

Matylda Sęk-Iwanek*

ORCID: 0000-0003-3576-0838

University of Silesia

GAMES IN FRAMES: BETWEEN COMICS AND VIDEOGAMES

The last few years have witnessed a growing interest in both comic book and video game research. As new means of expression, a form of visual communication, and as cultural texts, these media are increasingly converging. This text looks at three types of overlapping areas between comics and video games: two types of games in the form of comics and the adaptation of a comic book to a game. The dominant research perspective in this text is comic studies. The games are analyzed in the light of the theory of comics and the definition of comics. The purpose of this analysis is to investigate tropes in these games at the stylistic and structural levels, and to identify semantic differences between a comic book and a game.

Keywords: comics, comic books, comic studies, comics and video games, *Florence*, *Liberated*

INTRODUCTION

Interest in comic book studies and video game studies has been growing in Poland for the past two decades. In terms of forms of expression and visual communication, as well as cultural texts, these media have become increasingly intertwined. Not only does it create an interesting entertainment phenomenon, but it also generates new fields of study and academic analysis.

Both comics and video games belong to a class of hybrid and multimodal media¹. However, there are ongoing academic disputes over their hybrid nature (Backe, 2020; Goodbrey, 2014). Moreover, the two media are embedded in the universe of popular and visual-verbal culture (in comics, the verbal aspect is much more pronounced, while in video games *verbum* is often an equally important element). Because games and comics are immersed in popular culture, it is natural for them to interact: games tend to be based on comics, and (in the vast majority)

* Matylda Sęk-Iwanek, Uniwersytet Śląski w Katowicach, Instytut Nauk o Kulturze, pl. Sejmu Śląskiego 1, 40-001 Katowice; e-mail: matylda.sek@gmail.com

¹ Particularly on the level of material – comics are visual-verbal (static) media, videogames combine audible with visual-verbal (dynamic) elements.

comics tend to be based on games. However, as noted by Rauscher, Stein and Thon (2020, p. 2), research interest in the relationship between comics and video games is still residual. Even though games first came to be based on comics in the 1970s, research on this subject is still relatively rare.²

This is especially evident in relevant Polish academic circles, where examples of combining comics studies with game studies are scarce. This is an interesting phenomenon, as in everyday practice these fields have been interconnected since the 1990s. For years the press market in Poland has witnessed a growing number of trade magazines devoted to the combination of video games and comics.³ The largest and oldest comic book festival is a festival of both comics and games (International Festival of Comics and Games in Łódź)⁴. However, the scientific journal *Homo Ludens*⁵, devoted exclusively to games, has not published a single article referring to comics from (any) game studies perspective. The topic has not been discussed in either the few game studies monographs or in special issues of journals. In research into comic books the situation is similar: not a single issue of the scientific magazine *Zeszyty komiksowe (Comics Notebooks)*⁶, which publishes comic book research in the form of thematic issues, has been devoted to the combination of comic books and games. The only two texts which have appeared in comics studies anthologies were written by Paweł Panic (2014) and Andrzej Klimczuk (2011), and no monograph on the topic can be found. Neither has this problem been widely discussed in the worldwide subject literature, especially when compared to analyses of the relationship between comics and other media. In journals of comics studies (the perspective I adopt in this paper) articles on the topic in question appear sporadically, scattered across different titles, and they mostly present only descriptive comparative analyses. In 2020 the first monograph on the subject, entitled *Comics and Videogames. From Hybrid Medialities to Transmedia Expansions* (Rauscher et al., 2020), was published in English. In addition, Daniel Goodbrey wrote his doctoral dissertation on *The Impact of Digital Mediation and Hybridisation on the Form of Comics* (Goodbrey, 2017), but it has not yet appeared in print. In this text, Goodbrey discusses numerous forms of new media digital comics. In the “Game Comics” chapter he defines game comics in a very specific and distinct way, naming and analyzing them, separating them from other comics games.⁷ I mention his dissertation

² An Atari game based on Superman was released in 1979. In the early years of interaction between these media, it was more common for the comics to accompany the game.

³ The magazine “Świat Gier Komputerowych” (1992–2003) published comics by the well-known Polish comics author Śledź; Robert Adler and Tobiasz Piątkowski debuted in “Magazyn Cyberniekulturalny” (1997–2001); “CD-Action” featured, *inter alia*, Marek Lenc (since 1996). These are just examples of magazines which had a significant impact on the development of game journalism in Poland.

⁴ Its initial edition was held in 1991, first as the National Convention of Comics, then as the International Comics Festival (1999), and finally it was changed into the two-branch International Festival of Comics and Games (since 2009).

⁵ A periodical of the Polish Association for Game Studies published since 2009 by the Faculty of Modern Languages, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań.

⁶ Published since 2004 by the Institute of Popular Culture in Poznań, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and the NOVA comics library (UAM).

⁷ Goodbrey selects games such as “A Duck has an Adventure” or “Icarus Needs” and calls them “game comics” – these are particular games built of segments.

because, although his research is close to mine, I do not fully agree with his definition of game comics.⁸

I emphasize that the following study is of a preliminary nature. The dominant research perspective adopted in this article is comics studies, and games studies are treated as an additional point of reference. Nor do I analyze games from the perspective of narrative research. I focus on three different games which in distinct way correspond with the comics, and which were chosen for these features: First, all three were launched in the period immediately preceding my research, in 2018–2020⁹, and thus they have the attributes of novelty and relevancy. Second, from a research perspective it was crucial for me that each of them represents a different game genre and treats the idea of comics as their basis. Therefore, a common substantial element which corresponds with the subject matter of comics studies can be found in all of the discussed games. At the same time, each of the games uses the comics source material differently, as will be presented in detail in the course of the analysis. Finally, my selection was also based on the intentions of the games' creators, who indicated themselves that their affinities to comics made their products unique.

