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AUTOFICTOGRAPHICS

Exploring Truth and Identity in Autobiographical Comics

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Abstract

This exegesis documents my investigation into autobiographical sequential art narratives, surveying both the studio work of my doctoral candidature and key contextual research I undertook, and articulating the interrelations between theory and practice in this field. The prime contention of this research is that autobiography is inherently fictive, as it relies on fallible memory and fractured personas in order to convey narrative. Furthermore, the medium of sequential art as a vehicle for autobiographical narratives brings with it slippery interactions between image, word, and meaning, which are subject to variations of interpretation across different readers. Through my research, I have observed the indistinct lines that separate truth and fiction, both within genre and medium, while exploring methods of authorship that adhere to principles of an emotional rather than a literal truth. In this exegesis, I seek to define methods by which an author can put this ambiguity of 'truth' to constructive use through their informed manipulation of the sequential art medium, with the aim of actively and authentically communicating experiences of the past to readers. The exegesis moves between a third-person theoretical stance and a first-person point of view, reflecting the separation of self that is fundamental to autobiographical narrative. It is through this separation that the 'I' of today is able to reflect upon the 'I' of the past. This separation also serves as a function the doctoral exegesis itself, where personal work is examined within an academic context.

Statement of Originality:

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Darren Fisher

Date

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It would literally be a life in the gutter, if not for you.

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Introduction

I fell in love with reading and making comics in my youth, and remained fascinated with the form while many of my peers lost interest. The mix of images and words suited my introverted nature and penchant for spending all my spare time drawing and writing short stories; it was also fertile territory for learning about visual storytelling and narrative structure. Years later, after a period of growing dissatisfaction with the bloated superhero genre, I discovered the graphic novel *Blankets* by American comic author Craig Thompson (2003) in 2012. This coming-of-age autobiographical story of love, family, religion and isolation was presented in a hardbound book containing almost 600 thick, textured pages of drawings and text, rendered in deep black ink. I was acutely engaged during the experience and emotionally affected afterwards, as the narrative had somehow resonated with me in an altogether unique way. I wondered how, in the subjective telling of a personal story, Thompson had caused me to reflect on my own life so profoundly. How had he crafted a narrative that, through its metaphors, allusions, and symbols, resulted in a reading that felt entirely tailored to me, and completely relevant to my own experiences? I had not experienced this kind of reaction from reading a comic before, and it inspired me to investigate the genre of autobiography within this medium, leading to a focus on two key areas that are vital to the creation of authentic narratives, those of identity and truth.

The following exegesis provides an overview of autobiographical comics and a consideration of their functions through analysis and practice of various art styles, techniques, and media. While my long term goal as a practitioner is publication and financial sustainability through studio practice, the main focus of this doctoral project is to probe the boundaries of sequential art with relation to autobiography via a series of experiments and short form works, gaining clarity through practice, and leading to the development of skills and knowledge necessary to facilitate the creation of a long-form autobiographic comic. The outcome is the production of more than 700 diary comics, 110 pages of mini comics, and a long-form graphic novel draft of over 300 pages titled *Life in the Gutter*, all of which form the studio submission for this research. The body of work I have produced is a mix of finished pages and pages in development, using a range of artistic styles and approaches throughout. It serves as not only the first part of a finished story, but also as a document of an evolving art style that seeks to find new ways to express itself. It is the record of an ongoing series of experiments with the structure and possibilities of the medium, an interrogation of character, of movement through time, and identity states. The first part of this exegesis acts as a critical review of existing works and relevant theory, with these findings and theories synthesised in the later part of the writing in the analysis of my studio output. Therefore, these two informal sections account for a change in writing style and an initial refrain from personal voice and opinion. In giving a context to the studio work, Chapter 1 gives a brief historical summary of the medium of sequential art and discusses sequential art's multimodal and structural associations with the

fine arts. It goes on to describe the origins of autobiographical comics within the underground counterculture movement, providing an overview of some of its key practitioners and pinpointing the relevance of their output to my research.

Practice-based and practice-led research methodologies used in this study are discussed in Chapter 2, as well as the use of ongoing reflection via a blog and a diary comic practice. These research methodologies support the interrogation of truth and identity, concepts necessary to understand in order to establish a similar kind of resonance with the reader that I had experienced with *Blankets*.

Through this research, I grappled with the following question: What is identity and how can its various iterations be leveraged for an authentic investigation of personal issues? Therefore, Chapter 3 deals with concepts of identity and the self, debated topics in the fields of philosophy and psychology. One interpretation of identity is as a created facade, an assumed, shifting, projected state that is triggered by context. Neuroscientist David Eagleman argues “the self doesn’t exist in a vacuum” (2015, 146), a view reflected by philosopher Martin Heidegger, who states that humans are not only in a state of “being”, but of “being-in-the-world” (cited in Eagleman 2015, 146). Professor of Humanities Sidonie Smith and Professor Emerita Julia Watson (2001, 39) cite Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin in arguing that identity exists as a constructed state, dialogical in nature. To use an analogy, identity is a collection of masks that we choose from, depending on context in order to either blend in, to project a desired state of being, or to better understand others. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall builds on this idea, stating that identity is “a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process” (1994, 392).

Emeritus Professor of English John Paul Eakin (2008) posits that our sense of self and identity exists largely as the result of internal self-narrative and through dialogue with others. According to Eakin, this ongoing narrative identity system is a critical tool in our dealings with others, within society and culture, enabling us to make sense of our discontinuous and fractured lives, and adding continuity to a sense of self that is constantly called on to adapt to social situations and expectations. Depending on our overarching self-view, these interpretations may be positive or negative or shades in between, colouring the way in which we repeat stories of our self into the future. Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck corroborates the theory that the power of our beliefs, both conscious and unconscious, has a profound impact on our lives. German psychologist Friedemann Schulz von Thun’s concept of the “inner team” (1998), which posits that individuals are an amalgamation of different identities that all demand attention and fulfilment in varying degrees, takes the idea of a self in flux one step further. A balanced inner team, one that manages inter- and intra-personal communication through “co-operative leadership” (Schulz von Thun 1998, 21), is one wherein all of the separate pluralistic states are acknowledged as valid and necessary. Our narrative

identity system impacts on this fragile co-operation as we create internal narratives with themes such as “I’m too meek” or “I should not be envious”. Schulz von Thun argues that every part of our selves should be acknowledged and given space to perform their individual roles, albeit in a balanced way—a cooperation of all aspects of our inner team.

Literary critic Galen Strawson (2004) posits the idea of two distinct styles of ‘temporal being’: the episodic and the diachronic. This philosophical approach sees identity as a shifting, temporal state, experienced differently over time by different people. The episodic poses that since the inner state bears little resemblance to a sense of self that was possessed in the past, there is no sequential cause-and-effect organisation of identity. Therefore, states of identity are discontinuous; the current sense of self is not related to a sense of self at any other point in time. The diachronic presents life as continuous, a sense of self-evolving over time, with modifications made to an essential self. In such a view, a definitive narrative thread can be traced through a life wherein events and experiences continually shape perceptions and behaviour. Eakin (1985) argues that the majority of people are a mix of both types, although our behaviour may occasionally veer towards one end of the spectrum. The idea of episodic and diachronic temporal states of identity may aid in understanding how we exist from moment to moment, sometimes evolving in a linear, cause-and-effect manner, while at other times erratically exhibiting unexplainable behaviour, taking on radically different identity states that seem disconnected from previous experience.

In Chapter 3.1, I pursue methods by which the sequential artist can represent ideas of identity and the self across a range of studio practices, such as diary comics, visual experiments, a long-form graphic novel, and through the application of Scott McCloud’s Triangle of Representation (1994). The interrelation of identity and the medium of sequential art is proposed in Chapter 3.2, and is expanded on throughout the exegesis. The operation of text and its relationship with image, and the way in which these also mirror the identity–self relationship, are examined in chapter 3.3. To provide a counterpoint to these findings, I examine character development through purely image-based storytelling in Chapter 3.4. As a continuous theme underpinning the research is the intent of creating resonance with the reader, Chapter 3.5 considers how much an author might want to disclose in order to establish a sense of authenticity in character and story while still maintaining interest for the reader without repelling them with unsolicited intimacy. Methods for disclosing deeply personal inner states and outwardly projected identity states are also put forward so as to create a sense of truth.

The shifting states of identity and the pluralistic nature of the self has led me to question what indeed is truth when writing about the self, and how can the comic book author establish a sense of truth in a medium ordinarily associated with fiction. These shared threads of instability are discussed in Chapter 4, which examines how sequential art might be leveraged

for an authentic investigation of personal issues across time and iterations. This exegesis argues that autobiography is by nature a mix of fact and fiction based on the way that form, image, and text can be dictated and translated in a variety of ways across readers from diverse cultural and personal backgrounds. To manage this broad concept within the scope of this research, truth was necessarily constrained to a set of parameters most relevant to sequential art, including the link between author and character, and the semiotic concerns of text and image as means of communication. According to Czech literary theorist Lubomír Doležel (1998) and scholar Dorrit Cohn (2000), readers orient themselves differently depending on whether they are reading a work proposing to be truth or fiction (cited in Herman and Chaney 2011), but is it always possible to clearly separate the two? In literary traditions, the author is bound by strict requirements of truth, such as French professor and essayist Phillipe Lejeune's 'autobiographical pact' (1975). In order to meet these requirements, autobiographical texts must be told in retrospect and they must detail the story of an individual life or personality. Moreover, the names of the author, narrator, and principal character must be identical. Despite this, Eakin claims "the centre of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure" (1985, 3), such that in every account of a life, there is modification, invention, distortion, and, above all, subjectivity. After all, autobiography allows the author to reshape their history and thus perceived reality "as he believes and wishes himself to be and to have been" (Gusdorf 1980, 45), which is further skewed by an unsteady foundation of memory and interpretation.

For example, the diary entries that I use as a basis for my long-form narrative are written by the self of a decade prior, a rather different person to the self of today, whose recording of events has been coloured by an internal narrative identity system (Eakin 2008). For instance, entries written when I was feeling negative would be prone to casting events in a negative light, focusing on the things I had not achieved or should have done 'better'. Conversely, entries written when I was in a positive mood might have seen me look at things positively, retelling events with an altogether different spin. Memory and identity are thus inseparably linked and our view of our self dictates our worldview. Additionally, the construction of a medium also affects the truthfulness of a narrative. In the specific case of sequential art, the feeling of truthfulness is affected by the degree of realism in art style, colour, tone, line, and the way in which words and images interact, among many other variables, which this exegesis seeks to address. In seeking to establish a sense of truth with the reader, this exegesis balances calls for a literal truth with considerations of emotional truth.

Author Leigh Gilmore contends that autobiography "draws its authority less from its resemblance to real life than from its proximity to discourses of truth and identity, less from reference or mimesis than from the cultural power of truth telling" (2001, 3), moving the focus of truth away from literality and into the terrain of thematic and emotive authenticity. Gilmore thus implies that direct reference material, recorded accounts of conversations, and accurate

reproduction are of lesser importance than an open, honest account of one's story that cuts to the core of human experience. This view is echoed by Smith and Watson, who state that "autobiographical truth resides in the inter-subjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life" (2001, 16). In Chapter 4, I explore the ways in which an author can attempt to inject a sense of truth into a sequential art's narrative structure through the power of truth telling, with the intention of creating a shared understanding of the meaning of a life, and engaging with readers in a shared journey and interpretation of life's experiences, regardless of age, gender, race, and personal history.

Chapter 4.1 expands on the personal aspect of this research, with the intention of understanding the relationship between subjective experience and universal truths. The foundation of the research's long-form narrative, a series of diary entries, is considered as a visual anchor within and a way of negotiating Lejeune's rules of engagement. The pact was created specifically as a tool for use in literary texts; this research asks if it is also applicable to sequential art. Chapter 4.2 builds on the ideas of linking universal resonance to subjective experience, and discusses elements of sequential art autobiography that may contribute to this. Ultimately, in the telling of autobiography, points of view and interpretations of events are warped by identity states, value systems and ideologies. Autobiography is often limited to a single, biased vantage point of a past that is perceived and retold through an inherently distorted lens, asking the reader to engage with the author in a space that, while not fiction, can never be an exact facsimile of the past. Given all this, the author of an autobiographical sequential art narrative faces a great freedom from any notion of self as fixed, single, autonomous, and unchanging. Identity is rather a moving target of characterisation and representation that offers the author a range of opportunities in the telling. Thus, Chapter 4.3 outlines a reimagining of the genre of self-life writing within the context of sequential art, under the semantic mix of autobiography, fiction, and graphics or what I term 'autofictography'. Methods for creating a sense of truth within sequential art, while acknowledging inherent fictions of the genre, are subsequently outlined in Chapter 4.4, which explores ways of moving through timelines visually in a way that supports character and clearly demarcates changes in space and time. Chapter 4.4 explores the author's license to manipulate visual information in the interest of truth. Through the analysis of a number of works, both external and personal, this section highlights the usefulness of metaphor in conveying extra meaning in support of a sense of truthfulness. Chapter 4.5 concludes the section on truth by discussing interpretations of style, how it is influenced, and how it might influence the reading.

Through creative practice as reflective research, and by fashioning sequential art texts from experience, memory, and diary entries, this research investigates how we construct a sense of identity and present that construction to the outside world, and inversely, how we continually reshape our sense of self via narrative. In this way, the research explores both the

medium of sequential art, or the “philosophy of comics”, as well as the thematic matter it communicates, or “philosophy through comics” (Meskin and Cook 2012, xv), as a cohesive unit, a symbiosis of form and content. Research into scriptwriting and the search for a truthful output via metaphor, modes of representation, motifs and style have been covered in the aim of not only making sense of the work I have produced over the past four years, but also adding new knowledge to the topic of the effectiveness of comics in the communication of autobiographic narrative.

1. Sequential Art as an Autobiographical Medium

The joining of images and text across panels and pages is perhaps one of the most unique aspects of sequential art and it allows the medium to “tell a story both on different levels of the pictures and different levels of time” (Silbermann 1986, 21). The component structure of sequential art is inherently paradoxical; while its combination of words, symbols, and pictures, separated into panels, appears simplistic, the reading of these texts is complex, with much of the information processed on a subconscious level (Knilli 1986). Navigation of the complex communicative systems of sequential art occurs largely without conscious awareness and in a way that seems effortless, but is in reality the result of a series of reading and decoding skills that are learned and developed over time (Fisher and Frey 2008). Comics are anything but simple, and are in fact a “fractured surface... creating an experience that is always decentered, unstable, and unfixable” (Hatfield 2005, xiii–xiv). As such, this research proposes that comics are well suited to representing our fundamentally fractured, pluralistic inner self, and continually evolving outer identity roles.

The rationale behind my decision to explore autobiography through sequential art is based not only on its suitability to concepts of identity (and therefore, to the genre), but also to its historical ties, as the mechanism of self-expression inherent to autobiography is inextricably linked to the formation of the comics ‘underground’ movement, forerunner to the first autobiographical graphic novel. In his 1954 publication *Seduction of the Innocent*, psychiatrist and author Dr. Fredric Wertham issued a warning that reading comic books causes juvenile delinquency and illiteracy. Consequently, the US Senate held hearings to investigate Wertham's claims, leading to the establishment of a self-imposed Comics Code Authority by publishers. Forty-one provisions were created, targeting themes of violence, sex, and horror, with respect for government and parental authority prioritised (Nyberg 2017). These requirements were a boon for superhero comics and “affirmed the general perception of the medium as juvenile pap” (Hatfield 2005, 11; Harvey 1996).—~~a perception the medium has been pushing against ever since.~~ However, it is not within the scope of this research to speculate on efforts of practitioners and academics to elevate sequential art's status. In addition, the medium is nowadays widely acknowledged as being capable of communicating adult themes and serious topics, the fight for recognition having long been fought and won (Witek 1989; McCloud 1994; Hatfield 2005; Eisner 2008; Groensteen 2008). Struggle against censorship and regulation within comics has been aided by authors of sequential art operating within the genre of autobiography, leading to a fringe group of creators and a subset of comics known as ‘the underground’ (Witek 1989; Hatfield 2005; El Refaie 2012). The underground comic movement operated via independent small publishing and distribution (Witek 1989), questioning mainstream cultural practices and ideology, and demonstrating the communicative possibilities of sequential art as a tool of free speech and revolution (Witek 1989; Hatfield 2005; El Refaie 2012).

This subset of practitioners working within comics challenged reading tendencies and led to the first strictly autobiographical long-form comic, Justin Green's *Blinky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (1972), with others soon following, transforming the medium into a "radically new kind of expressive object, a vehicle for the most personal and unguarded of revelations" (Hatfield 2005, 7). In time, the comic book gained recognition as a powerful and important medium, with the ability to communicate all sorts of narratives, including historically important events, issues of gender and sexuality, love, and rejection. This was at least partly due to the efforts of these 'underground' comic authors and their encounters with self and society.

The intention of this research is to prove the ability of comics to perform the task of autobiography, as it is a hybrid medium that allows the author the flexibility of a painter, designer, printmaker, illustrator, writer and filmmaker. All of their associated tools, codes and conventions are free to be meshed and adapted in distinctive ways; sequential art's rich grammatical textures provide abounding opportunity for experimentation with image and form. Of all the art forms, comics are most often compared with film as they make use of many of the same narrative techniques and are typically a hybrid of the verbal and visual (Pratt 2009, 113), with comparable cinematic codes and conventions (Hatfield 2005; El Refaie 2012). Sequential art also call upon principles of photography, with many authors of sequential art making use of photo reference and actual photography within their pages, such as David Mack and David McKean (Chaney 2011; El Refaie 2012). There also exists a rich tradition of photographic comics in parts of Europe (e.g., *fotoromanzi* in Italy) and Latin America (*fotonovelas*). Further, sequential art borrows from painting, with many sequential artists employing paint as their medium of expression; within the sphere of the North American mainstream market, the most notable proponents are Alex Ross, Simon Bisley, Bill Sienkiewicz, and Glenn Fabry. Sequential art incorporates the written word as part of its multimodal structure, although it arguably operates far differently to literature. While literature relies on the reader to create an internal visual narrative and associative imagery, sequential art generates both an emotional and rational response based on its interplay of word and picture, artistic style and page layout (McCloud 1994). Despite sequential art being critiqued for its "hybrid" nature (Drucker 2008; Chaney 2011; El Refaie 2012), contemporary appraisal presents image-and-text relationships as meaningful complementary modes (Bezemer and Kress 2008). It is this fluid intermixing of art forms such as literature, illustration, storytelling, printmaking, photography, cinema, design, typography, and fine art that produces the rich texture and narrative possibilities of sequential art.

These cross-disciplinary relations create a unique experience for readers of comics; its mix of image and text requires comprehension of both written and visual languages. Indeed, "media that combine words and images confront the rigid binaries of modernist thinking and enable

audiences to recognize the hybridity of culture” (Kraemer 2016, 246). The choices made by an author of an image-based work on personal stylisation, literary style, narrative structure, layout, pacing, media and medium are encoded in this hybridised medium as subjectivities that are made objective and universal through their translation. The treatment of time in all its various tenses are interpreted by the reader through combinations of image, word, form, and shape, operating in webs of interdependence and making use of “both visual and verbal interpretive skills” in an “act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit” (Eisner 1990). Given these multimodal operations, this research will investigate potential mechanisms available to the author for communicating story, meaning, and emotion to the reader.

The works of comic authors that have been most influential to my work and to autobiographical comics in general span decades. All of them share an interest in human nature, social practices, and themes of relationships, external and internal. These practitioners and works examine a variety of themes through the disclosure of personal stories, seeking to engage the reader by establishing a rapport through sharing their experience. Their themes range from what it means to be a person in the modern world, how it feels to be alone, how to negotiate interpersonal relationships through to explorations of family, of love and loss, of belonging and of growth. The personification of identity and representation of the self, as well as notions of truth and its relationship to personal disclosure, are shared across their numerous texts. Because I consider these themes as pertinent to the genre of the autobiographical sequential narrative, I have examined the work of these practitioners via my studio work and reflect on them in the following section of this exegesis.



Figure 1. Harvey Pekar and Robert Crumb *The Harvey Pekar Name Story* 1977, page 3. Creative Commons licensed.

One of the most important practitioners of autobiography within comics (Hatfield 2005) is Harvey Pekar (figure 1), a seminal author of modern reflective and reflexive sequential art. Pekar demonstrates that everyday life provides sufficient subject matter to secure and maintain a reader's interest. His *American Splendor* series (1976–2008) provides an exploratory account of everyday events, employing linear timelines and basic panel transitions, and creating reader engagement by virtue of Pekar's unique identity and persona, and a paranoid neurosis that renders the everyday in peculiar and nuanced ways. I apply aspects of this open disclosure of personal flaws and neuroses within my own work, mindful of the point at which questioning a reader is likely to be turned away by such honesty, and that there is a point at which a character's ~~what extent of personal flaws turns a character~~ take them from being identifiable to irredeemable.

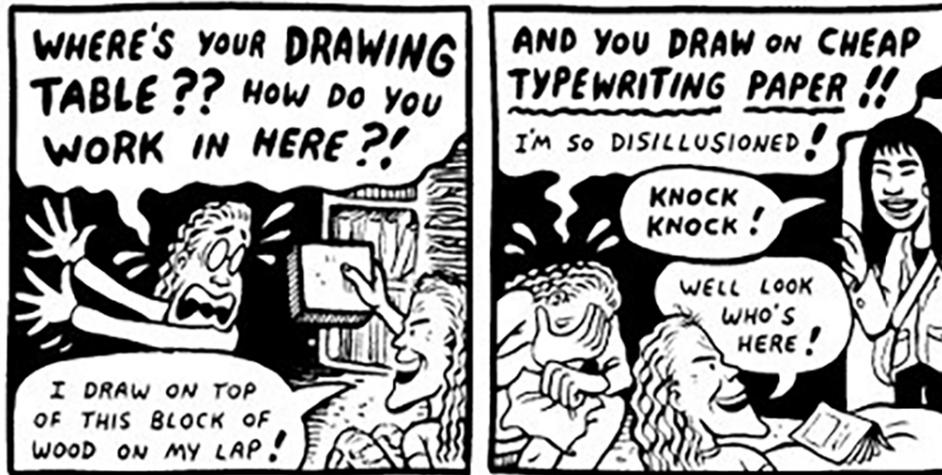


Figure 2. Joe Matt *Peepshow* (detail) 1987. Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

Joe Matt was a key player in the influential Canadian autobiographical comic scene of the 1990s (Beaty 2011; Hatfield 2005), communicating his relationship history, family dysfunction, Catholic upbringing, obsession with pornography, and excessive frugality in complete and unabashed detail. In relation to my research, my interest in Matt's work lies in his considerations of structure and candour, particularly that in *Peepshow* (2003, figure 2), which follows a diary comic format, mixing real events, fictional scenes, and the author's inner thoughts. The narratives within *Peepshow* are presented using an unconventionally high number of panels, with an average of twenty-four panels to a page, and sometimes as many as ninety-six panels. The strips are typically dialogue heavy, with small, detailed representations of characters that support the dialogue. Consequently, there is a noticeable absence of negative space throughout. One could easily conclude that Matt's focus is on conveying information predominately via the written word. The visual style is exaggerated and cartoon-like, with Matt making use of symbolic codes of visual language such as stylised caricatures, symbols of sweat, anxiety, panic, and motion, as well within the dialogue with differential line weight and exaggerated exclamation marks denoting character emotion. *Peepshow* raises questions regarding the impact of composition and of full disclosure on relationships with reader and on notions of 'truth'. What degree of truth is the author required to divulge in an effort to retain authenticity and yet maintain an audience? At what point does disclosure no longer serve the narrative and instead become a distraction?



Figure 3. Eddie Campbell *Alec Stories: The King Canute Crowd* (detail) 2000

Scottish comics author Eddie Campbell's *The King Canute Crowd* (2000, figure 3) details the author's identification with the 'waster' persona of the mid-1970s' punk era. This narrative, although openly autobiographical, is told through an alter ego, a technique also employed in Green's *Blinky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, mentioned above. Campbell keeps the reader oriented in space, with attention to setting via frequent establishing shots and the maintenance of background detail, creating a believable three-dimensional space for his characters and a fully rendered world for the reader to immerse themselves in. *The King Canute Crowd* explores interpersonal relationships and friendships by examining the roles we assume in society through our working, family, and social lives.

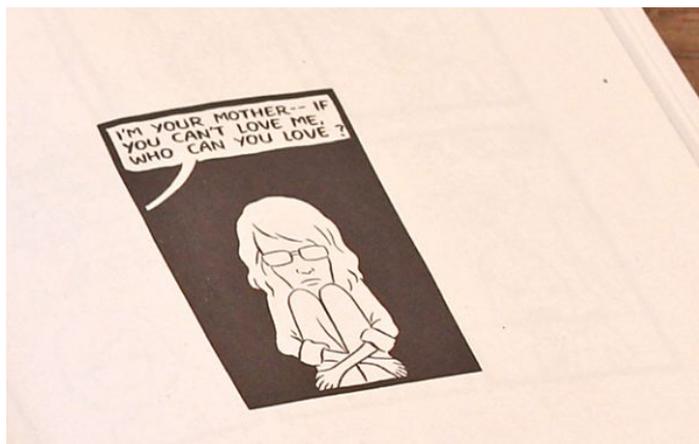


Figure 4. Chester Brown *I Never Liked You* (detail), 2002. Reproduced with permission of the publisher.

Canadian author Chester Brown's *I Never Liked You* (2002, figure 4) focuses on Brown's difficulties as an adolescent in sharing his inner feelings and his refusal to submit to social norms regards language and appearance. Brown uses a confessional style of autobiography, forgoing political correctness for candid authenticity in the tradition of the independent underground sequential artists of the 1960s and '70s. Brown's visual style is focused on line work, with the fine hatching of his backgrounds belying a perceived simplicity. *I Never Liked*

You is told largely without narration or text-based representation of sound; rather, Brown employs mimetic storytelling, which refers to the act of showing, not telling (El Refaie 2012, 55). Themes of otherness are explored, as the author reflects on his self-concept as a misunderstood loner. Brown examines the world through the lens of his childhood perceptions, disclosing his shortcomings and paranoia. Brown is a vital player within autobiographical comics and more broadly the underground scene, and his experimentation with the medium in exploring ideas of the self has provided the foundation for many of my own studio experiments.



Figure 5. Craig Thompson *Blankets* 2003, page 434. Reproduced courtesy of the publisher.

As mentioned in the introduction, Craig Thompson's *Blankets* (2003, figure 5) relates his childhood and teenage years of growing up in a religious, working-class American family. It deals with themes of first love, religious and authoritarian control, and the feeling of isolation that comes of being a social outsider. Thompson exploits the codes, conventions and structures of sequential art to bridge the gap between author and reader, manipulating panel structure and layout throughout. *Blankets* uses a three-act restorative structure, with the narrative moving back and forth in time, weaving minor themes and storylines together. Narration is minimal; the story progresses through dialogue and character interaction, and representational techniques are employed to communicate the outside world's effect on an often-bewildered Thompson. The narrative structure, mimetic devices, visual style and character development of *Blankets* are of interest to this research for the way in which they create a sense of engagement with the reader, particularly through the use of metaphor and symbolism in order to communicate personal states of emotion and the invisible world of the senses.

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Figure 6. Dennis P. Eichorn *Real Stuff* (contents page) 2004

Dennis P. Eichorn's *Real Stuff* (2004, figure 6) is the collected edition of a series published by Fantagraphics in the 1990s. Like Pekar, Eichorn is the solitary writer of these narratives; however, unlike Pekar, Eichorn's stories deal in lurid accounts of sex, violence, and substance abuse. Various artists bring to bear idiosyncratic art styles on Eichorn's wide variety of ideas to differing effects, adding additional layering of meaning to the tales and raising questions about the importance of style in the communication of narrative. The candid, confessional style of his narratives in conjunction with the variety of visual approaches provokes questions on the truthfulness of accounts of the past; further, the diverse art styles undermine a cohesive signature authority. *Real Stuff's* narratives evidence a diachronic presentation of personal evolution as Eichorn's youthful days of alcohol and violence are succeeded by ideals of peace and love. This approach is pertinent to my research and studio practice as it portrays a spectrum of progression across identify states and through time, examining the different events that affected such an evolution.

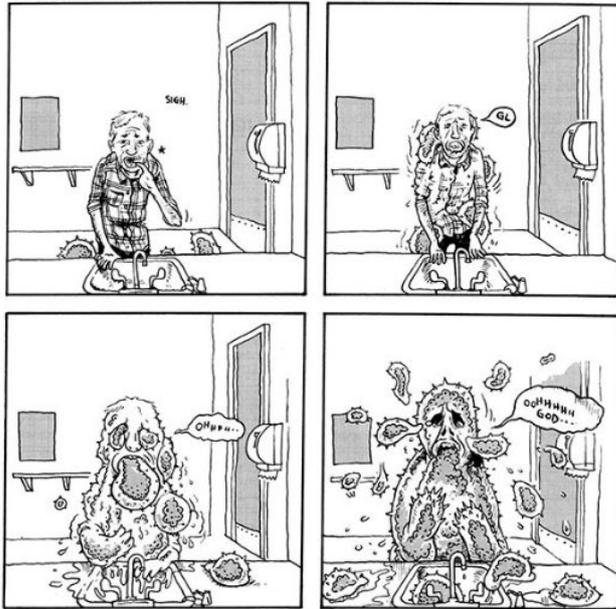


Figure 7. Ken Dahl *Monsters* (detail) 2009

Monsters (2009, figure 7) details Ken Dahl's self-diagnosis of the herpes virus and subsequent attempts to deal with his condition, communicating ideas of disease, inebriation, separation, sadness and shame. Dahl represents the herpes virus as a physical being that accompanies him everywhere, and so Dahl investigates the effect of his emotional state and notions of disease on inter-personal interactions, examining the way that social behaviour is governed by our sense of self. The creativity of Dahl's modes of representation is of interest to me not only for the way they depict identity and internal narrative, but also for their representation of emotional and mental states through style and symbols.

2. Research Methodology

For this doctoral project, I adopted the social sciences methodology of action research, which typically involves the interchanging modes of research and application that allow a practitioner to progressively narrow down on the subject and study method (Denscombe 2014). For example, when I began work on the story for my final output, the long-form graphic novel *Life in the Gutter*, I was curious as to how a range of narratives were structured. In order to create a visual sequence of structures, I conducted an experiment in counting the number of panels, words (narration and dialogue), and sound effects of four chosen texts, leading to a raft of discoveries, detailed in Appendix 8: Mimesis and Diegesis. Once I began compiling my diary entries into script form, deliberations ensued regarding what to leave out and what to include, where to begin and where to end. This instigated readings into three-act structure versus alternative approaches to writing (Dancyger and Rush 2006) as well as formulaic structures for script and story (Truby 2007). The interlinked cyclical process of reading, studio work, and reflection that I adopted provides a continual momentum, as “the application of findings and an evaluation of their impact on practice become part of a [self-correcting and ongoing] cycle of research” (Denscombe 2014, 122). To avoid too large a degree of randomness, I relied on grounded theory in order to keep an overview of my progress. Developed by Glaser and Strauss in the late 1960s, grounded theory is qualitative and exploratory, requiring an open-minded approach to research (Denscombe 2014), presenting anthropological knowledge as something that can be pieced together from analysis and interpretations of experience in the field (Glaser and Strauss cited in Grant 2014, 115). Finding a guiding logic and central narrative in disparate collections of notes, blog entries, drawings, and comics is akin to assembling a jigsaw puzzle with only an abstract concept of how the final image should look; grounded theory aids in providing a usable methodology for doing so.

As a key aspect of this practice-led action research, I maintained a blog from the very beginning of my doctoral candidature, Storybordello.com. The employment of a blog has provided a space for and an impetus to continually reflect on my work, and by uploading daily diary comics from the blog to social media, I have received instant information on readership demographics and the number of views—both important factors in considering how my work is received. The blog has also been useful in recording drawing events, exhibitions, and meetings I have participated in as well as providing a space for revising notes, thoughts, and processes. The site assists in audience building through regular updates; the majority of the views are for the diary comics and reviews of other practitioners’ works. The blog has provided the opportunity for me to experiment with a daily schedule of updates, resulting in an upload of 776 daily diary comics over two years and two months. The diary comics arose out of a desire to share snippets of daily life and the normally unpublicised minutiae of everyday life, aiming for work that is “simple, grounded, and true” (Watterson 2015, 27). The ritual of

committing an event from the day's proceedings to paper was an important contributor to the development of my ability and willingness to try new things. Importantly, it expanded my visual vocabulary and experimentation with different media, in the exploration and expression of relationships between my inner self and an outer projected identity.

By working through a series of studio works, I honed a style and an understanding of artistic ways to convey meaning that were suitable to the project to create a long form graphic novel within a realistic timeframe. This process of commenting on the present was essential in preparing to reflect on the past, as

the teller of his or her own story becomes, in the act of narration, both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance, and contemplation. We might best approach life narrative, then, as a moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices that, in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present. (Smith and Watson 2010, 1)

I expand on the subject of identity, with a focus on studio process and practice, in the following chapter.

3. Identity and the Self

3.1. Visual Identity

British philosopher Alan Watts (1973) draws parallels between concepts of personality and identity, reasoning that the idea of a personality derives from the word 'persona', a megaphone mask worn by actors in ancient Greco-Roman dramas. The 'persona' allowed actors to project sound in open-air theatres, while at the same time serving as signifier of an assumed and distinctly separate (i.e., false) identity. Over time, the persona has been conflated with notions of the real person, instead of referring to an assumed role (Watts 1973). My research works with this concept of persona/identity (I use the word 'identity') as external and contextual, raising questions that are necessary in the task of creating believable character/s for my graphic novel. How is identity created in life, and how might it be represented via the variables of image, text, and the conventions of sequential art? How do authors build rapport with the reader through a shared interpretation of life experience, and how might the medium of comics allow an author to navigate between notions of a true, inner self and its projected, external identity states simultaneously? How much of our assumed identity is indeed a fiction, and how can the mix of truth and fiction that we negotiate every day be convincingly represented within comics? As outlined within the introduction, identity can be viewed as a self-created, shifting state, contextually influenced (Eakin 1985, 2008; Eagleman 2015; Watts 1973; Smith and Watson 2001). Who we believe ourselves to be and how we portray ourselves to the outside world is subject to a mix of temporal, episodic and diachronic states (Strawson 2004), a self-perpetuating narrative identity system (Eakin 2008), and an inner team of competing wants and needs (Schulz von Thun 1998). This plural inner self is undergoing constant changes in hierarchy and as different parts of the inner self take leadership, this can be perceived by the outside world as multiple personality syndrome, with these personalities sometimes opposing each other; in extreme cases, this leads to schizophrenic/manic depressive tendencies (Schulz von Thun 1998).

Although concepts of identity initially appear as rather complex ideas, they provide a useful foundation for the creation of characters with a sense of flawed contradiction and inner conflict. I have tested this through my daily diary comic practice and my graphic novel, exploring a range of different concepts of identity; in particular, different versions of the self as it evolves from hour to hour, day to day, across social contexts.



Figure 8. Darren Fisher *Montage of I* (excerpts from Diary Comics) 2014–2015

Montage of I (figure 8) is a compilation of self-representations taken from the diary comics produced over the course of this study. These specific images were chosen to highlight different visual representations of shifting identity states and moods, as well as to display a range of styles and uses of media. Some of these stylistic variations were a direct result of experimentations in mimicry of notable artists. In other cases, the use of metaphor in combination with style and material was useful in communicating the contradictions between external identity states and the internal self. For example, the bottom left character places a helmet upon his head, preparing for battle; in the comics, this was a metaphor for preparing to engage with a hostile classroom. Solid black ink and watercolour was used to create a rough, grainy line, aimed at further reinforcing the protagonist's feeling of trepidation. In each of the characters in figure 10, there is a deliberate use of line, colour, and visual metaphor that is intended to communicate the various personas with subtlety and directness.



Figure 9. Darren Fisher *Identity Crisis* 2014

Identity Crisis (figure 9) explores the idea of contextually dependent identity in a simple way by using modern archetypes. These include The Lover, with the iconic flower between his teeth and a heart-shaped pendant, and a curled moustache referencing bygone romantic characters; The Student, with books and backpack, who is shown in down shot emphasising a low status; and The Teacher, who is seen in upshot with the clichéd shirt, tie, glasses and pocket protector. The final panel depicts the character's metaphoric state of schizophrenia, represented with literal cracks in the head and a divisive graphic background, indicating a coming apart, a psychological upheaval.

