

Scott Pilgrim vs. The World:

Motion Comic

FRAMING THE AUDIENCE

Scott Pilgrim vs. The World makes its intentions very clear from not only the opening scene, but even before the movie starts. The Universal logo sets a tone for this picture that resonates with the classic video game and comic book subcultures that appreciate how it respects the source material. The 8-bit animation and sound frames the audiences' perspective by bringing them back to a classic and nostalgic time for people whose ages are similar to the characters in the film or anyone part of that culture. This self-awareness lets viewers know exactly what they are getting in to and tells them that the film doesn't take itself too seriously, unlike many other comic book movies.

While the logo establishes influence from video game genres, the very first shot calls to attention the comic book medium that inspires it. *Scott Pilgrim vs The World* is a "pastiche crafted from a web of references and allusions that both parody and pay homage to their sources" (Eveleth 9). Alluding to the comic book within the movie is done through a way that many would consider to be 'on the nose'. The film utilizes a technique called kinetic typography to mimic the narrated exposition, onomatopoeia and dialogue that is in comics. Kinetic typography is when words appear on the screen as the person speaking is saying them and it is very effective here by converting the source material (comic book) to a medium that uses motion. Here is one example of kinetic typography executed in the movie. These moments blend the two mediums together very well and it is important to recognize that instances of this technique are always motivated by the story. For example, this particular scene uses it because the character in the middle, Stephen Stills (played by Mark Webber), is being drowned out by loud music as he speaks. Without these effects throughout the beginning viewers would become seriously jarred by the rapid surreal turn the movie takes during the second act. The first thirty minutes of the movie does not have much action, so it is used to establish the tone for the audience and get them in a frame of mind that is receptive to this specific style. By the time the first fight scene happens viewers have acclimated to the pace and visual style of the film so they are less surprised when the movie escalates the surreal video game/comic book inspired aesthetic. Transmedia involves telling a story across multiple mediums of communication and this text to motion takes comic to film adaptation to the next level.



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THE CHARACTERS

Scott Pilgrim vs. The World is a fantasy, action-comedy that follows Scott Pilgrim (Michael Cera) as he attempts to romance Ramona Flowers (Mary Elizabeth Winstead). In order to be with her he must defeat her seven evil ex-lovers. The situation gets more complicated by his bandmates who depend on him make it big and his seventeen-year-old girlfriend, Knives Chau (Ellen Wong). Everyone questions Scott along the way as he battles people with supernatural abilities and juggles the relationships in his life.

Many of the characters in Scott Pilgrim's group of friends are introduced both visually through the film and with a subtext that offers their name, age and a brief description of their character. Many of these visuals are taken directly from the comic itself.

Sometimes the description is innocuous, like their age, but some can actually provide some level of characterization to the people in Scott's life. This breaks a cardinal rule in filmmaking in which professionals (directors and scriptwriters) should "show and not tell" when it comes to unfolding the story and its characters. The movie's use of this technique allows it to



accelerate the initial development of a story that is rife with two-dimensional characters. The characters are highly abstracted and depth is downplayed in favor of dynamism and layout (Wu 6). Pretty much all of the actors portray the characters with a single, exaggerated, personality trait that they wear on their sleeve for the entirety of the film. Also, once a character has an established motivation it does not change throughout the movie; for example, Scott's band has a guitar player who only talks about and shows concern for the band, Scott's girlfriend in the beginning (Knives Chau) exists solely as Scott's love-struck partner and all Scott's sister does is challenge his relationships. This makes them two dimensional, meaning they lack depth. This two-dimensional approach to the characters reflects the fact that in the source material (comic) they exist, physically, in a two-dimensional space. This interpretation of comics alone would not be very compelling, but director Edgar Wright's style of visual comedy and timing compensates for the lack of dimensions in the characters by giving viewers laughable sequences within the three-dimensions that film allows the characters to move in. Striking this balance is important because it seemingly elevates our perceptions of the characters past what they actually are (and they are shallow at best). Much of this is done through slick transitions, abrupt cuts, jarring entrances and exaggerated space.

