

‘It is nice that you want to improve this comic book together with us’: The letters page’s significance in the transnational adaptation of Marvel comics in Finland

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Abstract:

This article explores the transnational adaptation of Marvel’s superhero comics through an analysis of letters pages in Finnish Marvel comic books. While media products and their fan cultures have become increasingly global, analyzing the national sites for fannish activity offers new insight into the roles of local agents in transnational adaptation processes. The letters pages in Finnish Marvel comics were a site where editorial choices were legitimized, gaps in the storylines were filled and the national Marvel fandom was born. Emphasizing the role of communication between the producers and the consumers, the article brings a new perspective to the local production process of global media products.

Keywords: Comic books, superheroes, fan studies, adaptation studies, popular culture, transnational adaptation

This article explores the letters pages in two of the most popular and prolific superhero comic books published in Finland, and more specifically the role their editor occupied in adapting the American comics for a new audience, as well as in constructing an audience for the adaptations. The letters pages that were published in the 1980s and 1990s in *Hämähäkkimies (Spider-Man)* and *Ryhmä-X (X-Men)*, were strongly attached to one person: Mail-Man, the editor of the letters pages, who later became also the translator and editor of several of the Finnish Marvel comics publications. Mail-Man was a pseudonym used by Lauri Narinen, although no details of his personal life, such as his name or age, were revealed during his time as the columnist, translator and editor of the Finnish Marvel comic books.

He became a popular figure and an expert among readers in everything related to Marvel's superheroes in Finland and remained so until moving on from the comics business in 1996.

My research is focused on the role of the letters page as a part of the transnational adaptation process of comics. Sociologist Casey Brienza points out in her work (2010, 2016) that to fully understand an artistic work, such as a comic book, its production and dissemination must be studied in the larger social and organizational context (Brienza 2010, 106). Although letters pages are a part of comic books, or the work itself, in this article I analyze them as a site where transnational adaptation becomes visible. Brienza outlines the effects of legal issues, technology, markets, organizational structures as well as the creators' input in the publishing process of manga in America, as she describes the transnational publishing process. (Brienza 2010; Brienza 2016, 17–18.) Anne Kustritz (2015) suggests that even if media products travel globally today, texts translated into different languages are adapted as they cross cultural and national boundaries, and differ from each other. Differences in location as well as cultural context affect the audiences' processes of reception and meaning making (Kustritz 2015, 29), and studying sites such as comic books' letters pages where the readers can express their ideas and views regarding the comics, can offer insight into the transnational adaptations of comics.

To call the Finnish versions of Marvel's superhero comics translations would not do justice to the different stages in the process of their adaptation. Much of the scholarship regarding the translation of comics focuses solely on the textual elements in comics, the so called 'translation proper' (e.g., Zanettin, 2008); although translation scholar Federico Zanettin has later suggested that the translation of comics could be divided into two separate sections. Translation itself, according to Zanettin, refers to changing the verbal elements in comics, and the concept of 'visual adaptation' refers 'to all changes made to the publication format, layout, pictures (including lettering [- -]) and in general all elements of a localized comic book except for the verbal content.' (Zanettin 2014) According to Zanettin, many aspects that adaptation studies consider to be part of adaptation, are part of translation. In adaptation studies, adaptation often refers to the process of intermedial transposition, from comics to film for example, but it can also be used to describe rewriting for a different audience. It sometimes resembles editorial practices such as shortening texts, but at the same time, adaptations often add new parts in the existing product in an attempt to update it. (Martins 2015, 46–47) These are the main reasons why 'translation' does not describe *Ryhmä-X* and *Hämähäkkimies* as products.

Instead, the Finnish versions of *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* are adaptations, made specifically to be published in Finland. The Finnish editor of Marvel's superhero comics in the 1980s and 1990s altered the original works in several ways in addition to translation. He chose stories from the vast original material, focusing on certain plotlines and leaving out others that were part of the original storyline. The changes were typically omissions, cutting whole plotlines and leaving out single pages or even panels. Occasionally the editor added pages in the Finnish version as well. These changes significantly altered the narratives as

well as the character development, as much of the character-building and personal relationships were omitted from the Finnish versions. (Author 2019)

Previous research on the transnational adaptations of comics has mainly used the concept to describe indigenously produced versions of familiar characters, such as *Spider-Man India* or *Spider-Man the Manga* (Stein 2014, 128–129). My description of the adaptation process of superhero comics in Finland resembles Ian Robert Smith's description of the use of American popular films in Turkey as I have, where parts of original films, including footage and music, were combined to make a new product for Turkish audiences. (Smith 2017, 36). As Linda Hutcheon writes, adaptations are recognized re-workings of original texts that can never fully replicate the original (Hutcheon 2006, 16), which is the case with the Finnish adaptations of superhero comics as well.

Comics scholar Daniel Stein describes how an American superhero becomes a transnational character as it is 'reimagined in a specific national context, narrative tradition and graphic style' (2014, 129), and I find that the process of preparing a comic for publishing in another cultural setting and in another language can be referred to as transnational adaptation.

