Creating Modern Mythology

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MFA Illustration - Graphic Novel
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Autobiography

My earliest memories in life go back to when I was four years old. I was in the hospital for eye surgery. I would draw pictures influenced by Saturday morning cartoons to pass the time. This was in 1978, a period predating cable T.V., hand-held video games, and iPods. There was literally nothing else to do in the hospital—unless I wanted to watch soap operas. Thankfully I decided to draw instead. I believe that is what started my love affair with the arts. I stuck with drawing, even if it led to my arrested development. The things I loved to draw then are the same as the things I like to draw now.

Super Friends and its successors were produced by William Hanna and Joseph Barbara from 1973 to 1980. They aired on the ABC network from 1973 to 1980 and ran as re-runs until 1982

When I went to undergraduate school (Southern Utah University) I didn’t originally go to be an artist. I wanted to be a lawyer, or business major, or something boring like that. Fortunately, I took an elective drawing class. My instructor saw my raw drawing ability and said, “You are not going to be a lawyer.” In 1999 I graduated with a Bachelor’s in Art: Illustration Composite.
My senior year at SUU I took a tour of the Academy while on a road trip to interview for an internship at ILM. When I saw the student work at the Academy I was blown away. It was better than the students at Art Center. The Academy had a lab of SGI machines running Maya and teachers that worked at Pixar. I was sold! I enrolled full time as a graduate student at the Academy in 1999 (back then it was still the Academy of Art College). I had completed my first semester at the Academy and was well into my second when I became violently ill. This illness eventually led to my dropping out of the Academy. After corrective surgery I had to get a job to pay off my medical expenses.

Thus my illustrious career in video games began. I accepted a job at a software development company called Saffire, in St. George Utah. I was doing concept work, 2d texture design, and 3d environmental design. After being there for two years I had advanced to art lead. Shortly after that, Saffire ran into financial problems and I was forced to find employment elsewhere.

My next job landed me at Origin Studios based out of Murry Utah. Origin was not involved in game development but rather video game marketing. After freelancing with them for a while I was asked to join them full-time. I worked there for five years and I loved every moment of it. Origin was crucial for the development of my digital illustration skills and 3d modeling capabilities.

As awesome as it was working for Origin Studios, comics were still what I wanted to do more than anything else. I teamed up with creators Ed Dukeshire and Mike Imboden to work on a story called *Fists of Justice* for Digital Webbing Presents. The story was published in Digital Webbing Presents #28 and it had a massive printing of 500 books. It was incredible the amount of attention my minuscule run on *Fists of Justice* created. Soon I was receiving offers from bigger publishers. It wasn't long afterwards that I began talking with my wife about quitting my job at Origin Studios to begin freelancing in comics full-time. She said “GO FOR IT!” So we did.

For the past 7 years I’ve been running Hardin Art Studios where I work full-time as a freelance illustrator, mostly working as a comic book artist but also continuing as a consultant for video games, toy design and novel covers. I’ve worked for clients such as: Marvel Comics, DC Comics, Dark Horse Comics, Struck, Sony, and Time Magazine.
Timeline

Courses Completed:

Summer 1999-
Figure and Expression, Story Telling

Spring 2007-
Color Theory, Chiaroscuro

Summer 2007-
Clothed Figure Drawing

Spring 2008-
Digital Painting

Summer 2008-
Graphic Novel I

Fall 2008-
Graphic Novel 2

Spring 2009-
The Renaissance Art World and Its Classical Origins,
Drawing From Imagination

Fall 2009-
Crossing Boarders: Art and Culture

Summer 2011-
Head Drawing

Summer 2012-
Group Directed Study Graphic Novel
Group Directed Study Concept Art

Fall 2012-
Watercolor
Group Directed Study Graphic Novel

Spring 2013-
Group Directed Study Graphic Novel
Group Directed Study Watercolor
Summer 2013-
  Group Directed Study Watercolor
  Professional Practices for Illustrators

Fall 2013-
  Creative Writing
Thesis Summary

I am an Illustration Major with an emphasis in Graphic Novel. My Thesis consists of 16 sequential art pages and three covers. Half of my illustrations were completed on 11” X 17” bristol board, finished in pen and ink. Very much the same way comics have been produced for the last 75 years (with all the advantages of that process). The other half of my illustrations were completed digitally. One of the goals of my thesis was to incorporate photo reference (gathered and shot myself). I have taken that process further and learned to build custom reference using computer modeling software, not only for backgrounds but for vehicles and characters. Throughout the course of my thesis I have learned how to streamline my process by incorporating drawing from imagination, the use of photo reference and the use of 3d models. I took advantage of more contemporary tools specifically, the computer and programs such as Photoshop, Daz3d, and Silo in order to create this process; I used it in the creation of the first half of my sequential pages (which was according to plan). However, as I progressed though my final project the advantages of going all digital soon became more evident, especially when creating the sequential pages. As purposed my final project consists of 15 pages, broken into three different vignettes consisting of four sequential pages and one cover illustration. I also added four pages of sequential art from DC Comic’s book Harley Quinn #1. A job I got as a result of showing the progress of my thesis to editors at DC Comics. Harley Quinn has pre-sold over 90,000 issues which will make it one of the top selling DC New 52 books for Dec. 2013. The genre of each episode is one of the sub-genre of mythology: fantasy, science fiction, and superhero. I added the pages of Harley Quinn to show the direct result from work-in-progress of my thesis project.