TRANSITIONS

In an interview with *Scott Pilgrim vs The World* comic creator Brian Lee O'Malley he was asked "did your books play with time they way Edgar does with editing?" To which he responded about how the snappy pace that comes from flipping through a comic was a big thing for Edgar and replicating this was important to him (CraveOnline). When a story unfolds in a comic, little more than a panel with a new setting is needed when transitioning both temporally and physically. In comics, we read at our own pace

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so our concept of time is more tenuous compared to a sequence within a movie. It is for this reason that we are more forgiving in comics when it comes to transitions within the story. A cut to a new location or time in film is typically established visually by tying scenes together or fading out. Story progression in comics can be less restricted by these factors. Certain tactics employed in the movie allows for this unrestricted storytelling to translate seamlessly to the big screen.

One of these techniques includes fast pans that blur the image into a new setting within the same scene. Instead of the character making his way through a house party in real time this allows him to accomplish the same things in a much quicker manner, focusing entirely on necessary interactions. This works visually and keeps the scene immersive because the pans either match the character's screen direction or movement before and after the transition. And as long as the settings are somewhat similar it will not confuse the viewer.

Another technique employed involves silhouettes of people walking in front of the camera as the shot changes. The shot is sometimes matched with another person at the new location revealing the new scene. This works well because a typical rule in editing is to cut between similar shapes and colors as it is less jarring to the audience. This method allows for seamless transitions in a scene with multiple extras on screen. It is also not limited to people, inanimate objects like pillars, cars or clothing racks are used to swipe between shots as well. The two shots are either linked by the screen direction of the actors or repeated dialogue. For example, if the last word said in one shot is "Hey", then the next shot will start with "Hey".

When reading a comic, our eyes will dart around the page from panel to panel and we see scenes play out like a slide show; pacing a sequence using the aforementioned editing techniques gives a similar effect, but with motion, as we shift around a setup while still keeping a fluid pace that does not break audience immersion.



- In this shot Scott and his friends were walking down an alley (left side) then are transitioned into a house party (right side) by a partygoer walking across the screen.

Implementing these storytelling techniques offers no other world outside of Scott Pilgrim and his relationships. Everything is confined to HIS world; the actors playing extras are mere set pieces or mcguffins and all we really know outside of Scott's personal goals is that he lives in Toronto. "The Scott Pilgrim franchise, with its devoted focus on Scott, appears initially not to open the door for much exploration of the world around him. The lack of narrative differentiation hinders world-building in some

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ways, but it is in Scott Pilgrim's generally subversive treatment of tradition, narration, and participation that its distinctive brand of transmediality becomes more clear" (Eveleth 9). This almost claustrophobic look at his life is meticulously structured to emulate the flow of a story within a graphic novel; no interations are wasted and every scene glides by like the page of a comic.

DIALOGUE AND PACING

Very often in comics the story unfolds in the panels by focusing on subject to subject interactions or a character performing a task with each action displayed in multiple panels. Adapting such a thing to the movie version of Scott Pilgrim results in a fast-paced editing style that focuses on each individual character should they be performing an action or dialogue. Typically, movie editors will split dialogue so that a character can be talking while the visual shot changes on the screen. This is done to make interactions more seamless by not bouncing around from character to character constantly as they speak. Comics do not have the luxury of splitting dialogue because we typically need to see who is talking in the panel since there is no audio. *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* often uses these quick cuts as a subtle way to emulate the swiftly shifting perspectives in comic books. This would typically hinder immersion in a feature length film, but *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* makes it work through the visual style. This all effects the pace and makes the movie feel like a roller coaster. Edgar Wright described the dialogue in the comic as fast paced and screwball comedy; he describes his film's dialogue as "rat-tat-tat" all throughout. Establishing the pace early on was important because you want the audience up to speed as soon as possible (Rodriguez). This is especially true when the speed is so fast.

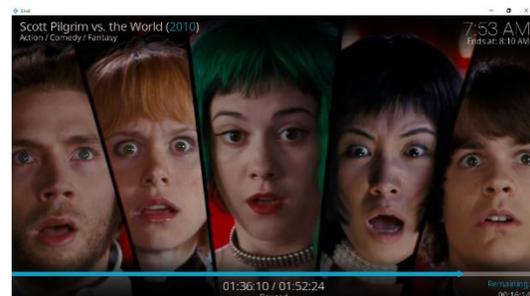


- The sequence above of Scott signing for a package and throwing it away all happens in a matter of seconds. A typical scene in a movie would have this action play out in one or two shots. This style of editing/filmmaking matches a comic sequence so much that we don't even need to see the scene play out in motion to know exactly what is happening.

