

**The Adventures of MetaMan: The Superhero as a Representation of
Modern Western Masculinity (1940-2010)**

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Abstract

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The Adventures of MetaMan: The Superhero as a Representation of Modern Western Masculinity (1940-2010) is a practice-based research project. The aim of this research project is to develop interactive works of art that interrogate superhero narratives and representations of male identity, with the potential to relate to the experiences of relevant users in educational environments. At the current stage of the project, young men aged 11-14 in the English school system are a possible target audience.

The work of art takes the form of interactive software written in Adobe Flash, with additional visuals created by myself in Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator and through traditional pen-and-ink drawings. The conceptualisation, development and execution of both software and content took place over a three-year period. While numerous literary and artistic references were employed in order to actualise this work, the software's visuals and words were entirely self-created.

The work's original contribution to knowledge is found in the project's form. In combining the platform of digital media with the artistic styles and narrative themes of the superhero genre of comic books, the project explores the subjects of heroes and masculinity and has the potential to help its target audience to understand that the definition of masculinity is always in a state of flux. As evidenced by the historical texts, studies of visual culture, gender, and media representations of heroes and men that were referenced to develop the software, different types of men, ranging from the civil rights activist of the 1960s to the macho action movie star of the 1990s and significant representations of masculinity between these decades have been regarded as hero figures at different points in time. The concept of masculinity is fluid and reliant upon a variety of factors such as current events, cultural trends, politics, economics and

popular culture and this is reflected in the evolution of the superhero in Western mass media.

The MetaMan project showcases the impact that heroes and role models have and the way that art can echo culture and society. It can provide a fully interactive experience that places modern masculinity into the context of the user's life and circumstances, adapting to each user. The software is accompanied by a written component detailing the reasons for its form and potential audience, the artistic process necessary to create it, an account of a pilot scheme conducted with 120 male students aged 11-14 in the English school system and the further applications and plans for the future stages of the MetaMan project.

Keywords

Superheroes, comics, visual culture, digital media, masculinity, interactive design

The Author and Artist

Sarah Zaidan holds a Bachelor's of Fine Art in Sequential Art from the Savannah College of Art and Design and a Master's of Art in Illustration and Animation from Kingston University. She counts Jack Kirby, Honoré Daumier, Terry Moore and Alphonse Mucha among her principal visual inspirations. Mythology, folklore and the way things work have significantly informed and inspired her visual art practice for over two decades, so conducting a research degree by practice exploring the superhero's evolution through time is perhaps a logical progression of her interests.

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Ahmed M. Zaidan, my grandfather and personal hero.

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Statement of Objectives

The objectives of this research are to:

- Develop an interactive work of art that explores the male superhero figure in American comics as an evolution of the male hero figure as a representation of masculinity within shifting socio-historical contexts.

- Demonstrate through the work of art how the evolution of American superhero comics is shaped by, and in turn influences Western masculine ideals and ideas, history and culture.
- Design the work of art to be fully interactive and non-linear and to combine text, image and animation within the work.
- Construct the work of art with potential pedagogical use as a tool to prompt reflection around issues of masculinity, identity, role models and heroism and the way gender ideals are shaped by society, history and popular cultural contexts.

Introduction

In this thesis, I address the following research questions through the medium of interactive visual art:

How and why has the representation of male superheroes in American comics changed over seven decades in relation to cultural and social representations of Western masculinity in the corresponding time periods?

Can some of the answers be explored in the form of an interactive work of art?

Can this work have the potential to be a pedagogical tool?

This written component, which accompanies the work of art, aims to provide a detailed chapter-by-chapter explanation and record of the MetaMan project's first four years. It begins with an introduction to the research questions and the literature I reviewed. This is followed by a discussion of the theory used to determine the project's form and who its potential audience may be. The artistic process I underwent to conceptualise and create the interactive software I developed is then discussed in detail, as is an account of a pilot scheme conducted with 120 young men between the ages of 11-14 to discern potential pedagogical applications. The writing concludes with an examination of my research findings, and further plans for research as well as for the software.

Literature Review

Like a novel, an opera or a ballet, myth is make-believe; it is a game that transfigures our fragmented, tragic world, and helps us to glimpse new possibilities by asking ‘what if?’—a question which has also provoked some of our most important discoveries in philosophy, science and technology.

-Karen Armstrong¹

1. Myth, Archetype and Narrative

The starting point for my research and the art I created was the link I perceived between the narrative structure and character types of American superhero comics and mythology (see Appendix 1) and I conducted a review of literature that examines the history and purpose of human storytelling and myth.

In Jung and Kerenyi (2002), Levi-Strauss (1963), Barthes (2000), Campbell (1972) and Lefkowitz (2003), I came across themes, narrative conventions and character types that reoccur and parallel each other in the myths of human society irrespective of religion, cultural background and pre-existing knowledge.² Mythology was never static at the time of its creation; it was subject to a fair amount of changes, due to stories being passed on via word of mouth, or for reasons of political propaganda or to reflect the changes facing society. These text present that myths were intended to provide societies

¹Armstrong (2005: 8-9)

²Jung and Kerenyi (2002:85)

with explanations for the unexplainable, such as forces of nature or the changing seasons. Jung defines these overarching themes as, ‘mythological components, which, because of their typical nature, we call “motifs”, “primordial images”, types or—as I have named them—*archetypes*.’³

Booker (2004) seeks to explain reasoning behind storytelling, using a selection of narratives that range from the ancient Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the *Descent of Inanna* to books, plays and films written during the twenty-first century.⁴ The author makes use of Jung’s definition of archetypes by presenting seven archetypal narratives: Overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, The Quest, Voyage and Return, Comedy, Tragedy and Rebirth and the character archetypes used in these narratives.⁵ In order to outline why human society has told stories for centuries and continues to do so, the author presents the argument that human beings are locked in a perpetual struggle for balance between the archetype of the Self, also described as ‘feminine’ traits of compassion and empathy,⁶ and the archetype of the Ego, described as ‘masculine’ traits of power and selfish desire.⁷ Booker’s view is that narratives initially existed to communicate this need for balance to a culture or society.⁸

Booker then details how human society looks for narrative conventions in fiction as well as in real life and that this has been put to use throughout history, believing, for example, that political propaganda is successful in its aims because it paints the

³ *Ibid.*:86. Emphasis original.

⁴ Booker (2004:5)

⁵ *Ibid.*:21-228

⁶ *Ibid.*:305

⁷ *Ibid.*:556

⁸ *Ibid.*:565-566

opposing side as a monster to be overcome and thus addresses its audience's archetypal expectations that good must triumph over evil.⁹

Booker's arguments and use of archetypal figures and narratives were useful to me at this stage of the research, and I agree with his argument that Western culture harbours certain expectations of narrative. I believe that this argument can be applicable to superhero narratives, which feature conventions of their own (see Appendix 2). I find Booker's reduction of the purpose of narrative to the struggle between the Self and the Ego potentially constrained and problematic if I were to adopt it as unequivocal fact in my research rather than one possible view. The categorisation of the Self's characteristics as 'feminine' and those of the Ego as 'masculine' is one I did not strictly agree with, but kept in mind and will return to when discussing literature relating to the alter-ego and secret identity of the superhero as well as literature that examines masculinity.

Schmidt (2001) believes that 'to a writer, archetypes are the blueprints for building well-defined characters.'¹⁰ He uses each of the twelve principle Greek gods and the Egyptian deities Isis and Osiris as the model for each character archetype in his character creation guide.¹¹ Each chapter shows the positive and negative sides of each archetype, how other characters view them, the factors that motivate them and the matters they fear and concludes with a list of examples of each character type in film, television and stage plays.¹² Finally, the so-called 'Masculine' and 'Feminine' journeys are discussed. The former is a story model patterned after the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and

⁹ Ibid.:668

¹⁰ Schmidt (2001:9)

¹¹ Ibid.:9

¹² Ibid.:21-166

focuses on a character setting out to complete a goal, either alone, or with the assistance of allies. Victory can only be achieved through personal growth and questioning one's place in the world.¹³ The latter is a story model patterned after the *Descent of Inanna*, and centres on a character gaining the courage to willingly face real or symbolic death, emerging as a fully-self-aware individual.¹⁴

Although the work of Schmidt showed me how archetypes can be deliberately used to create narrative works, I disagree with the narrow gendered labelling of 'Masculine/Male journey' and 'Feminine/Female journey'. While the author acknowledges that male characters can undergo 'Feminine' journeys and female characters can undergo 'Masculine' journeys, this terminology is problematic as it seems to suggest that completing goals is a 'masculine' trait while attaining self-awareness is 'feminine'.

Campbell builds upon Jung's definition of archetypes and places them into the context of mythic heroes and their deeds,¹⁵ which I felt this was an essential building block for the development of the artwork.

The archetypal figure of the hero is traditionally placed within a narrative structure described by Campbell as the classical monomyth:

'A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.'¹⁶

¹³ Ibid.:243-278

¹⁴ Ibid.:199-242

¹⁵ Campbell (1988:17-19)

¹⁶ Ibid.:30

Campbell then discusses the stories of numerous mythic and folkloric heroes through the lens of the monomyth and through using a narrative formula described as the hero's adventure, providing me with further building blocks. The formula of the hero's adventure begins with departure from his familiar environment and circumstances following his response, whether by chance or design, to the 'call to adventure'.¹⁷ He is then given material aid such as amulets or weapons by a 'protective figure'¹⁸ (often a supernatural entity in disguise) before he 'crosses the first threshold'¹⁹ to the realm of supernatural wonder mentioned in the summary of the monomyth. Therein he undergoes a series of trials and ordeals that test him. If successful, he is rewarded with a 'life-transmuting trophy',²⁰ whether 'the runes of wisdom, the Golden Fleece, or his sleeping princess'²¹ and has the responsibility of returning with it to the world he initially left, bringing the monomyth full circle. If he does not refuse this responsibility,²² he returns to benefit his community.²³

The structure of the monomyth may not seem initially compatible with the conventions of superhero comics, although there were similarities regarding the hero venturing forth and ultimately emerging victorious from his trials. I tried to consolidate the structure of every superhero narrative I could remember encountering into a single structure in the style of the classical monomyth in order to compare the two. This resulted in: 'the superhero's call to adventure comes when he responds to a threat (often a villain or impending disaster) to his community that only he has the ability to confront. His

¹⁷ Ibid.: 49-58

¹⁸ Ibid.:69-77

¹⁹ Ibid. 77-89

²⁰ Ibid.: 193

²¹ Ibid.: 193

²² Ibid.: 193-196

²³ Ibid.: 228

material aid may come in the form of his powers or gadgets or allies and he is faced with a series of dangers that lead up to the confrontation with the threat. The threat is ultimately defeated and the superhero returns to his community to wait until he is needed once again.’

As I continued to explore the hero archetype, I learned how its definition and characteristics have evolved through culture and history, that of America in particular. Lawrence and Jewett have restructured the definition of the classical monomyth as dictated by the structure and needs of American culture (where superhero comics originated) into what they have dubbed the American Monomyth:

‘A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity.’²⁴

In both the classical and American definitions (and my own attempt at defining the ‘superhero monomyth’), the monomyth retains its core concept of a hero figure carrying out superhuman feats and performing great deeds. Neither definition could be seamlessly applied to the superhero figure, however. The superhero does not ‘recede into obscurity’ after his victories; he returns the following month in a new adventure. Lawrence and Jewett address this, giving the emergence of serial narratives in media such as television programmes, radio shows and comic books in the 20th century as the

²⁴ Lawrence and Jewett (2002:6)

reason the American monomyth evolved in this direction.²⁵ Serialised stories ‘required a heroic format with traditional appeals of adventure and redemption but without marital resolution at the end’,²⁶ for this would require a new hero figure to appear in the next instalment of the narrative.²⁷ This indicated to me that researching the changes superhero figures undergo through time could not be complete without researching the forms of media these figures appear in, how these cause narrative and structural variations to the superhero genre and what these variations are. I will return to this issue shortly.

Keeping the monomyth, the structure of the hero’s adventure and the need to investigate the superhero’s evolution in mind, I continued to research the hero archetype. Armstrong examines, from eras ranging from the Palaeolithic period to the early 20th century, how the initial creation of a culture’s mythology and heroes stem from that culture’s circumstances, practices, concerns, beliefs and needs.²⁸ This echoes Booker’s observations during his examination of narratives at different points in history, although Armstrong does not discuss the Self and the Ego. Armstrong echoes Lefkowitz when presenting the view that ‘the myth is essentially a guide; it tells us what we must do in order to live more richly’,²⁹ and how ‘throughout our lives, we all find ourselves in situations where we come face to face with the unknown, and the myth of the hero shows us how to behave’³⁰ and she shares Jung’s argument that myth ‘not only helped people to make sense of their lives but also revealed regions of the human mind that

²⁵ Ibid.:36

²⁶ Ibid.:36

²⁷ Ibid.:37

²⁸ This is examined on an era-by-era basis in Armstrong (2005)

²⁹ Ibid.:10

³⁰ Ibid.:38

would otherwise have been inaccessible.³¹

This stage of the literature review suggested to me that explorations of the purposes of narrative, myth and the hero archetype may yield differing theories, possibly because the exact natures of narrative, myth and the hero archetype are not static throughout history. Their purpose, content and characteristics, as indicated by this stage of the literature review, are culturally contingent. Therefore, the next stage of the project's development would be to review literature that could provide me with information that contextualises the superhero figure, its creation and the reasons behind it, in light of the culture it emerged from.

2. History and Cultural Context of the Superhero

The starting point for this stage of the literature review was Reynolds (1992) in which the author attempts to define the mythology of the superhero. He begins with an observation that put me to mind of Lawrence and Jewett's discussion of media that allowed for the serialisation of narratives featuring heroes and made me aware that mass media such television and cinema :

Created as comic-book heroes, [Batman, Superman, Spider-Man and Wonder Woman] remain more widely known through television, the movies and (in the case of Batman and Superman) through a vigorous presence in American and European popular culture that ensures their recognition by millions who have never read a Batman comic or seen a Superman film.³²

This is followed by a brief history of the superhero and superhero genre from the late

³¹ Ibid.:10-11

³² Reynolds (1992: 7)

1930s to the 1980s, where a theme becomes evident; the evolution of the superhero figure is in part defined by the interests of its audience at any given point in time.³³

Superman's creator Jerry Siegel and his inspiration for a character who has existed in Western mass media for over seven decades. Siegel describes how he was 'lying in bed counting sheep when all of a sudden it hits me. I conceive a character like Samson, Hercules, and all the strong men I have ever heard of rolled into one. Only more so.'³⁴

Reynolds provides a definition of the genre (see Appendix 2) and examines how these conventions affect the way readers approach comics as well as how they affect the presentation of narrative continuity within the genre.

When approaching texts that addressed the evolution of the superhero figure, I discovered a difference of opinion displayed in the literature for the first time.

The works of Coogan, LoCicero, and Brown present as fact the theory that the ancient mythic hero has evolved into the modern superhero.³⁵

This view is contrasted by that of Klock, who states that 'academic approaches to superhero comic books take three major forms: structural mythology, cultural history, and cultural studies'.³⁶ His text begins by informing the reader that the works of Jung, Campbell, Levi-Strauss and Reynolds will not be used to as building blocks for his literary criticism of the superhero³⁷ and that this decision was made on the grounds that 'these kinds of observations in regard to popular culture have become tedious, and it

³³ Ibid: 8-9

³⁴ Reynolds (1992:10)

³⁵ See Coogan (2006:116-125), LoCicero (2008), Brown (2000: Kindle location 2275-2282)

³⁶ Klock (2002.:10)

³⁷ Ibid.: 8-10

should be the place of future criticisms to provide something more than structural mythology and systems like it'.³⁸ Michael Chabon's preface to Bolton (2008), *Secret Skin: An Essay in Unitard Theory*, believes that 'apart from a marked tendency to orphanhood, the superhero generally disappoints the expectations of mythology'.³⁹ He cites the superhero's birth as an ordinary, powerless individual, struggles to 'fit into the expectations of the quotidian world',⁴⁰ sense of moral obligation and assuming a secret identity rather than boast about his exploits as reasons for this viewpoint.⁴¹ Chabon contrasts these traits with those of a classical hero who is characterised by 'the lust for glory and fame and treasure'⁴² and 'the boastful trumpeting of one's name and parentage'⁴³ and concludes that 'the superhero is a parvenu in the house of adventure, an immigrant on the shores of myth'.⁴⁴

These opposing views caused me to evaluate my process thus far. To use, as phrasing, the three approaches listed by Klock, I had attained an understanding of structural mythology and was in the process of doing the same with cultural history and studies. I agreed with the belief that the superhero figure has its origins in mythic archetypes, but maintained that the cultural context of the figure at different points in time was of paramount importance to my project. By combining the three approaches to produce a work of art, I hoped to create knowledge that was fascinating and compelling. However, I took Klock's view as a warning; the work of art might be in danger of becoming 'tedious' if I presented it as a visual history lesson that was not engaging to its audience. Chabon's contrast of the mythic hero and the superhero confirmed what the first stage

³⁸ Ibid.:10

³⁹ Bolton (2008: 14)

⁴⁰ Ibid.:14

⁴¹ Ibid.:15

⁴² Ibid.:14

⁴³ Ibid.:15

⁴⁴ Ibid.:15

of the narrative review suggested: that even if superhero figures' origins may lie in the realm of classical myths, their form owes a potentially superior debt to their contemporary cultural circumstances. Keeping these viewpoints and my own responses to them in mind, I proceeded to review literature which examines the superhero from historical and cultural perspectives.

The modern superhero was introduced into American mass media with the first appearance of Siegel and Shuster's Superman in 1938.⁴⁵ Superman was met with tremendous success, largely because of the social and political circumstances he was born into;⁴⁶ a country still recovering from the Great Depression and facing the Second World War. He did not begin his career fighting supervillains who have become an iconic part of his mythology like Lex Luthor⁴⁷ and Brainiac.⁴⁸ Instead, he fought 'the villains that people were really worried about at the time: gangsters, corrupt politicians, fascists and war profiteers',⁴⁹ supporting Armstrong's research findings that a hero figure is defined partially by the concerns of the society that produced him.

Superman's subsequent evolutions continue to support Armstrong's argument, as Sabin explains:

In his earliest outings, [Superman] had been a kind of super-social worker, in the comic's words, a 'Champion of the Oppressed', reflecting the liberal idealism of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Drunks, wife-batterers and gamblers received his attention... Then, when the Cold War came to America, the character evolved into a fantasy guardian of the world order: an all-powerful, at times slightly portly-looking conservative, fighting for 'Truth, Justice and the American Way'. Later still, he would be revamped for more cynical times.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Daniels (2004:21)

⁴⁶ Knowles (2007:3)

⁴⁷ Lex Luthor first appeared in *Action Comics* #23 (April 1940). Daniels (1998: 66)

⁴⁸ Brainiac was introduced in *Action Comics* # 242 (July 1958). Ibid.:104

⁴⁹ Knowles (2007:3)

⁵⁰ Sabin (1996:61)

The upcoming Software and Content chapter examines the cultural context and representation of the superhero figure to a great extent, referring to literature reviewed here as well as to additional texts.

3. Further Texts on the Superhero

Fingeroth (2004) examines the superhero genre of comics in a psychological context, basing said analyses on the works of Freud and Jung, primarily. Easthope (1992) describes the genre as having stemmed from teenaged male wish-fulfilment fantasies. In the more history-orientated Sabin (1996), the influence of adventure newspaper comic strips such as *Wash Tubbs*, *Buck Rogers*, *Tarzan* and *The Phantom* on the superhero genre is examined, as well as the earlier pulp novels.

Conroy (2004), Goulart (2004) and Daniels (2004) combine factual and historical information with images and information about the characters and their narratives.

Morris and Morris (2005) examine the philosophy of superheroes by exploring issues of ethics and morality in the context of specific characters.

Dougall's two books offer little historical fact from the world outside comics. They are written in an in-universe style that focuses on the superheroes' histories and narratives within the setting of the comics, in the same manner as biographical information on non-fictional people.

Sabin (1996), Daniels (1991), Daniels (2004) and Simpson, Rodiss and Bushell (2004) explore the superhero from historical perspectives, giving the reader insight into how he

came about and how his genre conventions have evolved. Conroy (2004), Dougall (2006), Sabin (1996), Beatty, Dougall, Jimenez, Greenberger and Wallace (2004), and Levitz (2010) chart the evolution of his appearance.

Within the genre itself, there are narrative works that challenge and test the boundaries of established superhero rules and conventions (see Appendix 2). Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (1986) and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) exemplify this. Such texts often become the subject of questions, debates and essays within the field.⁵¹

Through reading the essays and interviews with comics creators in regards to superheroes in DeFalco (2006), DeFalco (2004) and Voger (2006), I had access to behind-the-scenes information regarding the storytelling choices made by the interviewed comic writers and editors for story arcs like *The Death of Superman* and *Batman: A Death in the Family*. I also learned artist Jim Lee's views on thematic and stylistic approaches to drawing Batman⁵², which I found useful in light of how I planned to draw many versions of the same superhero figure in this work.

It became clear to me that superhero is 'a significant innovation of 20th century culture produced by the media [he] inhabits (among other cultural forces)'⁵³ and has undergone significant changes in the seven decades he has been a feature of Western mass media⁵⁴ (see Appendix 1 for my personal observations of this). This stage of the literature review indicated that the cultural and historical context of the superhero is also reliant upon the media he is presented in and so this became the next topic I focused on.

⁵¹ Fingeroth (2004:156)

⁵² Voger (2006:68)

⁵³ Wandtke (2007: 231)

⁵⁴ Fingeroth (2004:34)

4. A Mass Media Hero

In addition to media presenting the superhero, I recalled how in my personal experience, I had encountered hero figures that did not fit into the parameters of the superhero genre in books, films, video games and sequential art. It would be, I decided, a very limited view if I were to claim the superhero was the only modern form of the archetypal hero figure in America and if I ignored media forms the superhero and the non-super hero figure were represented in the 20th and 21st centuries when developing my work of art. Lawrence and Jewett believe that modern stories of the hero figure in American media ‘arose in conjunction with evolving technologies of presentation’.⁵⁵ They provide an example of this evolution using the format changes of Owen Wister’s 1902 western novel *The Virginian* (which follows the structure of the American monomyth) across a century:

Cecil B. De Mille gave the book its first silent-film treatment in 1914...By 1929, *The Virginian* had become a sound film...In 1946, the movie was remade in color. In 1959, the publisher Gilberton issues the text in comic-book format as a Classic Illustrated (No.150). Then, in 1962, *The Virginian* became a serialized television program that lasted nine seasons. *The Virginian*-as-novel took on an electronic textual form when the Gutenberg Project published it in 1998 as a downloadable file. And in 2000, *The Virginian*-as-film was recast once again for a world premiere on the TNT cable network.⁵⁶

Fingerroth describes a similar evolution in reference to *The Shadow*, a pulp novel adventure hero:

⁵⁵ Lawrence and Jewett (2002: 8)

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*:8

In the 1920s and 1930s, there was a kind of synergistic back-and-forth between the troika of pulps, movies and radio. Characters like the Shadow...started in rough form in one medium, were modified in another, and then, with those changes intact, would become thus modified in his “original” form...through modern communications technology, the various incarnations [of these characters] were transmitted simultaneously to thousands and millions of eager readers, viewers and listeners.⁵⁷

The figure of the superhero was not only subject to revision during different time periods, but across different forms of media as well, in the same manner as the changes to the presentation of *The Virginian* and *The Shadow* described above.

Lawrence and Jewett address how revisions to the superhero figure within their original media of the comic book can also occur for reasons other than cultural factors, in this case because of advancements in the other media they appear in:

In the first years of its comic-book life, Superman’s power of flight was limited to prodigious leaps. When the first motion-picture cartoons appeared, however, “he gained the power of pure flight”, which was subsequently incorporated in the comics.⁵⁸

The themes of formal evolution because of advancements in media, the theme of narrative evolution because of advancements in media and the how the former can inform the latter, were themes that my work would need to address.

To provide a reference for my work, I constructed the following chart based on textual information and photographs found in Daniels (1991), (1998) and (2004),

⁵⁷ Fingerroth (2004:39)

⁵⁸ Lawrence and Jewett (2002: 42)

Sabin (1996), Voger (2006) Wandtke (2007) and Ndalians (2009) as well as my own observations in regards to the era I listed on the chart as the 2000s:

Era	Additional mass media comic books superheroes appear in outside of comic books
1940s	Radio and movie serials, animation, novels, newspaper comic strips, merchandise
1950s	Live-action TV shows, merchandise, newspaper comic strips
1960s	Live-action TV shows, animation, stage musical, Pop Art, merchandise
1970s	Live-action TV shows, movies, animation, merchandise
1980s	Live-action TV shows, movies, merchandise, newspaper comic strips
1990s	Live-action TV shows, movies, video games (console and arcade), animation, novels, merchandise (some v. high-end)
2000s	Movies, video games (console and MMO), animation (TV, direct to DVD, web) live-action TV shows, webcomics, theme parks, references in popular music, merchandise (some v. high-end), museum exhibition

Table ii: Seven decades of superheroes in mass media

The literature and chart reinforced my awareness of how the superhero has been consistently presented in forms of mass media since his creation. Despite the ancient origins of the hero archetype, modern superheroes were born into the world of American mass media. Whether their appearance is in comic books, graphic novels, films, live-action or animated programmes, video games or even musical theatre is immaterial; since Superman’s first appearance in 1938, these figures have been consistently presented in mass-produced forms of visual culture. This emphasised to me the importance of using a form of mass media as the means of presenting a work of art that uses the superhero as its subject matter; the form would suit the subject.

5. Audience and Fandom

Artists and writers bring the tapestry of their life experiences and inspiration to the works they create, and an audience does the same with the visual and textual media they

encounter. This is the basis of much visual culture theory, which Holloway and Beck address, as well as a point of view I wished to focus on in my own practice:

That the meaning of the ‘text’ is multiple, that its ‘truths’ are contingent upon the relative social, economic and political location of the reader or reading group, has been the greatest and most enduring lesson of contemporary theory, and has substantially informed the field of visual culture studies. Indeed, one persuasive signifier of the extent to which interdisciplinary visual culture studies has emerged as a more or less full-formed ‘postmodern’ discourse...has been in its inversion of the old binary that privileged the interrogation of the text’s production over the circumstances in which it is received...To do visual culture studies...is ‘to study the genealogy, definition and functions of postmodern everyday life from the point of the *consumer* rather than the producer’ (Mirzoeff 1999:3, emphasis original). Similarly...‘meaning does not reside within images, but it is produced the moment that they are consumed by and circulate among viewers’.⁵⁹

The ‘consumers’ of comic books, their readers and fans, have most certainly provided meaning to the images and texts within this form of mass visual culture in a unique manner. Brown observes how ‘comic book fandom is one of the most popular and best organized of media fan culture’⁶⁰ and that ‘fan cultures, particularly ones as formalized as comic book fandom, are influenced by rules and conventions, both textual and extratextual, that shape and perpetuate a fan’s reading of a media text.’⁶¹ The superhero genre, in particular, is ‘tightly defined and defended by its committed readership.’⁶²

Pustz, who views American comic fans in the 1990s as a ‘group segmented from the rest of American society by choices of leisure and patterns of consumption’⁶³ examines the history of American comics from the perspective of readership and reader practices. Brown’s exploration of comic book fans and fandom and Pustz’s

⁵⁹ Sturken and Cartwright 2001:7, quoted in Ibid.:5.

⁶⁰ Brown (2000: Kindle location 858)

⁶¹ Ibid.: Kindle location 861

⁶² Reynolds (1992:7)

⁶³ Pustz (1999: Kindle location 344)

examination of comic book culture, confirmed what I had been aware of since my undergraduate study when I became a member of this subculture: the prevalence of interaction with the source medium.

This practice dates back to the 1940s, where many superhero comic publishers established fan clubs their readers could join, such as the Junior Justice Society for fans of the Justice Society of America, or the Sentinels of Liberty for fans of Captain America.⁶⁴

In the 1950s, horror comics publisher EC Comics ‘were creating a sense of cooperation between readers and creators’⁶⁵ by printing letters sent in by fans.

Through the letters pages, fans were able to interact with not only each other, but the characters who hosted the comics themselves.⁶⁶ EC Comics had its own fan club as well, called the EC Fan-Addict Club.⁶⁷

In 1960, at the World Science Fiction Convention, Dick Lupoff and his wife Pat dressed as superheroes Captain Marvel and Mary Marvel and presented the first issue of their fanzine *Xero*, which featured a column focusing on Captain Marvel,⁶⁸ demonstrating another type of engagement with comics.

Letters pages continued to be a feature of comics throughout the 1950s, however in 1961, DC Comics editor Julius Schwartz began to print fans’ addresses along with the letters they sent in,⁶⁹ allowing fans to meet one another outside the letters pages.

The practice of making and distributing comic book-themed fanzines continued throughout the 1960s.⁷⁰ Comic book conventions became events where fans could not only interact with other fans, but meet writers, artists and editors in person as

⁶⁴ Ibid: Kindle location 455-461

⁶⁵ Ibid.: Kindle location:42

⁶⁶ Ibid.: Kindle location:42-47

⁶⁷ Ibid.: Kindle location:585

⁶⁸ Ibid.: Kindle location:625-630

⁶⁹ Ibid.: Kindle location:645

⁷⁰ Ibid.: Kindle location:650

well.⁷¹

The ways fans have interacted with comics as listed above continue to the present day, albeit in additional and modified forms. The medium of the internet allows for fan interaction to take place instantaneously on comic-themed websites, message boards, chat rooms and role-playing games.⁷² Pustz states that participation by fans is a feature of comic book culture that is ‘more widespread than in any other culture centered around popular media.’⁷³ This is a view I agree with and also base upon my own experiences with comic book fandom over the last twelve years, which include the creation of fan art, fan fiction, discussions in person and over the internet with other fans, attending comic book conventions, comic book signings by authors and artists and participation in internet role playing games. I believed that the work of art I planned to create could not discount this culture of interactivity and participation and needed to feature it in a prominent manner.

