V*iewpoints*

Comics as Art Therapy

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Spider Man and the Green Lantern are not the first images that most people conjure up when someone mentions "important art." In the world of fine art, comic books are often viewed as the bottom rung of the artistic ladder (or so a number of professors I have had over the years have tried to convince me). In the early half of the 1900s, such an assessment would not have been unreasonable. With their rudimentary visuals and sub-par writing, the comics of the day were nothing more than gags and cheap laughs. It was not until the end of the 20th century that comics became an acclaimed artistic medium, with profound and relevant writing and technically strong and aesthetically pleasing visuals. Professionals began praising comics for tackling "weighty issues of racism and bigotry, war and envy, and friendship, as well as the individual sense of responsibility and balance in life" (Grinfeld, 1997, p. 20). Some of the characters mirrored the same concerns of the everyday person, "developing skills, talent, and powers, and then using them in a responsible way" (Grinfeld, p. 20). Comic books became deep and complex works because their creators began to put their real life experiences into the books, as opposed to simply making up fantastic tales of far-from-realistic beings. Artists and writers began to use events in their lives that had caused them joy, pain, fear, and envy, and in a cathartic process, used their creations to relieve themselves of heavy emotions. In a way, the works began to take on aspects of their creators and became possible forms of therapy as well as art.

I believe in the use of comics as a form of healing because I have used the creation of comic book characters and worlds to work through problems in my life. In grammar school, specifically fourth grade, I created a character called "Super Derf" (Figure 1a). His alter ego was a shy, bookish character that was a virtual mirror reflection of myself. He was a chubby-cheeked, freckle-faced short kid from the same town where I lived. He had a good heart but was too reserved to interact with people the way he would have liked. Once he put on his hero costume, with cape and boots, he could overcome any obstacle and was revered by the masses. The plots revolved around superhero-versus-supervillain conflicts of the typical comic book sort. In the same way he responded to villains who stood against him, "Super Derf" also defeated the fear and insecurities his alter ego (as well as his creator) carried with him. Through that character, I could show the person I was and the person I wanted to be with nothing but a costume change.

Years later I created a different character that carried many of the same social and self-image insecurities as "Super Derf." Modeling him after how I viewed myself at the time, I called the character "The Fat-Man" (Figure 1b). Loosely (and admittedly) based on Batman, who was incredibly popular at the time, he was a short guy with a potbelly and a huge, round nose. In retrospect, I can see that the features were exaggerated, but at the time it was an accurate portrayal of how I viewed myself. I was still painfully shy and unable to socialize the way I would have liked. I had my creation be the hero and ladies' man I was incapable of being due to shyness. As it was with "Super Derf," the plots of "The Fat-Man" revolved around the generic hero-versus-villain battles. Through both of these characters I shed my shortcomings and existed in an imaginary world as I wished I could have done in reality. This served as a therapeutic outlet because I put into words and pictures the things I longed to say or do. I had found release for my pent up emotions and desires.

Only a few short years ago I once again found therapeutic relief in creating a comic book world. Having grown up considerably since the last time I sought solace in the medium (7 years having passed), I had gotten over my social anxieties and self-image concerns. I was going through more internal struggles. I had recently suffered a death in my immediate family that was putting stress on the surviving family members. I was still adjusting to college, and I was having relationship difficulties with my long-time girlfriend. All of this weighed heavily on my mind as I tried to maintain sure footing in school and work. Digging into my comic collection, I came across issues of James O'Barr's *The Crow.* O'Barr created the series in response to a personal tragedy, the death of his fiancée caused by a drunk driver ("About James O'Barr," 2002; Anderson, 2000). Feeling more confident in my ability to draw and write, I too set out to create a book that would serve as my therapy.