Together with the editor-in-chief, translator and the printing staff, the editor of the Finnish comic books, and of the letters pages, was part of a team that put *Hämähäkkimies* and *Ryhmä-X* on the shelves of newsstands monthly, and simultaneously helped to shape the Finnish superhero fandom and readership. By studying the letters pages of the Finnish adaptations of Marvel's superhero comics, I address the production as well as reception of these comic books. The production of popular cultural objects such as superhero comics requires input from a number of people, starting with the artist and writer, and up to the editor and translator of a transnational adaptation (Brienza 2010, 107).

I analyze the Finnish letters pages as a site where the transnational adaptation process of Marvel's comics was made apparent and legitimized. I argue that Mail-Man acted as a gatekeeper, as well as a gate-opener (Lee 2014, 201) between the Marvel Universe and the Finnish readership, and writing the letters page from this position opened up the adaptation process to the readers. Simultaneously, Mail-Man educated the readers to become members of the Marvel fandom through his own fannish persona. Through an analysis of letters published and Mail-Man's answers to them I investigate how Mail-Man's position was built on the letters pages and show the agency local producers possess in the transnational adaptation process.

Comics scholars such as Will Brooker (2000), Matthew J. Pustz (2007) and Ian Gordon (2012) have previously studied the letters pages in superhero comic books. Brooker focuses on analyzing the fan discourse in DC's superhero comics in the 1960s, especially with regard to how the fans discussed and gave credit to the authors and artists. Pustz and Gordon analyze the discursive community formed by fans writing to the letters columns of comic books. In Gordon's study, writing letters to *Superman* in the 1960s and 1970s was part of the reading practices of many of the comic book's fans. Pustz, in contrast, offers an overview of the history of the letters pages and points out the importance of their power in

building a fan community. While Brooker, Pustz and Gordon focus on fan discourses, in this article I focus on the editor and his interaction with the readers' letters. In these interactions, the editor constructed a framework for the readers' interpretation of the comics, while the letters page helped American superheroes cross the border between the United States and Finland. At the same time, they helped the readers to cross the border to the Marvel Universe.

Research material and methods

The research material for this article consists of the letters pages of *Hämähäkkimies* and *Ryhmä-X*. They have been the most popular and prolific Marvel comic books published in Finland. All the letters, Mail-Man's answers to them, and the opening words to each column published in *Hämähäkkimies* issues 8/1980–5/1983 and 11/1984–5/1997, (a total of 485 pages), as well as in *Ryhmä-X* 1/1984–12/1992 and 2/1994–8/1996 (a total of 287 pages), are part of my research material. Mail-Man's letters page was also published in the comic books published by his own company in 1983–1984¹, as well as in *Hulk* (published by Semic in 1984–1985), *MARVEL* 1988–1996, *Mega Marvel* 1–5/1997, and *Sarjakuvalehti* 1990–1996.² I have decided to concentrate on the columns in the two most popular comic books.

During the early years, the questions were re-worded by Mail-Man: 'Several people have been asking about the Spider-Car, so here is its history', 'The first person to send a question was Yrjö Ylimäki from Helsinki. He asked the following questions.' (H 9/1980)³ The readers and their interpretations were not yet given space on the letters page, their role was to make inquiries and receive answers. When Mail-Man returned to work for Semic in 1984, after the company had acquired the rights to all of Marvel's comics, his first column in issue 11/1984 saw the publication of the readers' opinions and questions in the form of letters, as opposed to a list of questions and brief answers. Some of the published letters were shortened, according to Mail-Man's own comments. Even the shortened letters gave more agency to the readers; they gained the possibility to participate more actively and manifest their readership. During the first years of *Hämähäkkimies* the letters page usually occupied one page of the comic book, but by 1985 it had expanded into two or even three pages per issue.

That being said, the question of the authenticity of the letters has to be acknowledged. With the editor himself confirming that some letters had been shortened or excerpted, it is possible that the editor or some other employees at Semic were ghostwriting part of the letters. The original Marvel comic books had letters pages, and having one in the Finnish adaptations can be seen as a way to tie the adaptation closer to the original comic books. With far fewer readers than *The Amazing Spider-Man* or *The Uncanny X-Men*, it could be necessary to fabricate some letters in order to keep the discussion lively on the pages of *Hämähäkkimies* and *Ryhmä-X* and to uphold a certain kind of self-image. (e.g. Barker 1989, 47) However, since my focus is not on e.g. the readers' opinions of certain events or characters, this does not affect my analysis of Mail-Man's role

in the letters pages or how he used it to communicate the adaptation process to the readers.

I started my analysis by reading through all of the letters pages, including Mail-Man's greetings, letters written by readers as well as Mail-Man's replies to them. I concentrated on the style and register, i.e. what kind of language was used by readers and Mail-Man; the content and the form, e.g. the length and topics of the letters and answers. I detected three positions that Mail-Man occupied in the comic books: filling out gaps to facilitate the reading experience, defending editorial choices, and educating readers into becoming fans.

