Artist Reflection - *Treading, not Running*:
Exploring Friendships and Recovery in a Graphic Novel

*Treading, not Running* is a 60-page comic about a runaway and a robot, and the journey that gives them both the courage to carry on. During the year-long creation of this book, many different themes were taken into account, and content based on the themes was explored, added, and subsequently trimmed to create a focused and clear narrative. This artist reflection (meant to be read after experiencing the comic itself) will explain the reasoning behind these choices, discuss the process work that goes into a project of this scale and type, and examine how this work fits into the larger context of the comic industry.

First, there’s an important distinction to make in the terminology of the field. “Comic” and “Graphic Novel” are sometimes used interchangeably, and other times used to make harsh distinctions about creative projects. There is some debate on how to discuss these works in an academic setting. Historically the term “graphic novel” was used in the 1980’s to bring a sense of merit and credibility to the art form. (Priddy 2017) It creates issue now by having an unclear definition, journalists and scholars have no singular consensus on what is a “comic book” versus a “graphic novel” and assign these terms to books based on arbitrary characteristics that vary widely. “Graphic novel” is often used as an attempt to elevate a story to “literature”, as if the narrative form of comics is not already literature. (Murray 2017)

During this project I fell into the mindset of feeling the need to call my story a “graphic novel” in order to make it seem worthy of discussion in an academic setting. Reflecting on it now, referring it to a comic is likely more accurate to what it is. This term describes the medium, not the message, and physically I created a comic. Dialogue is paired with page layout,
onomatopoeia, action lines and sequential drawings in order to convey what is taking place in the narrative. These are some of the core elements that make up a comic, and in a basic sense, what I set out to do was tell a story using these elements.

The industry as a whole has many different facets, some more widely popular than others. Action-driven superhero stories are what generally comes to mind when comics enter the conversation, but the medium is also effective for sharing quieter fiction narratives, biographies, historical nonfiction, and comedy, just to name a few possibilities. A practical reason for the saturation of action-driven comics may be the standard publication schedule. Many longer stories are told in a series of periodical 22-page shorts, having an action-packed sequence or cliffhanger on the final page of this short section can encourage readers to pick up the next one when it publishes.

When coming up with pitches for this thesis, I had a few stories in mind, the primary one a high-stakes drama about a lovers’ quarrel that brings about the apocalypse. Considering these stories in a bigger context, I realized that these themes of destruction and personal violence were already common threads in popular comics. While action scenes are fun to write, draw, and read, I also realized that making unique military factions and government agencies for this alternate universe was beyond my current skill set and scope of the thesis.

Diving further into the motivation behind choosing a topic, I discovered an interest in using the comic medium in a way I hadn’t before. To tell a longer, slower narrative that revolved around an ultimate message of hope and recovery. Common advice is “Write the story you want to read” and I desperately wanted to see characters finding the courage to take the difficult first steps towards recovery. Optimism as a central theme seemed much more appealing, rather than following a downward spiral of destruction. A simpler, more positive narrative was also better suited to the timeline of the project and my current storytelling interests.
During the process of writing the script, I did wonder if a comic medium was the right way to tell this story. The limited cast and simple setting of the van would suit a short film, and the storytelling components of flashback and interior monologue could easily be effective in first-person prose with no images. As the script came together I knew that the story could exist in either of these three formats, all would produce different results, and none of them would be ultimately “right”. My insecurities about the strength of the narrative were a product of not realizing that it was my story to tell, and that whatever format I chose to present it in was automatically correct.

In the first draft of the script that was written during Prospectus in the Fall, much of the focus was on the idea of freedom versus slavery. I drew parallels between Ad0 being created to serve humans, and Rat, who is trapped in the cycle of their addiction. Both had to overcome their respective captivities, or otherwise gain their “freedom” during the course of the road trip. The prevalence of robot-slavery parallels in current media caused me to turn away from this direction. Movies such as Blade Runner and I, Robot explore this question of AI systems developing humanity, as do more current video games such as Fallout 4, and Detroit: Become Human, among others. These stories explore androids as a metaphor for slavery to varying degrees of success, and considering that these movies and games were made by large teams of creative developers, I doubted that my tackling of a similar theme would be effective.

During the edit that became my final draft, I made a list of all the possible themes this story could have, and crossed out the ones that seemed overwhelming or distracting from the core of the recovery narrative. These notes, shown left and below, were incredibly helpful in narrowing the focus and finishing the script before before Spring term, which was dedicated to all of the artwork and book creation.
To elaborate on some of the decisions made in the notes, even though all of the conversations about gender were ultimately cut, I imagine they still take place off-the-page. The way the characters identify remains integral to who they are, both Rat and Ad0 are non-binary and use they/them pronouns. This representation is rarely seen in popular media, and not usually in a main character. More of it is desperately needed.

A recent example is the character Lynx Seventeen from the *Overwatch* comic “Searching” that released in 2017. Fans were excited for the reveal of the character’s gender identity, which was announced on Twitter, though there were mixed feelings about the fact that it is a very minor character, only appearing in a short comic with no implications of a larger role.

