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»We welcome you to your *Heroes* community. Remember, everything is connected«. A Case Study in Transmedia Storytelling

Abstract

Second screen strategies are quite common in today's television industry. Television viewers are used to hashtag suggestions appearing on their screens while watching their shows; networks commonly use second screen options and apps to enhance the audience's engagement with programming. NBC's *Heroes* (2006–2010) was »arguably, the largest and most complex transmedia network […] conceived« (RUPPEL 2012: 224) at the time; the series tested many strategies of media convergence in distributing elements of its fictional world through multiple media platforms.

This article focuses on the show's strategies enticing viewers to engage with its websites, print media extensions, accompanying games, and tie-over webisodes. There have been studies focusing on the series' branding (cf. GIANNINI 2014) or on the links connecting *Heroes*' different elements (cf. RUPPEL 2012: 61), yet there is a tangible lack of attention to what Jason Mittell has termed »forensic fandom« (MITTELL 2015: n.pag.).

This article examines the narrative gaps and story arc stops created by the fantasy series. The following discusses how these gaps allowed some viewers to evolve from their assumed passiveness in the general audience to instead become part of the fast growing fan base. Depending on varying levels of involvement, this fandom generated a number of *Heroes* ›experts‹, creating a tiered hierarchy. Those experts sought to answer questions about

mystified symbols, underdeveloped characters, open-ended storylines and potential references provided by the series. This article argues that the NBC strategy ensured the growth of a willing fandom and growing expert base without relying on overt prompts.

1. Welcome to *Heroes*

An ever-growing group of people with diverse special, or even supernatural powers tries to avoid apocalyptic versions of the future, while struggling with their personal issues. They slowly but surely come to terms with their only recently discovered talents as well as with the consequences of these skills and, in long and intertwining storylines, meet friends and foes on their journey. The characters either choose to join, fight against, or are captured by at least two mysterious organizations that know a lot more about the origins of these powers than the people affected. Declared season one goals are expressed in phrases like »Save the cheerleader, save the world« or questions like »How to stop an exploding man?«.

This is perhaps the most basic description of the first season of the television series *Heroes*, which aired on NBC in 2006 and will find new life in 2015 in the form of *Heroes Reborn*. The team around the executive producers Tim Kring and Dennis Hammer employed different transmedia strategies to advertise their show to potential and early audiences from the series' beginnings. They also used transmedia techniques in the so-called *Heroes Evolutions* concept to drive the narrative through the four seasons until 2010. Having witnessed the success of ABC's *Lost* (2004–2010) and its associated fandom and transmedia activities, *Heroes* was eager to benefit from the results of the experimental transmedia universe of *Lost*'s early years (cf. SHORT 2011: 139).

The *Heroes Evolutions* concept allowed for free exploration of content as well as giving guidance through its different media outlets for the participants in an Alternate Realty Game (ARG). Some users functioned as pathfinders, drilling into the narrative and spreading their findings in forums (cf. MITTEL 2012: n.pag.), encouraging others to explore themselves. These lead-users, their subsequent-users, and the ARG-players guided by the developers all had to be invited or encouraged to enter into the transmedia world. The different points of entry and the audience's movement through different media are the focal point here.[1] The original four-season run of *Heroes* is a closed object of investigation that can give insight into strategies employed by NBC before the contemporary standards such as twitter handles and mobile apps developed. This study will be of renewed interest with the continua-

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[1] Audience is understood as a target group or niche group within the larger dimension of viewers, but »which is not an analytical category, like class, gender or race, but a product of the media industry itself« (MOSCO 1996: 262).

tion of the thematic world of *Heroes* in the form of the limited run series *Heroes. Reborn* in 2015.

Looking back to 2006, NBC offered a limited range of online features to the series' audience. The series' homepage provided basic information on characters, cast, and series narrative, an episode guide, and downloadable screensavers. This page was linked to the network's main site and went up around the time of the series' premier on broadcast television. Contrary to newer series, such as HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011–), it is doubtful that this online introduction material was meant to generate an early ›buzz‹ for the series. This becomes evident by investigating the marketing tool that introduced *Game of Thrones*, Campfire's *The Maester's Path* campaign (2011) in comparison.