This article begins with a short summary of the history of letters pages in superhero comic books, followed by an introduction of Mail-Man and the comic books he was editing in the 1980s and 1990s. In three sections, I analyze Mail-Man's position as a gatekeeper and gate-opener from different perspectives. First, I describe how, by writing about what had been left out of the Finnish adaptations, Mail-Man was filling out the gaps in the readers' knowledge of the characters and plots. He also explained American culture to readers, filling a potential gap between US and Finnish culture. Second, I analyze how Mail-Man defended his editorial choices. He was responsible for the superhero comics' publishing program at Semic, the publishing house with the rights to Marvel's comics in Scandinavia, and a large part of his writings in the letters column justifies the choices made in the transnational adaptation process. Finally, I investigate Mail-Man's third position on the letters pages: that of a fan educating the readers how to engage in fannish activities, and the emergence of a Finnish Marvel fandom on the comics' letters pages as a part of the transnational adaptation process.

Letters pages in the USA and Finland

Fan engagement with comic books, such as EC's 'EC Fan-Addict Club' founded in 1953, and the early iterations of comic book fanzines that followed the official club and its bulletin, is built on the traditions of science fiction fandom in the 1920s and 1930s. Sharing their passion for sci-fi stories, the fans in the early 20th century set the precedent for fannish activity in the future decades. As early as the late 19th century, a network of amateur writers was established, sharing their writings in relation to a common interest via magazines. In the 20th century, sci-fi fans built their own fan community, one of the largest and most profitable worldwide, around this tradition. (Jenkins, Ford & Green 2013, 29–30; Romagnoli & Pagnucci 2013, 40)

In 1958, a letters page was introduced to DC Comics' flagship comic book *Superman*. The first letters were mainly about Superman's powers or plot holes and mistakes in the stories, but gradually the letters column developed into a broad forum for all discussion concerning Superman. (Gordon 2017, 118) A few years later, in 1962, the first readers' letters were published in Marvel's *Fantastic Four*, and in 1965 the Merry Marvel Marching Society, Marvel's fan club, was founded (Daniels 1991, 106). In their volume, *Enter the Superheroes: American Values, Culture, and the Canon of Superhero Literature* (2013), Alex S. Romagnoli and Gian S. Pagnucci write that an extensive section where readers could

share their views on the stories or ask questions was part of the publishing strategy that set Marvel apart from other comics publishers since the 1960s. (Romagnoli & Pagnucci 2013, 41–45)

The letters pages were not part of the Finnish adaptations of the Marvel comics from the very beginning; instead it was Lauri Narinen's own background as a fan of Marvel's superhero comics that introduced them to *Hämähäkkimies*. In 1980, the Swedish publishing house Semic launched a new comic book in Finland. *Hämähäkkimies*, the Finnish version of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, did not waste much time on introducing the new hero. In the very first issue, the Finnish readers were thrown into the middle of an on-going storyline about Spider-Man's clone version and Peter Parker's love triangle. Spider-Man's adventures had been published in the USA since 1963, and while the character's origin story was published in the first Finnish issue, those 11 pages did not offer much background for the ongoing adventure.

As he explained in interviews after ending his career, the new comic book caught the interest of Narinen, who was at this point assisting with the archives of the Finnish printing house Fennopress. Fennopress printed *The Incredible Hulk* for a British publisher, and the young Narinen – he was only 15 years old at the time – received comic books in exchange for his help keeping the archives in order. According to the interviews, Narinen felt that the publisher and editors behind the new *Hämähäkkimies* comic book lacked expertise on the Marvel heroes, and that, based on his experience as a reader and his collection of English superhero comics, he could help by setting up a question-and-answer-column to aid the new readers understand the characters' backgrounds. (Häkkinen 2013, Junni 2014, Mander 1997) It was in issue 6/1980 that an announcement was included about 'something new and fun in *Hämähäkkimies* magazine'. The announcement of a new section, 'Question and ask from Spider-Man' (Kysy ja utele Hämähäkkimieheltä) was followed by the first letters column two months later, in issue 8/1980. By its first appearance in the comic book, the section had been renamed 'Ask Mail-Man' (Kysy Mail-Manilta).

Narinen as Mail-Man was responsible for the letters column in *Hämähäkkimies* from its launch in 1980 until issue 5/1983, after which another person (Mikko Kautto) took over the responsibilities for 18 months. From 1980 until issue 10/1984, the column was a list of questions with the editors' answers to them; the letters were not published. In 1981–1982, Mail-Man also translated *Vihreä mies Hulk* (*The Incredible Hulk*), which was published by Oy Lukemisto Urkki Lektör Ab (later known as Oy Lukemisto Omnia Ab). In 1983, Narinen started his own publishing company Mail-Man Ky., and worked as the editor in chief. Mail-Man Ky. continued to publish *Vihreä Mies Hulk* throughout 1983 and started to translate and publish *Ihmenelöset* (*Fantastic Four*) as well. Narinen was responsible for the publishing program, translation, letters page, and marketing of both comic books. In 1984, the Swedish company Semic, which published *Hämähäkkimies* at the time, acquired rights to all of Marvel's comic books in the Nordic countries, and Mail-Man returned to work for the company.

As for *Ryhmä-X*, the Finnish adaptation of X-Men, Mail-Man's column was part of the comic book from the first publication, issue 1/1984, until its final issue 8/1996.⁴ In the first two issues, it was dedicated to introducing the heroes and villains alike, as well as Mail-Man's excited remarks on the quality of the stories. In the following issues, most of the letters were full of questions about the new heroes: who were they, what were their superpowers like and whether they had ever fought with any heroes better known to the readers.

