Mercenaries, Monsters and Me: An Advocacy Study of the Plaited Exegesis Methodology Through the Creative Praxis of Comic Making.

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A creative practice thesis submitted to the Wits School of Arts, Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Johannesburg

2025


MONSTERS
MERCENARIES
AND ME.
A PHD THESIS BY
RAY WHITCHER

ART
WANTON Page 1 Excerpt.

ABSTRACT

Abstract

Creative research is often seen as a point of contention within the greater academy; its methods range wildly in approach, but they are also often highly specific to one or two disciplines and yield varied outputs that can be difficult to articulate in more conventional academic fields. Some clearly put research at the forefront, but this can result in the creative artefacts becoming a byproduct of the process rather than fundamental to the greater project. Others over-focus on the creative elements and struggle to situate themselves academically outside of niche platforms.

The conflict between the integrity of the creative process and the structure of academia has often proven to be a barrier for writers, artists, musicians and performers to enter into active contributions toward knowledge of their practice and experience, ultimately resulting in an absence of research that could provide genuinely useful insights into a range of fields that go beyond the mainstream.

Inspired by the author's own journey as a Johannesburg-born and raised comic researcher and maker as well as lecturer within the field of digital arts and game design, this study engages with a proposed methodological system inspired by creative writing's plaited exegesis. The method has been modified to add paths of real-time inquiry that offer more engaging documentation processes and styles of research whilst still maintaining the freedom of creativity. Using comic making as an example that seeks to explore the embedded influence that one's place of making holds on the generation of creative work, especially when endeavoring to add a sense of locality as a core goal, two exegetical case studies are provided to display a two-factor process:

1. How to use the core structure of the plaited exegesis in creative research.

2. Points of inquiry that are generated by the study and serve as further points of critical engagement, in this case the influence of geography, and more specifically the socio-cultural geography of the South African city of Johannesburg, upon the maker and the making process.

The core knowledge gap is not, in fact, the method itself, but rather how it results in deep engagement with personal positionality – in this instance my own critical making process as a white, male comic artist and academic whose foundational undertakings are derived from fields of inquiry including area studies, transmedial narratology, critical representation and, of course, the tenets of writing and making comics themselves. Beyond this, an inquiry into Johannesburg

as a space, both physically and culturally, as well as an unintended, yet vital character of the stories generated for the case studies reveals the potency of place when the goal of a piece of work is to create stories outside of more traditional narratives.

The final output takes the form of a combinative document that is part thesis, part comic and part journal, structured in the proposed formats revealed during the study.

Finally, the case studies reveal the strengths and pitfalls of the proposed methodology and offer a platform of engagement for further applications with relevant modifications discovered throughout the research process.

Keywords

Creative Research, Plaited Exegesis, Comic Studies, Pedagogies of Creative Practice, Narrative, South African Comics



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Acknowledgements

Many people played a crucial role in the work, and while I can't thank everyone, I would like to highlight some of the people who made this research possible.

First, and always, to my supervisor Dr Catherine Duncan – you were there for me when this was just a nugget of an idea espoused by an overenthusiastic young researcher. Your patience, guidance, sage advice and the occasional theoretical smackdown was everything I needed. You've been an exceptional colleague, a phenomenal inspiration and my beacon when I began to waver in the darkness. Prof. Sue van Zyl, whose stalwart efforts got me through the initial proposal phase of this work and showed me the right way to do things, I thank you!

To my wonderful colleagues from Wits Digital Arts who were there for me from the very beginning of my career to where I am now – Hanli, you taught me how to write; Angus, your support and compassion is unmatched; Peet – I hope my terrible influence on you remains forever true and the same goes for you, Rachel, Steve, Romeo, Siya, Liezel, Hamisha, Haseenah – you are profoundly excellent humans.

To my colleagues at Uppsala University, I can never truly express my gratitude for the never-ending support you've given me, I am so eternally thankful for every minute and every cent you've invested in me to get this far. Tack så mycket!

The students past and present who drive my passion for teaching, who make me laugh and cry and question my sanity – you all inspire me to be better, to do better and to find ways of always ensuring your voices are heard. I hope that what you see here can give you a new perspective on your own work, and one that can spearhead the drive to tell your own stories.

To the readers of the final draft of this paper, Drs Halligey, Nelson and Stewart, I owe you a debt of gratitude – your critiques and feedback served to vastly improve upon the work, and I hope that this final version has met your standards!

My beloved South African comic community, with so many people who have worked so hard to make it what it is – I owe you so much! Moray, you will always be a superhero in my eyes. Bill, you owe me more collabs, and to so many others who helped make me the artist I am today, thank you!

My amazing mom, whose unwavering support and believe in me is unmatched, who drove me ever forward, who put me through university and a master's degree at great sacrifice and has never stopped being incredible – I love and respect you so very much! My younger brother Ivor, my first and harshest critic, actually helped at least make Vice a far more rounded character.

Then, Chanel, my forever fiend, my partner in weirdness and the love of my life – you pushed me, were there for me when I wanted to give up, you've been my test reader, my consultant and collaborator. You're my muse, and I couldn't have done this without you!

Finally, to you, the reader – may this research be of genuine benefit to you, and if not, I at least hope that it's entertaining.

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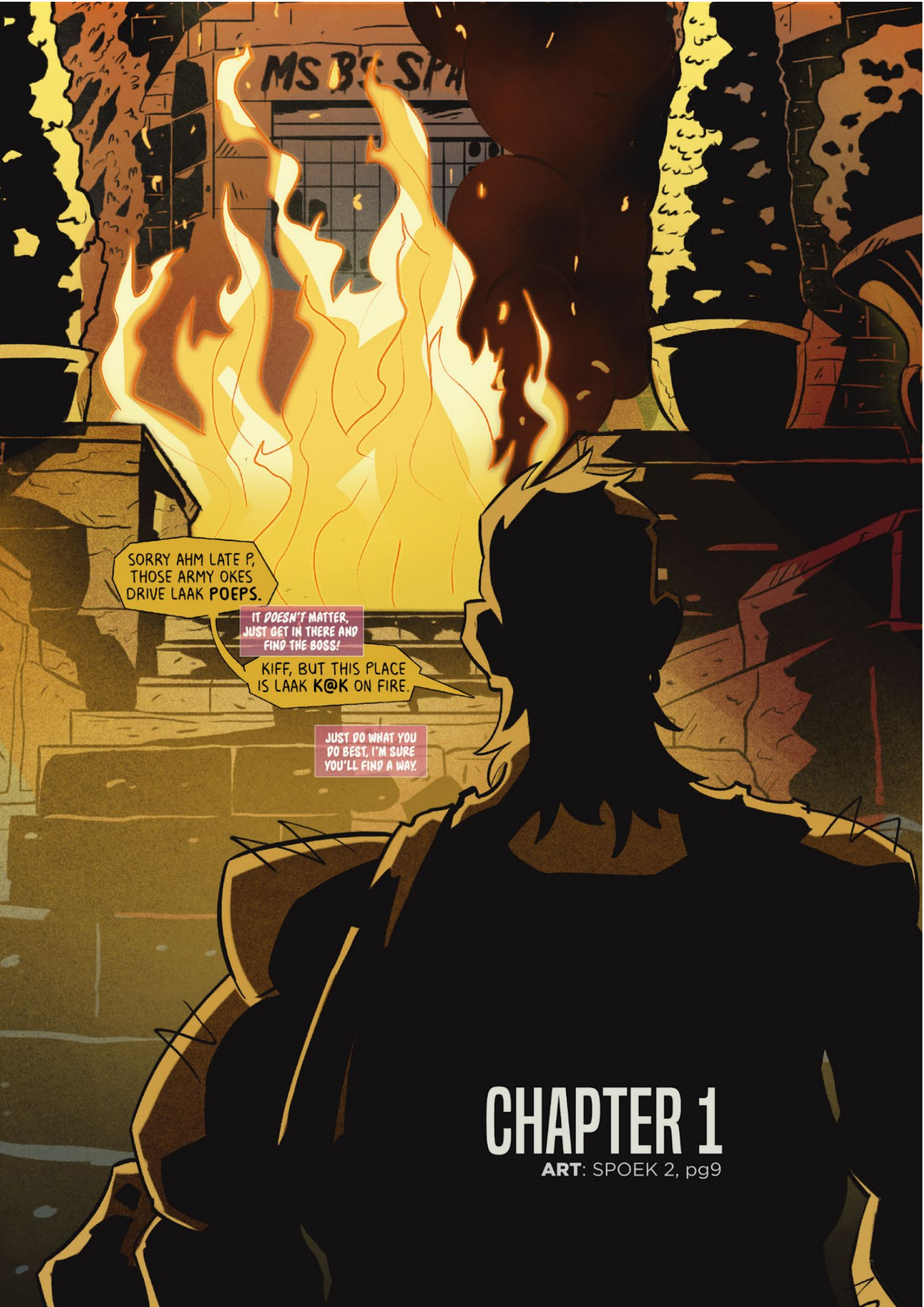
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CHAPTER 1

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Comics as Medium, Transmedia as Mode

While what follows is applicable to many creative mediums, I specifically opted to use comics as the jumping off point due to my vested interest in them as a medium. I have produced (and consumed) comics as a hobbyist, freelancer and researcher for multiple decades – the medium is an essential part of my creative DNA, inspiring how I draw, how I think and even my worldview. My earliest encounters with art were not paintings or opera or theatre, but rather a copy of *The Dark Knight* purchased by my parents for 50 cents from a local corner café. The striking images of Batman careening over rooftops and chasing down criminals immediately captured the imagination of five-year-old me – I was barely able to read the words but loved the images. To my great joy, *Batman: The Animated Series* debuted on television just a few weeks after this chance encounter with comics, and I was hooked – not just a fan, but a deeply ensconced Batmaniac. Soon my school days were filled with drawing comics about my character, "Super Dog", or scribblings of *Batman* or the *Ninja Turtles* or *Biker Mice*. My collection grew as I did, as did my drive to draw and make comics, and soon I locked into the medium in high school, injecting it into everything I did. Eventually comics started earning me money – my first paid job being for the popular South African soccer comic *Supa Strikas* in 2005, and then my postgraduate studies introduced me to adaptation studies (as a very early form of intertext/intermedia).

Comics have often been a polarising cultural artefact throughout their existence; at once both reviled and celebrated, the distaste stems from a perception that they do not hold enough aesthetic merit to be considered art. Earlier works from established scholars such as Prof. Thierry Groensteen noted concerns around the apparent barriers still prevalent in comics. In his 2007 book *The System of Comics*, Groensteen views the reasons for this as being contributed to by:

> Myopic scholarship, nostalgia, and idolatry have structured the discourses around comics for about three decades. All too often the history of the medium takes the form of an egalitarian chronicle where masterpieces and less glorious works are treated as equivalents, while, at the same time, the artists who "sell" are continually the object of fetishistic celebrations in which critical analysis has little place. (2007: 1)

Notably, the aspersions cast upon "commercial" comic artists are equally tainted by Groensteen's own myopia through which he infers that everyday (commonplace) comics, such

as Marvel's *Spider-Man* or DC's *Batman*, cannot be held in the same view as the celebrated classics of *Maus* (Art Spigelman, first published in 1986 and later collected into the *Survivor's Tale* anthology in 1991, collecting both volumes of the series) and *The Watchmen* (Alan Moore, 1986 – 1987). For context, *Spider-man* and Batman , whilst each holding a long established history (the former debuting in the 1960's and the latter in the late 1930's) and immediate recognisability, regardless of extant knowledge of their publishers (or even, to a lesser degree, their overarching narratives), the two titles are generally seen as populist sources of low-stakes entertainment, particularly with each boasting a vast array of filmic, animated and video game adaptations. Whilst understandably significant, this also means that their ubiquity in pop-culture tends to relegate their narrative merit into low-brow, low-stakes entertainment. Whilst this may seem to be unfounded defence of the two by me as a fan of both sources, I have encountered multiple occasions of meeting heavy criticism by other comic or media scholars, some even outright dismissing them as meaningless when I've presented various conference proceedings. In contrast, *Maus* was the first ever comic/ graphic novel to win a Pulitzer Prize, claiming the award in 1992 (Carnegie, 2025) and Moore's *The Watchmen* won several prizes, including a Hugo Award (The Hugo Awards Archive, 2025) as well as an Eisner Award in 1988 for Best Writer and Best Writer/ Artist for Moore and artist Dave Gibbons (Hahn Library Archives, 2025), which is one of the most prestigious awards a comic can earn, especially considering that the awards debuted in the same year. These, amongst other titles are synonymous with excellence of narrative, one (*Maus*) being a semi-fictionalised take of deeply painful account of the holocaust and the other a deep-set satire in the guise of a traditional superhero comic (*The Watchmen*). The two latter examples are undeniable in their potency, but tend to be seen as apex of comic narrative at the expense of many other titles offering moments of equal power and poignancy. As such, this treatment of some titles by Groensteen (and some of his peers) as lesser and others as greater holds little merit in contemporary comic studies, and I mean this with all respect, having co-curated the *Art of Comics* exhibition alongside him in 2019[1]. The age of Groensteen's book is certainly a factor in this, with the original French version being published almost a decade prior to its English edition. Comics in 1999 were ultimately different than the works of each subsequent decade. Much like the epochs of classic narratives, comics evolved, spawned new formats and started providing deeply profound stories between the covers of average superhero comics and specific graphic novels alike. Technology afforded the rise of independent comic makers whose contributions have added continually to narrative

[1] See https://friendsofjag.org/news-stories/artofcomics

discourse, with many being adapted into television series, video games and films to great success.

Comics have seen a prolific rise in consumption and public perception due to this same extensive televisual, cinematic and merchandising exposure. However, Paul Lopes notes in *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* that this has perhaps come at the cost of what he termed a "newfound interest in comic book culture", resulting in the "decidedly minor presence of actual comic books" (2012: 11). This is mostly attributed to the related "geek" culture fandom, which consumes comic artefacts en masse, as seen in collectible comic figurines and statuettes, special edition homeware, clothing and even furniture now entering the mainstream of consumer culture. There is an inherent trap here, as I perhaps fall into the nexus of the fan-consumer/researcher-maker, experiencing the social stigmatisation of being a fan of the medium in the 1990s, embracing (and enjoying) the paradigmatic shift in reception of the 2000s and then critically reflecting upon the complex relationship I now hold with the medium through the production of this research. There is a dual phenomenon at play here – the first can be rooted in what Moritz Fink, in his 2022 article *"Cool" Media Studies: McCloud, McLuhan, and the Popification of the Humanities*, refers to as the experience of the 'academic fan' (251) when discussing the 30 year anniversary of comic scholar Scot McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (referred to often over the scope of this research as well), whose work became a tour-de-force of analysing the inner workings of a comic from the perspective of a practitioner that differentiated itself from the more 'how-to' styles of narrative found in titles such as Eisner's *Graphic Storytelling* (2008) and Madden's *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures* (2008) by adding elements of media studies, such as semiology to help delineate some of the complexities found within the medium. The second element, and one of a more personal stance, was the rise of popularity of mass-media adaptations of comics and graphic novels, from the so-called Marvel Cinematic Universe (now firmly established with multiple big-budget comic films being released on an annual basis) through to video game series such as WB Game's *Arkham* series (2010 – 2015) centring around Batman as he battles his rogues gallery. From the 2000s, comics essentially became 'cool', which Fink cites McLuhan's work in the 1964 book *Understanding Media*, as a type of entertainment that fosters audience participation due to its inherently incomplete lack of information (253), meaning that comics present themselves as collections of abstracted (stylised) art combined with text, but relying on readers to fill in the blanks. The opposing side of this is so-called 'hot media', which are rich in detail and visual information (film, for example) and thus lessen audience participation. Fink speculates that the 'coolness' of comics lies in

their use of metaphor and anti-photorealism, which again links to McCloud's discussions of placeholders – it's easier to insert oneself into a simplified character design with basic, non-specific features than a fully-fledged human being with clearly defined personality and visual traits. The latent 'coolness' of comic is simultaneously attributed to the social side of being 'cool', where being a comic fan was at one point reduced to children's entertainment, or that of the strange and deviant (both of which I was termed in the 90s). Following the mediums mass-proliferation in the film adaptation boom of the 2000s, attitudes changed, and suddenly comic content was not only considered mainstream entertainment, but also cool in both forms of understanding. McCloud's work, as mentioned, is discussed at several points in this research, including this very Chapter, so to avoid repetition, it is advised that readers refer to the other instances of the discussion.

To return to the complexity of being a fan/ maker/ researcher, I need to be cognizant of the requirements of academic distancing when researching especially creative media, but cannot completely remove the embedded fan that drove the need to conduct this work in the first place.

This is noted by Bart Beaty in a concluding statement of his book *Comics vs Art* in which he offers the "mile-high" view of an academic practising comic making:

> [Maker-scholars can often reaffirm] the supremacy of the art world relative to comics by maintaining and reinforcing existing prejudices about the inadequacies of the form presumed to be inexorably tainted by mass cultures and its audiences, and turning the loathing of the form into a highly aestheticized performance of the self-hating artist that makes him all the more acceptable by the art world he claims to disdain. (2012: 222)

We (comic fans and makers) are victims of our experienced criticisms, reacting instead of adapting to the imposition of harsh views and unkind words. It enacts a spiral of, as Beaty puts it, self-loathing apologist work, but this view muddies, if not completely obfuscates, the validity of investing in comic production. As such, this research is positioned as neither defending nor evangelising the medium. In fact, comics in this case were chosen as an example, not as a catalyst of a much larger research project.

We should be cognisant, though, that when I refer to comics, I'm strictly discussing those with origins in the Global North, and specifically from a Western pedagogy. So, in this instance, the containing term "comics" refers to comic books, graphic novels and francophone bandes dessinée albums. Ostensibly, each of these types of publication has its own specific

formatting conventions, audiences and even tangential offshoots, such as webtoons, digital comics, interactive comics, motion comics and so on, but they are all rooted in similar graphic conventions and combine illustration with textual narration. While the mediums of the East, especially Japanese Manga and Korean Manhwa, are an essential part of the tapestry of comics, the works engaged with stem from my exposure throughout the course of my career as both maker and researcher. Manga only entered my life in the late 2000s, when translated books were available for purchase at high costs from niche stores. By this time, I was already working as a freelancer, producing American-style comics for brands ranging from Bioplus to Nissan. Access to American comics was also far easier and cheaper, resulting in me having "call-orders" (a reserved list of comic titles) set aside for me on a monthly basis at my nearest comic store. As such, my consumption of comics was predominantly comprised of DC and Marvel titles and foundational for most of my academic reading and engagement. Subsequent work has been produced within the frame of Afromanga (Bonzo), which is directly rooted in studies of Manga/Manhwa principles, but this is not within the scope of the research presented in this document.

As can be understood from the previous paragraph, a very clear definition and position on comics needs to be provided on my part, at least for the sake of clarity in this chapter. Thus, when I refer to any sequential narrative, I am specifically following the tenets proposed by researcher/practitioner Scott McCloud's definition of comics in his 2003 edition of *Understanding Comics*: "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (20). While this definition has been contested and even outright refuted, as several scholars believe that attempting to adopt a "single reified definition undersells the diversity and complexity of comics" (Samuel Delaney, as cited by Hatfield, 2010: 5), it does still have merit in my understanding of what a comic is. While I also don't fully agree with McCloud's take, especially considering the new variety of digital formats of comics, the definition is functional enough to serve as a contextual base. Furthermore, an open-ended approach is needed when dealing with comics created within South Africa, as the production of comics within the country is highly varied and often hybridised.

The premise of this research is multifaceted, but at its most distilled and cogent form, I am a South African comic maker who has been influenced, buffeted and perhaps even

corrupted by the extant homogeny[2] of the medium of comics. For a long time, I found myself floundering in a process of trying to discover who I am as a writer, as an artist and then as a South African attempting to make a path in an industry extremely far removed from my personal experiences and from my understanding of the worlds depicted in the comics I was reading. I was a visitor to another culture (American, in this instance), another place that only mirrored fragments of my own world and while I enjoyed this experience, I could never fully participate as an outsider, but desired deeply to do so.

So, as a beginner, I desperately attempted to become a facsimile of the comic-making teams that inspired me as I read the adventures of DC's *Batman*, Image's *Spawn* and Marvel's *Deadpool*, seeking to emulate not only the art styles but also the prolific output and complex stories far beyond my means as a young preteen. I eventually got relatively good at it; my skills grew with age and my narrative abilities went beyond characters punching each other for no reason. However, I still always set my stories in a nebulous impression of media-inspired Americana. From the television series I voraciously consumed to the video games, novels and even food, I always looked northward as the gold standard of all things culture. Fortunately, my years in tertiary education gave me a wealth of introspection and criticality; I was shown a new world of Afrocentric, continental identity, then distilled to the idea of local thinking at a more molecular form of reasoning, first nationally, then on a community level and finally at a personal, intimated horizon.

In seeking this new identity, in understanding the past, I became fascinated with creating something that I could share with my fellow South African citizens. The goal was no longer to make the next big Marvel title, but rather a uniquely South African comic that its audience could associate with, that showed *us* (as South Africans), spoke our language and had context. This held such a high stake for me that it was initially a core goal of this very research and one that was even presented in its most nascent conceptual phase, but this was not enough to hinge an entire Ph.D. upon, rather a small element that led to the larger goals the work. The idea of locality and place, which were secondary at inception, became lead motivators of the research problem (noted further in this chapter).

Another motivator for the change lay in my experience of critical comic studies often being consumed by a somewhat single-mindedness of engagement that either focuses on the minutiae of comic aesthetics (such as line weights, emanata and visual styles under the lens of

[2] In the sense of the influence that especially American comics has held on my initial understanding of the craft of comic narratives and art.

semiology as seen in the work of Scott McCloud, for example, who dedicates an entire chapter to the meaning of lines in *Understanding Comics*) or upon deep readings of narrative conventions seen in the work of scholars including Paul Atkinson (2009) in his focused account of the line of narrative seen in the juxtapositioning of comics and animation, or Mila Bongco's (2000) deep account of how we read superheroes, focusing on the greater archetypes and themes at play. This can result in the aesthetic–narrative dissonance through which McCloud's work has driven such critique in the case of the former, as his core concern lies almost wholly in the idiomatic presentation of the small parts that make a comic. Narrative or textual analysis can provide valuable insights into themes and meaning, but it can inadvertently render the visual (aesthetic) traits of comics secondary to their greater meaning when they are an assemblage of both image and text (both visually and as narrative).

That is not to say that these formats of comic studies are not valid in considering the genres and forms of the medium, but what is often lacking (in my experience) is an examination of the making of meaning in comics from a combination of all their elements, as well as the role of the makers themselves in doing so. Being a maker myself, my focus is on the production of comics in their entirety, rather than simply on the text or the critical reception thereof.

The struggle of finding a place as a creative researcher, then, does not strictly lie in a lack of availability of methods (quite the opposite - there is a plethora of options to engage with), but rather in the undertaking's relative "newness" in the greater scope of academic pursuits. When I began this research, simply proposing creative work was met with great concern (and even opposition by some colleagues), with arguments generally leaning towards a lack of a standardised approach, examiners and, especially, supervisors, at least in the South African context. I do wish to note that this is not a holistic view of the position of the South African academy towards creative research, but rather my experience within the auspice of my host institution at the time of writing.

Veronica Baxter, in her 2013 chapter "Practice as Research in South Africa", echoes my sentiment to a degree, at least regarding a less established experience of South African institutions in the methodological approach of most forms of Practice-Based Research[3] at the time of her writing. Baxter uses the metaphor of riding a bicycle: the act of riding is the creative process, whilst the understanding of the combination of muscles required to do so represents the research. In this instance, the understanding is vital, lest an overfocus on the isolation of

[3] For the context of this research, Practice-Based Research (PBR) includes related methodologies, such as Research-Through Design (RTD), Practice-Lead Research and Arts-Based Inquiry, among others.

knowledge may result in a fall, but we also cannot understand this risk unless we ride the bicycle (163). Granted that at the time of the chapter's authoring (2013), Baxter's statement that practice as research (or practice-based research) was still a new method in the South African context, going so far as to state that it was "not officially recognised yet by the academy" (163) has now since seen a shift. Much like my initial frustrations, she furthers her arguments by positioning the method (PBR), perhaps overconfidently, as "the only suitable methodology across a range of applied theatre and performance contexts" (ibid.). My cautious analysis of her position stems from a similar one that I held for many years prior to authoring this research where I was convinced that I was an academic rebel that was doing something wholly outside of the current norms, but really, I was simply naïve to the variety of creative research methodologies that exist.

In furtherance, we can also look at James Elkin's views on the specific undertaking of a creative PhD study in his 2014 book *Artists with PhDs, On the New Doctoral Degree in Studio Art*[4]. Elkins explores various facets of what a creative PhD both means and entails, from supervision methods and exhaustive lists of various creative programmes to identifying latent discrepancies of practise globally. Essentially, and similarly to my experience, there is a general lack of standardisation of what a creative (or in the case of Elkins, a studio-art) PhD requires in order to fulfil the academic standards of its host institution (2021). Considerations vary wildly, from required word count through to the qualifications of the supervision team and even how it should be examined, even mentioning the significant differences found between the UK, EU, Australia and African-Based institutions. In the book's fourth chapter, titled "Fourteen Reasons to Mistrust the PhD" continues to expand the lack of consistency and notes that, for example, not all art requires 'improvement', or would not benefit from PhD-level study. This may seem contentious, but is explain by the author when he discusses forms of art whose objectives intentionally lack clarity for the sake of expression, providing the example of artist manifestos that existed outside of the authoring artist's work (2021). Elkins explains that:

> ...if those manifestos has [sic] been written in contemporary academia, they would have been thoroughly criticized for overreaching rhetoric, lack of system, lack of argument, and lack of evidence. If Ad Reinhardt had read his own texts closely, as an academic reads, he would have been bothered by their many self-contradictions – or conversely, if his texts had been produced in PhD programs, they would have been edited down to fragments. (2021)

[4] Note that the version referred to is the most up-to-date (as of 2021) and hosted on Elkins' personal website.

To say this citation resonates with me would be a notable understatement – I faced these exact criticisms when proposing this work, because meaning is ultimately subjective, and quantifying that meaning to others is a significant trial to say the least.

There have been subsequent developments in creative practice research since then, including greater understandings of autoethnography and the mainstream entry of research-through-design into various fields of study, but practices and methods fluctuate as modes of making change. Baxter offers an observation from the Department of Higher Education's ordinances for the development of new pedagogic paradigms, however, that remains relevant even a decade later:

> It is not only crucial to take action to develop South African society, but also to find a way of carrying out research into that development … new methods of research need to emerge that encompass the breadth of work, and that close "the knowledge gap that resulted from imperialism, colonization and the subjugation of indigenous knowledges", and support the "reclamation of cultural and traditional heritage". (164)

It was this very notion of the nascency of creative research undertakings in South Africa, which encourages greater opportunities for entry into the academy without the imposing nature often associated with more typical analytical research, and the lack of clear structure or identifiable application, that ultimately inspired the work you see here.

What initially began as a far more simplistic venture of observing comic-making practices in the country grew into something far larger, as I was in a constant conflict between my reliance on the creative product in favour of academic quality because it was the easier route. To explain further, it was noted earlier in this chapter that the initial line of research inquiry focused upon how I would make a 'South African Comic', or more specifically, a comic that felt truly South African through the use of vernacular language, imagery and setting. The idea was to inform this process with research built upon my creative expertise as a comic-maker. However, I quickly fell into a trap of overfocusing on the creative artefact (the comic) at the sacrifice of the academic components that were starting to feel tacked-on instead of being a vital contribution as a grappled to find an adequate mode of incorporation, or least of cooperation, between the creative and theoretical part. As such, I could simply have authored a monograph, akin to a "how-to" book, and moved on, but not offer a genuine academic contribution beyond an anaemic impression of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*. While not said in exactly the same way, the earliest critiques of the conceptual phase of the Ph.D. mostly expressed concerns along these lines – that the creative work was overwhelmingly

favoured by me and the contribution of any kind of academic project simply was not offering a feasible contribution to the academy. It was frustrating to be faced with this challenge – I knew what I wanted to do but was unsure of how to actively express it in an academically viable manner and was met with strong opposition with each new attempt to rectify the validity. What I was not aware of at the time was that it was not so much the method or even mode of making that was causing this difficulty, but rather a lack of the organisational structure of a proper methodology.

A second attempt was made to rectify this issue by using Research-Through-Design as the methodology, yet I found myself mired by the overtly rigid nature of documentation and how it unconsciously biases the end product to fit into a set of categories that are neatly delineated as research and the creative production driven by the very specific criteria for fulfilment. My frustration lay in that it becomes readily apparent what the end results will be – there is no true discovery, but rather a detailed account of meeting each goal in order. I personally found this to be inauthentic to my creative process – I want to learn as I make, not have everything predetermined by a checklist. This, in fact, was what drove the final change of method – as detailed in Chapter 4, the toll that systemic rigidity of methodology was taking on my work was actively inspiring a deep dislike of what was being made and I was hitting a wall of frustration and lack of progress that had become the opposite of my first attempt – the theory (and methodology) was now hampering the creative work as opposed to the original issue of creative output relegating appropriate academic documentation.

It was the opposition to my undertaking that actively inspired a new trajectory. When constantly questioned what merit your work has, why it in any way offers something useful to the academy or even whether I was even taking PhD research seriously, I had to take a hard and realistic look at what I was doing, and, in all honesty, saw that it wasn't much. I pondered on what was lacking, what needed to be added or removed, all the while not realising that what I was lacking was, in fact, method. I believed in the "build it and the method will come" sentiment and was thus digging an ever-larger pit of spiralling creative work that had nowhere to go. A chance encounter with a colleague led me to discover a method that was simultaneously ancient and immediately contemporary – the exegetical model that stemmed from studies of the Bible and began to be applied more holistically to creative writing. Jason Nelson, a lecturer at Bergen University in Norway, was invited to my department (Game Design) at Uppsala University to present insights into creative research methods after his 2023 digital exhibition

10+10=The Pain Bees[5] and discussed the contributions that he and scholars like Nigel Krauth and Welby Ings had made, particularly in the field of creative writing. The establishment of the earlier forms of exegesis is what drove academics such as the mentioned group to develop further iterations that could apply to more formats. So, forms such as the "plaited exegesis", a phrase coined by Welby Ings, and radical exegesis models (which I discuss in detail in my method chapter) were born, a melding of creative work informed (but not completely dictated) by robust research and then reflected upon in real time that, for lack of a better word, made research documentation *fun*. The aspects of each method are discussed in detail in Chapter 2, and the application thereof is demonstrated in the case studies in Chapters 3 and 4.

The notion of *fun* research was novel – obviously, fun is subjective, and what is meant here is that this was research that lacked the sanitised dryness that made me want to retreat into focusing only on creative work and replaced it with a joyful experience, offering affordances of the creative writing field with deformalised registers and encouraging personal perspectives in order to maintain authenticity, but founded in deep research traditions that can span across content analysis through to visual analysis and, of course, journalling.

While the work of this thesis is now complete, the method remains an integral part of my own creative practice and my teaching and supervision approach. I cannot imagine a moment when I will not seek a way of working that provokes change or facilitate doing so while being situated in scholarship and the academy. The use and ramifications of these methods are most clearly applicable to pedagogic practices situated in a variety of creative fields and offer an inclusive but flexible model of research that can hold equal merit as an entry point and as a full-blown study. There are, of course, some problems in the method, but this in turn motivates the research impetus of this document.

Thus, the core problem statement is as follows: *By investigating the scope of the creative exegesis methodology, as proposed by Geland, Krauth, Ings and others, this research offers a creative research method, using a case study of comic making as a creative process aiming to represent the notion of locality as expressed through the author's lived experience of the socio-cultural geography of the South African city, Johannesburg*.

As such, this thesis approaches the problem statement through a creative exegesis research model using case studies generated over the course of the research as both a form of advocacy and a critique of the method. More specifically, amongst other things, a diegetic

[5] https://taper.badquar.to/10/pain_bees.html

investigation into localisation, its meanings and its implications is conducted, paired with a series of reflective accounts as I use my career as a South African comic maker as a base point, branching out into theoretical interventions through a revisiting of the genres, marketing and even platforms (such as online journalling on Milanote) to garner greater interest in South African comics as a medium. While exegetical methodologies more commonly find a home in creative writing as a field of research, this research shows that their practices lend themselves to a less restrictive model of discourse than the fields mentioned previously.

Core Theoretical Framework One: Definition of Local and Vernacular through the Lens of Socio-Cultural Geography

Over the course of the research, I use the terms *local* (and localisation) as well as *vernacular*. These concepts were some driving forces behind the research – I wanted to foreground my position and role as a South African comic maker and researcher; not simply as a South African who speaks about comics, but one whose motivations are deeply embedded in what that identity means and implies, for better and worse. As such, a fundamental requirement for conducting this research is to provide a clear contextual definition of local and vernacular to establish a baseline approach for the rest of the analysis. This requires an awareness of the personal positionality and circumstance of myself as a maker, consumer and researcher of comics, situated within the context of a series of concentric spaces that contain, at its core, fellow makers, then radiate outwards to fans, then the greater community and finally the hegemonic national identifier South African, in the sense of both citizenship and the physical place itself. This section serves to introduce the overarching concepts that I use but are also further explained in chapters 3 and 4 with context-specific knowledge.

The first area of contention faced lies in whether the pursuit of identifying local content falls within the sphere of ethnography, vernacular culture or even vernacular cosmopolitanism. These forms of study each have their own associations and connotations that can be applied to them, but there is an underlying base point of understanding various aspects of locality.

The most crucial understanding of locality stems from vernacular culture and vernacular cosmopolitanism, shaped by postcolonial thought. As lithely observed by Werbner in her 2006 article “Vernacular Cosmopolitanism”, this term is an oxymoron that “joins contradictory notions of local specificity and universal enlightenment” (496), perhaps naively, but it allows for a broader understanding of the concept originally proposed by Bhabha in his 1996 article “Unsatisfied: Notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism”. Werbner expands her reasoning for the accusation by stating that:

> These [oxymorons] pose the question whether the local, parochial, rooted, culturally specific and demotic may co-exist with the translocal, transnational, transcendent, elitist, enlightened, universalist and modernist – whether boundary-crossing demotic migrations may be compared to the globe trotting travel, sophisticated cultural knowledge and moral world-view of deracinated intellectuals. (ibid.)

While overarching in its breakdown, the point of interest centres upon the notion of a person who simultaneously holds the position of someone clearly endemic to their place of birth while transcending those same bonds in an outward reach, embracing the greater world around them. In its ideal form, a vernacular cosmopolitan comic could maintain that same sense of harmony of global techniques and local aesthetics, yet the term seems to be self-alienating due to the loaded expectation of the cosmopolitan being equally utopian. There is an inherent pressure to be perfect in this state, to the point that any real message would be plasticised in a glossy veneer of shallow ideological imposition rather than a shared common experience. Ironically, the colonial implication of this ideology becomes rather apparent when viewed through this lens, which is perhaps why Bhabha was quick to criticise any interpretation of vernacular cosmopolitanism that privileged universal liberalism over ethnic grouping and national identity (Werbner, 2006: 497). The danger here lies in excluding the cultural and ethnic mores that make a person who they are in favour of a more palatable homogeneous ideal that placates rather than fosters communication.

I too have struggled with this very issue – should the content I produce be so localised that it forgoes any inclusion of outside worldview, I'll lose the interest of a larger audience, but if I stray too far into globalisation, I'll risk losing my audience to genericisation of themes and inadvertently exclude the very people I'm attempting to represent. The two exegetical studies presented in this paper are founded in an understanding of narrative, one focusing on urban myth and the other experiential (a personal account of the influence of Johannesburg on my work), finding the appropriate voice and position that provides a firmly established locality, but one that functions in the established narrative paradigms of comics to allow maximum access to the stories.

On the notion of culture, perhaps then the definition should be centred on vernacular culture rather than cosmopolitanism. When we forgo the more idealistic, yet ironically classist, ideals of cosmopolitanism in favour of the idea of the everyday person, we begin to look at a more profoundly simple idea of understanding vernacular (or, in this context, local) as simply the average experience of a normal person within their personal and then national context. To

use a semantic example, if one were to hail a taxi in New York City, we are preloaded with the semiotic image of a yellow cab with one or two passengers, driving precariously among the chaotic streets of a bustling metropolis as other vehicles honk, drivers shout and pedestrians caterwaul in colourful affectations of "I'm walkin' over here!". This image is ubiquitous, universal and culturally ensconced into anyone who has watched a film or television series set in the American city, and it would be nearly impossible to not identify with the descriptor; yet, to catch a taxi in the South African sense is a completely different experience altogether. Here a South African national would picture a minibus hurtling with reckless abandon down the roads, stopping without warning across major intersections to pick up or offload passengers into their overloaded compartments and just as suddenly swinging back into traffic. The experience of the average South African taxi is one so profound that it has spawned stories, jokes, comic strips and even academic studies.

In the case of the latter, I cite an excerpt from Baletsi Tsatsi's "Taxi Diaries", featured in Falkoff and van Staden's 2020 book *Anxious Jo'burg: The Inner Lives of a Global South City*:

> As we get into town, a man with a heavy accent I can't place asks to get off after the robot [traffic light]. The said robot is orange, and instead of following road rules, the driver goes through, at this point it's red. The accent man doesn't get off and the driver asks "Didn't someone ask to get off?" The accent man speaks: "Yes, but I am not getting off anymore. You passed a red robot with me. You don't know how to drive." The driver grunts and from the grunt I know that had the accent man been close by, a hot *klap* [slap] would have landed on him and thrown him out of the taxi.

The journal entry presents the quintessential South African taxi commuter experience, laden with cultural affectations like *robot* and *klap* that are uniquely endearing to us as local readers yet written in a way that can easily be understood even by those outside of our cultural context. There is an idea of performance in Tsatsi's writing that is so easily visualised by anyone who has ever encountered a minibus taxi that also becomes our own secret joy as insiders. The humour and observer-as-commentator writing style allows an entry point to this, but having the underlying knowledge makes it genuinely special to me as a South African.



Figure 1. Deni Brown and Gavin Thompson's *Mama Taxi* (2018). Comic strip. Available online.

In Fig. 1, we encounter this experience in the form of a comic strip. The punchline of this particular example may not resonate with all audiences, but this is a common sight at most intersections in the urban spaces of South Africa.

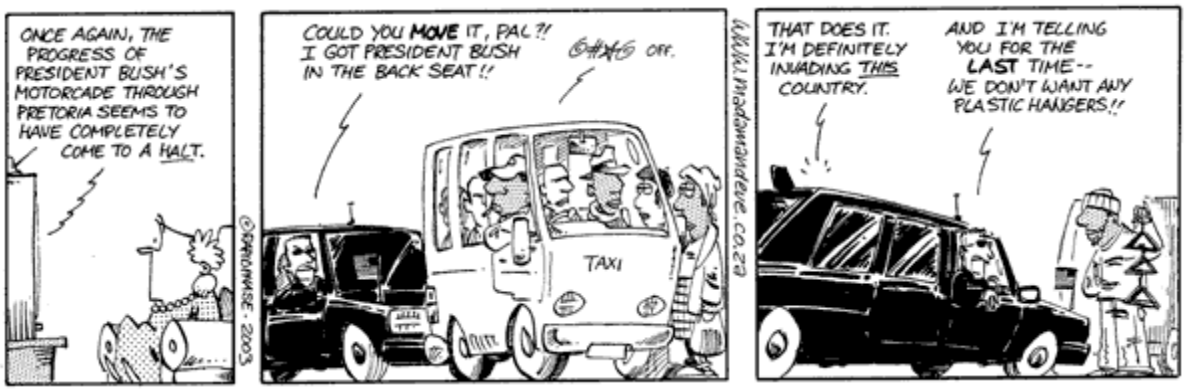


Figure 2. Francis and Rico's *Madam & Eve* (2003). Comic strip. Available online.

In Fig. 2, the beloved comic strip *Madam & Eve* takes things further, making light of former US President George W. Bush's visit to South Africa with a fictional encounter with a taxi, stoic in their equal disregard of all people and laws. The irony of the comic being written by a US expat living in Johannesburg is one to be truly enjoyed, as Stephen Francis offers a rather unique perspective as a former cultural outsider fully embracing the nature of his new country.

To a South African commuter, these vehicles are a vital service – far more available than buses and trains, relatively affordable and in some areas often the only option for transportation to work, home and even across provinces and borders – yet they are completely opposite to the international image of taxis' appearance and function.

It is in these semantics, in these ways of speaking and the meanings that we derive, what Margaret Lantis attempted to generate a working definition of in her understanding of vernacular culture in her 1960 article of the same name. While this is a rather old source, the message and mission of the writing is clear. Lantis begins by attempting to clarify her own understanding of people's daily existence:

> We are dealing with the commonplace; yet "mores", "folkways", all are somehow inadequate, first, because they fail to suggest any organizing principle; second, because their connotation is chiefly tradition, the past, even suggesting lack of present adaptation; third, as Sapir said, paraphrased by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952: 138), "custom" is a "common sense concept that has served as the matrix for the development of the concept of culture, and remains somewhat more connotive, subjective, and affect-laden". (1960: 202)

The core idea of custom being a "common sense concept" is where the fundamental difficulty of defining vernacular stems from. The meaning is clear and obvious to me, but it fails to articulate its intent, its limitations and omissions and even, perhaps, its own coding and miscoding in the eyes of everyone beyond my specific experience. It is in this same sentiment that Lantis posits her own attempt to reconcile these potential misnomers in phrasing by explaining that vernacular culture is the "vernacular aspect or portion of the total culture … It expresses 'native to …' or of common locality, region, or, by extension, of a trade or other group" (203). Here we start to find a more discernible state of meaning, and I particularly enjoy the somewhat casual allusion that the connotation of this meaning is "culture-as-it-is-lived". This embodies so much of what vernacularity means to me – lived culture, be it in language, activity or even common causes set against the backdrop of where we, in fact, live to experience these very facets.

Here the amalgam referred to covers the various components of vernacular culture covered previously. What I find most pertinent is the almost anecdotal parentheses extant in the "re-wording" (remediating) process that occurs when we begin to explore the concept of the vernacular. This adaptive behaviour is uniquely human – we apply our own contexts, biases, ideologies and, of course, *local* experience to inform our cognition of consumption. When we hear news on a global scale, it may evoke interest, but it is generally more from the desire to know what is happening in the world. When something is local, however, when it directly affects *me*, it becomes a wholly different experience. For example, the news of a traffic accident on a major highway in Johannesburg will not evoke the same response elsewhere as it would for

someone commuting to work in the city. This information will spread via official channels in news broadcasts, but it will also be shared via social media, sometimes at the cost of misinformation or hyperbole, but also often edited to specific detail in a way that the generalised news is not always able to relay – perhaps the extent of the accident, response of roadside assistance and even the precise location. That information is pertinent to the people local to the incident, be it proximal, relational or even intentional (people who were planning to use that route to travel but will now opt for other alternatives).

In this allegory, the thematic relevance can directly influence the way information is received. While a comic book most certainly does not hold the same gravitas as a traffic incident, a similar mode of thinking can be applied at a larger scale in how to make content more relevant to a potential readership. To address this idea, this research argues that the scale and scope of the distribution of comic material, counter to what many comic makers believe, needs to be reduced to a far more granular level – instead of South African characters being based in an American comic label's universe, such as Maggot from Marvel's *X-Men*, we need to host our characters in a South African circumstance. Loyiso Mkhize's *Kwezi* series has proven that an explicitly South African character based in a semi-fictionalised facsimile of the country (in this instance, Kwezi lives in "Gold City", an amalgam of Johannesburg and Cape Town) can not only achieve a large local readership but also be widely accepted on a global scale while still maintaining its identity.

What other stories can we draw upon in South Africa to make our own vernacular comics, then? How do we present our cultures with respect, but use them to create new and interesting narratives? With a wealth of folklore, traditional storytelling, rock art and even urban mythology, South Africa is not wanting for content – as such, drawing upon these rich narratives is how we can find a visual/narratological identity for South African comics. *Kwezi* and the *Shaka* series (by Luke Molver and Mason O'Connor) are arguably already doing that in their own way, the former using traditional superhero tropes in a South African context and the latter richly building upon a historical figure. Other titles like Daniël Hugo's *The Souvenir* and Ben Geldenhuys' and Danelle Malan's *Cottonstar* are also laden with South African folklore – one building upon the legend of Van Hunks and the Devil[6], the other a speculative take on a steampunk Cape Town.

[6] Told as the origin of the name change of Windy Mountain to Devil's Peak (a point adjacent to Table Mountain in Cape Town), as well as the coating of puffy white clouds that top Table Mountain stems from a chance encounter between Dutch settler Van Hunks and the Devil in the 18th century that culminated in a smoking competition between the two. Neither relenting, a vast white cloud swooped down from Windy Mountain and

Therefore, the working definition of vernacular for this research stems from a unified derivation of the most applicable aspects of vernacular cosmopolitanism and vernacular culture. While there are, of course, other pedagogic streams applicable to similar ideals, they are often loaded with their own constraints and limitations, and so the core definition of vernacular in the context of this research is:

The representation, be it visually or through text, of a shared common experience of culturally specific content informed by spoken, active and perceptive notions held by the targeted audience within a region-specific locality.

As such, when I speak to the making of vernacular or local comics, this is the core root of meaning, which will then be applied to elements like genre, production methods and characterisation.

