



**Carleton**  
UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS  
COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA STUDIES  
Fall 2020



COMS 3800A

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**Special Topic in Communication & Media Studies:  
Comic Books and Transmedia Entertainment**

## Table of Contents

Territorial Acknowledgement .....	1
Course Description and Learning Outcomes.....	1
Instructor .....	1
Format.....	2
Course Materials .....	2
Texts .....	2
BigBlueButton.....	3
Assessment .....	3
Outline of Topics and Readings.....	5
Policies.....	8
Declining Online Imaging and Recording .....	8
Statement on Student Conduct Online.....	9
Carleton Email Accounts.....	9
Electronic Submissions .....	9
Late Policy .....	9
Grading .....	9
Plagiarism and Academic Integrity .....	10
Retention of Student Work.....	10
Additional Student Support .....	10
Requests for Academic Accommodation.....	10

## **Territorial Acknowledgement**

The land on which Carleton University is located is the traditional, unceded territory of the Algonquin nation.

## **Course Description and Learning Outcomes**

Despite being a medium purchased and consumed by relatively few people, comic books have an outsized impact on the entertainment industries and culture at large. Companies like Disney and Warner Brothers make billions of dollars each year from intellectual property derived from comics, but mostly in the form of movies, TV shows, video games, and licensed merchandise, not comic books themselves. As Shawna Kidman writes in *Comic Books Incorporated*, “These two sides of comic book culture – the popular and the esoteric, the mass and the niche – originate in the interdependence between publishing and licensing that has long defined this ... art form” (2).

This term, we will use the paradoxical medium of the American comic book as a way to explore transmedia franchising in the entertainment industries. By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- describe the industrial history of comic books in North America;
- distinguish between adaptation and transmedia storytelling;
- analyze and critique entertainment companies’ transmedia strategies from multiple perspectives;
- and reflect on their own relationship with transmedia entertainment.

## **Instructor**

Welcome to COMS 3800A! My name is Benjamin Woo. I’m an Associate Professor in the Communication & Media Studies program and the director of the [Research on Comics, Con Events, and Transmedia Laboratory](#) (RoCCET Lab). I’m looking forward to spending this semester reading and thinking about comics and the entertainment industries alongside you.

Although we won’t have regularly scheduled classes together this term, I am always happy to hear from you. There are several ways to get in touch with me: you can **e-mail me using the Mail block on cuLearn**; you can **post on the cuLearn discussion forums**; you can **drop in for my weekly online office hours (Fridays, 1:00–2:00 p.m. Eastern)** by yourself or in a group to review course content, ask questions, or tell me about the comics you’re reading; or you can **make an appointment for a one-on-one meeting using the Scheduler tool on cuLearn** (two hours of meeting time slots will be available each week on a rotating schedule; meetings must be requested 24 hours in advance).

During the week (Monday to Friday), I aim to respond to your emails within 48 hours, and the cuLearn discussion forums will be checked daily. Please note that any course-wide announcements I send to you by email will also be archived for your reference in the “Course Announcements” forum on cuLearn.

## **Format**

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, COMS 3800 will be offered fully online in Fall 2020. I want to acknowledge at the outset that this will be an unusual semester for us all. You may be in different circumstances than normal and without access to some of the resources that you have been accustomed to relying on, from study space in the library or the Readers Digest Resource Centre to computer labs or fast campus internet connections. With that in mind, I have designed this class to be as flexible as I can make it. It’s been structured **asynchronously**, meaning **you can work your way through the “lecture” material at your own pace as long as you complete all six quizzes by Friday, Dec. 11**. Three of the six modules will be available from the first day of classes, and the remaining three will be added by the Fall Break. While an optional welcome/Q&A session will be held on Friday Sept. 11, **no course components will require you to log on at specific, scheduled times**. You also get to make some choices about your workload and deadlines.

