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The Design Process of Superhero Origin Comic Books

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Communication and Journalism

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Abstract

The design process for superhero comic book artists is an overwhelming task and an art in and of itself. Artists face the unseen pressures of spacing limitations, difficulties with the writers or editors, and the fans and fandoms of comics can be harsh critics. There are also a vast number of roles in the comic book creation process and the final product relies on the work of writers, pencilers, inkers, colorists, and letterers. Depending on the company or individual behind the comic, there can be multiple people working on a single comic or just one person performing all the roles.

For this project, I developed the concept art and basis for a superhero origin comic book, working as the creator, penciler, inker, and colorist. Adobe Photoshop served as my primary design program when polishing, inking, and coloring my free-hand sketches. There is no script and the focus of this project is entirely on art design. The aim is to demonstrate the amount of work it takes to develop a style, a system, and finally a character and world

Using inspiration from legendary comic book greats, I have catalogued my design process and detailed my experiences using both traditional and new media techniques.

Technology and the American comic book industry

The comic industry has its roots in journalism and newspapers, beginning with the “Yellow Kid.” The “Yellow Kid” was developed by Richard F. Outcault in 1895 and 1896 for the *New York World* publication. This character was one of the first reoccurring comic strip characters and he went on a series of adventures in *McFadden’s Row of Flats*, *Around the World with the Yellow Kid* and *Ryan’s Arcade* (Ohio State University Libraries, 2015). The popularity of this character also led to a press war fighting for the rights to the bald-headed child between Pulitzer’s *The New York World* and Hearst’s *The New York Journal* (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2010). Both of these publications recognized the influence of a fan-favorite character and the reach of the character was unprecedented. The battle over “Yellow Kid” is also attributed with the origin of the term, “Yellow Journalism,” due to the fear mongering and sensational behaviors of the newspapers (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2010). One of the reasons this character is titled the “Yellow Kid” and therefore “Yellow Journalism” is due to the *New York World*’s ability to print in color.

Color presses were in limited supply as the technology was still being developed and mass-produced. The first paper to print in color was *The Milwaukee Journal* in 1891 using a blue and red banner for the front page (Glaberson, 1993). Cartoonists would carefully etch an illustration into a plate that was then printed in color, but this method was time-consuming and laborious, therefore limited (Moritz, 1996). In 1894, *The New York World* obtained access to a color printing press and hired Outcault, a trained artist, to make a comic, “Hogan’s Alley,” for their Sunday section (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2010; Gordon, 1995). The *World* then began a test into printing yellow ink and used the “Yellow Kid” (then Mickey Dugan) as their Guinea pig (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2010; Gordon, 1995, p.53). The color yellow became his key

identifier due to his yellow gown and also referred to his assumed Asian race. Very few cartoons and comics had color or such a defined character, giving the *New York World* a unique position (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2010). Therefore, the technology of the color press heavily influenced newspapers' appeal as well as the content of comics.

After the success of "The Yellow Kid" adventures, a new industry began to form. During the end of the 19th century and into the 1930s, a shift occurred from simply doing funny comic strips in newspapers to creating full stories with recognizable characters. The proposed "Golden Age" of comics began with Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's *Superman* in 1938 (PBS, 2015). Jess Nevins, a pulp magazine historian, discusses how the comic book format benefited Siegel and Shuster because the character was allowed a simplicity with bold, primary colors, and the limited space allowed for straightforward powers like flying and strength (2017). The popularity of the Superman character even moved audiences into buying the more expensive comic books rather than cheaper pulp fiction magazines (Nevins, 2017). In the lead up and during World War II, the comic book industry boomed giving rise to many more costumed superhero characters including Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel, and Captain America (PBS, 2015). Audiences did not seem to want complex topics or artistic nuance, they rather looked for patriotic stories told through fun, colorful characters.

Comic book characters are only as successful as their artists and perhaps one of the most famous comic book artists is Jack Kirby; creator of the Hulk, the Fantastic Four, Doctor Doom, and many, many more. Jack Kirby was a huge fan of newspaper comics and was entranced by the freedom that the newspaper canvas allowed. Kirby stated in a 1990 interview with *The Comics Journal*, that he loved pulps as well as newspaper strips saying, "I think that's what brought me into journalism. The comics are so large and colorful. The pages are extremely large,

and I used to love that” (Groth, 2011, p.1). In fact, this interest in journalism may be why Kirby identifies himself not only as an artist, but also a “storyteller,” with comic art as his medium (Groth, 2011, p.6).