6. Masculinity

Another way that superhero comic readers can engage with the genre is ‘how the comics help them form an understanding of masculinity in contemporary culture.’⁷⁴ The reading of superheroes as a representation of masculinity can be traced back to the earliest days of the genre. Although Siegel and Shuster had designed Superman’s costume to make the character appear ‘glamorous and unique’,⁷⁵ it is difficult to ignore how the character’s body presents him as a ‘perfectly unified and complete’⁷⁶

⁷¹ Ibid.: Kindle location:972

⁷² Ibid.: Kindle location:79

⁷³ Ibid.: Kindle location:79

⁷⁴ Brown (2000: Kindle location 230-236)

⁷⁵ Daniels (2004:21)

⁷⁶ Easthope (1992: 28)

example of masculinity. Bolton references the classical Greek ideal of the epic male hero's body⁷⁷ when he describes Superman's costume:

With its flowing cape and skintight unitard, inspired by sources as diverse as the costumes worn by circus acrobats and Douglas Fairbanks in his period pictures of the 1920s, it combined the male fantasies of an idealized classical nudity with a flamboyant, performative intemperance.⁷⁸

The subject of masculinity in relation to the superhero cannot be explored without an attempt to define the nature of Western masculinity itself. Although there is a 'widely held, commonsensical assumption that masculinity is a standardized container, fixed by biology,'⁷⁹ in Western culture, when masculinity is examined critically in relation to Western culture and history, its definition is not stagnant nor is it static. Doyle elaborates, after investigating perspectives and representations of masculinity from ancient Greece to the 1980s:

What value does a historical perspective of the male gender provide?...One mistake we can avoid as the result of a greater understanding of the history of the male gender is the erroneous belief that what society expects of males today has *always* been expected. For example, many males today believe they must appear to be strongly sexed and completely competent in sexual relationships in order to prove to themselves and to other men and women that they are, in fact, truly masculine. But we know from history that the expectation that men be more highly sexed than women is a relatively recent addition to the male gender. Likewise, many men believe that aggressiveness is an essential and long-standing feature of the male gender. Again, however, we know during the Christian era, the ideal male was nonviolent. The practice of 'turning one's cheek' rather than striking back in anger was expected of the spiritual man. Thus one of the significant values of a knowledge of the historical perspective is that we can see

⁷⁷ Doyle (1989: 27)

⁷⁸ Bolton (2008: 25)

⁷⁹ Beynon (2008:2)

the contemporary male gender for what it really is—a *changing social phenomenon*.⁸⁰

Doyle's view is supported by that of Haywood and Mac an Ghail, who emphasise the social nature of masculinity,⁸¹ Beynon, who declares that 'masculinity is the child of culture; shaped and expressed differently at different times in different circumstances in different places by individuals and groups,'⁸² and Whitehead, who argues:

At the level of, for example, biology, the brain or genetics, masculinity does not exist; it is mere illusion. Masculinity is not a product or an entity that can be grasped by hand or discovered under the most powerful microscope. No amount of cultural representation can make masculinities biologically real. Any sense of masculinity's embeddedness in men's 'inner selves' comes only from fictional and superficial accounts of what a 'man' is.⁸³

This is the approach to masculinity that I will be presenting in the work of art in relation to the evolution of the male superhero. Masculinity does not evolve inside a vacuum; a man changes as the world around him does—or sometimes because of it and the role of a hero is shaped by cultural context. The upcoming Software and Content chapter explores how the male superhero and the cultural representation of Western masculinity have changed over seven decades in an in-depth manner.

⁸⁰ Doyle (1989:44)

⁸¹ Haywood, Mac an Ghail (2003:146)

⁸² Beynon (2008:2)

⁸³ Whitehead (2008:34)

Software and Content

Mythology, we have seen, is an art form. Any powerful work of art invades our being and changes it forever

-Karen Armstrong⁸⁴

Through research findings gained from my review of literature as well as my own artistic explorations into the representation of hero figures, I ultimately developed a work of art that takes the form of interactive software, written originally for the project. It is comprised of seven separate interactive environments, each representing a different decade from 1940 to 2010, and featuring as a guide, MetaMan, an archetypal male superhero of my own creation.

The software places the evolution of the male superhero in American media over a period of seventy years in parallel with the evolution social and cultural representations of American masculinity in the corresponding time periods. Each decade's version of the superhero character is examined, from the standpoints of physical representation, art style, personality, types of storylines, trends within the comic industry and involvement in media outside of comic books. Each decade's cultural representation of masculinity is likewise examined, citing historical events, political climates, trends in popular culture and changes in representations of visual culture as its contributing factors. The information is presented as informative texts,

⁸⁴ Armstrong (2005: 154)

illustrations and animations that appear individually or in combination with one another and are accessed via interacting with characters and objects in each time period.

In order to provide an authentic representation of the comic book style of each period, the colour palettes, typefaces and stylistic differences characteristic to every decade are portrayed accurately. The software presents its facts in a manner that offers flexibility to the user based on the choices they make while interacting with the software, providing an experience that varies from one user to another.

This chapter details the reasons for *MetaMan*'s medium and themes, its potential audience and purpose and finally, the artistic process I employed to take *The Adventures of MetaMan* from the conceptual stage through to functional software, supported by detailed rationales and findings from my research.

1. Setting the Scene

Through the literature review I learned that the hero archetype has existed and persisted in the narrative tradition of human beings independent of cultural barriers.⁸⁵ Each of the world's countries boasts a rich and long-standing tradition of mythology and folklore featuring stories of heroes.⁸⁶ The hero archetype has remained a feature of human narrative history until the present day, although it has evolved in accordance with the evolution of human society.⁸⁷ My research has suggested that the modern superhero

⁸⁵ Rank (2004:1)

⁸⁶ Knowles (2007:23)

⁸⁷ Booker (2004: 645-698)

owes a creative and evolutionary debt to the hero archetype.⁸⁸

The superhero is a staple of 21st-century Western society;⁸⁹ the tropes and conventions of his adventures are comfortable and familiar (see Appendix 2), while still commanding the power to inspire and excite as evidenced by his continued success after seven decades in existence. Still a mainstay in the pantheon of comic book genres, superheroes are equally at home in forms of media from cinema, television and video games⁹⁰ to fine art and fashion.⁹¹

This is a character whose nature sets him apart from ordinary humans and is commonly seen as a part of entertainment rather than education. In the West today, science and technology give answers that humanity's ancestors used myths to explain, as Rank and Armstrong have confirmed.⁹² The superhero, in developing from the mythic hero archetype, can be seen as both myth and education as well as story and entertainment in the contemporary sense. I intend to illustrate ways in which the former can be part of teaching perspectives and values regarding human nature and behaviour. Given this link with archetypal characters, the superhero's 'secret', his enduring appeal, may stem from audience perception of his powers, his deeds or his masculine nature. Indeed, there may be other factors.

This success may be linked with offering the reader a hero who also has the humanity necessary for readers to actively look for narratives featuring his exploits and heroism. For the reader, the appeal may be aspirational or inspirational. They may be looking for

⁸⁸ Wandtke (2007:15)

⁸⁹ Ndalianis (2009:4)

⁹⁰ Wandtke (2007:5)

⁹¹ Bolton (2008) provides both exhibition catalogue and commentary on the presentation of superheroes' bodies and costumes and the way audiences respond to them.

⁹² Rank (2004:375), Armstrong (2005:6)

a saviour or ways to 'save' themselves. This can lead to a number of questions about the superhero's function as role model and how to harness that potential to provide maximum benefit for readers.

The body of such superhero figures is unquestionably muscular; the image this projects, particularly when clad in the traditional skin-tight uniform, is one of power, strength and virility. This too leads to issues about representation and the reader's perception of such figures. It could be argued that 'ordinary' readers may feel alienated, feeling that muscles make might. Further, it flags up the need to explore whether all superheroes sport this type of body, or not, and how and whether this is a factor when regarded by readers. I will return to this issue shortly.

2. Establishing the Form

1. The Need for Interaction

The form this work of art would take needed to be determined. Replicating the relationship between the mass medium of superhero narratives and their audience during each decade of the medium's existence was a priority of mine for the project. I wanted to spark the same sense of excitement and freedom of imagination that reading a superhero comic has upon its audience⁹³ as well as maintaining the spirit of reader interaction that has characterised comic book culture for decades. An audience is not passive. The audience of superhero comics is especially not passive.

This approach also builds upon the relationship between visual culture and its 'consumers', which is characterised by personal and cultural contingencies, just as

⁹³

representations of superheroes and masculinity are. To say that visual media, at any given time in history, is a reflection of the era of its creation is far too simplistic a statement, for ‘the ubiquity of visual culture today, and the circulation of capital as visual information and entertainment, mean that visual culture can no longer be construed, if indeed it ever could be, as a simple ‘reflection’ of historical experience.’⁹⁴

While I was confident in my abilities to achieve the above goals in this work, I was unable to determine who my audience was and how they were to benefit from interacting with it. Although a history lesson poorly hidden inside a superhero narrative was the last thing I wanted to create, I nevertheless wanted to explore if the superhero could be used for possible pedagogical aims. The work needed to be accessible on multiple levels; to its audience, but also to myself throughout the creation process.

Although comic book fandom, as observed by Pustz, Brown and myself, is a thriving subculture on the internet, the internet has also proved to be an ideal medium to showcase superheroes and further establish these figures as part of mainstream popular culture. By the dawn of the 21st century, internet access had become a common part of Western life. By 2010, it was no longer restricted to computers, with mobile devices providing the internet on-the-go. Comic book publishers offer their products online for immediate viewing, doing away with the need to visit a comic shop. Marvel Comics’ official website provides excellent examples of this, offering digital comics, motion comics, film trailers, promotional materials for films, and full episodes of animated series as well as community message board features and downloadable content—all

⁹⁴ Holloway and Beck (2005:3)

featuring Marvel's pantheon of superheroes.⁹⁵ Touch-screen devices replicate the act of turning the pages of a comic book.⁹⁶ Superhero properties, whether they are television series, films or comic books, are often promoted online through viral advertising campaigns.⁹⁷

This may be the perfect time to maximise and build upon superheroes' strong footing in popular culture.

The way that text and the presentation of the superhero have evolved into their current states in contemporary culture held the beginnings of the solution to my dilemma of form. At present, technology has expanded to the point where books are no longer limited to their traditional shape and size and can be stored and read with ease on digital devices such as computers, e-readers and mp3 players. Superheroes and their narratives are no strangers to the world of digital media and technology, as 'computers stand proudly beside comic books, films, television series, and novels as purveyors of heroes who redeem threatened communities.'⁹⁸ They appear in video games adapted from superhero films and comics, as well as in games such as *City of Heroes* (2004-present), a massively multiplayer online role-playing game that allows players to assume the role of a superhero of their own creation. The contemporary superhero and the media he is presented in are in a state of evolution, as Wandtke observes:

⁹⁵ Retrieved December 1, 2010 from <http://marvel.com/>

⁹⁶ A perusal of 'smartphone' apps at the time of writing (March 05, 2011) yields the Comic Zeal Comic Reader by bitolithic (<http://www.comiczealapp.com/>), Digital Comics by Madcap Studios (<http://www.madcapstudios.com/>), and comiXology's comiXology (<http://www.comixology.com/>).

⁹⁷ Defined by Howard (2005) as '...today's electronic equivalent of old-fashioned word of mouth. It's a marketing strategy that involves creating an online message that's novel or entertaining enough to prompt consumers to pass it on to others — spreading the message across the Web like a virus at no cost to the advertiser,' viral marketing remains a prevalent advertising technique six years after the publication of the quoted article.

⁹⁸ Lawrence and Jewett (2002: 221)

‘Consequently, while the source medium of superheroes should not be forgotten, greater attention must be paid to revisions to the superhero within other media, *particularly as media changes due to technological innovation.*’ (emphasis mine)⁹⁹

This opened up the question of what type of digital media would be the optimum choice for producing the work. I was familiar with computer programs like PowerPoint and Blackboard, but the use of such programs as a platform for the practice would have been limited in the scope of their interaction. They are designed for presentations and classroom settings and while they are designed to communicate information, using them to replicate the entertainment of a superhero comic was not likely to be within their scope, making them a problematic choice of media. Software used to create the graphics found in video games, such as 3D Studio Max or Maya, were not a viable option, due to their complexity and the time frame I was operating within; not if I wished to achieve a professional standard of quality in the work. Adobe’s collection of programs include the software Captivate, described by its manufacturers as a ‘rapid eLearning authoring tool that lets almost anyone create and maintain complex content like software demonstrations, interactive simulations, branching scenarios, and quizzes, without programming.’¹⁰⁰ If I were to utilise Captivate, however, I would still need to create the content I would be using the software to present.

After researching the many applications of Adobe Flash, from website design to web-based video games to animated television programs, I found the a platform with the versatility that I was searching for. It was software that appeared to be limited solely by the imagination of its user. Its drawing tools allow for the creation of complex illustrations and simple geometric shapes as well as everything in between. Built-in

⁹⁹ Wandtke (2007: 231)

¹⁰⁰ Adobe (19 Jan 2009) *faq | Adobe Captivate 5*. Retrieved March 23, 2011 from <http://www.adobe.com/products/captivate/faq/>

animation shortcuts and web design elements eliminate the need to produce frame-by-frame animations or browser scroll bars from scratch while achieving an exceptionally high quality of work. Its integration with the programming language ActionScript provides a way of adding interactivity to projects.¹⁰¹ ActionScript 3.0 is, when compared to its predecessor languages ActionScript 2.0 and ActionScript 1.0, wordy, convoluted and counter-intuitive,¹⁰² however, it offers greater flexibility and freedom to programmers than its past incarnations.¹⁰³ The scope of the software is ambitious even by ActionScript standards; requiring types of code beyond what would be needed to build a typical computer game.¹⁰⁴ Despite this, they were not beyond the parameters of the language and when my professional instruction began, I learned there was no need to alter the content and presentation of the software from what I had already planned to carry out.

However, despite my knowledge and understanding of the theory I planned to employ as well as confidence in my own practice, as an artist working in traditional media with minimal digital involvement, I needed to develop my skills with digital media forms to create the work of art. Given my previous lack of familiarity, this was a significant potential impediment to the work, its quality and coherence. However, handing my sketches and plans to digital media specialists and leaving the realisation of my work to them while I assumed the role of overseer was the last thing I wanted, although expert guidance would of course be necessary. I needed to have direct involvement in its development, as much as I would have had this been a graphic novel or traditionally-

¹⁰¹ Shupe and Rosser (2008)

¹⁰² Perkins (2008:4)

¹⁰³ Ibid.: 2-3

¹⁰⁴ The AddChild/RemoveChild code that is primarily used to run the software is demonstrated in van der Spuy (2009:121) although it is combined with calling external .swf files into a main movie. This is not a typical practice.

created work of art; it is not a mere task of integrating my drawings into the software, but my research findings as well. A lack of familiarity with a medium was no reason to avoid attaining a working knowledge of it; I had, after all, begun the project with no knowledge of the history of myth and the barest familiarity with the history of the superhero genre. To create an interactive work of art required my own interaction with it; it is an extension of the research and cannot be divorced from it merely due to my technological then-ignorance.

I needed to comprehend and experience the scope of the software and immerse myself in it. I needed to engage first-hand with the parameters of Flash; what could and could not be achieved in it; what techniques and layouts are at ease with the functionality of the program and do not go against its grain or do a disservice to my research. Anything less would result in a disconnection between the research, the art, its content and how its audience might engage with it, rendering the entire work disjointed and lopsided. True mastery of Flash as an animation tool is an accomplishment that requires time, knowledge and years of hard work. The same is true of mastering Flash as a digital media tool, programming skills included. It is rare to the point of impossibility to find these two achievements at home in the same individual; these two vastly different uses for the same program demand two totally unique approaches to it. Mastery of Flash, however, regardless of the context, was something I knew I could not hope to achieve in the time it takes to complete a research degree. I would require, perhaps, two taught degrees in two separate fields. Instead, an attainable reality would be developing enough comfort and familiarity with Flash in order to develop this interactive, image-heavy work of art into a cohesive, easy-to-use piece of software.

2. A Potential Audience

I was able to ascertain a potential audience in a more concrete capacity by considering the primary audience of superhero comics themselves. ‘Traditionally, comic books readers have always been a predominantly white and masculine audience.’¹⁰⁵

Brown discovered that among comic readers in the America in the late 1990s, ‘many people were reluctant to identify themselves as comic book fans.’¹⁰⁶

To be a ‘fan’ in Western culture is considered by some to be part of a dubious category of social misfits. And to be a comic book fan, one seems to run the risk of being stereotyped as an awkward, pimply faced geek.

Pustz explains that while this stereotype, known as the *fanboy*, does have a basis in reality, ‘in truth, however, fanboys make up only a small percentage of comic book readers’¹⁰⁷ but he agrees with Brown that ‘the core readership [of comic books] is still adolescent males.’¹⁰⁸

It was probable I might have a ready-made audience for the software within the adolescent male comic fan demographic. I believed this could be a useful starting point for discerning an audience, but too limited of a view if I were to believe it was my only option. As discussed above, enjoyment of superhero figures and narratives is no longer limited to the culture of comic book fandom in the 21st century.

¹⁰⁵ Brown (2000:Kindle location 936))

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.: Kindle location 9344

¹⁰⁷ Pustz (1999:Kindle location 1026)

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.: Kindle location 319

The significance of superhero figures at the start of the 21st century equals that of such figures in the 1940s. They feature heavily in contemporary visual culture, permeating the contemporary mainstream. Children are growing up familiar with these characters via avenues broader than their original platform of comic books. Cartoons starring superheroes have existed since the 1940s (see Table i), but today these cartoons form their own genre, with viewers spoiled for choice as to what characters' animated adventures they wish to follow.¹⁰⁹ The first ten years of the 21st century have produced many high-quality film adaptations of superhero comics, which have now become their own genre of cinema.¹¹⁰ While 2000's *The X-Men* grossed nearly \$300 million, it was 2002's *Spider-Man* that truly kick-started the genre of superhero films in the 21st century, bridging the gap between established fans and the mainstream movie-going public.¹¹¹ *Spider-Man*'s director Sam Raimi made 'a fan's film that was about as true to the spirit of the character and the history of the comic book as a movie could get and still found a huge mass audience for the product.'¹¹² Wright goes on to add that 'upcoming film projects for the Fantastic Four, Iron Man, and Superman all promise an exciting new era for superhero movies,'¹¹³ a prediction which has come to pass. The current mass audience for superhero figures is a significant change to the landscape of Western mass media, especially when compared to the fanboy stigma that was prevalent in the 1990s.

This led me to consider what kind of relationship the software and its content could form with an audience of young men who may or may not be comic readers, but may

¹⁰⁹ To give an idea of the staggering amount of superhero cartoons produced in the first ten years of the 21st Century, the website Superheroes Lives provides a list, organised by company. Retrieved December 01, 2010 from <http://www.superheroeslives.com/indexcartoons.htm>

¹¹⁰ Fingerroth (2004:170)

¹¹¹ Wright (2001: 292)

¹¹² Ibid.:292

¹¹³ Ibid.:292

likely be consumers of media featuring the superhero. Masculinity, identity and role models can be complex subjects for a young man to approach. They might result in embarrassment or resistance when asked about directly. Perhaps, then, the superhero may provide the ideal avenue for discussion of these matters: a heroic male figure who excites and entertains, but is appealing and can be related to easily. By his very nature and history, the superhero echoes and represents the masculine ideals of the last seventy years. Through the variety of physiques and personalities he has assumed over the years, he can be viewed as an example of how the cultural representation of Western masculinity is fluid and not at all static. His continued existence can also demonstrate the power that role models have over human personal development in terms of how they provide a reference point for behaviour and aspirations. A young man approaching the software may have his own preconceptions and opinions regarding superheroes, masculinity, role models and men. Through interacting with the work, the preconceptions might become the groundwork that could lead to deeper thought and reflection regarding these subjects.

The success of the superhero figure in 21st century mass media may provide a starting point for the use of superheroes as tools to aid the personal development of young men through potentially educational resources such as the MetaMan project.

The way that young Western men engage and interact with visual culture and how their minds process it is not the focus of the work, but rather, the backbone upon which the efficacy of the project's potential learning outcomes may be reliant.¹¹⁴ This approach to the project's audience and possible purpose meant that in order to determine whether or

¹¹⁴ This approach is built upon Holloway and Beck's (2005:7) discussion of the foundations of, in this case American, visual culture theory.

not the software had the potential to be used as an educational tool, a pilot scheme involving a number of classroom applications with the software's target audience would need to be conducted, as discussed in the Pilot chapter of this account.

3. Examining Potential Issues

This raised another series of issues. Superheroes are not the only figures young men view as role models. Ordinary humans who achieve notable success such as athletes, sportsmen, musicians and celebrities are also looked up to and admired by this audience and might be an equally valid choice of subject matter for the software. Even in light of this, however, the reason for maintaining the superhero as a subject rather than sportsmen or celebrities was suggested by these figures' 'out of time-ness'. Triumphs in the field of sport, music, film or aiding victims of a catastrophe, are achievements unique to not only particular times, but particular situations and people. While cultural factors can indeed be discussed and examined, the project would risk turning purely into a history lesson; a chronicle of events. This went against the goals I had set for the work. Nor was this project intended to promote one career over another; an inevitability when our own reality is used entirely as the subject matter. It was not to present biographies of real-life heroes, an additional inevitability with this approach. The audience's ability to relate to the work was a must. When dealing with specifics instead of a broad, universal concept like the hero archetype, it would be easy for a young man viewing the project to feel he cannot attain the success of his favourite football hero because their backgrounds are too different, or for him to go out of his way to emulate this sportsman, feeling that is the only way to securing such achievements in his own career. I was seeking to avoid these issues and their implications in my work, and their

possibility and others served to re-emphasise why the superhero was an ideal subject matter for this software. The lifespan of humans, for example, is another factor that dissuaded me from using real-world heroes as a subject. When success is achieved in a particular field, the mark it leaves in the public mind is often fleeting. Its legacy may endure in the record books, historic documentation or in the memories of enthusiasts and trivia fans. However, by its very nature, this type of success cannot be compared to the manner in which superheroes have endured in the public consciousness, transcending even individual interest in the genre. Modern Western culture is steeped in the iconography of the superhero; the symbols of characters like Superman, Batman and Spider-Man are instantly recognisable to Western eyes, eyes that may have never even read a superhero comic, or watched a superhero film. These symbols automatically carry connotations. They instantly bring images to mind of strength, power or possibly men in tights; what is undeniable is that they invoke the viewer's individual perception of a superhero, whether it is as a camp, ridiculous character, a righteous defender of justice, a source of inspiration or something different altogether.¹¹⁵

Superheroes are fictional characters with potentially archetypal origins; their individual deeds are not, in the grand scheme of things, the source behind their appeal. It matters less in the eyes of their audience that the Fantastic Four won a decisive victory against Doctor Doom in a particular panel of a particular issue of a particular year than the fact they routinely combat evil in the first place. As demonstrated by the summaries of monomyths discussed in the literature review, the superhero is constantly a force for good, although how this is manifested depends on historical and cultural contexts. The

¹¹⁵ Brooker (2000:171-178)

superhero's role is as fluid and culturally contingent as the definition of masculinity is through time.

By placing the superhero in the role of a reflection of modern Western masculinity, he gains the potential to communicate complex subjects without losing any of the qualities that grant him audience appeal on both a grand scale and an individual level.

Capitalising on this offers great possibilities for giving young men a platform to assist them in identifying their own ideas of masculinity in a manner that is adaptable to each individual. A learning tool with these aims may potentially be a welcome addition to an age where searching for one's identity while striving for acceptance among not only peer groups but society as a whole is prevalent in the Western mindset.¹¹⁶

At this stage, the concern that using major events in American history and culture might alienate a non-American Western audience arose. Although I could not be certain before pilot testing of the project had taken place, I believed that to proceed with the American focus would not be detrimental to possible pedagogical applications of the software. I will return to this issue in the Pilot chapter. The factors that lead to the shaping of masculinities across the Western world in the decades I am examining are not solely dependent upon American events and culture and a great deal of overlapping takes place between America and the modern Western world. Not least due to the way in which, as addressed by Holloway and Beck:

... we are all conditioned by our structural position within the US-led global market, and hence by our class... Concurrently, of course, the social realm is also 'unified' in that we are all conditioned by constructed discourses of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and by other embedded relationships of social power. The social realm of late American capitalist-democracy is thus stratified and

¹¹⁶ Gauntlett (2008:105-106)

contested, but it is not intrinsically atomized, any more than it could be described as a seamless historical unity.¹¹⁷

Whilst developing my skills and knowledge in this wide range of technical, practical and theoretical areas, I planned to create five different interactive environments depicting eras of American history crucial to the development of the superhero and representing periods in time characterised by drastic changes in the way this character figure is portrayed. These time periods would be: the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, 1990s and the present day. I had deliberately left out the 1970s and 1980s due to time constraints, and intended to reference pivotal events of these decades during the 1990s. I designed the character of MetaMan, an archetypal superhero who could represent the genre without referencing specific characters, and whose evolutions would be presented in each era. The name 'MetaMan' is a multi-layered reference to the characters' evolutions and metamorphoses and to the self-referential qualities of a project that explores the evolution of the superhero presented by a superhero. MetaMan's visual evolution and the rationale behind each of the interactive eras are examined in an in-depth manner shortly. At the time the form of the work was decided upon, I barely had a working knowledge of how to draw and animate in Flash, let alone create programming code. However, knowing I could work with support from Dr Julian Mason, a superb programming instructor, and Steve May, an animator whose use of Flash can perfectly replicate traditional artistic techniques, and taking into account my own abilities as an illustrator, I forged ahead with developing the software regardless.

Perhaps, rather than practice-driven research, I could have completed a work of pure

¹¹⁷ Ibid.:2

research and completed it by circulating a questionnaire to discover male students' ideas about men and heroism that featured illustrations and images of superheroes and events from the past seventy years. However, given my commitment to engaging the potential audience in an educational experience and involving them as stakeholders in the project, I began instead from an approach which emphasised practice and embedded student views in developing MetaMan, rather than seeking their perspectives as an afterthought. The menu representing the years 2000-2010 was completed after incorporating these views and will be discussed thoroughly in the Software and Content and Pilot chapters.

4. Planning the Software

The Adventures of MetaMan was built on not only research and theory but on an in-depth practical artistic process. This process began with sketches that took the components of my vision out of my imagination and placed them into a tangible form. After this stage came the conceptualisation of each time period; MetaMan's design, the look and content of each environment, the evolution of this monumental archetype and the evolution of the Western man.

To start with the 1940s, also called the Golden Age of Comics¹¹⁸, seemed a necessary choice. Although the superhero genre began in 1938, I had chosen the 1940s as the earliest decade the work addressed rather than include the 1930s as a menu or incorporate the late 1930s into the 1940s menu. This was because I wanted to maintain the structure of seven decades for the project, but mainly because of the great success and cultural impact the superhero figure gained because of World War II.

Approaching the project in chronological order would allow me to experience the

¹¹⁸ Daniels (1991:26)

evolution of superhero comic book art firsthand as I recreated the illustration and design principles of the Golden Age, moving on to the period after that and so on.

Upon further reflection, there were several matters that needed to be taken into account before I could proceed. I was still attaining familiarity with the interface and uses of Adobe Flash, and was therefore aware that the first decade would likely take the most time to create. There was a certain sense of the unknown about the first decade; only by actually creating a complete era would I be able to discover if this approach to the practice was a viable one and if my ideas and theories could be presented visually in this manner. I may have mapped out the way in which I would go about the practice, but as long as my sketches remained mere drawings, and not interactive software, I would remain unsure if this was the ideal method. I needed to get started immediately, and I needed to choose an era that I was reasonably familiar with, for the sake of expediency. Aside from the manner in which World War II affected the superhero comic industry, I would need to conduct further research on masculinity, propaganda and the art and mindset of the period if I were to begin with the 1940s.

5. Developing the 1960s Menu

With this in mind, the decade of the 1960s became my choice for a starting point.

My reasons for this were manifold; the 1960s were a turbulent period in American history, one that threw into question all previous ideas of gender identity.¹¹⁹ The pivotal events of the decade were varied and affected Americans of all races, ages, genders and socio-economic backgrounds. My parents had been attending university in America at

¹¹⁹ Doyle (1989:44)

this time. Their experiences with the Anti-War Movement, Civil Rights Movement and Women's Liberation Front painted a picture of a decade fraught with massive social, political and cultural upheaval. For my mother, raised in 1950s Michigan suburbia, and my father, an international student from Saudi Arabia, the 1960s left indelible marks on their development and growth as adults and this provided me with firsthand insight into what living in this decade truly meant.

America's changes were reflected in the superhero comics of the time as well, providing so many new innovations and fresh material that the period is called the Silver Age of comics.¹²⁰ Superheroes evolved into flawed, introspective individuals, struggling to do the right thing at a time when the world around them was in flux. Where artwork was concerned, I already enjoyed familiarity with the Silver Age. My first encounter with superheroes in the comic book medium had been with influential artist Jack Kirby's 1960s work on *The Fantastic Four*, and I had previously conducted extensive research on Kirby and his practice during my Master's degree. Pop Art and its impact on comic books was an area I had become aware of during Bachelor's degree. The fashions, music and interior design of the decade are among my personal areas of interest.

Therefore, the challenges that faced me with the 1960s did not come from the content, visual or textual, but from the form and presentation of the decade. My key issues were around the best ways to showcase the superhero and the man of the 1960s, how and what key elements of the era to encapsulate and share and, significantly, get to grips with working with Flash.

¹²⁰ Reynolds (1992: 8)

The most important point to demonstrate was the concept of the male 1960s superhero as a complex, introspective man.¹²¹ Detailing the factors that led to this representation of heroic masculinity and the way readers responded to it based on their own ideas of masculinity and heroism would be crucial.

The major events of the decade would need to be presented to the user. These, along with the contemporary ideas regarding science, technology and art, would be the secondary points. Finally, I needed to be sure of the impact this era would have on the user; what they would come away with having learned and what bearing this would have on their personal picture of masculine identity.

Environment and Visual Style

When conceptualising the environment, I considered the seminal works of the decade—Stan Lee and Steve Ditko's *Spider-Man* and Lee and Kirby's *The Fantastic Four*. What set these titles apart was their portrayal of superheroes as complex individuals, with anxieties, fears and personal issues that often do not relate to their work as upholders of justice, but certainly work towards establishing them as well-rounded and relatable human beings in the eyes of their readers. While these flaws would have alienated readers in an earlier time, in the 1960s, an era of great change and uncertainty, it allowed readers to feel a kinship with their favourite heroes and helped to secure a loyal customer base. Daniels confirms,

In creating *The Fantastic Four*, Lee and Kirby established that the personalities of the heroes, rather than the plots, should be of paramount importance...In a field

¹²¹ Sabin (1996:69)

where gimmicks were usually considered to be the most important, the approach was revolutionary.¹²²

When taking into account the Silver Age's emphasis on the superhero as a person,¹²³ the set-piece for the decade was obvious: MetaMan's apartment.

Mindful of this, I set about developing the alter-ego of MetaMan in this period. In the tradition of superheroes whose first and last names begin with the same sound or letter, (Clark Kent, Peter Parker, Bruce Banner, Reed Richards, etc) I settled on Martin Miller, a young scientist living in a fictional 1960s metropolis similar to New York. He is intelligent, sensitive and introspective, of a lean, muscular, yet entirely realistic build, possessed of a strong sense of justice and desire to help others.

The creation of a supporting cast was also necessary as this was a period that put emphasis on inter-personal relations; Martin's supportive, working-class parents, patient-but-perplexed scientist girlfriend Jacinda Jones and chemically-altered arch-nemesis Verdigris feature prominently in the supporting material of the 60s. With the setting and characters decided upon, I moved on to the look of the menu.

To achieve the appropriate appearance, I looked to the artwork of Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko. These were the era's most influential comic book artists and I sought to combine the most memorable and recognizable qualities of both their techniques. Kirby's art style was very bold and dynamic, combining organic and geometric shapes with decisive lines and solid figures.¹²⁴ Ditko's style was more light, his figures less

¹²² Daniels (1991:85)

¹²³ Ibid.:95 offers examples of individual 1960s superheroes' humanising characteristics: 'Lee used him [Spider-Man] to challenge the very concept of the super hero. Spider-Man was neurotic, compulsive and profoundly sceptical about the whole idea of becoming a costumed saviour. The Fantastic Four argued with each other, The Hulk and Thor had problems with their alter egos, but Spider-Man had to struggle with himself.'

