

ALIVE- A PERSISTENT COMIC WORLD

**INTERACTION DESIGN SPECIAL PROJECT
INSPL - 58**

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Approval sheet

The project titled **Alive - a persistent comic world** by Dileep M, is approved for partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of 'Master of Design' in Interaction Design.

Guide

: 

Date

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Abstract

Comics are an ever-evolving medium to express the views and thoughts of the people. From short length strips to graphic novels, comics have found their way in the life of people. The primary advantage of comic as a medium is that it is fundamentally a visual medium, where pictures and text shoulder the burden to weave a story. Although a static medium of expression unlike film and animation, comics give a lot of room to a readers interpretation and imagination. Pace of reading, interpretation of visuals are left to the readers to imagine and immerse in.

Motion comics are a combined experience of the digital world with the pick and read feel of comic books. With the introduction of technology like smartphones and e-readers, the cinematic feel that was missing in print comics have now become possible. But though the concept of motion comics was received well, it could not guarantee a better experience than the print comics. There were arguments that motion comics are nothing but poorly executed animation sequences.

This project, titled “Alive!”, attempts to bring a new perspective to motion comics by proposing the design of a persistent comic world. Readers have the complete freedom on what content they should follow. A sand-box comic world can bring diversity in content as well as create an immersive experience to the readers.

Introduction

Comics are a medium to express ideas and views, often combined with images and text. They are generally composed of sequence of 'panels'. Each panel depicts one part of the story and can contain text in the form of speech bubbles, captions and onomatopoeia to add special effects. Size and position of these panels contribute to the narrative pacing and flow.

Comics books have been heavily influenced by culture and people and have a pre-history as far back as the cave paintings. They have continuously evolved from being an entertainment, to a medium of expression for people all around the world. Over time various different kinds of comics have emerged namely newspaper comic strips, magazine-style, novels and cartoons. One such variation is Motion comics.

A motion comic or animated comic combines the elements of print comics and animation. Individual panels are expanded to a single shot, adding sound, voice, animation and special effects. When film and animation are time-bound, motion comic retains the control to go through the content as per the readers' will while giving the readers an immersive experience of the moving world.

However the reception to motion comics has been a are mixed one. One one hand where its new experience seems to be more exciting and engaging on the the there are arguments that when elements like sound and voiceover along with camera movements are added to a comic sequence does it still hold true to its base as a comic book? Or does it change into just a poorly executed cartoon sequence. Is motion comics a world for a different set of audience and not the centuries old comic fans?

This can very well be answered by looking into the potential of motion comics. Motion comics are not just adding motion to static images. Rather it embracing and accentuating the whole experience of reading comics through technologies like Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality.

Current state of comics

With the ever increasing craze for technology and the quick replacement of print media comics books have still not left the battle ground and are holding up quite well. Partly because of the centuries old charm of the comic world that has been passed on from father to son as a legacy and also because, reading is considered as a great method to learn. The power of comics have found its way to the digital platform in the form of e-readers and smartphone applications.

However a major change in the stories and the telling of the stories is the growing presence of mainstream characters. Due to the thinning audience for comic book lovers the market is trying to find ways to survive. By selling stories around only the popular characters and killing and resurrecting the same characters again and again the market shows an immense lack of storyline and diversity. Publishers and comic writers are gambling with the existing audience base on characters that can carry a comic issue. However this looks like a short term survival strategy which doesn't seem promising when it comes to retain the existing and build new audience.

Therefore a new strategy that the giants in the industry are trying out is the concept of shared universe. Shared universe is where all the characters are in the same location and shares a single storyline.

For example, DC comics discontinued all their previous publications and started 52 new issues. They even brought back the lesser known books like Mister Terrific and Voodoo. In a shared universe, something happening to one title, will have ripple effect on others too.

However a comic series should be simple to follow and manageable for the reader to understand and comprehend. Trying to impose the concept of shared universe might sometimes confuse and tax the audience rather than making it an enjoyable experience. Like the release of the movie Avengers which might have been thought to increase the sales of the comics too. But this did not happen as the readers got confused to see a whole range of comics in the shop and couldn't identify which one to invest on.

With the increase in translation of comics into different mediums like film and cartoon series the shelf life of comics books have become very low. According to Chomicron, sales of top 300 comics went down by 11% compared to in the month.

A possible solution to such a scenario could be to take advantage of the technology available. Writers and artists who were earlier hired to write for print can now being hired to create content for digital platforms. This way the charm and style of the older comics can be transferred to the digital platforms. A digital platform can help in managing the content and make it rich in terms of experience.

To understand how this can be achieved through motion comics, existing animated comics were studied.

Existing motion comics

Framed - Android game

Framed takes an interesting approach to comic reading experience. Although it is published as a game, it is more aligned to a motion comic.



fig1. Rearranging panels

In Framed, readers have to re-align (fig 1) the panels to create a narrative for the protagonist to escape. Being interactive allows the reader to play around with the content and stimulate their imagination[2].