This interview from 1990 is very insightful because Kirby talks in depth about how his own upbringing in rough New York so greatly shaped his style, as well as provides details about the aspects of himself that he places into his characters like Ben Grimm or The Thing (Groth 2011). Kirby had an incredible intuition about art based on his own life and since he had been in real fights, he could devise and picture action sequences “like a ballet” (Groth, 2011, p.1) This is what lies at the heart of Kirby’s legacy, his ability to create movement and dynamism on a comic book page, bringing what were stiff characters, to life (Browser, 2012). The stylistic aspects and concepts of Kirby have been long-lasting, including his influence on my own work, yet Kirby is humble in that he believes, “comics is an American form of art that anyone can do with a pencil and paper” (Groth, 2011, p.1).

Kirby and his colleague Stan Lee upped “the game” on comic book making and defined the look of comics for years up until the 1990s. The next step for artists was finding ways to expand and continue their work in order to maintain the comic book industry. Computer technology, specifically Apple’s Macintosh computer, was advancing rapidly and a variety of programs soon became available to artists. MacDraw and MacPaint as well as ClarisDraw were available by 1994 and allowed for basic drawing applications and placing shapes into a project (Angus, 1994). Designers and artists were fascinated with this new medium and soon enough, there was the introduction of digital comics. Creators began finding uses and methods of using the computer, but Peter B. Gillis and Mike Saenz’ *Shatter* digital comic was the first of its kind (Garcia, 2013). The aim of the comic was for it to be produced entirely on the Mac, including the

sketching, lettering, as well as the marketing (Garcia, 2013). However, the limited abilities of the computer, a “clunky mouse,” and the small screen space, made this process extremely difficult so they were forced to scan images in, and eventually use a tablet (Garcia, 2013). The project switched hands and methods several times and only lasted fourteen issues, but the creators became leaders in the way comic artists could utilize the mac computer, making *Shatter* a legendary comic.

Since the 2000s a variety of mix-matching and integration of digital and traditional methods has been present in comic books. Comic book artist Lee Weeks who has spent thirty years in the comic book industry remarked how many artists work entirely digitally now (Costello, 2013). Weeks also expresses how this changes the abilities of the artists saying, “the analog version of comic book colors gave the colorists a palette of exactly 81 colors (and black) to work with. With the advent of computers and Photoshop/Illustrator, the digital guys have literally millions of colors to choose from” (Costello, 2013). Technology is therefore seen as an aid in the comic book industry since all of the tools required lie on one machine.

This digital fusion is also seen in a Marvel campaign marketed to social media sites titled, “Quickdraw” where comic book artists give an inside look through short videos (Marvel, 2017). There is no dialogue and the videos are entirely visual, perhaps so that people scrolling through social media will be captivated without the need for narration. This lack of explanation also puts more emphasis on the process and methods of the artists as we witness their step by step process to completion. An important aspect to note is that almost, if not all, artists featured are seen using the prominent creative digital company, Adobe Creative’s applications including Photoshop, InDesign, and Illustrator. For instance, in the “Quickdraw” of “Silk #11,” Helen Chen demonstrates the power of grids and layers by constantly switching back and forth and making

layers transparent to add details to other components of the work (Marvel, 2017). This campaign shows the impressive skill of the artists while at the same time inspiring the audience to pick up the mouse for themselves.

This use of different media platforms to promote and push the boundaries of comics' capabilities also comes along with the developments in digital technology. Besides TV shows, mainstream comic book companies have experimented with different ways to add motion into their storytelling techniques. For instance, Marvel's cybercomics were released in the 1990s, but today there are still variations of this hybrid of comic book panels and animated cartoons (Wershler, 2011). Marvel and DC have both put effort and teams in charge of motion comics and produced work like *The Spider-Woman Agent of S.W.O.R.D.* which has subjects in panels slightly shifting or panning with layered voiceovers (Bendis & Maleev, 2009). This is intriguing because traditional comic book artists now have to not only depict motion, but also allow room and believability for actual motion.

