.

To demonstrate a successfully unobtrusive exchange of control, consider pictures 1 and 2. In the picture 1 the movement of the characters is frozen in a mo-

ment of expectation before the impact. The character on the left is portrayed with an engulfing dominance. Her colour palette is matched with the red-or-ange-yellow scale of the background, which combined with her leisurely non-chalant, yet aggressive posture associates her with an unstoppable wave of molten lava that is about to consume the character on the right.

The character on the right is presented in a drastic contrast, in her cold colour scheme and a diligently contained, closed off posture. Her attack is posed to face left, which is cinematically themed as a backwards effort, a futile resist-ance.
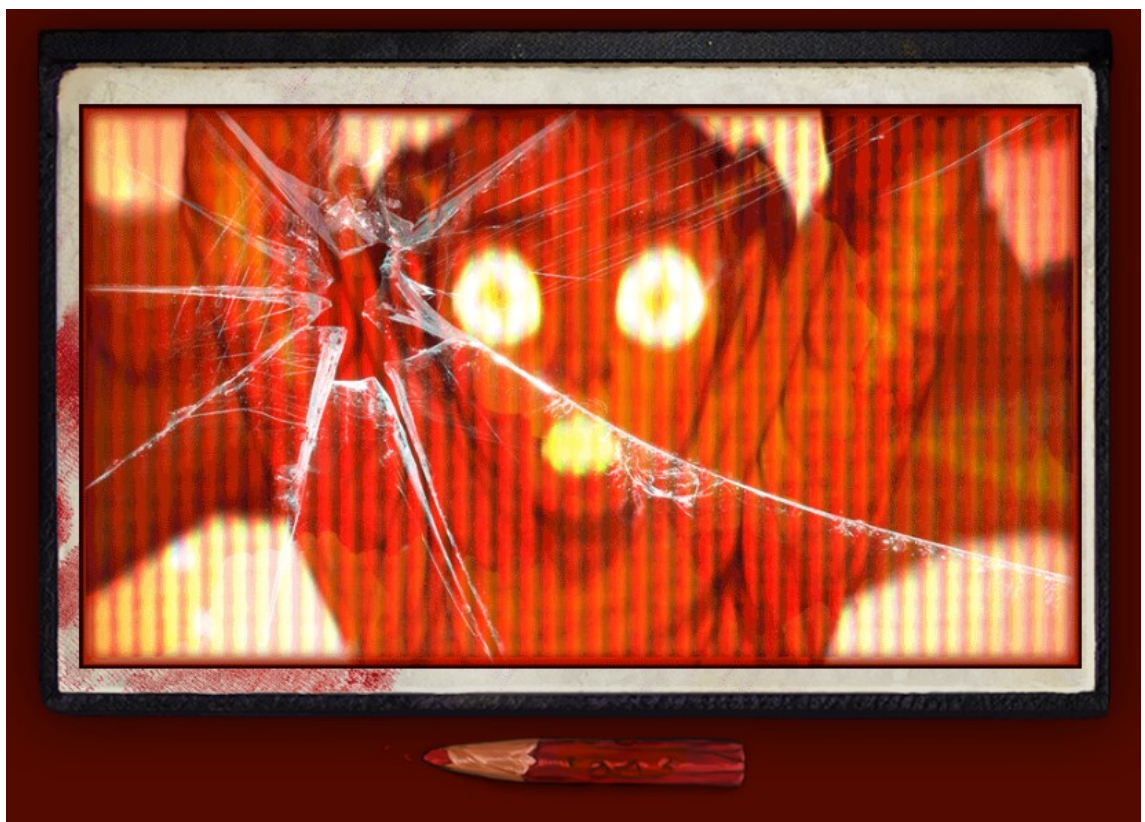
Picture 2. Second in a sequence of 3 concerning Ava's Demon
https://www.avasdemon.com/1546.html (Czajkowski 2012 – 2020, 1546)

Picture 1 transitions to picture 2, which is a special panel that indicates a video. The focus of the image is on the literal fourth wall breaking crack on the "screen" and it is animated to pulse softly with light. Furthermore, the pale, pa-per imitating the gutter of the frame that has so far in the comic remained un-changed, has been stained with a red handprint.

The image on the background has been cut into a tight bust shot and it is out of focus. The perspective has changed to the point of view of the character on the right, which is indicated by the consistent pose of the character previously seen on the left and the red-orange-yellow colour scheme.

As mentioned before, picture 1 depicts a frozen moment in mid swing of an axe, right before an impact. Unlike with the panels preceding both example pictures, Picture 2 remains in the same moment with the picture 1. It slows the flow of the story to an eventual standstill, while still holding the suspense with the irregular framing style.

As the video is triggered, the frame depicted in Picture 2 expands into an animated video that is accompanied by music. The animation is similar to how motion comics are animated; the movement is created by manipulating individual components of the pictures. It remains similar enough to how the earlier panels have been composed so that despite the exchange of control, the flow of the story remains intact.

There is no voice acting involved, only music and animation.

*Picture 3. Third in a sequence of 3 concerning Ava's Demon*
https://www.avasdemon.com/pages.php#1548 (Czajkowski 2012 – 2020, 1548)

After the video ends, control over the timeline is returned to the reader. The scene changes to muted colours and static shapes. The context of the comic encourages the reader to take back the control and keep going, as the depicted character's handcuffs are open and he is likewise free to move on his own accord.

