

CHARACTERS AND CREATORS FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN COMICS

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ABSTRACT

In an industry characterised by predominantly male creators and readers, the portrayal of female characters within comics and graphic novels raises important questions of representation, sexism, and the wide-ranging impact of stereotypes in media. This thesis provides an overview of the history of women in the comics and graphic novel industry, alongside a review of a selection of female protagonists. In addition to the research component, these findings will inform the design of a female protagonist for a graphic novel, in a narrative that explores and navigates the pervasive stereotypes associated with female comic book characters.

FOREWORD

Although I was an avid reader growing up, I was never interested in comics and graphic novels. It’s not that the art didn’t appeal to me or that the books weren’t easily available, but that I was given the impression that comics were not for women to read. This was partly influenced by the fact that I simply could not relate to (or was even repelled by) the depictions of women that I saw in most graphic novels – uncomfortably hyper-sexualised damsels in distress who I neither aspired to be like or wanted to be friends with. Much later, I met female comics fans who steered me in the direction of titles and creators that they personally enjoyed, and I finally managed to immerse myself in the wild and wonderful world of comics. However, it was quite common for me to be recommended a title with the caveat that I would have to overlook the way the women were written.


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INTRODUCTION

1.1 THESIS OVERVIEW

Comics and graphic novels are a popular and effective communicative medium, storytelling device, and art form. The field of comic studies has grown exponentially in recent years, garnering more academic attention and recognition due to a change in perception and status (Hatfield & Beaty, 2020). Comic studies intersect with many academic disciplines, despite not being regarded as a conventional area of research – indeed, comics have attracted criticism in the past for being supposedly damaging to literacy (Danziger-Russell, 2012).

For a long time, comics have also been incorrectly generalised as a masculine field of study (Gibson, 2020). However, as a form of art and literature, comics have the potential to enable women to connect with strong, complex, and diverse female characters (Danziger-Russell, 2012).

This thesis presents an overview of the American comics industry and the events and attitudes that have affected the industry's representation of women. It explores the main factors that led to the male domination of the industry and its male-centric readership. These factors include the role of female creators (in both the mainstream and underground comic scenes), the lack of documentation of female creators, and the ways women

are depicted in comics – factors which established many of the stereotypes still prevalent today.

By researching specific examples of female protagonists and narratives across a selection of genres and time periods, the thesis will analyse character designers' intentions, thematic decisions, and wider creative choices. The findings from this research will be put into practice in a creative component by creating a female protagonist for an original graphic novel. The thesis will also detail the visual and written aspects of the comic-making process as well as including the iterations of character decisions made along the way. The first part of the graphic novel is included here as the first issue in an ongoing series. I chose to illustrate this specific section due to its importance in introducing the main character and the world she exists within. An overview of the full plot will also be included to detail the major events of the story.

COMICS HISTORY OVERVIEW

2.1 Mainstream comics industry

2.2 The underground scene

2.3 Women's anthologies

2.4 Female characters

2.1 MAINSTREAM COMICS INDUSTRY

This overview will mainly discuss the anglophone comics industry – the rise of the Japanese manga industry has a very different history and will be briefly discussed later in this thesis.

Although the comics industry is relatively new, beginning as recently as the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, the precise origin of comics is surrounded by much debate. Comics theorist Scott McCloud (2017) links the art form’s inception back to ancient Egyptian art. Saraceni (2003) writes that the use of sequential art was prevalent in many ancient cultures as a form of storytelling. The first recurring comic strip character, Ally Sloper, did not appear until 1867. Ally Sloper was created by Charles Ross and Émilie de Tessier under the pen-name Marie Duval, and the character gained his own magazine in 1884 (Danziger-Russell, 2012).

Mainstream American comics have gained a reputation for being a male-dominated industry with a predominantly male audience (Hickey, 2014). Sabin (1993) breaks down the issue into three main aspects: female representation in comics, women in the industry, and the female audience. The three aspects are interconnected, yet each has their own unique issues and cannot be easily documented without resorting to superficiality.

For both readers and creators, comics have been shifting towards gender equality in recent years, but decades of male prevalence continues to affect the industry – as demonstrated by the limited representation of women in the Eisner Awards Hall of Fame, which began in 1988. Out of 184 names, only 22 are women, with most of these (15) awarded between 2017-2021 (*Hall of Fame*, n.d.). The first woman to win an Eisner Award for Best Writer was Marjorie Liu for *Monstress* in 2018. Even then, she shared the award with Tom King’s *Batman*, in the first ever tied result for the category (Brunet & Davis, 2022).

However, to claim that comics were always a masculine area of interest would be an inaccurate generalisation influenced by recent historical events. There is much evidence to show that there were many female artists and writers in the early 1900s making headway in the industry. Robbins and Yronwode (1985) list a large number of these “founding mothers”, describing their careers and work in their all-female anthology *Women and the Comics*. With scores of positive female role models to be found in comic narratives, the medium was comparatively gender neutral (Robbins, 1996).

Early newspaper comic strips were drawn by both men and women (Robbins, 1996), including in New Zealand (Benbow, 2020). George Gallup’s 1930s surveys showed that female readership was higher than that of men, as well as that people were more likely to read a newspaper’s comic section than its front page, indicating the medium’s popularity (Gordon, 1998).

After the massive societal change of the First World War there was a notable influx of women in the media and the arts, an industry that was previously male dominated (Robbins and Yronwode, 1985). Empowered by newfound freedoms and progressive attitudes, women were taking advantage of creative job opportunities. Many entered the comics industry, inspired by well-known female cartoonist Nell Brinkley (Robbins and Yronwode, 1985).

This did not continue, however. A wave of male-centric work ensued that set the tone for the rest of the century (Sabin 1993), predominantly written by men, for men, and about men. Adventure comics in particular were known for being unwelcoming to female readers, and became infamous for their glorification of ‘manly’ traits such as stoicism, leadership, and aggressive resolve (Sabin, 1993). In the 1940s male readership increased due to military service, which created high demand for comics as a pastime activity (Gordon, 1998).

The establishment of the Comics Code Authority (CCA) in the 1950s led to a collapse in the American comics industry. The CCA was formed in the aftermath of psychologist Dr. Frederic Wertham’s publication *Seduction of the Innocent*, in which he claimed comics to be a primary cause of juvenile delinquency (Danziger-Russell, 2012). The growing fear that comics were having a profoundly negative effect on children provoked the adoption of a list of regulations that acted in a similar way to movie ratings. The code prohibited comics from depicting things such as extreme violence, vulgarity, nudity, and same sex relationships.

The subsequent fall in comic book sales led to massive job losses in all areas of the industry. David Hajdu’s *The Ten Cent Plague* (2009), a history of the 1950s comics scare, concludes with a 15-page list of artists who never returned to the industry, including a large number of women. It seems that the creators who were at greatest risk of losing their jobs at that time were women and people of colour. Trina Robbins noted that “Two major comic book publishers that survived the comics depression of the mid- to late 1950s were Marvel and DC, and both companies have, since the mid-1960s, been gearing themselves towards superheroes and the

young male market. Female-oriented comic books were slowly being phased out.” (Danziger-Russell, 2012).

From the 1960s to the 1980s, surveys showed that men made up the overwhelming majority of readers, with gender representation in comics heavily favouring men (Choy, 2017). Women were not a major target demographic for publishers. Choy (2017) states that a 1984 Marvel survey showed that men made up 94% of their readership. Robbins (2002) writes that the highest level of female readership was in indie comics.

By the 1990s, Robbins (1996) states that the industry was not only a ‘boys club’ but a ‘playboys club’. This was the era of hyper-sexualised comic heroines, justified by the notion that not only were women no longer the target audience, but they didn’t read comics at all. The scarcity of female comics artists and authors, on the other hand, is a more recent development (Robbins, 1996). Tim Hanley (2018) has reported that in the spring of 2018, female creators at DC Comics made up 16.4% of its workforce, with Marvel Comics even lower at 15.5%. Only 3% of Marvel’s pencillers and inkers were women, and Marvel had no female letterers at all.

Nearly thirty years ago, Sabin (1993) discussed the lack of change in the comics industry since 1986, and wrote that anyone who could break the status quo would potentially gain a lot with their success. The industry’s continuing

male-centric reputation deters and denies access to female artists, authors, and fans, contributing to a lack of comics by women, for women, or about women, a trend only recently beginning to be subverted. Today, women are more vocal about female roles in comics and the wider comics community (Choy, 2017). The internet has opened up a wave of opportunities for female creators to share their work and circumvent the usual means of entry to the industry. This thesis will later discuss the rising demand for greater representation and the success of a number of female-led titles.

2.2 THE UNDERGROUND SCENE

The underground comics scene was an alternative grassroots movement that existed separately from mainstream comics and was deeply connected to the counterculture of its era. Sabin (2020) writes that the underground comics boom roughly spanned from 1968 to 1975. One of the largest names in the scene was Robert Crumb, who appears in the majority of writing about the time. The majority historical documentation of the underground scene discuss his impact during the undergrounds inception. However, as Crumb and his work are surrounded by controversy this thesis will only discuss his influence briefly to instead focus on the role of women creators.

The inception of the underground comics scene was partly a result of the censorship of the American comics industry following the introduction of the Comics Code Authority (CCA) in 1954. The industry began to self-regulate, with artists and writers having to pass a list of requirements in order to receive the CCA seal of approval. Due to the restrictions placed upon their content in order to gain this seal, comics for the most part became synonymous with children’s books during the following years.

However, the self-published, localised nature of the underground scene allowed underground creators to

circumvent CCA censorship, enabling the distribution of more adult narratives (Danner & Mazur, 2014). Uninhibited by the CCA, these publications portrayed smut, obscenity, violence, and profanity, often all at once (Dauber, 2021). Underground comics helped push the artform into new areas, allowing approaches formerly considered less professional to expand the visual vocabulary of the medium (Sabin, 2020).

While the underground scene gave women a newfound level of visibility in the field of comics, this was a by-product of the male-centric shift in comics and the industry’s continuing lack of inclusivity. The scene came with both opportunities and drawbacks for female creators; Mazur and Danner (2014) note that Trina Robbins, who worked in the early days of the underground, was not alone in discovering the industry to be a ‘boys club’. Robbins and Yronwode (1985) discuss the fact that many female comic creators were denied recognition or entry to the underground scene. This caused a large amount of anger and frustration, alongside a growing moral opposition to the sexist and misogynistic content being published. Because of this, the underground saw a political and feminist miniboom that reflected

the sentiment of the women's liberation movement as well as challenging the sexism in the scene (Sabin, 2020). Dauber (2021) describes a number of misogynist depictions of women circulating in the underground comics scene. In one such comic from 1969, *Lenore Goldberg and her Girl Commandos* by Robert Crumb, the female protagonist fronts a militant wing of the women's liberation movement, and the narrative ends with her performing fellatio on her male partner while he brandishes a severed breast. The story was accompanied by a comment from the author in response to criticism from female readers: "Well, listen, you dumb-assed broads, I'm going to draw what I fucking well please to draw, and if you don't like it FUCK YOU!!" (Dauber, 2021).

A number of feminist movements arose in response to these depictions. Sabin (1993) discusses the inception of 'women's comix', a reactionary movement that opposed the status quo dictated by the underground scene at that time. Mazur and Danner (2014) discuss the Wimmen's Comix collective, a collaborative publishing venture founded to support more female creators to enter the scene. Women's comix were a fast and effective medium for spreading messages in a humorous and informative fashion. The topics they explored included abortion, rape, and male violence. While often accused of being 'man-hating', and despite some publications containing misandrist content, there was a clear effort made to avoid being labelled as such.

2.3 WOMEN'S ANTHOLOGIES

The industry's male-centric focus is obvious in the titles of comic historians, written almost exclusively about male creators (Brunet & Davis, 2022). As a response, a number of women's anthologies have been published over the years to celebrate the work of women in comics. These also act as a means to rectify the lack of representation of women in historical research and disprove the proliferated falsehood that women weren't creating comics. Megan Kelso (2004) in the *Scheherazade* anthology writes that "the original purpose of a women's anthology was to demonstrate that accomplished women creators existed". Omitted from history, the creation of these anthologies was seen as a necessary undertaking, with titles such as *Wimmen's Comix* (1972-1992) and *Twisted Sisters* (1976-1994) setting a strong precedent for future anthologies.

Trina Robbins and Cat Yronwode's *Women and the Comics* (1985) is the result of a chain of events that began with an essay written by Mort Walker for the 1976 European Comic Convention. Walker wrote "the rib that God took from Adam and donated to Eve must not have been a funny bone. From all outward appearances, women don't seem to have one. In trying to assemble an exhibition of women

cartoonists, the Museum of Cartoon Art produced a paucity. Out of thousands of cartoonists in our collection, fewer than 20 are women..." (1985). Robbins and Yronwode's response was to amass the names and works of 500 female writers and artists in a 128-page book. The work was monumental in its own right and leaves a solid starting point for future historians to add to, in the hope that more female comic creators will receive the recognition they deserve.

Sabin (1993) states that despite the male domination of comics in the mid-twentieth century, the industry's expansion led to more women being brought in as colourists, inkers, and editors. Ruth Boyask (2016) describes the existence of female colourists as "the finest tradition of patriarchal capitalism, no less skilled, but less compensated, and less well recognised", highlighting the lack of spaces for women in the comics industry and in the wider creative industry. There are only so many creatives capable of standing out simultaneously, and recent social media trends mean that there's only so much time for one to remain in the spotlight. In comics, particularly, there seems to be far less space available for women to stand out as there is available to men (Boyask, 2016).

Although recently there is some debate as to what level of gender disparity is still prevalent in the industry, Joyce (2016) writes that "It was with some frustration that we found ourselves, a decade later, as women comic creators

in New Zealand, in the same circumstances that even some women comic creators were certain no longer existed". *Three words* is an anthology of women's comics from Aotearoa, edited by Rae Joyce, Sarah Laing, and Indira Neville, who united against the omission of women from mainstream comic narratives (Joyce, 2016). Joyce (2016) states "The women comic creators of New Zealand weren't being given a chance to tell 'our' narrative". In many ways, it still seems that many notable creators' work is being lost to record.

Three words was created to redress women comic creator marginalisation, after a recently published history of New Zealand comics and a series of exhibitions failed to include many women creators (Kinnaid, 2013). The editors believed that a large proportion of women who wished to create comics have been deterred by the perception that the comics industry is predominantly male. They made a call for submissions from a wide range of artists, from novices to established professionals. The influx of submissions from the emerging artists and writers essentially proved their assumptions to be well-founded (Joyce, 2016). Many women seem to want to make their start in the industry; however, they are deterred by multiple barriers that hinder them from sharing their work.

2.4 FEMALE CHARACTERS

Brunet & Davis (2022) highlight comic imagery as an example of the lasting and impactful consequences of women's portrayal in society. While there are female protagonists throughout history who have championed feminist ideals and empowerment, they have been heavily outweighed by sexism and misogyny (Brunet & Davis, 2022). There is also much debate as to what kinds of images of women constitute problematic portrayals. Sabin (1993) writes that there is a grey area in deciphering whether depictions of women are negative or positive, and the line between the two shifts with generations, social movements, and individual opinion. Sabin (1993) also notes the current social debate surrounding appropriate humour. Past dialogue and comments directed at female characters that were the norm for the time in which they were written could be seen nowadays as blatantly perverse, derogatory, crude, and sexist.

