MAKE OURS MARVEL

MEDIA CONVERGENCE AND A COMICS UNIVERSE

EDITED BY MATT YOCKEY

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS AUSTIN

Printed in the United States of America
First edition, 2017

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Yockey, Matt, editor.
Title: Make ours Marvel : media convergence and a comics universe / edited by Matt Yockey.
Other titles: World comics and graphic nonfiction series.
Description: First edition. | Austin : University of Texas Press, 2017. | Series: World comics and graphic nonfiction series | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016050503
ISBN 978-1-4773-1249-0 (cloth : alk. paper)
ISBN 978-1-4773-1250-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)
ISBN 978-1-4773-1251-3 (library e-book)
ISBN 978-1-4773-1252-0 (non-library e-book)
Subjects: LCSH: Marvel Comics Group. | Comic books, strips, etc.—United States—History and criticism. | Storytelling in mass media. | Motion pictures and comic books. | Comic strip characters in motion pictures.
Classification: LCC PN6725 .M34 2017 | DDC 741.5/973—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016050503

doi:10.7560/312490

Contents

Resources, 5 June 2010. Web. www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=24289.

———. "SENYC: Marvel's All New Young Guns." *Comic Book Resources*, 14 June 2014. Web. www.cbr.com/senyc-marvels-all-new-young-guns.

Pustz, Matthew. *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999. Print.

Raviv, Dan. *Comic Wars: How Two Tycoons Battled over the Marvel Comics Empire—and Both Lost*. New York: Broadway Books, 2002. Print.

Sava, Oliver. "Jason Aaron interview." *avclub.com*, 27 February 2012. Web. www.avclub.com/article/jason-aaron-69883.

Schatz, Thomas. *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*. New York: Pantheon, 1988. Print.

Smith, Anthony. "Action by Increment: Marvel Comics, Decompressed Narratives and the Collected Edition Market." Paper presented at Society for Cinema and Media Studies Annual Conference, New Orleans, Louisiana, March 2011.

Straczynski, J. Michael, story, John Romita Jr. and Scott Hanna, art. *The Amazing Spider-Man Vol. 1: Coming Home*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2001. Print.

Sunu, Steve. "HeroesCon '11: Matt Fraction's Fear Itself Panel." Web. www.comicbookresources.com, 5 June 2011. http://staging.cbr.com/heroescon-11-matt-fractions-fear-itself-panel.

"2008 Comic Book Sales Figures." *Comichron*, n.d. Web. www.comichron.com/monthlycomicssales/2008.html.

Wollen, Peter. *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972. Print.

Wright, Bradford W. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. Print.

"WWC: Marvel's Young Guns II." Comic Book Resources, 5 August 2006. Web. www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=7800.

CHAPTER 6

Marvel and the Form of Motion Comics

DARREN WERSHLER AND KALERVO A. SINERVO

Comics have always been an "intermedial" form. That is, in the sense of Dick Higgins's classic definition of the term, as a medium, comics occupy a space between visual art and literature (49). But what happens when comics fuse with media that produce moving images? Douglas Wolk provides the following caveat:

> The most thoroughly ingrained error in the language used to discuss comics is treating them as if they were particularly weird, or failed, examples of another medium altogether. Good comics are sometimes described as being "cinematic" (if they have some kind of broad visual scope or imitate a familiar kind of movie) or "novelistic" (if they have keenly observed details, or simply take a long time to read). Those can be descriptive words when they're applied to comics. It's almost an insult, though, to treat them as compliments. Using them as praise implies that comics *as a form* aspire (more or less unsuccessfully) to being movies or novels. (13)

Fair enough. But if comics as a form do not aspire to anything, the communities that form around comics and create a sense of what comics are *for them*—including marketing departments—definitely have aspirations, and those aspirations are always motivated by particular ideological agendas. Wolk claims that we "pretty much" know what comics are, and that that is good enough (17). While this approach avoids having to attribute any sort of essence to comics, it also skirts around the need for critical analysis in the interest of getting on with describing the stuff that we like. However, it

is entirely worth taking the time to look at discourse about comic forms in order to see what sorts of claims are being made about them and to think about what motivates those claims.

This chapter concerns the history of one major formation in Marvel's digital repertoire: the motion comic. Over the past two decades, Marvel has rolled out a new iteration of the motion comic on a surprising number of occasions, making claims each time for its innovative status, only to scrap it entirely and begin again within the space of a few years, claiming once more that what is produced is unprecedented. What is it about the form of motion comics that produces this constant churn, and how do we begin to trace it? What sort of audience does Marvel imagine for motion comics? Does it resemble the traditional comics audience, or even support the things that readers have always valued about print comics? And what contributions, if any, has the motion comic form made to the celebrated content of the Marvel Universe?

The larger point that emerges from a study of Marvel's various adventures in digital publishing is that in a networked digital culture, circulation outstrips continuity and preservation. In the name of increasing circulation, Marvel has produced a discontinuous series of mutually incompatible forms of digital comics. Digital technologies have also altered the physical form of print comics and, as a result of the new business models that accompany digital content, have transformed the histories and continuities of the characters on which their brands are based. Digital media excel at cheaply and shamelessly promulgating information across the globe. When they are used for storage, archiving, and preservation, however, they work against the grain, often producing uneven results.

Embracing circulation, then, occurs at the expense of duration, and this has been the case as long as writing and publishing have been industrialized. In 1942, Joseph Schumpeter coined the term "creative destruction" to describe "the essential fact about capitalism": in the very process of creating a new version of itself, its economic structure never ceases to destroy itself from within (83). It is simply not in the ethos of most companies, let alone contemporary companies, to carefully archive what they do.