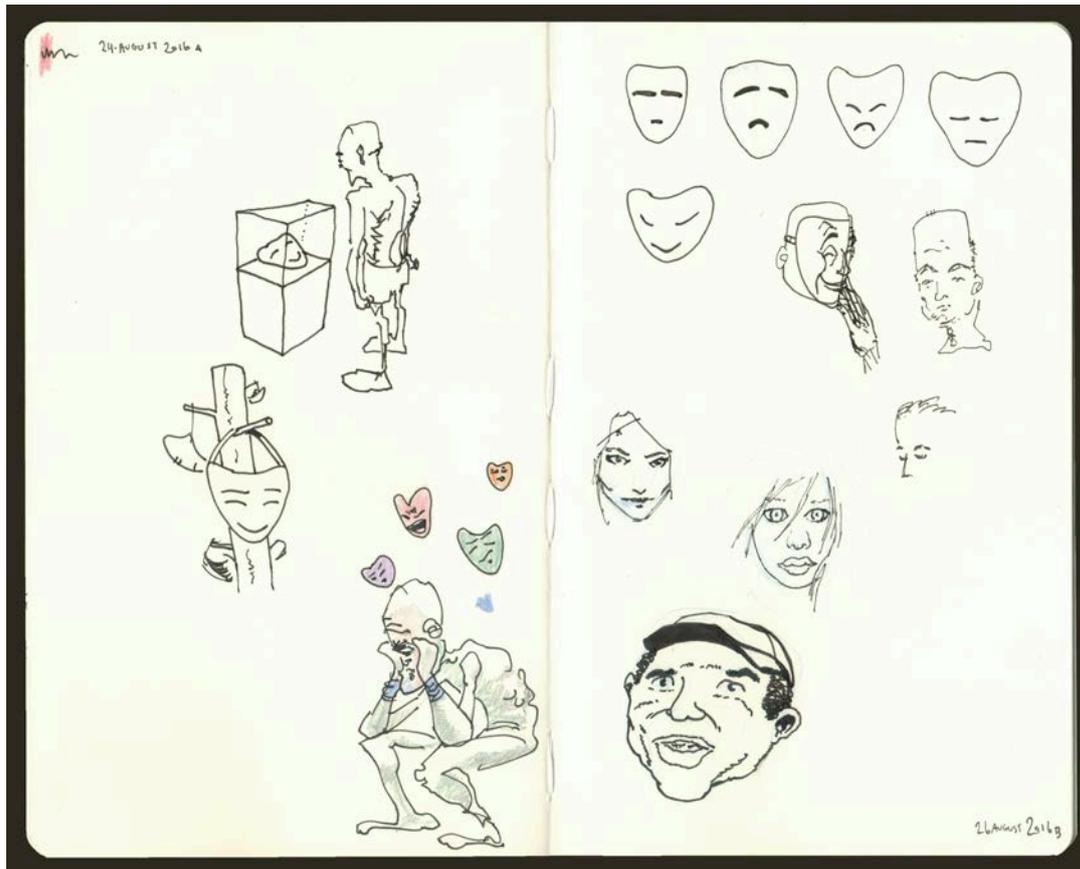


Figure 10. Darren Fisher *The Mask* (concept designs) 2016

The Mask (figure 10) communicates the idea of identity as a mask in an obvious way. I considered the use of masks within the graphic novel that the characters would put on and take off as an outward reflection of their contextually enforced changing identity states. Although this approach was discarded for being too literal, the idea remains, with a large portion of this research dedicated to fusing theoretical concepts and visual practice through a process of reflection and experimentation. Taking the analogy of identity as a mask further, within the context of comics, McCloud states

when you look at a photo or a realistic drawing of a face you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon you see yourself.... The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled... we don't just observe the cartoon, we become it. (1994, 36)

McCloud's assertion that we assume different states of being in the consumption of media speaks to an elasticity of identity that is as malleable as the medium of sequential art.



Figure 11. Darren Fisher *In the Waiting Room* 2014

I explore the idea of contextually dependent identity in my diary comic *In the Waiting Room* (figure 11), where an individual's behaviour may vary depending on who, if anyone, is looking. Capturing these types of responses was an important part in the creation of an authentic character.



Figure 12. Darren Fisher *Reflections* 2014

The concept of a narrative identity system, in which we narrate our lives and therefore create our identity (Eakin 1985), provided material for exploration within *Reflections* (figure 12). This comic uses three panels to depict a passage of time with two threads of continuity throughout—the character and his thoughts. Although a linear and simple use of the elements

of sequential art, this strip nonetheless communicates Eakin's theory of narrative identity. In attempting to build the visual vocabulary and tools needed to better represent nuances of identity, I undertook a series of visual experiments. One of them involved combining a variety of different representations of myself at different ages, along with a range of backgrounds and narrative devices. This was so as to better understand how a sense of a drastic episodic shift, such as those that occur around teenage years, might be depicted. To explore radically changeable states of being, I employed McCloud's 'Triangle of Representation' (1994, figure 15), and its triangulated points of Reality, Meaning, and Symbol, as the methodological tools for an exploration of identity within the visual. These led to a series of experiments in workflow processes, tools, and techniques which later informed my approach for the graphic novel, with the aim of producing work quickly and in a style that would not only be identifiable but would also suit the narrative.

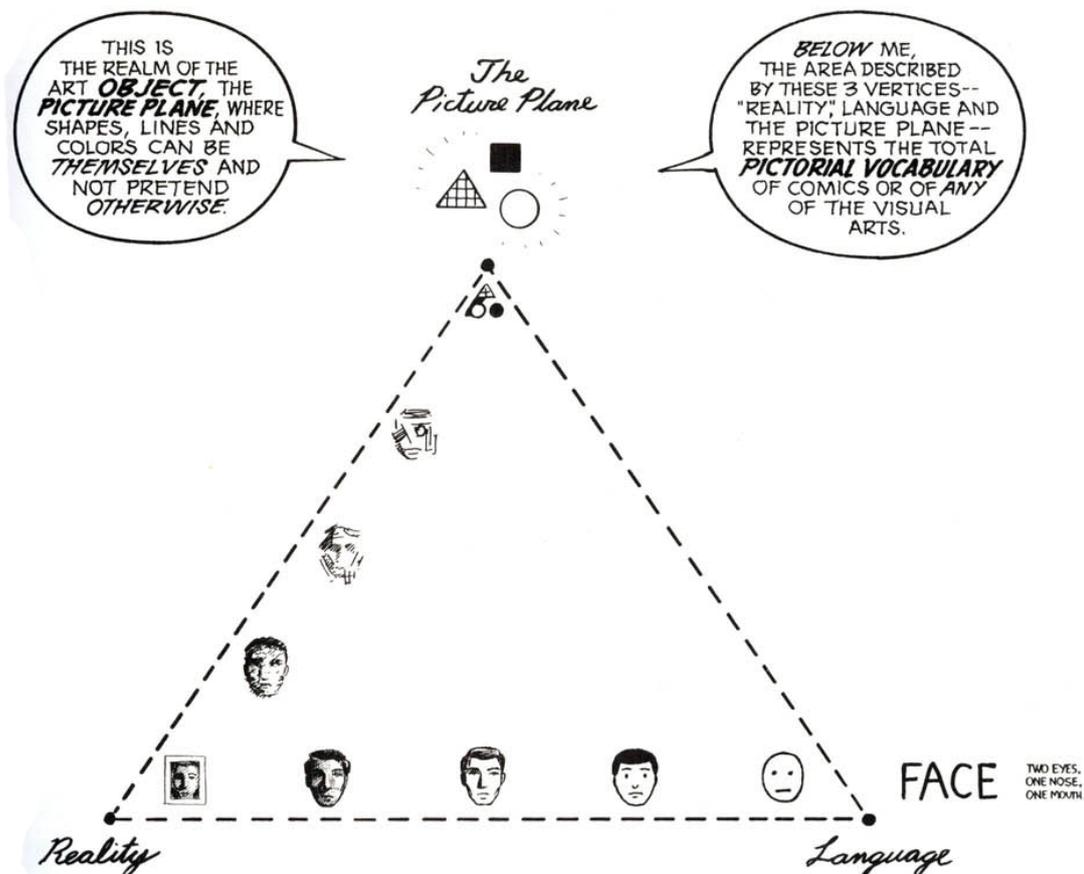


Figure 13. Scott McCloud *The Triangle of Representation* (HarperCollins, 1994), 51

McCloud's Triangle of Representation (figure 13) maps out a geometric spectrum of representational possibilities available to the sequential artist. The Picture Plane, at its apex, deals in what could be termed abstract art: non-representational images that do not carry an

explicit intertextual meaning. On another point of the triangle is Reality, which is the realm of photographs, cinema, and photorealistic representational art. At the third point of the triangle is Meaning, where the meaning of a thing is spelled out literally in words, symbols and icons. The visual experiments I took based on this model was a series of disparate visual elements composited together in an array of combinations, with a focus on character depicted at three intervals of life. The objective of this exercise was a greater understanding of what visual combinations work together effectively. The most successful of these images were selected for inclusion in the group exhibition *Shadow of a Mouse* at the Royal Queensland Art Gallery in October 2013.



Figure 14. Darren Fisher, compositing exercise, 2013

Figure 14 displays these representations of environment and character, both separated and unified in combination. The separate representations sit on different points of the Triangle of Representation and serve different research purposes. One of those purposes was to explore visually different states of mind. These include a wall being broken and falling into black space to symbolise an episodic shift in identity; a near-to-toppling series of blocks to symbolise the character's mental state, and a graphic stylised representation of earth and plant roots growing towards the light to symbolise hope. Character representations include a mouse with a jet pack, symbolising dreams of the future, and a blender with lightning trapped inside it, symbolising not only the cliché of caged lightning but also a sense of destruction that this entrapment might bring. Other renditions of the character at different ages were drawn in different styles, including a stark, chiaroscuro lighting style, a simplified style, and a

somewhat photorealistic style.



Figure 15. Darren Fisher *Shadow of a Mouse* (selected images) 2013

In figure 15, the interdependence of words and pictures has not been exercised. These examples demonstrate an unimaginative combination of these elements, where the words and the pictures say the same thing; the visual style is harmonious across foreground and background elements within each image. This is referred to as the lack of a “tension of opposites” required for the creation of humour or irony (Brunetti 2011, 30), which will be explored further in Chapter 3.2.



Figure 17. Darren Fisher *I Can't Imagine Anything Better* 2013

I Can't Imagine Anything Better (figure 17) demonstrates one way in which the different elements of sequential art can be manipulated to create extra meaning. The protagonist is shown sitting engaged in drawing, with his back to a visual metaphor of what is coming for him. White space, commonly associated in Western cultures with peace and tranquility (O'Connor 2011), is crumbling into blackness, representing a complete break in life as he knows it, brought on by oncoming adulthood. The thought bubble adds a level of irony due to the tension of meaning and intended humour, as the reader is aware that of something that the character is oblivious to. This image, although simple, makes use of different tracks of information—image, text, foreground and background—to create interdependence of meaning.

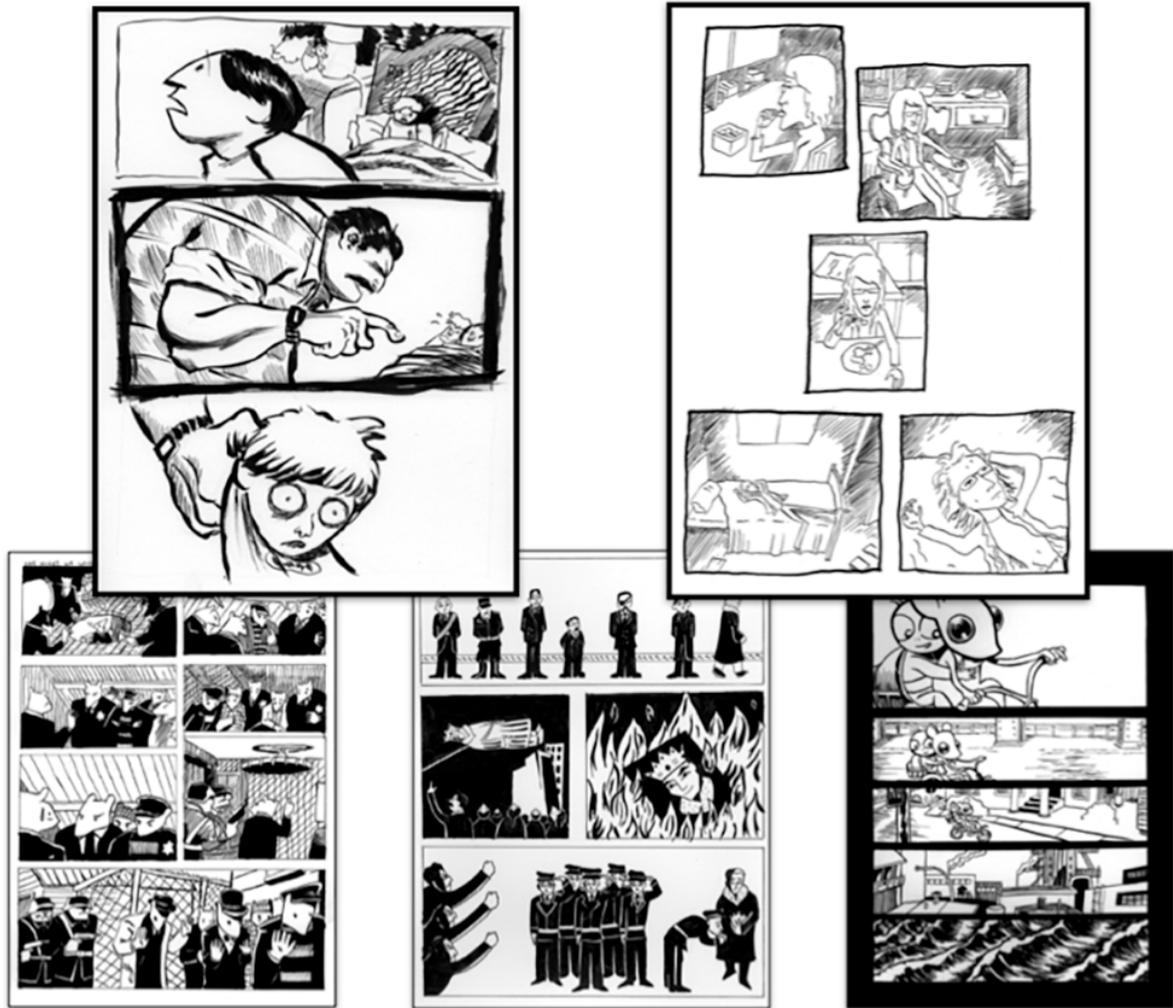


Figure 18. Darren Fisher *Mimicking the Masters* 2013

Another early visual exploration involved copying comic pages of chosen authors within my canon, where the process of duplicating each line and composition brings insight to the aesthetic choices therein. This exercise helped me to gain new insight into the visual approaches taken by these authors, not only technical aspects such as the dry-brush of Craig Thompson or the fine rendering of Chester Brown, but also aspects such as layout and representation of space and depth. This experiment led me to study Brown's and Thompson's techniques in more detail, as I was interested in their different approaches to line, material, and technique.

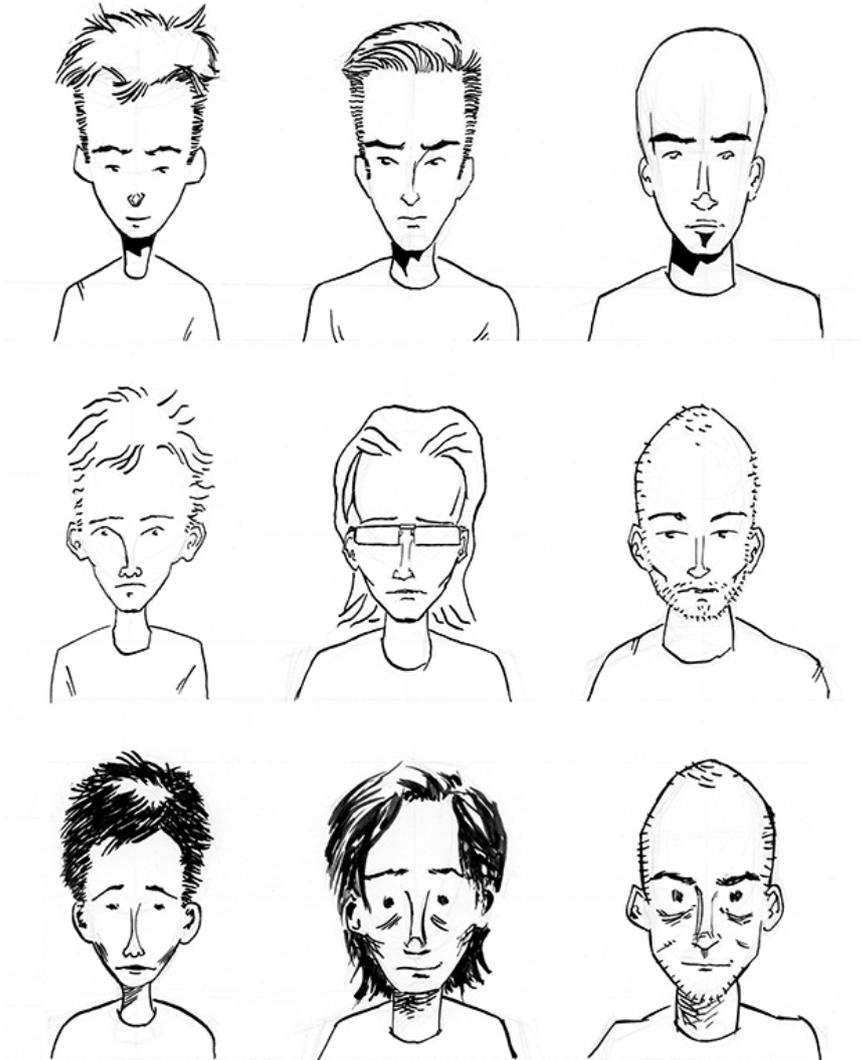


Figure 19. Darren Fisher *Faces* 2013

These exercises involved drawing a self-portrait from different periods of life in the borrowed visual styles of other practitioners, as seen in *Faces* (figure 19). Borrowing from the line work and tools of Thompson (bottom row) allowed me to establish an organic representation for a shifting persona, more economical in effort and time than my usual style (top row). The second row borrows from the line work of Brown. In mimicking a page of Brown's *I Never Liked You* (2002), I was surprised that what appears as random and messy line work actually requires tightly controlled penmanship to reproduce. It became apparent that this style of art is not suitable for my preferred process. I have an individual approach to making highly detailed images, and to spend such an amount of time on image making only to have it appear simplistic seems counter-intuitive. This act of drawing the same visage in various ways has connections to the pluralistic, diverse range of identity itself.

The concept of the mind consisting of many different states of identity, called the “inner team” or “inner plurality” (Schulz von Thun 1998) and “neural parliament” (Eagleman 2015), posits that our minds are a host of competing desires, goals, and fears that must be satisfied and balanced. This neural parliament has been explored within television, film, and animation. Pixar Studio’s *Inside Out* (2015) depicts a literal interpretation of the concept of an inner team, with colour used as a tool in the depiction and characterisation of distinct emotions, and colour psychology employed to obvious effect, where red represents anger, green envy, blue sadness, and so on. The inner team was also explored in *Herman’s Head*, a television show from the early 1990s, which depicts the protagonist’s various character traits of intellect, sensitivity, anxiety, and lust as four distinct and conflicting characters. In my research, I have experimented with visual representations of an inner team in the search for effective devices to present internal conflicts, while negotiating the necessity to operate in a variety of roles including author, protagonist, and narrator, further complicating an already plural self.



Figure 20. Darren Fisher *Lesson Learned* 2015

Colour is one of the more obvious tools in depicting concepts of emotion and difference, as shown in *Lesson Learned* (figure 20). Colour carries with it cultural connotations and communicates extra information, however relying on colour alone is flawed, as connotations vary across cultures, and therefore are a weakness when attempting to craft a narrative that resonates across cultures and demographics. The author, or ‘real life I’, may choose to assume the role of omniscient narrator in order to bring events spanning distances of space and time into cohesion, guiding the reader through the story as a wholly separate, disembodied entity. Mark Currie (2007) speculates that this type of narration may lead to a distance, or schism, between the reader and the characters. Alternatively, the author may assume the role of the ‘narrating I’, commenting on events of their life as a known persona within the story world. Here, the identification of the narrator as character assists in bridging some of the gap between the reader and the text, however this narration, taking place in the

present and reflecting on the past, is still likely to create distance. Lastly, the author may narrate as the 'experiencing I', identifying as the protagonist in the first person, within the timeline of the narrative. Here, there is no schism; the narrator, author and protagonist are the same person, and the narration is read as coming directly from the protagonist (Chaney 2011, 3). Sequential art critic and comics scholar Charles Hatfield (2005) posits that creating distance between the 'real life I' and the 'experiencing I' is critical to those autobiographical texts in which the I protagonist is often at odds with the older, more experienced, author. Hatfield cites Louis Renza's observation (1977, 317) that the author experiences his "signified past self as at once the same as his present self... and yet strangely, uniquely, as other to it". Hatfield speculates that this "otherness" allows the author freedom to create tension by carefully manipulating their use of the representational codes of pictures and words (2005, 128). Thus, the author can explore within this space highly subjective and abstract visual representations in counterpoint to the autobiographical text's truth claims. In doing so, Hatfield argues, the benefit is twofold. One, the resulting irony inflects the text with an emotional weight rather than mere literality; and two, the tension created by the contradicting styles of representation aids in establishing within the reader an acceptance of the present speaking to the past. Consequently, the research required further experimentation in manipulating the communicative elements in sequential art in order to play with the idea of the inner team and the shifting, unstable surfaces of identity.

3.2. A Built Environment

Our multifaceted, diachronic identity evolves via a series of choices over time relating to our ongoing, every-day narrative identity construction, influenced by and influencing our self-perceptions. Each of us is a built environment, largely responsible for our own story and the way in which we perceive the world and our self. Continuing with the parallel between identity and comics, "the story-space of a comic book can be seen as a built environment... the result of many practical decisions layered upon each other" (Grant 2014, 143); these practical decisions begin with story, and assemble their way onto the page in a myriad of possible ways depending on the author's choice of workflow. Scott Bukatman, Professor of Film and Media Studies at Stanford University, asserts that sequential art's strengths lie in the multiple ways it can be read, from panel to panel in sequence or as a whole, a "tabular, synchronic unity" (Chute and Jagoda 2014, 111). Similarly, identity may also be viewed as a tabular, synchronic unity; a whole composed of many parts. The pluralistic identity state, our inner team, is forced to present a united front, a cohesive whole, as part of operating as a rational, functioning member of society. Foregoing this and allowing the fragmented nature of the self to operate externally may, in extreme cases, be seen as symptomatic of mental disorder, something to be treated and cured if possible (Schulz von Thun 1998). Similarly, the comic author must strive for a cohesive whole in their presentation of a narrative, while performing a balancing act of story, text, image, layout, design and illustration. In a sense, this seems to

mirror the changing temporal states of identity. Bukatman (2014) posits that readers more than likely shift between multiple states of reading in the consumption of sequential art narratives. Some might, in fact, read from front to back, at random, or in all manner of creative ways, unburdened by the intentional narrative flow created by the author. When faced with a rigid grid structure as below, how does the reader traverse it as opposed to an organic, flowing layout? Is it possible to impose any sort of control over the reading?



Figure 21. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2017, page 306

How can this tabular, synchronic unity best be exploited to present a multifaceted and shifting identity system to the reader? In the page depicted in figure 21, I explore the tabular nature of comics in a literal sense, employing a rigid twelve-panel structure that forgoes the communicative aspects of a variable panel-size layout. This lends a certain type of rhythm to

the reading, a staccato pulse of beat that is evenly measured and moves backward and forward with a near equality of measure, varied only by the amount of negative space and text within each panel. According to the concept of the built environment, this type of layout might reinforce a steady reading pace and therefore a sense of stability, both in story and of character.



Figure 22. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2017, page 30

The excerpt in figure 22 shows how synchronic unity is easily affected by a disruption of layout. Narrative captions move through the centre of the meta-page, enabling a clearer line of reading through the “gutter” of the panels (McCloud 1994). This type of treatment reinforces the theme and title of the graphic novel, *Life in the Gutter*. The captions make explicit to a reader the protagonist’s inner voice, narrating his world and perceptions. The gutters are a metaphor for our inner, pluralistic, chaotic nature that is unseen by others, while the spaces inside the panels make visible the various states of identity that we assume. As the panels become increasingly fragmented, so the gutter space of the protagonist’s inner world expands. Either the states of identity being assumed are becoming more disparate or

his neural parliament is growing in size and power; such a choice of reading is ultimately open to the reader and can only be suggested by the author's manipulation of elements.

3.3. Interdependence

Two of the most obvious and important elements of comics' built environment are words and pictures. The way in which these elements work independently and the way that they interact gives rise to a multitude of possibilities in storytelling. Onomatopoeic text within sequential art narratives conveys not only the invisible world of sound, but its intensity and volume through the letters used to make up the words and their style, font, size, and colour.



Figure 23. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2017, page 214

In figure 23, the inclusion of sound laid over aspect-to-aspect panel transitions allows the reader to become familiar with the environment by painting fragments of a scene, which enables the reader to form a holistic picture of the scene within their minds. Panel one establishes the running faucet and sound, with the size of the panel given prime importance as it provides the binding element through the sequence. While the camera moves around

aspects of the scene, the sound of the tap runs throughout, its vertical structure acting as support to the aspect transitions. The tap's dominance in size provides a visual cue to its overarching importance within this scene. Its use as auditory bridge across succeeding panels and the visual indication of sound

acts to realize both space and time and authenticates the illusion (of space). Speech and music receive the most attention because they have specific meaning... sound fx and ambience provide the ground base of continuity to support the images. (Sobchack 1987)

The emphasised size of the running faucet also gives a clue to the reader of its role within the narrative (drowning out the sound of vomiting), a suggestive clue to the protagonist's actions.



Figure 24. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2017, page 240

As with many other mediums, in the creation of comics, ideas often arise throughout the process, and the story evolves as it is assembled. When constructing a sequence in *Life in the Gutter* (figure 24), I added lyrics from Ben Lee's song "We're All in This Together" (2005, used with permission) to provide Sobchack's "ground base of continuity" (1987) as the

'camera' moves around the scene. A continuous diegetic soundscape conveys a sense of place, reinforcing that the scene is set within a live music venue. When adding the lyrics to the images, however, I found that extra meaning spontaneously occurred where I hadn't intended, purely as a result of implanting unrelated text within the narrative. This synchronicity speaks to the beauty of the interdependence of text and image, and to the inherent human ability to spot patterns and create meaning.

Panel two in this sequence depicts the character Clint's new boss, part of his new life, in which he is trying to change what he considers are fundamentally flawed aspects of his character. The words in this panel, "cause we are changing", reflect this. Panel three's text, "We're all in this together" works in tension with one of the major themes of this narrative, loneliness, as Clint is confronted by his ex-fiancée and her current partner. There is a divide between them, both a metaphoric divide of emotion and a literal one of the bar. These characters certainly aren't in this together, and Clint is depicted as a small, naked child to further reinforce his feeling of insecurity. The final panel, "Someone remembers", gave me the inspiration to insert a flashback in the subsequent page as a way to provide the reader with some extra information on the characters' backstory, and to enable a respite from the tension of the scene. These 'happy accidents' occurred unintentionally, and were arrived at purely by the addition of predetermined text (lyrics) to the panels where they fit, speaking to the inherent ability of words and images to work together to produce more meaning than they can achieve alone.

This interdependence of word and image is similar to the way that people often say one thing while feeling and meaning something else. In socially constructed identity, spoken words are often contradicted by eyes, facial patterns, and actions; which we 'read' intuitively (Eggert 2012), decoding unspoken meaning hidden in gesture and expression. We are not only accustomed, but expected, to project identities that may not at all reflect the felt self. In attempting to better understand the interdependence of word and image within the context of double meanings, I performed an exercise from Ivan Brunetti's *Cartooning* (2011). It focuses on combining disparate images with pre-selected phrases to create new meaning and humour through irony.



LIFE'S GOOD!

Figure 25. Darren Fisher *Life's Good!* 2014

The contradiction of text and image to create a tension of opposites is employed in figure 25. “Life’s good” is a slogan associated with advertising for first-world technology, as well as a colloquial statement of positivity, and is contradicted by a representation of a familiar image signifying third world hunger and poverty. This is an example of how image and word work on two separate yet interdependent levels of communication, and how those pathways of information work together to create extra meaning; in this instance, irony, and perhaps offence. This intentional mismatching of word and image is important in mapping a sequential art narrative to the actions and idiosyncrasies of characters within the story world, with the aim of creating characters who are believable and relatable. The built environment of comics can be further exploited to communicate character and identity through the manipulation of spatial relationships, such as in Thompson’s *Goodbye Chunky Rice*.



Figure 26. Craig Thompson *Goodbye Chunky Rice* (detail) 2006

In *Chunky Rice*, Thompson uses juxtaposition to convey information about character and relationship (figure 26), depicting Chunky (the turtle) small and leaning subtly away from Charles to such an extent that he breaks the panel border. This breaking of the border is done only as required for extra effect, and further exaggerates the sense that Chunky is metaphorically wishing to escape from the narrative. Charles is seen taking up the majority of the space of the next panel, and through this exaggeration the power dynamic is set between the characters from one panel to the next. From these subtle manipulations of size and pose, the reader already has an indication of the relationship being established, that of prey and predator.



Figure 27. Craig Thompson *Goodbye Chunky Rice* (detail) 2006

Goodbye Chunky Rice also conveys discrete information about character by manipulating layout. For example, figure 27 depicts Dandel (the mouse) sitting with her back to us and facing the ocean. The panel is split in the middle; in the other division, the reader can see the rubbish accumulated in the rocks and the hints of an industrial landscape. The reader may then assume that Dandel chooses not to see such things and rather only observes the untouched ocean; thus, the reader might interpret that Dandel sees only the positives in the world and perhaps, by default, also in people. By way of this simple panel division, the reader is given greater insight into character, a subtle mimetic device easily communicated through framing and panel structure.



Figure 28. Craig Thompson *Blankets* (detail) 2003, page 101

The manipulation of panels, such as in the example of *Chunky Rice* leaning out of the panel border, can communicate on a subliminal level and further reinforce the ideas and themes of the narrative. In a scene from *Blankets* (figure 28), Thompson communicates emotion clearly and effectively by editing the panel border so that it fades out on its horizontal plane, leaving only negative space and the sound effect of a door slamming. This provides the reader with an immediate sense of disconnection as Craig leaves the scene. Raina's disappointment at Craig's departure is made obvious to the reader by this simple manipulation of structure, as the absence of a vital structure of the medium echoes the absence felt by the character.



Figure 29. Darren Fisher 1994 *Melbourne* 2014, page 8

I make similar use of this technique in *1994 Melbourne* (figure 29), pushing the idea further by gradually removing the opacity on the background panels leading up to this final panel. The aim is to communicate a feeling of isolation, echoing the character's emotional state, manipulating the elements of sequential art so that the reader feels empathy and connection with the characters.

3.4. Wordless

Dave Gibbons, artist and co-plotter/creator of *Watchmen* (1987), believes that, "comics are, first and foremost, a synthesis of words and pictures. You've got two tracks; a visual track and a textual track, and... essentially [a] picture shouldn't have to have any words and the other way around" (cited in Salisbury 2000, 93). When character action, part of the visual track, takes the responsibility of communicating narrative, it removes the communicative load on the written track of dialogue and narration. New media theorist Anne Frances Wysocki (2003) argues against this, stating that any medium that gives more weight to the image than to text is viewed as "either not taking seriously or properly used only for children" (cited in Kraemer 2016, 245). This research contends otherwise, choosing at times to convey emotion and

personality through action, including pose, expression, and movement alone, subscribing to Will Eisner's suggestion that "in comics, body posture and gesture occupy a position of primacy over text" (1990, 103). The acting of characters within a comic makes use of three design elements of comics, including the visual, gestural, and spatial, and these interact with the reader's knowledge of the characters to this point, their narrative journey, and the other design elements within the page, including text and layout.

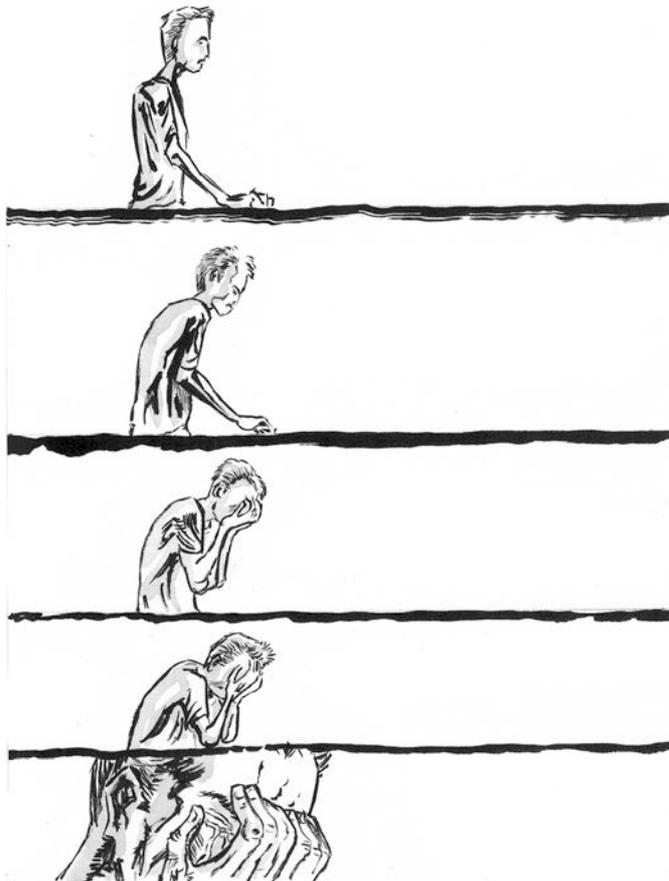


Figure 30. Darren Fisher *Chasing Shadows* 2015, page 10

Chasing Shadows (Figure 30) was completed as part of the 24 Hour Comic Challenge as a wordless narrative using only the communicative tools of image and structure, created with brush, ink, and wash on A5 Bristol board. The idea was to have the comic read quickly, absorbed emotionally, rather than intellectualised, with only visual information to decode. This was a challenge as the narrative moved forwards and backwards, jumping great spans of time and space without the aid of narration or captions to assist the reader. In a sense, the aim was to create an ephemeral quality somewhat like memory.

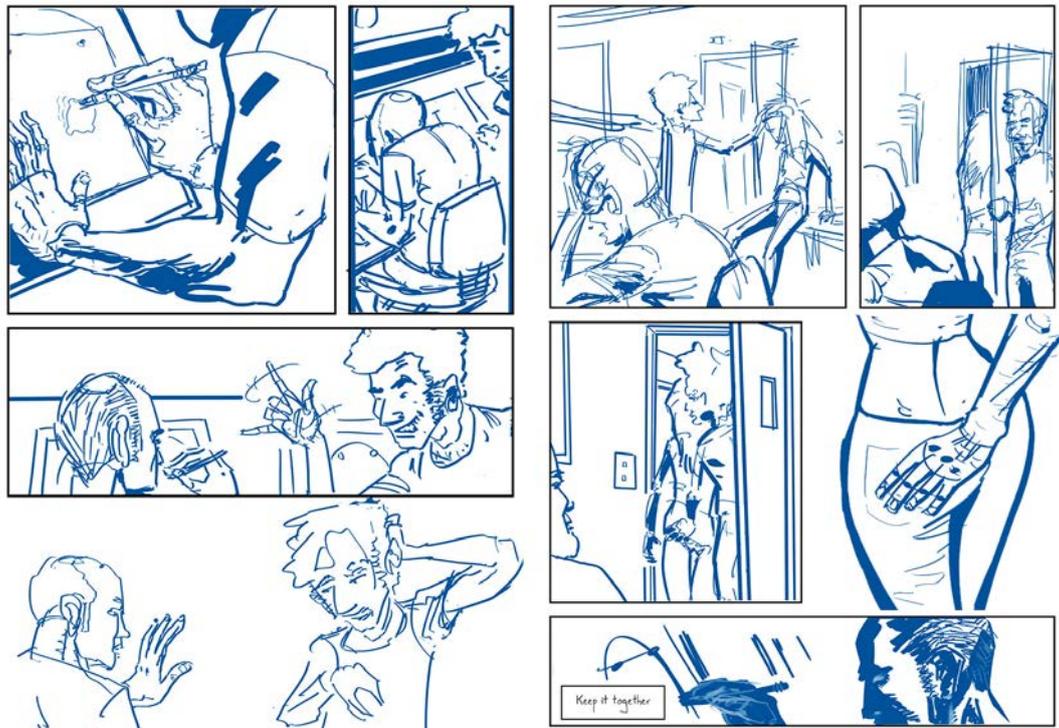


Figure 31. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2017, pages 233 & 234

Figure 31 illustrates a short wordless scene from *Life in the Gutter* that relies upon moment-to-moment and action-to-action transitions (McCloud 1994, 70); these types of panel transition stay within the same scene, with the same subject, and within a limited span of time. As such, this type of transition requires very little deductive capacity to stitch the panels together into a cohesive narrative. Within the page, a variety of panel transitions tell the story and give the reader all the clues they need to create mood and narrative from the disconnected images. Gestures become vitally important, describing character and relationships; the protagonist is trying to stay focused and resist the temptations of drugs and procrastination. The reader learns at the same time as the protagonist that the girl he is infatuated with is now taken, signalled by the physical gesture of someone else placing a hand on her, which implies sexual familiarity and possession. Throughout the story, the tug of war between discipline and temptation is a major theme as the character continually swings between trying to stay clean and being drawn back into his dark habits.

Words, in the form of dialogue and narration, make it is possible to convey complex ideas of a character's innermost hopes and fears quickly and easily. This is a diegetic form of storytelling, where the message is told and not shown. Where possible, I prefer to use less explicit, mimetic forms of communication to convey character and emotive states, in conjunction with manipulating the medium's codes, including panel transitions, layout, negative space, and acting.

3.5. Disclosure

Autobiographical comics and graphic novels are often controversial in their discussion of traditionally private topics and the depiction of authors' most innermost thoughts and deeds (Hatfield 2005; El Refaie 2012). Deciding on the degree of disclosure is a necessary step in the creation of autobiography, as the author is required to think about not only how much of their story they want to tell, but also to what extent they depict graphic and socially taboo acts. A good example of this occurred during September 2013, when I was given the possibility of taking over the editor/organiser duties on *Ashcan*, a Brisbane indie anthology comic. I contacted eighteen comic artist/writers asking for submissions to the theme of Taboo True Stories, setting restrictions against gratuitous violence, graphic sex, or explicitly depicted drug use. I hoped to produce an intelligent comic that expressed adult themes in an oblique, intelligent way that relied on metaphor, allusion, and iconography. The idea of creating a true taboo story was a barrier for many of the creators, and many of them dropped out. As a result, I relented and relaxed the theme to True Stories, reluctantly removing the Taboo aspect, which allowed the book to move forward. This experience prompted me to ask questions regarding disclosure of a normally private and personal nature. What are acceptable limits of disclosure, and can disclosure of normally hidden or taboo aspects of life help to flesh out a character in a meaningful way? Can honest confession bring the reader closer to the text? Robert Crumb, one of the most well-known exponents of underground comics, authored a number of comics that dealt explicitly with sexual acts, drug use, and other acts considered taboo, including *Zap Comix* and *Snatch Comics*. He says of his success "I used to censor myself when I drew cartoons. I just stopped censoring, that's all" (cited in Harvey 1996, 195).

