

Motion Comics: Immersion in the Age of Interactive Storytelling



Co-Authors:

Anindita Mondal

Tamal Saha

Abhishek Soni

Under supervision of

Prof. Phani Tetali

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Abstract

The introduction of comic books in our society was a great Godsend, because for the first time people realised that not only can the characters they only previously read about were actually talking and acting out, but also the world they belonged in were designed for them. Thus began the greatest revolution of transforming the world of comics to become increasingly realistic in order to enthrall you in their yarn of illusions.

This research focuses on finding a technique of interactivity in comics where readers can choose their own narratives as an alternative to motion comics being the future of comic books. Furthermore, it also aims at researching on the amount of presence and immersion that the reader achieves while vexed into the narrative and whether it enriches one's experience as a consumer of 'Stories'.

Keywords

Motion comics, immersion, visuals, panels, interactive, presence, innovative, sequential, illustrations.

Introduction

1.1 Background of Study

There was a time in our world where we slowly made a shift from storybooks to comic books and it was a revolution. People could see for the first time the characters in their head, laid out on paper that others saw as well. It was a boon and a curse. Some were delighted, some were critical about the idea of having their imaginations reduced. But everyone read them. They were simpler then, a four-color ink print that you can easily read and dispose.

However, with the advent of technology, they are no more just bound by the colors or dimensions of the paper. They don't live on paper anymore, they live amongst us. They are animated and are online. Instead of just imagining Superman fly, you can actually see him fly. Instead of imagining Phantom riding through the African tropical forests, you actually see him ride Hero through the winds.

Motion Comics has taken the idea of visualising comics to a new era.

It breathes life into Comic-dom's top artists and designers and made a very cost effective way of narrating a story free from the 2D boundaries of Panels and Gutters. Taking the existing comic artwork and building it in layers to create depth and allowing the camera to suggest changing points of view and added motion elevates what once had been a static experience: reading a comic book.

You are now, living a comic!

1.2 Problem Statement

The comic world has experienced a lot many changes in the last decade, from simple comic panels for Sunday newspaper, to entire graphic novels with dark and complex narratives. It was a necessity to keep the change coming as and when the demands of the world, updated. It was always a different mode to propagate the current events of anytime and with the inventions of other mediums, Comic Books took a back track to become a separate means for only entertainment.

However, with postmodernists technologies like VR-AR (Virtual Reality- Augmented Reality) becoming the call of the day, the comic industry got bound by it's fanbase. Thus, comes the imminent need to translate the method of storytelling via different modes of expression.

The first method that revolutionised the storytelling prospect of Comics was the creation of 'The Infinite Canvas'¹ by Scott McCloud in the 2000, where he proposed that instead of treating the screen to view the comic as a page, you view it as a window. It increases the possibilities of having an infinite direction to your narrative instead of being limited by the dimensions of your panels and the number of pages in each publications.

Comic artists have gone further into adding motion to their actions and characters that learn to live outside of their designated panels and in the world of the gutter spaces. Characters become self aware (courtesy Deadpool), and are aided with sound effects. Many comic artists have shifted their attentions from telling a great story as their main focus to the art of making it as realistic and as believable as possible.

Thus, we end up with a forbidding question: How far can you go until it's no more believable? How interactive can you make it until you lose your audience's suspension of disbelief?

1.3 Purpose of Study

With the impetus of introducing Interactivity as the next generation quotidian for motion comics, the purpose of the paper aims at recognising the idea of 'Immersion' that is drawn out and whether there is a metric that measures the tangible amount of immersion for a standard interactive comic. The challenge therefore also focuses in creating an interactive comic while following the proper A.D.D.I.E² model that would insight the idea of being a presence rather than simply voyeurism in the minds of the readers.