¹²⁴ 'The art would also be a major focus...if anybody could show that comics need not be hamstrung by the rules on explicitness, Kirby could: his explosive, kinetic style gave the appearance of untold power

Herculean than Kirby's, his linework containing traces of more traditional methods of visual art, almost reminiscent of woodcuts. Taking my cues from these artists, I created two images of MetaMan and Martin Miller in the same neutral pose using Adobe Flash. It was imperative that these did not create visual dissonance with the environment, which was to be created in Adobe Illustrator. This was a decision I made with trepidation; there was no simple solution to recreating the inking techniques of 1960s superhero comics with the drawing tools provided by Flash. To give the two illustrations, as well as the full-body illustration of MetaMan necessary for the body image animation the period-appropriate look, I spent twelve hours drawing in Flash. Flash would not be a feasible option to draw two separate rooms and all their components in anything resembling a timely manner. Adobe's Creative Suite series of programmes enjoy a high degree of cross-compatibility, however, and with the numerous custom brushes found in Illustrator, I was able to easily trace over my scanned pencil and ink drawings and recreate the organic look of inking with a brush and a dip pen. The folder of reference material I built up to help me achieve the right look for the 1960s is made up of vintage photographs of events of the decade as well as ordinary events, vintage advertisements, Silver Age superhero comic covers and pages, vintage-style reconstructions of 1960s scenes and images of 1960s furniture and appliance designs.

and energy...and his characters seemed as if they really could punch through walls. It was this unique talent above all that marked Kirby as one of the outstanding creators in American comics history.' Sabin (1996:69)



Figure i: 1960s MetaMan was influenced by Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko's artwork

Figure ii: Fantastic Four #49, April 1966, Marvel Comics. Art by Jack Kirby

Figure iii: The Amazing Spider-Man #2, May 1963, Marvel Comics. Art by Steve Ditko

Content and Historical Context

A central dilemma of Silver Age comics was the maintenance of a secret identity. While this had been a convention of the genre for twenty years already, comics of the 40s and 50s never addressed the issues that might arise from balancing a double life. The 1960s demonstrated this clearly, with superheroes' alter-egos being forced to come up with lies and excuses to keep their secret, leading to frustrated guardians or confused significant others. To represent the complexities and layers of his double life, Martin Miller, when we first see him, is dressed in civilian clothing, looking at himself in the mirror.

However, his reflection is in costume, demonstrating that he can never escape his life as MetaMan.

Upon noticing the user, he invites them to have a look around. I referenced furniture, appliances and artwork of the time to create the room, to typify the look of a young professional's loft apartment in a big city. I made sure that each object had a purpose in

order to insure a user-friendly interface with no extraneous details. The bookcase contains four interactive books, each one providing behind-the-scenes information about the 1960s superhero: the importance of an origin story, the introduction of varying body types in 1960s superhero comics, the reasons behind why the 60s superhero was so easy to relate to and the issues facing the man of the 60s that also had a profound effect on his personal development.



Figure iv: Complete 1960s Menu showing Martin Miller in his interactive apartment

On the wall of Martin's apartment is a print inspired by the works of Roy Lichtenstein, (1923-1997) who chose to focus on comics as a means of creating a commentary on modern life. From 1961 until 1965, he reproduced panels from romance and war comics as large scale paintings such as *Drowning Girl* (1963) and *Whaam!* (1963). He even went so far as to emulate the dots caused by four-colour printing. While Lichtenstein was personally fascinated by the style used in these comics, his paintings transformed comics into something trendy and fashionable in the eyes of his audience. Clicking on the print explains the relationship between Pop Art and comics, and how they each helped the other achieve greater popularity.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Sabin (1996:74-75)

Daniels offers further insights into the way the superhero genre broke new ground in American visual culture during the 1960s as well as Andy Warhol's incorporation of comics into his work:

Like the Batman TV show, Pop Art carried the imagery of the comic book to a new audience...Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein were in the vanguard of the Pop Art movement...Warhol began painting characters from the comics in 1961...Warhol concentrated on newspaper comics, but also produced a number of Superman paintings...In the stylisation of comic book panels, Lichtenstein saw an abstract quality of design that matched the archetypal simplicity of certain ritualistic story elements.¹²⁶

Figure v: Drowning Girl, Roy Lichtenstein, 1963



Figure vi: Pop Art-inspired Print in the 1960s Menu. It is heavily based on the work of Lichtenstein and reveals informative text discussing the link between comics and Pop Art in the 1960s when clicked on

Photographs on the bookshelf each contain a comic page detailing MetaMan's 1960s origin story, and the difficulties he faces in his love life, using typical art, colours and storytelling techniques of 1960s superhero comics. MetaMan's reflection displays an animation that shows his physique and the TV set broadcasts the main issues of the day, such as the Vietnam War, the Women's Movement, the Moon Landing, the Equal Rights Movement and the assassination of President Kennedy. The artwork for the television channels required a different approach. A black-and-white television set possessed a particular visual quality that could not be reproduced by digital means. I

¹²⁶ Daniels (2004: 148-149)

drew the three television journalists in pencil, scanned these drawings and converted them to vector images using Adobe Illustrator's Live Trace function. To keep the size of the files manageable and not render the Flash files too large for the programme to accommodate without crashing, I returned the images to Photoshop, reduced their quality and saved them as .jpegs. I then brought these .jpegs into Flash and composed the television set and its ten channels there. This provided the effect of a soft-edged vintage television picture that I had been aiming for.

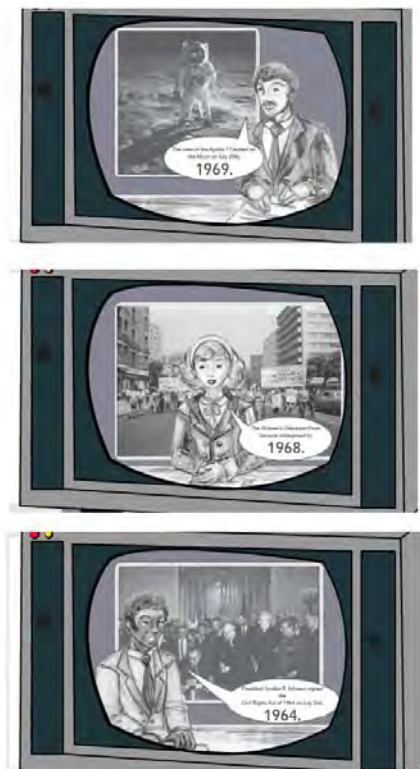


Figure vii: Screenshots of television channels taken from the interactive television set in the 1960s menu. A total of ten channels will appear at random when the yellow button is clicked, highlighting a selection of the decade's major events

Continuing the theme of duality and multiple layers, the room hides a secret. The house plant on the table is the hidden switch to access MetaMan's hideout—The Meta Chamber. The Meta Chamber's design draws upon the era's fascination with science—

not all of it accurate.¹²⁷ Following WWII, the USA was at the forefront of scientific development and by the 1960s, it was commonplace for a superhero to receive his powers through exposure to radiation, or through a chemical experiment gone wrong.¹²⁸ A chemistry set in MetaMan's laboratory discusses this fascination and what it meant for the public's mentality; and a series of short animations detail the application of typical 60s superhero crime-fighting gadgets displayed on the wall, such as smoke bombs and grappling hooks. These animations are inspired by the campy style and comedic tone of the 1960s Batman television programme starring Adam West.¹²⁹ The central object in the Meta Chamber is a large computer. Its buttons and screen allow the user to explore themes such as the costume of the superhero; its design aesthetic, purposes and impact on the reader¹³⁰. It also allows the user to cycle through variations on MetaMan's costume. These features as well as MetaMan's transforming vehicle, the MetaMobile, demonstrate the often-gimmicky themes presented in the comics of the time. In this room, MetaMan himself is in costume.



Figure viii: Complete Meta Chamber menu within the 1960s menu. This environment focuses on the gimmicky, camp and science-fiction orientated aspects of superhero comics in this decade

¹²⁷ Wright (2001:186) provides some charming examples: 'A fanciful [DC Comics] story from 1959 predicted that the coming decade would see American scientists devise a nearly perfect defense against enemy missiles so that there would be only a "one in a million" chance that one would get through to the United States...A 1963 story speculated that "when we [of Earth] reach Saturn and Jupiter we'll find marvellous inventions waiting for us—that we'll share equally.'

¹²⁸ Daniels (1991: 89)

¹²⁹ Sabin (1996:74)

¹³⁰ Reynolds (1992: 26-30)

In both the Meta Chamber and the apartment, MetaMan guides the user, providing hints when the mouse is rolled over objects, and his speech patterns, manner and personality change depending on whether he is on or off duty. As Martin Miller, he is casual, friendly and makes use of 60s slang. As MetaMan, he is likewise friendly, but speaks with more conviction.

Artistic Techniques and Design Choices

When designing the environments, objects and characters of the 1960s menu, I made sure to use a colour palette lifted from comics of the time as well. Influenced by Pop Art and the psychedelic fashions of the era, the comics of the 1960s often used brighter colours than in past decades, although the printing techniques remained the same as they did in the 40s and 50s. Vector programmes like Flash and Illustrator were ideal for the process of colouring in line art, as they are designed for maximum ease and convenience when doing so, making it extremely simple to replicate the flat colours used in Silver Age comics.¹³¹ The creation of this menu was often a struggle, as it was the first of the eras I built, and thus I had not been sure what to expect. It was also the first time I fully explored the drawing techniques found in Adobe Illustrator and Adobe Flash as well as how to get the most out of the cross-compatibility between the programmes. I had assumed that because each location had one figure, it would be less intensive than the 40s menu, which features American soldiers and a naval battle, or the 50s menu, in which MetaMan is part of a city street scene, but designing two indoor locations and all the interactive objects within them proved to be just as big a challenge.

¹³¹ Chiarello and Klein (2004:12, 13, 14) discuss the process of colouring and printing comics.



Figure x: Meta Mobile comic page showing the gimmicky nature of his transforming vehicle

Using a tutorial to create a custom swatch of dots in Illustrator,¹³² I learned the basic repeating pattern that Ben Day dots use. With a round-edged brush, I was able to replicate the series of five dots in Flash; by selecting them, copying and pasting them repeatedly while maintaining the same distance between the dots, I soon had the virtual equivalent of a sheet of Zip-a-Tone. It took no effort to make selections from my ready-made screen full of dots, paste them into the artwork as needed and toggle the size and colour of the dots once they had been added to the images. The result was a look that echoed Lichtenstein's Pop-Art paintings of comic book panels, intended to cement the link between comics and Pop-Art during the 1960s as well as echo the printing methods used in comic books at the time.

Figure xii: 1960s MetaMan with Ben Day dots emulating printing techniques and Lichtenstein's Pop Art paintings of comic panels

¹³² Jansen (2007, January 16) *Benday Dots Screen Fill technique*. Retrieved June 5, 2010 from <http://carijansen.com/2007/01/16/tip-053/>

Summary of the 1960s Menu

The goal of the 1960s menu is to present the user with a picture of an America beset by change from all angles; not least of these the idea of what makes a man. Through this introspective, complex superhero and the factors that attributed to his creation, the user will see that the man of the 60s was gaining the freedom to question the strict traditional values that preceded him. Although the rigid gender roles of the 1950s were still in place as well as in agreement with many men in this decade, for men who felt differently, the option to make their own path was becoming more of a reality.¹³³ A man in this situation faced confusion, opposition and the unknown, so the kind of hero he needed was one that even superpowers did not exempt from experiencing these same turbulent emotions, as evidenced by the resounding success of the genre during the 1960s, particularly with university-age young men.¹³⁴

6. Developing the 1940s Menu

My next focus was on the 1940s. During the months of September and October 2009, when travels and presentations prevented me from producing any digital work, I used the time to delve into the areas of this decade that required further research: the cultural mentality, masculine identity and military vehicle designs of America at war. By November, I was prepared to start working chronologically from this point forwards. I

¹³³ Doyle (1989:13)

¹³⁴ Sabin (1996:74-75)

was eager to trace the steps the evolution of superhero comic artwork had undergone in tandem with the evolution of masculinity in America. At the time, I was also engaged in the first module of the Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching for Higher Education. During the course of this module, I learned techniques and strategies to maximise my capabilities as an educator, including the art of critical reflection. This was especially useful in the context of my practice as well; I needed to ensure that the interface I created for the different eras was accessible to the user, easy and intuitive to learn from and that the presentation of the ideas within the work itself did not make the user feel that information was being forced upon them. The process of the user's interaction with the work would come to nothing if the work merely talked at them, not to them.

Historical Context

The first significant text that I chose to focus upon for the creation of this menu was the 1938 premier issue of *Action Comics*, where Superman made his first appearance and a new genre was born. Superman was an instant success for reasons addressed in the literature review and grossed \$950,000 for DC Comics in 1940.¹³⁵ As the 1940s began, the market was flooded with competitors and sales of superhero comics eclipsed that of all other genres.¹³⁶ Publishers took advantage of this when World War II began, churning out vast quantities of superhero stories that featured patriotic plots and motivational messages. Characters like Joe Simon and Jack Kirby's Captain America were created entirely for this purpose.¹³⁷ These comics were sent to soldiers on the front

¹³⁵ Wright (2001:14)

¹³⁶ Pustz (1999: Kindle location 409)

¹³⁷ Daniels (1991:37)

as well as purchased by readers at home. Superheroes battled Nazis, helped American troops, sold war bonds¹³⁸ and in doing so, inspired a nation. Higher defence spending meant more jobs, and more jobs led to more children having allowances, which they spent on superhero comics. 70 to 150 million comic books were being sold a month,¹³⁹ and the industry was booming, leading to this period in the history of superhero comics being referred to as the Golden Age by historians and fans. Stromberg reflects upon the success of the superhero genre:

Following hot on the heels of Superman, a whole genre of muscle-bound heroes emerged. The “Golden Age” of this genre coincided with World War II, and subsequently superhero comics were enlisted and used as tools of propaganda. It is probably not too much of an assumption to think that the image of a person who voluntarily gives up his ordinary life to don a uniform and battle bad guys resonated well with a nation at war.¹⁴⁰

The main points the 1940s needed to explore were the superhero as propaganda, the ordinary man as a soldier and the ordinary American as a patriot. Vilification of the enemy and the influence of pulp novels on the creation of the comic book superhero were the secondary points.

Environment and Visual Style

I was secure in the look of the Golden Age; comics of the 1940s employed clarity of line, diagonal hatching and cross-hatching to create shadows. The colour palette put heavy emphasis on red, green, yellow and orange, to the point that almost all colour was

¹³⁸ Ibid: 64

¹³⁹ Ibid:114

¹⁴⁰ Stromberg (2010:42)

non-local.¹⁴¹ Panel layouts took their inspiration from Hollywood cinema, an art form that was also in its Golden Age at the time.

Figure xii: Superman's first appearance in Action Comics #1, June 1938, Siegel & Shuster

Figure xiii: Captain America Comics #1 May 1941, Simon & Kirby

I was also secure in the use of Flash and Illustrator, after having spent four months coming to grips with the software. It was imperative that I display the role of superheroes in the war and their impact on American soldiers and I based the design of this menu on the staggering amount of WWII-era superhero comic covers featuring naval battles between the Allied and Axis forces. These scenes generally made use of a high camera angle, with the superhero aiding the US Navy from the sky. It became clear that by utilising a similar composition myself, I would be able to show all the imagery the era needed, without over-complicating the interface or trying to fit too much action into a single image. By removing the American soldier from his native soil, his role as a fighter and protector as well as the personal sacrifices he was making would also be emphasised.

Content

Just as important as the composition was the interactive content. The task of matching objects and characters to the planned interactions without the results appearing

¹⁴¹ Jim Steranko laments this phenomenon, as he reveals its cause: 'Early "craftsmen" painted men's suits green and orange (so readers could easily keep track of characters), never dreaming that color could be used to help build narrative sequences, shift attention from one panel to another, punch up dramatic beats...' Chiarello, Klein (2004:8)

contrived was more of a challenge here than it had been for the 1960s. After struggling with how to fit a total of six hotspots (essays on the man of the 40s, the evolution of pulps into comics, the use of the superhero as propaganda, the wartime representation of the Allied Forces' enemies as well as MetaMan's 1940s origin comic page and the animation showing his physique) into a composition where overlapping objects would lead to unstable programming code, I finally decided that two locations would be needed here as well. The first is a battle between American and Nazi warships, outlined by a short animation in which the American ship is outgunned. MetaMan appears and turns the tide of victory in the Americans' favour, amid the US Navy's cheers. This was a commonplace theme in superhero comics of the time and Brown observes how 'Superman fought the enemy at home and abroad. Other heroes, from Captain Marvel to the Spy Smasher, fought the enemy whenever and wherever they could.'¹⁴² The second location in the menu is accessible via one of the portholes of the American ship, and leads the user to the soldiers' quarters. The content in the second, less combat-driven location focuses on the quieter subjects of history of 1940s superhero comics; the genre's origin and link to pulp novels although action is to be found in the pages of an interactive comic book containing MetaMan's origin story for this decade. In the 1940s, MetaMan's guidance is filled with dramatic proclamations and witty statements with a patriotic tone.

¹⁴² Pustz (1999: Kindle location 455)



Figure xiv: Complete 1940s menu showing a patriotically-themed MetaMan assisting American soldiers



Figure xv: Complete cabin menu within the 1940s menu that focuses on the origins of the superhero genre

Figure xvi: All Winners #9, Timely Comics, 1943. Art by Alex Schomburg

Figure xvii: All Select #7, Timely Comics, 1945. Art by Vince Alascia

For the first time, in this location, MetaMan's role of guiding the user was given to a loudspeaker in the soldiers' quarters that barks orders as the user navigates the room. This decision was made because having MetaMan inside the ship while there was a battle raging outside at the same time was unfeasible from a narrative perspective.

Artistic Techniques and Design Choices

The battleships and quarters were meticulously researched and drawn in pen before being scanned and traced over, as well as coloured, in Illustrator. The program's custom brushes permitted me to emulate the look of randomised ink splatters when drawing the waves surrounding the ships.

The US Navy soldiers were drawn in Photoshop and added into Flash in the same manner of the TV channels from the 60s. My references for the 1940s were numerous; interior and exterior images of US and German naval battleships from the years of WWII, photographs of furniture that was used on these ships, vintage advertisements, wartime propaganda from the US and UK, Golden Age superhero comic book covers, covers of pulp novels and pages and vintage and reproduction images of WWII US Navy uniforms.



Figure xviii: A close up of the cheering Navy soldiers that feature in the 1940s menu

MetaMan himself would need major reinvention for this decade. This went beyond a difference in art style; MetaMan of the 40s required a complete change in uniform and colour scheme to properly present the image of a character in his very first incarnation. I realised that what I was feeling at this time must be akin to that a new artist or writer experiences when the task of drawing or writing the adventures of an iconic superhero

falls to them; only in reverse. I was faced with the challenge of making necessary changes while still remaining true to the essence of the character. I believed that if I was to properly demonstrate the superhero's visual evolution, I needed to be prepared to embrace these changes. In the spirit of patriotic heroes like Captain America and the plethora of heroes he inspired, including Uncle Sam, the American Crusader, the American Eagle, the Fightin' Yank, Mr. Liberty, the Liberator, Spirit of '76 and Captain Freedom¹⁴³ (as well as lesser-known patriotic characters like The Defender and Captain Wonder¹⁴⁴), Golden Age MetaMan was given a red, white and blue uniform that borrowed elements of design from the Art Deco period. Comparing this image of the character to that of his 1960s counterpart (both retain certain features such as a cleft chin and wavy auburn hair) resulted in giving me the first real sense of the scope and intentions of this project I had experienced so far. While these differences might have appeared cosmetic, they spoke of the deeper changes that led to the evolution of the character from patriotic avuncular figure to introspective everyman. In this period, MetaMan's origin story presents him as a soldier who, after heroically sacrificing himself to save his fellow man, is healed and given powers from a mysterious artefact, unearthed in the same tank attack that took his life. This promotes the wartime values of patriotism, self-sacrifice and reward for the willingness to do so. Period-appropriate fonts were used for all of the text featured in this decade.

¹⁴³ Pustz (1999: Kindle location 450)

¹⁴⁴ 'This [WWII] was a period when period when patriotic sentiment was not only looked upon favourably, but was almost mandatory within all parts of society, including comics. Thus, a great number of heroes were created who wore red, white, and blue in various combinations.' Stromberg (2010:155)



Figure xix: 1940s MetaMan sporting a colour scheme inspired by the American flag and a design influenced by the art of Joe Simon and Joseph Shuster



Figure xx: MetaMan's 1940s origin story in which he receives his powers from a mysterious artefact after sacrificing himself to save the life of a fellow soldier

Summary of the 1940s Menu

The aim of the 1940s menu is to demonstrate to the user that this period's idea of masculinity was intrinsically tied in to one's willingness to fight, defend and potentially die for their country. Aiding in the war effort consumed the lives of all Americans,

regardless of age or gender, and to express an opinion contrary to the school of thought that swept the country was to be perceived as less of a man. The 40s superhero needed to be a shining example of patriotism and a paragon of American wartime values in order to resonate with his readers. Stromberg reflects that:

Looking through the covers of superhero comics from the war years, it is evident how much they resemble official propaganda posters from that era...The ideas represented in the U.S. superhero comics were simple, often supporting the myths of American superiority and the enemy's inferiority, and depicting imminent victory...But comics writers were soon responding to the angry mood of the American people, and comic books became more hate-filled, depicting the representatives of the Axis as stereotypical villains and the American troops as equally stereotypical heroes. The comic book industry was actually able to boost its sales during WWII, because the help in the war effort meant that comic books were spared from paper recycling. Sales tripled from 1940-1945.¹⁴⁵

Beginning to Code

In February 2010, just as I was completing the 1940s, I began to undertake Kingston University's Introduction to Digital Media module, which focuses on Flash as a design tool and a programming tool. The course ran until April, and during this time, I received the instruction I needed to properly combine all the art and text I had made and would make into a cohesive interactive computer programme. This was not entirely straightforward; I had decided to use ActionScript 3.0, a fluid and customisable language that is also the most flexible and powerful scripting language available to use within Flash.¹⁴⁶ While certain tasks I needed it to do, such as MetaMan's dialogue changing when the mouse is hovered over an interactive object, used readily available programming codes, others required code to be written from the ground up. There is no guarantee that the code will be functional even if its syntax is correct, because types of code can clash with and override others. If this occurs, the cause of the problem must be

¹⁴⁵ Stromberg (2010:42)

¹⁴⁶ Florio (2009:64)

discerned and corrected through the process of trial and error before further work can proceed. It can be a time-intensive endeavour, but once the code is functional, it can be applied as many times as needed, and the entire practice operates on less than a dozen separate codes in total.

7. Developing the 1950s Menu

Historical Context

Still working with chronological intent, I started the 1950s in March; promptly after completing the previous decade. When the war ended, the success superhero comics had previously enjoyed soon became a distant memory. Tired of conflict, the American public was more interested in reading comic books in the genres of romance, crime, westerns and horror. Many writers and artists who had begun their careers working in the superhero genre took jobs writing and illustrating comic books belonging to these other genres.¹⁴⁷ This was one of the earliest indications of just how severely the comic book industry was affected by sale figures and the current fashion of the moment, a phenomenon that continues to affect the industry. Sabin describes these trends in the comic book industry:

As the 1940s moved on, so too did the American industry: other genres became popular as superheroes waned...Many of the genres that had been popular in the pulps now vied against each other for attention on the newsstand shelves, including westerns, detective, crime, war, science fiction and horror.¹⁴⁸

With the advent of the Korean War, publishers attempted to revive the superhero genre,

¹⁴⁷ Daniels (1991:54)

¹⁴⁸ Sabin (1996:66)

but the public's attitude had changed. Science-fiction, horror and crime-themed titles reached great levels of popularity and their content began to grow more violent as the 1950s progressed. Post-war America was a global superpower; leading the way in the fields of science, medicine and technology. The man of the 50s looked towards a glorious space-age future and his role had shifted from fighter and defender to worker and provider.¹⁴⁹ However, there was a sense of tension underlying this time in American history,¹⁵⁰ caused by a number of factors including the memory of World War II and the discovery of the Atomic bomb.¹⁵¹ Daniels outlines the fears of post-war America:

Often sentimentalized as complacent, happy days, the 1950s were actually a time of considerable tension in the United States. On the surface, things could hardly have been better. ... Yet there were undercurrents of fear, guilt and anxiety throughout the land... Humanity had acquired the power to eradicate itself. Americans felt a sense of betrayal as our allies became our enemies; the Russians were perceived as thieves who had stolen our atomic secrets. We built underground shelters to protect ourselves, and saw flying saucers in the sky.¹⁵²

In 1954, further changes to the American comic book industry occurred when the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency conducted an investigation into the comic book industry.¹⁵³ The committee was formed to examine the presentation of subjects of sex and violence in film, television and comic books.¹⁵⁴ These subjects were considered inappropriate for children to be exposed to and were seen as potential causes of juvenile delinquency in the years following World War II.¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁹ Doyle (1989:44)

¹⁵⁰ Daniels (1991:64)

¹⁵¹ Ibid.:64

¹⁵² Ibid.:64

¹⁵³ Ibid.: Kindle location 810

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.: Kindle location 813

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.: Kindle location 813-826

Nyberg summarises the Senate hearings that focused on the comic book industry and their results:

The committee held three days of hearings in New York City, called twenty-two witnesses, and accepted thirty-three exhibits as evidence. When it was all over, the comic book industry closed ranks and adopted a self-regulatory code that is still in effect today in modified form.¹⁵⁶

Witnesses included horror comic book publisher William Gaines and the psychiatrist Fredric Wertham.¹⁵⁷ In his book *Seduction of the Innocent*,¹⁵⁸ Wertham transcribed interviews with young boys who engaged in delinquent behaviour. A thirteen-year-old boy declared ‘I learned from crime comic books when you want to hit a man don’t get face to face—hit him from the back.’¹⁵⁹ A boy who committed a burglary stated that ‘I read comic books where they broke into a place. I got the idea to break into the house.’¹⁶⁰ Another boy who burglarized stores described how:

I read the comic books to learn how you can get money. I read about thirty a week...There was this one case. It was in back of a factory with pretty rich receipts, money. It showed how you get in through the back door. I didn’t copy that...I just switched to the skylight. I carried it out practically the same way as the comic book did.¹⁶¹

The supposition that reading comics (particularly the horror and crime genres, although the superhero genre was criticised as well), increased delinquent behaviour became a

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.: Kindle location 810

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.: 53/Kindle location 845

¹⁵⁸ Sabin (1996:68)

¹⁵⁹ Wertham (1955:74)

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.:70

¹⁶¹ Ibid.:73

national concern¹⁶² due to the fear and worry caused by the perspective presented in *Seduction of the Innocent*. However, the Senate hearings ended with inconclusive findings and recommended that publishers regulate the content of their comic books.¹⁶³ The Comics Code Authority was formed¹⁶⁴ in response to the negative publicity the comics industry experienced during the hearings which ‘combined with pressure from distributors, wholesalers, and retailers, brought sweeping changes...crime and horror comics disappeared from newsstands.’¹⁶⁵ The regulations it put into place would, as Nyberg outlines:

Without ever admitted that depiction of crime led young readers to become juvenile delinquents, the code nonetheless placed an emphasis on portraying crime in a negative light...on making sure that excess violence was purged...it was clear that code-approved comics would tone down the violence and sex. Beyond that, however, the code spelled out the ways in which comic book content would also uphold the moral values of society. There was never to be any disrespect for established authority and social institutions. Good always triumphed over evil, and if evil had to be shown, it was only to deliver a moral message.¹⁶⁶

Non-Code-Approved books were not allowed to be distributed or sold at newsstands, grocery stores or drug stores. These were the only places one could purchase comics at the time, as dedicated comic book shops did not exist in this era.¹⁶⁷

I gave serious thought to the inclusion of Wertham’s famous interpretation of Batman and Robin’s relationship as comparable to ‘a wish dream of two homosexuals living together’¹⁶⁸ and will revisit this subject in the Conclusions chapter.

¹⁶² Nyberg (1998:Kindle location 1123)

¹⁶³ Nyberg (1998:Kindle location 1114)

¹⁶⁴ Daniels (2004:114-115)

¹⁶⁵ Nyberg (1998:Kindle location 1123)

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.: Kindle location 1517-1537

¹⁶⁷ Stromberg (2010:93)

Environment and Visual Style

After the Comics Code was implemented, superheroes continued to be eclipsed by their competition and were regarded as yesterday's fad. By the middle of the decade, however, DC Comics, under the direction of editor Julius Schwartz, reinvented their Golden Age superhero the Flash. He was given a new costume, new name, new job and a new art style. Following his first appearance in DC's new title *Showcase* in September 1956, reader response to the Flash was so overwhelmingly positive that he made several more appearances, culminating in the publication of his own title in 1959. Carmine Infantino's artwork was characterized by clean lines, streamlined figures and panel layouts that possessed a cinematic feel. Combined with writer John Broome's introduction of footnotes in the Flash's stories that explained the science behind the superpowers, *The Flash* was a title unlike any other available on the market.¹⁶⁹ Marvel soon followed, with their character-driven reinvention of the superhero defining the character type in the 1960s.¹⁷⁰

Figure xxi: The Flash's reinvention in *Showcase* #4, DC Comics, September 1956. Infantino & Kubert

To encapsulate the mindset of America at the time, as well as present the changes the comics industry was undergoing, I chose to set the 1950s menu on a city street with a newsstand. The city's pristine skyscrapers and cars spoke of the American Dream society longed for, while the newsstand and its content provided both a picture of the

¹⁶⁸ Passage from *Seduction of the Innocent* taken from Brooker (2000.:103)

¹⁶⁹ Daniels (2004: 116-117)

¹⁷⁰ Sabin (1996:69)

comics industry and the culture of paranoia sweeping the nation. The essays in this decade would be presented to the user solely through a series of interactive newspapers and the images would come from the comic books the newsstand offered. MetaMan, his new look firmly in place, would be on hand to guide the user, as well as link to an animation showing his new physique and body image. MetaMan's uniform no longer sported the colours of the American flag. It was re-imagined in bold orange, blue and gold, with a mask hiding his features and a new logo that placed his initials within a geometric border. This, of course, was my original design for the character. In a strictly in-universe context (adding yet another meaning behind his name of *MetaMan*), these changes were only brought about in the second half of the 1950s.



Figure xxii: 1950s MetaMan featuring a new colour scheme and the influence of Carmine Infantino's art style.

Creating the background was a straightforward project; aside from the period-appropriate newsstand, cars, lamppost and fire hydrant (drawn in Illustrator), everything else in the scene was drawn directly in Flash. By this point, my comfort level with the programme had become thorough enough for me to know exactly what I could and could not produce in it. I was no longer intimidated by what Flash could offer me.

Where the flexibility and ease of producing my body of work was concerned, I could now see it was able to offer me quite a lot. For the first time since the practice began, I was thinking within the parameters of the programme, rather than against them.

