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## **Kick-Ass Version 2.0: The Superhero's Navigation of Comic Books, Film and Digital Media**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Formal properties of comics and digital media are represented through stylistic devices in the comic book and film adaptation of *Kick-Ass*. The interaction between the formal properties of different mediums can be understood through Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's (2000) *concept of remediation*, in which mediums influence and borrow from one another in a constant process. By discussing ways in which these interactions are presented in the both versions of *Kick-Ass*, this article explores comparisons that these texts suggest to exist between the spatio-temporal properties of, and experiences offered by, comics and digital media. Furthermore, analysis of the adaptation reveals that specific aspects of Hollywood technique, and the impact of digital technology on cinema, enable film to interrogate formal relationships between comics and digital media. The article also argues that the comparable types of control over spatial construction and temporal flow that comics and digital media offer audiences is paralleled by the actions of the protagonists in *Kick-Ass*, who achieve the spatio-temporal liberation superheroes enjoy by networking themselves through social media and utilising digital technologies.



## INTRODUCTION

Superheroes rarely age and yet are constantly adapting to the demands of new media. Studying the movements of the superhero from comic books into digital media can enable us to interrogate relations between the formal properties of these mediums. The *Kick-Ass* comic book (Millar, Romita Jr. and Palmer 2010) and film adaptation (2010) are ideal texts through which this can be explored. In following the attempts of a teenager to recreate the kinds of superheroic feats found in comic books through the aid of social media and digital technologies, these texts explicitly consider the compatibility of popular comic book narratives and digital media. The self-reflexive nature of the texts comments on form as well as content, with both providing representations of different media that outline formal similarities and distinctions between mediums.

Formal interactions between different mediums are illuminated by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's (2000) concept of "remediation", which will be outlined prior to my analysis of *Kick-Ass*. I will then discuss stylistic devices in the *Kick-Ass* comic book that represent different forms of media, and analyse comparable sequences in the film. This will enable exploration of what the texts themselves suggest to be the relations between the formal properties of, and experiences offered by, comics books in their traditional print form and digital media. While 'digital media' encompasses a broad range of objects and practices, the main forms evident in the diegesis of both versions of *Kick-Ass*, and to which this article primarily refers, are social media and digital distribution services available on the World Wide Web. The Web is a key platform through which digital comics are currently accessed, so analysis of ways in which the forms it enables relate to comics will further an understanding of the potential for comics to utilise digital formats. Other types of digital media that will be discussed are videogames, digital surveillance technologies and digital production techniques, particularly in regard to film.

I will finish by demonstrating how, in the film adaptation of *Kick-Ass*, the protagonist becomes a superhero through his use of digital media. This implies that the kinds of spatial and temporal mastery offered by comics and digital media are comparable to the abilities wielded by superheroes, which enable even the ones without superpowers to transcend restrictions placed on movement by the laws of physics, laws of man or social conventions. To provide the



foundations for this analysis I will first establish that spatio-temporal freedoms have been exhibited by superheroes and enabled by their utilisation of media, decades prior to the invention of digital technology.

## **SUPERMAN AND HIS MEDIA**

From their conception superheroes have broken physical laws and traversed different mediums. *Action Comics #1* (Siegel and Shuster 1938), widely considered the birth of the superhero genre, introduced the world to Superman, whose ability to leap an eighth of a mile allowed him to traverse great distances. His leaps turned to full flight as he soared from comic books to radio, cartoons, film serials and television. This flight soon allowed him to not only freely traverse space, but usurp temporal linearity when, in Golden Age comics, he developed the ability to fly through the time barrier. Superman's temporal mastery is cemented in cultural memory by the finale to *Superman: The Movie* (1978), in which he flies so fast around the earth that he causes it to rotate backward, which reverses the flow of time.