Crumb's self-published first issue of *Zap Comix* experimented with thematically bold material, and where he "let it all hang out—the raging Id" (Harvey 1996, 195). This lack of self-censorship, Crumb contends, is what allowed him to reach deep into his subconscious to depict the sexually explicit and self-exposing images and themes that made him one of the world's most famous illustrators and comic book authors. Crumb's work (and success) also gave permission for generations of artists following him to do the same, and in doing so, push the boundaries of what could be done in comics. The resulting 'underground movement' (Hatfield 2005; Harvey 1996; El Refaie 2012), revelled in the freedom of uncensored expression and in challenging socially constructed ideas of the taboo. As mainstream comics became heavily associated with superheroes and ideas of good triumphing over evil, so the underground movement, operating within small circles of distribution and self-publishing, appealed to an entirely different demographic of audience, who were interested in ordinarily private themes of personal disclosure.

The work of Chester Brown's *Paying for It* (2011) details his experiences with prostitutes in an open and unapologetic manner, candidly revealing Brown's sexual preferences and shortcomings. Brown's *The Playboy* (1992) focuses on his discovery of pornography as a teenager and graphically depicts his teenage self in the act of masturbation, and his subsequent guilt-ridden hiding of the pornographic material, revealing a complex push and pull of desire and shame. Brown's *The Little Man* (2006) depicts Brown going through the minutiae of a waking morning, graphically depicting the process of urination, as well as picking snot from his nose and eating it. Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2007) relates the story of her closet homosexual father's suicide and the deep impact that his hidden identity had on the entire family, and how she struggled to carve out her own identity in the wake of such tragedy. In *Real Stuff* (2004), writer Eichorn provides stories of drug use, of deviant sexual acts with prostitutes, of an aggressive, bullying past, all in the name of truthful and open disclosure. *Stitches* (Small 2010) tells the story of the countless X-rays that its author David Small received at the hands of his radiologist father, his resulting throat cancer, and the subsequent loss of his voice and physical disfigurement. This tragedy is set against the backdrop of a loveless childhood, his closet-lesbian mother, and an absent, distanced father. In *Monsters* (2009), Ken Dahl discloses his self-diagnosed contraction of herpes and attempts to negotiate relationships and a sex life, while in *Maus* (1986), Art Spiegelman shares his dysfunctional relationship with his Holocaust-surviving father. Joe Matt dedicates an entire graphic novel to his obsession with pornography and masturbation in *Spent* (2007), depicting not only himself in the act of masturbation but also in other unsociable practices such as eating scabs and mucus and urinating in sinks and bottles. For some, this may be going too far in disclosure, moving away from the creation of a shared understanding to the creation of a sense of disgust or at least a sense of irrelevance. Knowing the demographic that one is aiming to reach may help in mitigating this chance of creating revulsion, rather than empathy, in the reader.

The decision on what to disclose within my own work and how to disclose it was particularly relevant within my graphic novel. While I wanted to create a feeling of authenticity and create a space for resonance with the reader, I found it important to keep some sense of mystery in places and to also keep a distance in scenes where I thought it would aid the narrative.

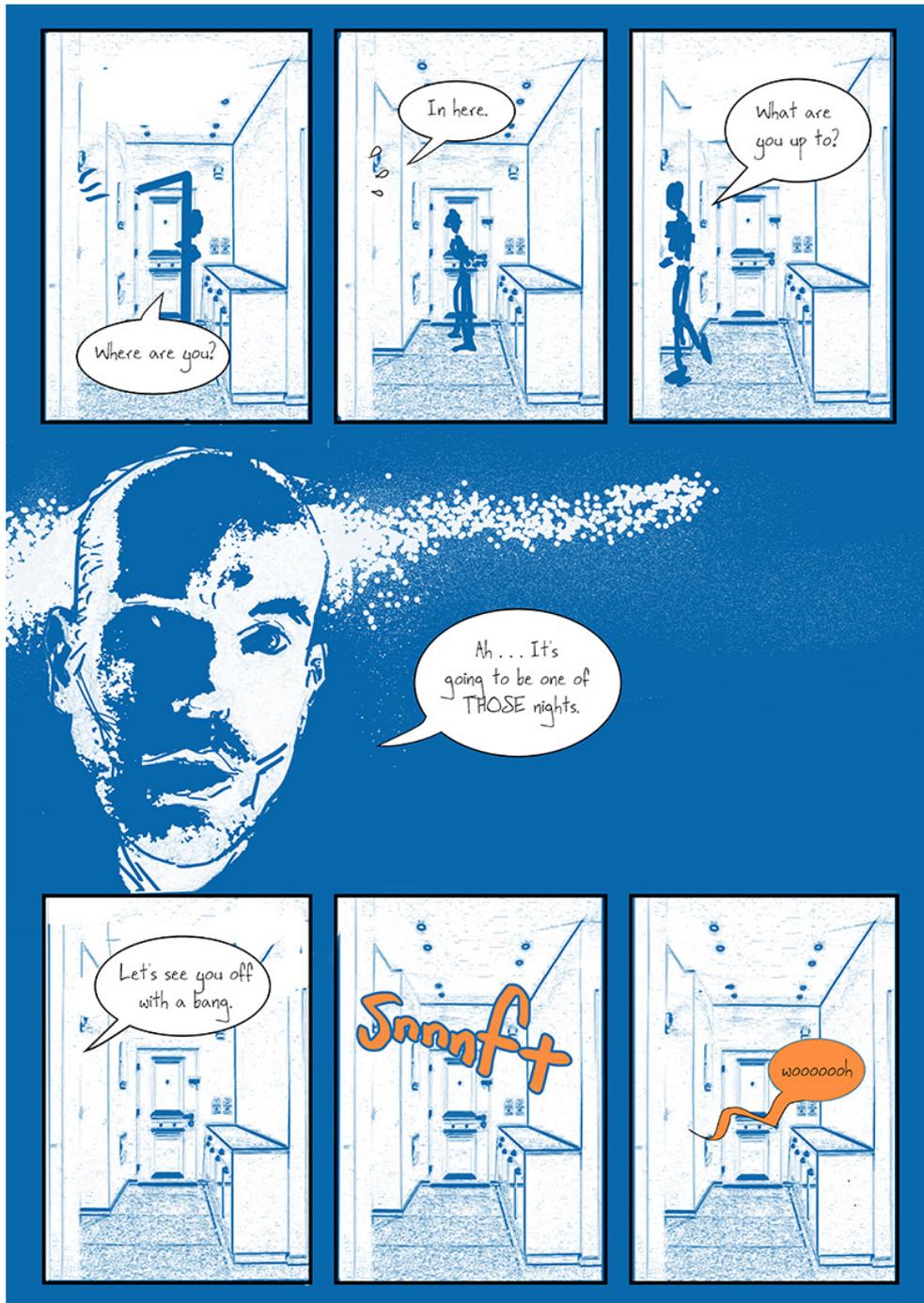


Figure 32. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2017, page 57

Figure 32 suggests, rather than explicitly shows, the act of drug taking. Sound effects are used to imply the action taking place; however, I chose to use this type of storytelling in order to build mystery. Keeping a metaphoric and literal distance between the reader and the characters behind closed doors communicates not only that this is a private act, but also implies that the character feels a sense of shame and distance with himself for taking part.

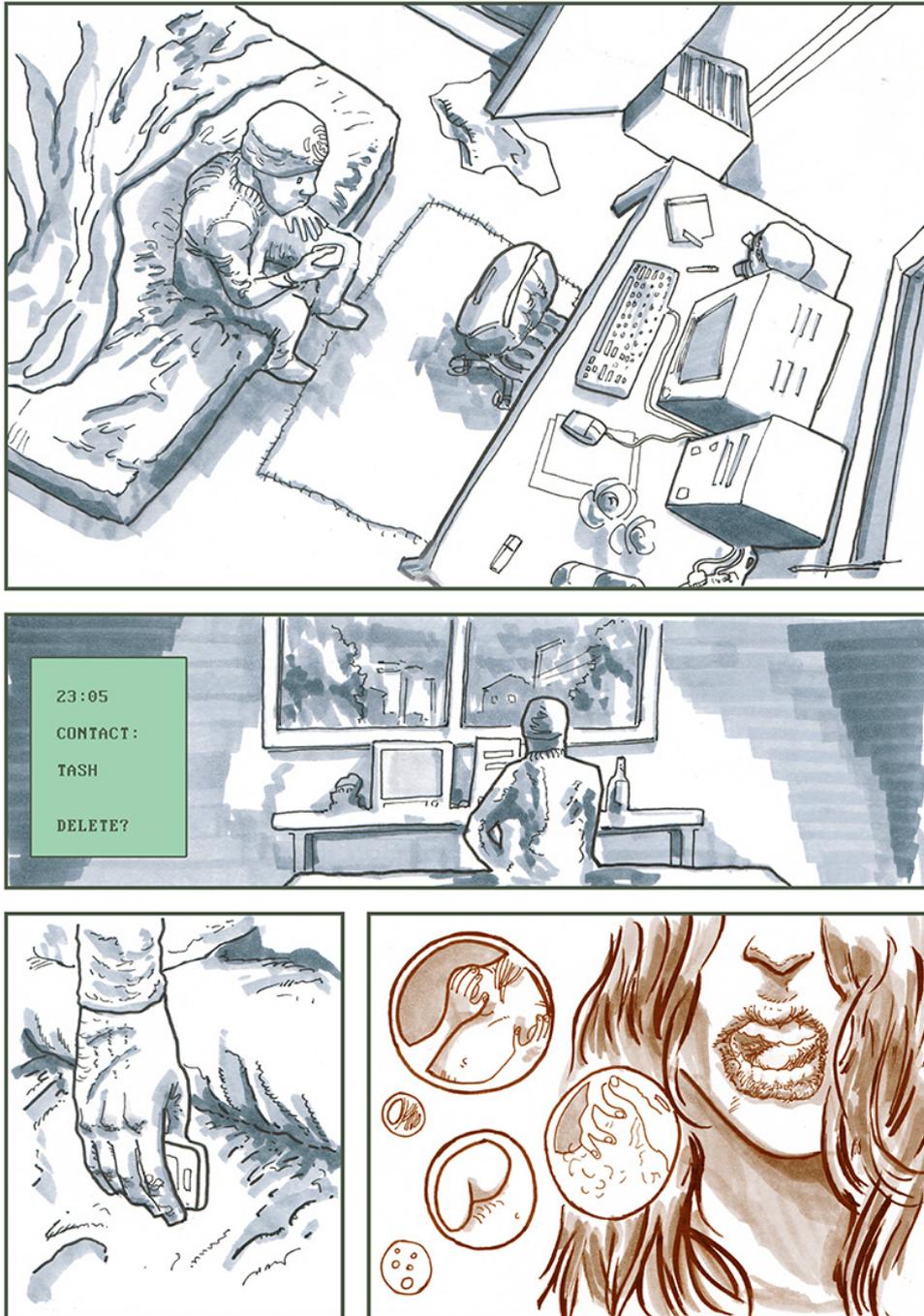


Figure 33. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2017, page 282

Figure 33 sets a scene the day after an intimate encounter has taken place. Instead of showing the act itself, I have skipped over it, using an ellipse of time, to move forward to the scene more relevant to the narrative—the character experiencing regret and feeling alone. The character's self-flagellation is an important driver of the story, and it is a critical part of Eakin's "narrative identity system" (2008). A brief flashback to the encounter is shown, but only through the thought bubbles; these glimpses of memory and moments are fast fading—like air bubbles, they are intangible and ephemeral.

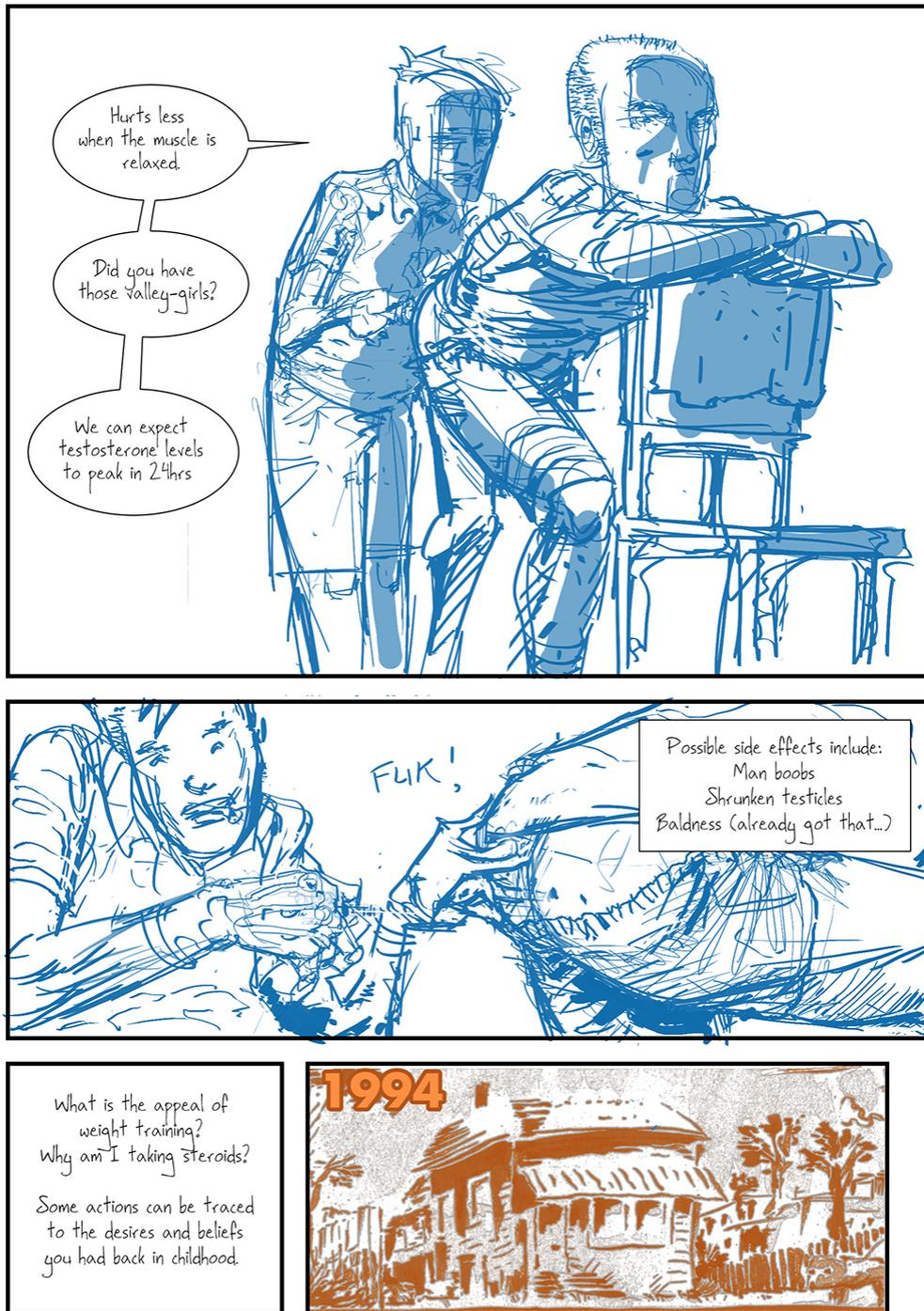


Figure 34. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2017, page 126

Conversely, in figure 34, I chose to explicitly show the act of ingesting a drug; here, it is injected into the muscle. The aim was to depict the ridiculousness of such an act and also to demonstrate to the reader through action the close bond between the two characters. Here, the act of drug taking is without mystique or allure, and shown as rather comical and embarrassing.

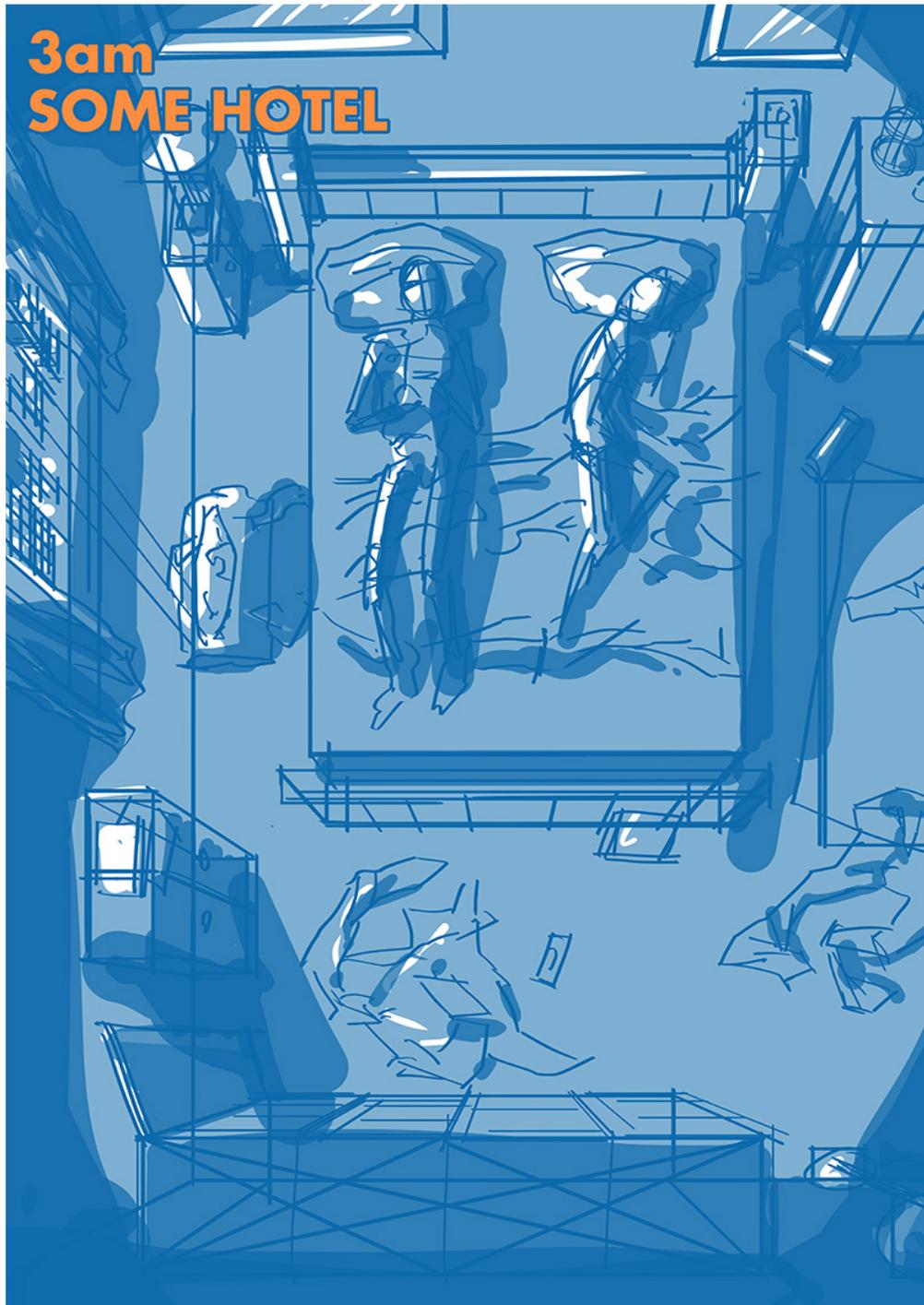


Figure 35. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2017, page 272

Figure 35 again uses an ellipse to skip over the actual events, implying a certain private nature, with the intent of echoing the character's loneliness. Even in a hotel room in bed with someone else, the protagonist feels alone, in the dark, and stares into the eyes of the reader. It is intentional that the actual act of sex, or the intimacies that might ordinarily be highlighted, are not a focus. Just as the character does not focus on these (ordinarily) positive activities, so too does the narrative linger mainly on the doubt and shame that follow such acts.

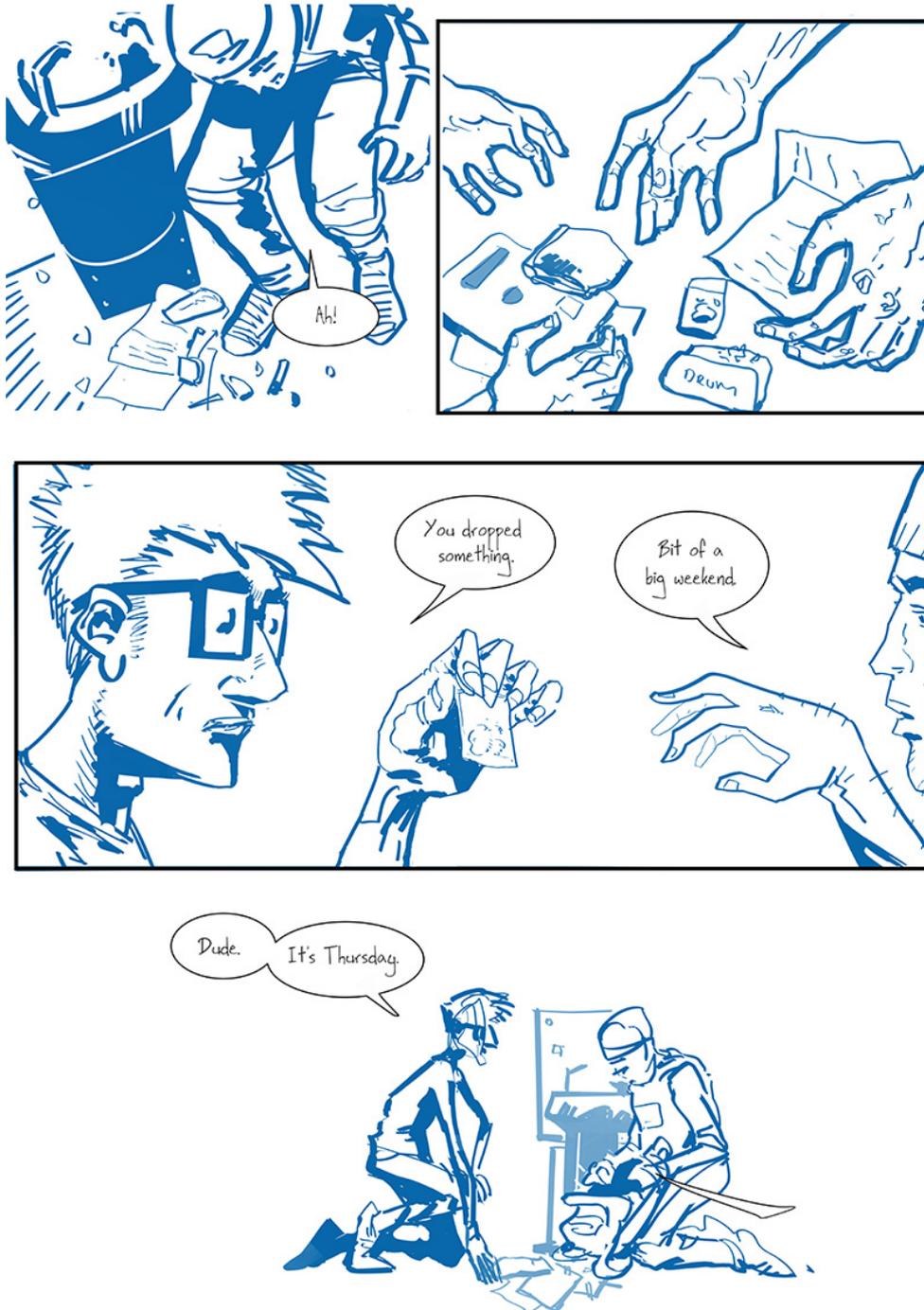


Figure 36. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2017, page 313

In the scene depicted in figure 36, I have chosen to bring a double disclosure into the narrative. It shows the protagonist's drug habit inadvertently become obvious to one of his close friends who was previously unaware of this activity. The kind of sudden disclosure then prompts the question, how do others react when faced with disclosure of taboo acts, and is that in any way a guide to navigating the reaction that a reader might have?



Figure 37. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2017, page 256

In disclosing character, there are certain acts that can be shown to convey information mimetically by showing, rather than telling. In figure 37, the protagonist is writing multiple texts and not sending any of them. This trait is indicative of his character, his self-doubt, and the conflict between his inner self and the external identity that he seeks to portray. These examples all demonstrate various ways in which the author is able to choose from degrees of disclosure of private acts. The choices are made in order to suit the requirements of clarity and of ensuring that the ways of telling the narrative are in keeping with its themes and characters.

One of the ways in which I might depict internally felt states of character-to-character relationships, alignment, mood, and state of mind is by the use of Heads Up Displays (HUDs). The implementation of such a device, traditionally found within games, and within game-oriented comics such as *Scott Pilgrim vs The World* (2010) by Brian Lee O'Malley, enables a view into the character's internal world and emotions without the need to use narration or thought balloons. One problem with this is that it may detract from the sense of authenticity of the narrative. It may also lend the narrative a game genre impression through the commonly held connotation of HUDs and games, which is not the desired outcome. Additionally, how such a visual device might be integrated into the narrative, adding to the visual harmony of the pages without disrupting the flow of reading serves as a challenge. Figures 41 and 42 show some initial attempts at visualising a workable HUD and the elements it might display, with these considerations taken into account. One possibility within a HUD is to list the actual members of the characters' inner team/neural parliament. Who would the members of the inner team be? Would they be based on emotions, such as in the film *Inside Out*, or attributes such as confidence, submissiveness, humour, and seriousness? There are a wide range of human emotions and competing voices to choose from, as well as psychological considerations of a person's attraction to another, the levels of interconnection and intensity of relationship (friendship, acquaintance, enemy). Biological factors of hunger, sleep, stress might be indicated on a HUD, also affecting a characters' behaviour. Key identities might be based on esoteric concepts of Western and Eastern astrology and elements, and this might influence behaviour between characters on levels that they are not aware of, while the reader would have, via the HUD, a sense of omniscience. Interpersonal relationships might be further clarified by the use of a system of symbols indicating a pack-mentality categorisation between characters, with a different alpha depending on the social context. Another idea is to incorporate within the HUD story writing concepts such as Antagonist/Opponent, Ally and Fake Ally (Truby 2007); however, this would ruin any surprise twist of a Fake Ally/Opponent and potentially weaken the story by making clear the different character's roles.

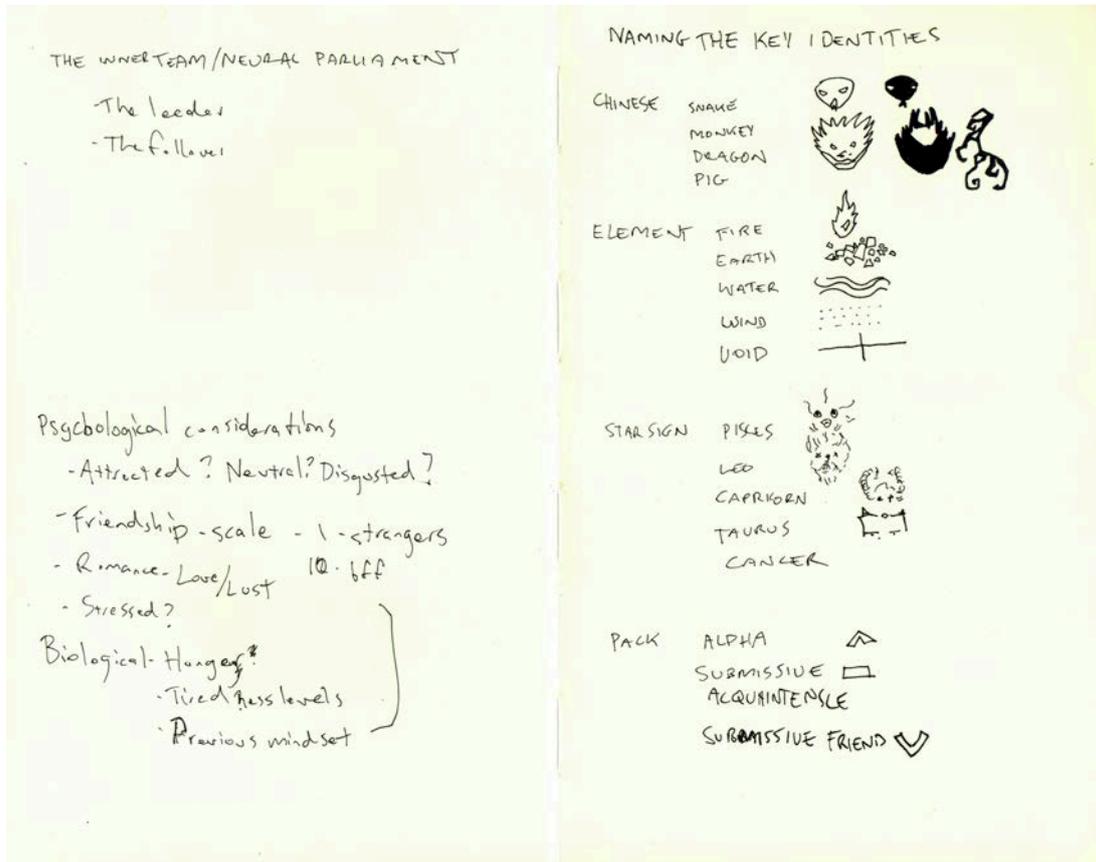


Figure 38. Darren Fisher, HUD concept, 2016

Other aspects of the inner state (as opposed to the external identity state) that could be displayed within a HUD are levels of intoxication and substance use, including coffee, cigarettes, and other drugs. Training and fitness levels could be displayed, as well as varying aspects of self-pity, remorse, and hope. Colour cues (see Appendix 5: *Life in the Gutter* planning & workflow) could provide a secondary level of information for the reader, such as pink for romance, purple for substance abuse, green for family, and yellow for training. The amount and type of information given in these HUDs would need to further the narrative and character development in a way that feels authentic to style, tone and genre, while staying within personally set limits of authorial disclosure.

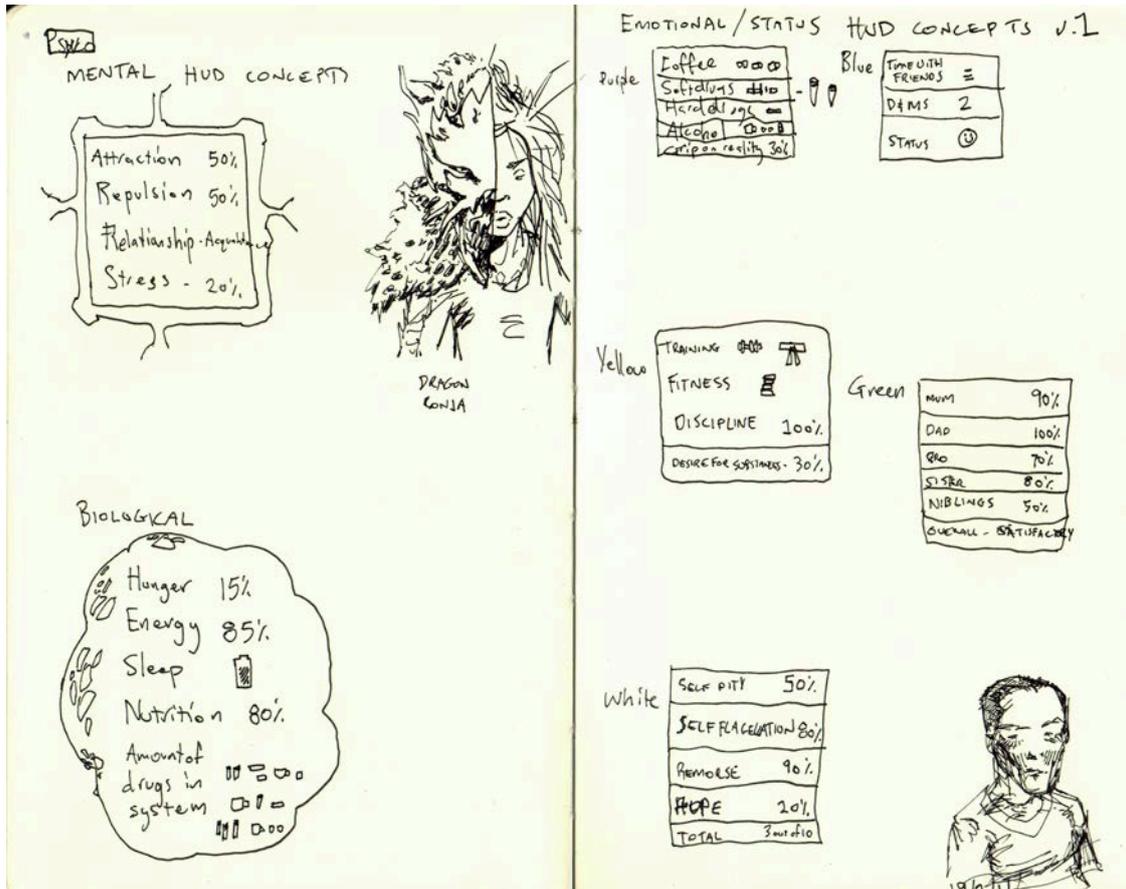


Figure 39. Darren Fisher, HUD concept, 2016

In summary, disclosure relates to the fine line between letting the reader ‘feel’ implicit information and delivering it explicitly, creating a sense of shared understanding while leaving room for the reader’s interpretation and investment. However, the negotiation of disclosure and the creation of realistic identity within characters is by far not the only authorial consideration. In aiming for a resonant story, establishing a sense of truth is also vital.

4. Truth (and Fiction)

4.1. Emotional Truth

Autobiography as a genre carries with it an inbuilt expectation of truth, of a retelling of events firmly rooted in fact without embellishment or fictionalisation. However, defining the boundaries of truth is not straightforward, particularly in the context of autobiographical narratives within sequential art, where memory, identity, image, and text, push and pull in all directions. This research seeks to demonstrate that a method of creating a universal, shared truth might, ironically, be to relate stories that are completely subjective and deeply personal. This paper will frequently refer to the creation of a 'sense of truth'. This phrase speaks to the creation of an understanding, by manipulation of the text, that the events and emotional responses within it are firmly rooted in real events of the author's past, recounted with honesty, and as fully as memory permits. The research outlines a variety of ways in which this sense might be constructed. Firstly, through the use of diary entries and material certification of the past, both as background development of story and visibly incorporated within the text, providing both a depth of research and a layer of documentary evidence for the reader. Secondly, by calculated manipulation of image via colour, line, shape, layout, style, and operations of image in combination with written language through dialogue, narration and sound effects. Thirdly, through the implementation of key theoretical findings including the "neural parliament" (Eagleman 2015) and "inner team" (Schulz von Thun 1998), allowing for the creation of characters who reflect the nuance and complexity of real life. Lastly, by writing characters with unfixed modes of episodic and diachronic character evolution, acknowledging that people do not necessarily change in linearly progressive arcs, as in traditional Western screenplays, but rather through a process that is back and forth, sometimes without discernible reason. The sense of truth that this research seeks to create between the author, the text and the reader, is of the often-chaotic reality of life and of human nature, fleshing out a life unbound by the rules of traditional storytelling and lacking the character arcs, restorative structure, and the cause and effect of fictional characters and worlds. This research will also seek to delineate the boundaries of emotional truth, and to make clear the rationale for adhering to emotional over purely literal truth.

During my time at undergraduate studies, I kept a journal, partly as a way to keep track of things in this eventful time and partly as a way to confide my thoughts when I was alone. The task of shaping these entries and notes into a structured narrative proved challenging. It involved processes such as fleshing out the characters' weaknesses and needs (Truby 2007) and showing them through identity-based action and built-environment considerations, as outlined in the previous chapter. This process of planning, revising and developing characters is documented in Appendix 5. There are a number of advantages and disadvantages to working from diary entries. Some of the advantages are that it gives a clear chronology of

events, aids in assisting memory of places and people, and gives some clues about the mental and emotional state of the 'experiencing I'. Disadvantages include that the diary entries are incomplete and biased according to my felt state at the time and my ongoing narrative identity system. Additionally, some entries focus only on events and others only on emotions, and it is thus incomplete and fragmented. At times, the emotional state of the 'experiencing I' was positive, and on reflection it is clear that these were usually times where I was engaged in constructive activities of training or making progress on diverse work, and staying free of substances. There were periods of great reflection and a kind of morose, tragic poeticism that emerged where I felt entirely hopeless. At other times, there were insights where I knew what steps were necessary to move forward; inevitably, though, I would fall back into bad habits, both physical and mental. This proved a difficult thing to work with from a storytelling point of view, since, according to John Truby, the protagonist must not be aware of his weaknesses, and, by default, his needs. Writing this character making the same mistakes time and time again while each time reiterating the requirements for recovery and improvement led to a story that felt cyclical and repetitive. I wondered how to create an engaging story that deepened with intrigue and challenge, so that the character's emergence at the end and triumph would feel satisfactory to the reader. Ultimately, the diary entries provided a good reference that meant I did not have to rely on memory alone. Although the entries could not be said to be entirely truthful accounts of events due to my narrative identity system and the way in which I selected events to tell and how to tell them, the entries at least gave a guideline of events and a look into the mind and emotional state of the 'experiencing I'. Working from diary entries so binary in their accounts of event and emotion led me to a crucial choice of storytelling, of whether to aim for literal or emotional truth. I chose emotional truth, and selected diary entries for inclusion in the narrative that would allow me to connect with the reader on the universal level of emotion over that of specific experience.

The shaping of the graphic novel from diary entries, through script development and rough layouts, and into the final pages was constantly modified by choices of what to keep and what to discard, how much to edit, and whether to include new material. The processes of choice, made from the very first stages of diary writing and following through the entire creative process, shaped the work and modified its qualities of autobiographic truth. By integrating the source diary entries into the current comic pages, I attempt to convey the internal world of the protagonist without having to resort to narration or grandiose speeches, as shown in figure 43.