The comic books on the newsstand are arranged into two groups: pre-Code and post-Code, differentiated by the presence or lack of a CCA (in this case, a mock logo was created in the style of the Comics Code Authority's, with the acronym of 'CCC' for 'Comics Censorship Code') stamp on the cover. The pre-Comics Code comics are for the romance, horror and crime genres. These three covers were created after researching the common compositions, colours and scenes that comics of these genres favoured. The post-Code comics feature three titles from the 'MetaMan family', in the spirit of the Superman and Batman families that featured prominently in 1950s comics.¹⁷¹ MetaMan is now aided by his female counterpart Miss Meta, his young ally MetaKid and pet MetaMutt.

Artistic Techniques and Design Choices

The style of writing, text and cover layouts are entirely faithful to the period. The artwork was drawn and inked by hand, then coloured in Photoshop and brought into Flash in .jpeg format, bypassing Illustrator completely. The cover logos and text boxes were created in Illustrator, however. They were then brought into Photoshop and added into the main images there. For this decade, I assembled a reference folder made up of comic book covers from throughout the period from the superhero, crime, romance and horror genres, vintage photographs of streets, drugstores and newsstands from the 1950s and drawings and images of cars from the period. MetaMan's speech is upbeat,

¹⁷¹ Daniels (2004:118)

optimistic and friendly when addressing the user.



Figure xxiii: Complete 1950s Menu



Figure xxiv: Pre-Comics Code-style Covers in the genres of crime, horror and romance



Figure xxv: Post-Comics Code-Style MetaMan Covers featuring child sidekick, Meta Kid, pet MetaMutt and female counterpart Miss Meta

Summary of the 1950s Menu

The aim of the 1950s menu was to show how the aftermath of WWII affected America's views on masculinity and thus what this age's hero needed to be. The 1950s superhero was as much a victim of wide-spread paranoia as the American public, and the slapstick science-fiction approach to his adventures in the first half of the decade did not merit his audience's attention. When he emerged in the second half of the decade with a slimmer build, an attitude that was grounded in reality but lacking in controversial content, he was able to remain a necessary part of American popular culture.

8. Unexpected Additions

I began to apply the programming code to this decade as well as the previous two; the results were more than a sketch of the bigger picture to come and confirmed that fully interactive software was a realistic and achievable goal.

At this crucial point in May, when I believed myself to be more than halfway through the practice, the three decades were evaluated by my supervisory team. I came away from this pivotal meeting knowing that the 1970s and 1980s could not be omitted from the final work after all. The developmental gaps in the evolution of masculinity between the 1960s and 1990s would have been too large and trying to fit a summarised explanation of how they came about into the 1990s when the scope the of project mandates condensed information would have felt forced and might have been potentially incomprehensible to an audience. However, adding in the 1970s and 1980s put the overall schedule under pressure and there was a possibility of non-completion. These two decades, while replete with plenty of different events and mentalities, were

not anywhere near the size of the 1960s and with this in mind, I aimed to complete them quickly and efficiently.

9. Developing the 1980s Menu

Historical Context

From start to finish, the 1980s took less than a week to complete. This decade was remarkably straightforward, in both content and my artistic vision for it; which is why I chose to produce it before I did the 1970s. From the superhero side of things, the 1980s menu needed to encapsulate the atmosphere of the decade's most influential works: Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (1986) and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986). Each of these titles, while vastly different in their approach and look, redefined what both creators and audience thought were the conventions of the superhero genre. In the creators' own words:

Frank Miller, who felt that super heroes had been too humanised in recent years, saw Batman as 'a god of vengeance' and wanted to restore some of the mythic power he felt had been lost. 'Comics had become more and more drained of the content that would give the heroes any reason to exist,' he says. 'I guess I was looking to bring comics more of an edge.'¹⁷²

'*Watchmen* [is] a comic book that called into question the basic assumptions on which the super hero genre is formulated. A comic book that seemed to transcend the form, *Watchmen* remains a landmark...' 'We started out purely wanting to do a strange take on super heroes,' Alan Moore recalls. 'As the book evolved, it became very clear that what I'd really been writing about was something else. I mean, on the very first page there's an atmosphere of apocalypse... *Watchmen* was designed to be read on a number of levels. To a certain degree all interpretations are true. We designed it so it got a kind of crystalline, faceted structure, where you could hold it in your hands and look at different aspects of it. All of these different

¹⁷² Daniels (2004:190)

threads of continuity are effectively telling the same story from different angles.” In its moral and structural complexity, *Watchmen* is the equivalent of a novel.’¹⁷³

This different approach made *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* impossible to dismiss as children’s entertainment and, the two series opened up a vast amount of potential for the medium of American comics.¹⁷⁴ In addition, the 1989 film *Batman* increased the character's popularity tremendously,¹⁷⁵ winning over old and new fans alike.¹⁷⁶

This, as well as a rise in violent crime in America,¹⁷⁷ launched a trend within the superhero genre for storylines that were ‘dark’; a byword for violent, disturbing and psychologically fraught. The line between hero and villain was regularly crossed, and doing the right thing was even more of a challenge for the 80s superhero than it had been for his 60s counterpart. Violence and mature themes in comics did not impact their distribution as significantly as they had previously; comic book shops were on the rise, and were free to sell titles that were not Comics Code-approved. Sabin explains:

The late 1970s and 1980s saw huge changes in the way comics were marketed, designed and, eventually, in the way they were perceived. The old newsagent market was declining at an alarming rate, but at the same time, a more specialised network based on specialist ‘fan’ shops (selling solely comics) began to take off...by the mid-1990s, over ninety percent of all comics were being sold through this channel. In the space of a few short years, the fan market had gone from being a parallel outlet of little commercial importance, to becoming the new mainstream...The shops sold an endless array of superhero comics...which to a fan were continuously fascinating, and hence limited their clientele to males between the ages of about twelve and twenty-five.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷³ Ibid.:196-197

¹⁷⁴ Sabin (1996:162)

¹⁷⁵ ‘Budgeted at \$40 million, *Batman* became one of the biggest hits in Hollywood history, earning back its cost in the first weekend it opened, and going on to gross a reported \$405 million around the world.’ Daniels (2004:202)

¹⁷⁶ Voger (2006:21)

¹⁷⁷ Knowles (2007:4)

¹⁷⁸ Sabin (1996:157)

This led to a rise in sales and broader readership, as did the selling of graphic novels in bookshops. Graphic novels, defined by Sabin as ‘lengthy comics in book form with a thematic unity’,¹⁷⁹ were largely a marketing technique, often collected monthly comic series’ story arcs, or the entirety of a mini-series, and released them under one cover, although graphic stories created specifically for this longer framework were not uncommon either.¹⁸⁰

Meanwhile, the 80s man found his definition of masculinity in a state of change that surpassed even that of the 1960s.¹⁸¹ Despite a return to the corporate provider role of the 1950s, he was growing aware that it was becoming more socially acceptable for him to be in touch with his emotions and engaging in activities that previous decades would have labelled ‘feminine’, such as childcare and home-making. Beynon describes the emergence of this ‘new man’ and the reasons behind it:

In the United Kingdom and United States pro-feminist men, sensing justice in the feminist movement and eager themselves for social change, attempted to raise both their own and their fellow men’s consciousness and foster a more caring, sharing, nurturing man. They willingly supported the women’s movement and taking a full role in the domestic arena (particularly in respect of child-rearing). These men were usually middle-class, well educated, intellectuals. Changing patterns in family life, with men marrying later or not at all, along with a willingness to take on a supportive role in a woman’s career, resulted in the emergence of the new man as an ideal. He was the riposte to vilified ‘old man’, his father, and a refugee from the hardline masculinity epitomized by the paranoid, macho men with stifled emotions. They were enacted on the screen by Wayne, Bogart, Bronson and Stallone...¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ Ibid :165

¹⁸⁰ Sabin (1996:165)

¹⁸¹ ‘Masculinity was more extensively transformed by economic and commercial forces in the 1980s than at any previous time.’ Beynon (2008:98)

¹⁸² Ibid.:100

Under the government of Ronald Reagan, a man who, not unlike Wayne, Bogart, Bronson and Stallone, began his career as a film actor of traditionally masculine roles,¹⁸³ America's economy, left in tatters by the events of the previous decade,¹⁸⁴ saw significant improvement. Reagan's promotion of the traditional male values of strength, aggression and self-reliance¹⁸⁵ caused many Americans to do the same, even as the workplace saw more racial and gender equality. This saw the conservative values of the 1950s portrayed as desirable. Wright explains:

According to the conservative worldview of the 1980s, the cultural upheavals of the 1960s and early 1970s were unfortunate developments that had hurt American morale, undermined patriotism, left society fragmented, and weakened the nation in the Cold War. The Reagan vision appealed to a nostalgic brand of patriotism that recalled the basic values that, proponents contended, had united Americans in the first place.¹⁸⁶

Visual Style and Artistic Techniques

In light of these changes, MetaMan of the 1980s required a culturally contingent redesign. As I had done in the 60s, I was reinventing MetaMan without having invented what he looked like in the decade that took place before the one I was working on. I had decided to postpone the 1970s until after I had completed the 1990s, as the latter promised to be a very content-intensive decade. Nevertheless, the image of what 80s

¹⁸³ Booker (2004: 689)

¹⁸⁴ These events are touched upon in the methodology behind the 1970s menu, later on in this chapter.

¹⁸⁵ 'Everything [at the end of the 1970s] seemed inadequate. The country had to move on, but it was not moving anywhere. Enter Reagan (with jubilation and a mandate). That mandate is specific: to control inflation, to reduce unnecessary governmental interference in private lives and in business, to reassert America's prominence in the world.' (Jan. 05, 1981) Out of the Past, Fresh Choices for The Future. *Time Magazine, US Edition*. Vol. 117 No. 1. Retrieved from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,922299-4,00.html> on December 20, 2010.

¹⁸⁶ Wright (2001:266)

MetaMan needed to be was so strong in my mind that his incarnation for this menu practically drew itself. Sharp edges dominated his design. His hair, once wavy was now choppy and uneven. His mask was now an extension of his cape, the ends of which were ragged from battle-damage. Even his logo, a double-M that followed a diamond-shape, was sharp and hard-looking. In terms of anatomy and facial structure, this incarnation of MetaMan was the most realistic version I had drawn.



Figure xxvi: 1980s MetaMan design, showing the influence of Dave Gibbons' and Frank Miller's art styles and displaying a less polished personal appearance

Drawing him in Flash still took twelve hours, but this had become familiar to me by then. For the setting, I designed a layout that combined *Watchmen's* iconic image of antagonist Ozymandias in front of his wall of television monitors with the image of Batman ever-vigilant in front of his Bat-computer. The colour palette used for this menu was substantially toned down from the previous eras. By this point, colouring techniques in comics had gained more flexibility than simple four-colour printing. Digital technology was on the rise in the graphic industries,¹⁸⁷ leading to greater variety

¹⁸⁷ Chiarello, Klein (2004:9)

of colour within images and the idea of a standardised ‘look’ for comics was becoming less prevalent.¹⁸⁸

The ‘dark’ atmosphere the 1980s menu required was achievable by emulating the look of digital colouring, as well as the substantially larger colour palette available at this time in comics history.

Using an image that contained a multitude of monitors provided me with a ready-made platform for adding the interactive hotspots; I merely needed to add interaction to specific monitors. This almost felt like cheating—for three menus, I had put tremendous amounts of thought and care into maintaining the balance between the images of the hotspots and their content, in order to avoid a confusing, contrived interface. For this era, I merely needed to choose what picture the monitors would display, and at this stage of the work, it was a welcome respite from my usually-long process.

The background took two days to build and was created entirely in Flash. The same was true of the supplementary material for the menu; aside from a comic page that was hand-drawn and inked, then coloured in Photoshop, all images and essays were assembled in Flash. Coding this menu proved to be an effortless task. This era included, in addition to the comic, the animation of MetaMan's physique and essays on the man of the 80s, the new graphic novel trend and the increasing lack of censorship facing comics of this decade. The fonts used in this decade are era-appropriate, and the font that features in MetaMan's speech balloons and comic page is inspired by that of *Watchmen*. MetaMan's speech itself is terse and clear-cut. My 1980s references were solely images from *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*.

Figure xxvii: Page from *The Dark Knight Returns*, DC Comics, 1986. Miller

¹⁸⁸ Sabin (1996:160)

Figure xxviii: Page from *Watchmen*, DC Comics 1986. Moore & Gibbons



Figure xxix: Completed 1980s menu showing MetaMan in front of a wall of interactive television screens

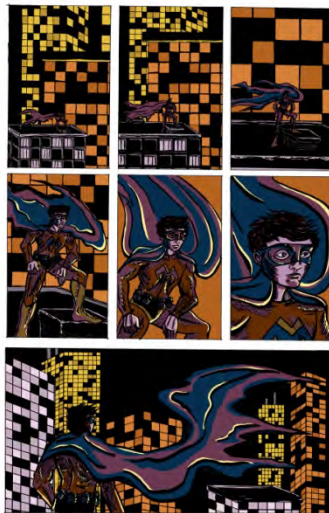


Figure xxx: A 1980s MetaMan comic page in which the character reflects upon his work as a superhero

Summary of the 1980s Menu

The goal of the 1980s was to showcase the seemingly-contradictory ideas of masculinity permeating America during this time and the turmoil they resulted in. No matter how much Reagan's government touted a return to the conservative values of decades past, and no matter how many Americans subscribed to these values, they could not undo the social changes brought on by the 1960s. Nor could the shaken faith of American's in their government after Nixon be restored so easily. This decade needed a superhero who was not afraid to get his hands dirty, but who could still remain true to

the principles he believed in—even if those principles may have made him seem closer to a villain than a hero. As Wright puts it:

Superheroes traditionally had stood as the champions of a good citizenry menaced by aberrant wrongdoers. In this cynical era, however, it was the superhero who was the aberration. Superheroes became a force for ruthless morality in a corrupt society that despised them. Theirs was a seemingly impossible task no sane individual would undertake, and indeed, the sanity of superheroes did come into question. Once confident symbols of hope, superheroes now spoke to the paranoia and psychosis lurking behind the rosy veneer of Reagan's America.¹⁸⁹

10. Developing the 1990s Menu

I then moved on to the 1990s. This was a decade I had planned out months in advance, long before I began creating it in May 2010. The superhero genre in this period, sometimes referred to as the Dark Age,¹⁹⁰ was split in two, and MetaMan needed to be able to do the same.

Historical Context

On one side of this split were the hyper-masculine, exaggerated fantasies of male action heroes, in the vein of *The New Mutants*' Cable (first appearing in 1990). Voger describes the main features of this type of superhero:

With conscience-deprived heroes indistinguishable from their adversaries, the Dark Age was typified by implausible, steroid-inspired physiques, oversized weapons (guns, knives, claws), generous blood-letting and vigilante justice. While heroes of the Golden and Silver Ages depended solely on their wits and powers to

¹⁸⁹ Wright (2001:266)

¹⁹⁰ See Voger (2006)

vanquish their adversaries, heroes of the Dark Age were not above flaunting a weapons advantage. Their guns got bigger and bigger.¹⁹¹

Brown's interviews with 128 young male readers of comics during this decade offer reasons behind the popularity of this type of superhero, discovering that 'quite a few of the most active comics fans, particularly those between eight and fourteen years old, currently favor the Image¹⁹² style of comic books'.¹⁹³ Tony, a nine-year-old fan of superheroes with exaggerated muscles, expresses his appreciation of the characters' physiques:

If I were a superhero, I'd want to be built like this...you could beat on anybody if you're this size. Look at the arms; that would be an awesome size to be...They are sooo pumped. Who even needs powers? Man, I'd just flex my muscles and everybody would take off.¹⁹⁴

Tony's friend Neil, another Image reader, shares his view of Image's superheroes:

I like the Image heroes better because they're huge. Some of these other guys are OK, but let's face it, someone like Batman just isn't man enough to take on somebody like Bloodstrike [an Image superhero]. Bloodstrike would probably just crush him in a few seconds. None of this 'I don't kill 'cause I'm a good guy' crap...A real man like Bloodstrike, with all those muscles and all those babes working for him, that's the way to be a man.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹¹ Ibid.:6

¹⁹² Brown refers to the hyper-masculine branch of superhero comics in the 1990s produced by the independent comic publisher Image Comics. I will discuss Image Comics and its impact on the industry in this decade shortly.

¹⁹³ Brown (2000: Kindle location 1961)

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.: Kindle location 1973-1979

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.: Kindle location 1993-2000

Brown observes that 60% of the 128 participants in his study agree with Tony and Neil and that the popularity of these over-muscled heroes may be due in part to how they provide a wish-fulfilment fantasy to their readers and how these young fans interpret masculinity as being tied to how big a superhero's muscles are:

It's clear that Tony and some of his friends fantasize themselves as the Image heroes. In describing the characters, he constantly slips between referring to them and talking about himself with the properties of the fictional characters. When I asked Tony about this, he replied, "Oh yeah, we are always joking around about who we'd want to be. I usually pick Prophet [an Image superhero] 'cause he's tough and huge and mysterious and he really kicks ass. That's what I want to be, a real man, you know, just lots of muscles and stuff when I'm bigger. That would be really cool."¹⁹⁶

The prevalence of celebrity writers and artists was another reason behind the popularity of this genre of superhero comics; the culmination of a phenomenon that began during the previous decade.¹⁹⁷ The other reason behind this character type's success was marketing by Marvel Comics. Sabin describes the lay of the land:

...They concentrated on more traditional material [than comics for adults], aimed at a teenage market. The focus would be on established characters rather than new ones, 'continuing comics' rather than graphic novels, and, above all, artist-led rather than writer-led titles. As a corollary, every effort would be made to appeal to the fan in the specialist shops (by way of gimmicks, collectable covers, and so on), while the casual reader in the book-shops would be virtually ignored. It was a 'back to basics' approach that certainly made commercial sense.¹⁹⁸

By this point in the industry's history, comic book shops were growing more common, and comic book collecting, already having gained momentum as a hobby in the 1980s,

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.: Kindle location 1979

¹⁹⁷ Daniels (1991:187-188)

¹⁹⁸ Sabin (1996:157)

was becoming more commonplace. The rise of independent company Image Comics and its overtaking of DC Comics' sales figures sent shockwaves throughout the mainstream American comics industry as Sabin explains:

The company [Image Comics] was formed as a 'creator-owned' concern by a group of disgruntled writers and artists from Marvel...It was not long before Image was beating DC Comics into third place on the sales charts. Why the Image titles should have been such hits is not difficult to explain. They were essentially re-runs of Marvel formulas produced by the biggest names in the business. Also, the artwork, as well as representing the peak of the fan aesthetic, was coloured by computer in an unusual and striking fashion. These factors all combined to make the imprint appear 'now' and happening.¹⁹⁹

Capitalising on this, publishers often resorted to sales gimmicks, such as holographic covers and declarations that first or milestone issues would increase in value someday.²⁰⁰

The range and scope of these sales tactics is demonstrated as Voger offers an exhaustive list of cover-related gimmicks:

The most common cover enhancement was a touch of silver or gold foil, frequently on the book's logo. The biggest buzz-magnet was the hologram. In between could be found die-cut covers, coated covers, all-foil covers, embossed covers, glow-in-the-dark covers...sparkling covers, wraparound covers, sliding "alternative" covers and combinations thereof.²⁰¹

Existing alongside the more traditional superheroes and the hyper-masculine characters discussed above and was a sensitive, metaphysically-orientated character type who could only loosely be defined as a superhero, but whose actions were heroic

¹⁹⁹ Sabin (1996:174)

²⁰⁰ Ibid. 171-172

²⁰¹ Voger (2008:128)

nonetheless²⁰². This character type, featured in *The Sandman* (1988) and *Hellblazer* (1988), for example, was aimed at an older audience, who preferred to see their heroes flex their mental muscles as well. This was a man who was not afraid to call on arcane forces rather than use his fists to solve his problems, such as *The Sandman*'s Morpheus or *Hellblazer*'s John Constantine, or, in the case of Peter Milligan's re-imagining of Shade the Changing Man (1990), become a woman.²⁰³ Many authors and artists of these series were British;²⁰⁴ their differing cultural mentalities offering something new and fresh to the realm of American comics.²⁰⁵ Although this character type was popular, his appeal was with a different audience demographic than the average reader of superhero comics in the 1990s as Brown observes:

The Sandman...offered much less hyperbolic models of masculinity. Unfortunately...most of the other revisionist types of comic books are classified as "Mature Reader" titles and are clearly not geared toward the traditional preadolescent consumer.²⁰⁶

By this point in the industry's history, comic book shops were growing more common, and comic book collecting, a niche hobby began during the 1960s, became far more widespread as well as comic book speculating.²⁰⁷ Capitalising on this, publishers often resorted to sales gimmicks, such as holographic covers and declarations that first or milestone issues would increase in value someday. The market became so saturated that it collapsed in 1993,²⁰⁸ taking many independent publishers and mainstream superhero

²⁰² Sabin (1996:168)

²⁰³ See issues 27-29, 32 and 63-70 of *Shade, the Changing Man*.

²⁰⁴ Sabin (1996:171)

²⁰⁵ Milestone Media, an independent company whose comics were distributed by DC Comics, was also interested in bringing new material to the superhero genre in the 1990s with multi-ethnic characters as well as black superheroes that often relied on their more cerebral qualities to save the day. Brown (2000) provides an in-depth examination of Milestone Media and its portrayal of black masculinity.

²⁰⁶ Brown (2000:Kindle location 2864-2869)

²⁰⁷ Voger (2006:7)

²⁰⁸ Wright (2001: 283)

comic series with it.²⁰⁹ Graphic novels, more popular in this decade and sold in mainstream book stores, helped attract a more mature, albeit niche audience for superhero comics.

Meanwhile, the man of the 90s was caught in between these two types of superhero where his gender identity was concerned. A now-booming economy led to a more materialistic attitude pervading America and Britain.²¹⁰ The Gulf War once again brought about the man-as-soldier mentality,²¹¹ with many men voluntarily taking up arms and leaving their country, in contrast to the WWII draft.²¹² Two-income families in addition to higher divorce rates, or couples with children not marrying at all²¹³ meant that many young boys were left with minimal—or sometimes without—direct influence from male role models in their lives.²¹⁴ Western political leaders were criticised for ‘lacking any firm moral ‘centre’’.²¹⁵ Defining the man of the 1990s presented me with a challenge. Tony Parsons scathingly summarises this as ‘the choice facing men today is between simpering cissy and unreconstructed lout.’²¹⁶

²⁰⁹ An excellent account of this period of comics history that places the MetaMerc type of superhero into cultural context and was also a valuable source of information for this section of the chapter, particularly the collapse of the market, is *A Journal of the Plague Years The Birth of Image, The Death of Superman and the Fall of American Superhero Comics*. O’Neil, T., (2010, November 19). Retrieved November 27, 2010 from http://www.theliftebrow.com/?page_id=560

²¹⁰ ‘Ross (1999)...asserts that by the 1990s the high-living that had been at the heart of the lifestyle of the elite and celebrities from the 1960s onwards was now available, albeit in a less lavish form, to everyone, whatever their means, on the streets throughout Britain...’ Beynon (2008: 109-110)

²¹¹ Haywood and Mac an Ghaill (2003:94-95)

²¹² The attitude of the young American soldier during the Gulf War is reflected in Time Magazine’s article *A Long Hallucination of War: ‘Polls suggest that young Americans are sometimes more eager for battle, or anyway less wary. A 20-year-old seaman aboard the U.S.S. Wisconsin in the gulf wrote to his family, “I am glad I am the only one of my generation in our family to volunteer to serve his country. Hopefully I will make a triumphant return to Norfolk with a bunch of medals pinned to my uniform. It looks like the combat service ribbon is a shoo-in.”* *Time Magazine, US Edition*. Vol. 136 No. 25. Retrieved from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,971879-2,00.html> on July 6, 2010.

²¹³ Haywood and Mac an Ghaill (2003:130)

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*:129,130,131.

²¹⁵ Booker (2004: 689)

²¹⁶ Tony Parsons, quoted in Southwell (1998:209), in Beynon (2008:113)

Visual Style and Artistic Techniques

This was, perhaps, an over-simplification of the situation, but it did served to confirm that, for this decade, I needed to design two separate versions of MetaMan and two separate sets of essays and visual material to expand upon each character. First was MetaMerc, with his bulging muscles, maniacal expressions, improbably large guns and cavalier attitude towards violence. Next was Meta the Mystic, a man whose slight build and almost-pretty features might give the impression of weakness when compared to MetaMerc, but who possesses tremendous inner strength and changeability.



Figure xxxi: 90s superheroes MetaMerc and Meta the Mystic displaying the contrast between the types of male superheroes that emerged in this decade

In the decade's introductory animation, MetaMan of the 80s divides into MetaMerc and Meta the Mystic, who each appear on a cover of their self-titled comic books. The covers' imagery and content provide the menu's hotspots. MetaMerc's cover encapsulates the quintessential elements of the type of superhero he represents: film²¹⁷ and video game tie-ins, sales gimmicks, independent publishers, celebrity creators and,

²¹⁷ Voger (2006:46)

most importantly, the concept of the male superhero as a muscle-bound brawler. His speech is loud, brash, macho and aggressive, challenging the user. The image of MetaMerc was hand-drawn-and-inked, then coloured in Photoshop, where the captions and text was also added. The logos and target symbols were designed in Illustrator first. Meta the Mystic's cover, in stark contrast, was digitally painted. It was the first time I had tried this technique. The cover draws its inspiration from a pair of Surrealist paintings: Roland Penrose's *Bien Visé* (1939) and Andre Masson's *Antilles* (1943), in reference to the surreal content regularly depicted on the covers of Vertigo titles. Painted covers were common practice for this genre of comics, with *Shade, the Changing Man* (1990), *The Sandman* (1988), *Preacher* (1995), *Hellblazer* (1988) and *Swamp Thing* (1984) as notable examples. This cover addresses the shift towards more mature themes in comics, the high quality of artwork to be seen in this genre and, as the pivotal point, the positive representation of a sensitive, more 'feminine' man as a hero. My references for the 1990s were, as was the case in the 80s, pages and covers from comics of the period: for MetaMerc, I drew inspiration from Marvel and Image's titles illustrated by Rob Liefeld, Todd McFarlane and Jim Lee. For Meta the Mystic, I referred to Grant Morrison's *Doom Patrol* (1987), Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* and Peter Milligan's adaptation of Steve Ditko's character *Shade, the Changing Man*. His comments to the reader are multi-faceted, designed to inspire deeper thinking and to reinforce the theme that not everything is as it seems.

Figure xxxii: Cable and Shade, the Changing Man typify two very different sorts of heroes. *The New Mutants* #87, Marvel Comics, March 1990. Art by Rob Liefeld. *Shade, the Changing Man* #55, DC Vertigo, January 1995. Art by Duncan Fegredo.



Figure xxxiii: MetaMerc and Meta the Mystic demonstrate this contrast as well in their complete 1990s menus.

The essays and animations called for a high level of visual detail as well. MetaMerc's essays are each presented inside of gun targets, with a heavy, blocky font. The animation that demonstrates to the user what this character is all about required me to use a technique I first encountered when making shadow puppets on my MA course. Attached to a stationary head, torso and pelvis by virtual hinges, MetaMerc's limbs were divided into sections; allowing for a greater range of movement.



Figure xxxiv: Screenshot showing MetaMerc in action

Meta the Mystic's essays are presented inside of the character's emblem; a Yin-Yang symbol combined with a Mobius Strip. His animation, in which he changes from male

to female to animal and back to male again, makes use of Flash's shape tweening, a function that transforms one object on the stage into another. There is a high degree of randomness when shape tweening vastly different objects (such as a unicorn changing into an older Meta), leading to unpredictable visuals, a side effect that initially discouraged me from trying it. Rather than come out incomprehensible, my test run of the animation yielded surreal imagery that was perfectly in keeping with the atmosphere I was trying to achieve.



Figure xxxv: A sequence of frames showing Meta the Mystic's transformation into Ms Meta

Summary of the 1990s Menu

The 1990s menu had, despite the large amount of information present, a simple goal in mind. The idea of masculinity was so divergent and subjective now that there was a need for more than one type of male superhero. Readers may have gotten their first introduction to the genre through characters like MetaMerc, but as they grew older, or if they were not enamoured of his brand of masculinity in the first place, characters like Meta the Mystic provided them with a concept of male heroism they could identify

with. It took a month to produce this decade.

11. Developing the 1970s Menu

My next focus was the 1970s, which I began in June 2010. Having completed the two decades that would follow this one already left me in a position I found intriguing in terms of its relationship to my practice: I knew what was coming, for both superheroes and the American man, having spent two months describing it. Now I had the opportunity to go back in time, so to speak, and explore the factors that led to the events and concepts I covered in the 80s and 90s and the immediate after-effects of the 60s. It was a situation comparable to putting a puzzle piece into place and discovering that I could now tell what picture the puzzle was meant to represent.

Historical Context

In the 1970s, social awareness was at the forefront of many an American mind, be it the issues of drugs, sexism racism or poverty. The ongoing Vietnam War and subsequent Watergate scandal caused faith in the government to plummet. A recession spanning two years and oil embargoes in 1973 and 1979 did not help matters, and forced Americans to rethink the routines of their daily lives. The man of the 70s had more freedom than ever before when it came to the choices he made in his personal life and ideals, even if current events got in the way at times. This freedom extended to the superhero of the 1970s as well. Daniels presents the example of the series *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, known for its frank depiction of social issues of the time:

In the opening of the new series, Green Lantern rescued a businessman being

attacked by a young thug, only to learn that the victim was actually a slumlord bent on throwing his elderly tenants out into the street. In a celebrated sequence, an old man berated the interplanetary hero for devoting his efforts to helping races with blue skins, orange skins and purple skins, but never having enough time for the black skins of his own world. “It was super heroes questioning themselves in fictional stories for the first time,” says O’Neil...there was a difficulty inherent in the approach, because confronting a super hero with racism meant that he would be obliged to admit defeat. He could hardly announce that he had solved the problem, as Jerry Siegel realised in comparable circumstances when Superman took on World War II. “Even if these characters existed,” O’Neil observes, “the fact that they have preternatural powers would not solve the world’s problems.”²¹⁸

When the Department of Health, Education and Welfare contacted Marvel Comics in 1971 about producing an anti-drug Spider-Man storyline, Marvel published the resulting issues without approval from the Comics Code. The response to this story was overwhelmingly positive and forced the CCA to re-evaluate their rules, leading to less stringent censorship when it came to the representation of drugs and other topical issues in comics.²¹⁹ The Middle East,²²⁰ Far East²²¹ and Soviet Union,²²² due to their involvement in the politics of the day, were on the minds of many writers and artists of comic books. A rise in new artistic talent led to more engaging and interesting visuals than had been seen previously in superhero comics; with the Comics Code being revised to be less stringent, a higher standard of work and wider variety of narratives were being produced within the genre.

²¹⁸ Daniels (2004:154-155)

²¹⁹ Daniels (1991:152-153)

²²⁰ (February 5, 1979) Business: Oil Squeeze. *Time Magazine, US Edition*. Vol. 113 No. 6. Retrieved from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,946222-1,00.html> on February 1, 2011.

²²¹ (November 15, 1971) The Press: Closeup on China. *Time Magazine, US Edition*. Vol. 98 No. 20. Retrieved from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,903250,00.html> on February 1, 2011.