The games I analyze in the light of comics theory and the definition of comics are:

- “Florence” (2018) created by the Australian studio Mountains and published by Annapurna Interactive. This game was released as an interactive story. The game’s creator, Ken Wong, describes it as a wordless comic.¹⁰
- “XIII” (2003; 2020)¹¹ originally developed and published by Ubisoft, a remake of the 2003 game released in 2020. It should be noted that the script, music, and voice acting are the same in both versions. This game was considered a breakthrough in the history of comic book games and was particularly appreciated for its visual layer. It is a first-person shooter videogame based on a well-received graphic novel series; the game exploits the structural elements of comics.
- “Liberated” (2020), an independent action-adventure video game, developed by Polish studio Atomic Wolf and published by Walkabout Games. The game features hand-drawn interactive art in the style of noir comic books, with the intention of making the player feel as if they were inside an actual graphic novel. The creators deem it “the world’s first truly playable graphic novel” (Lane, 2020).

⁸ Goodbrey writes: “game comics have been identified as a format of comic that exhibits some of the key characteristics of a game and uses some of the key characteristics of the form of comics in its gameplay.” Goodbrey focuses on the mechanics of their gameplay and the use of space within the two forms (Goodbrey, 2017, p. 127). I do not define “game comics” as a genre, what I do is to study the relation between comic books and games in three different types of games. In the context of the following paper it is worth referring to the above-mentioned chapter because Goodbrey analyses another genre, different from those I have chosen.

⁹ The game “XIII” is a remake of the game launched in 2003. According to critics, it is one of the most important comics games. For the purposes of this paper I comparatively analyze both versions.

¹⁰ Ken Wong describes “Florence” as a non-violent comic about love (<https://www.theverge.com/2017/10/24/16533918/florence-iphone-game-announce-ken-wong-interview>).

¹¹ The new version of “XIII” received very unflattering reviews (32–39 metacore on Metacritic – www.metacritic.com) while the original 2003 version has a generally favourable 73 metacore. There was also a game called “XIII: Lost Identity” released in 2011, and it was created as a game of the HOPA (hidden object puzzle adventure) genre.

All three games are considered by their creators to be groundbreaking, combining the two media in question and deepening the experience of the presence of comics in the game.

This paper presents preliminary research on the comics formula in games. The analysis takes a closer look at the overlapping fields of video games and comics, and its purpose is to examine the games in terms of tropes at the stylistic and structural levels, and to identify semantic differences between the comics and the games. First of all, I would like to examine the existence and function of the graphic novel elements (especially the structural ones) visible in games. Because the games are analyzed through the prism of comics, the comics features are treated as the most important. The main focus is put on the search for structural elements of comics in the game and the means of their employment. Another important aspect is the turn to the visual and verbal layer. The above directions indicate the analytical key of the paper.

BETWEEN DEFINITIONS

Before proceeding to a more elaborate analysis, a few words about definitions of comics are in order. According to Scott McCloud, comics are “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud, 1993, p. 9). It should be noted that in McCloud’s definition comic books are characterized by static images placed side by side, but they are also included in the category of art, as they are intended to evoke an aesthetic reaction. From another viewpoint, graphic novels are defined as a sequential art (Eisner, 1985), being primarily the language of stories (Eisner, 1996). Different semiotic codes are mixed into comic books (Kress, 2001). We can also consider the graphic novel as an “iconotext” (Szyłak, 2014), understood as a combination of words and images in a new entity.

I treat comics as a graphic narrative art form in a visual-verbal discipline. Comics are based on a systemic and structural construction (with different levels of complexity); they use a frame (also called a panel), which is the smallest meaningful entity, and a page. The structure of comics is formed by the layout and the mutual relations between elements such as page, frame, and inter-frame spaces (gutters), which all contribute to the work as a whole (Sek-Iwanek, 2018). Comics (just like video games) constitute an art which is constantly evolving and, like other artistic disciplines, constantly applying new solutions and inspirations, including those associated with new media.

In existing comparative studies on comics and games the following research categories are utilized: space as time, juxtaposition of images, closure between images, spatial networks, reader control of pacing, tabloidic images, and word and image blending (Goodbrey, 2014). The area of my primary interest consists of two main axes of communication around which the games in question are organized: the axis of iconic communication, and the axis of verbal communication. However, one cannot overlook the extra-comic elements present in games, such as the gameplay arrangement and the audio layer.