Perhaps there is something specific about the production of superhero comics as a genre that accentuates this general tendency toward reinvention and the disavowal of older forms. In "Baroque Mutants in the 21st Century? Rethinking Genre Through the Superhero," Saige Walton argues for a "baroque" model of the superhero genre. For Walton, the superhero

is "a mobile sign, historically dispersed across an array of media" (97). From this perspective, individual texts in the superhero genre function as components of immense transmedia networks, in which changes are not "evolutionary and discrete" but perpetually in flux (99). Crucially in these networks, Walton observes, "renewal occurs at a technological level, by maintaining connections with its Marvel comics past while drawing attention to media reframings, through temporally heightened, filmic, and digital metamorphoses of the superhero" (87). By this logic, if there is a specific recipe for "making Marvel," it will involve efforts to make Marvel's superhero narratives proliferate across any and every emerging media form, with little heed to *how* they connect to what came before, as long as there is always a connection. Moreover, says Walton, we should also be looking for claims about the ways in which a given superhero text in one of these emergent media forms "asserts the precedence of its own articulation" despite its reliance on Marvel's stock images, characters, and narratives (97)—in other words, that text will assert that its value lies precisely in the novelty of the appearance of superheroes in this new form. In Marvel's superhero media, then, both form and content exhibit a tension between the static idea of the superhero, on the one hand, and a constant formal and generic churn, on the other.

Part of the problem, then, is how and where to begin thinking about motion comics. The arrival of digital comics has altered our sense of the comic's efficacy as a storage medium. As Vilém Flusser notes in his writing about newspapers (the ancestral home of the print comic), digital media have changed the cultural context in which print appears, recontextualizing it into its exact opposite: "Paper, which is an ephemeral memory in comparison to marble or metal, becomes a durable one in the context of electromagnetic media—until tapes and records take over this role" (112). In comparison to their digital cousins, as Flusser suggests, print comics appear more sturdy, but this is a tenuous status at best. For most of their history, print comics had low production values to match their low cultural status. Even after the rise in popularity of variant covers and prestige-format trade editions in the late 1980s, comics are still more likely to be venerated by collectors rather than distributors or casual readers. Although the print quality of contemporary comics is markedly better than that of comics from the 1970s and earlier, most mainstream monthly comics today are still produced relatively cheaply, in large quantities—and official comics archives, especially public ones, are a rarity. Marvel's history of archiving its own materials, whether

in the form of reference copies of their own publications or as original art, was patchy from the company's earliest days (Wershler 127). As a result, scholars and historians interested in the history of digital comics are facing significant forensic work if they wish to reconstruct that history.

One important, ongoing component of that work will be the development of a schema of the various *formations* of digital comics. In *The Form of News*, Kevin G. Barnhurst and John Nerone describe "form" as follows:

> By *form* we mean the persisting visible structure of the newspaper. . . . Form includes the things that are traditionally labeled layout and design and typography; but it also includes habits of illustration, genres of reportage, and schemes of departmentalization. *Form* is everything a newspaper does to present the look of the news.
>
> Any media form includes a proposed or normative model of the medium itself. Put another way, the form includes the way the medium imagines itself to be and to act. In its physical arrangement, structure, and format, a newspaper reiterates an ideal for itself. (3)

This definition is explicitly ideological and post-Althusserian (3): form is how the medium imagines itself to be for another, not "as it is." In other words, formal choices are far from neutral, because they always do some kind of ideological work. Any explanation of media form has to take its ideological aspects into account in order to be effective.

Barnhurst and Nerone expand their analytical framework by suggesting that for any medium in its historical context, forms can be bundled together into a series of different *formations*. Each formation combines a system of production and "a broader cultural configuration" (the ideological component) with a "look" (4). Barnhurst and Nerone also use the word "format" in a way that is more or less interchangeable with "look," but "format" has several advantages over "look" as a term of reference. Recent influential work by Jonathan Sterne ("The MP3"; *MP3: The Meaning*), Lisa Gitelman (*Paper Knowledge*), and John Guillory ("The Memo") has refined the traditional site of analysis in communication and media studies from media writ large to include more finely detailed studies of format and genre. For Sterne, as for Barnhurst and Nerone, the notion of format always includes social context: digital format is a "crystallized set of social and material relations" that includes both a set of technological specifications and the various authorized and unauthorized ways that people make use of them ("The

MP3," 826). Not even genre escapes the connection to the social. Rather than seeing genre as a collection of conventions or literary attributes, Gitelman describes it, too, as a dynamic yet historically and culturally specific "mode of recognition" that takes its shape as a result of social practices of reception and expression (2). In *Comics Versus Art*, Bart Beaty contends that comics should be conceptualized as "the products of a particular social world, rather than as a set of formal strategies" (43). In Barnhurst and Nerone's formulation, as well as Sterne and Gitelman's more recent and complementary work, form—including the triad of media, format, and genre—always includes the social world from the outset.

These distinctions are necessary because it is far too easy to collapse genres, formats, and media into each other. Say "comic," and most people think "superhero comic," because we have a habit of mistaking formats for the genres that they express. But even the exclusively superhero-branded Marvel digital offerings contain a few surprises, such as the award-winning adaptations of Jane Austen novels by Nancy Butler with Hugo Petrus (*Pride and Prejudice*), Sonny Liew (*Sense and Sensibility*), and Janet Lee (*Emma*). Even when "comics" referred to print alone, there was always a wide range of formats, some standardized (comic strips, comic books, collected trade editions, and so on) and some unorthodox (very large or very small books, unbound books, comics on materials other than paper, comics as installations or architectural spaces). The problem is that the history of forms, especially digital forms, is messy.