The Maester's Path both targeted fans of the preexisting novels and sought a new fan-base for HBO's TV adaptation. The marketing agency sent so-called ›influencers‹ a wooden case full of spices and bottled scents, allowing them to (re-)create smells of the different regions in the fictional realm of Westeros (cf. KLASTRUP/TOSCA 2014). Campfire, in an accompanying video for the campaign, explains that they selected these individuals because of their ability to quickly share their experience with their respective readers and social media followers. Identifying their own lead-users and utilizing them so they would actively invite their subsequent-users along on the virtual journey to sites of George R.R. Martin's narrative universe had multiple effects. The subsequent-users too could walk on ›the Wall‹ or listen in on conversations in a tavern; the lead-users' blogs got increased traffic and the campaign spread virally, due to its ›digital word of mouth‹ approach via YouTube, Facebook and Twitter.

Note that Twitter was just starting out in 2006, so it was not yet considered to be integral to marketing campaigns. Therefore no cleverly hidden *Heroes* twitter handles can be found in the set dressing, as for example SyFy's *Haven* (2010–) likes to do, by disguising #escapetohaven in their *mise-en-scène* (e.g., as graffiti on a house). Neither was there a mobile app to sync your current episode to, as for example Starz' *Da Vinci's Demons* offered in 2013. The show asked the audience to »sync now« at the beginning of each episode. Using different characters, they could then digitally explore the realms of renaissance Florence, Italy. The scenes and objects available to the users would change according to which episode they were currently watching and synced to (cf. GANZERT 2013). Another transmedia device, often used today, did not find application in *Heroes* either. Many series, to increase the shares and Facebook likes, create polls in which viewers can vote for series elements such as their ›favorite villain‹. These polls provide some knowledge about viewers and uses of convergent offerings, but provide little for the narrative. They also generate revenue.[2] *Heroes*' web extensions instead focused on inviting further investigation into characters, the series' fictional compa-

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[2] During the show's hiatus between seasons, there was one voting process regarding possible new characters for upcoming seasons and their abilities, but again there was no charge.

nies, and locations. The websites thereby created a narrative construct that added diegetically to the series storyworld and therefore the enjoyment of the participating audience. All second-screen offers mentioned in this article were accessible without overly specific media conditions and generally free of charge. They were, however, financed through sponsorship and product placement by companies such as Cisco, Nissan, Sprint, and Apple, as Erin Giannini has explained (cf. GIANNINI 2014: 28).

Most of these elements were part of a concept originally entitled the *Heroes 360 Experience*. The name was changed into *Heroes Evolutions* for season 2 and the concept received a Creative Arts Emmy for Interactive Media Programming/Interactive Fiction in 2008 (cf. GILLAN 2011: 3). In her book *Television and New Media*, Jennifer Gillan considers *Heroes Evolutions* as »must-click TV«, a term she uses »to describe new media influenced network programming, marketing, broadcasting, and distribution strategies and audience reception practices« (GILLAN 2011: 1). It was activated on January 19, 2007, the original broadcasting date of the first season's 12th episode, »Godsend«. This episode was clearly not chosen randomly, as will become evident later. In an interview about *Heroes Evolutions*, co-executive producer and writer Jesse Alexander said that the then current version was a ›dry run‹ for an even bigger experience in the works for the future. It will be interesting to look at those strategies again, when *Heroes Reborn* will be shown and advertized for in 2015—this time, it already has a hashtag.

