Great Scott! Adaptive Dynamics of the *Scott Pilgrim* Franchise from the Comics to the Netflix Series

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Abstract

This article investigates the franchise that originated from Bryan Lee O'Malley's *Scott Pilgrim* comics series (2004-2010) and continued with a film adaptation (*Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, 2010, Edgar Wright) and the recent animated Netflix series *Scott Pilgrim Takes Off* (2023). *Scott Pilgrim*'s narrative ecosystem unfolds across various media, displaying heterogeneous characteristics regarding production structures, forms, and content. Indeed, the franchise also features several spinoffs: a short-lived mobile comic, a beat 'em up video game, and a card game. While surveying its medial articulation, I will discuss its appeal to hypermediacy mechanisms, both interweaving references between the components of the franchise and connecting it with music and gaming cultures; and its content, examining the progressive reworking of its storyworld, its alignment with diverse genres and imaginaries, and the way its unfolding aims to adapt and resonate with varied audiences and cater to their cultural preferences and consumption patterns.

Keyword: Narrative Ecosystem; Transmedial Narratology; Hypermediacy; Imaginary; Diversity.

Warning

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Introduction

This article aims to investigate the franchise that originated from Bryan Lee O'Malley's *Scott Pilgrim* comics series (2004-2010, accompanied by a short commentary titled *The Annotated Pilgrim*, 2007) and continued with a film adaptation (*Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, 2010), a mobile comic (*Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little App*, 2010), a beat 'em up video game (*Scott Pilgrim vs. The World: The Game*, 2010), a card game (*Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Card Game*, 2017), and the recent animated Netflix series *Scott Pilgrim Takes Off* (2023).

The media path taken by the *Scott Pilgrim* franchise is interesting in several respects. First of all, because of its unfolding through different media objects (comics, film, video game, and the Netflix series), which entails different configurations of authorship, displaying spontaneous and unpredictable shifts that suggest reading it as a narrative ecosystem

(Innocenti and Pescatore, 2017). The complexity and heterogeneity of this path are further highlighted by the franchise's reliance on a logic of hypermediacy (Bolter and Grusin, 1999), which results in a continuous process of intermedial citation of forms and protocols, not only creating a network between the various media objects belonging to the franchise, but also rooting it in music and gaming cultures.

From a narrative point of view, the different installments display a continuous expansion and contraction of the storyworld, connecting to different imaginaries and genres and aiming to appeal to the tastes, representation desires, and consumption habits of diverse audiences. In particular, the Netflix series conspicuously resonates with contemporary sensibility, incorporating the multicultural politics of the franchise while problematizing and rethinking some of its assumptions regarding gaze, agency, and gender roles.

Following these double articulation (mediality, discussing its production structures and formal features; and content, examining its imaginary and ideological assumption), this article will attempt to trace the parable of the *Scott Pilgrim* franchise from its origins to its latest development. In doing so, the article aims to merge the two perspectives through which the franchise has generally been studied – the one referring to the ideological and cultural aspects (e.g., Gray and Wilkins, 2014; McKittrick, 2014; Scoville, 2014; Lizardi, 2016; Pedinotti, 2016) and the one focusing on the formal aspects of its transmedia articulation (e.g., Murray 2012; Thoss, 2014; Chambers and Skains, 2015; Fehrle, 2015; Pino, 2015; Wu, 2016; Bodner, 2019). Moreover, the article builds on, and finds its originality in, its focus on the recent Netflix series, seen not only as the franchise's latest budding, but as a crucial occasion of reinvention, deviation, and mutation, both in terms of form and content, of the original material.

I've liked you for a thousand years: *Scott Pilgrim* as narrative ecosystem

How does the *Scott Pilgrim* franchise work?

To answer this question, it is perhaps necessary to start with an anecdote: the name "Scott Pilgrim" was not invented by O'Malley, but originates from the title of a song written in 1998 by the Canadian indie-rock band Plumtree. The song's lyrics don't say much, mainly repeating "I've liked you for a thousand years" and "I can't wait until I see you," but the song's attitude is consistent with the slacker rock imaginary that was fashionable in the North American indie music scene of the 1990s. The same imaginary is certainly embodied by the eponymous character as he debuts in O'Malley's comic series: a twenty-something with no job and no home (crashing at the house of his "cool gay roommate" Wallace Wells), who plays bass in an indie band called Sex Bob-ombs and dates a high schooler after a traumatic breakup. However, he will soon fall in love with a mysterious delivery girl.

Indeed, this genealogy tells a lot on at least three fronts: the central generative role played by intermedial transfers, the centrality of the theme of personal and relational adulthood, and the franchise's development by spontaneous budding. In this sense, the first question to answer concerns the configuration of the galaxy of texts reunited under the *Scott Pilgrim* banner.

Three texts form the narrative core of the franchise. The first – in chronological, if not hierarchical, terms – is the comics series (2004-2010) single-authored by Bryan Lee

O'Malley[44], made up of six volumes of around 200 pages each, and published by the Portland-based independent publisher Oni Press. The series begins by showing Scott Pilgrim in a platonic relationship with high school student Knives Chau. Very soon, Scott meets and falls in love with Ramona Flowers, an American woman with a mysterious past. Having just started hanging out with her, however, Scott discovers that to date her he must defeat her Seven Evil Exes, which he will do, unfolding a series of events prompting both him and Ramona to come to terms (symbolically and literally) with their sentimental past. Each volume thus "chronicles Scott's battle with one – or two when there are twins – of Ramona's exes, until finally defeating the leader and founder of the Evil Exes league, the *über-villain* Gideon Graves. The volumes seamlessly flip back and forth between a perspective grounded in reality, with normal rules of physics, and the very unreal battles with the exes and travels through the otherworldly "subspace" (Lizardi, 2012, p. 2). While the original comic was in black and white, the series has since been fully republished in color (2012-2015, colored by Nathan Fairbairn, allegedly by using the film color palette as a reference), with the supplement of bonus material (sketches, notes, and outtakes from the script). Additionally, a 30-page booklet titled *The Annotated Pilgrim* was published in 2007, featuring the paratextual apparatus related to the first two volumes.

