

ADAPTATION ESSAY PRIZE ENTRY

Transmedia Adaptation, or the Kinesthetics of
Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World

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Abstract Despite the overlapping vocabularies of comics and film, bridging the gap between the two in comics-to-screen adaptation has proven more fraught than expected. The majority of these adaptations sacrifice the materiality of comics by taking a 'realistic' approach, in which plot takes precedent over form. Although it has yet to enter academic discussion, *Scott Pilgrim Vs. the World* (2010, dir. Edgar Wright), based on the Canadian cult comic series of the same name by Brian Lee O'Malley, successfully translates the text/image construction of comics into cinematic form, which can be seen as a form of transmediality. Elaborating on W. J. T. Mitchell's classification of comics as a 'transmedium', I draw on two notions of transmediality from different disciplines that converge in the hybrid medium of comics: Gérard Genette's paratext, which falls under the greater rubric of transtextuality, and Henry Jenkins's 'transmedia storytelling', or a single narrative that is told across multiple media platforms. Much of the richness of the adaptation's multimedia aesthetic builds on the merging of different pictorial forms in Lee O'Malley's work, in which the distinction between the material and the virtual is already complicated in the source material itself: *Scott Pilgrim* contains numerous video game motifs, as well as sound and music, which are presented as 'visual onomatopoeia'. Highlighting the innovative cinematic strategies and attentiveness to the medium of comics in *Scott Pilgrim*, I hope to demonstrate how Wright's approach to adaptation provides a unique locus for adaptation and media studies in its destabilization of theoretical and disciplinary boundaries.

Keywords Comics, video games, transmedia, Scott Pilgrim, media studies, word and image.

INTRODUCTION

In 2010, Edgar Wright's *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World*, based on the six-volume Canadian cult comic series by Bryan Lee O'Malley (2004–2010),¹ made its debut at San Diego Comic Con, where it was enthusiastically received. The film's release in mainstream US theatres, however, was a financial flop, making back only thirty-one million dollars out of the exorbitant sixty million it had cost to produce. Critical reviews, on the other hand, were polarized. Many reviewers denounced the film's explosive, fantastical special effects and video game references as 'an assault on the senses' (*A.V. Club*), 'a fatal case of flash over substance' (*The Miami Herald*), and 'a disorganized mess' (*CINEMABLEND*). Like most cult movies, however, the commercial disappointment of *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World* was partially overridden by a

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devoted fanbase who celebrated both Lee O'Malley's graphic novels and Wright's ability to condense the entire series into a single film while paying homage to comics, video games, and the overlaps between the two. Additionally, several reviews also acknowledged Wright's unique approach to adaptation: the film was called 'the best video game movie ever' (*The New York Times*), 'the perfect comic-to-screen movie adaptation' (*The 405*), and 'an antidote to the current trend of ridiculously 'realistic' comic book and geek culture movies' (*IFC*).

A brief plot synopsis: Scott Pilgrim (Michael Cera) is an unemployed, emotionally immature twenty-two-year old bassist in a mediocre Toronto-based indie rock band, Sex Bob-Omb. Both the comics and their film adaptation open with Scott's announcement (to the incredulity of his friends) that he's begun dating a high school girl, Knives Chau (Ellen Wong). However, Scott quickly loses interest in Knives after meeting mysterious American Amazon.ca² delivery girl Ramona Flowers (Mary Elizabeth Winstead), whom he first encounters rollerblading through a 'subspace highway' that passes through his dreams. As Scott and Ramona begin a tentative relationship, he learns that in order to truly win her heart, he needs to defeat her Seven Evil Exes, all of whom possess various superpowers and have banded together to destroy the future of Ramona's love life.

While its premise is undeniably absurd and often downright silly, *Scott Pilgrim* also strikes a poignant chord with anyone who has ever felt aimless and cynical in their twenties, while taking the idea of 'emotional baggage' to a whole new level. Video games (Scott earns points, extra lives, and special items after each achievement), comics, and dream logic merge together to create an utterly implausible scenario in which Scott finds himself fighting Ramona's Evil Exes to the death. These epic, action-packed battle sequences (which onlookers watch with an inexplicable lack of interest) combine with romantic comedy tropes to create a pastiche of multiple genres and media.