3.1.2 Animations that are shaped like comics – Skull-Kidz!

A comic where the reader's control of the timeline is a variable is not constricted to the singular panel approach. Altough it is true that a page with a single panel fits aesthetically with an animated video, it is also possible to turn the other way around and make the video fit the aesthetic of a multi paneled printed page.

Skull-Kidz! by Luna Art is a comic that uses fully animated panels that are arranged into traditionally composed vertical pages. The issue of having too many moving panels active at the same time is solved by having only one panel in motion while the rest remain still, as presented in the Picture 4.
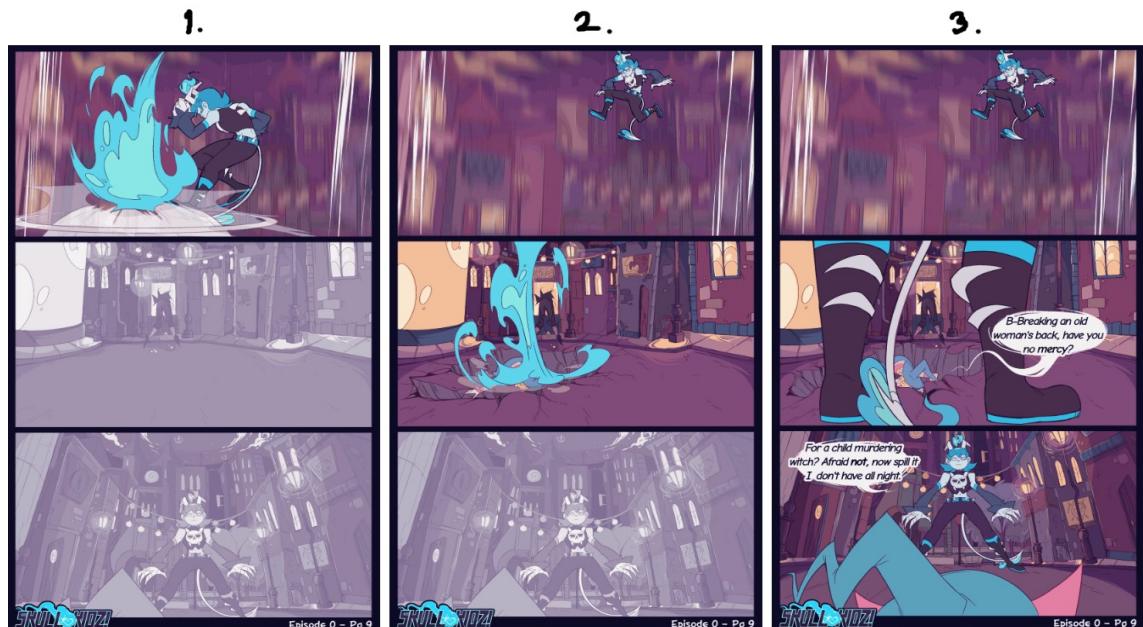
Picture 4. Three stages of a page in Skull-Kidz!
https://tapas.io/episode/1085561 (Luna Art 2018, 9)

Panels that haven't played yet have a significantly less saturated color scheme. Those that have finished playing freeze into the last frame of their animation and speech bubbles are left visible for further inspection.

The timeline of the animation is completely automated. Each page is a single full page GIF image.

In Skull-Kidz! the reader engages with the timeline by flipping through pages, and has the freedom of seeing an approximation of the page at a glance. The reader is encouraged to follow the author's control with muted gray scale still images that hint at the content of the full animation without revealing it completely. The reader consents to the author's control by waiting to see how the page plays out and is rewarded with emotional payoff.

3.2   Frame, composition and moving panels

> "Composition -- Each panel should be regarded as a stage wherein
> an arrangement of elements takes place. They must be arranged
> with a clear purpose. Nothing in a panel or page should be accidental
> or placed there casually." (Eisner 1985, rev.ed. 2008, 163-104)

In Eisner's theory of Sequential art, a page or an "instance" of a comic consists of at least two frames; a panel and the page on which it exists on. (p.39)

Both of these frames can be considered from two directions:

1   Frame as a container, a division of what is included inside the frame and what is left for the reader's interpretation

2   Frame as a narrative device, a guide for the reader to follow through the page

Eisner is particularly adamant about how important it is for the artist to maintain control over the reader's focus, regardless of whether the reader's eye wanders on the page.

If animation is based on the frame, the parts that exhibit change are the panels themselves. This effect can be achieved through HTML5 programming or video editing.

Comic book distributors like comiXology and the corporate-owned reading platforms of the major North American publishing companies like Marvel Comics, DC-comics and Dark Horse, have utilised the animation of the panels as a technical tool for user experience. This feature is called "guided view."

Guided view is a feature on a digital comic reading application. Its purpose is to bring up and magnify panels from a page to fit the entire screen display. It

allows the reader to concentrate on an individual panel without having to zoom in manually.