Johannesburg – the Unspoken Character

An element of locality that necessitates further discussion lies within a deeper element that is at once highly present and visible in the visuals of the creative practice, yet also deeply ingrained in the genetics of both the creative as well as research narratives is the city of Johannesburg. The megalithic city means many things to many people – a place synonymous with wealth and the height of urbanity, whilst equally feared as a crime-ridden, violent city of decaying infrastructure and morality in equal parts. It was also my home for almost four decades and one whose influence upon my lived experience, my personality and even my creativity, is essential to understanding how the idea of local is nebulous at best.

Jon Anderson, in his 2021 book *Understanding Cultural Geography: Places and Traces,* explains this phenomenon as cultural geography, and ideology that expands the general understanding of geography – something that usually deals with territories, physical landscapes and exotic territories (2021: 2) – to an understanding of how those spaces, along with their embedded political, cultural and social contexts affect the people that move and dwell within them. Anderson discusses the idea of the macro scale, which would cover the entirety of the Planet Earth as a grand container of all cultures to the micro scale, in which he uses the image of the room that he sat in while writing his introduction – a small, messy office filled with summer sunshine that served as a particular point of motivation (3). The microcosm of the office is unique to him yet still affected his overarching progress. He furthers this by discussing

covered its neighbour, Table Mountain. The competition only stopped in winter, which saw the Devil return to hell for warmth. Thus, the name was changed from Windy Mountain to Devil's Peak.

how areas like public squares often tend to attract specific use and users, which is different to an open field, a private home, or a pub (ibid.).

Johannesburg, then, forms part of the cultural geography of this research – a real location, a hyperbolised dominion of chaos, a home, a place of transition as well as the place of authoring within and without. As you progress through these pages, various elements of the Johannesburg cultural geography are engaged with to demonstrate its essential influence on the production and representation of my locality as both real and fictive spaces and the gradual revelation found in why this research ultimately came to become a new citizen of Johannesburg whilst simultaneously relying on the space (real or otherwise) as its catalyst.

In this way, Intermediality (see the following section) is indeed the theoretical lens employed throughout the case studies, but Johannesburg is the cultural container that is central to the thematic development of all to follow.

Several scholars have found a similar basis in this strange city – Sarah Nuttal and Achille Mbembe (in *Afropolis: From Johannesburg*), much like me, speaks of the metamorphosing nature of the place, calling it: "A city of surfaces, shining, shifting, superficial, sensational, singular. Alive, on the move, and at times as ugly as sin." (2007: 282). The duo based this sentiment on their mention of Johannesburg being referred to as a Township metropolis (281) because in "…Johannesburg the formal and the informal, official and unofficial, cohabit and at times become entangled, so that the city resembles now Los Angeles, now Kinshasa or Cairo, now all three at the same time." (282). A true melange of affordance and identity, yet also then finding that same identity in a space of purgatory as the negative sides of these elements become present.

A part of the ugliness is perhaps due to the city infrastructure gradually declining, revealing a slew of so-called 'bad-buildings', which Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon, in his 2022 book *The Blinded City: Ten Years In Inner-City Johannesburg,* explains the term as a moniker afforded to the many urban building in various states of dereliction found in the city ('Part 1': np). As the author continues through the various decades of his experiences in Johannesburg, he writes with surprising objectivity – humanising the people whose lives are so tied to the place, but honestly speaking to the cruelty and, at times, callousness the urban sprawl holds in the existence of its denizens. In the chapter titled 'The Camp and the City', Wilhelm-Solomon speaks of his journeys across Uganda during the reign of Joseph Kony, infamous for his child-soldier recruitment and enslavement of women in the early 2000s. Noting the terrible conditions of warn-torn Uganda's interment camps, he likened his experience of visiting the

‘Chambers’ building in New Doornfontein to record the activities of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF, or Doctors Without Borders) as near identical. As implausible as this may sound, it is very much a reality for many people under the irony of being situated in Africa’s wealthiest city, surrounded by shopping malls, wealthy suburbs and shining skyscapers as they live. According to MSF’s 2011 report, *Nowhere Else to Go*, which surveyed 82 inner city buildings that they identified as slums due to “…very poor or non-existent sanitation, people have difficult or no access to water, and they lack proper waste management and disposal.”, with statistics stating that 38% of buildings having one water tap per 200 residents and 7.5% of residents have no access whatsoever (2011: 1), among other horrifying conditions. Yet, Wilhelm-Solomon again speaks to the inherent hope and beauty found in the chaos – he carefully describes his various interviewees, providing a rich insight into their lives and stories – how they found themselves in these ‘bad buildings’. These accounts are harrowing, but their honesty and transparency is something that I feel is omnipresent in all Johannesburgers, whether native or new residents. Similarly, Bettina Malcomess and Dorothee Kreutzfeldt call Johannesburg the ‘not no place’ in their 2013 book of the same name – a play on Thomas Moore’s original coining of Utopianism after the Greek ‘U-topia’, meaning no place, or in Malcomess’ and Kreutzfeldt’s case, the ‘not no place’ is one of strife under the guise of idealistic precepts (10), yet not fully dystopic (ideally, it’s not beyond hope). Beyond their accounts of Johannesburg’s fluctuating states, they note, similarly to my discoveries in Chapter 4, the anachronistic nature of both the city and its citizens, likening both to functioning as time travellers (pp. 16-20) in a perpetual, non-linear flow of future-past, waiting and high speed, liminality and entropy. Johannesburg is a space lost in time, yet able to be all times at once. It’s a truly special place to inhabit.

To employ an entire city as a thematic container, then, is ill-advised for scope, as the complexity of the space can be seen even in this brief review. So this research reflects smaller habitats as cross sections – in some instances, the literal spaces of traversal are explored (such as busy urban roads and their surprisingly powerful means of storytelling) and others speak to the implicit horror of urban spaces, especially the liminality of the spaces inbetween (the lonely public bathroom, or Johannesburg CBD as a space of dread between the safety of the suburbs and the gloss of the high streets of neighbouring Sandton as the new financial hub of South Africa). These containers are outlined in each chapter, and the cultural geography of Johannesburg is explored in further detail in Chapter 2.

Core Theoretical Lens Two: Transmedial Narratology and Intermediality

The core theoretical lens of this paper is explored below as it forms a foundational part of the process of both making and reflecting upon the work produced in this research. This, rather than a traditional literature review, should serve as a premise, and it should be noted that the formatting of this research may be somewhat unconventional, as literature reviews are normally expected to appear as a firm section of the opening chapter. However, as each exegesis case study is self-contained, each incorporates the relevant literatures directly into the discussions at the chapter level.

Transmedial narratology is defined by authors Vandermeersche and Soetaert in their 2011 publication "Intermediality as Cultural Literacy and Teaching the Graphic Novel" as "narrative [that] transcend[s] cultures, distinct media, and genres" (3), deepening the principle by introducing the concept of extracompositional intermediality, which deeply explores a combination of multimodality, intertextuality and, of course, adaptation. The source consulted here is distinctly important to my own endeavours. Written as a guide on the pedagogics of teaching both the practice and the meaning of comics, the text classifies modes of comic presentation and making into categories (akin to typologies) that help to provide a greater understanding of their function as texts. The authors pose intermedia, then, as the logical evolution of intertextuality for visual media, with additional factors like medium and aesthetics being shown as key processes of the remediation that occurs during adaptation. For the sake of this research, I offer the following contextual definitions of intertextuality and intermedia in order to establish their specific traits.

Intertextuality should be understood within the standard auspice of intertext, which is how two texts drawn upon and influence each other – as such comics can be adapted from or inspired by the narratives of other texts (such as fantasy novels or a science fiction film) and vise-versa, but they also borrow as well as contribute visual influence in this process as well.

Intermedia, then, should be understood as how comics move from one form of media presentation to another and how these media, in particular their specific formats, influence the basic comic. In contemporary practice, comics still appear in their traditional print formats, but are also consumed digitally. The format of the medium dictates certain elements of composition, such as orientation (portrait or landscape) and even font sizes and thus affect the way narrative is constructed to afford easier reading.

The combination of these elements can thus be understood as transmediality; comics, by their very nature, are multimedial – their combination of image and text, their adaptation of narratives and even their variety of formats all add to a diverse medium that holds an innately potent place in visual media. Vandermeersche and Soetaert take this idea further by proposing that comics are hybrid artefacts, adding their own challenging of Scott McCloud's definition of comics by stating that "the graphic novel [comic] is characterized by a specific combination of words and images. The symbiosis of two semiotic modes has made it difficult to determine the affordances and constraints they separately offer storytelling" (4), furthering the argument by citing Karin Kukkonen's (2011: 36–37) observation in "Comics as a Test Case for Transmedial Narratology" that "comics are a key instance of the cooperation between different modes in narrative … [comics] cut across the categorical distinctions between words and images and their functions". These combinative elements apply to the earlier arguments I made about my own hesitation in accepting McCloud's definition – divorcing (written) text and images as individual parts that make a comic is not useful in understanding their function. Semiotically, at least as reinterpreted by Vandermeersche, Soetaert and Kukkonen, comics function as multimedial as well as multimodal[7] forms of production. I discuss this in much greater detail in Chapter 3 as I explore what happens to comics when they become interactive and augmented with audio and motion, which is a narrative as well as medial transposition far outside the standard idea of a comic (words and pictures contained in frames on a page). A question is then raised that asks whether interactive comics actually still are comics, as they contravene the accepted semiotic mode of comics as a format.

As such, in this thesis I engage with comics as products of narrative expressed by the combined presence of image and text, with the two holding equal importance regardless of the ratio of their shared presence or their mode of presentation. This avoids the pitfall of ephemeral analysis (i.e. looking at the minutiae of aesthetics that combine to produce a comic's modal format of presentation) while reminding both reader and researcher that comics, at their most basic form, are simply a way of presenting a story. As comics have gained greater traction in contemporary academic studies, they are no longer simply devices for semiotic analysis or even simply the items of multimodal or intertextual narratology analysis that we read in the works of Thierry Groensteen, but rather intermedial as they provide intermingling platforms of engagement. *The System of Comics* (1999), discusses Groensteen's "iconic solidarity" theory

[7] Here, multimodal can be understood as the constituent, combinative elements that work together to make a comic function – it its heart, a comic is a union of image and text, but it can also incorporate other elements that affect its composition – a comic that features interactivity and audio can be considered a game, or at least heavily game-inspired.

that details the construction of a comic page, particularly the function of panels coexisting on a plane acquiring coherence through sequence. *Comics and Narration* (2013) furthers the idea by exploring the application across a broad spectrum of Western comics. A flaw of these works lies in the remediation of comic into digital platforms, where panels no longer cohabit spaces but instead are instantiated by the reader/user, especially in the mediums of webtoons (vertically scrolling comics), interactive comics and motion comics (animated adaptations that retain the art but add motion and audio and remove traditional panels). Victoria Yefymenko, in her 2021 article "Comics as a Transmedial Phenomenon: From a Printed to a Digital Medium", offers this definition of transmedial comics that can potentially counteract the more rigid definitions offered in Groensteen's works: "A characteristic feature of contemporary comics is their transmediality, i.e. exceeding the boundaries of the printed page and transforming to digital narratives" (159). This can be built upon by adding Marie-Laure Ryan's definition of transmediality from her chapter on transmedial narratology: "Narrative is not just the wire frame plot captured by summaries, but the expansion of this wire frame into a total imaginative experience, into a spatio-temporal world to which we react intellectually, emotionally, and sometimes aesthetically" (2005: 10). It is her use of the term spatio-temporal that resonates most with comics – they are a process of time and space; their panels and gutters denote the presence (or absence) of time passing and do so as an inherent part of their very function. Kukkonen concludes her study with the following:

> Comics are a multimodal medium and a vehicle of narrative. As I have argued here, these two aspects of narrative are not entirely distinct; indeed, their multiple connections make comics a valuable object of study as we continue to theorize transmedial narratology. Images, words, and sequences interact in comics, and shape their storytelling potential. (2011: 49)

This thought offers a clear summary, and even a definition of comics as multimodal object, but one that can also function within multimedial environments.

Finally, Henry Jenkins, who is credited as originating the idea of transmedial narratology in a 2003 article ("Transmedia Storytelling") about *Star Wars* and its move into video games and other external media from film and later developed a syllabus for teaching it in 2014, offers a definition of the medium of study as:

> phenomena which are non-media specific, meaning not connected to a specific medium, and can therefore be realized in a large number of different media, such as literature, art, film, or music. The medium from which a given phenomenon originated is

> either irrelevant or impossible to determine; it is not an adaptation of a phenomenon from one medium to another. (2014: np.)

In this instance, folklore was my chosen narratological spectacle, as it presents narratives that are culturally specific, yet thematically adaptable. The African Continent is rich in these; the advocacy for the use of folklore as the base inspiration of narrative adaptation extends to the development of "new" (or at least alternative) narratives from outside the typical sources from the Global North that offer something both different and familiar. I find myself deeply knowledgeable of the adventures of the Greek/Roman/Norse gods, or of the Sasquatch and Wendigo and the Loch Ness monster, to the point of having become somewhat apathetic to yet another retelling of these tales; yet, I was beside myself with excitement when Blue Forest announced their work on the *Kariba* graphic novel in 2018. The story details the infamous Nyami-Nyami (a Tsongan legend of the two-headed god of the Zambezi River) retains the basic legend of the curse of the Kariba Dam construction project in the 1950s, which saw the mysterious deaths of dozens of its construction workers that were attributed to the wrath of the river god over the disruption of the river's natural course, but adds an element of speculative fiction in the form of the adventures of its two protagonists, Siku (a young girl whose innate connection to the Zambezi river becomes catalysed in her ability to control its waters and later discovery that she is, in fact, the daughter of the Nyami-Nyami) and Amadeo, the son of the head engineer of the dam. *Kariba's* blend of fact and fiction greatly inspired my process, where the stories that unfold add to the rich tapestry of the ancient folklore that inspired it, instead of simply adapting it into a simple literal story.

A title that also blends folklore with a more typical superhero style narrative is Loyiso Mkize's *Kwezi* (2014 to present), which often features villains including werehyenas and giants, while its heroes, a team of warriors that draw their powers from their diverse cultural ancestries, ranging from the Khoisan (South Africa's indigenous peoples) to the BaSotho offer a refreshing take on superpowers and legacy. The titular Kwezi even diverts from more typical expectations of young superheroes as he initially uses his manifestation of superpowers to gain viral fame instead of heroism, only truly becoming who he's meant to be when he embraces his history and heritage. There are so many opportunities for new and different tales presented in transmedial formats, and so *Wanton* and *SPOEK* are made to add to that roster.

The exegetical chapters will dive deeper into the application and ramifications of this lens, accompanied by sub-theories including lived spaces, urbanity and even tabloids as modern myth, but contained within their specific medial outputs.

Note: How To Read This Thesis and its Constitutive Parts

This research is constructed of three major parts, each contributing and functioning as a collective of the greater thesis but also designed to be experienced at the discretion of the reader. The parts are as follows:

1. The thesis document, detailing the overall research, exigent theory and methodological deliberations, then sectioning into chapter-based case studies.
2. The creative artefacts generated for the research, comprising a variety of comics. These are presented digitally for ease of access.
3. An online research journal, which hosts the final artefacts and documents the full developmental process ascribed to them.

This thesis presents the summative findings of the combined elements whilst encouraging access to the various items at any time to ensure a clear flow of information.

To provide further detail, the creative output of the thesis consists of the following elements:

1. Traditional media comics

- *Wanton* issue 0. This is presented in an English edition and a "True Edition", which features localised language.

- *SPOEK* issues 1 and 2.

2. Alternative media comics

- *Don't Go Alone!*

3. A digital research journal

The options presented above are unique in how they are made and informed, which is why the exegetical process will bridge the process in a linear method that follows the actual periods of my production process. Many of the outputs have been greatly influenced by my teaching and professional career, and this is an important feature to demonstrate how rapidly techniques and approaches can change, even in the 3-year cycle of this particular research undertaking.

The research journal is presented digitally in the form of modern sequential documentation (KanBan[8]) via the online platform Milanote,[9] which was chosen due to its versatility in combining text, visuals, video and links through a user-friendly, story-driven format, much like a comic. Milanote also features very clear terms about the protection of user information, intellectual property and an outright ban of AI scraping. I was afforded a professional hosting license for this study through support grants so that I could use the unlimited storage and board facilities offered, but the work presented will remain accessible should I ever cancel the membership, as the work hosted is permanent, at the cost of no longer allowing additions. I maintain the right to delete all work hosted without the interference of Milanote as an entity, which again provides peace of mind and security. See Table 1 below for a list of quick links to the various key sections of the research journal (note that you may need to enable 'rich text' in some versions of Adobe Acrobat Reader).

The second creative component is made up of a series of comics in a variety of media that I have generated for my storyworld property *Wantonverse*, which explores experimental art styles, narrative techniques and genre to provide various tiers of feedback and reflection cycles upon how I've sought to apply different forms of making practice that are informed by the methodology. Due to the complex nature of the study and the necessitation of digital documentation using multimedial applications, it was decided that the work is best hosted in a contained but non-linear portal so that it may be accessed at any time during the reading process whilst not interfering with the overall engagement of the thesis proper.

[8] Stemming from Japanese manufacturing methods, KanBan is a form of project management used to visually represent the process of production.

[9] An Australian-produced online app that grants full IP rights to users, as noted in their terms of service. Hosted work is secured and backed up and the company clearly states no work will be used in the training of AI or related software.

Journal Quick Access Links	
Research Journal Home Page	https://app.milanote.com/1NCNip1LxX8d1C?p=LMzboQwMErm
Journal Usage Guide	https://app.milanote.com/1TDqtj1kEPYz0P?p=LMzboQwMErm
Chapter 3/ *Don't Go Alone!* **Main Page.**	https://app.milanote.com/1SrtDG1Xgf1d5b?p=fvxglvzYM88
***Don't Go Alone!* Game Page**	https://captainmaladroit.itch.io/dont-go-alone
Chapter 3**: Part 1 – Making Digital Comics**	https://app.milanote.com/1SrtDH1HvdfNxt?p=fvxglvzYM88
Chapter 3**: Part 2 – Medium Adaptation**	https://app.milanote.com/1SsezR1VInre7M?p=fvxglvzYM88
Chapter 3**: Part 3 – Game Precedent Analysis**	https://app.milanote.com/1SrtDH1HvdfNAc?p=fvxglvzYM88
Chapter 3**: Part 4 – Pinky-Pinky in other media**	https://app.milanote.com/1SrtDH1HvdfNAF?p=fvxglvzYM88
Chapter 4/ Wantonverse **Main Page**	https://app.milanote.com/1SIQGV1nYjDs2Y?p=HcX0XSP0nnl
Chapter 4**: Storylines**	https://app.milanote.com/1T1kIT1cSFNd5W?p=HcX0XSP0nnl
Chapter 4**: Part 1 - Planning**	https://app.milanote.com/1SIQGW1zrRyocL?p=HcX0XSP0nnl
Chapter 4**: Part 3 - Adaptation**	https://app.milanote.com/1SIQGV1zrRyo9x?p=HcX0XSP0nnl

Table 1. Quick links for all main sections of the Research Journal.

Creative Works

The study produced various outputs for use in the exegetical chapters, the first to appear being an interactive comic, *Don't Go Alone!*, made in 2024 and hosted online here as well as on international independent game archive Itch.io[10]. This was used in Chapter 4 as a demonstration of multimodal comic production under the umbrella of *urban myth* as narrative. The comic is an interpretation of the South African urban myth of the Pinky-Pinky, an agendered imp-like creature that preys upon children that use bathrooms alone, presented in the remediated form of *interactive creepypasta* (internet-based myths and cryptids). The study seeks to understand the appeal of horror as a narrative form and the evolution of myth from playground tales and campfire stories to endless internet repositories, podcasts and videos, while framing locality through a discussion of how the Pinky-Pinky (an albino *tokoloshe*[11]) has been represented in the media over its multiple decades of existence as a narrative that is not so far removed from its horrifying reality that was inspired by a spate of brutal cases of gender-based violence and child abuse that occurred in urban public restrooms in the early 1990s.

The second creative artefact is a cluster of three traditional comics (intended for print) and one variant edition: a prequel issue of *Wanton* (in English and multilingual editions) as well as *SPOEK 1* and *2*. All comics are accessible digitally here[12] and are also integrated into the relevant chapter. Printed versions were also produced, and they may be accessed via contact with the author, but do not hold an impact on the study itself. Analysed in Chapter 5, the comics were produced at various points of this study, with *Wanton* being made as the earliest output in 2018, its translated (or "True") edition appearing the following year. *Wanton* serves as a preface of sorts, providing context for the larger story, introducing characters and establishing the setting (Johannesburg CBD). Beyond locality, the story's narrative sought to interrogate representation, folklore and language as essential ingredients in the making of a South African comic. *SPOEK*'s issues were then produced in 2021 and 2023, accordingly as the research saw a methodological shift from research-through-design to plaited exegesis, offering a counter-narrative of sorts to the mode of production used previously in *Wanton*. Where the latter takes itself seriously, *SPOEK* is irreverent, violent and experimental, exploring the appeal of abjection in horror comedy and discovering that that very abjection became an inviting form of

[10] https://captainmaladroit.itch.io/dont-go-alone

[11] A tokoloshe, according to folklore, is a small, imp-like creature that prey upon unsuspecting people at night. Read more about them in Chapter 3.

[12] https://app.milanote.com/1SIQGV1nYjDs2Y?p=HcX0XSP0nnl

representation after the revelation of Johannesburg as a site of narrative habitus and a site of great anxiety, strangeness and freedom.

Of note is that this thesis serves as a sample of the potential of the creative exegesis model (see Hamilton & Jaaniste, 2010 and Ings, 2015) and that I specifically use a modified version of the plaited exegesis model proposed by Ings in *The Authored Voice: Emerging approaches to exegesis design in creative practice PhDs* (see Chapter 2 for a full discussion of method).

As mentioned, the investigation involves two case studies – *Don't Go Alone!*, which looks at new media (in this instance, video games) and the other focusing on traditional media, *The Watonverse*. Both studies dealing with comics as the medium of production but consider the needs of their respective media. Each case study is presented as a standalone scenario to display the specific benefits and constraints of the modified plaited exegesis model. The second case study is founded on a crossing point between research-through-design and plaited exegesis, demonstrating a form of real-time adjustment and reflection that was originally proposed by Schön in 1991 in his book *The Reflective Practitioner* (specifically reflection in action), but necessitated and shifted by the creative work that was done over the greater span of this undertaking as I shifted means of reflection and production.

My Positionality as Creator: Drawing the Other while White – Possibilities and Pitfalls in Representation in Comics

The previous section discussed my general definition of the term vernacular within the context of this research, but it cannot function alone without identifying a second element of influence that has informed and guided my selection of definition – my position as a white, male researcher working in a medium in which I am consciously representing people outside of my race and (perceived) gender. Here vernacular becomes a difficult concept in that I may believe that the way I write and draw characters is wholly and purely based on narrative need, perhaps featuring some common literature tropes and stylisation, but also altruistically fair and just. However, that perspective is mostly derived from my perception of these same characters. I do believe that I have afforded the best possible balance wherever possible, including consulting with *inyanga*,[13] *sangoma*[14] and specifically Southern African folklore (from as many cultures as

[13] A traditional healer that channels spiritual energy and communes with ancestors.
[14] A traditional healer that specialises in the use of plant and animal products to provide cures for ailments, supplements and protection wards from various forms of harm, including spiritual.

possible), but there will always be inaccuracies, inadvertently poor characterisations and subconscious stereotyping. This is the true pitfall of being a fan-researcher-maker – my many hats begin to vie for position: as a fan, I have been inundated with nearly four decades' worth of comic and animated content, some great, some awful, some that have critiqued, many that have caused controversy, aged poorly or similarly fell prey to best intentions of ignorant decision-making. Sometimes I may have a deep love for a comic simply for the way it was illustrated, or even for one specific character, but its larger world is one of vile misrepresentation and disrespect. Does that mean that the art style is similarly bad? As an example, I grew up reading Hergé's *Tin-Tin* – the eponymous character's adventures, his plucky spirit, his love for his dog Snowy and even the drunken, thuggish behaviour of Captain Haddock brought years of joy and inspiration to me, but I was largely unaware of the existence of *Tin-Tin in Congo*, because whether intended or coincidental, that particular book was never given to me by my parents. I never saw it in shops or libraries and only encountered it in my teens when it was re-released for a very short period. I was shocked at the hurtful, brazenly insulting minstrelsy of the Congolese characters – helpless fools relying on a white saviour to fix their broken country. The book is often excused as simply being an artefact of its time, an era when this sort of representation was de facto to entertainment: Jim Crow, the infamous minstrel, entertained masses of white American audiences in Vaudeville theatres, and Mickey Mouse battled Sambo-Cannibals in the new medium of animation, encouraged by the reification of America's "Jim Crow laws".[15] It was a systemic and violent exploitation of black-othered bodies for the sake of the entertainment of white people. Christopher Lehman, in his 2001 journal article "Black Characters and Social Commentary in Animated Cartoons", discusses how the World War II era presented these depictions with great gusto as a form of comic relief from the greater issues of the war, with inept (black) servicemen performing as acts of physical comedic relief or as jazzy, exotic musicians to add some calm (75). Lehman also notes that the dawning of the 1940s saw a return to traditional depictions of black bodies in the model of Ub Iwerk's (the first ever Disney animator) *Sambo*, with his wide, red lips, small eyes, ears and nose with a highly exaggerated forehead and pitch black skin for men and the equally hurtful "Mammy" stereotype as depicted in the form of an overweight, servile and, as Lehman puts it, "desexualised" character, nothing more than a smiling servant. These soon prompted protests

[15] According to History.com (2025), Jim Crow laws were a collection of state and local statutes that legalised racial segregation. Named after a black minstrel show character, the laws – which existed for about 100 years, from the post-Civil War era until 1968 – were meant to marginalise African Americans by denying them the right to vote, hold jobs, get an education or other opportunities. Those who attempted to defy Jim Crow laws often faced arrest, fines, jail sentences, violence and death.

led by the NAACP,[16] with both black and white members protesting the negative (traditional) depictions that were so prevalent, eventually seeing a concerted drive to remove these stereotypes from films as of 1942 (Cripps, 1993: 53, as cited by Lehman, 2001: 76).

In this instance, vernacularity (of the American South) was the cause, not the release from exploitation – it was done because that's what was "traditional" for others to do at the time, much like Hergé's (and others') representation of the Congolese people in comics produced in the same era. We cannot always code vernacular items as inherently good, as they are typified by the times and contexts of their production. This is why finding the representative root of vernacular is so important. I may have a workable definition for the semantic elements of this research, but we also need to understand its caveats and risks.

Moser, in her 2008 article "Personality: A New Positionality?", offers: "it was long believed that the ideal scholar needed to strive for absolute neutrality so as not to 'taint' the research with his or her individuality" (384). When my research is implicitly personal, objectivity is going to be unachievable, but it is my responsibility to be as cognisant and fair as possible in my selection of representation. As Hall states: "we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position" (1992: 258). I hope that I too can create and reflect without being constrained by my position as white, male researcher. If that were the case, I would be locked into only ever creating work within the auspice of direct experience, rather than informing, learning and finding ways to represent the external experience as fairly as possible.

And so I set about the research with the intention of reflecting on my extant and new work using the following to guide my thinking and how I will be fundamentally displaying myself as well as my work in a manner that is as fair as it is fully researched and understood. Thinking around positionality, I need to investigate whether it's even possible to fairly represent characters outside of my own ethnicity from an ethical, academic and even practical standpoint. I cannot presume to simply (and naively) construct and write characters from a pragmatic point of view. My learned experience and process of reflection is covered in detail throughout Chapters 3 and 4, ensuring a clearly established position at the onset vis-à-vis the occurrence and discovery of elements at the end of each case study.

[16] National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Stereotype and Representation in the Comic Genre

To cite a passage from Stuart Hall's "The Spectacle of the Other" (1997: 229):

> [The Others] ... seem to be represented through sharply-opposed, polarized, binary extremes – good/bad, civilised/primitive, ugly/excessively attractive, repelling-because-different, compelling-because-strange-and-exotic. And they are often required to be both things at the same time!

These "tropes of representation" (229), as Hall terms them, are persistent – even as I document this citation, I am painfully aware of how guilty I am of depicting some of these tropes in my own work. There is metaphor and there is stereotype, and tropes and stereotypes can never be truly avoided when creating characters, lest the character become hyperreal and thus equally repugnant to negative stereotypes. Hyperreality, in this instance, extends along the lines of the uncanny – the sensation of something that is *too* real – a flawless effigy lacking the quintessential humanness that makes them feel uncomfortable to look at. Wax figures and photo-realistic 3D animation often suffers from this, with the figures lacking the nuanced expression of a live human that would foster comfort yet are too realistic to be seen as mere fictional characters. Hyperrealism in comics (or any narrative medium) can also be seen in character motivations and narrative design, where a truly perfect character does not inspire empathy, since they don't need it, and thus lack any real narrative merit. On the other end of the spectrum, a character with flaws doesn't have to be a narratively flawed character – their issues should never completely define them, just as their appearances shouldn't be the sole basis of their personality. A good writer or artist needs to bear this in mind – we can use stereotypes to preload expectations in order to directly subvert them or even lean into them. Sometimes a bad guy can simply be that – a bad guy.

In thinking like this, I question my role and responsibilities as an artist, because making characters compelling does not simply lie in the way they look but also in how they enact their personalities – so am I doing enough justice? Or am I just adding to extant stereotypes? This is why the documentation of process becomes so fundamental to this project as a whole. Ethics also come into play here, because I have an ethical responsibility to fairly represent my characters. This may seem somewhat strange as an endeavour, considering that these same characters are purely fictional, designed as narrative agents through which stories are told. There is a power here, and one that can easily be corrupted or even misinterpreted, as the way that these characters are designed to perform holds real-world consequences outside of their fictive domains. This is not specifically located to race, either, as other acts of symbolic

violence, such as classism, can easily be affected through these agents. This is a complex matter, and one that will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 4, particularly in the use of language as class signifier and intentional (subversive) stereotyping.

Marc Singer, in his 2002 essay "'Black Skins' and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race", mentions that:

> Comic books ... have proven fertile ground for stereotyped depictions of race. Comics rely upon visually codified representations in which characters are continually reduced to their appearances ... characters are wholly externalized into their heroic costumes and aliases. This system of visual typology combines with the superhero genre's long history of excluding, trivializing, or "tokenizing" minorities to create numerous minority superheroes who are marked purely for their race: "Black Lightning", "Black Panther", and so forth. (108)

This citation is integral to the kind of thinking that I apply when it comes to engaging with my own characters. The examples mentioned are problematic, but there are also far worse that are extant in comics, and negative typologies are the exact foible that have caused the reassessment of my approach and ways of expression. It certainly spurs the question of whether I even have the right to make the comic, but this very question in turn serves to inform a very important portion of what my understanding of vernacular is, which was earlier defined, in the context of this research, as *the representation, be it visually or through text, of a shared common experience of culturally specific content informed by spoken, active and perceptive notions held by the targeted audience within a region-specific locality,* especially in terms of visual representation. This is also addressed in detail as part of the second case study, showing these points of reflection while identifying concessions that needed to be made. There needs to be a very delicate balance between art and writing – I cannot simply draw what I think will work for functional representation; Singer has very clearly pointed out how quickly that can lead to codifying characters far beyond their intention simply because of how they look. It's one thing to create an appealing character, but it's another to ask who that character actually appeals to.

Singer furthers this line of thought by discussing that "Race in contemporary comics proves to be anything but simplistic. If some titles reveal deceptively soothing stereotypes lurking behind the veneers of diversity, then others show complex considerations of identity" (2002: 108). Ideally, the goal is the latter, and this requires research on the politics of identity to do so.

Martin Barker (as discussed by Singer, 2002: 109) addresses a corollary to the understanding of stereotypes in comics, stating that "[stereotypes] in comics, especially those which imply that stereotypes exert some manner of influence over readers, are built upon a shallow understanding of comics". Essentially, Barker asserts that these reproaches rely on "an unsupportable distinction between textual messages and devices" (1989: 109). This means that Barker sees the imagery as typical comic conventions (which was mentioned earlier) rather than ideological transmissions. There are obviously problematic issues here, because you cannot simply dismiss the representation of characters purely because that's "what comics do". Barker goes on to write: "Just because a witch-doctor appears, it does not mean he can be directly related to the mythical witch-doctor of racist legend; he is a witch-doctor within the transforming laws and structure of [the comics]. Therefore, he can 'reinforce' nothing" (1989: 127).

Barker's sentiment is being asserted on a far deeper issue than he realises. He assumes that readers of comics simply don't care about what they see – they buy the magazines purely as entertainment and nothing else. This dangerous separation of intent and perception results in arrogant claims that ignore very visually loaded signifiers which certainly may not intend to hurt but still evoke painful and destructive imagery. As I've learned myself (and which is why I included this specific quote), a *sangoma* is not simply a *sangoma* – the characters are a white man's presumed affectation of what he believes how an appealing-looking *sangoma* would appear in a comic. Singer critiques Barker on this very issue by saying that he lacks consideration for the "quintessentially Bakhtinian possibility that comics might heteroglossically incorporate the ideological assumptions of the imagery they draw upon" (110).

Comic theory, especially in terms of representation, is potentially as complex and varied as the very comics it seeks to engage with. As such, a researcher always needs to tread this territory with caution – here, representation is an important part of the process but also one facet of many in the overarching scope of approach. There are many avenues of research around representation, specifically in comics, to consider for further undertakings, but for now, it primarily serves to inform before offering critique. Further considerations around position, whiteness and the authorial voice are to be dealt with in later sections of this document as well as in the research journal.

Conclusion

Stemming from difficulties in finding a "best fit" for creative practice-based research, this document seeks to propose and advocate for the use of a modified plaited exegesis methodological framework. The functions of the method will be explored through the output of comics presented on varying medial platforms and in the underlying research and praxis that went into their making.

The core aim of the project is to explore the viability of the modified plaited exegesis model and its potential applications in various forms of research, ranging from course-based research projects to larger-scale outputs and reflecting upon the potential strengths and weaknesses that are present.

Comics were chosen as a platform due to my long-term experience of making and consuming them as a hobbyist, fan and eventually professional artist, researcher and teacher. This is facilitated by the production of comics framed under specific conditions presented within the exegetical case studies, with an overarching theme of embedding the idea of locality (South African, and specifically urban Johannesburg) into their narratives. This is done through the use of vernacular elements in the form of language, fashion and location, as well as narratives drawn from modern urban myth and traditional Southern African folklore, presented in formats complementary to their styles of narration.

Both studies are informed by the main theoretical lens of transmedial narratology and offer inquiry based on the considerations that need to be made in varying forms of media production (such as the affordances and limitations of using video game engines to produce interactive comics) as well as self-reflection on positionality, identity and decision-making throughout the research duration. This is complimented by the use of a reflection of the cultural geography of the city of Johannesburg as the contributor to the thematic exploration of locality and vernacularity in both the creative and theory-based components of this research.

The creative work is presented in its native medium, with the traditional comics appearing as printed products and the digital work hosted on relevant online platforms. This is accompanied by an extensive digital journal (or printed, where applicable) that offers further insight into production within the auspices of the case studies.

The structure of the full research is as follows:

- Chapter 1: Introduction to the study and discussions on positionality and theoretical lenses.
- Chapter 2: Full methodological discussion, with critical reflection on similar methods, and presentation of how the plaited exegesis has been adapted for this study.
- Chapter 3: Exegetical case study 1 – interactive comics. A full exegetical study on contemporary comic-making methods informed by urban myth and its contemporary digital format of creepypasta. The study adapts the tale of the Pinky-Pinky whilst offering discussions on gender-based violence, privilege, horror, the monstrous other and writing for digital media.
- Chapter 4: Exegetical case study 2 – traditional comics. In this instance, traditional infers comics made with the intention of being printed and engaged with as physical artefacts. This study reveals the transition from research-through-design to plaited exegesis, writing urbanity, personal locality (area studies) and representing the other (*as* the other). Two comics of differing styles and genres were produced to explore traditional speculative fiction and horror comedy as genres of expression. This chapter is divided into two parts to best facilitate the methodological process.
- Chapter 5: Overview of and reflections on the two case studies and the conclusion.

This is accompanied by the research journal, where relevant sections are included in each section.

As a recap, the opening chapters of this document serve as a preamble to the larger project of the research, designed to provide basic context in terms of theory and method as well as an insight into the reading trajectories that follow later. Chapters 3 and 4 can be read linearly or independently as each is a self-contained case study (although they do refer to some



Chapter 2: Core Methodological Lens– Creative Exegesis

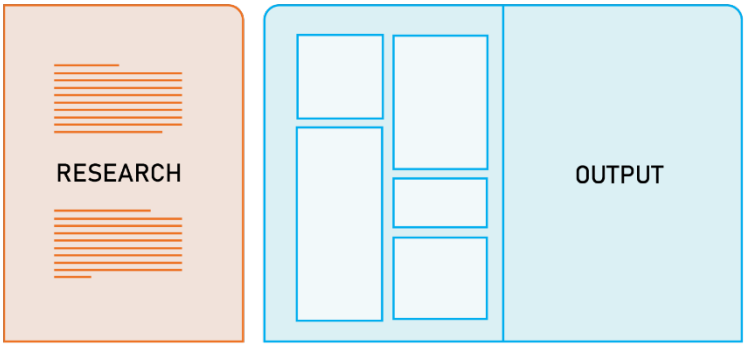
The previous chapter offered an introductory premise to the definition of key terms as well as the overarching positionality of both research and researcher. In tandem with this, a deep dive into the methodological structures that will be employed throughout is needed. It has also most likely been noted that my authorial voice has been markedly present over the opening sections of this paper, something that I believe to be of great importance to understanding the purpose of inquiry – one of learning as well as teaching (learn as I teach, teach what I learn) the possible role of comics as a medium of identity rediscovery and expression, starting with my own journey as a catalyst.

This chapter will offer a discussion of the chosen research method for this paper, presenting the overarching features of creative exegesis and discussions on how I will be deploying an adapted version of the method throughout this document.

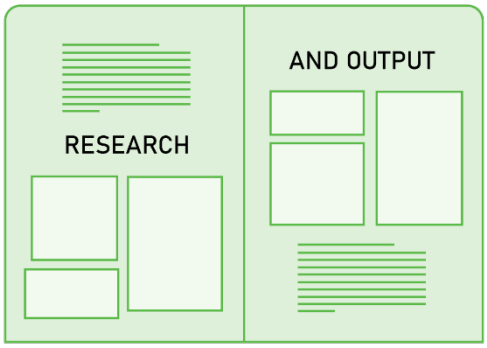
Context and Method Breakdown

At the onset of this research, one of the main points of difficulty was finding the most appropriate methodological execution, especially considering the nature of the topic of finding ways to instil a sense of the vernacular of Johannesburg's socio-cultural geography in my process of making comics. While interrogating ways of working within the scope of this conundrum, I encountered a text on creative exegesis entitled "The Authored Voice: Emerging approaches to exegesis design in creative practice PhDs", which was written by Welby Ings in 2015. As academics, we all are familiar with just how new and uncharted the territory of creative research is, especially considering how what qualifies as purely creative versus research-worthy is in a constant state of flux. One of the core points of focus in the article revolves around how a traditional form of scholarship has been reinvented and repurposed for the creative field of graphic design. In fact, Nigel Krauth, a great exponent of creative exegesis, speaks to the difficulty of conducting creative research as a lecturer in the same field: "it significantly involves the fact that creative artists teaching at tertiary level *themselves* strongly opposed the notion that what they did was 'research', as the following potted history indicates" (2011: n.p.). There is an implicit sense of the so-called "imposter syndrome" present in vocationally focused teaching methods; the primary outcome of skills development, at least to me, is often foregrounded above the critical reasoning for doing so, especially at the introductory levels of instruction found at a first and second year of tertiary education. Whilst the immediate results of the technical ability of student practitioners are evident, academic enquiry is perhaps relegated to content advocacy rather than deep understanding, which in turn

raises the question of the worthiness of the academic project (otherwise referred to as the “red thread”) regardless of the achievements of the student body. Krauth later speaks to how creative writing shifted and sped up the understanding of creative exegesis as a model of output as well as reflection: “For creative writers, the site of record of process pursued in the critical product was the same as the site of record of the creative product” (ibid.). At its simplest form, a revelation was granted to me in that this form of enquiry provided the ultimate approach – the critical product and the creative product exist simultaneously and are thus adaptive rather than simply reflective. To explain this further, fig. 3 point 1 demonstrates the more typical approach of PBR (practise-based research) and RTD (research-though-design), which involves a separation of the research and output, generally accompanied by a journal to add additional information and point 2 shows the hybridised confluence of research and output, serving as continual, active reflection and integration of both knowledge and praxis (an example of this being McCloud’s *Understanding Comics*).



1.Typical PBR/ RTD structures with separate documentation.



2. Hybrid Exegesis - simultaneous production of knowledge and artefact.

Figure 3. Illustration of the hybrid approach of exegesis-based research (2025). Image produced by Author.

In an update of his previous work, Krauth, in collaboration with coauthor Peter Nash, furthers his ideas around the creative artefact as research in a fusion of methods he terms the creative-exegetical. The 2019 article entitled "Creative Work as Scholarly Work" affirms what was mentioned previously: "creative" research, especially in the field of writing, comprises

> two components: a creative work and an exegesis. The creative component is submitted in a range of forms: novel, memoir, play, poetry, multimodal text, etc. The exegetical component is submitted as a scholarly commentary on the creative work to analyse the personal, social, historical, literary or industry contexts that influenced its making, or the practical and intellectual processes that informed its praxis, all of which seeks to demonstrate the value of the creative work as research in the university context. (Krauth & Nash, 2019: 281)

The authors find this typical process of submission to be counter to the intent of creative work – by divorcing the creative and the academic, it once again becomes an embodiment of the bolt-on process that has plagued the creative academic project for so long. Instead of symbiosis, the two exist in a begrudging tangle – the creative work is not "enough" for the academy, but the exegesis is counter to the flow of what it means to be creative because the endless cycle of making versus substantiating becomes exhausting, a sentiment I have felt myself experiencing many times in my career (and even in this very research).

Nash crafted an experimental short story that presents a detective undergoing an investigation directly linked to the critical process of writing as an essential part of the plot, but also as a self-referential exegesis contained in the artefact itself. The experiment revealed that

> [The blend of creative and exegesis] focuses on the creative work and the exegesis being the one thing. It focuses on a reading that reverse engineers the frameworks, processes, structures and materials employed in the production of the work. It also requires that the product itself reveal the quality of the plans employed, the testing of materials that has gone on, the nature of the dynamics of the moving parts of the work – at least to the eye of a qualified inspector. (2019: 297)

The "qualified inspector" here refers to the examiner of research presented for either academic qualification or publication, an expert in the field that understands this process due to their own research practices. They know what to look for and what makes research work, so when the research and the output are the same thing, we essentially find an amalgam that implicitly divulges the same kind of information expected in a typical exegetical process but

consumed as a creative product. This means that the final format of this research is both vital and integral to the actual artefact. I do not see my work as an investigation in two separate arenas but rather a partnership of approaches, especially considering my unique history as an academic researcher, practitioner, lecturer and fan of comics and comic making.

Ings further explains this feeling that "exegesis requires reconciliation between 'the disinterested perspective and academic objectivity of an observer/ethnographer/analyst/ theorist [and] the invested perspective of the practitioner/producer'" (Hamilton, as cited by Ings, 2015: 1277). Hamilton's observation makes allowance for both sides of the approach of a researcher as practitioner in that, as Krauth reflected upon, I cannot disinvest myself but rather need to use that investment as my primary source of motivation. Ings furthers this idea by stating that "[exegetical] structure has been shaped by its need to bridge (in authentic ways) practice, and writing about and through practice" (1279) and discusses a model proposed by Hamilton (ibid.) that is surprisingly suitable to what I'm trying to achieve: "the 'connective exegesis' ... [which] 'assumes a dual orientation – looking outwards to the established field of research, exemplars and theories, and inwards to the methodologies, processes and outcomes of the practice'".

By employing such a method, the research addresses the topic's larger concerns of representation and vernacular, and it demonstrates significant insight into the process of comic making from a practical standpoint. Ings goes on to state that:

> [The] "connective" model ... is designed to both contextualise and explain the practice. In this regard, it does not seek to illustrate theory with practice, nor is it an amalgam of Milech and Schilo's context and commentary models. Instead these exegeses grow as a form of living discourse with practice through iterations of work and ideas surfacing from it. The exegesis is seen as part of the creative work because its discussion with practice is also shaped by that practice. (ibid.)

In this instance, the creative exegesis affords the opportunity to approach the proposed research from a position that is:

> often multi-perspectival and voiced by more than one manifestation of the writer. Distinct writing and layout styles are adopted to address both the formal analysis of the theorist and the insightfully subjective voice of reflexivity. Thus, the voice that narrates a positioning of the researcher, a discussion of methodology, or offers a commentary on aspects of the work, may be very different to the voice that critically contextualises

practice in relation to existing knowledge, or critiques ideas in relation to existing theory. (1279–1280)

This also helps to avoid what Krauth discusses – how "The reflective journal exegesis, with its *this-is-how-I-wrote-my-creative-piece* approach, was soon deemed unexciting by creative writing candidates, supervisors and examiners" (2011: n.p.). Ings' offering is more akin to what Krauth describes as a "plaited text" in that "the creative writing doctorate's combination of creative product and exegesis insists on the writer's presence. The plaited text, in showing both the product and aspects of the process or its context, asserts the existence of the author" (ibid.). Ideally, presenting an explicit voice to the typically implicit processes of academic writing grants insight into the making process that affords far greater context than a simple analysis ever could.