Marvel has a strong interest in building its brand, and, odd as it might seem, this has everything to do with the fragmentary nature of its historical archive. Harold Innis, one of the foundational thinkers of communication studies, articulated an approach to understanding media and power based around the ratio of two forces that are always in tension with one another: time and space (Heyer 61). Innis argued that in a given culture, a concentration of one of these forces necessitates compromising attention to the other. This is what Innis famously referred to as "the bias of media"—not "bias" in the sense of a lack of objectivity, but in the same way that wood or cloth has bias (Heyer 33). For Innis, a given culture in a specific time and place always has a grain to it; actions that follow that grain will go smoothly, while things that rub against it will be more difficult. Digital media are space-biased, better at circulation than at storage, and that circulation often occurs in the name of building and maintaining a media empire. As opposed to the various forms of digital media on disk or the Web, contemporary mobile digital

media formats are a walled garden. They make it possible to maintain centralized control of intellectual property, expand rapidly, and maintain uniformity through inexpensive methods of access and translation. The cost of propagating information over space is preserving it over time.

Marvel's various and sometimes contradictory digital distribution strategies have rarely followed a single track, and they have certainly not "evolved"—old ideas keep reappearing, in many cases despite their repeated (commercial and aesthetic) failure. Newer forms are not necessarily better adapted to their cultural contexts than older ones, or more aesthetically satisfying, but it is difficult to tell, because they often completely erase their predecessors, which makes comparison problematic. As a result, the only practical way of studying the history of Marvel's electronic media forms is in terms of ephemera and refuse. This is not a new problem for media history; from Walter Benjamin to Erkki Huhtamo, Jussi Parikka, and Bruno Latour, media history often begins its investigations in the wreckage. Aside from the obvious pragmatism of this approach, it has the further advantage of avoiding the sense that technological change is a triumphant series of advances into the future (Huhtamo and Parikka 6). Latour clarifies how to do such work, noting that construction and demolition sites are places where the processes that make objects work (and fail to work) actually become visible (79–82). Marvel's early adventures in digital distribution are a graveyard of aborted experiments and unceremoniously abandoned products. When unveiling a new product, Marvel focuses on its features and its potential to reach new audiences or give loyal readers a new way to experience the comics they love. Rarely does the company draw attention to moves away from particular products, formats, or strategies.

It is helpful to think of Marvel's adventures in digital comics in terms of three different formations: interactive comics, digitized comics, and augmented print comics.[1] Each formation includes (or has included) several different forms, each of which has its attendant set of implications about what digital comics are supposed to be. As Beaty argues, trying to reduce this multitude down to an essence is beside the point. Thinking about the social world that each one imagines itself to be addressing, though, might tell us something useful about the sort of work that these forms do for Marvel.

Of the various digital formations, Marvel's motion comics appeared first, perhaps because, as Scott McCloud suggests in *Reinventing Comics*, most of the media windows in the contemporary environment are filled with

moving images. Here is our first example of the ideology of form at work: when digital windows arrive in our lives, they bring with them the expectation that what fills them should be in motion. McCloud contends that digital comics offer us the possibility of "diversifying our perceptions" (19)—but that will only occur if the producers of digital comics do not accept the expectation that motion is the most interesting option for them or the only possibility.

In 1996, in the early days of popular interest in the Internet, Marvel began its digital efforts by producing custom-made content for America Online's (AOL's) services. Cybercomics, a hybrid, "slightly interactive" form that fell somewhere between comics and animation, produced with Macromedia (now Adobe) Director, a complex and notoriously difficult multimedia authoring tool better suited for producing CD-ROMs than web pages, were probably the first entirely digital Marvel product (Chichester; Wershler 129). Like most emergent technologies, Cybercomics were, at the moment of their appearance, marginal, clunky, and at odds with the print comics that at that point were still the sustaining technology of the Marvel media empire. AOL users received free access to Cybercomics as part of their subscription package. Beginning in 1997, Cybercomics were available on the Marvel Zone website, which required only a free registration for access. In 1999, the site Next Planet Over republished a dozen previously released Cybercomics.

Cybercomics writer D. G. Chichester still maintains some of his works in the area on his personal website as of this writing, but this is where the digital forensics need to begin. No doubt the interface of these works has changed a great deal since the days of AOL and first-generation graphic web browsers, but it is difficult to tell *how much* it has changed because of the many layers between the contemporary reader and the files salvaged from AOL, as well as the impossibility of checking the versions that now exist against earlier versions. Indeed, the stark reality of working with the textual environment that Alan Liu dubs "Discourse Network 2000" (50) is that the appearance of the Cybercomics is now potentially different *for each reader*. The display resolutions and color gamuts of user hardware can vary greatly; the operating systems and browser display conventions (forward, advance, and pause buttons, image lightboxing, etc.) have changed; title cards and menus have been added to the comics; the framing of the Cybercomic content appears inside a web page rather than an AOL page; and so on. Chichester notes that he translated the Cybercomics into the form in which

they currently appear because the Director plug-in that originally powered them was late to be ported to Macs with an Intel processor (that update was only first announced in 2005). However, more than a decade online is a long time, and Chichester's own website has also been subject to digital decay. Although it offers visitors two versions of the Cybercomics, "Panel by Panel" and "Video" (in the ".flv" Flash video format,[2] embedded in the page with JW Player, a multi-format video player), the links to the latter return a 404 "File not found" error.