Robbins (2002) discusses how an artist's perspective comes across in the way they draw and write their characters. While this notion is echoed throughout the art world, it is especially apparent in the way that female comic characters are often portrayed. Female characters are often limited to wearing skimpy leotards and bikinis, relegated to love interests and damsels in distress for masculine appeal (Sabin, 1993). Innes (1999) highlights the

difficulty in finding representations of strong female characters; they are almost always secondary to a male protagonist and reduced to the occasional karate-chop and quip.

Female comic characters are a marginalised minority who deserve accurate and diverse representation. In recent years, there have been signs of a necessary movement away from this status quo following wider social and cultural shifts. Female and queer comic characters are no longer solely relegated to secondary and supporting roles. This enables them to be realistically represented, multi-dimensional, and have believable interactions with other characters. Although feminist and queer characters have always existed in mainstream comics, their identities were more implied rather than explicit, especially compared to the unambiguous representation seen in the fringes of comic culture and in the underground scene.


Trina Robbins was quoted saying "Women do not go to fan shops and it's easy to see why...with so many comic covers with images of women with basketball breasts and high heeled shoes, who'd want to?" (Sabin, 1993). Often women in comics

are given curvaceous, small-waisted figures, impossible proportions, and exaggerated facial features under the perplexing guise of 'idiot-proofing' gender recognition for readers. Robbins (2002) discusses a number of examples, such as the female counterpart to Garfield, a pink cat with over-emphasised eyelashes and lips. Another example given by Robbins (2002) is Oola from Alley Oop, whose sleek outfit and hairstyle is a stark contrast to the eponymous caveman Alley. The result is a confusing dichotomy where character designs don't make sense; the female characters often appear out of place (or at the very least underdressed) for their environments. These caricatures of hyper-femininity are a recognisable trend in comics which are still visible today. Some artists have parodied this by drawing male superheroes in poses associated with superheroines, to draw attention to these absurd (and sometimes anatomically impossible) double standards. Although the counter-argument can be made that male comic characters are often unrealistically strong and handsome, these portrayals still come from a male perspective, for a male audience – a power fantasy as opposed to sexualisation.

'Women in refrigerators' is a term coined by Gail Simone in 1999 to describe the gratuitous mistreatment of superheroines in comics. The Women in Refrigerators website lists numerous female comic characters who are subjected to injury, psychological abuse, rape, or murder. These depictions are often unnecessarily gruesome – the

list's name refers to a character who is dismembered and stuffed into a refrigerator (Johnston, 2018). Scott (2013) writes that this list was created to show the disproportionate number of female characters who are mistreated as a plot device in order to fuel the motivation of a male hero. The list does not include wives or girlfriends, who Simone described as "a whole 'nother problem" (Scott, 2013). John Bartol's essay *Dead Men Defrosting* argues that when male superheroes meet these same fates, they manage to return in a way that superheroines do not (Johnston, 2018). Simone's comment on women in refrigerators is that the consistent mistreatment of female characters drives women readers away from comics (Scott, 2013). Scott (2013) writes that this further widens the gender gap between male and female representation.

In more recent years, influential female protagonists are becoming more prominent. More female characters are breaking away from the status quo, no longer solely relegated to the realm of supporting roles, love interests, sex appeal, or damsels in distress. There has been a much-needed rise in authors and artists creating narratives that follow strong and complex female characters. Chute (2017) describes that female characters are essentially becoming superheroes in their medium. With agency, realistic aspirations, successes, and failures,



this new wave of characters places women as the focal point in their own stories.

In retrospect, I'm mortified by the representations of my gender that I have been subjected to through all forms of media. My screens and books were populated by highly sexualised female characters devoid of backstory or individuality. These completely unrealistic women were generated by men for the male gaze (Korsmeyer & Weiser, 2021). Unmarried and older women, on the other hand, often fall into the 'wicked witch' stereotype and are usually depicted as menacing or pitiful. These depictions of women are something I have found genuinely affronting from an early age, and I'm saddened by the realisation that sexism in media is common almost to the point of desensitisation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Female representation

3.2 Queer representation

3.3 Race representation

3.4 Superheroines

3.5 The Bechdel test

3.6 Manga

3.1 FEMALE REPRESENTATION

Hope Nicholson's book *The Spectacular Sisterhood of Superwomen* (2017) features and discusses a range of strong female comic characters throughout the years, analysing trends and themes from each decade. Despite its title, the book does not solely focus on the superhero genre. While it would be an impossible undertaking to categorise every single female character in existence, those chosen for this book are specifically picked for being the "weirdest, coolest, most of-their-time female characters in comics—for better or for worse" (Nicholson, 2017). Nicholson analyses changes in characters alongside influential political and social shifts, in over 100 titles. The book serves as proof of the long existence of strong female protagonists in comics, affirming that they truly belong there.

Glacock & Preston-Schreck (2004) analysed fifty comics from four daily newspapers over the course of a month. The study found stereotypical gender roles and underrepresented female characters, although there were higher levels of consideration when it came to the design of their physical appearance. There were clearly assigned gender roles, such as household chores for women and yard work for men. Glacock & Preston-Schreck also

describe the presence of minorities in these works as practically non-existent, with the exception of a few comics that focused on African-Americans.

Monstrous Women in Comics (2020), edited by Samantha Langsdale and Elizabeth Rae Coody, examines the coding of women as monstrous. The authors discuss the historical, societal, and cultural influence on the creation and origin stories of female monsters. Their research specifically looks at women in a patriarchal context, noting that the female characters who become monsters are often those who cross the lines of assigned gender roles (Langsdale & Coody, 2020). The authors note that it is imperative, however, not to limit the interpretation of female monsters to marginalisation and degradation, as the contextual intersections can also be empowering (Langsdale & Coody, 2020).

3.2 QUEER REPRESENTATION

Abate et al. (2018) examine lesbian and queer female characters in comics and graphic novels. They examine Wonder Woman and Peppermint Patty, as well as listing a selection of other works that contain explicitly lesbian and queer female content, alongside the history of its initial confinement to critical interpretation and innuendo. Although this article doesn't analyse the material in depth, it provides a starting point for further research into this area. Overall, the importance of representation in art and literature cannot be overstated. Comics and graphic novels have provided a place for minorities to share their stories and celebrate their identities while mainstream comics fail to provide inclusivity.

3.3 RACE REPRESENTATION

Aayeshah (2021) discusses the rise of representation and stories of gender inequality within Pakistani comics. This work was created to fill the gaps surrounding the discourse of Pakistani literature, through an analysis of three comic titles. The characters and the way they are presented through personality, life, and appearance are discussed, followed by an in-depth examination of the narratives and creator choices involved. It also provides an overview of Pakistani culture and its importance in these stories, and considers both visual and thematic aspects.

Howard and Jackson (2013) discuss Black representation and the exploration of the Black experience in comics, examining the unique values and beliefs intrinsic to African-American culture. The author discusses the profound effect that representation plays in comics, especially with superheroes such as Black Panther and Luke Cage, and the importance of representation for minority groups. Howard and Jackson set the scene by going in-depth into the history before touching on the importance of seeing oneself represented as a heroic character. Howard (2018) discusses the lacklustre inclusion of minorities, especially African-Americans,

in the superhero genre and how their negative depiction resulted in audience dissatisfaction. They note the economic impact on the comics industry and how DC and Marvel's monopolization of the market led to the inception of more Black and queer characters in the underground comic communities.

3.4 SUPERHEROINES

Thanks to the endless depictions of spandex-clad superheroines that adorn popular merchandise, it's easy to believe that the only powerful female characters are the ones in the realm of superheroes and neglect the relevance of equally empowering characters in other genres (Brunet & Davis, 2022). With the exponential rise of the popularity of superhero films, there has been a large amount of literature discussing the representation of women in both these films and the corresponding comics genre. In 1984 a Marvel survey showed that men made up 94% of their readership. As a by-product of the comic industry's male-dominated readership, their female characters were often reduced to scantily clad caricatures (Choy, 2017).

The Supergirls by Mike Madrid (2009) is a deep dive into the world of superheroines, detailing the narratives and characters of the most notable heroines in the genre. The author provides a history of the heroines and their origin

stories over several generations. Madrid says that following the publication of the original edition, his readers were shocked to be made aware of the early existence of superheroines that weren't Wonder Woman (2009). The intention of his work was to educate readers on the existence of characters who would otherwise be lost to history.

In *Female Action Heroes*, Knight (2010) discusses 25 female characters in video games, film, comics, and television. The book covers the connection between the characters and their audiences, as well as the characters' origin, abilities, outfit, weaponry, and antagonists. Knight then writes about the common themes that emerged from this research, such as rebellion, patriotism, vengeance, and war. Another theme is the many interpretations of feminism and its evolving definition throughout the time in which these characters were written.

3.5 THE BECHDEL TEST


Alison Bechdel is an American cartoonist, known for the graphic memoir *Fun Home* (2006) and her comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983-2008). She is renowned for the creation of the Bechdel test, a measure for examining the representation of women in media. The test, which originated in her comic *Dykes to Watch Out For*, consists of three primary questions: are there at least two women featured; do these women talk to each other; and do they discuss something other than a man? A requirement that the female characters are both named is often an addition to these initial rules. The Bechdel test helps to expose gender bias in literature and identify when female characters are portrayed in a sexist light.

The test caught on fast, although it was not intentionally created for application in gender analysis (O'Meara, 2016). It has been embraced by a number of researchers for its effective ability as a primary indicator of male bias (Agarwal et al., 2015). Originally made for film analysis, its generality and simplicity mean that the test has also been expanded to a number of mediums such as video games, comics, novels, plays, and even social media dialogue. Multiple Swedish cinemas made headlines in 2013 for their decision to display films' Bechdel test scores next to their ratings (Selisker, 2015).

3.6 MANGA

The influence of Japanese manga has rapidly spread around the world, and unlike the American comics industry, it has diversified its target audiences (Toku, 2007). One major difference is that manga has distinct genres for male readers and female readers – shonen (boys' manga) and shojo (girls' manga), among other demographics. There is much discussion to be had surrounding the portrayal of gender roles in these genres. However, that will not be the focus of this thesis, although Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaä* manga will be touched on as part of the discussion on female character design.

Schwartz & Rubinstein-Ávila (2006) discuss manga's widespread appeal and its expansion into Western society. With limited prior academic writing on the subject at the time, the authors researched manga's rising popularity and impact, discussing five genres of manga and giving a historical overview. For a more in-depth description of girls' manga, Toku's 2007 article further details the shojo genre, outlining the genre's important characteristics and history and its evolving portrayal of female characters.



Nishiyama (2016) discusses Japan's lack of progressiveness in favour of traditional values when it comes to the topic of gender equality. Nishiyama's thesis examines the portrayal of female characters in four titles in boys' manga and girls' manga, describing the restrictive roles that female characters are assigned in both genres and the implications this could have on women's self-esteem and aspirations. As one of the most popular forms of media in Japan, Nishiyama (2016) notes the limited study of manga in past academic research, finding the majority of existing work pertained to content analysis or solely focused on female characters as romantic interests and heroines.

Bakker (2018) examines gender representation in the popular anime adaptation of the ongoing boys' manga series *Hunter x Hunter*. Bakker discusses three aspects of gender – femininity, masculinity, and gender ambiguity – and analyses how a selection of *Hunter x Hunter* characters reflect, subvert, or challenge gender stereotypes. Bakker further discusses how these portrayals compare to both Western and Japanese gender norms, and the cultural differences between the two.

DESIGN PRECEDENTS

4.1 Strong Female Protagonist

4.2 The Maggie and Hopey Stories

4.3 Lady Mechanika

4.4 Nausicaä

4.5 Lore Olympus

4.6 Paper Girls

4.7 Ms. Marvel

4.8 Lumberjanes

4.9 Themes

This section will examine a variety of precedents for female protagonists. The selected comics include narratives written by both men and women, in anglophone comics as well as manga, including an analysis of author intentions, overall character design, setting, and supporting characters.

4.1 STRONG FEMALE PROTAGONIST

Strong Female Protagonist (SFP) was created by writer Brennan Lee Mulligan and artist Molly Ostertag in 2012. The story is available through an ongoing webcomic with regular updates which also been adapted into two graphic novels. *Strong Female Protagonist* is a meta examination of the superhero, written in a way that distinctly avoids echoing the historical portrayal of female characters in the superhero genre. The creators have stated that their intentions in writing protagonist Alison Green were to intentionally shatter the tropes and stereotypes of female portrayal in comics, to make Alison a powerful superhero as well as strong in a literary sense (Rivera, 2014). In an interview with Comics Alliance, Mulligan describes the creation of Alison as being akin to a writing exercise, creating an all-round strong female character while experimenting with broader aspects of complexity, three dimensionality, moral conviction, and heroism (Kahn, 2014).

Ostertag's art has a charming sensibility. While the linework and colouring are not overly complex or highly rendered, the artwork has a modern and realistic quality to it. Alison looks like a typical college student in both her features and wardrobe. She dresses for occasions, weather, and everyday activities in a way that's consistent with people her age. Her hairstyle also changes throughout the stages of her life, from a practical ponytail as Mega Girl to a pixie cut as a student. Ostertag grounds her characters in realism, and depicts a diverse cast through age, body type, and ethnicity. The level of representation is further enhanced by the depth the authors provide each character. Everyone's personal viewpoint is defined and expressed through their interactions with Alison to give readers a comprehensive understanding of who they are and what they stand for.

Alison Green is a twenty year old student finding her way in the world after unmasking herself and retiring from her role as Mega Girl. The catalyst for this was her realisation that what she and many superheroes were doing was not actually helping the world. Alison's powers include super strength, flight, temperature immunity, and near invulnerability, making her the most powerful known being in the *SFP* universe. This is a distinct contrast to historical portrayals of superheroines as weaker than or inferior to male heroes (Knight, 2010).

Alison works part-time as a firefighter, her superhuman abilities enabling her to better help those in need. *SFP* follows her struggles with fame and notoriety as she attempts to live a normal life, as well as following her evolving understanding of what it means to be a hero. Alison exhibits strong conflicting emotions in *SFP* as she tries to decide what it means to do good. Her opinions regularly clash with those of those of her friends and people she interacts with, including other superpowered beings, often debating moral and ethical issues at length. Ostertag explains that the choice to continue this conversation throughout the narrative is in part due to her current worldviews as someone who grew up in the wake of the Occupy protests, while Mulligan credits the influence of his studies in philosophy (Westrop, 2013).

SFP also depicts a diverse selection of other strong and individual female characters whose narratives interweave with Alison's. Mary Kim, a former member of Mega Girl's team, uses her power of invisibility to pursue a life of vengeance by executing abusers and rapists. The Paladin, a genius inventor, was building advanced weaponry from a young age and fights in a self-designed combat suit. Another notable character is Alison's sister Jennifer, who hasn't been gifted with any powers. Jennifer's story is an exploration of what it means to live in the shadow of an exceptionally famous and powerful sibling and how this

affects her family life and view of society. With the exception of superhuman and technical capabilities, the characters have an innate level of grounding and resolve, with recognisable, realistic attributes.

Tara Lynn Cooper, better known as Feral, poses an interesting contrast to Alison. With the power of rapid regeneration, Feral offers herself to be an eternal organ donor – well aware that her body reacts too fast for anaesthesia to work and that the machinery used to hold her open will have to be constantly repaired and replaced. In a cycle of agony, Feral endures the never-ending procedures for the sake of saving countless lives. The decision behind this act of selflessness poses a strong point of contention between Feral and Alison. Despite the irrefutable benefits of the donations, protests ensue from the public, and Alison too voices her moral opposition to the torment Feral has submitted herself to.