Superman's spatio-temporal liberation is rearticulated in hundreds of other superheroes, from Spider-Man swinging between skyscrapers to the X-Men's repeated encounters with their future counterparts. These fantastic excursions act as potent metaphors for the freedoms enabled by modernity. "Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound!" This familiar line, first used in the Fleischer Studios *Superman* cartoons (1941-1942), pits Superman against other wonders of modernity. The juxtaposition reveals that Superman represents man's ability to move ever faster, build ever higher. It is highly appropriate that the advances in the printing press that allowed comic books, and thereby superheroes, to proliferate, were also utilised by Superman's alter ego, Clark Kent. From his early days Clark utilised his role as a journalist to locate criminals for Superman to defeat, with print media often being a central arena in the fight for truth and justice. For instance, in a story titled "Campaign Against the Planet" from *Superman #5* (Siegel and Shuster 1940) a corrupt politician gains control over an influential newspaper, the *Morning Pictorial*, and uses it to run smear campaigns against honest politicians and police. Clark counteracts by publishing an article in the *Daily Planet* that reveals the truth, leading to war between the two newspapers in which thugs attack *Daily Planet* delivery trucks. Upon halting the flow of false information by



destroying the *Morning Pictorial's* delivery trucks and exposing the corrupt politician, Superman eradicates dishonest media.

It is therefore evident that, while representing the freedoms enabled by technological evolution, superheroes also employ media in their fight against evil. In Golden Age *Superman* comics the newspaper was the best form of media for quickly disseminating messages throughout society, but superheroes in the twenty-first century can utilise a diverse range of digital media. While this new media landscape may be different from that which superheroes originally inhabited, Bolter and Grusin's concept of remediation demonstrates that its mechanisms are rooted in the media by which it was prefigured.

## REMEDIATION

Remediation is a process whereby mediums develop through borrowing from and refashioning one another. Due to these ongoing interactions, Bolter and Grusin posit that “no medium, it seems, can now function independently and establish its own separate and purified space of cultural meaning” (2000, 55). This indicates a shared space inhabited by different mediums in which they are constantly engaged in reciprocal borrowings. However, this space is not one in which mediums simply flow seamlessly into one another; it is governed by the “double logic of remediation” (2). The two logics are “immediacy”, which is the desire to erase all traces of mediation and experience media as if it were reality, and “hypermediacy”, which delights in the multiplication of media. Bolter and Grusin elucidate:

If the logic of immediacy leads one either to erase or to render automatic the act of representation, the logic of hypermediacy acknowledges multiple acts of representation and makes them visible. Where immediacy suggests a unified visual space, contemporary hypermediacy offers a heterogeneous space, in which representation is conceived of not as a window on to the world, but rather as ‘windowed’ itself – with windows that open on to other representations or other media (33-34).

Describing hypermediacy as windowed alludes to the windowed design of popular computer operating systems. Indeed, Bolter and Grusin state that “the practice of hypermediacy is most evident in the heterogeneous ‘windowed style’ of World Wide Web pages” (31). However, they also trace the style back to artefacts such as medieval illuminated manuscripts (34). This



parallels Scott McCloud's demonstration that the formal traits he attributes to comics were evident centuries before the invention of the printing press, offering the *Bayeux Tapestry* as an example of medieval comic (1994, 12-13). The presence of text alongside images on medieval manuscripts and the Bayeux Tapestry situates them both as examples of hypermediacy, as they each deploy multiple representational forms in discrete units. This comparison reveals that another prime example of a medium that operates through the logic of hypermediacy is comics.

The formal relation between comics and a computer's graphical user interface (GUI) is further demonstrated by the fact that McCloud's definition of comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (1994, 9), describes many features of a GUI. Both comics and GUIs arrange different representational forms, primarily discrete units of image and text, spatially. Comics and GUIs offer 'panelled' and 'windowed' experiences, respectively.

Comics and digital media also reciprocally remediate each other. For instance, while many comics artists now use digital software at various, if not all, stages in their work, digital interfaces remediate representational forms associated with comics. Bolter and Grusin cite the use of speech balloons (a representational unit combining text and image that is culturally associated with comics) in visual Multiuser Dungeons (virtual spaces in which networked computer users communicate to create a narrative) as a remediation of comics (2000, 262). In recent years the deployment of speech balloons in digital media has gained greater prominence, with them becoming the standardised form in which text messages are displayed on smartphones. Meanwhile, the kinds of abbreviations and phonetic spellings found in text messages reflect the phonetic language associated with comics, while the integration of emoticons into text messages recalls how speech balloons in comics can contain images.

In one form of hypermediacy on a GUI, "different programs, representing different media, can appear in each window" (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 47). Comics can function comparably, constructing panels to represent different media. For instance, from the Golden Age, *Superman* comics have featured panels taken up by newspapers with headlines conveying important narrative information. Elsewhere, *The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller and Janson 2002) deploys panels shaped like analogue television screens, complete with rounded edges, while *Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbons 1987) presents excerpts from books published within the diegesis. Like GUIs, the hypermediated nature of comics makes them well equipped to represent other media.