This cinematic approach to designing comics has a great deal of crossover as many artists, including the legendary Frank Miller, end up working in film production. In an interview with Print Magazine, Aaron Sowd and Trevor Goring who are both accomplished comic artists as well as storyboarders discussed the comparisons talking about the authorships of comics versus films (Dooley, 2014). They both discussed the freedom comics allowed, but an intriguing aspect of the interview was the amount of crossover between their storyboarding experience and their work with comics. For instance, Goring mentions how working on his *Iron Siege* spread, which was adapted from a screenplay, had the same page count as a comic, (Dooley, 2014). A common theme therefore seems to be a cinematic and multimedia focused style amongst many comic book greats, indicating their work is larger than just one comic panel.

The enhancements in technology have enabled creators to go bigger with their work, but has also given audiences agency to critique. An issue that has always faced comics seems to be the lack of women sitting in the creative roles. Perhaps this is why artists of the traditional comic book industry focused so heavily on the white male perspective, they were mostly white men. Tim Hanley, a comic book researcher, remarked that even in 2014, 89.9% of DC comic credits (editors, writers, artists, colorists) were men and 88% of Marvel comic credits (2014). Thus, the biggest comic book kings are still facing a vast gender disparity which does change content and style.

The oversexualizing of female characters in comics is nothing new to note, but there has been more loud and detrimental backlash in recent years, due in part to technology. For instance, *The Killing Joke* was a controversial graphic novel in 1988 for its use of Barbara Gordon's sexual torture and humiliation as a plot device (Dockterman, 2016). However, it has long been hailed as a key joker origin story and was given a release date in 2016 as an R-rated animated film. This, in itself, is interesting because an animated film comic book film received a theatrical release, demonstrating that there is a market for adult animation blockbusters. However, *The Killing Joke* film was met with extreme animosity not only for maintaining the same issues as the comic book but adding a bizarre prologue to the comic (Dockterman, 2016). A video even surfaced online before the release of the film, showing a sex scene between Batman and Batgirl, and fans took to social media in order to complain and critique (io9, 2016). The bigger comics get, the fewer places they have to hide from criticism.

There are some negative views of the shifting ways comics are produced and the internet's effect on comics. The staff of comic book making in mainstream companies usually consists of writers, pencilers, inkers, colorists, and letterers (Ray Murray, 2013, p.339). Since the

“Golden Age” of comics, there have been critiques of this ‘assembly line’ production style with artists like Will Eisner and Carmine Infantino describing the conditions like “galleys” and “sweatshops” (Lopes, 2009, p.13). There are some appealing aspects of this process in that there is freedom of artists to work from home and at their own discretion rather than having to participate in the entire process. Jack Kirby remarked how much he enjoyed being able to do “whatever I liked to do during the day. I didn’t have to work in an office. I could work at home” (Groth, 2011, p.6). Technology and the internet has made it easier because collaborators do not have to share an office and can work internationally since files can simply be uploaded and downloaded through the web. However, the fact that collaborators may never meet face to face can lead to confusions and differences of opinion of a comic’s content or who was part of it, leading to certain contributors being undercompensated (Ray Murray, 2013, p.340). Thus, technology while being promoted as a positive medium for engaging with the comic book industry can actually end up isolating people from the final product and credit for their work.

Nevertheless, the influence of technology and the internet leading to globalization of the industry has also seen a rise of “webcomics.” Besides studio owned webcomics like Thrillbent, this work is also being posted online in communities including Comixology, Deviantart and even Reddit. This is where amateur and professional comic creators find a common ground since online communities seem to find their own way of grouping and while some may still choose to seek out professional and well-known creators’ work, other people have found solace in the odd and unguarded world of amateur art (PBS Digital Studios, 2013). PBS Digital did a short segment on this rising phenomenon, which is still expanding, and the creator of *Breadpig* webcomic, Christina Xu, elaborates how “thanks to the internet, you have these communities forming that are based around interests rather than geography or other things” (PBS Digital

Studios, 2013). What this means for superhero comics, is that the universes do have more diversity and people with different perspectives and backgrounds telling stories. Alex Woolfson has established himself a strong fan base with his *The Young Protectors* superhero webcomic saying “As a gay kid growing up, I loved science-fiction and action stories, but I never got to see what I really wanted to see—and that's kick-ass genre stories with heroes, real heroes, who just happened to like other guys” (Woolfson, 2017). Therefore, fans are now able to create their own content and reach audiences around the world.

With all of this in mind, where does my character and world fit in?