The flip side is that some of the familiar structures you’re used to – notably, weekly class meetings – aren’t going to be there. Consequently, you will have to be responsible for your own learning needs. If you’re ever feeling overwhelmed, unsure about what you need to do, or simply want to talk about the material, **please reach out: email me, schedule an appointment, or drop in for office hours**.

## **Course Materials**

### ***Texts***

You should ensure that you have regular access to *Comic Books Incorporated: How the Business of Comics Became the Business of Hollywood* by Shawna Kidman (University of California Press, 2019). An order has been placed with the [Carleton University Bookstore](#), but you are also free to order it from any bookseller that is convenient for you. All other required readings may be accessed via the ARES online reserves system.

You are also strongly encouraged to pick 1 graphic novel, 1 monthly comic book series, and 1 daily comic strip to read/follow during the term (this will be required if you plan to do the Periodicity & Seriality assignment):

- Graphic novels can be found at your local library, bookstore or comic shop; I’ve posted a curated list of graphic novels in the MacOdrum Library collection on cuLearn if you’re looking for some recommendations

- Periodical comics can be purchased digitally via Amazon Comixology or at a comic book store: if you're in Ottawa this fall, visit [Comet Comics \(Old Ottawa South\)](#) or [The Comic Shoppe \(locations in Centretown and Nepean\)](#); for other areas, see the [Comic Shop Locator](#)
- A selection of newspapers, including their comics pages, can be accessed online via [PressReader](#); if you're having trouble finding something, you can always follow @sluggoislit on Twitter

### **BigBlueButton**

I will hold regular, drop-in office hours using the BigBlueButton (BBB) web conferencing platform. You can access it directly from cuLearn. Chrome and Firefox are recommended browsers. As a matter of etiquette, please wear headphones/earbuds when logging into a BBB session in order to minimize background noise. Per our policy on [online imaging and recording](#), you are not required to turn on your camera. If your internet connection is slow (and plugging into an Ethernet connection or moving closer to a router isn't an option), you can also dial into office hours by phone.

### **Assessment**

This class uses a modified version of a grading framework called *specifications grading*. In essence, your work is graded as either complete or incomplete with reference to specific assignment specifications. If your work meets **all** the criteria listed in the assignment specs, then it is **complete** and you will receive credit for it. If **any** of the criteria have not been met, then the assignment is **incomplete**, and you don't receive credit for it (though you may be able to **revise and resubmit** it, see below).

I believe specs grading is more consistent and transparent than traditional grading. You should be able to compare the checklist of assignment criteria with your work and be confident of the result you're going to see. Second, I believe it helps to focus our attention on the **process** more than **outcomes**. Rather than worrying about the difference between 74% and 76%, we can have conversations about your ideas and your academic skills. In general, I'm asking you to reflect on what you want to get out of this class – what are your goals, whether in terms of things you want to understand better or skills you want to improve – and then to act accordingly to meet those goals.

Your final grade in the course will be determined by which assignments you successfully complete:

- **In order to pass the course with a grade of D or higher**, students must submit a Participation and Engagement Plan by Sept. 14, Midterm and End-of-Term Self-Assessments (Oct. 23 and Dec. 11, respectively), and write all 6 quizzes by Dec. 11, achieving an average score of at least 65%.

- **Students who wish to achieve a grade of C or higher**, will *also* complete the Course Notebook assignment. The Notebook comprises a series of exercises that model different ways to engage with the course material. Your Notebook will be collected for grading three times during the semester (Sept. 30, Nov. 11, and Dec. 11). You may break the required entries up across these deadlines as you wish, though you are strongly encouraged to turn it at least a few entries for each deadline.
- **Students who wish to achieve a grade higher than a C** may choose *additional* assignments from the following menu:

<b>Visual Analysis</b> 5 points	<b>Easter Eggs &amp; Peak Moments</b> 5 points	<b>Franchise Infographic</b> 10 points
<b>Superheroes &amp; Me</b> 5 points	<b>Culture or Commodity?</b> 10 points	<b>Periodicity &amp; Seriality</b> 15 points
<b>Summative Reflection</b> 10 points	<b>Take-Home Final</b> 10/20 points	<b>Research Paper</b> 30 points

You may do as many or as few of these assignments as you wish to reach the grade you desire (see table at right). Each assignment will be evaluated as either complete or incomplete according to the criteria laid out in their respective assignment specifications. Points earned from these assignments will convert to final grades as outlined below. You will be asked to indicate which assignments you wish to complete and to set deadlines for submission as part of your Participation and Engagement Plan (these deadlines may be altered when you submit your Midterm Self-Assessment).