Ings even provides a useful guideline on the general structuring of a creative exegesis, which should contain:

· an introduction,
· a positioning of the research and researcher,
· a review of contextual knowledge,
· a discussion of methodology and methods,
· a discussion of critical ideas underpinning the project and some form of critical commentary on the work produced. (ibid.)

This again serves to address the engagement process with the subject matter, and creative exegesis also offers an approach that is less restrictive than the strict hierarchical structures of information found in more traditional research. At first glance, this very much appears as a typical essay structure, but this specific format is meant to be a self-contained mix of both the research and artefact design, as demonstrated previously in fig. 3. This specific breakdown is ideal for smaller-scope research generation and served as a useful basis for the overarching trajectory of my case studies. Ultimately, this specific format needed to be modified to suit the means of production involved in comic making since the end results were intended to be standalone items as end-products of a deep process. As such, the Digital Journal and Dissertation elements of this research form the combinative approach, while the comics themselves are an assemblage of the communal, simultaneous research and making practises. I would therefore state that while Ings' structure is indeed the basic guideline for each chapter, the case studies involved specifically modified approaches to incorporate the various elements that went in to making them. This is partly due to exegeses traditionally

stemming from creative writing as a field, meaning that it is a more streamlined process to integrate the creative and analytical textual elements seamlessly in a single document, whereas visual media has the additional layer of physical development that needs to be incorporated, and unless the research is presented in Krauth's 'radical' form (explained below), the incorporation of reflective text into a comic that is intended to follow standard traits of producing an item for entertainment purposes can be disruptive, if not wholly detrimental to its consumption. Essentially, reading a comic that suddenly features an essay may come as a surprise to someone simply expecting a story of adventure and action. James Elkins similarly discussed the imperative of self-reflection in *Artists with PhDs*, noting "This idea that self-awareness is a desideratum for PhD-level instruction needs to be treated as a problematic assumption, not as a guiding principle. In my experience, the value accorded to self-reflexivity is never questioned. It needs to be." (2021). This means that the self-reflection moments that are natural to the writing process of an exegesis are not simply for greater insight, but essential to the foundation of making. This does not, though, mean that all reflection needs to be academically informed, but rather that the artist as subject is given a space of valid documentation.

Krauth's "radical exegesis", then, is one that goes far beyond the expected process of documentation to become a self-contained artefact. He describes the radical format as: "This exegesis doesn't just operate as a parallel text to the accompanying novel, it is itself an artefact, a system of parallel texts. It's an exegesis not just concerned with its novel; it's self-consciously about writing itself" (2011: n.p.). Whilst this holds great interest and potential in my eyes; my ultimate intention is to render a series of comics in different formats that instil a sense of the cultural geography of Johannesburg and offering a method of analysing and documenting the process of doing so in a natural and affective manner, rather than preloading or reflecting afterwards and as such, the plaited model of exegesis offers the best possible format for conducting work in this manner. The other driving factor for me was understanding the pedagogic potential of the plaited exegesis as an effective methodology for students of various creative arts to generate research in their fields in a way that actively encourages spontaneity instead of rigid structuralism that is neither appealing, nor best supports students that are not inclined towards more traditional means of researching.

Krauth and Nash discuss an interesting correlation of the historical position of the creative scholar in an analysis of a section of Horace's *Ars Poetica* (c.19–10 BCE) that discusses his struggles with this duality:

> Most of us poets – father and sons [i.e. addressed to Piso and his boys] – are deceived by appearances of correctness. I try to be concise, but I become obscure; my aim is smoothness, but sinews and spirit fail; professions of grandeur end in bombast; the over-cautious who fear the storm creep along the ground … You writers must choose material equal to your powers. (Horace, as cited and translated by Krauth & Nash, 2019: 284)

While Horace's cautioning is most certainly valid, especially in terms of self-analysis and the rationalisation of the role of creative production in academia (and their pitfalls), a later part (stanza 305, to be precise) of the same poem elucidates the following:

> I could write as good poetry as any; but nothing is worth that price, and so I'll play the part of the whetstone, that can sharpen the knife though it can't itself cut. In other words, without writing myself, I will teach function and duty – where the poet's resources come from, what nurtures and forms him, what is proper and what not, in what directions excellence and error lead. Wisdom is the starting-point and source of correct writing. (Horace, as cited and translated by Krauth & Nash, 2019: 284–285)

This cyclic reflection of Horace's position of a creative practitioner as well as teacher and scholar from two millennia ago struck a loud and concussive blow to me – this short section of prose so perfectly summates my own intention for this research and its process. I am deeply passionate about making comics, but I know that I too can serve the greater community better by similarly embodying Horace's whetstone to espouse (exegetically, of course) my own views of engendering relevance in a medium simultaneously old and continuously changing and thus in a cyclical state of newness.

To summarise, Ings offers a paraphrase of Nelson (2004, para. 22) on the poetic ethos of an exegesis narration:

> Here the exegesis reaches beyond the dispassionately prosaic; it touches something of the humanity of the designer. It is reflective and personally insightful. It makes lyrical links between the researcher and the researched. As such it "explores scope for emotional content within the academic". (1281)

As such, especially because of my personal investment in the subject matter, I firmly believe that this affords the best course of action when it comes to my own process of documentation. While this section has provided a breakdown of the application of the

proposed method, it may still be prudent to address how this differs from autoethnography, as the methods most certainly share many similarities.

Going back to Ings' observation that the autoethnographer tends to be objectively "disinterested", this does a disservice to the veracity of the method as it is more intricate and deeper than it perhaps appears here. As such, I begin with Leon Anderson's discussion in his 2006 article "Analytic Ethnography", which appeared in the 35th volume of *The Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, where the author offers his perspective on a set of sub-categories of autoethnography, those being "evocative ethnography" and what Anderson coins as the eponymous "analytic ethnography" (373).

As Anderson discusses, evocative ethnography can be attributed to passive objectivity in its discourse as it stems from more traditional ethnographic practices, but it equally tends to emphasise significant emotional investment into the research. Carolyn Ellis, noted as a core scholar in the field, rationalises the method by stating that "the mode of story-telling is akin to the novel or biography and thus fractures the boundaries that normally separate social science from literature … the narrative text refuses to abstract and explain" (2000: 744, as cited by Anderson, 2006: 377). While I fully endorse this attitude and was very much inclined to follow this method for this very research, one can see potential flaws of the "story for story's sake" when it comes to actual practical discourse. Essentially, evocative ethnography simply provides that the existence of the material is proof of the process, which is a wonderful line of thinking, but perhaps ultimately not useful when investigating systemic structures and underlying information from the making process. Anderson furthers this: "Evocative autoethnographers have argued that narrative fidelity to and compelling description of subjective emotional experiences create an emotional resonance with the reader that is the key goal of their scholarship" (2006: 377). This is, of course, utterly valid, but it is also a source of the criticism that autoethnography can evoke outside of the field of humanities, where it is viewed as possibly lacking scientific merit (as I have often heard said of my own work by colleagues in the social sciences). There is, however, a clear space for more realist-oriented research outlets, and at its core, what I am seeking to do is provide a clear framework that can advocate the creative process of computer game programming as robustly as the discussion of the visual style choices in my comic making. A coder does not write hundreds of lines of C# out of emotional response, but rather as a form of functional, practical narrative requiring constant testing, with the end goal of a game that performs the tasks outlined by the design team with as few "bugs" as possible. The writing process of programming is still wholly creative, but informed by an extensive knowledge of functions, variables and complex mathematical

structure as a form of adaptive, emergent narrative whose end goal is invisible if it works as intended. Evocative ethnography could, perhaps, discuss the frustration and struggle that inherently forms part of the fabric of programming, but it does not provide enough groundedness to allow for the simple systemic process of any baseline code. On the extreme, a large part of my comic making is very much derived from emotional and personal response; the art styles I use are heavily influenced by the media I consume, my writing style has adapted and changed as I've become older and more experienced – perfect material for autoethnography – but my academic career has spawned a constant line of inquiry that exists both within and without of my work. "Am I representing this character fairly?" has replaced "Does this character look cool enough?", "Am I providing enough exposition and narrative denouement?" came from "How do I get this character from fight A to fight B with the absolute minimum of context?" while I deeply interrogate the semiotics of how I've drawn specific elements in a scene, fighting the mise-en-panel to provide the "right" amount of negative space and diegetic imagery to foster the best possible storytelling. Previously, I simply illustrated what looked good or what will hide what I can't draw particularly well. These insights are massively informed by my work in academic writing, which is often siloed away from my creative work.

The lines between autoethnography and creative exegesis blur, however, when we engage with Anderson's proposed "analytic autoethnography" model. He immediately requires, as part of the greater method, that the researcher must be involved in the community of their research, or, as he terms it, is a "Complete Member Researcher" (CMR) (2006: 378). This means that you are involved in the community either as an "Opportunistic CMR", which means that you became a part of the community either directly (recreationally, as a worker, etc.) or circumstantially (through illness, accident, etc.) or as a "Convert CMR". A "Convert CMR" is a product of more traditional research methods, which sees a researcher become invested in the community through the immersive process of the work.

The second phase proposed by Anderson is "Analytic Reflexivity": "At a deeper level, reflexivity involves an awareness of reciprocal influence between ethnographers and their settings and informants" (2006: 382). The advocacy here is that more traditional autoethnographers work in a space that seeks to provide understanding to those outside of the world of discussion, while the analytic reflexivity model is tied more to the CMR – which purportedly produces research for those already in the community (akin to PAR). This offers a first point where exegesis divests from autoethnography – the latter method certainly has great potential to allow insight from either direction but then alienates the work by distinguishing between groups of those who know and those who want to know. Exegesis instead combines

both – a practical artefact that can speak to many readers and facilitates discussion and cohesion through a robust academic reflection, while still accounting for the personal investment of the reader.

When we turn to Anderson's third phase, the "visible and active researcher in the text" (383), it again becomes apparent where the similarities lie. It is undeniable that I am visible and active in this very research, but that is, again, because exegesis and autoethnography share several core ideals. Geertz offers a large critique of this facet of both methods when he mentions the tendency of autoethnography to read as self-absorbed and "author saturated texts" (1988: np.). Anderson offers that his analytical model is meant to avoid perceptible self-absorption through a higher reliance on generalised theoretical understandings of social processes (2006: 385) as part of the reflexive discourse; however, does this not defeat the purpose of his earlier critique of evocative ethnography being too objective? There are several conflations of intention, which again is why autoethnography often is viewed as inferior to similar methods (such as data-heavy research-through-design), because there seems to be a lack of agreement on where the voice of the researcher is read as authoritative or as narrative, regardless of evocative or analytical approaches.

Anderson's final two phases, which are "dialogue with informants beyond the self" and "commitment to an analytic agenda", are much more obvious in their intention. Analytic ethnography puts far more emphasis on engaging with external sources and participants as much as possible to better inform the process as a whole, which is bolstered by the "use [of] empirical data to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves" (2006: 387). The emphasis on social process is where my underlying critique of the method is pinned. As mentioned earlier, not all creative undertakings are informed by social processes but rather by pragmatic skill and/or knowledge, especially those in the technology fields.

It should, of course, be noted that any research method is bound to have flaws, and scholars like Christy Dena, in her article "The Creative Degree as Interface" (2005), observes common tensions between the written and the creative project of a PhD, notably describing the relationship as dysfunctional. She elaborates this with anecdotal quotes from colleagues and fellow creative researchers, with one colleague in particular stating that the academic requirements of the PhD "limit the opportunity for free-forming ideas" (2005: 32). Indeed, I have encountered this repeatedly both in my career and in this research itself – while the shifting of aims and objectives and even some subject matter is inevitable in the common practice of

research, what you are reading here has significantly transmuted from the original idea, as discussed in Chapter 1 where the methodology and even the central theme of the research shifted from a simple documentation of comic making in the South African context to the more focused line of the influence of the cultural geography Johannesburg upon my comic making and how I ultimately generated research from it.

Dena adds a further anecdote from the same colleague that explains part of the frustration stemming from how "an exegesis and creative work never separate" (2005: 32) because they both drive and are driven by the researcher–research relationship. It is in this arena that the true potential of work is realised. Bourke and Neilson further discuss what they identify as the most common stumbling point of the exegetical method: validity, necessity and usefulness (2000: 1), citing Paul Dawson's (1999) statement that the text produced in a creative writing class is not just a "first order practice … It is already a dialogic engagement with theory, with language, with a range of social and cultural discursive formations" (2000: 1). Essentially, these scholars argue that the process of writing itself is wholly sufficient due to the amount and type of work that goes into it, but it then elicits the academic value of such an undertaking, since it presumably lacks the requisite (or at least commonly understood) scientific documentation and processes found in more traditional and analytical methods. Bourke and Neilson further explain this tension stemming from the researcher when forced to validate their own creative work to make it "valid" as research (2) – it is difficult to maintain objectivity when the nature of the work is inherently personal. This can lead to resentment, frustration and even abandonment of research, which is the worst possible outcome.

Bourke and Neilson conducted an extensive content analysis on creative exegesis-based research from three universities, identifying the following modes of discourse as common themes: "First Order Journal Practice, Second Order Journal Practice, Literary Theory and Cultural Studies Theory" (2). Of the four, the first and second order journal practice were the most commonly used, with the other two stemming from minor variations.

The first order, according to the authors, is generally less formal and more anecdotal – much like a diary. Akin to a diary, this process can often feel "private" (2), in the sense that the writing can appear to be relevant only to the author, and even then, possibly only located to the research at hand. The dominant factor is that this is a more emotionally grounded style of writing, akin to ethnography and, as the authors note, "this kind of journal work far too easily collapses into narcissism and endless autoreflexivity" (ibid.), a pitfall I have often needed to avoid, especially when initially crafting this research. "Endless autoreflexivity" is one of the core

reasons for my own avoidance of autoethnography because it rapidly invalidates genuinely useful work.

The second order is more formalised, engaging with both the moment *of* and the moment *between* writing (3), allowing for a cyclic process of reflection, criticality and analysis around what it means to be an author, where it becomes an instance of meta-writing. This was later expanded by Hamilton and Jaaniste in 2010, spurred by developments of the method but also by virtue of more work being available, where the development of the "connective exegesis" (or plaited exegesis, as Ings terms it) "assumes a dual orientation – looking outwards to the established field of research, exemplars and theories, and inwards to the methodologies, processes and outcomes of the practice" (2010: np.).

Action Research and the Practice-Based Research Umbrella

I would be remiss in not acknowledging other established creative research methodologies that could potentially be similarly employed in a study like this. While autoethnography has especially been engaged with due to its deep connection to the style of writing found in the exegesis methodology, there are two other methods that could yield similar results, or at least thematically close in output.

Pedagogic practice has been a motivator for me as a smaller goal of understanding the processes involved in creative research – as mentioned earlier, as well as in Chapter 1, I have been seeking a way to use the outputs in my career as a lecturer of Game Design. One method that could be useful for doing so is Action Research, which stems from the education field that investigates the practice, understanding and conditions of performing specific actions (in this case, educating) but can easily be applied to almost any field.

Stephen Kemmis, in his 2009 article *Action research as a practice-based practice*, specifically leans into various roles of an educator as a practitioner, noting that action research, as opposed to more student education theory seeks to "…[close] the gap between the *roles* of theorist and practitioner." (468), meaning that the method asks the researcher to embody the practitioner and vise-versa. Kemmis asks the somewhat philosophical question of whether education is a process of research, or whether research is an educative process (ibid.). While I do believe the answer is yes to both, it also becomes a chicken and egg debate that can result in a spiralling argument of the effects of both.

The article later introduces the idea of practical action research that emphasis the self-direction of a project whilst paying heed to the involvement of others as equal subjects, with

Kemmis mentioning that "…the practitioner explores the outcomes and longer-term consequences of the practice to discover the kinds of criteria by which the practice should be evaluated…" (470), which can be linked to the reflective practices found in exegeses, but lacks the inherent notion of currency that I was seeking for my own work. What I enjoy about this idea is that it can be employed to craft a meaningful conclusion to research, especially in terms of reframing the findings as a new set of goals, providing the 'living impact' of pedagogic research that is vital to maintain best practice. My concern lies, however, in scope. While I believe that a robust case study that seeks to reflect deep engagement with praxis, it can become difficult to find the moments where criticality and practical decisions *are* separate, rather than constantly linking them. To illustrate this, Kemmis and Smith, in their 2008 book *Enabling Praxis*, list what they term as 'practice architectures', which have the following mediating preconditions:

> 1) *cultural–discursive* preconditions, which shape and give content to the 'thinking' and 'saying' that orient and justify practices;
>
> (2) *material–economic* preconditions, which shape and give content to the 'doing' of the practice; and
>
> (3) *social–political* preconditions, which shape and give content to the 'relatings' involved in the practice.
>
> (Kemmis and Smith, 2008: np)

These three elements fit neatly into some of the sections outlined in the exegesis, but by keeping them as individual processes, start to instil the same rigid formatting issue that I encountered with RTD since the sections need this division to maintain a sense of narrative clarity. With some adjustment, this could be actively useful in establishing a clear red thread by developing concrete goals – to me, this would be great for pre-production and used to inform the greater process but perhaps lacks the breadth of engagement that a methodology like Research-For-Design or Research-Led-Practice would far better afford.

While I may draw scepticism from the above rationalisations, especially since the notes from Kemmis and Smith seem to offer a perfectly viable option, Elkins offers another point of view on self-reflection that perhaps better articulates my sentiments:

> Historically speaking, artists have not always been very eloquent, or even very accurate, about what they do. Entire movements and centuries of art have flourished without the kind of self-reflection that we now value… we should probably say those movements

> and periods may not have been possible if the artists had been able to write at length… and analytic precision… Some art is hobbled by awareness. (2021)

Sometimes an artist simply does things without reason, or their reason is simply because it felt right to do. Detailed reflection is an expected requirement of many practice-based methods, but as I've mentioned earlier, this forced approach of constant critical thought can come at the expense of a valued artistic output. Indeed, it can check the standard requirements meted by a specific methodology, or even by the academy, but is it an expression of what the artist intended, or what the artist needed to do to achieve a set task. This should not be seen as a catch all criticism – systematic and deep reflection is integral to fields like Graphic and Game Design, both of which follow formalist values at their cores that benefit and prosper from deep reflective and iterative processes. This differs when creative work is seen as a point of inquiry – I make comics but want to know how to add a richer sense of narrative by using elements of locality/ vernacularity in their writing and illustration during the process without necessarily completely redirecting points of workflow or making due to academic fulfilment needs. If I'm constantly aware of a need for criticality in all parts of creativity, my work will indeed, as Elkins puts it, be hobbled by that awareness.

Practice-Based-Research (PBR), then, is not simply an adaptation of a theoretical framework, but rather one that is deeply rooted in the issues discussed throughout this chapter – in fact, while the stated methodology is the Plaited Exegesis, this too falls under the larger umbrella of PBR since its emphasis is very much situated in creative practice. PBR in this instance needs to be distilled into specifics, as the scope is as broad or narrow as one could choose to make it. PBR is also affected by, as well as affects the kind of documentation needed, namely provisional hypothesis investigation, concurrent journalling or post-reflective discussion. My specific needs were finding a methodology that made theory and art mutually constitutive, and the (modified) plaited exegesis proved a viable and motivating option.

To summarise, much like its cousin in autoethnography or complimentary reflective models like RTD, the exegesis model has the potential to facilitate the informal spiralling of content if left unchecked. The method has evolved over time to provide greater understanding and clarity of the role of the researcher-practitioner, with focus on the meta of creation. This differs from research-driven creative models, such as research-through-design and even practice-led research, in that the reflection is concurrent with the production, not an instigation or follow-up, and is thus embedded in the very nature of the research itself.

Practical Output

Concerning the process of creative exegesis, the output of the project should include all aspects of the production of the comics, from the scripts to the scamps, notes, journals, character sheets, edits and responses to feedback on design and execution.

To best reflect this, I will generate a substantive research journal – essentially, an insight into everything that makes the *Wantonverse*. Using anecdotes, excerpts, scans, reflections and process work, I will provide a curated experience of my personal journey of seeking to answer my research question whilst still having the final comic output as the pivotal exit point/end goal (yet still allowing for cyclical navigation of the process). In this way, I seek to give readers a direct line into my thinking and responses to my learned experiences of conducting this research. I will do so using digital KanBan platform MilaNote, which allows for a completely multimodal display of text, image, video and multimedia that is easily hyperlinked and so sustainably viable for traversal in a non-linear manner, unlike starkly and rigidly structured books and traditional websites. MilaNote also conveniently packages its boards into a singular app, so facilitating access is simple, less restrictive than traditional formats and a point of advocacy for the use of modern creative project management as both a documentation and a facilitation tool. The key imperative is open access: the journal covers almost two decades of my career as a researcher-practitioner in comic making, and as such it will include data that can be helpful to anyone who has struggled to find a way to start their career or to find their voice and style as an artist, or even a jaded academic who felt that their field was not relevant.

The journal will also be translated into an art book that will collect the final revelations and reflections of the research, the visual aspects and the journal into a single, collected work that will use the tenets of both formal and creative aspects of the work to posit that an endeavour like this should exist holistically, not in isolated parts. Therefore, I will submit the following artefacts for this research:

- The collected series of self-generated comics[17] that incorporate my studies, reflections and inquiries into what it means to make vernacular content. See Figs. 4 and 5, as well as Chapters 3 and 4. The collection is also provided as a printed book, as well as PDF compilation.

[17] https://app.milanote.com/1SIQGV1nYjDs2Y?p=HcX0XSP0nnl

- The digital research journal, hosted on MilaNote.com[18]. (See Fig. 6).
- An 'offline' version of the journal, collecting all elements of work produced into a single PDF.
- The final thesis, in the exegetical structure proposed in this research.

The Outputs

The images below provide examples of the work that will be encountered in this study, including the creative works as well as the research journal. All of these can also be accessed by the links provided above.



Figure 4. *Don't Go Alone!* interactive comic produced for case study 1 and output goal 1 (2024). Comic by author, online.

[18] https://app.milanote.com/1TDqtj1kEPYz0P?p=LMzboQwMErm



Figure 5. *Wantonverse* printed comics produced for output goal 1 and case study 2 (2018–2024). Comics by author, print and digital.



Figure 6. Excerpt of the digital research journal used for Chapter 4 (2018–2025). Hosted on Milanote.com.

Admittedly, the task presented by this methodological approach is a demanding one, but in this stream of thought, I find that it is the most effective way of presenting an already complex subject matter. The affordances granted by this more organic way of structuring and delivering findings suit my style as a more "academically disorganised" researcher who has a tendency of writing from the inside out of a problem and then corralling the threads into cohesive thoughts. The flexibility of the exegetical model still allows wild and wistful tangents

but essentially guides those same thoughts into a formal structure that builds upon this line of thinking. The focus on the "narrative" of the research is inspiring and exciting.

The decision process behind the proposed outputs has, itself, evolved and adapted along the natural trajectory of the research. Initially, I proposed a much simpler undertaking where I would create the series of comics listed above and write a study on how they were made from the standpoint of a South African comic maker. This was met with understandable criticism, as it was far too limited in scope to present anything truly useful beyond a semi-autobiographical account of very specific processes. Ironically, however, that critique inspired the line of inquiry that eventually resulted in my frustration around the lack of a cohesive methodology to provide the type of denouement I was seeking.

I realised that while the artefacts are the praxis, they are simultaneously the product of the research, much like I am a researcher-practitioner. The parts are synecdoche, not a means to an end, so a revisiting of the product as research and the research as product was in order. In the following subsection, a list of the process of the exegesis (as outlined by Ings) is presented, which has fostered a streamlined approach to the artefact outputs that I have chosen to theme along three lenses to demonstrate the flexibility on offer when using this method. Each exegetical study will have the common narratological origin of folklore, but I'll use the exegetical method to demonstrate the analysis styles and how they are informed on different platforms. (This also helps readers to identify different approaches, from inquiry of making to adaptation, hybridisation and interaction.)

The first analysis looks at alternative media comics, in this case focusing on an interactive short comic produced using the video game engine Unity while maintaining core tenets of comic making in the form of panels, speech bubbles and sequential narratives. A main point of investigation here will be around how comics can be augmented with motion, audio and interactivity and be presented exclusively on digital platforms. I will be using locality as a driving theme, but in this instance as a narratological device made under the auspice of urban myth.

The second analysis will include the comics produced for *Wanton* and *SPOEK* as a discussion on genre and localisation in traditional media, as both series have been developed using made-for-print techniques. This investigation further explores the potential of the method as a base point to choose a key lens (that being the production of localised content) and produce a small-scale investigation to build upon a larger argument.

Each of the outputs listed will contain the following elements:

1. Alternative Media Comics

- *Don't Go Alone!*, an interactive comic made in the Unity game engine and presented on digital game server Itch.io (formatted for mobile devices). Depending on the user, the comic should have around 10–15 minutes of reading time.

2. Traditional Media Comics

- *Wanton* issue 0 (serving as a world-building exposition comic): 18 pages of art, 4 covers. This is presented in an English edition as well as the "True Edition", which features localised language.
- *SPOEK* issues 1 and 2 (an exploration in the application of the horror-comedy genre to the core narrative world, maintaining similar visual elements, but ascribing to genre traits): 32 pages of art, 8 covers. Mixed languages and South African slang plays a significant role in characterisation.

The options presented above are unique in how they are made and informed, which is why the exegetical process will bridge the process in a linear method that follows the actual periods of my production process. Many of the outputs have been greatly influenced by my teaching and professional career, and this is an important feature to demonstrate how rapidly techniques and approaches can change, even in the 3-year cycle of this particular research undertaking.

The Practical Roles

The three deliverables (two traditional and one digital comic) of this research will not function in isolation, but rather in a process of symbiosis. While the comics are the heart of the project, their narrative base stems from Johannesburg's socio-cultural geography and its relationship to my personal experiences and the greater ramifications of how I choose to present their narratives and art is cyclical. The art style, for example, constantly changes for various reasons – firstly it is a growth of skill and ability, but it is also influenced by my own consumption of other comic material, animation, video games and films. If I find a certain style of colouring appealing, I may try that in a new issue of *Wanton* for purely aesthetic reasons (it's a part of independent production that is both positive and perhaps frustrating – I do not have an established brand that requires consistency, so experimentation is a de facto part of the process). However, there obviously are implications of doing so, because it may dramatically shift meaning and representation, and it may be too abstract to appeal to a mainstream reading

audience. In this occurrence, I would then need to reflect upon the choices made and, on the successes, and failures, and even offer a form of self-critique.

Hearkening back to Ings' (2011) exegesis structure:

· an introduction,

· a positioning of the research and researcher,

· a review of contextual knowledge,

· a discussion of methodology and methods,

· a discussion of critical ideas underpinning the project and some form of critical commentary on the work produced.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, however, Ings' structure, by nature of the research outputs, required altering to foster more effective documentation and development and as such, indeed saw a share of success and failure due to the experimental approach that used each case study to test a specific idea and format. Each chapter follows the same original structure initially presented by Ings and were then adapted as various needs arose to determine strengths and weaknesses. This means that the proceeding chapters are not required to be read in order – much like the accompanying research journal, the process is always cyclical, so things done and discovered in 2005 still have ramifications and influences on my contemporary practice, whilst simulating a stand-alone instance of self-contained documentation and bridged with reflective text. Ultimately, this specific project will need to end, but I hope that the methodological approach offered over the course of the next few chapters allows for a different way of thinking about the academic in the creative and the creativity of academia. This is reflected upon in detail in Chapter 5, including critical reflection on the potential risks of adapting the structure in the way done in this research.

Method Summary

Creative exegesis, stemming from creative writing, offers a rich and balanced approach to creative inquiry that places more emphasis on the research and critical understanding that informs its process. It is an alternative to methods like autoethnography, which inadvertently can feel more like diaries at times, while the structure offered by the proposed model overall allows for deeper engagement with theory. A digital research journal accompanies this thesis, used in a cyclical process of reflection and accessible through embedded hyperlinks, the app itself (Milanote) and, eventually, a printed version of the document as a final artefact that combines the exegesis with the final creative outputs in one cohesive manuscript. Finally, the largest point of advocacy for this method is its natural inclination to feeling "real-time". Similar

methods offer extensive reflection after the fact in the case of practice-led research, or voluminous onboarding as seen in research-through-design, whereas the creative exegesis's reflection can and should be written in congruency with the making process as an active and equal process. For lack of a more appropriate observation, the exegesis is a joyful research process that has helped me build a more holistic and fascinating product through an actively engaging cycle. Obviously, a caution I here offer to any creative practitioner is that you may run the risk of being swallowed by the exegesis, but the plaited method fosters moments of academic objectivity by holding three different reflective discussion points – one before, one during and one after the making process. With a little discipline and setting targets for word counts, this becomes an efficient and highly productive experience overall.

This chapter will be followed by the first of the two exegetical case studies, focusing upon "new media" in the form of adapting comics into interactive games and the role that multimedial transposition holds in carrying and affecting narrative traits in comics (see Chapter 3). The subsequent chapter (Chapter 4) then covers "traditional" (i.e. intended-for-print) comic making informed by the narrative habitus of locality as the second case study. As a reminder, these case studies do not need to be read in a linear order – each is intended as an independent point of advocacy for the methodology, and they link to each other through journals and interstitial discussions. The studies are then summarised and reflected upon in Chapter 5.


CHAPTER 3
ART: Don't Go Alone! pg 3
...it will engulf.
EEEE
EK!

Chapter 3: Urban Myth and Modern Technology– Interaction Exegesis

Content Advisory

Due to the nature of this case study's origins, this section features statistical as well as thematic discussions around gender-based violence. The data is used to inform and offer deep context but features upsetting results. I have been careful in attempting to use this data as an important factor of how and why this particular comic was made and ensured that any representation thereof is done with the utmost respect and thought.

***

Preamble

The overall goal of this research is to investigate the potential of the plaited exegesis methodology model as a viable platform for creative research that maintains academic rigour whilst not sacrificing the voice and personal experience of the practitioner. This goal is then refined into two core points of investigation that centre upon, in this instance, the making of comics that both express and then maintain the idea of a local identity through their narratives and visuals as a test case to ascertain viability. The local identity, in this case, has been identified as that of the South African city Johannesburg; my place of birth, education and much of my residence. By employing the lens of socio-cultural geography, Johannesburg, as the core locality, is distilled into various smaller parts that are used as points of investigation that involve the physical (real), as well as the cultural, human and even fictive elements associated with the space and place. The following case study situates itself in the latter parts of Johannesburg's socio-cultural geography – its urban myths and legends and how they affect its various citizens. By nature, these are simply stories, some akin to cautionary tales, others wild fantasies and yet others masking horrible truths under the guise of allegory. Nuttall and Mbembe discuss these elements of the city in their article *Afropolis*, using the metaphor of a skin that was once healthy and young, now pocked, scarred and festering, describing "A subliminal memory of life below the surface, of suffering, alienation, rebellion, insurrection—the powerful forces contained in the depths of the city." (2007:287). These powerful forces take the shape of many things, from the city's larger reputation as a place of crime and violence to anthropomorphised creatures whose origins are literally found in the sewers and pits (the scars and festering hernias) of a city in decay.

This example of exegesis follows the production of an interactive, self-contained digital comic that is hosted online and publicly accessible. The goal is to understand the production

process required to work in interactive media as opposed to traditional printed comics. The adaptation process is key to ensuring that the output maintains its comic essence but allows for deeper engagement through the addition of audio, motion and interaction. A secondary factor is the presentation of digital formats as a viable form of comics publication that allows for free distribution and promotion. Thematically, this chapter focuses on the content production of comics as they shift into new media, such as interactivity in the case of this study.

To maintain the scope mentioned previously of looking at the urban myths and legends that form the narrative geography of Johannesburg, I decided to base the story design upon the contemporary urban myth of the infamous Pinky-Pinky, in favour of developing entirely new content. This works in two ways: established stories have an in-built audience that is aware of the narrative as a whole, and myths by their nature are prime for remediation – each retelling adds a little of the storytellers themselves, building richness and depth. They also tend to be shorter, meaning that focus is placed on experience, not on extended narratives.

The goals for this study are:

1. Advocacy for plaited exegesis as methodology for creative work.
2. Understanding the phenomenon of urban mythology and its contemporary, creepypasta, and how it develops narrative rooted in reality. This understanding should then be applied to the narrative and thematic development of the creative output under the auspice of representing the socio-cultural geography of Johannesburg as a locality.

A secondary goal involves interrogating the medium of production itself:

3. Understanding the process of adaptation of comics from traditional layouts and media into a digital platform and whether they maintain their “comicness” or shift into something different.

The opening sections of this chapter introduce the key themes that I researched as I made the comic: urbanity and the urban myth as storyworld, my positionality as an outsider of the myth, a review of contextual knowledge, including the horror sub-genre of creepypastas and their proliferation by the internet, background information on the Pinky-Pinky itself and, finally, comics as video games.

This is then followed by a brief discussion on the chosen methodology (in this instance, the plaited exegesis) and finally offers reflections and conclusions drawn through the process.

Note that this chapter should be read in conjunction with the exegesis journal, as it provides deeper context on all areas of discussion. I provide links to relevant areas in each section. Refer to the diagram on the following page to see an illustrated reference of the journal's contents and links to the work in this document.

The intention is not to show a suggested means of reading, but rather how the work is plaited across this formalised reflection and the more open-ended notation of my process of development as the theory and praxis interwove to become a singular product. The diagram provides a summary of the research areas, then demonstrates their various links and moments of confluence and divergence. Most fundamentally, the work of the journal is not intended to be read linearly – rather, by engaging with each section independently and then drawing the links across themes should show the bonds of the theory and praxis in the natural and organic way it was produced.

The diagram should then be seen rather as a bird's-eye view, a 'zooming out' (literally and figuratively' to illustrate the full scope and breadth of its subsequent sections. I also hope that it helps avoid missing any content due to the unique configuration of the work presented and I encourage users to play the audio and engage with the various media provided to truly experience the developmental work as intended. For those more technically-inclined readers, I recommend starting with the 'Comic Production Part 2: Adaptation' section, which explains the methods adopted to translate traditional comic panel structures into something more along the lines of self-contained mini-films that would function on screen. Then look at the extensive breakdown of technical process used in the Unity Game Engine as seen in 'Comic Production Part 2: Digital Making' to see the development of a born-digital[19] comic.

[19] Refer to this chapter's discussion on electronic literature for context around 'born-digital' content..

Journal Findings: Chapter 3

Baseline Area of Study

Johannesburg as Socio-Cultural Geography
as expressed through Plaited Exegesis Praxis.

Goals:

1. Advocacy for plaited exegesis as methodology for creative work.

2. Understanding the phenomenon of urban mythology and its contemporary, creepypasta, and how it develops narrative rooted in reality. This understanding should then be applied to the narrative and thematic development of the creative output under the auspice of representing the socio-cultural geography of Johannesburg as a locality.



Notation Key:

- Narrative foundations and impact.
- Narrative precedents and influences.
- Comic adaptation process.
- Horror as genre and interactivity as narrative agent.

! Key Discovery/ Creative Influence

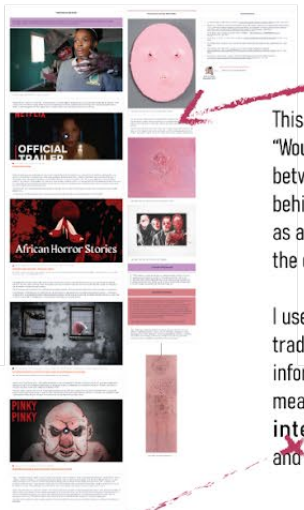
x Thematic Links and Influences

Theory and Precedent

Urban Myth/ Folklore as a Narrative Foundation

Explored in Part 1, reflecting on the writing process originating in rhyming fables similar to the tale of Anansi the trickster god.

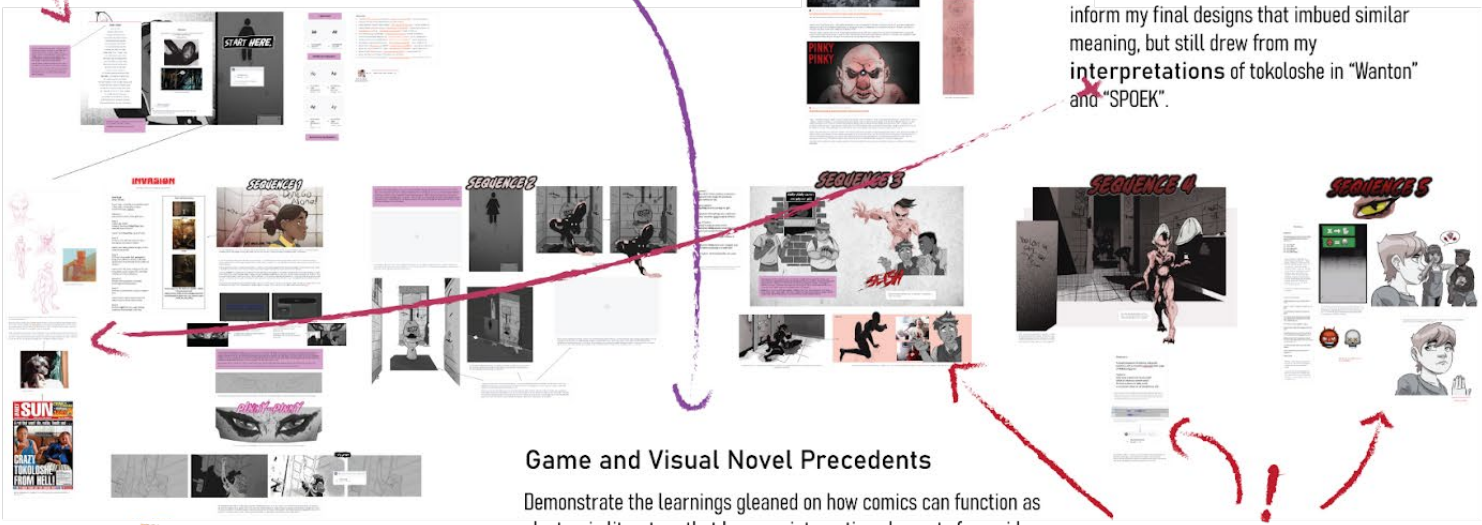
Continued through reflection on existing instances of the Pinky-Pinky in Media and creepypasta as instances of contemporary folklore.



Wounds

This section also offers insight into the "Wounds" series of paintings by Penny Siopis between 2002 and 2014. Her motivations behind the constant appearance of Pinky-Pinky as a subject **offered** a powerful insight into the creature's perceived meaning and threat.

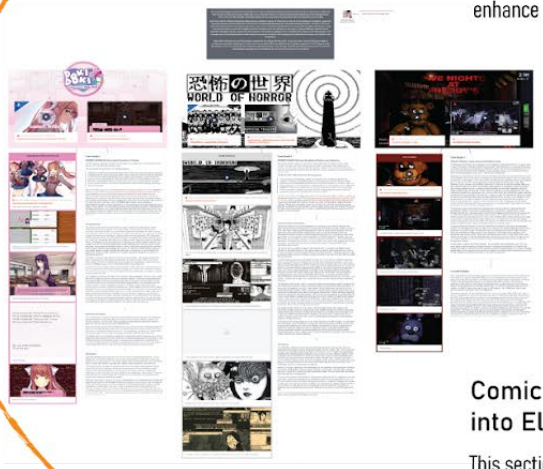
I used these insights, along with the most traditional descriptions of the monster to inform my final designs that imbued similar meaning, but still drew from my **interpretations** of tokoloshe in "Wanton" and "SPOEK".

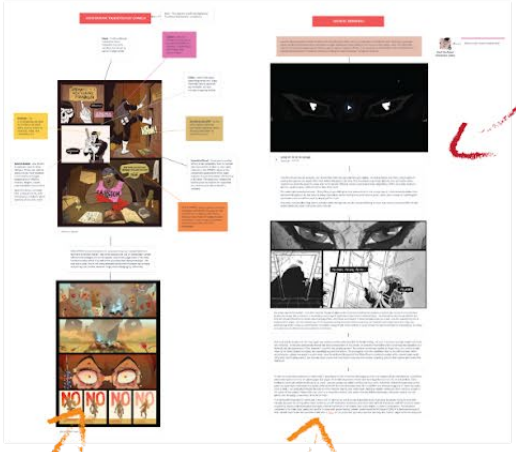


Game and Visual Novel Precedents

Demonstrate the learnings gleaned on how comics can function as electronic literature that borrows interaction elements from video games. The focus is applied to horror games that are inspired by urban myth/ folklore, where the exploration of narrative representation, use of audio and limited agency/ interface can enhance the horror experience.

The influence of narrative agency upon deciding on interaction freedom and control is then noted in the creative practice documentation.





Comic Narrative Adaptation into Electronic Literature

This section of the journal specifically explores the functional needs of adaptation from traditional print formatting over to electronic/ digital media comics. I explain a more typical page structure, then explore how the cinematic layout of "Wanton" helped to develop the panel system for "Don't Go Alone!"

The spaces of a city, and even the city itself, combines a milieu of culture, people, sights, smells and everything in between. Each street, akin to a line of a story, is woven into the greater cosmos of urbanity, but so is its own unique storyworld with thousands of events happening upon it every hour of every day. What could be a simple path to a final destination for some can be a significant memory for others – the place they met the love of their life, where they missed the bus that cost them a job, bought a home or experienced a trauma. These stories are singular, but they start to tangle and interweave as generations pass, places change and new stories are crafted, influenced by the prevailing urban dwellers or visitors. As such, we begin to see a form of synecdoche evolve – at a basic level, we could refer to 7th Avenue, utterly meaningless to most, but residents of urban Johannesburg may immediately associate the name to Melville, a popular location for food lovers, antique-collectors and party-seekers alike, or it may simply cast back memories of long-running soap opera *7de Laan*. These are basic associations, though, and urban spaces also present a tapestry of intricate and ever-changing narratives both singular and collective. This sounds hopeful, but urban spaces can also represent decay, entropy and chaos – the endless sea of people, the anonymity, the loneliness, the desperation. Events transpire that are beyond explanation, reason and fairness, and if they become frequent enough, they can even become their own synecdoche – manifested as anthropomorphic entities, because nothing else can provide comfort or closure.

These complex tales are crafted in the expanse of literal geography and span collective thoughts and opinions. Much like classic folklore, these stories manifest themselves as metaphor, intended to teach, to provoke or even to scare. Fantastical creatures and playful tales of animals are replaced by far more jaded tales, perhaps moulded by the prevailing negativity that urban life can instil upon its citizens. The urban myth is born in these conditions as they become fear made manifest. Within the space of Johannesburg alone, we hear the tales of the ghost of serial killer *Daisy De Melker* lurking in the old children's hospital, of *tokoloshe* terrorising the residents of townships and even of demonic possession of people and animals alike.

Positionality and Story Origins

What fascinates me as a creator is just how local, how *vernacular* urban myths are, yet extrinsically linked to global cultures. Is this due to the influence of media on societies, or are these tales born of similar situations, experienced wholly isolated from global culture, yet nearly identical in places across the world?

The *tokoloshe*, for example, can be likened to the imps, gnomes and pixies of European folktales. Penny Miller, author of the 1979 book *Myths and Legends of Southern Africa*, offers this description of the creature:

> [The *tokoloshe*] … is probably the best known character in Xhosa folklore … His reputation is bad, as he is usually kept by a witch. He eats her food, drinks the milk of her cows, and also makes love to her; in exchange he is obligated to carry out her evil requests. (102)

This is then furthered on page 182, where Miller describes how the Zulu people see the same creature:

> The malevolence behind this macabre being does not spring from the *Tokoloshe* himself, but from his evil master, the sorcerer, whose main aim and pleasure in life is to cause misery and strife among his fellow men. The *Tokoloshe*'s main asset is his ability to render himself invisible. Unseen, he can creep into a hut …

The commonality is easily understood here, with the Zulu and Xhosa cultures sharing many aspects, but it can be seen again in the Mpondo, who have shared origins but moved north of the Umtata region (Miller, 1979: 235). Their description of the creature is in fact the one most commonly associated with how contemporary South Africans tend to describe them in "encounters" through publications such as *The Daily Sun*. The Mpondo see *tokoloshe* as:

> a small hairy being with a man's form, but so small that he only reaches the average person's knee. He has hair all over his face and hair coming out of his ears … The penis of the male is so long that he carries it over his shoulder, and he only has one buttock. Both the male and female of the "species" seldom wear clothing; if they do, it is made of skins. *Tokoloshe* speaks with a lisp and lives in crevices under river banks. (Miller, 1979: 239)

This is, in fact, the very description I encountered when perusing books in the library of my primary school. I had heard of these creatures from my voracious reading of the *Madam & Eve* cartoon strips (see Fig. 7 below) and was inspired to read more. Being of quite a tender age, the description of the genitalia was horrifying, but one that indelibly etched itself into my mind reading the work of Miller all those years ago. As a now significantly older individual, it becomes apparent that the horror of the *tokoloshe*'s disproportionate genitalia obviously was sanitised in the family-friendly comics I was reading, but manifested as a clear and terrifying allegory for rape and gender-based violence. A creature that can turn itself invisible, that has enormous

genitalia and is commanded to do evil by a witch or sorcerer is a horrifying notion. People often prop their beds up on bricks to prevent a *tokoloshe* from climbing up the base due to their small stature, or purchase *muthi* (traditional medicine) from a *sangoma* to ward the creatures away.