Decisions to cut other themes and motifs from this specific project came from the fact that it is part of a larger world and story I plan to tell, with an even more diverse cast and plenty of opportunity to later apply the content that was cut here. There is a group of human characters better suited to delivering a story about slavery and trafficking, and more rugged, older characters who can portray a stronger story about wrestling with the ethics of living in a post-apocalypse world. Knowing these themes could be put to use in future narratives made me less hesitant to make those difficult decisions to trim out scenes that I loved.
When it came to creating and refining the four characters, many of their traits didn’t come about from traditional research. Instead, I did a basic visualization of what they might look like, and from that point, imagined potential conversations and scenes that might suit these characters. I went as far as to act out and record some of these back-and-forth conversations, and also conducted in-depth mock “interviews” with Rat and Ad0, asking about their goals, motivations, worst fears, and favorite memories.

Through this slower, organic development process, I discovered that there were some aspects of both characters’ lives that I was not yet “being told”. Focusing on those hidden aspects yielded the theme of recovering from trauma, and gave a more concrete reason for Rat’s addiction, which was a main driving force of the plot. Some of the details remain hidden even now, such as the exact nature of Rat’s accident, and how their friend Marnie died. I couldn’t draw these details into the comic because they were never revealed to me in full, and any solution I tried to work into the situation didn’t seem right.

One other aspect of the story that took a long time to settle was the ending. I went through thirteen different iterations before one stuck. The original ending involved Ad0 turning themselves in to the local Southport authorities in order to help investigate the attack on their family vacation home. This didn’t leave much room for Rat and Ad0 to interact or say proper goodbyes, in other endings, Ad0 was destroyed, either by police, scavengers, or the robot shop that Rat was going to sell them to. These didn’t seem very in-line with the recovery theme and were scrapped quickly. I decided to instead show Rat getting extremely close to selling Ad0, but backing out at the last minute. This happened in several different ways before the final iteration that made the most sense. Meegan is a dealer Rat knows from back home, and also a reminder of Ilka and
everything they have spent the whole comic running from, which sparks that ultimate change of heart.

After all the preparation work was finished and the ending finally settled into place, I dedicated all of Spring term to the final artwork. It had been my original plan to do the comic in full color, but a few color tests I conducted were visually busy and time-consuming to complete. I developed a greyscale shading technique that took half the time, felt more fitting to the characters, and still kept the pages intriguing to look at. At this point everything about the project was changing, and I wasn’t entirely excited about these changes, but I came to realize that all the excess was naturally falling away, and the truly important themes were becoming more realized. While inking and shading the pages, I decided to re-write the dialogue, again cutting out all the extra lines that were just distracting from the core of the story.

Looking back on the process now, I learned many important lessons, some that even contradict each other completely. It was important to be patient and not expect the story to come out perfect on a first draft. For example, letting those thirteen different endings come and go in order to reach the final one was an exercise in patience. However, in other cases it was more important to trust my first instinct, especially when making decisions about the artwork. Often I would catch myself second-guessing a panel and wanting to redraw it, thinking that being patient with my art would yield better narrative results. Not the case. I stopped myself from making all of these edits in the interest of time, and feel that the story doesn’t suffer to much from Rat’s eye being slightly small in one panel, or a background having an element in the wrong spot. These details are easy to overthink and get hung up on, if I hadn’t let these tiny errors go, the pages might not have been finished on time.
These observations I made about the process are unique to my current mode of working, but I’m also thinking about the bigger picture of my journey as an artist. I think about myself four years ago, just finishing production on my very first printed comic, Waxfellow a 30-page short story that was basically conjured as I drew it with no script, no thumbnails, and no discipline. My character decisions centered around the thought of “This person is fun to draw, so I’ll just draw them for thirty pages… doing stuff.”

I still have that first book, and it’s such an amazing contrast to put it side by side with Treading, not Running and see the physical evidence of what I learned in four years of college. The lessons I took from this year-long thesis would make great advice to that younger me, and hopefully one day I’ll end up in a position where I can share my knowledge with upcoming artists and storytellers. Looking to the near future, I already have a mind full of concepts for new stories to tell. Some short-term goals include making a comic in traditional media, specifically watercolor, and eventually revisiting the world of Waxfellow to see what it looks like translated into my new skillset. I’m excited to have completed a comic that is quite close to what I outlined in the Prospectus, and as fellow creator Lucy Bellwood said when I mentioned an insecurity about the finished product, “It doesn’t have to be perfect, it just has to be done, and you did it.”
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Bibliography:


**Annotation:**

While not a journal article, this book a a seminal work in the comic industry. Some creators have disputed McCloud’s methods of defining the field, but despite these disagreements, his advice is still relevant. This was one of the first books I read upon becoming interested in the field, and even several years later I revisit it for advice and reminders about page construction, eyeflow, and dialogue. The most interesting aspect of this book is that it is presented as a comic itself. This format is very fitting and allows McCloud to provide concrete visual references for the topics he explores, describing the medium of comics while also utilizing it in many different ways.


**Annotation:**

This article is about the ethics behind the concept of engineered human servitude, or EHS. The author, Steve Petersen is a scholar in the field, but also briefly looks at the issue from other lenses within psychology and anthropology. This specific article draws on a literature review in addition to Kant’s theory of humanity to structure the argument. Petersen’s main point is that there is an ethical way to enlist servant robots, and it depends on the intention behind their creation. He states that when the technology becomes widely available, the importance will lie in programming the robots to only perform specific tasks, be willing to do them, and be
unable to reason their way out of doing the programmed activities. He uses these criteria to draw the line between being a tool versus creature with agency. I considered these arguments when designing Ad0 and determining how much agency they have.