While *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World* has now entered the pop cultural canon of movies based on comic books, the unique logics that play out between cinematic adaptation and comics—and the products that result—have few precedents in more formal critical discourse. My aim in this article is to shed light on the film's unique approach to comics-to-screen adaptation, which can be seen as a form of *transmediality*. Here I am drawing on W. J. T. Mitchell's classification of comics as a 'transmedium', or a single medium that is 'translatable and transitional, mutating before our eyes into unexpected new forms' (255). Prior to Mitchell's use of transmediality within the context of comics, the concept was foregrounded by two very different scholars: Gérard Genette, whose object of study in *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1982), and *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997) was not a single work, but rather its links with other texts, and two decades later, media theorist Henry Jenkins, who coined the term 'transmedia storytelling' to describe a single narrative that is told across multiple media platforms. Although Genette primarily focuses on literature and Jenkins on digital media, both approaches to transmediality prove fruitful for exploring comics-to-screen adaptation, particular in the case of *Scott Pilgrim*.

Despite the overlapping vocabularies used to analyse comics and film, bridging the gap between the two in comics-to-screen adaptation has proven more fraught than expected. The majority of these adaptations, as we will see, sacrifice the materiality of comics by taking a 'realistic' approach, in which plot takes precedence over form. *Scott*

Pilgrim is one of the only adaptations to incorporate text in such a way that conveys the hybrid text/image construction of comics in cinematic form, pushing their transmediality to the next level. Much of the richness of the adaptation's multimedia aesthetic builds on the merging of different pictorial forms in Lee O'Malley's work: the comics possess an innate *translatability*—to use a Benjaminian term—because the distinction between the material and the virtual is already complicated in the source material itself. The *Scott Pilgrim* series contains manga³ and video game motifs, as well as sound and music, which are presented as 'visual onomatopoeia'.⁴ Highlighting the innovative cinematic strategies and attentiveness to the medium of comics in *Scott Pilgrim*, I hope to demonstrate how Wright's approach to adaptation provides a unique locus for adaptation and media studies in its destabilization of theoretical and disciplinary boundaries.

ON THE THRESHOLD: PARATEXT AS TEXT

Although Gérard Genette is most known for his work on paratext, for him paratext falls under the greater rubric of transtextuality,⁵ or 'all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts' (*"Palimpsests"* 1). Paratext, or any material viewed as supplementary to the text, such as the title page or author's name, is itself a transmedium, although Genette does not go so far as to use the term. Because paratext need not be purely textual, however—illustrations are considered paratextual—Genette's statement that a paratext is 'more than a boundary or sealed border. . . [but] rather, a threshold' (*"Paratexts"* 1–2), suggests that images can be intertextual, and vice versa. But although Genette himself emphasizes the open-endedness of the threshold, he has difficulty applying his methodology as systematically to visual media, because 'there are differences, sometimes of a fundamental nature, in the modes of existence and reception, in the ontological status of the works . . . and meaning comes about differently too' (*"Palimpsests"* 391–2). In many ways, Genette's extension of the analysis of images as paratextual becomes confused by the central privilege granted to 'text' and textuality. As a result, he does not acknowledge how transtextuality is complicated by the interaction between two or more *different* materials or media. The paratext is an 'instrument of adaptation' (*"Palimpsests"* 407), the vehicle that transposes texts from one medium to another. What does adaptation represent but breaking boundaries, breaching the threshold Genette says is 'meant to be crossed' (*"Palimpsests"* 410)?