Throughout these characters' connections to Alison, the authors weave an in-depth contemplation of morality and social justice while exploring the simple concept of good versus evil. They show that these ideas exist within shades of grey; there isn't one right way to do good nor one single act that

will benefit every person equally. These ideas inform and change Alison's character over the narrative, as well as critiquing common superhero tropes, providing a thought-provoking analysis of heroic acts and their ambiguities.

4.2 THE MAGGIE AND HOPEY STORIES

Love and Rockets is a comic series written and illustrated by the three Hernandez brothers – Jaime and Gilbert, known as “Los Bros Hernandez”, with Mario in a supporting role (Aldama, 2021). The brothers produce a wide variety of work, a passion inspired by their mother who shared her love of comics with her sons (Aldama, 2021). Jaime Hernandez is the artist behind the Locas stories, which follows the characters Maggie and Hopey. The Hernandez brothers have stated that their intentions in specifically writing female characters was not deliberate, but simply occurred naturally (Sabin, 1993).

The brothers were raised in a multicultural community, an influence woven into their comics, with the alternative music scene and Mexican-American lifestyles being major influences (Aldama, 2021). This is the backdrop for the Maggie and Hopey stories: in the fictional Los Angeles barrio Huerta (Hoppers) live two friends who share a love of punk music. The characters frequently interact with the gritty realities of the early 2000s, such as race tensions, gang conflict, and cultural differences.

Margarita ‘Maggie’ Chascarillo is established as a talented mechanic who hangs out with a social group composed of Penny, Izzy, Daffy, and Hopey. Apart from occasional travels to outer space and interactions with superheroes and dinosaurs, Maggie is a grounded, complex female character who spends her time hanging out with friends, attending punk gigs, and repairing cars (Nicholson, 2017). She and Hopey live day-to-day, scrambling to find money, with occasional appearances from Maggie's romantic interests, including Hopey herself. The way Jaime Hernandez immerses the reader in the story creates a strong connection between audience and characters, as if the reader truly grew up alongside them (Nicholson, 2017).

While Maggie and Hopey are both strong-willed and determined characters, Hopey in particular is incredibly punk, often depicted with alternative hairstyles and piercings which she sports to annoy her mother. Considerably less civil than Maggie, she's a typical troublemaker who enjoys tagging and other hijinks. Hopey is outspoken and witty, standing up in defence of herself and Maggie. She also plays bass guitar and tours with her band around Los Angeles. She and Maggie's relationship develops into a romance, which the story manages to address

without sensationalising lesbian relationships (Sabin, 1993); the theme of romance and sexuality between Maggie, Hopey, and other supporting characters is portrayed very naturally.

4.3 LADY MECHANIKA

Lady Mechanika is a series of comics set in a steampunk dystopia written by Los Angeles-based artist Joe Benitez, who has worked on a number of titles for DC Comics. After the launch of his own studio and the creation of *Lady Mechanika*, Benitez has also continued to produce the well-known title *Wraithborn*. Benitez has stated that the inspiration for the main character of the *Lady Mechanika* series was a group of steampunk cosplayers at a comic convention. Benitez then decided that his next venture would be the creation of a strong female character in a Victorian society (Thomas, 2015).

The eponymous Lady Mechanika was kidnapped by an unknown entity she continues to seek throughout the series. Her earliest memories are of being strapped to an operation table to have her limbs removed, waking up with highly intricate metal replacements. These give her superhuman strength and aid her to commit feats of athleticism impossible for a regular human. Danahay (2016) discusses the way in which this represents either the humanisation of the machine or the seamless mechanisation of human beings. Other than this, however,

Lady Mechanika's past is viewed only occasionally in brief snapshots triggered by other characters.

Lady Mechanika lives in Mechanika city, a technological marvel of steam-powered engineering. Working as a fighter and private detective, Lady Mechanika spends her time hunting leads related to her mysterious past and completing missions for wealthy benefactors. Mechanika stands by her morals regardless of the situation, choosing when to turn down money or accolades and sparing the lives of beasts and humans alike. She ultimately chooses to do what she believes to be right, despite the protests of her employers or the warring factions she encounters on her journeys.

Lady Mechanika's outfits are highly tailored, form-fitting, and much more revealing than the fashion of the time period the artwork is inspired by. With model Kate Lambert used as the reference for the face and body of the character, Lady Mechanika is further eroticised with clothing designed to emphasise her breasts and waist (Danahay, 2016). Her clothes, whether fighting or investigating, are fashion-forward with a high level of artistic design, and are often torn or destroyed during action scenes. Danahay (2016) discusses the contrast between the male characters and Lady Mechanika, whose body and wardrobe seeks to reinforce her femininity and

sexuality while male characters are depicted in functional, suitable clothing. Lady Mechanika fits the archetype of the ‘action babe’, as her character displays a juxtaposition of violence and sexuality (Danahay, 2016). This depiction is especially ironic considering that in the story she has already been objectified against her will quite literally with her prosthetic limbs.

In the first volume of the series, Lady Mechanika is pitched in a fight against another red-haired, body-suited action babe named Commander Winter, who Lady Mechanika has history with. There seem to be two main tropes in comics when it comes to female protagonists: either the female character easily destroys multitudes of strong male villains, or, if there are two strong female characters, they must be enemies and fight one other. *Lady Mechanika* uses both of these tropes.

In Volume 6 of the series, new illustrator Brian Ching gives a different style to Lady Mechanika. Her wardrobe, while still fashion-oriented, takes a more functional approach, with flat-soled shoes, leather greaves, shoulder guards, and practical bags. There are also significant improvements to the way her hips, bust, and lips are drawn. This version of the character resembles more the explorer archetype, with a military-inspired fashion sense. The difference in art style is quite noticeable, and somewhat changes the connotations of the narrative.

4.4 NAUSICAA

Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind is a manga series written and illustrated by Hayao Miyazaki, and was adapted into a Studio Ghibli film before the conclusion of the manga. The series is comprised of seven volumes that ran from 1982 to 1994, and is regarded as a worldwide commercial success (Osmond, 1998). Better known for his animation work for Studio Ghibli, Miyazaki’s *Nausicaä* manga was one of the initial catalysts for the establishment of the animation studio (Hairston, 2010). The film adaptation was based on the first 16 chapters of the manga and was released in 1984, directed and written by Miyazaki. The story and themes in *Nausicaä* would go on to echo through the numerous Studio Ghibli films that have followed.

Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind is a tale of environmental destruction caused by catastrophe and war. The manga is set in a post-apocalyptic landscape created when mankind polluted large areas of land. *Nausicaä* is set one thousand years after an event known as the ‘seven days of fire’, when gigantic man-made ‘god warriors’ destroyed the world to punish humanity (Hairston, 2010). The story alludes to these warriors being powered by nuclear energy, with contact causing radiation

poisoning. After the ensuing calamity, the seas have become poisonous and much of the air is unbreathable, replaced by toxic fumes that require humans to wear gas masks in order to survive.

One of the most notable features of this poisonous environment is the vast toxic jungle, home to a large variety of mutant insects that serve as its protectors. While humans struggle to survive in this world they have created, the jungle and its inhabitants flourish, and even convert poisonous fumes into harmless sand (Nunes, 2021). The narrative essentially depicts the enduring survival of nature while the human race condemns itself to extinction through its own selfish and unmoderated actions. We learn that it’s not the jungle that is toxic but the earth itself, and nature has adapted to slowly detoxify the earth (Nunes, 2021).

The protagonist, Nausicaä, is the beloved princess of the Valley of the Wind, a safe haven for humanity where constant air flow disperses the poisonous fumes from the outside world. Nausicaä is a young red-haired woman with a recognisable blue-belted jacket – key details that come to signal her fulfilment of a prophecy of a new era of peace and harmony. She is a highly complex and empathetic character who has a unique ability to communicate with the mutant insects (Bryce and Stephens, 2005).

Throughout the narrative, Nausicaä faces tests of strength, integrity, and leadership, which she ultimately overcomes. She understands the motivations and flaws of humans, learning their history over the course of the story, while seeking to change the disastrous course the human race is on. Nausicaä’s actions are informed by intellect and wisdom; her resourcefulness and knowledge help her to act calmly and decisively to protect others. She only acts in rage when her father is killed, slaughtering his murderers.

Nausicaä acts as a mediator and an advocate for peace, willing to sacrifice herself in the hope of reconciliation with the natural world. Through her communication with the insects, an understanding of boundaries is created to secure a mutually beneficial relationship between humans and insects (Bryce and Stephens, 2005). When the Ohmu, giant insects of the toxic jungle, charge to their deaths after a baby Ohm has been kidnapped by humans, Nausicaä comes to a moment of profound understanding. She surrenders her own life in order to save her people and return the baby Ohm to its family.

4.5 LORE OLYMPUS

The most popular comic on the Webtoon platform, with two volumes of books currently in print, an animated series in development, *Lore Olympus* is an adaptation of the Greek pantheon by Rachel Smythe. The story is a highly researched and recontextualised interpretation of classical Greek mythology for a modern setting (Webtoon, 2020). Webtoon, similar to other apps for webcomics, is a new way to experience comics through the seamless ability to scroll vertically while also incorporating digital elements such as music. The medium is accessible and specifically catered to devices like phones and tablets.

Lore Olympus is an exploration of romance, mythology, and trauma, centring around Persephone, the goddess of spring, and her relationship with Hades, god of the underworld. The countless versions of Persephone's myth lend themselves to many interpretations of her character. Smythe discusses the difference in her portrayal between stories; in one she's portrayed as a sad flower nymph, and the next she's a queen terrifying Odysseus (Garrity, 2021). That dichotomy created the starting point for the author, a way in which to develop and experiment with the character and the changes in her portrayal.

Smythe highlights the importance of emotional connection between characters, focusing on facial expressions and the

audience's ability to be fully immersed in order to sell the storyline and characters (Downes, 2019). It's this aspect of her comic that enables the audience to be completely drawn into the narrative and develop relatability through the characters' personalities. This focus on emotion gives a heightened sense of comprehension to the character of Persephone, especially the way in which she experiences trauma.

Smythe's eye-catching characters and art style are incredibly vibrant. The artwork of *Lore Olympus* is drawn digitally using highly recognisable colour schemes and character stylisations that complement the storytelling by presenting contrast and visual cues. Smythe uses Persephone's wardrobe as a way to explore the themes and evolution of the character. Persephone wears white clothing at the beginning of the series, juxtaposed by Hades' black suit as a way to play into the themes of romance and reflect the traditional marriage colours when the pair are introduced (Lucas, 2021). As Persephone comes into her own both in power and personality, her outfits transition into green. This creates a level of subconscious storytelling or foreshadowing that the reader may or may not pick up on, adding depth to the narrative.

At an early point in the story, Persephone experiences a major traumatic event which has

ongoing ramifications, changing how she interacts with characters and the supportive connections she forms with others because of it. Smythe has said that hard-hitting subject matter is intentionally expressed in an authentic, personal, and vulnerable way (Garrity, 2021), and hopes the perspective she provides will be educational, with the potential to create vindication and acknowledgement for readers (Downes, 2019). *Lore Olympus* provides an insightful look at the way in which Persephone experiences the event as well as how she copes with and interprets it, in a way that's representative of the experiences of many real-world women.

A number of the story's male characters often fall into the category of love interest or problematic antagonist, displaying traits of toxic masculinity. Zeus and Apollo are among the worst, with Apollo refusing to acknowledge his abuse of Persephone. Zeus, as in Greek mythology, treats his wife Hera poorly and has frequent affairs with mortals. In contrast, Hera is a strong and sympathetic ally for Persephone – a diversion from her traditional portrayal as cruel and vengeful.

The level of suspense rises with every episode of *Lore Olympus*, with the audience patiently (or perhaps impatiently) waiting for the constantly teased union of Persephone and Hades. Smythe explains that the reasoning behind this is to explore the two characters separately to fully contextualise them as individuals (Downes, 2019). Persephone, especially, is a young

character who's recently moved away from her overbearing mother and is experiencing freedom for the first time. Smythe discusses the need for her character to be able to develop and experience life as an individual to gain a better understanding of herself (Downes, 2019). This creative decision enables the characters of Persephone and Hades to be defined separately from each other, exploring their backstories, emotional responses, and goals rather than introducing them together as a single entity.

Persephone's romance with Hades begins to unfold from their first meeting. While both enter the relationship on a basis of consent and mutual respect, the two give each other space to grow, heal, and recover from their personal experiences. The story explores the building of trust and the recovery from abuse, as Hades' own trauma and previous relationships have impacted his perception of life in a way that reflects what Persephone is going through.

Persephone is established as a caring and studious character. As she gains her freedom in a realm her mother sought to protect her from, she comes to realise that not everyone's intentions are good. Somewhat naïve about the world she has entered into, she is faced with many challenges that she

faces both on her own and with the support of her friends. We watch her truly come into her own over the course of the series to become an empowering and capable character who's kind, thoughtful, and strong. We watch Persephone's unfolding journey as a trauma survivor as she's forced to repeatedly face her abuser, gradually overcoming and accepting her trauma. While she doesn't always cope in healthy ways, she remains a compassionate and honest individual.

4.6 PAPERGIRLS

Paper Girls is a science fiction comic series written by Brian K. Vaughan and illustrated by Cliff Chiang. The artwork ranges from bright neons to a desaturated retro colour scheme, matching its 1980s setting. The bold illustrations and linework have a natural feel, with the character stylisations grounded in a realistic drawing approach. The story begins with Erin Tieng, who's starting a paper run when she bumps into KJ, Tiffany, and Mac. When one of them is robbed by a group of teenage boys, they follow the thieves into a vacant house where they come across a futuristic machine. From there, the girls are thrown into the midst of a war between time travellers. While the series leaves its main characters in the dark, Vaughan (2017) says that clues are hidden throughout the story for readers to use to solve the mystery.

A significant choice in the series is the perspective it's drawn from. *Paper Girls* follows the story of four twelve year old girls as they witness chaos and death and must adapt to survive. Without being told the age of the characters, however, the way they're drawn and the way they act suggests their ages to be closer to fifteen or sixteen. The events of the story force the children to experience and react to uncomfortable and terrifying situations (Sojot, 2019). Although the story is told from the perspective of pre-teen children, it doesn't fall into stereotypical innocence (Sojot, 2019). While it may have been tempting to dumb down the story or the way the children talk, it's refreshing to see them being treated as intelligent. Despite their age, the cast are also often treated as equals by the adults around them (Sojot, 2019). A major conflict, however, is set up between the youth and the adults, the main antagonists known as 'old-timers' who have travelled from the future.