Sometimes these sequences are not fast enough to convey a dramatic scene in comic book form, so in a true literal fashion the movie will occasionally make use of a technique that directly mimics comic panels and show multiple shots at once. In film this is most effectively shown during a quick mass reaction or a phone call. Anything more complicated and you risk spreading the attention of the audience too thin, which can take them out of the movie.

SOUND DESIGN/MUSIC

The soundtrack for *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* is reminiscent of 80s and early 90s nostalgia and many of the sound effects are inspired by old video games.



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Both of these themes exist heavily in the comic book, so to express them in the movie compliments the intended tone of the original work while not cheapening the movie version.

The movie uses sound effects to exaggerate certain actions as a way to put emphasis on motion. Herbert Zettl's *Applied Media Aesthetics* describes sound's role as the aesthetic energy within a scene, especially in animated features (Zettl 329). Adapting the story from a comic to movie means that there will be motion added to the dynamic, tying all of the other elements together, and the heavy use of surreal effects makes the sound design crucial to energize and make the sequences more engaging. The film will use sound as a way to pull attention to certain things, add another layer of emotion to an otherwise ordinary scene and make a funny scene even funnier.

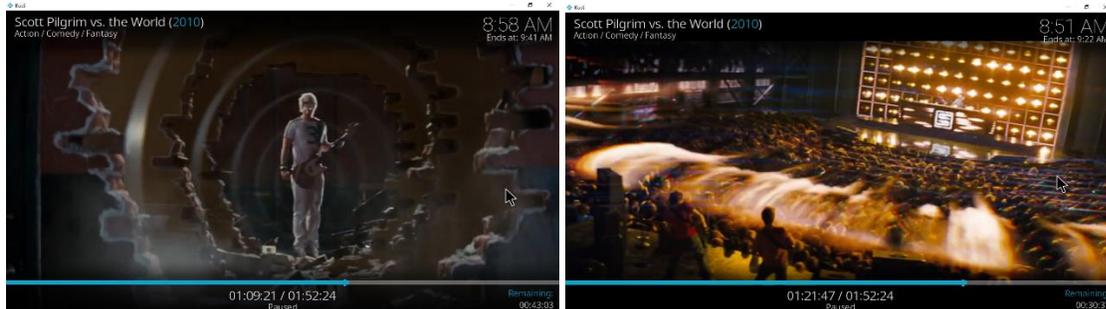


In a comic book the above scene would have dialogue written on it and our attention would be free to scan the panel at our leisure. Lee O'Malley could only convey sound and music through visual onomatopoeia or references to already existing musical themes, the film appropriates recognizable video game soundbytes to further immerse the viewer into its own unique hyperreality (Wu p.9). In the movie, our focus is contrarily being pulled by everyone talking so by adding a brief sound effect to accompany the "pee" arrow above it is certain that we won't miss it. While the comic would not need to worry about missed actions, a fleeting scene in a film adaptation must accentuate the action through the use of sound. The sound is also used to enhance the performance of the actors; the movie seems to be moving through Scott's adventures at 100 miles per hour, so there are often times when the characters' voices are modulated slightly (or drastically) in order to draw more attention to an important moment within their arch that may have been glanced over if the filmmakers had not emphasized it. Using sound as a means for character development is an important tool when you need the audience to feel certain ways or to get emotions across quickly and efficiently. This is effective here because the characters in the movie are already caricatures so further emphasizing certain aspects of their actions would only detract from their performances if they were realistic beings. Since a literal translation from comic to film does not put stock in realism the sound effects fit well within the narrative, especially considering the visuals that accompany them.

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VFX

In an interview with Edgar Wright himself, he explains how most comic to movie adaptations today strive toward some semblance of realism. This movie was an attempt at a “pop art explosion” embracing the magical realism of comic books (*Time Out*). Forgoing this established genre of realism enabled Edgar Wright to deliver a film with a fresh style and unrestricted potential. The visual effects used in the movie play a huge part in this; Edgar Wright also stated that they were basically making an animated movie in post-production. The effects are highly stylized and gives the interpretation a unique aesthetic. An interesting observation is that there is a heavy use of VFX representing sounds and soundwaves.