<b>Points to Final Grade Conversion</b>			
Points	Grade	Points	Grade
61+	A+	31-40	B+
51-60	A	21-30	B
41-50	A-	11-20	B-
		01-10	C+

**Please note that each grade requirement includes the requirements for the lower “tiers.”** That is, in order to receive any grade higher than a C by completing assignments from the choice board, you must also complete requirements for a C (the Course Notebook) and for a D (a 65% average on module quizzes, the P&E Plan, and both Self-Assessments).

What happens if your work doesn’t fulfill all the assignment specifications? For the Course Notebook, you can simply replace unsatisfactory entries with new ones on later submission deadlines. For the choice board assignments (with the exception of the final exam), you may choose to do another draft that incorporates the feedback you received and resubmit it within one week along with a cover sheet outlining the changes you made. If necessary, you may revise and resubmit multiple times until you meet all the criteria, but each time you resubmit an assignment, its value drops by 25% (e.g., a 5-point assignment is worth 3.75 points if complete after one R&R, 2.5 points if complete after two R&Rs, and 1.25 points if complete after three R&Rs).

### Outline of Topics and Readings

Module	Readings
Welcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Kidman, Shawna. “Introduction: An Unruly Medium.” <i>Comic Books Incorporated</i>, U of California P, 2019, pp. 1–17.</li> </ul>
Introducing the American Comic Book	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>McCloud, Scott. “Setting the Record Straight.” <i>Understanding Comics</i>, William Morrow, 1994, pp. 2–23.</li> <li>Chute, Hillary. “Introduction: Comics for Grownups?” <i>Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere</i>, HarperCollins, 2019, pp. 1–31.</li> <li>Smolderen, Thierry. “From the Label to the Balloon: The Creation of an Audiovisual Stage on Paper.” <i>The Origins of Comics</i>, translated by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen, UP of Mississippi, 2014, pp. 136–47.</li> <li>Jenkins, Henry. “‘What Else Can You Do with Them?’ Superheroes and the Civic Imagination.” <i>The Superhero Symbol</i>, edited by Liam Burke, Ian Gordon and Angela Ndalians, Rutgers UP, 2020, pp. 25–46.</li> <li>Adams, Mitchell. “The Secret Commercial Identity of Superheroes: Protecting the Superhero Symbol.” <i>The Superhero Symbol</i>, edited by Liam Burke, Ian Gordon and Angela Ndalians, Rutgers UP, 2020, pp. 89–104.</li> </ul>