The experiment brings out immense possibilities of the digital medium to generate and manage content.

Dracula

Dracula incorporates live action photos (fig 2) and allows the reader simple actions such as 'yes' or 'no'. The comic has managed to create the horror feel with its sound effects and subtle camera movements.



fig2. Photography with interactions

Though the readers are offered multiple choices, the story seems unaffected and is linear.

Nevermind the Bullets

The browser based comic has micro effects like parallax, autoplay, music, motion blur and simple interactions for the user to explore. The music changes as the narrative progresses. The bullets also allows the readers to create their own stories (fig 3) and share them in their social circle.

Such a feature challenges the imagination of the audience. People have come up with several interesting endings to the comic which were received much better than the original one[3].

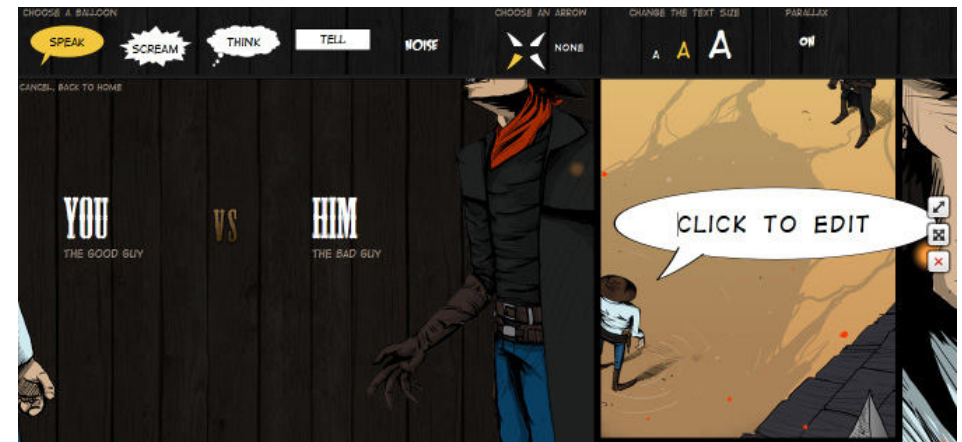


fig3. Create your own story

Marvel X-men AR comic

Marvel recently released comic books with Augmented Reality markers. Scanning over it reveals special effects and behind the scenes of making (fig 4) of the comic to the reader[4].



fig4. Augmented reality showing behind the scenes of coloring

Although incorporating augmented reality was exciting, the content of the comics remained same. The full potential of AR technology was not explored. Therefore was no motivation or benefit for the reader to utilize AR for the comic. This brings us to an interactive comics experience

Nonstop bar

Is a fully interactive comic that retains the quality of print comics. The panels are fully animated with special effects, but plays only on reader interaction (fig 5). This promises the reader to go through the comic in his/her own pace and time. The story is told in a linear fashion, creating a classic print comic experience[5].



fig5. Individual panels are interactive and animated

Challenges

All the existing motion comics focuses only on the main character. The universe where the story is happening is still shrouded. For example, comics like He-Man, Pokemon, Batman, Superman, Marvel heroes have fully detailed universe with a city map and character biographies.

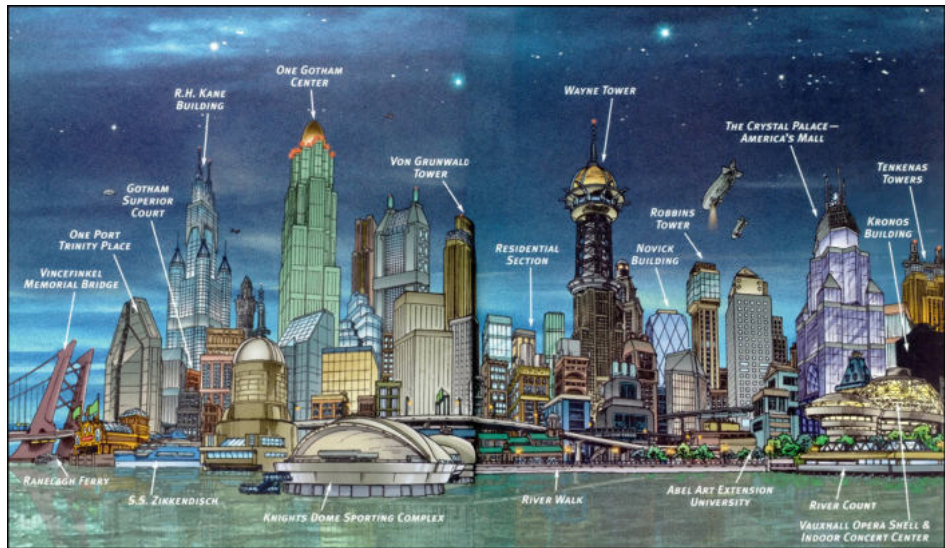


fig 6. Gotham city post-apocalypse

Such rich universes are going in vain due to the excessive focus on characters who can carry a title forward. With the digital medium, the comic world can be brought to the reader in a refined, detailed and enjoyable manner.