As the editor of Marvel's comics and letters pages in Finland, Narinen had a strong agency in their transnational adaptation process. In 1993, Mail-Man stepped down from the letters page of *Ryhmä-X* and concentrated on the publishing program, while his substitute with the pen name Letter-Lad answered the readers' letters. Letter-Lad is, of course, a pseudonym reminiscent of Mail-Man, but not quite as impressive; it is a diminutive version of Mail-Man that could refer to a relationship between a father and a son, or a superhero and his sidekick.

Mail-Man's Finnish letters columns were similar to their American counterparts in both Marvel's and DC's comic books in that they were a forum for the readers to comment on the stories, as well as read comments written by others. The letters pages in the original comics helped readers to understand the stories through reading how others had interpreted them, as well as giving the readers information about future events. (Pustz 2007, 163–164) Although the published letters were carefully selected and edited to fit the profile of the comic book in both Marvel and DC's products, there were certain differences between the companies' letters columns in the 1970s and onward. In DC's comics, the letters were often shortened or excerpted, while Marvel's letters columns featured longer letters full of questions, praise or even disappointment (ibid. 164–165). Like the original Marvel comics' letters pages, Mail-Man's question and answer column expanded after its first few years into including longer letters. It, too, served as a forum where readers could not only ask questions, but also share their interpretations and see how others had read the stories.

Mail-Man shaped the Finnish adaptations of the comic books by choosing and editing the published stories. He used the letters page as a part of the adaptation process. By filling out gaps in the stories, he influenced the audience's reading experience in a way reminiscent of the work of moderators in the online fan cultures of today (e.g. Grimmelmann 2015, Thomas & Round 2016). Without Mail-Man's plot summaries of past events and clarifications that filled the gaps left in the stories by cutting and pasting, the reading experience would have been different. His writings provided a framework for the reading experience.

Between 1980 and 1997 Mail-Man's letters page evolved from simple questions and answers into a significant part of the comic books. In 1981, 'Spidey-Club' (Hämärikerho), a fan club meant for readers of *Hämähäkkimies*, was started. It included a monthly lottery where members could win small prizes, as well as a membership certificate and number. In fact, the letters section was called 'Hämärikerho' ('Spidey-Club') in 1983–1984, which

emphasizes Mail-Man's role in building a readership community. Spidey-Club marked a certain kind of fan-ness, one that included actively joining a fan club and could be seen as highlighting the fan club members themselves. However, since the first issue of *Ryhmä-X* and issue 1/1985 of *Hämähäkkimies* the name was changed to 'Mail-Man's column' (Mail-Manin palsta). The change in name signified a shift from the comic book fans to the editor himself, emphasizing the importance of the character and persona of Mail-Man, which he continued to build and uphold during his years at Semic.

No one left behind – filling in the gaps and helping the readers

From the early years of the letters page, whether it was called Spidey-Club or Ask Mail-Man, a part of the column was to explain to readers what has happened or is about to happen in the stories printed in Finnish Marvel comic books. While questions regarding continuity and character arcs were common in the American letters columns as well (e.g. Pustz 2007, 174), I consider longer explanatory texts by the editor to be part of the adaptation process of the Finnish comics. In the early years of the 1980s, character introductions and describing the plot was needed to familiarize readers with the new heroes, while in the 1990s Marvel's comics universe was growing increasingly large and complex which resulted in complicated plots and crossovers. In the 1995 volume of *Ryhmä-X* almost every letters page begins with clarifications by Mail-Man, either explaining previous events or preparing the readers to interpret the events of the current issue. This was because although in Finland only one magazine was dedicated to each of Marvel's heroes, the material was selected from the dozens of superhero comic books that came out monthly in the US.⁵

Due to the growing number of Marvel's comic books in the United States, the Finnish publication could not keep up with the progress of the stories. The Finnish editor made a number of omissions (Author, 2019). The omissions were executed in a way that often affected the plot or character development. For example, in *Ryhmä-X* 7/1991, Mail-Man's column started with a recap of events from the previous few years to clarify the plot of the current comic book. The column served both new readers who had just bought their first *Ryhmä-X* comic book, as well as fans who had been reading for a few years.

The comics became more understandable through the letters pages. In *Ryhmä-X* 4/1995, Mail-Man starts by repeating an event from the previous issue, as well as stating another plot point from the current issue. He built a framework for interpretations and guidelines for reading, especially in cases where the letters page started from the first page of the comic book. In the case of *Ryhmä-X* 4/1995, Mail-Man's opening words are a perfect example of his attempted power to guide the readers' interpretations: he confirms on the first page that a character who everyone thought to be dead is still alive! This is a substantial spoiler to what will happen later on in the comic, and since it is found on the very first page, it is difficult to avoid. Avoiding the letters page until the whole comic book had been read is, in itself, a type of reading strategy affected by Mail-Man's work. Avoiding spoilers and Mail-Man's own interpretations, skimming quickly over the letters pages also changes the reading experience.