Comics and graphic novels will often have illustrations that represent a sound as a way to compensate for the restrictions of that particular medium. *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* adds a physicality to sound in the movie. Almost as a way to call attention to the fact that the characters are not bound by paper anymore. Motion and sound are the two things a comic book cannot physically convey; this movie displays sound as motion and it fits well within the context and style of the story. This is a huge reason why *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* translates so well to film; it can play with certain tropes from the source material without degrading the quality of its storytelling.

FIGHT CHOREOGRAPHY AND PHYSICS

At around the thirty minute mark the first fight in the movie begins and we get an uncanny representation of the phrase “every shot is a painting” (or in this case “every shot is a comic panel”).



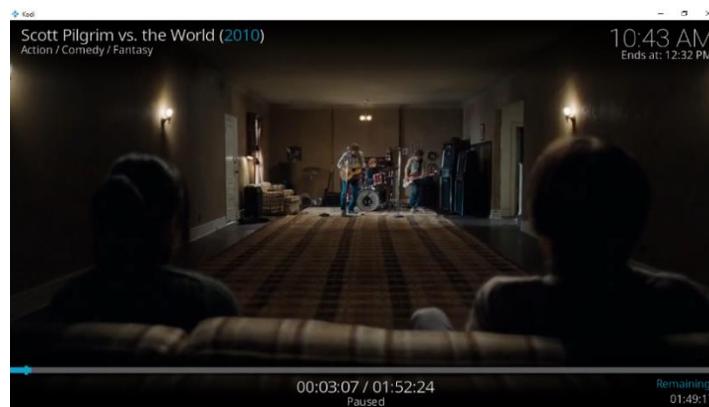
Technology has gotten to the point where filmmakers can recreate the physics in a situation so well that the most absurd of movements can seem almost realistic when executed. A popular action sequence in comics (especially in the Japanese genre manga) is one where the characters are running at high speeds towards one another before clashing into a flurry of punches and kicks.

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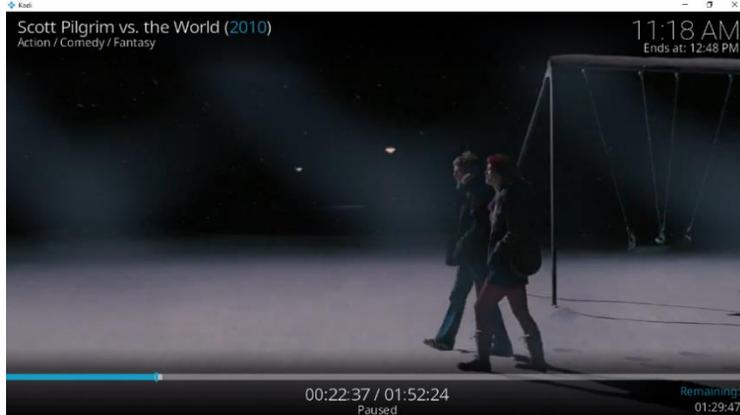
These sequences may as well have fallen straight off of the page of the comic. Also, the shot on the left is one of many that exaggerates the distance in an already established space. We see the gap between Scott Pilgrim and his opponent, yet the film lengthens the space as the action commences. This increases suspense when in motion, but it exists in the film due to a strong motivation to match the source material.

The creation of suspense is caused by increasing the time it takes for Scott's opponent to reach him. In a comic, this is a prime example of the reader controlling duration and movement as they spend as much or little time on certain frames or details (Wu p.5), but time must be applied in the movie to do the scene justice. The audience forgives these visually, reality breaking sequences because the movie established a precedence for it within the first scene when the camera zooms out into an elongated living room. By the time the surreal action begins the world has already been established to have a questionable relationship with reality.