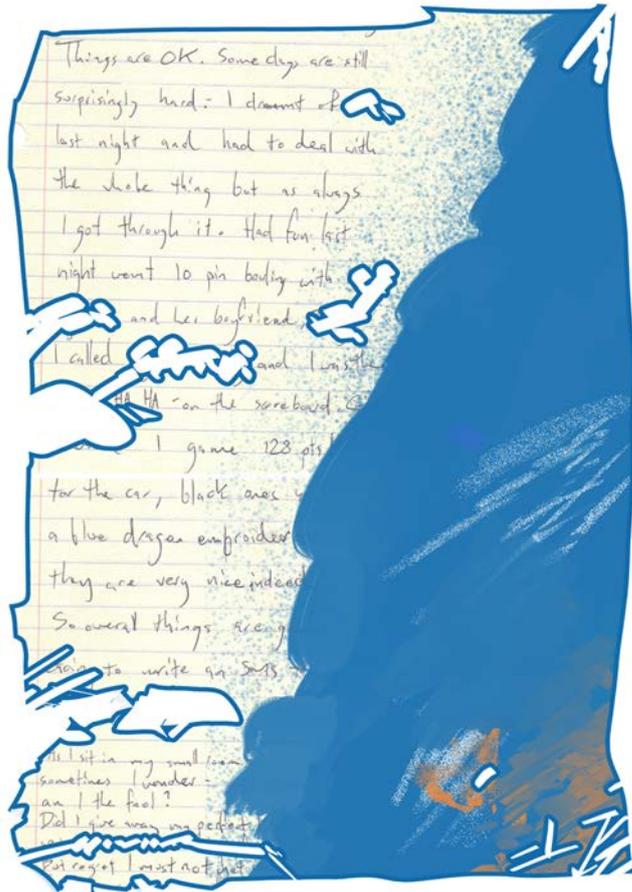


Figure 40. Darren Fisher, diary integration experiment, 2015

The integration of diary entries within narrative also gives me the opportunity to experiment with 'meta' page layouts (figure 40), with diary entries that formed the basis for the story now integrated into the pages they inspired, adding a self-referential layer to the narrative. This is in keeping with the reflective nature of this project, of the present commenting on the past, and as a further effort to establish a sense of authenticity within the reading.

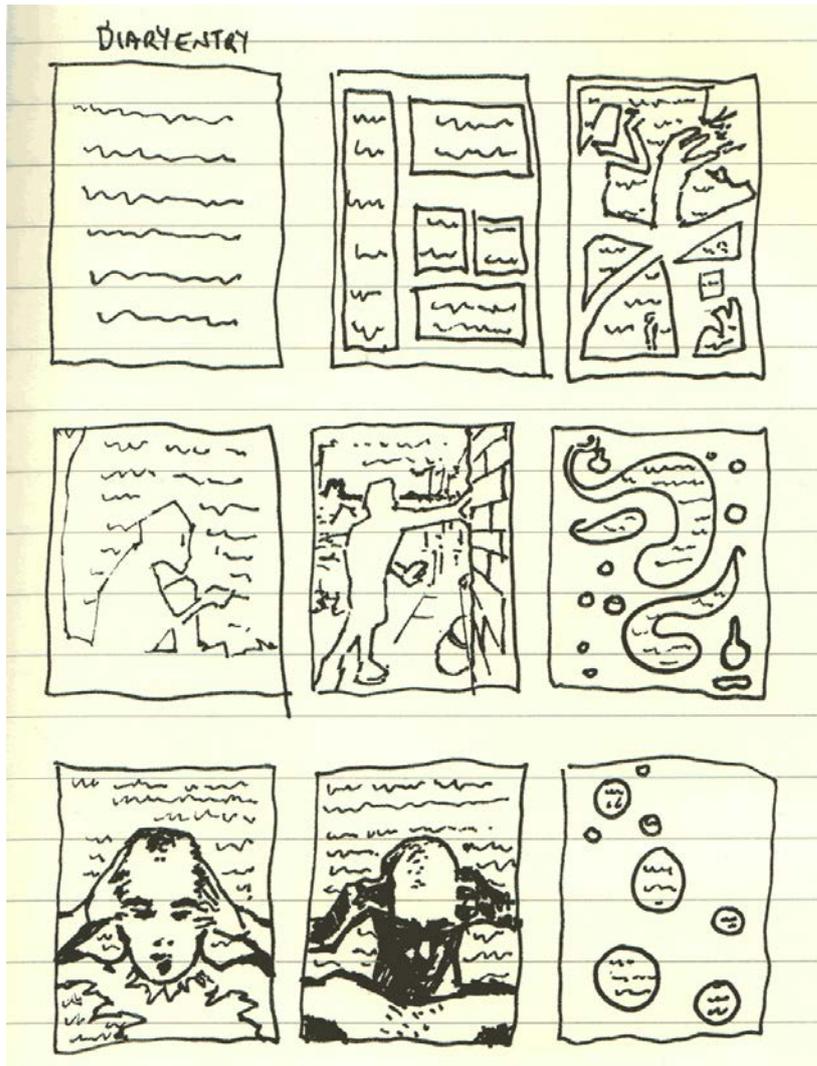


Figure 41. Darren Fisher, sketchbook excerpt, 2016

Many artists believe and apply a flowing, discovery-oriented methodology to drawing and the creative process (Ware 2014; Lynch 2014; Grant 2014). When discussing his drawing processes in an interview (see Appendix 7: A Frank Chat), Scottish comic book artist Frank Quitely confesses “I suppose I just feel my way through it.” With this in mind, I let the principles of action research to guide the application of my findings, allowing a random creative workflow only to the extent where it led me to create a greater sense of truth. This was sometimes facilitated through the use of digital drawing tools, which makes possible the ability of adding and removing layers, transforming and duplicating areas of the page, and moving forward and backward through edits.



Figure 42. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2017, page 220 (excerpt)

For example, in scripting a sequence shown in figure 42, I had written a line of dialogue to accompany this panel. However, during the drawing process I realised it would be more powerful to replace the dialogue with a hand gesture. This is a digital affordance—of developing dialogue and image together with the ability to easily edit and make changes at any stage of the process—that is not easily available to the completely traditional author. Through this process of constant reiteration and modification, the truthfulness of a sequential art narrative may be called into question. But at what point of modification is a text’s original authenticity affected? Sometimes, editing may be the result of a memory that is refined through the creative process; at other times, changes also occur in the interests of simplification, clarity, or for visual appeal. Most often though, I found myself making changes in order to enhance a sense of emotional truth.

In attempting to limit the variables of truth—both perceived and real—within autobiographical texts, Lejeune coined the 'autobiographical pact' in 1975 in which “we call autobiography the retrospective narrative in prose that someone makes of his own existence when he puts the principal accent upon his life, especially upon the story of his own personality” (cited in Smith and Watson 2001, 1). The consequences of violating the autobiographical pact can be substantial. James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* (2003) was published as an autobiographical account of Frey’s experiences abusing drugs and undergoing subsequent rehabilitation. Despite mixed reviews, it was promoted by Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club and presented as a life-affirming tale of perseverance and triumph. Shortly after this, Frey’s book became a number one seller on Amazon, going on to rank highly in the *New York Times*’ Best Seller list for fifteen weeks, with discussions ensuing regards licensing for cinematic adaptation. However, when it later emerged that many of the events in the book never happened, a rapid sequence of consequences followed. Winfrey publicly denounced Frey’s book, the publisher was forced to offer a returns policy for purchasers, discussions with production companies ceased, and the publisher discontinued further printing. The public, although eager for entertainment, do not tolerate apparent deception.

Nevertheless, since the mid-1970s, authors of sequential art have adhered to and rejected the autobiographical pact in varying degrees, thus affecting the reading of their narratives. For example, Eddie Campbell uses an alter ego in *Alec: The King Canute Crowd* (originally published in 1984), although the stories contained within are clearly autobiographical in nature. This allows Campbell a reprieve from the restrictions of Lejeune's pact, and Campbell is free to disclose any blend of fact and fiction within his narrative. Associate Professor Phoebe Gloeckner tells the story of her childhood love affair with her mother's boyfriend in *Diary of a Teenage Girl* (2002, 2015) using her alter-ego Minnie; however, this is counter-balanced with the addition of photographs, diary entries and drawings from the time. In the foreword to the revised edition, Gloeckner states that her book is a "novel", not a diary, an "encapsulated world created... that we are invited to enter and believe in, although its reality is artifice", creating "characters who can be universally understood despite being constructed with details so numerous that they could only refer to a particular situation" (2015, xv). These authors thus negate the requirements of Lejeune's pact while nevertheless creating narrative that is read and understood as autobiography.



Figure 43. Darren Fisher 1994 *Queensland* 2014, page 15

The autobiographical pact sets a framework for the author to follow in order to build a trust of truth between them and the reader. The pact was created specifically as a tool for use in literary texts; this research asks if it is also applicable to sequential art, where a bond of truth and trust might rather be facilitated by manipulation of the medium's visual elements. In my work *1994 Queensland* the story, narration and dialogue were taken directly from diary entries and used directly in captions with a handwritten font so as to highlight their diary-based origin (figure 43). In seeking to further reinforce the feeling of authenticity, I composited a blank page of ruled lines from the original journal exercise book of the diaries as a backing for the narrated text. These manipulations are intended to create a sense of reading the protagonist's confessional diary, as opposed to being directly narrated to, thus hypothetically increasing the text's authenticity. While endeavouring to adhere to the autobiographical pact's principles of truthfulness and rigour, I have also sought to create trust between myself and the reader via visual means, believing that the literal truth Lejeune insists upon is less important than emotional truth and the creation of a shared understanding of the meaning of a life.

4.2. Elements of a Shared Understanding

In seeking to determine the variable factors involved in the creation and reading of a comic that might contribute to a "shared understanding" (Smith and Watson 2001) within sequential art autobiographical narratives, I constructed a list of areas where the author is faced with challenges and opportunities in the creation of a sense of truth, including theme, experience, demographic, form, material, and cost. Choice of theme is one of the most obvious factors in the creation of a shared understanding. Regardless of how the author packages the universal and objective lessons and morals of their individual experiences, all themes are not likely to be shared by all people, particularly themes that are affected by ideology or deeply rooted ideas of sex, gender, lifestyle, and ethics. Similarly, the life experiences, preferences, and demographics of the reader will affect the likelihood of them taking interest in a text in the first instance, and then, colour their interpretations of that text. It is the role of the author, therefore, to tailor subjective experiences so that they might resonate in an objective, universal sense or to tease out and make clear the broader lessons and morals of their stories in a way that others might be able to relate to, regardless of seemingly unrelated individual experiences. For example, presenting a story that involves drug use is not limited to connecting to others who have also experimented with drugs. Working back from the superficiality of these acts and exploring the deeper reasons for such behaviour, such as an individual's difficulty in saying no, provides a broader platform of recognition for a wider range of readers to identify with. This may provide an opportunity for the creation of a shared experience with readers who, though they have not taken drugs, can relate to the situation presented. In the telling of my autobiographical narrative, I endeavour to pull out the fundamentally objective aspects of my life experiences while retelling specific events. The

form of the comic book is a secondary level of output that the author, or the publisher in some instances, has control over. The finished product's tactile form, material of construction, shape and size may also affect its ability to engage with the reader on the plane of a shared understanding. Does a hardcover lend more credibility to a text? Do different sizes bring with them different connotations? Does pricing affect the sense of a text's authenticity? Are we willing to put a level of trust in material objects on a spectrum that directly corresponds to its market worth? Does the print run of a comic have any effect on our perception of its authenticity or worthiness? Do we read a low-print-run zine differently to a mass-produced book or one with a limited print run? A book that has been published has passed a form of peer review through a process of editorial controls and thus may be read with the anticipation of a certain level of quality that may, perhaps, not be expected in a self-published work. Books released through a large publishing house will also have access to established distribution and marketing channels that will further aid their probability of reaching a wide audience. Without empirical testing, it is impossible to know how each of these factors might influence the reader, and such a list is only put forward in the interests of providing a loose framework for authorship and for possible future research. Although this exegesis speculates on how the reader might be engaged through the creation of a shared understanding and a foundation of truth, it does so with the knowledge that the only things within the author's control are those processes listed above including theme, experience, and form.

4.3. Autofictography

Life in the Gutter began as a series of diary entries that were expanded to dot points and then built upon with a stream-of-consciousness writing process. The resulting text was then sorted into three acts according to Dancyger and Rush's guidelines (2006) and then again restructured into Truby's *22 Steps of Story* (2007). Using the exercises suggested by Dancyger and Rush and Truby was useful in becoming familiar with the mechanics of action and story behind the script I had written, while at the same time providing insight into ideas of human nature. In Western conventional script writing, the focus is predominately on character, conflict, and resolution. Truby focuses on ideas of moral and psychological weaknesses and challenges that must be met and overcome, desires and the plans we make to fulfil them. His ideas on ghosts from the past that influence our behaviour, our view of the world, and ourselves were influential in my story-development process. After working on the script for almost a year and finalising a draft that adhered to the twenty-two steps of story structure, I began the process of layouts and drawing. After completing over 150 pages of rough layouts, however, I felt that the story was lacking in believability, that it felt contrived. This was a direct result of the redrafting and manipulation of events in order to fit the structural requirements of my chosen theoretical texts. The structure I had spent months working on, contorting my stream of consciousness writing, now seemed too convenient, too predictable, too obvious. I realised that the story no longer felt like a true autobiographical

accounting of a life. In my quest for a conventional structure, I had bent it far beyond the boundaries of truth and into the realm of fiction. This realisation led to a further rearranging of events, this time based partly on intuition and partly on simply replacing events back to their natural order. This final script drafting process sought to restore the anomalies of chaos and randomness, leaving in place the bizarrely interconnected, coincidental aspects of life. Regular modification of the story structure now occurred on an ongoing basis; once the larger beats of the narrative were laid out, smaller, finer threads of a page here or a sequence there continue to be added, removed, and rearranged, as required. Lejeune's autobiographical pact gives some clear-cut rules for autobiographical writing; however, it does not elaborate on authorial processes of how we reconstruct the events of the past, how we select and rearrange events to not only provide a truthful reading, but also enable a clear and engaging reading. This ongoing reshaping of events and manipulation of the past led me to consider fundamental questions of truth. Do boundaries in autobiography exist that clearly state demarcations of truth and fiction? How much modification can the author impose upon their life narrative before it becomes a work of fiction? Does a clearly visible authorial hand dilute a sense of reality and truth?

These questions may not have any clear answers, and they most likely vary depending on specific circumstance. Through the process of creating an autobiographic sequential art narrative, I put these questions forward and leave it up to the reader to construct their own responses. Modifications to traditional script structure practice are necessary to accommodate the chaotic nature of an authentic lived experience. As the resulting output is neither strictly autobiography nor fiction, and rather a mix of the two, I utilise the term 'autofictography' in referring to my work: an account of a past not fully remembered, coloured by current experience and subjectivity, and requiring shaping in order to fit certain expectations of story structure. At the same time, I also engage with the ideals found within the more demanding tenets of autobiography, including certain requirements of the autobiographical pact, such as retrospectively attempting to recreate the events of the lived experience. While I acknowledge that no autobiographical text can be an exact transcription of events, I endeavour to communicate them as honestly and openly as possible, within chosen parameters of disclosure. Ultimately, my intention is to establish a shared understanding of these events and their effect on me.

4.4. Establishing Truth: Place and Time



Figure 44. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2017, page 187

The concept of 'place' allows the author to delineate location, language, and the cultural practices of the narrative, aiding in speaking to an international audience with an authentic local voice. In a scene from *Life in the Gutter* (figure 44), Longbeach cigarette packs and Vodka Cruisers are placed within the mise-en-scène in order to establish social practice in an Australian working-class family birthday celebration. Moving the 'camera' around depicts these important visual storytelling elements, while also balancing negative and positive shapes. Thematically, the inclusion in the story of a mother who is suffering through cancer and still smoking cigarettes gives the reader more information not only about the protagonist's family but also the protagonist himself, as many of the demons he fights appear to be inherited results of genetics, upbringing, and place.

Manipulation of a reader's perception of time is another way in which sequential art might bridge the gap between truth and fiction within autofictography and there are innumerable methods available to the sequential art author allowing them to negotiate scenes and units of time. For example, on page 50 of *Goodbye Chunky Rice* (Thompson 2006), the text's protagonist, Chunky, meets conjoined Siamese twins. This page is correspondingly split into a fragmented puzzle, reflecting Chunky's sense of disorientation at the twins' appearance and extending the moment as the reader similarly tries to make sense of the mixed images. Unlike in film, due to a comic's spatial arrangement, comics readers determine their own pace (Pratt 2009). However, methods exist for an author to guide pace and timing by manipulation of text, detail and layout, effectively bending reality in order to create truth.

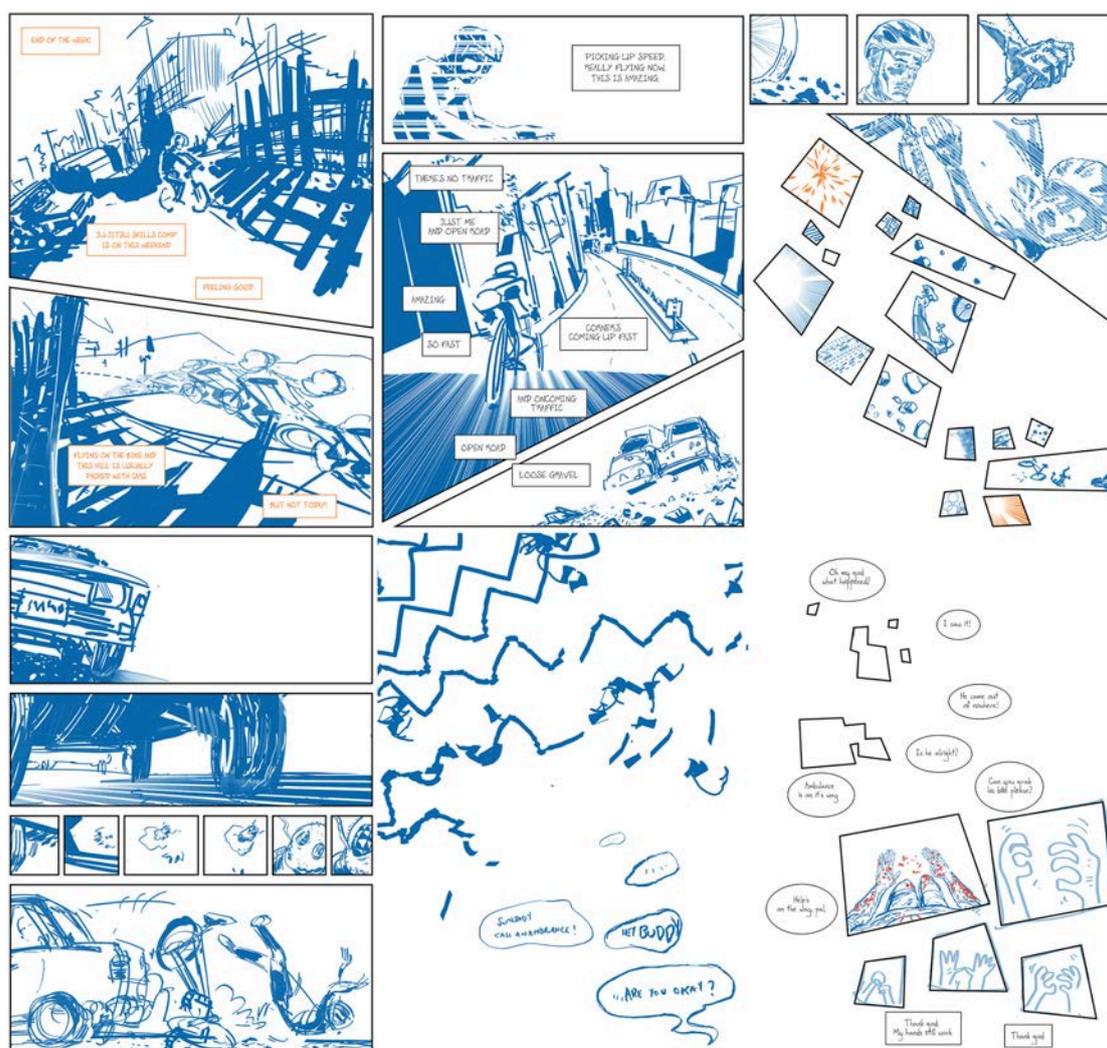


Figure 45. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2017, pages 101–106

Depicting the way in which perceived time varies requires informed manipulation of page layout and pacing of panel size and frequency, as well as judicious use of text, as demonstrated in figure 45. Setting the scene with large, open panel staging aims to produce a

fast-flowing read, with the idea being that the viewer moves through the sequence with a fluidity that mirrors the action. In the moment before the crash, the aim is to slow time by increasing the density of the panels and randomising the pattern of images. At the point just before impact, time is suspended—something I aimed to convey by removing text and creating “[s]ilence [which] has the effect of removing a panel from any particular span of time” (McCloud1994, 164). In times of extreme stress and danger, “memories are laid down with far more detail and richness than under normal circumstances” (Eagleman 2015, 65); the inclusion of a tightly packed sequence of panels aims to represent the secondary memory system of the oncoming car. This manipulation of structure and elements seeks to create a sense of felt truth in the scene.

In manipulating time so as to create a sense of truth and evolving identity, one of the main challenges is how to represent different timelines while maintaining a cohesive narrative. Sequential art theoretician Michael A. Chaney suggests that

a critical consensus has emerged emphasizing the uniquely supple procedures the comics form makes possible for the representation of multiple yet simultaneous time-scapes and competing yet coincident ways of knowing, seeing and being. (2011, 5)

There are a variety of ways in which these simultaneous time-scapes are represented. These include the diegetic use of the ‘narrating I’ across timelines, titles referring to time and place, and variations on visual cues including full page breaks.



Figure 46. Eric Powell *The Goon Comes to Chinatown* (excerpts) 2010

Eric Powell's *The Goon in Chinatown* (2010) is composed of different timelines, that of childhood, young adulthood, and the present. As seen in figure 46, each of these time periods is distinguished via specific visual treatments. Scenes from the Goon's childhood (far left) are rendered in black and white, a treatment which signifies nostalgia and the past due to its associations with pre-colour film and photography (O'Connor 2011). Scenes from the Goon's young adulthood are painted in a rose-tinted ink wash (middle), promoting the feeling of a

past viewed favourably, as if through metaphoric rose-coloured glasses. Scenes taking place in his present feature a black key-line around characters and a wider colour palette in a less painterly, somewhat more traditional, comic colouring style (far right). These minor alterations in colour and technique support the reader in navigating time changes without the need for narration or titles.

In *Life in the Gutter*, I experimented with moving between time-frames and representing various states of consciousness, including states of intoxication and waking/dream states. Readings on the distancing effect of narration (Currie 2007) informed decisions to relate events via mimetic visual devices rather than an omniscient and potentially over-bearing narrator. Time frames are indicated through changes in character design elements, such as hairstyle, physique, clothing and facial hair, while a variety of visual approaches explored within the studio work make clear the shifts in the protagonist's consciousness and mood.



Figure 47. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2017, page 72

As evidenced in figure 47, colour is a useful indicator of changing time periods. I made use of complementary of colour to guide the reader across vast distances of time. In figure 47, the time shifts within the panel, which speaks to not only relative time but also the protagonist's love of drawing, which has continued throughout his life.



Figure 48. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2017, page 64

As seen in figure 48, changes in colour can indicate a wide range of narrative concepts, including shifts in time and into the internal space of memory. Readers of comic texts should be able to understand that the placement of a character in a different setting from panel to panel means that the scene has changed and as such “mentally rearranges his or her conception of the narrative to accommodate this spatial transition” (Pratt 2009, 112), a form of Scott McCloud’s ‘closure’ (1994). McCloud coined the term closure in *Understanding Comics* (1994) to refer to the reading process of joining information from panel to panel, using fragmented and incomplete visual information to “mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (66–67). Almost a decade earlier, Alphons Silbermann stated that “something also happens between the pictures, and the consumer is called upon to discover the development of actions” (1986, 21). Henry John Pratt puts forward David Bordwell’s constructivist theory of narrative in cinema, where “the artwork is necessarily incomplete, needing to be unified and fleshed out but the active participation of the perceiver” (Bordwell cited in Pratt 2009, 114). Care must be taken to ensure there are sufficient cues to guide the reader through transitions, particularly through substantial jumps in space and time, in order to facilitate closure. The use of captions and titles, common in mainstream comics, is an easy if

somewhat obvious tool to assisting in guiding the reader across these “scene-to-scene transitions”. Such transitions “transport us across significant distances of time and space” and require “deductive reasoning” to decipher (McCloud 1994), while also acting as a narrator of events. Regardless of terminology and technique, the author must allow for the reader to bridge jumps in place and time, while ensuring they do not become confused and therefore break engagement.

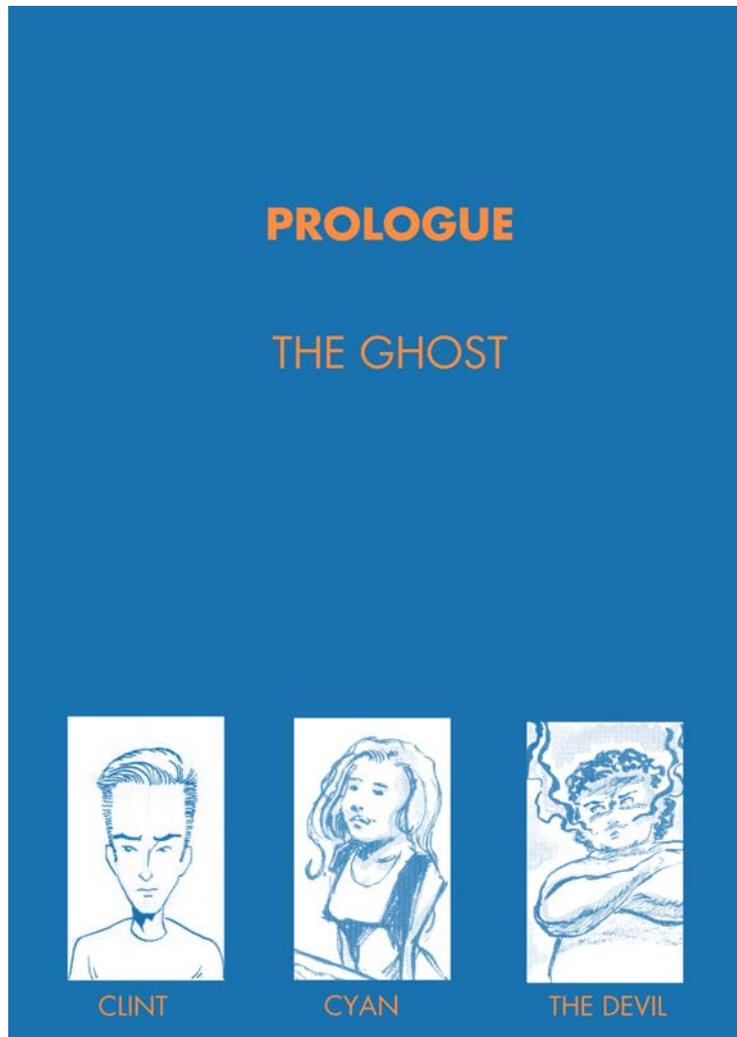


Figure 49. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2017, page 6 (draft)

Title pages such as that shown in figure 49 serve a number of purposes. Firstly, they afford a break in the reading that allows the reader to pause. Secondly, they allow for wordplay in the title, giving a sense of what is to come within the framework of theme and meaning. Thirdly, the author can introduce or highlight the characters within the scene, and while doing so, offer the reader the opportunity to check in on characters so they do not become confused with the growing cast. Lastly, they enable a very clear indication of time and scene change.

4.5. Metaphor

Truth within a visual arts context is highly subjective. In his book *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, Jonathan Culler says:

Traditionally, Western philosophy has distinguished "reality" from "appearance," things themselves from representations of them, and thought from signs that express it. Signs or representations, in this view, are but a way to get at reality, truth, or ideas, and they should be as transparent as possible; they should not get in the way, should not affect or infect the thought or truth they represent. (1997, 11)

In representing reality, truth, and ideas through visual signs such as images, the choice of image and the way it is rendered should be as direct and clear as possible. An image's fidelity within a visual spectrum between true and fake include "the degree of detail rendered, the presence or absence of background and depth, colour differentiation, saturation and modulation, light and shadow, and brightness" (Van Leeuwen 2005, 167). These are markers of clarity and realism that can aid in delivering truth, avoiding the possibility of mutating an idea through its delivery. According to Culler's thesis, then, it may be inferred that realistic representational images carry a greater weight of authenticity than abstract non-representational images do. However, these markers, particularly those within sequential art autobiographical texts, are not absolute. Elisabeth El Refaie points out that the use of a naive style of representational shorthand lacking in photographic fidelity (or realism) can in fact lend an extra degree of narrative authenticity (2012, 156–158). For example, a naïve, childlike style of drawing is used by Ariel Schrag in her books *Potential* (2000b) and *Awkward* (1999) to convey a sense of the innocence and immaturity of the age in which the books are set. This is a stylistic choice, and she demonstrates a far more sophisticated style in the books' dream sequences, simultaneously delineating dream from reality, as well as commenting on the feeling that dreams and fantasy perhaps carry a greater weight of reality for her than waking life does. In my own work, visual style is often a negotiable terrain and in the communication of emotional truth, I often choose to draw attention to the image. Fidelity and transparency are overlooked, for example, in making artistic choices that suit a short time of production, as with 24-hour comics, or when illustrating scenes where a certain type of abstraction or simplification is called for in order to match the theme of the narrative or to convey emotional truth.



Figure 50. Darren Fisher *Night Drive* 2013, page 12

In *Night Drive* (figure 50), I play with the truthfulness of an image, as the world of the visual is modified to represent the protagonist's experience, drawing on metaphor and intertextuality. Metaphor is a powerful tool in establishing a narrative's perceived sense of truth. In his work *After the Snooter* (2002), Eddie Campbell explores themes of financial struggle, staying true to one's calling, railing against conformity, sex, alcohol abuse, family and friends, presenting himself as an imperfect and therefore relatable person. Campbell is able to capture a mood, a time, and relate fundamental and universal concepts of the lived experience through the creation and manipulation of literary and visual metaphor.



Figure 51. Eddie Campbell *After the Snooter* (excerpt) 2002

In panel one of a scene from *After the Snooter* (figure 51), Campbell depicts “Straight Street, where the dreams get paved over” as a monotonous line of identical conforming houses; a literally straight, uninteresting street with a seemingly infinite horizon. This moves away from a realistic rendering of the actual neighbourhood, instead employing exaggeration. ‘Straight Street’ is also a semantic play on the word ‘straight’ in meaning conventional, normal, and the usual. This is a reflection of the artist and storyteller in communicating hegemonic norms of Western society regarding family and career. In the second panel, the protagonist confronts the looming sign “Succeed with caution”, perhaps a response by Campbell to pressures to pursue a ‘safe’ career. That this text is printed on a large sign reinforces the idea that this is not only something advised by friends and family, but rather a rule of law. Campbell reiterates his sense of nonconformance in the narration, “Even wearing eyeglasses he can make no sense of the signs”; he is aware of societal expectations, yet he feels no affinity for them. In the third panel, the text hangs over the protagonist’s head, “Get A-levels, get a career, get a driving license, ‘get laid’.” Campbell depicts his younger self physically weighed down by these perceived commandments of society, the use of vertical hatching reinforcing this weight of burden on the character. The emphasis on the phrase ‘get laid’ highlights the vacuous, meaninglessness of the act, a way for Campbell to show the reader how he feels about these hegemonic norms, to make his subjective impression clear. In three short panels, Campbell illustrates his personal responses to the pressures of society through metaphor and ironic manipulation of image and text, exemplifying efficiency of storytelling through economy of narrative. I explored metaphor and symbolism within my studio work, usually as a way to communicate ideas quickly or subtly. Some examples of this are described and depicted below.



Figure 52. Darren Fisher *Busy Bee* 2015

Individual characteristics and personality traits are most interesting to me as an author of autobiography, and one person so fascinated me with his energy and zeal for life that I was inspired to draw him (figure 52). In doing so, I had to make a choice between drawing a series of panels to depict his enthusiastic frenzy or illustrating with metaphor. I chose to illustrate with the bee as my sign, an insect associated with industriousness, while also being somewhat more appealing in form than its associated cousin of industry, the ant. The metaphor, as in this case, often has to suit more than one characteristic, and communicate multiple ideas at once. As such, the choice of metaphor is important in communicating the correct associations.



Figure 53. Darren Fisher *Enthusiasm Only Goes So Far* 2015

As a necessity, I sought to explore economies of narrative consistently during the diary comics, where I was limited in space and time. *Enthusiasm Only Goes So Far* (figure 53) aims to communicate mood and emotion economically, via the manipulation of colour, symbol, and pose to quickly describe a decline of states. The signifying text (the 'time') indicates that this decline is happening over hours and not minutes or days. Colours become less saturated, and symbols become less excited and cohesive, culminating in the recognisable 'zzz' of sleep. Metaphor allows for the communication of diegetic information without the need for words, another tool in the sequential artist's kit.



Figure 54. Darren Fisher *Welcome to the Future* 2015

Similarly, *Welcome to the Future* (figure 54) refers to the common problems of eyestrain and the poor ergonomic sitting position as a result of intensive writing sessions. The green-tinged colour reinforces a feeling of general displeasure with this task. This is exaggeration, an image that clearly lies and yet is truthful, not in spite of, but because of, its hyperextended nature, delivering its message quickly and humorously.

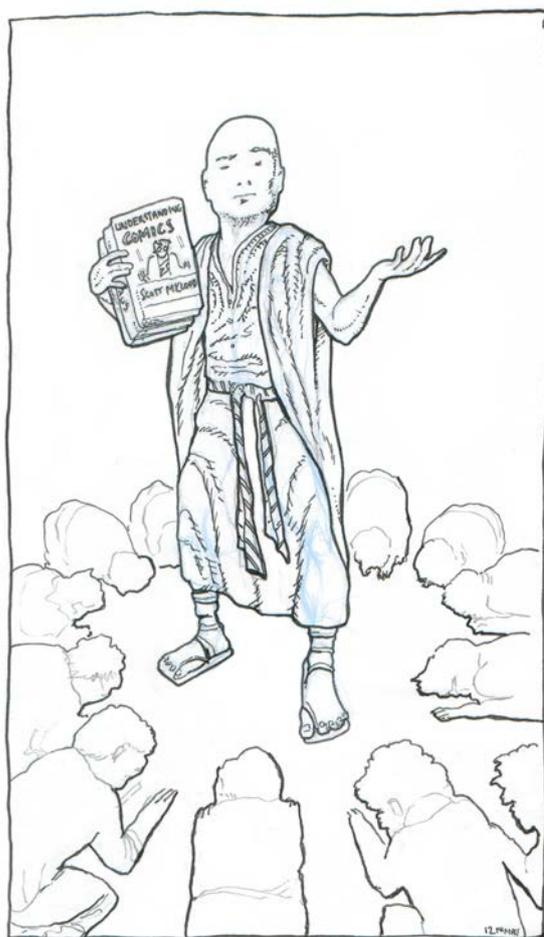


Figure 55. Darren Fisher *The New Commandments* 2015

The New Commandments (figure 55) is an ironic comment on the student–teacher relationship, drawing on the religious iconography of Moses with the Ten Commandments. The reader is called on to understand this is not literal truth, and in doing so they become an active participant in the creation of metaphoric meaning. Metaphor allows the author to communicate using humour, allusion and intertextuality, which prove highly useful when dealing with complex issues or telling a story within a limited sequence of panels. As an early foray into metaphor through the lens of multi-page narrative, I put together a three-page comic for my mother’s birthday, titled *An Incredible Life* (2013). Completed on 3-ply Bristol board using ink brush and traditional dip pens and brushes, this was a learning experience in

ink control and preplanning. My mother was orphaned at a young age and spent some years of her childhood in an orphanage run by nuns. The comic borrows from this as a theme, with the incorporation of religious iconography and symbols, including angels and scenes from Christian text, including the birth of Jesus. The depiction of her birth, early years, the death of her father and her time in the orphanage are depicted in short sequences of wordless panels.



Figure 56. Darren Fisher *An Incredible Life* 2013, page 2

Panel one shows her family together. I manipulated the right edge of this panel to resemble a burned photo, to show that this happiness was short-lived and referring to photographs as representative of memory. The next panel depicts her mother standing alone, with a spotlight on the children. There is a distance between them, and I attempted to communicate that her mother died shortly after. The following years in the orphanage are depicted in the following panel, as mum prays, surrounded by towering nuns. At this point, a short piece of narration bridges the gap to her adulthood, and a suitor, a literal knight in shining armour, comes to rescue her from her self-imposed gilded cage. The use of a fairytale trope is employed to give additional meaning to the text, and a sense of truth that is reinforced by semiotic intertextual association.

Uninsulated, unlit, and uninhabited—except by spiders and vermin (we heard skittering within the walls at night) and a few dust-filled cardboard boxes,



Figure 57. Craig Thompson *Blankets* 2003, page 16. Reproduced courtesy of the publisher.

In an attempt to better understand McCloud's Triangle of Representation (figure 13) within the context of metaphor, I analysed its disparate elements as used within a page from Thompson's *Blankets* (figure 57). On the picture plane, there are a number of different elements that draw immediate attention, including the exaggerated proportions of the foreground figure (the father), with his powerful hands and dominant size dwarfing the background figure (the son). Although representational, these figures sit somewhere along the Triangle of Representation, perhaps close to the bottom though near the middle. The main focal point is close to the surface picture plane, highlighting distorted proportions, twisted limbs, pronounced teeth, reptile eyes and jagged patterns to indicate danger, or dark nameless horrors. These symbolically indicate the fears of a child, and the author's method of giving the reader access to a child's immaterial sense of perception. Narration tells material truth of the space, and while more accurate to physical reality, lacks the truth of a child's imagined experience. All of these elements working together assure us that what we see is not real, yet at the same time is an open doorway to the world of imagination—a look into what this child fears, and a prelude to what he will further endure in the story. When considering truth within a visual context, it is arguably a shifting marker, dependent on whether speaking about the physical, material, surface (e.g., an indexical photograph) or inner truths of emotion, impression and experience.