Mail-Man filling out gaps and inconsistencies of the storylines on the letters pages acts as a form of both gatekeeping and gate-opening. Traditionally in media studies gatekeeping refers to news making processes, in which gatekeepers select the stories that are published, or, in television, format research gatekeeping which refers to producers who control the process of transforming foreign programs into localized products (Waisbord & Jalfin 2009, 59–60). However, a gatekeeper fan, in contrast, is someone who has an elevated status among other fans, often due to a connection to the media producer. As fans gain more respect and a higher status in the hierarchy, they can assume the role of a gatekeeper. (Chin 2018, 246) In the current-day online transnational cultural fandom, fans can work as gatekeepers as well as gate-openers themselves by choosing, mediating, circulating and promoting cultural texts outside their country of origin (Lee 2014, 201). Mail-Man was both a gatekeeper and a gate-opener: his expertise on superhero comics granted him the position of a fan gatekeeper, and as the editor of the comic books he was responsible for transforming a foreign product for the Finnish market, deciding what to publish and opening the gate to the Marvel Universe.

In addition to writing the letters pages and answering readers' questions about Marvel's superheroes, Mail-Man also translated the comics in *Ryhmä-X* for the first six years of the magazine, from 1984–1989, and edited it from 1990–1992 and in 1996. His role as the gatekeeper between the Finnish audience and the Marvel Universe was prominent. Starting in 1984 when Semic, the company that published *Hämähäkkimies* in Finland, acquired the rights to all of Marvel's comics in the Nordic countries, Mail-Man participated in the making of the publication plans in not only Finland but Sweden, Norway and Denmark as well (Häkkinen 2013, Mander 1997, 5). In addition to his work as a translator and the editor of the letters column, he also chose stories for publication and adapted them in a number of ways.

According to interviews, it had been Lauri Narinen's own fannish interest in Marvel's comics that encouraged him to work at Semic.⁶ He was a fan who was hired to work with the object of his fandom, and since professionalism is appreciated in fan hierarchies (Busse 2013, 79), Mail-Man reached top status in the not yet fully defined Finnish Marvel fandom. Commitment is regarded as one of the defining features in fan hierarchies: the amount of knowledge, level of participation and financial investment are factors that determine a fan's position inside the fandom (Busse 2013, 74–75; Orme 2016, 411). Combined with his becoming a professional and laying the ground for the fandom, Mail-Man's commitment later granted him a top role in the fandom hierarchy.

Mail-Man's expertise and gatekeeper status are connected to each other. He appropriated space for his own writings at the top of the letters' columns to promote upcoming comic books or albums, to explain events to readers and to bolster himself and to validate the editing decisions; thus, constructing a certain expertise for himself. He would use the space to enthuse about stories he was happy to publish, as well as to criticize authors, artists and stories that he did not appreciate. For example, in *Ryhmä-X* issue 1/1986 Mail-Man started with an overview of stories that had been left out of the

publication program, stating that many of the adventures were ‘badly drawn’. Mail-Man commenting on the badly drawn stories left unpublished made the adaptation process visible and emphasized his crucial role in it. Simultaneously, Mail-Man was educating the readers about the comics’ storylines, and presenting himself as an expert who could differentiate between good art and bad art. Having enough knowledge to become the expert filling the gaps was what granted Mail-Man his gatekeeper position, which is both a requirement for him rising to the top of the fandom, as well as the reason that he was able to reach the top.

Filling the gaps in the storylines was a part of Mail-Man’s position as a gate-opener. He explained the events of the ongoing crossover stories to the readers, and on the other hand, he mediated American culture to the Finnish audience. For example, in *Hämähäkkimies* 12/1990 one of his answers to a reader included a short introduction to different branches of the US Army and the current political and military situation they in the US (Operation Desert Storm). In *Ryhmä-X* 2/1995, Mail-Man started the letters page with an introduction to some new supervillains. He described the strengthening economic influence of Asia, concluding that Asian characters had become more prominent in American popular culture. With details such as these, Mail-Man facilitated the reading process by helping the readers better understand the backdrop to the comics.

On the letters pages, the hierarchy of fans was not organized according to who had the most comic books in their collection, but according to how the letter was written. A reader wrote in his letter: ‘I own approximately 440 Finnish Marvel comic books, which means that I have contributed to keeping the comic books published. So my words have some gravity (right?).’, and Mail-Man wrote back to him: ‘Thank you for your financial support, Tomi, it is always needed. However, your opinions will be heard regardless of how many comic books you own – the important thing is what is said instead of who says it.’ (R-X 8/1991; 25) In a teacher-like manner Mail-Man implied that it was not important how many comic books one owns, or how much money has been spent on them, rather, a well-justified opinion and analysis was the most important thing. This way, the editor invited new, less experienced readers to participate and express their opinions. Mail-Man frequently reminded the readers to give feedback and to justify each claim (H 11/1984; H 3/1986, 27; H 4/1990, 26; H 7/1990, 53; R-X 5/1987).

Filling the gaps and thus helping the readers was a major part of Mail-Man’s position as a gatekeeper and gate-opener. As an editor, Mail-Man was first responsible for choosing the stories he wanted to publish, after which he continued his work on the letters columns explaining the plots and filling out gaps in them. The columns were a part of the transnational adaptation process, because that is where Mail-Man defended his editorial choices for the readers and the stories brought supplied in the context of Nordic comics publishing. In the following section, I analyze how Mail-Man used the columns to legitimize these choices.

