

## **Transmedia storytelling e webtoons: velhos mundos em roupagens novas**

### **Transmedia storytelling and webtoons: old worlds in new clothes**

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#### **Resumo**

*Transmedia storytelling* é, por norma, apresentado como um produto do novo milénio, apesar de já ser comum desde que os indivíduos comunicam as suas “narrative[s] through a multitude of integrated media channels” (Kalinov & Markova, 2016). O cinema é um exemplo, mas não é necessário restringirmo-nos à época contemporânea: os jograis medievais eram artistas que fundiam as suas competências orais para recitar poesia, contar histórias ou entreter os nobres e a realeza com as de dançar, tocar música e cantar. Desde a invenção da imprensa e a sua disseminação através da democratização gradual dos livros, assim como por meio da Internet como o difusor por excelência de histórias provenientes dos quatro cantos do mundo que estas experiências se tornaram bens consumíveis. Surgem numerosas plataformas onde os leitores podem aceder a histórias *latu sensu*, abrangendo dos blogues e outros sítios a *podcasts*, *youtube* or a banda desenhada na *web*, sendo que estes são conhecidos como *webcomics* ou *webtoons*, “a complex system created by the distinctive combination of two media (comics and the digital)” (Cho, 2016). Em termos metodológicos, pretendemos identificar as diferenças entre a banda desenhada tradicional (em papel) e os atuais *comics* na *web*, examinar as principais plataformas que disponibilizam esta forma de *transmedia storytelling* e refletir até que ponto o *storytelling* se tornou num bem consumível.

**Palavras-chave:** *transmedia storytelling; webtoons; banda desenhada; commodification.*

#### **Abstract**

Transmedia storytelling is often presented as a product of the new millennium, though it has been around ever since people communicate their “narrative[s] through a multitude of integrated media channels” (Kalinov & Markova, 2016). Cinema is an example, but we need not restrict these examples to the 20<sup>th</sup> century: medieval jugglers or jesters were performers who blended oral skills for reciting poetry, telling stories and humouring noblemen and the royalty with those of dancing, music-playing and singing. Since the invention of the printing press and its dissemination in generally available books, as well as by means of the internet as the disseminator *par excellence* of stories from all corners of the world that these experiences have becomes commodified. This brings us to the issue of the multiple platforms where nowadays readers can access stories *latu sensu*, ranging from blogs and websites to podcasts, youtube or webtoons (i.e. comics on the web), “a complex system created by the distinctive combination of two media (comics and the digital)” (Cho, 2016). Methodologically speaking, we aim to pinpoint the differences between traditional comics (on paper) and current comics on the web, examine the mainstream platforms that make transmedia storytelling available and reflect upon the extent to which storytelling has become a commodity for present time users.

**Keywords:** *transmedia storytelling; webtoons; comics; commodification.*

#### **Introduction**

The activity of storytelling is as old as humanity itself, enshrined in the need to pass on to other generations stories, life teachings and routines, moral and ethical values, social roles, among many other aspects. In line with what Nováky (2001) argues, “[s]torytelling has been used to foster the development of new values by linking the present and future” and also both to the past, I should add.

With the technological advancement, “storytelling has become an increasingly important tool in facilitating changes in people and organizational cultures” (von Stacklberg & Jones, 2014, p. 58), whereby the new media carry out a function of the utmost importance in shaping public opinion and societal values. Such is its role that storytelling has become a commodity, particularly due to the multiple platforms where one can access them.

This is the reason I propose making use of the concept of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2006, 2007), i.e. the fact that many contemporary works expand through different media (film, TV, comics, books, etc.) and platforms (blogs, forums, wikis, social networks, etc.), and its relation to webtoons, the new genre of comics published on the web. As a prototypical example of transmedia storytelling that has reached its height with the advent of apps, I aim at eliciting this concept and that of webtoons on the first two sections of this paper, followed by a brief comparison of traditional comics to webcomics. On the penultimate section, I will analyse the selected platform Line Webtoon in more depth, as well as four examples of webtoons made available on this platform. From the abovementioned reflection, I will wrap up with my final remarks concerning webtoons as a modern form of transmedia storytelling.