¹ <http://scottmccloud.com/4-inventions/canvas/>

² <https://www.instructionaldesign.org/models/addie/>

Methodology

2.1 Understanding ‘Immersion’

It has often been a suggestion that immersion imbibes the idea of presence in any medium of storytelling.³ Creators design the environment in a manner that evokes a sense of belonging into the audience where the readers not only dissociate from their consciousness into the consciousness of the characters they identify with, but also the world they spun around the being.⁴

Michael Tye in his book *The Burning Train* (1995) had related the state of consciousness and Immersion by stating that often when the subconscious mind is prevalent like in dreams, the predicament of higher order demands the believability factor and insights the other senses as a part of that experience. However, there lies a fine line between creating a flow in a content that neither poses an increased amount of challenge to the imagination of the reader which in turn generates anxiety nor has the absence of it that eventually leading to boredom.⁵

2.2 Research Conducted

In order to properly determine the rate of immersion in an interactive comic as opposed to a regular comic, a set of three comics were created of two pages each. The pages consisted of a total of 12 panels and seemingly unrelated actions. The art style that was chosen for the experiment was simplistic line art without any colors in order to completely rid the audience of any distractions caused by the color scheme or the art pattern. Later, a single element was added in the form of a red (FF0000) circle to all the panels in order to create a connect and aid the readers in determining a flow in their narratives.

The participants who were taken for these experiments all belonged to an age bracket of 24 to 30 years. They all come from well educated backgrounds with an ample access to comic books and graphic novels. All of the participants have an higher education and are exposed to the postmodernists idea of strategic thinking.⁶

Experiment 1:

The first experiment had the panels in a fixed order and a descriptive sentence to each so as to aid the narrative thinking (Fig 1). The participants were asked to read the comic

³ Immersion and Emotion: Their Impact on the Storytelling by Rosa M. Baños, Ph.D. Departamento de Personalidad, Facultad de Psicología, Universitat de València, Avda. Blasco Ibañez, 21, 46010-València, Spain.

⁴ Immersion, Creation and States on Mind by Yulia Marouda (November 25, 2016).

⁵ The Concept of Flow by Jeanne Nakamura & Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Oxford University (2008).

⁶ Postmodernism and the Three Types of Immersion by Ernest Adams, Gamasutra (July 9, 2004).

sequentially and string together a narrative from it. All of the panels needed to be involved in that single narrative and it needs to go sequentially.

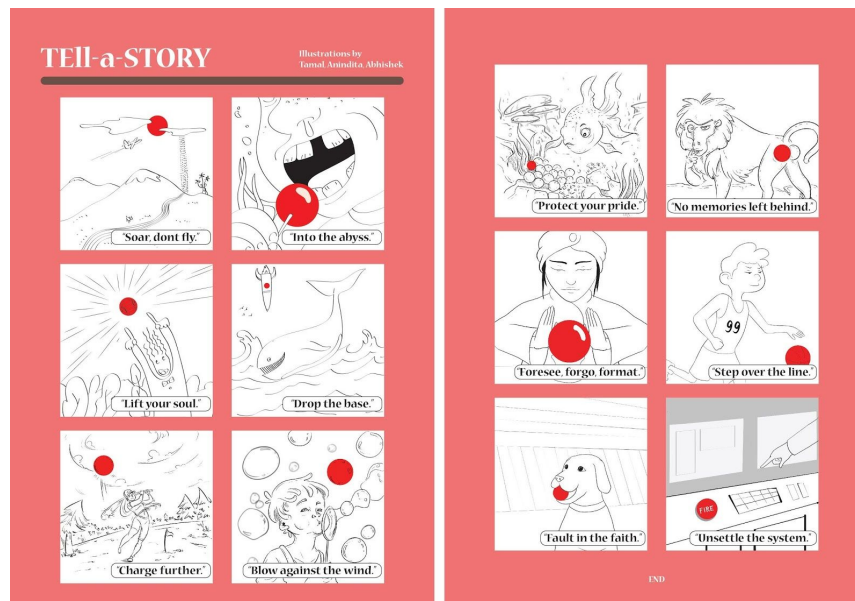


Fig. (1)

Experiment 2:

The next set of comic had the same visuals as the first one arranged in the same sequential order but had the sentences removed (Fig 2). It had only the visuals to guide them through the narrative and they had to involve all the panels and move according to the sequence provided.