Module	Readings
Comic Book Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kidman, Shawna. "Tales of the Comic Book Cult: Quality Demographics and Insider Fans in the 1970s–1980s." <i>Comic Books Incorporated</i>, U of California P, 2019, pp. 136–79.</li> <li>• Estrada Wilson, Adriana. "Not Just Superhero Stories: Comic Book Fandom as a Resource in the Cultural Toolkit of Life." <i>The Comics World</i>, edited by Benjamin Woo and Jeremy Stoll, UP of Mississippi, forthcoming.</li> <li>• Scott, Suzanne. "Fangirls in Refrigerators: The Politics of (In)Visibility in Comic Book Culture." <i>Transformative Works and Cultures</i> 13, 2013, <a href="https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2013.0460">https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2013.0460</a></li> <li>• Benjamin Woo and Nasreen Rajani, "Comic Book Stores as Sites of Struggle." <i>Point of Sale</i>, edited by Derek Johnson and Daniel Herbert, Rutgers UP, 2019.</li> </ul>
From Adaptation to Transmedia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cartmell, Deborah. "Adaptation as Exploitation." <i>Literature/Film Quarterly</i>, vol. 45, no. 2, <a href="https://lfq.salisbury.edu/issues/first/adaptation_as_exploitation.html">https://lfq.salisbury.edu/issues/first/adaptation_as_exploitation.html</a>.</li> <li>• Leitch, Thomas. "The Place of 'Literature and Film' Today." <i>Literature/Film Quarterly</i>, vol. 45, no. 2, <a href="https://lfq.salisbury.edu/issues/first/the_place_of_literature_and_film.html">https://lfq.salisbury.edu/issues/first/the_place_of_literature_and_film.html</a>.</li> <li>• Jenkins, Henry. "Adaptation, Extension, Transmedia." <i>Literature/Film Quarterly</i>, vol. 45, no. 2, <a href="https://lfq.salisbury.edu/issues/first/adaptation_extension_transmedia.html">https://lfq.salisbury.edu/issues/first/adaptation_extension_transmedia.html</a>.</li> <li>• Jenkins, Henry. "Transmedia Storytelling 101." <i>Confessions of an Aca-Fan</i>, <a href="http://henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html">http://henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html</a>.</li> <li>• Eiji Otsuka. "World and Variation," translated by Marc Steinberg. <i>Mechademia</i>, vol. 5, no. 1, 2010, pp. 99–116.</li> </ul>



Module	Readings
Comic Books as Transmedia Entertainment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kidman, Shawna. "Incorporating Comics: A Brief Transmedia History of the US Comic Book Industry." <i>Comic Books Incorporated</i>, U of California P, 2019, pp. 18–45.</li> <li>• Freeman, Matthew. "Up, Up and Across: Superman, the Second World War and the Historical Development of Transmedia Storytelling." <i>Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television</i>, vol. 35, no. 2, 2015, pp. 215–39.</li> <li>• Hanna, Erin. "Origin Stories: Comic-Con and the Future of All Media." <i>Only at Comic-Con</i>, Rutgers UP, 2020, pp. 29–61.</li> <li>• Rothery, Jason, and Benjamin Woo. "Mutatis Mutandis: Constructing Fidelity in the Comic Book Film Adaptation." <i>Comics and Pop Culture</i>, edited by Barry Keith Grant and Scott Henderson, U of Texas P, 2019, pp. 126–39.</li> </ul>
The New Superhero Mega-Franchise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kidman, Shawna. "Mutant Risk: Speculation and Comic Book Films in the 1990s–2000s." <i>Comic Books Incorporated</i>, U of California P, 2019, pp. 180–229.</li> <li>• Brinker, Felix. "On the Political Economy of the Contemporary (Superhero) Blockbuster Series." <i>Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Film</i>, edited by Shane Denson and Julia Leyda, REFRAAME Books, 2016, pp. 433–73.</li> <li>• Beaty, Bart. "Superhero Fan Service: Audience Strategies in the Contemporary Interlinked Hollywood Blockbuster." <i>The Information Society</i>, vol. 32, no. 5, pp. 318–25.</li> <li>• Pardy, Brett. "Selling Marvel's Cinematic Superheroes Through Militarization." <i>Stream: Culture/Politics/Technology</i>, vol. 8, no. 2, 2016, pp. 25–35.</li> <li>• Hassler-Forest, Dan. "Disney's Endgame: Corporate Stockholm Syndrome in the Age of the Mega-Franchise." <i>LA Review of Books</i>, 1 June 2019, <a href="https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/disneys-endgame-corporate-stockholm-syndrome-age-mega-franchise/">https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/disneys-endgame-corporate-stockholm-syndrome-age-mega-franchise/</a>.</li> </ul>