### **Transmedia storytelling**

Transmedia storytelling is often presented as a product of the new millennium, though it has been around ever since people communicate their “narrative[s] through a multitude of integrated media channels” (Kalinov & Markova, 2016). An example are medieval jesters, entertainers who blended oral skills for reciting poetry, telling stories and humouring noblemen and the royalty of the time with those of dancing, music-playing and singing. Another example dates from the end of the 19th century – cinema that started combining a multitude of semantic channels (moving image, sound, text, among others) merged into one single event: “multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience” (Jenkins, 2007).

Stories as such have become commodified firstly because of the invention of the printing press and its dissemination in generally available books, thus leading to the gradual democratisation of books and literature; secondly due to the internet as the disseminator *par excellence* of stories from all corners of the world and more recently the advance in technologies which “made the media more mobile, increasingly interactive and overwhelmingly versatile” (Bolin, 2007). As a result, the borders among media become somewhat blurred or fuzzy. In order to illustrate this idea, Bolin (2007) refers that “we can listen to the radio on television, computers, mobile phones, etc. We can watch feature films at the cinema, on our television

sets, in our mobile phones and, again, on our computers”. Therefore, “media content that previously were considered as belonging to a specific medium are today produced for audiences through a range of different distribution techniques” (Bolin, 2007), leading to what is known as technological convergence closely followed by textual divergence, for texts are now built to function on several platforms.

It is owed to these changes that von Stacklberg & Jones (2013) uphold that:

Today’s complex media environment is changing audience expectations of how, when, and where information is consumed. Media convergence is driving the development of new forms of storytelling in which integrated narratives are presented across multiple media. Participatory engagement of audiences through games, remixing content, and original user-created content is increasingly common. (p. 58)

Jenkins (2006) elaborates on this idea speaking of transmedia storytelling whereby “the media content providers are developing texts across several technological platforms, thus taking advantage of each platform’s specific qualities and abilities” (Bolin, 2007, p. 246). This author delves into examples, such as *The Matrix* (Lana & Lilly Machowski, 1999), *The Blair Witch Project* (Eduardo Sánchez & Daniel Myrick, 1999). While the former relies not only on the film text itself but also on the computer game reality, the latter was a case of audience speculation before the actual release of the film by means of a website that aimed to built up to the huge blockbuster the film turned out to be.

From Bolter & Grusin’s (1999) perspective, what occurs is a phenomenon of remediation “where older media and media texts re-appear in new media forms” (Bolin, 2007), for instance from literature to cinema or the stage or narratives appearing in different formats. One such example is that of *The Hitchhiker’s guide to the galaxy* (Douglas Adams, 1978), which was initially broadcast on the radio, then on the TV, turned into a book, a computer game, a comic book, a feature film, in an almost endless array of options.

In this sense, texts that are “played out across several platforms” allow for “the possibilities of constructing increasingly sophisticated narratives” (Bolin, 2007) and it broadens the possibility for this kind of communication to become commodified, as shall be seen in the case of webtoons.

### **Comics and webtoons**

Transmedia storytelling focuses on the reception side, which aims at “taking the audience on an emotional journey that goes from moment-to-moment” (Pratten, 2015), essential on the webtoon world since it leads to readers’ loyalty to the series. This interdependence with the readers is continuous, since their presence can not only be felt on the comment section, but

also on the authors' routine of presenting readers with Questions & Answers (Q&A), based on the feedback retrieved from their comments, and often their shorts that involve characters from the stories.

As in all newly-formed areas of knowledge, such as Comic Studies (e.g. Frederico Zanettin, 2014), there is a difficulty in defining the many forms of graphic narratives and various names coexist, such as 'webcomics' (comics published on a website), 'digital comics' or 'Internet comics', though 'digital comics' may also function as an umbrella term to include 'mobile comics'. Webcomics consist of "a complex system created by the distinctive combination of two media (comics and the digital)" (Cho, 2016). On the other hand, 'webtoon' is the term derived from Korean, a combination of *web* and *cartoon* that refers to webcomics, which, in 2000, also became the name of the Korean web portal created by Ch'öllian, as Cho (2016) upholds.