Thesis Project

My finished Project consists of sixteen sequential pages. Eight of which were completed in ink on Strathmore 500 Series Bristol Board. Eight of which were completed digitally. Three covers each with line work completed in traditional mediums (copic markers and watercolor) and colored digitally. The project has three vignettes consisting of four sequential pages and an accompanying cover. Each vignette is a sub-genre of the theme mythology (namely: Fantasy, Science Fiction [Sci-fi to be specific] and contemporary mythology [superhero]). With an additional four pages of sequential art from Harley Quinn. The fantasy pages of my thesis are an excerpt of Dragon Age: Those Who Speak #2 written by David Gaider. Published by Dark Horse Comics in 2012. The science fiction pages of my thesis are a pitch to Dark Horse Comics for Star Wars: Jaxxon. Written by Bryan Young. They are as of today unpublished. The pages of my superhero story are excerpts from Justice League 7.3 : Shadow Thief #1. Written by Tom DeFalco. Published by DC Comics as a part of thier event Villain's Month (2013). Harley Quinn #1 was written by James Palmiotti and Amanda Conner and is a part of the New 52 for DC Comics set to be published in December (2013).

All preliminary work for my thesis was completed in Photoshop. The layouts and pencils were drawn digitally on a Wacom 21UX Cintiq, using photo reference and 3d software to add a level of realism to each page. The finished digital pencils for all covers, Dragon Age and Star Wars were
printed out in non-photo blue on bristol board using a Brother Professional Series Multifunction Center. These pages were inked using traditional techniques. The pages for Justice League and Harley Quinn were done 100% digitally. The cover illustrations were colored digitally. The goal originally was to hybridize my process using advantages of working both traditionally and digitally. Working digitally allowed for more flexibility at the conceptual phase while the use of 3d environments greatly sped up the production of the pages. I turned to an all digital process in order to hit deadlines without a loss in quality for Shadow Thief and Harley Quinn. Originally I had planned to finish all the sequential pages traditionally but being able to be flexible allowed me to take on jobs that would otherwise be impossible. I needed the same speed in inking that was afforded to me in the preliminary stage. Namely the ability to make custom brushes, effects and to make custom scripts for such actions as spotting blacks. While I will not have original artwork for these pages to sell as working on books with a higher print runs means I can demand higher page rates and larger percentage of royalties.

These are photos taken for reference for Dragon Age those who speak. The results were fantastic, but the process was slow and expensive. Something I found unsustainable for a monthly 22 page schedule. You can see the results of the reference below in my Dragon Age: Those Who Speak (fantasy pages).
My artistic responsibilities for my thesis included: layout design, gathering and shooting photo reference, creating 3d reference, construction of 3d environments, digitally penciling the artwork, transferring the digital artwork to bristol board, finishing the artwork in ink or on the computer, and in the case of the cover illustrations, coloring them digitally.

The idea for my thesis project came about as an answer to some of the problems I am facing in my career. I found myself needing to reinvent my style. As I said in my proposal, comic books today are not just kid fare. The consumer is artistically savvy and increasingly hard to please. My artwork is usually created without the use of photo reference, so it is often viewed as, “too cartoony”. I needed to create a style that incorporated realism. Several of the best artist in comics use photography to help their work stand out. Working on my thesis I not only learned to include photo reference to help me draw realistically, but also turn to digital models that can be rendered on a whim, and better than real models they can be posed in almost impossible situations for indefinite periods. A big problem with using photo reference is becoming dependent on it and the amount of time it takes to gather and shoot. I needed to find a way to incorporate reference but not slow down my production time. In my first four pages of Dragon Age I shot reference for every panel of my thesis project. I had great results and the pages came out fantastic. However, I found the process unsustainable on a regular basis. The time it took to find models, schedule the shoot, and take the pictures would not be doable on a day to day basis. Not to mention the added cost of paying models. I came up with a creative solutions to cut costs on models, mostly hiring my kids and their neighborhood friends. That came with its own set of problems not to mention the ethics of forcing your kids to model for cents on the dollar. Once again I needed to find a better more reliable solution; one that was sustainable while being more affordable.