The second core text is the film adaptation (*Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, 2010), written by Michael Bacall and Edgar Wright, and directed by the latter. Despite not performing well at the box office, it quickly achieved cult movie status, combining Wright's flamboyant visual style with the foregrounding of a series of hypermediacy strategies that I will discuss soon. Plot-wise, the movie unfolds along the lines of the comic, although, since it had been conceived in 2007 and was realized before the last installment of the comic came out, Bacall and Wright were unaware of how O'Malley would conclude the series. Hence, as Bodner remarks, "Scott Pilgrim is rare in the history of comic adaptations in having a source text actively created while the movie is being developed and filmed. The act of parallel creation deeply affect[ed] both texts" (2019, p. 251). Notably, the film was built around an ending that saw Scott together with Knives Chau, and that was reshot, a few months before the film was screened, to realign with the comic's conclusion, where Scott and Ramona end up together.

The third core text is the recent animated Netflix series *Scott Pilgrim Takes Off* (2023), developed by Bryan Lee O'Malley and BenDavid Grabinski, realized by the animation studio Science SARU (which created the highly successful *Devilman Crybaby*, 2018) and directed by Abel Góngora. The series, which consists of eight episodes of approximately half an hour each, rewrites the story in an alternate reality in which the first Evil Ex apparently defeats Scott, and Ramona and Wallace take center stage. She will soon discover that Scott is not dead, but has disappeared, beginning a journey to find him that will reconcile her with her exes, whose fate will take a different turn; meanwhile, most of the characters will be busy filming a movie *en abyme* called *Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life*, whose plot echoes the original comic and film and, we will discover, diegetically stems from a temporal paradox originated by future Scott himself.

[44] Bodner (2019, p. 261) mentions the collaboration of John Kantz for screen tone and background, and Aaron Ancheta for crowd scenes and inking assistance.

Fig. 1: The covers of Scott Pilgrim's comics series, film, and Netflix series.

Borrowing Jenkins' dichotomy of transmedia storytelling, one can consider these three texts to be more prominent and, consequently, the franchise to be unbalanced, presenting "a clearly identifiable core text[s] and a number of peripheral transmedia extensions that might be more or less integrated into the narrative whole" (Jenkins, 2011). Indeed, the *Scott Pilgrim* franchise encompasses several other medial objects – less relevant from a narrative point of view – most of which were created around the release of the final issue of the comic series and the movie[45]. The first object is a 4-minute animated short (*Scott Pilgrim vs. the Animation*, 2010) focusing on Pilgrim's high school years. Produced by the Titmouse, Inc. studio, it aired on Adult Swim before being released on the studio website. The second is a beat 'em up video game (*Scott Pilgrim vs. The World: The Game*, 2010), co-developed by Ubisoft Montreal and Ubisoft Chengdu and directed by Paul Robertson. Influenced by 8-bit video games, it is a multiplayer side scroller featuring a soundtrack by the chiptune pop band Anamanaguchi, which was later reused in the Netflix series. The third is a mobile comic (*Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little App*, 2011), co-produced by the HarperCollins' imprint 4th Estate and Robot Media. Available for both iOS and Android, the app adapted the whole comic series for the digital environment (it was marketed on different digital comics platforms), allowing one to zoom in and out, featuring sound effects and vibrations, hidden extra artwork, and a networked comment section. Finally, a recent addition is a deck-building card game (*Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Card Game*, 2017), designed by Keith Baker and illustrated by Anita Osburn, produced by Oni Games and Renegade Game Studios. Players assume the roles of characters from the *Scott Pilgrim* universe, having to defeat Evil Exes and collect Power-Ups, either peacefully or by fighting their way through the game.

The difficulty in considering the whole franchise, then, stems from the fact that it encompasses both intermedial adaptations and transmedia expansions, created by a multitude of authors with their different (often distinctive) poetics, while being in more or less overt communication with O'Malley's text – I will consider the latter as the overarching

[45] I do not have enough space to discuss fandom here, although it is a constitutive part of Jenkins' understanding of transmedia storytelling (see Scolari *et al.*, 2014; Tirino, 2019). It must nonetheless be considered that, over the years, a significant fan production has also coalesced around *Scott Pilgrim*, mostly featuring (prose) fan fiction, fan art illustrations, and the obvious cosplaying. Moreover, O'Malley has long been very active on social media, notably admitting "to constructing his text partially in response to online discourse about the comic book" (Bodner, 2019, p. 252).

creator, being the owner of the original IP. Moreover, as anticipated, several elements that make up the franchise were later grafted onto its pre-existing structure. This is particularly interesting, as

> Whereas adaptations invite audiences to compare and contrast the adapted work with an original (a kind of vertical memory, as Harvey calls it), transmedia storytelling establishes a different dialogical relationship with a previous text, one that recalls some of its narrative, aesthetic, and storyworld elements – activating a type of horizontal memory (Pires de Figueiredo, 2022, p. 4).