This graphic form encompasses digital creations that stem from the artists who set out to intentionally produce for a digital platform. A determining aspect in its evolution has been the screen size and the shape that used to limit this form of creation, namely the comic panels and the manner in which readers access them. Webtoons are "constantly evolving and challenging its limits, reinventing new artistic forms and cultural practices" (Cho, 2016) – for example, webtoons initially followed conventional print formats (e.g. scanning of paper comics and the horizontal layout), but soon had to adapt and grapple with "the infinite canvas" (McCloud, 2000).

This process of adaptation and evolution leads authors to refer to several generations of webcomics: the generation zero consisted of scanned original comics; generation 1 integrated flash animation effects; generation 2 included the vertical layout scrolling; and, finally, generation 3 leapt into Apps. It is in this last generation that the true commodification of this new genre is overwhelmingly enhanced, since readers can download the apps of their desired webtoon platforms and from then on explore the hundreds (if not thousands) of narratives. As far as platforms are concerned, Ahn (2018) states that Yahoo Korea was the first to create a portal, named Cartoon World, in 2002, followed by the portal Daum in 2003 and then the Naver Webtoon in 2004.

Since then they have mushroomed worldwide, though we can identify four foci of webtoon platforms to access webcomics: in Korea (e.g. Naver Webtoon, Lezhin Comics and Daum Webtoon), in China (e.g. Kuaikan and QQ Comic), in the USA (e.g. Tapas and other Korean-based platforms, such as Line Webtoon) and in Japan (e.g. Comico Japan or Piccoma). For instance, whereas Line Webtoon allows full access to the webtoons, although you can become

a patron, being thus highly popular in the US or in Europe, Tapas only enables readers a set of episodes, then demanding a payment for the remainder of the series.

### **Brief comparison between traditional comics and webtoons**

Comics have been a popular form of cultural production, at least, for the last century, and there are three major producers that can be pinpointed worldwide: the American tradition, namely by means of Marvel and DC Comics, the Japanese, through manga (*kanji*), and the Franco-Belgian, with *Tin Tin* (Hergé) or *Astérix* (Goscinny and Uderzo). It is the Franco-Belgian authors that argue in favour of comics being considered the ninth art (cf. Tv Tropes). As an art form, comics merge word and image and demand visual and verbal interpretation skills, thus being a “sequential art” according to Eisner (2008) and McCloud (2000).

In terms of the comparison between traditional comics and webtoons, Cho (2018) sums up the following: both use the fundamental elements of this art form, namely the use of a specific grammar and vocabulary, as well as panels or frames, gutters, speech balloons and boxes or captions. For instance, gutters are used to create a visual space that goes along the text; if they take more space than the panels, they contribute to the narrative, sometimes expressing the duration of time and/or changes of location by its length; they give the illusion of panels being seamlessly connected, maximising verticality. Time might not be an element that is visible in comics, thus the organization of space creates temporality, as stated for the use of gutters. Text can be moved out of the frame of the panels and occupy places that were traditionally banned in traditional comics, as it is also done in graphic novels (e.g. *Habibi* by Craig Thompson, 2011). Colour started being used instead of the traditional black and white, even though in Japan they tend to maintain the traditional formats and colours. Webtoons are also defined for their verticality (or vertical scrolling panels) and transmediality which enables its distribution through multiple platforms, prompting a process of re- and co-creation. Music and animations may be added, what Cho (2016) names “transmedia tie-ins”, and they are also serialised. The serialisation criterion was typical of traditional comics, as the Portuguese comics series known as *O Mosquito*, published between 1936 and 1986.