The content of the "Panel by Panel" option, which still functions as of this writing, is similar to what can be found in Marvel print comics of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Chichester's site includes Cybercomics featuring Spider-Man ("Sandblasted"), Captain America and Iron Man ("Invasion Force"), the X-Men ("Twisted History"), Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. ("Jungle Warfare"), Daredevil ("Protection Racket"), and Blade (an early example of what would now be termed a transmedia tie-in with the first *Blade* movie). The Cybercomic form is specifically digital, though in true McLuhanesque fashion, the large speech balloon inside the browser lightbox that frames the Cybercomic alludes to its print ancestry. Inside the speech balloon is a rectangular frame that serves as the Cybercomic's cognate of a comic book page (in the Blade Cybercomic, vestigial nonfunctioning text, presumably from previous online locations of these panels, displays the message "NEXT PAGE LOADING" on the bottom of the last frame [Chichester]). Along the bottom of the frame-page is a thin gray strip, which indicates the frame number in the sequence in the left-hand corner; of the examples Chichester provides, the typical number of pages in each Cybercomic part is eight. As one mouses over the Cybercomic page, a popup navigation panel appears that (from left to right) consists of a thumbnail view of the entire Cybercomic part, a "back" arrow, an autoplay arrow, and a "forward" arrow. Clicking the forward arrow either causes a change in state in the current panel (such as a change in speech balloons, or a fade-in of a different graphic or audio element, as when, in the second panel of page 6 of "Twisted History," Professor X thinks of Magneto, Blob, Wolverine, and Storm, and each appears faintly in the background) or advances to the next panel in the frame (some panels are initially blacked out but faintly visible; some appear against a black background). In the lower right corner of the frame is a circular pie chart that indicates the progress through each frame's sequence of states. Some Cybercomics also included responsive audio tracks.

Cybercomics did not appear to be part of anything as organized as a digital strategy; nor did they have a particular model for revenue generation attached to them. In his brief explanatory text "About Cybercomics," Chichester downplays his own role and emphasizes their ephemerality: "Although these weren't 'real' comics, they were terrific to work on and I was very pleased with the relatively solid story arcs. These had a limited exposure and short run. Since then, they've occupied a lonely corner on various hard drives I've cycled through. Before there's a crash and I lose the whole collection to the digital graveyard, I figured I'd float 'em back out to whomever would like a read." Marvel stopped producing Cybercomics in early 2000, though the form bears a strong resemblance to later efforts such as motion comics and Guided View technologies.

At the same time that Marvel halted production of Cybercomics in 2001, it expanded its digital presence with the creation of Marvel dot.comics. Dot.comics were Flash-based motion comics that functioned much like Cybercomics, suggesting that the minimally interactive form still dominated the notion of what digital comics might be at the House of Ideas. The few dot.comics that can still be located are available exclusively through one of Marvel's own domains (http://dotcomics.marvel.com, no longer live), but readers of the first dot.comics also could access them on DVD-ROM or download them to their hard drives to be played through a piece of software called the Marvel dotComics Player, which can still be found in the backwater corners of the Web. Three exclusive dot.comics were also bundled with the DVD release of the two-disc special edition of Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* 2 (2004), so the notion of motion comics as part of the transmedia marketing mix was gaining traction.

As with Cybercomics, readers of dot.comics clicked their way through panels to reveal word balloons and transitions between frames, with the occasional cinematic effect like a pan added for splash pages or action scenes. In many respects, though, dot.comics were *less* interactive than their predecessors. Dot.comics were silent affairs, and their thumbnails represented entire pages of the original print comic, sans word balloons, rather than the individual animated states of the digital frame, as with the Cybercomics. For the reader willing to squint at his or her screen, this format did offer a rare chance to view the completed artwork of a comic page without any of the image being covered by word balloons or text boxes. At the same time, technical quality was low. Dot.comics panel transitions and visual effects were poorly animated, eliciting display errors and fuzzy resolutions when readers attempted to move backward through the comic.

Clicking on the panels of a motion comic to activate them is only the most visible and least important way in which the form engages the participation of the consumer audience. Transmedia is at least as much a business model as it is a creative form (if not more). Motion comics are attractive components of a transmedia assemblage because they are relatively cheap and easy to produce from existing properties, yet still smack of novelty, so we should expect to see more of them tied to Marvel events and major cinematic releases in the coming years. Moreover, they are highly amenable to the four "forms of participatory culture" that Henry Jenkins identifies as the milieu for the appearance of transmedia: affiliations, expressions, collaborative problem-solving, and circulations (Jenkins xi–xii). Both fan-made and professional animations and motion comics circulate across the Web, organized, cataloged, described, and debated passionately by fans, who often invest significant chunks of their time into these activities. The collaborative work of fans preserves such objects where even the publisher appears disinterested in doing so; further, their online writing is a huge component of what makes academic histories such as this one possible.

With the dot.comics, Marvel also began to develop a digital business model. Some of the content was drawn from back issues and some came from recent releases. In both cases, for dot.comics the added labor of producing original content from scratch was gone—another important difference from their Cybercomic predecessors. Marvel monetized dot.comics in a fashion similar to the early 1990s shareware model, where the first few levels of a video game might be available free of charge as a demo, and players had to purchase the full product to continue the games they had begun to enjoy (Allen). Individual dot.comics appeared and disappeared from the site to complement Marvel's print publishing schedule: for example, the first few back issues of a new series like *Ultimate Spider-Man* would be available in dot.comic format, but never the current issue. Further, the entire run would disappear for a time if the publisher reprinted a storyline in a collected edition (Allen). This practice is typical of the "bricks-and-clicks" marketing model that publishers of many types of print media were trying around the turn of the millennium: if readers wanted to keep reading, they had to go out and purchase the print comic (or follow a link from the dot.comics site to order it online).