If paratext can be seen as enabling transmedia discourse or adding to a source's translatability, the medium of comics also sheds light on how this process takes place. In comics the paratext takes on new significance: every piece of text and image, including those that appear before and after the primary body of the narrative, is both paratext *and* text. Captions and speech bubbles can hardly be considered supplementary to framed images—every part of a comic strip or graphic novel, be it the handwritten copyright page or the font and placement of each word, takes part in a self-contained dialogue between different media. Within the medium of comics, the boundaries between supplementary material and primary narrative disappear, as do those between text and image.

COMICS-TO-SCREEN ADAPTATION

Because of the overlapping vocabularies used to analyse comics and film (their use of framing, motion, and respective relationships to consumer culture, to name of a few), adapting

comics into film (and vice versa) is hardly a novel concept. Not all adaptations take a trans-medial approach, however; live action films⁶ often sacrifice the materiality of comics to realism, prioritizing plot and action over form. To take a recent example, the French art film *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (Abdellatif Kechiche, 2013), based on the graphic novel by Julie Maroh, erases all traces of its hand-drawn origins through cinematic realism; many viewers watched the film without any knowledge of its source material. Terry Zwigoff's *Ghost World* (2001), based on Daniel Clowes' serialized graphic novel, conveys a more 'cartoonlike' atmosphere through its saturated colour palette (an interesting choice, since the only colours in the graphic novel are various tints of blue-green), but the movie remains a film *based on* comics rather than a film *about* comics.

Sin City's (Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez, 2005) highly stylized use of colour (the film was shot in colour, then converted to black-and-white with digitally enhanced colour accents on select objects) and fidelity to the Frank Miller series come closest to embracing the materiality of the comics medium. The sleek neo-noir style of the film, one of the first to be shot on a digital backlot, is very different from what we see in *Scott Pilgrim*, whose whimsicality and self-awareness mean that no amount of illogicality is off limits. The incorporation of both diegetic and extradiegetic text, split screens, and hand-drawn sequences based on Lee O'Malley's original designs result in a viewing experience that feels more like reading a comic book than watching a film.

Unfortunately, it is possible that such whimsical cinematic devices have also caused the film to be taken less seriously. In a word, *Scott Pilgrim* was not considered an 'auteur' film, or even an experimental one. Ironically, the juxtaposition of photographic images with hand-rendered ones was once considered innovative and transgressive—avant-garde filmmakers such as Hans Richter, Man Ray, and Fernand Léger (whose 1924 *Ballet Mécanique* splices letters and images together to create a series of visual puns) sought to escape the commercial confines of mainstream cinema through their work. Many of these directors were primarily visual artists, targeting their films towards a selective artistic 'elite'. To take a contrasting example, Alfred Hitchcock's widely-seen and celebrated *Vertigo* (1958) was praised as aesthetically and culturally significant in part because of its unprecedented computer animations. Possibly the first movie to use computer-generated graphics (*Rhizome*), *Vertigo* included abstract animated series (designed by Saul Bass), both in the spiraling title credits and the famously psychedelic 'nightmare sequence', that were inserted into an otherwise realistically shot film.

Similar techniques in comics-to-screen adaptations, however, have not been so well received. Cinematic innovations and technological developments over the past fifty years have pressured films to conform to a higher degree of realism, or the simulation of a continuous reality within a single frame. Because devices such as the split-screen destroy this illusion of continuity, they inevitably result in a certain degree of self-referentiality that is often dismissed as camp or artifice. The original *Batman* TV series (aired on ABC from 1966–68), for example, is frequently lampooned for its attempt to visualize the sound effects of comics, in part because lacking today's special effects, text such as 'POW!' and 'BAM!' were superimposed over still frames, ironically pausing the action rather than conveying it. In a similar vein, Ang Lee's 2003 *Hulk* was a commercial fiasco—among numerous other points of critique, Lee's attempt to use split-screen

technique was critiqued as gimmicky and overly self-conscious, a comic book adaptation attempting to be an ‘auteur’ film.