According to a digital editor at comiXology, Tia Vasiliou, in a bookriot.com interview by Melody Schreiber, guided view serves as a method through which the reader is encouraged to slow down and linger to appreciate and pay attention to what they are reading. (Schreiber 2017, read 21.07.2020)

Like motion comics, the guided view has gained a mixed reception. As Vasiliou notes, the guided view has gathered positive feedback from the readers for optimizing a printed media for digital consumption.

On the other hand, as Kashtan notes in his book *Between the Pen and Pixel* (2018), some disgruntled readers have criticized the feature especially for being clumsy with the transitions inside the larger panels, thus taking away their autonomy of what specifically they would like to zoom into. (Kashtan 2018, 115 – 117)

Kashtan suggests that the problem is indeed in the fact that while the guided view can be useful, it cannot reach its potential as long as the original comic is not made with the possibilities and the restrictions of the digital screen in mind.

The independent webcomics media has more variety and freedom than the commercial sector to show how such techniques could be developed.

3.2.1 Negative container that changes reactively – Hobo Lobo of Hamelin

Josip Batinić brought up Sevan Živadinović's *Hobo Lobo Of Hamelin* (2011) as an example of a vertically scrollable, XHTML based, "enhanced comic" on his master's thesis *"Enhanced Webcomics" An Exploration of the Hybrid Form of Comics on the Digital Medium*. (Batinić 2016, 4)

The story appears in a single vertical frame. The canvas of the comic is larger than the window and consists of multiple layers of images. When the reader moves the window, the layers move in parallax, sliding the next panel into

focus. As each panel is aligned, a corresponding piece of text appears under the window to narrate the scene.

The inner panels do not have hard borders, but when the panel is properly in place, the overlapping layers of images create supporting borders from background elements, as demonstrated in Picture 5.
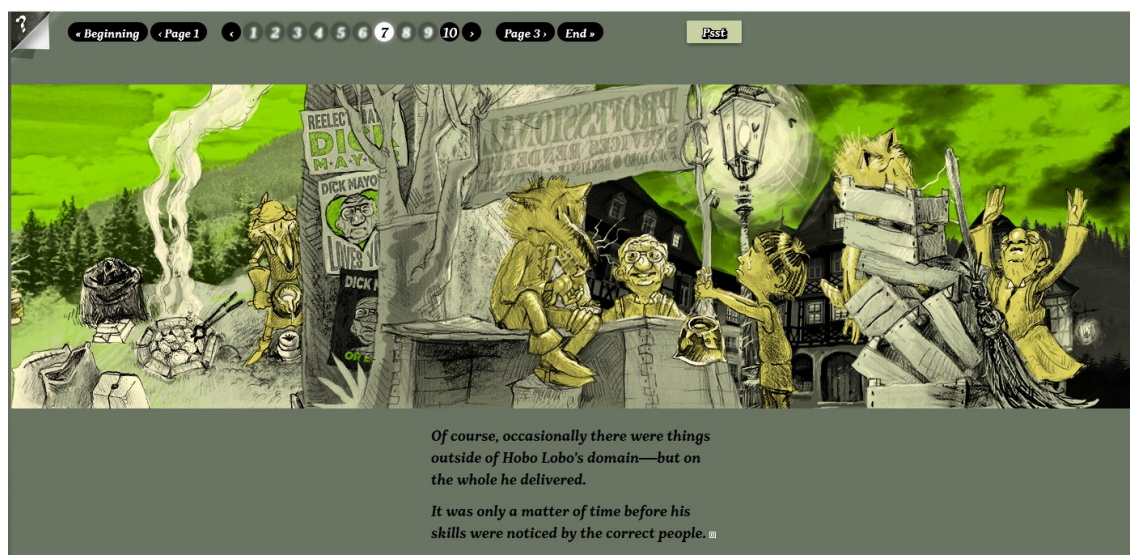
Picture 5. Hobo Lobo of Hamelin and the elemental gutters that move in parallax as the reader controls the page. http://hobolobo.net/tale/2 (Živadinović 2011, 2)

Hobo Lobo Of Hamelin lets the reader explore the panels and the spaces in between them in peace by giving the reader a full control of the space between each panel transition. However, the reader is not allowed to see something that the artist does not want them to see, since the author is in full control of the relative position between the layers.

The reader is also rewarded for reaching the next correct panel alignment by what Kashtan refers to as "good friction." The scrolling process requires a varying level of effort from the reader to move forward. The movement away from a panel requires more effort so that the reader does not accidentally leave the page earlier than they intend. The in-between section slides smoothly as long as the reader keeps pushing it forward. If the movement button is released

close to a correct alignment, the window automatically aligns itself satisfyingly into a correct position, like falling into place.

This technique falls right into what Kashtan quotes from a UX consultant Gideon Simons: "Good friction comes from things that may challenge your users and make them need to think more while using your product, maybe even make them do extra steps. -- But at the same time imprint a stronger experience" (Simons according to Kashtan 2018,102)

Hobo Lobo is still a work in progress, and by no means perfect. The author himself has acknowledged that the comic does not work on mobile devices or with a "weak web connection". Despite the techical difficulties, Živadinović is paving way to new format of creative expression. He has expressed the comic to be labour intensive, which has unfortunately resulted in the comic going into a hiatus with no known date of returning.