Shortly after Marvel began making Cybercomics, in 2003, it doubled down on a different version of the motion comic form by penning a licensing deal with Intec Interactive, a digital entertainment company (now primarily a video game accessories manufacturer) based in Florida, to produce Digital Comic Books (DCBs). These were DVDs that used Chameleon, a cross-platform (DVD, Xbox, Playstation 2, Mac PC) software viewer with its own digital rights management (DRM) system, to display "digitally enhanced" versions of classic Marvel titles (Reid). In this case, the digital enhancements in question included "professional voice-overs, original music, stunning effects and high-end sound design," according to a description published at the time. "Plenty of extra material is packed in as well, like previews, character biographies, original sketches, a documentary about how comics are made, and bonus chapters (including classic first appearances of the main characters)"—more than one hundred minutes of content per DVD (Wieland). Although their name suggests that DCBs were most closely related to comic books, Intec's own press releases repeatedly used the language of cinema to describe them: "a new digital format on DVD that retells some of these heroes' timeless tales in a cinematic style"; "they play like mini-movies"; and "because they play more like a movie than a comic book, each story delivers an amazingly immersive experience, even for those people who have never opened a comic book in their lives" (Intec Interactive, Inc.). The reason behind this repeated positioning of the intermedial comic as cinematic has everything to do with that last quotation.

It is the people who have never opened a comic book in their lives that are the imagined audience of the motion comic. By 2003, the rise to market dominance of the superhero blockbuster film was well underway, and the plans to sell digital comics followed suit. The places that Intec planned to market DCBs were not comic book stores, but "Toys R Us, GameStop, Hastings, SamGoody.com, SunCoast.com and other video/DVD retailing outlets" (Reid)—general retailers, game stores, and video media retailers. Given the amount of content they contained, the suggested retail price for DCBs was a bargain, at $9.99 each (Wieland). However, DCBs met the same fate as all of their predecessors—they were ignored by that coveted general audience. Today, searching YouTube for the string "Intec Read Along" reveals some of the contents of those DVDs, which are closer in the aesthetics of the dialogue and voiceovers to the 1963 animated *Spider-Man* series than to Sam Raimi's version.

By 2009, it should have come as no surprise that Marvel was making yet another foray into motion comics, this time under the Marvel Knights Animation banner. The press release for the first title, *Spider-Woman: Agent of S.W.O.R.D.*, completely ignores Cybercomics and dot.comics, claiming that

"this is the first time an original Marvel motion comic will be made available for fans to download and own!" (Marvel Motion Comics). Rather than hosting the content itself, Marvel chose to distribute it through iTunes, which initially had an exclusive right to it. Episodes were released biweekly, and the first episode of the series was initially priced at $0.99 to entice readers. The price rose to $1.99 per episode after two weeks, and that price stayed the same through all subsequent episodes. (Marvel would later use this same pricing scheme for its initial in-app purchasing system for static digital comics.) Marvel also went to pains to emphasize that these new motion comics were "true to the heritage of panel-by-panel graphic storytelling" (Marvel Motion Comics)—they used original art from the print versions of the stories, and the writers and artists of the print versions received full credit. The use of original art requires compromises somewhere, though: animation and voice acting are nearly as wooden as they are in Marvel's earlier attempts at motion comics, relying on sliding static figures across backgrounds, minimal movements of mouths and other facial features, fade-ins and outs, and so on. The second title in the series, an adaptation of Warren Ellis and Adi Granov's acclaimed *Iron Man: Extremis*, arrived with similar amnesiac hyperbole from Marvel editor-in-chief Joe Quesada: "Just as the *Iron Man: Extremis* comic book forever changed how we see Iron Man, the motion comic adaptation represents the next evolution of the medium" (Marvel, "New Motion Comic"). With *Extremis*, Marvel expanded its circulation beyond iTunes to include the Zune and Xbox networks. It also penned a licensing deal with reissue specialists Shout! Factory, who continue to distribute DVD and Blu-ray versions of these titles. Interestingly, Shout! Factory refers to these works as "films"—"a wonderful hybrid" whose "line remains true to the heritage of panel-by-panel graphic storytelling incorporating smart storytelling, groundbreaking graphics and incredible action." The logic of marketing trumps formal innovation.

In March 2012, the publisher announced the development of Marvel Infinite, yet another foray into motion comics that functioned like streamlined Cybercomics. Once again, in the official press release, a new iteration of Marvel's ongoing experiments in digital comics is described as if the previous ones had never appeared. This latest version of the intermedial comic form is touted as both innovative and faithful, "a new technique in comics storytelling that is built specifically for the digital world [and] yet in a very elegant way manages to keep the purity of what makes a comic a 'comic.'" The quotation is attributed to none other than Chief Creative Officer Joe Quesada. Within three sentences, Queseda reiterates this balancing act three times. It's an implicit dismissal of Marvel's previous efforts along these lines. The press release also quotes writer Mark Waid, who says: "What we're doing isn't bargain basement animation or print pages simply transcribed to the screen" (Morse).

What is *actually* new about this press release is that it provides a reasonably detailed description of some of the ways that the formal possibilities of motion comics are finally beginning to affect genre, particularly in terms of the decisions that writers and artists make about narrative technique. Waid describes his collaboration with illustrator Stuart Immonen on *Avengers vs. X-Men #1 Infinite* (the first Marvel Infinite title) as follows: "It's a lot more labor-intensive than your garden variety 10-page story, that's for sure; a lot more 'what if we tried this rack-focus effect?' or 'what if this frame stretched across multiple screens?' but it was so rewarding," and, "We're no longer confined by the limitations of the page. While we still are confined in a way by the size of a tablet screen in the same way that we have to deal with the physical size of a page, the screen is capable of so much more. You can layer your story in ways that are impossible with a physical comic" (Morse).