It should be noted that comics and digital media can oscillate between hypermediacy and immediacy, between providing windows to a range of different forms and then erasing the frames. For instance, an image in a comic can take up a whole page or double-page spread, thereby offering no other panels to compete for the reader's attention. Similarly, a user of a computer can expand a window so that it takes up the full screen. The double logic of remediation, embedded in the construction and experience of comics and GUIs, is represented in the comic book and film of *Kick-Ass* and, through this, formal relations between comics and digital media are illuminated.

### **WINDOWED PANELS**

The first panel of *Kick-Ass* depicts the figure of the superhero at an intersection between different mediums. Though presented in a comic, the captioned narration states "all those comic book movies and television shows, you'd think at least one eccentric loner would have stitched himself a costume" (Millar, Romita Jr. and Palmer 2010), thereby tracking the movements of superheroes from comic books to film and television, while the rectangular panel recalls a widescreen cinematic frame. A costumed man stands atop a skyscraper, silhouetted against a city skyline, the sunrise exuding adventure and romance in this heroic cliché. When the figure falls to his death in the proceeding panels, in a failed attempt at flight, the comic announces its desire to interrogate superhero conventions. Characters in *Kick-Ass* need more than just the iconography of a superhero. They must utilise media to gain spatio-temporal freedoms and have their roles as superheroes socially ascribed.

The properties of such media are demonstrated in the comic's construction, which is rife with remediations that juxtapose the spatio-temporal functions of different media against one another. In the opening panel the captioned narration is in the past tense. This continues throughout the comic, with the protagonist, Dave Lizewski, recounting the events depicted in the images from an unspecified moment. However, although the text and images occupy different moments, spatially they are presented together, on the same page. This recalls McCloud's assertion that "in the world of comics, time and space are one and the same" (1994, 100), evidenced through the fact that time can unfold within individual panels and across sequences of panels. While different panels displayed on the same page can represent different moments,



the past tense narration in *Kick-Ass* demonstrates that different units of text and image within a panel can also represent different moments.

The ability for comics to depict different moments simultaneously through spatial arrangement of representational forms enables them to represent the spatio-temporal properties of other mediums. For instance, the sequence that presents excerpts from Hit Girl's diary offers another contradiction between the temporal locations of the captions and images. The captions are in the present tense, but are designed to represent handwriting on lined paper, therefore situating them as old media. Furthermore, the images that accompany them have a sepia tint associated with old photos. Stylistic devices therefore represent the pastness of the handwritten diary, while the interplay between text and image allows past and present to exist simultaneously in the same space.

Different stylistic devices are used in the epilogue, in which Red Mist sends Kick-Ass a digital message, to associate digital communication with the present moment. The captions are presented as Apple Mac windows, complete with shortcut buttons in the top left corner while, unlike the rounded font used throughout the comic, the lettering is cleanly defined with straight edges; the kind of default font for Internet-messaging services. This denotes the instantaneous delivery associated with digital messaging. The accompanying images show Red Mist typing, indicating that the captions present what he is typing at that moment. This is the only sequence in the comic in which captions and images temporally align. The fact that the temporalities are drawn together by Red Mist's computer suggests that, while comics can suspend past and present together on the same page, digital media draws events into a singular present moment.

The notion of digital media drawing events into the present is also evident after Kick-Ass wins his first fight in the second issue, which ends with a full page image of the fight being recorded on an onlooker's mobile phone. The next issue opens with a page designed to recall the *YouTube* interface, on which the fight is being replayed. Although the standard release gap between two issues in a comic book series is a month, here that time span has been compressed by a representation of digital media returning the reader to the events that closed the previous month's issue. Serialised comics frequently open at the moment that the previous issue closed, but it is significant that in this case time has elapsed within the diegesis, as well as for the reader, so digital playback renews past events for both the characters and the reader.