3.2.2 Moving panels that snatch the attention – Unsounded

Unsounded by Ashley Cope is a long form web visual novel, which started in 2009. The pages are mostly fitted to a 600 x 900 pixel canvas that could easily be translated into a printed format, but every now and then it breaks its established format for dramatic effect.

Pictures 6, 7 and 8 demonstrate how Cope used moving panels as a guide for the reader's eye on the page 10 of of chapter 9. The initial page layout starts with the page on a dark background (picture 6.). Three seconds after the web page has loaded, a figure starts to slide into view from the top of the page until it settles into its place (picture 7.). Right as the figure stops moving, three figures in the last panel slide slightly to the right and the background of the layout turns into a bright pattern (picture 8.).
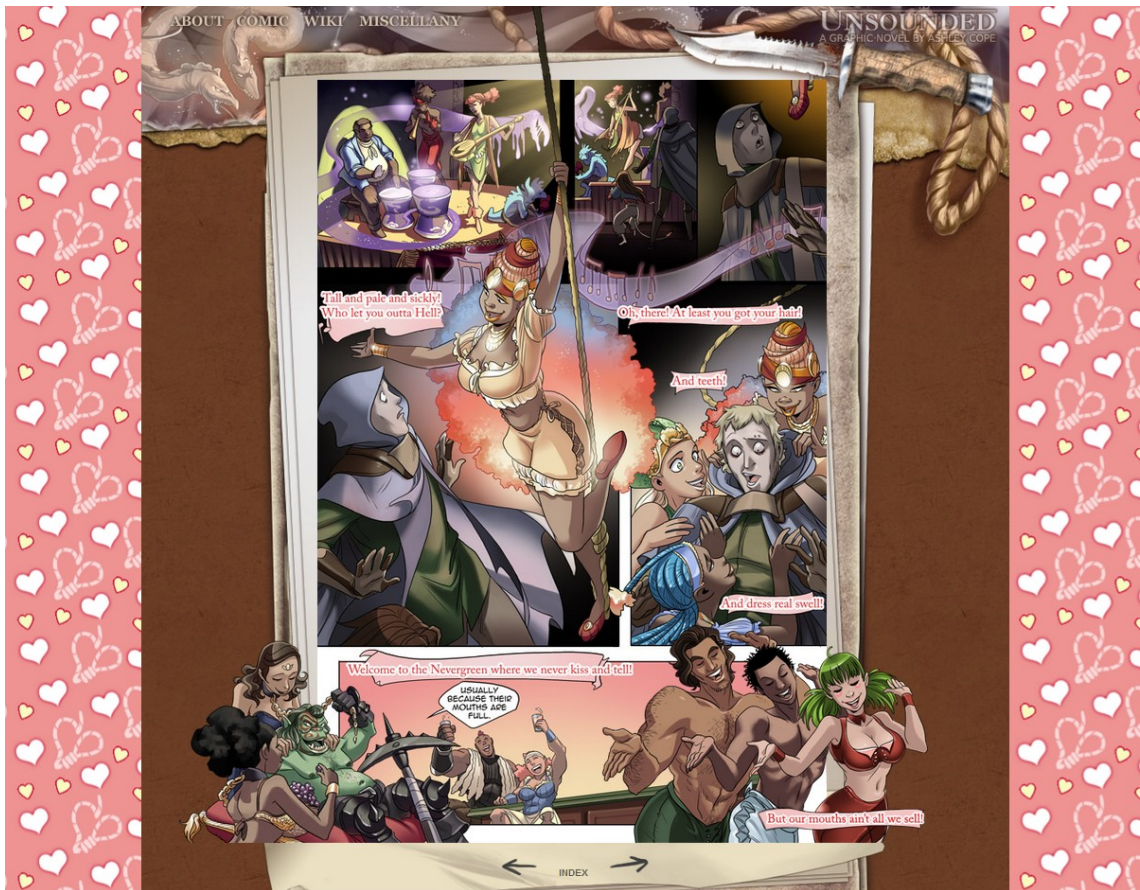
Picture 6. First in the sequence of three on the first example concerning the transition of moving panels in Unsounded
http://www.casualvillain.com/Unsounded/comic/ch09/ch09_10.html (Cope 2009 – 2020)

Picture 7. Second in the sequence of three on the first example concerning the transition of moving panels in Unsounded (Cope 2009 – 2020)

Picture 8. Third in the sequence of three on the first example concerning the transition of moving panels in Unsounded (Cope 2009 – 2020)

Similarly, on page 54 of chapter 12 as shown in the pictures 9 and 10, on the five second mark after the page has loaded, the two upmost panels slide apart to reveal a panel behind them. After the panels have found their place, the background of the panel below them shifts into a deeper contrast and reveals additional speech bubbles.

Picture 9. First in the sequence of two on the second example regarding the transition of moving panels in Unsounded

http://www.casualvillain.com/Unsounded/comic/ch12/ch12_54.html (Cope 2010)

Picture 10. Second in the sequence of two on the second example regarding the transition of moving panels in Unsounded (Cope 2010)

Cope has applied (either consciously or consequently) Eisner's ideology of the usage of frame in sequential art in exceptional accuracy.