2. Entering the *Heroes* Orbit

Before entering the *Heroes* universe, the audience has to be identified as ›the audience‹ (cf. ANG 1991: 61), with the potential and the media conditions necessary. At the same time the audience has to consent to their interpellation as such (cf. ALTHUSSER 2010: 146) and be willing to accept the invitation to interact with the show (cf. BOOTH 2011: 373f.). This is what, according to TV scholar Sara Gwenllian-Jones, constitutes the popularity of transmedia narrations:

> The appeal of these vast, transmedia fictions lies precisely in their invitations to immersion and interactivity; they are constructed, marketed, and used by fans not as ›texts‹ to be ›read‹ but as cosmologies to be entered, experienced and imaginatively interacted with. (GWENLLIAN-JONES 2011: 84)

These invitations to enter can be rather obvious, like text blurbs or overlays over the images to invite people to visit a homepage, use a twitter handle or, as mentioned above, to »sync now«. Nevertheless, this kind of interpellation is not applicable for audiences of the DVD version of *Heroes*, given that such overlays are usually only part of the broadcasted episodes and deducted for the DVD. This is why this paper focuses on invitations that were expressed through the narration, staging and montage itself.

For example, so-called eastereggs are useful devices in order to lead audiences deeper into a narrative world. Director Lars von Trier calls them »Lookeys«, and explains: »For the casual observer, it's just a glitch or a mistake«, but »[f]or the initiated, it's a riddle to be solved. All Lookeys can be decoded by a system that is unique« (quoted in BROWN 2006: n.pag.). Movie and series creators alike have long applied this kind of hidden object or symbol principle, as Carlos A. Scolari has shown for *Lost* (cf. SCOLARI 2013: 50) and Paul Booth for *Doctor Who* (2005–) (cf. BOOTH 2011: 370). Such elements can also be found in *Heroes*. The most prominent easteregg is a helix symbol that appears in varying quantities and forms in 17 out of the 23 episodes in the first season. In the second episode alone it is visible in a DNA computer program, on a business card, in a drawing, a painting, in a comic, and in one shot, the symbol is even formed by pool noodles. Later in the season, glass shards or the holes in a burned door take the shape of the helix. This symbol was so much of a central idea and connecting or guiding symbol for the series, that, in an interview with TV critic Michael Ausiello, creator Tim Kring stated:

> I would just say that part of the fun of watching the show is seeing how certain things crop up. And if you look at that symbol carefully, you might be able to figure it out. By the way, the symbol also shows up in places viewers can't see: On the door of a room in the soundstage where Heroes shoots, the sign reads ›PROPS‹—with that special S as the symbol. (Ausiello Report/Entertainment Weekly, 2006)

Other eastereggs in *Heroes* are a cockroach, a mysterious scar and the entirely fictional medical publication *Activating Evolution*, written by one of the show's characters. The book's title and cover are frequently mentioned and shown in the series, either prominently featured in the camera shot or casually placed in the background. The introduction to the book used to be partly legible on a homepage that appeared legitimate, complete with contact information, testimonials, and critiques for the book. Digging into the meaning and origin of these eastereggs is an important part of the show's forensic fandom (cf. MITTELL 2009), but only one element in the *Heroes* universe.

3. The Planets in the *Heroes* Universe

Heroes follows a mostly chronological timeline and narrates its long storyarches in logical succession. But the show is at times as tricky as a mind-game movie or puzzle film (cf. BUCKLAND 2009). In order to gather all the small pieces to solve such a puzzle (cf. BUCKLAND 2009: 57) the audience ideally decides: »We're going to have to watch that again!« (MITTELL 2006: 35, quoting *Lost*'s John Locke). In order not to miss a hint to the mythology, re-watching is a common viewing practice (cf. JENKINS 1995: 56). The *Heroes* puzzle pieces are especially small, as each character has very little screen-time to his- or herself before the focus jumps to someone else, causing a cliffhanger or pos-

ing a riddle every few minutes. But »[t]he weeks between episodes open up a text, allowing all manner of intruders and intertexts to inflect our textual gestalt« (GRAY 2003: 69) and giving the audience time to think about the riddles or research them online.