Making choices and defending them

Mail-Man's job as editor of both the letters pages and the comic books in general meant that he had a considerable responsibility for the Finnish adaptations. He could choose what he frequently described as 'good enough to publish' (e.g. in *Hämähäkkimies* 1/1990). In issue 1/1985 of *Ryhmä-X*, Mail-Man replied to a reader's letter asking about a particular crossover story featuring Spider-Man and the X-Men, writing that it would not be published in Finland 'because it is so poorly drawn'. Choosing the stories and letters to be published was both part of Mail-Man's role as the gatekeeper, and it was what set him apart from the readers. The readers were as enthusiastic about Marvel's comics and the characters as Mail-Man, but they lacked the power to define what it takes for a story to be well drawn or for a letter to be topical. Mail-Man used rhetoric that implies that one of his tasks as the gatekeeper in the transnational adaptation process was to protect the readers from poor-quality content.

Mail-Man emphasized the importance of the readers to the comic books, using their opinions as one way of justifying his publishing choices. At the end of the letters page in issue 11/1990 of *Hämähäkkimies*, Mail-Man wrote to the readers that they are essentially his, and the whole company's, employers. The comic books are made for the readers, and their opinions are crucially important when it comes to publishing plans. The publisher also legitimized the readers' participation in the making of the Finnish Marvel comics in the 1980s and 1990s by announcing the 'Marvel-kilpa', 'the Marvel competition'. Launched in *Hämähäkkimies* 9/1985, it was a feedback questionnaire, published in all of the Marvel comic books during the same month, with questions asking for the readers' favorite writer and artist, favorite heroes and villains, opinions on Mail-Man's column as well as details about the contents of each specific comic book. The results were published later during the year, and Mail-Man used them to justify decisions related to publishing. Mail-Man also used the answers as well as sales figures of the different comic books as responses when readers made requests or complained about the comics. (R-X 7/1991, 25, H 1/1990, 24)

In addition to the questionnaire, writing to the letters page was another way for the readers of *Hämähäkkimies* and *Ryhmä-X* to influence the contents of the comic books. As Mail-Man encouraged readers to 'improve this comic book together with us' (H 11/1984, 31), readers sent in their reviews of the comics, as well as publication suggestions for the future. Based on Mail-Man's answers it appears that some of them were fulfilled. By asking for the readers' opinions and suggestions and publishing them on the letters page, he could always use those opinions to justify why a certain story had or had not been published.

As a result of editing during the adaptation process, much of the plotlines about romance and relationships between characters was left out of the Finnish versions, with more emphasis on action and fighting. However, Marvel's heroes are known as superheroes who have weaknesses, and the complex relationships between the characters in the Marvel Universe sometimes reach soap opera levels. This was not to the taste of a certain Finnish reader: '*Hämähäkkimies* has too much sap. Please do not torture us with Spidey's feelings and softness.' He received the following answer: 'We decided to end the torture with

Spidey's softness for a while, or what do you think of this story featuring Kraven? Doesn't this have just the snap, crackle and pop?!' (H 9/1990, 28). Here, Mail-Man was using the letters page as a way to validate his decisions regarding the publishing strategy that was focusing on the action plotlines. Later, in *Ryhmä-X* 2/1991, Mail-Man described a forthcoming storyline: 'after we are done with the relationship crap, David Michelinie and Todd McFarlane will jump the gun ---' (66–67). Action-packed adventures were what he repeatedly enthused about, instead of the dramatic relationships of the characters. This implies that Mail-Man pictured the target audience to prefer action sequences. In fact, in another reply in the same issue, he justified the central role of action storylines by writing that many readers, including himself, enjoyed them: 'Many readers seem to enjoy them, and I also think that it is perfectly fine to include issues that are pretty much all action every once in a while' (RX 2/1991, 67).

The importance of Mail-Man's gatekeeper position in the Finnish publications is exemplified when he talked about collaboration with the other Nordic countries. In *Ryhmä-X* 1/1986 (2) Mail-Man wrote: '*Ryhmä-X* used to be printed in collaboration with the other Nordic countries, but since they did not understand what is good for them and cancelled *X-Men*, we had to look for other partners' and 'We have skipped over some pretty poorly drawn (Cockrum) as well as some better quality (Smith) adventures - -'. Four years later, pen name Mac-man writes: '*Hämähäkkimies* 8/1989 was really bad'. Mail-Man replied to this accusation that, in fact, he did not like that specific issue either and that in 1990 'we have decided not to publish anything mediocre – if the other Nordic countries wish to publish rubbish, they can go ahead! We will replace it with some heavy duty reading material and print it ourselves if we must.' (H 1/1990, 24) In the former example Mail-Man referred to two specific comics artists of the time, Dave Cockrum and Paul Smith, and condemned one of them as being of low quality. In the same issue, as well as in *Hämähäkkimies* four years later, he also mentions the other Nordic countries by contrasting their poor choices and inferior publication plans with his own, presumably better, choices.