In representing a video in a still panel, distinctions between the spatio-temporal properties of comics and digital video streaming services are apparent. McCloud argues that readers participate in the narrative flow of a comic through “closure”, a process of “observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (1994, 63), where static images and written text are brought to life in the reader’s mind. Thus, McCloud describes comics as “a medium where the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator and closure is the agent of change, time and motion” (65). Readers therefore mentally infuse the image of the video with movement. However, it is ultimately stationary, unlike an actual digital video, signalling a clear distinction between comic pages and digital interfaces. Despite this, similarities are evident. Bars above and below the video offer the options to search for more content or rate the video. If we consider the video screen as a panel, then the user is encouraged to fill the space outside of it with information, just as the gutter between panels in comics is the space the reader fills through closure. Furthermore, viewers of *YouTube* videos can pause and rewind, or navigate to different sections of the website. Comparably, the reader of a comic can determine the pace at which they read, refer back to previous pages, or mentally isolate individual panels.

McCloud labels digital comics that incorporate sound and motion a “mutation” (2000, 210) of the medium, but does not explicitly consider how this challenges, or is accommodated by, his definition of comics. If McCloud were willing to adapt his definition to include such mutations, it may even include interfaces like *YouTube*’s. Meanwhile, a consideration of GUIs that do not incorporate sound and video in relation to McCloud’s definition reveals strong correlations. Rather than exploring this, McCloud sees convergence as predominantly outlining medium specificity, claiming “as the technological distinctions between media fall away, their conceptual distinctions will become more important than ever” (205). Yet, as demonstrated above, representations of GUIs in *Kick-Ass* outline relations as well as distinctions between the spatio-temporal properties of, and experiences offered by, comics and digital media.

Films can also emulate the ways in which audiences experience comics and digital media, and outline parallels between their formal properties, as evidenced in the film adaptation of *Kick-Ass*.

### **KICKING ASS 24X A SECOND**

The sequence in the film adaptation that depicts the video of Kick-Ass’ (Aaron Taylor-Johnson) fight going viral presents digital media as both hypermediated and immediate. After Kick-Ass



wins the fight, an onlooker filming on their mobile phone approaches and asks his name. Immediately after he says "I'm Kick-Ass" the image freezes and is overlaid with the options *YouTube* offers to share, replay, respond or watch related videos as the camera pulls away from a laptop monitor. This seamless edit between the fight and its digital screening presents them as occurring simultaneously, suggesting, as did this event in the comic book, that digital media converts the temporal location of events it depicts into the present moment.

The counters that overlay the image as the camera pulls away from the video create a hypermediated aesthetic, which is accentuated by other media within the cinematic frame: the laptop monitor, posters and a television screen. While enabling the moment in which the fight exists to be renewed, its transition into the digital realm therefore also situates it alongside other media. The shot pulls out of the laptop monitor, into the comic shop in which the video is being viewed, and then draws toward a television on which a news report is replaying the video, creating a smooth transition between these physical and mediated spaces. In sharing the same fluid shot these spaces are drawn together, revealing the aptitude for the superhero, a figure traditionally associated with comics, to traverse spaces and mediums.

David Bordwell identifies "a free-ranging camera" (2002, 20) as a key trait of "intensified continuity", a term he uses to describe popular tropes of cinematography and editing in post-classical Hollywood cinema. The primary intention of this style is "to generate a keen moment-by-moment anticipation" (24), continuously directing audience attention to salient elements within the frame. Focusing on specific elements to the extent that other aspects of a scene's construction go unnoticed parallels Bolter and Grusin's notion of immediacy. Films can therefore utilise intensified continuity to simulate immediacy. In this scene, the free-ranging camera is used within a hypermediated environment to guide the audience from the laptop to the television. This provides a fluid segue between 'windows', effectively erasing the presence of other media within the environment.

In travelling from the laptop to the television, this shot illuminates relations between digital media and television that are discussed by Bolter and Grusin, who argue that "the liveness of the Web is a refashioned version of the liveness of broadcast television" (2000, 197). As the Web's liveness is a remediation of television, in connecting the *YouTube* playback of Kick-Ass' fight with a news report in which it is being screened, the immediacy of digital media is affirmed by that of television. Bolter and Grusin outline the mutuality of remediations between the Web



and television, observing that “television news programs also show the influence of the graphical user interface when they divide the screen into two or more frames and place text and numbers over and around the framed video images” (40). This is again evident in *Kick-Ass* as, like GUIs and comics, the news broadcast juxtaposes elements of text and image. The spaces of different media are therefore linked by cinematic technique that outlines similarities in their formal construction.