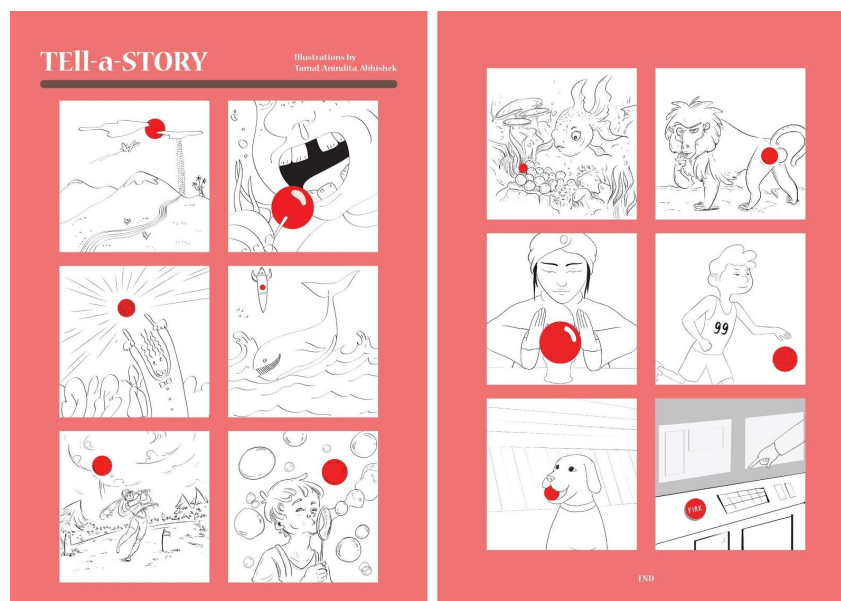


Fig. (2)

Experiment 3:

The third experiment was conducted using an interactive mode where all the panels of the previous two experiments were used but were not arranged sequentially. The participants had the freedom to randomise the panels and create as many narratives as they want to (Fig 3). Their only limitation was that they involve all the panels.



Fig. (3)

After the completion of the task, the participants were each given a questionnaire to fill that would determine the favorable outcomes of whether they prefer the standard format of comic book or the challenges that an interactive comic with infinite endings pose. The questionnaire also determined the amount of immersion and whether it increases or decreases over time and what governs these outcomes.

The first half of the questionnaire involved a clear understanding of what the participants faced as a creative challenge. Methodologically, the experiment grounded on two separate multivariate measurement, which analysed immersion and involvement as well as flow.⁷

⁷ Digital Games, The Aftermath: Qualitative Insight into Postgame Experiences by Karolien Poels, Yvonne De Korte (December 2010)

2.3 Limitations

There were a few restrictions in this examination, to be specific, the amount of accessible assets present in this topic. As the sources that are accumulated are restricted to those that can be secured on the web, for example, online books, posts on sites, and online journals, the situation doesn't allow further investigation of the subject past online sources.

Likewise, due to lack of proper investigative time, the research had to be limited to participants in a small demography and an overall understanding of the immersion rate based on participants Cognitive and Behavioral responses⁸. Also, the experiment could not be performed in a controlled environment and therefore had a small error in the rate of attention span caused by external sources.

Data Analysis

3.1 Readers' Familiarity with Comics

All the participants are aware of standard comic books and motion comics for over a period of three years.

Amongst them, 33% of participants have never read a comic book or found it interesting to read one. 20% of the participants read comics pretty rarely, comprising of short panels in newspapers or online social media content.

20% of participants read comics occasionally, primarily ones that belong to a particular genre of their liking or a loyal fan base of a character series. Most of them read a comic once every two or three months.

27% of the participants are avid readers of comics, having read one book every two weeks.

3.2 Visual Attractiveness of the Comics

The amount of visual attractiveness was also taken into consideration for the research as the images take somewhat precedence in determining whether a reader engages quickly with the content or repulsed. Since the same images were taken for all three experiments, the rate of immersion was successfully determined without any error in visual judgment.

It was discovered that most of the participants found the abstractness (66%) of the comic as the key attractive feature, followed by its emotional expressiveness, broad variety of characters, the presence of the environment and the idea of action and motion at 46% each. Somehow the lack of memorable characters posed as a downfall for the narrative strength of the comic and lacked the reader's attention thereof.