²²² ‘...it seemed as though the empire of Communism, which in the 1970s had taken over ten more countries in Africa and Asia, its greatest advance since the late 1940s, was better placed to challenge American hegemony than ever before.’ Booker (2004:683) reflects the American mindset at the time, as does Pines, B (Mar. 15, 1976) Time Essay: Red Star Over Europe: Threat or Chimera? *Time Magazine, US Edition*. Vol. 107 No. 11. Retrieved from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,945556,00.html> on February 1, 2011.

Content

I had a very straightforward image in mind for the layout of the 1970s, as I had with the 1980s. MetaMan would be on patrol in a dark alleyway, and the hotspots would be paper debris in the area, such as torn posters and discarded newspapers. The main points of the menu would be a description of the man of the 70s, as well as an essay on how superhero comics addressed the issues of the day. Additional points were an interactive tour of MetaMan's adventures in the Middle East and Asia, an essay on the decade's artistic developments and an animation showing MetaMan's 70s body image. MetaMan of the 1970s was a radically different man than his affable, Silver Age persona. He sported a tough expression, more accurate anatomy and a domino mask. His logo was now a self-contained diamond shape. I had grown used to the task of spending eight-to-twelve hours drawing MetaMan's primary image in Flash by this point.

Visual Style and Artistic Techniques

To properly reflect the high quality of often found in 1970s superhero comic artwork, I made the decision to not only hand-draw-and-ink my artwork for the era's illustrations, but to colour these images using digital painting techniques in Photoshop. The seven images needed for MetaMan's 'Tour of the Exotic East' were highly time-consuming to create, but the results encapsulate the mood, colour palette and feeling of the era's superhero comics to a degree other, quicker methods, could not. The alley setting was made using a completely different technique altogether. First, the bare bones of the image were drawn in Illustrator. I made liberal use of custom brushes, many of which I had never tried out before. This gave me a black-and-white image that was

appropriately dingy and moody, with a tremendously large file size. The lineart was imported into Photoshop, where it was digitally painted and saved in jpeg format, to maintain a small file size. The .jpeg was then brought into Flash, where MetaMan, (himself drawn directly into Flash) the posters and newspaper (drawn as lineart in Illustrator and with images added to them in Photoshop) were added to it. The text was presented in the form of scrolls that, from a narrative perspective, could have been discovered by MetaMan during his travels. The user is given an interactive map to explore MetaMan's travels. When one of the locations on Metaman's itinerary (Morocco, The French Riviera, Egypt, Japan and Tibet) is selected, a brief animation plays, showing how MetaMan travelled there and what he encountered.



Figure xxxvi: 1970s MetaMan inspired by Neal Adams' art style

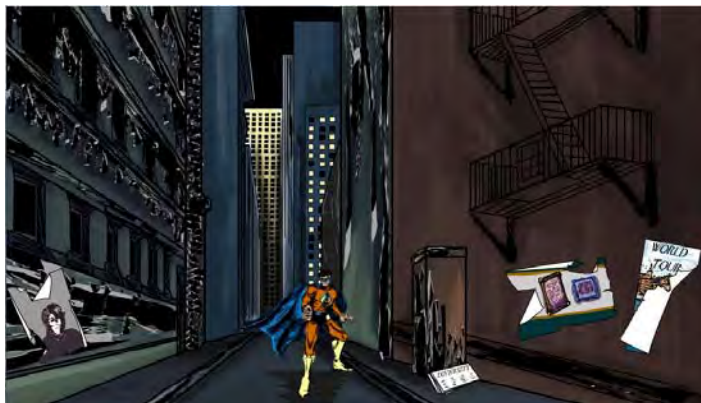


Figure xxxvii: Completed 1970s menu that places the character in a dingy city alleyway with interactive but torn posters on the sides of buildings

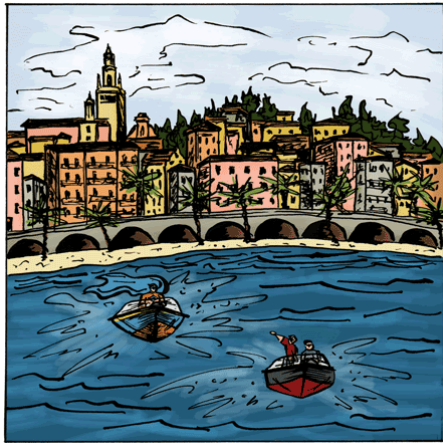


Figure xxxviii: MetaMan chasing pirates on the French Riviera



Figure xxxix: MetaMan fighting a ninja in Japan



Figure xl: MetaMan on board his plane

Figure xli: Green Lantern/Green Arrow #76, DC Comics, May 1970. Adams & O'Neil

Summary of the 1970s Menu

The 1970s menu is out to prove that a model of male heroism is not above self-discovery, self-doubt or taking pause in the face of insurmountable odds. He broadens his horizons, learns from his experiences and mistakes and is aware of what is happening in his own backyard. I made use of a vast amount of reference images for the 1970s, a separate folder of images for each location MetaMan visits as well as images of the vehicles he uses. Neil Adams' illustrations of Batman from the 1970s were an invaluable resource for the look of the period. MetaMan's speech in the 1970s is up-front and demonstrates an awareness of his surroundings and current events.

12. Developing the 2000s Menu

I moved from the disco age to the digital age in November 2010 when I began to work on the 2000s. This era presented me with a set of unique and complex challenges in its content and its design. It is extremely difficult to pin down a definitive 21st-century superhero genre 'look'. The 2000s have seen tremendous artistic variety in superhero comics; the characters' status has reached iconic proportions as never before. Audiences today, familiar with superheroes to an unprecedented degree, will recognise them regardless of the style they are presented in, allowing artists greater freedom in their interpretations of superheroes.

Visual Style and Artistic Techniques

Where a series of common modern superhero visual features can be found, however, is in recent animated adaptations of Marvel and DC Comics' titles. Batman received a high-quality animated series in the 1990s (*Batman: The Animated Series*, 1992-1995),

featuring clean, stylised designs by Bruce Timm and Glen Murakami that drew inspiration from sources as varied as Art Deco and Japanese animation and informed the style of Superman's subsequent animated adventures (*Superman: The Animated Series*, 1996-2000). This style evolved in the 2000s, as DC Comics continued to develop its DC Animated Universe of programmes, growing more stylised and angular. Marvel Comics were no strangers to giving their characters the animated treatment as well. During the 1990s, series such as *X-Men* (1992-1997) and *Spider-Man* (1994-1998) faithfully reproduced the art style and plotlines of their comic counterparts. As of 2008, Marvel has established its own animation studio and with it, a different approach to how its characters appear in the animation medium than had been demonstrated previously. Recent Marvel animation features defined angles, flat colours and exaggerated shapes in a manner unique from that of DC's presentation, but still sharing these design elements in common. Both companies' animated works are uncomplicated in design, slick in execution, and high in production values; they managed to draw inspiration from their comic book roots without being derivative or excluding viewers unfamiliar with the comics' continuity and plotlines. Above all, these animated series have succeeded in reinforcing the iconic status of these characters in another visual medium as well as their place as fixtures of Western popular culture. Especially helpful for me is the fact an overwhelming amount of modern Western television animation is produced in Flash.

With all this in mind, I defined the design elements MetaMan of the 2000s and his environment required. His costume would need to be simplified further than ever before and for the first time since the 1940s, I abandoned his mask. The issue of the superhero's secret identity, while still present, takes a back seat to the action in modern animated series and I wished to reflect this visually. Shadows and highlights must be

clearly defined and accurate to the position of light sources in their shapes and placement; when working with such a stark design style, any errors become glaringly obvious. MetaMan's new costume would feature gloves, completely covering his hands for the first time and creating a symbolic layer of separation between him and the rest of the world; this character is no longer a person but an icon, instantly recognisable and immediately representation of strength and heroism. For the same reasons, as well as in reference to the exaggerated, designs seen in modern superhero animation, MetaMan's body is liberally stylised with inhumanly broad shoulders tapering to a narrow waist, heavily-muscled thighs and slim knees and ankles.

Backgrounds would feature a liberal use of gradients, creating a high-tech, clean and modern look, eschewing black outlines to avoid dominating the composition and taking the focus away from MetaMan. In terms of the background itself, I chose an environment I had visited before in the 1960s and 1980s: the superhero's stronghold. This time, rather than a solitary, secretive lair in a hidden location, MetaMan's headquarters is in the middle of a city, shared with a team of diverse fellow superheroes, the Meta Squad, who feature in the an animation that evokes the introduction of a cartoon. This decision was made in order to reinforce the iconic status of the character; he operates within the public's realm, out of a building that makes him instantly accessible to them, putting the emphasis on MetaMan as a Heroic archetype as well as on his role and deeds as a superhero, rather than on his alter-ego. The room in the headquarters chosen as the menu's setting would be the Squad's meeting-place, combining elements of a boardroom with an information centre. The view of the city outside the building is a digitally-altered photograph; referencing the combination of media often seen in modern animation. Aside from MetaMan himself, whose image would link to the close-up interactive animation of his body the previous eras have each

employed with their own respective MetaMen, all the information in the present day menu would be found in the large, state-of-the-art computer dominating the conference table. This would contain a set of icons that are each interactive.

Reference for the visuals of the 2000s was made up of viewing the modern superhero animated films and series, *Justice League Unlimited* (2004–2006), *Teen Titans* (2003–2006), *Legion of Super Heroes* (2006–2008), *Static Shock* (2000–2004), *The Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes* (2010–present), *Next Avengers: Heroes of Tomorrow* (2008), *Justice League: New Frontier* (2008), *Wolverine and the X-Men* (2008–2009), *The Spectacular Spider-Man* (2008–2009) and the web-based animation *Gotham Girls* (2000–2002). I also assembled reference images of urban environments, boardrooms, modern office furniture, still images and pages from superhero animations and comics of the past 10 years to draw inspiration from, particularly where colours and art styles were concerned.

Content

Although, I had developed the look of the 2000s, its content was vague. When I conducted the pilot scheme, the students' input helped me to decide upon the following points to present within the menu:

MetaMan would need to be shown with the Meta Squad, who I also needed to design. I made this decision due to the proliferation of animated cartoons in the first decade of the 21st century that featured superhero teams, and because these particular cartoons were watched avidly by the students in the pilot tests. Series the students had mentioned by name were *Wolverine and the X-Men* (2008–2009) *The Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes* (2010–present) and *Justice League Unlimited* (2004–2006). When designing the Meta Squad, my watchword was 'diversity'. This was to be a superhero team that

reflected a variety of ethnic backgrounds, but I did not wish to spell them out directly for the user. I considered including character biographies for each of the team's five members; Major Change, Lady Meta, Miss Modifi, Alteratio and of course, MetaMan, but ultimately decided this would be detrimental to the strength of the characters. Just as MetaMan's powers have remained ambiguous throughout the decades; an intentional decision to give the user the personal freedom to decide what they are for themselves, so too was my approach to the Meta Squad's backgrounds. To directly attribute nationalities, histories and personality traits and even sexual orientations to the characters was to deny creativity and relatability to the user's and set definite rules for their interaction with this part of the software. Despite the characters' biographies existing in my imagination in their entirety, they possess ambiguity and familiarity in equal amounts. With the Meta Squad, I have allowed my knowledge of archetypes to directly inform the characters' designs and to avoid crossing into the realm of the stereotype.



Figure xlii: Completed 2000s Menu showing MetaMan in a glossy, high-tech headquarters building



Figure xliii: The Meta Squad. From left to right: Alteratio, Lady Meta, MetaMan, Major Change and Miss Modifi

Figure xliv: The Justice League, as they appear in the 2001 animated series created by Paul Dini and Bruce Timm

The tragedy of September 11, 2001 and its impact on not only the rest of the decade, but the Western world (truly, the rest of the world as well, but the focus of the research is on the West) cannot be discounted or disregarded in any way. The students in the pilot scheme all listed it as a major event of the 21st century, indicating how the shadow it cast was a long one; one that, a decade later, Western society is still very much under. The way the magnitude of this event affected both superheroes and ordinary men would need to be addressed.²²³ As Stromberg puts it:

Nothing has been as momentous in twenty-first-century American history as the attacks of September 11, 2001. As with the assassination of John F. Kennedy, everyone remembers where they were and when they heard the news, and this does not only apply to U.S citizens but to people all over the world. What happened also changed so many things concerning the relationships between the

²²³ Wright (2001: 288)

U.S and the rest of the world that it can be seen as one of the defining moments of this still very young century.²²⁴



Figure xlv: The 2000s menu includes an graphic tribute to September 11 2001

Equally important to examine is what makes the 21st Century Western man. He is the culmination of the six decades already featured in the software. I decided to depict his circumstances visually, using clean graphics and a limited colour palette in a style not commonly seen in mainstream superhero comics. In his world, as described by Gauntlett, he finds that:

With the decline of traditions, identities in general—including gender and sexual identities—have become more diverse and malleable. Although sometimes

²²⁴ Stromberg (2010: 164)

limited by the vestiges of tradition, modern lives are less predictable and fixed than they were for previous generations, and identities today are more ‘up for grabs’ than ever before. Everyone has to choose a way of living—although some people feel more enabled to make more unusual choices than other.²²⁵



Figure xlvii: In the style of independent comics, the choices facing the man of the 2000s are outlined symbolically

²²⁵ Gauntlett (2008:123) In the event I am painting the first decade of the 21st Century as a time of unfettered freedom of identity, Gauntlett clarifies that: ‘Modernity does not, of course, offer up an unendingly diverse set of identities for citizens, newly freed from the chains of tradition, to step into. Many social expectations remain—although these are perhaps the remnants of traditions which modernity is gradually shrugging off’ Ibid.:111

As for the 21st Century superhero, this decade sees him appearing to a nearly overwhelming extent in media outside of comic books.²²⁶ Live-action and animated television series, a plethora of films and video games dominated the entertainment industry. Even an exhibition of costumes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York made headlines, capturing the imaginations of fans old and new.

These various platforms emphasised a single point: superheroes have reached iconic status in this decade to a scale that has never been seen before, not even during the height of the Golden Age.²²⁷ Knowles suggests that this a side effect caused by the devastation of September 11; the public seeking heroes for escapism or comfort as humans have done so many times in the past.²²⁸

The integration of computers into the art world as well as the business world transformed the comic book industry in this decade, from both the inside and the outside and these transformations would need to be addressed, as well as the proliferation of superheroes in the television programmes and cinema of the 2000s. This may be special effects have finally caught up to the vivid imaginations and superhuman feats of comics, successfully replicating them on film in a believable manner. It may be a passing fad or a genre in its own right that will continue to be a mainstay of modern cinema in years to come, but at the moment, all 120 students who interacted with the software during the pilot scheme watch superhero films. Many recent superhero films

²²⁶ Fingerroth (2004:170)

²²⁷ It is interesting to note that the best-selling comic book of the century is issue #583 of *Amazing Spider-Man*, which shipped in January, 2009 and featured President Obama. An estimated 530,500 copies of this issue were sold. Information retrieved on March 3, 2011 from <http://www.comichron.com/vitalstatistics/topcomics2000s.html>. Other top-selling issues of the decade include the May, June and July 2006 issues of the Marvel Comics storyline *Civil War*—a commentary on the Patriot Act.

²²⁸ Knowles (2007:3-4)

and TV series of the past decade rely on the assumption that viewers are already well-versed in the conventions of the genre rather than explain them within the narratives.²²⁹

With all these issues in mind, I decided the 2000s menu would contain an illustrated essay on what the man of this decade's experience is like, further essays on how technology and cinema have impacted the superhero genre as well as the comics industry, a comic page on superheroes' mainstream role in society today, an animation introducing MetaMan and his teammates, the now-standard body panning animation and an essay ruminating on the future of the genre. Everything visual in this era with the exception of the hand-drawn illustrations, was created in Flash.



Figure xlvii: This illustration of an ordinary city scene contains a plethora of examples of how the superhero has permeated modern Western culture

Summary of the 2000s Menu

MetaMan's speech when addressing the user is reliant on their familiarity with the genre, and he is once again friendly and approachable. MetaMan of the 2000s needs to be able to navigate a changing world, technologically, socially and mentally. He needs to demonstrate an awareness of his roots while not being afraid to traverse new territory.

²²⁹ The television series *Heroes* (2006-2010) and *Misfits* (2009-present) provide examples of this.

Artistic Reflections

The work I created needed to inspire and excite in the same manner as a superhero comic book does the moment a reader sees its cover from across the shop floor and decides that between its covers is adventure they want to be a part of. Like the archetypal themes I had been researching, the work needed to be formed around the central backbone behind each concept I had been toying with the presentation of. This was a story that had a message to communicate and that message was now clear: superheroes may be the modern evolution of the hero archetype, but this archetype is defined and based around the evolution of what constitutes masculine strength; a seemingly rock-solid, archetypal concept as well, but one that, too, is subject to no small amount of evolution. Moreover, I felt the story of how masculinity and superheroes are linked should be told in a manner that prompts the audience to take the initiative and experience the story's progression themselves.

When I began to create the artwork for this project, the environments representing each decade their content moved straight from my mind to my sketchpad to my computer screen with confidence and purpose. Although environment designs have changed; initial sketches for the 1950s menu featured MetaMan, Miss Meta, Meta Kid and MetaMutt apprehending a criminal gang on a city street, and MetaMan's original design featured a laurel wreath-inspired logo and Grecian sandals, for example, behind the art was surety that propelled me into bringing it to fruition without a moment's hesitation.

Although I have avoided outright pastiche in the software's artwork, and incorporated elements of my own art style as I combined it with that of professional comic book artists, *MetaMan* has required me to test my artistic capabilities in unanticipated ways. An area that I had previously felt a fair amount of artistic insecurity about was the male body, particularly the well-muscled physiques sported by superheroes. As I began this project, my ability to depict the subject matter in a believable manner concerned me, and I felt there was only one way to address this concern: with readiness to learn and an entirely open mind. With the 1960s, this proved to be a powerful experience for me; I had admired Jack Kirby's artwork since childhood, his life had been the subject of a term paper written for my Master's degree, and now he was becoming my teacher. The respect and admiration I had already felt for this visionary artist only grew as I strove to incorporate the atmosphere of his work into my own, and the same was true of the other artists I studied the work of for the remaining six eras. I strove to attain an understanding of each artist's personal style, the aesthetics, trends and masculine ideals of each time period and to reflect this understanding in my own work. This resulted in my experiencing first-hand, with each line I drew and mark I made, what each of the seven time periods considers the image of heroic masculinity. In the faces of the eight versions of *MetaMan* the project features, I incorporated a sense of the personality traits the superhero of the time needed to possess. In their body language, I imbued them with mannerisms that communicate their characters.

When I began the project, I had known *MetaMan*'s uniform would change, but I had not anticipated how this would result in eight definite, concrete character designs, each completely unique from the other despite them each representing the same man. The project required me to depict different personality types while still retaining enough

points of commonality that the audience would recognise MetaMan in each era.

These changes only served to emphasise the points I was making with *The Adventures of MetaMan* regarding how masculinity and its definition has never been static throughout history. It also reinforced just how much the research was being defined by the act of creating the artwork and how the research was and is still an ongoing process.

There was a real risk of creating artwork that looked too slick, too inorganic and reliant on the computer. Wherever possible, I used methods identical to that of the artists working in each of the previous time periods and the traditional tools of the sequential artist: a dip pen, brush and India ink. This was feasible for comic pages, illustrations or static artwork within the environments. However, when the settings themselves as well as MetaMan himself, required me to work directly digitally I was faced with the added challenge of using digital methods to replicate traditional work. If the project's audience felt a sense of disconnection between the artwork featured on a comic page and the artwork used to illustrate the menu where it could be accessed, I would have considered the artwork unsuccessful. I had to gain familiarity with Flash, Illustrator and their drawing tools in a quick and comprehensive manner in order to discern the optimum method of, for example, drawing the shadows on a table so that they appeared to have been painted on with a brush and ink. That is not to say I rushed a single line of the pen, or line of text. The decision to, like in a comic book, use words and images to create the illusion of sound and provoke the user's imagination to provide it themselves, was even more reason for the quality of the artwork to be as high as possible.

When I reached the 1950s menu, I discovered that my previous apprehension towards drawing muscular male forms had vanished altogether. This type of body had been

absorbed into my artistic repertoire and is now familiar to me. The learning experience each era's art style provided absorbed me. Even the hyper-masculine, inaccurate anatomy of certain comics of the 1990s held lessons to be learned. I took forward from this style of working a type of visual shorthand that could just as easily be turned to work that does not rely on flashy explosions and bulging muscles and result in effective art. Digital painting, a way of working I had been longing to experiment for months, provided the ideal means of depicting Meta the Mystic's cover art, with the project's deadlines giving me no time for hesitation. Vintage cars and furniture, city streets and natural landscapes were all subjects I was previously unfamiliar with, but was able to draw with speed, precision and quality. Producing the sheer volume of artwork required to realise this project, combined with the sheer number of techniques I made use of for the first time left me positive and confident in my abilities as an artist.

Technological Reflection

It was fortunate that I developed such feelings in regards to my artwork, for, when learning the new language of ActionScript 3.0, confidence in one section of the arena bolstered my resolve to tackle uncharted territory in another.

ActionScript 3.0 might have been an area completely outside of my creative comfort zone, but that did not make it incomprehensible to a newcomer and coding errors can be fixed and do not always have complicated solutions. I did not achieve mastery over ActionScript 3.0 in the months that followed, however I did achieve basic competence in using the language along with patience when faced by errors. I have also employed codes not covered in the modules, seeking professional assistance only after

experimenting with them extensively first. A recent attempt at coding the main menu, for example, led to me scouring the Internet for a code that would permit me to load each of the eras in their entirety into the menu containing the navigation bar. While the base code itself was sound, it also assumed that I was loading the file from a floppy drive, using an abbreviation I had been previously unaware of. This abbreviation was explained to me by Dr Mason and a modified version of the code is being used in the final version of *MetaMan*.

This learning process has taken time. I did not resent this, nor did I feel that learning these skills was a waste of my time. The acceptance that ActionScript 3.0 was something I would need to develop a working comprehension of that went deeper than merely copying and pasting text happened, like my confidence in drawing muscular male bodies, before I had fully realised that it had. That I find myself actually enjoying the act of programming is a side effect that pleasantly surprises me. While I harbour no illusions that I am now a programming expert, I wish to take my knowledge of ActionScript 3.0 further and apply it to future digital media projects as well as using it to further develop the *MetaMan* software. Through the process of incorporating a programming language into this work, I have experienced how it removes any limits I might have put on the scope of my creative vision. With the knowledge I possessed before, during and after *MetaMan*, I now know how to produce artwork traditionally and digitally, how to animate said artwork, and how to allow a user interaction with it. I now find myself with the ability to move freely through several different spheres of visual communication media, spheres that seldom overlap, and would ordinarily have had no reason to in my own artistic practice. Now they have become an integral part of it, independently of *MetaMan*. I found myself switching skills in a single day; going

from drawing traditionally to writing to programming to drawing digitally naturally and easily by the time the project drew to a close.

In addition to animation, *MetaMan* has required me to delve into the realm of graphic design. Each era called for new logo and costume designs for MetaMan, as well as a custom mouse cursor based on the character's logo at the time. Illustrations in the style of comic book covers, as featured in the 1950s and 1990s needed to be composed in an authentic manner and feature logo graphics for the titles of each book. Rather than worry that a lack of formal education in the fields of logo design and typography might hinder the believability of the artwork, I relied on my comprehension of the principles of design as well as my intuition and a large amount of comic book covers for reference, and enthusiastically produced the images and logos I needed to. There is a certain mystique surrounding artistic materials and techniques and their differences; as if sculpting and painting, for example, are two different countries with their own separate languages and cultures. Over the course of this project, I have come to discover this is not the case at all in my own artistic practice, and to think otherwise is limiting my vision and creativity.

In the world of digital media, menu and interface designs play a crucial role in the functionality of a project.²³⁰ I am an avid player of video games, but my thought process is such that when confronted by beautifully-designed levels and characters, I will overcome the challenges of unintuitive or even poor menu and interface design to continue playing and even enjoying a game. This is not, of course, the general consensus of most gamers, nor my own when approaching the layout of my own

²³⁰ Scott, Neil (2009:xxi)

software. Likewise, I am not nearly this forgiving when it comes to website design. If I visit a site that is difficult to navigate, I will grow frustrated and abandon it unless the site's information is absolutely necessary to me. With a potential target audience of young boys, themselves likely video game veterans and frequent internet users, my challenge was to offer a navigational system that is so straightforward they do not give it a second thought.

First forays into main menu design involved a screen divided into seven comic book panels, with keywords and images from each era. The user would then select their first destination from the choices offered, and, when wishing to change time periods, would select their next destination from a drop-down menu concealed in a non-obtrusive place in the upper left corner of each era. This design was quickly abandoned after I began to experiment with drop-down menus and their variations. By obliging the user to locate and activate a relatively hidden navigational tool, particularly one that covers up the artwork when activated, I was obstructing my design, cluttering up the environment and putting more distance between the user and where they wanted to go²³¹. I needed to eliminate this distance as much as possible, and so the next design I devised featured an omnipresent navigation strip at the top of the screen. The main menu has been replaced by a navigation wheel, clearly displaying the name of each time period and accompanied by an illustration of the relevant version of MetaMan. While instructions are included, the end result speaks for itself as much as it possibly can, featuring clear, concise designs that require no hunting or searching on the part of the user to make them work.

²³¹ 'We should make the interface respond directly to the user's interaction. *Make it direct.*' (Ibid.:xxi)

Personal Reflection

Another side-effect of this project is the inability I have acquired to view any form of narrative, be it in books, films, television series, video games, and of course comics, without involuntarily analysing the story. My comprehension of storytelling conventions, techniques and methods has expanded to such an extent that I now perceive the underlying narrative structure of a tale within moments of encountering it. Without trying, I also take into account the time period the work was created in and try to place the work into its cultural context. What this has done is strengthen the structure of my own narrative work and assisted me in thinking objectively on the reasons why I have made particular storytelling decisions. It has also reinforced my ability to contextualise visual media forms.

MetaMan's original contribution to knowledge has not been restricted to the software and its uses; it is not confined to the act of practice-based research. On personal, philosophical and professional levels, I have gained insight, wisdom, personal growth and development than I had ever imagined in was possible for anyone, artist or otherwise, to achieve. Before *MetaMan*, I required certain conditions to be met if I were to approach working in unfamiliar media. As with my reasons for starting a Batman collection (see Appendix 1), I would begin with exhaustive research of the medium, including its history, evolution, its most prominent practitioners' biographies and every recorded variation on it so far. After that, I would collect my materials, test them out and only after feeling I could proceed without the final product ending in disaster would I start the work in earnest. The resulting product would generally be of very high quality in terms of execution, so I maintained that I had happened upon a fail-proof *modus operandi* for my art and saw no reason to change my approach, until the drive to create

the MetaMan resource threw my previous methods into both question and disarray.

This project may explore the superhero's evolution and perceptions, but through it, my artistic process and perceptions of myself have evolved as well.

This work of art is one I would not have done differently, given the opportunity. The high standard of artwork I had already produced before learning ActionScript 3.0 motivated me to keep learning the programming language to realise my vision.

I have grown more perceptive, of myself and the world around me. I am no longer intimidated by difficult, untried techniques and experiences, professionally and personally. I have faced the struggle between art and artist. I have experienced the battle of imagined capabilities versus actual ones and learned how to evenly match them, challenging myself while still maintaining my health and focus. As a result, I feel wiser and more adept at creating art as well as living.

In reflecting upon and writing about *MetaMan's* evolution, I realise that it would not have occurred in a way that was beneficial on artistic and personal levels if technology, design and the magnitude of my own ideas had presented me with a straightforward work of art. The artistic, technological and theoretical challenges this project presented me with galvanised me to approach them wholeheartedly and this resulted in a strong and well-rounded work of art unlike any I have produced before.

Pilot

The image of the angrily grunting and inarticulate teenager is not one which stands up to scrutiny when one looks at what can happen when boys are given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and are encouraged to talk.

Stephen Frosh, Ann Phoenix and Rob Pattman²³²

By July 2010, I had completed six of the software's seven menus. I had been working steadily on the written component of the project and had discussed its artistic process up until the 1970s menu. As I approached the menu that was to represent the first ten years of the 21st century, I became increasingly aware that once this era was complete, it would be to the MetaMan resource's advantage if I were able to put it to trial using a pilot scheme in an educational setting. I believed that in giving the project's potential audience of preadolescent and adolescent boys the opportunity to interact with the software first-hand, I would gain a practical understanding of whether or not the software had pedagogical potential through speaking with them and recording their reactions, views and opinions regarding the work. I planned to improve the software in the future through the feedback, whether positive or negative, that I hoped to receive. My goal was to arrange a series of pilot tests with groups of young men aged 11-16 from a variety of ethnic and economic backgrounds, hopefully having the chance to engage with over 100 young men in total.

²³² Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman (2002:256)

1. Background of the Pilot Scheme

I began the pilot scheme by conducting a review of relevant literature. Brown's interviews with 128 young comic book fans in the 1990s were particularly beneficial. The superhero comic fans Brown interviewed were largely polarised in their definitions of what constitutes masculinity and heroism. One type of reader subscribed to the views of young men like Tony and Neil, as mentioned in the Software and Content chapter, whereas another type shared the opinion of an unnamed young black man in his late teens who values intelligence over muscles, as evidenced in his opinion of the teenage superhero Static: 'Static, well, he's just a high school kid, but he's the coolest, and I think the smartest, of all of them. Yeah, I'd stack Static up against any other superhero any day. He's the man.'²³³

Brown reflects that these opposing opinions of heroes and masculinity may be a result of how 'the male identity in the twentieth century is perceived in extremes: man or mouse, he-man or ninety-eight pound weakling'.²³⁴ I began to wonder how the male identity in the 21st century was perceived by young men growing up over a decade after Brown's study. I wondered how they would respond to a work of art presenting different types of men as hero figures, even though they are all revisions of the same man.

Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, in their 2002 study of 245 boys from London secondary schools aged 11-14, directly explore the male identity in the 21st century. Among their research findings, they discovered how these boys generally believe that 'popular masculinity involves 'hardness', 'sporting prowess', 'coolness', casual treatment of

²³³ Brown (1999:Kindle location 2781)

²³⁴ Ibid.:Kindle location 2588

schoolwork and being adept at ‘cussing’’.²³⁵ However, ‘many boys spoke about wanting to look good in designer clothes’²³⁶, wanted to ‘care for, play with and teach children and show them things and places’²³⁷. This suggests less binary extremes of male identity than Brown’s study indicates, although Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman explain the underlying causes of their research findings:

British masculinities (as others) are socially constructed from within a culture in which sexual, racial and class inequalities are still deeply embedded and these are reflected in the ways in which boys make sense of themselves, in what they take to be acceptable and what they oppose. For most boys, femininity is disparaged...social class is an axis around which different masculinities form...Homophobia is rife in schools...The result of all this, for girls as well as for boys, is to sustain discourses of gender identity which are narrow and constraining and which reproduce inequalities and suffering from generation to generation.²³⁸

The work of Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman led me to reflect upon what I might expect by introducing the MetaMan resource into an educational setting. I was reluctant to approach the pilot scheme with preconceptions regarding student reactions and feedback, but I could not help but anticipate that a character like Meta the Mystic would be met with negative, potentially homophobic comments, and that the more lithe and streamlined 1950s MetaMan might be seen as ‘wimpy’ compared to his more muscular incarnations. On the subjects of the 1950s MetaMan and the homophobia observed by Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, I did not discount Wertham’s interviews with adolescent young men who viewed Batman and Robin’s relationship as implicitly homosexual. One young man explained how:

²³⁵ Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman (2002:10)

²³⁶ *Ibid.*:14

²³⁷ *Ibid.*:14

²³⁸ *Ibid.*:264

I think I put myself in the position of Robin...I remember the first time I came across the page mentioning the 'secret bat cave'. The thought of Batman and Robin living together and possibly having sex relations came to my mind. You can almost connect yourself with the people. I was put in the position of the rescued rather than the rescuer. I felt I'd like to be loved by someone like Batman or Superman.²³⁹

I wondered if young men in 2010 perceived this relationship between Batman and Robin, or if they might express potentially homophobic views regarding these or other superheroes.