I am a longtime fan of comics and the main appeal for me is the artwork and storytelling techniques artists employ. Therefore, when I began this project, I wanted to pay homage to some of my greatest influencers. One of the main goals of this project was using technology to create my artwork, something that was unfamiliar but intriguing to me. I would not call myself an expert at Photoshop, I had experience editing images and knew the basic functions of a number of tools, but I had no experience sketching or creating anything from scratch using the program. I also do not own a tablet, a common tool for professional and amateur comic book artists which allows people to sketch like they would on paper directly onto a screen. These were some of my original setbacks, but also something I found exciting about the project. I wanted to get better with the technology and see if I could push myself into working with simply a mouse.

One of my first considerations was that I needed to make a character who shared my personal experience and perspective as a young, white female. Even with the expanding range of characters and backgrounds in the comic book universes, I still believe it is key we have more female characters who are given agency and not oversexualized. When designing this character, I

therefore tried to make an outfit that was feminine without relying on sexualized aspects of the female body. The entire costume was devised with other iconic characters in mind. For instance, I used the *Xmen* Rogue's gloves as inspiration as well as Jean Grey's shoulder pads in my original sketches, although slowly I transformed and adapted them into my own creation. A main component of the costume is the helmet, which I based off of Captain America as well as Juggernaut's helmet design. The reason I shaped the helmet in such a way was because I realized I wanted the character to have a background in rock-climbing. This also meant that the character was simply gathering objects and pieces from which they had access to. This is the same predicament that we see in many origin comics, namely *Spiderman* or *Ironman* who are not yet aware of the full extent of their responsibilities by donning the mask and cape, figuratively and physically.

Besides making my character a rock-climber, I also decided to give the character a background in Journalism. This was once again an homage to Peter Parker and Clark Kent's professions. Something I have always found fascinating about their roles in media is that they wanted to control their own stories as heroes. In some ways this seems villainous, since it is a major conflict of interest as they are almost always the subject and the reporter. In another way, and in my biased opinion as a journalism major, I think this also gives the characters' motivation for their actions since they have to report on horrendous news all the time, and therefore taking action in more way than one does have some reasoning. Thus, by providing these two simple details, a rock-climber and a journalist, I established the character in my head. She would not have to be a lethal crime-fighter and could use her rock-climbing gear, making references to the web-slinging of Spiderman and Wonder Woman's lasso of truth, whilst also living a double life as a subtler crime-fighter, a journalist.

I began the process by laying out some basic designs on any paper I could find, sketchpad paper, notebook paper, the corners of assignments and so on. I also devised my own version of a turnaround and expression sheet, which is most often used by artists working in teams and who need to maintain a uniform depiction of the character. Once I had a vision in mind of my character I drew an action shot, something “superheroish” which I then took a photo of and scanned onto my computer, combining traditional and digital methods. I then began blocking sections off using the Photoshop paint bucket tool and just went over and over the work using a range of layers and different brush sizes, rendering the work (*Fig. 1*). I started drawing this character with a purple and yellow scheme but changed my approach due to the earlier research surrounding the impact of primary, patriotic colors mainly red and blue.

Eventually I started drawing entirely digitally using my mouse, a process that truly tested my abilities and patience. However, once I memorized certain commands, I realized the amount of shortcuts that Photoshop allows for digital designers, particularly the layers feature. I would sketch a rough outline, then add a layer with a more defined sketch, then a final layer which I would color and polish. The layers also meant I could work on the backgrounds simultaneously or separately from the rest of the content. For the reflection image concept artwork (*Fig. 2*) I would go back and edit the background, adding more details and atmosphere, and then return to the characters, and then back to the background. Photoshop’s range of colors and brushes all in one program also meant I did not have to take time mixing paints or trying to make previously used colors. Instead I could just pick from my customized palette. I ended up really enjoying the rendering and coloring aspect of the process since I think playing with textures is one of the most fun components of art. The helmet in particular was an easy feature where I attempted to flush in

highlights and make it look more solid and reflective than the rest of the costume and stand out against from its environment (*Fig. 3*).

Whilst I was designing and drawing, there were a few key factors I wanted to emphasize in my work. One of these was storytelling and visual narrative, vital components of comic book artwork. I therefore needed a basic story that would not need much explanation. I created two symbolic representations of the character's alter ego and struggle with identity. These can be seen in *Fig. 2* and *Fig. 3*, the first showing a mirror image of the alter ego rock climber witnessing the superhero form and in *Fig. 3* the red helmet sits on a newspaper office desk. In the background of *Fig. 3*, news clippings of the character in her superhero outfit can also be seen. This demonstrates the different worlds this one person inhabits which is a common theme in many comic books as characters attempt to balance and hold onto their identity whilst hiding it from everyone else.