In the sequence discussed above, it is only when the video freezes that the hypermediacy of digital media is exhibited. This shift from movement to stillness therefore parallels an oscillation between immediacy and hypermediacy. Comics also offer stillness in their hypermediated construction, but when movement is simulated through closure they gain a degree of immediacy. Laura Mulvey argues that cinema’s central paradox is “the co-presence of movement and stillness, continuity and discontinuity” (2006, 12). Stillness is traditionally evident in single frames of celluloid, which are not isolated for cinema audiences. However, with digital viewing devices “cinema’s stillness, a projected film’s best-kept secret, can be easily revealed at the simple touch of a button” (22). As a medium defined by movement and stillness, film is well equipped to represent the ways these function in other mediums. The enhanced ability of digital filmmaking technologies to oscillate between movement and stillness is utilised in two key scenes from *Kick-Ass* to draw comparisons between the formal properties of, and experiences offered by, comics and digital media. The first presents a comic book that reveals the origin of Big Daddy (Nicholas Cage) and Hit Girl (Chloë Grace Moretz), the second a digital video of Big Daddy fighting gangsters.

As Marcus (Omari Hardwick) reads the comic about Big Daddy and Hit Girl’s origin, the shot representing his gaze enters, explores and then exits certain panels in one continuous movement. As it enters panels the illustrations become three-dimensional environments. This presents the idea that, while panels in comics offer fixed views, they suggest spaces beyond their borders, and juxtaposed panels often provide different views of locations, which the reader connects in their head to create complete environments. The fact Marcus’ gaze transforms the fixed perspectives offered by panels into navigable environments therefore demonstrates how the reader of a comic participates in spatial construction.

When exploring the panels the images are not captured by an actual camera, but are constructed digitally. However, the fact that the ‘camera’ seems to enter the comic from the live



action space Marcus inhabits provides a continuous transition from the physical space to the comic's panels. Meanwhile, the characters have ink-black outlines associated with comic book art and speech balloons are present, while the cel-shaded three-dimensional environments are comparable to those found in videogames, creating a hybrid space that recalls both comics and videogames. Bolter and Grusin state that "with the introduction of digital techniques, the Hollywood style has expanded its representational palette from old-fashioned and still popular transparency to at least a moderate degree of hypermediacy and self-acknowledgement" (2000, 154). Interaction between Hollywood technique and hypermediated digital manipulation is apparent in this scene, as the free-ranging camera creates consistency in an environment that exhibits traits of different mediums. In using cinematic technique and digital technology to oscillate between immediacy and hypermediacy in a space that fuses comics and videogames, this imagery suggests that comics and digital media offer comparable experiences of immediacy and hypermediacy.

In the instances that multiple panels are visible in this sequence they are still, two-dimensional images. However, when the shot enters one of these panels the gutters that border it are erased. It is no longer a separate window offering a fixed perspective, but inhabits the whole of the cinematic frame and, although characters remain frozen, the environment is explored. In some cases, shifts in perspective enable narrative development to occur within a panel. For example, one panel shows a living room, the door to which is closed. As the shot enters the panel and circles the room it goes behind the television, and upon emerging from the other side reveals that police have burst through the door. Camera movement therefore triggers narrative developments within still environments. The stillness and hypermediacy of juxtaposed panels on a page segues into movement and immediacy when the shot enters a panel.

The sequence in which Big Daddy is viewed, via digital playback, massacring a warehouse full of gangsters, redeploys this shift from stillness and hypermediacy to movement and immediacy. We see the video selected from a list of digital video files, each presented as still images in small windows and suspended alongside one another, comparable to panels in a comic. Hypermediacy is accentuated by the fact that the interface is displayed on a television that provides another window within the film's frame. However, when the file is selected and begins to play the video expands to inhabit the whole of the television screen, and the camera pulls in so that it also takes up the cinematic frame. This exhibits a steady progression from hypermediated stillness to immediate motion. The transition to immediacy is not completed



solely through the number of windowed units decreasing until the video playback takes up the whole frame. Initially the video's image possesses a faded, grainy texture, which conveys the sense that this is a recording of a past event. The transition to immediacy is completed when, as the camera pulls into the scene being replayed, the image gains the same clarity as the rest of the film, suggesting that through digital playback the events have been brought into the present.