Transmedial narratology and media studies have extensively considered the possible configurations of transmedia franchises, albeit still struggling with disciplinary divides (most notably, the different meanings attributed to the terms "transmedia" and "transmedial": see Baroni *et al.*, 2023).

Coming from the former discipline, Jan-Noël Thon identifies three possible diegetic dynamics within narrative universes: "redundancy", when the same storyworld elements are repeated across different media; "expansion", when new elements are added; and "modification", when the same storyworld is inhabited by elements that seem to be completely unrelated (Thon, 2023, p. 229).

Interestingly, while Thon does not envisage any kind of "condensation" or "reduction", as he is not including adaptation amongst the transmedial strategies he considers, he mentions that "changes in a franchise's authorial constellation may also result in the redefinition of (some of) the relations between its various work-specific storyworlds and occasionally [generate] rather fundamental changes of the 'intended structure' of its transmedial universe" (Thon, 2015, p. 33). As such, he ultimately argues for an understanding of transmedia franchises as keeping together several local, non-contradictory, medium-specific storyworlds in a global, often contradictory "storyworld compounds" that he calls "transmedia universes" (Thon, 2023, p. 228).

Simultaneously, media studies in the last 20 years have followed Jenkins' extremely influential idea of transmedia storytelling as systems of "co-creation" where "integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience" (Jenkins, 2007), where "ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story" (Jenkins, 2011). Tirino remarks how recent forms of transmedia storytelling are mainly focused on shrewd worldbuilding (2019, p. 26) rather than being centered on characters or authorship. A more recent perspective – and more apt to account for the texts constellation shaped by franchises such as *Scott Pilgrim* – is that of "narrative ecosystems" (Innocenti and Pescatore, 2017; see also Tirino, 2019): "open systems, inhabited by stories and characters that change through time and space," that form interconnected structures, where "sequels and prequels, reboots, spin-off, and crossovers are all in a dialogic relationship with each other" (Innocenti and Pescatore, 2017, p. 170). Narrative ecosystems are "capable of shaping and adapting itself for different users, needs, and experiential strategies" (Innocenti and Pescatore, 2017, p. 171): "the narrative material is alive, undergoing processes of competition, adaptation, change, modification, etc." (Innocenti and Pescatore, 2017, p. 170), ultimately aiming at homeostasis, or balance, over time.

I argue, then, that the *Scott Pilgrim* franchise is an example of a narrative ecosystem made of both horizontal expansions and vertical permutations of its source material, operating principally on its storyworld and displaying a series of adaptive and inventive operations, going both towards and against medium-specific forms and discourses. In this analysis, I will focus on the three texts that constitute the franchise's narrative core(s), further examining their medial characteristics and investigating its content's somewhat modular, yet largely spontaneous and unplanned, evolutions.

Scott Pilgrim and the mediamorphosis: medium specificity, retro-remediation, and hypermediacy

In order to consider the way the franchise foregrounds its mediality, I will adopt Irina Rajewsky's taxonomy[46], stemming from transmedial narratology and distinguishing three kinds of "narrow intermediality":
(1) media combination, where intermediality is "a communicative-semiotic concept, based on the combination of at least two medial forms of articulation" (2005, p. 52);
(2) medial transposition, that is, intermedial adaptations, "the transformation of a given media product (a text, a film, etc.) or of its substratum into another medium" (2005, p. 51); and
(3) intermedial references, namely, medial representations of emulations of a different medium (i.e., *ekphrasis*).

The *Scott Pilgrim* franchise is highly distinctive when considering its mediality, as it combines all three intermedial processes envisioned by Rajewsky: it encompasses multimodal texts, based on a constitutive "media combination"; it features several medial transpositions, moving from the comic series to the movie and from both to the Netflix series (I will discuss the implications of these passages shortly)[47]; and, more evidently in the case of the comics series and the movie, it foregrounds a series of intertextual and intermedial references.

All intermedial references rest on a tension, inherent in remediation processes, between immediacy and hypermediacy, "the transparent presentation of the real and the enjoyment of the opacity of media themselves" (Bolter and Grusin, 1999, p. 21); or, as Thoss puts it, between eradicating or foregrounding the signs of mediation (Thoss, 2014, p. 212). This may result in configurations that are more or less "mediagenic" – that is, following Marion (whose neologism mimics the idea of "photogenic"), displaying a combination where a certain content felicitously actualizes the expressive and communicative potential of a particular medium (1997)[48]. From this perspective, *Scott Pilgrim* stands out for being distinctly *un-mediagenic*, relying on a complex network of hypermediacy mechanisms that I propose to distinguish between endogenous (related to other elements within the franchise)

[46] For a different model (more indebted to media studies), see Elleström (2014).
[47] If one considers the whole franchise, there are clear-cut examples of adaptations (the mobile comic) or transmedia storytelling (the animated short), but most of its peripheral components can be seen as encompassing both movement: the video and card game, notably, are *both* adaptations and transmedia nodes of the franchise, offering different entries and a diverse engagement with it.
[48] Marion's idea is a weak, less prescriptivist version of medium specificity, seeing *mediageny* as the result of a consolidated set of practices (and recurring imaginaries) enacted by a medium, rather than some inherent qualities solely depending on its affordances. For an articulate discussion of medium specificity, see Carroll (2019).

and exogenous (related to medial objects foreign to the franchise): on the one hand, the comic incorporates visual tropes typical of manga (Berninger, 2014), the film heavily remediates the language of comics (Fehrle, 2015), and the Netflix series mimics both strategies *while* also incorporating several filmic affordances; on the other, the whole franchise rests on a constitutive hypermediation of music (Pino, 2015) and video games (Wu, 2016), and the consumer cultures connected to them.