I am, of course, aware of the irony of what I present here; I first engaged with *tokoloshe* as a form of entertainment in a daily cartoon, a most benign and innocent medium that was accessible to me in my white, middle-class home. The creatures were categorised and understood as fiction, much like fairies and trolls, because I grew up in a safe and secure environment. I feared more from people – bullying was an ever present and constant factor in my life, and because my tormentors were my peers, my trauma was easily understood, if not easily dealt with. I could escape to comics, to animation and to video games where the heroes always won, defeating the villains with altruism and fairness, so hope was always a part of my childhood. This is the currency of privilege: hope, because hope is a luxury afforded to very few. To expand, I remind you of Wilhelm-Solomon's discussion of 'Chambers' in Chapter 1 of this research – a building less than 15 kilometres from my home in the suburbs, yet so far removed from my experience that it may as well have been on a different continent. At the time of Wilhelm-Solomon's investigation (the late 2000s), I would drive in close proximity to Chambers on my way to my classes at the University of the Witwatersrand when I was completing my master's degree, ignorant of the abhorrent conditions hundreds of people were living in. The private vehicle, expensive tertiary education and various technology I had access to a distant fantasy of the people living in true fear of slum lords, corrupt police and 'The Red Ants'[20]. Currency of privilege, then, can be understood as both financial and comfort (including safety) affordances that extend beyond basic survival into luxury. As such, I will always be an outsider of the reality of Johannesburg's inner-city life as I spent much of my time there as a transient, yet some elements seem to become universal, regardless of location or even class. The tokoloshe is one of these elements.

[20] A private 'security' company hired to perform forced evictions, specifically from the 'bad buildings' of Johannesburg CBD known for their all-red uniforms. (Wilhelm-Solomon, 2022)



Figure 7. Francis, Dugmore and Rico (sa.), *Madam & Eve* comic strip featuring *tokoloshe*.

A brief search of the website archives of South Africa's most widely read newspaper, *The Daily Sun*, reveal headlines across the publication's history, with titles like 2023's "Evil *Tokoloshe* 'Throws' Phone at Gogo's Head! [sic]" and 2019's "Tokoloshe G-String Terror!" to 2015's "Torture by Tokoloshe!", ranging from the absurd to horror.

Referred to below, but vital to discuss, is my position towards the content that I am working with and depicting. Gender-based violence is a difficult topic to work with – sensitivity, fairness and consideration always need to be put at the forefront, but honesty and reality need to hold equal ground, because we cannot deny the existence of this form of violence. I was physically assaulted by a romantic partner in my early twenties; the physical harm it caused has long since faded, but the trauma required nearly a decade for me to accept and deal with. I was an adult when this happened, but gender-based violence most certainly has no age limit. I waited too long to talk about the occurrence – the shame and disappointment, in both her and me, affected my trust, my family and my later relationships. I hope that by balancing fiction with reality through creepypasta and urban myth, I can reach people who need help sooner. The host page of the comic features links to international helplines where people can seek help anonymously – if nothing else, I hope that people talk about this.

The Pinky-Pinky as Cryptid

To return to the horror themes of this section, through an almost organic evolution, the *tokoloshe* – an already fearsome creature – had its myth revitalised in the early 1990s in the form of the horrifying Pinky-Pinky, which shifted its originator species' hunting grounds to the urban environment, where it specifically preys on pre-pubescent/early teenaged children (mostly young girls) if they dare to venture unaccompanied into public bathrooms at night (see below). Descriptions of the creature vary, but the consensus is that it is neither male nor female (while also being both), with one claw, one paw, half human, half beast (a mix of cat and dog most commonly) and albino (hence its pinkness). The creature has even found its way into the

world of fine art, where South African mixed-media artist Penny Siopis presented a series of works in 2002 that revisited a myth she had all but forgotten when, as her curatorial notes cited by Moletsane et al. (2008: 35) mention, her son returned from school one day and informed her of the incredible story that one of his classmates had told in a presentation on urban myth (see my discussion of some of her works here[21]). In a review of Siopis' exhibition 'Time and Again', which featured an assortment of Pinky-Pinky paintings from her 'Wounds' series, Anna Stielau mentions the primary driver of the work during this era (between 2002 and 2014) being an investigation of pain and injury, or more specifically;

> To that end, she [Siopis] concerns herself not only with the physical fact of injury manifest in the wound, but also with the suffering of communities both micro and macro, with history's capacity to injure the present, and with the quotidian personal battles played out in the space of the family and invested in domestic objects. Frequently, but not exclusively, these explorations take the vulnerability of women and children as a point of departure. (Stielau in Artthrob, 2015)

Vulnerability, here, is the important factor, especially in the instance of GBV where the vulnerable are preyed upon with such cruelty. The pain caused is both immediate in its physical manifestation, then permanent in the psychological harm that results from abuse. Stielau echoes this in a specific discussion of Siopis' conceptualisation of the Pinky-Pinky:

> Pinky Pinky is, I'd argue, a kind of embodied wound in itself. The character's body is a blank pink void into which a plethora of terrors can be deposited. In Siopis's interpretation, his amorphous form houses the varied agonies of history – fear of the colonizing foreigner, the alien, the white and male invader – and the same threat of sexual violence evoked by the spaces he inhabits. In this latter sense, Pinky Pinky is perhaps evidence of the wounds inflicted by puberty, of an unfamiliar and unpredictable sexuality emerging from the shadows and heralded by blood. Plastic nails and eyes and testes rupture the surfaces of Siopis's canvasses. The monster emerges out of formlessness as though by sheer force of will. (2015).

Note that while the Pinky-Pinky is typically understood as agendered/ non-binary (neither male nor female, neither beast nor man, but both at the same time) in its description, the pronoun he becomes commonly associated with it. The case studies discussed in the research journal also share this idea, with the South African-made film adaptation of Pinky-Pinky specifically casting

[21] https://app.milanote.com/1SrtDH1HvdfNAF?p=fvxglvzYM88

a male actor and relying on a male appearance to impose the same fear of the male invader in a private space.



Figure 8. Penny Siopis, *Who is Pinky-Pinky?*. 2002. Oil paint and found materials on canvas.

Fig. 8 shows one of many of Siopis' interpretation of the creature, its sickly, roughly textured pink coating severed doll's hands and a pile of plastic baby figurines. Its mask-like face covers dead, plastic eyes staring with emptiness and uncanniness in a grotesque display of power. There is no empathy or kindness or comfort here. This embodiment of violence's belly filled with its victims; its visible body parts made of artefacts of youth and play that have been distorted and twisted into a pose that shows a predator patiently waiting its turn to strike. Siopis' interpretation far better reconciles the concept of the horror this beast entails, an assemblage of grotesque metaphor, where my design is far more literal, following the descriptions of the beast from the various urban myths. This was a choice that again attempted to apply a slightly more easily accessible understanding by adding viscerality to the monster in a more traditional creature feature manner. Where mine is traditional, Siopis' is eldritch in its

unknowability and inspired some of the deeper narrative that I wrote, if not the actual visual treatment itself.

To return to Siopis' initial catalysing event for the series of paintings of hearing her son tell a story that felt like a generational memory, to this young boy, with access to private school education and a prominent contemporary artist as a parent, the fascination with the story would be akin to any other ghost story – good for a scare, but ultimately not impactful on a daily basis. He is safe and external to the real horror of the creature, again benefitting from the currency of privilege afforded to him. This is by no means to say that sexual violence and child abuse do not happen to the privileged, but rather that safety is presumedly higher and that there are support systems in place for people who succumb to this violence. As such, I feel that this conversation was more of a prompt – a way to express pain and fear through a known figure that allows for creative interpretation.

Gibbs et al. (2020) explain the lack of contextual awareness by citing two other studies around the risk of non-partner violence in areas that lack private ablution facilities: "Qualitative research outlines clearly how shared toilet facilities or open defecation increases the risk of non-partner violence, whereby women have to walk to use toilets, thus increasing their vulnerability, particularly at night" (590), but do acquiesce that the link to poverty and poor communities needs more exploration.

A significant part of Gibbs et al.'s study focused upon access to toilet facilities, where thousands of young women aged 12–24 were asked about access to and what kind of toilet facilities they had (ranging from own-flushing to communal pit-latrines and even no access to toilets; actual toilet usage was reserved to respondents older than 18 for ethical reasons) (2020: 591–592). They were also asked whether they had encountered any form of violence (physical or sexual) over the past 12 months during the period of 2019–2020. The results were alarming, with 7.8% of the surveyed confirming some form of assault in public toilets and 7% in outdoor areas. These numbers only confirm actual reports. It means that 1 in 20 women in lower income environments experience some form of violence before the age of 24 (2020: 594). The existence and perseverance of the Pinky-Pinky as a cryptid over the last three decades is therefore no surprise whatsoever. The sample taken here consisted of 10,635 women in four rural or low-income communities of Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal, a mere fraction of the two most densely populated provinces of South Africa. An alarming point is that studies like those by Moletsane et al. and Gibbs et al. (amongst many others), focusing on toilet use and safety, exist in the first place, marking a far greater problem than many may be aware of. Pinky-Pinky,

then, provides a vessel through which to tell this story – whilst the creature's popularity as an urban myth may have waned since its inception, the statistics discussed here are very much contemporary and show why the Pinky-Pinky has not faded into obscurity. Nuttall and Mbembe even discuss the Pinky-Pinky as a part of the fabric of Johannesburg, referencing Nuttall's review of Siopis' series of works inspired by the creature: "Some people say he [Pinky-Pinky] is white. Other people say he is black but a black that is so white that he has to wear a hat to protect himself from the sun… Everyone says he is actually not a he even though many of his actions are like that of a man…", (Nuttall, 2004: 3, as cited by Nuttall and Mbembe, 207: 286). The behaviour noted here unsubtly points to the craven nature of a man that unashamedly abuses women and children, his (its) polemic elements weaving an image of a monstrous shapeshifter that seeks only to cause pain.

Horror is often rooted in much worse real-life situations, yet we seek comfort in the medium because we know that it will end at some point. It is an escape, a thrill-ride and entertainment because it's safe and consumed on our terms, but what happens when we cannot control it? Horror video games, for example, rely on various mechanics to instil a greater sense of vulnerability. Survival Horror games, such as Capcom's *Resident Evil* series rely on careful inventory management by restricting the availability of storage space for items – do you sacrifice bandages for a weapon or abandon ammunition to store a key – a simple decision can determine whether you will complete the game or be defeated by an enemy. Other games restrict the ability to save by using specific in-game locations that require specific inputs, such as a coin-operated booth – if you were frivolous or over-reliant on saving, it may be a long time before you can save again – death resulting in repeating hours of gameplay.

More considerations involve the stripping of agency in interactive horror – unbeatable enemies that need to be outwitted, rather than attacked, or the deliberate restriction of movement through altered controls or even levels that change, placing barriers behind a player or a series of locked doors as they attempt to escape a beast that's chasing them. Interactive horror champions changed states of engagement to allow players to be embody the horror experience. Ultimately, we still 'play' horror games as a form of entertainment. Mathias Clasen, in his 2010 article *The Horror! The Horror!* reminds us of the perfectly human response of fight or flight to situations of fear (115), additionally citing David Quammen's (2004: 3, as cited by Clasen, 2010:116) observation that "among the earliest forms of human self-awareness was the awareness of being meat", stating that according to human biology and evolution, we as a species are acutely aware of our fragility, especially in the face of creatures bigger, stronger and faster than us, but to be able to imagine being predated upon by a monster from the safety of

the screen affords the same adrenaline-fuelled high without any of the inherent danger. Clasen continues by discussing the associated taboo of the monstrous form through the lens of religion – monsters are unclean and abject, repulsive things that "violate established cultural categories" (116), posing a threat to what we deem right and pure. This is immediately apparent in how both the tokoloshe and its cousin Pinky-Pinky are described, with special mention of monstrous sex organs and drooling, lascivious tongues. They are at once monstrous, yet also representative of truth, vessels of excuse or reason for the horrific acts endured by their victims whose reality is so unwanted, so obtuse that it's easier to believe that only a monster could do such heinous acts.

Horror as a form of entertainment fits into a useful observation by Clasen that humans that enjoy horror experience it as an "emotional jungle gym" (117), a form of entertainment providing just enough danger to be thrilling, much like some people enjoy eating spicy food. As such, there are levels and degrees to how we choose that experience. Film offers the barrier of passivity as we enjoy a narrative replete with specially designed music, sounds and visuals to enhance the abjection, but is consumed in a small dose over an hour or two. These films can vary wildly from horror comedies to extreme gore and content to offer a level of thrill appropriate to the audience. When horror enters interactivity, the experience becomes deeper, less removed as a player now has control over the actions on screen. The levels of agency and difficulty of these games actively affect tension with the threat of failure or frustration adding an extra condition to the horror. Scarier still, at least from my perspective, is playing horror in virtual reality, where you are now fully immersed in the world, your physical body now the 'controller' with a headset that isolates external sound whilst channelling atmospheric 360-degree audio, your only true escape is to physically remove the equipment. These conditions change and vary in degrees but can be distilled into more classic literature films. I borrowed a significant amount of inspiration from horror games, especially in terms of audio and restrictive agency, but rely on the dread factor as opposed to immediacy. I have the benefit that I designed the panels to appear via specific interactions, causing an inability to skip ahead or 'cheat' the narrative by looking at the next panel that would typically appear on a page. In this way, audio can be triggered specifically to evoke a shock response or removed entirely to cause fear from its absence. As such, the interactive comic medium certainly provides a viable platform for horror narratives and with patient, thoughtful crafting, can offer an equally scary experience as its related media platforms.

Review of Contextual and Technical Knowledge

The choice to tackle traditionally oral content with contemporary media and methods was inspired by the internet becoming the de facto source of modern cultural narratives. Myth evolved along with the platform, starting in shared discussion forums, then spanning to social media and even spawning an entire genre of extended myth entitled *creepypasta* (more on this shortly) found on platforms like Reddit and 4chan. Podcasts about myth arose with the new medium, and we are now even seeing games, both digital and analogue, being inspired by contemporary and early creepypasta, often classified as nostalgia horror if presented in 1bit (single colour, highly pixelated visuals with midi or chiptune audio). This is seen in games like *World of Horror* (Koźmiński, 2019), glitch horror, which sees a seemingly innocent subgenre like a dating game subverted into extreme horror through "glitches" and unnatural or unexpected game states such as *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (Team Salvato, 2017). There are also titles like *Five Nights at Freddies* (Steel Wool Games, 2014–present) that have spawned entire storyworlds filled with fan theory, extended participatory cultures and even cinematic adaptation despite being based on the terrifying premise of animatronic dolls coming to life and attempting to murder any living being they encounter. I conduct a precedent discussion of the work in the research journal, which can be found here[22]. This latter content, however, is beyond the scope of this research and the focus will instead be placed on the evolution of urban myth.

A common factor in the proliferation of urban myth can be associated not only with cultural or interpersonal narratives but also with nostalgia. Cooley and Milligan, in their article "Haunted Objects, Networked Subjects: The Nightmarish Nostalgia of Creepypasta" (2018), premise the link of horror and nostalgia by stating:

> The saddest thing about nostalgia is that it is always the seed of tragedy. We fall in love with a story, we tell it to ourselves again and again, we fall in love with our retellings, we forget to consider whether there was ever a meaningful difference between the story and our retellings and, eventually, we make the decision to revisit that story: expecting, of course, the static object we've immortalized in our minds to exist just as we think we've left it. (2018: 193)

There is a deep honesty in this revelation, which is linked to what Pascal LeFèvre first mentioned in the issues encountered in comic-to-film adaptation often being a "problem of primacy: usually people prefer the first version of a story they encounter" (2007: 2). We become

[22] https://app.milanote.com/1SrtDH1HvdfNAc?p=fvxglvzYM88

deeply attached to our memories of "better" times, and for some, those memories are associated with the media they consumed in those times. Horror, as a genre, has a natural appeal towards the escapist – the extremity and surrealism of the contents of the media consumed provides anathema to reality; an "it could be worse" point of view that, ironically, can evoke a sense of safety and order in the viewer. For me, it is the collective memory of reading and trading R. L. Stine's *Goosebumps* books, collecting *Garbage Pail Kids* cards or reading EC comics' *Tales from the Crypt* on a monthly basis. *Goosebumps* has now had two cinematic adaptations and two television series, with the most recent version (2023, as of the authoring of this work) presenting itself as adult-horror, combining the nostalgia of the books with extreme visceral horror in an attempt to appeal to those audience members who actually grew up with the books. Cooley and Milligan offer a more grounded view of this proliferation of nostalgia, calling it a hagiography (2018: 194), especially considering how the use of nostalgia in media is generally unsubtle in its use to garner profit from an audience seeking a reconnection with their past. The authors then explain how internet (online) horror has shifted audiences away from the pay-to-reminisce model of media giants to a deliberate participatory communication that prioritises the narrative above all else:

> Online horror and its subversive commentaries on social media practices do not permit a safely linear relationship with the things we love. It forces us out of the familiarity of our comfortable perch in the position of subject, disarms us of the ability to identify narratives and other agents as objects, and reveals that the screen we thought we could watch horror unfold behind with a tense handful of popcorn was never a one-way window. (194)

It is in this give-and-take relationship that I found inspiration for choosing games as my third and final medium of adaptation. Comics generally enact nostalgia in the same pattern as many other media, especially in the traditional printed titles still in circulation to this day. They offer a narrative to be consumed on a one-way, reader-as-consumer premise. Much like novels, films and television, this is perfectly suited for basic entertainment purposes, but the lack of agency can often leave readers dissatisfied, whether by story, art or even external factors (such as several DC titles being called out for featuring AI-generated cover art and inspiring boycotts of the brands).[23] Games, however, provide far more agency (or at least the perception thereof), which fosters a more intimate relationship with the media due to its inherently interactive nature. Interactive and game comics are no longer just read, they also facilitate deeper

[23] See Dodge (CBR, 2024) and Johnston (Bleeding Cool, 2024).

engagement through multimedia. They can also be consumed via mobile device or computer, meaning that they eliminate the need to purchase physical media that can be damaged or lost. The inverse, though, is that digital media also can feel decidedly disposable, since it is far easier to "binge" entire volumes of work instead of collecting issues once a month or waiting for annuals every twelve months.

Defining Digital

Georgio Busi Rizzi, in his 2023 article "All Click and No Play: How Interactive are Interactive Digital Comics?", offers a clear set of categories for digital comics as they can often be conflated or confused with one another, despite having different requirements and platforms.

Rizzi (2023: 2) presents his proposed definition of digital comics in three categories:

1. Homothetic comics: The most common type that features digitised comics (in the form of basic PDFs or similar visual formats) and skeuomorphs (strip-based) comics. These comics are presented in grid patterns and are typically static, following traditional print formats.
2. Linked comics: These often rely on scrolling and are contained within the confines of a window or screen online, using the indefinite area of digital space to allow for constant growth. Another form of linked comic focuses on "panel delivery", where each panel is presented one at a time and reveals the next only by clicking or tapping them.
3. Expanded digital comics: These feature intra-panel expansions that allow for a different perception of the storyworld compared to traditional comics. These include augmented reality comics (where you use a smart device to access additional information/music/animation), virtual reality and explorable comics, as seen in game-based comics. Rizzi also describes this type as featuring "enhanced" panels that allow deeper engagement.

Some people may believe that the second and third categories actually are so far removed from the understanding of what makes comics *comics* that they are no longer part of the medium. Rizzi mentions factors such as single panels subverting the "sequential narrative" part of comics and removing the agency of reading pace (2). However, this is open for interpretation, and ideally, if people understand what they've read as a comic, then it is, for all

intents and purposes, a comic, regardless of semantics. The debate this offers is out of scope of this study but is one for potential future discussion.

Don't Go Alone! would fall under the panel delivery type of the second category (linked comics) but features some elements from the expanded category as well, where parallax becomes a core element of the reading experience and the panels interweave with each other and use cameras, depth and sound to provide greater moments of emanata. I discuss this in depth in the reflection section of this chapter.

Electronic Literature

As content becomes increasingly consumed on screens, it is equally important to understand the function of literature within the digital domain. While Rizzi's categories allow a better insight into how interactivity works, we also need to understand the impact that any electronic platform holds on its content.

Katherine Hales offers a useful explanation of electronic literature in her 2016 book chapter *Electronic literature – what is it?* as "Electronic literature, generally considered to exclude print literature that has been digitized, is by contrast "digital born," a first-generation digital object created on a computer and (usually) meant to be read on a computer." (198). It is relatively easy to understand how a digital comic, especially an interactive one, then, can be understood to fall under this category. Hales then explains that The Electronic Literature Organization (TELO), a collective of scholars and practitioners with focus on the production within electronic formats, offered a definition (or, at least, qualification) stating that electronic literature is "work with an important literary aspect that takes advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer."(198). This is not in any way a perfection definition, as it becomes increasingly obvious that it is perhaps too vague – what qualifies importance? What aspects of computers specifically and to what extent?

Hales offers that readers of electronic literature also tend to approach it with a deeply embedded set of expectations informed by their experience of print media, including how words are formed and shaped, the actual layouts of print media and even how one engages with it (198-199). What this means for electronic literature is that many consumers are expecting something different to print, not simply a story hosted on a website, yet the making of electronic literature itself is informed by processes mostly unique to its environment, from programming languages and video games to film and other digital media as a hybrid. If a piece of electronic media is adapted from print, does it still fulfil the requirements established by TELO's

definition? More specifically, is a digital comic electronic enough if it's simply intended to be read on a screen, or does it actively require elements that are uniquely digital/ electronic (motion, interaction, etc.) to qualify?

Hales offers examples of electronic literature in an effort to explain the genres present, prefacing that most examples require a base of programmed code (199). The most basic form of this, then, are hyperlinked stories. These stories involve rudimentary interactivity in the form of clickable links common to all websites and hosted on platforms like Twine[24], which uses basic HTML code to generate interactive moments in stories that either offer divergent narrative paths, or a used to control the time and flow of reading. These would fall under Rizzi's second category of digital comics: linked comics. The conventions are identical, with the substitution being found in panel delivery, rather than just text. Linked media is a standard of electronic literature, yet ultimately not exactly innovative in approach (execution is a different matter, because simplicity can enhance other elements). These, of course, vary in scale and can offer complex generative elements sourced from data repositories that make each experience unique (see Nelson's *10+10 = The Pain Bees*, which was discussed earlier as an example) as well as embed video or animation and have progressed rapidly in methods of development over the relatively short period of time that web programming has existed.

Interactive Fiction is the next genre identified by Hales (200) and is one much more closely linked to video games to the point of occasionally being difficult to distinguish (whether that is necessary is another debate). This specific genre is where *Don't Go Alone!* Would likely fall under if seen as purely textual, but as a comic presented in Rizzi's categories as both linked and expanded, the lines blur rapidly and the output begins to suffer from a slight identity crisis – is this a comic, interactive fiction, game, all, or none?

Hales' final genre is classified as one that is no longer locked into a computer (202-203), starting with platforms like audiobooks and podcasts and then expanding into virtual and extended reality, where we can now move through the spaces of a story or see them projected onto surfaces previously impossible to engage with. These can also involve interaction and active participation that affects the story in real time.

Ultimately, electronic literature is complex and even difficult to truly define at times, but I believe that the work presented here does ascribe to many of its conventions. What I can say for certain is that *Don't Go Alone!* is not comic, at least not by the understanding of the

[24] https://twinery.org/

conventions of electronic literature and the various definitions of comics as medium, but this will be reflected upon in further detail in the concluding section of this chapter.

Parallax

To provide some context of use, I use the term parallax in its video game background, in which it is understood as layered background images moving past a central camera in a two-dimensional scene at varying speeds, depending on distance, to emulate a sense of depth and space. Parallax, in this case, actually finds its origins in animation, where the multiplane camera was developed by Disney Studios to create multi-layer scenes on sheets of glass. These would then be moved incrementally, photographed and then moved again, pioneering the effect (which was originally called tromboning due to the way the instrument produces different sounds depending on the distance of the slide). The technique was first seen in Disney's 1937 Oscar-award-winning short film, *The Old Mill*, and then vastly improved in the studio's debut feature film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, which was completed in the same year. Video games introduced the effect relatively early, as seen in the arcade title *Jump Bug* (1981) and later in Nintendo's *Super Mario Bros* (1985). It has now seen mass proliferation in 2D and 2.5D games (where 2.5D presents flat characters on 3D backgrounds or uses 3D cameras to achieve depth and other visual effects over layered 2D backgrounds) and is, of course, used extensively in the creative output of this research.

My core intent for this is to instil the sense of depth that parallax affords, but also to evoke a sense of queasiness in the reader – nothing is ever stable, and things can be revealed if you look around enough. Any other technical jargon will be covered in the reflection section of this chapter.

Comic Medium: Visual Novels and Interactive Comics

The choice of medium is also a factor widely influencing how the narrative was designed. Unlike writers of more traditional texts like novels and, of course, comics, the producer of a digital, interactive comic also needs to focus on the nuances of user engagement and immersion to ensure the product offers an intuitive and simple experience. This is especially important for interactive comics because its readers may not usually engage with interactive media like digital games but may have found the idea of experiencing a different form of comic narrative appealing. I opted for the visual novel medium, which at its core offers an interactable reading

experience with the addition of other media, such as audio and basic animation, as an augmentation to the process.

Visual novels span almost all narrative genres and can even vary in the amount of gameplay offered, from simple button clicks to hybrid 3D movement and animation. Camingue, Carstensdottir and Melcer offer an extensive definition of what a visual novel is through a large-scale content analysis of 54 games that fall under the general medium, which resulted in the following:

> A Visual Novel (VN) is a digital narrative focused game that requires interactions where the player must be able to impact the story world or the story's progression. The story and interactions are most commonly presented through a text box and often employ additional forms of interaction including menu choices – which often contain sets of actions that the player character can perform – or dialogue options representing the player character's speech or thoughts. Crucially, VNs have On-Click Progression, where the player clicks, taps or presses a button to see the next part of the story. The aesthetics of VNs are most often conveyed through static images of characters, background art, sound effects (SFX) feedback, and soundtracks. (2021: 11)

While I initially intended to present the output as a basic interactive comic (or linked comic, as Rizzi terms them), I noticed that I had inadvertently gamified some of the content; the interaction is limited to swiping/dragging, but users have control and agency over when and how they do so. The comic also features extensive use of parallax, not just for visual effect but also to further user engagement, particularly on mobile devices (computer parallax is driven by and limited to the position of the mouse pointer, but mobile devices feature gyroscopes and accelerometers that sense the degree and speed of tilt, making the parallax effect feel more natural and playful). The above definition of visual novel also provides a clear trajectory for the work produced, as it has all of the features needed to consider the title a visual novel, besides choice-mechanics. This may seem minor, but it does allow for a larger potential user base – instead of just comic fans, we now open up the experience to fans of visual novel games as well. The medium itself also fosters and facilitates a prioritisation of reading and narrative, and while *Don't Go Alone!* is far more image-centric, its core game loop requires a thorough engagement with the narrative. In fact, it is designed in such a manner that the user has to scroll through the speech bubbles and caption boxes in order to progress. Whether the user reads the text is obviously up to them, but narrative still drives the process forward.

Notably, Camingue et al. (2021) also drew their game sources from three major distributors – Steam, Google Play and Itch.io (6–7). The first two are the biggest commercial platforms with the largest selection of titles for desktop and mobile devices alike, while Itch.io is the largest independent game distributor and also the platform that I have chosen to host my own work. Several considerations were involved in this, but the choice predominantly revolved around Itch.io featuring a dedicated section for interactive and digital comics, a customisable game homepage and universal access from both desktop and mobile devices (including both Android and iOS). The site also allows free content hosting and uploads, whereas Steam requires payment and Google Play tends to prioritise commercial products over free small-scale apps.

While engaging with the comic content on Itch.io, I noticed that most were simply downloadable PDF or image files and that the website was used as a basic hosting platform rather than being integrated with the full reading process. Others were developed on platforms like Twine, which allow makers to use rudimentary HTML scripting to develop simple text-based interactions. There were some projects that piqued my interest, such as Napartart's Spanish language title *María de Zugarramurdi y las mujeres que fueron embrujadas* (2023, see Fig. 9). The interaction is designed for mobile devices, controlled by taps and features animations in each panel using warping and some puppet-style motion.



Figure 9. Napartart, demonstration of animation and interaction (2023). Screen recording of digital comic.

The animation adds depth to the work, and the limited colour palette and the focus on characters encourage engagement, but I also concur with Rizzi's concerns (2023: 2) about this

style of presentation removing itself from its comic origins and becoming something else. It still has panels and speech bubbles, but the slideshow-like transitions and substantial white space between moments of interaction break the typical reading process. I also find that the interaction method, which mostly occurs in the form of the arrows seen in Fig. 9 or the occasional blip to indicate a tap, can be distracting and inelegant, especially when considering that this particular example was made in a time of greater interactive capabilities.

My critique, however, is only levelled at the choice of interaction. The art, the hand-made lettering and the textures are engaging and appealing. The simplified narrative works well for the medium, using the animation to do the "heavy lifting" of the storytelling. The latter factor is especially important, considering that if the piece were more dynamically interactive, it may have oversaturated the experience, so the balance is key.

Genre: Creepypasta as Modern Myth

Theme is also a driving factor for me, and I elected to use modern urban mythology, in the form of the internet phenomenon creepypasta, as a core inspiration to how I wrote and approached my own work. Cooley and Milligan offer an explanation of the origins of the innocuously intonated creepypasta, stating that "The term 'creepypasta' is a portmanteau of the words 'creepy' and 'copypasta'. 'Copypasta' came into use around 2006 to refer to texts that could be easily copy/pasted and spread virally" (2018: 194–195). They add that the term rose to popularity after the founding of creepypasta.com in 2008 (195) and the subsequent content sharing that occurred across channels such as the media repositories 4chan and Reddit. Christi Williams, in her 2015 Digital Humanities Symposium *How has Creepypasta transformed folklore?,* even calls creepypastas "a digital version of folklore" because they have easy accessibility in terms of readability and a central, homogeneous point that tends to grow and shift with each retelling (such as the popular "Boyfriend's Death" campfire story about an ill-fated road trip and a hook-handed killer), offering the appeal of crafting narratives within the central point.

Remediation is key to the function of creepypasta; it evokes engagement while also perpetually renewing itself, which again is why the folklore element is so often attached. My first-ever encounter with the medium was its now most popular story, 2010's *The Russian Sleep Experiment*, written by an author known only as Orangesoda (creepypasta.com, 2012). It featured a harrowing tale of an alleged experiment conducted on Soviet soldiers during World

War II, exploring the effects of sleep deprivation and the potential to create an evolved soldier. The story was presented as a factual account, featuring several well-made images that added to the mythos and authenticity, with the most well-known depicted below in Fig. 10. The narrative was crafted in the style of a news article, in a matter-of-fact tone of voice that blurred the lines between fiction and the potential reality presented by the tale, with only the final climax breaking the immersion by falling under the auspices of horror tropes fuelled by the final soldier's monologue.

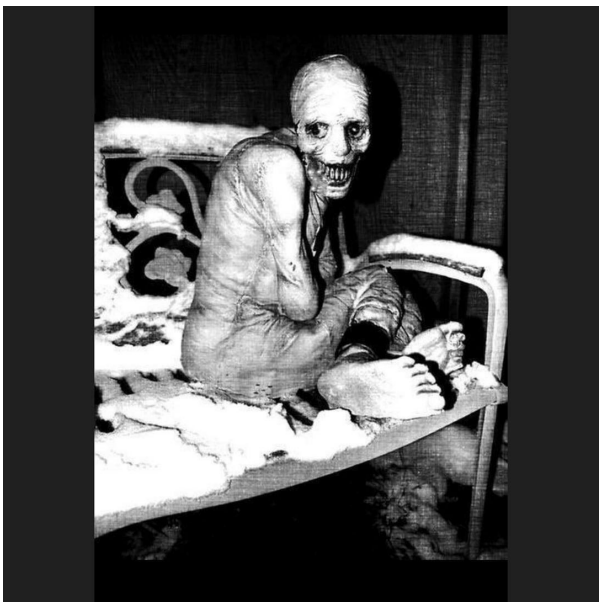


Figure 10. "Final Result" image from *The Russian Sleep Experiment* (2010). Digitally altered photograph sourced from Reddit.

The story still left its mark in my mind – it was powerful and provocative, and the style of writing (excluding the ending) influenced a lot of my own work. Even the above image has held a resonance with me, subconsciously influencing the design of the Pinky-Pinky. To maintain the remediation pattern, there have been several audio retellings of *The Russian Sleep Experiment*, hosted by Creepypasta.com, reframing the story into the oral tradition of urban myth and folklore. This cyclic nature of storytelling is fundamental to the propagation of any good horror, often relying on nostalgia and memory but being bettered in their newest incarnations.

As such, the task of this particular mode and method of production is to evoke that same sense of nostalgic horror and allure that I first encountered in the earliest days of the genre of creepypasta, using its traits to foster a retelling of the story of the Pinky-Pinky that I heard in the playground of my primary school, read about in newspapers or even watched in cinematic adaptations. The Pinky-Pinky is as timeless as its cousin, the *tokoloshe*, yet it really only entered the public narrative from the early 1990s, making it a far more modern cryptid

(mythological creature) than many others in the South African context. Its story and meaning are transcendent: a hermaphroditic, ultraviolent fiend created as anecdote to the even more monstrous plight of abuse and gender-based violence that has become so prevalent in contemporary society. We create monsters to seek solace from many things, but this one is, unironically, much closer to home than most. The story needs to prompt conversation – to evoke questions, nostalgia-fed responses and, importantly, new understandings, especially from a new generation of readers and re-tellers. As a standalone-project, the next phase of the work would be well-situated in Participant Action Research – holding reading/ interacting sessions and then facilitating discussions of the work would be of great benefit in improving any areas that may be lacking in representation or meaning. This also allows greater reflection potential for development since audience response would help to reconfigure several elements of the work when needed. The ideal version of the work would be one developed with a community of readers from all walks of life – to embed the natural flow of oral storytelling with digital documentation would turn this into a more organic product linked to the tradition of playground urban myths, refined through the means of presentation developed by creepypasta and finally engaged with by the global community. For now, the story remains self-contained to ensure fulfilment of the purpose of this case study, which is focused on the transposition of the Johannesburg-based urban myth of the Pinky-Pinky into a digital comic inspired by creepypasta structures and electronic literature conventions.

Webcomics as Contemporary Folklore

Manouach and Foka note that webcomics (and similar born-digital comics) are contemporary mediums of folklore, explaining that the various works are "vernacular expressions emerging from community practices rather than institutional mandates." (8). In simpler terms, the stories being told are mostly by choices – a form of expression generated by the maker themselves, whether an original narrative or remediated stories like *Lore Olympus* (see the following section) or *Don't Go Alone!*, and not one done as a commissioned work like the mainstream printed works of studios including Marvel and DC. As an acquiescence, the large publishers themselves also have a variety of digital adaptations and born-digital media, ranging from motion to interactive and even augmented reality comics, but these still fall under the auspice of commercial fiction that uses established characters as both narrative as well as brand agents. Much like folklore's origins in oral storytelling, a webtoon exhibits the characteristics common to traditional folklore tellings, while providing self-sustaining and self-perpetuating documentations processes in their online environments. Manouach and Foka list the common features as "collective creation through creator-audience interaction, cultural transmission

through sharing and recommendation networks, variation through fan art and remix culture, and function as repositories of community values and experiences" (8). These factors were essential in my own endeavours, especially the cultural transmission of Johannesburg's urban myths, variation and community experience. My version of Pinky-Pinky stands alongside its various formats of narrative but is intended to grow and change and add to the contemporary culture of creepypasta as a complimentary genre while contributing to the greater tapestry of digital folklore content.

Methodological Discussion

The methodology employed here falls under the plaited exegesis model, as discussed in Chapter 2, which offers a form of "real-time" reflection upon the production of the chosen artefact. This is, in part, informed by the critical analyses of theories and ideas that precede this section as well as by observations made concurrently during the making process, which is documented in the interactive research journal[25] that accompanies this work.

The practical output takes the form of an interactive comic made in the open source game engine Unity with a proprietary add-on for digital comic-making called Panoply (Opertoon, 2024). The extension was funded as part of an ERASMUS[26] research grant that was used in a teacher exchange programme run between VIA University College in Viborg, Denmark and Uppsala University, Sweden, in which I was tasked with teaching digital comic making to VIA's 3rd-year visual storytelling students.

I opted for Unity because it is universally and freely available to students across the world and for Panoply as it is a powerful and easy-to-use facilitation for interactive comic making that shares Unity's user interface but uses visual coding in place of Unity's standard C# language. This has numerous benefits for artists, ranging from Unity's large footprint in the game industry (with Unity and Unreal vying for the top spot as leading game engine), which means that it has extensive support and tutorials as well as easy integration onto platforms like the game repository Itch.io, to Panoply allowing visual development of what otherwise would require substantial programming skills in interactive comics.

The method was set to a cyclical process that began with research (both thematic and visual), resource gathering, documentation, critical reflection and then making. Making began

[25] https://app.milanote.com/1SrtDG1Xgf1d5b?p=fvxglvzYM88
[26] https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/

with script writing and planning, then visual development and finally production. All art and interactive media was self-produced, and I used open-source audio, with attributions featured on the final comic's web page.

Production was documented in the journal, with key factors and decisions discussed in detail, especially around changes needed in visual development for the proper functioning of the comic.

Critical Reflection

When first planning and developing this case study, I had several goals in mind. Creatively, I wanted to explore a domain of comics that I had worked with on only a very cursory level during my undergraduate studies, which was in the early 2000s, when both computational power and software were still extremely limited. It's no surprise that Scott McCloud held such contempt for the medium of digital/interactive comics when he wrote his much-derided Chapter 5.5 in 2008 after the success he found with his *Understanding/Making/Reinventing Comics* series. It was in its most nascent form, with internet-based programming languages like HTML and Adobe Flash's ActionScript in only their second or third iterations,[27] meaning that the ability to develop even rudimentary interaction was time-consuming, difficult and even specific to the web browser version being used by each individual user.

Most interactive comics, at the time of McCloud's authoring of Chapter 5.5 in 2008, were rudimentary hyperlink titles, which simply asked users to click on a highlighted link to proceed to the next panel or occasionally offered a choice mechanic to emulate early digital roleplaying games and even the classic choose-your-own-adventure novels. Even McCloud himself falls into this familiar system, using basic clicks to move his narrative along while espousing how digital lines can never be as crisp and clean as inked works, but he does admit that there is an inherent luxury in being able to digitally render lines in any colour (although it's also quite easy to do scans of traditional work with a few steps in software like Photoshop – I feel like McCloud has some resentment/technophobia that precludes this knowledge).

[27] For context, as of the writing of this chapter in 2025, HTML is now in its 6th version; CSS, which dictates the size, shape and media of web pages, is now in its 3rd version; ActionScript is defunct, and several new languages have been added.

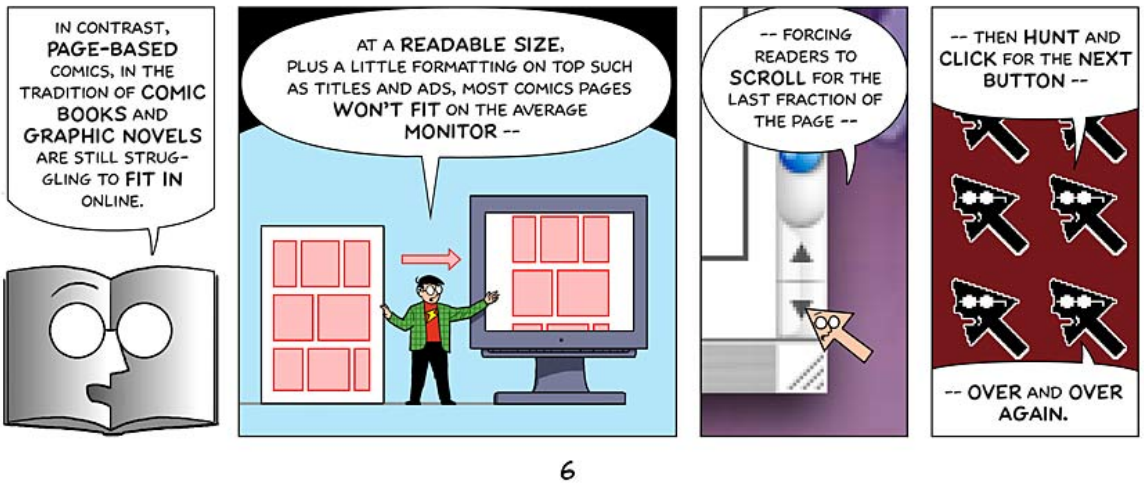


Figure 11. Scott McCloud, criticism of digital comics in *Understanding Comics*, Chapter 5.5. (2008). Screenshot of website.

Fig. 11 demonstrates why McCloud's work could use some updating. While there indeed still are platforms that require scrolling and online services like Webtoon actually have a feature where comics can be scrolled indefinitely, they are also formatted to facilitate this process, often with longer, narrower panels and specific breaks. For example, Rachel Smythe's *Lore Olympus* (see Fig. 12), which started in 2017 and completed its run in June 2024, boasting 1.4 billion reads, counters McCloud's claims that comics cannot work "below the fold" (2008: 6). Rizzi used McCloud's discussion of the "Infinite Canvas" (McCloud, 2008: 8) as a baseline when creating the linked comics category of digital comics but expanded upon it as he also noted the changes that have occurred since McCloud's original publication (Rizzi, 2023: 2).

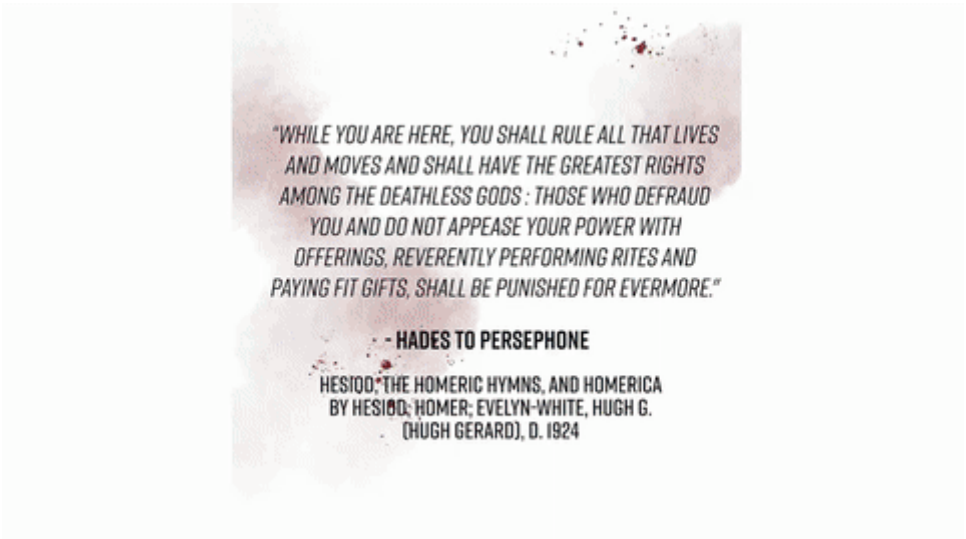


Figure 12. Rachel Smythe, *Lore Olympus*, Chapter 1 excerpt (2017). Digital comic hosted on Webtoon.

As seen above in fig. 12, Smythe's design allows for multiple screen sizes and alignments to still read the comic at the intended pace. The vertical gutters are made larger or smaller to show different passages of time that are driven by the speed of scrolling. This means that the scrolling is not only expected but also a vital feature of reading the comic.

I do, however, agree with McCloud's summative thoughts where he discusses the overt use of animation, audio and even voiceovers tending to feel more like "half-baked wannabe [sic] movies than as viable new forms of comics" (2008: frame 11). He furthers this by claiming that comics that want to incorporate animation need to do so liberally and have them as an essential part of the reading experience (as seen in *María de Zugarramurdi*, Fig. 9), not as simple attention-grabbers. This was something I constantly had to be mindful of, because too much of anything can detract from the experience rather than add to it. Eventually, the question "if you're basically going to animate most of the work, why not just make it an actual animated series?" will be asked, and arguing against it would be difficult.

Ideally, if you are going to make a comic, regardless of medium, it still needs to be a comic at its core. This is why I was careful not to overstep these elements, rather using them to add to the experience but not overwhelm the process.

I also came to the revelation that what I produced was not, in fact, an interactive comic, as the expectation tends to be that there will be actual choices/in-panel engagements. Rather, I produced what Rizzi in his 2023 article defines as "expanded digital comics" (1). Rizzi (2023: 2) further cites game scholar Espen Aarseth (1997), explaining that the conditions required for interactivity to foster agency are ergodic (nontrivial) efforts relevant to the story at hand.

While *Don't Go Alone!* certainly employs swiping/dragging and parallax as tools to drive narration, this would ostensibly be "trivial interaction" in the eyes of Rizzi and Aarseth. My argument to the contrary would be that I employed limited interaction to remove complete agency from the reader – I want them to go ever forward into the darkness. They may pause as much as needed, but they need to keep going to see the final revelation. Much like overt animation, I didn't want interactivity to interfere with the story because it would become too gimmicky.

Rizzi's terming of traditional comics as prototypical (2023: 2) is an interesting framing. It can be read as print comics simply being the first iteration, set to inevitably be replaced by its next incarnation. I don't agree with this at all, as traditional comics are a primary medium in my eyes, different from digital media – much like animation and live-action film most certainly

share a common base but still are two different forms of media. However, my work conforms to his idea of the linked comic (with a little extra from expanded digital comics added to the mix).