Unlike the 1960s *Batman*, the use of visual onomatopoeia in *Scott Pilgrim* seamlessly merges reality and illusion, which seems apt for a storyline in which the two are indistinguishable. Despite the impossibility of the events that ensue, both viewers and characters suspend their disbelief; Wright states in an interview that the film was ‘an attempt to embrace the magical realism of comic books’ (*Time Out London*). Whereas *Batman*’s ‘action’ words were clearly situated in an extradiegetic space, words in *Scott Pilgrim* are used visually and texturally. When Sex Bob-Omb’s drummer Kim mimes shooting herself in the head, ‘BLAM!’ appears in the air next to her, recorded sound and image moving perfectly in sync (Figure 1). Each time the doorbell rings, ‘DING DONG’ appears on the screen, each syllable in complete synchronization with the ringing—that is, when ‘DONG’ appears, ‘DING’ has already disappeared. The result is an illusionistic synthesis of image, text, and sound in which words have their own materiality. Each font seems to have its own personality and substance; ‘DING DONG’ dissolves ephemerally, whereas the letters in ‘BLAM!’ rapidly fall out of the frame one by one, like a row of dominoes.

COMICS AS TRANSMEDIUM

Although comics and film are often compared for their use of multiple frames that convey an illusion of continuity, the ways in which the two media manipulate time and space are profoundly different. Unlike the process of watching a film, in which the viewer passively receives a stream of images in a particular order, reading a comic strip or graphic novel requires a greater degree of participation. The reader controls both duration and movement, spending as much or as little time on certain frames or details as feels natural to them. Because comics can simultaneously capture multiple timeframes, there is no single or ‘correct’ way to read them. By playing with the placement of text and images, the cartoonist allows for both diachronic and synchronic reading methods: the reader-viewer can take in the entire page (or page spread) at one glance, or they may proceed from frame to frame in a linear order.



Figure 1. Kim Pine mimes shooting herself in the head with accompanying text. “*Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World*” / Universal Pictures/ Eric Gitter, Nira Park, Mark Platt, and Edgar Wright /Edgar Wright.

Whereas an illustrated narrative denotes clear boundaries between its text and its accompanying drawings, comics fuse the two together, making ambiguous the order in which they are meant to be read. As Tom Gunning points out: ‘Comics do not simply combine words and images but rather contaminate and transform one by the other. In comics, images, forced into a flow of succession, take on the form of reading, while writing regains the dimension of imagery’ (49). In this sense, blurring the boundaries between diachronic reading and synchronic seeing directly relates to the cognitive processes of mentally ‘translating’ images into language. Comics function simultaneously as both hybrid medium and anti-medium, juxtaposing visual and verbal signifiers and inverting traditional hierarchies of word and image.

Additionally, the origin of a drawing is entirely different from that of a photographic or digital image. Unlike a photorealistic film whose goal is total narrative immersion, stylization and abstraction in comics (what we might call ‘cartoonishness’) exacerbate the tension between illusion and materiality, which refers back to the surface of the drawing. Bryan Lee O’Malley avoids imitating real life in both form and content: just as *Scott Pilgrim* unfolds in an impossible video game/fantasy version of Toronto, its characters are highly abstracted and depth is downplayed in favour of dynamism and layout. Engaging with or relating to characters with anatomy as flattened and graphic as *Scott Pilgrim’s* requires a certain suspension of disbelief. As Pascal Lefèvre writes, ‘A drawn image offers a specific view on reality and the creator’s subjectivity is built into the work ... every drawing style implies a certain interpretation of reality in visual terms, a particular visual ontology’ (9).

Thus, adapting comics into film requires reconciling two differences between the two media: (1) Their treatment of time and space and (2) The opposition between drawn and photographed images. One discernible though often overlooked solution to this dilemma is the storyboard: by using the multipanel grids of a comic page as a storyboard, a comics-to-screen adaptation can serve as a literal translation from paper to screen. Process and result become nearly one and the same: what was the final product of a graphic narrative becomes a design sketch in the context of film production. In *Scott Pilgrim*, in which many storyboards were taken directly from the comics, these grid-based sequences convey a sense of fragmentation, rather than the usual illusion of cinematic continuity.