Module	Readings
Crawling the Transmedia Web	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kashtan, Aaron. “Change the Cover: Superhero Fan Identity in an Age of Diversification.” <i>Journal of Fandom Studies</i>, vol. 6, no. 3, 2018, pp. 243–61.</li> <li>• McWilliams, Ora C. “Who Is Afraid of a Black Spider(-Man)?” <i>Transformative Works and Cultures</i>, no. 13, 2013, <a href="https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2013.0455">https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2013.0455</a>.</li> <li>• Thomas, Tracey. “‘Let’s Do This One Last Time’: Character, Adaptation, and Nostalgia in <i>Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse</i>,” Canadian Society for the Study of Comics, 5 June 2019, University of British Columbia, Vancouver.</li> <li>• Cicci, Matthew A. “The Invasion of Loki’s Army? Understanding Comic Culture’s Increasing Awareness of Female Fans.” <i>The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom</i>, edited by Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott, Routledge, 2018, pp. 193–201.</li> <li>• Coker, Catherine. “Earth 616, Earth 1610, Earth 3490—Wait, What Universe Is This Again? The Creation and Evolution of the Avengers and Captain America/Iron Man Fandom.” <i>Transformative Works and Cultures</i>, no. 13, 2013, <a href="https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2013.0439">https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2013.0439</a>.</li> </ul>

## Policies

### *Declining Online Imaging and Recording*

This course includes optional sessions that using the BigBlueButton video conferencing platform. This raises some important privacy considerations that all students should know. You are not required to turn your camera on and may decide to turn it on or off at any time. Students are **not permitted** to take photographs, screenshots, or record other students unless they obtain **explicit permission** from the professor and all other students well in advance of the session.

Office hours and meetings held on BigBlueButton will not be recorded by the instructor. Our initial welcome/Q&A session will be recorded by the instructor to ensure access for those who cannot attend or those who wish to review it afterwards; if you do not wish to be recorded during this session, please let me know by email, and I will contact you to discuss alternate arrangements.

This statement was adapted from the research-creation project *Cam Hunters* (artist-scholars Julia Chan and Stéfy McKnight [STÉFY]).

### ***Statement on Student Conduct Online***

All students are expected to contribute towards an engaging, inclusive, and safe learning environment. During all class-related activities, whether synchronous or asynchronous, students are expected to engage in respectful and courteous communication. In accordance with the [Student Rights and Responsibilities Policy, discrimination and harassment](#) will not be tolerated. It is a violation of course policy to cut and paste, screen shot, share course content, or post the words of your classmates, TA, or Instructor outside of class without permission. All work submitted in this course must be uniquely your own. When submitting assignments and/or completing exams, you are expected to articulate responses in your own words rather than cutting and pasting from course materials without permission, which is a form of plagiarism.

### ***Carleton Email Accounts***

All email communication to students from the Communication and Media Studies Program will be via official Carleton University e-mail accounts and/or cuLearn. As important course and University information are distributed this way, it is the student's responsibility to monitor their Carleton and cuLearn accounts.

### ***Electronic Submissions***

All assignments will be submitted electronically on cuLearn, typically as .pdf files. It is your responsibility to ensure that you have gone through all the steps to complete the submission by the deadline.

### ***Late Policy***

Given the amount of flexibility already built into the structure of the course, assignments will not typically be accepted late. As you work backwards from due dates to establish timelines for yourself, please build some cushion into your plans to account for minor illnesses or things taking longer than you expect.

That being said, if you experience a significant disruption to your ability to complete your academic work, whether due to the COVID-19 pandemic, another serious or chronic illness or other major life event, please contact the instructor as soon as possible to discuss a plan to get you back on track in the course.

### ***Grading***

Standing in a course is determined by the course instructor, subject to the approval of the faculty Dean. This means that grades submitted by an instructor may be subject to revision. No grades are final until they have been approved by the Dean.

Final standing in courses will be shown by alphabetical grades, as determined by the course components satisfactorily completed. For your reference, the system of

grades used, with corresponding grade points, may be found in [§5.4 of the Undergraduate Calendar](#).