Through comments such as these two, Mail-Man did not simply validate his choices, but bolstered his own persona as the all-knowing expert and gatekeeper of the Marvel Universe. He attempted to convince the readers that his taste as the editor of the Finnish Marvel comics was superior to those of other Nordic countries, and maybe even better than the taste of the editors at Marvel.

Teaching the readers a fannish attitude

The letters columns were a forum for the early Finnish Marvel fandom. National media cultures have remained relevant despite the growth of the importance of global cultures, as Kaarina Nikunen (2014) observes. The existence of a national forum expands the social space of fandom to include the whole country instead of one's immediate circles, at the same time creating a site where it is possible to exchange ideas in one's own language instead of communicating in a foreign tongue. (Nikunen 2014, 249–254)

From the very beginning, Mail-Man's writing style and register was very conversational. He addressed the readers and writers of each letter directly, creating an atmosphere of personal attention, and by referring to himself and the readers as 'us' he created a shared community to which he also belonged.

Well, there was a piece of truth that no one should have any questions about! You are absolutely right, 'RFJ', and therefore you get 10 points and a golden star (which you have to draw for yourself).' (RX 7/1990, 63), 'Dear Backstreet Joe, try to rest, drink something warm with honey and take it easy... We all would like you to stay with us for a long time.' (RX 3/1994, 38)

Mail-Man's tone was humorous and sometimes a bit snide (such as when he tells a reader to give him/herself a gold star), but at the same time he addressed the readers in a friendly manner, such as in the last quote where he wishes a reader to get well soon. The letters columns of the original American Marvel comic books included in-jokes and praise for the fans since their start in the 1960s, and the editors used the columns as a platform to establish their philosophy of comics and attitude towards their fans (Pustz 2007, 165). Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, the creators of Spider-Man and many other Marvel's superheroes, would answer readers' questions in a friendly, often humorous way in the comic books' letters pages, creating a relationship between readers and creators. By providing the readers with a channel to discuss their favorite characters and give feedback on the stories, Lee created an atmosphere where the creators and readers were equally invested in the comics. (Romagnoli & Pagnucci 2013, 41–45) By replying in his humorous way and encouraging the readers to give feedback about the comic books, Mail-Man was doing a similar thing in the Finnish context.

Mail-Man was a gate-opener also in the sense that the gender or age of the readers was not featured in his writings, which meant that the letters pages had an inclusive atmosphere. Comic book culture has been identified as a male-dominated sphere since the 1970s, and more specifically an adolescent male sphere (Lopes 2006, 405). However, in the Finnish letters pages, questions of age or gender rarely emerged. On one such occasion, two writers described the looks of certain characters in their letters. The first one writes about a poster featuring the character Psylocke in a swimsuit that 'should be on the wall of every male X-fan', and the second letter stated that 'Longshot awakens tender emotions in all female readers (me!)' (R-X 12/1994; 65). On another letters page in *Ryhmä-X*, one fan was appalled by other readers complaining about the violence used by the anti-hero Punisher, and he suspected that they must be 6-year-olds because of their opinions. Mail-Man refuted the suspicion by stating once again that all opinions are equally valid regardless of who the writer is (R-X 8/1991, 25–26).

By singling out letters that were especially good, Mail-Man educated the readers about fannish activities. In the very first letters column after his return to *Hämähäkkimies* in 1984, pen name 'TR from Turku' (TR Turusta) wrote a letter describing why *Hämähäkkimies*

is the best comic book in Finland: 'it outshines the rest of the comic books because of its brilliant 'philosophy': you can't get through life with only wits and/or strength, you have to have humour as well (at least this is how I have come to understand the issue).' (H 11/1984, 31) The pen name makes some suggestions to improve the comic book and asks a few questions. Mail-Man pointed out this as a model for a well-written letter, thanking the writer for wanting to 'improve this comic book together with us' (H 11/1984, 31). In the end of the column Mail-Man reminded the readers to explain in their letters why a particular comic book was good or bad, instead of just stating an opinion, 'as did our friend TR from Turku.' (H 11/1984, 31) Mail-Man encouraged and educated the readers to write letters to their favorite comic book. The letter by 'TR from Turku' served as an example of the type of letter that Mail-Man wants to receive and answer: it includes praise, some questions and thoughtful reflection on the quality of the stories. The readers were made part of the adaptation process, and at the same time, Mail-Man instructed them in a fannish mode of engagement where fascination and frustration are both present at the same time (Jenkins 2006, 247). This engagement was manifested in the letter-writing as not only praising the stories, but giving suggestions and criticism as well.

Mail-Man instructed the readers how to write the letters, what to think about the stories and characters, and who are the best comics writers and artists at the moment. The readers' opinions were important to Mail-Man and Semic because, as illustrated in the previous section, it was implied that these opinions and preferences were used in the making of their publication plans.

