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The Comic Strip Project: An Exercise in Hypermedia and Hyperrealism

In the television series, *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, the series protagonist, Joel Robinson, invents a device called The Cartuner which “takes stodgy ambiguous cartoons ... and mixes them with stifflingly unfunny cartoons... puts them together and makes them funny!”. Perhaps then the genesis of the Comic Strip Project lies in this anecdote and the idea of mixing various narrative genres together to comment on and critique them. To wit, the concept of the Comic Strip project is simple: build an interface wherein a four part narrative that takes place within three genre tropes can be arranged by a user, to tell a narrative that can borrow from one or all of the narrative genres we presented. In this remediation of comic strips into an interactive screen-based form, we have attempted to highlight several aesthetic and technical factors of the three media (comics, moving image, and digital media) we are working with.

An attempt to transfer the affordances of comics translates into pushing the limits of what can be called the moving image. One of the affordance of the comic is the gutter, the space between the panels where the transition between panels is filled in. In transitioning to the moving image, the replication of that transition is made by both the interface design as well as by the use of long pauses at the beginning and end of actions in the moving parts. An Aesthetic decision was made by the group to represent action as still as possible. This is obviously a distinct difference in typical cinematic style, embodied by forms such as classical Hollywood style.

We chose to use the green screen technique in order to more properly highlight the remediation of comics into the screen. This critique of the media was further pushed

by utilizing dubbed speech, voiceover in place of text bubbles. The dubbed speech, we felt, was a good analogue to the fashion with which one reads a comic strip, especially those with awkward or staid writing. The dialogue in particular was written to be recognized as an extension of the narrative modes employed by the various styles. This was done, not as parody necessarily, but as a way of both critiquing the ways in which the various narrative genres are represented in the various media forms.

Aesthetically, in order to highlight this hypermediacy, we felt it was important to push the conventions and narrative tropes of each of the individual styles to a hyperreal level. For example, in our “punch line” aesthetic borrowed from Jim Davis, we borrowed some of the conventions of late 70s sitcoms of Garry Marshall (*Happy Days, Laverne and Shirley, Mork and Mindy*) such as excessive canned laughter and applause at the beginning and end of an episode, in order to highlight both the staid quality of such comics, but to also highlight the ways in which screen-based media forms of the genre attempt to generate humor, even when the onscreen action and dialogue are not particularly funny. The choice of maintaining the camera in one space, mostly relying on the two shot, was to maintain the stillness most humor comics maintain.

Our take on serialized comics, specifically melodrama comics like *Mary Worth*, focused on the use of a shot/reverse shot schema more like a television interview than a film. The close-up shots purposely break the 180 degree rule, in order to more accurately represent the framing used in the comic strip. Voiceover is used to emulate boxed text, which is a technique often employed to provide context for the serial narrative, Here of course there is no prior narrative context, so the voiceover consists of

setting up the scene. The last scene's voiceover utilized a high pass filter effect in order to explicitly define it as speech that would appear in a thought balloon, since that style of comic uses it often to spell out character thoughts and emotions.

Our use of Chris Ware's style, specifically that of *Jimmy Corrigan* (which did begin as a newspaper comic) began with selecting unusual shots in order to destabilize the viewer. This effect was further enhanced with shot processing, such as in the first scene, where circles are used, much in the way that Ware does, to highlight certain elements of the action. Visual and aural montages are utilized in order to emulate the quickly paced, small frame layout Ware utilizes in his work. It is also employed to emulate Ware's treatment of fantasy.

The windowed mode references comics as well as provides a space of hypermediacy, as any one of the 12 combinations of videos can play in the interface instantaneously. This also shows the fluidity in narrative construction, which is a new affordance of remediation from moving image, to digital media. This procedural generation of narrative further extends the multiple, windowed nature of hypermediacy in the digital form. Interestingly, this multi-layered, more immediate interface allowed us to reinforce the comic strip aesthetic, creating a layout that is evocative of the form.

The Comic Strip Project Attempted, by remediating comic strips into film, then into a digital artifact, to transfer the unique affordances of comics into the hypermediated, immediacy that a multi-windowed interface affords. Secondly we tried to transfer many of the aesthetic and narrative conventions of comics into the moving image as possible, making various decisions about shot composition and sound that meant to evoke a hyperreal look at some of the narrative genres used in comics. This

dual remediation allowed us to accurately capture the mechanics and aesthetics of comics in a form where multiple narratives can be created and the various limitations on the forms and genres can be exposed and thought about.