The directions of the animation follow the same reading convention which the entire comic is based on; up to down, left to right. (Eisner 1985, rev.ed. 2008, 41-42)

On the page 9 of chapter 10 the space that is left for the descending figure is left so devoid of elements that the narration feels lacking until the figure is in place. (Eisner 1985, rev.ed. 2008, 42)

The change between the dark and the light, or (high and low contrast) layout background colour indicates a message for the reader to interpret about the nature of the change in the scene's atmosphere. (Eisner 1985, rev.ed. 2008, 44)

The hard border frames reveal something hidden by their movement and the soft border frames highlight the depth and separation between what has been established as ordinary in the static frames. (Eisner 1985, rev.ed. 2008, 45-50)

The animations have been programmed to be automatic. Once the animation has begun, it cannot be stopped nor can it be repeated unless the page is refreshed manually.

As established before, based on Pernilla Larsson's findings on her thesis research (2018), the dominant opinion on the academic literature and the various articles on the subject, an unprompted animation tends to cause confusion in the majority of comic readers.

In the case of Unsounded, Cope has established her style as "experimental" by stretching the reader's expectations purposefully in other forms. An animated page may come as a surprise that stops the natural flow of the story, but it is not necessarily a negative quality if the reader already knows to expect surprises.

3.3.   Anatomy, characters and moving actors

Eisner uses the terms "Actor" and "Character" in his theory of sequential art to refer to the expressive object of focus in a comic. A human character as the actor is the most emphasised example in the *Comics And The Sequential Art* (Eisner 1985, rev.ed. 2008. 103)

As Eisner puts it,

> "In comic book art, the artist must draw upon personal observations and an inventory of gestures, common and comprehensible to the reader. In effect, the artist must work from a "dictionary" of human gestures." (Eisner 1985, rev.ed. 2008, 104)

In other words, the reader has to be on the same page with the artist about how the "character" works, what it is limited to, how it can be identified, and what it is expressing.

When these aspects are animated, they emphasise on the questions of how the action is conducted and by whom.

As a note, in the context of this research, the "character" or "actor" can refer as much to a humanoid character as to an animal, object, or something else entirely as long as it is a narrative object of focus with identifiable characteristics that a reader can empathise with.

3.3.1 Amplified mechanical anatomy – Papaye

The frame by frame process of an action is a crucial part of Eisner's theory of sequential art. According to him, an artist must consider the full movement of the action and pick a specific frame that encapsulates the narrative purpose of the entire action in one gesture. (Eisner 1985, rev.ed. 2008,109)

Eisner lists a variety of things that the artist has to understand and consider while picking and creating these frames, but three of them in particular rise

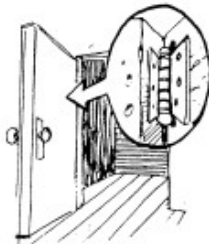above others when considering anatomy, as shown in the picture 11: the human machine, objects and devices.

Maximum back

THE HUMAN MACHINE: Consider the human (or animal) body as a mechanical device. As such, it has a limited range of movement. Understanding what it can or cannot do is critical to its manipulation.
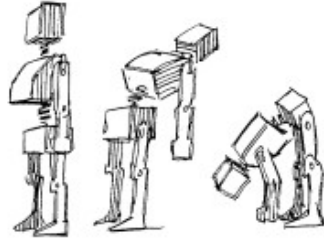
Maximum forward

Even a table lamp has anatomy.

OBJECTS: All objects with which people live are essentially machines. From a simple empty box to an automobile they have an anatomy and a limited range of operating capability. In this they should be considered as you would a human body.

Casual props, must work accurately. For example, understand how a door is hinged.

DEVICES: Understand how they work! The reader will know how they *should* work and will respond negatively if you are inaccurate. This holds true in a realistic as well as humorously exaggerated cartoons.

Picture 11. (Eisner 1985, rev.ed. 2000, 148 and 150)

Essentially, the point that all of these three quotes are marking is that in a single frame the reader should be able to understand the limits and possibilities of the subjects of interaction.

Papaye (2017) is a short animated comic by username "Madeleine" on the webcomic portal tapas.io. According to the author's description it was produced for the international 24 hour comic event, although she notes that it took 32 hours for her to produce it from start to finish.

The page 66, which is shown in the picture 12, holds a single panel in which there are three three animated subjects; an anthropomorphic dog, a slingshot and a pinecone.

Picture 12. An example of minimalistic movement that directly establishes the roles and dynamics of the "actors" of the scene in PAPAYE.
https://tapas.io/episode/644143 *(Madeleine 2017, 66)*

The panel is a 2 frame GIF image. The animation is focused between the position of the wrist of the hand that holds the slingshot, the pull-back of the hand that holds the pinecone and the tension that they create in the slingshot.

The animation adds further understanding of the limits of the subjects of the scene which the reader would not get from a still image.

The dog character is shown to be at a position where the limits of the action of pulling the pinecone back are restricted by the tension of the slingshot. The pulling hand could potentially pull further, but the returning twitch of the wrist of

the other hand signals that further exertion could lead to negative consequences.

The strings of the slingshot are pulled to their limits and will not budge much further. This is indicated by the tension that forces the actors to stay in a constant struggle between the two frames.

