GAMIFYING THE DIGITAL COMIC:

Creative Labour and the Future of Digital Comics in a Neoliberal World

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This thesis is in two parts: Part 1 is this written analysis, while part 2 is a creative component that consists a comic-game hybrid made in the Unity game engine with an executable (.exe) game file.

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DECLARATION

I certify that the work titled "**Gamifying the Digital Comic: Creative Labour and the Future of Digital Comics in a Neoliberal World**" has not been previously submitted for a degree, nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree to any other university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. All help or assistance that I have received in my research work and in the preparation of this thesis itself have been appropriately acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Queenie Chan (45045348)

April 2024

ABSTRACT

This is a two-part creative thesis, which consists of a written thesis, and a creative component consisting of the production of a hybrid digital comic.

Comics Studies may be a comparatively new area of study and digital comics even more so, but how the socio-economic system of capitalism and neoliberalism influences the creative output of a comics creator is a less-studied phenomenon. This thesis plans to shed light on this, by examining the nexus of neoliberalism and globalised creative labourers in the industry of comics and video games. It especially looks at how a multitude of forces—including cognitive and platform capitalism—shapes the individual comics creator, enmeshed as they are in the unequal power dynamics inherent to a digital landscape dominated by transnational corporations, government organisations, transmedial storytelling and convergence culture.

In this two-part thesis, the first half aims to use discourse analysis to consider the effects of neoliberalism on global creative labour mostly through the prism of the South Korean "Webtoons", an oft-understudied area of Comics Studies which is currently also the most popular format for digital comics on the internet. Meanwhile, the second half provides an attempt at resisting these hegemonic forces, by dissecting an existing case study of an activist digital comic, and then producing a comic-game hybrid that attempts an intersectional approach to critiquing neoliberalism. By this, it also stakes a claim on the future of digital comics through the use of creative commons, as a pushback against the hegemonic corporations that dominate this online space.

Note: The comic-game hybrid, its source code and this thesis can be download at http://www.queeniechan.com/phd

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic swept the globe, paralysing entire societies with governments-issued lockdown orders while struggling to contain the ever-rising tide of infection and deaths. The impact on the global economy was devastating—the resulting disruption of everything from supply chains to international travel caused one of the worst economic contractions in the history of capitalism (Saad-Filho, 2020), to say nothing of the human cost.

Although the world-altering threat of COVID-19 has since receded, signs of economic recovery were far from swift. Instead, the world soon found itself enmeshed in an era of high inflation and global conflicts—a continuation of a decade-long period of stagnation caused by the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC). Even now, the reverberating shocks of the GFC have not yet been alleviated, entrenched as they are due to the preceding half-century of neoliberal economic policies (Saad-Filho, 2020). The end result—hollowed-out industrial bases, crumbling healthcare infrastructure, a nomadic and impoverished working class—has only accelerated the rising wealth gap between the rich and the poor. When it became apparent that there are no individualised solutions to the growing sense of social malaise, new alternatives to the existing system have yet to be forthcoming. As the wealth gap widens and more and more people fall through the cracks, existing societal tensions and populist movements that have the potential to evolve into violent, destructive forces will only continue to surface (Peck & Theodore, 2019, p. 260).

We all approach and grapple with overwhelming societal problems from our own limited, personal perspectives. As a practicing comic book writer-artist writing in the academic discipline of Comic Studies, I am no different. Comics Studies may be a comparatively new area of study, but despite the many areas it covers in its scope, one of its lesser-studied areas is *how* the socio-economic system of neoliberalism influences the creative output of a comics creator. For this reason, I'm interested in studying the specific expression of neoliberalism in the creative industries of comics and video games, with the hope of yielding maximal insight through my own lived experiences. This is important, because while comics was once a product of a localized culture, the onset of the internet

era has meant that cultural production and its audiences are now a globalized phenomenon. Once subject to limited readers contained by geographical and/or cultural borders, the liberating effects of the internet has not only shattered these confines, but also evolved the medium. These "digital comics", a product of the technological environment they spring from, can differ from traditional book-form comics in their form, function, production processes, delivery, and so on. Since my background uniquely positions me to bring new perspectives that are often lacking in more conventional takes in academia, the first half of this thesis aims to analyse the effects neoliberalism has on comics production, and the ways it can shape the medium in a digital world. While academia has produced volumes of work on various forms of media and the process of artistic production, how socio-economic systems actively shape the choices a working creator makes even *before* they decide on a project is less understood. Similarly, the technological basis by which digital comics is produced and disseminated—and who owns and controls these systems—are also less-studied, though no less important.

This brings the need to understand the nature of neoliberalism into focus, and how globalized creative workers in comics and video games operate in its nexus. With its unfettered faith in the efficiency of the free market, its reduction of all aspects of life into units measured by profitability, and its relentless focus on self-sufficiency, the potency of neoliberalism makes its hegemonic set of governmental, societal and economic beliefs all encompassing. Therefore, the first half of this thesis will aim to examine how a multitude of forces—including cognitive and platform capitalism—shapes the individual comics creator, enmeshed as they are in the unequal power dynamics inherent to a digital landscape dominated by transnational corporations and government organisations.

Artistic production does not take place in a vacuum. Most would agree that the context of such production—whether in a state-funded academic capacity or a creator selling their work in an open market—can significantly affect the kind of work being produced. Likewise, so can the *format* of the production. In the specific case of comics, the final output can vary wildly, depending on whether the work is intended to be presented in the traditional printed format of a book, or in a digital format with (or without) all the bells and whistles that technology can bring. Digital comics, unlike print comics, is unusual in that its various formats defy easy or tidy categorizations, and due to

its extremely malleable and constantly evolving nature, it is not unusual for it to contain elements of multimedia or to borrow from video games. This means that the various online spaces that allow creators to disseminate their comics can also differ vastly in their presentation, and also in the underlying software processes that power such platforms.

Combined with the tendency of creators to gravitate towards hosting sites that amass the greatest numbers of eyeballs and thereby avenues to profitability, one can argue that digital comics platforms can have an outsized influence on the distinct *formats* that digital comics take. When comic creators have to alter their work to fit the requirements of a platform to get acceptance or visibility, a creator is already enmeshed in a globalized, transnational socio-economic system that subtly shapes them towards certain values, production processes, and target audiences. Within such a context, a digital comics platform with monopoly power is in a unique position to dictate what is permissible in this space, what form it should take, and also normalize certain kinds of labour practices that may be disadvantageous to creators. How that plays out, and what the wider implications of that will be for the future of digital comics creation is something that this thesis hopes to examine in greater detail.

Following on, the second half of this thesis is expressed through an activist-driven creative thesis, where I attempt some pushback against the aforementioned hegemonic influence and possible ossification of the medium. This will be achieved on two levels—by creating a hybrid digital "comic-game" in which part of the process is to release the source code to the public, and using the content of this "comic-game" to educate a layperson audience about the accumulative nature of capitalism. This latter part will use a limited, pre-existing digital comic as a case study and springboard, to which a more advanced version of it involving ludic processes borrowed from video games will be produced, with discourse on intersectionality added.

One might question how (a) making the toolset for creating a hybrid "comic-game" accessible to the general public, and (b) creating an education digital comic about capitalism, are connected. However, while the relationship between these two goals may initially seem tenuous, they are actually intertwined. This is because the goal of activist-driven comic creation is both to reach a wide audience and educate them by creating a broad and expansive picture of the issues at hand, while *also* galvanizing and mobilizing

said audience by giving them the tools to engage in self-expression and community-driven debate. Since the logic of neoliberalism leans towards privatization of all aspects of life, it can be argued that escape from this system is impossible for all who live and work within it. This is especially true if one were to frame neoliberalism as a project aimed at the restoration of class power through the suppression of organized labour, which is the strain of neoliberal discourse that this thesis mostly follows. Therefore, while it is possible to create an educational "comic-game" targeted exclusively at comic creators by highlighting the unequal power dynamics between them and digital comics platforms, a path that can engage a wider audience was ultimately chosen.

The power of comics, within the context of activism, lies in its accessibility. In theory, anyone can pick up pen and paper to contribute to the debate, and its visual impact is much more immediate than text. If by targeting a larger audience (which still includes comic creators) through a more generalized approach on an important subject matter can better achieve the goal of challenging and raising awareness of a hegemonic socio-economic system, then that is the path that this project prefers.

Methodology

As a practicing comic book artist, one of my objectives is to find new ways to engage in activism, and to approach a complex socio-political issue in an engaging, informative, and enlightening way.

For that reason, this thesis is divided into two halves. One half will be a written exegesis which will use critical theory to analyse and examine the various overlapping fields relevant to the topic. Meanwhile, the second half will be the aforementioned hybrid "comic-game", presented as an interactive digital comic that uses a game engine called Unity as its basis. This is known as "practice-led" research, where the process of artistic production is used as a vehicle to drive the production of new knowledge, while the accompanying thesis will be used to present the findings in a format that is digestible to the academic community (Gibson, 2010). Both parts are meant to be considered not as separate entities, but as two interlocking halves of the same whole.

Core to this exegesis are the fields of digital comics studies and post-Marxist theory, such as using the lens of a feminist and post-colonial approach to traditional Marxist theories, and also to Guy Standing's concept of the "precariat". This approach is useful, since traditional Marxism focuses largely on the dynamics between the bourgeois and the proletariat, which the artisan class (which modern comic creators belong to) don't fit comfortably in since they have long been a group that are largely freelance workers relying on feudal patronage. For that reason, discourse analysis will be used to discuss these topics, to consider the effects of neoliberalism on global creative labour, which will also be seen mostly through the prism of the South Korean digital comics—known as "webtoons".

Webtoons is a new format of digital comics from South Korean that is currently underexplored in comic studies (Yecies & Shim, 2021, p. 4). Created by South Korean internet portals in the early 2000s, the word "webtoons" is a portmanteau of "web" and "cartoons", and usually refers to a format of infinite vertically-scrolling comics that is geared towards smartphone-centric reading. Since its first appearance as a form of short form entertainment, it has since spread internationally as the most popular form of digital comics. Spearheaded by a website *also* called "Webtoons", owned by South Korean internet conglomerate Naver, "webtoon" has thus become both a term for a particular comics format, and the name of a global digital comics platform so large it has arguably monopoly status in that space.

As befitting the multi-disciplinary approach common to these areas of research, this part of the thesis will also reference a number of disciplines. It will begin by narrowing down the broad canvas of topics that neoliberalism covers to its most relevant. This will include the problematic nature of the term in academia, while also articulating its relationship to various forms of capitalism, including newer conceptions of capitalism which has emerged in the digital age. Then, to examine the plight of the creative worker in the post-industrial age whose primary product is intangible culture, theories of cognitive and digital capitalism will be used. To analyse the lightening-fast speed of digital transmission and the spread of fan culture through networked connectivity, I will be examining convergence and participatory culture. To bolster analysis of the creative part

of the thesis, I will use video games studies, gender studies, activism, intersectionality, and other adjacent topics to gird the production of my "comics-game" hybrid.

In the attempt to better understand the experiences of digital comic artists, I will also use discourse analysis from the field of digital gaming studies to bridge the gaps where scholarship on digital comics may be lacking, and also to examine activist approaches in these respective fields. Also, since the production of an artistic product cannot be divorced from the conditions under which it is created, I will also be examining the way neoliberal labour practices manifest in both video games and comics, while using post-colonial studies to critique why this topic may be under-addressed in existing circles of comic studies scholarship.

The insights gained from that will then be used in the second half of this exegesis—which will be to critically examine an existing case study that explores the theme of class privilege. This will then lead to be creation of an interactive digital comic using similar but expanded ideas and base mechanics, as will be later explained.

The existing case study to be used is "On A Plate" by Toby Morris, a 4-page digital comic that was originally published in 2015 on the website of Radio New Zealand. It must first be clarified that the inclusion of it in this thesis is not to critique Morris' work or approach. Nor am I suggesting that my own creative production is superior to his, since I feel that the intention of the author was skilfully expressed in his comic. Instead, the intention is to question some of the underlying practices that many Western comic book creators (and the institutions that provide publishing space to comics) may have towards the production and presentation of socially-conscious comics in the digital realm, which may have put constraints on the breadth of approaches an artist can take towards a particular topic. This will be accomplished using a panel-by-panel dissection of "On A Plate", to discuss the various techniques the creator uses to make his point. This will also be a discussion of the shortcomings the strip has, that may (or may not) be a result of having to work under certain constraints.

Finally, the creative portion of this thesis will be used to produce an interactive digital comic exploring the intersection of neoliberalism and issues of class, race, and gender. It will be created in a game engine but function primarily as a comic, but will

borrow ludic elements from video games such as branching narratives based on random number generation, something not typically seen in narrative comics. In terms of content, it will look to raise awareness in the layperson about the accumulative effects of capitalism, while discussing the underlying software processes as part of said content by releasing its source code. This will be done by packaging the source code as a downloadable zip file, presented to the reader through in-game hyperlinks, which will also be published under a "Creative Commons" license. This final act is crucial to the process of creating this digital comic, both as a way to address the limitations of my creative thesis, but also to combat the tendency of neoliberalism to capture digital information as something to be bought and sold. My actions are thus a pushback against this, and representative of the activist approach that this thesis chooses to take against a hegemonic system. Finally, this hybrid will aim for online distribution as a free web browser-based game on sites like itch.io and/or Steam, to maximise its reach and fulfill its original goal of targeting a wider layman's audience. While the ultimate success of such an endeavour cannot be quantitively measured in the wider world, I hope that this thesis and its accompanying creative work can also contribute to the current scholarly discussions around neoliberalism, digital comic studies, and video game studies.

Lastly, I should also clarify that this thesis is *not* about formalising some sort of definition of a digital comic or a "comic-game" hybrid. This point needs to be made, due to the overall patchiness of academic studies on digital comics, and in particular, its connection to video games. This is because while comics studies and digital gaming studies may be two burgeoning academic fields which have emerged in the past two decades, exploring the overlap between the two disciplines will still find plenty of gaps (Lippitz, 2019, p. 115; Thurmond, 2017, p. 39). It is not for a lack of academic interest, even if "scholars have been slow to embrace the potentials opened up by the intersections between comics and video games" (Lippitz, 2019, p. 115). Much potential certainly exists, as experimentations in this area "could mean the rise of a hybridized genre that blends comics and videogames together in a special way that neither medium could accomplish alone" (Thurmond, 2017, p. 7). However, since neither medium have had much scholarly agreement on their definitions, the lack of demarcations of where

comics end and video games begin (or even what a hybrid will look like) is simply a reality that has to be acknowledged for the sake of this thesis.

Challenging the Dominance of Digital Comic Platforms

This problem of definitions is particularly acute in the arena of digital comics, compared to its traditional print counterpart. One possible reason, which will be further explored later in this thesis, is that academic works that focus on digital comics are surprisingly uncommon (Jin, 2023, p. 8; Kleefeld, 2020, pp. 195–196; Thurmond, 2017, pp. 5, 22; Yecies & Shim, 2021, p. 4). To date, there has been few formal attempts (or even any official terminology) to distinguish between various kinds of digital comics. Few distinctions are made between (a) comics which are mere digital reproductions of their printed version, (b) comics that take full advantage of their digital nature by adding interactivity, music and animation, and (c) comics such as the South Korean "webtoon" format, which cannot be credibly divorced from their transmedia environment. Meanwhile, there are also academics who don't think of digital comics as comics at all, while others are dismissive of the experimentations in digital comics. While dialogue about these issues is beginning to be established in comic studies, largely spearheaded by the COVID-19-incentivised mass-shift towards digitisation, the field is still far from a diachronic view of digital comics. This is true even without incorporating the business models of different modes of digital comics (eg. webcomics VS webtoon models) into this view, which further adds an additional layer of complexity to the topic.

It is perhaps for these reasons that the more technical questions about the creation of digital comics—such as the underlying software processes and digital platforms that gird the continual evolution of the digital comic format—has remained largely unexamined. Due to the complexity of digital comics from a technological perspective, and the larger institutions and various ecosystems that certain forms of digital comics come already enmeshed in, it can be argued that a piece of digital comics narrative cannot be regarded as existing free of forces external to the author's original intent. An example of this is the case study which will be used in this thesis, which is Toby Morris' digital comic "On A Plate". At a glance, Morris' comic may resemble a digital reproduction

of a print comic, but it contains subtle animation that consists of blinking characters, the flickering of a soft glow from a television screen, and simple movements of characters' limbs as they point or gesture. Due to these features, it has already propelled itself past *just* a digital reproduction of printed page, even as it looks almost identical to one. Was the choice to create a digital comic with limited animation the decision of Morris, or that of his publisher the website Radio New Zealand? The latter may prefer limited animation to attract viewers, despite lacking the digital infrastructure to host a digital comic with more complexity, so we may never know. Likewise, while most digital comics still generally prefer a series of static images that loses little if reproduced in print, increasingly, there are instances of digital comics (particularly webtoons) that incorporate interactive elements that range from animation, to even augmented reality and virtual reality (Yecies & Shim, 2021, pp. 134–147). This is especially pronounced in the area of "webtoons", that influential digital comic format from South Korea which will be the focus of a later section of this thesis. As the technology for creating interactive comics become more freely available and widely-accessible, it is possible that comics that use the full-spectrum of interactivity available may one day become the dominant form.

It is this possibility that makes what this thesis is trying to achieve significant, and which pulls together all the disparate threads of neoliberalism, digital capitalism, creative labour, digital comics, and my own creative production. As previously stated, digital comics is still in its infancy and full of independent agents experimenting with various formats, but there are already established market forces that are hegemonic players in this space that push a certain kind of format and idiom on a global level. These market players tend to be the arms of much larger multi-national corporations with fingers dipped into many areas both in and outside of culture, and sometimes even involve government funding. While the agenda of the government may ultimately differ from that of the corporation, this still gives these corporations the ability to dictate the wages of many different kinds of workers and set trends across a multitude of industries. With this level of influence, it is not a surprise to find that the corporate directives of such large players can often shape the artistic production of not just the creators they employ, but also that of independent creators who must adhere to market trends to be seen. This

makes neoliberalism (as a socio-economic structure), the creative arts, government intervention, and the global plight of the creative labourer inextricably intertwined.

One such large player is the aforementioned website Webtoons.com, owned by South Korean internet conglomerate Naver, and which most creators flock to due to their monopoly on internet viewership. Like many such corporations, Naver is driven by profitability, and they and their fellow rival Daum have also made plenty of experimental forays into mixing digital comics with multimedia elements. While none have achieved the sort of cultural primacy they are hoping for (yet), these attempts are also girded by the underlying technology and in-house proprietary software that these companies have developed and therefore own. These software tools present a "barrier of entry" to creators who lack technical skills, so if one were to create a hybrid digital comic, one may be restricted to tools being provided by these companies—thus locking them into the formats and distributive reach of these platforms. Should one of these hybrid creations achieve mainstream success and become the next global standard for digital comics, it is likely that these corporations might then dominate not only the format used to create that digital comic, but also the software processes that the creative work takes. This could end up restricting the artistic freedom of individual creators, and also give a hegemonic corporate force even greater control over a medium as its digital form evolves. The end result could be the stifling of exciting or innovative new art forms that could otherwise arise through experimentation outside such paradigms.

This increasing encroachment of large corporations on cultural content and immaterial symbols is one of the drives that neoliberalism is frequently criticized for—its drive to privatise all aspects of life. According to Lawrence Lessig (2004), before the advent of the internet, culture was often freely-distributed. Eventually, intellectual property law came into effect, to incentivize and protect the rights of individual creators who may want to commercially exploit their productions (Lessig, 2020, p. 104). However, as technology has altered the ability for society to capture cultural content in forms that can be bought and sold, the balance of power has shifted from individual creators to large corporations, which can use their influence with lawmakers to benefit them (Lessig, 2020, p. 105). The end result is not just creative workers losing bargaining power, but a shrinking of the "digital commons"—with the "commons" defined as the natural and

cultural resources that should be accessible to all members of society. What was once freely-distributed in the early days of the Internet is increasingly carved-up by large corporations for privatization, aided and abetted by the law, while newer contributions are also owned by large corporations to begin with.