In addition to this concept artwork, I wanted to try my hand at creating storyboards and visuals of what the inside content of the comic may look like. For the first (*Fig. 4*) I used *Action Comics #241* as inspiration as it depicts Superman discovering "Fort-Superman" and what would be later known as "the Fortress of Solitude" (Coleman, Boring, & Kaye, 1958). Almost every superhero needs a headquarters so I thought my character should have one too and that this could be a simple, yet important storyboard. However, for the setting, I chose an area resembling a small town, like Laramie, Wyoming. There are so few superheroes based in rural areas of the U.S. or the world for that matter. A large part of this is presumably population size, as well as the fact that most mainstream comic book creators tended to live in big city hubs like New York or L.A. Nevertheless, for this character, as part of my attempt to add diversity to the industry, I could switch and change up the location. Vedawoo also provided a nice comparison to

Superman's Fortress of Solitude as it is reasonably isolated, vast, and interestingly shaped with the variation and stacking of boulders. Therefore, I decided this should be the base or headquarters for my character (*Fig. 4*).

Another important factor was contrast and tone. In my fight sequence storyboard (*Fig. 5*) I played around with black and white, eliminating most mid-tones, giving the scene a moodier tone and vibe. I used Frank Miller as inspiration since he is known for his black and white, film noir-esque work including in his *The Dark Night Returns* mini-series (Miller, Janson, 1986). Miller has now moved into the film industry and his use of lighting and shading in his comics highlights his cinematic approach to art. I attempted to capture this same demonstration of movement and conflict and used the Brazilian martial arts dance, capoeira, as an example in order to create my work. I watched several YouTube videos depicting capoeira, primarily Thiago Santos' *Capoeira "No Pain No Gain" #3 – 2016* video. I enjoyed the exuding of strength portrayed in capoeira with the extending of limbs and weight balance. This also let my character find a different fighting method than the stereotypical punches and "pows" or "whams."

This project was eye-opening for me as a longtime superhero comic book fan. There have been so many advancements in the mediums for making comic books and with it an expanding landscape of artists able to create and distribute their work. I really wanted to give life and movement to a character using digital technology. I tested my abilities with Adobe programs and developing a character and their backstory entirely visually. The project took a great deal of time and I have a new found appreciation for both traditional and digital comic book artists. The character's name is fittingly "Cliffhanger" as this is only concept artwork for an idea that could eventually become a full comic book. Therefore, I would love to see what I could do with this character and world in the future, hopefully adding a new perspective to the superhero universe.