The most effective use of comics as storyboard is in Scott’s dream sequences, which facilitate his encounters with Ramona as she travels through ‘subspace’. In the first of these dreams, Scott is alone (‘So alone...’ he whispers to himself) in a computer-generated desert landscape, only to have Ramona zoom past him on rollerblades, reassuring him that he’s not alone, ‘just having some idiotic dream’ (Figure 2). Wright maintains the fragmentation of the comics medium by retaining the divisions between the original panels: the screen fades to black after each frame, an attempt to mimic the simultaneously diachronic and synchronic experience of reading comics (Figure 3). The space between panels in comics, also known as the ‘gutter’, is evoked through these blackouts, which function as brief moments of dead space.



Figure 2. Scott first encounters Ramona in a dream in *Scott Pilgrim, Vol. 1: Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life* (2004). Courtesy of Bryan Lee O'Malley and Oni Press.

TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING: VIDEO GAMES AS BRIDGE

While comics are a transmedium in and of themselves, their interaction with other media also creates a larger conversation, what Henry Jenkins calls 'transmedia storytelling'. In his inventive book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006), Jenkins defines: 'A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole' (96). These overarching transmedia narratives are collaborative, creating an exchange in which 'each medium does what it does best' (96). Jenkins' conception of convergence, or the tendency for different media to merge through overlapping narrative and communicative connections, is an antithesis of McLuhan's eponymous theory of divergence, in which electrification and digitization dematerialize and decentralize forms of communication.

For Jenkins, today's proliferation of convergence makes transmedia storytelling inevitable: a delocalized narrative forces viewer/reader participation, creating what he calls 'knowledge communities'. While undoubtedly financially motivated, the segmentation of a single storyline into multiple forms of media can also be seen as a new approach to adaptation that allows the differences between distinct media to be celebrated rather than concealed.

Because of the multiplicity of references to different media within the *Scott Pilgrim* comics, expanding the narrative across different platforms has been organic. In addition to the comics and film adaptation, an animated short, *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The Animation* (aired on Cartoon Network's Adult Swim in 2010) fills in a subplot of the series not included in the live action film. Because *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World* includes animated



Figure 3. Corresponding dream sequence from *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World* / Universal Pictures/ Eric Gitter, Nira Park, Mark Platt, and Edgar Wright /Edgar Wright. Layout made with CollageFactory.

interludes in the same style as *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The Animation*, the transmedial references from one to the other are both narrative and material. This kind of nonlinear storytelling that demands viewer participation can be seen as a game, which *Scott Pilgrim* simulates by creating a world in which games and reality are indistinguishable.

It would be a serious omission to write an article on *Scott Pilgrim* without discussing video games; in fact, most reviews of the film labeled it a ‘video game film’ rather than a comic book adaptation. Because video games themselves involve participatory narratives, they reflect Jenkins’ transmedia storytelling model more accurately than another medium. Although most of the video game aspects we see in *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World* were taken directly from the comics, the adaptation pushes these elements to their limit through special effects and sound samples. As Jenkins argues, film and video games in the twenty-first century possess overlapping vocabularies: ‘In the era of digital effects and high-resolution game graphics, the game world can now look almost exactly like the film world—because they are reusing many of the same digital assets’ (104). By fusing video game aesthetics with cinema, *Scott Pilgrim*

creates a seamless ‘video game world’ that merges the real with the virtual, ‘[collapsing] the distance between gamer and avatar not by throwing the player into the world of the game, but rather by bringing it to him As a result, the line between fantasy and reality is not so much blurred as erased’ (*The New York Times*). In fact, this was precisely Lee O’Malley’s goal in creating the comics: to convey the experience of conflating reality and video games, however fantastical. Perhaps not surprisingly, there is now a *Scott Pilgrim* video game (*Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World: The Game*), released on PlayStation and Xbox in 2010.