⁸ Engagement while Reading Manga: Measuring Indonesian Reader's Immersion within Manga Universe, Hafiz Aziz Ahmed, Shinichi Koyama, Haruo Hibino (November, 2016)

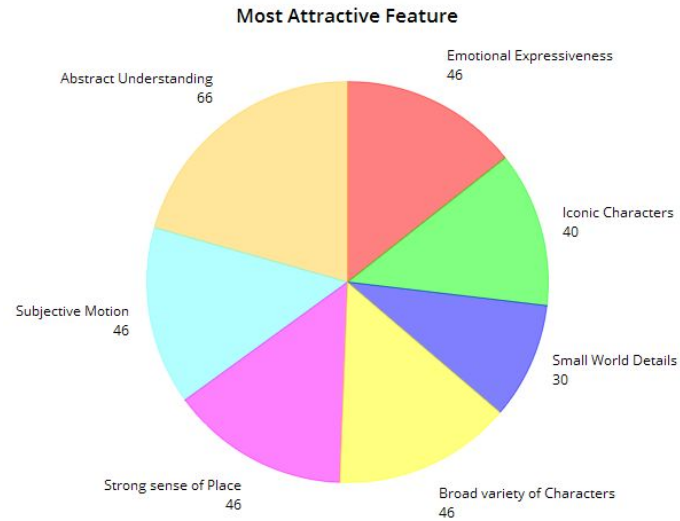


Fig. (4) (Data In Percentage)

3.3 Rate of Immersion Among the Readers

In order to understand the rate of Immersion, a set of two questionnaires were created. The first dealt with the cognitive understanding of the comic piece. The questions encapsulated the factors of how much attention were all the panels calling, whether they felt in control of the narrative, if they had a familiarity towards the role they are playing as a narrator of the story and so forth.

It was discovered that most participants enjoyed the minute small world details that the panels provided and that helped them visualise the stories within the gutter spaces of two subsequent panels (Fig 5) . With subsequent iterations in the narrative, the participants faced a diminishing essence of control, both because of limited panels to work with and also a loss of further ideas. They had a greater sense of being engaged with the characters of the panels but had a considerable lack of presence in the world of the characters, primarily due to the simplicity in the art style that provided little evidence of the world around and left most of it upto the imagination.

The second part of the questionnaires dealt with the personal experience of the readers and their ability to associate with the comic (Fig 6). It was noticed that the participants faced a steady increase in the flow of their thought process that led to an increased involvement in the plot and were very relaxed upon reaching a favorable ending. There was a fair amount of apathy amongst the participants mainly because the main character of their narrative wasn't a human but just a geometry, and so, they lacked a certain sense of empathy for the character.

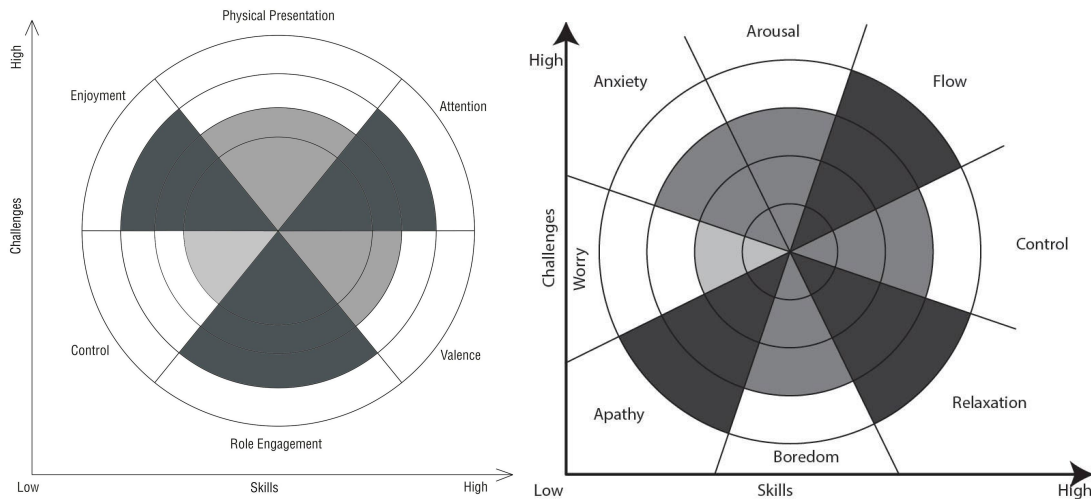


Fig. (5) and (6)