This helped reframe my idea of my own work; I was worried that the lack of overt interaction was to the work's detriment, but I also wanted to control agency as a sort of catch-and-release experience, as is so common in horror.

For instance, I find horror games that present you as a helpless protagonist to be frustrating – you can only run, hide and try to avoid the creatures – but I also understand that the helplessness is, in fact, where the horror lies, and this is why I pushed aside my personal preferences to produce the comic in the same manner. Abuse of any kind strips power from the people who are harmed, and even the bravest, toughest people can be broken by it. The allegory that the Pinky-Pinky presents needs to be exactly that – that this can happen to anyone, and it is devastating and horrifying.

Pinky-Pinky and Me

I'm acutely aware of a potential issue of representation in the story. While I tried to be as balanced as possible, the current state of transphobia that is so prevalent in society can easily be applied to a monstrous character that presents both male and female anatomy simultaneously. This is most certainly not the case in my design, where I was rather attempting to show that abuse has no set gender – it can happen to and be perpetuated by all genders. I believe that I have been fair and balanced in this arena, but I also know that there are ramifications.

I drew upon this when I selected the legend of the Pinky-Pinky, a mutated, albino *tokoloshe* rumoured to prey upon unaccompanied children in public bathrooms. I distinctly recall the tale being told on the playground of my primary school and as campfire stories at cub scout gatherings and being horrified at the idea of this terrible, pink thing crawling out of a toilet and snatching me away at night.

The myth terrified me, and for many years I couldn't go to the bathroom at home without the light on and deeply feared public toilets of any kind. Essentially, the myth did its job: it scared a child away from the real danger posed by an outbreak of attacks and kidnappings that was occurring at that time. The creature was indelibly etched into my mind, but it slowly faded into obscurity as time passed – it was a part of who I was and its impact was real, even if the monster wasn't – and this began to spark inspiration upon the power of narrative.

The issue of the GBV content is partially addressed by adding additional information both in the comic and on the Itch page, to the effect of sexual, gender and physical abuse coming in all forms, but I must be cogent of my work's implications. I have also provided links to multilingual, international abuse counselling services in the Itch page's caption, because if my work can help even just one person, then it has achieved something more than simply being a product of research.

From a personal perspective, I struggled with the making of this content – I've mentioned my own experiences with abuse, but also my sexuality (or lack thereof) often precludes me from feeling comfortable with seeing and dealing with anything sexual in nature. However, abuse is not comfortable, and the reality of it needs to be spoken about. This is not something that superheroes can wholesomely save us from – it's something that only honest and open discussion can address. *Don't Go Alone!* needs to be a catalyst of this, not just another comic, so I hope I have created something meaningful. The personal investment in this subject carries risks, from subjectivity to emotional harm, but I feel that I balanced my approach with research, fairness and being able to step away when needed. Not having the pressure of a publisher or a paying client to get the comic done helped enormously, because it was made on my terms and in my own time, so I could constantly step back and reflect.

I also chose not to be overt with the violence in the comic – there's a space for gore and viscerality, and I happily apply that in works like *SPOEK*, where the brutality is offset by comedy and context for the sole purpose of entertainment. *Don't Go Alone!*, however, has a much more real premise, even while presented as a creepypasta. It deals with violence against children, legitimate and real sites of abuse and the absence of safety to speak about the circumstances. To then add extreme violence on top of an already difficult subject matter would be wholly unethical and defeat the point of the narrative. I instead opted to imply violence, using audio and atmosphere to supplement where needed, to balance the horrible reality of the Pinky-Pinky's myth with narrative impetus. Horror will always be a niche genre, it's simply not for everyone – but those who do engage with it still want to be entertained by the thrill and adrenaline of fear, so my audience does need reason to proceed with the story beyond the reality.

Why Make Digital Comics, then?

I recommend digital comics being employed, like my own work, as interventionist pieces that accompany larger campaigns. Ram Devineni's *Priya's Shakti*, which was produced in 2014, is perhaps the ultimate example of this. Falling under Rizzi's expanded digital comics category,

Priya uses augmented reality (AR) in conjunction with a printed comic to tell a harrowing story about sexual violence faced by the women of India and the world at large. It was built upon a larger campaign that eventually saw *Priya* being named the "Gender Equality Champion" by UN Women, winning dozens of awards and making all of its materials freely accessible for academic research. *Priya* draws its narrative from real life as well as Hinduism, following the activities of the titular Priya after she experiences gang rape and subsequent social stigma. The story follows Priya, as well as the goddess Parvati, who is horrified by the extent of sexual violence that the women of Earth face. The goddess empowers Priya, inspiring her to speak out against her attackers and to forge her independence from the tragedy that befell her (sourced from priyashakti.com, 2024). The use of AR provides additional engagement with content, from simple aesthetic treatments like adding animation and audio to some panels, to a call to action and access to resources regarding GBV and support for any that experience it. Comics present a level of accessibility that many other media cannot, from the inherent privacy of reading, to allowing for less literate people to still understand the events through imagery. By combining AR, this allows even the barrier of literacy to be subverted with audio narration and localised languages. Technology like AR, however, requires access to smart devices, which can be a barrier to many, but its affordances are worth consideration.

I had the privilege of presenting alongside Devineni at a UNISA[28] conference on Comic Making in the Global South in 2020, and his influence and passion were a large driving factor in my own research. Ultimately, what has been achieved by *Priya* needs to be echoed, and here the power of the medium of digital comics offers far greater potential. Interaction, in general, makes things more memorable and provocative. The active engagement with the comic immediately shifts it away from its traditionally passive medium, with instant calls to action available through links, videos and information.

AR comics like the *Priya* series are relatively new in comparison to other forms of electronic literature/ digital comics that can use a physical artefact for engagement (be it a printed comic, poster or other item that is used as an 'eye' for an AR app to function, akin to a QR code) or screen-based interactions like a mouse-over or click that triggers the same results. This does mean, though, that preservation and cataloguing is easier than born-digital comics when seen as a physical item, but in my experience, the apps made to read AR content are often outmoded or not up-to-date, which then makes the content unusable. Free apps also force proprietary engagement by either requiring an accompanying AR reader app or payments

[28] The University of South Africa

to unlock storage or free access to the data. These are inconvenient, but not strictly barriers to development. An important takeaway is that the message that the *Priya* series disseminates is specifically resultant of its use of hybrid technology. The comics in the series are freely available as downloads and are paired with educational materials in the form of student and teacher guides that are translated into five different languages. The reach of *Priya* is global, meaningful and powerful, and only possible because of its inherently digital domain and as the name itself states, the AR technology is simply an augmentation, not a vital part of the work, but still contributes an added layer of meaning. In a similar way, *Don't Go Alone!* Uses audio, text and basic animation to equally enhance the experience. I do believe that the comic could function without text at all, instead using the narrative pacing of the interactions, audio and animation to do the heavy lifting, but some readers may find this less engaging. See the Technicalities section of this chapter, as well as the interactive journal for more insight into the narrative and technical design of the comic itself.

This is not to say that this is the only way digital comics can see success, and there are wildly successful titles, such as *Niko and the Sword of Light* by Imaginism and Studio NX in 2013, that use swipe interactions with richly animated panels and parallax to tell a fast-paced and exciting story. The comic has now been adapted into an Amazon Prime animated series as of 2024.

Technicalities

As can likely be gleaned from this chapter and the breakdown of the technical production[29] of the comic, linked comics require significant work, even for limited length narratives. In fact, the intended length of reading time is not actually a factor in development, because a short narrative of one scene with three panels still requires the same amount of setup, layout, thought and art development per panel as a longer work would.

In comparison, the script, which would be the equivalent of about six pages in total length, took longer to execute than *SPOEK*'s 12-page script. This dictated, in part, the decision to mostly maintain a greyscale colour palette throughout *Don't Go Alone!*, but I also did so because I felt that limiting colour actually helps to really make the darks feel palpable, mixing traditional comic hatching and halftones to give texture to the world. The Pinky-Pinky was the deliberate exception to this, inspired by the Yellow Bastard character from Frank Miller's 1994

[29] https://app.milanote.com/1SrtDH1HvdfNxt?p=fvxglvzYM88

graphic novel *Sin City*. The character's sickly yellow colouring (see Fig. 13) evokes such a sense of diegetic otherness that you can almost smell the stench that he emits. It's an ideal application of colour to emphasise and deliver otherness in a world that is physically and metaphorically presented as black and white.



Figure 13. The Yellow Bastard appears even more repulsive set against the starkly black and white world of *Sin City*. Frank Miller (1994). Graphic novel. Print.

Pinky-Pinky's unnatural skin allows for the same methodical use of diegetic colour, and I always accompany the creature with a dripping, sloshing sound – a sensorial *moistness* to foster discomfort. The character design was relatively easy, as the Pinky-Pinky was the central creature and the rest of the cast was situational to populate a world of horror. I also wanted to maintain consistency between the other works featured in this research, so a lot of the monster's form is based upon my designs for the *tokoloshe* seen in both *Wanton* and *SPOEK*, as well as the *Popobawa*[30] seen in the latter title, while also showing its features as described in its origin myth – with hybrid cat and dog features on a human form, one claw, one paw (I

[30] A Zanzibarian vampire/ demon that is reputed to prey upon the mental energy of typically male victims. Its attacks result in fits identical to epileptic seizures.

interpreted this as one hand featuring claws, the other a paw) and being neither male nor female, but also both.

I initially wanted to keep the creature more as an unseen terror, but I also remembered how much I dislike that as a horror fan – I want to see the beast in all its grotesqueness, not simply its shadow. This is partly a personal preference and, honestly, because I occasionally enjoy literal abjection – I will happily watch the next iteration of the *Halloween* (1978 - 2022) series, or the wildly gory *Final Destination* (2000 – 2025) films for the pure entertainment of their implausibility; while similarly enjoying the metacritical subversion of Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996 – 2025) series, or the dark psychological dread seen in films like Dario Argenta's 1977 production of *Suspira*. The catch with more subliminal horror is that its ultimate meaning can be missed by the audience, because horror, like any other genre, has a wide pool of styles and conventions and audiences may not always be familiar with them, or even find them appealing. An average slasher-film fan may simply be bored by the abstract mania of Ari Aster's 2023 film *Beau is Afraid*, yet it flawlessly represents the horror of agoraphobia, anxiety, guilt and parental relationships in a twisting chain of near absurd events. As such, and knowing my own feelings about it, I felt that the narrative would better benefit from the constant presence of the Pinky-Pinky, rather than implication. As an embodiment of GBV, it can strike anywhere, at any time. Whilst its activities are conducted in isolation, its repercussions and ever-lasting. However, the more people talk about it, literally bring the Pinky Pinky (and GBV) into the light, its power can be taken, it can be slowed down, it can be punished. So, I would rather have a monster that's always there, waiting in your peripheral vision, than one that lurks until the narrative arc meets its tension climax.

Panel and page planning were significantly tougher; the simplest change from portrait to landscape requires a revisiting of all compositional rules that comics tend to follow. Wider pages can often evoke a longer sense of time passing between pages, and a lack of verticality means more story needs to be told in fewer panels to maintain a good reading cadence. Too many panels will become visually boring, while too few will mean strange compositions and odd pacing.

The fact that the panels themselves also move while containing multiple layers of images and text also means extensive planning for composition (both within and without), for size overshoots (so that parallax doesn't cause images to be cut off or reveal borders) and for text that is clear and large enough to read but also doesn't overwhelm the visual content of the work.

The choice of making comics in this format is, therefore, not one that can be made just because it seems interesting, especially not for a solo maker. Even the most basic linked comics require an understanding of hyperlinks, interaction and branching storytelling, while also asking that artists shift into screen-centric and optimised design. Art needs to be of a high enough resolution to maintain quality across various screen sizes, but also not so high that it increases file sizes (and, subsequently, loading times). Text needs to be larger than in printed materials, contrast needs to be thoroughly understood in order to prevent haloing (where letters appear to have auras, meaning that visually impaired readers will only see blurs) and other elements like dyslexic-friendly fonts need to be used as well. Admittedly, this is on a much higher tier of output than many of the comics online, but it's also a way to get your work noticed and prioritised. Accessibility is tantamount to this, and Itch as a hosting platform in fact prioritises accessible comics on its home page.

Upon writing this, *Don't Go Alone!* was in fact featured in Itch's top 50 New and Popular Comics (see Fig. 14 below), which is surprising considering that it's a horror comic.

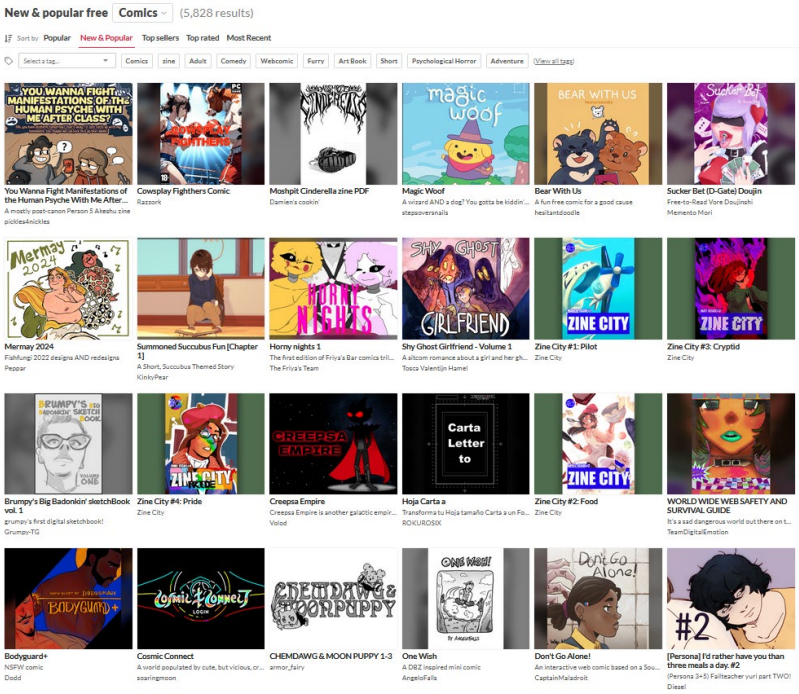


Figure 14. Screenshot of Itch.io's New and Popular Comics section, with *Don't Go Alone!* at the 23rd position.

When looking at more advanced methods, such as using game engines, augmented reality, virtual reality and other technologies, another layer of complexity is required in that you then need to be familiar with programming or deeply knowledgeable of production software. Here, my background as a lecturer of game design proved to be vital – I was acutely aware of my

capabilities as both an aesthetic and technical artist and could work to those strengths. I am still aware that my work could be even more dynamic, but that's a personal goal, not a professional one.

As such, I cannot advocate this style of comic making to people unfamiliar with the technical areas. These can, of course, be learned, but that requires deep investments of time and effort, and production will still be slow and frustrating because of being new to the techniques.

However, this is a very viable platform for teams – dedicated artists, writers and programmers can make this process so much easier, and specific areas can be focused upon for maximum impact. What took me nearly four months to make could be done in one by a strong team, even with less experienced individuals.

It is also easy to gain traction on Itch as it has an in-built audience, but equally difficult to monetise the product – the New and Popular page for the horror category featured nearly 6,000 new posts over the month of July 2024 alone. The works vary in quality and type, and they are free, seek donations or require payment for access. Payments are not regulated – Itch suggests an amount (the equivalent of R25 or €1,25 per user), but the individual comic producer can charge anything they want, and some comics can exceed a price tag of R200 (or €9,99). The other issue is the absolute inundation of pornographic content, to the point that any other work is drowned out and nearly invisible (this is more problematic for paid comics – free works are more balanced). Sadly, this isn't just an Itch issue, with every platform generally sharing similar issues.

To make this viable, work would need to be produced to a high standard and provided on more bespoke sites, such as Ko-Fi or Patreon (which have monthly user subscriptions and once-off payment options), or sold through apps for mobile consumption. This is again an exhausting and demotivating angle for a solo producer and a difficult task even for a team, so I cannot fully advocate this method of making outside of large-scale projects. There is most certainly potential, and the comics are rewarding experiences and engaging to read, but they are high effort for low stakes.

Conclusion

This chapter sought, as an advocacy for the plaited exegetical method, to:

1. Understand the phenomenon of urban mythology and its contemporary, creepypasta, and how it develops narrative rooted in reality. This understanding should then be applied to the narrative and thematic development of the creative output.
2. Understand the process of adaptation of comics from traditional layouts and media into a digital platform and whether they maintain their "comicness" or shift into something different.

Urban myth is an established field of research with an extensive history that began in the 1960's as an investigation of Urban Folklore[31], stemming from the oldest oral storytelling traditions and has now evolved and shifted into new media in the form of creepypasta. This, in turn, is either presented as written narratives hosted on websites or maintains its oral history by being recounted in podcasts and videos. Although it is more recent, creepypasta has become a rich source of research into the continuance of traditional myth while also being a source of newly generated ephemera. Characters like Slenderman, Momo-Chan, the Mothman and even remediations of folkloric cryptids like Skinwalkers have rapidly risen into the public eye (and domain), inspiring a variety of adaptations ranging from video games to films. The world loves monsters, and each monster often tends to have a basis in some public sentiment.

Slenderman – a long-limbed, faceless creature in a pinstripe business suit – embodies the fear of power imbalance, of anonymous authorities in control of our lives and our inability to do anything to escape their reach, which can easily be compared to the Pinky-Pinky. They are worlds apart, but all cultures have their own terrible creatures that echo themes regardless of language and identity, transcendent and ubiquitous.

My Pinky-Pinky was simply an update from the schoolyard tales that I heard in primary school in the early 1990s as well as similar stories gleaned from friends, tabloids and even quantitative research (as seen in Gibbs et al.). I shifted it over to creepypasta formats, keeping the narrative brief and the moments of horror greater while attempting to maintain the truth behind the myth.

[31] See Laba (1979), Thompson (1980), Milestone (2008), etc.

The comic process itself revealed a mix of results; I'm happy with what I made and believe that I achieved my goal of presenting an older myth in a modern format, but I can also see the issues arising in how the comic was made. It was time-consuming, extremely technical and long-winded for a relatively small product, and getting it to gain traction online will be difficult without extreme dedication to promotion, which I cannot do while conducting this research. Similarly, there is a sense of impermanence attributed to digital-born content – an item that began as data, an intangible, conceptual string of numbers that can be easily lost at the shutdown of a website server or corrupted code. Similarly, while I cannot quantify this statement beyond personal experience, I also feel that there is a reticence, at least from traditional/ established fans of comics, to engage with born-digital content because it doesn't quite have the same feel or process of reading. The other side of this is that native born-digital comic readers may not even notice the existence of the content because of a perpetually growing index of content across hundreds of platforms. This new era of digital folklore is prolific in its expansion – a boon to storytelling yet overwhelming in its endless volume.

If I were to zoom out a little and return to the second goal of the main output of my research, which seeks to develop a sense of the socio-cultural geography of Johannesburg, this was far better represented, but at a cost of reducing some contextual knowledge within the comic itself for the sake of narrative coherency. However, the host platform of Itch.io allows additional descriptions to be added, where I not only explain context, but, like *Priya*, provide resources for those that may have experienced GBV or abuse in any form via hyperlinks and downloads. Ideally, a next phase of this research would be a transition into audience studies (as discussed in Chapter 2), which would allow for participatory development for a version 2.0 of the work that delves more into the experience and features elements such as additional languages and even voice narration to improve accessibility. As a point of interest and included in the comic collection anthology of this research, I *re*-remediated the comic into a print-friendly version, which can easily be translated into an augmented reality version of the story, still using the same audio and animation, but as an external enhancement.

There is also the question, raised by both McCloud and Rizzi, of whether the work produced even still is a comic – yes, it is still a sequential narrative that combines text with image, but it can also be read non-sequentially, gives and removes agency through interaction (see the interactive journal[32]), and becomes a larger product external to a typical comic. At the same time, it is also not interactive enough to be a game because it features too little agency.

[32] https://app.milanote.com/1SsezR1VInre7M?p=fvxglvzYM88

As such, there is a crisis of identity, because it is neither comic nor game, but also a little of both, just like the Pinky-Pinky and its genders. Is this, perhaps, an augmented digital narrative, then? Or is it a subcategory of electronic literature? The difficulty in reconciling this identity is that hybrid, interactive comics don't comfortably fit into the definitions offered by Hales earlier, especially in terms of the mention of 'importance' and digital-born. Comics, with their deeply established history in print, are not digital-born, but interactive comics are – while there are analogue (print) versions of this, where one uses dice and panels numbers to make choices akin to classic 'Choose-Your-Adventure' books[33], the majority of especially interactive comics will be created specifically for digital consumption.

This idea of the augmented digital narrative would need to be explored in a different and more focused undertaking, because I do see the critique levelled at the potential departure from what is traditionally understood as a comic. However, the design techniques, illustration methods, choice of lettering and even compositions, while needing to be designed to suit the Panoply format, were always designed as comic panels first[34]. So, for the sake of brevity and clarity in this particular example, I would posit that what has been produced is an alternative form of comic, but a comic, nonetheless.

Finally, Manouach and Foka, in their 2025 research *Comics as Heritage: Theorizing Digital Futures of Vernacular Expression*, discuss an important factor that can greatly inhibit the meaning of digital comics – a lack of preservation. Written from the perspective of cultural heritage, the authors mention the loss of thousands of digital comics when webcomic website SmackJeeves closed down in 2020 after 15 years of existence (2025: 1). There were no backups, and the comics vanished from existence. While they may be preserved on their creator's home computers, many are permanently lost as cultural artefacts that were unique to the building of webcomics as a medium. The authors note this as a "critical gap in heritage studies" (ibid.) since these unique modes of storytelling are mostly ignored by cultural heritage frameworks that favour tangible objects and archives.

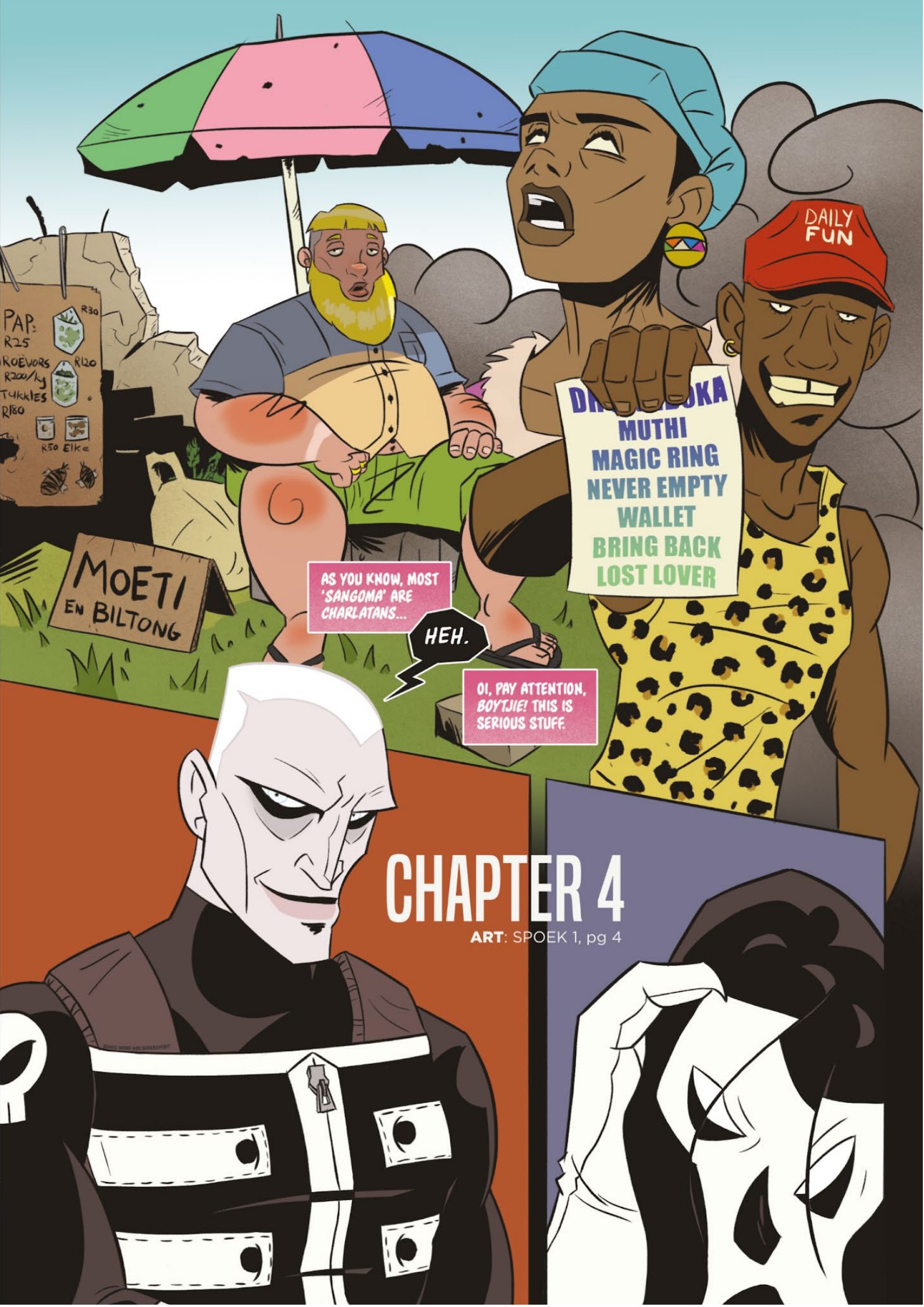
[33] An example of which being Al Ewing and Marvel's 2018 *You Are Deadpool* comics, which place readers in the role of Deadpool, a character known for fourth-wall breaking, as you attempt to escape a *Dungeons & Dragons*-style game. Readers are required to choose panels and pages at certain junctures that can result in death, various endings or even skipping entire issues of the comic.

[34] https://app.milanote.com/1SsezR1VInre7M?p=fvxglvzYM88

Manouach and Foka further note the impact that lack of preservation of digital comics causes:

> The oversight of digital comics as heritage extends beyond simple institutional neglect to reveal deeper epistemological limitations in heritage theory itself. Traditional heritage frameworks, developed primarily around physical artifacts and monumental sites, prove inadequate for addressing the complex temporalities, technological dependencies, and participatory cultures that define digital comics. Webtoons—digital comics specifically designed for online reading using vertical scrolling formats optimized for mobile devices - represent a particularly significant development, creating global cultural phenomena that transcend national boundaries while remaining largely invisible to traditional heritage institutions. (3).

This is an angle not even I considered initially – my motivation for developing an interactive comic was more along the lines of working in a format that has easy and visible distribution models that offer an affordable (or even free) form of publication at the cost of high competition. However, the idea of web/ digital comics forming an important part of contemporary folklore practices is one that fits precisely into the overarching goals of the main research of testing the plaited exegesis methodology model as a means to communicate the socio-cultural geography of Johannesburg through the medium of comics.



CHAPTER 4

ART: SPOEK 1, pg 4

Preamble

The following case study will focus upon traditional (print-format) comics in the investigation of:

1. How to use the core structure of the plaited exegesis in creative research.

2. Points of inquiry that are generated by the study and serve as further points of critical engagement, in this case the influence of geography, and more specifically the socio-cultural geography of the South African city of Johannesburg, upon the maker and the making process.

This particular chapter represents a turning point in the research that became a product of a shift in approach of methodological output, first as a change over from Research-Through-Design (RTD) to the Plaited Exegesis, and then how I arrived at the conclusion that I had eventually modified the plaited model further due to some elements not fully allowing scalability. The comics presented here vary significantly in age because of this – *Wanton* was completed with the intention of using standard reflective practices about locality as post-production discussion, essentially talking through the elements that I believed were local and justifying them with research afterwards. This resulted in rudimentary textual analysis without the critical payload needed to develop something from it, but in my self-critique, I started to explore the themes, designs and even colours used in the comic and found a commonality that was deeply surprising as it was obvious – the city Johannesberg, its culture and its people were omnipresent in my work – etched into the fabric of its basis. The visuals are of course stylised, speculative takes of the space, a form of impressionism produced by the hands of a fervent fan of Western animation's visual language but informed by a natural resident of the city. It would be different if I had to set the events in Cape Town – my impressions gleaned from short stints as a tourist, rather than a local – so it would be shallow and superfluous. In contrast, I have lived Johannesburg, not just in it as a resident, but also as a quintessential concept. I have an accent laced in the 'culture' of its Southern suburbs (more on this later), I have walked its potholed, cracked streets, been mugged, seen hijackings, stood on the top of the Ponte Tower (see the Journal) and felt its strange mix of hope, anxiety, violence and fear as a watched to ironically beautiful pink and purple-hued sunset, its colours only possible because of the pollution and smog in the air. As Nuttall and Mbembe mention: "[Johannesburg] is an environment studded with texts. Road signs, billboards, newsprint, magazine covers. A stream of global and local city signs, of Johannesburg representation. A city of surfaces, shining, shifting, superficial, sensational, singular." (282) – there is no place quite like it, and those signs

are more than just advertisements and directions – they take the form of the narrative of the city through bizarre headlines, graffiti, hand-painted storefronts and wheatpasted pamphlets promising cures for everything ranging from empty wallets to sexual inadequacy (and tokoloshe removal). The ever-present entrepreneurial spirit of the city is inspiring (the "shining" element of Nuttall and Mbembe's experience) – if there's a product to sell or a service to offer, it can be found in the form of roadside barbers, street food sellers and even dubiously sourced cellular phones[35]. I couldn't make up the Johannesburg experience if I tried, and in later sections of this chapter, I discuss how it has influenced and even birthed subcultures, such as Zef and Car Spinning[36]. My work is a mirror of this wild place, and I attempt to show it in all its splendid grotesquerie as a small part of Johannesburg's socio-cultural geography.

Through this investigation and discovery, I began to find weak points in my employment of the plaited exegesis methodology, when it comes to scope of work and the application of theoretical lens. This case study transitioned into something more akin to a close reading of the older work (*Wanton*) and then adapted into real-time reflection in the introduction of *SPOEK*. It should be noted that this case study did not, then, successfully achieve its goal of methodological advocacy, but generated something of such significance to my larger understanding as a researcher-practitioner that I believe its final yield is still important, if needing substantial retuning to best suit even the modified form of exegesis that I envisioned. I thus term this particular method cyclical exegesis, since its hybridity stemmed from post-reflection of earlier work into a form of exegesis that was not quite suitable for the nature of the work, but can be used in other contexts.

Method Preamble

This exegetical chapter explores the practical development of the *Wanton* comics series' storyworld, which combines the eponymous flagship comic *Wanton: When the World Was Still Strange* and *SPOEK* issues 1 and 2. It serves as an introduction to the cast of characters as well as the setting of the narrative. This chapter will continue to advocate for the creative exegesis model as method. Where the previous chapter explored alternative media adaptation, this chapter seeks to investigate the theme of form in the production of traditional comics.

[35] The cover page of this chapter, from the first issue of *SPOEK* draws its inspiration directly from these sellers.
[36] A motorsport that involves driving modified cars in circular patterns, or 'drifts', as the driver and passenger perform stunts both inside and outside of the moving vehicle.

As demonstrated in Chapter 3, comics, like most other media, are ever evolving and changing as technology and means of making shift as new technological affordances and platforms become available. This prompted my observation when exploring the interactive format: the work presented there may even no longer be considered comics, especially if we were to follow the contentious (and ever more dubious) definition proposed by Scott McCloud, that comics are "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (1994: 20). Interactive comics immediately countermand this as they provide a reader the agency to control sequences, reading paths and even the space of the work. Thus, it is pertinent to this study that I also engage with my work in what I refer to as "traditional" comics (i.e. comics designed and intended for print and sold as physical objects) as a comparison to new media comics to demonstrate the commonalties, differences and potentialities of the two mediums. Another factor to consider is the exploration of the deepening of my personal knowledge and skill as I sought to not only make comics but also critically discuss what informs my approach as a researcher-practitioner working in very different forms.

The chapter begins by contextualising the case studies central to this chapter, including scope and scale, then continues to explore the plaited exegesis methodology while laying out the process of the creative practice (the development of three traditional comics).

The goals for this case study are:

1. Continued advocacy for plaited exegesis as methodology for creative work and for evolution of cyclical exegesis (i.e. practice-led research).
2. The exploration of "drawing local" into comics from the perspective of both citizen and cultural outsider. Essentially, I look into the act of drawing upon the socio-cultural geography of urban Johannesburg and its people as a fictive but extant space.

And a secondary goal:

3. Following the above, I want to present comics as a highly accessible form of entertainment, with the core goal of localisation in both content and language at the forefront.

Keywords for this chapter: *Vernacularity as Identity, Locality, Socio-Cultural Geography Studies, Comic Production, Folklore, Horror Comedy Genre*

The opening sections of this chapter also introduce my research as I made the comic: production methods, vernacular as personal position, inspiration and output. I discuss my positionality as an outsider of some of the sociocultural bases of the folklore that inspired the stories and present a review of contextual knowledge, including the speculative fiction and horror-comedy genres as well as contemporary South African comic titles that serve as a comparative base point (which can be found in the journal).

Note that this section should be read in conjunction with the Exegesis Journal[37] as it provides deeper context on all areas of discussion. I provide links to relevant areas in each section. The first section of the journal provides story context for the *Wantonverse*[38] as a whole, and it is recommended that it is read before continuing with this chapter. While full-scale comic exegeses that I have encountered, such as "Film on Paper, Graphics on Screen, Feminism in Story" by Jingwei Xu (2019), incorporate storylines into the research proper (Xu, 2019: 6), the nature of my own work would result in the need for several of these storylines presented simultaneously, likely to the detriment of narrative flow. Therefore, I felt it more appropriate to have my work feature in a less disruptive manner while maintaining the format of exegetical practice that I am advocating. It should be noted that the examples below are much larger in scope, showing the scalability of the exegetical method. I have chosen to show a comparison between older and newer work here as a final point of advocacy for the plaited exegesis model.

This chapter is divided into two sub-chapters that explore the different forms of investigation and documentation that occurred over the course of this work in order to maintain scope whilst still incorporating a red thread[39].

The first sub-chapter demonstrates the production methods that were used to generate the comics and shows a shift in perspective as the research moved from an initial research-through-design approach to the plaited exegesis.

The second sub-chapter explores a discovery that was made during the methodology shift in how deeply my surroundings (particularly Johannesburg) inspired my narrative and character designs and how this became my own form of expressing locality in my work.

As with Chapter 3, a diagram has been provided to demonstrate the use and reflection hosted within the interactive research journal. A key note of difference from Chapter 3's

[37] https://app.milanote.com/1SIQGV1nYjDs2Y?p=HcX0XSP0nnl
[38] https://app.milanote.com/1T1kIT1cSFNd5W?p=HcX0XSP0nnl
[39] That being a clear line of situated research that builds upon the interconnected findings of the various case studies.

diagram is that due to the significantly larger scope of this exegesis necessitating a split of case studies, the diagram offers a more structured approach of reading the journal with links the appropriate chapter sub-sections and the journal's influence upon and from the written content found here. That is not to say that I discourage organic and non-linear reading, but the logic will be easier to follow using the notations.

It may also become apparent with the notation system how the discussed 'cyclical' exegesis manifested itself as the interconnectedness is also interdependent on each section of the journal to articulate and reflect findings. Where Chapter 3's content is difficult to view apart, a true product of plaiting theory and praxis, the legacy of earlier research methodologies present in some of the process has allowed for a modified approach to exegesis that perhaps suits larger scale undertakings like this.

What remains consistent with Chapter 3, however, is that the work is still a project of the symbiotic relationship between the research and praxis. Whilst this one had to be reevaluated to better fit into the proposed structure of plaited exegesis, the eventual outcome yielded something that is not a plaited exegesis but yields highly beneficial knowledge contributions to the overall research problem of this dissertation.

Journal Findings: Chapter 4

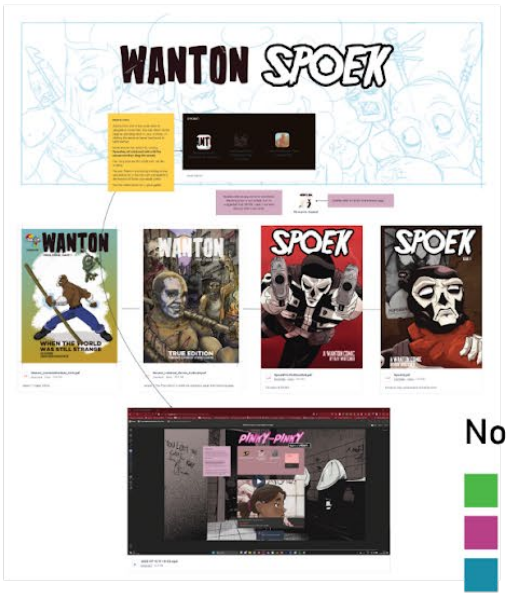
Baseline Area of Study

Johannesburg as Socio-Cultural Geography as expressed through Plaited Exegesis Praxis.

Goals:

1. Continued advocacy for plaited exegesis as methodology for creative work and for evolution of cyclical exegesis (i.e. practice-led research).

2. The exploration of "drawing local" into comics from the perspective of both citizen and cultural outsider. Essentially, I look into the act of drawing upon the socio-cultural geography of urban Johannesburg and its people as a fictive but extant space.



Landing Page

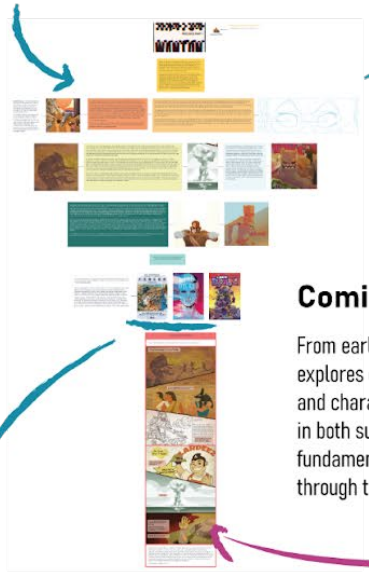
Access to the work produced for and referred to in the exegeses are found here.

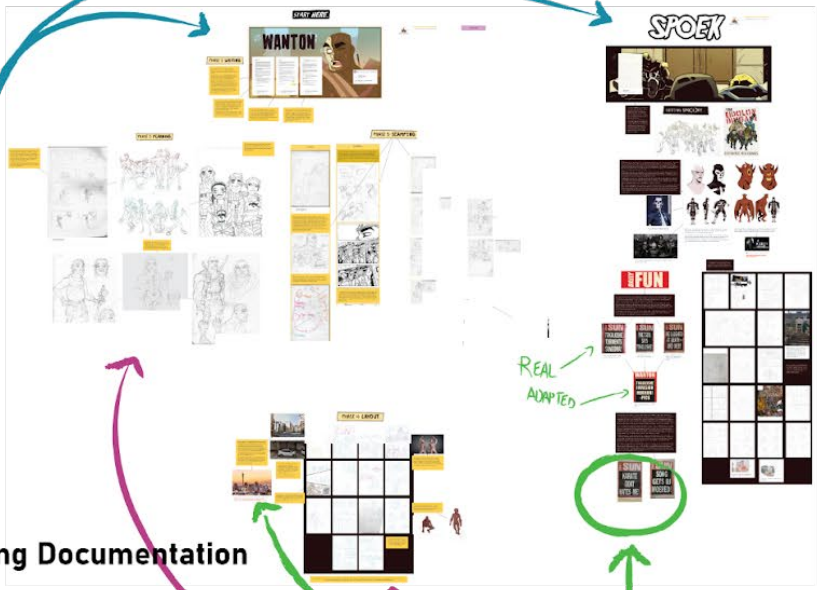
Notation Key:

- Johannesburg Narrative Habitus.
- Practical Production.
- Comic narrative development and impact.

Comic Precedent

This section explores the narrative generation of the Wantonverse (the collective storyworld of both "Wanton" and "SPOEK") and comic series that inspired the narrative exploration of folklore that is presented as a form of speculative fiction and its influence on my writing style.



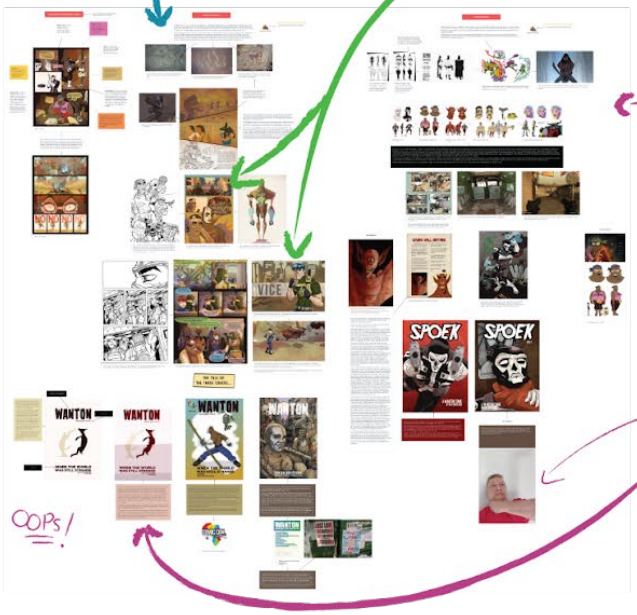


Comic Making Documentation

From early sketches and script drafts, this section explores discussions around making process, writing and character design as representation, as reflected in both sub-sections of the chapter. This forms a fundamentally interstitial point of **reflection** through the studies.

Johannesburg the Protagonist

The eventual knowledge contribution of this chapter (and research) stemmed from the pure experience of Johannesburg's narrative habitus, expressed by place, rumour, people and **hyperbolic** tabloid headline posters. While the comics have independent stories, the city is the true main character.



Practice and Praxis

As encountered in Chapter 4.1, the practice of comic making and praxis of the research become merged - the original planning now integrated with an understanding of socio-cultural geography as a theoretical lens. Here breakdowns of process, learnings, failures and even the actual self-embedding performed in making the content of "Wanton" and "SPOEK" are on display, coupled with reflections of the Johannesburg element of the production.

In addition to the content covered in Chapter 1, an honest discussion on my position needs to be held before proceeding with this section. Much of the content here and in previous chapters offers a personal account of decisions and experiences that have driven my pursuits as a comic maker, but it can be seen as somewhat siloed from experiences external to a consumer and practitioner of a medium that has been dominated (at least in the West) by white men since its inception. Great strides have been made in recent years, with a fundamental shift in the making, access and even mediums being experienced by a far larger audience thanks to the internet and the arrival of user-friendly online self-publishing platforms such as Webtoons and Tapas, which now allow anyone, instead of an elite few, to make and promote comics.

Culturally, I have an even greater stake in this – as mentioned above, this chapter is all about locality and the vernacular in comic making, and as a South African, my perspective encapsulates a myriad people, races, genders and locations in a country that is both post-apartheid and post-colonial in a still rather recent frame of time.

There is no guarantee that creative work produced as an outsider will ever be free from harm, but it is also unrealistic to attempt to produce anything that is free from stereotype, as stereotypes and the tropes they generate offer a bridging point through which readers can build association. Alvarez and Font, in their 2022 paper "TropeTwist: Trope-Based Narrative Structure Generation", offer a contemporary view of the necessity of tropes in the medium of game design, one already explored in this research. They offer a further definition of tropes in an entertainment medium like video games that "share common elements and underlying narratives, but it is non-trivial how to identify these, how to define and analyse these games structurally, or what type of common underlying structures exist" (2022: 1). Dyer, in his 1977 book *Gays and Film*, furthers this in his discussion of the difference between types and stereotypes (with types being a proto-form of tropes), stating that without the use of types, "it would be difficult, if not impossible, to make sense of the world" (1977, as paraphrased by Stuart Hall, 1997: 257). These sources stem from differing fields of discourse, specifically media studies and anthropology, but the link to the function of tropes, types and stereotypes forms an important basis of decision-making, especially for me as a researcher-practitioner. Stuart Hall's work on tropes of representation forms a binding catalyst of these phenoms in his work on tropes of representation - we rely on types to form our basis of perception of the world and the people around us, as both objects and people offer recognisable traits in everything from their style of dress to the way they move and even their function in society. This is then layered into our cultural knowledge and experience of these types. As Hall states, we associate something with a flat surface on top of four legs as a table – we may not have seen that exact

kind of table before, but we possess enough knowledge and experience to understand its function. As such, we typify things to make sense of them in our world view. These typifications may not be correct as they ultimately hinge on our learned experience, which is where stereotypes or even simple assumptions can occur. This, as Hall mentions, is where problems occur; we reduce everything we know about a person based upon traits that we associate with them in a form of simplification. Following that, it is a rapid decline into exaggeration and naturalisation, to the point where we normalise those stereotypes into a homogenised "fix" that irons out potential complexity (Hall, 1997: 258).

A superhero comic, for example, can easily be reduced to a typically attractive, generally Caucasian, bodysuit-wearing, highly athletic figure possessing supernatural powers that attempts to protect citizens from various dangers ranging from petty crime to extinction events. This series of tropes can be ascribed to characters across history and brands, with Superman, Spider-Man, Captain America and Wonder Woman being but a fraction of these. The "fixed" point of Hall's discussion is that our assumed knowledge of superhero stories means that we can expect colourful, perhaps moderately violent but ultimately harmless stories that may have some "tough" topics but ultimately receive some form of rounded solution within a six-issue story arc.