After receiving confirmation from my supervisory team that a pilot scheme of this nature was ethically sound, the next stage of the pilot scheme was to contact every boys' secondary school in Kingston upon Thames and the surrounding area by telephone in July 2010. I limited the location of the schools to this area because it was where I was based geographically, and I believed it would be relatively easy to travel to and from the schools without requiring so much time that it disrupted my schedule of coding and completing the software. I chose to limit the pilot scheme to schools with an all-male student body because I had been focusing on young men and their relation to superheroes in my research at the time. The issue of young women's potential interaction with the MetaMan software is one I will return to in the Conclusion chapter.

2. Contacting Schools

When contacting the schools, I explained the software and its potential purpose in an approachable and concise manner. Although occurred was two weeks before the summer holiday, both Mr David Starbuck, Head of Year 12 at the Tiffin Boys' School,

²³⁹ Wertham (1955: 192)

and Mr Simon Whittington, Associate Assistant Headteacher at the Coombe Boys' School expressed an interest in the project. They both requested that I contact them again after the autumn term began in order to organise the pilot tests. I had wanted to initiate this facet of the project at an earlier date than July 2010, but half-finished software would have put me at a disadvantage when approaching schools and presenting the project to them in an accurate manner.

At the time of the pilot scheme, the Tiffin Boys' School in Kingston upon Thames was a Voluntary Aided boys' Grammar School with over 130 years of experience although it became an Academy School in July 2011. It has a student body of 140 boys from Year 7 to Year 11²⁴⁰ and has a reputation as one of the most prestigious boys' schools in the area.

The Coombe Boys' School in New Malden was founded in 1931, but underwent significant refurbishment in 2005, when it became a Foundation School. It has a student body of approximately 725 students from Year 7 to Year 11 and including a Sixth Form.²⁴¹

Based on this information, I believed that the two schools would be able to provide me with a variety of students from different backgrounds and looked forward to conducting the pilot scheme in the autumn. However, I spent the rest of July and August writing and when the autumn term began in September, I started attending several programming modules a week. While this provided me with the resources to further develop the software's code and rectify various programming bugs, my schedule did not allow me time to begin the pilot scheme, although I remained in contact with Mr Starbuck and Mr

²⁴⁰ Information on the Tiffin Boys' School retrieved on November 3, 2011 from <http://www.tiffin.kingston.sch.uk/>

²⁴¹ Information on the Coombe Boys' School retrieved on November 3, 2011 from <http://www.coombeboysschool.org/Mainfolder/CBS-Documents/Boys-Prospectus.pdf>

Whittington, providing them with excerpts from my writing that addressed the software's purpose and potential audience. Mr Starbuck responded with an email on October 22, 2010 that led me to realise the importance of including a lesson plan with the software if it were to be eventually distributed commercially:

I've re-read the MetaMan information, and I think it's still worth exploring because the concept sounds excellent. Its half-term next week but I will pick up some emails. So please let me know the following:

1. Please could you send me scree grabs so I can see the sort of quality of product we're looking at here.
2. Obviously we would also need to liaise with our network managers, and an indication of the amount of space it would require (and any other technical information) would be helpful.
3. Is there an accompanying lesson plan?
4. There may well be scope for trialling the software with our year 8 or year 10 boys in late November or in December. I suggest that we just try it with one group of 30 boys at first to see how it goes. How, ideally, would you like to monitor and deliver this session?

I responded that day by providing both teachers with screenshots from the six completed decades as well as the in-progress Software and Content chapter and received positive and encouraging replies. Mr Whittington's reply included that he would arrange for a Year 7 class to be available when I was ready to begin the pilot scheme. I did not have a lesson plan at this stage, but began to think about the sorts of questions it might contain, knowing that if I intended to develop the software in the future as a pedagogical tool, a lesson plan would be a necessary inclusion with the software.

3. Structure and Student Involvement

In an email dated November 2, 2010, Mr Starbuck offered me feedback regarding where the software might be able to fit in when applied in an educational context, suggestions on how to proceed with possible commercial applications and what age group the work might be suitable for:

Your software essentially looks at the issue of identity. This comes up under the Citizenship banner, which is essentially a cross curricular set of aspirations. I would expect to see your lessons in a PSHE class (personal, social, health and economic education). Google PSHE and Citizenship and look them up on the National Curriculum website. If advertising this material to schools you will need to very clearly state how this ties in with elements of the national curriculum, otherwise teachers will assume that it doesn't and won't buy it. I imagine it will fit in very well under personal wellbeing in the PSHE curriculum and under the identity and diversity section of the Citizenship agenda. You also need to think more carefully about the target age group. We tend to divide them into key stage 3 (11-14years) and key stage 4 (14-16 years). There is probably more market for this to 13-14 year olds in years 8 and 9.

I investigated the website of the National Curriculum, finding that the key concepts in the PSHE curriculum for Key Stage 3 include:

Key concept 1.1, Personal Identities:

- a. Understand that identity is affected by a range of factors, including a positive sense of self.
- b. Recognising that the way in which personal qualities, attitudes, skills and achievements are evaluated affects confidence and self-esteem.
- c. Understanding that self-esteem can change with personal circumstances, such as those associated with family and friends, achievements and employment.

1.5 Diversity:

- a. Appreciating that, in our communities, there are similarities as well as differences between people of different race, religion, culture, ability or disability, gender, age or sexual orientation.
- b. Understanding that all forms of prejudice and discrimination must be challenged at every level in our lives.

2.1 Critical Reflection:

Pupils should be able to

- a. reflect critically on their own and others' values
- b. reflect on personal strengths, achievements and areas for development
- c. recognise how others see them and give and receive feedback
- d. identify and use strategies for setting and meeting personal targets in order to increase motivation
- e. reflect on feelings and identify positive ways of understanding, managing and expressing strong emotions and challenging behaviour.
- f. develop self-awareness by reflecting critically on their behaviour and its impact on others.

3. Range and content:

The study of personal wellbeing should include:

- a. examples of diverse values encountered in society and the clarification of personal values.²⁴²

I believed that the key concepts listed above could eventually be worked into a further, pedagogically-focused version of the software, and will return to this subject in the Conclusion chapter.

In late November my schedule was able to accommodate conducting the pilot scheme.

Mr Starbuck arranged for me to conduct two pilot tests at Tiffin with a Year 8 class and Year 9 class, each made up of 30 students. Mr Whittington was able to do the same at Coombe with a Year 7 class of 30 students. Each class period would last three-quarters of an hour.

I left the 2000s menu deliberately incomplete, although I had designed MetaMan and his environment and translated them into Flash. This decision had been made for advantage of the software's development. The content of the 2000s menu could be determined through input from the students as they interact with the software. These young men were likely to be consumers of superheroes in various forms of mass media,

²⁴² Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (2007, July 13). *Citizenship key stage 3*. Retrieved from <http://curriculum.qcda.gov.uk/key-stages-3-and-4/> on November 11, 2010.

and it would not be untoward to surmise that they would also be familiar with interactive media. Their positions as ‘men of the 2000s’ could provide me with ‘insider information’ on their views of the decade they are growing up in. This is a methodology used by Gauntlett, who has found that exploring identity through visual means can yield very successful results., not least because ‘the process operates on the visual plane, to a substantial degree—like many aspects of social experience’.²⁴³

This method could also allow the students to feel involved and that they were helping me achieve something I could not have done without them; making them heroes in their own right and, in a sense, stakeholders in the project. Expanding upon this approach, I decided to print out high-quality illustrations and comic pages from *MetaMan* to distribute to the students as thank-you gifts at the conclusion of each pilot test. I selected the 1950s cover of *MetaMan*, *MetaMan*’s 1960s origin story, *MetaMan*’s 1970s’ battle with ninjas, the *Watchmen*-inspired comic page of the 1980s and the cover of the 1990s’ issue of *MetaMerc*.

Further preparation included the purchase of a voice recorder with the ability to connect to a computer so I could transfer the sessions’ recordings onto it in MP3 format.

4. The Pilot

In early December, a week before the pilot scheme was scheduled, I visited each school, accompanied by the software. Mr Starbuck and Mr Whittington had each requested to view the work and its content beforehand in order to make sure it was appropriate for students aged 11-14. I also provided them with my CV, which details my experience teaching at both primary school and university levels. Mr Starbuck and Mr Whittington

²⁴³ Gauntlett (2008:255)

both responded with enthusiasm and approval to *MetaMan*'s artwork, animations and written material. When I was demonstrating the software to Mr Whittington, who shared an office with several teachers, ICT teacher Mr D Millea was present at the time. He became excited when he viewed the software, revealed that he was a fan of superhero comics, and asked if I could present it to his Year 9 students of 30 students. I readily agreed and we arranged for this to take place on the same day as my pilot test with Mr Whittington's Year 7 class. I went over the questions I planned to ask each group of students with Mr Starbuck and Mr Whittington. I developed these questions to help gain an awareness of the students' views and designed them to allow for flexibility in accordance to the students' responses:

Before the pilot test begins:

- Ask students about their familiarity with superheroes (particularly the media they are familiar with these characters from and what they think of them), comics and the time periods (their perceptions of the past).
- Guide the students through the software; ask students which eras they want to see and in which order. Paraphrase the text sections for time constraints.
- Who are the students' role models?

At the end of the pilot test:

- Who is a hero? A sportsman, a soldier, an actor, a music star, a doctor, a parent, a teacher? Fictional characters? Mention names and encourage the students to do the same to see their perception of heroes.
- Do the students want to be heroes? How do they believe they can do this?
- Would they wish to be a superhero? Any particular powers or characters?
- What makes a man? Is, Meta the Mystic less of a man than MetaMerc, for example? Why?

- What do the students think a man needs to be today? Why?

The questions were viewed as appropriate by both teachers. My goals for the work were met with the same endorsement and I was given further PSHE resources to assist in the potential future applications and development of the software: a link to the teachers' material website <http://www.teach-ict.com> and a presentation on the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL). Teach ICT is a resource for teachers and students in the field of information and communication technologies. It focuses on Key Stages 3, 4 and 5, and currently uses superheroes in some of its material that promotes online safety. Mr Whittington believed that MetaMan can be used to teach and promote the aims of SEAL among students as a mascot character if accompanied by a modified edition of the software and its supplementary material that emphasises personal development and positive values over the historical aspects of the work.

1. Group One

The first pilot test took place at the Tiffin School, to the Year 8 group. After conducting a quick meeting with Mr Starbuck where we went over the aims and schedule of the pilot test, I introduced to another teacher, Miss O Shirley and her students, who were completing a French lesson. Upon introducing myself to the class as an artist and research student conducting a PhD, I was asked a question I had not been remotely prepared for: 'Miss, what's a PhD?'

I had permission from Mr Starbuck to record the session, but I asked Miss Shirley and the students if they were in agreement with being recorded as well.

The classroom lacked the necessary cable to connect my laptop to the projector and

attempts at procuring one were unsuccessful. I proceeded ahead with the study regardless; as soon as I mentioned my work involved superheroes, I was met with cheers and exclamations of ‘yeah!’ and ‘yesss!’ to the extent that Miss Shirley had to request the students settle down. Because of the subject matter of the software, the boys did not mind that they had to crowd around the screen of my laptop. I began the study by asking how many students in the class read comics; out of thirty, 90% did. Their tastes in comics were quite varied; Marvel and DC superhero comics were read by the majority, but so were *The Simpsons*, *The Beano*, *Tintin* and *Asterix*. There was no dividing line between what the boys considered more or less worthy reading material; superhero comics were equally at home on their bookshelves with humour or classic adventure series. The genre of what they read was not as important as its ability to entertain them, the boys simply stated. The non-comics readers in the class had no interest in the medium but did not look down on their peers who did read comics. Every student in the class watched superhero animated series and live-action films, however, and reported this to me with enthusiasm. My own familiarity with current superhero cartoons and movies and expression thereof succeeded in breaking down whatever barriers the boys may have put up between themselves and I, and I decided it was time to show them the software and asked them which era they would like to see first.

The boys chose the 1940s menu and were engrossed by it from the moment they saw its introductory animation of the naval battle. The students’ interaction with this menu was routinely punctuated by their opinions, questions and comments. The students interacted with the voice recorder, moving it around to be closer to whoever was speaking. In the eyes of this group, I was very clearly someone who knew everything there was to know about comics and they saw their chance to receive answers to aspects of the medium

that did not necessarily have to do with superheroes. Why did Japanese manga sport a rating system, asked a boy who had tried to buy a volume of a series for his brother, but rejected it due to its violent content. Why did superhero films contain elements of romance and drama instead of just heroes saving the day? Why was Batman attracted to Catwoman, a criminal?

Fifteen minutes into the session, one of the boys was urgently called away to attend band practice; he had been one of the most proactive participators in the pilot test and I offered him a choice of one of the images I had printed out before he left. His classmates immediately asked if they could receive their own printouts then as well, rather than wait until the end of the session, and this added an undercurrent of excitement and anticipation to the classroom's atmosphere from that point on. The entire group found the historical aspects of the software absorbing; there was a proliferation of remarks beginning with 'so *that's* why...' particularly during the discussion of the 1960s menu. They were completely unfamiliar with the history of Western comics themselves, but were well-versed in the major events of each decade which they contributed each time they chose a new era. Seeing how these events related to superhero comics and vice versa held their interest and fascinated them. They accepted the content of the software without question, understanding that MetaMan is in essence the same character during these seven decades, but not finding it odd or unusual that his design and personality experiences so many, often drastic, changes. The rest of the session flew by, and the boys were disappointed when it was time for me to leave. When asked; their concept of a hero was, across the board, a person who helps and saves others. They did not specify that such a person needs to be a man. I had printed out equal amounts of each illustration the students received upon leaving the classroom, but the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s images proved to be more popular than the gritty 1980s

MetaMan or the hyper-masculine 1990s MetaMerc. The students and Miss Shirley asked me to return once the software was complete and able to be used by the entire class on individual computers. Mr Starbuck followed up with me afterwards and echoed this sentiment.

2. Group Two

The following week, I conducted the two pilot tests at the Coombe Boys' School. I began with Mr Whittington's Year 7 class, in a dedicated computer lab. Before the session began, I connected my laptop to the projector so that the software was ready and waiting for the students before they arrived. I began the session in the same manner as the previous one; an introduction of myself, my research and my art background, followed by an explanation of the software. I also asked the students for their permission to be recorded, although Mr Whittington had given me permission to do so beforehand. I asked the boys some questions to ascertain their familiarity with superheroes, and what form of superhero media they consumed, as well as what their favourite genres of comics were. In contrast to the first group, every student present read *Match of the Day*, which, they assured me, featured comics. Superhero comics were popular with a far smaller percentage of the students, as were *The Simpsons* and *The Beano*; about 60% of the class. However, the entire class was vocal in their enthusiasm about watching superhero films and cartoon series. In this group, the definition of a hero included 'someone who is there for you, even if it's just for something small', 'a guy who saves people', and although it was met with giggles from some, a teacher. This time, I increased the boys' involvement with the study; each time I changed time periods as per their requests, I asked the class what they knew about each decade and used their answers to form the basis of how I expanded upon these

events' relation to the superhero genre.

I was asked on more than one occasion throughout the presentation if I had really created all of the artwork. The boys were as engrossed by the software as the previous group had been, and their younger age led to a wider variety of reactions than the first group. By the time I had reached the 1960s, one of the boys pointed out in wonderment that the cursors used in each time period were changing in accordance to MetaMan's logo. The 1960s animations generated so much amusement the class needed to be reminded to settle down. These young men were universally perplexed and somewhat distressed by the 1990s' drastic departure from traditional superhero conventions and wanted to know when 'regular' MetaMan would be back. In stark contrast to the Image fans Brown interviewed in the 1990s, MetaMerc's exaggerated muscles and guns generated amusement, but he was not, in their opinions, a superhero. Upon reaching the 2000s, and viewing MetaMan's design, there were several exclamations of 'he looks older now!' The boys informed me that they had learned a great deal from the software, particularly about their society and culture and were eager to experience the full working version upon its completion. They mentioned how it was clear superheroes and men had changed over time.

The 1950s, 1970s and 1980s illustrations were the most popular among this group.

3. Group Three

When I began the second session with Mr Millea's Year 9 students, some older boys aged around fifteen or sixteen were using computers towards the back of the room. They assured me that their presence would not disrupt my presentation. I began in the same manner I had with the Year 7 group, but very early on, it became evident that

there were some devoted superhero fans among the boys in this class. Three of the students, who situated themselves at the front of the room as soon as I introduced the subject matter of the software, considered themselves to be authorities where superheroes were concerned. Although this group's reading preferences were, once again, heavily slanted in favour of *Match of the Day*, with the entire group immediately stating it as their favourite comic, *The Simpsons*, *The Beano* and superhero comics were still ready by a handful of the students, 30%-40% in this case. Once again, superhero films and cartoons were enjoyed by all of the students, particularly *Iron Man* and *Spider-Man*. This group provided me with varied and eloquent responses as to the nature of heroes; 'anyone can be a hero, if they do good things', 'someone famous, or a dad, a friend or a teacher' and the ever-popular 'someone who saves people.' It was unanimously agreed upon that superheroes and heroes were two different types of people, and the boys believed that being a hero was a goal they could achieve.

When I loaded the software, the older boys stopped their work to watch it; although they did not contribute to the pilot test, they were interested and fascinated by the work itself. As I had done before, I asked the students to tell me what the major events of each decade were; the student at the very front of the class would routinely contribute with important occurrences from the history of superhero comics as well. He knew that the superhero genre had begun in the 1940s, although he had not been aware of superheroes' involvement during WWII, or that Batman and Superman were both published by DC Comics. He requested that we move directly from the 1940s to the 1960s, in contrast with the other groups who had insisted on experiencing the software in chronological order. This student was surprised to discover there was more to his favourite characters than exciting adventures and phenomenal powers; and he pointed out to his classmates the names of pre-existing superheroes MetaMan referenced each

time the decade changed. His facts were not always correct, and his two fellow comic fans were prone to engaging him in debate. Whenever this happened, their other classmates would request that the three boys fall silent and listen to me, as they regarded me as more of an expert on the subject of superheroes. Based on the comments of this group as they interacted with the software, it was evident that the work was building upon information they had known previously. Before *MetaMan*, admitted that they had not thought to make a link between art, entertainment and society, but during this pilot test, they expressed a keen interest to do so and wanted to know more about how superheroes can reflect the culture they are produced in.

Illustrations from the 1970s, 1980s and 1960s were the most sought-after among the students of this group. As the boys left the room upon the session's completion, the three superhero enthusiasts asked me how much the software would cost and where they would be able to purchase it. Other classmates who overheard their enquiry told me that they were interested in doing the same.

Afterwards, Mr Whittington requested that I remain in touch and let him know when the project was complete so that I could return and show it to the boys.

4. Group Four

My fourth and final pilot test was conducted at the Tiffin Boys' School. Mr Starbuck met me upon my arrival and introduced me to Mr K Holt, whose Year 9 class I would be working with. This session took place during the last week of classes before the Christmas holidays, and the boys had been informed before my arrival that the day's PSHE lesson was going to feature an artist and her work. When the students were asked about the genres of comics they read, *Match of the Day* was not mentioned. This group

favoured superhero comics, *The Beano*, *Calvin and Hobbes* and the Japanese manga series *Naruto*, and about 50% were readers of comics. Superhero films and cartoons were watched by the entire class, a fact they reported with gusto and enthusiasm. The group was full of eager participants; everyone had something to say and contribute. Their knowledge of events of the 20th century was excellent; providing me with a firm base to work with when explaining how historical factors impacted masculinity and superheroes. The boys also considered the dates of England's World Cup wins to be of equal importance to the Moon Landing or the introduction of the first colour television set into the UK. They were fascinated with MetaMan's evolution; Meta the Mystic's transformations into woman and animal, for example, was not considered 'feminine' or 'gay' (reactions I had been anticipating) as the students concurred he was like Harry Potter, which one of the boys eagerly pointed out had been first published in the 1990s. MetaMan of the 2000s was universally declared to have 'grown up' in comparison to his previous incarnations.

This group demonstrated no real preference to one decade's illustrations over another, and took home all the remaining printouts I had brought with me.

Mr Holt suggested that during the last five minutes of the class period, the students write and/or draw their definition of a hero and their feelings about the project. The mood in the classroom following the students' interaction with *MetaMan* was one of excitement and the boys' interpretation of this quick assignment featured a good deal of variety. Some provided me with drawings of superheroes they had designed, complete with name, list of powers and in some cases ('Doesn't know who he is or trust. Abandoned when baby'), background information. All of the students provided me with the following definitions of what makes a hero, which I have reproduced as the

following list:

- A hero is a guy who helps people.
- A hero can be anyone. As long as they have really trimmed abs.
- A superhero can be anyone who has determination to do good. They do not have to have any superpowers.
- A hero is a guy who does something good like a hero.
- Doesn't need powers. Doesn't give up. Determined. Strong. Helpful.
- A hero is someone who fights evil and protects the world.
- A hero is a legend.
- A hero is someone who does good to the world and only does good. They do not necessarily need to have super powers but sometimes they do.
- A hero is someone who helps and/or saves lives. They don't have to have special powers.
- A hero can have superpowers or no superpowers. What matters is that they bring good to the world. They can be anyone or anything! EVEN DORA CAN BE A HERO!
(underlined and accompanied by a drawing of the character Dora the Explorer)
- Clever. Strong. Mysterious. Heroic.
- Hero: Doesn't necessarily have to have superpowers but they have to behave in an extraordinary manner (good way) and help other people.
- A hero just has to save or help people. I saved my pet cockroach from falling onto the floor.
- A hero can be anyone who does good, e.g. save someone's life.
- A good hero will even have their own problems.
- A hero could be anyone that has done something good for a purpose.
- Ideas of Heroes: Head Teacher fights evil around school.

- What is a Hero? A hero is someone who can do something extraordinary. He doesn't necessarily need superpowers, but he has to be able to do something special. A superhero should be someone we can relate to, they might be different in society but we should be able to feel their intentions.

Who is a hero? A hero could be anyone to start with but could be someone respected—billionaire, singer, footballer.

5. Results of the Pilot

Based on the responses of the 120 students who participated in the pilot scheme, their unanimous belief is that heroes save and help people. Background and gender are generally irrelevant. The majority's use of the male pronoun when defining a hero may be the result of an hour in the company of a male superhero. Traits such as determination and goodness take precedence over the possession of superpowers. A hero and a superhero seem to be regarded as two separate entities; heroism can be achievable by anyone in our world, whereas superheroes were viewed by the students as a construct of fantasy, with the parameters of their genre clearly understood by their audience. The concept of ordinary people being heroes through acts that, while they may not involve saving the world, are still important in their own right, appears to be evident to them as well.

Another significant result of the pilot scheme was that it demonstrated the software's focus on America was not detrimental to the success of its ability to relate to these four groups of students. The students in both schools were already familiar with events the software draws on for content, such as wars, inventions, and popular culture of the past and present; even when these were specific to America. I had been expecting this in the case of World War II, but the students at the middle and upper end of the age group

expressed familiarity with American Pop Art, the Moon Landing, the Civil Rights Movement and trends that dwelled in the public consciousness, such as James Bond films during the 1970s, or the Rambo films of the 1980s. The boys did not feel excluded by the software covering primarily American culture and history, nor did they feel the only relevant events were those that overlapped with the culture and history of the United Kingdom. The cultural divide between American and England was not even mentioned by the students or their teachers at any stage in the fieldwork; it seems to have been a non-issue. This is encouraging in terms of future uses of the software. Finally, the content of the 2000s menu became clear to me as a result of the students' input, reactions and interactions with the software. I have discussed how I incorporated these into the menu in the section of the Software and Content chapter dealing with this era. However, due to the limited nature of the pilot scheme, it was neither possible nor feasible to define masculinity in the first decade of the 21st century, but through the students' behaviour and feedback, I was able to make observations that may suggest aspects of the students' views on the subject. In both schools, it was clear that the young men in the 13-14 age groups in particular displayed awareness of past and current events. In the brief time I was present in the students' classrooms, I saw that Mr Whittington's students and Mr Millea's students would occasionally make informal, and jokey but still respectful comments to their teachers, which were returned in a friendly but restrained manner. This behaviour which was absent with Miss Shirley and Mr Holt's students, whose interactions with their teachers were generally reserved. *Match of the Day* was read by all 60 students at Coombe, but by none of the Tiffin students, although the Year 9 class at Tiffin knew many facts about football and attached great importance to sporting events involving England. This was a fascinating observation in light of Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman's research findings that 'football was a key motif in

the boys' construction of masculinities...football talk was an important resource drawn upon in the construction of gendered identities'.²⁴⁴ The Year 7 class, upon viewing MetaMan's 1970s villainess love interest Ice Burn, exclaimed 'wow!' and 'she's fit!', a reaction none of the Year 8 and Year 9 students expressed to the class when they saw the same image. The majority of the students in all four groups were from white backgrounds, although approximately 40% of the students were Asian and Far Eastern. I was unable to observe that the students treated one another differently because of ethnic background or any other reason, nor did they seem to interact primarily with students who shared their ethnic backgrounds. All four classes presented the impression of a community group who viewed one another equally. Again, I stress that I was not present in the schools long enough to develop any deeper awareness of dynamics within these groups of students, or how they interact with one another when a teacher is not present. I cannot conclude that my findings provided me with a formula for defining the man of the 2000s, but when designing the illustration for this section of the 2000s menu, in which a young man is faced with personal choices including adhering to established ideas of masculinity while rejecting others, I kept the students and their behaviour in mind nevertheless.

6. Reflection

The pilot scheme found me regarding *MetaMan* with new eyes. I now had a possible picture of how its target audience might engage with the software, in their own words. The students responded to the software with wonder, fascination and enthusiasm. Based on their reactions, the software captured their interest and there was an indication that

²⁴⁴ Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman (2002:12)

the students may have made new connections between entertainment and culture. All four teachers I worked with agreed that the software would be a valuable educational resource if applied to PSHE lessons. They felt a work with this high level of interaction is a resource personal development classes are lacking, and that it takes a form students can easily engage with. Mr Holt informed me that his students become easily bored by worksheets and textbooks in their PSHE classes and that if I could relate the *MetaMan* software to issues such as drug abuse, he believed that it would have the potential to be highly beneficial to students. He also provided me with copies of activities, handouts and guidance for teachers used in current PSHE classes so that I could consider adapting the resources found in the *MetaMan* software to their material in the future.

The positive student response to the pilot scheme suggests that the *MetaMan* resource may be capable of educational applications. In order to do so, I will need to develop lesson plans, suggested activities, assignments and questions, further reading and notes for teachers. The content of these would vary depending on the age of the students, the focus of the class the software will be used in, and what the optimum application of *MetaMan* would be in each classroom situation. I will discuss these issues further in the Conclusion chapter, but believe that the pilot scheme was ultimately a success and that it has provided me with a starting point for *MetaMan*'s future potential.

Conclusions

The American monomyth's history is intertwined with the technology of twentieth-century entertainment. The latest technomythic platform is the computer.

- John Shelton Lawrence & Robert Jewett²⁴⁵

At first glance, *The Adventures of MetaMan: The Male Superhero as a Representation of Modern Western Masculinity* is a simple piece of interactive digital media. Similar interfaces are commonplace in websites and in video games.²⁴⁶ The facts and events it discusses can easily be found in history and reference books. Tributes to comic artwork and narratives and in particular, those of superhero comics, are not an uncommon practice, appearing in works within and outside of the comics industry and ranging from homage to pastiche to parody, such as *DC: The New Frontier* (2003-2004), *Tomorrow Stories* (1999-2002), the massively multiplayer online role-playing game *City of Heroes* (2004-present) and Andy Warhol's Pop Art prints of Superman. Like superhero comics themselves, *The Adventures of MetaMan* might appear to be merely a retread of subjects met before, an entertaining diversion from reality and certainly not an original contribution to knowledge. But like the superhero figure itself, there is more beneath the surface than appearances may indicate.

²⁴⁵Lawrence and Jewett (2002:1999)

²⁴⁶ Scott, B. and Neil, T (2009:105-121) and van der Spuy, R. (2009: 115-163) provide detailed step-by-step guides to overlays and controlling movie clip objects; the techniques I used to program the software. The former is discussed in the context of web design and the latter in the context of developing an interactive storybook video game.

I hope that through the visual and textual examples presented in this interactive work of art and the research that led to its creation, how and why the representation of male superheroes in American comics has changed from 1940 to 2010 has been answered clearly. I also hope these examples relate to the cultural and social representations of Western masculinity in these seven time periods.

The results of the pilot scheme suggest that the software can communicate these concepts and that it may have pedagogical applications. The MetaMan resource may build upon ideas students might bring with them when they approach the work and it may inform them of concepts they might have overlooked or been unfamiliar with. It may also provide them with a foundation to put what they learn from the work into the context of their lives and circumstances, but these goals cannot be achieved without further development, which I shall now discuss.

Developing the Software Further

1. Immediate Goals

My immediate plan for the software is to revisit the content and address several issues that were not presented in sufficient detail.

Technological Amendments

Although the software is fully functional in its current state, and I have made sure the code is stable and robust and will not crash, it will require the following amendments. The custom mouse cursors in each time period were viewed by students in the pilot scheme as an example of how MetaMan's logo has evolved and they received positive feedback. Despite this, they are an impediment to the functionality of the programme. They are often large, unwieldy and in shapes that do not lend themselves well to being used as pointers, and so it becomes difficult to accurately click on interactive objects, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. It often takes deliberate multiple repositioning of the mouse cursor before the interactive object is accessible. This can be rectified by either removing the custom mouse cursors altogether, or increasing the hit area of the various interactive objects. If I remove the custom cursors, I will include an option in the main menu to view the evolution of MetaMan's logo design instead.

In addition, there is an issue with interactive files that contain interactions within them, such as the television set in the 1960s menu and the interactive map in the 1970s menu. These files do not close when clicked on, unlike the basic text and image files that lack interaction. To circumvent this, I have created replicas of the original menu for each era, which then places itself on top of the interactive file when this file is clicked on. It creates the illusion of the main menu for the corresponding era being accessed. In reality it is a sandwich effect of files, with the main era menu at the bottom, the interactive file on top of it, and the replica of the menu above them both. This causes the

programme to lag in terms of speed, but more importantly, the stacking files can obscure the interface at the top of the screen. Menus that contain additional environments, like the 1940s and the 1960s also have this problem. When the software is launched in the web browser Internet Explorer, refreshing the page corrects this, but I plan to find a method of avoiding this sandwich effect altogether.