Hence, the creation of "Creative Commons" by Lawrence Lessig, a non-profit organization and international network in 2001 dedicated to expanding the range of creative works in the "digital commons". "Creative Commons" is a form of copyright licensing that was developed to re-think the role of the "commons" in the so-called "age of information". It argues that the digital age has given rise to—independent of government intervention—two parallel economies consisting of a free, gift-driven "sharing economy" and the more conventional "commercial economy", and that creators should be given the legal tools to choose which one they want to participate in (Lessig, 2008, p. 226). For that reason, licensing your work under "Creative Commons" licensing means that as a creator, you choose to waive certain specified rights in your creative work for the benefit of other creators or recipients.

This brings to the forefront my own creative project, developed as pushback against this increasing encroachment through the intention of using the "Creative Commons" license and the free-to-use game engine Unity. This is aided by the fact that I am creating an activist digital comic through the publicly-funded institution of a university, since profit need not be a core motive for its existence or development. Instead, the basis of the project stems from the need to create and disseminate a digital comic that uses technology in a way that can be useful in an academic context. There would therefore be no need to own or patent the underlying code that the project is built on—it can be released under a "Creative Commons" license and freely used by others who want to create something similar. The project's existence therefore allows a space in the digital comics discourse which, through an open-source approach to the underlying software, can draw in creators who might otherwise not have the technical skills to build a "comic-game" hybrid from scratch. Likewise, this prevents digital comics from being fully shaped, locked, and owned in a particular format propagated by a corporation for reasons of profit. In other words, it's an attempt to expand the medium of comics in the "digital

commons", which is increasingly becoming boxed-in by conglomerates which use either monopoly power or government levers to dominate a particular market.

Limitations and Scope of this Project

My thesis aims to contribute to the creation of new knowledge in the realm of comic studies, as well as aid in the continuing evolution of digital comics outside the context of the most dominant, commercialized digital comic platforms. However, many limitations to this artistic production do exist, as the scope of this project (time and budget) is constrained by what is possible within the context of doctoral research. Since neoliberalism is an exceptionally broad subject matters that can encompass multiple aspects of socio-economic life, I will also be forced to pick and choose particular societal strains to focus on, so that the project remains manageable. These choices are largely arbitrary and will be determined by the subject matter's popularity in everyday discourse and public consciousness, but this is a problematic approach even if a fully-rounded approach was never impossible to begin with.

These limitations also make the release of the game's source code to the public even more vital to the project. As an individual with a specific social-economic status and personal experiences, any project I create that addresses intersectional issues such as race and gender is bound to have plenty of blind spots, so much so that even if I had the scope to address them, it cannot be done so entirely by myself due to a lack of range. I acknowledge this problem and have no proper solution to it, so the fair and logical thing to do would be to release the source code so others can make their own version of my creation, particularly those who find my renderings of a particular situation to be (inevitably) inaccurate or inauthentic. In doing so, I make the licensing of the art and source code to "Creative Commons" a necessary part of this thesis. Not only will it claim a space for a particular kind of digital comic to exist in an otherwise commercialized landscape, but this action can also address the project's problems, and invite a wider community to use the source code for their own activist projects as well.

PART 1: THE COMIC ARTIST IN A GLOBALISED, NEOLIBERAL WORLD

Neoliberalism as a Concept

Before it can be understood how the comic artist functions in a neoliberal world, the history of the term neoliberalism must be explored—namely its origins, its use (and overuse), and its various interpretations throughout different disciplines in academia. Unfortunately, while the term "neoliberalism" is widely known and used in the social sciences, it has also been overused to the extent where it has become conceptually ambiguous, contradictory, polymorphic, and lacking in any standardized definitions (Goldstein, 2012, p. 304; Hilgers, 2010, p. 352; Jessop, 2013, p. 65; Kipnis, 2007, p. 383; Peck & Theodore, 2019, p. 245; Robles & Franco, 2022, p. 101; Venugopal, 2015, p. 166). It has become "a controversial, incoherent and crisis-ridden term, even by many of its most influential deployers" (Venugopal, 2015, p. 166), even as its staying power indicates that there is a need for some sort of signifier to describe the current, on-going economic malaise and real world discontent. Whatever the term is meant to describe, the most common narrative can be very broadly framed as some sort of deliberate shift, in recent macro-political history, away from a sort of public-collective mindset to that of a private-individualised viewpoint (Barnett, 2005, p. 8; Venugopal, 2015, p. 182).

Terms with poorly-demarcated definitions and plagued by conceptual drift is nothing new in the social sciences (Venugopal, 2015, p. 171). According to Venugopal (2015), what differs with "neoliberalism" is that term originated in the discipline of economics, where until the 1970s it was largely used to describe the work of Milton Friedman, Frederik Hayek, and the counter-Keynesian Chicago school of thought. After that, it largely vanished from the economics discourse and increasingly began to appear in the social sciences, going from an obscure term in the 1980s to one that was used to describe the broader wave of market deregulation, privatization and the retreat of the welfare state that swept the world. It grew to encompass various social, economic, political, cultural and ideological dimensions, covering both the local and global, to the extent where the term began being referred to as an epoch-making phenomenon. The biggest problem with this catch-all bogeyman term is that while the term has become

intertwined with all the discontent for the current dystopia, no actual government or organization out there claims to be enacting "neoliberal" policies; instead, the term has become a rhetorical device used by left-wing academics to critique economic phenomenon they dislike (Barnett, 2005, pp. 9–10; Venugopal, 2015, pp. 179–183).

Perhaps this is why using the term "neoliberalism" to describe the techno-capitalist matrix that a digital comic creator finds themselves in before they even begin to create may be an apt choice for this thesis. The term itself carries a lot of baggage, some of it negative, but is also generally recognized both within and without academia to affect a particular ideological position and mindset. This aligns the activist outlook of this thesis— as well as my own personal disposition as a practicing comic book writer-artist—fairly well. Nonetheless, a particular strain of approach still needs to be identified for the purposes of this thesis.

While neoliberalism has many contradictory definitions, let us first approach the subject by broadly dividing it into two schools of thought with several loose categories. The two main ones can firstly be described as the "Foucauldian governmentality" approach, and the "resurgent class power" approach—which views neoliberalism as capitalist authoritarianism and global neo-colonialism (Hilgers, 2010, pp. 355–358; Jessop, 2013, pp. 71–72; Kipnis, 2007, pp. 384–385; Robles & Franco, 2022, pp. 101–102; Venugopal, 2015, pp. 174–175). The former is where the state looks to expand market rationality to all social dimensions to produce responsible and governable yet alienated subjects, while the latter points to a political project where there is a deliberate, global reinforcement of capitalist class power with the intent to subjugate and reverse the gains of labour.

As one might expect, these two positions are not without their inner contradictions, and many theorists, apart from belonging to one group or some other one, can also merge elements of both and others. For the most productive approach, this thesis chooses mostly focus on neoliberalism as it has been theorized by Marxist academic David Harvey. This is largely because his work is well-known, mainstream, and relatively uncontroversial in in its approach of neoliberalism as restoration of class power, though Harvey has also been criticized for referencing and rebutting a body of knowledge called "neoliberal theory" where evidence for such contemporary scholarship is scant

(Venugopal, 2015, p. 181). I will, however, also make nods to any other strains of neoliberalism where applicable. Due to the transnational nature of digital comics platforms, it will also reference the core-periphery relationships that US imperialism has established across the world, though it should be stressed that the mutable nature of neoliberalism means that this approach is just one amongst many.

Neoliberalism is also indivisible from capitalism, though it is necessary to note that the two are *not* one and the same—even as the two share many overlapping characteristics, as they also do with other wide-ranging issues such as globalism, imperialism, and financialisation. While these concepts are all inextricably interlinked, for the purposes of clarity and the containment of what might otherwise become an impossibly vast and unwieldy discussion, I shall be mostly addressing the characteristics of neoliberalism and its expression through various forms of capitalism, particularly through the internet. I will also be mentioning globalism, imperialism, and financialisation where applicable.

That said, it is probably safe to argue at this point that both neoliberalism and capitalism go beyond mere economic systems, and instead are societal systems that exploits and reorganises social, political and economic life in all its entirety (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009b; Fraser, 2014; Harvey, 2005). How it achieves this is manifold and complex. The influence of neoliberalism today may be far-reaching, but it is by no means applied equally or evenly across the globe, and it has many variants (Hall, 2011, p. 708; Harvey, 2005, p. 9). Nor does it function devoid of pressures both external and internal, such as US military intervention, and/or the socio-political-historical realities of whatever place it penetrates. That means its application can vary widely from country to country, but that it is also subject to the usual imbalances of core-periphery relationships that defines Empire, as well as the whims of multinational corporations and financialised global capital that often work glove in hand with state power (Harvey, 2005, p. 34). The end result is that while a sizeable portion of the global south's neoliberal turn can certainly be attributed to US imperialism, not all of it can be. For example, while Chile in 1973 may have been the first "successful" US neoliberal project, the neoliberal turn in China in 1978, UK in the 1980s and 90s, and Sweden in the 1990s all occurred without the typical American imperialistic manoeuvres (Harvey, 2005, p. 9).

Likewise, the role of government in the management of social conflict arising from the wealth gap cannot be overlooked (Streeck, 2011, p. 17). As Streeck (2011, p. 6-7) believes, the goal of democratic capitalism is the challenge of resource allocation in society, which demands government cater to two conflicting impulses—the need to allow free markets to achieve equilibrium, and the need of the masses for equity and wealth redistribution. Both are contradictory rather than compatible, which eventually led to financial deregulation and the taking on of private debt by the masses. This was seen as way to foster harmonious relations between the elite and working classes, and for the state to ensure that the principles of the free market is kept alive since that is seen as the primary engine of economic growth and wealth (Worth, 2014, p. 159,161). However, after the global financial crisis of 2008 and the increasingly interconnected nature of the world, governments can no longer rely on closed national communities to alleviate economic problems. Instead, globalized financial markets and wealthy oligarchs end up forcing governments to impose sacrifices on their populace, which further strips democratic power away from the masses (Streeck, 2011, p. 26). This approach supports the governmentality view of neoliberalism as a morally neutral form of orderly governance that aims to produces a liberal, responsible, and entrepreneurial citizenry with properly functioning markets.

In places where governments have been willing participants, differing parts of the world have also implemented neoliberalism with variations. Examples include the European social market model versus the Anglo-American market forces model, even as the UK and the US models themselves show significant differences between them (Hall, 2011, p. 708). In contrast, the economies of Asia rely heavily on state involvement (which on a superficial level appear to be contradictory to neoliberalism's tenet of small government and deregulated markets), while the collapse of the former Soviet Union caused a looting of public assets by a kleptomaniac oligarchic class. Neoliberalism is, therefore, "not one thing. It combines with other models, modifying them. It borrows, evolves and diversifies. It is constantly 'in process" (Hall, 2011, p. 708). For this reason, my application of neoliberal theory to the digital comics industry is but one strain of possible approaches, and I make no argument that it should be the only or the dominant one.

Lastly, while the Global Financial Crisis has thrown the legitimacy of neoliberalism as a governing and socio-economic system in the eyes of the general public since 2008, this was not always the case. There was a time when neoliberalism was considered a liable pathway to better wealth distribution and prosperity in the long run, as some of its most famous intellectual supporters such as Friedrick Hayek and Milton Friedman would argue (Cottier, 2023, p. 512). Neoliberalism as a term may have garnered negative connotations in left-wing academic circles from the social sciences, but its original definition in economics remain separate and valid. Billed as a kind of free market fundamentalism or conservative economics, its belief that markets are the best distributor of wealth and that government intervention only limited this process (Cottier, 2023, pp. 512–513), it was nonetheless quite alluring to many. To understand how and why this is, it is crucial to look at the history and origins of neoliberalism, and its relationship to its precursor and oft-cited collaborator capitalism.

History of Neoliberalism

To begin our understanding of neoliberalism, we must first look to the origins of neoliberalism in its earliest recognisable form. This can be traced to an offshoot of liberalism in the 18th Century that focused on the limits of governmental power, and that government's subsequent yet paradoxical management of "permissible" freedom under their rule (Andrew Baerg, 2009, p. 116). Commonly regarded as rooted in principles of "classic" liberal economic and political theory, "critical to their development were the enclosures of common land, the agrarian revolution, the expansion of markets (in land, labour, agriculture and commodities) and the rise of the first commercial-consumer society in the 18th Century" (Hall, 2011, p. 708).

In reality, much of this was accompanied by European colonialism. As the European powers engaged in a race to carve up the globe, we saw the subsequent invasion and conquest of foreign lands. There was also the establishment of slave plantation economies, and the extraction and appropriation of the periphery's natural resources for the enrichment of the Empire's core. This continual war and subjugation would lead to a massive expansion of global trade, and the accompanying bureaucratic structures it

required for management would also lead to the creation of joint-stock companies. Typically evolving from family businesses, the concept of the "multinational corporation" is foundational to the various forms of capitalism–and by extension neoliberalism–that we have today (Hall, 2011, p. 710). These companies would go on to serve as the engines of domestic consumption and imperial growth, and their charters—sanctified by state power—granted them the same rights as that of "free men". In practice, this allows them the right to turn a profit, accumulate wealth, and to buy or dispose of property in accordance to (and often only to) their own private interests.

The ensuing decades of 1880s to the 1920s brought enormous socio-economic changes, with the emergence of a society based on mass consumerism (Hall, 2011, p. 711). This brought about an expansion in the media and advertising spheres, as well as the rise of Fordist industrial production, labour unions, and political parties—enacting, for a time, the Marxist tug of war for control between the bourgeois capitalists and the proletariats. The subsequent devastation of two World Wars and the looming threat of communism then brought renewed vigour to the capitalist order, as the US ruling class sought to avoid a repeat of the catastrophic economic conditions that led to the Great Depression and the slump of the 1930s (Harvey, 2005, p. 9). This meant a commitment to domestic peace and tranquillity, to be achieved through a compromise between labour and capital that led to the establishment of the welfare state through Keynesian economic policies. With a strong regulatory environment and socio-political constraints that kept the most zealous impulses of entrepreneurial and corporate activities under watch, working class institutions such as labour unions and left-wing political parties were able to flourish relatively unmolested (Harvey, 2005, pp. 11–12; Streeck, 2011, p. 11).

On the international front, a new world order was constructed on the Bretton Woods system, which used the US dollar as the global reserve currency (Harvey, 2005, p. 10). It allowed for free trade in goods through a fixed rate of exchange pegged to the price of gold, which acted as a restabilising force that was backed by US military power; only the Soviet Union and its accompanying bloc of Communist countries stayed outside the reach of the system. This would ensure stability for a decade or so, until a series of crisis and shocks in the 1960s and 1970s began to shake the system. With plunging tax revenues and ballooning social expenditures across the board, the result was widespread

unemployment, inflation, and social turmoil. The problem of capital accumulation and the debasement of the US dollar through capital flows and military adventurism in South-East Asia would also lead to the abandonment of the gold standard in 1971, allowing the US dollar to become a true free-floating fiat currency. Clearly, the Keynesian policies that led to decades of peace in the post-WWII order was no longer working, and states now had to forge new alternatives to overcome this crisis.

This opened the opportunity for a group of economists known as the "Chicago Boys", who were heavily influenced by the neoliberal theories of Milton Friedman, to test their ideas (Hall, 2011, p. 708; Harvey, 2005, p. 8). Hayek and Friedman's theories on neoliberalism, though not identical, arrive more or less at a similar conclusion—that markets are inherently dynamic and always in a process of reformation, so to allow society's ills to be corrected, we should allow actors in a free market to reach a state of (close to) equilibrium (Bruff, 2019, p. 367). Ensuring that the government does not intervene and distort the market is crucial, as is the transformation of non-marketised aspects of society like trade unions and welfare programs to allow resources to be properly distributed. Unlike other intellectuals of the WWII era such as Daniel Guérin, who believed that wayward corporations caused totalitarianism, Hayek believed that it was collectivism (Fleming, 2020, p. 117), which lends some credence to that era's political climate and the fear of Soviet Communism. He and others like him genuinely believed that political backsliding can be caused by central planning (including Keynesian policies), and that a society built entirely around free market voluntary competition is the best route to prosperity.

The country of Chile, already a victim of the US Cold War program to counteract the socialist tendencies of its democratically-elected president Salvador Allende, became the experimental cauldron for these economists, who operated under the auspices of American-backed dictator Augusto Pinochet. As they restructured Chile's economy to reverse the nationalisation of key public assets, they also privatized and deregulated resource extraction. They also guaranteed the right for foreign companies to repatriate profits from the country, and all and any dissent from indigenous and left-wing groups to this process saw them brutally crushed by dictator Pinochet. This marriage of deregulation, free marketization, expropriation of resources from the periphery to the

centre, and enshrinement of the rights of private ownership—all backed by the underlying threat of state-sanctioned violence—would become one of the lynchpins of neoliberal capitalism in its many current forms.

The temporary economic boost this gave to the Chilean economy was over in less than a decade. However, this experiment was deemed "successful" enough for it to be enacted domestically in the US under Ronald Reagan, and in the UK under Margaret Thatcher, in the 1980s (Harvey, 2005, p. 9). In the US, this also culminated in extensive deregulation of the finance sector by President Bill Clinton in the 1990s, unleashing a wave of financial "innovations" that harnessed the growing technological connectivity of the world to create all kinds of new financial markets based on securitization, securities, and futures trading (Harvey, 2005, p. 33; Streeck, 2011, p. 17). In short, capital was now fully transnational and capable of crossing deregulated borders at the speed of light, a landscape which enabled financial centres to shape the lives of people halfway across the globe. And cross it did, as multinationals quickly took advantage of much lower labour costs in developing countries to boost profits and stock prices.

In America, this also signalled a shift away from an industrial economy to a service-based one, and the result was rising income inequality, union-busting, and cuts to social spending. Traditional Keynesian was now in full retreat, and the "reduction in aggregate demand caused by fiscal consolidation, were counterbalanced by unprecedented new opportunities for citizens and firms to indebt themselves" (Streeck, 2011, p. 17). In short, the ordinary citizen is now encouraged to become a debt-laden entrepreneurial unit swimming in a sea of liberalised debt markets, resulting in the replacement of public debt with private debt. From the perspective of those who see neoliberalism as "Authoritarian Capital", this is the watershed moment in the post-war project of class power restoration, a deeply political project that seeks to roll back all New Deal compromises (Venugopal, 2015, p. 174). Meanwhile, for those who take a more economic approach to neoliberalism, the free market is seen as a driver of growth and wealth, and a natural force with rational actors that will eventually reach equilibrium if only government will stop meddling (Streeck, 2011, pp. 6–7; Venugopal, 2015, p. 172). By that logic, this loss of bargaining power by the worker is seen not a setback, but as a liberation of agentic individuals who are now free to make whatever choices they desire in a meritocratic free

market (Venugopal, 2015, p. 172). This is no different for the creative class, which has always lived under unstable labour agreements—now, under this new system, they are recharacterized from creative "labourers" to creative "entrepreneurs".

Neoliberalism, Comics, and Digital Comics

For decades, I have been a practicing comic book writer-artist who has worked both in the commercial publishing world and in self-publishing. For that reason, I am perhaps in a relatively unique position to examine the labour practices that exist in both realms, and to analyse the way that wider economic and socio-cultural forces can subtly shape the content and format of art. This is because that while the theory and cultural engagement of comics has been amply discussed in comics studies, the role of how an overarching, globalised neoliberal economic structure affects local comics production is less considered. Likewise, the experiences of the individual comics labourer in a trans-nationalised culture market are also a perspective that has been less engaged in academia. This is unlike video game studies, which has dealt with the globalised nature of the international video game production value chain, and how it affects the creative labourer at various socio-cultural, ethnic, and political intersections (Andrew Baerg, 2009; Bulut, 2015; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009b; Fung, 2016). Anglophone comics studies, unfortunately, has rarely touch upon this subject.