According to Japanese Professor Park Seok-kwan:

[s]tory-based long-running webtoons are carefully structured like dramas in ways that keep readers begging to know what will happen next. On the other hand, episode-based shorter webtoons revolve around an appealing central character. Either way, readers are compelled to look for the next episode. (cit. Ahn, 2018)

## Analysis of a selection of examples

From the webtoon platforms abovementioned, I will focus on Line Webtoon, one of the oldest Korean platforms. This platform, both online and as an app, allows readers to subscribe the chosen webtoons and thus receive notifications, alerting them to the newly available episodes. They can be featured on a daily basis (rarer), weekly (specific week days), every two weeks or monthly. As already mentioned, it is not uncommon for the webtoons to have intermissions, for personal or professional reasons, to present shorts or Q&A. Line Webtoon also organises webtoons by genres (see table 1), it invites volunteer translation, allowing widespread webtoons to be translated into less common languages (usually from English), and enables users to publish, by applying their work for the website's support.

Genre	Examples of webtoons subscribed
<b>Action</b>	<i>Lavender Jack</i> (Dan Schkade), <i>Necabual</i> (2Heroes)
<b>Animal fantasy</b>	<i>Fox fires</i> (Pipilia)
<b>Comedy</b>	<i>Hapi Buni</i> (Ryan Pagelow)
<b>Drama</b>	<i>Lumine</i> (Emma Krogell)
<b>Fantasy</b>	<i>The strange tales of Oscar Zahn</i> (Tri Vuong)
<b>Heart-warming</b>	<i>Castle swimmer</i> (Wendy Lia Martin)
<b>Historical</b>	<i>Lavender Jack</i> (Dan Schkade)
<b>Horror</b>	<i>Live Forever</i> (Raúl Trevino), <i>Saya</i> (Storybard)
<b>Romance</b>	<i>My Boo</i> (Jeongseo), <i>Siren's Lament</i> (instantmiso)
<b>Sci-fi</b>	<i>Petrichor</i> (motli)
<b>Slice of life</b>	<i>Saphie: the one-eye Cat</i> (joho)
<b>Sports</b>	<i>Midnight Furies</i> (Jess Herron)
<b>Superhero</b>	<i>Lavender Jack</i> (Dan Schkade), <i>Backchannel</i> (Stan Lee, Tom Akel, Andie Tong)
<b>Thriller</b>	<i>Side kicks</i> (IRON Shin)

Table 1 – Examples of webtoons according to their genres

From the webtoons presented on Table 1, I selected four to be analysed more thoroughly because of their more striking features. The first one is *Necabual* by 2Heroes (cf. Figure 1), currently with 8 episodes, featured rather unevenly (sometimes once every two weeks or once a month) and is classified as fantasy and action. It is mostly a black and white webtoon with a

significant use of light blue, red or purple for specific purposes. The gutters are all filled up to create the notion of different spaces and time passing by (cf. Figure 2), as Cho (2016) purported.

It presents a Peruvian community that is going to be the target of attacks, by which their allies have been falling: they are demons hiding in the shadows. This is an extreme situation of apocalyptic dimensions, where three ordinary girls are chosen by the gods to become the guardians of this community and possibly all the others as well.

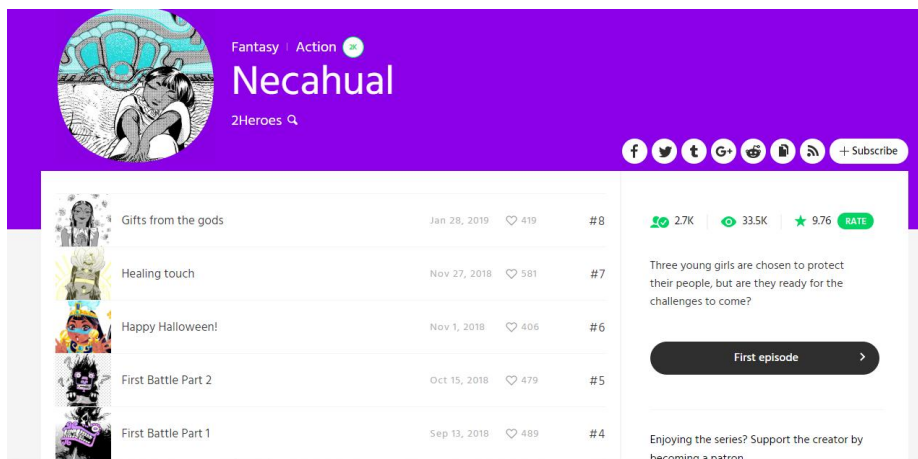


Figure 1 – *Necahual*, webtoon by 2Heroes



Figure 2 – Different places depicted in the first episode

The second webtoon is *Lavender Jack* by Dan Schkade, a thriller, though I should also add a superhero and historical story, currently on its 38<sup>th</sup> episode, and featured weekly (cf. Figure 3).