Erin is the main protagonist of the story and the newcomer to the group. Mac is tough and witty, the first paper girl in the town. The story hints at her troubled family life and a history with the police, which is evident early on. Tiffany is an African-American girl who's into gaming, and KJ is a hockey-stick-wielding Jewish girl who we learn is fated to enter a potential romantic relationship

with the currently-homophobic Mac. By travelling into the future, the four girls are confronted with their older selves and families. The older Erin is still working for the same paper in the same town, Tiffany is heavily involved in the alternative scene with her boyfriend, and Mac learns that she dies young and her parents move away. This is something she contends with throughout the story, causing her much pain, sorrow, and feelings of hopelessness. As the story progresses, we see the characters grow more confident as they successfully navigate their way out of tricky situations. Meeting their future selves provokes interesting changes in demeanour and behaviour as they interpret what their future lives will be like. When asked if there was any inspiration from people in his life, Vaughan states that the characters were conceptualised from a combination of reality and fiction, with characteristics drawn from real people (Renaud, 2017). Chiang's response was that for any believable character, there has to be elements of reality; the characters should be drawn from real life. (Renaud, 2017)

Monica Johnson (2016) notes the stark contrast of the all-female protagonists to their male creators. Johnson comments that "overall, the girls are stereotypical and unimaginative representations of race and class. The usual tropes are represented—the Irish girl is poor and is the bad seed who overcompensates for the instability of her upbringing with confidence; the Asian girl is obedient, proper, and somewhat timid; the Jewish girl is smart, but

not quite physically adept; the Black girl is physically adept, and is adopted. Even though Vaughan makes the unique effort to remove boys as the central desire that defines the girls, a tiresome gender trope remains—that female characters only become empowered, or "fight back" as it were, as the result of being victimised by men." (Johnson, 2016).

In Volume 2 of the comics, KJ suddenly gets her first period. It's speculative as to whether this makes sense in the context of the story or if is rather fulfilling a checklist of experiences relevant to twelve-year-old girls. In the space of a few pages, KJ notices the blood, expertly solves the issue, and is off into the action once more. The way this is conveyed is baffling, with none of the fear, anxiety, or confusion that such an event would be expected to provoke, especially considering the likely lack of sex education these characters would have received in the story's 1980s setting.

There's something undeniably discomfiting about a creative team of men narrating a twelve-year-old girls' first period. In an interview with The Comics Journal, Chiang was asked about the decision to write a story about young girls: "We had blinders on, and unfortunately that's our privilege showing". He stated that with more funding and prior consideration, the chosen team and story would

likely have been done quite differently (Stone, 2019). Vaughan had a similar reaction after the realisation and likened it to a Tumblr post pointing out the irony of all-male panels discussing female empowerment. “God, what an idiot that I never thought about the optics of this, much less the ethics” (Stone, 2019). This trend of male artists and writers creating works about the experiences of women poses very interesting questions about whether there is a ‘right’ way to tell these stories. Vaughan has said that their intention for *Paper girls* in the future was simply to tell the best story they could (Stone, 2019).

4.7 MS. MARVEL

Ms. Marvel appeared in comic shops in 2014 amidst a wave of representation and diversification in Marvel comics (*Ms. Marvel’s America*, 2020). Protagonist Kamala Khan, a Muslim Pakistani-American superhero written by a Muslim woman, caught the attention of fans and media alike (Nicholson, 2017). Willow G. Wilson, a Muslim American woman, was chosen to lead the creative team behind *Ms. Marvel* to ensure its authenticity (*Ms. Marvel’s America*, 2020), and editor Sana Amanat is Pakistani-American. The series discusses topics pertaining to past representations of Muslim people of colour in media, of which Marvel comics itself has a dubious history (Kent, 2015).

Kamala is a legacy character, having taken up the moniker of Ms. Marvel from Carol Danvers. The publication of *Ms. Marvel* unlocked an unexpected new fan base with a high level of Muslim and female readership. Wilson’s response to the comic’s continuing success was “This book should have not sold. It should have been dead on arrival by the old industry manual” (*Ms. Marvel’s America*, 2020). The recent uptick in female-led titles from Marvel shows a growing audience demand for female representation, as well as financial justification for publishers (Kent, 2015).


Yehl (2014) discusses how *Ms. Marvel* confronts oppression and racism towards the Muslim community in a light-hearted yet thoughtful way, while avoiding the serious political issues that might deter potential readers. The upbeat tone of the story is mirrored within Adrian Alphonas’ artwork, which is dynamic and energetic with the vibrant colouring of Ian Herring. The artwork’s unique style complements the energy, warmth, and boldness of the story. The narrative explores life in a Muslim family and the ways their values contrast with Western culture, as well as the ways different family members express their faith. The narrative explores themes of alienation, othering, and oppression (Kent, 2015), and Kamala throughout the comics faces racist comments about her nationality.

Kamala is a teenager from Jersey City, who magically gains the power to shapeshift and heal injuries, as well as gaining superhuman speed and strength. Her outfit is an adaptation of the original Ms. Marvel costume and is based on a burkini, in classic blue and red with a lightning bolt motif across the chest. Kamala has a rebellious streak, initially sneaking out at night to attend parties with the popular crowd, later doing so to fight crime. Kamala is an Avengers fan who writes fan fiction. Her main inspiration is Carol Danvers, Ms. Marvel, whose mantle she takes up with Danver’s approval as they fight alongside one another.

Kamala’s personality sets out to explore the teenage experience for a Muslim Pakistani in American society. The narrative explores her fun and quirky character through humour and relatability. As she navigates the trials of high school with a strong group of loyal friends and her charming approach to life, the comic’s emphasis on relatability “has the effect of positing a kind of universal teen experience which critics suggested was being fulfilled by the character” (Kent, 2015).

4.8 LUMBERJANES

Lumberjanes is an all-ages comic series written by the all-female creative team of Shannon Watters, Grace Ellis, and Noelle Stevenson, with illustrations by Brooke Allen. The narrative follows the supernatural adventures of Lumberjane Scouts Jo, April, Mal, Molly, and Ripley, a friend group of diverse personalities, ethnicities, body types, and sexualities. Ellis describes the experience of creating the series as the fulfilment of a childhood dream (Bulloch 2015). In making the series, the writers have created the representation they would have wanted to see in literature when they were children, in the hope it will be inspiring to children today. Stevenson discusses the creation of a safe space for female and queer readers who are looking to read comics and find narratives representative of themselves (Kahn, 2014). In mainstream comics publishing, a large number of queer and feminist works are sidelined in favour of guaranteed money-makers with a pre-established audience, perpetuating the male bias. Watters specifies that this explicitly pertains to mainstream comics, as underground and indie comics have always been a place of diversity, hosting a plethora of queer and feminist narratives (Abad-Santos, 2015).



Lumberjanes, however, has been incredibly successful in the mainstream and the authors express the level of surreal excitement they've had with the response to the comic (Abad-Santos, 2015). The very existence of *Lumberjanes* ensures representation for young women and members of the queer community alongside new viewpoints and perspectives. Watters expresses a hope for greater representation in the comic industry's upper management level in the near future (Khan, 2014). Stevenson talks about the lack of diversity in the comics she could access when she was younger, stating that it wasn't until much later on after the discovery of other queer and female writers that she felt the industry was a place where she belonged (Kahn, 2014). With more creators who are women, people of colour, and queer, there's more space for different viewpoints and greater variation for readers. There is a clear need to celebrate diversity and representation in creators and in characters; its positive impact on children, especially, cannot be overstated. This isn't an attempt to put current creators out of their job or rebuild the system, but to create more spaces and opportunities for minorities.

Lumberjanes presents an extensive range of female characters compared to most mainstream works. Every character is fully explored, with their own strengths and fears, aspirations, and goals. Their outfits are uniquely tailored to how they present themselves, in a way that resists the tropes female characters often conform to.

Stevenson explains that the characters are there to have fun, so their appearance was designed to not make a big deal of their gender nor sum up what it means to be female (Kahn, 2014). By simply not acknowledging that there is anything extraordinary or shocking about what kinds of activities female characters participate in, especially those considered to be areas of masculine interest, the writers break down the binary system of traditional gender roles, negating the inherent stigma around female characters in media. Normalising the diversity of female characters provides vindication for female readers who are often alienated by a lack of representation and role models.

Stevenson also highlights the decision to avoid including male characters in the early stages of the series (Kahn, 2014). The writers didn't want the fact that their characters were all female to be a dominating aspect, and didn't want to create conflict between the two genders. The focus on the all-female cast allows for the exploration of each of their personalities. When male characters are eventually introduced, there's no sexist or disparaging comments made, and no immediate eye-locking romance. The male and female characters are incredibly kind and supportive of each other, effectively given an equal playing field to interact with each other. We watch the boy scouts enjoy

stereotypically female activities such as baking, while expressing derision at their scoutmaster who acts as a parody of toxic masculine traits.

Queer comic artists in the past have frequently created stories depicting same sex relationships to help expand the breadth of narratives available to adolescents. In the 1950s, the establishment of the Comics Code Authority resulted in regulations that prevented the depiction of explicit same sex relationships in comics until 1989 (Gillingham 2018). The result of this is a present lack of queer representation in the comics industry, with a tiny percentage of narratives about open same-sex relationships.

In the *Lumberjanes* series, the characters Mal and Molly enter a romantic relationship, a storyline which occasionally diverges from the core plot. While both characters' exact sexualities are undefined, we get to see the two grow through their interactions in the relationship. Gillingham argues that comics have the unique ability to act as a reflective medium and can create an important sense of self-affirmation for readers (2018). Representation can help others to understand their own sense of character and feel less like a social pariah in a world that often rejects those who do not conform. The *Lumberjanes* friend group and the relationships in it provide an incredibly important representation of diversity for all ages.

The series has been a huge hit with a wide variety of demographics. While appropriate for younger kids, the series has also had success with teenagers and young adults. Watters discusses the importance of not simplifying a story to appeal to children (Kahn, 2014) – children are perfectly capable of comprehending sophisticated narratives. The creators of *Lumberjanes* have managed to establish a larger audience by not skimping on depth, complexity, or danger, while still making their content appropriate for children.

4.9 THEMES

Throughout these titles there is a tendency for stories of female characters to be told by male writers and artists, and although this is common in comics, it raises many questions. While some male creators are celebrated for the way they depict their characters, others are subjected to scrutiny and criticism. Comparing this to the ways in which female creators portray female characters is a valuable exercise, but it can be difficult to pin down distinct differences between these approaches. Are creators overstepping by narrating the experiences of characters of a gender or sexuality they haven't experienced first-hand? Depending on the circumstance, it may be necessary for a person who does have those lived experiences to be consulted in the design and writing process – or, ideally, included in the creative team from the beginning.

In terms of character design choices, these titles are excellent examples of literature's potential to help dismantle, rather than reinforce, stereotypes. In some titles, there is an evident attempt to avoid stereotypes and common tropes in the depictions of female characters, notably in *Strong Female Protagonist* and *Lumberjanes*. Instead, the characters' personalities, outfits, and capabilities feel individual and distinctive, not defined by stereotypes. *Lumberjanes'* Noelle Stevenson

explains that writers often give male characters more adventures and agency than their female counterparts, making the female experience look decidedly less appealing (Kahn, 2014). By rejecting this stereotype in *Lumberjanes*, the characters' identities are unconstrained by their gender. While there's nothing wrong with having interests that conform to traditional gender roles, defining gender as a set of immovable categories is harmful. The struggle to fit within the boundaries of what society determines to be masculine or feminine is an issue that is deeply personal to me, and analysing these diverse characters has been an incredibly cathartic experience.

Another common narrative technique seen in these titles is female characters' motivations stemming from their victimisation by men. This is evident in *Paper Girls*, *Lady Mechanika*, and *Lore Olympus*. The action in the *Paper Girls* series kicks off with the protagonists being robbed by teenage boys, and for *Lady Mechanika* it's a matter of vengeance as she seeks out the man who mutilated her body. In *Lore Olympus*, Persephone is raped and has to learn how to cope while she continues to be forced to face her abuser.

In *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, *Strong Female Protagonist*, and *Ms. Marvel*, we get a strong sense of the characters through their worldviews and politics, another recurring theme in these titles. Nausicaä has a deep understanding of her society and environment, her choices informed by the destruction and pollution she witnesses. Alison struggles with the ethics of her actions and spends her time exploring the viewpoints of others, ultimately seeking further education to better learn how to help people. Kamala frequently discusses the racism and othering her Muslim community faces. Her best friend, Nakia, is also a social activist who fights to protect those she cares about. We learn about the beliefs and virtues of these characters through their actions and internal monologues, so the audience can fully understand what motivates them and the causes they believe in.

Overall, the most common theme among these titles is the large audiences they have reached. *Ms. Marvel* gained widespread mainstream success in the face of predictions that it "should have been dead on arrival" (*Ms. Marvel's America*, 2020), and the authors of *Lumberjanes* have also received a remarkable reception to their work (Abad-Santos, 2015), and *Lore Olympus* is the most popular comic on the Webtoon platform with well over 5 million

subscribers. These examples confirm the existence of audiences for female-led titles, proving that good stories with diverse representation will encourage new readers to flock to the comic medium.

DESIGN OUTPUT

5.1 Comic design process

5.2 Plot

5.3 Iterations

5.4 Final character design

5.1 COMIC DESIGN PROCESS

In combination with this thesis, I wrote and illustrated a 35-page comic comprising the first part of a graphic novel. This aspect of the research portfolio directly engages with the creation of a female protagonist as well as the narrative she exists in. In addition to the 35 pages, I have mapped out a further storyline that would take the total page count to 75-100 pages.

Ideation

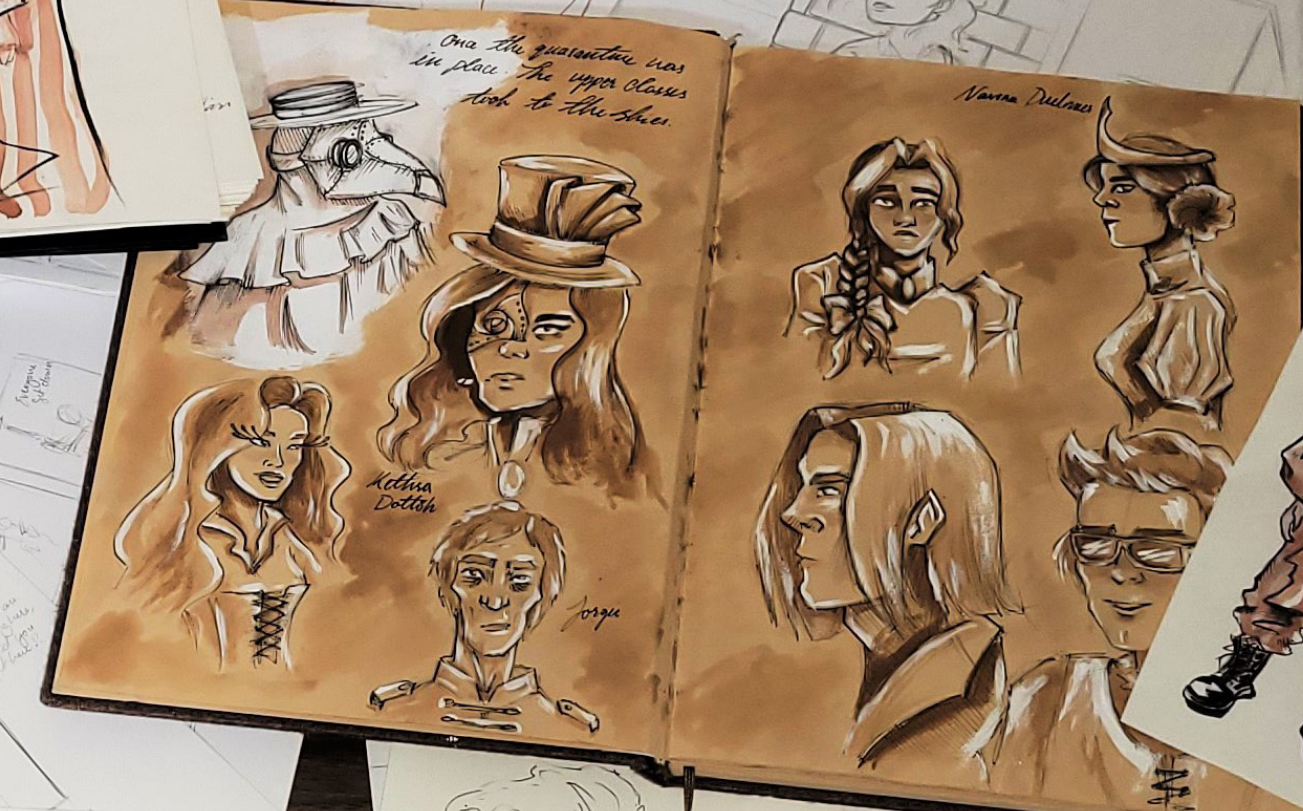
I began the creative process with a very simple list of ideas and concepts, simultaneously using this time to doodle in my sketchbook, coming up with potential characters and defining facial features. I came across a handful of overlapping concepts that became the basis for the background of my narrative. The story is set in a steampunk dystopia where the effects of a plague are beginning to surface. The upper class predominantly reside in and rule from floating cities while overseers enforce order upon those who live below. I wanted to experiment with class divides and use the floating cities to explore how the two main social groups would react and be affected by the spread of the plague.