In *Scott Pilgrim*, video games bridge the gap between the intrinsic transmediality of comics and macroscopic transmedia narratives. There are so many video game motifs in the comics that they cease to be motifs: nearly all the bands—Sex Bob-Omb, The Clash at Demonhead, and Crash and the Boys—are references to video games. ‘Subspace’ is a reality-bending highway directly referencing *Super Mario Bros. 2*. In another instance of paratext as text, many of the comics’ title pages are based on video game logos: Volume Two’s title is a faithful homage to the 1989–90 game *Bonk’s Adventure*. In addition to the seemingly infinite number of references to specific games, there are also more generic video game conventions. The fight sequences with the Seven Evil Exes instigate different gaming tropes: minions, summoning magical monsters, finding a ‘special item’, tricking the unbeatable boss, getting an extra life, and leveling up (in this case, Scott earns the ‘Power of Love’, followed by ‘Self Respect’), and so on.

Whereas Lee O’Malley could only convey sound and music through the above-mentioned visual onomatopoeia or references to already existing musical themes (‘I learned the bass line to *Final Fantasy III*!’), the film appropriates recognizable video game soundbytes to further immerse the viewer into its own unique hyperreality. Before the narrative even begins, the viewer is confronted with a pixelized Universal logo, and its distinctive theme music has been converted into a simulation of eight-bit era sound to evoke the gaming aesthetics of the 1980s and early 1990s. In the film, electronic sound effects

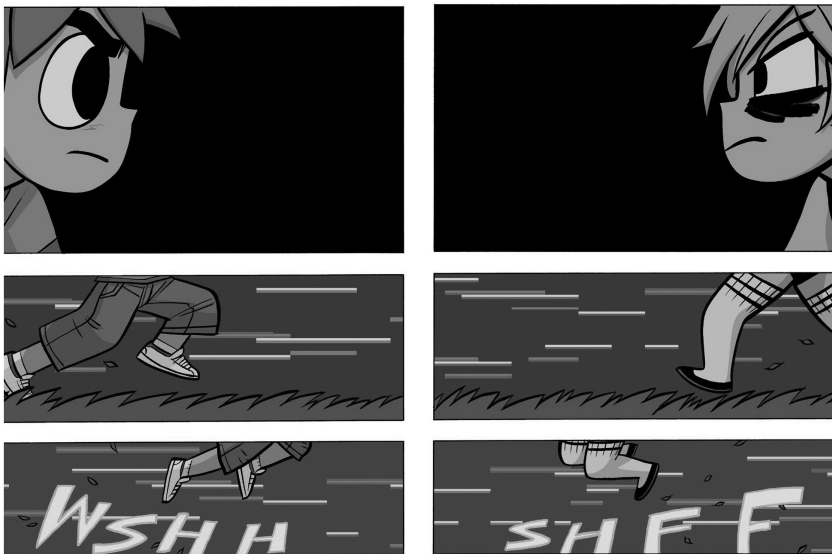


Figure 4. Scott fights Roxie Richter, Evil Ex Number Four (*Scott Pilgrim Vol. 4: Scott Pilgrim Gets it Together*, 2007). Courtesy of Bryan Lee O’Malley and Oni Press.

intrude on conversation and other sound samples are direct appropriations from specific video games. For example, the ‘K.O.’ sound we hear when Scott defeats Matthew Patel, Evil Ex Number One, is the announcer’s voice from *Street Fighter Alpha 3*. The film’s video game soundtrack reaches its peak in an orchestration of the Legend of Zelda *Fairy Fountain* theme, which appropriately accompanies one of Scott’s many dream sequences.