4.6. Style

The tools and materials used in image production can have the side effect of influencing the output. Working with a brush and ink will naturally see a different final product to one created using copic markers, pencils, or acrylic paint. I used digital tools (Manga Studio Ex 5) in the planning and layout stages of my autofictographic narrative, a software package tailored for comic art. Its inbuilt functionality, which includes perspective rulers, speed line tools, panel border templates and filters for manipulating drawn and imported images, aids in streamlining the production process. For example, I have drawn my protagonist so often, in many different contexts and timeframes, that his face looks (unintentionally) different from page to page. Digital drawing packages, however, allow the user to import images and trace directly over them, raising the problem of keeping a sense of consistency across the work, as photo references often clash with the comparatively simple style of the other images. A choice must be made on which visual style to maintain, and where to use photo reference. Quitely advises “picking out one or two characters and using photo reference for them and leaving the rest of them plain” (see Appendix 7: A Frank Chat). Perhaps for key moments and characters, a somewhat realistic drawing services the story by adding a specific, subjective representation, as explored in figure 68.



Figure 58. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2017, page 216 (excerpt)

As mentioned, markers relating to the fidelity and realism of an image affect its reading. Does an image drawn over a photo carry a greater sense of truth than that drawn from imagination? Is the representation drawn from imagination or from a model sheet perhaps more truthful, as it is based instead on the emotional impression of that character? Does the overall sense of authenticity of the finished work suffer from the mismatch of photo-traced images and those drawn from imagination, or is it possible to harness this contrast, as demonstrated in figure 58, to positive effect? Further to the questions of fidelity, what effect does the quality of line and the level of detail make on the reader? Is it necessary, or even helpful, to carefully delineate every form, every character and environment?

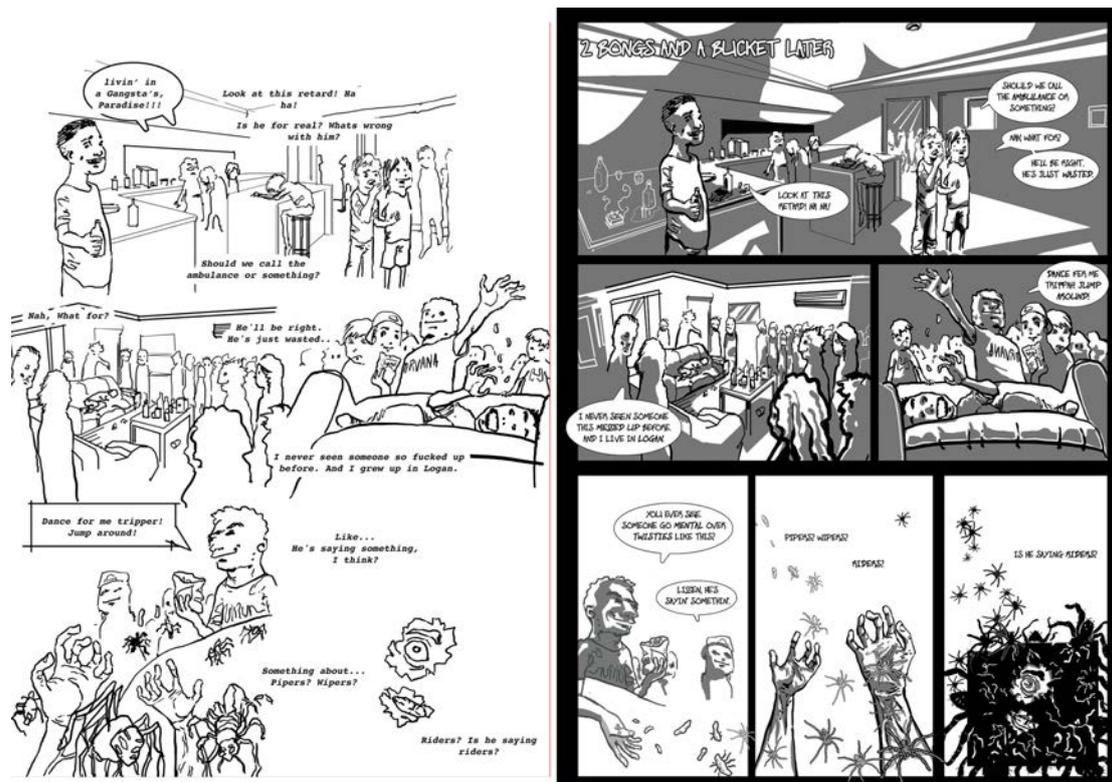


Figure 59. Darren Fisher *The First Time* 2016, page 5 (early draft on left and final draft on right)

The examples in figure 59 compare an early and final draft of page 5 from *The First Time* (2015). Have I necessarily enhanced the reading enough to justify the hours spent refining the image? Does the reader require a tightly controlled and highly finished drawing if the story is strong enough and the images are clear? To reiterate a quote from McCloud: “when you look at a photo or a realistic drawing of a face you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon you see yourself” (1994, 36).

My aim, therefore, is to establish a style that is clear enough that a smooth flow of reading is possible, taking in concepts of value and shape composition and leading the eye. Regarding the reader, Quietly remarks

I’m always trying to simplify things... When you consider how quickly people read through a comic, spending, say, three or four seconds on a page, the idea of having things where they always flow from left to right, where the natural focus of any given frame where your eye is drawn to is also the focus of the story in terms of plot or whatever at that moment in the story... I find as you’re drawing this stuff, its better if you can keep simplifying, keep being as direct, subtly as direct as possible all the time. (interview with the author, see Appendix 7)

These considerations of reading must also allow enough plasticity of image that the reader is able to supplant themselves into the narrative, as per McCloud's idea of reader identification with the cartoon image. The degree of an image's finish is one determiner of what may be called style. But what is style, and how can it be exploited to add truthfulness to a narrative while allowing for interrogations of identity?

In his PhD thesis, Pat Grant states,

to cartoon is to make marks that are locked within a nest of cages. Some of these cages are created by the author. Some are created by the conventions and idioms of the visual language. Some are created by the practical restraints of the workflow. Either way, the friction between the cartooning body and the walls of these cages is an essential component of style. (2014, 172)

The way that Grant delineates style is as something that is shaped by its constraints, rather than existing as an actively chosen outcome. That is not to say that one cannot choose to ape a style, and speaks only to style as it flows out, unthinking and freeform, but largely determined by format and skill. Style has the ability to influence the reading and impact the overall presentation of the work as well as, ideally, echoing the themes of the narrative. Pratt (2009) puts forward the idea that visual style is an important contributor to the story atmosphere and the reader's perception of narrative. He states that

the way in which the word balloons and sound effects are drawn, together with character design, inking, and colour choices (if applicable) serve important storytelling purposes. They allow the artist to create a mood, give the emotional context of a scene or story, increase or decrease the drama of a moment, and so on. (Pratt 2009, 110)

When asked about his style in an interview found on the *Daredevil* special features DVD (2003), comic artist John Romita Jr says, "the only style I have is a deadline style". My own style of drawing and design changes constantly, depending on my mood, time restraints, and unknowable factors that influence the way in which my mind envisages and the hand inscribes. Increased confidence resulting from regular practice, the pressure of time, external stressors, and adjustments to expectations are all factors that influence style.

Ultimately, the pursuit of truth might be best viewed as a moving target that the author can only aim for, which may find its target with the reader or may not, depending on all of the variables of author, reader, and text. In my research, I have focused on creating clarity of reading, with a focus on somehow establishing a rapport with the reader, some kind of shared understanding, empathy and resonance.

Conclusion

This exegesis has provided an overview of research and practice in autobiographical comic-making, with a focus on aspects of identity and truth as they pertain to sequential art. Chapter 1 provided a context for this research by offering an initial proposal of the suitability of sequential art to this study and a selection of key practitioners and events. As discussed in Chapter 2, this research has been facilitated by a practice-led and practice-based methodology, exploiting principles of grounded theory and the processes of action research, allowing me to reflect on the past and the present, both as author and subject. Reflection on the present was actively directed via a daily diary comic-drawing practice, which also facilitated experimentation with media and medium. Additionally, the regular maintenance of a blog provided a space for active contemplation on the doctorate in progress, including workshops and meetings that helped shape my creative process. As noted in Chapter 3, these practices aided in a study of past notions of the self, vital in probing concepts of identity as multiple interpretations including shifting temporal states—either linked (diachronic) or unrelated (episodic)—and as a collection of masks. Readings into the plurality of the self added an additional layer of context to this shifting temporal/mask concept and the competing dualities of the inner and outer persona, further complicated by ongoing self-narrative identity systems.

In the cyclical processes of practice-led and practice-based research, these philosophies of identity were tested by applying the theoretical construct of Scott McCloud's Triangle of Representation (1994) to a series of visual experiments, including a compositing exercise that considered the changing self through the lens of disparate visual art styles. These explorations represent my efforts in seeking ways in which to communicate an authentic sense of past experiences, depicting a self that is potentially so radically changed to the 'narrating I' of the present that it could be questioned if indeed they are the same person. A key finding of this experiment was an understanding of the interdependent mechanics of words and pictures in creating a "tension of meaning" (Brunetti 2011) as a narrative tool for the author, and that this tension is lessened if similar information is delivered across the two modalities of conveying information (words and pictures). A secondary finding was that this tension is also diminished by the implementation of a harmonious visual style across foreground and background elements. This speaks to a sliding scale of tension available to the author, to the point whereby the stylistic variation between foreground and background is so drastic that the aesthetic effect may adversely affect reader engagement. This knowledge is useful in providing ancillary methods of creating intentional disruption of reading, such as when signalling changing timelines to the reader. A third finding of these visual experiments was the effectiveness of using written text to communicate information not only on the denotative level of semantics, but also to shape meaning connotatively through shape, colour, and form. This exercise surprisingly yielded more insight into the effectiveness of written text in combination with images than it did about style alone, providing

new insights into ways to create meaning and to further control the reading experience.

These findings led me to further explore sequential art as a “fractured surface” (Hatfield 2005, xiii–xiv) in Chapter 3.2, which became a pivotal aspect of the research. The gutters of the comic medium are seen to act as a metaphor for the inner pluralistic self, while the spaces inside the panels make visible the various states of identity. Through practice, it became evident that as the panels become increasingly fragmented, the gutter space (and the protagonist’s inner world) expands, which reveals the protagonist’s states of identity becoming more disparate. In this way, sequential art proves to be a perfect tool for communicating characters as multidimensional beings. Chapter 3.3 studied the interactions of the written word and image through a practical study of text as sound, its ability to act as an auditory bridge in knitting together scenes, and the implementation of diegetic sound as song lyric, to create extra meaning, further complementing character and narrative. Chapter 3.4 discussed the creation of narrative without words, to determine where the story might benefit from purely image-based storytelling. This mode of narration speeds the reading, and further testing may reveal that in the case of wordless comics the narrative is absorbed emotionally rather than intellectually, taking on an ephemeral quality somewhat like that of memory, most suited for flashbacks and character introspection. Chapter 3.5 focused on authorial disclosure as a possible support to reader engagement, probing what to disclose, how, and to what extent. Without the benefit of a qualitative study on the effects of degrees of disclosure, this exegesis can only speculate on the effects of any authorial processes on the reader; it is beyond the scope of this research to answer these questions definitively. In the absence of such research, this exegesis points to the historical formation of the underground counterculture movement, founded on a reaction to the strictures of censorship. Its seminal practitioners, including Robert Crumb and those who continue working under its banner, have continually pressed the boundaries on what is considered acceptable content, contributing to the broad freedoms of expression available to authors of sequential art today. Consequently, I choose what I am willing to disclose, and where my own limits of honesty lie, based on considerations of serving the narrative and aiding reader engagement over deliberations on taste and fears of external censorship.

Studying the qualities of identity led my research into discussion on what constitutes notions of philosophical ‘truth’, and how to reconcile them within the context of comics, as presented in Chapter 4. These considerations were further distilled to notions of authorial honesty and integrity, and the requirement of an author to share their emotional experiences as authentically as possible. This prioritisation of emotional honesty over (an attempt for) verbatim accounts acknowledges the inaccuracy of memory and its reproduction, particularly within a visual medium, and indeed within any autobiographical narrative. The building blocks of the final studio work, a long-form graphic novel, was thus appropriately formed from diary entries—artefacts of a past self that are necessarily skewed by emotional recounting and the inadequacies and inconsistencies of

the written word, and yet projecting a sense of authenticity as a documented recording of the time, are discussed. With this impasse of ideologies at its foundations and tensions informing its genesis, the graphic novel proved a logical space for further probing the boundaries of truth and fiction. Ventures into reflexivity within the text included the assimilation of diary entries within the finished pages, character narration in the second person, and the inclusion of sketches and ephemera from the past. As such, the research investigated ways in which to exploit the blurred boundaries of literal and emotional accuracy via an informed application of sequential art elements. These include manipulation of the content of narrated captions, such as creating captions with a lined paper background to indicate journal entries, creating a font in my own handwriting, and the aforementioned incorporation of real diary entries into the finished pages. These manipulations are made with the intent of creating a sense of authenticity, while closing the distance between reader, text, characters, and author. These inquiries and studio work led to a modified way of thinking about autobiography and one of the major findings of this research, as reviewed in Chapter 4.3. The term 'autofictography' was adopted as a concept flexible enough to accommodate the various approaches to organic story building, and as a means of addressing the challenge of creating authenticity in an inherently fictive medium and genre. This semantic mix of autobiography, fiction, and graphics located my work outside of the rigorous demands of an arguably unattainable 'truth' while still adhering to a code of honesty and open disclosure. Autofictography is a banner of genre and an authorial method which acknowledges the blurred boundaries between truth and fiction, acting as a means of negotiating the consequences of betraying Philippe Lejeune's autobiographic pact. This way of thinking about autobiography allows for degrees of fiction and artistic subjectivity, and was adopted in response to the challenges of creating story from diary entries and traditional methodologies of imposing predefined storytelling structures, and conventions onto the chaotic and seemingly random events of a life.

The affordances of an autofictographic approach prompted further research into the depiction of concepts such as time and place, and how they might best be communicated within the medium of comics, as discussed in Chapter 4.4. I experimented with moving between time-frames, indicated with changes in character design elements such as hairstyle, physique, clothing and facial hair, and between various states of consciousness, including states of intoxication and waking/dream states, related by the manipulation of panel borders and the merging of separate moments. Colour shifts also facilitated these changes in time and space, while reflecting on the psychological state of the protagonist when such shifts occurred within the same panel. In Chapter 4.5, image manipulation was discussed within the context of metaphor in order to convey a sense of truthful, yet complex realities. In my studio work, under the banner of autofictography, the literalities of the image became flexible or were overlooked entirely when short production times, as with 24-hour comics, necessitated particular artistic choices, or when certain narrative themes called for a type of abstraction or simplification. The decision to adhere to emotional truth over other concepts of truth, such as realistic visual fidelity and exact reproductions of events, was an active choice in keeping with

the intentions of my work within a framework of autofictography. These ironic manipulations of image and text exemplify an efficiency of storytelling through economy of narrative, in their reliance on colour, form, intertextuality and association. The Triangle of Representation was again applied in the analysis of figure 57, finding that truth within a visual context is arguably a shifting marker, dependent on whether speaking about physical, material and surface realities (e.g., an indexical photograph) or the inner truths of emotion, impression and experience. Autofictography, however, preferences the latter, and therefore visual metaphor is a primary means of expression of character and situation in my studio practice.

These investigations into the manipulation of images in pursuit of emotional truth led to a discussion on style in Chapter 4.5. I scrutinised the evolving style across my studio work, with a view to understanding how its variations might influence the interpretation of narrative. As I have adopted practice-led research, the onus has been on artistic growth and experimentation on trialling unfamiliar materials, work-flows and techniques. In using the traditional methods of brush and dip pen with ink for the first time, I discovered a new appreciation for tonality, light, and shadow, as my usual penchant for detail was less attainable with these unfamiliar tools. My explorations with the brush in various states of ink absorption led me to discover an array of previously unexplored stylistic effects. The use of ink washes and brush and their resultant organic, chaotic marks contributed to the creation of a visual landscape, invoking themes of dream and memory. The daily output of different stories necessitated a range of visual approaches, which pushed my personal style beyond the pitfalls of boredom and complacency. Further, working within the constraints of a single page, or limited-panel strip, required the efficient communication of ideas. Ultimately, this practice honed my ability across media—not only in ink but also with markers, watercolours, digital illustration and pencils. Importantly, a consideration for the visual literacies of the reader has been instilled in my practice, as I focused on directing the eye, visual flow, tension of meanings, composition, negative space and balance of value. In summary, the daily comics encouraged a greater range of techniques such as caricature, simplification of line, the use of mixed media, working across digital and traditional pipelines, and the ability to move from idea to resolution quickly. These skills provided a platform from which I could confidently embark on a long-form autofictographic narrative.

The focus of this research has been to investigate the effectiveness of sequential art as a vehicle for the genre of autobiography. It has found sequential art to indeed be a worthy site for the exploration of associated notions of identity and truth. The research finds that through a number of mechanisms, including the interdependent interaction of words and images, the medium of sequential art bears many parallels with the human experience; in particular, the contradictions between a projected, temporal and contextual identity state and the inner, experiencing self. Seen in this way, both medium and genre operate as a chain of competing and collaborative components with the preferred outcome of a cohesive, united front. As such, sequential art's

interlinked and interdependent components work harmoniously in communicating the tensions between functions of the inner self/selves and the outer persona/identity states, while navigating the muddied terrain between truth and fiction via the same processes of interdependent meaning-making. Stemming from this research is the definition and negotiation of a suggested approach to personal life-writing—'autofictography'—that fully accommodates the complexities of sequential art. Autofictography allows the author to exercise the elasticity and interplay of sequential art's elements in order to capture the complexities of human behaviour and personal experiences, with emotional authenticity as the primary goal, superseding expectation of literalities inherent to autobiography within literature.

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Appendix 1: List of Studio Works

2013	<i>Burnout</i> . 7 pages. An exploration in dip pen, brush and ink on A3 Bristol board, based on an existing storyline from a previously completed comic.
2013	<i>An Incredible Life</i> . 3 pages. More practice using traditional tools and employing diegetic methods to provide an overview of a life within a short space.
2013	<i>Night Drive</i> . 24 pages. A comic completed within 24 hours using dip pen, brush and ink on A5 paper, based on a night out in 1997 and related drug experience.
2013	<i>Preparing for ZICS</i> . 6 pages. Experimenting with colour markers and a straight-ahead method of working based on time spent preparing comics for print.
2013	<i>1994 Melbourne</i> . 9 pages. Using dip pen, brush and ink; this comic is based on diary entries from high-school; explores diegetic methods of representation through captions and hand-written font.
2014	<i>1994 Queensland</i> . 15 pages. Continuing on from <i>1994 Melbourne</i> , this story made more use of ink washes and had an open layout structure informed by previous work.
2014	<i>Chasing Shadows</i> . 24 pages. A 24 Hour Comic using traditional tools, briefly exploring a previous relationship. This comic represents a first-draft for a series of flashbacks in the final graphic novel.
2014	<i>Storybordello 1</i> . 310 pages. Compilation of 2014 diary comics, colour, printed through Jeffries Printing and self-published through Ingram Spark.
2015	<i>The First Time</i> . 6 pages. To be published within <i>Ashcan X</i> , a comics anthology I curated, uses digital tools and explores a seminal drug experience, 99apitalizing on research into character and story development.
2015	<i>Wise Up Kid</i> introduction. 3 pages. Photoshop, colour.
2015	<i>Buddy, his Beat-Up Gibson, and the Gods of Guitar</i> . 15 pages. Photoshop, B&W with colour accents.
2015	Script for <i>Life in the Gutter</i> . 33,000 words.
2015	<i>Storybordello 2</i> . 280 pages. Comipilation of 2015 diary comics.
2016	<i>Ashcan X</i> . 50 pages. Curated, edited and self-published comic anthology.
2017	<i>Life in the Gutter</i> . 312 pages.

Appendix 2: Exhibitions and Presentations

2013	<i>Shadow of a Mouse</i> , group exhibition, Royal Queensland Art Society
2013	"Mimesis and Diegesis in Sequential Art Self", presentation at the GUPSA Cross Fertilisation Symposium
2014	<i>Reel Deal</i> , group exhibition, Griffith University Film School
2015	<i>TEXTure</i> , group exhibition, the Edge Digital Media Centre
2015	<i>Roughing Out</i> , group exhibition, the Drawing International Brisbane Symposium
2015	"Autofictography and the Shifting Self", presentation at the Drawing International Brisbane Symposium
2016	<i>Ashcan Comics Retrospective</i> , group exhibition, Brisbane Writers Festival, State Library of Queensland

Appendix 3: Diary Comics

3.1. Post-it note comics

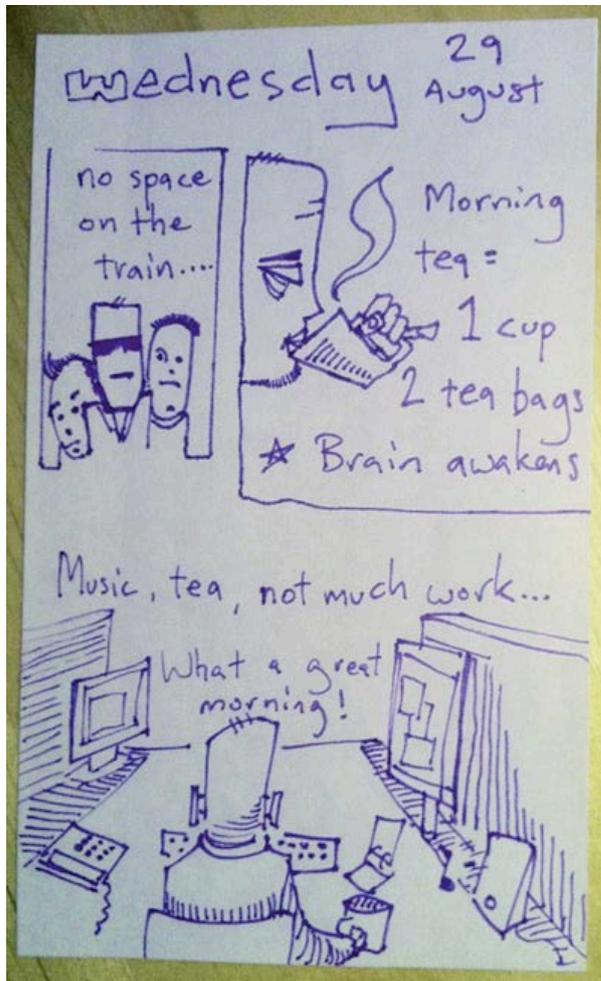


Figure 3.1. Darren Fisher *Brain Awakens* 2012

The first Post-it note comic I created (figure 3.1) was an outcome of the constraints of time and material, and motivated by the need to be creative within an otherwise stifling office job. It became an ongoing challenge to tell some kind of a story in the limited space of a Post-it note, and without being caught and disciplined for drawing at work. I was inspired by the diary-strip comic technique that multi-award winning author James Kolchaka uses in *American Elf* (1998–2012). *American Elf* often depicts an interconnected series of moments in time rather than a casually structured narrative, in a similar sense to iconic comic strips such as *Peanuts*.

I found that working within this confined medium was challenging, along with the fact that I also limited myself to drawing only in pen with no pre-planning. Constraining myself to this limited space and lack of preparation affected the style I produced; as observed by Pat Grant, “style is affected by the nest of cages” (2014, 172), and in the case of the Post-it-note comics, the nest of cages was transformative. Previously, my ‘style’ was extremely detailed and covered in hatching, musculature striation, lighting effects and texture. Within the spatial limitations of the Post-it-note and using only a simple ballpoint pen, my style became simpler and more reminiscent of cartooning than illustration by necessity. The speed at which I could produce these limited narratives and the evolution of penmanship that emerged fuelled further

exploration into different media and styles, evolving into what later became a daily diary comic practice.

3.2. Diary Comics

15th November 2013

5am- woke from a vivid dream, jumped out of bed to write it down.

.....
Kids screaming, laughing, running around. Streamers, party pies, cake. A birthday party. A creepy looking dude with beard and crusty coat gives the kids a box.

“Make sure you don’t look at it too long” he chuckles.

The kids take are all fighting to have a look and are getting increasingly excited. Eventually one of the mothers comes along and grabs the box. She looks in and a blue glow is reflected glow on her face.

There is a long pause. The sound of the kids die away. We look closer into her expression, frozen, the glow growing stronger.

She looks up finally and the scene has changed. She is now in a shipping yard, it is night, there is no no one around. She walks away, confused.

There is a blue glint in her eyes.
.....



Figure 3.2. Darren Fisher *Blue Reflection* 2013

My daily diary comic practice officially began with a particularly vivid dream that I experienced in November 2013 (figure 3.2). I was compelled to commit the dream to memory and I inscribed it hastily in a half-asleep fugue state later that day, adding a key image from the dream that I could still remember. After compositing the elements, I reflected that the act of drawing something every day that was inspired by the everyday was a worthwhile activity. The things I drew would be inspired by my thoughts, activities, and things that I had seen and dreamt, and it inspired the practice that would follow.



Figure 3.3. Darren Fisher *Drive to Bargara* 2013

Initially planning to create the diary comics digitally, in December 2013, I found myself without a computer for three days, having only an A5 moleskin art book to draw in (figure 3.3). Ever since, this type of moleskin book has been the medium of choice due to its portability, my preference for the texture of its paper, and the robust nature of the cover. The definitive page size limited the comics I could produce, which became an important useful constraint when making one every day, although I would at times use different books, paper types and sizes for the diary comics due to unexpected circumstances. This daily practice continued for the following months, becoming an integral part of my daily routine.

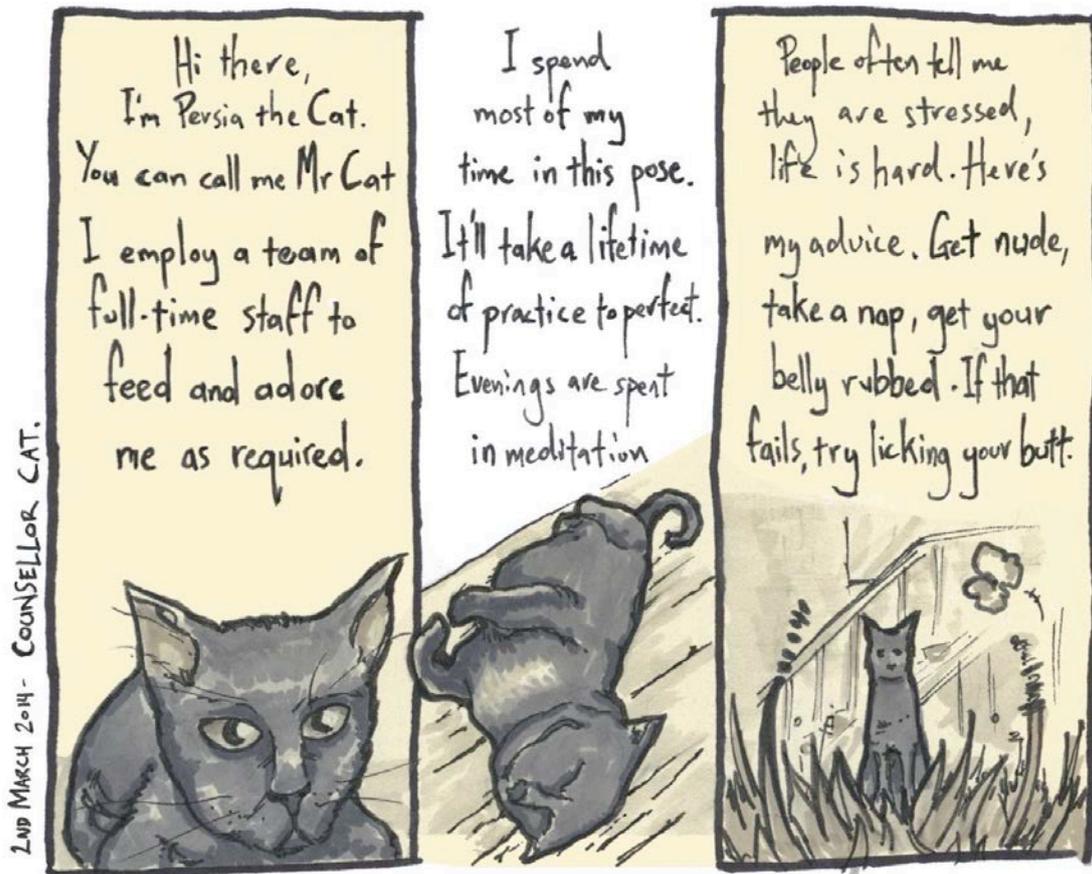


Figure 3.4. Darren Fisher *Counsellor Cat* 2014

While personal and private matters were disclosed, openly and without shame, certain measures were taken to protect the privacy of others and to speak about matters where others might take offence. Figure 3.4 is an example of this, where I have used humour and absurdity in a matter relating to interfamilial disputes. At the same time, the use of a cat allows me to not only comment on universally appreciable cat behaviour, hopefully assisting in enticing more readers to my blog. The diary comics was a useful place for me to comment on events of the world and things around me, but most of the time the focus was on the personal, and I would often use metaphor and allusion to comment on things that might infringe on the privacy of others.



Figure 3.5. Darren Fisher *The Doubt Monster* 2014

As a practicing artist and doctoral student, I have experienced many periods of self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy. These feelings were given a space and acknowledged within the diary comics, such as in figure 3.5, which somewhat alleviated them. While this research does not focus on the therapeutic aspects of art, the benefits of making art and giving space for negative feelings are useful for myself.

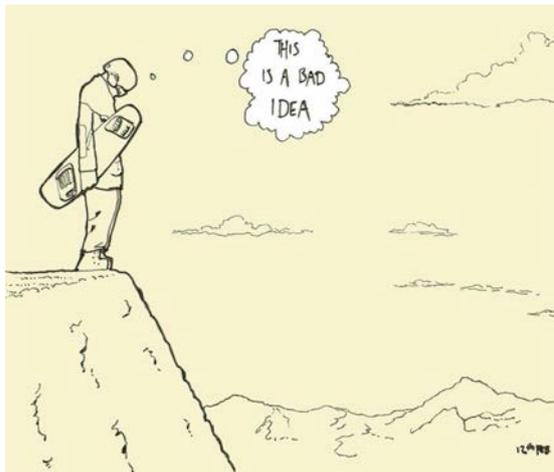


Figure 3.6. Darren Fisher *Comfort Zone a Distant Memory* 2015

While the diary comics usually fit within the parameters of “images in sequence” (McCloud et al.), there were times when a single image was most appropriate to communicate an idea or event. Figure 3.6 refers to a snowboarding holiday and asks the reader to fill in the events that could happen next. In a single image comic such as this, extra attention is given to composition and clarity, acknowledging the illustrative connotations of the standalone image. In retrospect, it is possible that this illustration would still work in the same way without the text, as the message of “this is a bad idea” is carried in the body pose. Removing the text

diary comics. Further quantitative case studies across a range of comics, investigating the range of different panel setups, would be useful in revealing more information about the operation of this form.

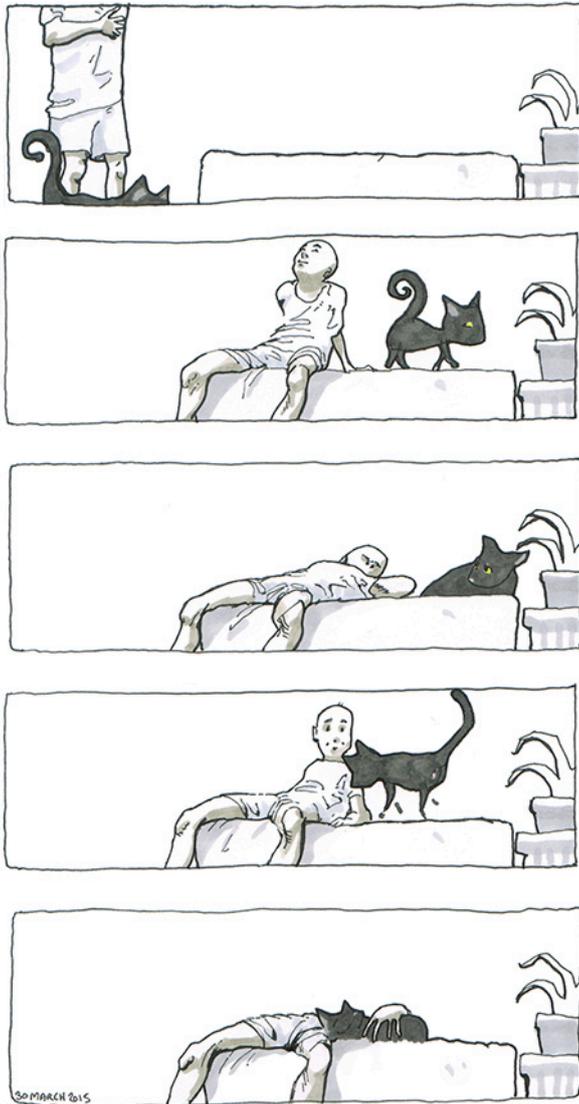


Figure 3.9. Darren Fisher *Furry Fruit of My Loin* 2015

At times, the diary comics were a place to explore simple things in life that bring me pleasure and comfort, such as shown in figure 3.9. The decision to depict something that occurs within a short space of time is aided by two things; one is keeping a stationary 'camera' to frame the action clearly. This has the additional benefit of giving the impression of events happening in real time (Gertler and Lieber 2009). Secondly, it required enough frames to show every key movement in that sequence of moments, which necessitated the implementation of a mix of Scott McCloud's moment-to-moment and action-to-action transitions (1994, 70). Doing so avoided any necessity to use narration or text, as these panel transitions are stitched together easily by the reader, requiring very little deductive reasoning. This type of comic relies on a simplicity of shot design to echo the simple beauty of the

moment. The use of a fixed viewpoint is common in three- and four-panel strip comics, where the focus is on character interaction and a necessity for the reader to absorb information quickly.



Figure 3.10. Darren Fisher *The Art of Zen* 2015

Diary comics were an ideal platform for experimentation with identity states, an overriding curiosity of my research. *The Art of Zen* (figure 3.10) looks at the way in which one person can alternate between radically different states according to context. In this example, my rage is triggered when driving. This sense of rage is reinforced by the manipulation of the second panel border and provides a reverberation of my scream in the panel itself. The final panel, the payoff, shows the character as relaxed and calm, having experienced an enjoyable drive. Although an exaggeration of the truth, this comic speaks to my ability to take on different aspects of our pluralistic identity as required.

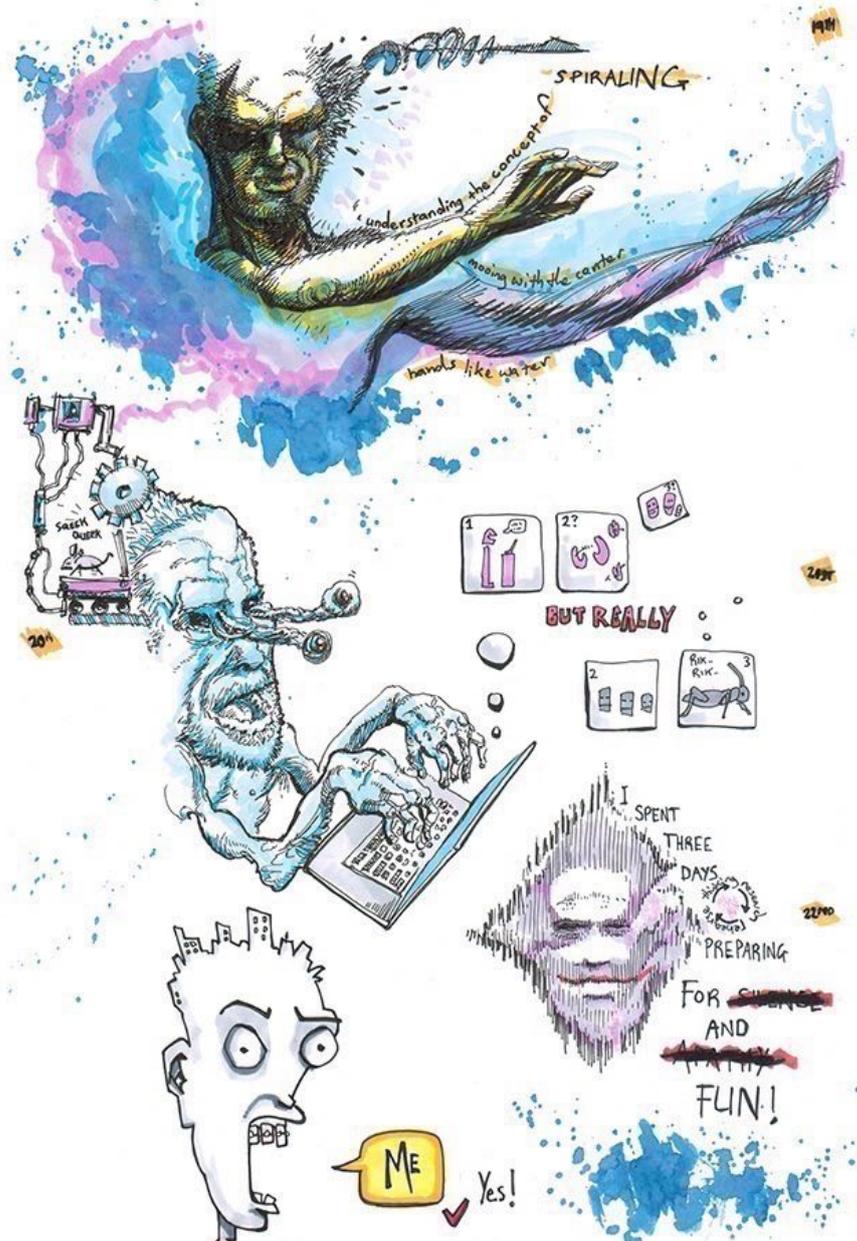


Figure 3.11. Darren Fisher, Diary Comics 19–22 April 2015

As the bank of diary comics grew, I was inspired to experiment not only with media but also how far I could extend defamiliarisation. Figure 3.11 takes influence from the work of David Mack and from Robert Crumb’s statement that his early fame came soon after he stopped censoring himself (cited in Harvey 1996). In this mindset, I drew freely, without putting restrictions in place. This allowed for a faster work flow without second guessing, as well as a bold approach to the use of colour. The reader is being challenged to engage at a deeper level than previously in order to decode the information and to navigate the strips, which are indirect, non-linear, and lacking in the usual edifices of sequential art of panels and word balloons. The diary comics increasingly became an exercise in combining media in ways I

hadn't before, as well as daring the occasional production of comics without putting excessive thought into how they might be translated by the reader.