As said, the comics series foregrounds a first reference to manga. As such, it can be seen as transcultural or trans-generic rather than intermedial, but the specificities of manga are such that several scholars consider it a different medium from comics (see Hernández-Pérez, 2016). Bodner describes O'Malley's series as "a multigeneric, postmodern pastiche of media narrative and graphic traditions, the most striking of which is the incorporation of manga facial structure and overall character design into a North American comic" (2019, p. 247). Indeed, the first issue starts like many prototypical independent comics, focusing on the sentimental life of this quintessential slacker (Berninger stresses the link between this part of *Scott Pilgrim* and the tradition of Canadian comics: 2014, p. 245) – until the first Evil Ex appears and attacks Scott,

> and the two are revealed to be capable of gravity-defying acts of hand-to-hand combat involving motion lines, force fields, exaggerated facial expressions, and the summoning of paranormal entities […]. From this incident onward, the series is frequently punctuated by manga-like fight scenes, including comedic combat with robots, samurai swordsmen, and giant foes (Pedinotti, 2015, p. 57).

The manga-esque nature of the series transpires not only from its narrative tropes, but from a precise set of aesthetic coordinates – in the line, facial expressions, *emanata*, *onomatopoeia* (Wu, 2016), and so on. Moreover, "the original black-and-white editions were printed in a 5 × 7' digest form, which in the world of North American trade publishing has become commercially and semiotically synonymous with the notion of 'authentic manga'" (Pedinotti, 2015, p. 58). It is worth noting, however, that, while O'Malley declared that his main inspiration was shōnen manga, he also stated that, at the time, the only one he was familiar with was *Ranma 1/2* by Rumiko Takahashi (Hudson, 2011); consequently, it is more apt to consider *Scott Pilgrim* as a "manga-influenced" comic (MIC), rather than an original English-language (OEL) manga (Berninger, 2014, pp. 246-247).

The second reference is established by the film towards the comics, and it is probably the most evident. The film indeed explicitly and repeatedly emulates the comics aesthetic (Thoss, 2014; Bodner, 2019) through a series of techniques: juxtaposing textual inserts, captions, *emanata*, and *onomatopoeia* to the audiovisual dispositive of the movie; incorporating several panels from the comic, although in an animated version; and replicating the comic layout through consistent use of split screens (see Bodner, 2019, pp. 254-256). Moreover, the movie foregrounds its medial heterodoxy by relying on other "unnatural editing technique[s]" (Fehrle, 2015, p. 10): worth mentioning is the accelerated pace of the dialogues and the occasional resort to *tableaux vivants*, both reflections on the spatialized time that characterizes comics' meaning-making.

The Netflix series, in turn, conspicuously references the filmic language. This is foregrounded through the systematic use of fake camera blurs, but also through the incorporation of both narrative and formal devices such as the documentary (the entire episode *Lights. Camera. Sparks?!*, Ep. 01x05). The same role has the long chain of metalepses accompanying the fight between Ramona and Roxie, which begins in the video store where

Kim Pine works but, after a shelf of DVDs falls on them, is projected into the diegetic universes of the rented films, through a chain of concatenated metalepses and genre pastiches. Also worth mentioning are the series' references to comics, not so much (or not only) by taking up the stylistic devices already adopted by the film, but by foregrounding its genetic affinity with manga/anime, both in its aesthetics and through diegetic representation – notably, by depicting one of the Evil Exes watching a (fictional, stereotypical) anime.