### ***Plagiarism and Academic Integrity***

The Carleton University Senate defines plagiarism as “presenting, whether intentionally or not, the ideas, expression of ideas, or work of others as one’s own.” This can include the following:

- reproducing or paraphrasing portions of someone else’s published or unpublished material, regardless of the source, and presenting these as one’s own without proper citation or reference to the source;
- submitting a take-home examination, essay, laboratory report or other assignment written, in whole or in part, by someone else;
- using ideas or direct, verbatim quotations, or paraphrased material, concepts, or ideas without appropriate acknowledgment in any academic assignment;
- using another’s data or research findings;
- failing to acknowledge sources through the use of proper citations when using another’s works and/or failing to use quotation marks;
- or handing in “substantially the same piece of work for academic credit more than once without the prior written permission of the course instructor in which the submission occurs.”

You should familiarize yourself with Carleton University’s [policy on Academic Integrity](#).

### ***Retention of Student Work***

Work submitted in this class may be retained for internal use and shared anonymously (that is, with all identifying information removed) as an example for future classes. If you do not consent to this use of your work, please speak with the instructor to opt out.

### ***Additional Student Support***

The Centre for Student Academic Support (CSAS) is a centralized collection of learning support services designed to help students achieve their goals and improve their learning both inside and outside the classroom. CSAS offers academic assistance with course content, academic writing and skills development. Visit their [Online Resources page](#) for more information.

### ***Requests for Academic Accommodation***

You may need special arrangements to meet your academic obligations during the term. For an accommodation request, the processes are as follows:

- **Pregnancy obligation.** Please contact your instructor with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. For more details, visit the Equity Services website: [carleton.ca/equity/wp-content/uploads/Student-Guide-to-Academic-Accommodation.pdf](http://carleton.ca/equity/wp-content/uploads/Student-Guide-to-Academic-Accommodation.pdf)
- **Religious obligation.** Please contact your instructor with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. For more details, visit the Equity Services website: [carleton.ca/equity/wp-content/uploads/Student-Guide-to-Academic-Accommodation.pdf](http://carleton.ca/equity/wp-content/uploads/Student-Guide-to-Academic-Accommodation.pdf)
- **Academic accommodations for students with disabilities.** The Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities (PMC) provides services to students with Learning Disabilities (LD), psychiatric/mental health disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), chronic medical conditions, and impairments in mobility, hearing, and vision.

If you have a disability requiring academic accommodations in this course, please contact PMC at 613-520-6608 or [pmc@carleton.ca](mailto:pmc@carleton.ca) for a formal evaluation. If you are already registered with the PMC, contact your PMC coordinator to send me your Letter of Accommodation at the beginning of the term, and no later than two weeks before the first in-class scheduled test or exam requiring accommodation (if applicable). Requests made within two weeks will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis. After requesting accommodation from PMC, meet with me to ensure accommodation arrangements are made. Please consult the PMC website ([www.carleton.ca/pmc](http://www.carleton.ca/pmc)) for the deadline to request accommodations for the formally-scheduled exam (if applicable).

- **Survivors of sexual violence.** As a community, Carleton University is committed to maintaining a positive learning, working and living environment where sexual violence will not be tolerated, and is survivors are supported through academic accommodations as per Carleton's Sexual Violence Policy. For more information about the services available at the university and to obtain information about sexual violence and/or support, visit [carleton.ca/sexual-violence-support](http://carleton.ca/sexual-violence-support)

For more information on academic accommodation, please contact the departmental administrator or visit [students.carleton.ca/course-outline](http://students.carleton.ca/course-outline).

Carleton University also recognizes the substantial benefits, both to the individual student and for the university, that result from a student participating in activities beyond the classroom experience. Reasonable accommodation must be provided to students who compete or perform at the national or international level. Please contact your instructor with any requests for academic accommodation

during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. <https://carleton.ca/senate/wp-content/uploads/Accommodation-for-Student-Activities-1.pdf>