At the same time as the announcement of the Marvel Infinite initiative, the publisher launched a complementary project adding motion and metacontent to its print comics through special software tools—augmented reality (AR) apps for smartphones. Marvel AR launched in 2012 as a free app (developed in partnership with Aurasma) on iOS and Android devices (Hutchings). Certain print comics, such as Warren Ellis, Mike McKone, and Jason Keith's *Avengers: Endless Wartime* (tellingly, the first of Marvel's Original Graphic Novels line, which requires no knowledge of Marvel continuity other than what might be derived from Hollywood films), now arrive with icons marking their covers and certain pages. When the reader holds the camera of his or her phone or tablet over a marked page, the app scans the entire page as if it were a QR code and launches a short video or audio segment "enhancing" the page's content (Marvel, "The Marvel ReEvolution"). These segments range from full animated sequences with sound, dialogue, and narration to adaptive audio tracks, drawings animating the transition from pencil roughs to full-color artwork, or the author or penciller walking across the screen and offering commentary on the production of the comic.

AR features change the comic book experience in more than just the obvious ways. For example, when using the app, the reader must reorient the way a print comic is read, holding the mobile device an appropriate

distance away from or above the comic. Accessed this way, even a print comic is now read through a practice of digital mediation and network access (as the AR app must be on a working phone connected to the Internet in order to function). The features also layer the comic in question with extra dimensions of ephemeral temporality; just like the smart-panel system of Marvel's digital comics, the AR content changes the experience of reading a comic from interpreting fixed images into interpreting moving images, and often transforms comic reading from a silent activity into an auditory one. Finally, the AR pushes against expectations of the materiality and mobility of comics. While the migration from the page to the phone or tablet screen meant that readers could take more comics with them in smaller and lighter packages (after all, an iPhone can potentially hold thousands of comics on a device that fits into a pocket), using the AR app with a print comic is far more cumbersome than either holding the print comic or squinting at the smartphone screen. Certainly, the app is not optimized for use on the bus. Perhaps this is why some of the content of Marvel AR has recently begun to migrate onto Marvel Digital Comics Unlimited (Rosenblatt), showing up in comics on the subscription service here and there. This move suggests that adding multimedia content to the printed page will also be a passing phase. Amalgamating all the content onto a digital device provides an easier reading experience for the consumer than hybridizing the print comic and the mobile device. And, given the rate with which companies render consumer technology obsolete, the probability that any of the AR content in books like *Endless Wartime* will be accessible to anyone in even five years approaches zero (unless, perhaps, someone captures it and uploads it to YouTube or another video hub).

At this time, the narrative of Marvel's digital strategies is becoming increasingly tangled as the publisher's transmedia tactics begin to bear fruit. Marvel's digital products are difficult to track not only because the company keeps so few publicly accessible organized records, but also because the products move and mutate quickly. Interfaces change with no warning and frenetic frequency; features available with other products appear and disappear; and tie-ins to other branches of Marvel's successful transmedia empire spring up everywhere. Context is now harder than ever to trace, and there is no cataloging allowing users to coordinate their reading experience. The current state of affairs is a far cry from the GITCorp DVD archives of entire Marvel print runs, where the reader was able to see even the peripheral content of ads, letter pages, and editorial notes, all as they

appeared at the original time of printing. Now, even accessing the same comic through the same digital avenue twice results in different contexts, as sidebar ads, menus, and interface tools are continually updated as part of the product's cloud-based status. Reading a Marvel digital comic tomorrow may offer a completely different experience than it offered today, owing to a totally different interface aesthetic, with new or absent features. Tomorrow, the same comic you read today may have a soundtrack, or it may have had a soundtrack removed. For scholars seeking to track and describe these objects, the difficulties are clearly multiple and solutions are rare.

The subtext running through this entire fragmented narrative is deeply embedded in discursive frameworks of control. Such discourses run through these products on a level that becomes most apparent when the user pushes up against the boundaries of these controls. The sense of "shared ownership" over the product that both comic book scanners ("pirates") and readers have in a transmedia environment may have led Marvel to move toward cloud-based intermedia libraries laced with DRM tools. While the tactics relating to access and control are obvious in the case of online-only, DRM-locked comics, the contents that come through augmented reality apps, while copyable, are much harder to reproduce and pirate than when pirating involves simply extracting image files. For readers, there is more to experience when accessing comics via Marvel's official proprietary services than when reading scanned print comics in CBR or CBZ format via independently created software—but only in the short term. And, given the number of iterations that motion comics have already seen, Marvel's basic refusal to even acknowledge their existence, and the tendency of new hardware and software in both home computing and mobile platforms to lack any kind of backward compatibility, digital comics readers who might be interested in any sort of long-term relationship with the products they purchase should remain skeptical.

These trends point toward Marvel's focus on market expansion and control rather than fan values or communities. The comic book store was long the local center of fan-based commerce and casual interaction among comic book readers (Wright), although the annual convention was the gathering place for more formalized and spectacular fan interactions—cosplay, swag bags, etc.—and for interactions between fans and creators. By selling DVDs online and alongside movies and music, Marvel was attempting to reach new markets, but in neglecting to ensure wide placement on comic book store shelves, the publisher ignored the established readers who

sustained its business. Fans interested in purchasing the DVD collections generally had to do so outside of the comic book store, and therefore not within their local communities. This development may have had less to do with Marvel's intentions than it did with the established circulatory networks of Marvel's licensees. Regardless, neglecting the local comic book shop was reflective of Marvel's prioritization of market expansion over fan values. It was a first tiding of things to come as the publisher's increased focus on digital products moved Marvel comics farther and farther outside the local communities fostered by the comic book store, and farther as well from the interests of comic book collectors.