All this is not to say that comics studies have not addressed neoliberalism, or examined comics from a perspective outside the dominant sphere of Anglophone culture. In comics studies (and its academic adjacent film studies), there have been scholars that used discourse analysis to address neoliberalism or capitalism through the lens of a particular work of comics. Since comics—in particular American superhero comics—has had such a strong influence on cinema since the early 2000s, there has been no lack of academic discussion about the various ways adapted comic works such as "Batman", "Y: The Last Man", "The Walking Dead", "Ghost World", or "Watchmen" either reinforce or attempt to undermine the current neoliberal agenda (Cummings, 2015; Giroux, 2010; Huddleston, 2016; Manis, 2018; Sugg, 2015). While these works are mostly American-centric (or Euro-centric), there are also scholars from less culturally-hegemonic parts of

the world such as Latin America (Espinoza, 2017), Senegal (Seck, 2018), and South Korea (Yi, 2020) who have analysed local comic artists and their output. These academics often frame these comics within the context of their countrymen's struggle against the neoliberal reforms imposed upon them by imperialistic forces. They also catalogue the activist role these works play in highlighting the devastating effects these policies have had on the lives of the working poor.

This work has been very helpful in connecting the work of localized comic artists and neoliberalism. To further the discussion, I would like to use a more globalized perspective of digital comics production, and to focus more on the effect that neoliberalism has had upon the author during the pre-production phase, rather than the audience reception of said strip or the author's output. By moving further up the production processes and examining the socio-economic-cultural processes that an author is already enmeshed in *before* they began producing their work, I hope to gain additional insight into the crucial part of the lived experiences of a comic book artist living in a neoliberal world.

Through that, I also hope to examine the working conditions of individual comic artists in a transnational and precarious labour market, or the limited bargaining ability that a solo creator can have with the publisher middlemen that will bring their work to a paying audience. This latter point is important, since this process exists largely outside the view of academia and so is less addressed, since academics are usually not practitioners of the medium or a party to the commercial forces that dominate the comics marketplace. However, due to the neoliberal drive to compartmentalise every aspect of the human existence into a quantifiable form, this process does not exist outside of the neoliberal paradigm. Even as that process may mostly be about logistical and marketing concerns such as funding, distribution, and target audience (little of what most people would term "creative"), it still has influence on the artistic output that comes after.

The goal of this is to expand academic insight into neoliberalism and comics production, since neoliberalism is by its nature global. It involves the unfettered movement of capital, people and ideas between porous borders. By focusing on the localised effects of neoliberal policies on artistic production and consumption rather than

a more holistic approach, certain insights are missing. If a deeper understanding were to be attained, one must seek the root of the issue, which will require a grasp of neoliberalism's global reach and an analysis of the associated core-periphery tensions in various overlapping comic markets. This is necessary—whether these tensions be regional, cultural or political; production, ownership and/or labour-based such as institutional versus independently-produced; or format-based such as print versus digital. In other words, a top-down, analytical perspective is required.

This is especially true when one considers the nature of digital comics, which not unlike neoliberalism, is *truly* global by definition. Apart from its democratic approach to publishing, the internet has also revolutionised the comics creation by enabling "just-in-time delivery of almost every aspect of the production process, streamlining how comics are made in innumerable ways" (Kleefeld, 2020, p. 1). This has had an accelerating effect on the creative content and format of digital comics. This process of increased globalisation has caused the trans-nationalisation of symbolic markets, which in turn has dislocated national cultures from their points of origin. This has led to a confluence of sorts, which is a "fusing of various cultural influences, genres, digital and non-digital formats, new ways of combining images and text, traditional and new themes, intertextual and hypertextual strategies" (Espinoza, 2017, p. 6). This "cultural hybridity" has thus become a hallmark of contemporary graphic narratives production, which is largely de-territorialised and unmoored from local influences, while absorbing influences from other cultural spheres (Espinoza, 2017, p. 6). For that reason, digital comics need be analysed with a global spectrum of convergence and digital participatory culture in mind.

Then there is the fact that the creative class in general, which comic artists are a part of, struggle harder than most with the transition from local to globalized labour transitions. Long associated with precarious work, the creative class has always had work that is less localized and Fordist production-line based, as well as "traditionally [having] involved insecure employment practices" (Neilson & Coté, 2014, p. 3). This means that while creatives are a large enough class to have always existed, its freelance nature means that it can often be left out of traditional discussions regarding Marx's proletariat (or that of its more updated terminology).

Obviously, the unstable nature of creative work has an effect on the type of creative work produced by comic book artists, as does other dilemmas that all creatives encounter—such as issues of funding, distribution, and finding a target audience. Since comic book art is often drawn by a single person or a small group working in specialised positions, it is often an extremely labour-intensive process which has yet to be alleviated by modern technology. Many comic artists may have exchanged pen and paper for a laptop and drawing tablet, but the use of pre-rendered backgrounds or 3D modelling software has not significantly reduced the creative labour to produce the polished, sophisticated hand-drawn look that modern comic consumers demand. Due to the isolated and gruelling nature of comics production and the fact that most comic artists are freelancers even when working within an institutionalised framework, this labour remains largely invisible (or is irrelevant) to consumers. The financial, emotional, and health costs of creating comics are therefore mostly borne by the creative team. This makes the ability for a comics creator to find a proper distribution channel to secure readers and therefore monetary return extremely important.

Given the breadth and range of distribution channels in our digital age, and the popularity of comics with the general public, one may think that comic book creators have an array of choices. That would be misleading—just as traditional print publishers operated a gate-keepers in the pre-internet days by only choosing to publish and distribute stories that conformed to the institution's values and/or the tastes of their customers, the so-called democratisation of the internet has resulted in a handful of tech companies dominating the online cultural landscape. This is a problem that is as true for independent webcomic creators as it is for South Korean webtoon artists, and anything else in-between. Even if you're a creator able to sustain yourself from your online creative work, you are still at the mercy of transnational corporations, organisations, and governments who police the underlying infrastructure of the internet.

While these "platforms" do not serve the exact same role as those of legacy publishers, they "provide storage, navigation and delivery of the digital content of others, [and] are working to establish a long-term position in a fluctuating economic and cultural terrain" (Gillespie, 2010, p. 348). This ultimately translates to power-dynamics with the content creators that they host that is not unlike that of traditional publishers, despite

the democratising rhetoric of the digital age. Once again, creators have to conform to the values, tastes, and formats of these platforms so they can have access to audiences, which due to the increasingly crowded nature of the internet, only a well-funded platform will have the capital and marketing know-how to provide.

However, even when one is working outside of online platforms that specialise in digital comics, one may still be subject to the needs of institutions that are only tangentially-related to comics. For an example, one can look to the case study for this project, Toby Morris' four-page "On A Plate" digital comic. Previously, I questioned Morris' underlying approach to creating a digital comic, but given the context under which this work was produced, the length and format of his story was probably not decided by him. "On A Plate" (2015) was originally commissioned by Radio New Zealand, a government-funded website, which would have provided adequate funding for the production of the comic, but which would also have required the final product to conform to a format that they could easily fit and distribute on their website. This means that the length or the choice to use limited animation on the comic might not have been decided by Morris—they may have been predetermined by the commissioning institution, not to mention the ownership of the comic after it has been published is unclear. There is also the issue that a comic that has an anti-capitalist slant is unlikely to appear in a capitalist newspaper, thus limiting the original distribution channels that Morris could have pitched to with his creative work, presuming that the idea for the original strip originated with him. On a possibly related note, the digital comic also adheres to the skeuomorphic image of the book, which may either hint of a conservative creative approach by Morris, or reflect a financial consideration he made, in that digital comics are more liable to get a printed edition should they be easy to reproduce on paper. Since the market for digital comics is still smaller compared to that of print comics in the West, one cannot ignore the possibility that it was a choice informed by materialist concerns that became primary to creative intent.

All these aforementioned considerations are part of the unspoken and hidden processes that a creator must consider before they produce a comic in a neoliberal world, due to the amount of labour involved versus the dubious financial returns. It is also less discussed in comic studies, for the same reasons that the effects of neoliberalism on our

lives and our decisions are often obscured by the abstract nature of its machinations. To identify and understand these subtle influences on the creative output of artists, one must first breakdown and understand how neoliberalism functions on a global scale. One must also examine the various comics markets across the world and their core-periphery relationships to each other, and how a freelancer must navigate these tensions in the creative decisions they make.

For that reason, it is not implausible to claim that comic artists working in a neoliberal world exists in a Foucauldian panopticon, a matrix of self-regulation that encourages self-policing and the conformity of their work to fit the needs of pre-existing institutions. This, of course, has always been the case throughout history, as artists try to balance personal artistic expression against the forces of market demands, though what has changed is the nature of the commercial intent as the feudal patronage system gives way to the full-throated entrepreneurial free agents of neoliberalism. And thus, the "precariat"—a type of individual defined by their precarious existence as a member of the nomadic working poor—was born.

The Precariat: The Locus of Capitalism & Neoliberalism

The conception of the "precariat"—as typified by Guy Standing in 2011—was notable in the academic field of neoliberalism, though the origins of term can be traced decades back to anti-globalist media (Foti, 2017, p. 9,15; Munck, 2013, p. 748). Typically defined as young, female, immigrant, and typically from multicultural urban environments (Foti, 2017, p. 21), the term "precariat" taps into the "increasing discontent and dissatisfaction among a range of groups and stokes in people–particularly educated younger people in Western countries" (Johnson, 2013, p. 385). Since its academic inception, it has become a framework for several differing interpretations of the concept, and can be analysed through the lens of gender (Pecourt & Obiol, 2022), environmentalism (Neimark et al., 2020), creative (Peuter, 2014) and academic precarity (Atkins et al., 2018; Burton & Bowman, 2022), and so on. However, there are also dissenting opinions on its overly Eurocentric perspective (Munck, 2013), on whether this type of individual even exists as a "class" equivalent to Marx's proletariat (Wright, 2016,

p. 123), and how it is really a hegemonic form of employment that is a response by the ruling classes to the crisis of Fordism (Bulut, 2015, p. 199).

However, the "precariat" can offer a useful evolution of Marxist terminology, as a helpful point of comparison when discussing the oft-neglected labour of freelance comic creators. Traditional Marxist discourse is typically focused on class tensions between the land-owning, capitalist bourgeois class versus the proletariat—defined as the workers who sell their labour in fixed employment contracts. However, those working in the creative arts don't fit easily into this framework. As a group, artisans have always lived precarious lives throughout the ages (Neilson & Coté, 2014, pp. 3–4)—whether they are dependent on the graces of a feudal patron, or on the feast-or-famine cycle of the modern marketplace's appetite for commercial art. For that reason, since Standing's 2011 work defines the precariat by their tenuous relationship to labour markets, devoid of the stable, fixed-hour jobs enjoyed by wage and salaried workers, I considered it a more suitable environment for discussing the plight faced by modern creative workers.

Because most creative workers are freelancers, they share certain employment conditions (or lack thereof) with the precariat. Both groups are without access to any of the social status or monetary benefits usually granted for loyalty and subordination within a discernible workplace hierarchy—which causes them to have minimal trust relationships with the state, capital, and employers (Standing, 2011, p. 9).

Despite this, the term "precariat" is also inadequate in describing the creative class, since unlike the mundane work of logistical or service workers, work that carries a cultural or artistic dimension contains a sense of glamour with it that deems it socially desirable. It is this desirability, plus the individualism inherit to artistic production, that differentiates these two groups. However, despite the differences in societal perception, the external conditions of the market react to these two groups in much the same way. As a group, both exist within a system that emphasises efficiency and market competitiveness as a principle of life, and which urges corporations to pursue maximum labour flexibility to ensure that labour costs stay low. For that reason, if the argument is that Amazon warehouse work should be low-paid because it is low-skilled and easily replaceable, then the argument that creative workers should be low-paid is that it is a "dream job" which should be done for love, and not money.

Regardless of whether you're a precariat or a creative worker, the original argument for such informal labour arrangements was that worker flexibility will ensure that jobs stay in one area rather than migrate along with capital to places with lower costs of labour. However, the rise of technology that allows the spatial restructuring of work on a global scale has altered that completely (Kalleberg, 2009, p. 5). This had a profound effect on creative workers, since digital creative work, more so than logistical or service-related work, can be done remotely and transmitted over the internet. Freed from temporal and spatial constraints, transnational interconnectedness has allowed both "labour" *and* "labour processes" to become decentralised and globally dispersed. If the de-industrialisation of the US by outsourcing production to cheaper countries such as China has resulted in a permanent underclass of struggling former blue-collar workers in developed nations, the ever-expanding technological advancements we are still going through means that even white-collar jobs are now being threatened (Kalleberg, 2009, p. 8). As this process continues to work itself up the workplace ladder, the greater the stratification of rich and poor gets—resulting in a widening and increasingly unbridgeable gap.

The question then becomes: what is the ultimate drive behind the forces of neoliberalism and capitalism that pushes these immense socio-economic changes? Some have argued that the increasing social inequality is the whole point of the neoliberal project, since its goal is a restoration of class power along the lines of a supranational rather than sovereign class of wealthy capitalists (Harvey, 2005, p. 16). Others have argued that it is an economic project that aims to harmonise the relations between the elite and working classes by allowing the ability of the free market to eventually create an equilibrium where all rational actors will benefit (Streeck, 2011, pp. 6–7). Meanwhile, a more governmentality approach would see neoliberalism as a neutral force, whose ultimate goal is using government intervention as a way to produce responsible, governable (if alienated) citizens (Kipnis, 2007, p. 385).

If one is to observe the growth in share of income by the 1%, this project has been exceedingly successful, not just in wealth accumulation, but also in preventing any sort of organised and/or consistent class-based resistance to this process. Unlike Marx's proletariat, who found solidarity and a common cause in banding together to leverage

their power as a collective, the precariat seems to lack the same instincts and/or capabilities. As Standing argued on p3 of his book, the precariat is still a class in embryonic stage—it currently lacks an ideology coherent enough for true class consciousness to crystallise. If so, why is that the case?

The key to this question is manifold. One explanation is the spatially and temporally-displaced nature of precarious work—unlike the Fordist proletariat, the precariat simply lacks a single production site that can be the focus of organized resistance (Peuter, 2014, p. 267). Another is to understand neoliberalism's ability to "[institutionally separate] 'economy' from 'polity', a separation which expels matters defined as 'economic' from the political agenda of territorial states" (Fraser, 2014, p. 67). This speaks of the tendency of neoliberal economists to frame the so-called "free market" not as a construct of humans that can be politically controlled for the benefit of societal good, but some kind of wild, untameable force of nature that must be allowed to roam free in the name of "efficiency". This dogmatic belief has a tendency to disempower the individual from using the tools of democracy to make economic choices, as the ideology prevents politicians from not only tackling but from even *speaking* about pushing back against neoliberal policies in any meaningful way. The precariat is then alienated from the political process, causing them to look outside institutional structures to bring about agents of change. Examining this discourse, how it developed, and what its goal are may help shed some light on the links and interplay between capitalism and neoliberalism, and where the precariat fits into both these systems.

The theory of neoliberalism can trace its origins to a small and passionate group of economists, historians and philosophers who found inspiration in work of Austrian political philosopher Friedrich von Hayek (Harvey, 2005, p. 20). They called themselves the Mont Pelerin Society, and their beliefs were characterised by a mix of traditional liberalism, which adheres to the fundamental ideal of personal freedom, and the free market principles of neo-classical economics that emerged in the latter half of the 19th Century. It was a move away from the Adam Smith era of classical economics, though they kept Smith's idea that the "hidden hand" of the market was the best way to mobilise the human instinct for wealth and profit. This meant that as a rule, they were deeply opposed to any form of Keynesian state intervention, as they argue that state decisions

will always be hopelessly swayed by the influence of interest groups (unions, environmentalists, trade lobbies, etc), and will always be a step behind the pure signals that a liberated market can send.

However, there remain many points of tension within this framework of neoliberal theory. As others have commented, "the scientific rigour of its neoclassical economics does not sit easily with its political commitment to ideals of individual freedom, nor does its supposed distrust of all state power fit with the need for a strong and necessary coercive state that will defend the rights of private property, individual liberties, and entrepreneurial freedoms" (Harvey, 2005, p. 21). However, these contradictions may be what make neoliberalism thought so powerful, as "ideology works best by suturing together contradictory lines of argument and emotional investments, finding what Lachau called 'systems of equivalence' between them" (Hall, 2011, p. 713). In other words, contradictory and inherently unstable packages of ideological content work *precisely* because different parts of the package appeal to different groups of people. Through this patchwork of emotional identification, a precariat forges their own identity, piece by piece, depending on their mood at any moment in time.

An example of this dynamic at work would be two of the most popular discursive figures of neoliberal discourse, the hardworking "taxpayer" who resents have their taxes fund the lifestyle of the lazy "welfare scrounger" (Hall, 2011, p. 715). That an individual is capable of being both a hardworking taxpayer *and* a user of public services is clearly possible, but rarely a topic of public discourse. Instead, framing the experiences of individuals living in a neoliberal society as a series of fragmented but opposing points of identification suits the unmoored existence of the precariat quite well—a "hero" and/or hardworking "taxpayer" one day, they are a "victim" and/or a "welfare scrounger" the next (though not both at the same time). This litany of one-dimensional narrative roles, presented like an array of identities to choose from, actually references another popular neoliberal discursive figure—the "consumer". As a figure who is "free" to exercise limited choice in the market place, the consumer is the embodiment of a fully marketized and therefore ideal neoliberal society—to the extent where even something as socially contingent and historically constituted as personal identity can also be subsumed under consumer behavioural patterns. This commodification of identity is further fragmented

by the fact that the precariat's existence lacks stability and predictability—thus preventing them from forming a sense of kinship with others undergoing the same hardship.

As Standing argued, "the precariat is not a class-for-itself, partly because it is at war with itself" (Standing, 2011, p. 25). In this aspect, one can find further similarities of the creative class to the precariat, with one key difference—while the precariat can still find common cause to rally together, creators and their products are *meant* to be pitted against each other in competition. Since the value of much creative art, at least in some commercialized markets, lies within the perceived originality and therefore personal nature of the work, artists differentiate themselves from their rivals through their individuality. This makes it all the more difficult for artists to mobilise themselves as a collective as the basis for their competitiveness lies in being distinct from each other.

Labour Division Along Gender and Racial Lines

Apart from the precariat himself being the embodiment of neoliberal free market ideals, the precariat also presents a problem for the more traditional Marxist interpretation of capitalism. As previously mentioned, neither the precariat or the creative worker fits easily into the Marxist model of class struggle—with the divide between capitalists who own private property as means of production, and workers who sell their labour in a free market they are compelled to participate in. One of the reasons for this is that while Marx has much to offer in terms of the general conception of capitalism, it "fails to reckon systematically with gender, ecology and political power as structuring principles and axes of inequality in capitalist societies—let alone as stakes and premises of social struggle" (Fraser, 2014, p. 56). Some of this has got to do with the enormous changes society has undergone since Marx's time, namely that of anti-colonialism, the feminist movement, and the civil rights movement. Since the second creative half of this thesis also addresses intersectionality in a neoliberal and capitalist society, it would be prudent to address how Marx's theories have been expanded by some more recent commentators—by proposing the concept of the "semi-proletariat" (Fraser, 2014, p. 59).

The semi-proletariat is much like the precariat, with a few key differences. According to Nancy Fraser (2014, p57-58), one of Marx's core features of capitalism is that it is a system with a directional goal—the seemingly endless accumulation of capital. According to Marx, "[in capitalist society], capital itself becomes the Subject", as all human needs are made secondary to this as it is assumed that all other needs can be met by possessing adequate capital, resulting in a constant, self-expanding cycle. When exercised in the market, this allows the capitalist to find land and labour to facilitate production, and also to determine how society's surplus can be invested. In a capitalist society, the market is considered the best choice to decide how surplus is allocated, and so surplus is either reinvested or accumulated since the means of production is held in the hands of a few. This means that at some point, a limit will be reached, and for capital to continue its to perpetual expansion, it must rely on expropriation via "non-compensation of a portion of workers' labour time" (Fraser, 2014, p. 61). In other words, as time goes on, a capitalist society has to find more and more methods and justifications for *not* paying workers in cash wages what they *could* otherwise pay for, but choose not to.