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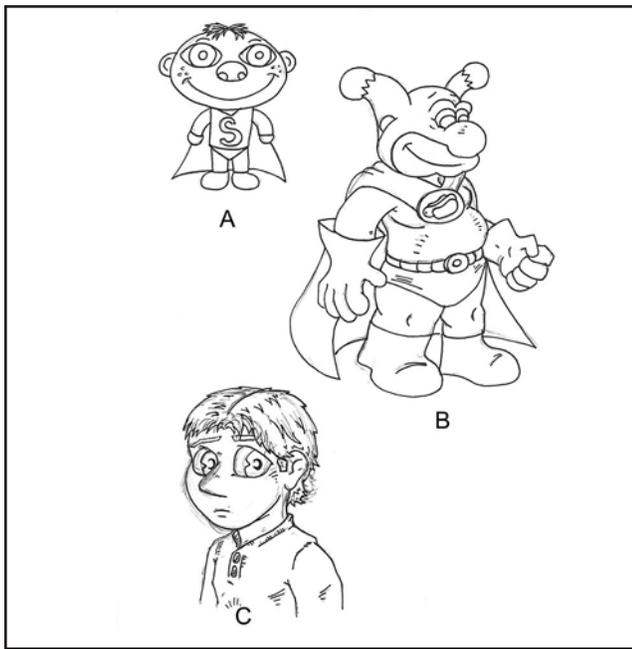
Figure 1
Examples of Self-expressing Characters
Created by Myself

Putting pencil to paper, I began weaving a tale of love, sacrifice, and faith. No longer concerned with getting too personal, I shed the idea of an alter ego and made the focal character like me in both appearance and name (Figure 1c). I put him in the same exact place I was in at the time, with the same pain and fear I had. Having difficulty dealing with himself and also with everyone around him due to the stresses, my character went through a crisis of faith in which he began questioning himself and his beliefs. My character's friends were all based on my friends, a technique also used by comic creator Jonathan Adams in his book *Truth Serum* (Roberts, 2001). The cartoon story evolved into something of a morality tale with the focal character always doing the ethically correct thing, despite the obvious pain it caused. Ultimately, my character lost a member of his family, lost his girlfriend, and barely managed to keep his friends—just as I had. The difference was that in the world I created, my cartoon self was strong enough to be relatively unaffected by what transpired. He was able to carry on with a positive attitude and a happy outlook, just as I wished I could do. In the world I created, there might not have been a happy ending, but at least I had control over what happened and when. I never completed the book. To this day it remains unfinished because it became obsolete, having served its purpose. Getting past the grief, fear, and pain was more important than completing the story, and the more of my feelings I put on the paper, the less that remained inside me.

It appears that using comics as a therapeutic outlet is becoming recognized by academia. The community out-

reach program at the University of Illinois at Chicago advocates that youth create autobiographical comics ("Autobiographical Comics," 2002). Recognizing the strength of this narrative art form, the program, developed by visiting artist Heather McAdams, has students and teachers create autobiographical comics that explore interesting moments in their lives. Inspired in part by Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize winning comic *Maus,* which is a recounting of the artist's father's experiences in a Nazi concentration camp, the cartoons allow their creators to reexamine moments in their lives that were important and memorable. This process encourages the students to place themselves back in the moment and to act as they did, or in some cases, as they wished they had.

As a medium, comic books provide their creators a wide variety of resources to aid their mental health. They allow for expression of the self in terms of body image, verbal expression, physical action, and emotion. Some people may identify with existing cartoon characters; however, by encouraging people to create narrative tales of their own, they not only can identify with their own creation but also can release some of the negative aspects of their feelings in a constructive and creative manner.

As a therapeutic tool, creating comics is a safe avenue of release for clients. Within the panels, the client can create a world in which the actions of his or her characters carry only the consequences that the artist chooses. Using comic book creation as a therapy tool can be especially useful for children because the comic book medium is familiar to them. In therapy, clients of all ages can express anything they wish through their characters. Carrying no repercussions in the real world, situations can be resolved as the artists see fit. Through the conflicts and resolutions experienced by the characters, which may parallel those of the creators, clients may find comfort in having a tangible representation of their triumphs and failures—fictitious or real.

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