In his writing on computerized networking, Darin Barney claims that the imbalance of space-biased media in the modern age (embodied by digital technologies) lessens our culture's sense of community. He points to the capacities of digital networks for storage and retrieval, explaining that they devalue the preservation of communicated information, enforcing a cultural priority of speed over continuity (52–53). Traditions and shared values flounder under the weight of digital nowness, a nowness, according to Barney, that negates collective, communal memory and replaces it with unmoored communications between individuals (60). This thesis fits comfortably with Marvel's shift from products (ownable removable media) to services (subscription-based networked media). The company's lack of organized, publicly accessible documentation of its own strategies further elaborates Barney's point, as it constitutes an absence of history. But the even greater loss of history and documentation will come when (not if) Marvel discontinues a given service, changes a given interface, or stops offering a given special feature.

A reader who buys a Marvel print comic owns that content for as long as the paper stock lasts or the reader keeps track of it. A reader who purchases the same comic digitally has it for as long as Marvel maintains its own servers, services, and records. The purchase of a particular digital product may entitle the customer to a digital copy, but only until a certain date, beyond which it may no longer be available (Ellis and McKone 120). Due to the cloud-based nature of Marvel's contemporary digital offerings, accessible only through approved Marvel web portals and apps, the reader's "ownership" of his or her purchases depends on Marvel's continued success (or, at the very least, existence). Extra content, such as AR features and adaptive audio tracks, are even more ephemeral, because proprietary methods do not yet exist for pinning this content down locally. Perhaps eventually, Marvel will monetize these features in a fashion that is distinct from Marvel Digital Comics Unlimited (perhaps in the same way one can purchase a standard DVD or an edition loaded with special features). Until such a time, it is effectively impossible to track or capture these digital objects in any kind of coherent fashion. The target is not only moving; it is also blurring, flickering, splitting apart, and reforming in versions that are oddly similar, but apparently unaware of their own recent past.

From Cybercomics to Infinite Comics and AR, all of Marvel's iterations of the motion comic form are predicated on the same basic notion: animating the static comic page. The reinvention and relaunching of intermedial motion comics every few years demonstrate that the ideology of that form operates according to the familiar logic of creative destruction. Various combinations of special features and digital-only content, as well as the ever-changing interfaces for accessing such content and the constant rhetorical claims of innovation, provide ample evidence for this contention. The circulatory methods and business models of a space-based, networked, digital milieu favor endless permutation, not preservation for posterity. The only way to stay profitable in such an environment is to stay on the cutting edge of distribution methods, attempting to maintain accessibility across devices and formats, while viewing content as something to be remixed rather than preserved. Off the page, ads can be replaced, terms of service can be updated, editorial content can be rewritten. Locks might be placed on content as well, but focusing on preservation is beside the point, because Marvel's business is now based on anything but time-biased media.

This overriding concern with circulation is not promising for the development of the comic form. Formal innovations remain at a minimum when brand is king. From a creator's perspective, the obsession with motion is particularly odd, because it is only one possibility for making comics digital. The list of possibilities that Scott McCloud presents in *Reinventing Comics* could remain as a set of moribund futures betrayed by the actual course of events, much like Ted Nelson's *Computer Lib/Dream Machines*, first published in 1974, was for a more sophisticated form of hypertext than the World Wide Web. But the ongoing obsession with motion has more to do with the lucrative nature of motion pictures and the desire to build an audience for Marvel films than with a general interest in formal innovation. As Jennifer Daryl Slack and J. Macgregor Wise point out, one of the linchpins of modern ideology was that progress—which is really just forward movement—somehow equaled evolution toward something better (10, 17).

Marvel invokes that rhetoric constantly with its motion comics, but all that changes, really, is the digital resolution, the soundtracks, and the commentary, changes that have rarely, if ever, made for better art. Perhaps we've even given up on the notion of progress in favor of the convenience of having short-term access to comics on our mobile devices (Slack and Wise 19). We cannot be certain about the characters, the storylines, and the continuity of any fictional universe: the only thing we can be certain of when we try to predict the future of the Marvel brand in digital media is that the iconic capital "M" logo on the cover of every issue, the masthead of every website, and the opening shots of every film will remain.

NOTES

1. This chapter does not address the introduction of digital production techniques to print comics, a subject broad enough for many other papers on a number of topics, including the use of digital typefaces, colorization, the influence of drawing tablets and Photoshop on illustration style, digital layout and prepress methods, the "widescreen aesthetic" of writers like Warren Ellis and its influence on framing and storytelling, and so on.

2. A logical choice because Macromedia had purchased Flash from its original manufacturer and developed it as an export option from Director.

WORKS CITED

Allen, Todd. "Dot-comics Lure New Readers." *Chicago Tribune*, 24 June 2002. Print.

Barney, Darin. "The Vanishing Table, or Community in a World That Is No World." *Topia* 11 (2004): 49–66. Print.

Barnhurst, Kevin G., and John Nerone. *The Form of News: A History*. New York: Guildford Press, 2001. Print.

Beaty, Bart. *Comics Versus Art*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012. Print.

Chichester, D. G. "About Cybercomics." *Capitalist Fiction*, 2010. Web. http://capitalistfiction.com/web/cybercomics/comics_carousel.html.

Ellis, Warren, Mike McKone, and Jason Kieth. *Avengers: Endless Wartime*. New York: Marvel Worldwide, 2013. Print.

Flusser, Vilém. *Does Writing Have a Future?* Trans. Nancy Ann Roth. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. Print.

Gitelman, Lisa. *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. Print.

Guillory, John. "The Memo and Modernity." *Critical Inquiry* 31.1 (2004): 108–132. Print.

Heyer, Paul. *Harold Innis*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003. Print.

Higgins, Dick, with an Appendix by Hannah Higgins. "Intermedia." [1966] *Leonardo* 34.1 (2001): 49–54. Print.

Huhtamo, Erkki, and Jussi Parikka. "Introduction." In *Media Archaeology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. Print.