After entering the image the camera traverses the space, following Big Daddy around. The constant, somewhat disorientating edits are very different from the continuous take in the comic book sequence. This suggests that, while comics allow the audience to manage the temporal flow of events, exploring panels at their leisure, digital interfaces can be typified by a rapid flow of information. However, the editing offers a comparable level of immediacy and immersion as was evident in the comic book sequence. This is outlined by the fact Bordwell identifies rapid editing as another element of intensified continuity, stating that "rapid editing obliges the viewer to assemble discrete pieces of information, and it sets a commanding pace: look away and you might miss a key point" (2002, 24). This commanding pace, like the free-ranging camera, propels the audience through narrative space, focusing attention away from elements of hypermediated construction.

These two sequences therefore utilise intensified elements of Hollywood style to synthesise the hypermediated aesthetics of comics and digital media into cinematic space governed by immediacy. This synthesis is facilitated by the comparable formal properties of comics and digital media, although differences in the presentation of these sequences also represent distinctions between the mediums.

In these sequences Big Daddy's past adventures are suspended in media, which audiences within the diegesis can activate and draw into the present. The diegetic audiences, Marcus and Chris D'Amico/Red Mist (Christopher Mintz-Plasse), are unwanted. While Marcus causes annoyance to Big Daddy, Chris screens the video for his dad, Frank D'Amico (Mark Strong), which leads to the torture and murder of Big Daddy. The imprints superheroes leave in media can therefore lead to their physical capture. Physical actions being enabled through utilisation of media is central to the narrative of *Kick-Ass*. The film adaptation in particular presents Dave's construction of *Kick-Ass* as facilitated and threatened by digital media, while battles between heroes and villains are enacted across both physical and mediated spaces.



## THE NETWORKED SUPERHERO

In the film adaptation Dave purchases a diving suit from the Internet to use as his superhero costume, but his initial attempts at superheroics lack any other engagement with digital media and end unspectacularly in hospitalisation. After recovering he sets up a *MySpace* account for Kick-Ass, recognising that he can use social media to culturally disseminate his superhero identity. This is enforced in the voiceover that follows, in which he states “my hardware was fixed now, I was back and running Kick-Ass version 2.0”. In likening Kick-Ass to computer software he announces his superhero identity’s entwinement with digital media.

Once Kick-Ass’ role as a superhero is culturally acknowledged through the video of his fight going viral, fans contact him via MySpace. This opens virtual doorways between the spaces he and his fans inhabit. Through disseminating himself across online services, which can be accessed through a range of devices, Kick-Ass becomes what Bolter and Grusin call the “networked self”, where an individual’s identity is “expressed in the many forms of networked communication on the Internet” (2000, 257). In fragmenting the self across different media the self becomes hypermediated. The networked superhero therefore recalls his origins in the hypermediated medium of comics.

Kick-Ass’ networked self is used to locate his physical self when Big Daddy and Hit Girl trace his Internet Protocol (IP) address. Later, Red Mist manipulates Kick-Ass into meeting him through projecting into popular culture a mediated image of himself that cannot fail to agitate and intrigue Kick-Ass. Chris’ construction of Red Mist is founded on the staged apprehension of one of his dad’s goons, which gains him television coverage on which he promotes his networked self as being “just one click away” at redmist.org. Therefore, while an individual can have their role as superhero socially validated through networking themselves across media, a networked self can be manufactured under false pretence to gain superhero status for nefarious purposes. It is in his deceitfully attained superhero identity that Chris emails Kick-Ass to suggest that they team up.

Once they meet in real life, Red Mist tricks Kick-Ass into leading him to Big Daddy and Hit Girl. Kick-Ass arranges a meeting between the four by setting his *MySpace* page to “on vacation”; a code previously established whereby a public announcement by Kick-Ass’ networked self conveys a private message. Big Daddy then sends Kick-Ass details of the meeting’s location via



a MySpace message. These interactions between networked superheroes lead to a physical meeting, in which Hit Girl is shot, while Kick-Ass and Big Daddy are taken captive by Frank.