What occurs, then, when those same tropes are used in deliberate contrast? Garth Ennis' *The Boys* (2006–2012) explores a superhero world gone wrong – superheroes are celebrities, using their status in bacchanalian excess from extreme drug use and orgies to actively committing crimes under the auspice of their status. The eponymous "boys" are a secret group of superpowered CIA agents tasked with regulating the behaviour of the superheroes, even to the point of viciously killing or torturing the heroes that have violated laws. The scenes are grotesquely explicit with graphic depictions of gender-based violence, fetishism, racism and everything in between. In one way, the comic's exploitation of tropes as extreme subversion was highly refreshing at its time, seeing the debut of several other dark superhero series such as *Kick Ass*, *Invincible*, *Wanted* and *Powers*, with the first three seeing successful film or television adaptations and the latter winning several comic awards[40]. What perhaps is different in these examples is that while they are equally critical of superhero stereotypes, they maintain a boundary of extremity which *The Boys* and its sister title *The Preacher* not only cross but joyously flaunt (*The Preacher* is by the same creative team, and both again feature highly popular television adaptations). I feel that there is a point where the

[40] Specifically the Eisner award for best writer in 2002 and 2003 concurrently.

narratives presented are no longer challenging satire and rather extend into becoming genuinely harmful scenes of hatred.

It would be naive of me to say that my view is shared; *The Boys*, despite its content, produced 72 issues and was even nominated for an Eisner Award in 2008, which is the highest honour a comic can receive. The television series, which has run on Amazon Prime since 2019, has won a flurry of awards and features the same violent, sexual and hate-filled content. There is potency in this – people have clearly wanted an escape from the more family-friendly fare of Marvel and DC films, but a deep irony exists in that season four of the series sparked a severe backlash by many of its more right-inclined viewers when, in a state of intentional self-awareness, it was revealed that the very people celebrating the corrupted heroes are the same that the show unsurprisingly is actively mocking. Stuart Heritage, in a 2022 article featured in *The Guardian* newspaper, writes about the revelation that main character/villain Homelander (a parody of the all-American superhero tropes of Superman and Captain America)

> becomes the head of an over-reaching corporation and immediately finds himself out of his depth. He's a self-destructive mixture of professional ambition and personal insecurity. In other words, as if it needed to be spelled out, Homelander is Donald Trump. (Heritage, "Why superhero satire The Boys turned off its rightwing fanbase", 2022)

The danger of subversive tropes is that audiences often can misconstrue their true message. When a series joyously celebrates the hateful and destructive behaviour of a character at the forefront of the narrative as the intended lynchpin of the satire, who sees almost no consequence for his behaviour, suddenly and in an almost *Scooby-Doo*-esque removal of the mask of controversy states: "Hello, your beloved paragon of vice was actually a satire this whole time", it can obviously rub people the wrong way. Satire straddles a dangerous line of relying on hyperbole and sarcasm that teeters on the brink of offence, which is highly effective for the people that are aware of it, but likely deeply problematic to people that were not aware that they were being mocked. Younas et al., in their 2025 article "Satire: A Double-Edged Sword in English Literature", use an example of the line that satire straddles in their discussion of Jonathan Swift's story *Gulliver's Travels*. They particularly note that Gulliver, whom most recall as a heroic character, (initially) is presented in the story as "rather simple, without much internal emotion or reflection" (2025: 84), which is very similar to the way I crafted SPOEK, or in the case of the previous example, how the character Homelander is represented. The authors note that there is a turn in this portrayal, as Gulliver gradually

becomes bitter and cynical as the protagonist struggles to connect with and understand the various cultures and societies he encounters, which essentially is Swift's expression of his own dissatisfaction with the British government at the time (the Lilliputians particularly being parodies of the Whigs, a British political party whom Swift believed to be especially shortsighted and foolish) (ibid.). In the case of Swift's story, Gulliver's omnipotence stems, quite literally, from his size – an unstoppable god-like figure in the eyes of the Lilliputians, just like Homelander, himself a parody of Superman, sees humanity as pests that he can use to further his own means. However, without context, one may only ever be familiar with Gulliver encountering the tiny people and being tied down due to his being viewed as a giant menace, the political critique simply unimportant when compared to the fantastical encounter.

We can easily be reminded of Hall's writing in 1997's "The Spectacle of the Other", where he specifically speaks about the othering potential of fantasy and fetish (257); the desire for the unspoken exotic taboo is why series like *The Boys* have such large audiences. Hall's discussion of the Other as this self-same exotic taboo is a line I constantly tread in my work, particularly in *SPOEK*. I am cogent of how my characters are designed, especially Mrs B, as she leans heavily into stereotypes that can be seen as a harmful representation of a black woman by a white male maker. Hall's discussion of "symbolic power" and "ritualized expulsion" (259) is specifically a catalyst I used in crafting my own "understood representation" (I speak of this in more detail in the Contextual Knowledge section of this chapter). My choices will be elucidated in this chapter, but I again am aware of and welcome critique of my methods here.

Part 2: How Are Comics Actually Made?

To begin this study, it is only fitting to engage with the actual construction of the medium. There is a plethora of instructional books, online tutorials and even courses that vary in method and instruction of the rather large question posed by this section, and while I could acerbically answer this section's title question "by drawing one", that is not helpful and only partially accurate, because what actually construes a comic is as diverse and complex as the medium itself.

As seen in Fig. 15 below, cartoonist Keven Huizenga provides a clear and concise approach to the expected pipeline of traditional comic production that he breaks down into 7 basic steps:

1. The Idea(s).

2. Reference.
3. Write/Draw.
4. Scan and Production.
5. Printmaking. (If necessary.)
6. Assembly.
7. Completion.

(Huizenga and the Center for Cartoon Studies, 2011: 14–15).

Most guides follow the same rough idea, from McCloud's *Making Comics* (2006) to Will Eisner's *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* (2008) and even Abel and Madden's *Drawing Words & Writing Pictures* (2008). While the latter title is a textbook produced for teaching the pedagogic practice of comic making, each book provides a definitive and lengthy take on the above steps. Notably, I originally encountered the Huizenga guide in Eisner's book (2008: 21) as an example of a succinct way of explaining the way comics are produced. However, I cite a section of Eisner's introduction as a form of countermand: "Reading in a purely textual sense was mugged on its way to the twenty-first century by the electronic and digital media, which influenced and changed the way we read" (2008: xvi). Granted, this was written in response to the rise of film and how it changed the way audiences consumed content, but I still find that it aptly describes the conundrum I faced in the previous chapter when realising that the digital comic that I made was no longer, in fact, a comic – at least not by accepted definition.

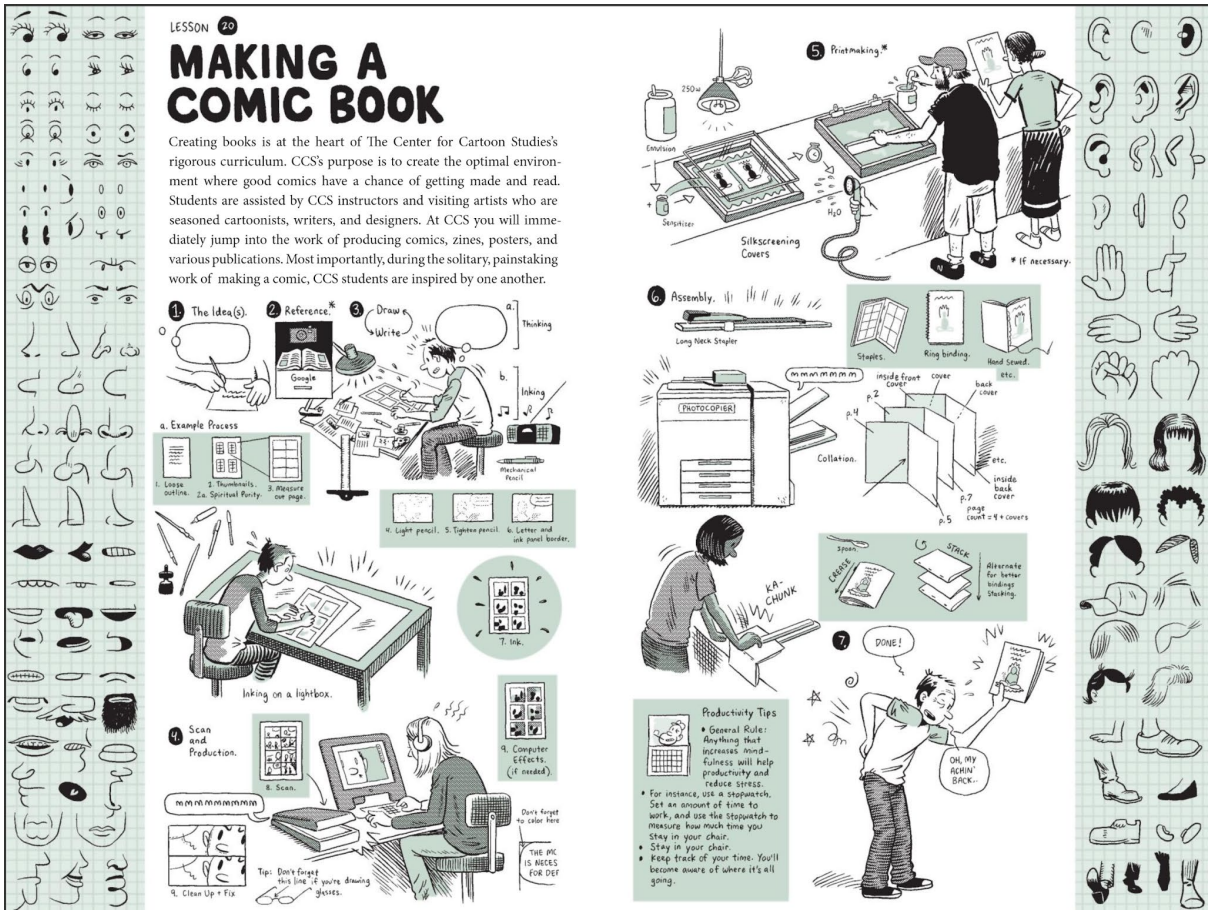


Figure 15. Kevin Huizenga (2005, reprinted in 2011). Pages 14 and 15 of *How to Start to Think About Learning to Draw Comics* produced by the Center for Cartoon Studies.

If I had to retool Huizenga's list, I would suggest something more along these lines:

1. Ideate
2. Reference and Precedent
3. Writing/Drawing/Narrative Design
4. Production
5. Compiling
6. Distribution

While still mostly the same, the affordances granted by digital media mean that many steps become amalgamated. Huizenga's step 4 is almost entirely intended for traditional media, assuming that the comic was drawn in pencil, then inked, perhaps even coloured with gouache or watercolour and then scanned for digital reproduction. Even the printmaking speaks to silk-screening, where I used digital lithography to print *Wanton* and *SPOEK*.

Instead, we factor in digital inventions, such as programs dedicated to providing poseable 3D figures (examples being Terawell's DesignDoll, or Clip Studio Ex's internal 3D reference model plugin). Even something as simple as Pinterest, with its near endless wealth of image resources, provides a plethora of inspiration, from colour palettes to location shots to fashion and everything in between.

When I speak of narrative design, I incorporate the specific format the comic is intended to be produced for in the planning – a webtoon needs to have long, scrollable sequences, while an Instagram strip comic, such as the work of popular illustrator Adam Ellis[41] (known as Adamtots on his various social media platforms), needs to plan for "swiping" to ensure the narrative is staged correctly and paced properly to ensure a clear reading process on the app. Each requires different forms of narrative, making the process complex by sheer variety of approach.

Production can also include traditional materials, but it is mostly made with software and drawing tablets due to the efficiency the tools grant while eliminating the need for cleanup and high-end scanners. Contemporary comic makers are no longer simply writers or illustrators, they are also programmers, animators, sound designers and so much more due to an increasingly competitive industry as well as constantly shifting modes and methods of output. Large studios (such as Marvel and DC) still follow a more traditional pipeline, as listed by Huizenga, but independent and new media artists tend to be adaptive. We need only look at virtual reality and 360-degree comics (where narratives include fully immersive worlds, audio and even the ability to physically move through the spaces of the art) to know that linear narratives are not only difficult to maintain but can actually be to the detriment of the experience.

Assembly is now about compilation and optimisation, not just printing and stapling pages together. Slow download times due to large file sizes mean that you may lose readers, so a complex balance needs to be maintained.

Finally, distribution – previously the mandate of a publisher, now a core requirement for most artists as we now need to market and promote our work, find a suitable platform of engagement, decide whether to charge for reading or provide free content in the hopes of building an audience. If anything, I certainly feel "mugged" by the twenty-first century (as Eisner put it) when it comes to my decisions as a comic maker.

[41] https://www.instagram.com/adamtots/reels/?hl=en

We could delve into the works of McCloud, whose series of books have held great influence over my own approach. I still employ his triangle of representation (see Fig. 16 below) in my own production processes, as well as in my teaching, even in tangential subjects like animation. Of most interest here is his "amplification through simplification" (1994: 36) standpoint – McCloud argues that simpler characters hold more ability to appeal to greater audiences because they substitute clearly humanistic traits for more gestural and stylised features, shifting semiotically into different modes of metonymy. Essentially, a simpler character becomes an easier platform for self-insertion, thus holding greater appeal than one that is more realistic due to the omission of features that offer some form of distinction (consider an emoji or smiley face, which is a modal representation of a face reduced to a circle with lines yet still reads as human expression). I very much agree with this sentiment, echoing it in my own design process where I favour shapes, silhouettes and bold colours over realism. Comics already exist in a space of suspension of disbelief, and while many attempt to maintain a sense of realism in terms of illustrative anatomy or rendering, I personally find it extraneous and detrimental to the meaning-making process as an artist but also to the perception of the reader, for whom clarity of message should always be prioritised over viscerality.

As a caveat, however, and one discussed in my journal[42], there is obviously also such a thing as *too much* simplification, where a character becomes so stylised that they become unique artistic artefacts themselves, moving from mere representation to becoming an icon of sorts (such as Mickey Mouse being iconic of Disney as a brand). This was a lesson learned in creating *Wanton #0*, where I used heavily metaphoric imagery with highly conceptual and, upon reflection, avant-garde exposition that could only possibly resonate with myself. To critically view the first cover postmortem, it would work only as a rare variant cover on a very established title that was well-known to feature abstraction and strangeness. It would rely on its name to sell the book but offer something of interest to more hardcore fans of the work. Perhaps someday in the future, there may be a call for such designs, but for now, I needed to understand that a cover is essentially a large advertisement for the content within a comic for a potential audience that likely is not familiar with the story.

[42] https://app.milanote.com/1SIQGV1zrRyo9x?p=HcX0XSP0nnl

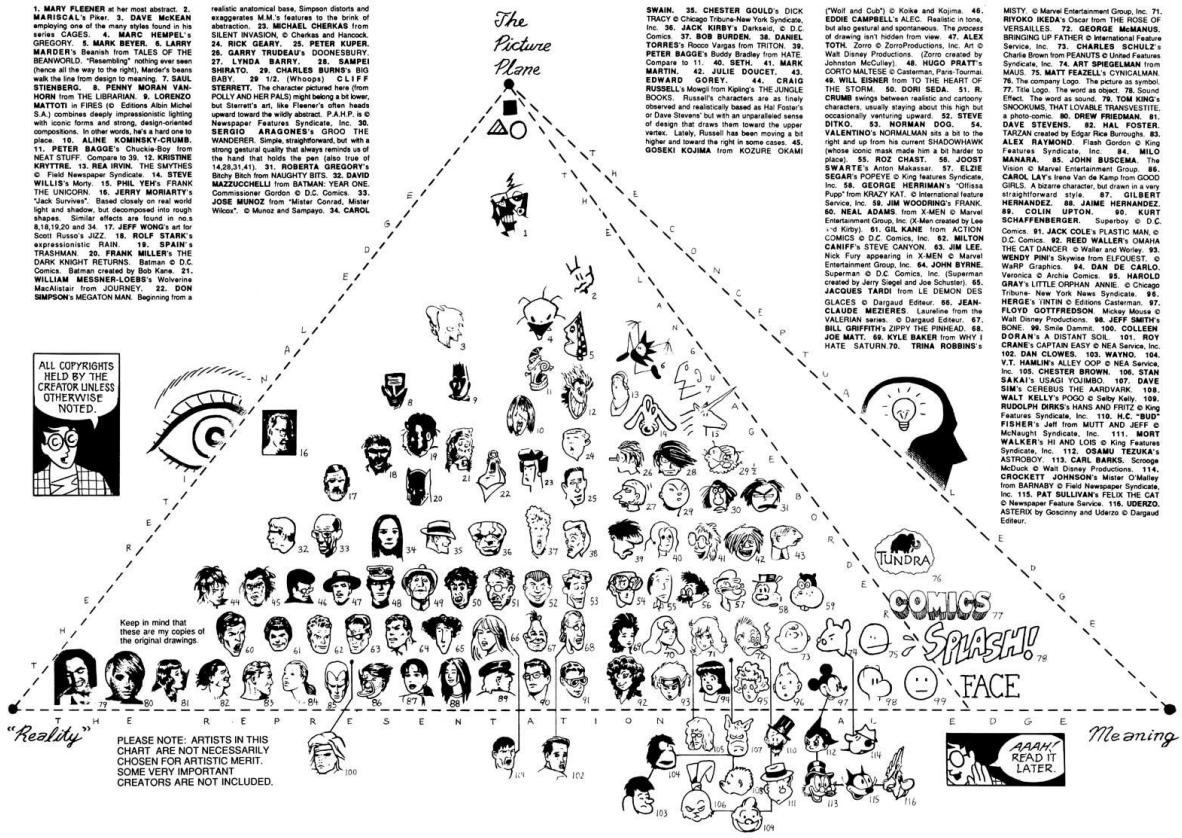


Figure 16. Scott McCloud's "Triangle of Representation" (1994: 52–53).

McCloud's diagram is admittedly complex, with even the author using a self-insert panel saying "Aaah! Read it later." in acknowledgement in the bottom right corner. However, the diagram is preceded by an extensive discussion on the semiotic process of stylisation and offers substantial insight into the thinking that often happens (or is intuited) during the character design process of any comic title. If I had to analyse my own work, it would sit close to 53, tending more towards meaning while trending upward to the picture plane. I aim for simplicity with a modal iconoclasty – characters should be unique, but still offer simplicity of form.

This is a brief insight into the representative nature of comics, but an adequate bridging point to begin the discussion of the working process of creating *Wanton* and *SPOEK*.

On *Wanton*: *When the World Was Still Strange*

The title of this section, as well as the chapter name for *Wanton #0*, was drawn from Penny Miller's 1979 book *Myths and Legends of Southern Africa,* partly as a tribute, partly as a

generative idea catalyst. Miller's work is fundamental to the worlds I've constructed, but even more so a large part of why I became so fascinated with African mythology and folklore in the first place. This is discussed in further detail in Chapter 3, as *tokoloshe* have transcended folklore and become elements of modern urban myth.

Besides my first encounter with folklore, I was also growing up in the 1990's – a decade that signified the end of apartheid, the rise of the internet and digital media, and a cultural inundation as the world welcomed South Africa back into the global community. Animation, video games and, of course, comics were entering the mainstream of popular culture. The world began to see the rise of film adaptations of various titles, such as *Judge Dredd*, *Tank Girl*, *Batman*, *Superman*, *Spawn* and many others, with the *Blade* series of films (that started in the late 1990s) being credited as the originator of the boom of comic films, followed by Marvel's wildly successful adaptation of *Iron Man* in the early 2000s. I could now walk into a local newsagent's and see shelves of comics, and soon even venture into stores like The Outer Limits or Cosmic Comics that specialised in selling comics, and so began my collection.

The following sections delve into the combinative influence that my deep love of comics, as well as my locality, had on my journey as a comic maker. The impetus on embracing my "Joburger"-self stemmed greatly from Sharlto Copley's portrayal of Wikus in the 2009 film *District 9* – he was the painfully sincere *oom* (unrelated uncle) you occasionally encounter in many spheres of South African culture, but prominently in Johannesburg. He's the well-meaning but unskilled teacher that tried to teach me Afrikaans, or the family friend that everyone feels a little sorry for and invites over for a *braai* (barbeque) and who talks exclusively about his low-level government job. He's the proud but invisible cog that somehow keeps the city functional and one of hundreds of identical people I would encounter daily. That film also had a profound influence on my writing – it unashamedly spoke to the (literal, in the case of the film) xenophobic attacks that occurred on 11 May 2008, seeing thousands of foreign residents displaced and sited in tent settlements not all that different from the informal settlement presented by the film (Kirsten, 2018: 4) for their "safety". I would drive past one of the larger camps on my daily commute to university, the white tents a prominent scar from the tear in society, and feel the contrary shame of what my country had done while I travelled in my private car from the relative safety of my home in the suburbs to my postgraduate studies. *District 9* took this shame and multiplied it, casting the tale of a marooned species of extra-terrestrials named "Prawns" that were forced into an identical "temporary" settlement as they survived on scraps and the "generosity" of the government while facing terrible discrimination and cruelty from all sides. Kirsten adds further critique by mentioning the South African constitution's clear

stance on South Africa belonging to all who live in it, whilst at the same time "South Africans seem to neglect the fact that migrants are then in turn also granted the rights outlined in our Constitution" (Kirsten, 2018: 3). The enmity and avarice of xenophobia is inescapable, and a film pointing it out in such a raw and brutal manner opened my eyes to the power of popular media. I had also realised how Johannesburg itself, a place of fear and change and hope and viscerality, held substantial influence on me personally and how it initially seeped into my process unconsciously, and then became fully embraced as I matured as a creator.

Review of Contextual Knowledge: Area Studies – Johannesburg as a Genre

> This highly visualised oscillation between pride and abjection, between high achievement and failure at reaching even minimal standards, is a key aspect of South African identity. (Van Staden, 2020: 33)

A brief interlude into the perpetual state of fluctuating identity of the average denizen of Johannesburg is useful in response to the previous section and to provide context to later sections of this chapter. Nicky Falkof and Cobus van Staden published their collection of essays, critical responses and experiential didactics, *Anxious Joburg: The Inner Lives of a Global South City* in 2020, offering a deep dive into the field of area studies, set against the overarching topic of anxiety. At first, this may seem arbitrary, but the lived experience of an average "Joburger" is one of constant anxiety – from impenetrable traffic to failing infrastructure, excessive crime and unimaginable wealth disparity (the richest of the rich and the poorest of poor live as neighbours, separated by the width of highways and gated communities). Anxiety is a noun, a feeling and a state of being; it is, indeed, wanton. Van Staden's opening remarks in his chapter "We Are All in this Together", in which he discusses the catastrophic events that erupted after the Global Citizen concert of December 2018[43], speaks to the notion of anxiety as a narrative simultaneously *of* and *about* the Global South – provoked by those that live within and spoken about captiously by those that live without, but not entirely discrete from one another (23).

In the forthcoming paragraphs, I will speak about my personal encounters with anxiety, and its causal cousin, dark humour, as a native Joburger – one who stems from the privilege of

[43] As a brief summary, a spate of muggings and violent crimes occurred after the concert as poor event management resulted in extreme traffic and a lack of shuttles that forced large streams of people to congregate at a nearby petrol station as they waited for private taxis. Groups of opportunistic criminals swept upon the awaiting commuters, robbing them of valuables.

being a white suburban resident, whilst also a part of the city's engulfing tapestry. I have been a multiple victim of crime, from muggings to hijackings, but have also actively fought against criminals, knowing the risk to my life, but also knowing that nobody will help me. I've stopped to give first aid at horrifying traffic accidents on major arterial roads and overheard (white) rubberneckers commenting "Isn't he scared of getting AIDS?", and I've myself been knocked unconscious in a bicycle accident and was utterly ignored as I tried to call for help to passersby after waking up.

Johannesburg is a cruel place.

However, I have also seen true beauty, art, collaboration and genuine humanity at its most fundamental roots. We are, indeed, all in it together.

Van Staden later discusses the visuality of Johannesburg (2020: 31–33), particularly in the light of the city's most famous optic: crime. Johannesburg is fascinating in this area – it is no secret that crime is ever present and inescapable, yet the citizens simply embrace this as a fact of life. Van Staden offers this insight:

> Crime becomes an anxious lingua franca in which Johannesburgers talk about the state – both its absence (the lack of effective policing, lapses in the judicial system, even missing street lights) and its mutated over-presence (corruption, state capture). In the process, crime has ceased to be a problem with causes and solutions, instead becoming a permanent structuring element of society. (32)

While many other societies strive to achieve the odd mix of anarchy that keeps Joburg somehow functional, it is such a natural state to its citizens that it's no longer even questioned. A large part of my own experience of this informed my story craft in both *Wanton* and *SPOEK*. In the *Wantonverse*, Joburg has become a seat of power in the Global South, yet it is actively run by corporates and criminals (which is not all that far removed from its current state). This allows the less-than-ethical behaviour of SPOEK and his cohorts, for example, who are mercenaries given absolute freedom to get the job done, or the lack of support for the residents of the crumbling CBD as it gradually gives way to tides of *tokoloshe*, with the exhausted and under-supported military barely able to contain the waves as their funding ever decreases, as seen in *Wanton*.

Yet somehow we still laugh, smile, love and function. My worlds are steeped in fiction, but a realisation of potentiality. This odd acceptance, surely unimaginable to most, is part of the Johannesburg habitus, as titled by Aidan Mosselson in his 2020 chapter "Inner-City

Anxieties: Fear of Crime, Getting By and Disconnected Urban Lives". Notably, Mosselson explains the habitus as "a framework for acting and expressing one's social position and identity" (248). This expression functions in many ways – at once a social mirror and a fantasy, a farrago and embodiment of all manner of facts and illusions. Residents living in the affluent northern suburbs (such as Sandton, Parkhurst and Rosebank) may never encounter the CBD – the north has bountiful supplies of malls, boutiques and activities that relegate the former cosmopolitan city centre to a crumbling hive of violence and fear to be avoided at all costs. This is echoed by Hook (2020: 91), who speaks of how the unwanted truth of the city is rendered invisible by the (mostly white) affluent class in his chapter "'The White Centerline Vanishes': Fragility and Anxiety in the Elusive Metropolis". Encountering the true Joburg often requires being a resident therein (often immigrants or low-income citizens) or a commuter throughout (a mix of a variety of people moving to and from work, school and social situations). In my own experience as the latter, I spent countless hours sitting in back-to-back traffic on the M1 highway, a provincial road moving between the southern suburbs (including Soweto), Johannesburg, Sandton and, eventually, Pretoria. Frustrated by the unending lateness, multiple clutch and gearbox replacements (from having to lurch forward metre by metre) and general awfulness of traffic, I decided to take the "scenic" route, cutting through the old town of Turffontein and travelling into and through the city centre via Commissioner Street – the once premier stretch of the city, adorned with beautiful sandstone skyscrapers and their sculpted art deco visages seen in the headquarters of various banks through to the anachronistic modernity of the glass-coated former Stock Exchange building down to Hillbrow. A name as innocuous as it is accurate (Johannesburg is surprisingly hilly), but one that strikes terror in the hearts of many. Hillbrow's habitus narrative (as defined by Hook) is nearly universal – a death sentence for commuters, a warzone of gangsters and foreign menaces to be avoided at all costs. This narrative is not just relegated to white citizens, but to people from all walks of life. The sad reality is that Hillbrow is one of the most population-dense areas of not only the city, but also of the entire Gauteng province. The negative associations of the place, however, are gathered from generalisations and assumptions – Hillbrow may no longer be the shining jewel of its Apartheid legacy; which was at one time a trendy place to live for its young, white residents – but its desolation, and then reclamation has offered an affordable space to live for thousands of people from across South Africa and its neighbouring states. While Wilhelm-Solomon showed some of the horrors found in the residential areas of the CBD that creates these associations and assumptions, Hillbrow is equally a hub of life and commerce, filled with residents, students and commuters, as alive as any other city district.

During my postgraduate studies, I travelled to Ponte Tower with some classmates to collect visuals and sound recordings for a project. We “coerced” a guard to let us in and were escorted up to one of the former penthouses. I walked inside and was surprised – the space was massive, with incredible views of the old city and its shining new neighbour Sandton in the distance. The walls were covered in pink shagpile carpets and accented with oak panelling. It was amusing and deeply saddening, because this was a perfectly preserved snapshot of 1970’s Joburg, but as you walked out the door and looked down (Ponte tower is a large cylinder, hollow in the middle), it was filled with rubble and debris from its stalled rejuvenation project, its inner walls filthy, and the guard was very strongly advising that it was time to leave.

The strangest occurrence during this walkabout happened while we were moving between Ponte and my car (parked about 900 metres away in a secured lot) and carrying camera and sound recording equipment. A group of young men with heavy accents approached us, asking us what we were doing while eying our kit. An astute lie from a classmate told them that we were a TV crew, filming footage for the news, and our new company was enchanted. They asked if they could be in the story, and we said yes – they immediately gathered around my classmate, affably hanging arms over shoulders while suddenly manifesting a collection of knives and a gun in an utterly self-aware display of power in the face of being in the “news”. I held my parametric microphone (which I’d borrowed from the university) and asked the group to say hello while my other classmate snapped some photographs. The tableau then disbanded, and the group of men came over to see the pictures on the display screen of the camera. They asked us when the story will air, we said soon and they walked away, telling us to “have a lekker [nice] day and thanks for the pics”. It was surreal. Our group, two white and one Nigerian student, stood staring at each other for a beat, then very hastily returned to the safety of the car.

It was the nicest group of gangsters I’d ever met.

The encounter was illuminating; the local students had spent their lives actively avoiding what had just happened, the cruelty of the criminal elements of Hillbrow being near mythical, akin to instant death for those pale of flesh, while our foreign friend was simply relieved to be as far away from the brandished weapons as possible. While some concerns were, in fact, confirmed, we’d also encountered the strange beauty of Joburg, felt the fear, but belly laughed at the bathos of our chance meeting with some of the residents.

My commutes changed after that. I stopped just seeing the fading beauty of the buildings and started looking at the people, not just out of fear of smash-and-grabbers or

approaching hijackers, but also out of genuine interest in the humanity of the city that was once simply a void as I moved as quickly as possible through these spaces to get to my actual destination. Now I saw the entrepreneurs, their tiny stores built out of old bookshelves and wedged into nooks and niches in buildings that once merely were decorative. They sold all manner of things, from weaves to packets of chips and even cellular phones of dubious origin. There were larger *spazas* (informal shops) in the intended storefronts, bootleg fast food outlets, the odd *shebeen* (informal pubs) mixed between high fashion chain stores, churches, schools … There was life. I had spent my life keeping my eyes forward, avoiding everything possible, conditioned by media and class to fear this pit of inequity that was Joburg, but was now seeing all that was old but new. I saw awful things as well – especially smash-and-grabs and muggings, which as a gridlocked commuter you can do nothing about, but I also saw fellow drivers rally around each other, winding their windows down and telling the victim that they will drive with them to a petrol station, offering a small comfort and safety. The community of the Johannesburg habitus is not often thought about. Commuters are still inhabitants, albeit temporarily, but we are still part of it. As Njogu Morgan mentions in his chapter "Driving, Cycling and Identity in Johannesburg", we experience a "travail of travel" (2020: 64), nuanced by societal anxiety, but abated by the abject (at least in my experience). There was nothing quite as sublime as the pink and indigo hues of a Joburg sunrise cast against the natural yellow of sandstone edifices to frame a potently colourful image that washes away the perpetual anxiety, even if briefly.

Johannesburg as a path of commute, as a place and as an experience not only holds a profound influence on my desire to communicate the feeling of locality, but it also crafted my entire view of narration, representation and perceptibility. The following subsections will be used to illuminate some examples of the effects, but most importantly, the city taught me to be honest as an artist. Johannesburg is not pretty, or kind, or fair, but it engenders these elements in their causal absence. This, then, is the true lingua franca, as Van Staden mentioned, but I believe it is far better represented by Fanagalo, a pidgin language based on Xhosa, Zulu, English, and Afrikaans and spoken in the mines in South Africa (Merriam-Webster: 2025), to preserve my goals to investigate vernacular.

The Narrative Habitat as Habitus of Johannesburg

Headlines as Story Provocation

The title of this section may seem strange at first but is inspired directly by one of the primary sources of my narrative arcs in both *Wanton* and *SPOEK* – the *Daily Sun* tabloid.



Figure 17. A *Daily Sun* street pole poster featuring a headline about a *tokoloshe* (2014). Photograph by author.

Steenveld and Strelitz, in their 2010 article "Trash or Popular Journalism? The Case of South Africa's *Daily Sun*", offer a definition of tabloid newspapers:

> [tabloids] privilege melodramatic tales of everyday personal experience, and arguably, in so doing, draw attention away from the wider political and economic processes that shape readers' lives. From this perspective, tabloids contribute little to the social processes that help build democratic societies – the defining rationale of journalism – and are thus dismissed as worthless. (2010: 531–532)

While sounding dismissive, this is derived from their understanding of the overarching criticism of tabloid media in general, especially considering that their sources mostly view "true" (non-tabloid) newspapers as signs of a healthy democracy. This view, however, is very clearly seen from a privileged point of view (as the authors mention), because reneging personal stories, regardless of hyperbole or not, is destructive and most certainly undemocratic at a core level. Tabloids give voice to the usually voiceless, and in that they hold a distinct power of appeal especially amongst the working class. The authors term this

demographic “first time newspaper readers” (533), further citing Media24, the media conglomerate that owns the *Daily Sun*, and publisher Deon du Plessis’ vision of the tabloid’s average reader (Media24, 2006: 50, as cited by Steenveld & Strelitz, 2010: 533):

> it had to target one guy: the blue-collar, skilled working class guy who generally lived in the townships. This guy was on the move. He now owned his house, he was starting to decorate it, worrying about his kids, rather than manning the barricades. The politics of struggle were over … We started with him, the potential reader and ended with the paper: a paper to suit the skilled working class guy in 21st century South Africa.

The *Daily Sun* became a deeply embedded part of my everyday narrative as I drove to university (and a few years later, work) on Johannesburg’s infamously traffic-burdened M1 north highway (as discussed in the previous section), with the large, striking headline posters adorning streetlamps providing a break in the mundanity of stop-start driving. Some content proved to be so unexpected that I would be prompted to drive down Jan Smuts Avenue or Beyers Naudé to try to find them again, often, for lack of a better term, to “collect” them for display purposes. *Karate Goat Hates Me!*, a headline from 2009, resonated so much with me that it became the catalysing title that began my strange hobby.

During the research conducted for this chapter, I incidentally came across a *Sunday Times* (one of South Africa’s more prestigious newspapers) article that happened to discuss the average South African’s relationship with newspaper headline posters. The journalist behind the 2013 “Roadside Attraction” article, Tymon Smith, informs readers of an art book called *Frozen Chicken Train Wreck* that collected over 100 examples of the headlines, compiled by Laurence Hamburger over a five-year period for almost the same reasons I have mentioned above.

Hamburger (as quoted by Smith, 2013) likens the headlines to “‘tweets in a mechanical age’, the visual indications of a country in constant flux”.

Smith adds a colourful rhetorical anecdote, where I answered yes to every situation:

> Perhaps, over the years, particularly good ones have caught your eye. Perhaps you’ve parked your car and rushed over to a streetlamp to extract them from their holders – the ones that bear your name or mark a significant event – and maybe you’ve taken them home and put them on the wall. The Radium Beer Hall in Joburg is marked by the

collection decorating its walls, reminding you "Your Bra can Kill You" and warning, "The Situation is Vrot[44] with Danger". (2013)

The fascination and impetus to "collect" these unique artefacts also arises from the fact that newspapers do not archive them, instead simply replacing them with new news items for the next day and recycling the old ones. This temporality, a spur of the moment, once-in-a-lifetime nature of the headlines makes them so much more significant, only existing in a tiny moment while inspiring everything from horror to belly laughs. These are the collective vernacular voices of the average South African (especially city-based citizens), embedded in our very DNA as we traverse the many, endlessly busy roads of the urban sprawls we dwell within.

Hamburger furthers my observations about these headlines in the synopsis of his book: "They are a tabloid summary of our zeitgeist gleaned from political speeches, public innuendo and colloquial bons mots, an everyman's state of the nation address – ironic, whacky, and often replete with bitter truths" (2014).

Smith, however, offers critique on the choice of presenting the headlines without further information or context by noting: "Some may see the lack of any context for the headlines as problematic. After all, these are words that refer to actual stories about real people and events and there is no further information given in the book" (2013). As a point of contention I've realised myself, I also understand that more often than not, the only context most observers of these headlines have are the fleeting seconds of observation as they drive past. Since I ardently collected particularly striking headlines, I would often buy the accompanying newspaper or visit its online archives to read the actual articles, themselves more often than not revelatory of far more insidious and worrying truths. I discussed this in the previous chapter, but many of the *tokoloshe* stories are laden with allegory for domestic abuse, especially when told from the perspective of a male victim, who may note that the attacks happen while sleeping next to a partner but attribute any injury to creatures.

For me, the headlines serve as a catalyst for exploring the allegory, offering a prompt for a greater story to unfold. It is very rare indeed to be given sentences as compelling as "Tokoloshe stole my 4–5" (4–5 being urban slang for penis) or "Tokoloshe Torments Sangoma!", the latter of which being the actual headline that inspired *Wanton #0*.

[44] Rotten.

SPOEK was drawn from the headline "He Laughed at Death and Died!", which I used as inspiration for his initial encounter with Mrs B and then the *Popobawa*. For these brief but potent narratives, it was a story that was part of my everyday life that gave me the fuel to craft the stories I wanted to tell, allowing the narratives to not only be inspired by but also deeply rooted in the urban locality of headline posters, something that very few South Africans have not encountered.

The Production of Locality and Dark Representation

A core goal I have had since the earliest sparks of my career was understanding what makes a story feel *local*. Is it the way characters speak, or perhaps how they look? Is it their mannerisms and behaviour, or is there something more? What are universal aspects versus the truly specific nuances that tell us that a character saying "Hey boet, I klapped some lekker gains at the gym this arvie, wanna celebrate with a jol? Maybe skeem some bints for the lags?"[45] could almost invariably be classified as a very specific denizen of the Fourways area of Johannesburg? This is, of course, extraordinarily essentialising and reductivist, but much like the headlines of the *Daily Sun*, it strikes such a uniquely specific chord that one can only think that one either knows somebody exactly like that or has at least encountered someone.

If I had to ask myself, what does an average Joburger look like, I would struggle to tell you, regardless of being a part of the city's cosmopolitan make-up of people – the reason for which lying in this exact statement. There are so many people in Johannesburg[46] that it would be impossible, or wholly inaccurate, to simply create an amalgam. Instead, we must go deeper into regional sections of the city to obtain the "local".

As an author, my writing and work has been informed by several of these localities. I grew up in the south of Johannesburg, an area synonymous (unfairly, perhaps) with extreme gym culture, a highly affected accent and more than a little crime; went to school in the northern suburbs, replete with "larney" (high elocution, often British-sounding) accents, social stigmatisation (othering) of Southerners as the dirty poor, and jockish behaviour; and eventually lived in the West Rand – with more Afrikaans and Zulu speakers, an obscene amount of strip malls and alcoholism.

[45] In regular English: "Hey buddy! I had a pretty good gym session this afternoon, so let's celebrate with a drink. Maybe chat up some ladies for a laugh?"
[46] Over 4 million, according to *Statistics South Africa* (2024).

These are, of course, hyperbolised to the point of caricature, and I have not mentioned the East Rand, which is the "birthplace" of Zef Culture,[47] but these stereotypes and generalisations form the seeds of nuance and recognition that actively create an affiliation with those spaces. These "Tropes of Johannesburgness" form a fundamental part of who I am, my daily existence in the perplexing, dangerous and sometimes even liminal space of the city adding a never-ending spree of anecdotal tales. As such, the local is now at such a meta space that it lies in my personal worldview, but one that echoes outward and is often reflected in jokes, memes and even Instagram reels that confirm the confusing state of what it means to be a native Joburger. There is, of course, a distinct element of so-called "white fragility" that could be subsumed from my writing here – I'm wholly speaking of my experience as a white person in these instances and thus surely evading the underlying truth. Robin D'Angelo, in *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism,* defines white fragility as

> a state in which even a minimum of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviours such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situations. These behaviours, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. (2011: 54)

A painful notion not at all lost on me. An earlier draft of this chapter was certainly shrouded in alabaster, doing the basic work of position, but not actually reflecting upon it critically. Indeed, I did my very best to represent my characters, but I also opted for silence and guilt on larger gaps in the critical process. I do not believe that this writing is perfect now, but at the very least, it's a lot more honest about my role and the thinking involved in the making.

The flux of identity presented by Zef, jocular and perhaps scathing in review whilst being cognisant of classism within white, and particularly white Afrikaans, culture, is tantamount to challenging the notion of the local. Arjun Appadurai, whose article I borrowed the name from for this section, "The Production of Locality", mentions that trying to seek what it means to be local is perhaps a moot point due to what he refers to as "transnational destabilization" (1995: 204). Essentially, as the world becomes more rapidly homogeneous, Appadurai asks whether there is any point in trying to define locality. Simon Bronner, in his 2009 chapter "Digitizing and Virtualizing Folklore", asks a similar question when regarding how the internet is becoming the

[47] A lifestyle and musical subgenre pioneered by popular South African band Die Antwoord. The founding members Ninja and Yolandi Visser present their own extreme stereotypes of "low-class", drag-racing, foul-mouthed, street-fighting East Randers. The irony is that Ninja, aka Wadford "Waddie" Jones (who started his career as Max Normal), grew up in the affluence of the north and attended the same high school as me.

new space of folklore generation: “Does where you are from matter anymore then? For folklorists, who are perennial commentators on the formation of cultural identity through the production of tradition in place, this context for transmission means rethinking business, or analysis, as usual” (23). Bronner further cites one of his earlier works (2006), as well as that of Ketner (1976), to elaborate upon how the internet can diminish or obfuscate the locality of a text:

> Vernacular expression through various forms of transmission, the engineered or mediated inter- and hyper-textual, visual assemblage that characterizes much of Internet communication provides challenges of identification and interpretation based on the discreteness of extracted artifacts of tradition. (2009: 23)

It should be noted that the cited chapter, despite being written in 2009, is quite out of date in the representation of storytelling on the internet – many of the sites referred to at the time of its authoring have since become defunct, terms have changed and the rise of large-scale repositories in the form of Wiki sites and Reddit, as well as social media like Instagram and TikTok, have allowed and encouraged platforms of distinct, local and vernacular expression. It also means that we are flooded with content of all forms and varieties at a constant basis and can subconsciously conflate many notions into our idea of identity.

Appadurai’s observation that “small-scale societies do not and cannot take locality as given. Rather they seem to assume that locality is ephemeral unless hard and regular work is undertaken to produce and maintain its materiality” (1995: 206) does ring true. I could easily have decided that my characters would simply be more generic and ubiquitous, fitting in with a more extant sense of global comic identity. It would be easier to market my work, less alienating for non-South African readers and perhaps even simpler to produce, but it would also feel inherently dishonest of me to tell stories about characters I have no affiliation with, or, in that matter, any form of cultural empathy for. I can obviously enjoy characters outside of my national specificity, but that stems from ancestral colonisation – the artefacts of the past hold a greater cultural significance to me as a white person from Johannesburg than it would to a subsistence farmer in the rural Karoo, and they are thus easier to osmose into my own process. I discuss the idea of the ‘currency of privilege’ in Chapter 3, part of which includes access to items that fall under the luxury, or at least non-essential, category, which comic books very much fall under. As part of my heritage, my father an immigrant from Zimbabwe and mother a first-generation child of Scottish parents born in the Eastern Cape province, comics were a gift given as a generational extension (*Tintin* and *Asterix*, for example, were comics that my parents

themselves read as children), or perhaps even as a tradition. Every Christmas I was gifted with titles from the United Kingdom, ranging from DC Thompson's *The Dandy* (1937-2012) and *Beano* (1938 – present) annuals as a younger child through to Rebellion Development's *2000 AD* (1977 – Present). In between these, I picked up copies of DC and Marvel comics from the corner store. Eventually, as it became more accessible, I began voraciously reading Japanese Manga, each subsequent work holding its own set of influences on my storytelling and art style. However, all of these were read from the perspective of someone outside of the cultures depicted. Some titles would occasionally be set in South Africa, or perhaps feature a South African character, but they were always impressions, facsimiles gleaned from media and websites.



Figure 18. Disney, screenshot from *DuckTales* episode "The Ballad of Duke Baloney" (2018). Animated series. Available on Disney+.

Fig 18. shows this idea of facsimile – the scene above is taken from the 2018 remake of the animated series *DuckTales*, itself an adaptation of a comic series by Carl Barks[48] (originally titled *Uncle Scrooge Adventures*), featuring the adventures of Scrooge McDuck, a miserly billionaire explorer. In an apparent representation of Pretoria, we are presented with an odd melange of visual iconography – hawkers selling wears from what appear to be middle eastern

[48] Whose notable influence on comics has an entire style of illustration, called Barksian Comics that involved expressive, variable thickness of lineart and the use of grawlix, typographic substitutions for swearing. (See Tom Andrae's 2006 book *Carl Barks and the Disney Comic Book: Unmasking the Myth of Modernity* for full details of Barks' career and influence).

market stalls, amongst jacaranda trees on a dirt-road, the Houses of Parliament in the distance all coated in a yellow grading. When asked how Scrooge ended up in South Africa, he vaguely answers that the queen of the Sahara owed him a favour. The complete inaccuracy of this is beyond farcical, the Sarah quite literally being the farthest point North on the African continent and in a different hemisphere from South Africa. What appears to have happened is that a very quick online search yielded a collection of the above imagery, which were then collaged into this anachronistic impression of Pretoria – acceptable to outsiders, insulting to locals.