The pinecone has no agency and thus only moves passively through the interaction between the character and the slingshot.

Papaye is mostly presented one panel at a time, which reduces the risk of animation taking attention away from the static panels. Unfortunately most of the animated panels do not loop, which causes problems with the scrolling algorithm that tapas.io enforces.

3.3.2 Indentifying and expressive movement – Midnight Guest

According to Eisner, as long as the character in a comic does not move literally, the movement has to be expressed symbolically, so that the reader can supply the rest of the movement through their own imagination. (Eisner 1985, rev.ed. 2008, 104 – 109)

Aside from the limitations and possibilities, a question of *how* an action is presented tells more about the nature of the acting character and the motivation behind the action that is being taken.

> "The manner in which these images are employed modifies and defines the intended meaning of the words." (Eisner 1985, rev.ed. 2008, 6)

Once again Eisner emphasizes the importance of the connection of understanding between what the author wants to say and how the reader interprets it.

The gap of interpretation in still comics can be narrowed through stylistic choices like cartoonish exaggeration and/or through external, elemental symbolic language like motion lines, like demonstrated in picture 13.

... The underlying symbolic posture is given verbal and visual amplification. Dialogue, visually familiar objects (such as spears, architectural elements and costume) and facial expressions, convey precise emotional messages.

Picture 13. (Eisner 1985, rev.ed. 2000, 15)

It is important to keep in mind that these symbols of movement do not belong exclusively to the comics industry, and are often used in animation as well. The implication here is not that the symbols should be replaced by literal movement, but that since animation and comics have a lot of shared language, perhaps they could be used to complement each other.

That being said, as an example of animation in a comic that serves a purpose of identification in movement and mannerism, *The Midnight Guest*(2020) by A.F. Brady provides an excellent case of the potential of adding animation into an otherwise static narrative.

The Midnight Guest is a comic that was posted in two parts on the blogging and social networking site tumblr.com as an anecdotal re-imagining of a bat flying into a room from an open window. A single panel of the otherwise still comic is animated.

Upon inquiry for the inspiration for the animated panel, Brady comments as follows:

"Animating it expands upon the bat's chaotic/haphazard characteristics as a subject, making it responsible for both demonstrating the extent of silliness to the main character's actions and according consequences while providing a core source of visual humour. I felt to animate the panel would not only deliver a higher amount of comedy but also give the audience more of a sense of the bat's energy that can't be fulfilled by a frozen image." (Brady 06.05.2020, Appendix page 3)

No other characters or elements are animated, only the bat. The panel that is animated is also made special by being the largest, darkest and the most realistic one in style. The animation is used as an additional layer to emphasise the bat's characteristics.

Picture 14. The atmosphere of the last panel changes drastically depending on if it is still or in motion. https://my-darling-boy.tumblr.com/post/616983910981746688/but-what-if-the-bat-was-from-my-secret-gay-vampire. *(Brady 2020)*

Throughout the *Comics And Sequential Art* (Eisner 1985, rev.ed. 2008) Eisner emphasises time and time again how important it is for the artist to engage in the commonalities of the human experience to engage with the reader.

The Midnight Guest is a wonderful example of that dialogue between the author's control and the reader's expectation. A bat is not as universal of an actor as a human when it comes to a shared understanding of expressive characteristics, but it holds a cultural significance for the *The Midnight Guest's* target audience.

The reader is expected to share an assumption with the main character of how a bat *should* move in the context of a romanticized narrative. The animation works as a crucial reference to dispel the expectation by intentionally restricting both the reader and the main character's interpretation.

3.4.   Writing, draftmanship and moving symbology

"Comics deal with two fundamental communicating devices: words and images. Admittedly this is and arbitrary separation. But, since in the modern world of communication they are treated as independent disciplines, it seems valid. Actually, they are derivatives of a single origin and in the skillful employment of words and images lies the expressive potential of the medium." (Eisner 1985, rev.ed. 2008, 7)

All parts of the narrative process of the theory of sequential arts are intertwined around the idea of conveying messages through symbols and symbology.

As much as letters are literal symbols that are combined to form text that the reader can interpret through their understanding of language, sequential art relies heavily on the symbology of shapes, colours, angles, physical expressions, materials, compositions and changes.

An artist offers symbols to the reader by "writing" them into the elements of the art. The reader in turn "reads" the symbology from the elements and recognizes the experiences that the symbols refer to.

Animating the elements instead of the timeline, the panels or the action has gained the most positive endorsement in the academic discussion.

In his bachelor's thesis *Moving Picture as a Part of Comics' Storytelling* (2016), Jouko Heinänen concludes that using a minimal amount of animation on his thesis project proved effective as it was used as a way to affect the mood and to guide the reader's view.

His sentiment was shared by Josip Batinić on his master's thesis. Batinić observed that in the majority of the comics that he used as examples, short animated GIF images were mostly used to "--create a more atmospheric feel for the environment and the characters--" as an "-- aesthetic enhancement, rather than a "cheating device" used in order to facilitate the absorption of information." (Batinić 2016, 6)

3.4.1 Letters and lines – Junkwraith

Animating letters and speech bubbles poses the danger of hindering the clarity of the text, but in moderation it can be an effective tool.