Games based on dexterity-dependent tasks, action games, and shooters do not relate fully to the poetics of comics, while puzzles and riddles are thought to be consistent with the nature of comics (Rauscher et al., 2020). One can thus assume that a user can find the “comic-bookiness” of a game in its story and fictional narrative. At the same time “[...] the

word ‘interactive’ is the key concept that sets games apart from other forms of entertainment” (Newman and Simons, 2004, p. 35). The link with the user present in games is discussed in the literature in other contexts as well. Montfort writes that the narrative of a game depends on the gamer: narrative begins with interaction (2005, pp. 23–24).¹² The role of the reader’s interaction with comics is highlighted by many researchers, from Scott McCloud (1993) (who used the term “closure”) and Will Eisner (1985; 1996) (who underlined “context”), through Thierry Groensteen (2007) (“general arthology”) and Benoit Peeters (1991) (*four types of relationships on the narrative-composition axis*), to Jerzy Szyłak (1999; 2000; 2014) (*evolutions of the concept*), Wojciech Birek (2014) (“sylvic forms”), Michał Wróblewski (2016), and Paweł Gąsowski (2016) (*cognitive approach*).

Definitions of the video game often refer to concepts such as “interaction”, “user interface”, “input device”, “feedback”, and “platform”.¹³ Jesper Juul enumerates the following features of video games: (1) rules, (2) variable, quantifiable outcome, (3) value assigned to possible outcomes, (4) player effort, (5) player attached to outcome, and (6) negotiable consequences (Juul, 2005, p. 36). Jesse Schell defines a game as “a problem-solving activity, approached with a playful attitude” (Schell, 2008, p. 37). Perhaps the simplest definition of video games was provided by Nicolas Esposito: “A videogame is a game which we play thanks to an audiovisual apparatus and which can be based on a story” (Esposito, 2005). For the purposes of this study I have adopted Esposito’s perspective as the most capacious.

In this regard it is also worth considering the seminal definition of a play proposed by Huizinga (1938) in his theory of games and play. Moreover, Niklas Schrape refers to Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman who describe the creation of meaningful play and the ability to put the game in broad contexts as the most important element of the game. Schrape treats the game as a system and sees the players’ activities as essential for the game’s entirety. He stresses the interpretative context of games, although he also notes that, “It is important to point out that this conception of meaning is not identical with meaning as used in literary interpretations” (Schrape, 2008, p. 112). He emphasizes a whole set of possibilities of connotations.

In this paper the analysis of games is focused on comic books, their structure, compositional elements, and the verbal layer. The definitions I employ very broadly define both comics and games:

- a comic as a graphic narrative visual-verbal art form (text),
- a videogame as a game which we play thanks to an audiovisual apparatus and which can be based on a story.

In order to examine the comics formula present in the selected games, I pay particular attention to structural, visual and verbal elements. At the same time, I treat Juul’s features of videogames as reference points when I ask whether or not the games lose any of their basic functions or elements.

¹² It should be noted that narrative theory in games is widely discussed in the literature on the subject. Game researchers particularly praise the theories developed by Janet Murray and Espen Aarseth, among other game and folk researchers. In view of this text, however, it will be more important to study components of the comic book conducted by the comics theorists mentioned in my paper.

¹³ Those concepts are present both in the popular and academic understanding of games. It is enough to consult the Wikipedia term “video games” to see them employed.

“FLORENCE” – A COMIC BOOK RESEMBLING A GAME

The first game to be analyzed is the widely acclaimed interactive story and videogame “Florence” (2018), which can be accessed from mobile devices, Nintendo Switch and PC (Win and macOS). On April 4th 2019 “Florence” won the BAFTA Game Award for Mobile Game. This is noteworthy evidence of the game’s popular and critical success.

“Florence” resembles an interactive graphic novel with elements of a game. It is realized in the convention of a comic, but one within the genre of the novel of manners. The plot revolves around the story of a young woman, Florence Yeoh, who matures to fulfill her social roles. The protagonist is in the process of an internal change as she struggles to deal with her past while reconstructing her own identity. In the game-comic she meets a man, Krish Hemrajanich. That meeting is necessary to strengthen Florence’s internal need for change. The game is centered around the protagonist’s choices along her path in life. Florence is an office worker who – following her mothers’ advice – deals with digits and numbers, although in fact she would rather become an artist.

The creators directly indicate that “Drawing inspiration from ‘slice of life’ graphic novels and webcomics, Florence is intimate, raw and personal.”¹⁴ The plot follows a classic novel structure, first depicting Florence’s sad days, and then a change which brings a life filled with another person, love and passion. Subsequently, after a year, we witness the protagonist’s crisis and breakdown. What remains is the change which occurred in the main character.

The game story is divided into chapters and subchapters which present Florence on her path of change. Due to its structure, the game main menu resembles a table of contents – therefore, even at this basic level, a reference to the comic book can be observed (it must be noted that videogames often exploit this feature). From an aesthetics standpoint the game is rendered in a convention of comic-book drawings. All structural elements indicative of a comic book are present in it: an entire page, the frame, the inter-frame gaps (gutters), and speech balloons. The story is told in a form of sequential frames. The technique used in the game employs not only static drawings, but also dynamic motion comics. During most parts of the game, the player deals with static images which only mimic movement (for example, by objects moving in relation to one another – motion comics). The game elements are only minimally interactive, like a map which when touched shows pictures from a Polaroid camera (an interesting pop culture trope in itself); the player must then shake the photo in order to develop it and pin it to the map. The order in which specific tasks are completed is irrelevant, as are the time the tasks take and the amount of energy the pictures require to be moved or “developed”.