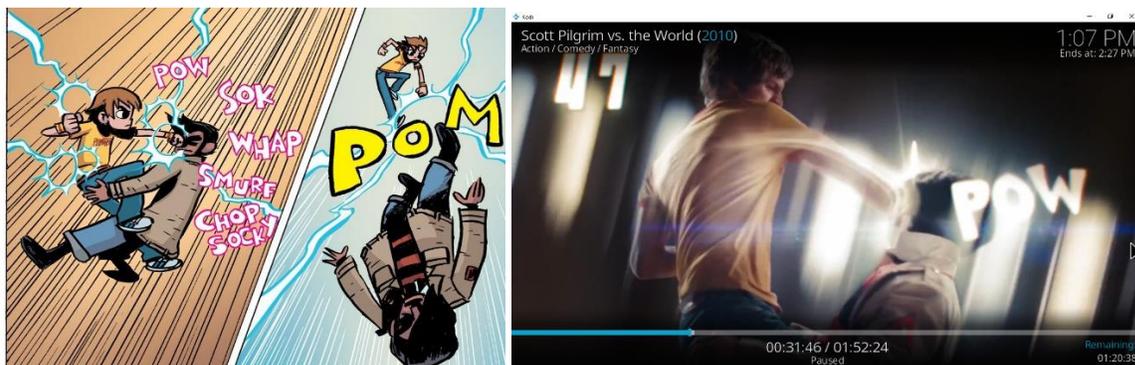
**LIGHTING**

Earlier I mentioned that Scott Pilgrim's world is extremely confined around him. This is made even more apparent through the lighting used throughout the film. Within a comic panel, all of what matters is within those little boxes where the characters live. The cinematography within *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* takes this concept and applies it to the movie by filling all of the unimportant parts of the sets with negative space, or darkness. The comic itself also uses this tactic.

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As a contrast, for the more intense scenes there are many cases in which they use a lighting effect called bokeh in order to mimic the look of the comic. Bokeh is the effect in which lights in the background appear out of focus and soft. They are a popular aesthetic in photography.



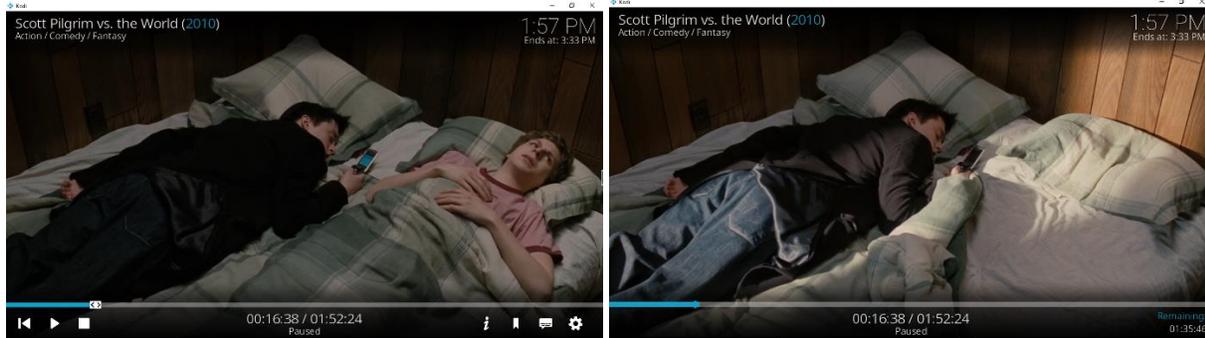
When the film version is playing at full speed you get an effect that compares visually to the lines going across the comic panel. These bokeh are used in many of the fight scenes because the depth of field separates the actor from the background and allows for a very cinematic spectacle.

CONTINUITY/MISE-EN-SCENE

Artwork within comic books is often consistent and maintains continuity throughout the work. Adapting comic to film is nothing new, but this film's translation is one of the closest. Spatially, *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* is very intentional in every single shot. These sets were crafted with the comic book in the director's hand. The article *The Art Direction of Scott Pilgrim vs The World* talks about how "Wright's film flows from scene to scene with such a sense of pace and purpose that every single beat is delivered with dynamic urgency. Perfectly paralleling the kinetic on-screen action, there's an energy inherent to Scott Pilgrim that pulsates through its editing" (Brown).

Certain sequences play with continuity by demonstrating that the creative team has a strong command over mise-en-scene. When emulating pictures on a page through cinema this is an important skill to have.

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- The right image displays nighttime while the following shot is the next morning. The two shots are played immediately, back to back, showing passage of time as it is often done in comics. Little things like this do a lot to acknowledge the static source material.