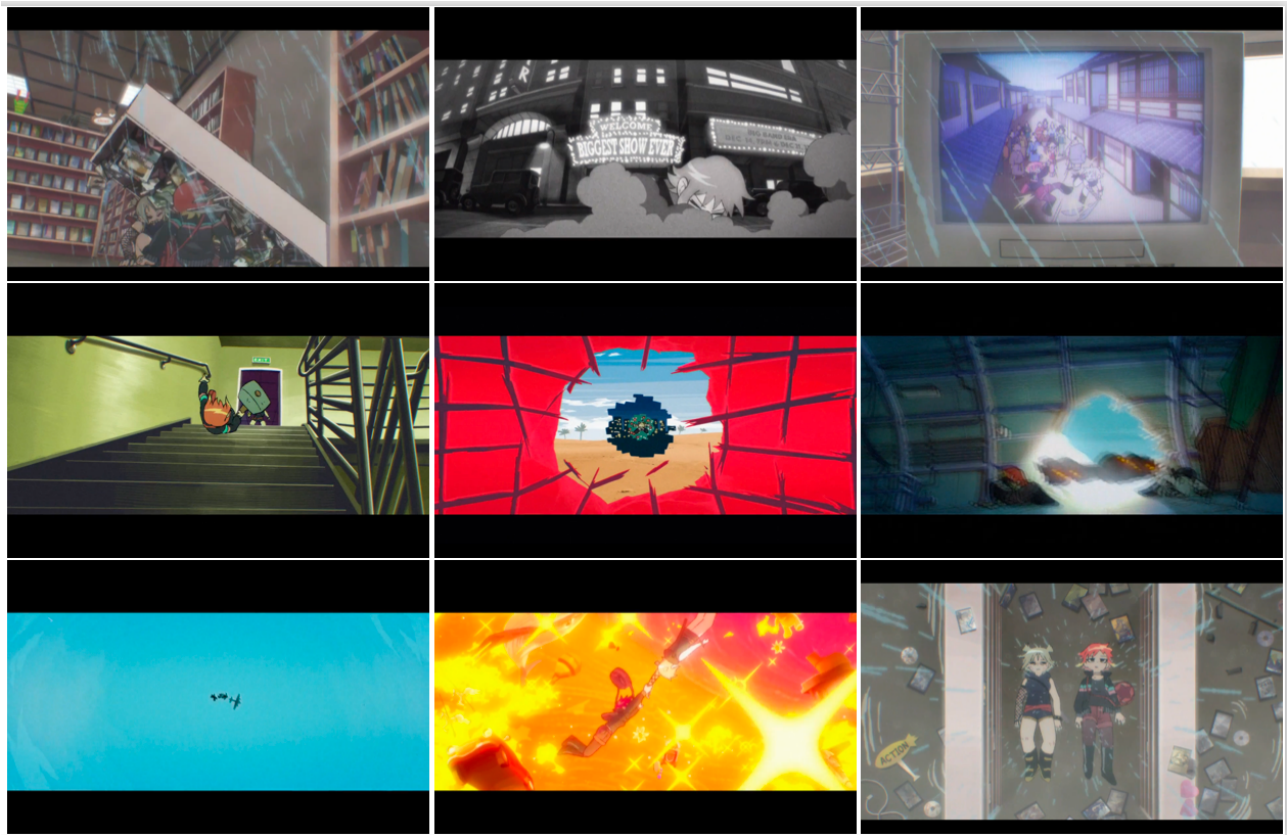

Fig. 2: The chain of metalepses from Scott Pilgrim Takes Off *(*Ramona Rents a Video, *Ep. 01x03) ©Netflix 2023*

At the same time, the appearance of the backdrops (and especially of the buildings) in the Netflix series is very reminiscent of the aesthetics of click-and-drag video games of the 1990s, which opens up the first, and most consistent, "exogenous" intermedial reference to video games, both as a set of formal and semiotic elements and as a culture. It is impossible to draw a complete list of the network of references that the franchise weaves with various video games, activating, as in the case of manga and anime, a relationship that is both intermedial and intercultural. The cultural coordinates to which *Scott Pilgrim* refers, indeed, almost exclusively concern Japanese products (in the series, only those marketed by Nintendo). Although some of the referenced works, such as the *Tony Hawk* series, are contemporary to the period in which the events of the franchise are set (i.e., the "Toronto of a few years ago" mentioned in the opening of the Netflix series), the vast majority have to do with the medial past of Generation Y. Throughout the franchise, *The Legend of Zelda* (1986), *Final Fantasy II* (1988), *River City Ransom* (1989), *Ninja Gaiden* (1989), *Sonic the Hedgehog*

(1991) and *Dance Dance Revolution* (1998) are overtly or covertly mentioned[49]. Moreover, the fight sequences are strongly reminiscent of games such as *Street Fighter* (1987) or *Tekken* (1994), both in their style and because of the use of video game tropes, such as the coins that spun at the end of each battle, or extra lives floating in the air. Finally, the aesthetics of the opening screens of each of the episodes of the Netflix series, and the names of almost all the bands in the franchise, are pastiches of as many video games.

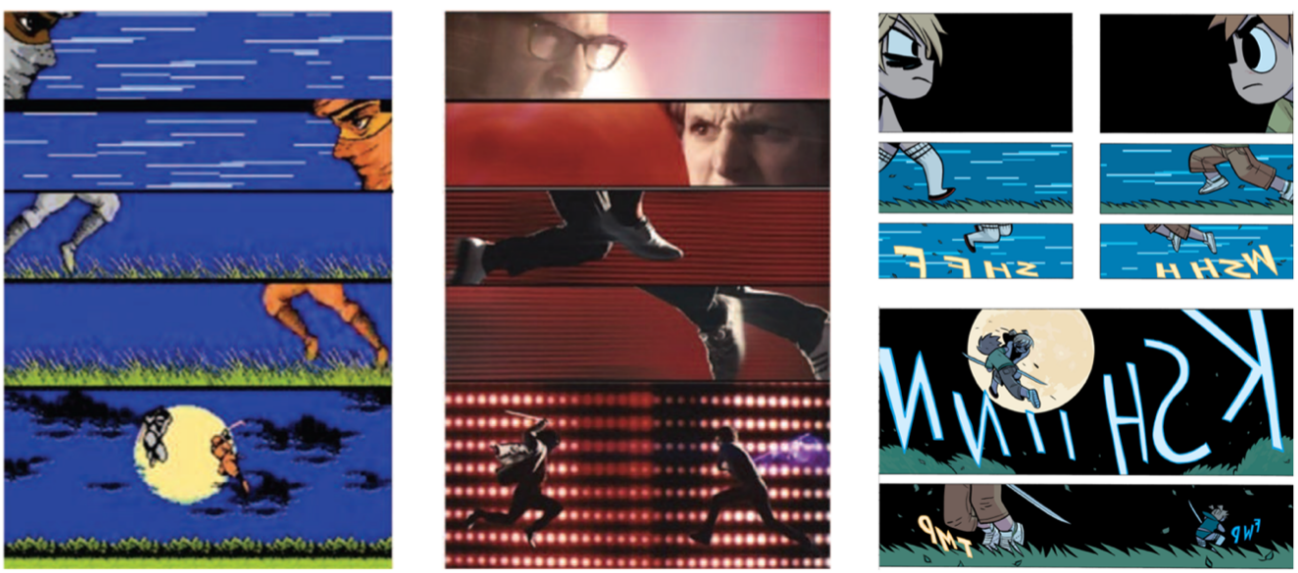

Fig. 3: the comics series' (on four pages) and film's reference to Ninja Gaiden *(on the right).*

[49] For example, in Wright's film, the characters play a fictional video game called *Ninja Ninja Revolution*; in the Netflix series, the cheat code used to enter the virtual reality room is the Shoryuken input from *Street Fighter 2* (1991).