This built-in research period shrinks due to new viewing practices, like ›binge watching‹ with TV-on-demand. And if the trend toward *ad hoc* releases of whole seasons continues, like *Netflix* did for their first in-house production *House of Cards* in February 2013, transmedia universes will also change. But the invitations to older transmedia worlds hold up, even if the contents on the other end of the link might no longer be available (cf. RUPPEL 2012: 51).

If, between 2006 and 2010, audience members accepted one of the invitations and went online to educate themselves about, e.g., the helix symbol, they could find countless forums and message boards. They could learn that the symbol is a vertical half of the well-established symbol for DNA sequences and compare and discuss their observations with others. One of the bigger discussion forums was located on the *9th Wonders!* page, that also inspired this paper's title. This page was the official/unofficial fan site for *Heroes* and promised many things to its visitors:

> This site is your direct connection to Heroes. The cast. The creators. The fans. We're all in this together. Come back here often to get updates from the set. Clues of storyline to come. Interviews. Live chats. Videos. And some surprises that we have in store. We welcome you to your Heroes community. Remember, everything is connected.
>
> Tim Kring

The page is made to look like a silkscreen printed paper cover and therefore aesthetically references back into the TV series. In *Heroes*, *9th Wonders!* is a comic book drawn by Isaac Mendez, an artist who can look into the future, in which other characters recognize themselves and find useful hints for their own actions. It is—at least on a visual level—what Jason Mittell accurately calls a »diegetic extension« (MITTELL 2015: n.pag.). Even though *Heroes*' aesthetics are similar to adaptations of DC or Marvel comics and the genre might suggest otherwise, the show was not based on a print original comic book. But while the series was running as well as during the hiatus, free comics were released online.[3] Comics or books and the core element of a transmedia world can have different relations: they can either be retellings or be structured like a new, unseen episode (cf. MITTELL 2015: n.pag.). Following this definition, the *Heroes* graphic novels were a mix. A single graphic novel is too short for a whole new episode, but they could be the equivalent to one character's screen time in one *Heroes*' episode. They all offered new information on character origins and past events, so they were not mere retellings of the story. However, while they sometimes ventured far away from the show's plot, the comics connected to it very closely and added to the ›fan-text‹ (cf. ROBSON 2010: 211) through transmedia. Tying in nicely with this transmediali-

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[3] The show's developer, Tim Kring, and his team of authors gave a nod to the roots of the genre and offered a highlight for fans when they invited comic legend Stan Lee to do a cameo as a bus driver in Episode 16 of the first season.

ty is the fact that the TV show itself is structured like a printed publication: the seasons are volumes and the episodes are called chapters—another nod toward the intertwining of the different media outlets. Unfortunately, this literary structure does not extend to the *9th Wonders!* page, even though the page was supposedly creator Tim Kring's direct connection to the show's fans and could have been structured similarly.

This page with its promise of ›a community‹ and all the fan-operated pages are clearly aimed at the fans as an extradiegetic group of people. The community will thus form as they communicate with each other and exchange knowledge, gaining more and more experience with the fictional universe of the show. The forums are also the space in which the lead-users and their subsequent-users communicate with each other. In order to be recognized as a lead-users, they had to share their forensic endeavors with others, posting news on their search or their »drilling« (MITTEL 2012: n.pag.), which would sometimes »lead them to go as far as examining the source code to a digital graphic novel in the hope it might reveal a link to a hidden space of content« (RUPPEL 2012: 55).

These external fan practices may be participatory but they are clearly located in an extradiegetic orbit of the narrative world. This means that these fan activities have little effect on the narrative, as Scolari poignantly puts it: »In short: *not all the paratexts that sprout around a text necessarily form part of its narrative world*« (SCOLARI 2013: 62, original emphasis). The *9th Wonders!* page is an »engagement medium«, which, in the words of Ivan Askwith, is able »to provide audiences with a range of opportunities to engage with television content« (ASKWITH 2007: 62). Fan forums like this do not necessarily fall under the oft-quoted definition by Henry Jenkins:

> Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes it[s] own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. (JENKINS 2011: n.pag.)