There are a few mini-games (or tasks) implemented in “Florence”, such as puzzles in speech balloons, “scratch cards” in sketches, and colorful collages. Sometimes the user has to tap something. The only really creative mini-game is the collage, as the other activities are very simple. The tasks concerning the sketches do not have to be performed in a very precise manner, which indicates that the gameplay is not conclusive, and the main focus is on the narrative. The most demanding mini-games are the puzzles in the speech balloons. Some mini-games contain interesting references to new media such as Instagram (although

¹⁴ Retrieved from: <https://annapurnainteractive.com/games/florence> [21.05.2021].

no company names are explicitly used), online shops, the “like” function, and sales diagrams. The game sometimes requires no action on the part of the player. During the “Let Go” chapter the player must not touch the screen and has to wait until the ghost of the ex-boyfriend remains behind and finally disappears.

In terms of construction, the game is more similar to a comic book (or even a picture book) than to a videogame. It uses static or semi-static images that are shown on the screen like frames on a panel. No typical game dynamics or gameplay elements are present. “Florence” has a table of contents accessible from the menu where the content is divided into acts and chapters, each bearing its own title. This makes it more similar to a book than a graphic novel.

The game’s first chapter is played automatically – it is composed of charts, and the images scroll to the right. In the second chapter the movement of panels and frames is integrated with the movement of the user’s hand (scrolling up). Both of those chapters are almost monochromatic, with only a few colorful accents. One of them is Florence’s box of keepsakes that transports her to specific memories from her childhood. At the age of seven, Florence Yeoh is a character living in a world of colors, where everything is vibrant.

The drawings in “Florence” stem from a strong iconization, simplicity, universality and subjectivity (McCloud, 1993, p. 46). The colors used reflect a creative, and not a realistic, palette (Czaja, 2016, p. 168).

The third chapter requires the user to turn the mobile device over and use a horizontal wide shot, to see an anonymous urban space presented in shades of grey, lacking colors. Interestingly, the photos viewed on a smartphone are colorful, so it can be assumed that Instagram life is more exciting and colorful than the actual reality of the protagonist. The colour yellow (important for its symbolic value of joy, new life, and youth) is introduced by the appearance of musical notes. Music brings Florence joy, and with it her world becomes colorful again.

In the subsequent frame the first speech balloon appears. It is a vehicle of an interesting narrative and structural element, as the balloons are composed of puzzle elements. At first, they are small and grey – symbols of shyness, they are as shy as the first sentence the future lovers utter to each other. These speech balloons then come to indicate the growing closeness between them. The closer the characters come to each other, the better they understand each other and the more the speech bubbles change. They tend to consist of fewer puzzles, as the communication between the characters becomes clearer. The relationship moves to the level of high-context communication.

Another stylistic procedure used to reflect their conversations is the shape of the puzzle elements, which change during an argument. The traditional rounded jigsaw puzzle pieces become angular and then sharp.

Many chapters open and close with the same motif, using a frame narrative structure. In general, specific places and everyday life activities are essential to the game. These things change according to the context and the mood of the situation, such as while eating (together or alone) or while brushing their teeth (as a morning routine or a shared toothbrush cup).

The characters are voiceless throughout the game, even during a heated mother-daughter fight, when we can “see” the voices but cannot recognize any of the words being spoken. It must be noted that “Florence” is, in essence, silent – the audio-narrative layer is not present. It is also devoid of any verbalized dialogue. All of the portrayed conversations are unspecified,

expressed in empty speech balloons. Emotions of the uttered words are evidenced by the shapes of the puzzles which the player uses to build balloons, and the speed of their appearance. Only telephone conversations with Florence's mother introduce a verbal layer, in the form of a mini-game. Text appears as subtitles in pictures, and this is the only manifestation of verblivity in the game in the field of active gameplay.

The game is based on the story, images, and music. The game's moody instrumental soundtrack is another crucial element of its construction. Most of the reviews highlight the soundtrack's quality, approving of its significant role in both the narrative and user engagement.

In comic books, the reader's eye movement is determined by the author. There must be a logical and structural order which leads the receiver from frame to frame in the course of the story. This is the so-called choice of flow constructed by a cartoonist. The reader is also free to choose a different way of exploring the work; for example, by first looking at the entire page, all frames at once, and only then focusing on details. The player of a game, however, does not have the opportunity to choose the order of frames, or to look at the entire chart at any time. The frames and charts progress one after the other, and the user has no choice in viewing their order of appearance.

There is no possibility of losing the game, and the player is not encouraged by any results, points or statistics. The task completion time is also irrelevant. The player's effort is minimal, the game has minimal rules, it is very intuitive, and the gameplay is simple and friendly. The end-game solution is not variable, and – as one cannot lose – the players do not pay attention to final outcomes. In spite of that, the game has the impact of a real-life experience. There is a simple, universal story behind it, which works very well in popular culture. "Florence" is a game which emotionally engages its players its story.

A game's mechanics, story, aesthetics, and technology can be described by means of Schell's definition, mentioned earlier. Schell also highlights another important feature, namely that a game can be seen as "a problem solving activity, approached with a playful attitude" (Schell, 2008, p. 37). However, problems meant to be solved are absent from "Florence", which means that a crucial gameplay element is missing here. If we look at "Florence" through Jesper Juul's approach to videogame features (Juul, 2005, p. 36), it becomes clear that the game lacks a crucial element. Player choices do not generate outcomes, and player effort is minimal. However, Juul also notes that "[...] the classic game model is no longer all there is to games" (Juul, 2005, p. 53), and this allows the existence of "borderline cases". In my opinion "Florence" is such a borderline case.