New Art and Content

The time frame I worked within to create the MetaMan software did not permit me to examine representations of masculinity in American superhero comics or in Western society as a whole that are not Caucasian. The ‘man of the decade’ sections of each era do not explore what these time periods were like for American men of varying ethnic backgrounds and I intend to amend this after conducting further research. Brown’s examination of black representations of masculinity in comics will be a primary resource for these additions. In the 1970s and 1990s, I plan to include the evolution of Major Change, a character who was created as part of the 2000s Meta Squad. 1970s Major Change will be a Blaxploitation-inspired superhero in the style of Luke Cage, and Black Lightning whereas his 1990s counterpart will represent an alternative view of black masculinity in the style of Milestone superheroes such as Hardware and Static. I plan to conduct research into the social and cultural representations of other ethnicities of men in American superhero comics and American mass media as well and discuss the findings textually.

I also plan to develop additional artwork for the 1950s menu. Time constraints did not permit me to create more than cover illustrations for the comics on the newsstand. I would like to demonstrate the themes and styles of the comics presented by illustrating

a page of narrative artwork for each one, particularly to present the differences between comics predating the Comics Code and comics published after its implementation.

This is also a course of action I intend to take with the 1990s and 2000s; both eras contain images representing the superhero of the time, but lack sequential narrative artwork.

Referencing the Content

Although I have included a reading list with the software in its present state, my plans for providing references to the factual information included in the work go beyond this. I intend to link the text featured in the software with the reading list that I drew on for specific references, allowing the user to learn exactly what research resources I used and where they will be able to have access to the same information. I plan to utilize quotes from these texts as well as summaries of their content. This will potentially allow the user to obtain new knowledge and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the information in the software, which is necessarily selective.

I am planning a more sophisticated version of this for the software's long-term goals.

Teachers' Resources

Before I can explore any further pedagogical potential the software may have, it is imperative that I develop and include resources for teachers. These resources will not be developed solely through my own research; I intend to create them with input from the teachers who assisted me during the pilot scheme to ensure their relevance and pedagogical validity. These resources will consist of supporting notes that explain the use of the software, suggested lesson plans and activities built around the software and its content, questions to ask the students and to use in group discussions and additional

references regarding masculinity and superheroes that may be relevant to the software's pedagogical applications but are not present in the work itself (e.g. more in-depth literature on the representation of masculinity in each time period as well as cultural and social factors.) This is where I would address homosexuality as it relates to superhero comics and their readers.

Subjects I will examine include Wertham's interviews with gay young men in the 1950s and how he believed Batman and Robin's relationship could be construed as being indicative of homosexuality,²⁴⁷ the impact of AIDS on the gay community in the 1980s and the representation of LGBT characters in superhero comics from the 1990s onwards. This allows the teachers to decide whether or not this material is appropriate to discuss in class. I will also address these topics in versions of the software aimed at audiences older than 11-14.

The software as a whole will be revised in line with the Constructivist learning theory. This approach to learning is a facet of cognitive science, which focuses on 'how people learn, remember and interact, often with a strong emphasis on mental processes and often with an emphasis on modern technologies.'²⁴⁸ Pritchard explains that:

Constructivists view learning as the result of mental construction. That is, learning takes place when new information is built into and added onto an individual's current state of knowledge, understanding and skills. We learn best when we actively construct our own understanding.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁷ Wertham (1955:192)

²⁴⁸ Pritchard (2009:17)

²⁴⁹ Ibid:17

The software inadvertently operates on this definition, and I plan to make it do so in a more deliberate manner. Social Constructivists Vygotsky and Bruner believe that discussion with peers as well as with teachers contributes to the development of knowledge. In the case of peers:

Dialogue becomes the vehicle by which ideas are considered, shared and developed. The dialogue is often with a more knowledgeable other, but this need not always be the case. Dialogue with peers can be of equal value. Prior knowledge, naturally, has a part to play. It is an individual's prior and current knowledge that forms the basis of any contribution to a dialogue.²⁵⁰

In the case of teachers:

The teacher has the role of stimulating dialogue and maintaining its momentum. In a very real way, the teacher engages groups and individuals in dialogue and supports the development of understanding. The undertaking of this role, in a planned way, has a particular name and is known as 'scaffolding'.²⁵¹

Examples of scaffolding include discussion, working collaboratively and designing tasks that assist understanding the material that is to be learned²⁵². I intend to incorporate suggested scaffolding activities into the teachers' supporting notes for the software. In addition, I am not discounting the importance of peer discussion as a means to develop knowledge, and will therefore include suggestions of topics related to the work that the students can use to prompt dialogues with one another.

²⁵⁰ Ibid:24

²⁵¹ Ibid:24

²⁵² Ibid:25

2. Intermediate Goals

Although the pilot scheme took place with boys and young men aged 11-14 at boys' schools, my intermediate goals for the software include conducting further schemes at girls' schools and schools with co-educational student bodies as well as further pilot tests with boys. The software in its current state would not be used for this stage of the project; before this takes place, I plan to realise a goal I have had in mind for the software's future from the time I conducted the literature review.

This goal is to create another half to the software that is an exploration of the female superhero as a representation of Western femininity.

Whitehead asserts that masculinity 'remains fixed by one important consideration, that is, it exists in relation to femininity.'²⁵³ In Davies' interviews with primary school students of both genders, she learned that 'boys know in preschool, and probably before they even learn to speak, that the world is divided into male and female.'²⁵⁴ Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman discovered that discussing the differentiation between boys and girls made up a significant part of their research findings when interviewing 11-14 year old boys and girls in secondary school.²⁵⁵ Gill, approaching masculinity and femininity through their representations in the media of television and advertising, presents examples of 'adverts for gender-typed products which construct all-male or all-female environments.' that build upon the argument that 'men are from Mars and women are

²⁵³ Whitehead (2008:34)

²⁵⁴ Davies (1993:89)

²⁵⁵ Frosh, Phoenix, Pattman (2002:11)

from Venus.²⁵⁶ She argues that this Mars/Venus approach to the representation of masculinity and its relation to femininity in the media ‘not only reifies psychological sex differences but also freezes in place unequal power relations.’²⁵⁷

This put me to mind of Booker’s belief that humans must achieve a balance between their inner ‘masculine’ (aggressive, Ego-centric) and ‘feminine’ (compassionate, Self-focused) natures, and Schultz’s ‘male and female’ journeys, and caused me to realise precisely why I found these types of gendered labelling problematic in relation to my research. In a project that presents masculinity as a fluid and culturally contingent concept, presenting the male superhero figure without the female suggests that I am enforcing the gender-typing Gill has observed in other forms of mass media. To proceed with the MetaMan software as it is at present, I run the risk of contradicting my goals for the project, and ignoring how masculinity and femininity relate to one another.

In order to avoid this, I intend for the MetaMan software to eventually exist as half of an interactive work of art whose other half asks how and why the representation of female superheroes in American comics has changed in relation to the social and cultural representation of women in Western mass media.

To avoid prioritising one gender over another, any further pedagogical and commercial versions of the software will contain both male and female superheroes.

²⁵⁶ Gill (2010:108-109)

²⁵⁷ Ibid:109

Variations on Content and Audience

I intend to create several variations of the software aimed at different age groups and have made this decision for a number of reasons.

In September 2009, I was invited by John Lowe, Dean of Communication Arts, and David Duncan, Chair of the Sequential Art Department, to present two lectures at the Savannah College of Art and Design, my alma mater. The first talk detailed my process of bringing the 1960s from concept to finished work. It was given to the students undergoing the Sequential Art MFA course of study. The second was a more comprehensive presentation of the project's evolution up to that point, open to students of all degree levels and majors. The feedback I received from these talks suggested the software may be beneficial to aspiring comic book artists. Students repeatedly stated that this work was the first of its kind to delve into the visual evolution of superheroes alongside the conceptual evolution and that the information it offers that can help students to develop their own drawing skills while instructing them on how to approach the iconic character of the superhero in their artwork and writing in order to create a high standard of story and art.

My first priority for the software is to develop it in line with the amendments mentioned above for use within the PSHE and Citizenship curricula in the British school system, as the pilot scheme has indicated it can be potentially successful in these areas. I plan to conduct deeper research into the learning outcomes of Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 in these subjects and alter the software's content, focus and teachers' resources accordingly.

Following this, I will develop a ‘university edition’ of the software, aimed at students undertaking sequential art courses. This version of the software will place heavier emphasis on the artwork. Its resources for teachers will include visual and narrative-driven assignments to prompt artistic development, while still maintaining the software’s focus on how masculinity is culturally contingent.

3. Long-term Goals

In April 2010, I applied for Kingston University’s Enterprising Graduate Award programme, which began in October 2010 and ran until April 2011. This has been beneficial to my long-term goals for software. I have learned how to identify the problems that the software is solving, how to reach the target audience, develop a business model and identify what the business sector the software falls into and how to get it onto the market. Acquiring these business-related skills aided me in structuring and submitting an application to WestFocus’ Bright Ideas competition in December 2010. Entrants to this contest are current students at each of the seven universities that comprise the WestFocus entrepreneurship group. Out of a total of 171 entries, *The Adventures of MetaMan* was awarded a grand prize of £1000 in February 2011. Wining this prize provided me with reassurance that the project can have pedagogical commercial viability and encouraged me to plan developing it further to achieve this. In late 2011, I will be included in the Enterprising Graduate Award’s testing group to learn how to begin the process of doing so.

My ultimate goal for the software is to host it on its own web server. I plan to link the software to a database of information and reading lists, accessible through the text and image in the software itself. Through the medium of the internet, I can incorporate

community features into the work, adding another layer of interaction in addition to the classroom activities and peer discussion within schools mentioned above. Students would be able to create their own account to access the software, and to design their own superhero avatar. My plans for community features are still in the conceptual stage, but they build upon the pilot scheme and how student feedback helped me to develop the 2000s menu.

Via the website, students would be able to communicate with one another as well as offer their input on future MetaMan-related educational resources; such as the planned different versions of the software. I wish to maintain the quality of students as stakeholders in the project. Teachers would be able to make their own account to access different features, such as the ability to communicate with other teachers as well as myself for technical or content-related discussions and to provide their own input on the software, current and future.

I would also like to design a version that operates on touch-screen devices and could be available for download as a smartphone or tablet application.

These ideas are still rough and subject to intense refinement; however I am firm in the belief that future development of the software needs to maximise interaction between learners, educators and the software itself, and that this process needs to be ongoing. User engagement, response and input can help to create an entertaining and educational work of art that changes and evolves over time. My reasons for wanting to maintain user interaction and input remain linked to comic book culture. I would like the MetaMan resource to capture the same sense of excitement and enjoyment that reading a comic book provides, but also for it to build upon the interaction between readers and

creative teams and readers with one another. This work of art cannot replicate the environments of the letters page, the comic book shop, the comic convention or the comic book discussion message board, but as it currently has the potential to create its own environment of user interaction in classroom settings, I wish to explore how it can do the same on the platform of cyberspace. Like the superhero figure itself and the definition of Western masculinity, I do not intend for this software to be a static work of art.

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Images of comic artwork were scanned from the multitude of reference books listed in
the above bibliography.

Architectural, photographic, vehicle, furniture and clothing reference has been provided
by Getty Images. <http://www.gettyimages.com> All contents © copyright 1999-2011
Getty Images, Inc.

The photographic backgrounds seen in the 2000s menu were created using textures
from CGTextures. Vijfwinkel, M. CGTextures. Retrieved from <http://cgtextures.com/>
on November 23, 2010 and February 15, 2011.

The software features the following fonts:

Blah Blah Blah

Dave Gibbons Journal

Kickback

Slap Happy Drop Caps

Wild and Crazy

These were created by Comicast Fonts' Starkings, R. and Roshell, J. and purchased
from <http://www.comicbookfonts.com/> on March 1, 2010.

Appendix 1: Background to the Research

Superheroes have been a part of my experience first as a reader, then an artist and now a researcher of comics for over two decades. Growing up in Saudi Arabia during the 1980s, exposure to Western children's media was limited and largely came from holidays visiting my mother's family in America. On one of these trips, at the age of six, I was given a set of video cassettes for Christmas, consisting of episodes from Filmation Studio's animated series *Batman with Robin the Boy Wonder* and *Aquaman* from 1969 and 1967, respectively. Although I was enthralled by the characters and their adventures, I also sensed that they were a part of something much bigger; until I knew exactly what, I felt that I was not yet ready to draw them. This was a departure from my standard procedure toward characters I liked; drawing them in my own style was as natural as breathing to my six-year-old self, yet it seemed inappropriate in this case. I was certain if I tried, some essential part of the superheroes would be missing from my drawings because I had only received a small glimpse into their stories.²⁵⁸

Twelve years and many more superhero cartoons and comic books later, I held on to this mindset despite pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Sequential Art. I had grown up reading what issues of *Batman*, *Spider-Man* and *The Fantastic Four* I could find while on holiday but primarily purchased the readily-available in Saudi Arabia Archie Comics. My own work focused on narratives that fell squarely into traditional adventure, supernatural or slice-of-life genres. Superheroes, to my mind, existed as part of a complex mythology too impenetrable for me to even come close to understanding. I

²⁵⁸ In fact, it was three years later when I finally learned Batman's origin story; from the back of a box of cereal in an American grocery store!

maintained the attitude that my relationship with superheroes would always be one-sided. I was a consumer of media they featured in but would never truly comprehend them. My mentality changed during my third year of university when I was given the assignments of illustrating a script featuring Superman, and another featuring Spider-Man. Daunted by the tasks of drawing objects my twenty-one-year-old self found difficult, such as cars, crowds and city skyscrapers, I was even more intimidated by the idea of drawing these enduring, larger-than-life heroes in action and doing justice to their iconic status and long-running adventures. The resulting artwork was timid, hesitant and displayed a lot less confidence than my usual work. Disliking this, I began to take stock of my attitude towards superheroes and I resolved to overcome this problematic approach to characters I felt I was simply not enough of an expert on to successfully draw.

In my final year of university, I began to collect graphic novels featuring Batman, my favourite superhero. My collection spanned stories from the 1950s to the early 2000s, and I sought out whatever episodes of *Batman the Animated Series* and *Batman Beyond* that I could. Feeling, at last, that I had acquired a working knowledge of Batman and his world, I chose to pencil, ink, colour and letter the script for *The Monument*²⁵⁹ as the final project on my course. In this story, a statue of Batman is unveiled in a park in Gotham City. Interwoven with villain Hugo Strange's plot to blow up the statue is a look at the various reactions the monument elicits from the public. The titular monument is alternately the site of a candlelight vigil held by Goths, a site for fans of Batman to congregate, a site for Gotham's anti-Batman citizens to hold protests, spray paint-wielding teenagers to deface and homeless people to use as a shelter. Through

²⁵⁹ *The Monument* was written by Darwyn Cooke and illustrated by Bill Wray when it originally appeared in *Gotham Knights* #33. DC Comics, New York (1996)

illustrating these scenes I became acutely aware of the varied perceptions that can surround superheroes, even in their own narratives.

After this project, I was satisfied that I had overcome the perceptions that had held me back artistically and accepted that I did not have to be a superhero expert to competently draw these figures and their stories. I no longer viewed my Batman collection as a necessity to drawing superheroes and instead maintained it out of enjoyment for the character and stories. It was put on hold for almost two years due to the demands of my Master's degree leaving me with little time to read for pleasure and I was eager to resume it when the course came to an end. When I did, however, I discovered that my perceptions of superheroes had changed once again.

During my Master's degree, I learned to apply research methods I had previously only employed for writing academic papers to my artistic practice. Following the course, whenever I approached a work of art, particularly narrative art, I involuntarily found myself thinking critically about it and challenging and analysing the ideas it presented to see if and how my own practice as a sequential artist could benefit from my findings. When looking at my recent purchases of *Batman: Tales of the Demon* (1991) *Batman: The Cult* (1991), *Batman Gothic* (1992) and *Batman: Death and the Maidens* (2005), I saw many narrative themes that feature in stories from mythology, folklore and religion. As I read the four graphic novels in a single sitting, I saw the character of Batman do battle with an enemy who would test the strength of his mind as well as his body with each encounter,²⁶⁰ an enemy who succeeded in breaking his spirit, taking his city and nearly causing him to betray his principles,²⁶¹ an enemy who sold his soul to the Devil

²⁶⁰ Ra's Al Ghul in *Batman: Tales of the Demon*. O'Neil, et al. (1991)

²⁶¹ Deacon Joseph Blackfire in *Batman: The Cult*. Starlin, Wrightson and Wray (1991)

and sought to consign the souls of Gotham City's people to the same fate²⁶² and finally, the Caped Crusader is pulled into a family conflict that would be at home in a Greek tragedy while possibly encountering the spirits of his murdered parents and thwarting an attempt to assassinate Superman.²⁶³ In the face of these adversities, Batman used strength both internal and external to save, or in some cases, survive the day and displayed a commitment to battling evil that eclipsed all other aspects of his life. He was aided by a variety of allies and made use of numerous inventions, gadgets and vehicles. Although familiar to me, these narrative elements and personal characteristics intrigued me for new reasons. I wondered about the thought processes that had led to the creation of each of the stories, and could not help but be reminded, because of my long-standing interest in world mythology, of heroic trials such as the Greek hero Hercules' defeat of the Hydra through ingenuity,²⁶⁴ heroic accoutrements such as the Norse god Thor's magic hammer, gauntlets and belt,²⁶⁵ and the enemies, items and allies I recalled the gods and heroes of the world's pantheons possessing.

Although my fascination with mythology predates my first encounter with superheroes and I have maintained it for over twenty years, making a connection between these two types of heroic figures had never occurred to me before. I was amazed at the possibility of a connection, puzzled that I had never noticed it before, but moreover, I was inspired by it and wanted to create new art that explored it directly.

Before I could act on my inspiration, I went back to the introductions prefacing the four graphic novels, in hopes that they might contain insights to their respective creative processes and perhaps an outright admission of a mythic connection. The introduction

²⁶² Mister Whisper in *Batman Gothic*. Morrison and Janson (1992)

²⁶³ Nyssa's machinations to recruit her half-sister to help kill their father Ra's Al Ghul as well as assassinate Superman in *Batman: Death and the Maidens*. Rucka, Janson (2005)

²⁶⁴ Murray (2005: 286)

²⁶⁵ Cotterell (1997: 187)

to *Batman: Tales of the Demon*, a collection of stories written by Dennis O'Neil from 1971 to 1980 that showcase his creation, the villain Ra's Al Ghul, specifically addressed my observations. The introduction was written by Sam Hamm, who wrote the screenplay for the 1989 film *Batman*, and begins with him ruminating on the longevity of heroic characters and offering the reader 'a four-part recipe for concocting mythic heroes'²⁶⁶. Hamm's list first recommends that the hero must be set apart from the rest of his society somehow, through natural talent or superhuman abilities. Second, the hero's motivations and personality must be presented clearly, while at the same time allowing for 'periodic revisions and reinterpretations, so that succeeding generations of readers will continue to find him fresh and exciting'.²⁶⁷ Third, but not viewed as necessary by Hamm, is providing an origin story for the hero. Finally, there must be a number of characters who antagonise the hero. The most powerful of these antagonists must reappear throughout the hero's adventures, in order for them to 'be indelibly linked, in the public mind, with our hero and his legend'.²⁶⁸

Hamm's mythic hero recipe led me to reflect on its content and if and how it applied to superhero characters beyond Batman. What he described were conventions of the superhero genre of comics that I had been aware of for years yet never thought about at length or in depth before completing my Master's degree. I had previously taken these conventions for granted, not realising they were the very elements that had caused me, at six, to immediately view Batman and Aquaman as larger-than-life, legendary figures. They were also the same elements that were causing me, at twenty-six to believe there was a link between ancient mythic heroes and modern superheroes.

The issue of superheroes being revised and reinterpreted, factors such as superheroes

²⁶⁶ O'Neil, *et al.* (1991: 4)

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*:4

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*:4

being set apart from society, having a compelling origin story, and the concept of ‘the hero’s legend’ in the public mind could, I believed, be applied to any number of hero figures from mythology and folklore with ease. This was the starting point for me to cease viewing superhero characters and narratives as mere entertainment and, instead, as characters and narratives with possible mythic origins. In the weeks that followed, I remained inspired by what I discovered reading those four graphic novels. The desire to create a work of art that addressed the connection between these two types of heroic figures continued to intensify and I decided to begin a research degree by practice in order to make the work a reality.

I felt strongly that a central subject of the work would need to be the evolution and revision of the superhero through time. Even if it had not been mentioned in Hamm’s introduction, it was an aspect of the superhero genre I had been aware of for years, although I had never given very much thought to the reasons behind it. I simply took it for granted as I did the genre’s other conventions, assuming it was the result of art styles falling in and out of fashion and little else. This time, however, I could not ignore that the superhero’s revisions went deeper than the cosmetic.

In an example from my recent reading of the Batman graphic novels, the character responds to an almost identical set threat in two very different ways.

Batman: Tales of the Demon features a story from 1971 in which Batman internally evaluates a pair of villain Ra’s Al Ghul’s machinegun-wielding guards as ‘disappointing! They look like any *other* creeps who need to prove their manhood with noisy sticks!’ He subsequently disarms the guards by walking up to them and pushing their guns aside with a quip of ‘can it, sonny-boys! You don’t *dare* use that thing...as we

both *know!*'²⁶⁹ In *Batman: Death and the Maidens*, originally published in 2003, Batman again confronts a guard of Ra's Al Ghul who also carries a machinegun. This time, he approaches the guard silently and stealthily, grabs him, knocking the gun from his hands, and pulls him into an alley where he demands the whereabouts of his master. Despite Batman's hand closing around his throat, the guard defiantly replies, 'you are *revealed* to us, Detective. *Spineless*, you lack the will to *kill*.' Batman punches the guard in the teeth and responds with 'maybe...But I'll sure as hell *hurt* you a lot', after which the guard capitulates.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁹ *Daughter of the Demon*, page 8, panels 5 and 6. O'Neil (1991: 39) Emphasis original.

²⁷⁰ Rucka, Janson (2005:204-205) Emphasis original.

Appendix 2: Further exploration of the superhero's characteristics

My personal definition of the 'superhero monomyth' was expanded upon when Hamm's mythic hero recipe reappeared in other texts. Reynolds' list, 'constructed from the motifs of the first ever superhero comic'²⁷¹ states that:

1. The hero is marked out from society. He often reaches maturity without having a relationship with his parents.
2. At least some of the superheroes will be like earthbound gods in the levels of their powers. Other superheroes of lesser powers will consort easily with these earthbound deities.
3. The hero's devotion to justice overrides even his devotion to the law.
4. The extraordinary nature of the superhero will be contrasted with the ordinariness of his surroundings.
5. Likewise, the extraordinary nature of the hero will be contrasted with the mundane nature of his alter-ego. Certain taboos will govern the actions of these alter-egos.
6. Although ultimately above the law, superheroes can be capable of considerable patriotism and moral loyalty to the state, although not necessarily to the letter of its laws.
7. The stories are mythical and use science and magic indiscriminately to create a sense of wonder.²⁷²

Brown's list is derived from that of comics historian Mark Benton and states that:

1. The hero must wear some form of distinguishable costume that sets him or her apart from ordinary people.
2. The protagonist must possess some form of superpower, be it of alien origin (e.g., Superman, the Martian Man-Hunter), granted by the gods (e.g., Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel), induced by science (e.g., Captain America, the Hulk), or developed through years of self-improvement (e.g., Batman, the Green Arrow).
3. The character hides behind the guise of a dual or secret identity.
4. The superhero must be motivated by an altruistic, unwavering moral desire to fight against evil.²⁷³

²⁷¹ Reynolds (1992: 16)

²⁷² Ibid.:16

²⁷³ Brown (2000: Kindle location 2302-2307)

These lists, along with Hamm's earlier recipe and Chabon's list of the superhero's characteristics reinforced to me what I had been developing a growing awareness of ever since I illustrated the script for *The Monument*: that even the definition of what makes a superhero and what he represents to his public is not static.

Appendix 3: Reflection on Wertham

The idea that comics were detrimental to their young audience was not a new one.

Studies on comic books' effects on American children and young adults can be traced back as far as 1906²⁷⁴ and continued throughout the 20th century.²⁷⁵ However, it was not until the Senate hearings that any of the criticisms against comic books led to major changes in this form of mass media.

Although Wertham, his book and his genuine belief that reading comics was detrimental to young minds are often viewed as the reasons for the creation of the Comics Code and the subsequent changes to comics' content,²⁷⁶ this viewpoint is limited and incorrect.

Wertham's research focused on the role of culture in social psychology, an area he believed was underdeveloped in his field.²⁷⁷ His aim was 'to understand the ways in which mass media shaped society',²⁷⁸ a common focus of scholars in 1950s America.²⁷⁹

He also researched the psychology of violent crime, and through his work with children and young adults at the Lafargue Clinic, a non-segregated psychiatric clinic in Harlem, New York, he began to perceive a correlation between delinquent behaviour and reading comic books.²⁸⁰ This caused him to believe that the sale of crime-themed comic books to children under the age of fifteen should be banned.²⁸¹

Seduction of the Innocent was a product of these beliefs, not 'an objective overview of

²⁷⁴ Nyberg (1998:Kindle location 120)

²⁷⁵ The results of these studies generally paint comics as a negative influence on their young readers, although there are a few studies that claimed reading comics have no ill effects and can be useful educational tools. Nyberg details these studies and the responses they received. Ibid.:Kindle location 102- 382

²⁷⁶ Nyberg (1998:Kindle location 1128)

²⁷⁷ Ibid.: Kindle location 1140

²⁷⁸ Ibid.: Kindle location 1145

²⁷⁹ Ibid.: Kindle location 1145

²⁸⁰ Ibid.: Kindle location 1169-1204

²⁸¹ Ibid.: Kindle location 708

the comic book industry, but a deliberately sensationalised portrait of the worst that comic books had to offer.²⁸²

During the course of my Bachelor's degree, I had believed Wertham to be an enemy of free speech, whose inaccurate claims spurred the persecution of the American comic book industry and was the reason why American comics have had to struggle to be considered a legitimate form of visual art in the years following the formation of the Comics Code.²⁸³ Now I was in the process of producing a work of art that aimed to present the ways in which the figure of the superhero and his representation in mass media is shaped by society and the discovery of Wertham's professional goals astonished me. My viewpoint regarding the effects of reading comics on the mind could not be more different than Wertham's and my exploration of the superhero's connection to mythic archetypes was one he completely disagreed with, stating that 'comic books have nothing to do with drama, with art or literature.'²⁸⁴ However, his viewpoints were products of his educational background,²⁸⁵ just as mine are products of my own. When I learned that he condemned racism and the negative portrayal of non-Western races and female characters in comic books²⁸⁶ and that he was critical of the depiction of violence in mass media as a whole,²⁸⁷ I felt that, as in the cases of Klock and Chabon's views differing from my own, I should not dismiss Wertham outright. I agree with Brooker, who indicates that 'Fredric Wertham cannot be explained away as a narrow-minded fool whose work was informed by prejudice against those who did not conform'.²⁸⁸

Fifteen pages of *Seduction of the Innocent* are devoted to the condemnation of

²⁸² Ibid.: Kindle location 1248

²⁸³ Pustz (1999:Kindle location 619)

²⁸⁴ Nyberg(1998: Kindle location 1261)

²⁸⁵ Ibid.: Kindle location 1257

²⁸⁶ Ibid.: Kindle location 1261-1278

²⁸⁷ Ibid.: Kindle location 1299

²⁸⁸ Brooker (2000:114)

advertisements that promote their products by taking advantage of teenagers' insecurities about their appearance.²⁸⁹ Wertham rejected the idea 'that readers were passive consumers',²⁹⁰ a view that I share. As discussed in the Form and Audience chapter, this view has influenced the theoretical development of the MetaMan project. Brooker's observations accurately describe my view of Wertham following my research for the 1950s menu:

The great irony is that Wertham...was on the whole more progressive than the audiences of the 1950s would have been comfortable with. He achieved his success with *Seduction of the Innocent* by playing down his views on racism and highlighting instead the aspects of his personal agenda that were more to the public's taste...Most of us would, if fully apprised of Wertham's views, fall pretty much into accord with his attitudes towards racism...We would probably agree with him that it is wrong to exploit teenage insecurities in order to sell bogus 'health' products in the back pages of comic books.²⁹¹

In *Seduction of the Innocent*, Wertham sacrificed objectivity and academic rigour to further an agenda he believed in strongly. He did, however, present his arguments in a style that was accessible to non-academics. I believe that my approach to my work can benefit from the story of Wertham's involvement with the events leading up to the implementation of the Comics Code. In the MetaMan project, I will be presenting theories I believe in, using an approach and prose that I intend to be accessible. I came to regard the example of Wertham as a reminder not to let my art become the metaphorical soap box for my views, experiences and opinions.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.:114

²⁹⁰ Nyberg(1998: Kindle location 1284)

²⁹¹ Brooker (2000:114-15)

Appendix 4: A Theoretical and Artistic Reminder

In October 2009, when I had created the visuals and content for the 1960s menu, I was invited to speak at the Women in Comics conference at Cambridge's Murray Edwards College. My research into the male superhero garnered the interest of artist Melinda Gebbie and her discussion with me over the course of the afternoon delved into the matter of how an artist's inspirations, experiences and identity put an indelible stamp on their work; and that this stamp is visible to this work's viewers or readers even if the artist is personally unaware of it. This was a matter I was aware of through my examination of visual culture theory; that attaining absolute objectivity in the way a work of visual media is presented and regarded is potentially impossible to achieve.²⁹² As the artist puts their own stamp on the work in terms of its presentation, so too does the work's audience in their interpretation and opinion of it.²⁹³ Conversing with Melinda, was beneficial from the theoretical perspective but also from the artistic perspective due to her discussion of her process when creating the art for the graphic novel *Lost Girls* (2006), written by Alan Moore. The work features frequent homage to and pastiches of art styles, paintings, costumes and literature, ranging from Belle Époque to Post-Impressionism and displaying a high standard of authenticity and faithfulness to the original artists' styles. Although the content and medium of *MetaMan* could not be more different from that of *Lost Girls*, it was useful to speak with an artist who had undergone a similar creative process while my own work was still in development. Melinda confirmed what I had already suspected while creating the art for the 1960s menu; this manner of working was time-consuming because it required me to

²⁹² Holloway and Beck (2005: 4)

²⁹³ *Ibid.*: 5

work in art styles that were not entirely my own. I resolved to devote sufficient time to producing artwork that reflected a high standard and quality, and accept that it would not happen overnight.

Appendix 5: 1940s Menu Text

Man of the 40s:

The 1940s was an era that held fast to traditional concepts of gender roles that had been established in previous decades. Through the atrocities of war and well-placed propaganda, Hitler, his forces and later the Japanese, became the antithesis of everything America stood for. They were murderers, bullies, tyrants, and if allowed to continue, what state would this leave the world? How could the American people reassert control of their lives and even their country?

The answer came in the form of a revival of what can be termed core American masculine values. For men, becoming American heroes meant adopting a selfless, patriotic attitude. They were expected to defend their country without question and die for it if need be. Although they were fighting for their country, dreams and freedom, they were expected to put these dreams aside until the war was won.