Starting the writing process

In the early writing stages I used prose to construct the narrative. This allowed me to develop the bigger picture while noting aspects I planned to convey visually later on. However, I pivoted away from this method after reaching the halfway point of my story. It was akin to writing a full novel and it wasn't translating well into a visual narrative. A lot of this writing would eventually change and be re-adapted into comic panels. It was, however, very helpful in gaining a broader understanding of the story and constructing an image in my head of the visual landscape.

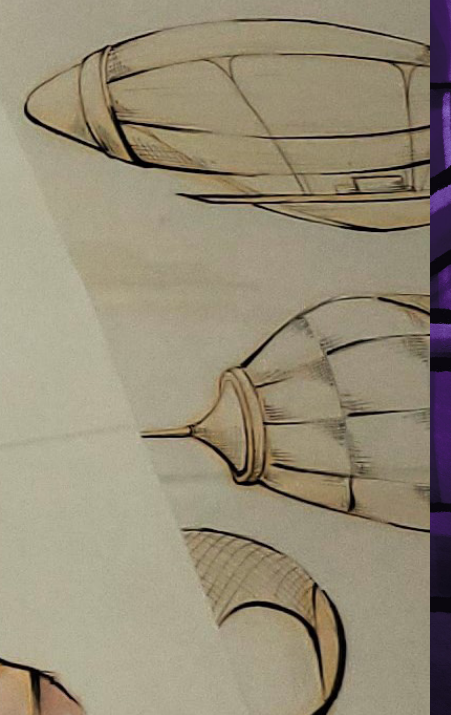
- I saw the roof watching airplanes.
 - I saw the floating palaces. Her mum tells
 - She goes up to collect towns. Her mum tells
 - She walks to the less conspicuous
 - Establishes her town to sell towns at
 - One who's fight ring by black market
 - She returns home to see an arm and the
 - Bell house is with the town and asks Mr. Gile's
 - She makes her fight in the the which
 - Bell meets some of the bringing recruits needed
 - Standing word of the laborator
 - They become guards at the laborator
 - The recruits give her a deal to help her
 - Bell is part of the procession presenting the
 - To the royals

- an escape
 - in the subject
 - in lack because



Mr. Bell! Use to
 see you again
 Afternoon Gile's
 to see you in the style
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Sure thing, but a way
 careful
 As this one for
 Mr. Gile

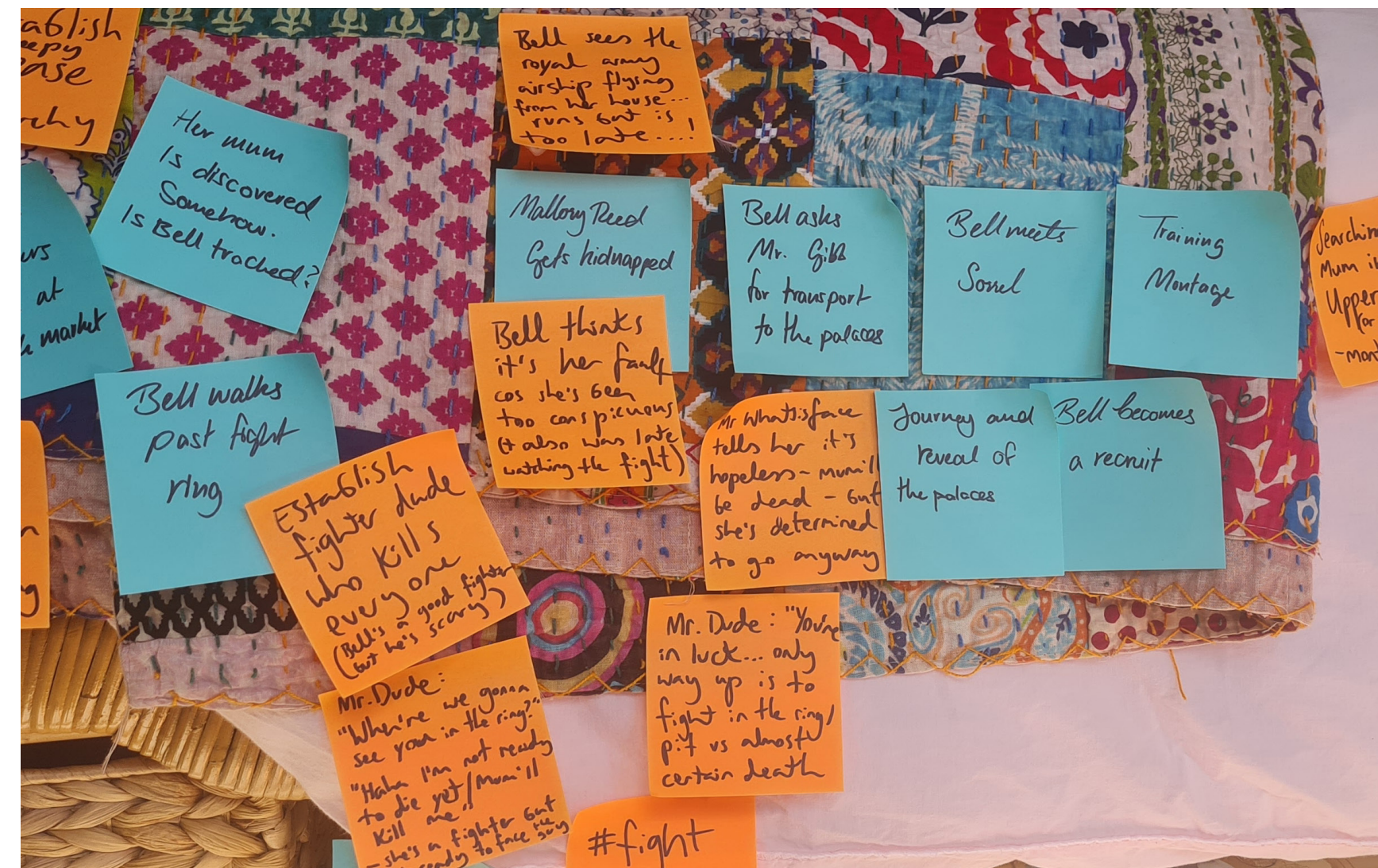


Timeline and story plot points

By taking a step back and using a basic framework I was able to note the main themes and events of the story as a timeline. Using this, I was able to create overarching subplots that would tie in simultaneously with the major storyline. This became the easiest way to experiment with plot options, and as a result I ended up changing the narrative quite drastically over six iterations. I continued using this method to expand on the plot points until I had a cohesive storyline.

Thumbnails

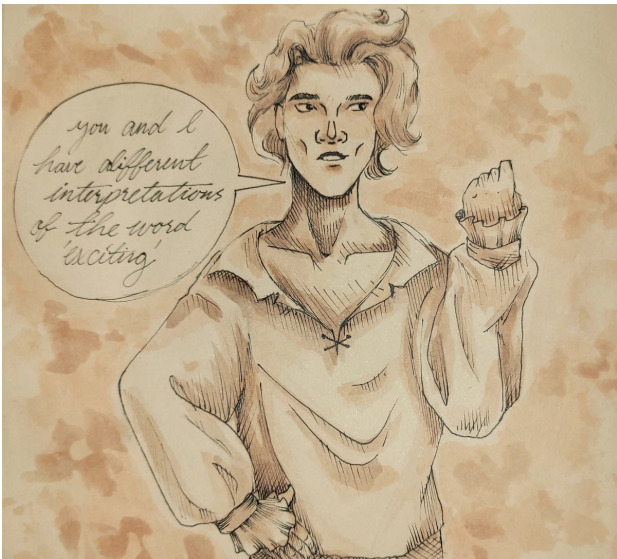
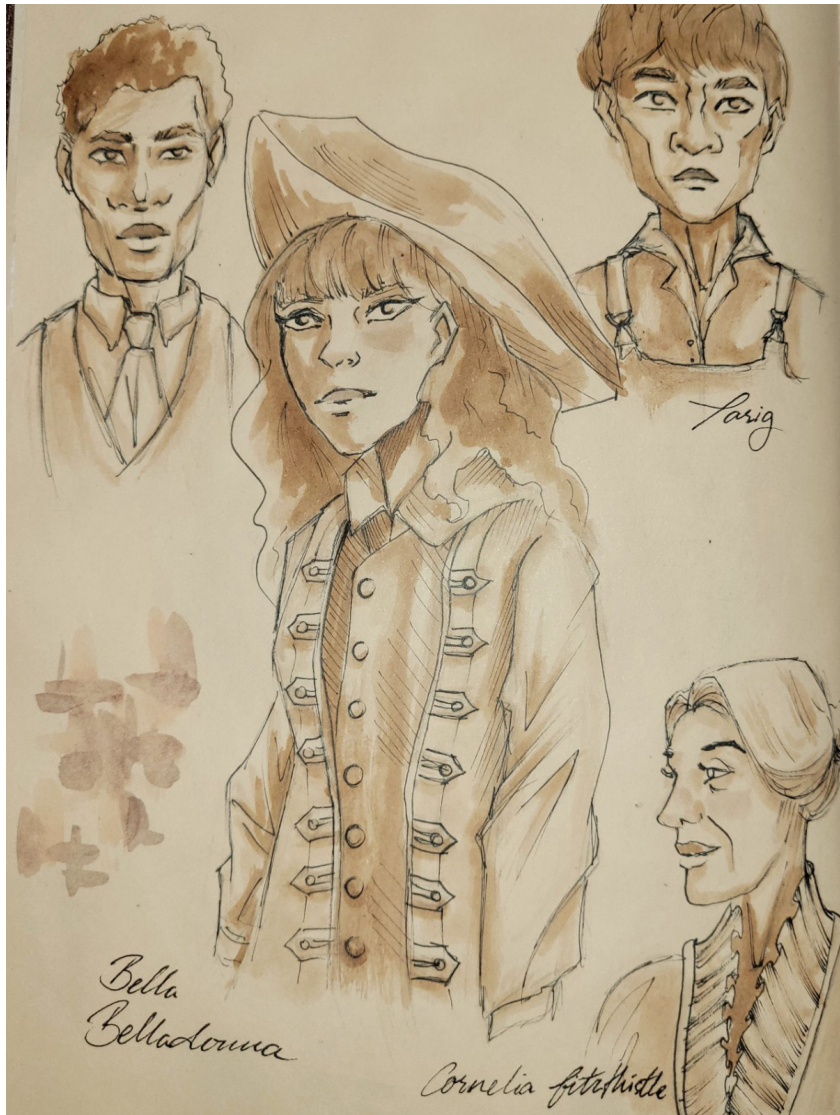
The next stage of the process was to translate everything into thumbnail sketches. Thumbnails proved an effective way to work out the progression of panels and dialogue without having to consider page layouts. Thumbnails are low detail, stick-figure sketches that convey the composition, character action, and important information to be built on later. This was a time-consuming process which required the initial framework to be broken down into smaller sections and fleshed out into a series of interconnecting panels that made visual and narrative sense. It was at this stage that I crafted more iterations of the story, simplifying it by removing or merging unnecessary characters and events.

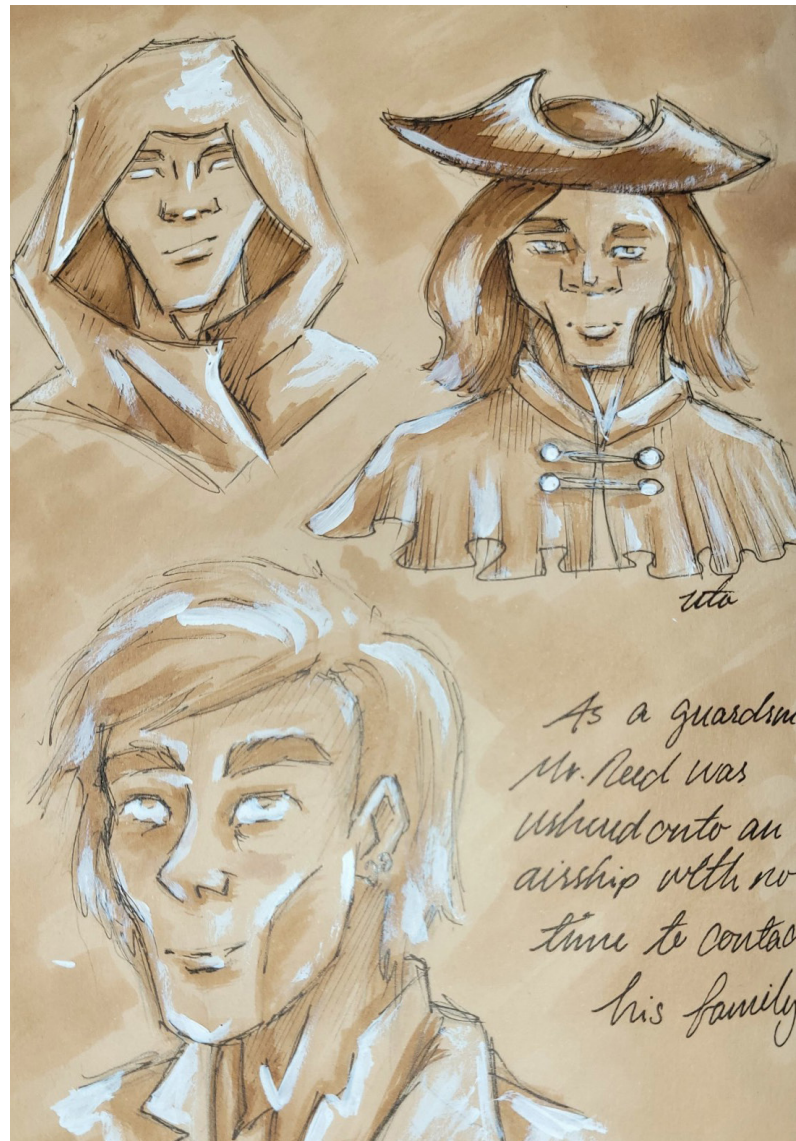
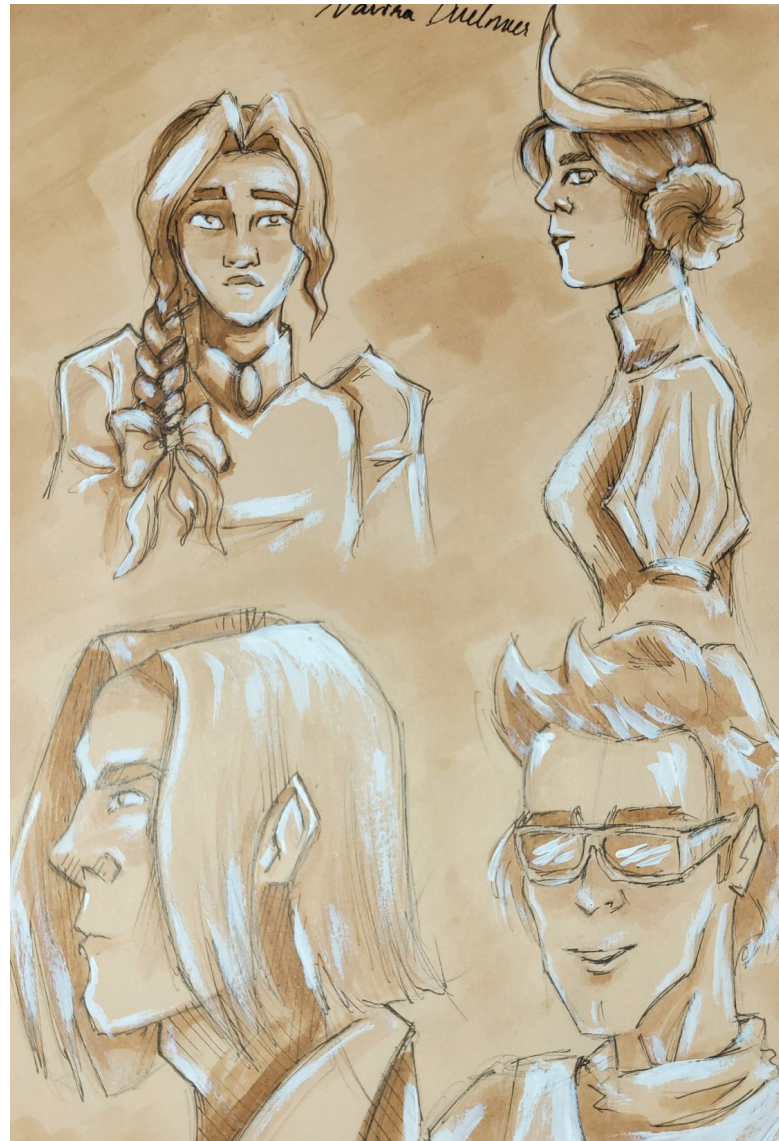