To sum up, "Florence" is a role-playing game with a deliberately minimized level of gameplay and a very high level of immersion. The assumptions of its authors, who wanted to create a "comic book without words", determines the way of transmission and the shape of aesthetic solutions. It actively employs structural elements of comics, such as pages (also splash pages), frames, gaps, and speech balloons, using them as basic components.

What warrants attention is the fact that the iconic communication axis is realized in comic-book stylistics. "Florence" is designed as a mute game and a mute story, with no discernible verbal components (except for table of contents and menu – yet they are outside the field of the game), and thus the verbal communication axis is essentially not employed. The only signifiers of speech are the wordless speech balloons.

XIII – FROM A COMIC BOOK TO A VIDEOGAME – GAMECRANISATION

The second game to be analyzed is based on “XIII” (Thirteen), a Belgian action-adventure graphic novel series by Jean Van Hamme and William Vance (drawings and scenario).¹⁵

The comic’s titular protagonist suffers from amnesia and is seeking to discover his vague past – the story is inspired by Robert Ludlum’s book “The Bourne Identity”. “XIII” is a long-running comic series: It first appeared in 1984 in the weekly Franco-Belgian comics magazine “Spirou” and has been published ever since. The popularity of this title has yielded several adaptations.¹⁶ What is most important, the storyline of the first five volumes was adapted into a videogame in 2003 to critical acclaim and commercial success, which led to another adaptation: In 2020 a remake of the *XIII* videogame was released, yet this time to a much more muted reception.

The 2020 “XIII” game prologue utilizes an embedded multimedia narrative structure (a story within a story). The game begins with a film screening, where the film is interlaced with the comics. It is worth noting that the remake here uses the scene from the original version of the game – during the “screening” the player is watching the original intro to the 2003 videogame, a clear reference to the original. A comic book (volume) appears on the screen, followed by the presentation of whole pages and frames. A shot which becomes frozen, minimized on the screen and extracted with a frame has its own tradition in film history: “Admittedly, in cinematographic terms, this style is called »split screen« or »multi-dynamic image technique«, but the grid-like composition of the images is strongly reminiscent of comic strips and one could call this sequence an »animated comic«” (Lippitz, 2019, p. 118). The introduction has a retrospective character, and the motif of memories often recurs throughout the game. Most of the protagonist’s memories are presented in black and white frames but are colorful in some cases. Because of that, the stylistics is not explicitly legible to the player/viewer. An onomatopoeic “CLICK” occurs at the beginning and the end, and thus forms the first frame of the narrative structure.

Subsequent chapters begin with panels which are divided into frames and labelled with titles. Animated and moving scenes appear, where the screen is divided into rapidly changing frames. The inter-frame spaces are black, and transparent in terms of meaning.

In the course of the game both thoughts and conversations can be heard, because thoughts are shown in speech balloons and voiced. The balloons are rectangular in shape, and some have direction markers. When the NPCs are killed by the protagonist’s bullets, they utter a sound indicated by onomatopoeia typical of comic books. Some of the onomatopoeic words used in the game are: the “arrrrr” last gasp, “boom” for an explosion, the “crack” of breaking glass,

¹⁵ There are two terms relating to the adaptations of film, literary, and comic works to the videogame format in the Polish language. The first one, *gradaptacja* (game-adaptation), is constructed by combining the words “game” and “adaptation”. The second one, *egranizacja* (game-screening), is a playful way of using the words “screen version” and “game”, as only one letter in the word *ekranizacja* (adaptation) is substituted and where the affix “e-” connotes virtuality. Both terms are used in the genre discourse.

¹⁶ 2008 saw the release of the TV film “XIII: The Conspiracy” (with Val Kilmer and Stephen Dorff). A subsequent TV series was produced in 2011 entitled “XIII: The Series”.

and the “click, click” of a switch. These words are in large font, directly on the background, unconfined by speech balloons. Other graphical elements signifying emotions and senses, typical of comics, are employed. Surprise is shown through “sense indicators” (they were most often used in Spider-Man comics to exhibit the spider sense), often rendered as multiple lines radiating from the protagonist’s head.

The game’s story is based on a comic book; it has specified goals and is presented in frames. The protagonist, the eponymous number XIII, awakens not remembering anything and finds himself entangled in intrigue. The game concentrates on the gradual exposure of the protagonist’s identity and is based on moving to subsequent levels. Even though the narrative is not as deep as in the graphic novel, the game’s story is legible and interesting. The player is focused on a task and a path leading to its completion. The gameplay structure is linear, and the player’s choices do not impact the events. The game mechanics are not complicated: “XIII” is a first-person shooter game with elements of stealth and action. The player can change the dynamics of the gameplay, and while the game is agile it allows for a broad exploration of space.

Sometimes during the play comic-styled frames are visible, which are used to zoom on a thing or to present objects beyond our field of vision. Smaller frames appear in the corners of the screen (both static and dynamic, i.e. animated) and serve the purpose of introducing new objects into the action space, such as an incoming helicopter or running adversaries. However, this is executed inconsistently and accompanies only some situations, and the frames may seem even more random because they are not always fully linked with sound. It seems that the application of this narrative element does not stem from the logic of the game or the tradition of the game narrative. In a similar fashion, during conversations an avatar of the protagonist’s interlocutor appears in a frame located in the upper portion of the screen. Despite that, the game is sub-interactive, as the communication with other characters is only residual and the story is linear. The game lacks the narrative dynamics of a comic. The graphic novel “XIII” has an extended plot and numerous dialogue sequences. The story is to some extent based on relations between characters, and it uses classic instruments and tropes: a courageous and daring agent, beautiful women, political intrigue, corporate plotting, war, passion and victory. The narrative in the game is significantly simplified and the relations with NPCs are limited to forms necessary to the development of the plot. The potential of the original story is not exploited, either on the scenario level or in the structure of the game.