Just as how Eisner explains boldfacing letters (Eisner 2008,129), an animated effect on the lettering invites the reader to "hear" the emphasis and the tone of the text.

In Ellinor Richey's comic *Junkwraith* (2018- ongoing), the lettering is occasionally presented with an animated effect that makes the letters flutter lightly. The same effect is also applied to the lines of the speech bubbles and the panel borders.

The effect is generated by the text being rendered into a two-frame loop animation in a GIF format. The shaky text is used particularly in moments where the contents of the text are presented as significant and affect the main character's experience of insecurity.

Picture 15. First in a sequence of two concerning animated lettering in Junkwraith https://tapas.io/episode/943665 (Richey 2018)

In chapter 1 part 2 the effect is applied to the words between two characters who are talking about the main character's efforts in an evaluative manner. One character aims to devalidate, the other to validate. The shaking stops when the character with the validating voice accedes and seemingly turns to condescension.

Picture 16. Second in a sequence of two concerning animated lettering in Junkwraith https://tapas.io/episode/1458382 (Richey 2018)

Another time this happens is in chapter 3 part 3 where the main character is reminded of a traumatic event. Words in the present send her into a flashback in the past where the words between her and her mother are presented with the fluttering effect.

The context of the first scene has a note of mockery, which could speculatively indicate that the fluttering effect signifies lilting laughter. However, when both scenes are examined together, the indication shifts so that instead of presenting how the words would be delivered by the characters who *say* them, it represents how the main character *feels* about them; shaky, fluttering and unsure.

The panels of *Junkwraith* are sparse with wide spaces between them. This way the animations have enough space to work individually without distracting the reader from each other.

3.4.2 Symbology of elements – Our Toyota Was Fantastic

The term "elements" in sequential art refers to the multitude of components that the art of the comic consists of; the lines, textures, materials, arrangements, characters, backgrounds etc. (Eisner 1985, rev.ed. 2000, 5)

Altogether the elements are used to contextualise the narrative with associative language of symbolism.

In his anecdotal comic *Our Toyota Was Fantastic* (2013) Boulet uses animation to stage an environment where the high speed movement of a car bleeding into the relatively static experience of a back seat passenger.

Picture 17. First in the sequence of two concerning Our Toyota Was Fantastic
http://english.bouletcorp.com/2013/10/08/our-toyota-was-fantastic/ *(Boulet 2013)*

Every panel has at least the shaky animated effect on the lettering of the text. All animation is distributed between the text, lights/shadows and gas-substance (steam/smoke/gas). The characters themselves are never animated, only the material background elements.

The purpose of the animation is to invoke the reader's sense of nostalgia through an idea of an experience similar to what the artist is depicting. The animation does not bring much new information, the story stays the same regardless, but without the atmospheric value of the animated effect, the comic loses the precise impact that the visual symbology of the movement provides.

The issue of the danger of making the animation distracting is eradicated by composing the panels into sections. Each section has a similar colour palette and a unified and synchronized animation cycle. The rhythm of the animation in each section carries over between the panels creating an illusion of the car moving at a steady speed regardless of what happens inside the car.

Picture 18. Second in the sequence of two concerning Our Toyota Was Fantastic, showing the progression of animation on a single panel. (Boulet 2013)

The animation guides the reader's eye through contrast and intensity.

4 CONCLUSION

How *does* the use of animation change Eisner's original methodology of the narrative process?

The simple answer is: it doesn't.

Eisner's methodology is fundamentally based on a rhetorical point of view. The communication and subtle symbolic language between the artist and the reader are the subjects that Eisner specifically focuses on in each chapter of *Comics And The Sequential Art.*

Eisner gives some examples of the visual language that has been proven effective with the audience that his comics cater to. However, he also emphasises that it is up to the artist's own rendition skills to find the method of expression that connects with their audience. (Eisner 1985, rev.ed. 2008, 7 – 8)

By this logic, as long as the artist keeps the fundamental requirements in mind, using animation as just another symbolic tool should produce desirable results for the North American (and like minded) demographic.

A more complicated answer to the research question is: by expanding upon it.

The idea of animation and the potential of film technology is touched upon in Eisner's text, but it is only briefly mentioned as an example for an entirely different concept.

There are many aspects of comics that Eisner's methodology does not cover, because his expertise was based on a career in a restrictive industry in a time where, for instance, exploration of colour in a serialised product was still a brand new and luxurious concept. Therefore, understandably, the rhetoric that he teaches is based on comics that are black and white, static and composed to be printed.

Adding animation to the theory of sequential art requires the consideration of what it can provide to a comic. The question should be considered with the same seriousness as any other technical element; what does colour provide in comparison to the black and white comics? What costs and benefits does the digital format provide that the printed medium does not?