To avoid slipping into a transmedia taxonomy or a mere listing of elements and failing the claim to know every corner of the *Heroes* universe, the following section hones in on how an intradiegetic invitation to transmediality can take place.

4. An Intradiegetic Transmedia Invitation

As one evident example for this kind of invitation, I draw upon one specific scene from episode 12 of season 1, »Godsend«, the episode when the *Heroes Evolutions* concept launched as mentioned above. The two adversary characters Mohinder Suresh and Noah Bennet have a brief conversation during which Bennet hands over one of his business cards. In a close-up of the card the audience can now read the web address »www.primatechpaper.com«

(see fig. 1). At this point of the TV narrative, the audience already knows the name of Bennet's company—the only reason for this invitational close-up is for people to go online and try out the web address. This is even more evident given that we never see Mohinder actually visit the homepage. Christy Dena understands this scene as a »catalytic allusion«, which »can have two functions: they can simply operate normally as part of the non-interactive discourse, or they can succeed in being recognised and acted upon as a catalyst for action« (DENA 2009: 310). Assuming the allusion worked and the audience followed the invitation, they found a homepage that let them browse through company information, etc. It was very reduced in style as well as information and the design looked outdated for 2007.

Fig. 1:
Screenshot of business card close up from *Heroes* S01E12 (»Godsend«)

In Marc Ruppel's detailed network analysis of the connections between media and narration, he explains the different links or edges that can prompt movement from one medium to another, focusing on what he calls ›migratory cues‹. These cues can be »any sign in a transmedia fiction that assists an audience in making correspondences and connections between sites« (RUPPEL 2012: 62). When the audience recognizes and follows the prompt to move to another source of content, they have to blend the information given at the start with the content at the end point of their movement: »In other words, migratory cues are active cognitive constructs, devices of storytelling through which various narrative paths are marked by producers and located by an audience through activation patterns« (RUPPEL 2012: 62). To Ruppel, the business card close-up is a

> unidirectional example of a direct internal cue (unidirectional in that there is no content that subsequently leads one [back] to the TV episode from which the cue originated). [...] Once this cue is followed (the target being the website itself), we encounter a similarly seamless and fictional website for the Primatech Paper Company [...] Following yet another direct internal cue—the phone number—one can opt into the Heroes 360° Experience [...] In this regard, the direct cue also functions as a trailhead for the intracompositional integration of an Alternate Reality Game. (RUPPEL 2012: 103f.)

At this point I want to consider the visitors who didn't follow the latter cue, but continued their own research on the page.[4] When the mouse cursor of the self-motivated user hovered over the company's logo on the top left corner (see fig. 2), the ever-present helix symbol lit up in red. After clicking on the symbol a login window appeared, asking for a name and password. The name »bennet« was already filled in and the matching password was easy to guess. If successful, a secret *Assignment Tracker 2.0* database opened up, which allowed the users access to blackened .pdf files about characters that ›the company‹ was either employing, following, or holding in custody.

About Us

Since 1962, Primatech Paper has been an industry leader in the manufacturing and distribution of paper products to retail outlets around the world.

Fig. 2:
Screenshot of http://www.primatechpaper.com [accessed August 2, 2009]

These redacted files are a great metaphor for the clearly defined power structures at play in this specific interaction—we, as the audience or »viewers« (HARRIES 2002: 103),[5] are clearly restricted in our access to information. The fictional company and the actual network both determine what we get so see or read. The fact that the power of the company would also extend to the user immersed in the fiction makes sense. The fact that the power of the NBC developers also restricted the actual range of interaction for the factual user reveals that *Heroes*' transmedia world might be interactive but is not really participatory. Nonetheless, the lead-viewers were now

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[4] The possibilities for forensic fandom are built into the transmedia world, but are of no importance in Ruppel's study. They may be part of the intricate network diagrams but are not elaborated on in the text (cf. RUPPEL 2012: 235).