I ran into more problems depending on photo reference working on my Star...
Wars: Jaxxon pages. Unlike Dragon Age the characters in Star Wars were not human. The protagonist was a giant gun slinging rabbit. The villain was a Darth Vader-like cyborg. I tried using things like toys as reference but the level of detail was so poor it wasn’t a lot of help. I started looking for alternatives. I had been using the computer to build custom backgrounds so the thought occurred to look into using the computer to model for people as well. I found two programs specifically designed for this purpose: Poser and Daz3d. While finding these programs came too late to help me with my Star Wars pages I did put them to good use with my final four sequential pages on JLA #7.3 Shadow Thief. By the time it came to my last four sequential pages I had worked out a lot of the process of when to use photo reference, when to use a computer model, and when to rely on drawing from imagination.

Overall I was successful in reinventing my style. My pages on Shadow Thief were so well liked at DC Comics, I was given the assignment to be the artist on Harley Quinn. I continued using the style I developed under my thesis for the first two issues. In order to hit my monthly deadline I had to abandon inking traditionally, however the increased page rate for working on a bigger book and the royalties for the sales on issue will help to recover some of the losses for not having traditional pages to sell. Being able to secure the position of a top selling book at DC Comics is validation to me that my thesis was a success.

That is not to say that I didn’t make some epic mistakes along the way. After taking my watercoloring studio course I tried using watercolors to color some of my covers instead of going through with my original plans to color them digitally. This proved to be too much of a challenge. I think I will need much more practice to be able to control watercolors to the point where I can have the same result I could have digitally. I will need much more practice with the medium before I am proficient. This resulted in a lot of time spent redoing my covers.

Another mistake I made was being dependent on other people for writing. Postponing my creative writing class until the end of my semester proved to be disastrous when some of the writers I asked to provide scripts for my project flaked on me. I found myself scrambling for a scripts and being at the mercy of others to provide the writing for my project. When I was able to convince DC to let me use their scripts for my thesis. I thought they had come to my rescue but they ended up sending me scripts that were for a fantasy comic, when I needed a script for a superhero book. This
resulted in doing three issues of *Demon Knights* before I was able to get the script for *Shadow Thief* #1. While I’m confident I could have pulled something out if I had to, I’m sure it would not have been the quality I’m used to having when working on a script done by a professional.

If I had to redo my project I would seriously consider writing and drawing my own book and being in complete creative control. At the same time though it is nice to have the validation from publishers like Dark Horse and DC Comics, their editors, and the fans of their properties. I think that I will make this a goal for my future. To publish my own books using a style and technique that I want to use and not one that I have to use because I am a slave to a deadline or a process used because it is the fastest or cheapest way to get it done. The good thing is that with the skills I have developed though my studies at the academy, when it comes time to do my own book fans will be familiar with my work and hopefully follow me from some of my work on top tier DC books to the work I self publish. Considering the sales for the first two issues of Harley Quinn that will be a very good thing.
Dragon Age: Those Who Speak
Issue #2, Page 3
Created 7/7/12
Pen, Ink and Gouache on Bristol
Page #1 Fantasy Genre.

Dragon Age: Those Who Speak
Issue #2, Page 4
Created 7/8/12
Pen, Ink and Gouache on Bristol
Page #2 Fantasy Genre.
Dragon Age: Those Who Speak
Issue #2, Pages 6-7
Created 7/22-26/12
Pen, Ink and Gouache on Bristol
Pages #4-5 Fantasy Genre.
Dragon Age: Those Who Speak Issue #2, Cover (unpublished)
Created 9/26/12 (?) Pen, Ink and Gouache on Bristol Colored Digitally Fantasy Genre Cover Illustration.

Star Wars: Jaxxon Pitch (Unpublished) page #1
Created Fall 2012 Pen, Ink and Gouache on Bristol Page #1 Science Fiction Genre.
Star Wars: Jaxxon
Pitch (Unpublished) page #2
Created Fall 2012
Pen, Ink and Gouache on Bristol
Page #2 Science Fiction Genre.

Star Wars: Jaxxon
Pitch (Unpublished) page #3
Created Fall 2012
Pen, Ink and Gouache on Bristol
Page #3 Science Fiction Genre.
Star Wars: Jaxxon
Pitch (Unpublished) page #4
Created Fall 2012
Pen, Ink and Gouache on Bristol
Page #4 Science Fiction Genre.
Star Wars: Jaxxon
Pitch (Unpublished) Cover
Created Fall 2012-Fall 2013
Digital
Cover Science Fiction Genre.

Justice League America 7.3:
Shadow Thief #1
Created Summer 2013
Digital
Cover Superhero Genre (Censored)
Justice League America 7.3:
Shadow Thief #1
Pages #2-3
Created Summer 2013
Digital
Pages #1-2 Superhero Genre