To achieve this, a real-time or persistent world concept was designed.

Alive!

All the existing motion comics focuses only on the main character. The universe where the story is happening is never much talked about or explored.

Alive! brings every single detail of the comic world to the reader in the form of a sand-box 3D world.



fig 9. Explorable world with event notifications

Readers can go around the world, explore each and every part of the world (fig 9). All the elements in the world is interactive and several events unfold at different places. In this way, the reader will have a better understanding of the comic world and a better immersive experience than just animation.



fig 10. All event notifications

All the events that are happening in the world are real-time and the readers get event notifications of what's happening where. They can then go to that part of the world and experience it. Here, the reader got notified about an activity that is happening in the fictional world now. They can also go and visit the past events (fig 10).

Events are essentially the respective motion comic issues. By representing them as events in the world, connected to their own comic-verse helps to establish the length and breadth of the comic universe. It also provides the sense of shared universe. More than one event happening at some point of time about multiple characters provides an effective means to try and bring up lesser known characters and evaluate their potential to carry a title forward. The whole world is at the disposal of the writer. They can experiment with a lot of characters and see who all appeals to the audience.

The persistent world allows the readers as well as writers to experiment with the comic world. Readers can subscribe to specific landmarks in the world and follow all the events happening there.



fig 11. Subscribing to events

Once a subscription is made, whatever is happening to that place will be notified to the reader. Subscription model helps the reader to follow characters or places and grow up with the evolution of those entities in the comic world. The bonding created to such entities will be greater and writers can get an idea of what the readers are looking for.



fig 12. Event pops-up to view[6]

An event based approach also helps in creating new content. Writers can bring in new characters and branched storyline rather than sticking to one character with a linear story. The possibilities are endless. The stories could be inter-weaved and can bring out more characters into focus. All this can be achieved without causing any confusion or distraction to the readers. The best part is that everything is happening in one world, where the reader gets notified about all his/her subscriptions.



fig 13. Map of the comic world

A holistic view of the world with all the characters and storyline provides a better understanding for the reader.

Each event will be a short motion clip, showing what happened there. For example, if the reader subscribes to the police station in the comic world, he/she will get notified of every single event that is happening there. Details about the inmates, new inmates, news about what crime is happening, who brought them in all is shown to the reader.

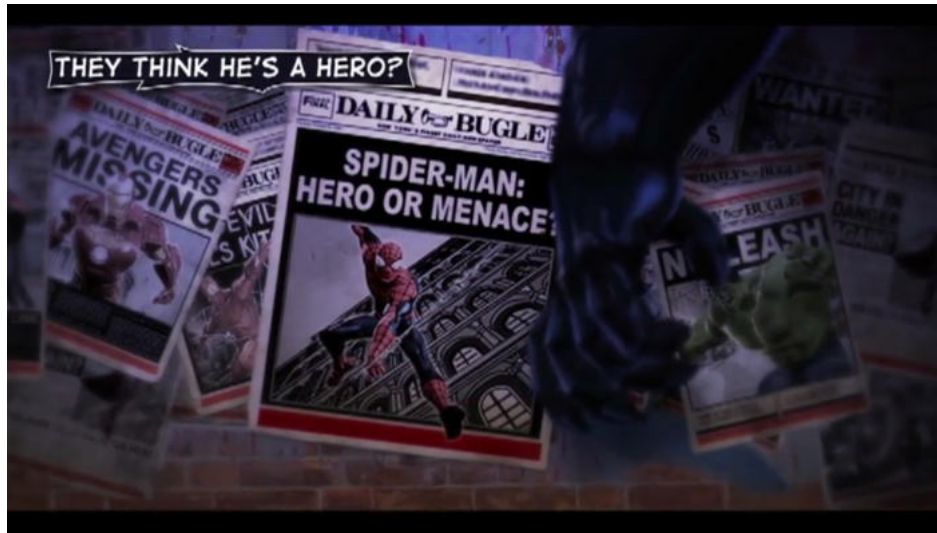


fig 14. Story details[5]

Readers can follow certain events or characters and understand how the character has evolved across time. In this way, there is flexibility and diversity in stories and characters. Readers might find more relatable characters in such a world. By studying the behaviour and inclination of the readers, publishers can decide which characters or storyline to move forward with.

Conclusion

Comics are ever-evolving. They are competing with other immersive technologies like animation, film and games. A persistent world approach guarantees diversity in content for publishers as well as readers. It brings about more diversity and richness in the fiction while maintaining the same immersive experience of the comic world. Readers have the freedom to choose what content they want to experience and branch out as they wish. This gives them a balance and room to execute one imagination while enjoying the experience of a more fast paced and interactive medium.

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