Figure 3.12. Darren Fisher, Diary Comics 23-25 April 2015

My next attempt at pushing boundaries came immediately after, this time using previously unexplored media. Although watercolour was new to me, it felt familiar due to my experience with ink washes. The end result (figure 3.12) contains some appealing elements such as the spray of crimson paint, quickly created with a flick of the brush, and the indications of skin flushing. A secondary benefit of working with watercolour is the enjoyment in observing the paint as it dries. The paint behaves in unpredictable ways and creates its own uncontrolled patterns and fusions of colour, more pleasing than I had intended. In this example, I have

provided a simpler structure that nonetheless operates without the usual constructions of sequential art.

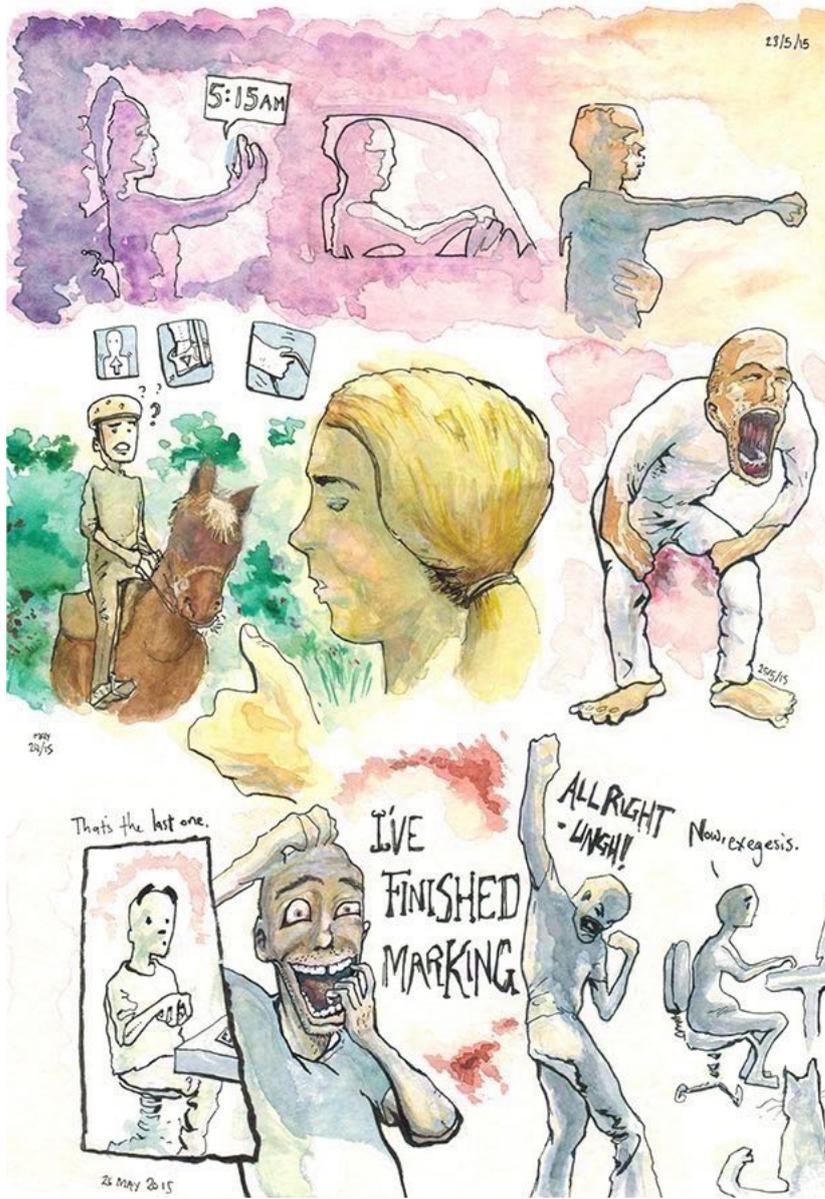


Figure 3.13. Darren Fisher, Diary Comics 23-26 May 2015

Figure 3.13 shows my ongoing attempts to craft an effective 'meta-page', where the individual strips operate separately, yet also work together as a holistic unit. As this was a learning activity, these comics were first carefully pencilled with blue animation pencils. Loose washes of watercolours were applied over the top; however, I discovered that erasing the blue lines ripped the water-softened paper. Eventually, with some modification of my erasing technique, I managed to lighten the blue lines, and was thus armed with the knowledge that this is not an ideal workflow. Each visual experiment clarifies processes for the next time, of what to do and what not to do, of how materials interact, and what the best sequence of their integration is.

These ongoing explorations allowed me to gain confidence in the mediums, evidenced here by a thicker, multi-layered application of paint.

3.3. Site statistics

A benefit of sharing the diary comics online has been growing a readership. The Wordpress blog offers an array of real-time statistics on audience numbers, views, and general demographics, and direct feedback by way of interaction through social media helps in understanding what engages people.



Figure 3.14. Darren Fisher *Gee, 20 Years in Jail for This Comic* 2014

Gee, 20 Years in Jail for This Comic (figure 3.14) was created as social commentary on the heavy police presence in South Bank, Brisbane, during the G20 summit in November 2014, and has received a high number of views relative to the other diary comics. The reason for this is certainly not because of the quality of the draftsmanship, composition, or lettering, as there are far more refined comics with far less views. I do not believe it is due to the exaggeration employed or the attempt at humour. Rather, I believe it may be attributed mainly to the social statement I am making, or it may have been a side-effect of Google web searches on the G20. Either way, it is evidence that situating my stories within a real-world context and commenting on social/cultural/political views and events may aid in broadening my readership, as the visual and narrative style employed for this comic were similar to that of other, less popular comics created around the same time.



Figure 3.15. Darren Fisher *Es ist Kalt* 2014

Es ist Kalt (figure 3.15) has the second highest number of views out of all the diary comics; however, it does not have any of the social commentary of figure 88. The reason for the success of this image may instead be aesthetics; the simplicity of blue ink wash, black markers, digital lettering, and negative space. Unfortunately, there is no concrete mechanism to find out the reasons for these views, although it seems plausible that visual treatment and shared themes/world events may contribute to a comic strip's public success. However, the other factors at play, such as algorithms, as well as personal popularity and time spent on social media means that the site statistics are a poor way to judge success.

APPENDIX 4: Mini Comics

During my candidature, I have produced eleven mini-comics, with a total of 114 pages. Constructing narratives within different page constraints has developed my strengths in storytelling and enabled me to take steps to rectify shortcomings. The mini-comics contributed to the pool of skills necessary for the longer-form graphic novel, helping in the development of a keen appreciation of how the final result should look, underpinned by a relevant and effective structure. Visual, narrative, structural, and thematic experiments have led to ongoing refinements in storytelling, layout, composition, and visual craft. Some of these mini comic, including *1994* and *Chasing Shadows*, have been doubly beneficial as I have been able to use sections of them within *Life in the Gutter* to create flashback scenes.



Figure 4.1. Darren Fisher *Burn Out* and *An Incredible Life* (excerpts) 2013

My works *Burn Out* and *An Incredible Life* (figure 4.1) are two stories that do not fit within the genre of autobiography, and yet their production enabled me to gain confidence and versatility in using dip pens, brush, ink and ink washes. This experience in traditional media translates into new approaches and ways of working in digital production. In *Burn Out*, text was added after the document was scanned, while in *An Incredible Life*, the text and word balloons were drawn onto the paper and inked along with the images. This added a finality to the document and meant that while I was still able to change things in post-production, the temptation for future modification or editing was lessened. Also, the addition of text to the paper with the images led to a greater degree of care in placement, allowance for negative space, and the movement of the reader's eye, which has carried over into my later works.

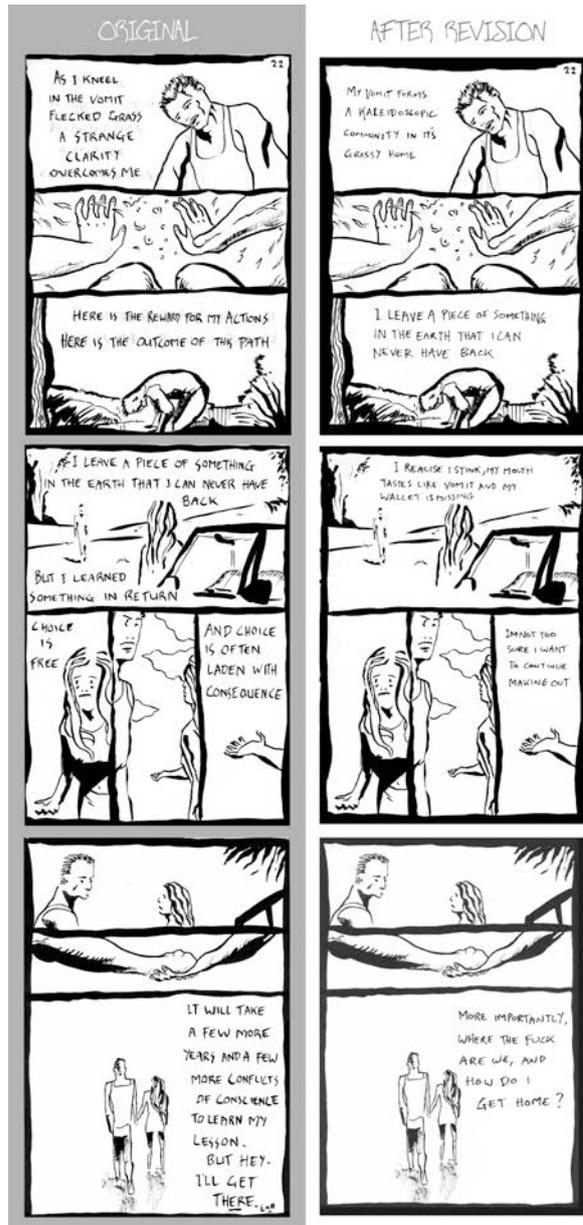


Figure 4.2. Darren Fisher *Night Drive* (comparison of two versions) 2013

Night Drive (figure 4.2) was produced within the constraints of the 24 Hour Comic Challenge (see Appendix 6), with little time for drafting or revision. The act of creating this story from start to finish within such a truncated space of time resulted in a finished work that flows in a way that is sometimes lost in works completed over weeks or months. After the event, my supervisor suggested corrections for future drafting, such as a revised ending, highlighting that it is the author's responsibility to present material for a reader to process and make their own conclusions, rather than to explicitly inform the reader what was or should be gained from the reading. In light of this, I made changes to the text of the final pages, as seen in the right page of figure 91. This allowed me to avoid 'preachy' overtones while subverting expectations of a happy ending, in a (hopefully) humorous and ambiguous fashion.



Figure 4.3. Darren Fisher *Socially Awkward* (page 1, comparison of two versions) 2013

Using the knowledge gained from *Night Drive*, I redrafted a short autobiographic comic I had originally created in 2011, *Socially Awkward* (figure 4.3). I fully rescripted its five pages with the aim of providing a less didactic narrative to the reader, as my supervisor had suggested, leaving space for the reader to formulate their own opinions on the meaning of the narrative. The lettering was composited using a handwriting font to aid in the sense the of personal thoughts, as if from a diary, and the layout was modified to sit within the gutters, thereby providing more clarity of reading, and also removing the narration from the space and time of the narrative (Pratt 2009, 109).



Figure 4.4. Darren Fisher *Preparing for ZICS* 2013

Preparing for ZICS (figure 4.4) documents time spent preparing comics for print to sell at the Zine and Indie Comic Symposium (ZICS) in Brisbane. It was an experiment using a “straight-ahead” (Williams 2001, 61) approach to story (similar to the Post-it note comics), without planning and without using pencils to layout the pages in advance. The final result has a looseness of line that tends to get lost in other more polished pieces, and while it has a lot of

problems, the experience helped me in finalising later works when they were finished, as opposed to perfect.



Figure 4.5. Darren Fisher 1994 *Melbourne* (page 3) 2013

All of these minor works as well as the visual experiments outlined in Chapter 3.1 led to my embarking on a more finished narrative, this time focusing on diary entries from my final years of high school. In September 2013, I completed work on *1994 Melbourne* and followed in December, with a further fifteen pages for *1994 Queensland*. As seen in figure 4.5, text was taken directly from diary entries and implemented within narrative captions using a font created from my own handwriting. In seeking to further reinforce the feeling of authenticity in the reader, I scanned a blank page of ruled lines from the original journal exercise book, using this as backing for the narrated text, as outlined in Chapter 4.1 (Emotional Truth). Ink and ink washes were applied with brush onto A5 Bristol board, and in these works I experimented further with dry brush techniques in order to emulate the work of Craig Thompson.



Figure 4.6. Darren Fisher *Chasing Shadows* (page 9) 2014

To produce *Chasing Shadows* (figure 4.6), a 24-page comic in my second 24 Hour Comic Challenge, I employed the approach of brush, ink, and wash that I had practiced on *Night Drive*, *An Incredible Life*, *Burn Out* and *1994*. Comparing this work with that completed the previous year provided insight into my artistic progression, identifying developing strengths of brush work and use of ink washes. *Chasing Shadows* was produced without text, with the narration added in the final hours of the challenge. After researching the works of wordless narrative authors Lynd Ward and Frans Masereel, I removed the text for a recent printing of *Chasing Shadows* and found that the reading benefits as a result. This may be because the work was produced without text in mind, and so enough of the narrative was already communicated within the images.



Figure 4.7. Darren Fisher *The First Time* (page 1) 2015

The First Time (figure 4.7) was created completely using digital techniques. This six-page story explores themes of substance experimentation and, more importantly, the protagonist's issues with saying no. This style was also a tester for using a completely digital workflow within *Life in the Gutter*; however, it proved too time intensive and was subsequently discarded for use within the graphic novel. Other associated comic endeavours are outlined in Appendix 6. These works were all completed with the aim of developing an aesthetic, as well as the storytelling skills, to produce my long-form graphic novel.

APPENDIX 5: Life in the Gutter Planning & workflow

From the beginning of my candidature, I knew that I wanted to create a character-driven story that had a feeling of authenticity and believability. Although I had the story, in a sense, based on memories and diary entries, I still needed to understand who the characters were: their motivations, desires, fears, and goals. As a part of this, I established a character web (figure 97), based on exercises taken from John Truby's *Anatomy of Story* (2007).

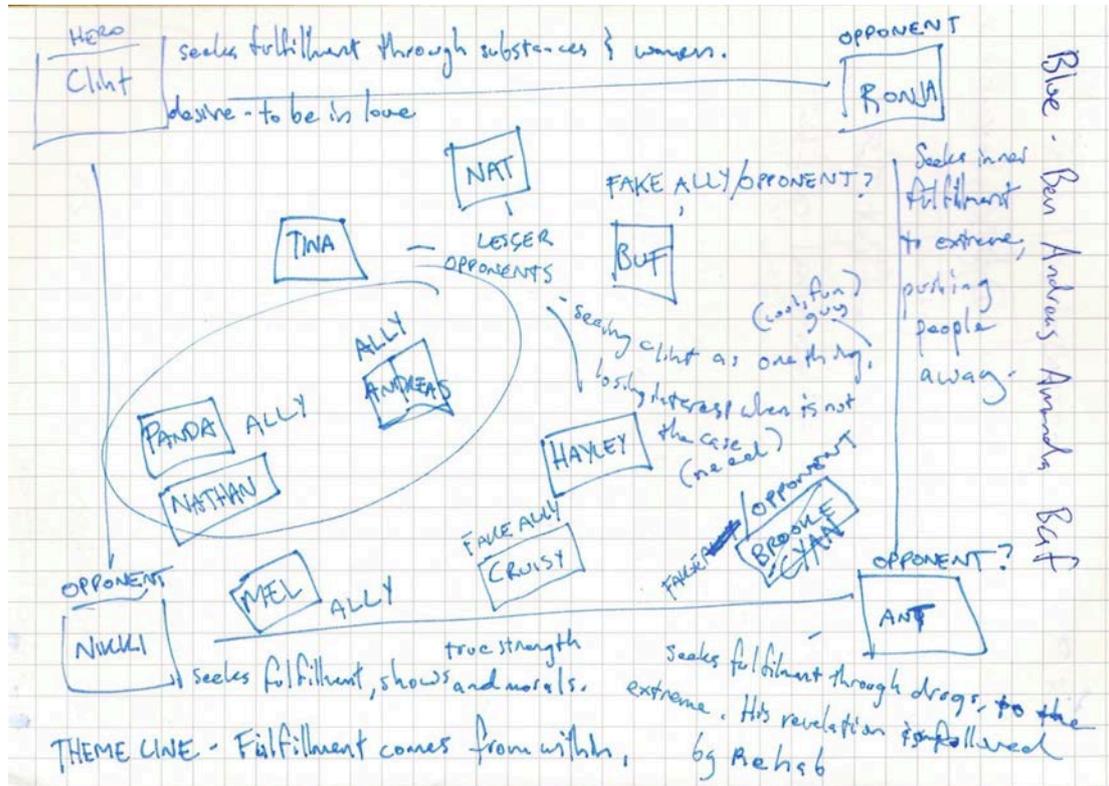


Figure 5.1. Darren Fisher, character web, 2015

Truby's *Anatomy of Story* (2007) was pivotal in my understanding of the different character roles, such as hero, opponent, ally, and fake ally/opponent, and their relation to one another. It also gave me tools to probe beneath the surface of their actions to understand their needs and desires. In the case of Alphonse's character, I was able to have the person he is based on complete these exercises and give me an accurate analysis of character. In the other cases, I was forced to make my own interpretation.



Figure 5.2. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2017, page 296 (excerpt)

Figure 5.2 is an example of using this knowledge overtly within the narrative. I was cautious of using dialogue to express how the characters feel throughout, and the reason for doing so here is that this is a moment of deep confidentiality between the two characters. Although, people in my life do not speak like this all the time, there are certainly times where I do have such conversations with people whom I feel close to. Once characters were completely fleshed out, the script was written, all of the visual experiments were complete, and I had a solid backlog of comics completed, I was ready to begin *Life in the Gutter* in earnest. Although I had a good idea of what the workflow would be, it required some finessing on an ongoing basis. After trial and error in a number of different methods, primarily exploring within the diary comics, I settled on a method that seems to work. It begins with the script, and then laying out the script page by page inside Manga Studio Ex 5, and copying and pasting the script directly from Scrivener into Manga studio. Shot, action and dialogue were all laid out quickly and easily, and I was able to quickly gain an overview of the flow of story. After experimenting with variations on InDesign and Photoshop processes, I finally figured out a relatively quick and easy workflow.

MONTAGE
 DRIVING TO WORK IN HEAVY TRAFFIC
 OPERATING A FORKLIFT
 MAKING SMALL TALK WITH CO WORKERS
 EATING LUNCH ALONE
 STICKING LABELS ON PLASTIC BOTTLES
 DRIVING TO NIGHT SCHOOL (TAPE)

SITTING IN CLASS WORKING ON ESSAY
 CHATTING TO ANOTHER CLASSMATE, JOHN
 DRIVING HOME
 SMOKING JOINT
 POPPING PILLS
 DRAWING
 SHOWERING
 SLEEPING
 ALARM
 COFFEE

JOINT
 PILLS
 SHOWER
 DRIVING
 WORK
 DRIVING
 NIGHT SCHOOL

ETC ETC-
 THE PANELS KEEP REPEATING,
 GETTING SMALLER AND SMALLER

GLENT
 This is it. This is what you deserve - the road has travelled.

Man, what an idiot. You always believed he made too much.

You could have had it all. The perfect wife. The house near the beach.

Security, comfort. Love.
 Instead this is what you get.
 You're alone.
 Get used to it.

Figure 5.3. Darren Fisher, excerpts from the script for *Life in the Gutter* 2015

The first step involved formatting the script in Scrivener into a proper screenplay format while revising dialogue and deleting unnecessary sections, and then pasting the script in to Manga Studio page by page. While doing this, I visualised the panels and images, trying to construct a pace and tempo of storytelling which was aided by being able to create the text layouts quickly. Figure 5.3 shows pages from the script conveying the protagonist's daily actions. There is little indication of how the panels would be structured, only what their content might be, and even that is open to interpretation. It was important to leave room for inspiration and creativity at every step of the process; as such, the script is largely void of directions on camera angle, shot selection or panel structure.

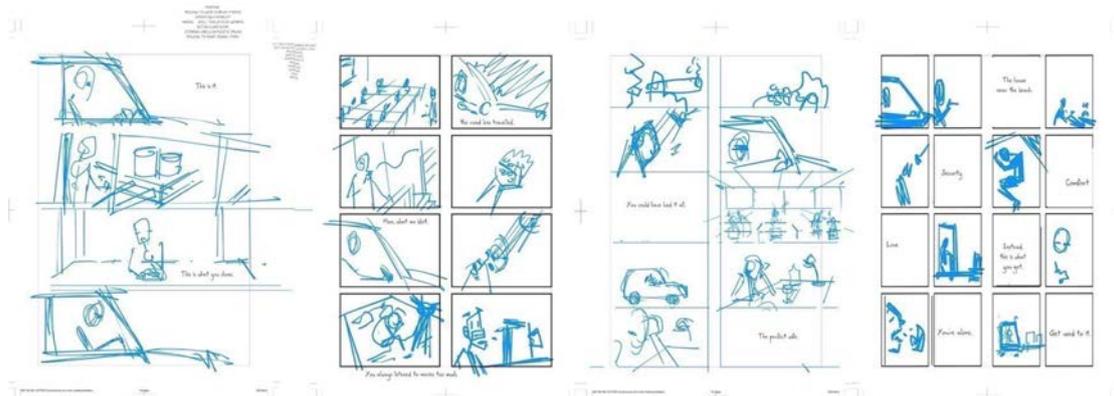


Figure 5.4. Darren Fisher, excerpts from rough digital layouts of *Life in the Gutter* 2016

Figure 5.4 shows pages from the beginning of the graphic novel which were hastily completed during a 24-hour challenge. The finish was extremely rough and left a lot of room for interpretation in a second draft. In creating art, certain considerations must be made by the artist before the first stroke even touches paper. What are the materials to be used? How do the materials interact? Has the artist used them together in this combination before? What kind of technique will be used; will the artist be working quickly, loosely, gesturally covering

the page and allowing for 'happy accidents' to occur or will they use a tightly controlled line, carefully orchestrating every mark that they make on the paper?

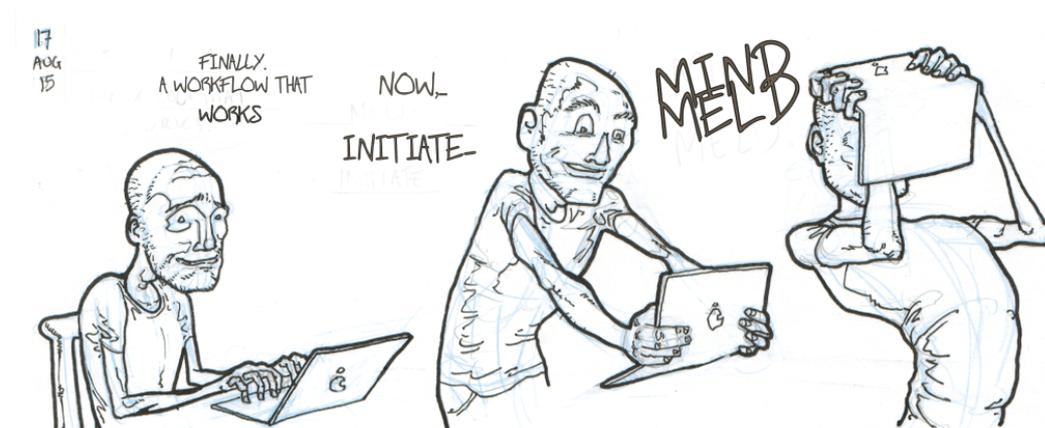


Figure 5.5. Darren Fisher *Connection* 2015

In beginning to draw the pages for my graphic novel, I thought I had solved most of the problems of media and medium selection. The diary comics were my place of practice and experimentation, and after two years of them I settled upon a certain visual style, as seen in figure 5.5 (*Connection*). I feel that leaving the blue lines in these images allows for a greater sense of construction and volume, providing an extra dimension of energy that is sometimes lost in the simple inked line. However, this line alone did not completely fulfil the aesthetic I sought for the graphic novel. I wanted to be able to indicate light and shadow without embarking on laborious hatching and cross hatching that would detract from the clear line. This clear line style, or *Ligne Claire* as it was pioneered by the French Herge, creator of *Tin Tin*, requires all lines to be the same size and the absence of hatching (Pleban 2006). I decided that copic markers were a suitable medium with which to achieve rendering without compromising the clear line. This necessitated intensive experimentation with copic markers, in order to set out from page one of the graphic novel with an approach and a workflow already in place.



Figure 5.6. Darren Fisher, *It's up to You* 2015

Figure 5.6 is an example from a series of diary comics where I embraced a somewhat chaotic approach. This involved first drawing quickly and loosely in pencil, suggesting shapes with only a vague idea of what the end result would be. Then, instead of applying carefully controlled ink lines, I instead used the chisel end of a copic marker to quickly block in the shapes and forms, building the image without putting in place strong expectations and allowing the speed of the copic application to determine forms and shapes. An example of this is in the shape to the right of the figure, which was created during an unthinking flourish of the wrist, materialising something that my thinking mind did not intend on designing. The forms of the rider's body were brought into relief quickly using this workflow, not completely bypassing, but somewhat circumventing, the time-consuming anatomical construction of line. This process instead allowed my subconscious mind to guide my hand, gently observed instead of tightly controlled. Without the opportunity to erase 'mistakes', I was locked into whatever my hand had created, forced to move forward and work with whatever arose. This technique could be considered a form of 'estrangement', for both the author and audience, my own estrangement from expectation and the audience's estrangement as they are forced to look into the image and decipher the random marks of chance.

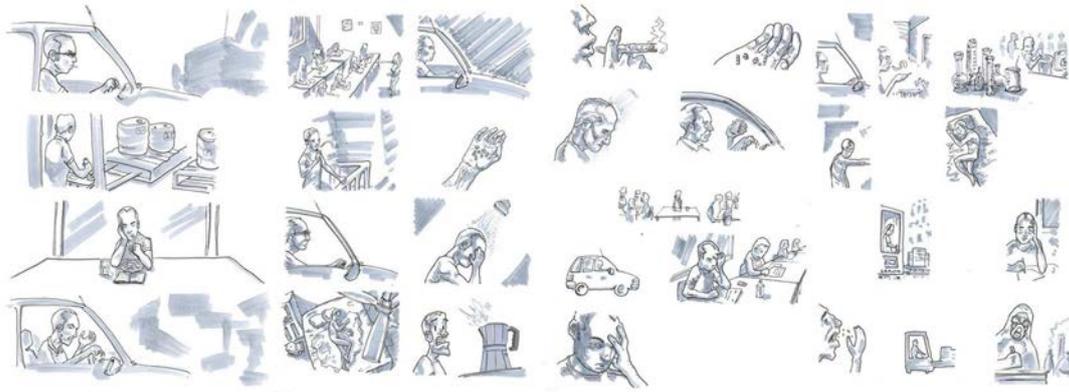


Figure 5.7. Darren Fisher, excerpts from first draft traditional layouts of *Life in the Gutter* 2016

The stage after the layout of script is the layout of images, as shown in figure 5.7. I decided to adopt a workflow of digital layouts to be printed and pencilled/inked traditionally after visiting the comic artist Frank Quitely in his Glasgow studio. Quitely draws pages digitally, prints them in non-reproducing blue line onto Bristol board, and then pencils directly over the top, a process I decided to modify and adapt to suit my own preference. All the figures and basic shapes are blocked in, drawn gesturally and roughly with the timing, pacing, and general layout as the main concerns. The second stage of drafting would come later, and was planned as a finessing of these pages digitally. However, I wanted first to see what the result would be if I skipped the second digital draft stage and drew the finished draft traditionally directly over the first, rough layouts. I used bleed-proof paper which has the advantage of a degree of transparency, meaning that I wouldn't need to use a light box to apply finished art over the rough layouts. I applied a technique I developed with the diary comics of first using the chisel end of copic marker to flesh out forms and to establish lighting and shadows, in a Cool Gray #4 tone. Once this stage was complete, I would use technical pens to draw the lines in a variety of sizes from 0.1 to 1.0. With this workflow, I found I could easily produce three to four finished pages per day.

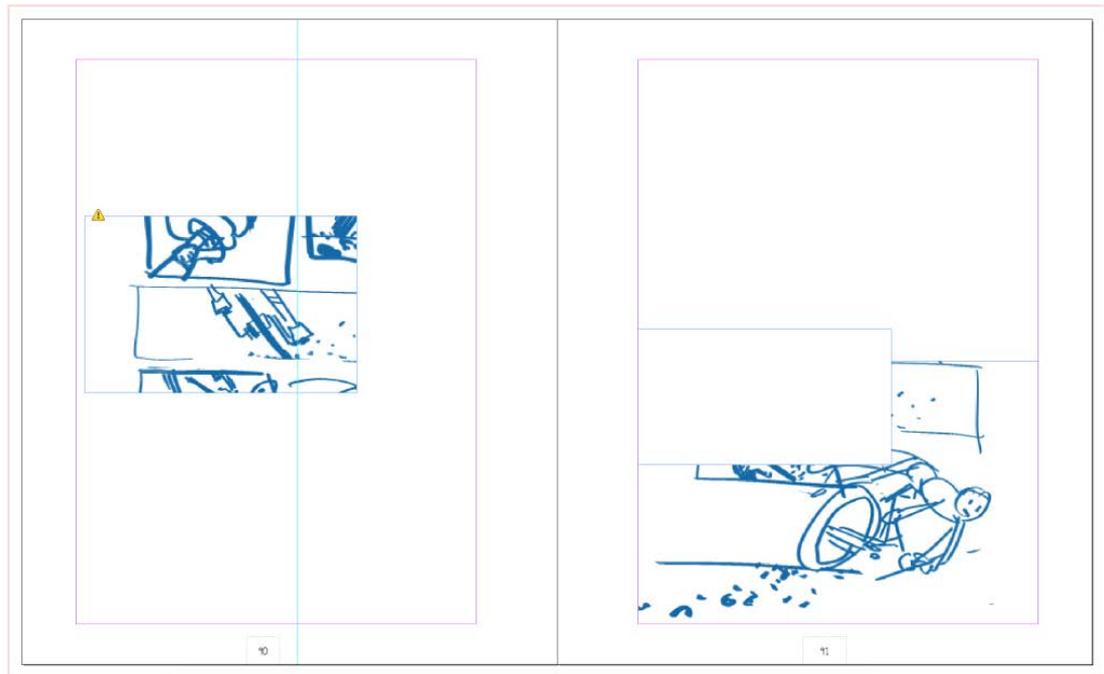


Figure 5.9. InDesign error

This workflow I selected eventually suffered a critical error when I decided to restructure the order of the source files, which were Manga Studio files placed into an InDesign document (example in figure 5.9). This resulted upon export in a reordering of the filenames, which was particularly a problem considering the source files were all 'placed' documents within InDesign, while the lettering and titles were not placed and rather made within in InDesign and laid over the top of the placed files. InDesign, naturally and sensibly, was not able to intelligently match the lettering with the new location of its relevant files. All this resulted very quickly in a chaotic document with lettering and panel constructs in all the wrong places. Consequently, I changed the workflow to exist entirely within Manga Studio until the work was ready for compilation, and it seems obvious now that a process becomes less stable and more prone to problems the more steps and/or software it requires. I was doubling up on work to maintain something that only needs to be created in the final stages. Keeping all of the working stages within Manga Studio means I can restructure the order of pages at will, and restructuring is an ongoing process. I have found that the story only becomes fully comprehensible to me once the visuals are in place; an overview of scenes becomes easier, and the links between events seems more tangible, making editing at that stage more logical. This restructuring of scenes is necessary, particularly considering the multi-timeline structure of the narrative and the attempts to create something of a logical flow of events from what is otherwise an almost randomised sequence of events.



Figure 5.10. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* (overview screen shot) 2017

Viewing the inbuilt page navigator within Manga Studio means I can see the entirety of the narrative at a glance. In a sense, this view is not unlike Will Eisner's concept of the meta-page (1990), a composition of meaning, colour and tone. Detail is lost and instead broad aspects of storytelling become more evident, such as the way that colour shifts across the pages, providing an uncluttered overview of how the scenes interact with one another. This is not unlike how the omniscient narrator perceives a narrative, with all points of time existing simultaneously. Therefore, when observing the story in this meta-view, confidence in scene editing and arrangement is facilitated. It is a logical assumption to state that our distance from something affects our perception of it. When working at the level of script, it is often difficult to see the overall structure, and that is why a script ordinarily starts with a one sentence premise, easy to handle, and grows from there. As I began with a mass of diary entries that I

had to then refine down into a workable story, it was at times difficult to keep a clear overview of the story in mind.



Figure 5.11. Darren Fisher *The Cycle of Love* 2014

This is similar to working and viewing at different scales within illustration and comics, an idea I explored in *The Cycle of Love* (figure 5.11). According to comic artist Frank Quitely

when you're looking at it at its biggest, you're looking at the mark making, you're looking at the pictures itself, you're looking into it like a scene the way you would watch television or a movie, but you're also looking at it the way you like to look at a drawing—you're admiring the way it's been done, these folds here, and the suggestion of big inky strokes here, and a more definite pen mark here. But once you get down to this size (the middle ring) you start dividing your attention between the overall figure and the background and the overall composition, and then by here (inner ring) you're really looking more at areas of light and dark. (Interview with artist in his studio, 2014, appendix 7)

5.2. Life in the Gutter planning and process exhibition

The following presents outcomes from an exhibition where I asked how autobiographic stories might be adapted into informative structures that are recognisable and engaging, yet remain authentic as autobiography. It sets up the challenge of communicating complex drafting and story design processes within a visual context. It seeks to conceptualise a sequence of visual artifacts with the ability to draw the viewer in via well-designed imagery, in order to communicate the ordinarily text-based information of story structuring and revision. This research contributes to knowledge by its adaptation of diary entries into a story structure that is recognisable to western audiences while maintaining a sense of authenticity as autobiography. It unpacks the steps and processes in a visual manner, allowing for three different ways of seeing this process through three different lenses; theme, story, and character. It innovates via its multi-faceted approach to design, and its allowance for different ways of seeing and of processing information. This research has significance for the innovative manner in which it presents a lengthy doctoral research process to an audience in a variety of ways. It allows for the assimilation of complex narrative drafting in a simply digestible format. It demonstrates the multi-faceted approaches necessary within sequential art storytelling using an adaptation of the very same structures it comments on. It functions as communication, education and visual art.

Compiling a bullet-point list of all the events contained within my diary entries from 2005 to 2007 enabled me to build an overview of events and to refresh this period of life in my mind. The next stage of story building, as suggested by my associate supervisor, involved writing conversational dialogue and loose stage directions in a stream-of-consciousness style, without revising or editing, and using the bullet points and diaries for reference. This exercise was aimed at re-connecting with the events of the past, and fleshing out dialogue and characters. After writing 20,000 words of dialogue and a range of vignettes, I had only made it through half of the bullet points. I needed to start considering an overarching structure with relevant and satisfying closure. The construction of a visual overview of the story using Post-it notes, grouped by theme according to colour and position (below), was vital in moving a step forward in building structure.



Figure 5.12. Darren Fisher, *Graphic Novel Planning* 2014

The themes chosen were as following:

Blue: Friends—positive influences, non-drug oriented

Orange: Physical training—Ju-jitsu, weight training, physical exercise

Pink: Romantic pursuits—successful and unsuccessful

Purple: Substance abuse—alcohol and drugs

Yellow: Employment and university—learning and working

Green: Family

White: Philosophising

Applying this categorisation made clear where scenes crossed more than one theme/colour, indicating particularly significant events where ordinarily separate areas of life became intermixed. For example, where an event involved training under the influence of drugs, the yellow training post-it note might be positioned within the purple band, or a purple (drug) post-it note could sit within the yellow (training) band. Another advantage of this method was that time and interrelation/cause and effect of events became easy to navigate. For example, when viewing a scene, it was now possible to appreciate events taking place in the same period of time by casting vertically up or down; to see how different events are related across time, by scanning horizontally left or right. The interaction of events across areas of life, before, during, and after other events, could easily be observed. A clear structure and ending, however, was yet to be articulated.



Figure 5.13. Darren Fisher, *Revised Planning Timeline* 2016

Each scene is given a colour according to theme and placed according to timeline and revised chronology after story structuring and re-structuring. Patterns across themes are easier to spot in this format, and it served a vital role in the scriptwriting process.