Superhero comics during wartime reflected these masculine values perfectly. The superhero was represented as a wholly good patriotic force, completely in control and utterly selfless. If his actions made him take pause, or if he ever experienced a moment's horror at the violence and death war brings, readers were never aware of it.

Pulp Non-Fiction

Between World War I and World War II, pulp novels and magazines, which got their name from the inexpensive paper they were printed on, enjoyed great popularity. Pulp

were cheap, entertaining and often featured beautifully-illustrated covers. There was something for everyone, be it horror, crime, romance, science-fiction or fantasy.

The detective and adventure titles of this era would go on to have a profound effect on comic books and lead to the birth of the superhero genre. This came about when retired military man Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson founded *New Fun: The Big Comic Magazine* in 1935. Wheeler-Nicholson had been a pulp writer himself, and he possessed the vision to look beyond the bound reprints of newspaper comic strips and conceive of comic books filled with entirely new material, bringing the florid prose and intense action offered by the pulps into a new medium. He added *New Adventure Comics* and *Detective Comics* to his line-up of comic books, which contained adventure stories.

Representing the Enemy

From 1939 onward, superheroes defeated analogues of the Nazis and Hitler. Writers and artists, along with the rest of America, were united in their hatred of what was being portrayed as a tremendous force of absolute evil. Hitler and the Axis had taken on the role of monsters, threatening the peace and wellbeing of the world, and only through the combined efforts of the agents of good, in this case the Allied Forces, could the monsters be defeated.

These enemies were portrayed as entirely inhuman, unfeeling monsters that lived to destroy and annihilate.

These stereotypical depictions were prolific in all the comics of the period, and while they are considered offensive by contemporary standards, in the context of their time, they are an accurate reflection of how the enemy was portrayed in virtually all visual media of the era. Racial stereotypes of antagonistic characters were not only

demonstrated in comic books, but also in films, plays and propaganda posters. In stark contrast, superheroes were shown to have idealised, muscular bodies and classically handsome faces.

Superhero stories also emphasised that the real superheroes were the American people, whether they were soldiers defending their country overseas or civilians supporting the war effort in their daily lives. Superhero comics were sent abroad to the American troops, many of whom had been readers of these titles during more peaceful times and this in turn boosted their morale and made them feel more in touch with their home country.

Birth of a Hero

Adventure stories had been a feature of sequential narrative since the appearance of comic strips like Hal Foster's *Tarzan* in 1929. Adventure comics offered strong male protagonists, gripping storylines and realistic art styles unlike anything that had been seen in comics before. The genre's style was heavily influenced by pulp novels, often having not only publishers, but artists and writers in common.

In the June 1938 premier issue of *Action Comics*, Superman made his first appearance and a new genre was born. Created by teenagers Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster who were inspired by pulp novels, the burgeoning science-fiction genre and heroes with Biblical and mythological origins, Superman was an instant success. As the 1940s began, the market was flooded with competitors and sales of superhero comics eclipsed that of other genres.

Publishers took advantage of this when World War II began, churning out vast quantities of superhero stories that featured patriotic plots and motivational messages.

MetaMan comics of the Golden Age clearly demonstrate these ideals. Martin Miller was a soldier, who, through an act of self-sacrifice, gained powers from a mysterious artefact and took on the mantle of MetaMan. They also featured a strong feeling of patriotism, as evidenced by the colours of MetaMan's costume. In his comic book series, MetaMan is seen fighting Nazis and Japanese saboteurs at home and abroad and bolstering the morale of the American people.

Metaman's dialogue:

“Find out why the real heroes are the valiant American soldiers!”

“Contribute to the war effort by finding out what you can do to sink the Nazi saboteurs!”

“I am MetaMan, champion of change and defender of the downtrodden!”

“A battleship is a soldier's home away from home! Find out more!”

Speaker's dialogue:

“Listen up, soldier! This is no time to be reading comics, even if it IS MetaMan!”

“Get back out into the fray!”

“MetaMan is a real man! Go find out why!”

“ Stop wasting time with that pulp novel and get back on deck!”

Appendix 6: 1950s Menu Text

THE MAN OF THE 50S FACES THE FUTURE

The man of the 50s was still a fighter and a provider, but rather than provide safety for his country as a soldier, he provided his family with a home and money.

In the early post-war days, America was truly a world superpower, with more wealth and technology than the rest of the world.

However, America's technology had a darker side—one that was capable of destroying millions of lives. The threat of nuclear war was the other side of the coin in a world where it seemed anything was possible.

Teenagers in this generation found their imaginations captured by these concepts, and rather than embrace the patriotism of their fathers, they began to question it. This mindset escalated towards the end of the decade, culminating in the change-filled, turbulent 1960s.

ADVENT OF THE COMICS CODE

Psychiatrist Fredric Wertham's book *Seduction of the Innocent* was published in 1954 and blamed comics, particularly the crime and horror genres, for many social problems.

It was one of the reasons the US Senate formed a subcommittee to examine the ties between comic books and juvenile delinquency.

Because of the bad publicity from the Senate hearings, the publishers of DC Comics, Timely Comics and Archie Comics devised a method of survival in the form of the Comics Code, which was a means of self-censoring the content of their titles, in a bid to appear as inoffensive as possible.

Following the establishment of the Comics Code, superhero comics adopted a generally comedic tone and were firmly aimed at children

RENAISSANCE (SUPER)MEN

The superhero genre began to recover during the second half of the 1950s.

Publishers began to completely reinvent established superheroes of the 1940s.

These characters were often given complete makeovers: new costumes, new jobs, even new names. Completely new superheroes were being created as well.

Superheroes started to display a wide variety of facial expressions.

MetaMan comics of the 1950s demonstrate this revival.

MetaMan wears a dynamic orange, blue and yellow costume.

The design of his costume has also undergone an overhaul, losing the M motifs on his cuffs, cape and boots. The MetaMan logo is now a bold, geometric shape and the character hides his identity behind a mask.

Because of both World War II and the early post-comics code days, MetaMan has a whole franchise of related characters, from his female counterpart Miss Meta, to his child sidekick Meta Kid, to his pet MetaMutt.

Members of the MetaMan Family starred in their own comics and crossed over into each other's, often teaming up in their fight against injustice.

COMMERCIAL APPEAL

When World War II ended, the American public was more interested in reading comic books that did not feature muscular men saving the day and the indelible ties between super-heroes and the war itself brought about bad memories for readers.

This left a gap in the market for other genres to fill, although superhero comics were still being published, to a much lesser extent.

Several genres flourished above their competition, genres that had previously existed as pulp novels: romance comics aimed at a female audience, western comics, horror comics and crime comics. Crime and horror comics often featured graphic violence against innocent characters as well as against villains. Instead of always showing male characters in control, the storylines in horror comics often showed men in fear, terror and despair.

Speech Balloons:

Metaman stand: GREETINGS FROM METAMAN!

HERE AT THE META NEWSSTAND, YOU CAN FIND OUT ALL ABOUT THE CHANGES SUPERHEROES-AND AMERICA- WENT THROUGH AFTER THE WAR!

Man of the 50s paper: THE MAN OF THE 50S FACES THE FUTURE! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Comics Code paper: THE COMICS CODE CAUSES MORE CHAOS THAN A SUPERVILLAIN! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Renaissance Supermen paper: SUPERHEROES GAIN BACK THEIR POPULARITY! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Commercial Appeal paper: OTHER GENRES USURP SUPERHEROES AS THE PUBLIC'S FAVORITE COMICS! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Romance cover: LOVE STORIES CAPTURED THE PUBLIC'S IMAGINATION MORE THAN SUPERHEROES' ADVENTURES!

Horror Cover: COMICS READERS COULDN'T GET ENOUGH OF HORROR STORIES' THRILLS AND CHILLS! WHAT BROUGHT THIS ABOUT?

Mm cover: THE ALL-NEW METAMAN MAKES KNOWS HOW TO MAKE AN ENTRANCE!

MsM cover: THE METAMAN FAMILY IS EVEN MORE MIGHTY THANKS TO MISS META!

MK cover: METAKID & THE MISCHIEVOUS METAMUTT BRING LEVITY TO THE METAMAN FAMILY!

Appendix 7: 1960s Menu Text

POP ART:

The Pop Art movement started when a collection of artists and writers in 1950s London wanted to examine the effect of American mass media upon British culture. When Pop Art reached the United States, however, its mission was to challenge the definition of modern art.

Why couldn't comics, so long disregarded by the fine art community, be considered art in their own right?

It was Roy Lichtenstein (1923-1997) who focused on comics as his preferred method of self-expression. From 1961 until 1965, he reproduced panels from romance and war comics as large scale paintings such as Drowning Girl (1963) and Whaam! (1963). He even went so far as to emulate the dots caused by printing in his painting style. While Lichtenstein was fascinated by the style used in these comics, his paintings transformed comics into something trendy and fashionable. College students who belonged to the Hippie movement embraced Pop Art and in turn, comic books.

A Hero You Can Relate To

By the 1960s, it was no longer enough for a superhero to merely fight crime and uphold justice. The comic book industry reflected the social ideologies of the time, and the changes America was going through created the demand for a superhero with more depth of character than the straightforward patriotic heroes of the 1940s. In addition, the fascination with space travel and off-the-wall storylines as characterized by comics of

the 1950s were not sufficient to maintain readership.

Now that the genre's conventions were firmly established, it was time to test their boundaries.

Where it would have been unheard of for a 1940s superhero to express doubts about his calling, question the purpose of war, or agonize over how apprehending a bank robber has caused him to stand up his girlfriend, themes such as these became prevalent in the 1960s. Marvel Comics' titles *Spider-Man* (1962) and *The Fantastic Four* (1961), which were penned by Stan Lee, excelled at this. Rather than make the superhero appear weak or incompetent, his complex personality was an instant success with his readers.

Masculinity was no longer defined by constant victory in this turbulent era. Rather, it was facing internal demons or personal struggles and emerging victorious that made someone a man worth admiring.

Recommended Reading: [Man Of The 60s](#), [A Heroic Physique](#), [Heroic Origins](#)

Heroic Origins

The success of a superhero, as well as his ability to remain popular over time relies on a number of factors. These can include how memorable his costume is, how interesting his powers are and how gripping his adventures are, but a superhero's origin story is equally important. What makes a man put on a colourful costume and fight evil? Does knowing the answer make his audience support and believe in this superhero?

When faced with a man who can fly, readers want to know what made him that way. If he can lift mountains with the aid of a pair of magical gloves, where did he obtain them, and what makes him, in particular, deserving of them?

If the answers are not satisfactory, for example, if he is not a good and upright man, or if he abuses his powers, yet is not the villain of the story, a reader will question why they are meant to care about him.

The origin stories of superheroes, which give insights to their motivations, have become important parts of the characters' histories. Many iconic superheroes' origin stories have become as well-known as the stories of mythic heroes, even with people who have never read comic books.

Recommended Reading: [Man Of The 60s, A Heroic Physique, A Hero You Can Relate To](#)

A Heroic Physique

The 1960s heralded more variety in superhero comics, as writers and artists were eager to see how far they could push the limits of the genre but still maintain readers' interests. With the rise of the "everyman" hero came some necessary visual changes. After all, not every man has the exact same build or classic good looks, but why should that stop him from becoming a superhero?

Recommended Reading: [Man Of The 60s, Heroic Origins, A Hero You Can Relate To](#)

Costume Text: A superhero's costume is more than a pair of underpants worn over tights. When designing a superhero, writers and artists are faced with the challenge of

giving that superhero a costume that is unforgettable and impossible to ignore. In the superhero's world, it needs to be a uniform, a disguise, a declaration of intent and provide him with a new crime-fighting identity. It must reassure civilians that help has arrived, warn villains that their evil plans are about to be thwarted, allow other superheroes to recognize him as their ally and offer some form of protection to both the hero's body and who he is when out of costume. It often needs to house any gadgets or accessories he uses in his superheroics, not impede his movements at any time and be instantly identifiable to anyone looking at him, friend or foe as well as provide ease of movement.

The superhero's costume also signifies his strength and powers. His body is on display to the characters in his world and also to the reader. Although superheroes in the 1960s had different body types from one another, all their body types represent the idea of a strong, capable man in excellent physical condition. The design of his costume can communicate to his readers what his powers are, what his methods of crime-fighting are and even what his personality is like. It hides the identity of his alter-ego, but shows the reader his identity as a superhero. It shows the kind of man he wants to be seen as in his world and also shows the kind of man his creators want readers to see him as.

In the 1960s, MetaMan's costume underwent further stylistic refinements as well as a logo change. Gone was the patriotic theme of his first costume. Building upon MetaMan's early Silver Age revamp, his new costume featured cleaner lines, a more definite logo design as well as outfits for every climate and terrain.

Super Science: Since the end of World War II, the American population had become

aware of nuclear weaponry and radiation, and a sense of fear and paranoia had grown up surrounding them. The tensions caused by the Cold War which began in 1945 and the Cuban Missile Crisis which started in 1962 did not help matters, and this reflected upon the superhero comics of the time.

Although elements of science had featured in superhero comics since the 1940s, in the 1960s, science was often the reason a superhero got their powers.

The effects of radiation were not all known or understood, and so it was conceivable that in the world of fiction a character could gain superpowers from exposure to it, usually in a scientific experiment gone awry.

In comic books, the laws of science became malleable, constrained only by the limits of the creator's imagination. A wide variety of stories, ranging from the fascinating to the bizarre, was the result.

In the 1960s, MetaMan comics feature plotlines and a rewritten origin story that demonstrate the public's interest in science.

His new origin gives him a sense of responsibility to use his powers for good even if he has to make personal sacrifices. This helps to establish him as a worthy male superhero in the eyes of his readers.

Man Of The 60s

The 1960s were characterized by questioning. Questioning the familiar. Wondering if that was truly the only way to live one's life. Young Americans were faced with changes, the likes of which they had encountered before. The Vietnam War. The Sexual

Revolution. The Equal Rights Movement. The validity of religion and government. These are only a handful of events that set the 60s apart from decades before it.

Because of this, gender roles were questioned as well, and the rigid constraints of the 50s were under fire. What was good enough for one's parents was no longer good enough for them. The man of the 60s might consider a break from tradition. Having a secure job, a home, wife, two children and a dog was goal he might question striving for.

The man of the 60s might view the past as something to be cast off. He wanted to express himself and his views without the worry of censorship, and in the event of censorship, he was not afraid to insist on making his voice heard.

It was up to the superhero of the era to relate to the man of the 60s, rather than push him away with out-dated concepts and values, yet still maintain his upright, moral character. Doing the right thing in this turbulent time was a challenge on par with defeating one's arch-nemesis, but one the superheroes of the era rose to with aplomb.

Recommended Reading: [A Hero You Can Relate To](#), [A Heroic Physique](#), [Heroic Origins](#)

Speech Balloons:

Flat: "Oh, hi! I didn't see you there! I was just...doing some thinking. Have a look around and make yourself at home!"

- Mirror "When I look in the mirror...do I see Martin Miller or MetaMan? Sometimes, I

just don't know.”

- Bookshelf “I think I've got some books you might wanna read. If you're wondering about the recommended reading at the end of some of my books, they're on the shelf too, just keep looking!”

- Photograph (origin story trigger) “That's my graduation photo. My parents made so many sacrifices so I could follow my dreams. That's why I promised myself never to let them down!”

- Photograph (Jacinda) “That's my girlfriend, Jacinda. Sigh...sometimes I really wish I could tell her I'm MetaMan. I hate how I've always gotta duck out on her.”

- TV or newspaper dealing with the war/other issues of the time/equal rights. “Wanna watch some TV? There's a lot going on in the news.”

- Plant triggers secret hideout. “This might look like a plain old houseplant, but it's got a real big secret!”

Chamber: (MetaMan is not Martin here, so his speech is more typical superhero than average guy)

- Just standing there: “Welcome to the Meta Chamber! My hideout is full of top-secret information, but you've got an all-access pass to it!”

- Computer “My MetaComputer can tell you about everything that makes me tick!”

- Lab “Here's where I perform my top-secret experiments in the name of justice!”

- Gadgets “Even a superhero needs a helping hand, and that's where my gadgets come in!”

- MetaMobile “My trusty vehicle, the MetaMobile comes in handy no matter where I am! Check out my MetaComputer for more information!”

Appendix 8: 1970s Menu Text

Man of the 70s:

While the previous decade had been one of questioning, the 70s were the time to find answers. America was starting to grow used to the aftermath of the new developments the 60s had brought with them. The changes helped to raise awareness about the issues such as racism, equal rights for women and different definitions of masculinity. For every man who believed he was defined and given value by his role as a soldier or a provider, there was a man who believed his value and identity came from his actions as an individual, whether it was in his politics, his hobbies or his relationships with others.

MetaMan of the 1970s represents the developments of this decade through his actions as well as his appearance. Because of the energy crises in 1973 and 1979, Americans grew more aware of the Middle East and its politics as they directly impacted the consumption of fuel and thus, people's daily lives.

In his "Tour of the Exotic East" storyline, MetaMan travels to such countries as Tibet, Egypt and Japan, honing his skills with the help of Buddhist monks and ninjas, and doing battle with sinister sorcerers and spies. When on American soil, MetaMan did not waste time in patrolling the mean streets of his city, cracking down on crime, racism and drugs.

Weighty Matters:

Superhero comics have never been strangers to current events. From the Second World War to the rise of the Hippie movement, comic books have incorporated subjects and ideas from the times they were created in. In the 1970s, however, comic book

companies developed storylines that were deliberately intended to raise social consciousness.

President Nixon's championing of the War on Drugs campaign made drug abuse a subject on many people's minds. The Department of Health, Education and Welfare asked Marvel Comics to address the dangers of drugs, which they did in a three-issue Spider-Man story arc in 1971. Because the story was so successful, the Comics Code revised its regulations: drugs could be shown provided that they were displayed in a negative light, making their dangers clear to readers.

Following this revision to the Code, DC Comics published a series of stories that featured the superheroes the Green Lantern and Green Arrow confronting issues that weighed heavily on readers' minds at the time such as racism, drugs and pollution. Because each character possessed a radically different viewpoint than the other, their conflicting approaches when facing the same problem provided an engaging dialogue for readers.

Another feature of 1970s superhero comics was the emerging theme racial diversity. Heroes were no longer restricted by the colour of their skin or their place of birth, although they were still very much the minority in a world filled with white superheroes. Nevertheless, this was the first time in the genre's history when black superheroes got their own dedicated comic series, such as *Luke Cage: Hero for Hire* (1972), *Black Lightning* (1977) and *Black Panther* (1977)

Works of Art:

Comic artists in the 1970s like Neal Adams, Jim Steranko and Lou Cameron began to bring influences from fine art into their work, combining styles, techniques and materials. Line art inspired by Art Nouveau could be seen alongside inking techniques that were reminiscent of Renaissance artist Caravaggio's use of light and shadow. These artists and others had their own individual style, making their work instantly recognizable to readers.

In the superhero comics of the 1970s, it was not unusual to see characters in fist-fights being flung through panel borders, colour being used sparingly for emphasis and the size of panels or their content varying dramatically to set the tone of a scene.

The artwork featured in MetaMan comics of the period reflects this by displaying a shift towards the realistic, with a focus on more accurate anatomy, dynamic action scenes, real-life locations and atmospheric, painterly inking. The character's logo has changed once again, to a simpler diamond shape. The lack of pupils in his eyes gives him a more serious, removed image while still letting him retain a wide range of facial expression. This is also the first era to portray MetaMan as possessing body hair, and he is often seen removing his shirt for ease of movement during combat.

Speech Balloons:

"A man today has a lot of choices to make."

"I've had to train my mind AND body to fight crime."

"In this world, you have to be socially aware."

"My training has taken me down many paths."

"Fashions change and so does art."

"Stay close. These streets aren't safe."

Appendix 9: 1980s Menu Text

Man of the 80s:

The man of the 80s was shaped by many influences. Even twenty years after the fact, the changes brought about by the turbulent 60s were still impacting America. The Sexual Revolution, Civil Rights Movement and Women's Liberation Front had come and gone, but sexual freedom and equality in the workplace were here to stay.

The very definition of masculinity was in flux, another result of the 1960s. Traits that would have been condemned as "feminine" according to the rigid gender roles of the 50s were absorbed into the lexicon of acceptable male behaviour. The workplace was still a male-dominated environment, but with more working women, and more men willing to assist with tasks that only thirty years earlier would have been the sole domain of their wives, the division that classed man as breadwinner and woman as homemaker was blurring. It had been slowly blurring for the past two decades and the man of the 80s was the product of it.

The Graphic Novel Phenomenon:

The term "novel" in and of itself gives a sense of something substantial and weighty. A novel is not a magazine article, not a newspaper and most definitely not a comic book.

The term "graphic" has a meaning that can cover everything from the visual to the visceral. Putting the terms together gave a sense that graphic novels were a form of literature and that a reader could expect a better quality of art and writing from them than what was found in monthly comic books.

At this time, comic books in America were still viewed as the domain of children and teenagers. Adults could purchase a graphic novel without feeling as if it was beneath their dignity. Sold in bookshops as well as comic shops, there was no need to comply with the Comics Code, and creators had no reason to censor the content of their work. Soon, titles were being created exclusively for the graphic novel medium without appearing as monthly comics first. Graphic novels were not an instantaneous hit in the 1980s, but by the present day, they have become a staple of the sequential art medium and a recognized art form in their own right.

For Adults Only?

In the 1980s, violence in comics, including the superhero genre slowly began to escalate. In the world outside the printed page, violent crime was also on the rise in America. As the content of comics has always reflected real-world goings-on, depictions of criminal activity and the destruction it caused to society as well as superheroes and the civilians in their lives became commonplace in the 1980s. It was no longer enough for a superhero to possess emotional depth. Now he had to claw his way back from failure or despair, and the more scars he emerged with, the better.

MetaMan's 1980s design reflects these factors in his hard-edged, no-frills emblem, jagged lines, a mask which covers more of his face and his grim and hard demeanour. The inking style has changed as well; although his physique is well-built and heroic as ever, the colour palette used is more muted, with darker tones and much heavier inking.

This is a superhero that inspires fear in those who encounter him, even if they were on the right side of the law.

Popups:

Menu: THE WAR AGAINST CRIME IS A NEVER-ENDING ONE. HERE'S WHERE I KEEP WATCH ON MY CITY.

Man of 80s: IT TAKES A LOT TO MAKE A MAN TODAY. EVEN THE AVERAGE GUY ON THE STREET HAS A HARD TIME OF IT.

GN: CREATIVITY IN THE FACE OF DESTRUCTION.

Adults: CENSORSHIP CAN'T LAST FOREVER.

Pan: THAT'S ME.

Comic: A TYPICAL NIGHT ON THE JOB.

Appendix 10: 1990s Menu Text

MetaMerc Cover:

Super Entertainment:

With Batman riding high on the success of Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, it was only natural the Caped Crusader would receive the Hollywood treatment. *Batman* was a box-office sensation, grossing over 400 million dollars worldwide, appealing to readers and non-readers of superhero comics alike.

The decade would see a further two Batman movies, as well as dozens of live-action versions of superheroes old and new.

In the 90s, the superhero video game broke new ground. For the first time since the genre's inception in 1939, anyone could assume the role of their favourite costumed crime-fighters.

The platforms of films and video games catapulted superheroes beyond the confines of loyal readers and fans and into the mainstream, albeit in a limited manner.

While a grown man might refrain from admitting he read superhero comics, even a person who had never picked up a comic book in their life now recognised that superheroes were firmly entrenched in the popular culture of America.

Super Macho Men:

Superheroes had always been muscular, manly and strong.

However, in the 1990s, it was commonplace to see their muscles, manliness and strength become exaggerated to gigantic proportions.

This type of superhero lacked the psychological depth of the 80s superhero and the relatability of the 60s superhero. His readers might never find out his origin story, motivations or purpose and this did nothing to dilute their enjoyment of his adventures.

By definition, he was an anti-hero. The storylines he featured in were glossy, violent tales that valued plenty of style over substance.

Understanding that their current audience was almost exclusively comprised of teenaged and preteen males, writers and artists provided growing boys and young men with an extreme fantasy of adult masculinity: by tapping into every element that they were sure to adore and flooding every page with them.

Visit [Meta the Mystic's](#) half of the menu to see the other side of the 90s superhero coin!

A Glut of Gimmicks:

In decades past, gimmicks had often been part of a superhero's costume and arsenal; now they were part of comic books themselves, affecting form, and appearance, content and sales.

Comic books covers had always been a marketing tool, designed to catch the eye and attract customers with bright colours and striking imagery.

Covers of the early 90s featured glow-in-the-dark covers, the use of metallic foil and inks, holograms, die-cut or embossed motifs and shapes and even multiple covers for the same issue of a single comic book became common.

By 1993, sales gimmicks had lost their novelty. So-called collector's editions had lost their value. For the market to recover, publishers were going to need more than glow-in-the-dark covers.

Celebrity Creators:

In the late 1980s, a trend began that would impact every aspect of the superhero genre in the 90s. From art styles to storylines to the market nearly collapsing in on itself; the reason for these changes was the celebrity creator.

In the 1990s, as far as readers were concerned, artists like Jim Lee, Todd McFarlane and Rob Liefeld were bigger superstars than the characters they drew.

Their art style was an instant hit with young boys, propelling the artists behind it to stardom;

they were the rock stars of the superhero set. It didn't matter which characters they drew, sales skyrocketed on any book these artists had their names on.

Because their art styles were so popular, other companies and artists used them in their superhero comics.

By the middle of 1993, there were too many! Superhero comics had stopped making money, thousands of comic book stores closed across America, independent publishers went bankrupt and dozens of mainstream superhero titles were cancelled.

The road to recovery was long and continues to be in progress, although graphic novels

and film adaptations have greatly helped to restore financial success to the superhero genre following the market's staggering crash.

Meta the Mystic Cover:

Sensitive Super Men:

Although superheroes like MetaMerc were tremendously popular in the 1990s, Meta the Mystic and characters like him were a different sort of superhero.

He represented a type of man who did not rely on physical strength to solve problems.

He was undisputedly powerful; however, his strength also came from his intelligence.

His adventures drew inspiration from sources that included mythology, folklore, classic cinema, fine art, punk music and the occult, instead of action movies.

Although he was less flashy than MetaMerc, he was not unnoticed. His audience was more varied than the audience of mainstream superhero comics and included older teenagers and adults, male and female, from a variety of backgrounds and sexual orientations. Representations of all these types of readers could be found in comics like Meta the Mystic, which was unusual in American comics of the time.

Art and Soul:

In contrast to the trends in mainstream superhero titles that meant flashy violence and hyper-masculine characters took centre stage, series like Meta the Mystic employed a different approach to comic art.

Even if their worlds and adventures were unbelievable, these heroes were able to make a connection with their ordinary human readers because their speech, facial expressions and behaviour were often very believable.

Restricted Access:

In 1993, a turbulent year for the American comics industry, DC Comics launched an imprint that offered something new: Vertigo.

Vertigo titles offered art and stories that were different from anything mainstream American comics had produced and were aimed at a mature audience.

It aimed to fill a gap in the industry for, in the words of Vertigo's editor, Karen Berger: "material for adults—male or female—who didn't necessarily read comics growing up."

As all Vertigo covers declared the content within was "suggested for mature readers", and the comics were sold directly through comic shops, writers and artists did not have to censor their ideas and images to maintain the standards of the now-mostly-disregarded Comics Code. This labelling suggested these comics were not for children, and that other types of comics like MetaMerc were for immature readers.

Touch of Class: Where mainstream superhero titles attempted to entice readers with die-cut covers, series like *The Sandman* avoided gimmicky covers. Because the 1990s was an era when trading cards were all the rage, mature and independent titles were no exception. However, these tie-ins elevated the humble trading card to an art form,

featuring fully-painted exclusive artwork by high-profile talent. In addition, their merchandising took a different form than the usual action figures and Halloween costumes. They were aimed at an older different age group, and this meant merchandise had to grow up accordingly. Hand-painted, limited-edition statues of characters were produced, mirroring the high production values of the comics they featured in.

Fig. 1: A selection of Meta the Mystic trading cards, featuring a rare “chase” card of Ms Meta framed with a silver border. These cards still command a high price in the collector’s market.

Fig 2: A photograph of the cold-cast porcelain statue depicting Meta the Mystic in feline form. This statue was limited to 300 pieces worldwide and came with an engraved wooden base for display.

Speech Balloons for MetaMerc:

First: “Time to MAKE some MAYHEM!”

Entertainment: “Go watch my movie, OR ELSE!”

Celebrity creators: “Are you TOUGH ENOUGH to READ MY COMIC?”

Gimmicks: “Goin’ for the GOLD!”

Macho: “CHECK ME OUT!!”

Speech Balloons for Meta the Mystic:

First: “Welcome to a world where the seen and unseen are one.”

New Man: “Can you define me?”

Art: “Within these pages lies a feast for the eyes as well as the mind.”

Access: “This is not a journey for the young or faint of heart.”

Luxury: “Souvenirs can be an investment.”

Appendix 11: 2000s Menu Text

Superpowered Technology:

On and off the comic page, 21st-century technology has become an indelible part of the superhero genre. In this era of instant information and communication, the gimmicks and gadgets in the comics of the fifties and sixties seem a tame prediction of the future (although personal jet-packs have yet to become a reality!). The science in superhero comics, always fantastic and several leaps ahead of our own, does not have to leap all that far anymore in the 21st century.

Superheroes and their alter-egos have become computer-literate and tech-savvy, and make use of this knowledge in both their professional and personal lives. Martin Miller is just as likely to check his email account as MetaMan is to mine his supercomputer for information on a new villain's powers.

It has become commonplace for the citizens of the universes they inhabit to display a likewise command of technology, with superheroes becoming the subjects of in-universe online forum discussions, blogs and fansites as is the case with non-superpowered celebrities in our world.

From a behind-the-scenes standpoint, technology has made its mark on the comic book industry as well. Previously-manual steps in the superhero comic creation process such as colouring, lettering, printing and even inking generally take place digitally in this decade. With e-mail dissolving geographical boundaries when it comes to the transmission of information, an artist can live and work in a separate country from an inker, colourist or editor without delaying a comic book's release.

The Super Screen:

Maybe it's because modern computer graphics have finally caught up with the imaginations of artists. Maybe it's because seven decades of larger-than-life adventures offer plenty of material to draw inspiration from. Or maybe it's because comic publishers wish to introduce their characters to as wide an audience as they can.

No matter what the reasons may be, the 2000s has been a decade full of superhero films. Beginning with the hotly-anticipated *X-Men* (2000, directed by Bryan Singer), a film that succeeded in appealing to long-time fans and non-comics-readers alike, the next ten years saw superheroes become a silver screen staple. From adaptations of classic series to completely original material, from sequels to franchise reboots to parodies, superhero films are commonplace in the 2000s.

Due to the differences between the medium of film and that of the source material, it is impossible to completely translate the experience of reading a superhero comic onto the screen. Speech patterns and sound effects must be supplied by the reader's imagination based on their written form on the comic page, and while panel layouts have often been compared to shots taken by a film camera, the reader may glance at a panel as quickly or as leisurely as they wish. And of course, to see what happens next, the reader must turn the page. While an exact translation may be impossible, maintaining the look, spirit and message of a superhero comic is not. The films can create new superhero fans, but they can also cause fans to disagree with the way their favourite comic has been adapted into the medium of cinema.