Hutchings, Emma. "Marvel Launches Augmented Reality Comics." *PSFK*, 14 March 2012. Web. www.psfk.com/2012/03/marvel-augmented-reality-comics.html#!F5OtK.

Intec Interactive, Inc. "Intec Interactive Partners with Marvel Comics to Release Digital Comic Books On DVD: New Product Line Augments Classic Comics with Voice, Music, Sound Effects and Special DVD Features." *PRNewswire*, 9 December 2003. Web. www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/intec-interactive-partners-with-marvel-comics-to-release-digital-comic-books-on-dvd-73251257.html.

Jenkins, Henry, with Ravi Purushotma, Margaret Weigl, Katie Clinton, and Alice J. Robison. *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*. John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Reports on Digital Media and Learning. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009. Print.

Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. Print.

Liu, Alan. "Transcendental Data: Toward a Cultural History and Aesthetics of the New Encoded Discourse." *Critical Inquiry* 31 (2004): 49–84. Print.

Marvel. "The Marvel ReEvolution Is Here." *Marvel*, last modified 15 March 2012. Web. http://marvel.com/news/comics/2012/3/11/18265/the_marvel_reevolution_is_here.

———. "New Motion Comic: IRON MAN: EXTREMIS." *Marvel*, 25 March 2010 (updated 12 April 2010). Web (Google cache version). http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:D412K23lvqEJ:marvel.com/news/comics/2010/3/25/11770/new_motion_comic_iron_man_extremis.

Marvel Motion Comics. "Spider-Woman: Available Now on iTunes." *Marvel*, 19 August 2009 (updated 14 October 2009). Web (Google cache version). http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:_joG8bBLIEYJ:marvel.com/news/comics/2009/8/19/9237/spider-woman_available_now_on_itunes.

McCloud, Scott. *Reinventing Comics*. New York: HarperCollins, 2000. Print.

Morse, Ben. "Marvel Infinite Comics Unveiled." *Marvel*, 11 March 2012. Web.

http://marvel.com/news/comics/2012/3/11/18266/marvel_infinite_comics_unveiled.

Nelson, Theodore. *Computer Lib/Dream Machines*, 2nd ed. Redmond, WA: Tempus Books / Microsoft Press, 1987. Print.

Reid, Calvin. "Digital Comics from Intec." *Publishers Weekly*, 22 December 2003. Web. www.publishersweekly.com/pw/print/20031222/36251-digital-comics-from-intec.html.

Rosenblatt, Seth. "Finally, Marvel's Ready for You to Hear Its Comics." *CNET*, 9 March 2014. Web. www.cnet.com/news/finally-marvels-ready-for-you-to-hear-its-comics-scoop.

Schumpeter, Joseph A. *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. 1942. New York: Harper, 1975. Print.

Shout! Factory. "Marvel Knights: Collection." *Shout! Factory*, 22 November 2011. Web. www.shoutfactory.com/product/marvel-knights-collection.

Slack, Jennifer Daryl, and J. Macgregor Wise. *Culture + Technology: A Primer*. New York: Peter Lang, 2005. Print.

Sterne, Jonathan. "The MP3 as Cultural Artifact." *New Media & Society* 8.5 (2008): 825–842. Print.

———. *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012. Print.

Walton, Saige. "Baroque Mutants in the 21st Century? Rethinking Genre Through the Superhero." In *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero*. Ed. Angela Ndalianis. Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies. New York: Routledge, 2009. 86–106. Print.

Wershler, Darren. "Digital Comics, Circulation, and the Importance of Being Eric Sluis." *Cinema Journal* 50.3 (2011): 127–134. Print.

Wieland, Jonah. "Eagle One Media to Distribute Marvel and CrossGen Digital Comic Books." *Comic Book Resources*, 13 April 2004. Web. www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=3377.

Wolk, Douglas. *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*. New York: Da Capo Press, 2007. Print.

Wright, Frederick. "How Can 575 Comic Books Weigh Under an Ounce? Comic Book Collecting in the Digital Age." *Journal of Electronic Publishing* 11.3 (2008). Web. http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/3336451.0011.304.

CHAPTER 7

Transmedia Storytelling in the "Marvel Cinematic Universe" and the Logics of Convergence-Era Popular Seriality

FELIX BRINKER

When the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) kicked off with the release of *Iron Man* in 2008, few suspected that Jon Favreau's movie would end up being the first installment of one of the most profitable media franchises of our time. During the preceding twelve months, cinemagoers had witnessed the release of *Spider-Man* 3 (Sam Raimi, 2007), *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (Tim Story, 2007), and, shortly afterward, *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008). When *Iron Man* premiered, it seemed to do little more than follow the same tried-and-true model, which, coincidentally, *Superhero Movie* (Craig Mazin, 2008) had spoofed just weeks earlier.

Nine years in, Marvel Studios' project to build a franchise around a series of self-financed, interconnected film and television releases is still in progress. Currently comprising the films *Iron Man* and *The Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier, 2008); *Iron Man* 2 (Jon Favreau, 2010); *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnston, 2011) and *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011); *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012); *Iron Man* 3 (Shane Black, 2013) and *Thor: The Dark World* (Alan Taylor, 2013); *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Anthony and Joe Russo, 2014) and *Guardians of the Galaxy* (James Gunn, 2014); *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon, 2015) and *Ant-Man* (Peyton Reed, 2015); *Captain America: Civil War* (Anthony and Joe Russo, 2016) and *Doctor Strange* (Scott Derrickson, 2016); plus the ABC television series *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* since 2013 and *Agent Carter* since 2015; the Netflix shows *Daredevil*, *Jessica Jones* since 2015, and *Luke Cage* (since 2016); and a number of associated short films called "Marvel One-Shots" (included as bonus content on DVD and Blu-ray releases) and tie-in comic books, the MCU has made Marvel