The process of planning, as represented in figure 5.13, is as follows:

- Reading over diary entries from 2005–2007
- Grouping scenes according to theme
- Adding keywords of events, characters, place
- Creating a colour key to indicate themes
- Plotting scenes on the x-axis
- Looking for patterns
- Restructuring story and scenes according to script development



Figure 5.16. Darren Fisher, *Board #2* 2016

Board #2 details the writing process, from diary entry collection through to the current phase of layout and thumbnails. It was challenging to present this in a visually interesting way, and the density of text probably prevented people from taking the necessary time with it. The process of writing, as represented on this board, is as follows:

- Stream of consciousness writing
- Dialogue & descriptions, getting a feel for it
- Group the script into chapters and send for critique
- Rewrite
- Work on premise, character web and story structure
- Rewrite layout, establishing pacing
- Image thumbnails



Figure 5.17. Darren Fisher, *Board #5* 2016

The third board gives an approximation of the central characters in the protagonist's life, with their placement on the board indicating main thematic ties and emotional distance. The colours also indicate dominance, with romance and its intermingling with substance abuse taking up the majority of the space.

Reading the character web:

- The web of characters in the story
- Each of them in the area of their main thematic connection
- Territory of colour represents that theme's impact
- Diary comics representing style and theme
- Character design and stylisation
- The divide between discipline and excess

5.3. Style

The desire to work faster and produce quantity over quality of line occurred a number of times during the production of the first draft of *Life in the Gutter*, and I felt a pressure to accelerate at the stage of the graphic novel that I refer to as the big, horrible, hump. At that time, I had converted more than half of my thirty-thousand word script into pages; little people and places trapped within an assortment of digital shapes, nested cages and built environments, on a succession of 281 pages. At that point, with the time for production fast running out, I felt the need to meditate on where the project was and where I could see it going. There are a few things that necessitated this reflection, one of them being time restrictions, and the other being an evolving digital drawing style. This first draft level of completion evolved over time due to an increased skill in drawing digitally, and thus was part of the reason for eventually rethinking the need for a second and third draft. Below is a slice of pages over the course of the graphic novel that takes a look at the progression of digital drawing finish, with an obvious overall trend to the images becoming more refined.



Figure 5.18. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2016, page 43 (early draft)

This is one of the first digital pages completed after the first 24-page trial. These are still rough and require comprehensive redrafting. There is no clear use of perspective and no indication of characters' features.



Figure 5.19. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2016, page 58 (draft)

In this page, there is some photo reference used in the first panel, initially planned to be a second draft consideration; however, it still needs redrafting to clarify characters and setting.



Figure 5.20. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2016, page 85 (draft)

This page demonstrates the use of photo reference for setting and text laid out as approximating a final draft. However, the drawing is still rough, and the imported photo reference needs to be modified by filters or by drawing over the top in order to set it within the page.



Figure 5.21. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2016, page 157 (draft)

At this stage of the production, the drawings are becoming more painterly than the previous ones. Already here there are minimal changes required for a second draft, including the use of a perspective grid and photo reference for cars, as well as digital panel borders.



Figure 5.22. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2016, page 199 (draft)

Here the characters are becoming recognisable and semblances are clearer immediately. The page layout structure is becoming stronger and clearer, although perspective grids and tightening of backgrounds are still required. Some indication of colour in panels of focus aids in adding an extra layer of meaning and characterisation.



Figure 5.23. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2016, page 220 (draft)

At this stage, the characters are clearly worked out. I'm beginning to play with tone and value, previously a third draft consideration.



Figure 5.24. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2016, page 239 (draft)

Here I'm experimenting with a complementary colour for music and text. Character details including textures are included. Application of greater degree of depth of space and use of value to separate elements.



Figure 5.27. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2016, page 307 (draft)

The pages are now 80% finished, with only minor photo reference and cleanup remaining. At this stage, it is possible to go over the image directly with copic markers and ink pens and produce the final draft.



Figure 5.28. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2016, page 315 (draft)

These are the most recent pages. In the digital example, it is evident that the first draft style has gained coherence, with work produced in the first instance so close to the final print quality that they do not require more drafting.

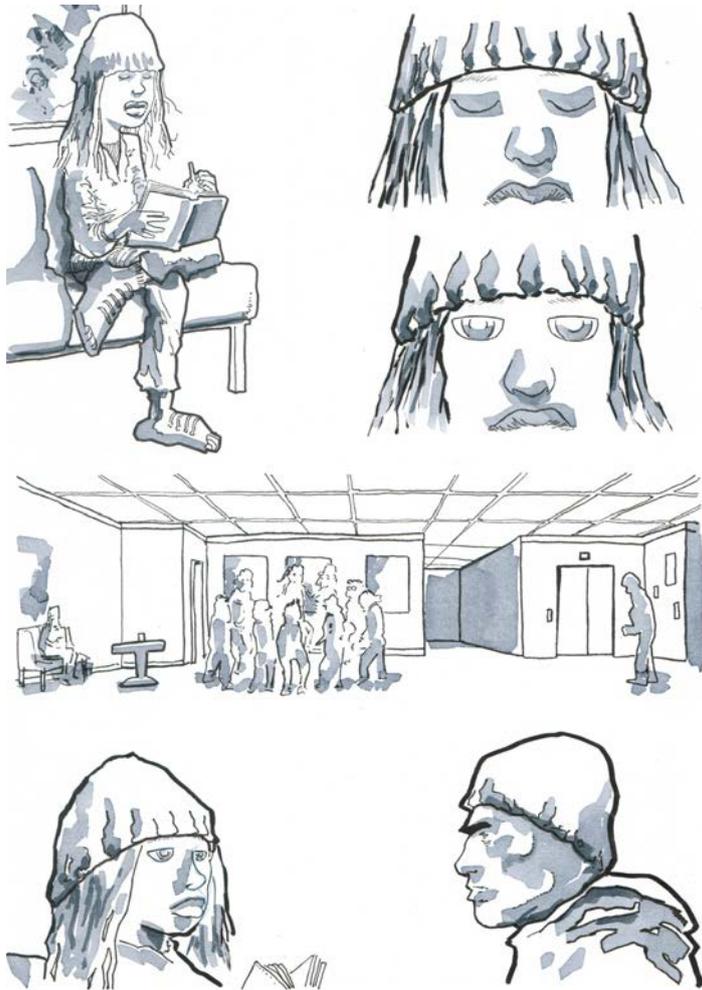


Figure 5.29. Darren Fisher *Life in the Gutter* 2016, page 316

This page shows the copic markers over a digital first draft in the final page. Here the final traditional stage requires no guesswork, only drawing over the lines and reproducing the first draft faithfully. The most recent pages are so close finished quality that I cannot see the value of going over again with the copic markers and ink pens, except for keeping the style consistent throughout. It still makes sense to have the first draft digital 'pencils' as close to completion as possible, which takes out extra guesswork in the inking phase and means that I will be able to move more quickly when the time for finalising the pages comes.

APPENDIX 6: RELATED ACTIVITIES

6.1. Wise Up, Kid!

Wise Up, Man! –talkin’ peace, love and straight thinkin’ is a comic book application for touch screen tablets. Addressing a perceived dearth of ethics content in educational curriculum in primary schools, the application presents wisdom stories from across the world’s great spiritual traditions in a non-discriminatory, inclusive and light-hearted fashion. Aimed at 9 -12 year old children, three comics and an activity page address themes of self-worth, compassion, forgiveness and tolerance. Stories provide practical advise on living well and in harmony with others and with our environments. The project aims to provide meaningful learning material for those parents and children looking for a broader approach to values-based learning. *Wise Up, Kid! –talkin’ peace, love and straight thinkin’* includes comic adaptations from the Zen Buddhist, Sufi and Jewish Mussar traditions. The activity page *ponder, ponder .. pondering* aims to encourage in children an attitude of attentive curiosity and mindfulness. (<http://www.petermoyes.com/wise-up-kid>)

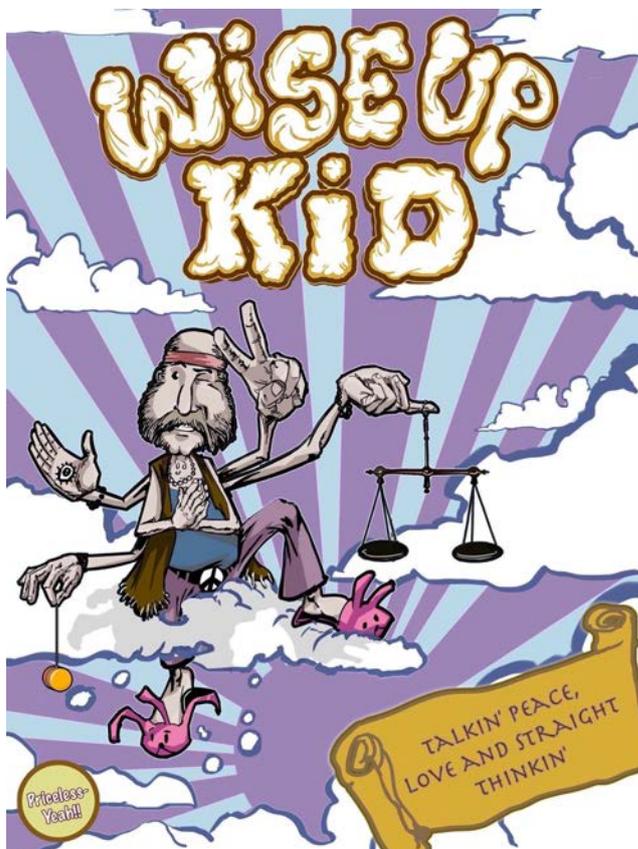


Figure 6.1. Darren Fisher *Wise Up Kid* coverpage, 2015

Working on *Wise Up Kid* involved character design for the main character Carlos, the design and illustration of the cover, a three-page introductory comic, a fifteen-page vignette, a contents page and miscellaneous other illustrative tasks. The main thing I had difficulty with was adhering to the style we had decided on and keeping on model with Carlos. In the three-page introductory comic below, I attempted to recreate a style of background reminiscent of the old Looney Tunes *Road Runner* cartoons. The only adaptation was the use of key lines, intended to allow the foreground elements (particularly Carlos) to sit into the backgrounds.

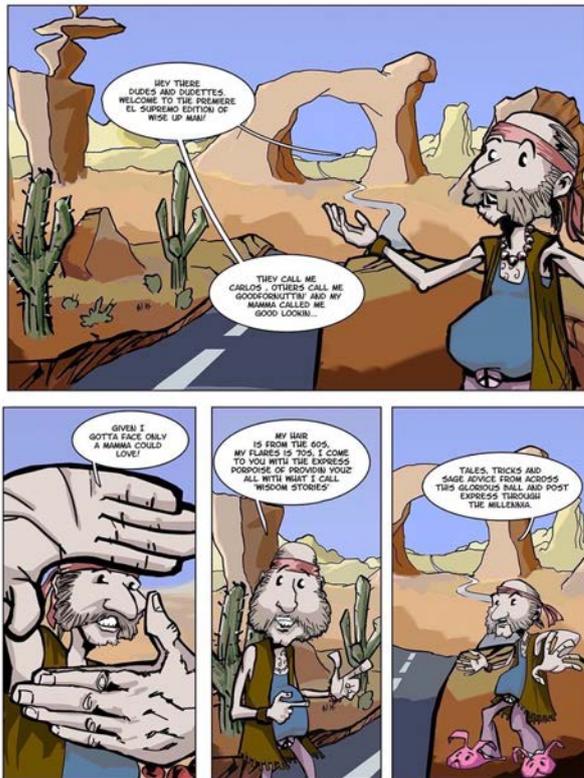
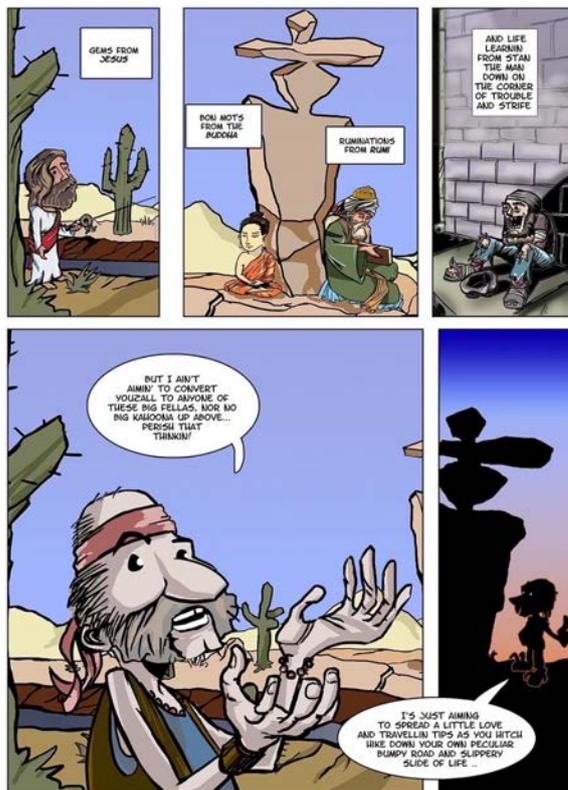


Figure 6.2. Darren Fisher *Wise Up Kid* 2015, page 1



Character design also covered Jesus, Buddha, and Rumi, as well as a caricature of a homeless man, Stan. These characters were developed with the same intention as the backgrounds, to be recognisable, while still maintaining a cohesive style across the piece. In the final panel of page two, I use a silhouette shot, showing, with the same piece of background, time changing from panel to panel, aiming to add an extra depth of time to the comic, which speaks to the journey of life.

Figure 6.3. Darren Fisher *Wiae Up Kid* 2015, page 2



The final page makes use of different religious symbols as well as a hallucinogenic themed background. All of these elements aim to reinforce the idea that this text is non-denominational, all-inclusive, and somewhat esoteric in its leanings with something of a hippy-inspired, new age bent.

This comic, although not a narrative as such, involved a number of problem-solving steps, one of which was how to create an interesting and engaging comic where there is no action, only a single narrator speaking to the camera. Having the help of the writer in this instance was invaluable, and solutions were developed together to a pleasing result.

Figure 6.4. Darren Fisher *Wiae Up Kid* 2015, page 3



The main part of this project, the fifteen-page *Buddy, his Beat-Up Gibson and the Gods of Guitar*, involved a close collaboration with the writer. *Buddy, his Beat-up Gibson and the Gods of Guitar* takes its cues from the Jewish Mussar tradition with a story on gratitude as told by Dr. Alan Morinis.

The anecdote concerns the famous violinist Itzhak Perlman and a concert in New York. The objective of this adaptation is to encourage children in an attitude of positivity, flexibility and perseverance—valuable attributes for meeting life’s challenges. Such an attitude might come from a gratitude for what we have rather than what we have not.

Figure 6.5. Darren Fisher *Buddy, His Beat-Up Gibson and the Gods of Guitar* 2015, page 1



Figure 6.6. Darren Fisher *Buddy, His Beat-Up Gibson and the Gods of Guitar* 2015, page 11

The finessing of script and story throughout the process then became less of an intuitive process than one of communication and discussion of ideas. As always, the addition of images resulted in the addition or removal of text throughout the story as it became evident that a certain image could carry information that was previously the domain of dialogue or narration.

Completed entirely in Photoshop, the comic made use of photo reference for the 'ghost' characters, as well as touches of colour throughout to add extra effect. Seeking to maintain a predominately black-and-white noir approach in places with only touches of colour, similar to Frank Miller's *Sin City*, this comic also explored a variety of panel structures throughout. The page below is an example of all of these techniques, with the first panel a double-circular panel structure that is intended to conjure the feeling of peace, a common connotation of the

circle in composition theory. In the following panel, Buddy breaks out in an inspired riff that is reinforced through the addition of hyper colour, weaving tendrils of musical magic, starting in his third eye, further complementing the overarching esoteric/spiritual themes of *Wise Up Kid*.

6.2. Ashcan



Figure 6.7. *Ashcan promotional image 2014*

Ashcan Comics is a comic book short story anthology compilation that serves as a platform for Brisbane-based independent comic creators. This is an accessible alternative to comic creators for whom professional mainstream publication is not yet attainable, matching writers with artists, preparing documents for print, hosting educational workshops, and facilitating comic-centric events such as launch parties for Ashcan publications. Its first issue was published independently in September 2010 and since then it has released nine issues and a separate spin-off issue under the Ashcan imprint.

Over the past four years and ten issues, Ashcan has introduced and showcased the work of more than one hundred amateur and semi-established comic creators, artists and writers. Within these numbers, creators have gone on to having their work published on a national scale. One example is Benjamin Constantine, whose work was featured as part of a national advertising campaign. Selecting the best work of the underground scene allows Ashcan to give a kick-start to creators, showcasing their work to a wide variety of other avenues of publication and exposure. Ashcan fills an identified gap in community publications, enabling writers and artists to practice their craft, network with other like-minded individuals, get inspired by seeing their work in print, and perhaps move into more legitimate spheres of publication. It frees them to be creative and removes any potential blockades related to business matters, printing costs and distribution concerns.

In September 2014, I was contacted with the possibility of taking over the editor/organiser duties on Ashcan. If I didn't take over, the imprint would be discontinued. I consulted with my

supervisor who suggested that if I curated a themed issue, it would count as research points towards my doctoral studies.

I was pitching a book without gratuitous violence, graphic sex, or explicitly depicted drug use. I hoped to produce an intelligent comic that, even if using these themes, did so in an oblique way that relied on metaphor, allusion, and symbology/iconography. I understood this was not an easy ask, which is why I assembled a team of experienced creators with a proven track record of quality output. I sent off a grant proposal to Arts Australia, applying for funding to pay the creators and to take Ashcan across the entire convention circuit of OZ, on the basis that it would be suitable for all ages.

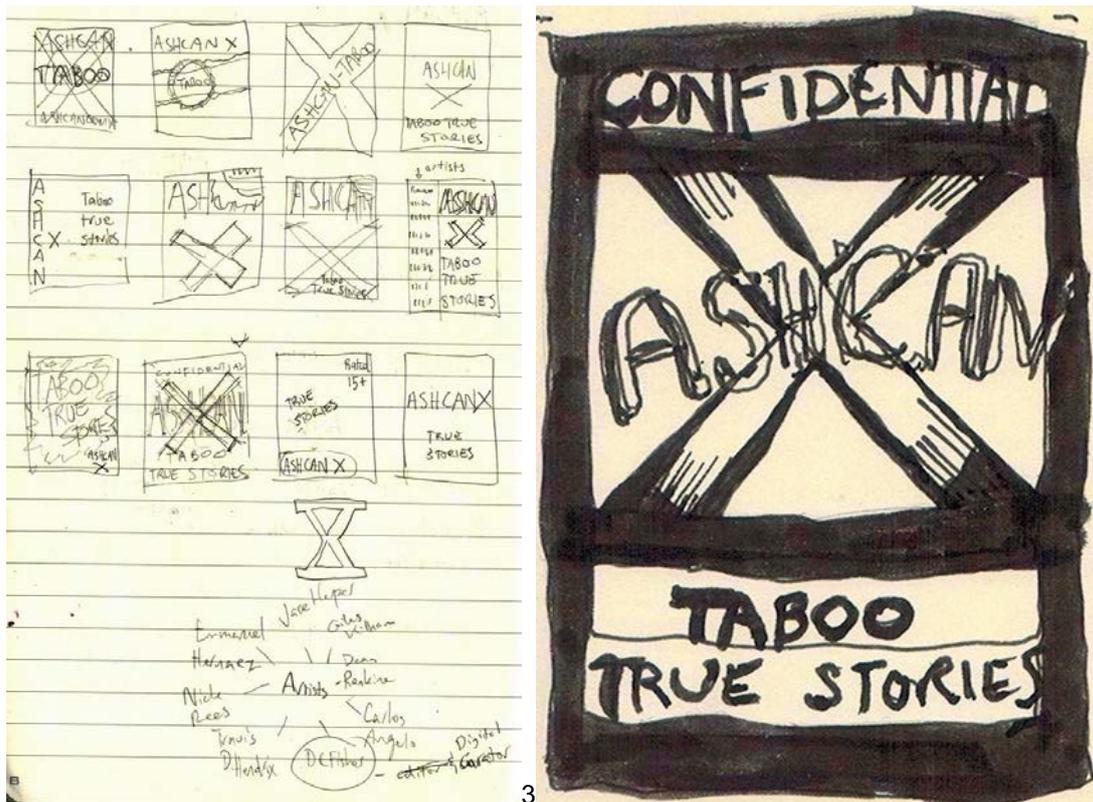


Figure 6.8. Ashcan issue 10 initial cover designs, 2014

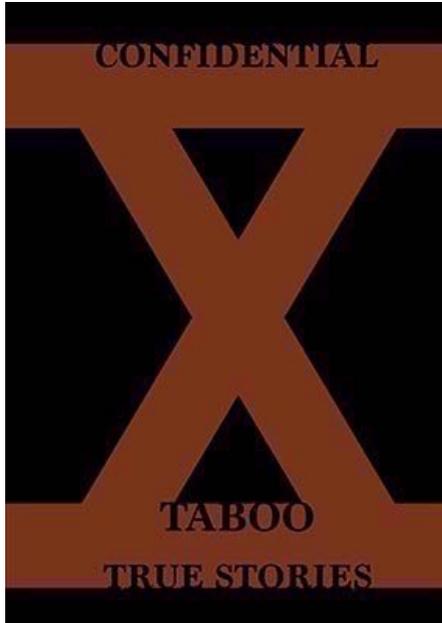
In October 2014, I sent out a reminder, hoping for some initial pages or proposals. By November, I had received a couple of scripts, and while they were interesting, unfortunately they were entirely fictionalised, in instances only loosely based on real world events taken from Wikipedia. I stressed again the importance of the theme, particularly the *true* part, in the context of autobiography.

Some examples of feedback:

What would be an acceptable level of taboo? PG15 seems like we could only get in "socially acceptable naughty" and not really "taboo".

...What's taboo these days AND ok for teens to read - I have some rippers but I don't think they'd meet the age restriction.
If there WAS something in my life that was taboo (I cant think of what that could be even if there was) I wouldn't want to do a comic about it! I say re-evaluate!

The theme seemed to present a *real problem* for many of the creators, as they were quite vocal in their reluctance to create a taboo story based on their own life. A couple dropped out.



I relented, and relaxed the theme to True Stories, reluctantly removing the Taboo aspect.

By March 2015, I had received the first pages from a few of the contributors, and they were looking good. To cover the dropouts, I had contacted a few extra people, some of whom were able to come on board. I was past my projected launch date but things were progressing. By May, I had received 32 pages of completed work and realised that, as the tenth issue of Ashcan, a comic that traditionally had around 50 pages, this would be a little thin. So, I put out a call-out to the main Facebook page, and contacted a few more potential contributors. The task of getting free work out of talented people was harder than I had anticipated.

Figure 6.9. Ashcan issue 10 cover design, 2015



With my doctorate culminating, a busy teaching load and three overseas trips, 2015 turned out to be a busy year for me. Unsurprisingly, then, Ashcan became a lesser priority for me. I had contacted a number of people about contributing, with little success. I had an InDesign document with the pages I'd received, but most people hadn't sent me their bio information, and I still needed to fill more pages. The cover was slowly coming along, and as I was responsible for all the editing, organising and compilation duties, including design and layout, but everything was moving slowly.

Figure 6.10. Ashcan issue 10 cover design, 2015

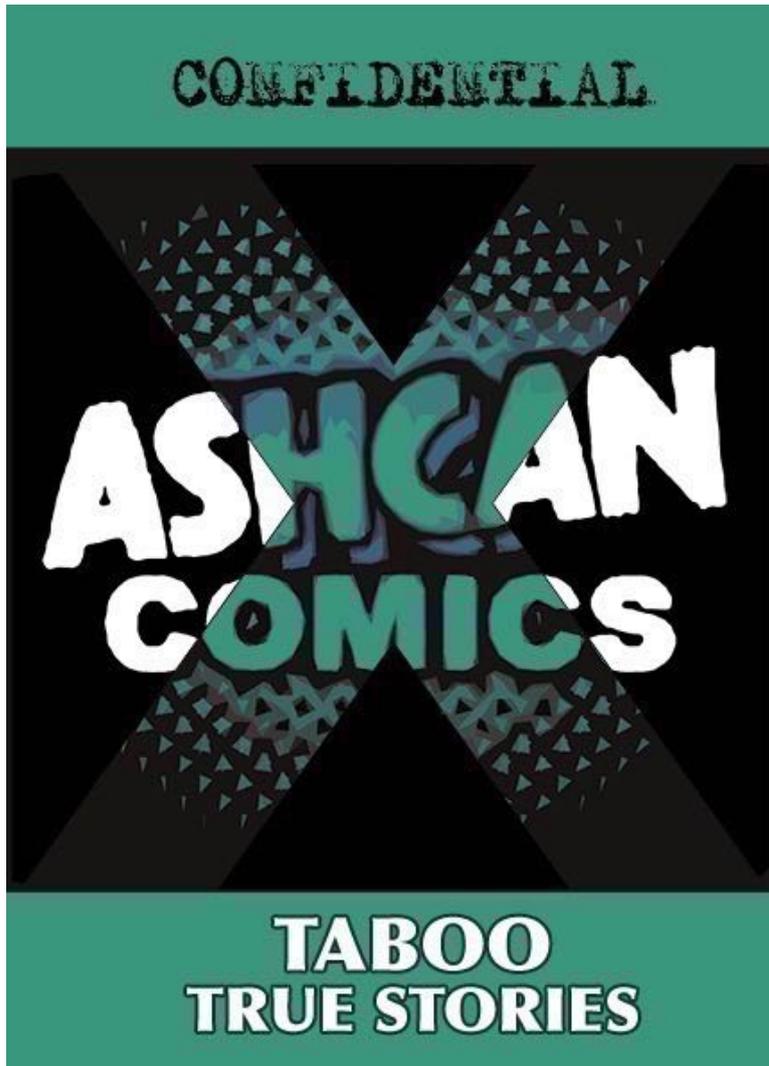


Figure 6.11. Ashcan issue 10 cover design, 2016

By January 2016, I had finally managed to assemble all the information I needed and was saved by a couple of last-minute submissions that pushed Ashcan up to over 50 pages. I sent the completed file to Baden Kirgan at Jeffries Printing, who sent back a proof, which made clear an inconsistency of the quality of blacks across different stories. I had to then solve one of the conundrums of printing, which is, *what is black?* Apparently, it is not just 100% black, rather also an addition of an exact quantity of Cyan and Magenta, which also meant all the pages had to be formatted to CMYK, not grayscale as I'd previously thought. This also caused problems with the adjustment layers in my own pages, among other things. With some consultation with designers and the printer, a lot of time spent on forums dedicated to these sorts of problems, and another proof kindly provided by Jeffries Printing, we were looking on track. The choice was made to print in full colour, even though most of the pages are in black-and-white and grayscale, as printing in colour gives a rich black that black-and-white printing can't match.



Figure 6.12. Ashcan issue 10 final cover design, 2016

Finally, after a year and a half, Ashcan X was completed. A launch party and retrospective exhibition in conjunction with the Brisbane Writers Festival has taken place and the comic is now available in a select number of stores and an online store. I learned quite a bit about InDesign and how to organise people effective skills in the development of my career as a visual artist and as a leading member of the comic community.

6.3. The 24 Hour Comic Challenge

The 24-hour comic challenge has existed in various forms since Scott McCloud and Steve Bissette first conceived it of in 1990 as a dare to complete a 24-page comic in 24 hours. After taking part in a challenge in 2013 that was hosted by Pulp Faction, an aggregating and organising body that also distributed prizes, I produced *Night Drive*. The following year, I was prepared to create another one; however, Pulp Faction had ceased operations. I then decided to host the challenge myself in a way similar to what Pulp Faction used to, creating a place for people to share their entries, comment, like and get excited about making comics. I took advantage of an existing platform in Facebook and began organising sponsors and promoting the event as a non-profit venture with the aim of getting people drawing, sharing their images and working under a deadline. The event was a success and I have now organised it three years in a row, with established sponsors who contribute prizes every year.



Figure 6.13. Darren Fisher *The 5 Stages of the 24 Hour Comic* 2014

Appendix 7: Work Review with Frank Quitely

Excerpt of transcript of pages review in August 2014 with comic artist Frank Quitely in his Glasgow studio. Included here are the pages we were looking at, and the changes that Quitely suggested.

1994 PAGE 9



Frank: I probably say this all the time, but this kind of feels like it's going from right to left. Maybe partly because its tipping that way, maybe partly because it looks like that's the back of the chair, the bit his back would be leaning on, so it kind of suggests its going that way. As a general rule I always tend to make everything go left to right, unless there's a reason. Like here, where Grant says so and they've got to go right to left. [Frank shows the original art of page 6 from *Pax Americana*.] But there are a number of different things I did to make that still work. You know, because that really goes against the grain with me. As it is, it's even the

dialogue in the script reflects the fact that they're moving backwards through a situation.

Darren: Do you have to know what text will go on and where the balloons will go?

Frank: I prefer to know, but it's common for me to be working on draft script with incomplete dialogue. As I have a rough idea, it helps.

Darren: A lot of stuff that I'm working on for the doctorate is autobiographical and obviously it's not in a mainstream style. I'll never be working on *Superman*; I'm focusing on mainly mundane kind of things.

Frank: But there's uniformity to it to the look of it, to the line you're using; to the way you're using greys that pulls it all together. I think if you started picking out one or two characters or details and using photo reference for them and leaving the rest of it plain, I think that would be problematic, but I actually think it works.

Darren: Do you use much photo reference yourself?

Frank: Only where I really have to; if I need a picture of the White House or a specific kind of car or something like that. So, I use photo reference, but even at that I'll get a picture of a Mustang or whatever and I'll draw it from a slightly different angle from the way it is in the photograph. Apart from the rare occasions where the photograph's exactly the angle I want.

Darren: I'm also interested in your use of perspective; it seems a lot of the time you're using one-point, and it's really clear, it works. I'm wondering what your thoughts are on that.

Frank: Again, sometimes you want a view of a room where you see a couple of walls and, for whatever reason, you pick a high angle or a low angle and you want diagonally one half of the room and it makes sense to use two- or three-point perspective. Very often, although it's a laborious process getting the pages to work the way I want them to, I find that, generally speaking, I'm always trying to simplify things. Very often, it's satisfying to use one-point perspective because usually then you've got a simpler composition, and as often as not, the focal point will be in the centre, or the focal point will be a character or a prop or whatever, which, again if it's the focal point, will very often be in the centre.

When you consider how quickly people read through a comic—spending, say, three or four seconds on a page—the idea of having things where they always flow from left to right, where the natural focus of any given frame where your eye is drawn to is also the focus of the story

in terms of plot or whatever at that moment in the story. It's tempting when you're spending hours and hours on each panel and you're drawing and working out a sequence to try and make us see as many different things on each panel as you can, but I find as you're drawing this stuff, it's better if you can keep simplifying, keep being as direct, subtly as direct as possible all the time.

1994 (PAGE 8)

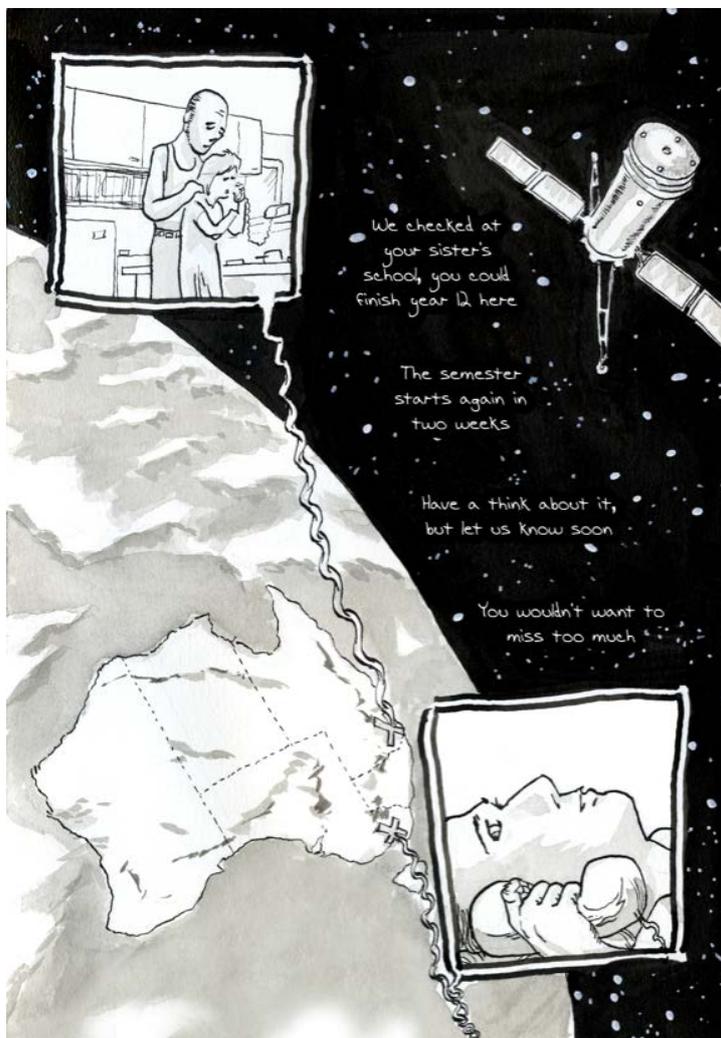


Darren: In this one, I wanted to show the feeling of disconnection and loneliness.

Frank: It's nice. I would have considered, maybe, starting to fade out the background, maybe very subtly there [pointing at panel three] and then considerably more here [panel four]. But, I think I would have probably gone against that. You know, considered that, and then decided just to leave the blank background to the last panel. Which is what you've done, and you might've done it intuitively. Presumably, he's been feeling slightly lonely and disconnected

since he took on board the fact that he was moving, and now he's talking to his friend about it, so he's already feeling this way and it makes sense that it's not until they actually start drifting physically apart... when he's physically being left on his own that that would kind of crystallise the feelings that he had anyway. So, I would have considered fading it out gradually and I would have ended up going with that. But, again, each of those panels individually, I would flip them, because even though you know he's moving, and the visual flow of the comic is going this direction, the fact is, if everything was flipped, it would always be moving in the direction the comic was flowing in, and then he would be standing still, on his own, in white space as his friend leaves him... so... [Laughs] it makes perfect sense that way it is. It's just for me, for that tiny extra subliminal satisfaction that I get from comics, where you don't even notice how they're working, I would do that.

1994 (PAGE 7)



Darren: In this one, I was trying to show a long-distance phone call.

Frank: That's really nice. Really effective. Kind of, you can use this as an example of what I was just talking about, about keeping it simple. That's a really nice, simple presentation, you know like, explaining the idea. In a way, it's kind of superfluous to what's actually going on, and what's being said, but it just ties it together really nicely.

BURNOUT (PAGE 6)



Darren: In the other pages, I was working on A5 and this one I worked at A3. This cuts between two different characters.

Frank: Yeah that's nice; I don't see anything obvious that I would change. Being really picky... You've got a very perfunctory kind of a stage setting [on panel three]. And given that, you know, it's a pretty cool thing, of someone taking off in this fashion, having a perspective maybe somewhere high off panel might help channel some of that. You know, to give you that

sensation of a rush of force. I mean if you imagine standing at street level and seeing someone shooting up the side of a building, or up between the buildings, it would be pretty spectacular, and it would be following the perspective of your eye as you look up. And similarly, it doesn't take a huge amount of time in a panel that small to put in the buildings in the background if you needed them. If you had enough detail in the buildings that were framing the ascent then the silhouette would work perfectly well, but whether you kept the silhouette or put in perspective detail in the buildings, the idea of just making them look that bit more realistic I think helps sell it. It's that way sometimes where you see superhero artists, for instance, drawing two superheroes slugging it out in the street, and they do a really nice job of the two guys fighting, and then the people on the sidewalk are like mannequins. Maybe a couple in the mid-ground are showing some kind of expression or reaction, but everyone in the background are just like mannequins. And the fact is, every single person in the street, like a Norman Rockwell painting, could be engaged in some way, or be still reading the paper and ignoring, or missing it completely. But that would help sell it. And similarly, the perspective for that corridor [panel 4] is super simple one point perspective, something that I use all the time, but it does have a first draft look about it. I mean, literally an extra five minutes' investment. Again, it's that way, people notice things more when they're not quite right. It's like you notice the dirty fish tank in a way that you don't really notice the clean fish tank.

Darren: So some architraves or extra detail?

Frank: No, not even, just the fact it looks like it's an infinitely long corridor, as if those points would meet just behind her head, but it also seems very close to us. I think at that angle the doors wouldn't be as wide as that. Also, what I find is that people tend to be very forgiving of art styles, in terms of the type of finish we use, the type of hatching, how good the anatomy is. But with some things, like perspective and anatomy to some extent, particularly if you're doing something that has a bit of an adult theme, not necessarily in terms of content but in terms of approach, if it's kind of a thoughtful read, sometimes spending that little bit longer on things like perspective and anatomy can help sell the idea, or the story as well. And similarly, that [panel eight] looks like you hadn't quite made up your mind about the perspective you were using. And again, you've got someone flying above a city, so if you block it in like this as a simple representation of a city, if you just make it... you don't need to go full Akira and do the whole city, but even just a close up of the top of a building that's got an advertising board or something and some cables or whatever, just that fact that it's real, you know? Rather than a backdrop.

Darren: Yep. Often with backgrounds and buildings, I think I'll just fudge it, I'm sure it'll be fine, and then at the end I think, I should've spent the time.

THE CIRCLE OF LOVE



Darren: I've made a short diary comic every day since last November, just as a daily practice. In this one I'm trying to get the reader to look around the page in a different way. I've seen some of the stuff David Mack does in *Kabuki* and it actually had me turning the page around and I thought, 'how can you get the reader to want to do that?'