The original Belgian comic book is drawn in an American style, in a realistic convention, yet both versions of the game vastly differ from their comic book archetype in terms of graphic design. The 2003 version, which was considered a technological and stylistic breakthrough at that time and garnered good reviews for its artistic style, was created using a technique called “cel-shading”, a type of non-photorealistic rendering designed to make 3-D computer graphics appear flat. This technique can make an image look like a comic book drawing, sketch, or animation. Using this technique a characteristic paper-like texture can be imitated. Using a variety of methods, a designer creates black ink outlines and contour lines. This design is somewhat similar to *ligne claire*, a technique used in comics to outline the contour with a clear, black line. Hergé introduced this style in “Tintin” – in comics of this type the image is completely flat; in the game shading is added to make the image more

dynamic and multi-dimensional. For a more pronounced effect, the frames appearing on the screen utilize Ben Day dots. In the refreshed 2020 version, however, the images lose their comic-like nature, and the graphics are simplified and flattened. Despite better technological possibilities, the game creators did not attempt to apply new techniques, neither on the level of deepening the comics-like experience nor on the level of gameplay, so the critical response was much more negative than for the original. However, for the purpose of the game analysis in this study it can be concluded that the game contains six distinctive features (Juul, 2005): it is based on defined rules, the definition of the goal is understandable (quantifiable outcomes), there are values associated with each outcome, effort is needed on the part of the player, the player is invested in the outcome, and negotiable consequences are present. Many different measures were employed to aesthetically mark the game's origins in comics. Chapters begin with comics-like pages, while entering into frames (by means of closeups) moves the action to new destinations. Comics frames also introduce different perspectives and planes of viewing the same object.

The XIII videogame splendidly developed a repertoire of icons in its axis of iconic communication, which relate to the game's predecessor: comic books. Apart from the choice of image creation techniques, structural elements common to comics are also present, such as frames, pages, and even a page-turning visual effect. Numerous signifiers of emotions and onomatopoeic signs are used. The onomatopoeia relates to the verbal plane as well. It is the verbal communication axis that the speech balloons and narrative panels revolve around. Therefore, it seems that the work, while unquestionably being a videogame, bears visible characteristic features of a comic-book narrative. And while it is not a game with a thoroughly comic-book gameplay, and its "comic-bookiness" is confined to the visual and aesthetic layers, the presence of comics is introduced effectively and explicitly.

"LIBERATED" – A PLAYABLE COMIC BOOK

The last game to be discussed in this paper is the Polish game "Liberated", released in 2020. It was intended to be a truly playable comic book. To implement the idea, an original script was created, and a comics-like style was applied. At the same time, the whole thing was adapted and transformed into a videogame.

Of all the games discussed in this text, this one adopts comics material to the greatest extent. A telling measure used by its creators is a specific take on a common videogame feature – the "story mode" difficulty setting. In "Liberated" the story mode is called the "Reader" game mode.

The game is divided into four parts, presented in the form of successive issues of comic books. The first shot in the game, showing a comics cover, is followed by a shot of a turning page. This measure, consistently applied throughout the game, deepens the sense of reading activity (the player can even hear the rustle of the turning pages).

Each page presents a chart with empty frames which are gradually filled as the action develops. The frames are surrounded by a white, transparent inter-frame space. Some frames use a measure known as motion comics, used in the other two games discussed here and

stemming from online comics. Some of the frames, mostly horizontal ones, freeze the plot for longer. They are gameplay frames in which the player actually performs specific tasks and controls the character. The gameplay is conducted in the form of 2D animation with elements of side-scrolling, action-adventure gameplay. The game includes stealth, logic puzzles, and fragments of platform games. The chosen aesthetic form is a hand-drawn black and white game in the *noir* style.

The game has a rather complicated plot in which the player impersonates different characters – in subsequent parts of the game the player learns the story from different sides of the conflict. The comic tells a story set in a dystopian cyberpunk world whose government ruthlessly rules and manipulates society by means of new media, particularly social media and user data collection. The plot is built around a terrorist attack on a school in which many children were killed; the attack was the beginning of changes and of introducing a controlling computer system. In the course of the game, the player impersonates, among others, a character who accidentally finds himself in the middle of a conflict between the authorities and an anarchist resistance group. During the game we play characters of all options.

The game shows clear inspiration from comics such as “V for Vendetta” and Frank Miller’s “Sin City”. The creators themselves talk about wide-ranging research which included a variety of games using comics themes, but also literature, feature films and TV series.

The game is accompanied by sound – fairly neutral background music, and natural sounds like city noise, sirens, and sounds of different objects. The sound of the dialogue, in turn, depends on the language version and it can be disabled. The sound of the dialogue in English is redundant because of the verbal messages expressed in speech balloons. In the Polish language version, the lack of sound in the dialogue enhances the effect of immersion in the comics atmosphere.