Figure 4: Netflix series' title screens and their references[50] *©Netflix 2023.*

This opens to the other main media attractor of the series, namely, music. I mentioned that the franchise is symbolically indebted to the slacker aesthetic developed through music (and film) in 1990s North America (Pino, 2015). Scoville indeed asserts that the *Scott Pilgrim* film (whose soundtrack is by Nigel Goldrich and includes original Beck songs) projects

> The mythologizing of the cool Annex scene, the transformation of Toronto indie rock, as well as games and alt-comics (and even such stereotypically downtown things as veganism), into the stuff of adventure, romance, superpowers, and magic. Nearly all of the major events in both comics and film are connected in some way to this music scene (Scoville, 2014, p. 204).

The soundtrack's auratic value is confirmed by the Netflix series, which features several iconic songs from late 1990s/early 2000s indie rock, starting with the aforementioned *Scott Pilgrim* by Plumtree. The series further reflects on this pivotal role of the music medium by staging the whole Scott Pilgrim's comics story (once again *en abyme*) as a (fictional) musical during episode *2 Scott 2 Pilgrim* (Ep. 01x07). Music in the series, however, also becomes a symbolic link to manga and video game culture, referencing their imaginary both visually and through the soundtrack. Concerning manga, particularly relevant is the choice as theme song of Necry Talkie's *Bloom*, a power-pop up-tempo whose lyrics (in Japanese) nostalgically

[50] https://www.reddit.com/r/ScottPilgrim/comments/17ztro7/scott_pilgrim_takes_off_title_screens_references/ [last accessed 13.05.2024].

evoke the series' imaginary. Moreover, the Netflix series interweaves explicit visual and thematic references with two Japanese works in whose plots music plays a central role: the *Beck: Mongolian Chop Squad* franchise (1998-2008, the manga by Harold Sakuishi; 2004-2005, the anime created by Madhouse studio; and 2010, the live-action film directed by Yukihiko Tsutsumi), and *FLCL*, an original video animation (OVA) series written by Yōji Enokido and directed by Kazuya Tsurumaki.

In parallel, music acts as a glue between the imaginary of the franchise and video games: the entire soundtrack of the Netflix series, performed by the American chiptune-pop group Anamanaguchi, is taken from the 2010 *Scott Pilgrim* video game, and recreates the retro sound aesthetics of 8-bit video games. Relatedly, two key moments for the film and the series are characterized by the soundtrack of *The Legend of Zelda*, defined by Edgar Wright as "like nursery rhymes to a generation" (McWhertor, 2010), and an 8-bit version of *God Only Knows*, originally by the Beach Boys. As is often the case, stylistic choices thus carry a complex symbolic value, acting as a foothold and semantic bridge to other cultural contexts, eras, and media.

Scott Pilgrim's precious little multiverse: imaginaries and stereotypes in the comics series and the film

This dense intertextual and intermedial network has two implications: on the one hand, as Thoss argues while discussing the franchise's references to video games, despite mentioning "specific – and occasionally obscure – titles", most references possess a generic quality that makes them "obvious to anyone with even a passing knowledge" of the original objects (Thoss, 2014, p. 216). This dynamic is well-known within nostalgia studies – and indeed, the franchise weaves "vintage video-game and indie rock references into its very fabric, which puts *Scott Pilgrim* in dialogue with a contemporary society that is obsessed with past cultural artefacts" (Lizardi, 2012, p. 1). These references root the imaginary of the franchise in a series of habitus that are readable even by those who do not know the sources first-hand. Moreover, they symbolically foreground the theme of one's relation to their past, which is reinforced structurally by the iterated flashbacks and diegetically by the recurring theme of refusing to grow up and by the whole toxic, past-obsessed idea of conquering one's romantic history by confronting their exes (Lizardi, 2012, pp. 2-3).

While the past plays a key symbolic role, following Pedinotti, the story's other "overt thematic preoccupations include the specific flavors of narcissism, escapism, projection, emotional and sexual irresponsibility, loneliness, denial, and media-induced reality-confusion that often accompany the twenty-something phase of life," whose central dramatic conflict concerns "struggles to become emotionally committed, responsible adults" (Pedinotti, 2015, p. 57). In this sense, Bodner notes how "the pattern of employment, housing, and general socioeconomic profile" represented by the character "creates an accurate ethnographic snapshot" of O'Malley's generation (Bodner, 2019, p. 261). Indeed, Kondo summarizes the socio-cultural coordinates of *Scott Pilgrim* as follows:

> The early 2000s, a time of flip phones, dial-up internet symphonies, and the birth of MySpace profiles […]. Amidst the Y2K transition, *Scott Pilgrim* became a magnetic force field, blending '90s grunge vibes with the neon glow of the emerging digital age.

> O'Malley wove together video game aesthetics, music subcultures, and everyday life into a narrative quilt (Kondo, 2024).