Understanding the power of digital media to disseminate messages through society, Frank live-streams the torture of Kick-Ass and Big Daddy on the Internet, in an effort to discourage other superheroes. Frank therefore hijacks the cultural prominence Kick-Ass enjoyed through digital media. His live stream is associated with the liveness of television when televised news broadcasts relay the stream. However, when an image of the torture freezes it is revealed that a news report has halted their presentation of the stream as an anchor announces “due to the distressing nature of the images we are unable to broadcast the events currently streaming live on the Internet”. The irony of this statement indicates that, while both television and Internet streams offer experiences of immediacy, television’s immediacy is curtailed by external forces such as censorship, which ultimately control the flow of the images, while the Internet grants audiences control over the stillness and movement of often un-regulated content.

Hit Girl rescues Kick-Ass through trumping the immediacy that grants Frank control over mediated spaces. After inhibiting the vision of Kick-Ass’ torturers by shooting out the lights, her attack is shot from a first-person perspective that simulates sequences from the *Call of Duty* videogames, where the player embodies a soldier wearing night vision goggles. This is denoted on the image by a green tint and digital counters presenting the goggles’ hypermediated interface. The shots from this perspective are relatively long and depict continuous movements, suggesting that the embodied experiences granted by first-person videogames offer greater immediacy than Frank’s live stream. This enables Hit Girl to move freely around the environment and take out the gangsters, who lack her digitally enhanced perspective. Once she has killed her adversaries Hit Girl shoots Frank’s camera, halting the live stream and destroying his command over both physical and mediated spaces.

Kick-Ass and Hit Girl plan their final assault on Frank’s headquarters with the aid of live video streams received from Frank’s security cameras, hijacking his spatial mastery obtained through digital surveillance. The appearance of multiple video feeds on a computer monitor recalls juxtaposed panels on a comics page. Just as different views of a location in comics panels allow the reader to mentally construct a complete environment, the juxtaposed video feeds map Frank’s headquarters.



Commanding virtual control over physical spaces through digital technologies facilitates physical mastery of these environments. The liberated movements of the superhero can therefore act as a metaphor for the spatial mastery enabled by digital media. Considering this, it is appropriate that Dave's savvy utilisation of digital media culminates in him piloting a jetpack that was purchased, not incidentally, through the Internet. While this is a marked deviation from the far less glamorous finale in the comic book, and could be seen as surrendering to Hollywood convention, it is actually Dave's heightened utilisation of digital media in the film that enables this flight. Through the successful construction of a networked superhero self, *Kick-Ass* achieves the spatial mastery of a bona fide superhero.

After their victory against Red Mist and Frank, *Kick-Ass* and Hit Girl land on a rooftop and stand heroically, silhouetted against the city skyline, certifying their status as superheroes. This shot echoes the opening panel of the comic, enforcing how, unlike the ill-fated superhero depicted in that, Dave has gained the ability to freely traverse, both virtually and physically, the landscape that stretches out before him.

The narrative of *Kick-Ass* tracks the development of a superhero through his interactions with digital media. Through analysing stylistic devices deployed in the comic book and film, it is evident that the hypermediated nature of comics provides a platform from which superheroes can leap into other media. The superhero's journey from print comic books to digital platforms is facilitated by their comparable spatio-temporal properties. Each spatially arranges different representational forms in ways that encourage audiences to interact with and master these spaces. The reader of a comic mentally activates narrative space, facilitated by the juxtaposition of still images that suggest diegetic environments' dimensions. Meanwhile, audiences of digital media may activate digital videos through the click of a button, or explore three-dimensional environments in videogames. In regards to temporality, while the static panels of comics suspend moments in a vacuum and present them alongside one another simultaneously, the dynamic screens provided by digital technologies constantly renew events and pull them into the present. Each offers a kind of temporal mastery. Comics allow readers to select moments from a sequence of juxtaposed images and travel back and forth through the narrative at will. Digital storage and playback enables past moments to be brought into the present. Comics and digital media therefore offer comparable levels of spatio-temporal mastery and experiences of immediacy through their related, but distinct hypermediated construction. The impact of digital technology on all media allows the spaces between them to be more freely traversed. However,



it is only through mastering the complexities of these mediated spaces that flights of fancy can really take off.

James Taylor is a PhD student in Film and Television Studies at the University of Warwick. His thesis explores the adaptation of the superhero genre from comic book to film, focusing on aesthetic interactions between media, and considering ways in which the genre's conventions shift in the transition from comics panel to screen. Email: [J.Taylor.3@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:J.Taylor.3@warwick.ac.uk)



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