In addition to narrative panels and dialogue balloons, visualized onomatopoeias are – on a mode similar to the previous games – located within the frame space without framing. The game also includes the aforementioned mini-games, simple logic puzzles. Puzzles are accompanied by a separate interface, as they are solved on the screen of a smartphone held by the character. This feature resembles one used in “Florence”.

At some points, the game selection tree is expanded, and the player can choose options for the character’s behaviour, such as an arrogant or polite attitude, or being in the mood for conversation or for escaping. However, these selections do not change the final solutions: regardless of the decisions the character will go to a particular place, although the length of the route may vary.

The gameplay is very close to the natural rhythm of reading comics. Most of the time we see subsequent frames in close-up, but after playing a double chart (two adjacent pages) we can usually look at the whole chart in its entirety. All the six game features enumerated by Juul can characterize this way of gaming.

At the same time, the game’s creators have consistently applied all structural elements of comics – from references to serial graphic novels, through charts, frames, inter-frame spaces, speech bubbles and narrative panels, to almost static images. The adopted visual convention and the use of hand-drawn images bring the game even closer to a realistic comic in the American style. Thus, we may mark all the elements of comics on the axis of iconic

communication¹⁷. The second axis refers to verbal communication – in addition to speech balloons and narrative panels, there are onomatopoeia, neon signs and inscriptions on walls, billboards, and bulletin boards in the city space. Since this is a cyberpunk game, computer interfaces, AI, and all sorts of monitors are frequently used. All the verbal messages are located on the level of gaming, not in the interface or the game menu. The area of the axis of verbal communication encompasses numerous different elements.

CONCLUSIONS

The history of video games has witnessed numerous games inspired by comics. They have explored the potential of comics in various ways. “While many action adventures and platformers do indeed appear much closer to animation than to traditional comics, one can also find more than a few videogames that do not just draw on stories told by comics but also (or primarily) work to evoke the combination of words and pictures in panels and panel sequences that defines comics’ mediality” (Rauscher et al., 2020, p. 2). “Comic-bookiness” in video games can be explored in many different ways, and new levels of interconnectedness in this field can be constantly unveiled.

This paper presents preliminary research on the comics formula in games. All three games were released in recent years, but due to the graphic form (3D) and the same plot in the 2020 “XIII”, I also analyzed the original game from 2003.

I adopted the perspective of comics studies, and thus the research determinant in the paper stems from comics theory.

As an analytical key, I used the search for structural and material elements (visual and verbal) of the comics. The analyses of the games were organized around two main communication axes: the axis of iconic communication, and the axis of verbal communication. Although these codes are the main subject of my analysis, I tried not to omit extra-comics elements present in the games, treating determinants indicated by Juul as points of reference in this case. A brief conclusion can be found at the end of each subsection. At the same time, it can be assumed that all three games analyzed in this study can be classified as being of the “progression game structure” type. “In progression games, the player has to perform a predefined set of actions in order to complete the game” (Juul, 2002, pp. 323–324). They have a linear plot which leads to one specific outcome.

“Florence”, “XIII” and “Liberated” are playable stories provided to users via an audio-visual apparatus. At the roots of these games one may find the material of comics, which determines their style and organizational measures.

The value of studying the links between comic books and games relies on the awareness of communicative relations which appear when using interactive media. Comics tools of content delivery provide communicative power which might enrich the artistic and cognitive potential of games. At the same time, characteristics of comics applied to videogames do not evoke the need to redefine the concept of the game. Games with comic book elements or

¹⁷ Especially if ‘comics’ is defined broadly, embracing hypertext comics, motion pictures, and interactive comics.

features remain games. The case of “Florence” indicates a wide array of narrative, stylistic, and structural capabilities stemming from comics which can be employed by game makers. This shows that the structural or stylistic elements of comics can be used in a non-literal way, and the game does not have to copy the aesthetic formula of the comics.

The authors of “XIII” used the comic book that inspired the game in a very selective way, both in terms of the plot and the comics material. The game does not employ all the structural elements of the comics. As mentioned above, components such as speech balloons and visualized onomatopoeias are redundant in relation to the sound layer. Frames or charts introduced to the games have aesthetic and semantic meaning – they function as reminders of the original work. The use of the cel-shading technique brings the visual layer closer to the comics aesthetics, although this effect is lost in the remake, owing to the change of drawing technique. Nevertheless, “XIII” is an example of a game in which the applied comics accents are implemented on the level of gaming; they do not constitute a mere interlude between subsequent stages of the game. Given the historical context and the potential of the adopted solutions, “XIII” is the starting point for more games inspired by the structure of comics or for “gamecranisations”.

The structural and semantic potential of the comics is used to the greatest extent in the game “Liberated”, where the creators implement the volume, chart and frame. Moreover, they simulate a real reading of the graphic novel, accompanied by movement and gameplay. Although similar treatments had already been introduced to games,¹⁸ it had not been done to such an extent. Moreover, in the discussed case the whole game is based on this concept. Its creators draw attention to the fluid choice of flow, to the need to slow down the rhythm in favor of comfortable reading of speech balloons. “A really big [challenge] was just getting a good ratio [...] Shoot off too far in either direction and you end up with either a visual novel or an action game that just has comic book cutscenes” (Lane, 2020).

Numerous comics-based components are gathered around both the axis of iconic communication and the axis of verbal communication in “Liberated”. Atomic Wolf studio intends to develop works on the synergy of comics and videogames: “Continue exploring this direction of bringing comics over to a new medium – not just video games with bits and pieces of comic book flavor, but simulating the whole comic book experience that’s then enriched with sound, motion, choices, and honest-to-god enjoyable gameplay” (Lane, 2020).