One configuration is a society that relies on the "semi-proletarianized households", which is a Fordist-era arrangement that divides labour into male productive labour that is paid in cash wages, and female reproductive labour which consists of unpaid childcare and housework. This gendered partitioning of labour also relies on both marketized and non-marketised form of labour, with non-marketised labour defined as self-provision from gardening or sowing, informal reciprocity in terms of mutual aid between friends and relatives, and state transfers such as welfare benefits, social services and public goods (Fraser, 2014, p. 59). This has been an intrinsic to capitalism from its conception, since after all, wage labour cannot exist without (unpaid) childrearing, housework, schooling, and elderly care which can create new able bodies for labour while replacing existing, worn-out ones. The social emphasis placed on wage-earning in a capitalist society thus places power on those who perform male productive labour, while undervaluing those who perform female reproductive labour, making the gender divide in capitalism deeply embedded and structural.

From the concept of the "semi-proletarianized household", one can see how Fordist capitalism contains a key feature that is distinct from neoliberalism. Whereas neoliberalism aims to commodify and exploit all social life in its entirety (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009b), capitalism was designed to have marketized and non-marketized aspects of it operate in an interdependent (if unstable) manner. However, as we advance further into the 20th Century and technological change and social revolution grew at a faster pace, even these institutionalised gendered aspects of the "semi-proletarianized household" began to break down. No longer was wage labour bound to the male gender—women became increasingly recruited into low-wage service work, while the housewife and her domain of the domestic mutated into the ultimate neoliberal discursive figure of the "consumer". This features as an example of how capitalism and neoliberalism dovetail through the figure of the precariat, in that the expropriative and accumulative nature of capitalism eventually means that even the non-marketized aspects of capitalism is also absorbed. This siphoning of value off the non-compensated part of a worker's time has inadvertently led to a reconfiguration of gender power dynamics, and the breakdown of what was the patriarchal family unit into the agentic individual who is "free" to choose.

Apart from gendered subjugation through absorbing non-marketised forms of labour, there is also capitalism's racial subjugation to consider. Since the earlier stages of capitalism included colonialism—with its territorial conquest, and exploitation of indigenous labour and slave plantation economies at the empire's periphery—capital expansion also requires constructing a hierarchy of sorts that will separate different classes of labour from each other. One common separation is the marker of "race", which conferred a status on certain individuals that prohibited them from meaningful participation in a capitalist society by marking them as "slaves". In this process, capital is accumulated through confiscation, whether of land, animals, tools, mineral deposits— right up to entire human beings, their sexual and reproductive capabilities, their children, and bodily organs (Fraser, 2016, pp. 166–167).

This is one place where both capitalism and neoliberalism show their contradictory impulses—by demanding a small and non-interfering government (since the market must be allowed to dictate), but also requiring a strong state capable of using violence to

enforce social order. In order for distinct classes to be created, whether they be divided on gendered or racial lines (or both), both a legal system and the institutionalised structure of a sovereign state must exist. There has to be a judicial system to declare who is fit to be a member of the capitalist class permitted to own the means of production, and who through the marker of "race" or "gender" lacks the necessary legal status to be anything other than a producer of labour (paid or otherwise). Unfortunately, these rules are often arbitrarily set up, liable to influence from those in the power echelons, and often rewritten to allow the confiscation of assets from whatever subjugated population that has been brought into the system through imperial expansion. Once integrated into the system in a subordinate role, "emancipation" may not necessarily raise the social status of a subjugated population—the historical marker of "race" can cast a long shadow that can impact generations.

This again calls to the figure of the precariat and the discourse of neoliberalism—which argues that the deregulated free market is the ultimate equaliser, and that the agentic entrepreneur's individual merit is the lone deciding factor in their earning capacity. This is untrue, since the accumulative nature of capitalism means that some people are born into circumstances that grants them more, while others are born with markers that historically deign them as worthy of less on the labour market. This can give credence to the argument that capitalism is not an economic system but a "mode of accumulation that is […] a [social] system of [class] domination" (Fraser, 2016, pp. 164–165), which at its heart requires a body politic capable of conferring and enforcing the legal status of "free citizens" on certain groups of people, but also the label of "slaves" on others.

Through the interplay of these two systems, one can argue that if "capitalism" is framed as "the hand", then "neoliberalism" can be framed as "the glove" whose discourse enables the worst excesses of capitalism to be hidden from public view. If there are any high-minded, utopian ideals of perfect efficiency through the free market, it can be said to be primarily a system of legitimisation and justification to maintain the position of economic elites (Harvey, 2005, p. 19). Aside from that, it's important to note that while the aforementioned theories of the "semi-proletariat" refers to largely Fordist production-line labour arrangements, the drive for expropriation via non-compensation

for work still carries over to the production of non-tangible goods and skills whose dimensions are symbolic or social. This same problem exists similarly in the plight of creative workers—particularly comic creators—and possibly even more so with the digitisation of society as the next chapter will explore.

PART 2: THE CREATIVE WORKER IN COMICS AND VIDEO GAMES

The Special Plight of Creative Workers

With this backdrop of neoliberal thought girded by state-sanctioned capitalism, we now turn to the creative class, who emerges in this system as a specific *kind* of precarious worker. Unlike the typical precariat, who may formerly have been the industrial proletariat or the salariat who have had their state and/or enterprise benefits stripped from them and therefore fallen into precarity, many creative labourers have always had insecure employment as a defining feature (Neilson & Coté, 2014, pp. 3–4). This self-reliance, risk-taking adaptability, and flexible work schedule seems adherent to neoliberal ideology, and as such, appear like the model neoliberal subject (Peuter, 2014, p. 264). However, this is not true across the board—some creative workers are employed in full-time work in corporations with all the attendant benefits that position offers, though that tends to be for workers who work on large, collaborative projects like video games. While game workers can also be self-employed and engaged in seasonal, temporary, or freelance work, it tends to be comic creators who fall almost exclusively in this latter category of lone creators.

It is important to note the distinctions between these game workers and comic creators in our upcoming analysis. While these two groups can sometimes be engaged in labour contracts that is superficially similar to that of the salariat (ie. job security in return for subordination), they are often subject to a different mode of neoliberalism to those who do non-creative work. Just as neoliberalism does not express itself equally in a geo-spatial sense, the way the creative class functions in a particular region or industry also differs in terms of production practices, ethno-cultural background, and proximity to core markets for their output. Put simply, game workers and comic creators may do jobs that superficially appear to overlap, but are governed by completely different industry standards and production processes. However, this does not mean that an analysis of neoliberalism in both industries will provide no scholarly overlap. Instead, I believe that due to the more varied approaches that the two academic fields have towards the subject matter, there is great benefit to finding and analysing the common ground

between them. For that reason, I have chosen the most relevant parts of each field to bolster my analysis of how neoliberalism can affect transnational creative workers, particularly from video game studies, which benefits from a longer history of scholarship in neoliberalism. Hopefully, this can help offer insights that comic studies may have less coverage in, and vice versa.

Game workers and comic creators, as previously stated, both share characteristics with the conventional precariat. However, one key way that they differ is in the glamour that working in a cultural industry can confer. Known as "social capital", it is an abstract idea that conceptualizes social relations such as trust, informal networks, values and norms as assets and resources that can be harnessed to improve economic outcomes (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009). Unlike the back-breaking labour of fruit pickers or the monotony of being an Amazon warehouse worker, artists who work in the field of comics or video games carry a certain social cachet which cannot be easily measured in material terms. This means that although the creative worker and the precariat may both belong to the same *class*, they do not possess the same *status*, a gap that persists even amongst different types of creative workers who work in the *same* industry such as in video gaming (Neilson & Coté, 2014, p. 4). This is contradictory to the usual expression of neoliberalism, if neoliberalism is to be understood as "a mode of governance based in the production of subjects whose central preoccupation is insecurity", leading to a "status that offers no sense of career, [and] no sense of secure occupational identity" (Neilson & Coté, 2014, pp. 4, 6). Since creative work is often socially positioned as desirable and exciting, the game worker and comic creator is rarely subject to the same ontological sense of precarity that the non-creative worker is. It may involve the same gruelling hours, emotional labour, unstable work arrangements, and unequal ownership stakes, but the discourse and rhetoric involved are different to other kinds of precarious work.

To understand these differences the scholarship around creative labour in comics and video game studies should first be examined, because while both industries are highly visual mediums that involve many artists, their work arrangements and status can differ greatly depending on a variety of factors. While video game studies already have an existing body of work that addresses creative labour in gaming, this is less developed in English-language comics studies, which is why I'm incorporating highly-relevant parts of

games studies to aid my analysis. This is a situation that this study will hopefully help change, so attempts will be made to draw upon my own experiences and knowledge as a comic book artist and the various work practices I have encountered. This can unfortunately make the observations limited and anecdotal, but hopefully journalistic articles that cover the comics industry can also be used as supplements where applicable.

A second problem is the question of how exactly to define the "creative class". Since the distinction between formal and informal work in creative industries are blurry to begin with, the precarisation of the workforce through neoliberalism has sparked questions of how much the cultural and creative sectors extend into the wider economy (Neilson & Coté, 2014, p. 6). Are doctors and lawyers considered creative workers? What about financial traders, architects, or engineers? If a programmer who works for a video game company is considered a creative worker, what about a programmer who works for a video-sharing internet start-up? Questions like these make it "difficult to draw any firm border around the category of cultural work, and this indeed makes a sectoral definition contested and provisional" (Neilson & Coté, 2014, p. 6).

For the purposes of this project, the analysis will be restricted to creative labourers from two industries—comics and video gaming—since my creative component will be a digital comic that uses game mechanics, and will be created using with a game engine. This fits the scope, although this thesis also acknowledges that the disruption that precarity has presented to work culture in general cannot be tidily analysed through simple comparison between different groups, whether these groups be divided by regional, cultural, industry, or analog versus digital space (Neilson & Coté, 2014, p. 8). There will also be some generalisations made about "typical" working arrangements in both industries, even though the informal nature of work in cultural sectors means that there is no such thing as "typical". Despite this, it can be argued that there are standard industry practices that has long been in existence, and highly-relevant segments of scholarship has been chosen to aid in this analysis.

For video games, the industry is typically dominated by large companies that hire workers either as employees or contractors for a variety of specialised roles, while in comics, nearly all workers are freelancers who contract with a publisher. No matter how popular the creative work the comic book artist is working on, they tend to be self-

employed workers who bear the cost of production themselves, while the publisher acts as a middleman who facilitates the process of getting the product to market. Between these larger institutional producers, there are also any number of independent creators who publish their work through self-funded publishing or the internet, and who are engaged with these institutions and their markets in a core-periphery relationship. Should these independent creators find financial success or cultural cachet, they are often absorbed into larger institutions, or they may grow into an institution themselves to perpetuate the cycle, which makes their existence a necessary and mutually influential part of the industry landscape. Due to the availability of existing scholarship, the preliminary analysis will be from video games studies first, to discuss the role of the creative workers in both industries, and of the rhetoric that surrounds them there.

Cognitive Capitalism and the Concept of "Work as Play"

Examining the cultural labourer in video gaming can be daunting task. After all, the so-called "video games industry" does not just encompass the hit-driven, franchise-producing, international conglomerates that services the 2.341 billion active video gamers around the world (Baltezarevic et al., 2018, p. 72). It also includes the "enormously wide spread market [that offers] video content, products, virtual reality, special events and video game tournaments" (Baltezarevic et al., 2018, p. 72), as well as console and hardware sales, merchandising, spin-offs and adaptations in other entertainment mediums. In 2020, global video games revenue alone was estimated to be around $180 billion (Witkowski, 2021), and as an industry in a capitalist system, video games has "pioneered methods of accumulation based on intellectual property rights, cognitive exploitation, cultural hybridization, transcontinental subcontracted dirty work, and world-marketed commodities" (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009b). It employs millions of people across varying industrial practices, cultural contexts and socio-political circumstances, which in a world of ethnocultural pluralism, finds a huge array of experiences of neoliberal globalisation. The range is so wide, it even challenges the base concept of creativity. After all, an artist labouring under government censorship in China, an innovative Korean game designer honing their entrepreneurial skills, and an

Indonesian game tester working for a Western multinational can hardly be said to be all performing the same "creative" work (Fung, 2016, p. 201).

However, as different as these worker's experiences are, they can all be said to be performing "immaterial labour". This is a form of non-physical labour "that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity (Bulut, 2015, p. 197)", which comic creators also perform. Unlike material objects like a car or the act of extracting minerals from a mine, immaterial labour involves the creation of non-tangible goods and skills whose dimensions are symbolic or social, such as video games or comics. It can involve the manipulation of code on computers, generating an emotional reaction, swaying artistic standards, fashion, or cultural norms, and coordinating communication across networks on a non-managerial level (Bulut, 2015; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009a). It is "less about the production of things and more about the production of subjectivity, or better, about the way the production of subjectivity and things are [deeply intertwined] in contemporary capitalism" (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009a).

Immaterial labour is also by no means limited to paid creative workers, as consumers can also be mobilised to perform it (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009a). Ever since computers became society's main technology of production and capitalism's post-war engine of profit, networked computing systems have increasingly infiltrated all aspects of human life. Although their origin was from military nuclear-age simulations, their eventual formal and informal applications would gradually range from the educational to governance, to the industrial, scientific and financial, to retail and administrative, and everything in between. Whether for war or for leisure, the decentralised nature of networked computing has contributed to a global governance by capital that instead of the top-down dominance of traditional Empire, uses a constellation of interconnected and multilayered agencies that function through "network power" (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009a, pp. 19–20). These agencies can involve but is not limited to nation-states, and can also include transnational corporations like Microsoft and Sony, world economic bodies like the World Trade Organisation and International Monetary Fund, international organisations like the United Nations, and non-governmental organisations like the Red Cross (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009a, pp. 19–20).

According to Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter (2009), Regardless of alignment, these nodes act as the imperium from which governance is exerted, but also as points of surveillance where participants must connect to the network in order to live, work, and play. By that reasoning, interactions at the most macro-level may involve large multinational corporations, but at its most micro-level may involve peer-to-peer social media posts that facilitate everyday communication between networked humans. These social media posts are then gathered as data points, collated into individual profiles, and sold to corporations to engineer better consumers, but the production of these posts by the network users also act as consumer-produced advertising for these social networks—making them immaterial labour. Due to the enmeshed nature of networked computing in our lives, it can become very difficult to argue that immaterial labour is necessarily confined to creative workers and cultural industries in this day and age. After all, the very nature of networked computing is to ensure that that all aspects of life occur within the surveillance of some electronic network—simply because the act of living outside of one can very quickly become unsustainable for an individual.

This highlights "one of the characteristics of intellectual and affective creation—a blurring of the boundaries between work and leisure, [by] creating a continuum of productivity and of exploitability that is beyond measure" (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009a). When the boundaries of work and desire are blurred, work is socially-coded as "fun", and the rhetoric becomes couched in an almost ideological "language of love" (Bulut, 2015, pp. 196, 200). This holds true for both the comics industry and the video games industry—not only is the line between work and play dissolved, but so is the line between production and consumption, and voluntary activity and precarious exploitation (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009a, p. 29). When work and play is defined as intertwined and inseparable, there is no need for any other activity outside of work in an individual's waking hours.

This creates a working environment where creative workers are encouraged to allow their working hours to creep into their leisure hours, as worktime becomes inseparable from playtime. For comic creators especially, low pay rate for pages, unequal ownership of intellectual property, and questionable working conditions when it comes to deadlines become difficult to challenge, as the creator's output is framed as a "labour

of love". When exploitative labour practices occur for game workers, such as the infamous "crunch time"—which in video game companies translate to countless late nights that can go on for months before a game's release—aggrieved employees are told to be grateful for the chance to work in such a glamourous and desirable industry (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009a, p. 59; C. Kim & Lee, 2020, p. 361). Slogans such as "if you do what you love, you'll never work a day in your life" proliferate, with the effect of trivialising the complaints a comic creator or game worker can have against unfair practices or unsavoury work conditions.

Of course, work you love is not just fuelled by your passion—it still contains plenty of the mundanity of work. Likewise, immaterial labour from a creative worker does not just encompass personal expressions of an emotional, social or artistic dimension, but also requires a lot of knowledge and expertise, often honed for years. This knowledge cannot be easily measured or extracted, but in a highly-networked, capitalist society, it is crucial for the owners of production to turn this expertise into a commodity that can be bought, sold, and owned. This is easier said than done—with the advent of the networked computing age, particularly in the 1970s where there was a marked shift from the industrial to the information age, a mutation in capitalism occurred which saw the usual definition of "capital" shift (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009a, p. 36). This shift cannot be simply defined by the onset of constantly networked humans—instead, it is characterised by the means of production shifting from industrial machinery to the cognition of workers. Where once the worth of a factory may have lain in its manufacturing line and its physical machinery, the "machinery" of a company now lay in the cognition of its workers, which unlike machinery, has the power to leave the company and go home at 5pm.

The drive to permanently capture and commodify this "cognitive machinery" is partly what drives the concept of "work as play", and a particular configuration of capitalism some term "cognitive capitalism". Under this system, "workers' minds become the "machine" of production, generating profit for owners who have purchased, with a wage, its thinking power" (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009a, p. 37)—in other words, the "cognitariat". In order to control its workers, capital is then driven to devalue them, by making them interchangeable cogs in a system that aims for full-spectrum dominance

of a worker's waking hours (Neilson & Coté, 2014, p. 3). This is an extension of the desire to control—should a worker love their work to the extent where work is play, then they are driven to stay at work for as long as possible. This benefits capital in several ways; by capturing and converting the play time of workers into unpaid work time, and also by harvesting any cognitive capital that emanates from its living subjects and fixing it a format that can be bought, sold, and accumulated.

For comic creators, since they have always been freelancers and rarely employees, this latter situation is the most common outcome for what they produce, and the primary engine of their exploitation by large corporations. Sometimes termed "dead knowledge", this phrase encompasses expressions of ideas which are repackaged into intellectual property rights, patents, trademarks, copyrights and other instruments of legal ownership (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009a, p. 44). These often become the basis of corporate revenues, one whose immaterial properties mean that its market reach is global, and which operates on the basis of a knowledge-based "rent economy". As expected, the harvesting and ownership of such copyrights from their living creators is often a point of contention, as the relationship between worker and owner (particularly in large multinationals) are often deeply unequal. This is especially problematic for peripheral comic creators striking deals with core publishers and distributors—they are usually expected to surrender all intellectual property rights and creative control, leaving to a situation which some describe as indentured servitude (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009a, p. 43). In their own defence, publishers ascribe these exploitative practices to a hit-driven industry where only a small fraction of games or comics make the majority of the money.

While the concept of the cognitariat may find its strongest expression in the video game industry due to its embedded relationship with networked computing (and its tendency to have less freelancers), it would be incorrect to ascribe the practices of cognitive capitalism as something indivisible from networked computers or the information age. Nor is it necessary for a publisher to purchase the cognitive labour of a particular creator through a work arrangement as formal as that of a wage or a salary—it can be done with the creators purely as freelancers, and through the capture of distribution channels and "dead knowledge" alone—as it is with comic creators. There is

also the issue of A.I., which with its burgeoning onset into the labour market, could soon bring about immense change to labour relations and the concept of the cognitariat. A change may yet again occur where the means of production now shift away from human cognition and back to machinery—albeit less industrial machinery than software processes. Once again, the humans are cogs in a system, but instead of nodes linked by a network, they now become sources of data for nodes within A.I. networks, or artisans that work on the periphery of what A.I. produces such as by fixing the mistakes an A.I. network may create.

Neoliberalism in the Medium of Video Games and Comics

One reason why creative labour in video games studied is well-documented compared to comics studies is because some in game studies consider video games an inherently neoliberal medium. This is because video game players engage with games as agentic individuals who are constantly presented with a configuration of choices, which act as a simulation of the neoliberal reality they live in (Andrew Baerg, 2009, p. 119). This has the effect of turning leisure time into something resembling "training" for a neoliberal world, except for a crucial difference—unlike the actual world, the virtual worlds in gaming are often presented as a level playing field that offers a meritocratic fair fight that depends entirely on the player's skill level (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009a, p. 28).