Dan Schkade presents himself as a writer, artist and letterer and, apart from this webtoon, has participated in *San Hannibal*, *Will Eisner's The Spirit*, *Battlestar Galactica: Gods and Monsters*, *Invasion from Planet Wrestletopia* and *Love is Love* (Cf. the author's website). According to Dueben (2018, online), Lavender Jack presents himself as "a thief and vigilante exposing the misdeeds of his town's corrupt and wealthy elite". He tries to revenge a friend's unfortunate misdeed (whom we are still to know) by acting as an avenger in the city Gallery. In Figure 4, it is clear the use of the gutters to create space and the position of text in out-of-the-ordinary places.

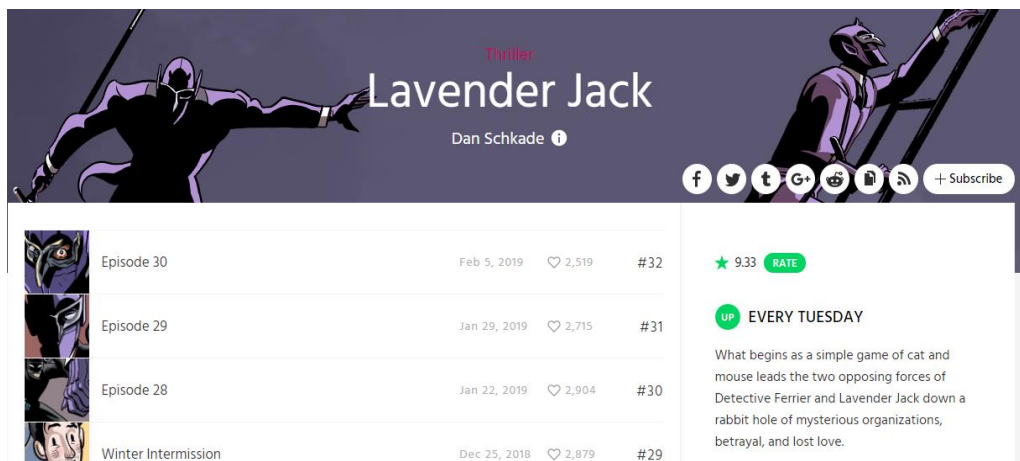


Figure 3 – *Lavender Jack* by Dan Schkade



Figure 4 – *Lavender Jack's* first episode

The third webtoon is *Siren's Lament* by instantmiso (cf. Figure 5), defined as a romance and fantasy story, which often includes music in some of its episodes (cf. Figure 6). It features on a weekly basis and is already on its second season and episode 132. *Siren's Lament* deals with an

orphan Lyra who's been adopted by a granny and owns a flower shop. She accidentally comes across a siren who kisses her, Ian, and the siren curse is divided between the two; this sets in motion a course of events that uncovers a distant past that connects Lyra to Shon's former girlfriend, in some way connected, and the Poseidon.