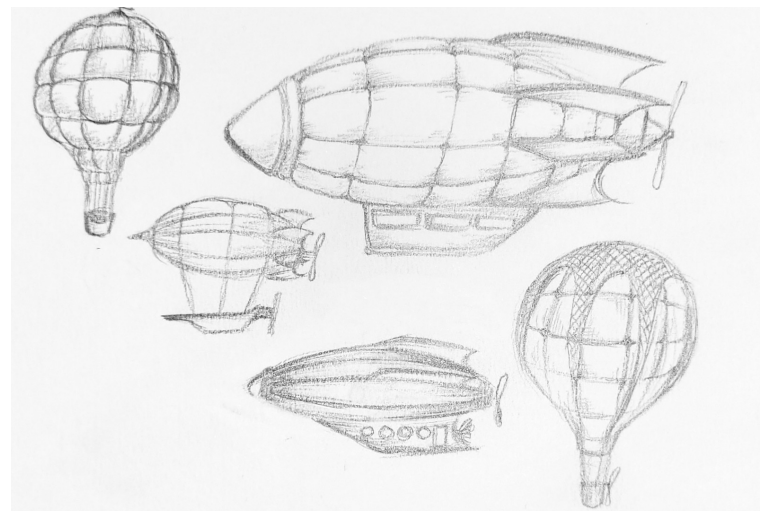
Character design sketches

The character design phase was one that I enjoyed immensely and wish I had more time to experiment with. Drawing faces and character expression sheets was a real learning curve. I had limited experience with drawing people and found myself in deep water attempting to create character sheets and expressions. I found it easier over the course of the project to keep a level of consistency with how my characters looked. However, this is a skill I very much wish to continue practising over the coming years. I used my sketchbook, scrap paper, and even the backs of receipts to maintain my skills through the research process, experimenting with different facial features, ages, and genders. When I began this process, I found myself unable to control the end result of the drawings, and the faces would turn out differently based on the preliminary steps of the process. After a while, this became more intuitive, and I had a greater level of control over the end result. It became easier to pick out nuances and recognise when proportions were incorrect, as well as better understanding what to do in order to resolve these issues.



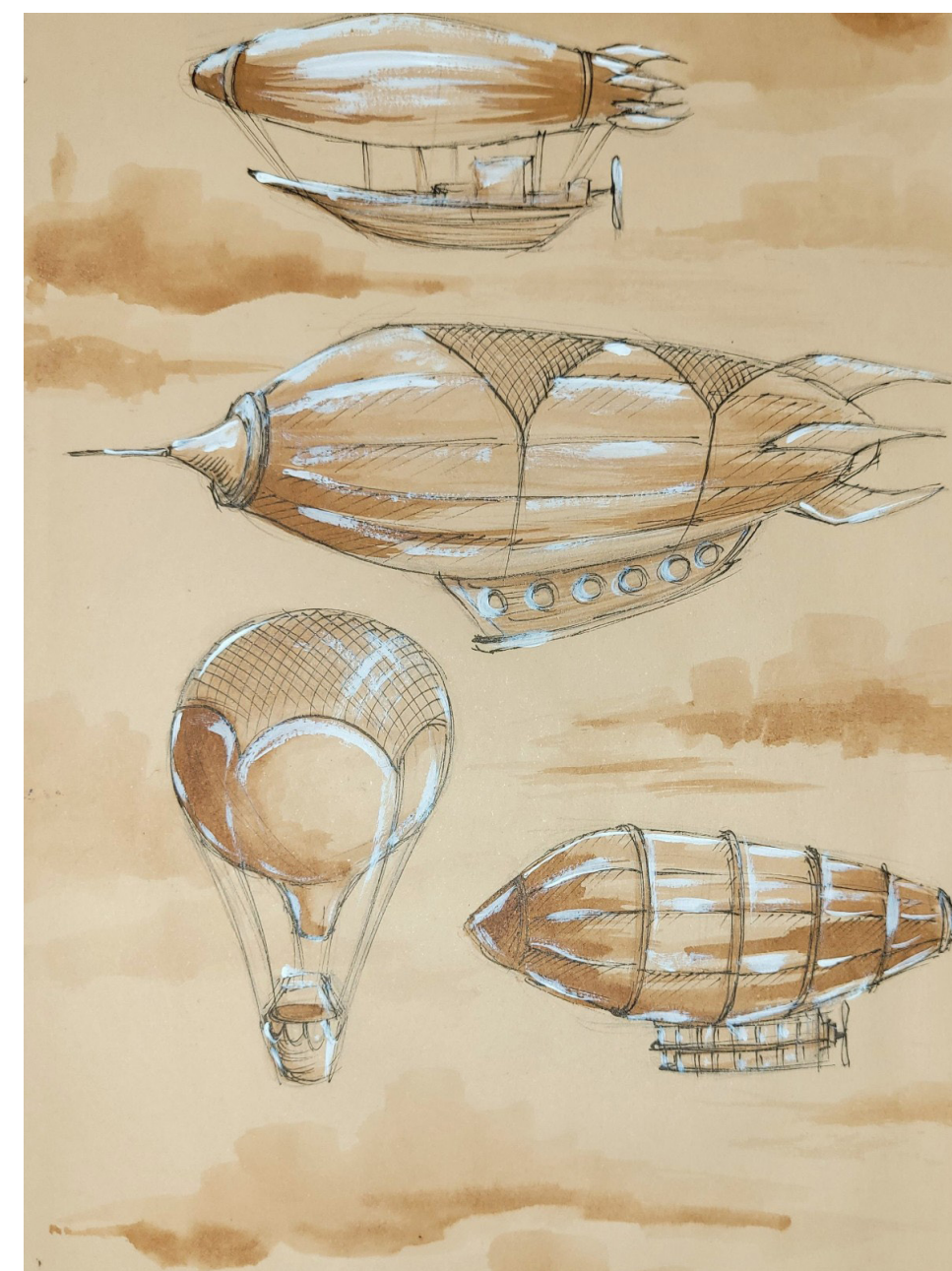
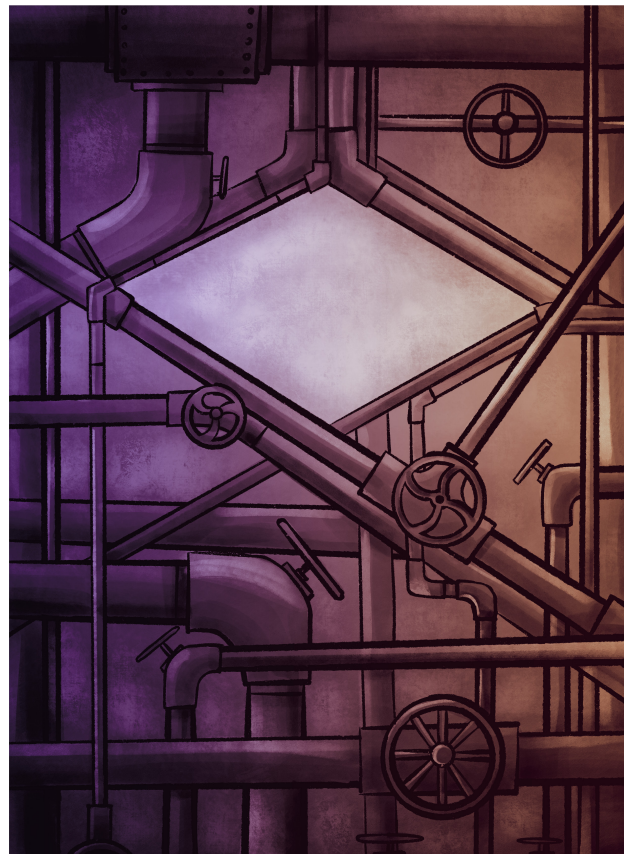


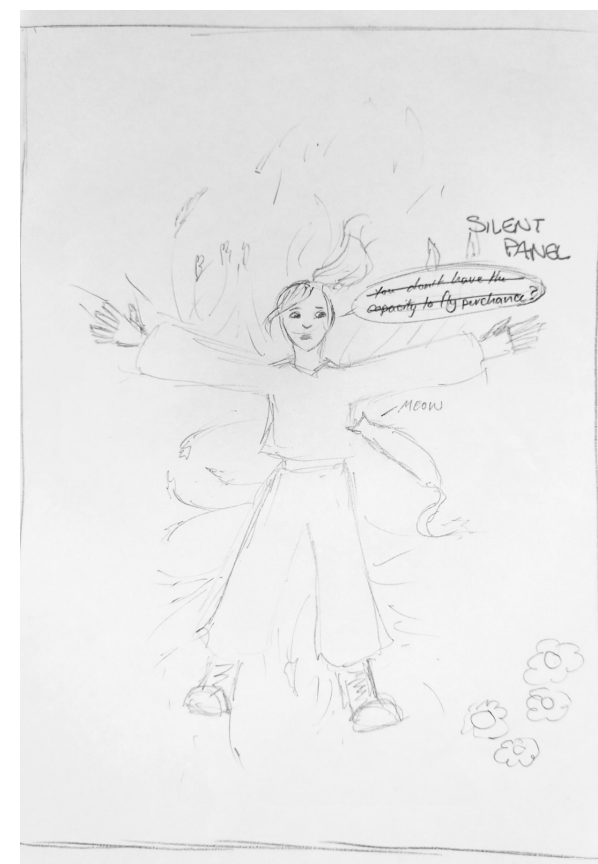




Worldbuilding

As well as character designs, I also experimented with the worldbuilding and overall look of the setting. This included the design of urban environments, the Upper City, and airships.