Unfortunately, this kind of academic interrogation for the medium of comics is uncommon in comics studies, which puts forward the necessity of this project to do so. This is required due to the creative component of this doctoral study, since it intends to create a digital comic strip by using a video game engine to produce a hybrid. For that reason, the inherent neoliberalism in digital comics needs to be addressed. A secondary reason is also because this project intends to use part of its creative half to question and explain neoliberalism to the lay person, while also examining the context by which digital comics production occurs by releasing its source code under "Creative Commons" licensing. It would therefore be remiss to not examine any neoliberal underpinnings that the medium possesses. Since video games are a medium that can be academically argued

to be inherently neoliberal, using the characteristics of a video game to challenge neoliberalism is contradictory and problematic unless the video game can consciously subvert neoliberal ideas, which my creative project also aims to do. Comics, on the other hand, has had very little scholarship that addresses the intersection of neoliberalism and creative labour, or even markets and distribution. As a result, I am forced to use gaming studies and my own lived experiences and outside knowledge as a practicing comic book artist to draw conclusions.

Since comics is a linear narrative using visual communication to bring about open-ended interpretation by the reader, comics as a medium doesn't contain the same neoliberal impulses compared to the agentic power fantasies of video games where interactivity implies infinite freedom. However, the distribution channels and the publishers that comics uses exist within a neoliberal system, which is an important note to make since distribution channels and a creator's capacity to reach audiences can impact artistic intent and format—since they form the context under which a comic is produced. While a creator can create work with little regard to commercial appeal, no creator works in a vacuum, and it needs to be acknowledged that all creators are going to be subtly influenced by outside forces even if it occurs on an unconscious level. Therefore, to regard distribution channels and the creative labour and intent that goes into creating a comic strip as separate—rather than intertwined and mutually-influential—would be inaccurate. For that reason, the next part of the thesis will examine the commercial context of digital comics production, and the aspects of it that comics studies fail to adequately capture and analyse.

PART 3: DIGITAL COMICS

An Introduction to Comics Studies

Comic studies is a relatively new area of study in Anglophone academia, which since the early 2000s, has garnered the attention of academics due to the rise in popularity of superhero movies and the cultural dominance of comic book adaptations in cinema (Smith, 2018, p. 110). Despite this legitimisation, comics studies remain a poorly-funded area (Beaty, 2011, p. 107; Fischer, 2010, p. 8) filled with part-time academics from other disciplines (Fischer, 2010, pp. 8–9), many of whom are motivated either by nostalgia for the comics they read as a child (Kleefeld, 2020, p. 197; Pickles, 2016), or an interest in expanding their original disciplines with the visual-storytelling repertoire of comics. It may therefore be inevitable that comic studies is a multi-disciplinary field, since until quite recently, "comics studies in the U.S. has been defined by a defensive relationship to the academy at large[…], leading to a need for U.S. comics scholars to claim alliance with other, more recognisable fields: autobiography studies, sexuality studies, postcolonial studies, etc" (Gardner & Herman, 2011, p. 6). This in itself is not a problem, since all academic studies draw on pre-existing fields, though in this case, it can lead to certain blind spots that arise due to historical reasons. One such instance is that while Anglophone Comic Studies may have had a short existence, the pre-existing fields of Anglophone film and life writing studies do not (Beaty, 2011, p. 106). This can lead to the tendency of Anglophone theorists to draw largely from the American experience (as would be the norm from their original fields), or mostly from singular foundational texts such as Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, which has its obvious limitations (Kelp-Stebbins & Kelp-Stebbins, 2019, p. 3).

Until recently, when it has become more academically accepted, this need to defend comics from the usual critiques of it being coarse, lowbrow material suitable only for children has hampered comic studies in Anglophone academia (Beaty, 2011, p. 107; Gardner & Herman, 2011, p. 6; Pickles, 2016). Its positioning as a medium midway between art and literature also hasn't helped, as neither branch is adequately equipped to all aspects of it holistically (Kleefeld, 2020, p. 196; Pickles, 2016). The end result is an influx of academics who fall into either one of two categories—"comics fandom" and

"literary culture" (Kleefeld, 2020, p. 197; Pickles, 2016). The former consists of scholars who were fans of superhero comics (the dominant genre of Western comics in the 1960s), and who came to formally study them later on, while the latter are those from literary studies whose tastes gravitate to works that resemble those from their field. Both groups bring their interests, perspectives, and methodologies with them, leading to papers on certain subject matters becoming more dominant than others—such as superheroes, memoirs, non-fiction comics, and realistic fiction (Gardner & Herman, 2011, p. 6). This self-perpetuating cycle thus creates an atmosphere where papers on these subjects tend to be published more than others, and while there has been an increase in comic papers that tackle romance, humour, children's comics and marginalised creators, the prevailing situation has yet to shift by much (Kleefeld, 2020, pp. 197–198).

That's not to say that *all* comic studies papers are mired in superheroes, memoirs, and non-fiction. Outside the Anglophone sphere, such as in the comic powerhouses of France and in Japan, comic studies have long flourished, albeit under different sociocultural and institutional practices (Gardner & Herman, 2011, p. 6). However, attempts to bring these practices into Anglophone comic studies have been limited. Few Anglophone comic scholars have approached the formal complexity of Francophone scholars (Kelp-Stebbins & Kelp-Stebbins, 2019, p. 4), while other times, attempts to translate and bring such works to Anglophone comics scholars has resulted in pushback due to differing traditions and frames of reference (Fischer, 2010, pp. 1–2).

Into this fray comes digital comics, a relatively understudied area of comic studies for the aforementioned reasons. While the digital revolution may be at the forefront of many artistic mediums, the area of "digital comics" still remains an ill-defined and barely-negotiated area within comics studies, and even with new/hybrid media studies (Thurmond, 2017, pp. 5, 22). Part of this is exacerbated by the fact that despite the medium's widespread online readership, there hasn't been much press coverage, even within media circles that should otherwise be devoted to comics news. For example, a cursory 2017 analysis of the top six comics online news sites found that only 30% of articles were about comics, and mostly DC and Marvel comics with barely independent print comics mentioned, let alone digital comics (Kleefeld, 2020, pp. 9–10). This lack of visibility is a self-perpetuating problem, with it even extending to academic publications

that purport to exhaustively canvas the field. To illustrate the point, the "450-plus-page 'authoritative' *Routledge Companion to Comics* featuring some of the most knowledgeable scholars in the field […] contains little if any attention to web or digital comics, let alone webtoons" (Yecies & Shim, 2021, p. 4).

The Problem of Digital Comics in Academia

As a relatively niche area (depending on who you talk to) of comics with limited media visibility, fan activity, and unmeasurable economic value, it is no surprise that academic papers that reference digital comics are far from the norm (Kleefeld, 2020, p. 196). Due to the lack of a substantial body of work, no proper definition of "digital comics" will likely be forthcoming for a while, though it's not necessarily a "problem". This nebulousness can be beneficial, as it allows the development of "digital comics" to be malleable, while offering an array of infinite possibilities for the form to evolve in.

That said, academics who *do* address digital comics offer a number of explanations for this state of affairs, ranging from a lack of boundaries and definitions, few viable texts to analyse (whether it's issues of availability, distribution, or personal interest), dismissive attitudes from influential scholars, the on-going decolonisation of academia, and so on. One reason offered as to why digital comics is such a poorly defined area of research may be traced to the fact that "most of our digital reading practices, including reading digital comics, borrow from the skeuomorphic image of the book" (Martin, 2017, p. 3), a process also defined by new media theorists Jay Bolton and Richard Grusin (1999) as "remediation". Whether true or not in practice, many consumers and academics today still consider "digital comics" to be electronic reproductions of printed comics, which despite a change in technology, is believed to faithfully adhere to the limits of the printed page. Even though migration to the digital realm has removed the fixed linearity of print and allowed a hypertextual approach (Aggleton, 2019, p. 396), "digital comics" as a category have yet to carve out a discernible niche in the western media landscape. The lack of press coverage even from comics news sites compounds this problem.

Another problem lies in the fact that there is no "official" terminology for the kind of digital comics that *isn't* a straight-forward electronic adaptation of a print comic

(Martin, 2017). Certain terms may exist for particular formats, such as the early 2000s South Korean portmanteau of "web" and "cartoons", which fixed the term "webtoon" as something that usually means a smartphone-centric, infinite-scrolling form of comics that is unfriendly to a straight-forward conversion to print. However, this term is just as likely to refer to anything published on a webtoon platform, regardless of form (Yecies & Shim, 2021, p. 4). Furthermore, French theorist Anthony Raguel (2009) notes that academics have also freely and interchangeably used a number of terms for digital comics, ranging from "interactive comics", to "e-BD", "online comics", "webcomics", "multimedia comics", and also "turbomedia" and "BD/I" for the academically inclined (as cited by Martin, 2017, p. 2). I personally use "digital comics" for the purposes of this thesis, but I must note that this is not at all a universally-accepted for the somewhat nebulous "digitised narrative comics" I'm referring to. There are even fewer formal attempts to differentiate between straight-forward narrative comics, and newer forms of digital comics that employs all the bells and whistles technology provides (such as hyperlinks, film, animation, sound, and interactive elements) that may generate multiple branching narratives. In other words, while "digital comics" may have existed as early as the 80s and 90s, the broad spectrum of experimentation that exists in the format means that it remains an ever-evolving hybrid with continually expanding possibilities. This makes the task of even charting a chronological history of the medium's evolution a daunting undertaking.

Further complications are added by the fact that comics is also a common medium of online communication due to the mix of words and pictures that made up the early Internet in the 2000s. This has led to the evolution of short, shareable comic strips which are now so widely-disseminated on websites and through social media that it has popularised the medium to the extent where many (but not all) memes are actually digital comics (Kleefeld, 2020, pp. 6–7, 46). The ease of image-sharing online has simply made comics so ubiquitous that many are not even recognised as "comics". As comics scholar Sean Kleefeld explains, "many people likely would say they never read webcomics or have no interest in them; although in point of fact, they probably read webcomics on a regular basis without even realizing it" (Kleefeld, 2020, p. 6).

All this has opened digital comics up for claiming by other disciplines. After all, digital comics remain a hybrid object sitting at the overlapping boundaries of multiple mediums, as "once animation has been introduced into a comic, the question arises as to at what point a comic ceases to be a comic and becomes an animation" (Goodbrey, 2013, p. 194). Without any demarcated boundaries, digital comics is often in danger of being claimed by the film or video games disciplines, or being swallowed into the generic clump labelled "multimedia" for lack of a better term (Dittmar, 2012, p. 88; Lippitz, 2019, p. 116; Thurmond, 2017, p. 22). And then, there are the theorists such as Thierry Groensteen (2013), Anthony Rageul (2014), and Dittmar (2012) who argue that digital comics may not be a subset of "comics" but an entirely new medium, since some lack the juxtaposed, sequential panelling and spatial/temporal simultaneity that most consider a hallmark of the medium (as cited in Martin, 2017). Unfortunately, these academics have little interest in defining what this new medium of digital comics entails.

There are also those who have been dismissive of the experimentations in digital comics. One such academic is Scott McCloud, the producer of some germinal pieces of comics scholarship on digital comics, such as the concept of the "infinite canvas", which breaks the restrictive format of the printed page (McCloud, 2000). When questioned about "motion comics", a form of digital comics that combines animation and sound with comics, Scott said: "I think animation can play a role in comics in a certain context but I think full-out motion […] are a sad, temporary, abomination" (Morton, 2011, p. 260). Likewise, new media luminary Henry Jenkins was similarly unimpressed. Despite acknowledging the possibility of rich and interesting hybrid media forms, he would say in a 2012 interview: "here [in digital comics], there has been very little real growth since McCloud and his followers tried to jump start this process more than a decade ago, much to my disappointment" (Round, 2012). This was a sentiment shared by not just other comics scholars (Baudry, 2018, p. 3), but by comic artists and writers within American comics as well (Morton, 2015, p. 348).

Perhaps the problem with digital comics is not that it's disappointing, but rather that the spectrum of academic contact and personal experiences with digital comics remain so broad (and tethered to print comics) that they lack engagement with each other's arguments and therefore the coherency that comes with such dialogue. There is

also the major issue of discovery, since "what digital comics lack, in fact, are maybe not the masterpieces that could be brandished as ideal examples of its singularity, but scholars and critics able to find them" (Martin, 2017, p. 14). An additional layer of postcolonialism is also present: there are few digital comics papers that mention the aforementioned $855M globally-dominant Korean webtoons industry without shunting it into the umbrella category of "transmedia" or "Asian/Korean studies" (Jin, 2023, p. 8; Park, Eui-Myung; Lee, 2019; Yecies et al., 2020). This is unfortunate, but not a surprise—despite Korean webtoons having far outstripped Marvel, DC, ComiXology and MadeFire in revenue, very little scholarly attention has been paid to it save a few case studies (J. H. Kim & Yu, 2019, p. 1; Yecies & Shim, 2021, p. 4). This is not unlike the gigantic multi-billion dollar Japanese comics (typically called "*manga*") industry—again, often shunted to "Asian/Japan Studies" (Hernández-Pérez, 2019, pp. 4–5)—with the global dominance of print manga rarely addressed despite its reach and readership being far higher than all other kinds of print comics.

However, this diffused approach to digital comics may be rapidly changing. Since COVID-19 caused a sudden uptick in the prevalence of digital entertainment, comic scholarship circles have seen an increase of interest in digital comics. Due to the ever-growing pervasiveness of digital comics as cultural objects, creative practices, and as modes of production and consumption, comics scholars are beginning to acknowledge the gaps in the field, and make attempts to address these limitations. Despite the persistent overall lack of consensus, if there is one thing that most academics can agree on, it's that digital comics, by its very nature, is an international enterprise since its main conduit of delivery and consumption is via the Internet. Unfortunately, some of these attempts only highlight that the field is some distance away from addressing the multi-faceted nature of the topic, particularly from a globalised, diachronic perspective. Even academic tomes dedicated to the subject matter can either cover only a particular format of digital comics, or to cover it with a regional rather than global scope. To illustrate my case, I shall use two recently published books dedicated to particular areas of digital comics.

For example, while comics scholar Sean Kleefeld's 2020 monograph *Webcomics*, one of the first of its kind, attempts to diachronically canvas the evolution of digital

comics and the associated creative and commercial practices and socio-cultural impact, the book has been criticised for failing to cover the "epoch-making webtoon phenomenon arising for online Korean comics optimised for smartphones" (Hatfield, 2021, p. 209). Meanwhile, although Brian Yecies and Ae-Gyung Shim's 2021 book *South Korea's Webtooniverse and the Digital Comic Revolution* exhaustively covers Korean webtoons and all its associated, interconnected creative industries from a globalised perspective, its focus is exclusively on South Korea's industry only. The fact that Kleefeld's and Yecies & Shim's book were published within one year of each other, with both extensively covering large, culturally-significant and regionally-diverse areas of digital comics without much overlap, shows that there is much scholarly ground yet to be explored in digital comics. Since then, a second book on webtoons called *Understanding Korean Webtoon Culture: Transmedia Storytelling, Digital Platforms and Genres (2023)* by Dal Yong Jun has been published, though like Yecies & Shim's book, it is a webtoons-only book. The wide-ranging approaches of the two aforementioned books also illustrate far more than just the socio-cultural differences between creative practices and modes of consumption between the American-centric "webcomic" and the Korean-centric "webtoon". It also demonstrates a difference in governmental and institutional support of the latter versus the former.

Unlike webcomics, Korean webtoons exist only partially as the work of independent creators harnessing the democratic power of the internet to bypass traditional publishing gatekeepers. Instead, they are more likely to be part of a transmedial, Korean government-supported attempt to project Korean "soft power" onto the global stage (J. H. Kim & Yu, 2019, p. 5; Yecies & Shim, 2021, p. 11). According to Yecies & Shim (2021) and Jun (2023), webtoons are therefore not an isolated pop-cultural phenomenon that just serendipitously happened to surf the crest of the smartphone revolution. Instead, it is a carefully-cultivated IP engine that stands alongside K-pop and Korean cinema as part of KoreaWave 3.0, a global, state-backed, billion-dollar juggernaut that aims to positively influence South Korea's international image in trade, tourism and academia. In other words, KoreaWave (also known as "Hallyu"), is part of a South Korean's national economic strategy which aims to invest in cultural industries, with the explicit goal of

using culture not only as a form of identity, but as profitable commodity (H. K. Kim et al., 2016, p. 533,536; Michell, 2021, p. 181).

The term "soft power" was originally coined in the late 1980s by political scientist Joseph Nye, and is commonly defined as the cognitive ability to entice and attract others on the international stage (Hahm & Song, 2021, pp. 217–218; H. K. Kim et al., 2016, p. 533; Michell, 2021, p. 181; Yoon, 2023, p. 342). The government of South Korea adopted has as a form of national branding strategy, despite the concept having its limitations (Hahm & Song, 2021, p. 218; H. K. Kim et al., 2016, p. 534; Yoon, 2023, p. 343), and it sometimes being accused of being propagandistic (Jung, 2019, p. 362), and depicting only the most desirable aspects of Korean society (Michell, 2021, pp. 181–184). Its overly-commercialised and profit-driven directives has also caused accusations of cultural imperialism (H. K. Kim et al., 2016, p. 531) from neighbouring countries, while its manufactured approach has also led to its business models being built on exploitative labour practices that has resulted in lawsuits (Michell, 2021, pp. 185–186).

It should be mentioned that this vertical integration of otherwise disparate creative and advertising industries is also not a Korea-specific phenomenon. A similar approach can also be seen in neighbouring Japan's "media mix" strategy, where Japanese comics known as manga has long been the centre of transmedia practices (Jin, 2023, p. 16). This is even though the historical, political, economic and socio-cultural climate of Japan is vastly different to that of Korea. In this next section, we will be exploring the problem of exploitative labour in cultural industries that rely on the transmedia and media mix model.

Media Mix, Transmedia and Platform Capitalism

Originating in the 1960s, "media mix" is the divergent proliferation of a single piece of creative work across multiple media forms, which Henry Jenkins would define decades later in 2007 as "transmedia" (Jin, 2023, p. 12; Steinberg, 2012, p. 7). Also academically termed "convergence" from Jenkin's book *Convergence Culture* (2006), the goal is to use this proliferation to corral audiences into consuming a wide range of interconnected entertainment experiences based on one germinal piece of creative work, and in the

process reconfigure the relationship between media industries, audiences, and new technologies (Santos, 2017, p. 273).

Core to this framework is "affective economics", which is a marketing strategy that seeks to "quantify desire, measure connections, and to commodify commitments" for the sake of shaping patterns of consumer consumption (Santos, 2017, p. 277). In practice, it becomes a social-cultural process where consumers are encouraged to form emotional attachments to a piece of creative work, and then to use that emotional investment to produce and share their own content based on it via networked technologies, thus providing free labour (Jin, 2023, p. 153). This user-generated output then circulates the fandom, rising and dipping in popularity based on the desires it elicits, where it may ultimately end up influencing the original work in turn. The cycle of media production and consumption thus becomes a collaborative rather than top-down process, even if the balance of power between publishers, fans and creators remain ultimately unequal and tilted towards the institutions who retain their gatekeeping capabilities. Ultimately, affective economics enable publishers to tap into fan-generated work as free content and labour for their platforms, which when properly enmeshed in its context within this new media environment, becomes commodities that can be further harnessed to elicit more emotions from readers.

One may therefore assume that networked technology is a prerequisite for convergence, but it is important to note that this practice predates the internet and has also existed in the analog era as fanzines, conventions, and letters to comic publishers (Santos, 2017, p. 276). What networked technology does is maximise the speed, efficiency, geographical distance, and economies of scale by which this could be done, while also allowing the owners of the network architecture to data-mine all nodes of participation in the network to further amplify its effects. While publishers in this instance may also regard fan-created work as competition that could cannibalise their core audience, they also recognise that fans serve an important role in the core-periphery relationship of a cultural industry to its consumers. This is because apart from acting as unpaid promotional agents who galvanise the unconverted into buying the favoured cultural product, these fans also served as a potential workforce that core producers can draw upon to fill in future labour gaps.