DIRECTION

It is worth mentioning that director Edgar Wright's style is very apparent in all of his films and that style just so happens to work perfectly with a literal comic-to-film translation. His timing conforms well in this genre and the visual comedy exhibited throughout *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* compliments these character archetypes because they are often either being absurd or are in an absurd situation. The visual comedy just offers a bit of self-awareness and shows that the film does not take itself too seriously.

CONCLUSION

Storytelling across mediums of communication can be held to a fairly high standard when it comes to respecting source material. What you get when you adapt a graphic novel or comic book series into a motion picture is a step outside of the box in many traditional cases. An understanding of what *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* is, comes from the film being a meticulously crafted visual translation of a comic book. Through this transmedia we are given an amalgamation of aesthetic and technical filmmaking that moves these characters off the page and brings the world with them.

Crossmedia or transmedia are occurrences today that I predict will eventually become the norm when it comes to consuming narrative driven entertainment. Transmedia is the branching off of fictional storytelling into multiple mediums; in the case of *Scott Pilgrim vs The World* it is from comic to movie and then to video game. The overarching narrative that comes from transmedia is sometimes called a Storyworld (Bain, Jenson, Sangruengkit, Silman, Zi). Nowadays a story rarely stops at a book or a film; often times they are continued, adapted or expanded through an alternate platform. What makes this convergence of storytelling so relevant in contemporary culture is the fact that audience engagement is a huge factor in fiction today. "Once a fan-base is established, a more complex and targeted narrative can be distributed onto different platforms" (Bain et al). Being able to continue a story outside of the original interpretation is becoming more and more commonplace. "While it's possible for creators to expand on the source material, there are inherent limitations. The original interpretation exists, and more often than not creates a precedent by which fans know and relate to the show" (Summers). A reason why transmedia is largely a fresh concept in 21st century mainstream media is because in the

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past it was all too easy for people to read a book or watch a movie and have no idea that the story was expanded through another platform. This is where audience engagement through the internet and social media comes into play. Online fandoms can further perpetuate storytelling potential and myth building. Depending on the narrative, certain mediums could be more effective at portraying a certain story than others. This makes *Scott Pilgrim vs The World* such an inventive portrayal of cross media that does not lose many elements in the transfer from platform to platform.

While *Scott Pilgrim vs The World* is a very faithful adaptation it is also an interesting case study for transmedia in the modern era of entertainment. It is interesting because most studies in transmedia explain how multiple platforms change or evolve a story to compensate for each iteration of the story in other mediums, but *Scott Pilgrim vs The World* tries its hardest to bridge mediums and make the storytelling more seamless across different media. Even the *Scott Pilgrim vs The World* video game emulates the art style of the graphic novel.



- The *Scott Pilgrim vs The World* video game (above) shows that all adaptations of a fictional story can be translated in a way that visually emulates the source across various platforms, not just film.

While today's technology can bridge visual gaps between mediums, it is often that the way that a story unfolds can be restricted depending on the platform it is told through. For example, there is an immediacy and intimacy found in comics and film that is very difficult to portray in a book, but books offer a means to explore a narrative in a way that would be too time consuming in film. *Scott Pilgrim vs The World* shows us that filmmakers should not be against trying to blur the lines even further. Establishing a brand or franchise is extremely important in today's fictional mainstream atmosphere. The marketing benefits of *Scott Pilgrim vs The World's* inventive aesthetic is that it is easily identifiable regardless of whether you are looking at part of the comic, film or video game. This goes back to the point earlier about engaging the audience; by applying a common aesthetic across all of the transmedia there is a potential for strong engagement through branding. Marvel and DC dropped the comic book aesthetic in favor of realism (although some of their upcoming films look like they might be breaking this mold). That said, their many installations follow a consistent style that makes it extremely successful at audience retention.

The fact of the matter is that "our definition of what constitutes transmedia is still very much evolving" (Jenkins). Transmedia is described as being a means for experimentation, innovation, and exploration

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across all platforms. Henry Jenkins, the man who coined the term transmedia, explains that it has created a space in mainstream media where aesthetic and cultural concerns can re-enter the discussion. He holds the stance that these practices should enable filmmakers and content creators to make richer aesthetic experiences to support engagement and creativity of the fans; to further deepen the stories and performances that they are staging. *Scott Pilgrim vs The World's* staging of the comic through motion on the big screen satisfies this definition and is an example of transmedia that enriches storytelling in spades.

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