Frank: It's really nice. I don't know if it's a conscious decision or not but it's good that you chose to work in a much heavier line than the previous page because when you start reducing it it's still working, even at a smaller scale. It's always interesting, as it always is with these kind of things where, when you're looking at it at its biggest, you're looking at the mark making, you're looking at the pictures itself, you're looking into it like a scene the way you would watch television or a movie, but you're also looking at it the way you like to look at a drawing—you're admiring the way it's been done, these folds here, and the suggestion of big inky strokes here, and a more definite pen mark here. But once you get down to this size (the middle ring), you start dividing your attention between the overall figure and the background

and the overall composition, and then by here (inner ring) you're really looking more at areas of light and dark. It's nice.

Darren: I don't know how many people are looking at it that closely [laughing].

Frank: Well, all other artists as far as I'm aware. I can't look at anyone's art, whether I like it or not, without actually imagining myself making these kind of marks. Sometimes when you're looking at other people's work you're thinking, 'oh I would have done that in a different way', or sometimes you think, 'oh yeah', just because you know what type of marks are being made or sometimes you can guess at what kind of pen or brush is being used. And you can see when, the whites have been left because of the negative space, rather than being added later. I mean, I can't help noticing that kind of stuff.

ES IST KALT



Darren: This one is another diary comic done in blue ink and wash in the beginning, and then a black ink pen afterwards.

Frank: It's nice, it's got a kind of Genie look. It's funny because you were saying earlier about not having the kind of style where you'd be drawing *Superman*, but it never ceases to amaze me how everybody's style kinda suits personal work, like diary style work or whatever. That's really nice.

DISAPPOINTING DIET



Darren: Here I was playing around with, you know, if something's in another language then you don't really understand it. It's kind of, in the background.

Frank: That's good, that's really good. This is great.

Darren: Yeah, I didn't quite capture the actual look of horror on her face [laughing].

Frank: No, but the thing is, the way that works for me is, she's half trying to keep on a mask, or put up a front, and she's half stunned, beyond her own control anyway. And then she regains it enough to give this nearly smile with a mouth, and nearly hiding it with the eyes. It

works really well, and this vegetarian alarm thing works really well. I like the fact that the style of the diary comics keeps changing.

LOOK INSIDE AND DIG DEEP



Darren: I'm quite mad on bike riding and also, colour's a new ground for me.

Frank: Is it mostly on-road?

Darren: Yeah, road bikes. Here I'm playing with colour. Your coloured stuff is so great... I don't know how you do it! I'm wondering, how do you tie a page together with colour?

Frank: This is really nice. Did you do this on paper or digitally?

Darren: So this is on paper and then the lettering and these little things [pointing to the captions] were digital. These are also on A5, pretty small.

Frank: If I'd done that for a diary comic, I'd be perfectly happy with it. If I was redoing it for a broader publication, and I was doing the colouring, I'd probably have the line work fading back, away from black, towards a neutral or warm grey, or towards a blue nearer the horizon.

The way I would normally go about something like that is, I'd start it in pencil the way I did the Sandman pages, and then I'd do the lifework for the darkest blacks and then the rest of the line work I'd either use coloured inks or pencil, you know, fading back into the background. And also in terms of, sometimes what you're drawing in the panel, dictates what the colours are going to be like anyway, you know if it's night time and people are sitting around a campfire, you know roughly the way it's gonna go. Just as an aside, if I've got a large image to colour, and let's just say for instance it's a crowd scene. The first time this came home to me was years ago, I did a piece for an art shop and it was a Geoff Darrow/Where's Wally-style crowd scene outside of the shop with loads of people. And when I went to colour it, I was colouring with liquid acrylics, or watercolours, or a combination, and I thought 'where do I start with this?' So I decided what I would do was I would deal with all the colours that I knew first, particularly with the neutrals, so I did all the skin on all the people, I did the grey tarmac of the road, I did all the blue denim, all the brown or black leather, all the white t-shirts or the white office shirts, and then if there were yellow lines in the road or a red pillar box, or the colours of the shop front, I put in all those colours where I wouldn't be allowed to change things. And then after that I was left with all the T-shirts and scarves and hats and cars and things so it was a question of actually finding a balance that I liked, because I knew I only had one shot at each thing.

Darren: And you look to balance it out?

Frank: Oh yeah, unless there's a reason not to. I mean, you take a photograph of a crowd scene or a busy street or something and you might find that you've got three red cars down here, and four people with red jackets. And it's not the way you would arrange a painting, or arrange a photo-shoot, if there was a choice. And obviously if you're colouring it yourself. Unless there's a reason to be doing that, say if there's a wee pocket of red gravity somewhere (laughs).

SUBURBAN SUNSETS



Darren: Here I'm playing around with copic markers, just trying to get more confidence with colour.

Frank: That's really nice. Just, you know, ignoring the art work and the aesthetics, and just dealing with it as a wee three-panel piece, this is actually really lovely, because this is something that's familiar to everybody. This [pointing to panel one] runs into this [panel two] but this is suggestive of being back indoors, because this looks like a human figure, rather than the hillside beyond the trees which is what I thought it was when I started reading it. But what you're talking about is the day moving into the evening, and the whole thing works in perfect sequence. The suburban sunsets, all the detail in this panel, everything that's not sky is a silhouette of suburbia where this is happening. Even the fact that suburban sunsets is set inside this black silhouette, rather than being in the sky, everything about that's actually really great.

FAULTLINES (PAGE 17)



Darren: These are a couple of older pages from a few years ago. I actually spent a bit more time on these ones.

Frank: It's got a wee hint of Will Eisner's stuff about it. This is all digital? It's working well using the solid blacks on the more prominent detail on the window, and more of a grey, or is just a thinner line? Or a slightly softer focus or something? Is that just a brush and that's a pencil or something?

Darren: It's just a lighter touch and a finer brush point.

Frank: It's really nice, even these frenetic white squiggles running up there, the side of the lamp post, the traffic light or whatever, it's just everything. Again, although it's quite different from some of the styles before, the fact that it's all the one thing is kinda nice and ties it together

Again, this is just an opinion rather than a piece of advice or anything, but what you were doing here with the brickwork being grey and the window and outline of the buildings being black, can work quite well here on the hand, where all the detail on the hand would be in grey, whereas the main folds and outline could be in black. But that's not necessarily an improvement, it's just something I would consider. Exactly what you've done here with the features of the face and the facial hair. Though, there is a wee bit of inconsistency here in that, even though you're working in a very loose style, something that I'm noticing here is that you've got a heavier line on top of the waiter's shoulder, and the upper side of the arms and so on, and generally speaking, I would have that the other way round. It's just because, for example, you draw a circle, you can imagine it's a flat circle or you can imagine it as a sphere. But you draw it with a brush and you press very lightly with the tip at the top and heavier underneath it's easier to see it as a sphere because it's got that wee bit of weight and shadow. And similarly, just to be aware of that even when you're just sketching or scribbling, it has an effect on the outcome of what you draw. It's like when you're drawing tiny people or something really, really small, sometimes it's easier to pull back slightly and feel your way down the calf and into the shape of the ankle, because you're trying to watch the tip of the pencil... sometimes you need to do that kind of half and half thing, between feeling it and drawing it.

FAULTLINES (PAGE 3)



Darren: This is from the same comic.

Frank: This last panel's actually really nice. You've got a wispy, fluid, kind of translucent style going on in the mark making in the sky and something that's scratchy and drier-looking in the grass. It's nice that there are several types of marks you're making in the foliage. Whether it's the shading or the texturing or actually the main drawing itself, it ties together very well. And it also sits very well within the page and the rest of it, which is indoors, and very stark and harsh, in keeping with the scene. And then you've got this leaving and going outside, which is

a really nice contrast.

Darren: I'm thinking that with some of my older stuff I'm jumping around too much with the camera.

Frank: Again, it's that way when you spend so long drawing it, it seems like it's really boring, so there is a tendency to draw comics where you're trying to find the most dynamic angle, or the feeling that's most sympathetic to the scene. And sometimes if you think, someone's coming into a room, someone's already sitting in the room, and this conversation goes not very well and one of them leaves, and it's not going to take people very long to read through it, so the idea of having somebody walking into a scene where you see the other person and the two of them start a conversation, and maybe your first panel's an establishing shot, the way it is, and then you're either zooming in slightly, to the action, or zooming out slightly, or whatever, but probably there's not a need to be moving the camera around as much as you are. It might be enough that you have the camera almost set, and you follow someone in, and you either slowly pull back, or slowly move in, or maybe at one point you choose a view from outside. Maybe you wait till the switch happens in the dialogue, or the penny drops, but, that's a common thing to keep making things interesting. Often, it's easier for the reader if they're able to read through it without having to go back to check.

Darren: When you're planning out a page are you thinking of it in terms of a movie, in a cinematic sense, or something completely different?

Frank: Both, because when I read the script I get a series of still and moving images in my head. The same way as when someone tells you a story of what they were doing last night, even if you're doing something else, you're making visuals of what it is they're saying. And when I'm reading a script, because a lot of it is descriptions of single images, it's a combination. When you read the descriptions of a still image you get various versions of that image, and some of them are moving around a bit... because you're imagining, 'well this guy's moving in, what if he was walking down the stairs, and what if he was walking up the stairs, and what if he was coming around the corner?' And so, you're imagining these things moving, but you're imagining them from the point of having to make them into a still composition, and you're imagining that still composition, especially in thumbnail stage, in terms of 'how does that lead to that? How does that relate to that?' So, I suppose I just feel my way through it.

APPENDIX 8: DIEGESIS AND MIMESIS

Communication within sequential art employs a plethora of fragmented elements working in cohesive tandem. How do these elements work together, in which instances are they best kept separate, and how can the author successfully engage with the reader by informed manipulation of these elements? As a means of offering proposals to these questions within a selected range of relevant works I have used a variety of methods. These methods include a formal analysis of visual techniques in terms of style, line, tonal quality and composition of scenes. A secondary method of analysis has been employed to examine the interrelation of narration and dialogue and use of sound effects, focusing on a survey of the frequency of panels per page, amount of dialogue (spoken words) per page, narrated words per page, and the frequency of sound effect elements used. By reducing these elements to numbers and plotting their use within graphs I hope to gain more clarification into the means of an author's engagement with the reader. Selected texts have been chosen for analysis based on a shared genre, their wide range of visual styles, and the differing approaches to storytelling. These texts are as follows.

Alec: The King Canute Crowd (Campbell 2009) details the author's lack of direction as a young man, and his identification with the 'waster' persona in the punk era of the mid-1970's. This text, although openly autobiographical, is told using an alter ego. This necessitates a different kind of storytelling and therefore, it stands to reason, engages a different kind of reading to strictly first-person narratives.

Blankets (Thompson 2003) deals in themes of first love and the feeling of isolation that comes of being a social outsider. This text makes use of various manipulations of the medium's architecture for to bridge the gap between author and reader, as well as selective use of diegetic storytelling.

Goodbye Chunky Rice (Thompson 2006) is a tale of interpersonal relationships told through metaphor. The reason for choosing this text and the former is the way in which Thompson makes use of altogether different modes of storytelling and style in order to present his narratives. The contrast between the storytelling and visual approaches of *Goodbye Chunky Rice* and *Blankets* demonstrates sequential arts elasticity, showing that an author can choose from a broad array of tools with which to compose their narratives.

I Never Liked You (Brown 2002) focuses on the author's difficulties as an adolescent in confessing his inner feelings, and his refusal to submit to socio-cultural norms of language and appearance. Chester Brown uses a confessional style of autobiography arguably pioneered by the likes of Joe Matt (1987) and Justin Green (1972). Brown attempts to convey all aspects of his life, regardless of subject matter or ideas of political correctness.

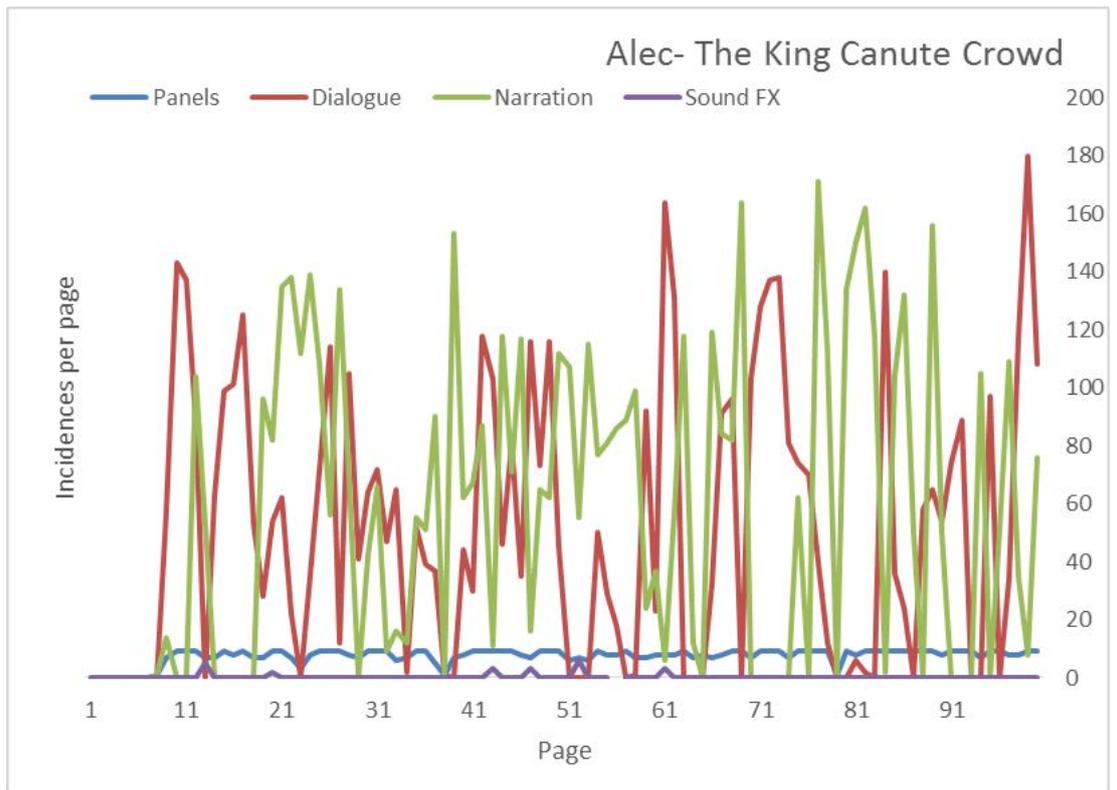
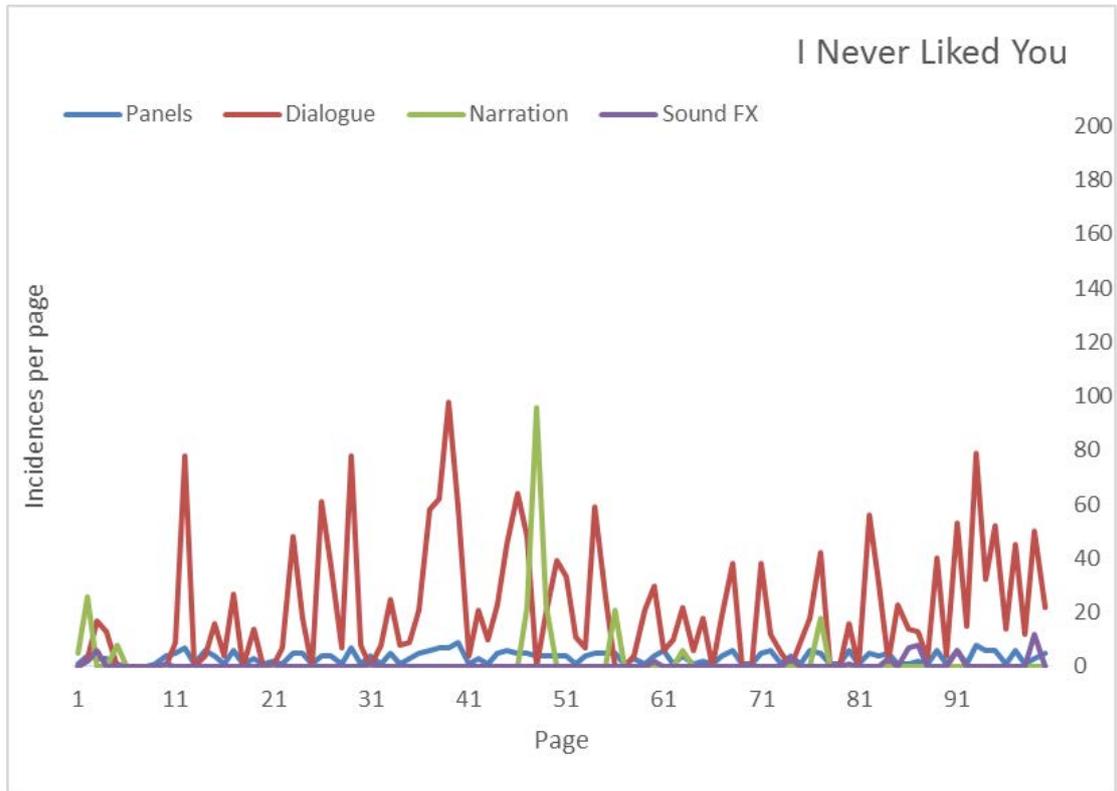
As a part of the analysis of these texts I have examined the elements within each that I estimated were crucial to deciphering modes of storytelling. These elements are the number per page of panels, dialogue (including thought bubbles), narration and sound. The reason for these choices are as follows.

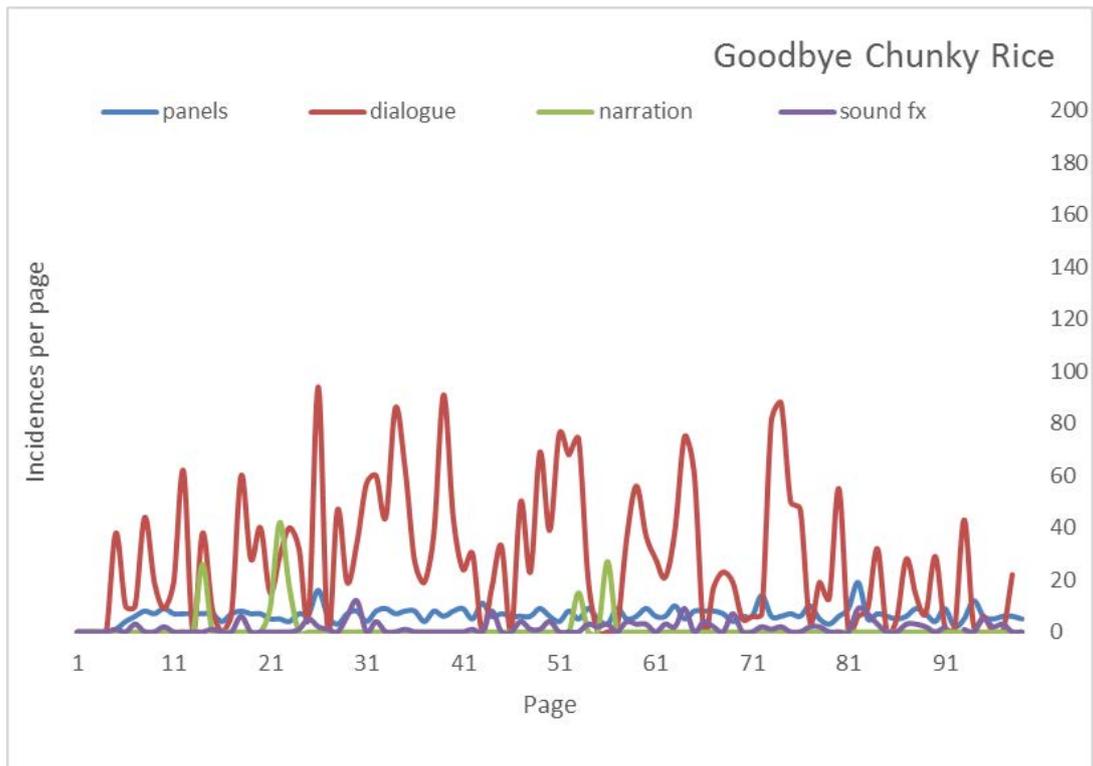
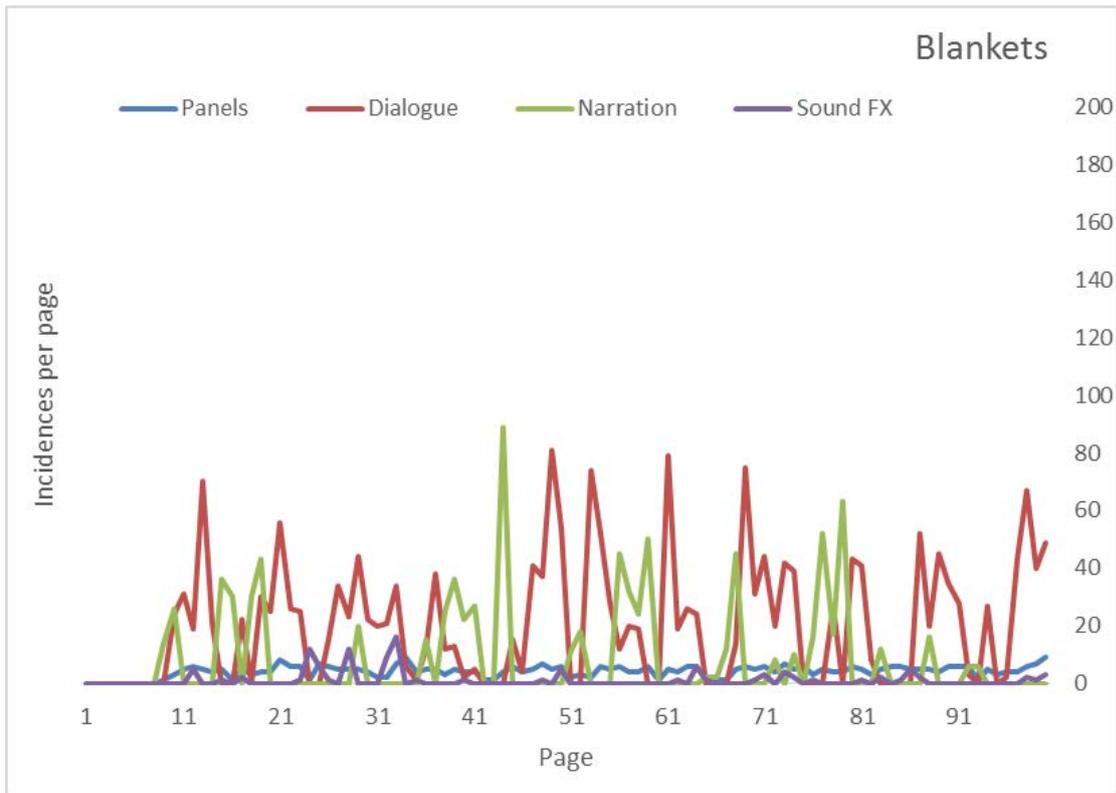
The number of panels per page serves as an indicator of panel size and frequency, therefore also of the authors pacing of the overall text. Single panel splash pages are used ordinarily to highlight a climax in action or to provide some kind of extra emphasis in the storytelling, be it through a full page establishing shot or full page close-up of a character's expression. By the same token, the use of many panels to a page is a common technique in slowing down the reading by providing extra information, as well as allowing for the assumption that a succession of panels will demark a progression in time. By looking at the number of panels over the span of a narrative it is therefore possible that the author's pacing and story structure may become clearer. The visual plotting of panel frequency on a graph should allow us to identify the author's rhythm and timing, by providing a clear image of the ebbs and flows of a story.

Amount of words as dialogue (including thought bubbles) per page were counted in order to provide a clue to the amount of information conveyed to the reader through dialogue, and to ascertain how the author manages flow of dialogue through a narrative. Do they maintain a steady flow of dialogue throughout, does the dialogue have similar peaks and valley to the panel frequency? Is there consideration for reading speed, with lesser dialogue given in the lead up to a climactic point in the narrative? By counting number of words (dialogue) per page I hope to answer these questions.

Amount of narrated words per page in conjunction with spoken words was selected to give an greater clue to the way in which these two different approaches to communication work in tandem.

Sound Effects per page: An indicator of stylistic choice in storytelling. My suspicion is that a more realistic text will not rely as heavily on sound effects, with a differentiation between the realism of pictorial style and the more cartoon modes of sequential art.





For the purposes of this study only the first 100 pages of each of these texts was used. Initial findings were as follows. *Alec: The King Canute Crowd* employs over than double the dialogue and more than six times the amount of narration as any other text. *Blankets* has a mid-range count of both. *I Never Liked You* has very low counts of dialogue, narration and panels. *Goodbye Chunky Rice* has the second highest amount of dialogue and sound effects, and the lowest amount of narration.

An overview of the graphs shows a relationship between the peaks and troughs of dialogue and narration. They seem to be most inversely opposed; sections with heavy narration have a reduced count of dialogue, and vice versa, although at times the dialogue and narration appear at the same time. What does this mean? Does the narration give additional layers of meaning to the dialogue? Does one support the other? Or are they two distinctly separate types of communication within storytelling?

The Ancient Greeks referred to two modes of storytelling, Mimesis (showing) and Diegesis (telling) (El Refaie 2012, 55). These two modes are closely related in their operation to dialogue (mimesis/showing) and narration (diegesis/telling) in sequential art. This discovery led me to concentrate on these two modes of storytelling more thoroughly.

DIEGESIS

In defining diegetic narration within sequential art, Mario Saraceni writes:

The caption at the top of the panel often represents the narrator's voice, a kind of commentary on the incident depicted in the panel. The words and pictures can either blend or collaborate. Bold fonts, larger fonts, handwriting (as opposed to the uniform mechanical typeface) constitute graphical uses of words. (Saraceni, 2003, p.212)

Saraceni refers here to the use of diegetic narration, suggesting that the very style of font and way it is integrated into the image has in itself a mimetic effect. It is important to note that there is not always a clear-cut distinction between the two modes of storytelling, and other examples of this will be highlighted within this paper.

As raised earlier, Mark Currie referred to a distancing effect that occurs when narration is used (2007). Eddie Campbell's *Alec: The King Canute Crowd* embraces the schism by creating distance between not only the narrator and protagonist but also between the protagonist and the reader. Campbell uses a number of ploys in order to do this, such as a large amount of long shots which create, literally and metaphorically, a sense of distance from the character. Campbell makes infrequent use of close-ups, a camera shot in cinema that is used to show emotion and build empathy. He places a static camera outside of the group so that we feel as if we observe their actions from a removed vantage point and do not interact

with them. Lastly, Campbell creates distance most obviously by naming his character Alec. This use of alter-ego affects the reading, and we do not necessarily read it as autobiography. In delineating boundaries that the autobiographical author assumes, we may define their key roles as follows. The real life I, or the author creating the text, assumes the role of the narrating I, or the narrator in commenting on events of their life as the experiencing I, or the protagonist. Different modes of diegetic narration may be used as seen in the examples below.

The omniscient author as narrator

Used primarily to bring events spanning distances of space and time into cohesion, this type of narration creates a distinct schism between author and narrator. Here we envisage the narrator as a wholly separate, disembodied entity.

The omniscient narrator commenting in the first person

This form of narration creates some sense of distance between protagonist and narrator, however the identification of the narrator assists in bridging some of the gap. For example, although the narrator is not identifying as the protagonist, we can assume that they may have known this person or have been closely related to the events narrated.

The narrator identifying as the protagonist in the first person

Here there is no schism, the narrator, author, protagonist are the same person. We read this kind of narration as coming directly from the protagonist, whether as their thoughts or as narrated by them from a future tense.

Craig Thompson tells his autobiographical story within *Goodbye Chunky Rice* through the use of heavily stylised characters. Each character can be read to represent a different portion of his psyche, or different aspects of his personality. Christopher Booker in his text *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* argues that “stories take shape in the human imagination round certain archetypal patterns and images which are the common property of mankind” (Booker 2004). Thompson chooses his representations carefully, with each of the characters embodying a certain archetype visually and through their actions. In enabling a reader’s sense of engagement with these common archetypal properties, Thompson makes use of narration infrequently. Where it exists within the text it is performed by the characters themselves in order to relate important events from their past.

A by-partisan, disembodied narrator is not used by Thompson, this enables a reading where we can imagine there is no separate author/storyteller. Without an all-knowing narrator casting their own inflections on events a sense of closeness to the characters is created, and by means of symbiosis, reader engagement with the narrative is supported. We are thus able to engage with the story in a similar way to how we are able to empathise with a friend relating a significant personal event. In order to minimise narration within *Goodbye Chunky Rice*, Thompson has made use of mimetic means in which to convey diegetic information. An example of this is given on page eighty as Thompson depicts one of the characters, Solomon, remembering an event from his childhood in the form of a sequential panel strip enclosed within a thought bubble. This mimetic act of showing as opposed to diegetically

narrating such an event is economical and forces the reader to decipher the sequence, forming their own conclusions as to Solomon's emotional response. This method of allowing the character to narrate their own story is a key element of fictional world-making and an important key to creating believable narratives within my own studio output.

MIMESIS

Mimetic storytelling refers to the act of showing a story and is the main method of communication in film, opera and drama (Refaie 2012:55). In mimesis the author is not overtly telling us the protagonist's motivations, or how they think or feel through narration. Mimesis refers to the communication of such ideas by means of characters interacting through dialogue and action. This form of storytelling is most challenging for the sequential autobiographical artist. As I have experienced in my own studio work, there is a temptation to narrate background stories, character motivations, emotions and sensations, simply because conveying such information through dialogue and image is challenging. However there are methods for doing so, and by analysis of these texts I was able to identify a number of techniques that convey such information mimetically, thereby strengthening the bond between author, protagonist, and reader.

As previously established, diegetic narration has a tendency to pull the reader out of the story, or at least create a sense of distance between the narrator, narrated and the reader. In Craig Thompson's *Blankets* the two modes are kept mostly separate- the only times they cross over are for deliberate storytelling purposes. Thompson gives consideration, both for these different modes of storytelling and for the reader's engagement with the text.

On page 29 of *Blankets* Thompson changes, mid-page, from mimetically depicting his teacher reprimanding him for a drawing he had made of people eating faeces, to narrating "If only god could forgive me for all the times I pictured people eating their own excrement". This panel depicts his bullies, his teacher and his babysitter eating faeces. Then within the same page he moves to another scene with his babysitter, adding an additional signifier of change of scene by altering the panel's style to a thicker, rougher line. This use of the narration pulls the reader out of the scene momentarily. As we are plugged back in by the dialogue we are aware by means of the narration that a change has occurred, without a need for Thompson to overtly narrate the jump in time and location.

This type of panel transition, named a scene-to-scene transitions by Scott McCloud in his seminal book *Understanding Comics*, is defined by McCloud as enabling the author to "transport us across significant distances of time and space" and requiring "deductive reasoning" to decipher (McCloud 1994). McCloud goes on to argue that the greater the reader deduction required, the greater their participation (1994:69). By techniques such as the one outlined, Thompson has found a way to use the distancing effect of narration to his advantage, enabling him to make the most of a reader's engagement with the text while avoiding confusion in jumping from scene to scene. As we can see from this example, the

medium of sequential art makes possible “the representation of multiple yet simultaneous time-scapes and competing yet coincident ways of knowing, seeing, and being.” (Chaney 2011)

On page 124 of *I Never Liked You* the author, Chester Brown, narrates through the protagonist. In a sequence of 9 panels the narrated I, Chester as a young man, talks to the reader directly, describing an overview of his relationships with the love interests in his life at the time. Brown uses a dialogue bubble broken up into dotted lines, the signifier within sequential art of a whispered voice, as if he were quietly confiding a secret message to us. This type of mimetic narration is not normally used within sequential art, and by the use of the whispered voice we are given the impression that Chester does not want to be found out to be ‘breaking the rules’. This is a secret between the protagonist and the reader, a clue to Chester’s character and a technique serving to bring us closer to him, in the way that confided secrets do.

On pages 124-126 of *Alec: The King Canute Crowd* the author, Eddie Campbell, speaks directly to the reader in the same fashion. He describes his work life and duties, his relationship with his boss and the books he reads, going into details about his understanding of these influential books and how they relate to his own life. This is just a small example of the intertextuality abounding within *Alec: The King Canute Crowd*, a text that draws its meaning from the knowledge of a variety of other texts. In page 127 another character from the text, Danny Grey, enters the scene and the protagonist falls back once more into the role of unknowing actor within his own life’s drama. This mimetic monologue acts to convey diegetic information whilst reducing the schism between narrator and narrated. The two facets of the author are able to become more truly the same identity in the eyes of the reader. These techniques are useful examples of methods that I can use within my studio practice to convey diegetic information mimetically. As one of the key aims of my studio work will be to establish rapport with the reader, any way in which I can reduce distance with them will be applied.

SOUND

Onomatopoeic text is used within sequential art narratives to convey the invisible world of sound, with the representation of sound made meaningful not only by the letters used to make up the words but also by their style, font, size and colour. For example if a character falls to the sound effect ‘thump’ in size 10 comic sans, we will read the action differently to the same visual with a half page, violently hand-rendered ‘CRASH!’ While sound effects are used heavily in *Goodbye Chunky Rice*, they may not suit all types of narrative, and the author must be careful not to use any elements that could potentially break a reader’s engagement unintentionally. By analysis of the texts within this study a tentative correlation may be drawn between subject matter and visual style, determining the potential validity of the use of sound effects.

Goodbye Chunky Rice is a suitable vehicle for these effects due to its animation style setting and anthropomorphic characters within a heavily fictionalised world. The absence of sound effects, it could then be argued, is important in maintaining a realistic reading, as evidenced in *I Never Liked You*, as well as *Alec: The King Canute Crowd*. In a text like *Blankets* that deals with realistic themes while using a stylised visual approach, the use of sound effects is moderate. The onus is on the author to perform a balancing act of all of the elements available without overwhelming the reader or disengaging their interest. Sound effects are rarely used in *I Never Liked You*. Any inclusions by the author can then be assumed to be of importance to the narrative.

On page 91 of *I Never Liked You* the sound of Chester's heart is shown in bold text, repeating the word 'THUMP' down the page as he talks to Sky, a girl he likes. This mimetic representation of the protagonist's internal sensations enables the reader to know his nervousness without conveying it diegetically through narration, or by straying from a faithful representation of events by using visual signifiers of sweat, shaking hands or a quivering voice bubble. It is important to note that an author is at liberty to make use of visual methods for conveying the world of the senses. This also aids in imparting the reader with clues as to the type of world and therefore identity the author is creating.

Imagery, symbol and icon can be used to represent the world of sound and synaesthesia as shown in *Blankets*. In pages 433 and 434 Thompson describes a scene where he watches his girlfriend sleeping. He narrates "I heard Raina's breathing, and beneath that her heart beating, and beyond that, the gentle murmur of spirits in the room". Thompson makes use of flowery symbols to show the passage of her breath, water ripples to represent the beating of her heart, and images of winged angels encircling the room to describe the atmosphere. This type of mimetic representation not only appeals to a reader's subconscious by visualising sound, it enforces the author's views on spirituality by use of universally recognisable iconography, thus potentially giving the narrative greater emotional impact.

DISCRETE MODES OF COMMUNICATION

As a visual medium, sequential art may also communicate by way of visual style, character posing, size of elements with panels, relationship of panels within the page and juxtaposition of words with the image, to name just a few. The possibilities are vast, and the way in which the different elements interact with one another multiplies those possibilities to a seemingly infinite range. This paper will by necessity be required to select a small number to focus on, and perhaps only touch briefly on others.

In *Goodbye Chunky Rice*, page 33, we are introduced to Charles. Charles stands in an overtly masculine pose, eyebrow cocked, unwelcoming. The reader, by interpreting this pose, already creates their own conclusions on Charles' character from this initial panel. The author of sequential art narratives is required to be a master actor as well as storyteller, writer and artist. Posing tells a great deal about character motivation, alignment and mood. In applying

this to my studio work I have been attending lifedrawing classes more frequently as well as making a habit of drawing people in public, observing body language and social interaction. If the aim is to provide a “shared understanding” (Smith and Watson 2001, 16) then creating a believable world with believable characters is paramount.

Craig Thompson uses a juxtaposition of different sized elements in neighbouring panels to convey information. On page 34 Thompson depicts Chunky looking small, and leaning subtly away from Charles to such an extent that he breaks the panel border. This breaking of the border is done only as required for effects such as this. Charles, in the next panel, is taking up the majority of its space. By exaggeration of size it seems that Charles could easily eat Chunky in one mouthful. The expressions of both are also important. Chunky seems apprehensive, fingers touching and arms slightly crossed in a defensive pose, Charles looking vacant eyes and pleased, as if about to dine on a tasty meal. From these subtle manipulations of size and pose the reader already has an indication of the opposing types of characters here, that of predator and prey.

Goodbye Chunky Rice conveys discrete information to the reader in a number of imaginative ways. On page 47 Thompson depicts Dandel sitting with her back to us, looking at the ocean. The panel is split in the middle, in the divided half we as the reader can see the rubbish accumulated in the rocks and metonymic hints of the industrial landscape. We can assume that Dandel does not see these things, instead only observing the untouched ocean. We may read that Dandel has a romantic view of the world, she is the hopeless romantic looking inward. By way of this simple panel division the reader is given greater insight into the character, a subtle mimetic device that is only available to the medium of sequential art.

DIEGESIS AND MIMESIS- CONCLUSION

With the variety of communicative elements available in sequential art, and the elasticity of their interplay, it seems the ways in which an author can tell their story are limitless. By bearing in mind certain simple guidelines as outlined within this paper, such as the distinction between mimetic and diegetic modes of storytelling, the chances of telling an engaging story may be enhanced. This study has shown that the mimetic act of showing as opposed to diegetically narrating events forces the reader to decipher the text and form their own conclusions. As I have experienced in my own studio work, there is a temptation to narrate background stories, character motivations, emotions and sensations, simply because conveying such information through dialogue and image is challenging. However there are methods for doing so, and by analysis of these texts I was able to identify a number of techniques that convey such information mimetically, thereby strengthening the bond between author, protagonist, and reader. Further research will aid in highlighting other factors that contribute to reader engagement, and the ways in which authors of sequential art narratives may guide the reading of their texts.