This setup therefore shares similarities to the plight of creative labour in the video game industry, with some key differences—one of which is the self-employed comics free agent versus the salaried or wage-earning video game cognitariat. Instead of video gaming conglomerates trying to monopolise an employee's time and produce by blurring the boundaries between work and play, comic publishers fan the affective flames of a fandom in the hope that popular works will rise to the top within a networked system. When a creative work wins enough readers for profitable exploitation by the transmedia machine, said work has already been captured as "dead knowledge". It is also irrevocably enmeshed within the system. Due to the nature of networked effects, removing such a work may be either highly difficult, or the process would destroy a large portion of the work's original meaning since context is often a foundational part of such works. While Japan can be credited to be the pioneer of such methods, it is perhaps Korea who has best perfected this strategy in the digital age, and expanded it. Its current scale—a globalised, industrial, multi-industry encompassing juggernaut—can be attributed to a new form of capitalism some call "platform capitalism".

Platform capitalism refers to the intersection between neoliberalism and digitization, or a digitized version of capitalism build upon platforms to facilitate the commercial exchange of goods and services for profit (Papadimitropoulos, 2021, p. 246). Generally, it is regarded as a key developmental time in capitalism that has led it to a shift from an industrial paradigm to an informational one, though not everyone is entirely convinced of this new epoch (Boyer, 2022, pp. 1857–1858, 1867) or the term's digital essentialism (Steinberg, 2022, pp. 1070–1071). Since Nick Srnicek's 2016 influential book *Platform Capitalism*, the term has grown in popularity and complexity (Steinberg, 2022, p. 1070), with academics expanding it in terms of its various facets such as the "gig economy" VS "crowdsourcing" VS "platform economy" (Liang et al., 2022, p. 309), and referencing its industrial precursors such as Toyotism (Steinberg, 2022, p. 1070). Its pluralities across different global regions has also been explored, such as the Asian state-driven model which sees the government assert its authority over the platforms, versus the western market-driven model which sees the state largely bypassed (Steinberg et al., 2024, p. 3). Unfortunately, while the usual utopian rhetoric of platforms leans towards that of innovation and transformative democracy, the "themes of connectivity and

exchange, central to platforms, [still] obscure the neoliberalist ideology that runs free at the heart of platform capitalism" (Liang et al., 2022, p. 323).

Nevertheless, theorists such as Srnicek (2016) sees "platform capitalism" as the inevitable outcome of the competitive pressures of industrial capitalism in the 70s, which after waves of cost cutting, financial speculation, and outsourcing, saw a 90s boom in digital and communications technology (Srnicek, 2016, pp. 17–19). This era laid the groundwork for the restructuring of capitalism, something that always occur when the system suffers an external shock. This time, it's the so-called "information economy", which sees the product of work shift from the production of commodities to the manipulation of immaterial symbols and cultural content. In other words, a new ownership class has now risen in advanced, de-industrialised economies. Instead of owning the means of production, they now own "information", as well as the underlying software platforms and networked infrastructure that harvests, analyses, repackages, and resells it, often at a higher economic value (Srnicek, 2016, pp. 28–29).

A "platform", at its most basic level, can be defined as digital infrastructure and intermediaries which can provide two or more people the means to interact, typically in the form of a marketplace, and where sometimes tools are also offered to allow users to build and offer their own services to others (Srnicek, 2016, pp. 31–33). This gives the platform owner a privileged position to collect and record all exchanges on their platform as raw data that can be resold and used to shape better consumers. Likewise, it also takes advantage of networked effects that amplify the usefulness of the network based on the number of users it attracts. As people are more inclined to join larger, more populated platforms over smaller ones, this naturally leads to a tendency towards monopolisation, as the cost of acquiring more users becomes lower once the initial investment in infrastructure has been made (though it will never be zero as electricity, cabling, and storage costs will always apply). This inevitably leads to a process where economics of scale can be reaped at a global level, but which due to oversaturation, leads to asymmetrical capital-labour relations which cause an increase in wealth inequality between classes (Boyer, 2022, p. 1876). To aid in this system of infinitely expanding networked effects, platforms often engage in cross-subsidisation, where certain aspects of a platform is used as a loss-leader to draw in new users, while a different set of paid

services are offered once that user is on the platform so that the initial cost can be offset. Lastly, while platforms can present themselves as democratic blank slates that allow users to project whatever they want, in reality, restrictions set by the platform owner means that certain product or behavioural rules are applied to all users of a platform in a top-down, hierarchical manner.

A platform is therefore an extractive apparatus for data, a closed system that "installs a top-down orchestration of bottom-up networking between producers and consumers" (Papadimitropoulos, 2021, p. 250). The platform is the ultimate facilitator of the neoliberal, digital evolution of the "consumer" into the "prosumer". Prosumers, which are consumers that have gone past passive consumption, now exist on platforms as a "new type of exploited digital worker who produces (surplus) value that turns into monopoly rents for platform capitalism" (Papadimitropoulos, 2021, p. 252).

When the theory behind "platform capitalism" is applied to Korean webtoon platforms, the full extent of these interlocking relationships and power imbalances between the network of prosumers and the platform is revealed. This is especially relevant when one considers that South Korean webtoons act not just "as technical intermediaries, but [also as] institutional mediators, shaping the performance of actors in the cultural field" (J. H. Kim & Yu, 2019, p. 2). This "webtooniverse" is also, in terms of readership and influence, currently the dominant form of digital comics—and therefore, the model by which future digital comic platforms hope to emulate. As a category, Korean webtoons have far outstripped digital competitors such as the far more culturally-influential Marvel, DC, and Amazon ComiXology by generating an estimated $17 billion USD in revenues across Australia, Korea and Japan in 2012-2014 (Yecies & Shim, 2021, p. 3). This is a figure that has only continued to grow since then—in comparison, the Japanese manga industry worth is $5.6 billion USD in Japan alone in 2020 (Peters, 2021).

Part of its success can be attributed to the fact that webtoons has had a very deliberate, digital transnational transmedia strategy from the start (Jin, 2023, p. 101,136), but it is also important to note that webtoon's underlying business model is drastically different from that of traditional comics (manga or otherwise).Korean webtoons and Japanese manga may both be comics industries that uses a confluence of media mix, affective economics, and networked effects, but due to historical precedence, the

majority of the manga industry stills runs like a traditional book publishing industry (though that is also changing). This is due to the fact that the manga and webtoon industries in Japan and Korea respectively is politically, historically, economically, structurally, and socio-culturally different. However, there is value comparing the current state of their industries to highlight the similarities and differences in how a creator may function in each transmedial environment to try to maximise profits. An example would be in the production process itself, where little has changed from the analog print era for both systems despite their different starting points. In both industries, individual creators self-fund their original works, pitch them to gatekeeping publishing institutions, and if accepted, is given editorial support and a small fee in return for exclusive production and distribution rights. Should a creator fail to land a publisher in this process, they are free to self-publish and distribute in a sizeable amateur market that coexists in a core-periphery relationship to that of the professional market dominated by the big publishers. If they gain traction or cultural cachet, they may be absorbed by the traditional publishers, or become a publisher themselves. However, the similarities often end there.

In Japan, where the manga market is much more established and has a much longer history, there are multiple large and small publishers experimenting with digital models of monetisation. However, for those who work for the largest and most dominant of the publishers, the bulk of a professional comic artist's income still comes from the serialisation of their work in specialised manga magazines, be they print or digital. After initial publication, these works are eventually collected into graphic novels called *tankoubans*, which are sold in print and digital editions as individual books are. This rather straight-forward process of creation, production, distribution, and sales of a clearly defined, physical product makes it very easy to calculate the number of sales that a particular creator has made of a certain series over time. This in turn renders it simple to estimate the monetary benefits that a creator can gain from participating in this system. Within this system, if a certain manga gains enough sales and therefore an audience (which can be quantified through the compilation of publicly available book sales data), the creative work is then spun through the transmedial machine. It will then emerge as the seed inspiration for an array of animated series, live-action films, prose adaptations, musical theatre productions, plays, musical tracks, drama CDs, video games, fashion lines,

merchandise, theme park rides, and so on—thereby becoming a source of profit for a multitude of interlocking creative industries. Each of these can be counted as a licensed sale of a separate aspect of the original creator's subsidiary rights, and so the monetary benefits can be gleaned from publicly available information.

For most Japanese creators, the format of e-manga is yet another avenue of profit for them. This may be why digital manga itself has seen little creative experimentation in terms of technology, even though the sales of digital manga have been increasing year-on-year in Japan, to the extent that it can match the revenue of print manga. As in most digital comics in the west, digital manga still retains the skeuomorphic image of the book page, along with their famous black-and-white artwork. Originally developed for ease of printing on newsprint, manga has even developed a unique aesthetic which has been refined over the decades to look appealing even when printed on cheap paper. Since Japan's manga industry has long been a sizeable portion of all printed material in the country, its publishers see little reason to change a successful formula.

From this process, it is safe to say that an industry equivalent of this can be found in the western young adult novel industry, where a massive cross-audience hit like the *Harry Potter* series can find a second life in transmedial adaptations across multiple mediums. One industry may publish manga and the other prose fiction, but a core difference is how the more self-contained, vertically-integrated, interlocking nature of the Japanese entertainment industry sees a smoother and faster transition from free-floating creative manga work to IP engine. Likewise, despite the steady increase of digital book sales over print book sales, the core engine of profit for them still remains rooted in the analog world—through the relatively transparent sales of individual print books or their digital equivalents. Not so for the Korean webtoon industry. If one were to delve into the history of Korean comics as whole, there is an identifiable moment where the industry shifted from print to digital.

The Rise and Development of Korean Webcomics

Print comics has had a long history in Korea, starting with short satirical cartoons first published in early Korean newspapers in 1909 (Jin, 2023, p. 22). Post-War Korea, in

particular, was a boom time for Korean-produced comics targeting children, with comics rental and reading establishments becoming the primary distribution channels in the 1950s and 60s (Jin, 2023, p. 23; Yecies & Shim, 2021, pp. 27–29). Due to the enormous demand, Korean publishers would eventually supplement domestic production with pirated, localised copies of popular Japanese manga, which would otherwise be banned by the South Korean government due to World War II antipathy. Eventually, the industry would falter in the 70s and 80s, after it came to be dominated by a mini-conglomerate that prioritised profit over quality. Likewise, creators also saw themselves being creatively constrained by moral panics and scrutiny from the government. However, its fortunes would change with government intervention in the 90s, which saw the implementation of the Korean government's Cyber Korea 21 policy—a plan for transforming Korea into a "knowledge-based" superpower economy for the 21st Century (Yecies & Shim, 2021, p. 50).

Since the Korean government has been promoting advanced computerisation and laying down a high-speed broadband network for the country since the 1980s, the advent of Digital Korea was able to quickly benefit from this infrastructure. Due to the mushrooming of internet cafes in the 90s—which quickly replaced traditional comic rental establishments—the nation also saw a rapid expansion of Internet Service Providers, publishers, entrepreneurs and artists (Jin, 2023, pp. 21–23; Yecies & Shim, 2021, pp. 51–52). All were eager to experiment with these new digital frontiers, and from the mid-90s onwards, Korean Internet Service Providers would start featuring regular, free "manhwa" (Korean comics) as an audience draw alongside the usual games, travel advice, and BBS services. Traditional comic publishers would follow suit, as would early digital entrepreneurs, launching their own digital manhwa sites and enabling print-based manhwa creators an opportunity to transition to digital markets. These would soon become something akin to digital comic rental establishments, though rampant piracy and the difficulty of monetisation on the early internet would mean that bankruptcy and consolidation would plague these early publishers. It wasn't until the early 2000s that internet search company Daum would introduce comics on their portal, and after seeing it rocket to its fourth most popular service after its email, search, and online community services, other search portals like Naver, Lycos Korea, and Yahoo! Korea would follow

suite (Yecies & Shim, 2021, p. 55). Ultimately, it would be Daum that became the originator of the specific format known as "webtoon", after it trialled a new kind of digital comic called "Love Story" by creator KANG Full on its site in 2003.

"Love Story" was a departure from most of the short, episodic comics that filled these digital comics portals at the time. Instead, its popularity would cement the established format of webtoons today, as it was serialized as a relatively long story with arcs, which were then broken down into single weekly episodes. Each episode was displayed in a vertical-scrolling format with large gaps between each panel, which would eventually evolve to a reading experience ideal for the rampant finger-flicking that characterises speed-reading on the smartphone. This format, coupled with the use of colour, would become a uniquely Korean feature of such, which would help distinguish it from its cousin Japanese manga. The portmanteau "webtoons" eventually entered the popular lexicon, and by the time the widespread adoption of smartphones came around in 2012-2013, webtoons would be further propelled webtoons to new heights of cultural significance. Ultimately, it would be search engines Daum, Naver, and a handful of start-up companies rather than legacy publishers that came to dominate the webtoon industry today (Yecies & Shim, 2021, p. 55).

Apart from birthing the modern webtoon, 2003 also saw the first Five-Year Development Plans for the Comics Industry from Korea's Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MCST). Along with the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA), Korea Manhwa Contents Agency (KOMACON), and a constellation of other related government-funded institutions and industry bodies, these agencies would form the backbone of what would come to be known as the "Korean Wave"—a government-led initiative to globalize Korea's creative industries and enhance the standing of Korean-produced cultural products overseas. These measures provided strategies for raising awareness, reforming distribution structures, establishing production infrastructure, facilitating exports, sourcing funds for foreign cultural events that enhance reputation, and so on (Yecies & Shim, 2021, pp. 60–61). Key to these ventures was the transitioning of the Korean comics industry from print to digital, and in particular, using webtoons as a core component of a transmedia machine to manufacture a plethora of interconnected cultural products— known as "one-source-multi-use" (OSMU) content at the time.

Webtoons are therefore not an individual, self-contained industry, but part of a Korean national policy that combines physical digital infrastructure with cross-subsidisation of search platforms such as Naver. Far from a supposed constellation of free-lancers, it is a portion of a much-larger, government-backed, cultural influence machine that aims to project the "soft power" of the Korean nation onto the global stage. For example, Naver is now the leading digital comic platform in Asia and dominating the North American and other markets, with a growth in revenue of 597.6 billion won in 2019 to a four-fold increase of 2075.8 billion won in 2023 (Jobst, 2024). Meanwhile, other webtoon platforms such as Kakao has also found success in siphoning away fiercely-loyal consumers of Japanese manga and anime and switching them to webtoons (Yecies & Shim, 2021, pp. 93, 108). The appeal to a youth market has been successful, with 70% of webtoon readers under the age of 30, with a 50-50 gender split, and new user growth in multiple global markets ranging from the US, Russia, Mexico, India, Australia, Brazil, South Africa, UAE, France, Turkey and Colombia (Eser, 2024). With the user base comes monthly revenue of an average of $16.40 per month per user (Eser, 2024) , with paid content accounting for 80% of revenue, as well as a fast-growing advertising and IP adaptations business (Milliot, 2024). The latter, in particular, saw successful webtoons being adapted into film, TV series, games, merchandise, and printed books, leading to sales of $108.3 million, along with advertising sales of $145.4 million (Milliot, 2024). This has been a growth of 31.4% since the previous year of 2023 (Milliot, 2024), which shows the success of the transmedia model of taking successful IPs and cultivating adaptations across multiple media formats.

This success, the result of a confluence of political-economic factors, has thus made Korean cultural industries a government-formulated organ by which a strong neoliberal approach to "culture" is encouraged. This is particularly true in the redefinition of "culture" as "content", so as to prioritise the commodification and economic value of "culture" (H. Cho, 2021, p. 87). Given what we know of the webtoon industry, it is worth examining how platform capitalism expresses itself in this particular marriage of digitization, network technology, cultural content, fan engagement, and creative workers. As per the previous definition, a "platform" is digital infrastructure and marketplace that aims to harvest data from its users, which over time also leans towards monopolization

and cross-subsidisation to attract and retain these users. Despite the rhetoric of democratisation, a platform is not free from political motives, or platform-enforced rules—instead, it acts as a constantly-evolving ecology which shapes the interdependencies of all participating parties (H. Cho, 2021, p. 77). One can also argue that while the overarching goal of all platforms is to sustain itself through monetizing its infrastructure or its products, its main goal is the perpetual cycle to grow users, harvest data and surplus value, and amplify networked effects until the questionably-achievable goal of monopolization is reached.

The webtoon industry fulfils all these tenets. Since it is funded partly by a government-driven geopolitical objective, Korean webtoon platforms carry not only the capitalistic motive of profit-making, but also the political need to promote Korean culture and values to a global audience. This naturally creates a hierarchy on the platforms where Korean creators and content is prioritized above that of all other types of creators, despite claims of meritocracy and democratic discovery algorithms. Secondly, it is quite telling that search engines Daum and Naver are the largest webtoon platforms, and consequently those most aggressive in their push to develop overseas subsidiaries and readers. As technology companies whose core business is data mining, webtoons is just one more service these online portals offer to attract more users—albeit one that has the added advantage of drawing foreign audiences who may otherwise have no reason to use a Korean-language search engine.

It is therefore not a surprise that the largest platform Naver, with a substantial international footprint thanks to its 2014 launch of a multi-lingual version of its webtoon platform Line Webtoon, runs its webtoon department at a loss (Yecies & Shim, 2021, p. 93). This can still be seen in the way Naver currently operates Webtoon, which at the time of writing, has gone public on the US NASDAQ on the 27th June 2024—despite revealing itself to be still unprofitable, with a loss of $145 million on revenues of $1.28 billion in 2023 (da Silva, 2024; Morris, 2024). This lack of concern over profitability is further compounded by the fact that within 3 months of going public, the company has also been hit with a 50% loss in stock price (from $21 at initial offering to $11), to accusations of securities fraud, and employee disputes over stock options (W. Cho, 2024; Lee, 2024). As of the time of writing, a class action lawsuit has been threatened by

aggrieved investors of Webtoon, with claims that the company "failed to properly disclose key negative information during the initial public offering (IPO) process, including a decline in revenues from advertising and intellectual property businesses" (Lee, 2024). While this further confirms tech giant Naver's core business interest in data mining over webtoon IPs, these allegations also throw into question the validity of some of Naver's own available data on the overall business model of webtoons. Due to litigation taking years, and the impossibility of independently verifying Webtoon's figures, Webtoon's profitability cannot be confirmed and so comparison with competitors is difficult. This means that apart from the smaller, boutique webtoon publishers with more specialized audiences, tech giants such as Naver are less akin to any kind of legacy publisher, and more akin to Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon, with their subsidisation strategies and need for total market dominance.

Compared to its main competitor the Japanese manga industry, which is still dominated by large print publishers with expanding digital presences, Korean webtoon giants are less interested in comics as an artform or even a profitable enterprise. In fact, Naver has been lambasted by webtoon industry representatives for using webtoons to drive traffic to its other services, to the detriment of their creator's monetary benefits—more of which will be examined later (Yecies & Shim, 2021, p. 83).

Webtoon Creators, Monetisation & Visibility Labour

With this transmedial confluence of Korean-based creative industries, government initiatives, and big tech platforms, wherefore the webtoon creator? It may come as no surprise that as with many digital ventures—regardless of whether they are industrial or informational in nature—creators publishing on webtoon platforms suffer from the same downward pressure on wages that many traditional industries face upon digitization. With comics being such a time-consuming and labour-intensive job with dubious returns, it is questionable whether the monetization model of webtoons has managed to raise the labour conditions of the many hopefuls that produce work for its platform.