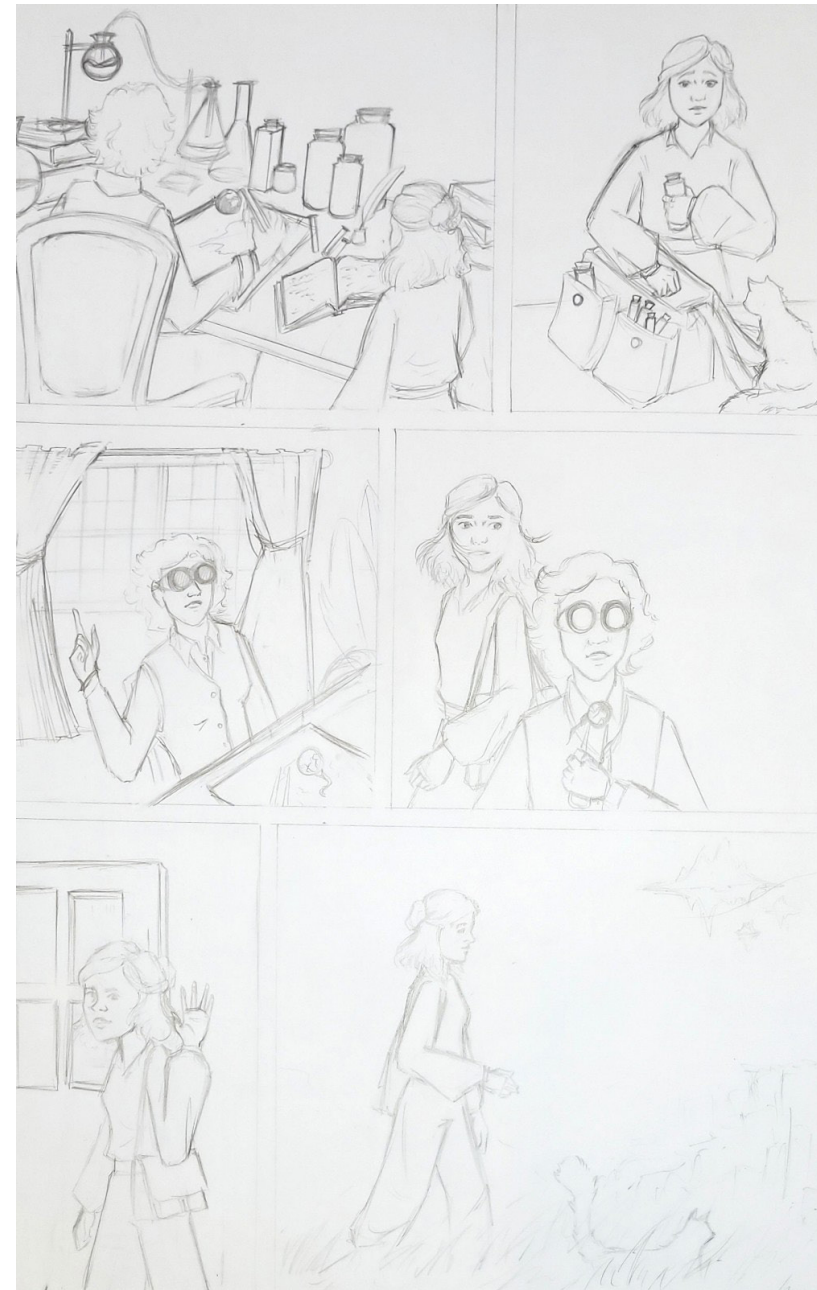


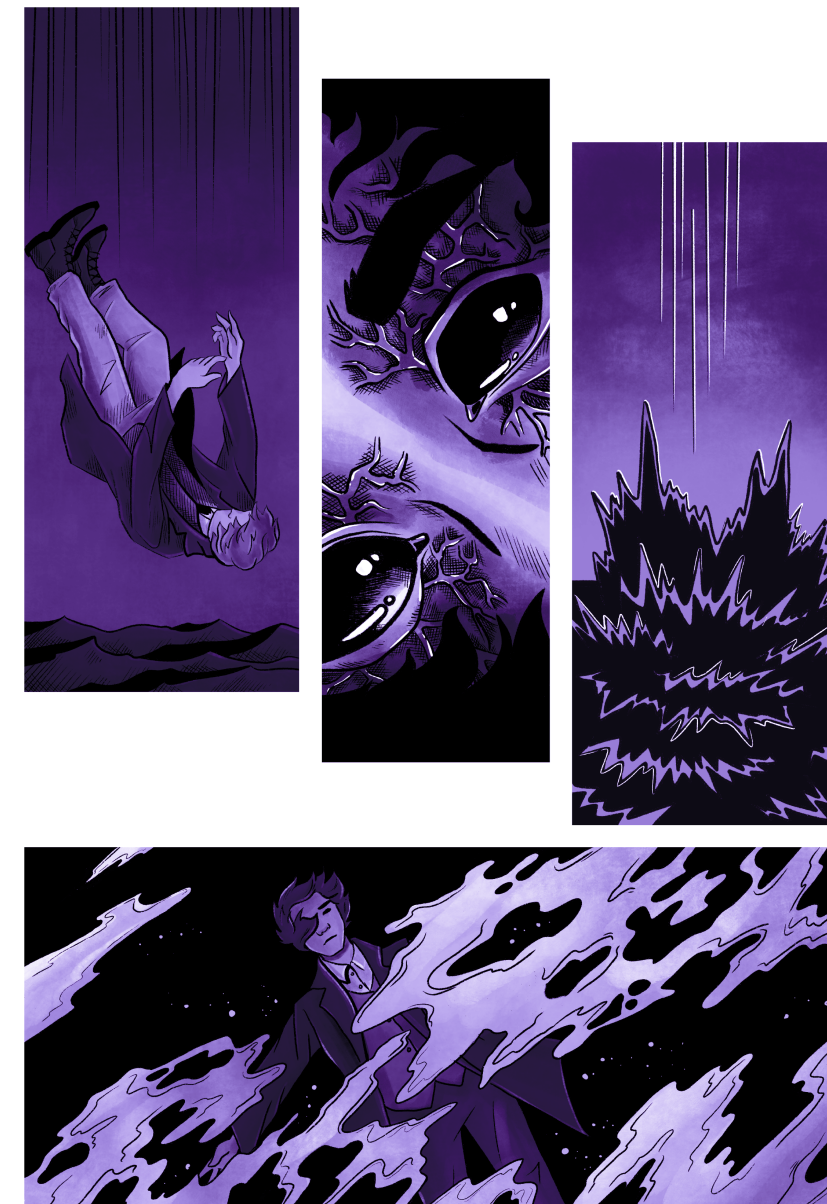
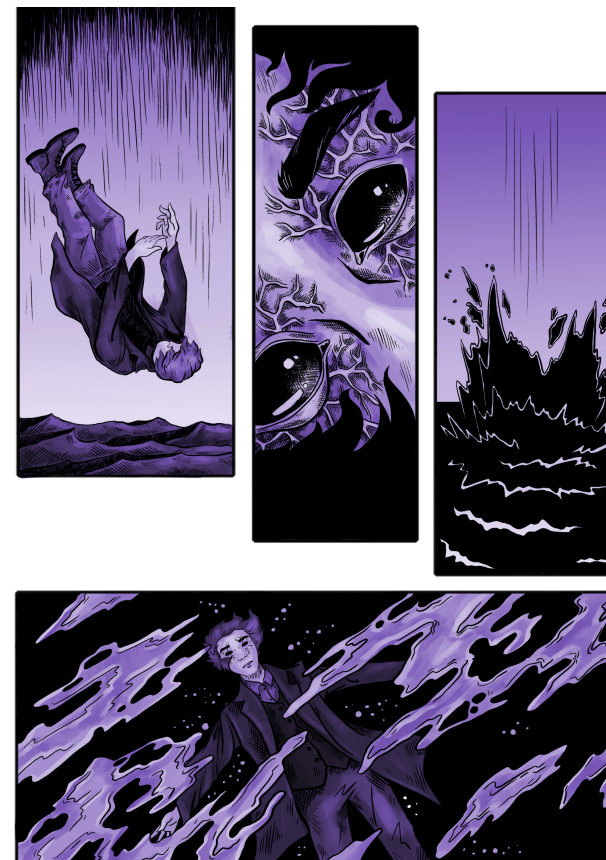
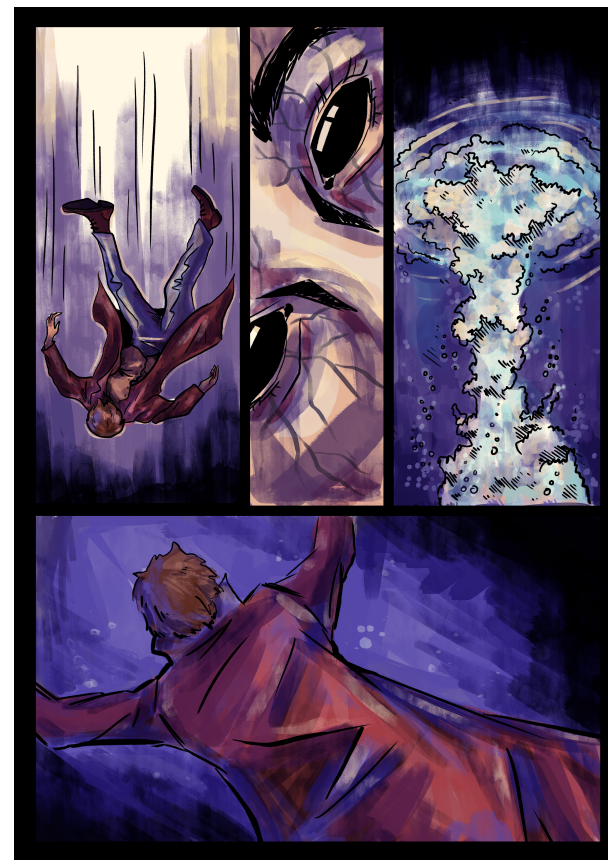
Page layouts

Taking the thumbnail sketches, I experimented with how groups of panels looked on the page. These panels were drawn in much more detail, considering space for dialogue and environments. It was here that I had to consider both dynamism and readability. The visual appeal of double-page spreads was also necessary to take into consideration. The way that comics are drawn over two pages enables a reader to accidentally skip ahead and spoil aspects of the story. I discovered that drawing the resolution on the top of the following page was a good way to add suspense for readers. This stage was also the time to add and remove panels and alter the images to create a sense of pacing and flow.

Page roughs

My page roughs were ruled up and drawn on A3 sheets of paper. This stage of the creative process was mainly about filling in the background and finalising character poses and expressions. By experimenting with the linework involved in each scene, I created a reference for the final artwork which would be drawn over the top of a scan of these drawings. Some panels in this stage changed from what was depicted in the original thumbnails, to make the artwork more dynamic, create more intensity, or give space to certain elements.





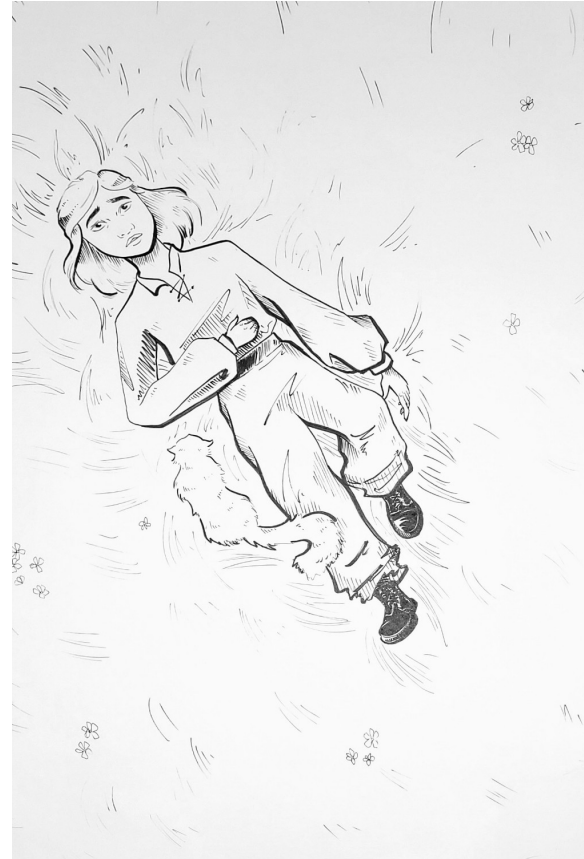
Style experimentation

I started off with a traditional art style using fineliners for the linework. I then pivoted to digital due to the flexibility of the medium. Experimenting with two different artsyles, I decided on a single process to use for the entire comic. I began this process with a Wacom tablet and Adobe Photoshop, but accessed an iPad at a later stage to boost the efficiency of my artwork output. I used the pages drawn up in Photoshop as a base reference and drew them again in Procreate, as the change in available tools and brushes noticeably changed the art style. The final artwork was created using Procreate on iPad.



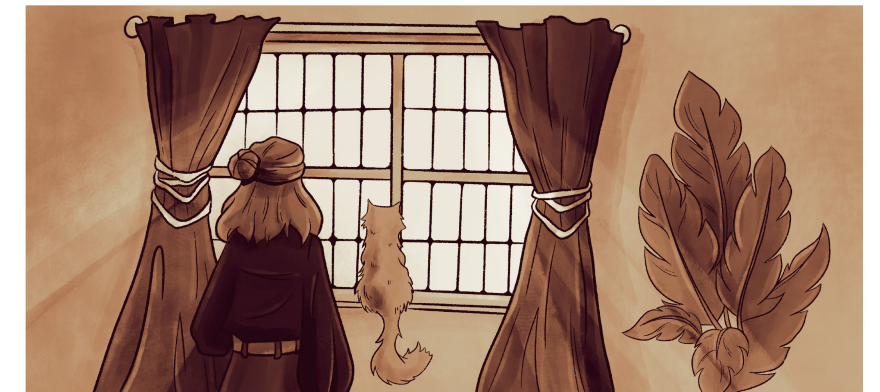
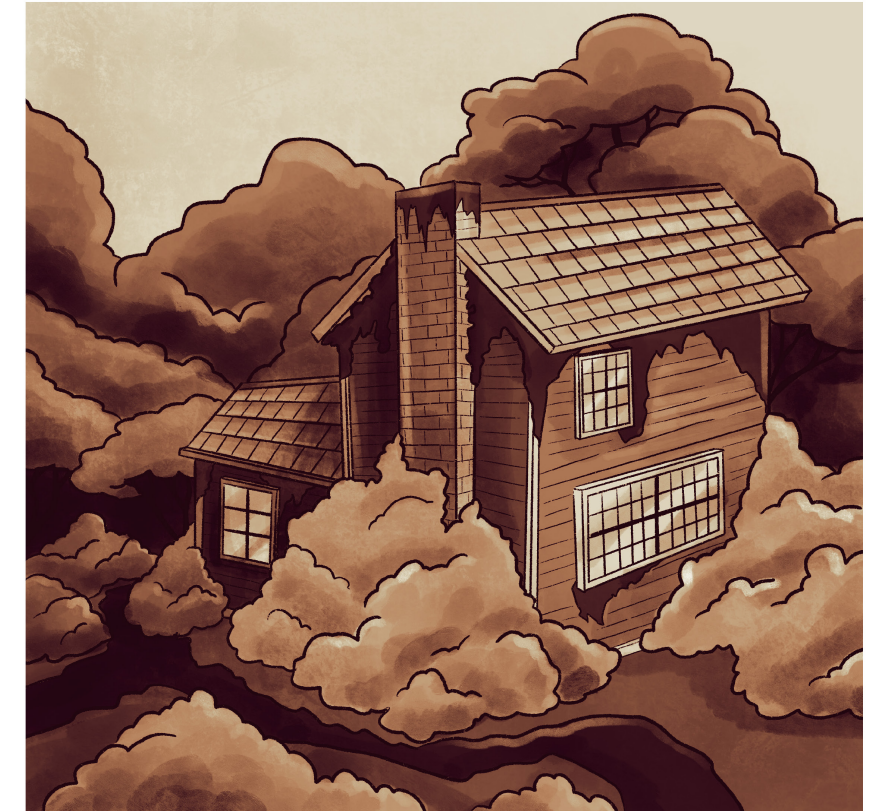
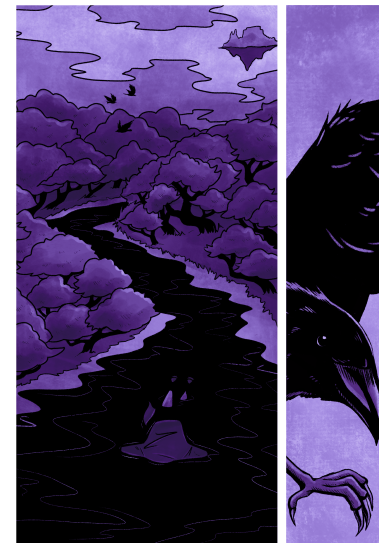
Digital Artwork

I started off with a black ink brush to sketch over the reference image, then used flat grey tones underneath the linework to map out areas of shade. This helped to establish light and dark tones without having to consider colours. I then used a half-opacity gouache brush to layer in shadows and highlights. This helped create depth and a sense of shape in the artwork. A grunge brush was used over the shading to enhance the dark tones and give the panels a grittier texture. If the panels turned out too dark, I used a white layer at 5% opacity to separate the flat colour from the linework for clarity. The artwork was then exported into OneDrive and accessed from my laptop.