This is the issue that I wanted to prevent the most – by genericising the work to fit into a global market, it loses personality and may even lack context to actively engage audiences, but by locating – specifying – details, an 'insider's view' is granted. While it may potentially alienate readers, it also offers something exotic and different to the usual narratives and locations they may be used to. This draw from work that is different is extolled by the rise of popularity of Japanese manga (comics), which, according to Australian research firm IBISWorld's Shahool Al Bari in 2022, constituted 76.6% of all United States comic sales (including superhero and independent titles) in the year of the article's publication. This is incredibly telling, as the world's largest comic producer's products are secondary to licensed titles from Japan. The reasons for this are many, but at its simplest form, the manga format (in the English-language market) tends to present stories arcs in collected volumes at a cheaper price point than equivalent US comics. A combination of black and white printing on cheaper materials (where US comics are almost always in colour and on gloss paper) in shorter and physically smaller (ISOA5 in comparison to US letter) formats and larger distribution models means that production is cheaper and faster in the Japanese market. Combined with a vast array of genres, stories and animated adaptations (anime), there is a constant influx of unique stories far beyond standard superhero fare that maintains an audience despite its often-specific location in Japanese socio-cultural geography.

In Chapter 1, I discussed Margaret Lantis' study of vernacular culture and reaching an understanding that local (or at least native) identity can be seen as "culture-as-it-is-lived". The implication here is that we, as people, obviously have deep heritage and cultural roots, but by co-existing in spaces that forge coalescence simply by proximity, we unconsciously subsume each other's culture while generating our own subjective experiences into fantastical and odd daily narratives. We are products of our space, of our conversations and of each other. The digital folklorists may not be wholly misplaced in saying that the internet has caused a form of anti-culture but can be countermanded with the same logic – exposure to cultures often

external to our own allows us to identify similarities and understand differences while adding new layers and nuances to our personal culture narratives.

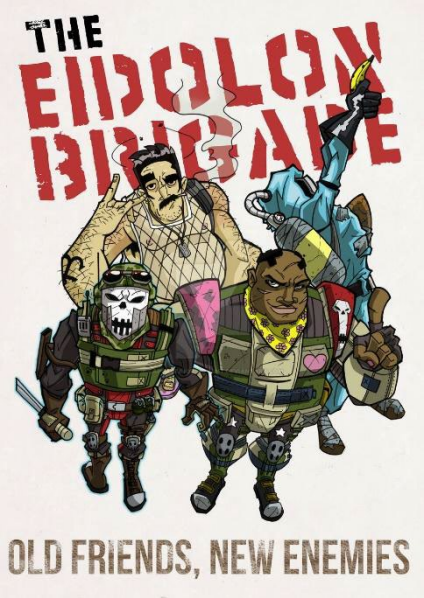


Figure 19. The original cover of *The Eidolon Brigade* (later to be renamed *SPOEK*). 2017.

This notion of personal culture is demonstrated in fig. 19. My motley crew of mercenaries that would later form the core team of *SPOEK* were very specifically based on people in my life. Starting with the protagonist, SPOEK was directly inspired by family friend Piet Maritz, a (now retired) flying-squad policeman from the south of Johannesburg whose acerbic, dark sense of humour and confidence, as well as hairstyle, was the prototype for Piet Casspir's (SPOEK's actual name) personality and appearance. Precious (P in the comics) is based on one of my closest friends, whose compassion and strength is perhaps surpassed only by their slightly bourgeois lifestyle in the north of Johannesburg, presented as scarred warrior with a penchant for the finer things. Gorilla hails from the East Rand, perhaps the most stereotypical of all the characters, but also a person with the biggest heart and toughest skin (an amalgam of several friends). The final character, who the cast believes is named Grape (they can't understand what they're saying through their gasmask), is the team's wildcard – an embodiment of pure impulse and danger, yet fiercely loyal to their team.

SPOEK's redesign in 2019 (see Fig. 20) was needed to introduce his original human form before his untimely demise but also give him more expression – the version in Fig. 19 featured an iron mask, which looks imposing but doesn't offer much for empathy and performance. I borrow the "infeasibly human-like mask" idea from various *Deadpool*, *Spider-Man* and *Batman:*

Beyond comics, which each feature characters in masks that can move and express with fantastical ease.



Figure 20. SPOEK unmasked and masked. 2019. Art by Author.

Piet (Maritz) is obviously nowhere near as cold and intimidating as his fictional counterpart, but little twists are sometimes needed to make a character design more iconic. The name SPOEK is also personal in nature – my brother was given the nickname as a child because of his slight build and pale skin (like a ghost). My family, being half Irish and half Zimbabwean, are far removed from Afrikaans as a language and culture, and the word's misspelling (the real version being identical to the English "spook", but pronounced in the same manner as "book") is partly due to my heritage, but also a nod to affectations we South Africans often place on words or phrases as part of our numerous dialects and regional accents. The name change was also from the same revelation about *Wanton – Eidolon Brigade* is accurate, but ultimately meaningless to many people, especially considering the old English word for ghost being present as a nuance rather than appeal. *SPOEK* is far more interesting, and even with the intentional spelling error in favour of phonetics, it has that in-built cultural reference to the myriad ways that words are pronounced.

The setting, Johannesburg on the most part, also plays a vital role in the story, akin to having its own character. The storyline section of the journal provides the basis for the importance of city, parallel to (and inspired by) the Megacities seen in *2000AD*'s popular *Judge Dredd* comics, in part to add a slight Grimdark genre spin but also as a speculative outcome of the events that led up to my stories. Below I discuss the greater impact the city had on my writing and the visual content of my comics.

Johannesburg, You Beast.

My other mission was to make the city of Johannesburg as much of a character in my comics as *SPOEK* or the *tokoloshe*. As can likely be understood from the introductory text of this sub-chapter, the city was never meant to simply be a location, but rather an integral part of the narrative space of the comics.



Figure 21. Wheatpasted posters promising all forms of miracles. Photograph by author (2014).

One need only consult with the pamphlets and posters printed in gradients and handed out at traffic lights or pasted upon any available surface to find an entire world of urban narrative, from promises of larger penises to conveniently easy ways to join the Illuminati (see Fig. 21). There is also satire and protest art, such as seen below in Fig. 22, offering public sentiment and expression that forms yet another part of the tapestry that is the city. Johannesburg is a space of so many things, but it's nothing if not honest about itself.



Figure 22. Mock “OBEY” poster featuring Jacob Zuma. Photograph by author (2012).

The urban spaces of Johannesburg are discussed in further detail in the journal, and also earlier in this chapter, but these examples have been selected to show the spaces and interactions with them that drove so much of my own narrative design. It was surprisingly easy when the source is so full of spirit and strangeness.

Johannesburg, to me, also has its own colour palette – its smog-laden air giving some of the most truly magnificent sunrises and sunsets, cast against an iconic skyline. The pinks and oranges, surreal (and manufactured in their own way), iconically set the sandstone facades of the old CBD’s art deco style buildings ablaze with colour.

Figure 23. Page 1 of *Wanton* featuring my impression of a Johannesburg Sunrise.

Fig. 23 is a direct demonstration of the inspiration discussed earlier – I used Commissioner Street as the base, which was a route I drove almost daily during my student years, with the Carlton Center scaled and moved to add a little more prominence for the composition. My use of the splash page format (generally a large single image with some text as opposed to panels) was intentional, akin to the establishing shot of a film.[49] I wanted to show a space of decay, but still teeming with life and colour. The entrepreneurial spirit of an average Joburger is on display in the hastily crafted *spaza* and *shebeens* amongst the ruins, and a reference to one of my favourite television shows, *The IT Crowd*, is displayed on the former splendour of the Carlton of intermedial reference. All this is surrounded by the sunrise wash – the warmth that doesn't leave the space, used to juxtapose the awful events that are about to ensue.

Nicky Falkof, in the amusingly titled chapter "Ugly Noo-Noos and Suburban Nightmares" (2020: 115–131), cites a quote from Lindsay Bremner's *Writing the City into Being* (2010: 44):

> While our language about cities generalises them, makes them comparable with other cities, able to circulate as part of urban (or sociological or cultural) discourse, cities

[49] The mediums share many similarities, in fact, including comics adapting mise-en-scene into mise-en-panel.

> themselves are unique. They are unparaphrasable … They have more in common with poetic than literal language, with literature than information.

My poetry simply happens to be multimedial – my muse is the chaos that is Johannesburg, its stories live through and around me, projected into my visual denouement of these self-same experiences through the lens of what can very likely be ascribed to pop-impressionism. Fig. 20 is an amalgam of the horrible and hopeful Hillbrow I discussed earlier – the vision projected by the news, by rumours and by friends and family versus my authentic lived version, hybridised into a dystopian projection informed by the real and speculative reputation of Johannesburg alike.

To draw a comparison, Falkof speaks of another legendary horror of Johannesburg:

> The monster of my youth was not the ANC terrorist or Angolan communist whom we [white suburban dwellers] were warned about. I did not fear stories of the murderous urges of "maids" and "garden boys". Rather, I was haunted by a more tangible demon: … the African king cricket … the Parktown prawn. (2020: 116)

This monstrous insect has spawned tales of all kinds to the extent of becoming figures of urban myth themselves to the terror of all Joburgers alike. Its tenacity, hardiness, aggression and alarming size could possibly only be imagined but is very real. Falkof even adds an anecdote of an overseas friend's first contact with one of these little monsters:

> Everybody had told me about crime in Joburg but not about the local etymology fauna of this city. Suddenly, among my sandals I noticed something moving. It was the largest cucaracha that I have seen in my life … I was not going to sleep in that room with such a beast. Suddenly, the thing throws ink, I have no words to express my feelings of horror … (2020: 121)

You would be forgiven for laughing at this story – its seeming hyperbole typical of a storied encounter with some unpleasant insect – but any local Joburger, no matter their status, locale or situation, will have a near identical tale of an encounter with the red and black coloured terror (ink inclusive) – a bond of disgust that unites us all, a communally shared tale of living and the ineffable infiltration of the creature into any and all types of space. My *tokoloshe* are very much inspired by the behaviour of this insect, an unwanted but potent resident of both the real and the imagined Johannesburg.

This serves as an end point for the first half of the exploration of this exegesis. Notably, the formatting has strayed significantly from the version proposed by Ings by combining several

sections, such as contextual knowledge and positionality, into a larger narrative driver that incorporates them into accounts of making as they are learned and changed that functions more along the lines of a close reading-based form PBR. An element perhaps slightly more unique to the plaited exegesis is the reliance on visuals as a record of the conceptual framework – the images, videos and gif animations hosted in this document as well as in the journal hold a special position in enhancing accessibility, especially with more technical elements of creative work that can (and should) easily be document in congruence with the research and reflective documentation. Whilst not necessarily serving as the best template for the use of plaited exegesis, what has occurred is a shift over to Krauth's idea of the "radical exegesis" (see Chapter 2), which sees the research and work presented hybridise into its own artefact, with the exegesis, as Krauth observes, becoming "about the writing itself" (2011: n.p.) as a parallel text. The risk, or perhaps inhibiting factor, though, is that Krauth's structures are, ironically, too prescriptive to best suit this undertaking. As explained in this Chapter's preamble, the difficulty of reconciling methods lies, in part, in the residual influence that the original RTD methodology held on the work – too much had already been done to fully make use of plaited exegesis' real-time research-making process and the work is too disparate to be functionally merged into a singular entity as is required of Krauth's method. The text is not quite parallel, nor is it tangential – it seemingly orbits the work as a gravity of influence, which is what leads me to concluding that this specific analysis is best described as a cyclical exegesis, borrowing traits from RTD's documentation processes, the plaited exegesis' creative model and an attempt at unification through the radical exegesis. The cyclical element functions non-linearly as well, applying older and newer learnings concurrently which can very quickly cause structural issues. To draw a sub-conclusion, it is abundantly clear that for a plaited exegesis to work fully as a methodology, the creative elements need to be produced in tandem with the research to provide an effective, structured means of real-time documentation that follows a basic process, much like a production pipeline. As a heavily modified version of this approach, I can see how other methods like close reading could potentially be used to produce creative work, but would need to be done so at a significantly smaller scale – a four page mini comic with a singular set narrative and limited cast as opposed to a full-scale piece that serves as a first act of a story. While this means that this particular case study example did not fulfil the goal of demonstrating the plaited exegesis methodology (at least in terms of Ings' version), it paves the way for alternative means of production that can employ methods more commonly associated to qualitative studies or non-creative practice research at a small scale to demonstrate learning.

Chapter 4.2: Telling My Truth

Part 2: Methodological Discussion

The methodology employed here can be considered both a connective and a plaited exegesis, as discussed in Chapter 2 (but it manifests itself in the form of a modified/ expanded plaited exegesis, as observed in the previous sub-chapter). As this section details both work recently produced (in the form of *SPOEK #2*) and work made over the course of this research, which began around 2019, I believe that being able to reflect upon older work whilst again employing real-time research can actively expand the relevance and purpose of this work as a whole. This is once again informed by the critical analyses of theories and ideas that precede this sub-chapter, as well as by observations made concurrently during the making process, which is documented in the interactive research journal[50] that accompanies this work. The following sub-section expands upon the learning gleaned from this process, firstly employing the plaited exegesis model as it was intended (in concurrency with research), but expands beyond the methodology's expected format following a far greater understanding (and reflection) of the profound influence that the socio-cultural geography of Johannesburg had upon me while making the comics.

The practical output(s) in this instance follow the trajectory of more traditionally produced comics, that it to say, comics produced with the intention of being printed and distributed as physical items. These titles fall under the auspice of what I call "The *Wantonverse*" and include a prequel (issue #0) of the eponymous *Wanton* as well as two issues of *SPOEK*, a series that dwells in the darker corners of its parent title.

All art seen in this section is self-produced, as are all scripts, planning and production. All evidence of this is present in the "Traditional Comic Production" section of the journal, where I also discuss much of my thinking and process to maintain brevity in this section.

Why Wanton?

I often get asked why I chose the title *Wanton* for the original comic, and the answer is that it, admittedly, stems from a little pretention, but also from the word holding significant meaning to the actual content.

[50] https://app.milanote.com/1SIQGV1nYjDs2Y?p=HcX0XSP0nnl

Wanton, in its simplest form, means something of extreme excess, and it is mankind's wanton greed/avarice/exploitation/belief (or lack thereof) and/or grief that has caused so many problems in the world we live in today. The name is important in what it represents but can be alienating to an audience that is new to the story. *SPOEK*, in part, was an experiment to countermand the alienation, where I followed a completely traditional approach to the name (the main character), the cover style and even design conventions inspired by mainstream US comics. When attempting to sell both titles at events such as Comic Con Africa, almost every potential consumer would gravitate immediately to *SPOEK*'s bold, red cover with its menacing protagonist leaping towards the viewer, guns akimbo, then follow up with *Wanton*, especially with the first iteration of its cover proving far too abstract and conceptual for most people.

Essentially, I had viewed my original title from the unearned perspective of an auteur, believing that if a comic stood out purely because it was different then it would attract a readership. Several years down the line, I noted Eisner's discussion on the "contract" that is created with a reader when we make a comic. The famous maker states:

> At the outset of the telling of a story, whether oral, written or graphic, there is an understanding between the storyteller and the listener, or reader. The storyteller expects that the audience will comprehend, while the audience expects that the author will deliver something comprehensible … This is a basic rule of communication. (2008: 49)

Abel and Madden further Eisner's discussion in their own work when briefing would-be comic artists on the use of titles: "[Titles] telegraph information about the [comic] to a reader, and if they're inappropriate, they may put an unwanted spin on the work, or even discourage a reader's interest" (2008: 161). At the most basic form, I had failed to communicate the best version of my content, and as such, failed my contract with the reader. This is, of course, an extreme position, and perhaps the wont of an artist viewing older work through a critical lens, but it was a fundamental lesson to learn in my process and development.

The cover has since changed (twice), and I discuss the various motivations and processes in the *The Tale of Three Covers*[51] section of the journal. I did, however, maintain the mock newspaper headline of the back cover, as it very quickly became a great point of popularity among readers of both of my main titles, while providing a tongue-in-cheek synopsis/prompt for the story content within.

[51] https://app.milanote.com/1SIQGV1zrRyo9x?p=HcX0XSP0nnl

Wanton has remained the title, with readers now being acquainted with the work, and the revelation displayed in the "intermission" section of issue #0 providing the lacking context. I speak about the idea for doing this in greater detail in the journal, especially since a comic having an intermission is decidedly not part of the norm, but I felt it was both needed and necessary to express the world that has come to be.

A secondary goal for the *Wantonverse* was to offer it as a "true" reflection of its people. I wanted the cast to speak their home languages and follow their cultures. Obviously, considering my race and my own cultural heritage, I was not exactly suited for such as task. Instead I consulted with various people, starting with a young woman, Spirit Ndlovu, who had received the calling to become an *inyanga*. With her permission, we held informal discussions around her experiences, what it meant to receive the calling and what it meant for her. Much of the dialogue helped me to craft Bhawodi – a young person suddenly given a great responsibility, the duty sometimes too burdensome but so vastly important to him that he would risk everything. Spirit's struggle saw a dichotomy of wanting to work in new media, studying game design, but being called upon to maintain a tradition deep to the core of her person. Her reality was difficult and she eventually pursued the calling, so I am truly grateful that I was able to have the dialogues we had.

The most important lesson she taught me concerned the differences and similarities between *inyanga* and *sangoma*, the former dealing mostly with traditional medicine (*muthi*) and the latter with matters of the spirit and the soul. Insimbi and Bhawodi were thus crafted to represent these two sides – Insimbi greatly versed in the ways of the *sangoma*, but physically frail; Bhawodi confident in the tactile nature of *muthi*, but whose youth and overconfidence mean that his grip on his spirit is not strong enough to master. Beauty (Miss/Mrs B), seen only fleetingly in *Wanton* but taking a starring role in *SPOEK*, is a combination of both – cursed with a proxemic drain of the life force of all humans around her and a master of *muthi*, making her power almost limitless, it has forced her into a life of isolation, surrounded by the very creatures she once swore to destroy.

The story holds some personal origins, too – I lost my father to suicide at the age of 14. His choice was sudden, unexpected and unexplained. It devastated my family, and as a young boy, I felt like it was somehow my fault, that my weakness or ineptitude or mediocrity was the reason he left. That guilt lived as a voracious monster within me and dealt painful, brutal criticisms of everything I did. Like Bhawodi does later, I thrust myself into bettering myself in the things I believe I lack, hyper fixating on being the perfect academic, artist, sportsman,

everything possible to avoid my grief. In a word, it was *wanton*. Writers and creators will always find ways to self-insert, but in this instance, my origin is right there for all to see, just fictionalised and blamed on *tokoloshe*. Ellie and Vice also play a part – Vice being a needless risk-taker, Ellie being the ignored voice of reason, but also the only people they have left in the world.

These themes are, of course, semi-biographical, but grief is universal, regardless of language and culture. It was surprising, then, that an early critique that I received during the defence of the proposal for this work was based upon the "Disneyfication" of my characters – while not fully explained by the examiner, I believe the comment's reduction/essentialisation stems from the more cartoonish looks of my characters, rather far removed from typical DC/Marvel fare. This can be linked to what Eisner termed "reader influences" in a brief section in the chapter about national influences on comics. Eisner explains that after World War II, various countries began to introduce a variety of "home-grown" comics, having shared the medium as a piece of expression and entertainment that had a drive to satisfy their own readers with "stories, art and icons that reflect their own national culture" (2008: 74). In what is perhaps a somewhat misguided statement, Eisner also mentions that the visual shifts had an impact on the storytelling in that "certain stereotypical images retain a national character". I believe the intention here was something more along the lines of "iconic" in the semiotic sense, but it makes more sense when Eisner offers a closing statement about how writers/makers function in their national identities:

> There is a strong national influence on any comics storyteller which makes it difficult to produce images with a deliberate international intent. However, the fact that many images portray universal human posture and gesture does serve to maintain the viability of the visual language. (2008: 74)

As has been discussed earlier in this research, I heavily disagree with these thoughts but can also understand their origins. What about comics from the Global South (including India and Pakistan, in this instance), whose industries are mostly young, some no older than 40 years? The influences on comics in these nations are a combination of initial colonial artefacts (including *Tintin* and co.), as well as newer media like manga, video games that allow for a flexible, lest rigid approach to their art and storytelling since they are not so reliant on traditional expectations from established titles.

To return to the point of this section, though, beyond the exceptional advice provided to me by Spirit, I am equally indebted to the Wits Language Department's Malebogo Thabong, who

not only generated the Southern Sotho translations for the dialogue between Insimbi and Bhawodi but also helped me to correct some assumptions I had made during writing, including conversational tone, reference and meaning. I believe that the dialogue between father and son shows their relationship far more accurately, especially because the English version has a slight coldness to the way they engage with each other. The Sotho is warm and lyrical and verbose, but most of all, it's true.

That was what inspired the generation of what I called the "True Edition", where the characters speak the way they would at home, not simply how I wrote them. "National comics", as Eisner terms them, suffer from the need to be more like everyone else and thus slightly lose their essence and intention along the way. This isn't always a bad thing; Malan and Geldenhuys' *Cottonstar*[52] has a uniquely South African twang to its cast, but they still hold themes that can easily resonate with an international audience, from its Corporate Ninjas to the piratical adventures of the crew. We are quickly reminded of where the comic's world is set when we hear Vuis Visage claiming "BLISKEM vroumens" (see fig .24 below), or a person running in fear from mutant *dassies* (rock hyrax – a gopher-like animal prevalent in South Africa); we can thoroughly enjoy a secret, arcane knowledge of the local context while international readers can celebrate the art and humour.

[52] A pirate-themed sci-fi adventure comic set in the speculative aftermath of the polar ice caps melting, leaving most of the world covered in an expansive ocean and South Africa being one of the few remaining land areas and thus an economic hub.



Fig 24. Danelle Malan and Ben Geldenhys, page 28 of *Cottonstar*. (2015). Webcomic. Available: https://cotton-star.com/comic/page-28-2/

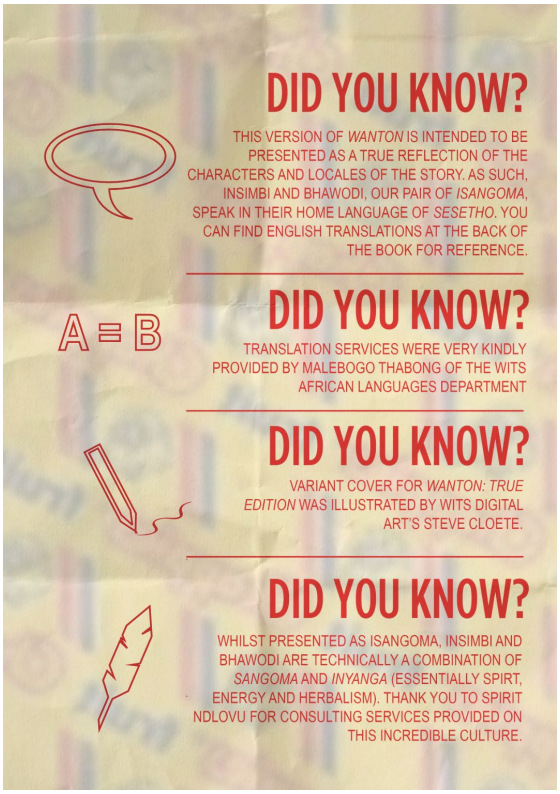


Figure 25. Interior cover of *Wanton: True Edition*, inspired by the wrappers of Chappies Bubble Gum.

While it perhaps is a little heavy-handed, I even included a mock Chappies wrapper on the interior cover of the True Edition, using the iconic (at least to me) 'Did You Know?' facts that were printed on the inside of the bubble gum's packaging, which I feel is as local as the *Daily Sun*. I collected dozens of the wrappers to understand the visual language and typography of their design and then configured them to feature the credits and thanks for the contributors to the work. Depicted are my words to Spirit, Malebogo and my colleague, Steve Cloete, whose art adorns the cover (and who is a person I deeply admire as a contemporary). This version of the comic encapsulates the vision I hold for transmedia: an adaptation of several Southern African folkloric and mythological tales; a mix of genre within speculative fiction and folklore; a transposition of the aura of the local using art, characters and text; and a presentation in languages specific to the people contained within the storyworld. The intervention of all of this is a product of the socio-cultural geography of Johannesburg – impossible to be produced without the lived experience of the city, but able to communicate the themes and concepts to a broader audience by encouraging an open engagement with the material and journey through the narrative with the characters as a guide.

Craft and Criticality: The Then and Now

The unique position provided by the altered method of studying the comics allows me a moment of pause in looking at what was done before and after the reconfiguration. When I first presented my proposal, I had only completed *Wanton,* its purpose a point of advocacy and demonstration of technical ability that would also be the initiating part of the creative research that was proposed.

I had gone with a very conceptual style of approach, from basing the illustration technique on rock art during my collaborative work with the Rock Art Research Institute[53] (RARI) of South Africa to, in retrospect, needlessly complicated metaphor-laden art on my initial cover design. In an earlier section, I mentioned the "contract with the reader" and how I failed on my part by using inadvertently alienating design techniques. A cover is the first (and often only) impression an unknown title makes on potential readers and it needs to compete against hundreds of other titles, some extremely popular, others in the same position of being unknown. This is abated a little when the artist can directly sell and promote their work to potential readers as they get to actively talk to customers and display their work.

[53] https://app.milanote.com/1SIQGV1zrRyo9x?p=HcX0XSP0nnl

Ghost Stories and the Dark Representation of Satire

To perform one final modal shift in methodology, *SPOEK* is investigated in the plaited exegesis format. In this instance, the practicalities are detailed thoroughly in the journal, as I felt it more pertinent to discuss the use of horror comedy as a genre study and how it maintains and defies genre expectations.

Much like my work, horror comedy is a somewhat strange combination – the name itself an oxymoron of two elements that simply should not meet, yet in its defiance of the expected norm, it offers a platform of potent social commentary, self-awareness and a generous helping of viscera. Horror, as a genre, lies in a convenient state of undeath; more so than any other, horror can resuscitate and reinvent itself when so many other genres become predictable and moot. Noted *New Yorker* film critic Pauline Kael discussed this undying notion of horror in her review of *Nosferatu* (1922): "Every horror film seems to become absurd after the passage of years and many before – yet the horror remains" (1982: 524). Indeed, horror possibly retains its relevance and simultaneously outdates itself by dealing with topical content that serves as an extreme reflection of societal standpoints. Netflix's *Black Mirror* (2011–present), with its unspoken "red mirror" horror subset, often presents satirical cautionary tales on the world's over-reliance on technology, with situations spanning from digital blackmail to corrupted dating apps and even metacritical episodes that present a "show-about-a-show" scenario about the consequences of binge-watching. *Godzilla*, on the other hand, with its decades of cinematic history, presents (at least initially) a harrowing metaphor of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima that served to end World War II (2024's *Godzilla Minus One* bringing that perspective back). While ultimately very different, these two examples still play host to fears from both a societal and a more localised point of view.

We must also be aware, however, that films like the original *Godzilla*, and even later contemporaries such as *The Exorcist*, have been laughed at as much as they have terrified audiences. The reason for this is often attributed to over-exposure, with author Chris Yogerst, in his chapter "Rules for Surviving a Horror Comedy" (2016), noting that what once was horrific to audiences, such as the idea of brain transplants and resurrection of the dead in the film *Frankenstein* (1931), has become so tawdry from decades of repetition that it even has appeared in the animated shorts of Warner Bros.' *Looney Tunes* as a form of visual gag for younger audiences (Yogerst, 2016: 169). Even more so, zombies have seen constant reinvention, even at the hands of the director that made the undead creatures famous in the

first place – George Romero, who shifted the brutal and dark tones of *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968 to comedic parody in its direct sequel, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). This was then further parodied in Edgar Wright's *Shaun of the Dead* in 2004 as it shifted to a mockery of the zombie-like drudgery of corporate jobs and surviving in modern suburbia. It is in this horror comedy, then, that satire becomes parody, the horror often escalated to underscore the ridiculous heights of dread, yet offering scathing views on its own subject matter. The horror comedy ultimately relies on having audiences that are, in fact, numbed to extant expectations of the horror genre and thus able to be on the inside of the joke by sheer virtue of familiarity.

Yogerst furthers this by mentioning horror films that are intentionally subversive, such as Wes Craven's 1996 *Scream* being self-aware of its own slasher-film tropes – with its iconic self-parodying opening sequence which was later reused as a jocular plot twist in the franchise's spoof meta film series *Stab* – smartly used not only to recap previous events but also to set up later consequences for the cast (2016: 170). Yogerst continues by adding that "Film genres, with their stocks of increasingly familiar plot elements, characters, and images, cultivate audience expectations with each new film. Once established by repetition, however, those expectations allow filmmakers to engage with the genre in increasingly complex ways" (2016: 171). It is in this audience knowledge that I hinged *SPOEK*'s writing.

The concept of the comic is, at first, nothing particularly special beyond, perhaps, the setting – a mercenary is sent on a mission to eliminate a powerful witch that his employers have deemed a threat. He even battles zombies (albeit inspired by Benin's practice of *vodun* instead of Western disease-born undead) and a few *tokoloshe* along the way. It would be easy to find comparable adventures in Mike Mignola's *Hellboy* (following a group of supernatural creatures that are tasked with defending humans from bigger, meaner creatures), or Lowell Cunningham's *The Men in Black* comics about a team of unknowable government agents policing various extraterrestrial threats to the Earth, and I rely on this because these works greatly inspired what I've done. Even *SPOEK*'s design is based on characters like Marvel's Spider-Man and Deadpool, while adding in a dash of design from the bands My Chemical Romance and Ghost BC. Familiarity is important – where I previously failed with *Wanton* being too obscure, I wanted readers to glean a sense of near déjà vu when seeing the cover of the work, because it helps to build an expectation of things to come.

SPOEK, then, changes convention, having an over-powerful and confident lead being utterly destroyed in the space of a few pages. He goes from smirking sleazebag to bloody

corpse in the blink of an eye – his *wanton* underestimation of his target is his undoing, his final enemy a ferocious and unstoppable demon cracking puns between death blows.

The second issue pushes this to the extreme with its visceral goriness, the stripping out of panels in favour of kinetic compositions – I wanted no pause in the pain and suffering of SPOEK. The downfall of someone with such an ego needs to be experienced in detail. This seems cruel – to be so brutal to my own character – but it is ultimately necessary to set up the motivations for him post-death.

The Dark(er) Representation in SPOEK

I will state clearly here that *SPOEK* is very much the tale of a team of anti-villains – they have no qualms about their morally dark methods and are only loyal to each other and to whomever is paying the highest rates. This does not mean that they are fully reprehensible – each member of *SPOEK*'s squad presents various motivations with a commonality of being outcasts for various reasons. SPOEK himself is the least complex and the most evil – he enjoys his job a little too much and even in his ultimate humiliation, he only becomes so powerful out of his own anger and need for vengeance. Precious, however, is SPOEK's foil – a deeply compassionate and empathic person whose size and gender (non-binary) see constant discrimination and mockery; Gorilla is a mutant and socially coded as low-class, leading him to becoming numb and emotionless as a protective state; and Grape is … unknowable. The storyline is not one of hope and wonder, as is often the case in speculative fiction subgenres, but rather acerbic and honest in its characterisations of the mercenaries and villains, essentially two sides of the same coin, just with different motivations. Much like *District 9* shifted my understanding of storytelling in the space of South Africa, I too wanted to move away from the boundless hope and kindness seen in so many other comics produced in South Africa. In *SPOEK*'s world, there is no hope. Humanity is negotiable, the country snapped free of its last dregs of democratic rule and fallen prey to corporate overlords profiting from war and chaos. That doesn't mean that the South Africanness of the characters isn't still there – the community and humour is something I don't believe will ever die, and Johannesburg remains as resilient as a weed; while sent into ruin, it is still sprouting sites of obscene wealth, with its citizenry as enterprising and callous as always as they sell sham *muthi* (see *SPOEK 1*) and run *spazas* and *shebeens* from the gutted ruins of skyscrapers. They see *tokoloshe* in the same vein as cane rats (fearsome, but still just pests) and fearlessly walk streets now populous with as many monsters as there were once only muggers. This also inspired the phrase *dark representation* in discussions with my colleagues.

There was a part of me that feared reflecting upon some decisions made in my craft – did I go too far? Is this fair of me to do?

I crafted this work from the knowledge and experience of writing and researching satire in various media platforms. Satire is not something that can afford to be subtle, lest its message fall by the wayside, instead favouring fandoms that ultimately fail to see the point (much like the example of *The Boys*). That is not to say that crafting works of dark satire, especially in horror, is a comfortable process. You are at once aware that you are designing to challenge, not to hurt, but that you have to push the boundaries of comfort into a difficult place. This is not the time to hold back out of concern of offence, to avoid specifics that can resonate too deeply with people, but rather to produce with the intention of offering the unconventional truth, the grotesque, festering truth buried under the veneer of good intentions. Comics can often be seen as sanitised, harmless fantasy – the superhero saves the day with minimal damage, or cities are conveniently evacuated. Villains are decidedly evil – their goals strictly to cause chaos and harm without reason. We can, of course, go on the extreme end, with comics like *The Boys* series, as well as Robert Kirkman's *Invincible* (2003 – 2018) series presenting the polar opposite of this, with greymoral 'heroes' committing barbaric acts of violence with no accounting for anyone but themselves – their extremity is absolute and unforgiveable. What I seek is a balance of this – characters that represent the abandoned and unwanted that are bitter because of it, villains whose motivations are not ultimately evil, rather enacted without empathy. These are human beings that have all lost something, the mercenaries have useful skills, but are disposable, the acts they perform are financially, not altruistically motivated. They make bad, and even wrong choices and suffer the consequences. They employ tropes and stereotypes to force assumptions from the reader, with some of those assumptions being fact. I know that my choices may cause harm, and it puts me in a difficult position, because I could sanitise the concepts, place everyone in appropriate PG-13 attire, make them all thin and attractive and white and disappear into a sea of identical stories, or hide behind metaphor and hope my reader "gets it". Or I could take a leaf from Zef and boldly assert a narrative that is not meant to be comfortable – filled with characters that are outcasts and appealing for their otherness because they actually offer an interesting point of view (as opposed to tokenistic inclusion) and wrap it together as a horrible, if at least humorous, account of the most scabrous underdogs one could ask for (or not). Much like the humble minibus taxi, these agents of chaos are an essential part of the tapestry of South Africa; they are our neighbours and relatives and random encounters on the streets, invisible because of their difference, their counter-normalcy, yet far better agents of society than the media-appropriate veneers meant to

represent them. As the premise of Falkof and van Staden's book, *Anxious Joburg*, suggests, I lived in that anxious city, and that state and place inspired narratives far more potent and sublime than I would ever manage living somewhere peaceful and calm. It made my stories raw, my characters strange and my lived experience dynamic. It also made me ask myself why I was running away from my role in how I make my comics. My characters are likely offensive by the nature of their presentation and writing, not to intentionally cause offence, but because they are the people I experienced and saw as a Joburger, commuter, pedestrian and victim; they were created from my privileged skillset and knowledge. My metaphors are deeply considered, but self-defeating in the way that satire is comedy for the educated elite, not for the masses. Thus, drawing an overweight black woman in shabby clothes and hoping that readers will understand that she's relying on those exact stereotypes to be underestimated is naïve at best, dangerous at worst. Instead, I need to be honest as a maker – I intentionally used stereotyping and tropes as a narrative device. They will likely offend, but they will likely also resonate with the local experience. Mrs B is designed to look exactly like a person you may encounter on a trip into the city (see Fig. 26 below). If you have no knowledge or experience of Johannesburg, then she is highly problematic-looking and you are completely within your rights to be offended. However, as you join my experience and understand the power in rendering her in such a powerless manner, you may understand why I chose this route, or you may understandably still be angered.





Figure 26. Comparative image of a *muthi* seller at Faraday Station in Johannesburg (photograph by Clement Lekanyane, published by *The Sunday Times,* 2011) and the design of Mrs B (art by author).

The *Popobawa*, then, was particularly important in facilitating the borderline between the violence and underlying tensions of the story and the strange moments of comedy. I initially didn't intend for its dialogue to be so sassy, but the more I illustrated the beast, the more I felt compelled to add the odd sense of humour. This is perhaps due to so many other titles making the unbeatable "big bad guy" interminably stoic, unrelenting and humourless. We need only look at the recent onslaught of Disney/Marvel's *Avengers* series of films where villains like Thanos and Ultron present all-powerful but humourless obstacles to their superhero foils, becoming rather blasé as they amalgamate into unmemorable set-pieces for battles. The *Popobawa*, however, will hurt you as much with its words as with its massive fists.

The juxtaposition of appearance to personality and ability plays a vital role in most of the cast of *SPOEK*, with Mrs/Miss B (her title changes depending on mood) being the most intensely dichotomic character. Her age, her choice of clothing and even how she holds herself are all forms of camouflage – for all intents and purposes, she's somebody's mom, or even their *gogo*.[54] She wears a Sunflower Fund buff on her head and carries a "Spore" (Spar) grocery bag full of herbs. Her old, dirty clothes tell a story of someone who has suffered, who is struggling and thus rendered invisible to passersby by a state of unwanted otherness. Her power lies in her shrewdness; living in liminality grants her unrestricted egress through spaces otherwise controlled, her apparent frailty bait for unsuspecting would-be attackers (both human and monster), and so she maintains a stranglehold on the darkest underbellies of society. Her encounter with the *Popobawa* is testament to this – upon hearing of a vastly powerful witch, the monster was naturally inclined to follow its greed for the energy Beauty possesses. Just like SPOEK, misplaced judgement soon results in the creature being severely injured and captured by Beauty. As seen in the first issue of the comic, SPOEK cannot even scratch the monster with his high-powered weapons, but Beauty's power is so intense that she burned the flesh of the *Popobawa's* hand and carved her cursed phrase *lekhora* (Sesotho for "slave") upon its chest, reneging it to perpetual servitude as a literal thrall of her sheer ability.

[54] A Nguni-language term of endearment, akin to "granny" in English and pronounced goh-goh.

All that is left for the monster, reduced from all-powerful to servant, is bitter sarcasm and gallows humour, often resulting in further injury, but it is unable to stop because it's the only freedom still granted.

It was during this ideation that the relationship between the two villains manifested itself. A monster reduced to mindless work, desperate to be free again, and its vicious captor whose ambitions surmount the wills of even the most avaricious of the gods. SPOEK, then, sits in the middle. He is no hero, nor would he want to be – money and the job are the only things that matter to him. He isn't even an anti-hero, because to be one would require even the most basic of empathy, which he lacks. Anti-villain, then, would be most appropriate, because his loyalty is negotiable, and currently the "good guys" have the largest budget.

While Beauty's goals are self-serving, they stem from decades of cruelty – she wants to purge the earth of everything, to force a hard reset and place everyone and everything on the same footing. The *Popobawa* simply wants to live freely, following its own natural course of hedonism and hunger. SPOEK simply wants chaos, because it means that he can continue to kill, maim and destroy with joyous abandon. I discuss many of my choices around designs in the Adaptation section of the journal, especially with regard to representation.



Figure 27. A contextual shot of Mrs B's first contact with SPOEK (2019). Art produced by author.

As seen in Fig. 27, the intentional design elements used on Mrs B are meant to be subversive. She has crafted an assemblage of stereotypes by design – she wants people to see her as the weak, overweight black woman, her clothes cheap and chintzy – rendered harmless

by societal gaze, or perhaps even as a victim. The thing she cannot and will not hide is her poise and posture – she is nothing if not confident, her pure vitriolic hate of society fuelling her drive. Even in the sequence above, she is the person in control, not SPOEK. She reduces him, calling out his own ignorance and punctuating it with a slur (*mlungu*[55]). He is as meaningless and empty of threat as she chooses to be perceived herself. Human and monster alike are mere obstacles to her, but her shrewdness and intelligence has given her the wisdom to be patient as she gathers the tools and soldiers she will need for her ultimate victory. Ultimately, Mrs B is the lord of her own regime of representation. Dittmar, in his 2020 chapter "Narrative Strategies – African Types and Stereotypes in Comics", furthers the discussion on types: "The design of figures in comics is usually based on types, not only in reference to race, but also to subcultural style, class, and/or professional occupations are used as core for these figures" (30). In my case, the subversion and amplification of these types is essential to the perception of my characters – I actively require underestimation, surprise and (if needed) even offence – Mrs B as a human being opposes the assumptions made based on her appearance, she rules her regime of representation.

Thus, the theme of hubris becomes key. These three main players are all apex in their minds – a witch, a monster and a hunter, interchangeable and equal – and so all are laden with the thought that they are invincible. SPOEK is the first to meet his downfall; he sings lamentations about grandfathers passing gas (a childhood rhyme) as he slays enemy upon enemy, cracking terrible puns to his teammates and even outright telling Beauty about his disappointment upon their meeting. When perched upon such a high tower, one truly needs to fall hard, and so he does. Beaten, humiliated and then consumed, the mercenary is erased, without fanfare or reason. To make matters worse, his soul is trapped in a special bag of *muthi* and bound to his costume and then set ablaze to be cursed to haunt the location of his utter defeat for all eternity.

The other two have longer journeys ahead of them. SPOEK's vengeance in issue two inadvertently partially releases the bond that Beauty holds on the *Popobawa*, while Beauty's plans are disrupted in *Wanton*.

Surprisingly, a character that was more difficult to craft for the comic was Gorilla. He appears to be the prototypical Boxer-type character from *Animal Farm* – an everyman from the

[55]The literal meaning of *mlungu* is "white person". Depending on context, this can either be viewed humorously or invectively as an insult.

wrong side of the Gautrain[56] tracks. His thick East Rand accent with a melange of Afrikaans and English aphorisms provoke a sense of low-class Afrikanerdom akin to the Zef stylings of techno band Die Antwoord or rapper Jack Parow. For all intents and purposes, that's exactly who he is, but he's also deeply earnest, loyal and an incredibly adept soldier – his mutations (disproportionately large arms and hands with short legs) work to his advantage whilst also originating his invective nickname.

In their 2011 paper "Bastardised Whiteness: 'Zef'-Culture, *Die Antwoord* and the Reconfiguration of Contemporary Afrikaans Identities", Marx and Milton paraphrase a series of useful citations that explore the complexity of whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa, which I will use due to the eloquence through which they explain the phenomenon:

> within a South African context there was/is nothing intrinsically covert about the formation of white identity: "… in … South Africa … white people are acutely aware of their whiteness" (Steyn, in De Klerk, 2010); "… there is a self-consciousness to South African whiteness [and] in seeking to limit their performance of whiteness post-apartheid (by 'watching themselves being watched') South African 'whites' actually reinforce the primacy of whiteness by seeing it as implying a special responsibility" (Nuttal, in De Klerk, 2010). Hall noted that "… what unsettles culture is matter out of place – the breaking of unwritten rules and codes" (1997, p. 236). (Marx & Milton, 2011: 723)

The authors further explore the emergence of Zef, which is a genre that embraces the identity and role of post-apartheid white Afrikaans youth by offering a darkly self-aware, critical but honest form of expression through the music and art that is produced (727). I discussed my own experiences growing up as a white, English-speaking member of the so-called "Born Free Generation" previously, where I would often find myself in a liminal space of never being part of the previous regime, but simultaneously speaking the language of the coloniser – a different oppressor in the same pale flesh. Botes and Kannemeyer echoed this in their work in *Bitterkomix*,[57] fully embracing their status of being the faces of former oppression and now being a true outlying minority exploring their sense of place in a country that did not want them. This sense of both responsibility and liminality is crushing at times, because you are acutely aware of the harm caused by members of your culture, or even of your family.

[56] A rapid transit train that runs the length of Johannesburg from its central station in the CBD through to neighbouring city Pretoria, both of which are situated in the Gauteng province.
[57] A series of semi-autobiographical graphic novels illustrated in a style similar to Hergé's *Tintin* comics.

When Die Antwoord first appeared, I was in my final year of study in my undergraduate degree. At first, I was wondering why Waddy Jones (Ninja) was pretending to be Afrikaans, especially considering his previous work in his band Max Normal, but the strange, ironic and odd beats of "Enter the Ninja" resonated deeply with me. It was something new and different, and while we thought Die Antwoord was a parody band akin to New Zealand's Flight of the Conchords, it soon became clear that they were onto something. It was thus surreal to walk around the painfully upper-class white-colonial Greenside Woolworths and see Ninja and Yolandi shopping for groceries – worlds apart from their "*roff en siff*"[58] personas on stage – or seeing one of them leave my local barber shop as I went in for an appointment. This dichotomous behaviour is likely why I could never really take them seriously, but the band soon started to deeply embody their own image and went all-in on the image of the low-class white Afrikaner. Even Zef itself can roughly be translated as "kommon" or common (as defined on the self-styled Zef website watkykjy.co.za), which is ascribed to "clapped-out Ford Cortinas with fur on the dashboard, tight mom jeans pulled up too high" cultural artefacts (Mhambi, 2024).