In many ways, both the comics and the movie take an ambivalent stance, glamorizing this imaginary. Indeed, this lays the foundation for a story that is both a romantic comedy and a *Bildungsroman* centered on an emerging protagonist of the media imaginary of the late 1990s: a (white, hetero, cis) young boy spurred into action by romance and self-discovery. Scott personified the idea that nice, unassuming, unthreatening (both to a certain extent) men were entitled to finding success in love and life[51]. His journey makes him a generational emblem, reflecting cultural shifts in the portrayal of masculinity that finally allowed rooting for "nice guys" – sensitive, introspective male ideals – in opposition to the triumph of 1990s macho jocks (Rabiroff, 2023). In this respect, Wright's film is the epitome of the indie romantic comedy of the 2000s/2010s – considering "indie" as "a cultural category characterized by a specific sensibility, style, themes, viewing practices, and, crucially, the self-aware outsider status as being 'off-Hollywood' that stems from a shared consensus between filmmakers and interpretive communities" (Oria, 2018, p. 149). However, the rom-com storyline is significantly hybridized with the structure, drawn from video game, that superposes to the hero's journey the progression towards defeating the final boss.

If, from a formal point of view, the franchise still stands out for this original reuse and mix of genre tropes, at the level of imaginary and ideology both the comic series and films display several criticalities. As Lizardi points out, despite its progressive intentions "*Scott Pilgrim* does not live up to this idealized nostalgia reversal or remediation potential, and ends up reaffirming hegemonic gender roles and heteronormativity under the guise of a hip, politically correct perspective" (Lizardi, 2012, pp. 1-2). In fact, although the key symbolic nexus of the franchise has to do with the ability to grow and evolve, Scott is ultimately unable to free himself from his past (Lizardi, 2012, pp. 3-4) – a struggle shared by Ramona, whose ever-changing hair color is a sign of her temperamental nature rather than her supposed ability to shed skin and evolve (a theme that the Netflix series problematizes). From various points of view, this has to do with the very fabric of the story the franchise tells. As Lizardi notes,

> [The] over-arching structure of *Scott Pilgrim* creates a gendered past in many significant ways. Scott takes on the role of the dominant male who must prove that he is 'better' than those boyfriends who came before him, as well as vanquish Ramona's past to become her past, present and future. Ramona's exes are willing to fight with Scott in a stereotypically territorial male fashion (Lizardi, 2012, p. 4).

That *Scott Pilgrim* relies more than it appears on stereotypical representations of gender roles and sexuality and replicates hegemonic logics can be seen in the extent to which secondary characters, both heterosexual and homosexual, are all functions of a system that revolves around Scott himself, and which readers perceive according to his perspective (Lizardi, 2012, pp. 7-10). Indeed, both the comics series and the film featured a non-monocultural, non-strictly heterosexual character system: one can mention Knives Chau and her friend Tasha, the Evil Exes Matthew Patel and the Katayanagi twins, Scott's roommate Wallace Wells, Ramona's Evil Ex Roxie Richter, and (in the comic) Scott's ex Kim Pine. At the same time, this nominal representativity was not matched by sufficient

[51] In this sense, the choice to cast Michael Cera as the movie's protagonist stands out, him being the quintessential embodiment of non-threatening masculinity in the indie comedies of the 2000s.

narrative centrality, roundness, and agency of those characters. From this point of view, the condensation operated by the film does not allow this potential diversity to go beyond mere tokenism: notably, even O'Malley explicitly asserted regretting the film's predominantly white casting (Nakaji Monnier, 2016). Nor does it benefit the character of Ramona, who, despite Mary Elizabeth Winstead's excellent performance, is reduced to little more than a prize that Scott must conquer (Bodner, 2019, pp. 250-51) and a purely instrumental figure for Scott's growth, consistent with the trope of the manic pixie dream girl.

However, the film's issues are largely shared by the comic: Berninger remarks "the marginality of Asian characters," which particularly stands out "when one considers O'Malley's own half-Korean background" (2014, p. 250). Pedinotti more radically reads the series as a process of cultural appropriation of the manga imaginary, which "projects an image of multicultural openness while simultaneously exhibiting signs of racial antagonism in its subtexts" (2015, p. 64). According to him, against the initial presentation of "several smart-alecky, wisecracking, mostly white but sometimes not, mostly straight but sometimes gay, Canadian and American hipster kids" (Pedinotti, 2015, p. 59), the comic stages instead a series of romantic subplots whose point is to marginalize Asian characters, resulting in "a hip version of the white, heteronormative couple play[ing] the role of a filtering institution in a ubiquitously manga-fied reality" (Pedinotti, 2015, p. 65).

Scott Pilgrim vs the algorithm: gaze, agency, and diversity

Considering these issues, the Netflix series tries to go in two directions. On the one hand, it retains the franchise's spatiotemporal setting, as evident from the many signifiers incorporated to anchor the series in the mid to late 2000s – the Nintendo console, anime on cathode ray tube television, the *Guitar Hero* video game, Crocs shoes and so on[52] – and begins with a first episode that seems, until the last moments, to be an almost exact copy of the film. On the other hand, by inverting a central narrative link (Scott does not defeat the first of the seven Evil Exes, but seems to perish in the fight), it gives rise to a what-if that weaves dense transtextual links with its hypotexts (comics series and film), incorporating the multicultural politics of the franchise while taking the opportunity to rethink, in light of contemporary sensibility, its more problematic issues in terms of gaze, agency, and gender, especially in relation to the idea of (monogamous) romantic relationship. This shows a true use of transmedial storyworlds as "abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms" (Klastrup and Tosca, 2004, p. 409).