I want to close with a final anecdote from *Scott Pilgrim* that simultaneously links all three of the media I have been discussing. While I mentioned the challenges of attempting to convey the fragmentation of comics via split screen in film, *Scott Pilgrim* manages to avoid this fate by seamlessly merging comics and video games. In the comics, Scott’s climactic fight with Evil Ex Number Four, Roxie Richter (Figure 4), is an almost frame-by-frame recreation of the introduction for the game *Ninja Gaiden*. In the film, this sequence is used for Scott’s final battle with Evil Ex Number Seven Gideon, but the way in which the screen splits into multiple frames is exactly the same layout as the comics, and transitively, the *Ninja Gaiden* intro (Figure 5). Here, a single referent has multiple signifieds; video games act as a ‘bridge’ of sorts between comics and film, rendering a composite, trans-medial universe that blurs the distinctions between hand-drawn and digitized realities.

NOTES

¹ Volumes 1–6 include: *Scott Pilgrim’s Precious Little Life* (2004), *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World* (2005), *Scott Pilgrim & The Infinite Sadness* (2006), *Scott Pilgrim Gets It Together* (2007), *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The Universe* (2009), and *Scott Pilgrim’s Finest Hour* (2010).

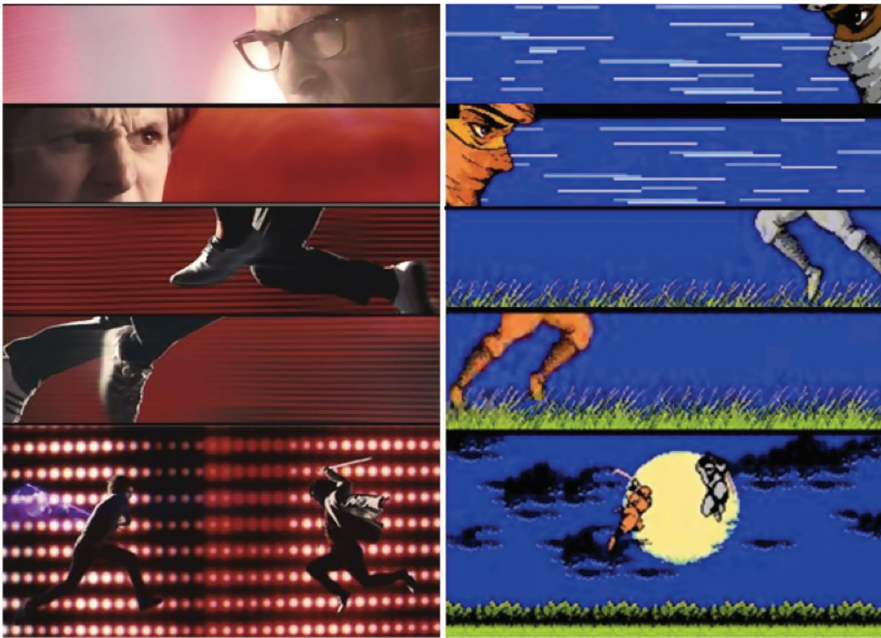


Figure 5. Side-by-side comparison of Scott’s fight with Gideon and opening sequence from *Ninja Gaiden*. Games Radar/Chris Antista (<http://www.gamesradar.com/every-scott-pilgrim-vs-the-world-videogame-reference/4/>) Left: “*Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World*” / Universal Pictures/ Eric Gitter, Nira Park, Mark Platt, and Edgar Wright /Edgar Wright Right: “*Ninja Gaiden*” / Nintendo/Tecmo.

² The Canadian domain for Amazon.com

³ An analysis of the *Scott Pilgrim* series as a transnational form of *Shōnen*-style manga deserves its own separate study, and unfortunately lies outside the scope of this article.

⁴ Also worth mentioning is the symbiosis between original and adaptation: *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World* was released in theaters while Bryan Lee O'Malley was still working on the final volume, giving Lee O'Malley the opportunity to reflect on and even appropriate some elements from the film.

⁵ Genette considers transtextuality to be more inclusive than the more widespread concept of intertextuality, which he considers a subcategory of transtextuality.

⁶ An alternative to comics-to-live action adaptation is animation, allowing the director bypass the conflicting ontologies of drawn and filmed images. Notable comics-to-animation adaptations include *Fritz the Cat* (1972) and *Persepolis* (2007).

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