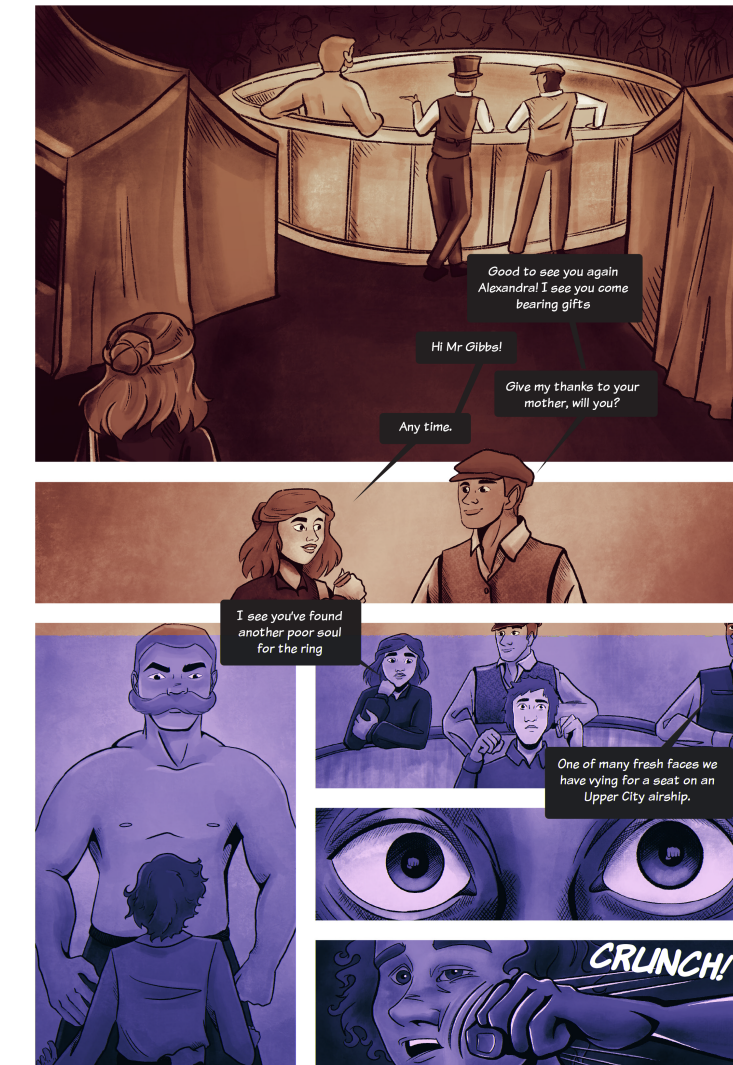
Final page layouts and gradient maps

The final page layouts were created in Adobe InDesign. Once aligned and spaced, I used Photoshop to alter the lighting and contrast levels of the artwork. By using a gradient map, I created a duotone effect over the grayscale imagery. Through this, I was able to keep a consistent use of colour throughout the images, as the gradient adhered to specific tones in the artwork. This also allowed me to experiment with the split toning of highlights. It was here that I decided to use a purple as well as a sepia gradient to help differentiate the scenes and affect the mood of the comic.



Text and dialogue

The final dialogue was completed over a series of drafts. I used Adobe Illustrator to experiment with the size and style of different fonts used for main dialogue and sound effects. The final font choice was then arranged and formatted as white text on black text bubbles, to contrast with the background art. With each draft, edits were made to cut down the text, removing superfluous dialogue to enhance readability.



5.2 PLOT

The story takes place in a steampunk dystopia where the working and upper classes are divided by the ability to access floating cities. The protagonist, Alexandra, lives on the industrialised surface world, a lower-class area run by overseers from the royal Upper City. At 19 years old, she aids in her mother's business, selling and trading medications to get by. Her mother is a scientist who has escaped the Upper City to live in isolation on the outskirts of the Lower City, where she continues her work in secret.

Whispers of the plague are spreading through the surrounding boroughs and people are becoming wary as the overseers tighten their grip on the city. The Upper City send down swathes of troops to keep the virus under control and suppress news of its existence – in some cases by eradicating whole towns. They overseers have been fighting to keep industrial production going while managing the rising tensions of those on the surface world, who were already struggling to survive and meet the Upper City's demands.

Alexandra's mother has been contacted by a plague doctor with samples of the infection in an attempt to cure the virus. One day, Alexandra returns home just in time to watch her mother being kidnapped by Upper City soldiers. Alexandra is determined to find a way to reach the Upper

City to rescue her. With the help of a friend who runs a fight ring, she takes on a man in the hope of winning a spot on an airship as a trainee soldier for the Upper City. The Upper City has also been dealing with the plague, and to fill their ranks are offering those who can survive in the fight ring the opportunity of a new life as a soldier.

Alexandra wins the match and begins her training in the Upper City, keeping her identity secret. She gains an ally, fellow recruit Sorrel, and explores the city, coming to understand the lies perpetuated by those in power: the plague is rampaging across the surface world, but its origins stem from the upper city itself. She and the other recruits are forced to deal with the sick, infected, and dying, a job with a high mortality rate that the other soldiers have no wish to dirty their hands with themselves. The silver lining to this is that Alexandra learns the whereabouts of her mother, who is being kept against her will with other kidnapped scientists at the palace laboratories to find a cure for the plague.

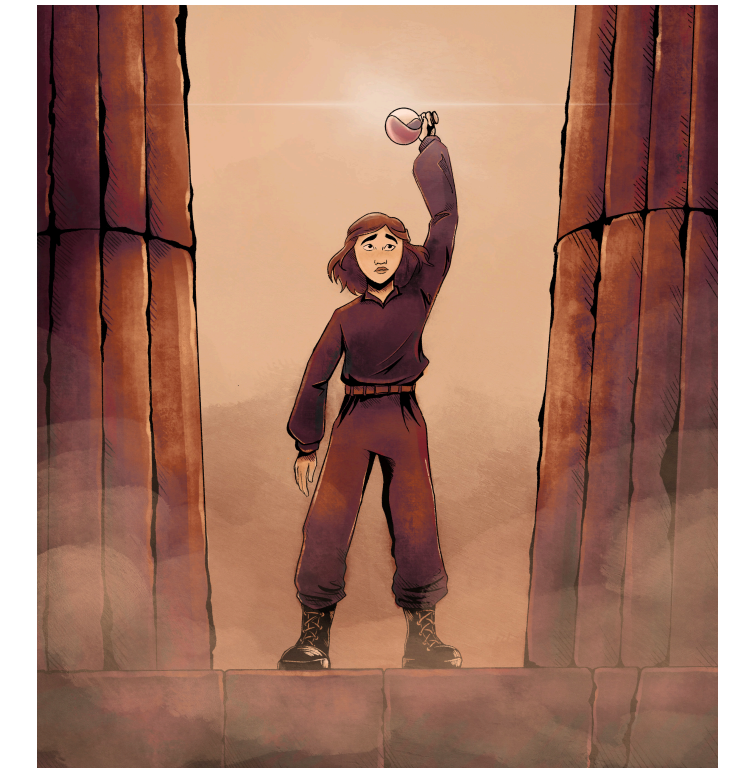
The plague itself is a virulent extension of the machinery the Upper City runs on. A mutated version of oil seeps into the human bloodstream,

taking over their minds and bodies to focus on the sole function of working in perpetuity. The human body eventually exhausts itself and decays. However, her mother's captors intend to use the cure to immunise only the upper class. Meanwhile chaos is building on the surface world, as protests break out and war looms.

Alexandra finds herself trapped between two opposing forces in the Upper City: the rebels and the monarchy. The rebels are heavily inspired by French revolutionaries, while the royals are attempting to save themselves from the plague and distance themselves from those on the surface. When the plague affects industrial production, the monarchy doubles down on the cruelty dealt to Lower City workers, provoking more hatred.

The conclusion of the series will hinge upon the rescue of Alexandra's mother and their escape with the cure to the plague. The Upper City rebels create a diversion, revolting against the monarchy who aim to keep the cure for themselves. Alexandra has allied with the rebels, unaware that their 'diversion' is a coup as to take control of the city in a violent bloodbath. Alexandra's mother is shot during their escape, leaving Alexandra to seek answers and fend for herself in her continuing journey.

Alone and on the run, protecting the sole sample of the cure, the lives of thousands now rest in her hands.



5.3 ITERATIONS

The narrative went through a number of iterations, focusing primarily on Alexandra and her situation in the political landscape created by class divisions. In the first draft, Alexandra's father dies, and her mother is left an amputee after thwarting an assassination attempt on the king. Her mother is honourably stood down from military service and returns to live on the surface where she relies on monthly pay checks from the Upper City military. Due to their association with the Upper City, Alexandra and her mother are treated like outsiders, living on the periphery of the Lower City where Alexandra is forced to steal and barter to survive. One day, the military comes calling to her area of town looking for new recruits and Alexandra decides to join. She's treated poorly by the other recruits for her youth and social status. In the Upper City, she befriends a boy her own age. She discovers the boy was born in the Lower City and was adopted by an Upper City couple who believed removing him from the surface world would give him a life of comfort. However, he's an outcast amongst his peers and consistently bullied. His character was designed to mirror Alexandra's in that none of them belonged in either society. The two would try to find a way to prevent the Upper City from harming those on the surface. The boy was initially planned to enter the narrative quite late, but was eventually removed in order to condense the plot down as his backstory and

involvement in the story would be quite extensive. There was also the potential for the reader to assume that a romantic narrative would ensue. My priority was for Alexandra to be the sole focus of the storyline; there is always a potential for a male secondary character to be added in later. I wanted to keep the majority of the characters in the main plot female, and found quite unintentionally that more emphasis was placed on Alexandra's mother because of this. Her recruit friend Sorrel comes in as a substitute for the boy, also taking up a large part of the narrative in the second half of the story.

In another variation, I depicted Alexandra as having a 90's 'bad girl' personality type. I ended up moving away from this, as I wasn't convinced that I could write this kind of character in a compelling way, and I was concerned about the narrow line I was walking between empowerment and cliché. I included a number of scenes of her fighting using her environment which I plan to rework into future scenes. In this iteration, Alexandra's mother had been a former guard in the Upper City who, after the death of her husband, returned to live on the surface. Alexandra's mother teaches her to fight, and when the Upper City soldiers come looking for recruits she takes her mother's place, in a

version I lovingly refer to as *Genderbent Steampunk Mulan*. Alexandra is taken to the Upper City to train, where she discovers a sinister plot that will affect the lives of everyone on the surface. While I liked aspects of this version, I was unable to justify the guards taking Alexandra instead of her mother. I ended up using parts of this as the inspiration for the final version of the story.

I decided that the story's main 'villain' would be capitalist greed for wealth and power as opposed to a particular human being. I have kept the genders of Alexandra's adversaries and allies in the story varied. A common trope in female-led comics is that the main villain or main antagonists are usually men, causing the female protagonist to "only become empowered, or "fight back" as it were, as the result of being victimised by men" (Johnson, 2017).

Another branch off from the final storyline included an obstacle course instead of the scene in the fight ring. This narrative was a lot more action-packed and violent. After being caught stealing, Alexandra fends off guards as she runs away over rooftops, using some well-placed scaffolding to swing around and launch the guard from the roof. Later when she encounters the obstacle course, she must navigate the high platforms while fending off attacks from other people as they race to the end. I considered adding a spike pit to raise the stakes, but this version was significantly more gruesome than I had intended and I ended up toning it down considerably.

5.4 FINAL CHARACTER DESIGN

When designing my protagonist, the first round of considerations to be made were quite obvious. The character wasn't going to be overtly sexual or sexualised: no basketball breasts, overdrawn lips, giant eyelashes, or tiny waist. Wardrobe was the next consideration. The clothes needed to be practical, not overly revealing, and natural for a girl of her age and upbringing to wear. The outfit I chose was something suitable for large amounts of walking, fighting, or feats of athleticism, and is paired with a half-up-half-down hairstyle that would keep her hair out of her eyes. Alexandra wears a billowy long-sleeved shirt tucked and belted into practical trousers with leather walking boots – simple wear that she would realistically be able to afford. She later receives a new uniform in the Upper City consisting of formal military attire, with a tunic, sword belt, and fitted jacket, with lots of pockets. I imagined Alexandra collecting scraps of fabric, charcoal, and herbs that her mother taught her about, storing them in her pockets to come in handy later on.

In terms of female representation in the final iteration of the story, I ensured that it passed the Bechdel test as a basic first step. Interestingly, I realised in my early drafts that the beginning of the story didn't quite meet the test's criteria, an oversight caused by condensing the script to quickly establish multiple characters. I assumed

the opening conversation between Alexandra and her mother would pass the test, but realised that they mention a male character. However, after that realisation, the problem was easy to fix. The second part of the comic will be dominated by the adventures of Alexandra and Sorrel as they search for Alexandra's mother in the Upper City.

Mallory, Alexandra's mother was another character I wanted to experiment with. With older women in media often taking background roles, being cast as the evil witch/crone, or the hot aunt, I wanted to make Mallory an interesting standalone character. Her interests revolve around scientific research in order to help other people and is ultimately kidnapped by the Upper City for her capabilities. While I have primarily focused on comics depicting characters closer to my own age, another interesting field of study to fully research would be the portrayals of older women in comics.

Alexandra's primary motivations in the story are to rescue her mother and get back to the surface world. Her mission is beset by obstacles as she's dragged into things she doesn't understand, her loyalties pulled in different directions. She finally

attempts an escape with her mother and ends up with the fate of the human race in her hands, leaving her mother behind, under the assumption that she's dead, to escape the ensuing violence. From there on, her mission is to save humanity itself.

In the opening of the story, Alexandra's goal is to do her best to help her mother. Without the same extent of medical or scientific knowledge as her mother, Alexandra takes on the role of distributing her mother's medicines in their community. I chose to keep Alexandra's mother's backstory a secret. I was initially considering making her character the protagonist, but decided to have the world depicted in small snippets through Alexandra instead. Alexandra has learnt to be independent, self-reliant, and driven, heading out on trips by herself. She has built up trust and rapport with a number of contacts in the Lower City who she can rely on for aid.

I went through a lot of internal debate when deciding how to go about the scene where Alexandra fights in the ring, and came up with four concepts for her success. She could outright win; she could cheat; she could outwit and outmanoeuvre; or she could win by reaching a time limit by refusing to give up. I based my final decision on my own experience in martial arts. In an enclosed arena with no obstacles other than the opponent, a fist fight would be determined by arm reach, weight, height, and experience – all factors which are not in

Alexandra's favour. I chose to portray her as resilient and capable, although she is not the strongest fighter. She enters the ring knowing the risk she's getting herself into, refuses to back down, and manages to survive and continue to the next stage of her journey. In later fights, she'll be using the environment and her quick-thinking abilities to gain an edge over adversaries where possible.

I realised through this process that a strong female protagonist shapes the story itself immensely. To depict an empowering fight scene with closer odds, I had to alter the entire scenario and the elements at play. By adding weaponry, uneven terrain, specific environments, and aspects that don't necessarily rely on strength and brute force to overcome, I gave Alexandra much better odds. While there are scores of female characters who can easily defeat male antagonists, I wanted my character to be relatable in ability level. Her strength is not in fighting or any particular skill, but in determination.

CONCLUSION

6.1 CONCLUSION

Through researching the history of comics, we can better understand the events that led to such a disparity in gender representation. We have seen how major social and political changes over the decades interwove with the history of the American comics industry. Reader demographics have slowly shifted over time as new waves of creators, styles, and genres shape the stories being told and sold. Now, we see more diverse representation across the board, giving voices to those who were once silenced or confined to the underground scene. There is a growing demand for female-led titles and female creators, with comic narratives evolving with the zeitgeist and reaching new audiences.

In this thesis, I have delved into a selection of titles past and present to examine the representation of female comic characters. I have analysed a wide range of female protagonists: Alison Green's moral and ethical debate of what it means to do good; the nostalgic relationships in the work of Jaime Hernandez; the empathetic and wise leadership of Nausicaä; the perceptive character dynamics of *Lore Olympus*; the badass talents of Lady Mechanika; the strong-willed paper girls; the quirky and charismatic Kamala Khan; and finally, the pure fun and adventure of *Lumberjanes*.

The analysis of these precedents has informed the design of my own character and her narrative. The first act of my story, which I have fully illustrated, depicts the start of Alexandra's journey and introduces her supporting case. Alexandra's story will be one of adventure, determination, and camaraderie as she overcomes adversity as delves into new challenges to reunite with her mother and – of course – save the world.

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