By advising the readers how to justify their opinions and write to the letters page, Mail-Man was constructing a fannish audience for the new Finnish comic books. Although he was not the original artist or writer of the comics, his work as the editor and translator meant that he had an important role in adapting the American superhero comics to the Finnish readers. Given that both *Hämähäkkimies* and *Ryhmä-X* were new publications, Mail-Man had to construct an audience by convincing the potential readers to keep on investing in the Finnish Marvel comics. In *Ryhmä-X* pen name X-FAN asked whether it would be possible to buy back issues of *Ryhmä-X* directly from the publisher, to which Mail-Man answered that it is impossible: 'Usually the best way to make sure that you get a copy of each issue is to subscribe to *Ryhmä-X*. You see, its fans are more interested in collecting comic books than the average person, which means that back issues do not end up in antiquaries.' (RX 3/1986, 1) Collecting or archiving particular materials are important factors in building a status among fans (McCudden 2011, 23), and Mail-Man seemed to understand this as he encouraged the readers to invest money in comics: the best fan will subscribe in order to get all issues.

Like moderators of online fan communities, Mail-Man curated discussions and shaped the readers' interpretations of the comics (Thomas & Round 2016, 241). He asked questions, looking for the readers' opinions on a variety of matters from whether the comics should be glued or stapled together, to the contents of a single issue. The letters page made audience participation possible in the Finnish context. Mail-Man's main contribution to

shaping the readers' interpretations was his instructions regarding letter-writing. By advising the readers to write longer letters and be specific in their analyses, Mail-Man constructed the Finnish Marvel-fan as someone who is involved and precise, and by reminding readers that used back issues of the comics are hard to find he added a collector's mentality to the image of a good fan.

On the letters pages, Mail-Man instructed the readers to express their fannish attitude and constructed a national fandom for Marvel's comics. Paul Lopes (2006) argues that community is the key in comic book culture. It is important to belong to a community and to be able to relate to other people with similar interests. (Lopes 2006, 408) Additionally, the feeling of not knowing enough about a certain phenomenon can even stop a fan from participating in the fandom, such as going to comic book stores (Orme 2016, 411). Mail-Man's letters column was an important feature in the comic books because it worked as a forum where someone new to the comics could ask questions and learn more. Through his letters, Mail-Man occupied the position of a fan more advanced in the hierarchy, working as a teacher to newer fans. Although Mail-Man's writings had an instructive tone, there was no discrimination against questions that were 'too simple', and new readers were guided into the Marvel universe by plot summaries.

The letters column was important to the birth of the Finnish fandom in two ways: on the one hand, it was a place where fandom was constructed as fans expressed their opinions and expertise. On the other hand, it served the purpose of answering questions made by readers who were not yet familiar with the comics so that they would continue to read them.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of the letters pages in *Hämähäkkimies* and *Ryhmä-X*, I have shown that the Finnish editor of these comic books and the letters pages named after him had a significant role in their transnational adaptation process. Mail-Man was a gatekeeper, superior to the readers in his knowledge about past and future events, his power to define which stories were worth publishing and which letters interesting enough to print. He worked as both gatekeeper and gate-opener, positioned between the vast American comic book selection and the Finnish readers, shaping the way the Finnish readership experienced and interpreted Marvel's heroes. At the same time, Mail-Man taught the comic books' readers how to manifest a fannish attitude. By creating a national forum for fannish discussion, Mail-Man facilitated the emergence of a community which also served the purpose of educating the readers. Belonging to a community and being able to receive information about the object of one's fandom are important factors in fandom, and Mail-Man was the main agent in the Finnish scene.

Analyzing the letters and Mail-Man's answers has given new insight into understanding the process of the transnational adaptation of comic books. By analyzing the letters pages in two Finnish superhero comic books, I have investigated the ways in which the Finnish letters pages are connected to the adaptation process of the original American

comics. I have shown that the role of individual gatekeepers and gate-openers can be crucial by combining fan studies and comics studies, which brings new perspective to the local production process of global media products.

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Notes:

¹ *Ihmenelöset (Fantastic Four)* in 1982–1984, and *Vihreä mies Hulk (The Incredible Hulk)* in 1981–1983.

² MARVEL, Mega-Marvel and Sarjakuvalehti were comic books that featured different superheroes and their stories.

³ Translated by the author from original Finnish quotes.

⁴ With the exception of the year 1993.

⁵ In the 1980s and 1990s *Ryhmä-X* consisted of stories published originally in at least all of these comic books: *Avengers*, *Avengers Annual*, *Cable*, *Classic X-Men*, *Giant Sized X-Men*, *Marvel Fanfare*, *Marvel Team-Up*, *New Mutants Annual*, *Solo Avengers*, *Spider-Woman*, *The Uncanny X-Men*, *What if?*, *X-Factor*, *X-Force*, *X-Men*, *X-Men Annual*, *X-Men Unlimited*, *X-Men vs. Avengers*, *X-Men vs. Fantastic Four*. *Hämähäkkimies* included stories from at least *The Amazing Spider-Man*, *Amazing Spider-Man Annual*, *Fantastic Four*, *Marvel Fanfare*, *Marvel Team-Up*, *Peter Parker the Spectacular*

Spider-Man, Spectacular Spider-Man, Spider-Man, Spider-Man Unlimited, Spider-Man vs. Wolverine, Web of Spider-Man.

⁶ In an interview from 2014 Lauri Narinen describes how he contacted Semic after purchasing an issue of *The Hulk* from an auction. <https://muropaketti.com/viihde/haastattelu-marvel-maestro-mail-man-vaihtoi-supersankarit-perheeseen/> (retrieved 11.3.2019).