[5] I consider this term useful, as it is not about content being produced through audience participation, as Axel Bruns' ›prosumer‹ (cf. BRUNS 2010) and others are concerned with. Instead, »the ›viewer‹ is intimately involved in mixing or producing their screen media experience« (HARRIES 2002: 103).

inside the company's database on their own account and, therefore, inside the extended diegesis. They could decide to share the precise information how to get there in a forum or opt to just point their subsequent-users in the right direction, without reducing the scavenger hunt facet for them. Players of the ARG would eventually also arrive at this point, but they would have been shown the way and given the password (see below).[6]

Knowing about Primatech's homepage, lead-viewers who were tempted to look into Hiro Nakamura's background could visit the homepage of the Yamagato Fellowship. This Tokyo-based, totally fictitious company belongs to Hiro's family and is highly involved in the series mythology. On the page, the storylines of fictional characters are mixed with actual historic persons, such as Benjamin Franklin or biblical figures like Jason. The page advertised an exhibit on the ›legendary‹ Samurai Kensei, Hiro Nakamura's childhood idol. The symbol on the hilt of his katana is explained as being the combination of two Japanese signs meaning ›godsend‹. Unsurprisingly, it is the helix. A fictional documentary about the samurai makes strong references to the TV series' storyline: the sword is reported stolen and the TV audience knows by whom. Not only was this homepage a way to enrich the Japanese storylines in *Heroes*, it also added the perception that the TV audience now had more knowledge than the reporters in the documentary and could increase their knowledge by watching and searching. They could support Nathan Petrelli's intradiegetic run for office in the US Senate via his campaign homepage, downloading »Vote Petrelli« stickers, etc. His biggest campaign sponsor, Mr. Linderman, naturally also had an online presentation for his Las Vegas casino The Corinthian. After this character gets killed in episode 22, there was a short obituary added to the otherwise very static page as well as a notification that the casino was going to be demolished soon.

Note that on none of these homepages, NBC banners or any other signs that marked them as parts of a fictional narration were shown. Still, it is more than unlikely that anyone but a member of the curious *Heroes* audience would start promoting Petrelli's senate campaign. Even if, theoretically, anyone could access these pages with or without the knowledge of their context, in their status as probable but still fictional homepages located in the always extradiegetic Internet, it becomes evident that these homepages are transmedia extension, relating to the transmedia universe of a clearly defined core text. Although they worked as singular entities, they do not fulfill Jenkins' demand that »[e]ach franchise entry needs to be self-contained so you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game and vice-versa« (JENKINS 2006: 96). As will become evident, even the ARG cannot be considered a self-sufficient part of the *Heroes* franchise, because it always links back to the show which »acts as a binder, a spine through which network continuity and coherence is maintained« (RUPPEL 2012: 256).

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[6] I can only assume that there has to be a difference in the personal experience of those who found their own way around the described functions and those who followed the path laid out for them by the producers.

The question of how people who were neither lead- nor subsequent-users were guided through the transmedia universe remains. *Heroes Evolutions* chose a character to be the scout for the audience, leading them to the various realms of the narrative universe: Hana Gitelman. Other characters had a part in guiding the viewsers as well. For example, Hiro Nakamura, who started a blog called *A Hero's Quest* on February 9, 2010, after the existence of evolved humans was revealed to the world by Claire Bennet, or the collective identity of two graphic novel characters aptly named Evs Dropper, trying to bring down the company and sending out messages. But Hana Gitelman

> is unique in that she was introduced and developed entirely as a cross-sited character, one whose exploits are charted across the Web, SMS messages, email and graphic novels, occasionally appearing in the television show as well. (RUPPEL 2012: 303)

5. Hana Gitelman—A Transmedia Guide

In the opening scenes of episode 16, season 1, the TV audience meets Hana for the first time: a very confused and, unfortunately, nuclear Ted Sprague is hiding in a wooden hut »somewhere in the Nevada desert«. He gets contacted via a chat message and gets even more confused when he notices that his Internet connection is down. His chat partner is called »wireless« and proceeds to show him schematic drawings of an injection gun, with a needle that explains the shape of a scar Ted and many of the characters have on their neck. Intrigued by this information, he asks »wireless« for a meeting. Almost immediately after that message, a woman enters the hut, telling him her name is Hana Gitelman and that she has the ability to mentally receive and give out digital information without an Internet connection. She also displays the scar on her neck, before straight up asking Ted to help her destroy the company: »I can find them, Ted. You can nuke them«.