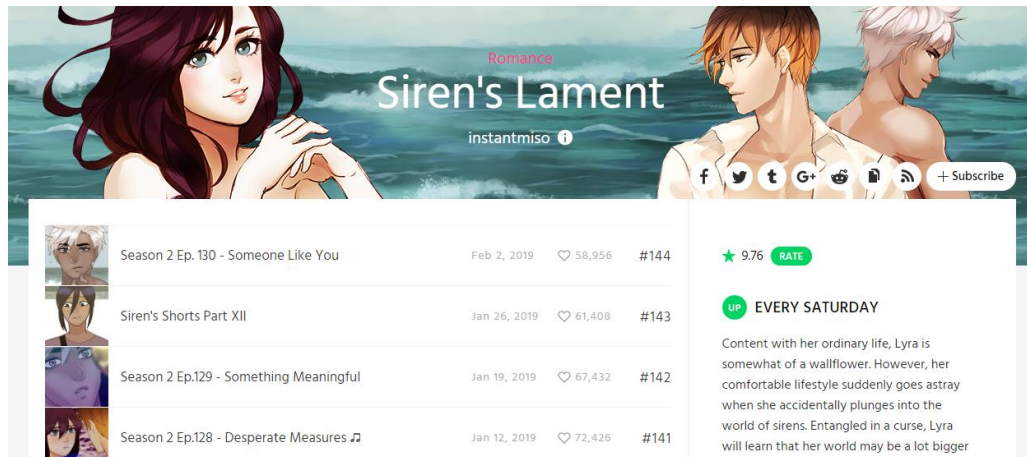


Figure 5 – *Siren's Lament* by instantmiso

♪  
Please have your sound on for this chapter

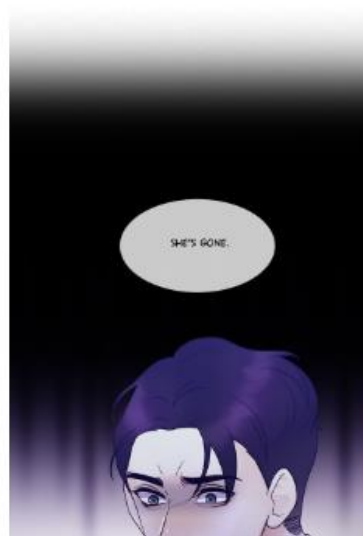


Figure 6 – Request of music for episode 131

Finally, *Backchannel*, a webtoon by Stan Lee, Tom Akel and Andie Tong (cf. Figure 7) that presents itself as being superhero and deals with a teenager, Tom Tanner, who is taken inside the virtual world of gaming to act as an ethical hacker. He is portrayed as an ordinary teen, on the day of his birthday, and also a superhero on the virtual world. After a long intermission of 5 months, the webtoon returned with its 9<sup>th</sup> episode.

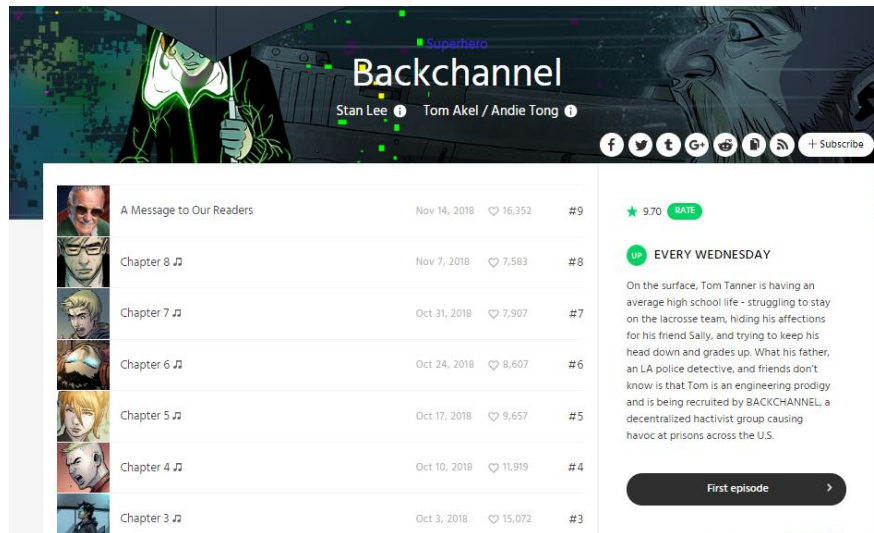


Figure 7 – *Backchannel* by Stan Lee, Tom Akel and Andie Tong

This is one of the few webtoons that include animation and every episode has several occurring, for example, the figure on the casualties varies the percentages (as if a digital clock – Figure 8), whereas the one with the Peniview, California, is flashing (cf. Figure 8). Music has present in all episodes so far, as the symbol at the list of episodes acknowledges.