Some benefits of animation that have been observed in this thesis are as follows:

- A break from the regular method of progress to place emphasis on a narrative climax like with Ava's Demon
- A tool to engage in the back and forth conversation between the artist's control and the reader's patience like with Skull-Kidz!
- A mechanic to let the reader explore while keeping the control of what is being explored within the author's limits like with Hobo Lobo of Hamelin
- A guide for the reader's eye like with Unsounded
- A tool to place the emphasis on the mechanical proceedings of an action like with PAPAYE
- A reference to correct a misconception that has been intentionally created with the symbological language for comedic purposes like with Midnight Guest
- An effect to draw attention like with Junkwraith
- A symbological language of its own based on the shared experience of visible change like with Our Toyota Was Fantastic

The most consistent conclusion in this research is that way animation is applied to a comic should abide by the established way the reader is expected to interact with the comic. In other words, it is of upmost importance that the reader is able to react accordingly to the animated elements.

Despite the efforts in the field of motion comics and the tools like the guided view, animated comics have not caught onto the commercial market like they have in the webcomic community. There are no extensive studies about the subject available to the public, nor does the academic study seem to be in much of a hurry to expand.

Some experimentals platforms, like MadeFire by Ben Wolstenholme, Liam Sharp and Eugene Walden which combines the mechancs of the guided view with the kinetic effects of a motion comic, have been launched, but their integration to the public consciousness (like with motion comics and guided view) remains to be seen.

Animated comics have been criticized as labour intensive (Parkkonen 2018, 33 and Heinänen 2016, 22), distracting (Larsson 2018), too controlling (Batinic 2016, 6 – 8) or just downright pointless as a form of their own (McCloud 2000, 210).

Still, in the entrepreneurial sector of webcomics, the number of new comics with animated effects is irrefutably steady, even if finding exact numbers is difficult. Unfortunately webcomics are still a difficult medium to study, due to the lack of unity between the large number of different publishing portals and personal domains. (Kashtan 2018, 107)

Aaron Kashtan offers a possible explanation for the negative attitude presented by the commercial and academic fields in comparison to the positive one that can be seen in the field of webcomics. According to him, the comics studies in general bear a legacy that comes from being treated as arbitrary and nonessential compared to, for instance, literary and film studies. (Kashtan 2018, 107)

As a relatively new academic practice, the dominating opinions of especially the British and North American comics studies are still derived from the rethorics of literature studies, which Kashtan deems insufficent.

The comics studies are also severely hindered by the language barriers between different countries and cultures. The ”European and Asian industries” are often referenced without specific hard evidence or even personal account (Hague 2014, 48 and McCloud 2000, 65). Co-operation and translations of academic texts between different languages would be beneficial.

One specific suggestion for improvement of the academic research would be to expand the forms in which the research is acceptable to be reported. If the subject of the study relies fundamentally on its digital and kinetic nature, for instance a video essay or some other entirely digital format should be considered as an alternative to a written and printed format.

To summarise, the study of animated comics would benefit from further research on how to study webcomics in reliable numbers. The quality of the research could be improved by critical evaluation of the pre-existing source material and the possibilities of digital media as a legitimate essay format.

Extensive study on the symbolic language of change and motion in animated comics would also be very helpful, as would the co-operation between professionals from different comics industries that work under different languages and cultures.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Correspondence with A. F. Brady, 5. – 6.6.2020

Laakso:

Hi!

I am Oona Laakso, a student of interactive media and arts in the Tampere University of Applied Sciences (Finland).

I am writing my batchelor's thesis about how animation is used on digital comics (especially webcomics) and I was wondering if I could use your comic about the bat from a secret gay vampire as an example of the benefit of animating a singular active subject or character on one panel to emphasise the nature of their actions.

If this sounds acceptable to you, I would love to discuss it further to get my facts right and to credit you accurately.

Outside tumblr I can be contacted through my official email, oona.laakso@tuni.fi

Best regards,
Oona Laakso

Brady:

Hello! Ah sure you could use it! Would you prefer to discuss it here or through the email?

Either way is fine, e-mail would be great but only if you are comfortable with that.

Ah well then I think I would be feel more comfortable just speaking through Tumblr, if that's alright with you!

Laakso:

I understand completely.

Now, I have a couple of questions, which, please feel free to answer or not, completely up to you. The reason that I am asking them at all is that since I have an open line of correspondence with you, I want to make sure that what I write remains fair and acceptable to you as the author of the comic. If you do not prefer to answer, that is also fine with me.

Firstly, Just to make sure that I don't make any incorrect assumptions I would like to ask you directly an alias/username/title and a pronoun that you would like me to refer to you with in the paper.

Secondly, is there a specific title for that comic that you would like it to be referred to as?

Thirdly, would you like to comment on what inspired you to animate a panel of that comic?

Again, thank you for your correspondence. If there is anything that you'd like to ask me about this thesis or my writing policy, feel free to go ahead.

Brady:

A. F. Brady is the artist title I usually use, and you can shorten to Brady when needed; and he/him please!

I'd say the title is "The Midnight Guest"

And you can take what you would like from this as my inspiration! "Animating it expands upon the bat's chaotic/haphazard characteristics as a subject, making it responsible for both demonstrating the extent of silliness to the main character's actions and according consequences while providing a core source of visual humour. I felt to animate the panel would not only deliver a higher amount of comedy but also give the audience more of a sense of the bat's energy that can't be fulfilled by a frozen image."

And you're welcome! I'm glad my comic could help your paper! And I think I'm alright from here! This does sound like a fascinating thesis; I wish you all the best in your writing!

Laakso:

Thank you so much and all the best to you too! :))