However, seeing that they were determined to figure out favorable endings for the story at large and being invested in that mission, it is safe to assume that there was a level of immersion amongst the limited source material and a need to find coherence even amongst the nonsensical. This proved the comic's endurance in the form of ideo-pleasure and psycho-pleasure as a positive perception to create a bridge between the user and an entity as proved by Patrick Jordan's theory⁹. Participants on an average spent about 20 minutes of their time investing in the comic after which they either faced a diminishing interest or had a time crunch.

Discussions

After a detailed insight into the experiment it was understood that out of all the participants, 80% preferred the interactive comic over the standard comic style. Out of the participants who read comics often almost half of them have chosen to stick with the standard comic style because of familiarity factor and prefer the style in their comfort zone rather than experimenting with newer technologies. Most of the participants who read comics occasionally or pretty rarely are more open towards the new technique of interactive comic. For experiment one, it proved to be a greater challenge to everybody because of an added limitations of words and most of the participants tried to connect the sentences rather than the visuals itself. The words took precedence over the visuals. This broke the flow in most participants as it posed quite a challenge to have both the visuals and the words take part in a singular narrative. All participants preferred the solo visuals to create the narrative. Looking into the pattern of interest, it is safe to assume that the interactive comic had a higher rate of immersion because of the freedom in choosing the narrative style. However, all participants tried to spin the narrative around the red circle. While most participants

⁹ Engagement while Reading Manga: Measuring Indonesian Reader's Immersion within Manga Universe, Hafiz Aziz Ahmed, Shinichi Koyama, Haruo Hibino (November, 2016)

associated it with a shape shifting ball, some went ahead with metaphorizing it with Greed or with an alternative energy source. While some stories had regular narratives at phase value of the visuals, most of them were fantastical stories about magic, shamans and world destruction.

The immersion rate was largely determined by two different factors, their physical presence and their social presence in the narrative. Considering Gestalt's principles¹⁰, it is likely that the participants found resemblance in panels that had similarities within themselves. They formed separate packets of panels that had something or the other to do with sports, panels to do with animals and panels that were related with a state of element like water or air. They spent more time in finding correlations between the larger packets.

A general behavioral pattern can be drawn from the data that concludes that more the imaginative capabilities of the participants, the greater were their Immersion factorial in the Interactive Comic. In an average, most participants chose upto two iterations of the narrative, with a gradual incline in the rate of Immersion from the first narrative to a second and then a steep decline in interest. The decline in the immersion rate was mainly due to time constraint, lack of multiple narrative ideas or the visuals losing its aesthetic value after a period of time. Most of the participants agreed to find the interactive comic appealing and would like to try it some other time, owing to the fact that repeated iterations in a single sitting causes a strain in their thought process and as a result a loss in their attention span.

Conclusion

Being a part of a research to investigate on the future of Interactive Comic with multiple narrative and its effect of readers capabilities, it is safe to conclude that the visual and cognitive challenges that the multiple narratives posed were sufficiently welcomed amongst a large group of people. Both owing to the opportunity of being actively involved in the future of the characters and the climax of an epic, it brought forth a great emotional attachment to the characters at hand and a sense of control rather than being a passive audience to some else's story.

The research can further be explored at large and is only in its primary stage of study amongst a limited number of participants and does not reflect the ideologies of the Comic community at large. Nonetheless, the positive outcome of the research opens a plethora of opportunities to delve in the psyche of the community and calls forth more opportunities for research.

¹⁰ Gestalt's Theory in Interactive Media Design by Lisa Graham, Associate Professor at University of Texas (2008)

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