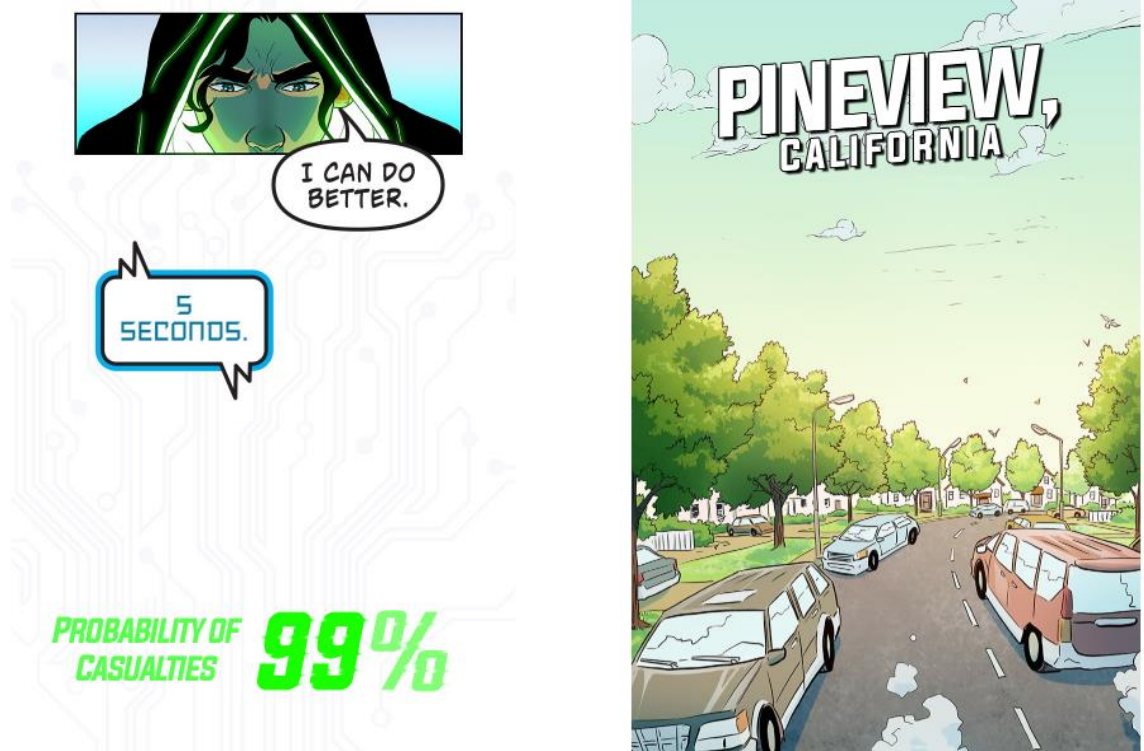


Figure 8 – Examples of animation on Backchannel (first episode)

## Final remarks

Transmedia storytelling brings about “undeniable aesthetic and artistic gains”, as well as “economic incentives for its development” (Bolin, 2007), but, above all, it makes the reader dependent on several platforms to appreciate their stories, encouraging consumer loyalty, and thus becoming a modern commodity. If once it was the printing press that enabled this commodification, currently digital media are calling the shots.

The development of webtoons through multiple platforms evolved dramatically, from mere scans of paper comics to mobile and computer apps, making graphic narratives a thriving industry in less than 20 years, in line with the new concept of graphic novels, also a recent hype. It was indeed the apps that brought on the height of the commodification of this new genre and enabled users to access an almost endless number of texts from multiple platforms.

From the selected webtoons shown above, I aimed at demonstrating that they are using all the major features of a generation 3 comic on the web: not only are they all vertical (thus enabling easy scrolling) and thus make use of the spaces between panels (or gutters) to create a sense of space and/or time, but they also throw in the added bonus of music and animation, though the latter is rarer, thus being transmedial. Webtoons have in fact moved forward from

traditional comics or even the more recent graphic novels by enabling the enhancement of the traits referred to, as well as easy access to this new form of transmedia storytelling available on multiple platforms on the web and also on mobile and PC apps.

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