The TV audience can gather that she is out for revenge, but, other than her scar, they have no real indication as to why she is so determined. Viewsers who followed the invitation of the business card from four episodes earlier could have already read Hana's blackened file in the *Assignment Tracker 2.0*. They know that she herself is basically a transmedia superhero, who taps into any wireless device through her altered brain waves. Comic readers could have downloaded four issues solely on Hana's background story. Through that, they know, at the moment of the original broadcasting of this episode, that Noah Bennet recruited her from the Mossad for the company, where her abilities manifested. In the last »wireless« comic, Hana escapes the company's compound on a motorbike (see fig. 3). The readers would only find out whom she was headed for, when *Heroes* returned to the TV screen after the show's hiatus. When actress Stana Katic enters the scene just described, the similarities to the drawings in the comics are obvious and Hana's story continues.
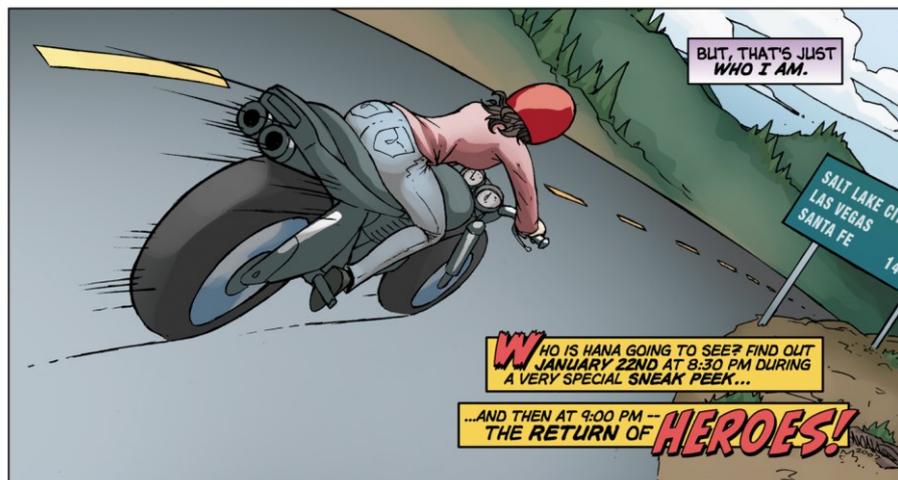
Fig. 3:
Last panel in Chapter 16, wireless Part 4 of the *Heroes* comic (2006)

Even though lead-users could have discovered Hana's web presence on their own, finding the blog[7] was easiest for the players of the ARG. Hana is their main contact, who sent them emails and text messages that, for example, led to Primatech's hidden functions described above: »Get2 2 kno Ted 2: Go 2 primatechpaper.com, find helix. Same place as b4. Usrnme: bennet Pwrd: claire. Ted's code: TSntz14b. Rembr: Usernme always bennet«. Other messages referred to her MySpace page, a platform that in 2006 was still frequently used, and other online transmedia extensions. Hana is eventually killed but continues to exist virtually, proceeding to »relate to the present-time of and media employed by the players« (DENA 2009: 283). Even post-mortem, she blogged and communicated with the ARG players. In one post, she offered a link that led back to The Corinthian's homepage, which lead-viewers may have found before. But this time, there was a chat window, with a conversation going on between Hana and Micah Sanders, a little boy who can manipulate machines. Micah then invited Hana and the user into another password protected area and led through Linderman's art archives with virtual post-its. This function was only available through the link on Hana's blog and couldn't have been found otherwise.