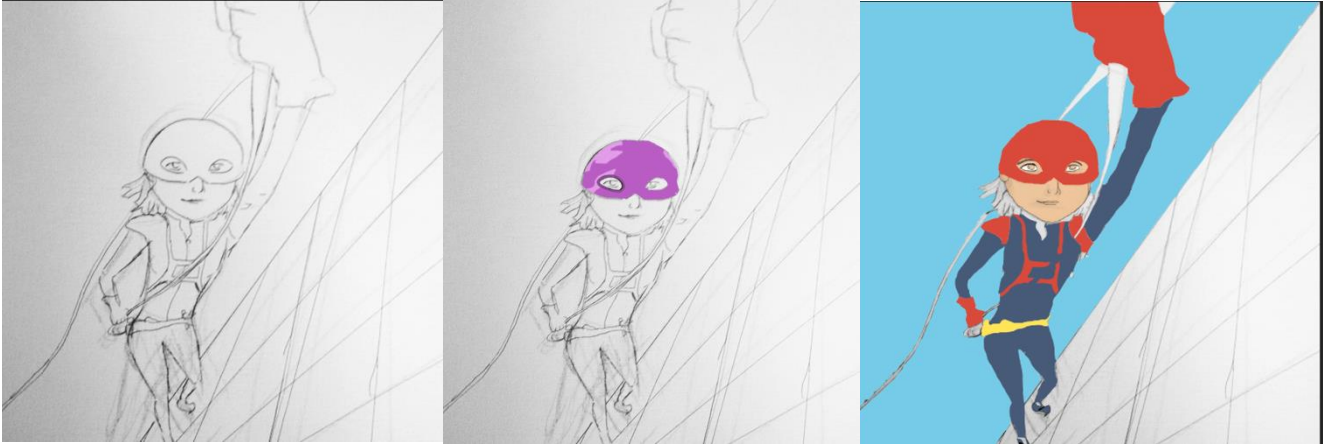


Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

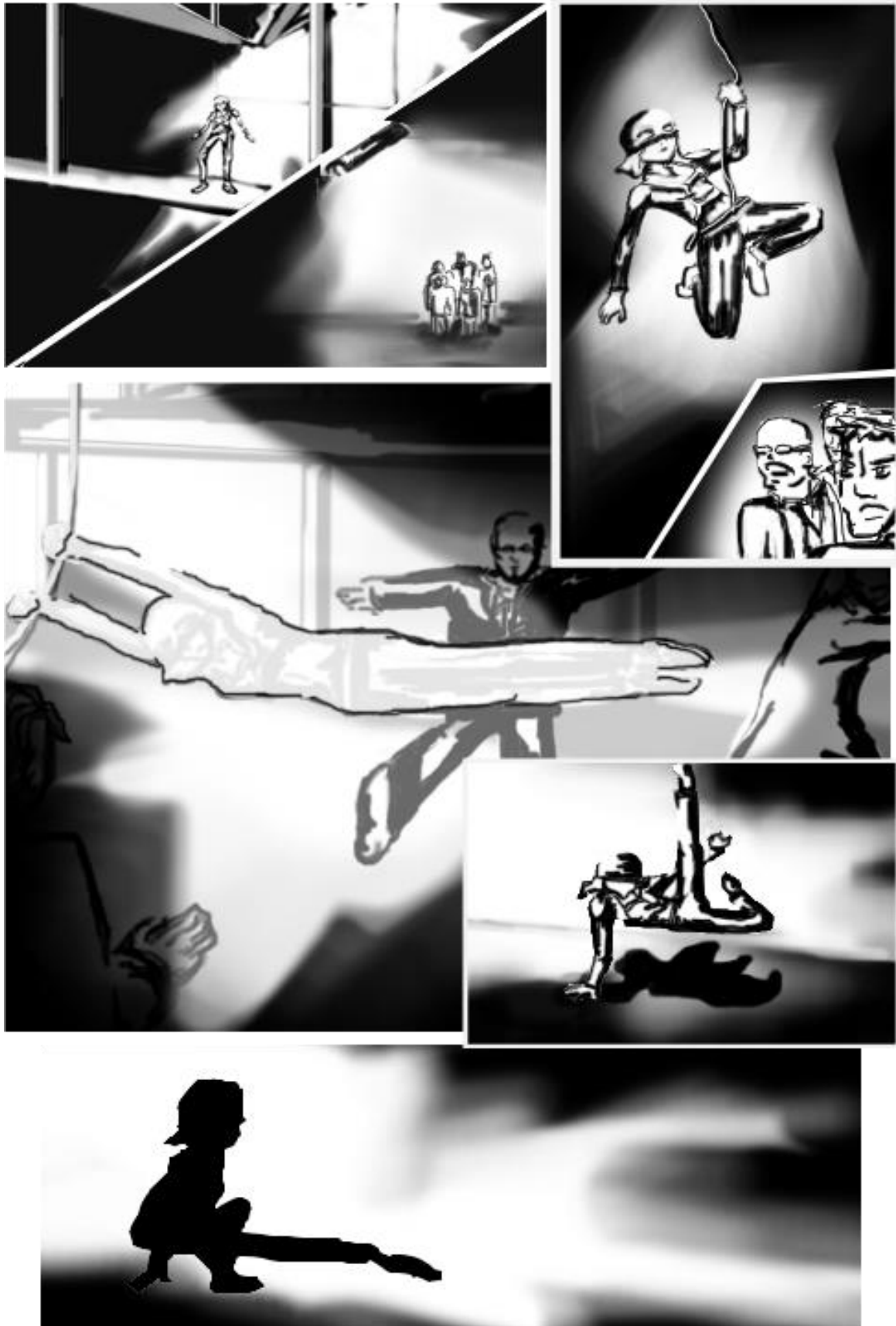


Fig. 5



Fig. 6

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