The presented study was carried out from the perspective of comics research (particularly common in Polish comics studies). However, taking into consideration the opportunities offered by game studies, the perspective of exploring the mutual influences between comics and video games seems to be extremely interesting and vast. The above issues and, I hope, also the areas identified in this text will encourage further reflections and analyses, which may lead to the development of new paths of development and expression in the media in question. I believe that the interactive potential of games can be one of the directions for the development of digital comics genres.

¹⁸ A similar feature can be found in an episode of “What Remains of Edith Finch”, the acclaimed 2017 adventure game. In the chapter “Barbara” the main character finds a comic book, and can read it, which allows the player to view one of the stories in sequential graphic format, typical of comic books.

REFERENCES

- Backe, H.-J. (2019). Komiksy-gry i gry-komiksy. Przeciwno pojęciu „hybrydy”, *Tekstualia*, 3, 58, pp. 71–92.
- Czaja, J. (2016). Kolory i ich funkcja w powieści graficznej „Zaduszki” Rutu Modan. In: J. Czaja, M. Traczyk (Eds.), *Komiks wokół warstwy wizualnej* (pp. 167–180). Poznań: Instytut Kultury Popularnej.
- Eisner, W. (1985). *Comics and Sequential Art*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Eisner, W. (1996). *Graphic Storytelling*. New York: Poorhouse Press.
- Esposito, N. (2005). A Short and Simple Definition of What a Videogame Is. In: *Proceedings of DiGRA 2005 Conference: Changing Views – Worlds in Play*. Retrieved from: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/221217421> [21.05.2021].
- Goodbrey, D. (2014). Game Comics: An analysis of an emergent hybrid form. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 6, 1, pp. 3–14.
- Goodbrey, D. (2017). *The Impact of Digital Mediation and Hybridisation on the Form of Comics*. University of Hertfordshire [doctoral dissertation].
- Groensteen, T. (2007). *The system of comics*. Mississippi: Jackson – University Press of Mississippi.
- Gąsowski, P. (2016). *Wprowadzenie do kognitywnej poetyki komiksu*. Poznań: Instytut Kultury Popularnej.
- Huizinga, J. (2020). *Homo ludens. Zabawa jako źródło kultury*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Juul, J. 2005. *Half Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Klimczuk, A. (2001). Gry komputerowe i branża gier a sztuka komiksowa. In: G. Gajewska, R. Wójcik (Eds.), *KONtekstowy MIKS* (pp. 385–396). Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskiego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk.
- Kress, G., Van Leeuwen, T. (2001). *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*. London: Arnold Publishers.
- Lane, G. (2020). Feature: Liberated Developer on the Challenges of Creating a Truly Playable Comic Book. Retrieved from: https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2020/01/feature_liberated_developer_on_the_challenges_of_creating_a_truly_playable_comic_book [21.05.2021].
- Lippitz, A. (2019). Lost in the Static?: Comics in Video Games. In: M. Fuchs, J. Thoss (Eds.). *Intermedia Games – Games Inter Media: Video Games and Intermediality* (pp. 115–132). New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding Comics. The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper.
- Montfort, N. (2005). *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- McLuhan, M. (2004). *Zrozumieć media: Przedłużenia człowieka*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Naukowo-Techniczne.
- Newman, J., Simons, I. (2004). *Difficult Questions about Video Games*. Eastbourne: Suppose Partners.

- Panic, P. (2014). Bijatyka wychodzi poza kadr. Wpływ komiksów na gry z gatunku *beat'em up*. In: I. Kiec, M. Traczyk (Eds.). *Komiks i jego konteksty* (pp. 143–156). Poznań: Instytut Kultury Popularnej.
- Peeters, B. (2007). Four Conceptions of the Page, (trans.) J. Cohn. *ImageText*, 3, 3, pp. 41–60.
- Rauscher, A., Stein D., Thon J.-N. 2020. *Comics and Videogames. From Hybrid Medialities to Transmedia Expansions*. New York: Routledge.
- Schrage, N. (2008). Playing with Information. How Political Games Encourage the Player to Cross the Magic Circle. In: S. Günzel, M. Liebe, D. Mersch with the editorial cooperation of S. Möring (Eds.). *Conference Proceedings of the Philosophy of Computer Games* (pp. 108–126). Potsdam: University Press.
- Schell, J. (2008). *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses*. Pennsylvania: Schell Games.
- Sęk-Iwanek, M. (2018). *Pejzaże miasta w komiksie*. University of Silesia [doctoral dissertation].
- Szyłak, J. (1998). *Komiks: świat przerysowany*. Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria.
- Szyłak, J. (2000). *Poetyka komiksu. Warstwa ikoniczna i językowa*. Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria.
- Szyłak, J. (2014). Notatki o książkach obrazkowych. *Zeszyty Komiksowe*, 17. Retrieved from: https://www.zeszytykomiksowe.org/zeszytykomiksowe/pdf/nr17_szylak_1.pdf [21.05.2021].
- Wróblewski, M. (2016). *Powieść graficzna. Studium gatunku w perspektywie kognitywistycznej*. Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego.

Submitted: 13.01.2021

Reviewed: 13.01.2021

Revised: 20.03.2021

Accepted: 21.03.2021

Published online: 30.06.2021