Monetisation came slowly to webtoons, not least because the concept of micropayments needed time to develop and be implemented. Up until 2009 when Daum

made the decision to monetise their most popular content, most webtoons operated on a free-to-read basis, with only a creator's production costs covered and little left for living expenses (Yecies & Shim, 2021, p. 63). Daum's move brought disruption to this model, but was a welcome change for creators, industry groups, and even readers, who for the first time witnessed the possibility of a paying career blossoming on this new platform ecosystem. Soon after in 2014, Daum's own internationalization push to rival that of Naver would see a flurry of horizontal growth in related industries, with Daum partnering with California-based webcomics startup Tapastic to reach an English audience. With the onset of smartphones, Daum would then absorb KAKAO, a popular messaging app, then go on to develop a series of community-based apps centred around particular functions such as KakaoStory, KakaoTaxi, KakaoMap, KakaoMusic, KakaoStyle, and many others (Yecies & Shim, 2021, pp. 86–87). The impetus for this is obvious—by merging all the user bases for these apps and cross-promoting to them, this would become the foundation of a vertically-integrated music/movie/talent production studio. Their biggest and largest rival Naver would quickly follow a similar setup of its own.

The creation of an IP engine production pipeline does not contradict the monopolistic and cross-subsidisation tendencies specific to platform capitalism, but it can unearth a new range of monetization opportunities to creators that didn't exist before. Transmedia storytelling embellished by networked effects was still a relatively new area of entertainment, and the segmentation of Daum and Naver's audiences unexpectedly provided an experimental playground to find new ways of monetisation. Apart from fulfilling their ambitions of promoting Korean culture and values globally, webtoons has also been a highly attractive vehicle for branded advertising, educational content, government announcements, product placements, and cross-promotional character advertising with hit content from other mediums such as K-pop. The youthful webtoon audience, consisting largely of teenagers and young adults, made it a coveted demographic for advertisers to pursue, and having a centralized platform that can seek out, negotiate, and manage such commercial relationships are undoubtedly helpful. This business model has proved highly lucrative to the top webtoon creators, with established webtoon artists earning an estimated 1,000,000 KRW (USD$825) per episode of content, and even beginner creators earning an estimated 500,000-900,000 KRW each episode

(USD$410-750) (Yecies & Shim, 2021, p. 6). This is on top of the aforementioned branded webtoon opportunities, not to mention all the other adaptations such as movies, music, novels, merchandising, etc that a successful webtoon IP can also earn in fees and royalties.

New monetization opportunities propel an industry forward, but not all participants are awarded equally. That webtoons has a star-system where the top creators reap most of the rewards is not unusual—for those who struggle at the middle or bottom, the windfall that the most popular artists reap seem impossibly out of reach (J. H. Kim & Yu, 2019, p. 5). This is especially true when you consider that only 1.8% of all webtoon creators make the majority of their income from copyright sales, and while 120,000 creators compete monthly in uploading content on Naver, only a mere 0.03% are commissioned by the platform to become a paid creator (J. H. Kim & Yu, 2019, pp. 5–6). This has created an ambivalence around the free labour of amateurs, sometimes pitched as a form of "(work) volunteerism" where budding creators are adding value to platforms as a way of honing their skills in the hope of attaining a future career (J. H. Kim & Yu, 2019, p. 6). That is not to argue that *all* webtoon creators are necessarily labouring under this pretext—key to the tension inherent in academic arguments about the growth in "free labour" in digital context is that at least *some* of it is given purely for the purpose of personal enjoyment.

That said, controversies over underpaid creators and blacklisting of insubordinate artists also exist in webtoons, as they do in many other industries, digital or otherwise. Core to these disputes are the same complaints by creatives everywhere—the intense competition and over-saturation resulting from low barriers of entry, and the inability to charge high prices due to the ubiquity and availability of free digital content. These problems are also not unique to artists, as platforms also need to attract users, deflect governmental and marketplace challenges, and cut costs to compete with other platforms for views and paying customers. It is no surprise that disputes can arise from the tensions between the need to attract creators with generous contracts, and the tendency for tech companies to squeeze maximum productivity from their internal employees while paying as little as possible.

An example is the 2017 labour dispute between adult content publisher Lezhin, and the public airing of grievances over payments, contracts, and communication issues by some of their creators (Yecies & Shim, 2021, pp. 125–127). Lezhin had previously survived a government crackdown on lewd content, but soon found itself embroiled in accusations of unfair payments to creators regarding overseas distribution and profit-sharing. Creators also accused Lezhin of enforcing late fees and penalties on authors who didn't upload on time, and of legal intimidation and creating a blacklist of vocal authors, who then found themselves shut out of advertising and promotional campaign opportunities. Lezhin would later apologise to the creators, but the public fallout left a dark mark on the company's "creator-friendly" reputation.

It also brings into focus the power imbalances between webtoon platforms and the creators whose work they rely upon, particularly in the role of foreign creators posting on the international arm of webtoon platforms. If one considers that webtoons is not a Korea-specific platform, but instead seeks to absorb the creative works and online audiences of other regions as well, one wonders how much more difficulty international creator will have in getting grievances addressed if Korean creators are vulnerable. Not that there many alternatives to webtoon platforms for digital comic artists either—by being the gathering point for such a large, global following of comic enthusiasts, it is only natural that Korean webtoon platforms have become the most logical place for comics creators, regardless of geographical location, to launch their latest work. This has the side effect of creating a closed eco-system—instead of a creator being subject to a publisher in their own country that is bound by the laws of that government, they are now subject to a transnational, transmedial corporation, whose adherence to laws and jurisdictions over issues of creative rights (whether it is over labour or intellectual property) is unclear.

There is also the problem of webtoons being partly a politically-driven project, which means that non-Korean creators will always face a steeper curve of success than native Koreans. One such situation can be seen in Naver's English webtoon site, which crowd-sources English-language webtoons by creating two tiers of creator-owned work—the paid "Webtoon Originals" section, and the unpaid "Webtoon Canvas" section. This is not unlike the Korean section of the site, which separates the competition into three tiers, in which open laissez-faire competition is encouraged, and fuelled by obtaining

positive user feedback and ratings (J. H. Kim & Yu, 2019, p. 2). In the English-language site, the former "Webtoon Originals" section are the Naver-approved works that are deemed sufficiently popular (or of adequate quality) to be actively promoted as the site's main draws, though the slots for these placements are limited, and the terms of Naver's contract with these individual creators are also unknown. The latter "Webtoon Canvas" section is where all new creators (many formerly readers of the site) begin uploading their webtoon strips, slowly gathering likes and subscribers until they hit a supposed pre-determined threshold by which they are allegedly offered a contract to join the "Webtoon Originals" section.

In other words, Naver's English webtoon platform, unlike its traditional print cousin, encompasses the *entirety* of the core-periphery dichotomy of a regular comic book market, which sees traditionally published, institutionally-approved creators and fringe, independently published works. Where originally both professional artists and amateurs had multiple avenues to find an audience, with digitization, both these groups exist side-by-side on the same data-mining, closed eco-system. This serves two purposes for webtoon platforms—not only does it allow an efficient identification of up-and-coming new trends, but it also ensures that a webtoon creator's success is algorithmically entwined with that of the platform. Should a creator build a large fanbase on a platform, it makes leaving the platform and finding success outside of it that much more difficult. This has the tendency to make both culture and the constant, active participation of their creators dependent on the platforms (H. Cho, 2021, pp. 75, 84–85), which can undermine the sometimes-forwarded argument that these amateurs are "complementary" rather than "subordinate" to the platform (J. H. Kim & Yu, 2019, p. 7).

Then there is also the problem of over-saturation in the "Webtoon Canvas" section. Due to the low barrier of entry, this section of the site is often flooded day and night by new creators, none of which are curated save for the occasional "featured" section that the site editors highlight. Since the kind of webtoons a viewer is exposed to is arbitrary and dependent on the site's black box algorithm, there is little way for a creator to stand out except to actively market themselves on other social media platforms, thereby driving new readers to Naver. In that instance, apart from being subject to the inherent

instability of a creative career, amateur creators are also required to perform a variation of "visibility labour" (Abidin, 2016, p. 87; Duffy et al., 2021, p. 3).

Originally coined for Goldhaber's (1997) attention economy, the term refers to Instagram influencers who harness the unevenly reciprocal relationship and free labour of their followers to achieve the algorithmic engagement that makes brand deals and sponsorships possible (Abidin, 2016, p. 87). It can also refer to the posturing and self-curation that influencers do to appear noticeable and prominent online, in order to attract clients, followers, the media, and other audiences in the hope that their outsized digital presences can be harnessed for commercial gain (Abidin, 2016, p. 89). In the world of amateur webtoon artists, it emerges as the need for creators to battle the whims of Silicon Valley algorithms for visibility on social media platforms, in order to drive traffic to their comic on the oversaturated Webtoon platform. It therefore is a hidden cost (embedded into the system) that sits on top of the emotional labour of self-funding the production of a webtoon, and one that generates no small amount of fear and anxiety. Unfortunately, there is little way around it—a lack of transparency over how the algorithm functions on a platform are part of what keeps creators posting more, while also performing the additional work of driving new readers to their webtoon, and therefore the platform.

This system shows how platform capitalism feeds directly into the neoliberal rhetoric of the meritocratic entrepreneurial artist who succeeds in finding an audience through hard work. By locking creators into a handful of large, closed eco-systems with a two-tiered system that separates success and failure by a single tab click, they effectively stymy the possibility of success outside such systems in the first place. Few digital comics creators starting out today will even consider creating outside such systems, due to a lack of infrastructure and audience. As is the nature of such monopolistic structures, which can be one of the outcomes of neoliberal policies where all aspects of life are pushed towards privatisation, participation is almost mandatory. It is here at this juncture where platform capitalism also intersects with the expropriative nature of capitalism as theorized by Fraser (2014) regarding the "semi-proletariat". Just as Fraser suggests that the only way for capitalism to continually expand in a Fordist model of labour is to expropriate the non-marketised parts of a worker's time, platform capitalism has found a

way to capitalize off the labour of freelancers that they previously had to pay for. Instead of having to pay creators through wages or licensing fees in the way of traditional publishers, the monopolization that platform capitalism allows has led freelancers to freely give away their work for the mere chance of exposure to a large audience.

Lastly, webtoons also follows the logic of neoliberal platform capitalism by having an audience that primarily consists of prosumers. Their multi-lingual sister-sites have legions of fan translators who produce translated editions of their favourite webtoons, creating a scenario where the platform is benefiting from the unpaid labour of fans who may later aspire to become webtoon creators themselves (Jin, 2023, pp. 153–154). This sort of dynamic places webtoon platforms closer to social media platforms, which is further enhanced by the comments section that is made available at end of each webtoon episode. In theory, the comments part of the site is to provide real-time feedback to the creator and to foster a sense of support and community to the supporters of a particular webtoon, but is just as likely used for data-mining purposes. In order to take advantage of networked effects, these platforms must continually manufacture better consumers that will consume more webtoons and their associated products, engage with the site, and recruit new readers to webtoon platforms.

This is therefore an infinitely-expanding process that platform capitalism must engage in. Many of their mother company's purchases, such as Naver's purchase of Wattpad in 2021, is an example of this. Wattpad is a website that primarily functions as a prose version of webtoons, where users read and self-publish written works of fiction either original or fan-fiction based around a particular piece of IP. At first glance, it may seem irrelevant to the visually-driven nature of webtoons, but what this business decision reflects is a desire to combine different creative audience bases to cross-promote, so as to satisfy platform capitalism's drive towards monopolisation. Given Naver's core business is information-driven, and how the quality of its product increases through its harvesting of user data as networked nodes, it would be incorrect to argue that Naver or Daum are even in the creative arts business sector at all. For such technology giants, the production of cultural content has little meaning outside of consumer data collection, and even whether the work is of quality or cultural significance is irrelevant. Likewise, the transmedial approach of turning webtoons into IP engines that spin-off across a range of

mediums occurs not even as profit-motivated decisions, but rather as a way of attracting and retaining users to data-mine.

Still, the obscured hand of the government-driven "Korean Wave" directive behind many of these projects will ultimately require such businesses to prioritise the works of Korean creators over those of international origin. This does not bode particularly well for the working conditions of overseas webtoon creators, or even the future evolution of webtoons as a form within Korea itself. Given the current situation, there is little to no incentive for any of these platforms to change their manner of operation, let alone give priority to the rights and desires of the comic labourers that fuel its platform.

The Continual Evolution of the Free-to-Read Online Model

Despite the aforementioned grim prospects of the webtoon creative labourer, it should be clarified that the webtoon business model is far from settled, nor is it necessarily going to be the dominant form of digital comics going forward. Webtoons may have gathered the largest global audience when it comes to free-to-read comics, and popularized its vertical-scrolling reading format (whether or not they include technological innovations such as augmented reality (AR) or virtual reality (VR), music, animation, multimedia, and the such), but the online space is constantly evolving. Regardless of whatever medium digital comics may grow to encompass, trends will wax and wane, and audiences will always flock to whatever platform provides the most entertaining and compelling stories.

Likewise, while Korean webtoons have a head start on the free-to-read online comics space, it would be wrong to discount the competition from Japan's traditional manga publishers as they actively push back and begin seriously competing with webtoons. According to statistics, Japan still retains a whopping 43% of global sales of comics, compared to the US with 15% and South Korea (in 2015) with 11% (Turrin, 2021), so in terms of total volume sales, it is still ahead in terms of measurable comic sales. It is worth noting that while US and Europe all respectively sport a digital comic sales rate of less than 10%, both Japan and South Korea have digital comic sales that make up 55% and 50% of its total comic sales respectively (Turrin, 2021). In other words, although

Japan's digital manga market consists only of scanned versions of its black-and-white traditional print manga—lacking the experimentation in format and technological wizardry of Korean webtoons—it has no trouble finding a paying audience. In fact, with the onset of Japanese manga publishers producing their own free-to-read digital manga platforms such as [Shounen Jump+](#) (launched in 2013), overall sales of manga have only grown.

Even more impressive are the break-out hits of Japan's free-to-read manga, such as "Spy x Family", "Kaiju No. 8", and "DanDaDan", all of which have managed to move hundreds of thousands of print books (on top of digital sales). These sales figures, representing measurable sales of tangible products that have been made available for free, resemble its traditional print sales model so closely that one can only argue that the move from serialized print magazines to online free-to-read was a great success. In fact, if one were to look at Japan's weekly print manga bestseller lists, it would be impossible to tell at a glance which titles were digital free-to-read, and while were traditionally published as serials in print magazines. If the creative labourers who work in the Japanese online manga space have the same contract terms as those who work for the print magazines, then they represent a successful, up-and-coming crop of creators who are reaping the windfalls of a new business model.

If one were to measure success through the metrics of profitability and compensation to the original creators, then Japan's new digital model is giving Korea's webtoon model a run for its money. Ultimately, the success of one model over another may change the direction that digital comics could develop in, though it is also equally possible that both can co-exist since they represent radically different visions of the medium. Regardless, the resilience of Japan's direct print-to-digital model shows that the future of digital comics need not necessarily lie in innovation or technological improvements, since audiences seem content with digital versions of print manga—at least for now.

PART 4: CASE STUDY & ACTIVISM IN DIGITAL COMICS

Introduction

Now that we've established the globalized, socio-cultural-economic dominance of neoliberalism, and explained the enmeshed nature of the comic creator's output within this system, we turn to the creative part of this thesis and our case study. As I've established earlier, this part of the project is about the context of creation as much as than the content. While the (activist) content itself aims to reach a larger audience by educating the general public about the accumulative nature of capitalism, a sizeable portion of the value comes in being able to experiment within the realm of digital comics without the usual commercial pressures I have described earlier in this thesis.

Key to this is the intentional public release of the source code used in the construction of my "comic-prose" hybrid under the "Creative Commons" license. One of neoliberalism's more unsettling impulses is to subsume all aspects of life into private property, and the "digital commons"—once the foundation of a free and open digital internet—is no exception. The "commons" is the natural and cultural resources that should be accessible to all members of society, but under the auspices of neoliberalism and its cousin US Imperialism, it increasingly sees itself under attack. The concept of "Creative Commons" was created by Lawrence Lessig (2004) to counter this, by demarcating a two-tiered economy where a creator can use the license to signal that they want to participate in the "sharing economy" rather than the "commercialized economy" (Lessig, 2008, p. 226). My actions will therefore create a space for this particular format of digital comic so that community-based participation and remixes can be allowed, within the legal context of non-profit, open-source creative production. Without it, the digital comic space might end up being occupied only by commercialized takes on the medium, owned and controlled by monopolistic and hegemonic platforms.

As inspiration for the content of the digital comic itself, I used the Tobey Morris's 4-page digital comic "On A Plate" as a guiding basis. As previously stated, this comic was not chosen for analysis because it is a flawed comic—I personally believe the creator to have succeeded in what they set out to achieve. Rather, it was picked because I consider it a good starting springboard for examining similar topics in the under-explored format of digital comics—namely comic-game hybrids—which can open the simple premise of the original strip to a broader, richer vein of experiences for both readers and creators to

enjoy. For this reason, I will be offering a close reading of "On A Plate", the dissection of which will be followed by the construction of my own digital comic, which will canvas the same topics as "On A Plate" but with the additional depth that hybridisation and a different production context can allow. This will also require the activist leanings of the comics medium and the video games to be explored, as both disciplines probably have their own history and academic approaches to the subject matter.

To properly define the goals of "On A Plate", it is intended to be a digital "activist comic", written to persuade its reader to support or to oppose a particular stance on a charged and controversial topic. This is despite the fact that the term "activism" can be problematic in some academic circles, due to it being a nebulous and ill-defined word that can include, and is adjunct to, a range of activities which few would lump under the umbrella of "activism"—such as journalism and education. As a broad, all-encompassing word, it lacks the specificity and connection to an identifiable social cause which may give it concrete grounding (Lund, 2018, pp. 40–41). Unlike terms like "suffragette", "abolitionist" or "socialist" which signify the political goals of the individual by label alone, "activist" is a contentless and generic label which at best can be connected to an identifiable cause only through linkage—such as in "feminist activism" or "environmental activist". That's not to say that all activists are aware or interested in these nuances—it's not unusual to find activists who identify as engaging in "comics activism" at the juncture of graphic memoir, comics journalism, and educational comics (Davies, 2017, p. 1). Still, it is helpful to give the label of "activism" to behaviour intended to induce political, social or cultural change, so for the purposes of this thesis, I shall limit the usage of the term "comics activism" to refer to comics that specifically aim to express the creator's political beliefs.

On the other hand, activism in video games is rather unlike that in comics, and require a different kind of interrogation. This is largely because of the added layers of complexity that interactivity, rule-based play, and computational processes can bring to video games. As Ian Bogost (2007) argued in his seminal piece "Persuasive Games", "procedural representation is significantly different from textual, visual, and plastic representation", and "only procedural systems like computer software actually represent process with process" (Bogost, 2007, pp. 14–15). Unlike graphic representations such as

in comics, video games cannot be easily separated from the hardware and software systems they must function on. For that reason, when games are evaluated as persuasive arguments, an analysis that goes beyond that of just the aesthetics of the game or player experience may be required. Since computational processes are expressed through the creator's programming and therefore authored in the game's code, mounting a persuasive argument in a game may ultimately include exposing the code of a game to scrutiny (Bogost, 2007, pp. 28–29). This runs contrary to standard commercial practices in gaming, where a piece of code would be fiercely guarded as valuable intellectual property, not unlike any piece of proprietary owned software.

Since the creative component of this thesis is a comic-game hybrid, this will be taken into consideration, since within the context of this PhD, releasing the code of my creative thesis is a deliberate part of the goal, as I will later clarify. As scholarship on digital comics—let alone activism in that sphere—remains rare, it is likely that the bulk of my analysis will draws from existing scholarship from game studies, with some nods to more 'traditional' comics activism.

Activism in Comics and Video Games

The graphic arts have long been harnessed to express political beliefs or opposition, and comics is no exception. The awareness of comics as an easily accessible tool of activism amongst certain marginalised communities is fairly high in our current day and age. At first glance, it wouldn't seem logical—after all, the medium (at least in the West) first entered popular consciousness as propaganda during World War II, and had much of its more explicit and transgressive elements neutered through censorship efforts such as the Comics Code in the 1950s.