Gorilla is very much a product of this – his greasy mullet, ill-fitting clothes and filthy *plakkies* (flip-flops) all being deeply iconic of Zef, but he holds a much deeper side of someone who fears losing the only people that have ever shown him any kind of respect. Outwardly, Gorilla is a joke, but he dresses the way he does out of comfort and access – his build makes it impossible to wear "normal" clothes that aren't custom-made for his strange build, though the *plakkies* are more of a personal choice. Inwardly, he has faced rejection, discrimination and even fear – it has hurt and numbed him, but he actively chose to remain true to who he is, rather than trying to fit in. The key to Zef is finding a place of acceptance for the liminal white Afrikaner as another part of the cultural tapestry of South Africa, and that's why Gorilla is wholly part of and representative of something that is unique to the country's culture. To use an observation from Dittmar (writing about comic villains in this context): "in most genres, comics tend to simplify [visual representations] not only visually, but also in their narration", and he goes on to consider how this is not universal to comics, but the more complex the design of visual and narrative, the more demanding comics become to read (2020: 30). At their core, comics serve the function of providing a narrative, but how they do so is entirely down to author intent, publisher demand or even the social or cultural context of the place of making, making the approach difficult to truly specify. Here, Mrs B is deeply complex – her semiology is painful and crude, but her character is intended to be revealed slowly. SPOEK, on the other hand, is exactly

[58] Afrikaans slang for rough and gross/disgusting.

who he appears to be – vicious, callous and spiteful. I wanted a simple protagonist for this reason; he's no hero, and it's the people around him that develop him. Gorilla is entirely reductive and simplified – his motivations, speech and needs are basic, but his simplicity makes him unique: he is nothing but himself, and he owns his appearance, his background and his purpose. He has no need to conform and he never will, because he is truly content. He is, therefore, the most complicated character of all.

Conclusion

This chapter sought, through the exegetical method, to:

The goals for this case study are:

1. Continued advocacy for plaited exegesis as methodology for creative work and for evolution of cyclical exegesis (i.e. practice-led research).
2. The exploration of "drawing local" into comics from the perspective of both citizen and cultural outsider. Essentially, I look into the act of drawing, drawing upon the socio-cultural geography of urban Johannesburg and its people as a fictive but extant space.

And a secondary goal:

3. Following the above, I want to present comics as a highly accessible form of entertainment, with the core goal of localisation in both content and language at the forefront.

While the first two points of the goals have, I believe, been partially met, I do feel that to achieve a proper conclusion, some further points in the final goal should be addressed.

I refer to the maker (myself) as an unseen character in my work – this is not an extension of ego, but rather a notable process of craft when engaging in wholly personal work. If I was tasked to write an issue of *Batman*, I would already have a clear idea of who he and his alter-ego, Bruce Wayne, are as people, what his goals are, how his storyworld functions and even how he moves. This has come from decades of exposure to the character through a vast variety of media – I've read his comics, played his video games (on every generation of platform since the SEGA Mega Drive), watched him in countless animated and filmic adaptations and even cosplayed as his cohort Nightwing. This means that, with a slight sense of irony, I would not have much creative freedom – Batman is heavily established and nearly 100 years old, with a deeply entrenched fandom for good measure. To that end, he has become formulaic. There

have, of course, been truly memorable moments in his history, but often the narratives will follow a "villain of the week" theme or have a more long-form conspiratorial foundation, and they will always have the hero prevailing against all odds.

Independent titles free us of this constriction. Nobody knows who Vice, Ellie, Beauty and SPOEK are; instead, they are vessels of potential. I don't need to worry about Superman's altruism or Deadpool's metanarratives, I can instead present a cast of oddball characters that function beyond the tropes of their medium and appearance. To succeed in this, universality has to be avoided – it's a trap that new writers fall into because they want to foster mass appeal, but that just provides an endless facsimile of stories and character archetypes that we already know. Instead, I sought to move past this by using themes from my own life and making flawed, troubled characters from it. Admittedly, my life has perhaps been slightly more chaotic than others', with significant traumas and many life-threatening injuries providing a well-spring of inspiration (I have, at this point, fractured 22 bones, including my skull and two vertebrae in my neck).

Most importantly, though, the characters ultimately needed to be human, even the monsters. The *Wantonverse* doesn't simply have creatures in it for disposable targets – they are vital to the fabric of the world, as they were the victims of humanity and thus have their own desires, hopes and flaws. I also took a risk by heavily locating my work in urban Johannesburg. This will likely alienate many readers, but my hope is that the recognisability of the places, the people and the language fosters a greater call for such specific design intention. On a more open level, I also believe that the exoticism holds enormous appeal by virtue of being different to everything else.

To close this section, it should be noted that these two sub-chapters ideally would be better suited for longer-form research. The expansive nature of the content developed in this creative practice is, in reflection, too overt to provide a close analysis of specific values, instead favouring a more general overview that stemmed from an active shifting across methodology that served to inform a previously embedded influence (Johannesburg) as a key factor in production as it revealed itself through reflection. I do rely on my journal as a key player in facilitating deeper engagement, but it's clear that the thematic exploration could easily be done on a single issue of the comics developed. However, the ability to engage with older work (*Wanton*) and compare it to new material, especially in *SPOEK 2*, has provided some compelling insight towards my own developmental process.

While I far exceeded the constraints suggested by Ings' plaited exegesis structure, I continue on the reflection drawn in the sub-conclusion of Chapter 4.1. While what has been presented here no longer follows the defined structure of plaited exegesis, its modified version has extended the potential for analysis. To enable a better workflow in concurrent research-praxis, I found that some sections of Ings' structure are better served by being merged into larger thematic categories.

As a reminder Ings proposed the following format:

· an introduction,

· a positioning of the research and researcher,

· a review of contextual knowledge,

· a discussion of methodology and methods,

· a discussion of critical ideas underpinning the project and some form of critical commentary on the work produced.

Firstly, merging positionality and contextual knowledge provides a more natural flow of information that provides a more holistic understanding of the thematic design. I would then add a specific section for the theoretical lens, since it needs to be motivated as an internal catalyst of investigation which can inform a more robust model for the methodological execution. Essentially, the plaited exegesis is simply the means of conjunction between writing and making, a modular system that can be informed by many other processes. In this chapter, I identified the possibility of even using non-creative-practice methodologies in this way, simply tempering the creative output to suit the needs of research goals and findings.

I also believe that parallel texts are useful when writing for more traditional institutions or publications, but the radical method works especially well with complimentary mediums – in this case illustration, design, comics and writing can easily merge with the text[59]. There is a potential in doing this with interactive media, using web platforms or self-contained apps (or games) to relay and demonstrate concepts. My research journal, in this instance, is what I believe is the real exegesis – a space that allows flexible access to all materials, be it research, reflection or output in a single space and at the reader's leisure. There is much untapped

[59] Film, music and performance are different – they suit the more typical plaited format that allows the writing and output to be viewed apart or in conjunction.

potential there and lies in an external space of being its own product that contains all research, while functioning outside of the typical bounds of even the plaited exegesis model.

This specific section employed that modularity, becoming a close reading of my part of the socio-cultural geography of Johannesburg and how it is reflected outward in my work as a comic artist. As is natural to experimental work, the scope of this chapter became overtly expansive and most certainly not appropriate for the established idea of the plaited exegesis, which I believe is better suited to more narrowly focused endeavours, but the modified version crafts a robust account of process that is deeply informed from a critical mass.

Further observations and conclusions will be made in the closing reflections that are presented in Chapter 5.



CHAPTER 5

ART: Anthology Cover

Chapter 5: Exegesis Reflections

Preamble

While shifting its axis somewhat, the research impetus of this work maintained its original problem statement whilst adapting the methodological elements discussed in:

By investigating the scope of the creative exegesis methodology, as proposed by Geland, Krauth, Ings and others, this research offers a creative research method, using a case study of comic making as a creative process aiming to represent the notion of locality as expressed through the author's lived experience of the socio-cultural geography of the South African city, Johannesburg.

The initial methodological idea behind this research was to explore the nature of creative research as it currently functions within and without the greater academy of the humanities and find an option that can reconcile certain gaps between formal requirements and creative processes without necessarily disrupting either. Significant strides have been made in terms of developing appropriate and useful methodologies that provide far more robust scope by providing more quantifiable data, which creative research was often maligned for perceptibly lacking, eschewing results in favour of more ethnographic experiences. Whilst practitioners like me deeply value the contributions of the latter, it is often difficult to justify the worthiness of the work outside of niche disciplinary reviews – the work is, for lack of a better analogy, written for those who already know it, or at least care deeply about it. James Elkins' simultaneously critical and evangelical *Artists with PhDs* (2014 and 2021) discusses these struggles deeply, offering both reasons for and against creative research, but, in summary, states that an artist shouldn't feel the need to attain a PhD as it can often inhibit their actual processes (see the chapter "14 Reasons to Mistrust the PhD"), but it can offer immense potential for personal growth. The impetus of this research's methodology then arose from seeking how to better document and demonstrate creative studies in a way that facilitates the freedom of making whilst still justifying all steps of the process.

Granted, methods such as research-through-design have provided workable templates in this regard, putting at the forefront the need for a strongly grounded study prior to the conducting of any creative praxis; but as design as a discipline (in most of its forms) already contains a deep structure that is necessitated by planning and research, the work created is mostly prescribed and without much flexibility. Autoethnographies, then, offer complete freedom of expression – a personal and richly documented account of the very nature of creative experiences – but can get lost in the process and struggle to connect to a larger red

thread of study. Scholars such as Welby Ings then developed the so-called plaited exegesis, a method that performs the task of reconciling the gulf between creativity and research that I was experiencing, fostering an “in the moment” form of research documentation that simultaneously informs and is informed by the creative product whilst actively engaging with the voice and presence of the author.

This discovery inspired a modal shift in my research. A method that actively inspires research is a most ideal avenue of exploration for creative practitioners (including myself) that have previously felt discouraged by the rigour of academia, allowing for the facilitation of inspiring research pedagogies in teaching and learning environments. A decision was made to then test this method to explore its usage and impact on a platform of creative work that I have been making and researching for multiple decades: comics. The idea was not to conduct a piece of comic studies research per se, but rather to use this medium as a demonstrative platform that could serve as a placeholder template for many other fields. Ideally, this research could be replicated in game design, theatre or any other creative discipline and still yield strong explorations into the creative journeys of the researcher(s).

As discussed throughout this document, this research employed two case study demonstrations to explore the potential of the method as well as any possible pitfalls or limitations. The idea was to maintain comics as the praxis but explore sub-genres such as game design and narratology to advocate the flexibility of approach offered by the plaited exegesis.

In the two case studies, Ings’ clearly defined structured approach unexpectedly evolved into a hybrid format, merging position and contextual knowledge, resulting in a cascading revelation of insights that affected (and were affected by) the research as an entire product, not just as a sequence. A re-evaluation occurred, especially of the longer format research demonstrated in Chapter 4 that saw a fundamental and paradigmatic shift of the thesis’ core goals involving a much deeper consideration of the socio-cultural geography of Johannesburg that had been drawn from an unintended close reading of my creative process as a born resident of the spaces both actual and perceptual.

Whilst fully intended as a methodological exposition, I inadvertently discovered a far larger path of knowledge generation that was afforded only by the accidental straying from the base structure of the plaited exegesis model: my learned experience and its transferral. This will be explained in the next section.

5.1 Knowledge Contributions and Findings: It was all Joburg's Fault

Following the discussion of the methodological element of the research problem, the mode of testing and its theoretical lens proved to be far more impactful on the creative output than originally thought. Chapters 3 and 4 were initially intended to be explorations of the adaptation of narratives into different forms of comics, with the first exploring urban myth (and its contemporary form of creepypasta) and the second looking at traditional folklore and its applications in other genres (speculative fiction and horror comedy). I furthered this in Chapter 3 by using creepypasta as a point of advocacy for generating an interactive comic, arguing that the space of the internet is now the narrative habitus (at least by definition of a space that fosters and generates stories for, in this case, its digital citizens) of modern urban myth; presenting an online artefact was thus a logical exploration of the addition and remediation of older myths. Habitus, in this instance, was drawn from Pierre Bourdieu's era-spanning work as it appeared in 1989's *Social Space and Symbolic Power* and later in 1993's *The Field of Cultural Production* (Bourdieu here acknowledged as the originator of the theory and its most prolific scholar, so this selection only represents a fraction of his work). My first understanding is drawn for the concept of a habitus speaking to its inhabitant's (here as author/ maker) position in a given social space (1989), which rejects the idea of a 'rational' actor, instead stating that knowledge is specific to the extent of awareness of given social structures. I discussed this in Chapter 4, mentioning that I would not be able to present a story based in Cape Town with the same depth and social knowledge as I can with Johannesburg. A secondary element presented by Bourdieu's habitus is the idea disposition of its speaker (in this research, termed positionality), which is "…not based on conscious intentionality but rather from unconscious dispositions towards practice and depend on the power position the agent occupies in the social structure" (1993: 58). While I termed this disposition the 'currency of privilege' in Chapters 3 and 4, my practice stems from that power-position. My views on Hillbrow, expressed in Chapter 4, for example, are originated from an outsider's perspective. My brief visits to the area were more aligned with research tourism than active engagement, and I was terrified to be there. Yet, I am still white and male, my presence a version of power imposition that afforded the luxury of the whimsical encounter with the weapon-wielding gang that afforded me safe passage and an unforgettable anecdote. Had my power been any less, that situation could have ended very differently. I also have my skills, education and access as a second to technology as a form of power-privilege. I am equipped to tell the stories in the

manner I did, aware of the greater meaning and impacts whilst still using the opportunity to further my academic career, as well as generate work intended as entertainment first, social critique second.

It was in the exploration of the function and origins of urban myths that I began to realise the importance of locality in making the tales relevant to their consumers. We may be familiar with how films will often anthropomorphise New York City, giving it an associative personality, an inherent sense of cruelty and darkness set against its shiny veneers, but as cultural and physical outsiders, we may never truly associate with the idea of sewer alligators or the river Hudson's Ghost Ship myth. However, Johannesburg (or Joburg as it's affectionately termed) is not lacking in tales of monsters and horror – from the ghost of serial killer Daisy De Melker haunting the former children's hospital to *tokoloshe* and possessed animals, there is a special line of narrative embedded in the very fabric of the South African city.

If Chapter 3 was the spark, then Chapter 4 would be the explosion – the much larger second case study took an unexpected journey into the territory of socio-cultural geography studies during the earlier phases of the research. As mentioned earlier, this chapter was a clear departure from the original structure of the plaited exegesis, as proposed by Ings, intended to demonstrate more traditional practices of comic writing and making, instead segueing into a line of inquiry that revealed just how much being a native Joburger had affected my positionality and process as a creative practitioner. What started as an anecdote about how my inspiration for writing had come from the *Daily Sun* headline posters and *Madam & Eve* comic strips shifted into the ways my residence of and daily commute through the city had been influencing my state of being as a person and a maker.

Johannesburg wasn't simply the place of my birth, or the place I lived in for most of my life – it had also become a lived genre (or narrative habitus, as explained earlier) that drove my creative process. The extent and profundity of influence was far beyond what was initially presumed, soon revealing that the colours I choose, the narrative arcs I construct and even my sense of humour are all deeply embedded in my identity as a Joburger – not simply South African, but specifically and quintessentially a denizen of the most infamous of urban centres, located even more so as a white, male citizen of the city's southern suburbs, a satellite area replete with commuters, gyms and a heavily affected accent.

There is much to unpack here – a system of class, cohesion and inherent difference extrapolated by the essence of being a Joburg southerner, whose daily journeys into the north (a place of alleged wealth and high class citizenry) made me a class infiltrator, all the while

consuming (and appropriating) the media of street pole paraphernalia as it began to etch its way into a kernel of narrative that would become the catalyst of my work.

For much of this research, I struggled to reconcile my identity as a positional driver of my work and research. At first, I believed that an exploration of my role as a white male practitioner attempting to represent a South African cast in comics was the driver for a larger part of my research, but it felt lacking and inconsequential. The answer from the stance of pure representation is that there will always be a use of types, stereotypes and tropes. It is ineffable and inescapable. I can do my best to address potential harm and pain caused by any unintended misrepresentation, but it's not possible to make a wholly representative and fair depiction of the complex socio-cultural dynamic of South Africa.

Worse is that it would be dishonest.

As Chapter 4 expanded (and was later divided into two parts), it became evident that my path as a creator is riddled with more potholes than Beyers Naudé[60] avenue and more dangerous than walking through Hillbrow with a handful of cash. Joburg aphorisms aside, it's these self-same experiences of nuanced inconvenience, fear, boredom and excitement that come from being a city dweller that left their mark on me. I've seen the best and worst the city has to offer, experienced crime and prevented it, had unrepeatable things said to and about me, but also had complete strangers wish me a good day. This transcends the idea of the local that was initially introduced in Chapter 1 – that being a more formative version of what was eventually summated here. It was presumed that locality, in the case of this research, was based upon making something feel local by making use of identifiable imagery, language and location as visual signifiers of a specific place. Instead, it was discovered that locality, in my instance, was even more granular than that, and my observed and lived stories stemmed from it – I am a product of Johannesburg, with all that it entails.

5.2 Methodological Evaluation

The methodological goal of this research was to gain a deep understanding of the creative exegesis methodology, and specifically the plaited exegesis, to interrogate it and apply it to my own work to discover potential extensions of outputs for creative research as well as possible

[60] One of the large main roads that runs the length of central to northern Johannesburg, often filled with roadworks, potholes and broken traffic lights.

shortcomings in how the method functions in the larger academic project. This work is specific to my process, demonstrating the iteration, reflection and discovery that has helped me to deeply engage with my creative process as a practitioner while simultaneously investigating pedagogically applicable research methods that provide genuine alternatives to more traditional lenses of study, even within the creative field.

The research journey sought to understand how the influences of my surroundings, nationality and experiences have shaped my narratives as a form of personal exposition, and how I then outwardly presented these elements in my work as a comic artist. There has been a shift in my line of thought as I moved from the standardised research-through-design model of analysis into the "real-time" documentation afforded by the plaited exegesis methodological model proposed by Welby Ings. This allowed a natural flow of data synthesis and creative process as opposed to piecing together "appropriate" elements stipulated by fixed goals that may not fully reflect the intention of either the work or the maker.

Formal Summations

The Research Journal

Whilst not new to most forms of creative research, the research journal proved essential in the generation of this work over time. Presenting the journal in a digital, highly interactive format was itself vital to the true experience of the work, allowing for a fully multimedial exploration of the development of the work on a platform that can host everything from text to video and even interactive games. The nature of this research means that a more traditional presentation of these findings simply would not be as effective; contemporary creative research should be documented using contemporary methods if we ever are to actively improve the approach of this form of research in the greater academy.

All journal work discussed below can be found here[61], along with additional addenda that provide a contextual account of my personal journey into the world of comic making over 15 years. The journals were designed to be read non-linearly and independently for ease of access.

[61] https://app.milanote.com/1TDqtj1kEPYz0P?p=LMzboQwMErm

Part 1: Overarching Exegetical Summation – Chapter 3

The exegesis chapters were presented as case studies with the intention of demonstrating the execution of differing thematic and theoretical approaches within the larger auspice of the plaited exegesis method. Comics were selected as the creative artefact due to my long history of researching and making them, but they can easily be replaced by any other form of creative work and/or field. Another reason for presenting case studies was to demonstrate how professional experience in a creative medium can be documented successfully without research feeling disruptive or forced, instead living symbiotically with the active engagement of the creative experience itself.

Chapter 3 demonstrated a close observation of employing the contemporary narrative techniques of creepypasta and more typical tenets of urban myth to develop an adaptation of the tale of the Pinky-Pinky, a type of mutated *tokoloshe* that preys on children that use public restrooms alone. The creative work is presented in the form of an interactive comic that is intended to be consumed on either mobile devices or computers, as they are the most likely means of access for the intended reading audience.

The core points of investigation of this chapter were:

1. Understanding the phenomenon of urban mythology and its contemporary, creepypasta, and how it develops narrative rooted in reality. This understanding should then be applied to the narrative and thematic development of the creative output.
2. Understanding the process of adapting comics from traditional layouts and media into a digital platform and whether they maintain their "comicness" or shift into something different.

Transmedial narratology theory was applied to the adaptation process, cross-examining the roots of urban myth and the later development of creepypasta, the appeal of horror as a narrative and the experience of the Pinky-Pinky legend, as sourced from anecdotes, online documents and videos. As a more "modern" creature that rose to prominence in the late twentieth century, the Pinky-Pinky, was a schoolyard tale passed around orally. The legend was grounded in the distinct reality of gender-based violence, especially against young girls in lower-income areas, which had become prominent. The discussion of the story origins revealed that attributing the horror of the experience to a monster is often easier than accepting the

reality, while at the same time developing a scare tactic to discourage venturing into unknown spaces alone.

The creative artefact was developed in concurrence with the knowledge-gathering process, seeing a cyclical application of theory into the foundations of the working process. The specific focus of the creative work was upon the specific needs of narratives designed for interactivity – what remains, what is removed and what is entirely unique to the medium. In this case, sound and user agency were of particular note, as they augment and shift the reading process into one that is driven by touch and the reader's specific engagement – narratives can be paused, rewound or quickly flicked through. These aspects were taken into consideration and specific delays, diegetic audio and interactions were designed as dedicated points of inference.

Upon completion, the study revealed that the artefact produced was no longer simply a comic – its multimodality had shifted the traditional understanding of the medium into something else. The artefact still uses comic-style panels, text and bubbles, but it also employs animation, sound and interactivity, which changes reading from a passive to an active process. This change is necessitated as an aspect of creepypasta narratives, themselves digital natives rather than traditional oral or written urban myths, thus adding an element of archivability.

The final comic/game *Don't Go Alone!* was hosted on Itch.io, a popular independent gaming portal, allowing free and universal public access to the content. It was noted that while it was a unique and appealing process of making comics, this format requires significant amounts of development time, high levels of technical skill, access to high-speed internet and powerful computers, and then a dedicated approach to publicising and promoting the content, as it has to contend with hundreds of other submissions that occur on a daily basis. However, the deeper engagement with the application of creative and research-informed narratives in a real-time path of expression genuinely evoked a sense of joy in the process of documentation and reflection. Essentially, it was proven to be a genuinely fun mode of creative research previously never experienced.

Journal

The research journal for Chapter 3 was presented in four parts, which were used to show various key points in the making and research process for the exegesis. Section 1 focuses specifically on the technical considerations of making interactive comics, showing character design, scripts, art integration and even the physical construction of the comic in the Unity

game engine. The second section looks at traditional comic panelling compared to how these methods needed to be shifted in the interactive comic. The third section explores related precedents in the form of the video game mediums of visual novels and point-and-click narrative games made in the horror genre. This starts with an analysis of the subversive horror of a satirical dating-game-cum-psychological horror story, *Doki Doki Literature Club*, then turns to Eldritch horror/urban myth game *World of Horror* and ends with a contemporary title, *Five Nights at Freddy's*, that has drawn thousands of early teenage fans into its story world, discussing why horror is so appealing to younger fans. The final section looks at the Pinky-Pinky as presented in other forms of media, from South African films to podcasts, YouTube videos and artist Penny Siopis' recurring presentations of the creature in her work, particularly at her *Time and Again* exhibition in 2015.

The journal combines various media, including GIF images and video recordings of the making process of the comic, visual precedents and a soundtrack that was commissioned for the final product. It was important to immerse the reader in this process, as simply presenting static images will be of no benefit when attempting to demonstrate how one needs to think in three-dimensional space when developing parallax stories.

Part 2: Overarching Exegetical Summation – Chapter 4

The second case study of the exegetical method presented a much larger scope of investigation that focused on traditional (intended for print) comics as the creative artefacts and looked into representation, folklore, narrative and positionality during the process of researching and making comics with very specific audiences in mind. The larger scale partly resulted from the legacy of the research-through-design method used earlier; instead of redoing the study, the opportunity presented itself to discuss the shift of mode and method, which could serve as a greater point of advocacy for the employment of the plaited exegesis method in favour of research-through-design. The chapter began with an overview of the core intention of this decision and started the discussion of the role of positionality as a white maker of comics featuring diverse casts and highly specific locations.

Following the discussion of position and the modal shift from research-through-design to plaited exegesis, the chapter introduced its key points of discussion:

1. Continued advocacy for plaited exegesis as methodology for creative work and continued evolution of cyclical exegesis (i.e. practice-led research).

2. The exploration of “drawing local” into comics from the perspective of both citizen and cultural outsider. Essentially, I look into the act of drawing, drawing upon the locality of urban Johannesburg and its people as a fictive but extant space.
3. Following this, I want to present comics as a highly accessible form of entertainment, with the core goal of localisation in both content and language at the forefront.

The first task following the positionality overview was to establish the modes and methods of making what was defined as a traditional comic (book formatted and intended for printing), which started with an overview of the production pipeline discussed by both comic makers and scholars, in this instance Will Eisner and Kevin Huizenga, but updated with processes that were noted as having changed or even become outmoded since the original publication of the Huizenga and Eisner texts.

A discovery was then made in that personal experience; my knowledge was informed and crafted by being a member of the so-called “Born Free Generation”, the first to experience racial integration in schools, the end of all apartheid restrictions and the birth of the new constitution, but also retaining a legacy of the true destruction the former fascist state had wrought. Reading myths and legends as a child fuelled my imagination, but it was the legacy of the era, the new spaces and people that were once forbidden and taboo, and the strange tapestry of post-apartheid Johannesburg that started to craft a contemporary urban myth, fuelled by fear of change, anxiety of existence (as former enemy, now compatriot) and the rise of technology as the world shifted from analogue to digital media in front of my eyes.

The chaos of change and constant newness was presented through several factors, beginning with the city of Johannesburg itself, crafting a lingua franca and narrative habitus as discussed in several authors’ work around the area study of Johannesburg, with the city as a source of anxiety in all forms. Existence in a city that is deeply complex, terrifying, yet openly honest about its state of being yielded an influence upon me that I was not aware of until conducting this study. The lens of area studies and their effect was then applied through specific catalytical investigations.

As narrative habitus, the tabloid headline posters of the *Daily Sun* served as a catalyst in story crafting. Their provocative messages and use of urban myths provided a notable source of (unintended) inspiration for creative endeavours. The phenomenon was investigated and revealed to be something that was a product of the exploitation of the blue-collar worker class, yet one that holds vitality in the lived experience of Johannesburg in particular. The headlines’

influences were demonstrated in *SPOEK*, one of the comics developed as part of the creative output of the research, and their role was expanded upon in the research journal.

The second phase of exploration turned to the production of locality and dark representation, a section that dove deeply into the role of the maker in representation, the power it holds and the responsibility of privilege and race in both good and bad frames of presentation. Aspects of race and decisions made around why certain characters were rendered in the way they were were interrogated through the use of Hall's "Spectacle of the Other", links to area studies and what it meant to authentically represent character tropes through the satire presented in the horror-comedy genre. This was followed by a look into class discrimination within white communities, providing a reading into Zef culture and its impact on the writing and representation of Gorilla, a character from *SPOEK* as a class other.

The lengthy contextual knowledge was employed to give deeper insight into the production process of both *Wanton* and *SPOEK*, demonstrating the application of known, learned and revealed techniques of narrative design and visual representation found in both titles. The method section explored failed decisions, responses to critique and the application of locality that was fundamental in the making process of the comics. This section provided the ultimate discovery of my working process, which will be discussed fully later in this chapter.

Final Summation

The advocacy for the plaited exegesis model stemmed from the initial difficulties in presenting creative research in a way that encourages formal reflection whilst also allowing for creative freedom in the production of the artefact. Two case studies of different scopes were used to explore different modes of making.

The first, a smaller study on digital comics themed around urban myth/creepypasta, yielded clear and useful results – the active application of knowledge to the process resulted in a fast-paced but effective research method that produced a highly polished artefact whilst also yielding useful reflective knowledge.

The cost of this is that the study needs to be relatively small and is demanding to produce, but it can be recommended for deployment in research projects, journals or smaller scale postgraduate research. The risk of scope creep is the largest negative factor, and for lack of more formalised critique, another risk lies in the "fun factor" of the process, leading to overt development and potential obfuscation of research questions.

An exploration of positionality under the auspice of the representation of locality was presented and then narrowed down to the specific influence the socio-cultural geography of Johannesburg held on the creative craft as well as prompting research on the traditional comics produced as the creative artefacts of this study. The contextual knowledge section grew exponentially after an unintended but ultimately useful application of the close reading lens to area studies that revealed a far deeper truth and place of pure honesty in reflection about the position, power, privilege and responsibility of a white comic maker in South Africa.

As noted in the reflections of Chapter 4, this was not strictly following the tenets of format requirements of the plaited exegesis, but it stemmed from the necessity of discovery. As such, the second case study failed as a point of advocacy for the specific process laid out by Welby Ings but provided a much larger insight into the greater methodological project of the research: being able to represent the benefits and limitations of creative research as attempted through the plaited exegesis model and what needs to be done address shortcomings.

The plaited exegesis method, at least in my experience of it in this research, works best when conducted with completely new work that is developed in conjunction with the research (as seen in Chapter 3). Chapter 4 showed how legacy work can, in fact, impede the coherency of the research as it requires an extensive contextual discussion that ultimately obfuscates the greater process of the method. While it still holds potential, the study in Chapter 4 should have omitted *Wanton* and rather focused only on *SPOEK*, as the former would have benefitted far more from remaining a research-through-design project presented on its own, given the reflectivity that was natural to the age of the work. That being said, I mentioned the addition of a cyclic exegesis that can factor more reflective practice whilst still fostering the production of new work. In this way, I could take the original *Wanton #0* and document the making of the subsequent issue, using the learning from reflection, self-critique and a specific theoretical lens to explore the production. I also feel that the written element of the work should borrow from the radical exegesis method described by Krauth, which sees the merging of the elements in a single body of work – here, the journal becomes the thesis as it reflects upon the developmental cycle that encourages concurrent notation and reflection.

Final thoughts and conclusions will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

5.3 Literature: Others, Creativity and Pragmatism

To conduct this research, many sources were consulted throughout the various chapters. Due to the nature of the study, core theoretical frameworks were presented in Chapters 1 and 2, with literature reviews being provided within the structural systems proposed by the exegetical method in Chapters 3 and 4. The main lenses took the form of socio-cultural geography studies, as well as Intermedial (with emphasis on Transmedia) Narratology. Both occupy a greater territory of narrative studies, with the former relying on tenets of Bourdieu's habitus, mixing culture studies with area studies, while the latter is employed as a device of interrogation for adapting [comic] narratives across different instances of media.

I intended this dissertation to be seen as a container of sorts – explaining the finer points of interrogation and then presenting the learning as test case studies. These case studies were in turn expected to be read as free-standing agents, tied together through the research journal component and the dissertation's reflective moments. I needed to adopt some special framework additions, such as the 'Preamble' sections in Chapters 3 and 4 as bridging for the larger research project, meaning that in an ideal world, it should not appear in an actual exegetical study. As the method requires specific literature reviews (here termed contextual knowledge), I elected not to present all consulted theory in the dissertation's literature review, since it would not accurately reflect my vision of conducting research in plaited exegesis format. This decision significantly alters the typical structure of the PhD, but in a manner that I hope challenges the assertions of using traditional formats of documentation and many kinds of creative research. I again hearken back to Elkins' discussion of the typical problems faced by many creative practitioners that can find the academic tour-de-force rigour of a PhD both imposing and disruptive to expressing their practice as something of academic merit.

Whilst this understandably is an unconventional approach, especially in PhD work, I believe that it facilitates a clearer line of thought – the overarching frameworks are employed throughout the research to ensure consistency, but the specific literature that was required to make the individual creative artefacts is presented under the structure of the plaited exegesis method. These contextual knowledge sections, as they are termed by Ings, provide the catalytic knowledge through which the rest of the work is developed and reported. This structure also affords a space for personal anecdotal knowledge that affects and is affected by the reflective practice that is encountered in this manner.

As this research presents itself under the auspice of comic studies, I consulted the works of several key scholars that have provided long-standing definitions of the field of study as well as a critique thereof. Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* provides a baseline definition of what a comic actually is, as he maintains that without an established definition, one can argue that almost anything is a comic. While I agree with this statement to an extent, his definition of "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (1993: 20) has subsequently been highly criticised because it excludes alternative media comics, digital comics and, especially, text. It is the exclusion of text (in the form of captions, bubbles and onomatopoeia) that scholars such as Thierry Groensteen have found problematic in McCloud's work. The debate around meaning is, in summary, found in the dissonance between scholars studying the structural minutiae of comics (such as lines, panel sizes and the like) and those studying comics as texts, where I believe that a blending of the two approaches at least offers a more insightful form of investigation into the medium.

The next point of investigation is the relationship between creative research and the South African academy, where Veronica Baxter in her 2013 book chapter *Practice as Research in South Africa* discusses the crucial need to provide more creative research methods in the academy, because the affordances it grants to people typically not inclined to traditional, analytical research offer an untapped realm of exploration in many under-researched fields. Baxter specifically looks at research-through-design, which was the original method for my own research, and leads logically into the discussion of the creative (and plaited) exegesis, as proposed by Welby Ings in *The Authored Voice: Emerging Approaches to Exegesis Design in Creative Practice PhDs* (2015). This text formed the basis of my own methodological undertaking and allowed me to develop a structure of creative practice and research I never had encountered previously. It is a method that prioritises and necessitates the voice of the author as an important part of the overarching research artefacts and avoids the more impersonal formats of research-through-design while it requires deeper engagement with research than more typical journal-based outputs like autoethnography and practice-led research. I combined this with the larger theoretical framework of transmedial narratology, originally developed by Henry Jenkins in 2003 and then expanded upon by scholars such as Karin Kukkonen as well as Vandermeersche and Soetaert, who specially focus upon comics and graphic novels as truly multimodal and multimedial artefacts. The narrative foundations of comics as text generally stay intact as they shift from format to format, often being augmented rather than fully changed. This is discussed especially in Chapter 3, where an investigation is

undertaken into the meaning of comics when they go through an extreme process of remediation. A discussion of narrative transposition is also found in Chapter 4, where the notion of the city as a narrative genre itself embodies its own form of transmedial narrative generation.

This framework is the primary driver of all creative work in this research; the common ground is storytelling, and the research output is then the mode of how that story is told (be it through digital or traditional media).

As may be inferred from the earlier sections of this chapter, positionality played a pivotal role in the underlying investigation of the more personal side of the making process. Stuart Hall's "Spectacle of the Other", in his discussions of the binary oppositions that form tropes of representation (i.e. good/bad, black/white, etc.), served as a base point. An expanded view within the context of comics was then explored, engaging with texts such as Marc Singer's "'Black Skins' and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race", which specially investigates the tokenisation and performativity that is so extant especially in superhero comic books.

These early readings provided a foundation for an understanding I was seeking to explore and which initially was a secondary concern in the research – my role and position as a white comic maker. At first, I shifted the focus to defining locality and vernacularity, because I believed that this was the greater concern of crafting representative stories in the form of comics. I engaged with various forms of locality and vernacularity research, including vernacular cosmopolitanism as discussed by Werbner in her eponymous research, which is essentially an extension of Homi K. Bhabha's earlier critique of the same topic, noting that the term "vernacular cosmopolitanism" is an oxymoron. I believed that vernacular culture perhaps was a better point of investigation into understanding the meaning of vernacularity from a socio-cultural point of view and read into Margaret Lantis' definition of the topic from the 1960s, which she essentially boils down to being a "common sense concept", where she ultimately describes vernacular culture as being "local to" the culture being discussed. My overall understanding of the various sources allowed me to offer a working definition of the locality I refer to throughout this research:

The representation, be it visual or through text, of a shared common experience of culturally specific content informed by spoken, active and perceptive notions held by the targeted audience within a region-specific locality.

This definition should be read in conjunction with the expansion of Bourdieu's habitus, which used his ideas of privilege and lived knowledge formed by a local resident's experiences as affective agents in qualifying and processing locality.

These findings were then developed further within the contexts of the two exegeses. Chapter 3 delves into transmedia as a form and mode, then investigates the application of this style of storytelling into located narratives inspired by urban mythology and, later, its contemporary internet-based cousin, creepypasta. Locality played a vital role, both in discussing the origins of the tale of the Pinky-Pinky through my own and others' encounters and in how to best use the medium of interactive comics to allow for an augmentation of the reading process through the application of sound and motion. A critical reading of Penny Miller's *Myths and Legends of Southern Africa* was used to gain information on the role of the *tokoloshe* as a cultural artefact, but also to see the source as a product of colonial South Africa, especially from its position and presentation. I viewed this as a useful but deeply problematic source that I could learn from in terms of avoiding certain forms of presentation and even tone of voice.

Diegesis and interactive theory provided the initial cohort of comic research, with an interrogation into the process of adding meaning through visual representation in traditional media and its expansion in new media.

The next exegesis, in Chapter 4, provided a thorough account of area studies as a framework, which ultimately saw the chapter being divided into two parts due to the avenues of investigation this provided. Whilst still conducted through the lens of transmedia, area studies (particularly inspired by Falkof and van Staden's *Anxious Joburg*) provided a specific means of approach that evoked a provocative line of self-questioning that led to a discovery of many of my motivations as both a researcher and a maker. The chapter employs traditional comic making research as a preface, referring to the work of award-winning comic artist Will Eisner, and then branches into a multifaceted look into positionality, representation and narrative origins. The initial understandings learned from vernacular culture imbued with the contemporary research of socio-cultural geography studies yielded a critical top-down view of a process nearly invisible to me as a maker. Using the plaited exegesis' natural call for stepping away from the personal view to critically reflect afforded a unique opportunity to look at the larger scope of the work without personal influence and thus revealed a truth that had always been there, but one I'd never noticed before. The choices I'd made were obviously intentional, but also highly affected by my own lived experience as a native Joburger. My characters are not just characters, but reflections of a world I've lived and breathed in for decades. My desire to

avoid typical, Americanised narratives of superheroes because they felt inauthentic was partly rooted in this lived knowledge – I just could not see a character like Spider-Man swinging through Joburg's tight and chaotic streets and actively making any difference. A group of bitter, strange and nasty mercenaries taking on *tokoloshe* in pitched battles in Ghandi Square sounds far more natural to me.

The line of query exists here: is it then better to render a utopian narrative of clean, perfect people in a functional, if somewhat generic, city, that will ostensibly cater to a broad audience at a potential cost of wavering interest?

My answer has been revealed by this study to be *no*. To use my own moniker, it would be *wantonly* dishonest to *not* tell the tales of Joburg as experienced by a local. My characters are not simply designs to facilitate a narrative, they have been formed and influenced by the coalescence of over 20 years of moving through the space of the city as I pursued a career as a researcher-practitioner in the field of comics. Johannesburg is, first and foremost, the central character in my modes of representation – its chaos and colour and stench and influence are essential to who I am – meaning I am as much a character of Johannesburg as it is a character of mine. The symbiosis of this function is what made my position:

I am a white, male Joburger.

I am privileged to be white but restricted by it at the same time.

I live within and commute throughout Joburg.

I consume the stories of the city through the texts, images and words posted on its walls and lampposts and spoken by its people.

This consumption is wholly subjective yet it is my honest experience.

I project my fears and anxieties into the way I draw.

I understand that these states are lived by every other Joburger.

There is no one kind of Joburger, much like there is no one kind of South African.

Nonetheless, I will do my absolute best to show the diversity and fabric of this society, for better or worse.

While my position limits me in terms of acceptability, Joburgers are nothing if not flexible when it comes to owning our identities.

This does not excuse me from the hurt I may cause, and I never do so intentionally or maliciously, but I would do more harm to the locality of my work by not representing the narrative so intensely embedded in my lived experience. This maker-position conflict is not merely limited to white makers, but the scope of this study is. The other end of this sentiment lies in the alienation of outsiders – whilst I believe that much that is seen in my work will likely resonate with any urban South African, the same cannot be said for those from small towns. If we step back a level, Southern African neighbouring countries can likely empathise with the stories but may lack greater context. The rest of the world may enjoy the story for its difference, but themes and meaning will ultimately get lost in favour of aesthetic and genre considerations the further removed it is from its generative cultural centre. Whether or not this is bad depends more on its reception – the purest goal of my comics is entertainment; if that is achieved, then it is already a success.

Conclusion

This document began as an advocacy for the plaited exegesis methodology by expressing the idea of narrative locality through the production of a variety of comics in varying formats as a test case, but the actions of demonstrating that method yielded an exciting and challenging perspective that I had been avoiding throughout my career. I believed that I made comics the way I did simply because I didn't know any other way. I was informed by my consumption of the medium and evolved by researching it, but I never quite understood where the ideas originated from or why I went about the work in the manner I did.

To say that the findings were forced would be inaccurate. A very early version of this research set out to investigate the roles and responsibilities of white comic makers in South Africa, but I lacked the conviction to tread those waters too deeply, and the research contribution to justify the work as a true PhD was simply not apparent, as discussed in the first chapter of this document. It took a great deal of reflection to get to the eventual point of discovery in Chapter 4, and it took the enthusiasm of approach to circumvent the established parameters of the proposed case study to inform what had occurred and why.

Comics have always been a part of me – I've been drawing them since the late 1980s – but this was a tactile and thus *known* entity in my life. My tastes changed, my abilities improved, and I even discovered the joy of comics in academia, but this was again on the surface of my knowing. I knew that I could draw, that I can write and that I am able to conduct

research, and I assumed that this was driven by my consumption of similar items. It explains certain stylistic traits and nuances, yes, but it never explained the motivation that I drew upon to do so. There have been several instances where I was asked why "local" is so important to this to both me and this study. My answer was always focused on justifying the uniqueness of localisation as a special selling point for a product with largely established industries in the Global North, but that wasn't it. The earworm muttering "make it local" was actually a deeper part of me that was fascinated with where I was from – not simply South Africa, but Johannesburg itself, inspiring a larger endeavour to discover my roots – as an artist, a South African, and, especially as a Joburger that happens to use the city prolifically in my work.

Further Directions for Research

With the trajectory of the research shifting quite dramatically from its original intent, I would like to continue performing a series of more standardised plaited exegesis studies in order to further test the veracity of the method, especially after noting that it perhaps is better suited to shorter format research. It also needs to be produced concurrently with the creative output as it necessitates research during production as a form of discovery, where RTD requires extensive research prior to development and PBR methods are best suited to larger scale work or deep post-production reflection.

I had also originally designed this research to have three exegesis case studies – the two presented here, looking at traditional and digital comics, and a third one intended to explore intergenre and transculture, using the very recently developed medium of Afromanga/Bonzo as the platform of investigation. Due to scope considerations, this was eventually removed from the research plan, but a topic I maintain interest in. Presenting this work may function best in a book chapter, as the constraints of that form of publication may be key in maintaining a tight scope of work and research.

The plaited exegesis also holds great potential in research projects that have an emphasis on creative work, the pedagogics of which can serve as a basis for curricular development of research into creative fields in my role as a lecturer. There are many avenues of exploration that are untapped, especially in the fields of animation and game design, which could yield some fascinating data through this method. I caution readers, though, to be extremely cognizant of the scope and scale of the work. The standard plaited exegesis affords a unique opportunity to employ real-time documentation, but needs a strict set of output parameters, or smaller scale work, to truly function well for studies.

The other concession I offer is the selection of a clear research lens, even narrower than what I used (especially since I used an overall lens and two specific lenses for each case study) to ensure contained and structured academic rigor.

I also believe that the greatest potential of the plaited exegesis perhaps lies in reframing the nature of academic documentation in general. Many fields prove the veracity of using the artefact *as* research, especially creative writing and performance, but for fields that straddle disciplines, such as Game Design as it borders computer science, technology, design, arts and narrative, need slightly more controlled means of documentation for academic studies. However, games can most certainly be research artefacts themselves but may not succeed as their intended output – being a game, as they can be mired by the needs to reflect and define moments of development. The plaited exegesis presents a non-disruptive means of doing so, presenting theory and creative work as mutually beneficial and when documented through means that allow and foster non-linear diegesis through exploration, can provide access to audiences previously uninclined to academic reading and writing. I believe the true product of the methodological part of this study was its journal – a space of free movement, honest reflection and academic process that hosts the creative outputs seamlessly. The work is openly accessible, easily archivable and can still contain all standard academic requirements.

Final Thoughts

Our stories are deeply personal things, reflected outwards against a societal mirror as we express them. Mine just so happened to be reflected by the cracked, grimy windows of a decaying city, whose people traverse it with their own stories to tell through their actions, appearances and even simple presence.

As a South African comic maker, I am not simply trying to make the next big Marvel or DC title, but rather to simply present the lived stories that exist around me, because nothing can truly be more creative than a *Daily Sun* headline, more inspiring than a Joburg sunrise or more inherently odd than simply existing in such a strange, *wanton* place. To share such stories is a prerogative both unconscious and vivid, but to study them has been an absolute privilege of discovery.

Finding a lens that actively encouraged this understanding demonstrates what can be done when we seek to understand our place in the world. Socio-cultural geography studies helped me identify my locality and comics allowed me to express it visually and self-critically.

Narratives begin from the personal experience and then grow and expand into a form that befits its contents, but also appeals to potential readers, so if we can take something so specifically personal as our unique experience of growing up in a city, the possibility for narrative is endless. For all other achievements of this writing, what I believe it did most for me was to grow me as a person, to make me feel safe and excited to create and share my stories, to know that my comics mean something beyond their pictures and words and do so because those meanings were born into me and expanded and understood with each new story I told.

I would never have truly known this without conducting this research, itself a story.

A final thought is expressed in this last piece of advice that I gleaned from this work overall:

Write *where* you know, *who* you know and *how* you know, because that is where the real story lies, one that will never be boring.

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A note on usage of figures: Unless otherwise stated (and cited), all images are produced by the author of this paper.

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