Hana Gitelman clearly is *Heroes*' transmedia guide and, in the terms of art theory, could be called a *Rückenfigur* or rear-view figure, representing the searching viewer in this setting and being the figure to identify with (cf. KOCH 1965). Marc Ruppel even goes as far as proclaiming »Wireless is less a character moving through the Heroes universe as she is a facilitator of the causal interactions that take place in the ARG« (RUPPEL 2012: 309). He traces her movement in and out of the various sites of the *Heroes* transmedia network, showing how she explores the extensions alongside the user. Through

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[7] The blog could be found at http://www.samantha48616e61.com [accessed December 11, 2011]. Many researchers as well as myself face the challenge of content being taken down over time, so only static documentation of the pages is still available.

the narrative information of these extensions, *Heroes* can establish what Nick Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst have called »a form of skilled audience« (ABCROMBIE/LONGHURST 1998: 121). From this skilled audience, »the fan ›expert‹« (ROBSON 2010: 212) is recruited. This *Heroes* expert has an abundance of knowledge about the weekly TV audience. If an audience member is not yet part of the experts, they might never get a more open invitation to become one while actually watching *Heroes* than Hana mentally typing »Look at the needle« on the computer screen.

This is where I would like to refer to what I read as the golden rule in Mittell's chapter on transmedia storytelling, namely »[t]*hat transmedia extensions from a serial franchise must reward those who partake in them, but cannot punish those who do not*« (MITTELL 2015: n.pag., original emphasis). It is clearly rewarding to have this additional knowledge, but the show was actually very well watchable and understandable without it. And in a way very similar to Mittell's *Lost* example, a lot of the information acquirable online was never referred to in the show.[8] The text messages and emails that were directly addressed to the players of the ARG are surely one of the most effective ways to create a connection between the audience members—who have become users or viewers and who also may have become ARG players. Their forensic fandom or gameplay temporarily leads them far away from the TV series itself and deeper into the transmedia universe, before pushing them back toward the actual show, without which little of the additional information would make sense. Thus, the *Heroes* universe always keeps the television series as its gravitational centre, pulling all the other elements back to the main narrative outlet. Staying in this imagery, it has become clear that, while the described transmedial elements work in their own sphere, none would work without the show. Still, all were utilized in their media specific capacity employing not only specific strategies but also aesthetics (as was already discussed with regard to the comics). The entire experience of *Heroes Evolutions* was unified and coordinated by the creators leading the audience through the experience by employing transmedia scout Hana Gitelman, who was able to cross the borders of all the sites of the transmedia network.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to give an impression of how the creators of *Heroes* and *Heroes Evolutions* integrated print media, multiple homepages, various online forums, an Alternate Reality Game, etc. into their storytelling. The case study allowed reflections on the implications of each element for the transmedia universe of *Heroes*, whether it falls under current definitions

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[8] However, this cannot be definitely stated, as the second season was cut short, both in episodes and in quality, because of the writers' strike of 2007. Accordingly, some plot lines might have been prepared without ever having been executed.

for transmedia, crossmedia, transmodal narration, intertextuality, or some other term. While most of the additional offers were successful and were used or accessed by the audience and especially by lead-users, there was hardly any overt invitation to the audience to emerge into said transmedial world. Instead, as this article has shown, there were multiple (more or less) subtle hints or migratory cues that motivated the so-called passive TV audience to become active online.

Through these devices, the audience was encouraged to seek out sources of knowledge about mystified symbols, unintroduced characters, and open ends other than the TV show itself. Posing almost as an unreliable narrator, the series did not primarily aim at generating clicks on the nowadays notorious second screen. Instead, it left gaps and seemingly dead ends in its storytelling to be explored. *Heroes* succeeded in establishing not only a loyal fan base but a distinct and large group of *Heroes* experts. These experts could be divided into at least three groups of lead-users or -viewers, subsequent-users, and ARG players. All groups had to actively search the Internet to obtain specific knowledge about the series' universe and needed to be willing to invest time and effort into the show's mythology—but, as a result, they also became part of the *Heroes* community. »Remember, everything is connected«.

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