Consistent with what seems to be a constitutive crisis in the underlying ideology of prototypical romantic comedies up to the 2020s (Oria, 2021a; 2021b), *Scott Pilgrim Takes Off* completely changes tack, morphing into a kind of procedural in which Ramona, who has become the protagonist, wants to find out what happened to Scott. Throughout her investigation, she will have the opportunity to achieve closure on various relationships from her past and reflect on her tendency to run away from problems instead of facing them. At the same time, Wallace's character acquires greater salience, capitalizing on the comedic

[52] It would be interesting in this respect to investigate the absence, amongst the many commodities, of mobile phones – an element that, along with the Internet, seems to originate a constant narrative uneasiness in contemporary fiction (see Miller, 2011).

aspects of his being the "cool gay roommate": he ends up playing himself in the *Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life* film, whose shooting occupies the central episodes of the series (and offers the opportunity to parodically distance the series from its hypotexts while mentioning them *en abyme*); he makes one of Ramona's exes fall in love with him; and finally meets his future partner on a trip to Paris.

As noted by Phillips (2023), the series thus re-signifies many problematic assumptions from the comics and film by foregrounding their toxicity, while making room for the personal growth and redemption of several characters. It also leaves space for a less stereotypical and more nuanced queerness, if only because the greater exposure allows even the lighter secondary characters to acquire greater complexity. By constructing an alternative unfolding of events, the series hence allows for a dialogue based on double coding with the franchise's possible worlds, while at the same time radically resignifying Scott Pilgrim as a character.

Crucial from this point of view is Scott's evil alter egos, the embodiments of his negative sides, who had, both in the comics and the series, an ultimately absolutory function. In the comic, Scott tried to confront Nega Scott, but finally resigned himself to merging with him, accepting the mistakes he has made and forgotten; in the film, Scott merely good-naturedly chatted with Nega Scott when the latter appeared in the finale, stating "he is just a really nice guy. We're gonna get brunch next week. We actually have a lot in common". In contrast, in the last two episodes of the Netflix series, one discovers that Older Scott is responsible for the different turn of events, bringing Scott into the future solely to prevent him from starting a relationship with Ramona, which would eventually be destined to end in divorce, scarring him emotionally; and that Even Older Scott is, exacerbating the same premises, a disturbed incel terrified of being hurt by feelings. However, while this makes it clear that Scott himself should be read as a negative character (or at least one unable to overcome his flaws), it remains unclear why a character as allegedly empowered and mature as Ramona would be so interested in pursuing an insignificant twenty-something with whom she has only had one date. Indeed, despite the increased emphasis on diversity, the series itself continues to revolve around its eponymous protagonist to the point of barely passing the Bechdel test.

The question then arises whether the *Scott Pilgrim* franchise is not constitutively problematic on an ideological level, considering contemporary sensibility. From this point of view, the Netflix series's alleged commitment to multiculturalism and diversity proves to be more problematic than its premise would suggest. This commitment rests on Netflix's policies on inclusion and diversity – ostensibly a central concern of the platform, which, since 2019, has been pursuing a precise Inclusion Strategy, aiming to represent its audiences in all their diversity. This process followed a report that considered twenty-two indices of diversity and inclusion, including sexuality, disability, race, and gender (Asmar *et al.*, 2023, p. 25; Khoo, 2023, pp. 281-82). As such, Netflix, "in its communication, presents itself as the voice of a new generation and promotes its programming as a way for young audiences to vicariously negotiate their way through the complexities of society" (Asmar *et al.*, 2023, p. 32).

However, various scholars have pointed out several issues associated with this agenda. First of all, although sold in relation to the idea of "global citizenship", the diversity that Netflix offers has precise socio-cultural coordinates, which bind it to the contemporary US context (Asmar *et al.*, 2023, p. 36; Khoo, 2023, p. 282). This "dominates cultural

conversations worldwide by influencing prevailing norms and narratives about what it means to live in (multicultural) societies" (Asmar *et al.*, 2023, p. 35). Moreover, "when cultural identities become addressed as market segments, misrepresentation inevitably ensues as corporations will tend to only promote the most marketable aspects of a culture" (Asmar *et al.*, 2023, p. 36). This shows in strategies that privilege "visibility over representation" – the former understood as "highlighting the visual signifier of race", the latter as "a discussion of the structural barriers that various minorities face" (Jenner 2018, p. 196). Finally, this diversity is apparent much more than it is substantive, leveraging the Recommender Algorithm ("a collective term for a series of proprietary computational tools developed by the company since the early 2000s": Khoo, 2023, p. 282) to filter content by foregrounding more diversity than the catalog itself (Khoo, 2023, p. 283).

From this point of view, *Scott Pilgrim Takes Off* turns out to be an interesting operation from the formal and thematic points of view, but only a half-won battle ideologically, due both to some ingrained criticalities in the franchise's deeper symbolic mechanisms and to the corporate priorities behind Netflix's identity politics.

Conclusions

The *Scott Pilgrim* franchise stages a unique combination of medial, formal and content features and tensions that deserve to be discussed in greater detail and systematically. This expanding narrative ecosystem has been able to adapt to changes in the mediascape over the twenty years the franchise has unraveled. Still, this adaptability, which has resulted in often flamboyant results from a formal point of view, suffers, when considering its content, from certain problems that seem to be indelibly inscribed in the symbolic structure underlying the franchise. Its renewed focus on representativeness eventually fails to break free from a performative diversity, which nonetheless seems to meet with favor among many.

Perhaps, then, borrowing from the Greek tragedy the idea of "fatal flaw," the last fight that awaits the franchise is *Scott Pilgrim* vs. its *hamartia*. Whether Scott will eventually win it, only time will tell.

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