The 60s saw the surviving popular genres of comics—such as superheroes—thrive, and while superheroes of that era primarily promoted a heteronormative form of white masculinity, there were also plenty of gaps that allowed an underground strain of comics production to find a footing and an audience. This counter-cultural "comix" pushback against the more hegemonic, mainstream form of comics was primarily fixated on drugs, sex, and profanity, and while it was occasionally political, those efforts were largely

unfocussed. It wasn't until the 70s that a more organized form of comics activism emerged in the form of "women's comix", which allowed women to express themselves both as creators, and as part of the burgeoning feminist movement of the time (Lund, 2018, p. 44). This would eventually blend with other socio-political causes and emerge as various strains of feminism, such as ecofeminism (Nordenstam & Wictorin, 2022, p. 3), Marxist feminism, intersectional feminism, Anarcho-feminism, and so on.

Still, that they remained largely on the fringes of the mainstream highlights that the "structures of work [as still] defined [as] within patriarchal norms", which points to the tendency to devalue the produce of women versus that of men due to the oft informal nature of women's work (Arora, Paya; Raman, Usha; Konig, 2023, p. 19). Since the mainstream superhero comics industry was created by white men, which privileged hiring white male creators for an audience of (mostly) white men, the end result is that comics produced by women tended to be created outside this production system. The lack of actual paid work from a pre-existing system meant that these comics can be considered "informal work", and so carries lesser monetary value and cultural cache in the eyes of the readership. For this reason, the feminist redefinition of "work" (a central preoccupation of the feminist movement from the start) becomes important, since it allows for calls to expand the "classical Marxist notions of use and exchange value as they operate within a capitalist system" (Arora, Paya; Raman, Usha; Konig, 2023, p. 19). Without this process, counter-cultural "comix" and those who create it, whether they be women, people of colour, and the LGBTQ+ community, will continue to be devalued.

Regardless, the evolution of the feminist movement encouraged other oppressed and marginalised groups such as people of colour and the LGBTQ+ community to also harness the accessibility of the comics medium to produce and distribute their own "comix". Key to this has been the rallying cry of "the personal is political", a phrase coined by Carol Hanisch in the 1970s that was intended as pushback against the idea that organized political activism should focus on structural inequality rather than personal experiences (Lund, 2018, p. 44). Since the experiences of the disenfranchised are the products of, and cannot be easily excised from, the power structures that produced them, these experiences are therefore not isolated incidents but part of a pattern produced by hegemonic societal forces that has to be fought via collective action. In

other words, a disparate collection of personal experiences does not necessarily dilute political action—it can also become an organizing force (Lund, 2018, p. 44).

This brings us to the forefront of the idea of "intersectionality", a term first coined by Kimberley Crenshaw to describe how marginalised groups who exist at the crossroads of more than one kind of structural disadvantage can be invisible to those who suffer from less (Galvan, 2018, p. 375). Society may recognize racism as a negative force that discriminates against black people, or sexism as harmful against women, but may have a "blind spot" when it comes to the two-fold set of problems that black women face—as victims of both racism *and* sexism. This is further amplified when you consider the multitude of other identities said black woman might also intersect with that could create trauma, such as that of sexual orientation, disability, poverty, and so on. A single human identity can be spliced into multiple, overlapping lived experiences that can have an effect—whether minute or immense—on that person's sense of self. It can also become a galvanising force by which that person communicates their experiences, and as a way for them to push back against uncaring institutions that wound them.

Such people can be said to benefit immensely from their ability to use the graphic arts to express their frustrations, dispel loneliness, and impress their grievances on others. In particular, the comics medium is cheap, can be quickly and independently created, and with nothing more than pencil and paper. It's an accessible, impactful form of storytelling that spreads with the speed of news reports, and which can harness the power of iconic imagery to mobilise (Jaggi, 2012; Klaehn, 2022, p. 825). Through the combination of words and pictures, particularly those of facial expressions, comics can convey a sense of raw immediacy to the reader, while giving anonymity to the creator and the characters (where necessary) to protect personal identities (Nordenstam & Wictorin, 2022, p. 4).

All this makes it an apt medium for activism, except that these advantages apply mostly to comics that are hand-drawn, printed, and distributed as hardcopies within a physical space. Once you consider "comics activism" in the format of digital comics, completely new considerations come into effect—not least because of how some aforementioned comics scholars don't even regard digital comics as "comics", but as a completely different medium. One might consider "digital comics activism" as having the

same advantages that networked effects typically confer—such as speed, instantaneous global distribution, and the ability to reduce the cost of reproduction to almost zero—but it can also act as an obstacle to the disenfranchised.

To engage in "digital comics activism", one must have access to the appropriate computer hardware, the correct imaging software, a connection to the world wide web, a working knowledge of how to operate these systems, and even some level of on-going involvement with the sort of online communities that can spread and amplify your message. That is not to speak of the various institutional middlemen—internet platforms, service providers, and government bodies—which may have reasons to slow or hinder the spread of your message should it run counter to their interests. In fact, the underlying reality of our digital infrastructure means that even activists who resist Amazon's unscrupulous practices are likely hosting their websites on Amazon Web Services due to its 32% market share (Wittenburg & König, 2023, p. 146). As much as we like to believe in the democratizing nature of the internet, unless one has access to technological know-how in creating a digital comic, the advantages that "digital comics activism" can confer is almost negated by the possibility that marginalized groups may be the ones that have the *least* access to this knowledge.

For that reason, when "digital comics activism" does appear, it may or may not overlap with the medium of video games and the way in which activism is practiced and dissected within video games. Digital comics, when one considers the small amount of output that claim this label, can range from electronic versions of printed comics such as the aforementioned "On A Plate" (or even an internet meme), to fully interactive gamified (and/or narrative) experiences built using a certain piece of software and for specific online communities—and everything else in between. The possible range of approaches within this sphere is so expansive that finding a commonality amongst them is difficult, let alone critiquing and comparing *just* those with activist intentions. For ease, how activist leanings in video games are analysed and dissected in video games studies shall be examined, and used as a starting point.

Activism in video games has been noted and studied by video game scholars, though that was not always the case. Just as comics suffered from the perception that it's frivolous entertainment unworthy of serious study, so did games, until academic

acknowledgement in the 1970s that differentiated a specific category of analog pedagogical games from their counterparts which were made primarily for amusement. Termed "serious games", these were typically made and funded by schools, governments, hospitals, the military, and multinationals with the explicit goal of training employees or educating the public about the roles of these social, political and corporate institutions in civic life (Bogost, 2007, p. 55). While these games can be fun, their primary goal is to support and buttress the interests of the institutional groups that made them, and so can be regarded as a separate category to games with more grassroots, activist origins which are often made in opposition to, or outside of, the establishment (Bogost, 2007, p. 57).

While the line between "serious" games and the latter category—often called "interventionist" video games—can be blurry, the more popular theories about such games tend to look beyond just the original creators and their intentions for a deeper, broader discourse. Interventionist games may or may not be pedagogical—their primary definition is that they are games designed to influence or challenge the player's fundamental beliefs, with the ultimate goal of either reinforcing or changing said player's beliefs.

How a game does this can be loosely divided into two opposing camps of thought. The procedural approach argues that a game asserts its influence by embedding its meaning into the game's ruleset, while the constructivist approach claims that the player creates the meaning through the performative process of playing the game (Skolnik, 2013, p. 147). Not unlike the "Ludology VS Narratology" debates in the early days of video games studies, the discussion has since moved on from simple binary opposition, and has accrued more sophisticated approaches and arguments. However, it is important to first examine how these ideas came about, and what the basis of these arguments are.

One of the more foundational arguments for procedurality comes from Ian Bogost's 2007 book *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, where he proposes the idea of "procedural rhetoric". Procedurality "refers to a way of creating, explaining, or understanding processes, and processes define the way things work: the methods, techniques, and logics that drive the operation of systems, from mechanical systems like engines to organizational systems like high schools to conceptual systems

like religious faith" (Bogost, 2007, pp. 2–3). Within the context of video game studies, these "processes" in question gives digital games the unique property of being not just a set of rules that express an argument to the player, but one that is girded by the underlying processes of a computer (Sicart, 2011). This differentiates its discourse from that of analog games. Rhetoric, meanwhile, refers to *persuasion*—the ability to mount an argument using textual or visual representations with the goal of pushing a particular position while excluding other viewpoints (Bogost, 2007, p. 37). Put together, "procedural rhetoric" refers to the specific ability of video games to impose certain social, political, ethical and aesthetic values onto its player, by engaging them with a pre-defined set of computer processes and game rules that must be deciphered in order to play the game. Extensive interactivity is not necessarily needed for this to happen; many such video games do not require much user participation, with some allowing only for simple user input and configurations from which new, transformative output is generated, usually by running said user input through a hard-coded set of parameters (Bogost, 2007, pp. 40–41).

This is also one of the ways in which procedural representation is set apart from textual or visual representation—unless explicitly revealed, the inner workings of procedural representation are often opaque to the player, since it's embedded within a game's code. Termed the "black box", this is where a player is prevented from a full understanding of a game's inner workings (Williams, 2020, p. 569), either as a function of limiting a player's interaction with the code to only its user interface, or the need to protect the software's proprietary code as intellectual property. This is an oft-critiqued situation since it hampers a fully-rounded analysis of a game and authorial intent—as Bogost notes in the case of simulation games such as "SimCity"— "opening the box" will better allow players to critique it. However, counter arguments exist as to whether understanding an interventionist game depends on a player's grasp of a game at the code level. Certainly players grasp how a game like "SimCity" is played, but if they don't want to engage critically with it, whether the approach is "black box" or not will make little difference (Bogost, 2007, pp. 62–63). This dilemma inherent to the relevance of code as part of player experience, in the discourse of procedural rhetoric, is an important one in

regard to my creative thesis, so I will be returning to this topic when I discuss my own practice-led research later.

When "procedural rhetoric" was first proposed, it furnished the medium of video games with theoretical underpinnings that gave it some coveted respectability, while also giving it a distinct identity apart from other types of digital media (Sicart, 2011). It opened the doors for academic discourse on video games as a valid and unique medium for cultural expression, and it was nuanced enough to allow for the rupture that occurs between a "rule-based representation of a source system and a user's subjectivity" (Bogost, 2007, p. 107). This is termed "simulation fever", which is the internal crisis that arises when a player knowingly interacts with a simplified version of a real-life complex system—such as a navigational map that is a representation of an actual location—and the player's personal understanding and experience of this gap.

Despite its consideration for both sides of the equation, procedurality is not without its critics, most notably Miguel Sicart's 2011 polemic "Against Procedurality". One of his arguments is that Bogost's theory focuses more on "procedural representation" rather than "player agency", and its design-centric focus places the onus of the interventionist game on the game designer to produce an experience that can properly communicate its message. This feeds into the practice-based philosophy of game creators, which spurs them to consciously make design decisions that buttress this theoretical framework when they want to be perceived as "serious"— thus becoming a self-perpetuating cycle in terms of discourse. This can imply that the player experience is not agentic, or borne out of a player's own whimsical, creative or performative self-expression, but rather something that can be shaped and predicted through thoughtful, unidirectional game design (Sicart, 2011). The popularity of these ideas also highlight the lack of a compelling, structured counter-discourse—a "theory of play", so to speak—that can advocate for the argument that play "is not a scientific process, but is within the realm of the myth and the rite as much as within the realm of rationality" (Sicart, 2011). By de-emphasising the ability of the player to disobey, subvert, or change the rules of a game they are playing, it can narrow the understanding of games and their potential from an aesthetic and cultural viewpoint.

This proceduralist VS constructivist debate has not been resolved, but it has since involved more nuance. One proposed approach was by viewing procedurality not as a singular force, but on a spectrum between "strong" and "weak". As theorised by Michael Skolnik in 2013, "strong" procedurality refers to games with a fixed ruleset, a strict authorially-intended meaning, and a rhetoric with the specific intention to guide. On the other hand, "weak" procedurality is the opposite, referring to games with an open ruleset that allows multiple styles of play, and the player's own personal interpretations of a game's semiotic content rather than the ruleset alone (Skolnik, 2013, p. 151). Since most games will fall somewhere between these two polar opposites, such conceptions of procedurality allows a more holistic approach to the debate amongst others, while erasing an artificial dichotomy between two supposed schools of thought. By expanding the sphere of possible considerations when it comes to how interventionist video games can be analysed, these new frameworks also pave the way for both ruleset design and player experience to be simultaneously dissected.

An Analysis: of "On A Plate" (2015) by Toby Morris

We now return to our case study and starting point for my practice-led research, which is Toby Morris' 4-page digital comic "On A Plate" (2015). As previously stated, this is a simple comic that addressed the themes of class and privilege in a forthright and effective manner. Commissioned by the government-funded Radio New Zealand, which allowed Morris limited space but the artistic freedom to address issues of wealth inequality, he was even able to use limited animation to add spark into his strip and to attract reader interest. And generate interest it did—the comic went viral, filling the inboxes of many who were still struggling after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, and for whom the promised returns of a "recovering economy" never quite materialized. It also signalled a willingness of the general public to use comics to spread commentary on our current system, while advocating an artistic approach that critiques capitalism while crossing political divides. This is a comic that aims to draw attention to the growing gap between the rich and poor that is endemic to our current society, and the obliviousness of those who are ensconced in their bubble of wealth privilege. In that, it is successful.

Figure 1 – page 1 of "On A Plate"

First, let us further discuss the storytelling devices by which Morris delivers his message, and why they are effective. "On A Plate" tells its story via a series of identically-sized, boxy panels that are arranged in columns, with the left column telling the life story of the well-off (presumably male) baby Richard, while the right column details the life of the less-privileged (presumably female) baby Paula. The comic is then read from left-to-right, and down the page, with each "row" representing a new stage of the characters'

lives. This inevitably forces the reader to compare the lives of these two individuals, and turns what would otherwise be a standard page layout of a typical comic into two separate, parallel narrative streams.

From the start, the two babies are framed identically (*Figure 1, first row*), with close-ups of their faces drawn in a simple style and with muted, drab colours, to imply that these two are interchangeable. As such, what sets them apart is less a portrait of them as individuals, but the narration that informs us that Richard's parents are "doing "ok", while Paula's are "not so much". By emphasizing that these babies are the same but for their parents, this panel simultaneously supports the neoliberal discourse of how everyone is born with equal opportunities and achieve what they do via hard work, while subtly undermining that very same premise by reminding us that everyone is born to parents who may or may not have means. That the narration avoids labelling the parents as from a particular class is also an interesting choice—by *not* defining what "ok" versus "not so much" means, it avoids the terminology of class struggle and therefore the appearance of a politically-motivated comic. It also allows the strip to travel further than its intended audience of bourgeois readers—being vague helps it to achieve a sense of universality. That it is also a reasonably short comic that doesn't outstay its welcome is also helpful in spreading its message.

In the immediate next row (*Figure 1, bottom row*), the babies are now slightly older, but are now framed within the context of their immediate environment. Previously, the blank background gave away little besides the narration, but now, both words and narration supply the advantages that Richard's family home provides over that of Paula's. Here, Richard's house has drawings of toys and books, while Paula is drawn sitting on threadbare floorboards with nothing else but other wandering people. At this stage, these two babies are still drawn in similar poses like the first panel, thus showing that they are still interchangeable, although the narration now supplies an embellishment to the art by pointing out that Paula's damp living environment has made her health worse than Richard's. From then onwards, the characters are shown at each stage of their lives and in completely different poses and situations (even when the locations are the same, such as a school), thus implying that the last time they might have been *truly* equal was when they were newborns.

Figure 2 – page 2 of "On A Plate"

This manner of storytelling continues, as a stream of box-like vignettes locking these two individuals into their own worlds (*Figure 2*) while the narration explains how the accumulated years of parentally-granted advantages can give a child privilege. This reliance on narration can backfire at times—overt authorial activism in popular media can

sometimes be seen as heavy-handed moralising, and can provoke a negative reaction from the audience and cause them to reject the ideological message the work was trying to convey. Since the goal of "intervention"—as described by Baz Kershaw in his 1992 history of British political theatre—is to challenge audience beliefs and precipitate an internal crisis *without* an immediate rejection (Sicart, 2011, pp. 148–149), such a result can be counter-intuitive were it to alienate the reader.
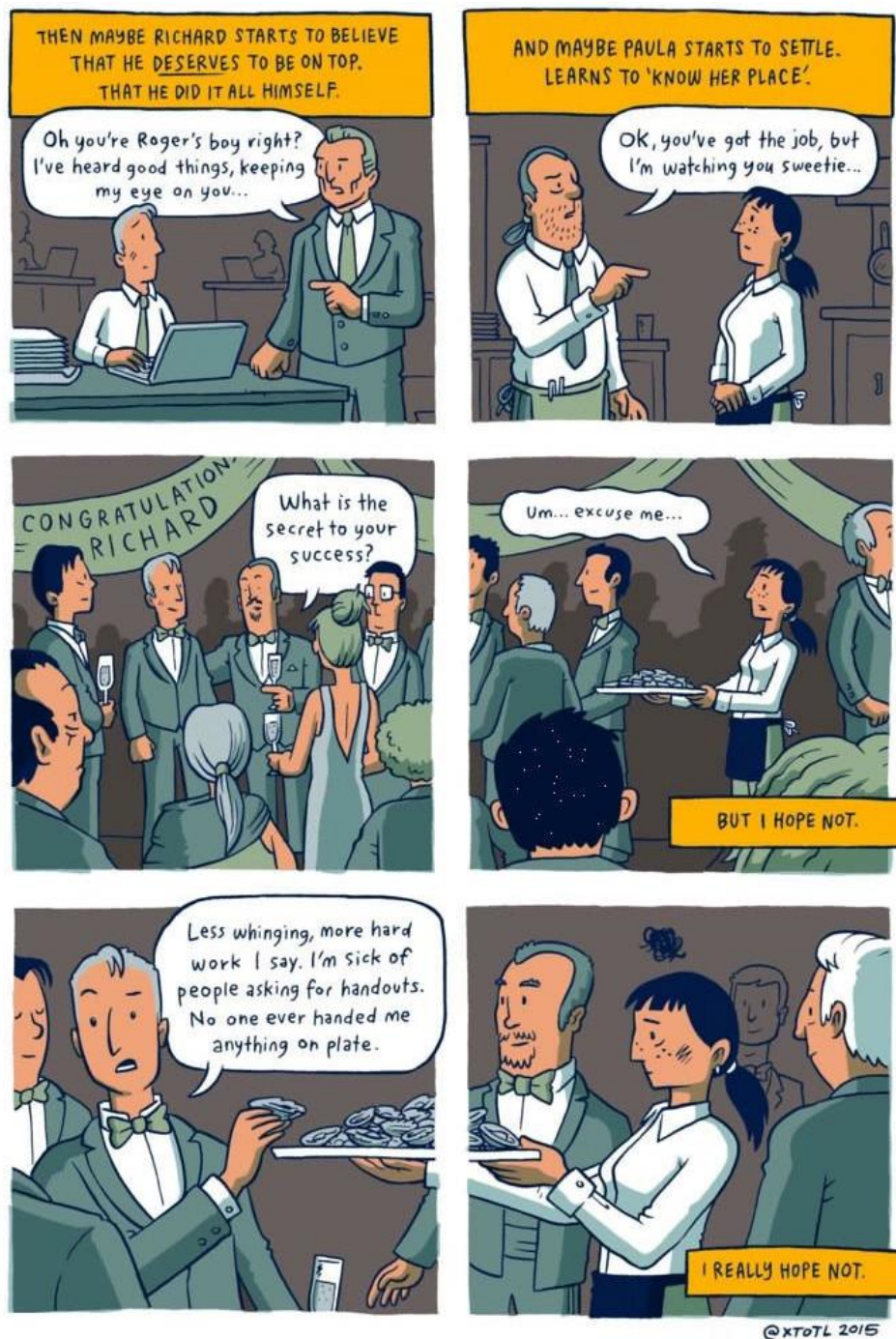

Figure 3 – page 4 of "On A Plate"

Thankfully, this is a problem that Morris largely avoids, by using an authorial narrative voice that exists primarily to describe the life circumstances of his two characters, which ends not in a conclusive statement, but in an open-ended, questioning "maybe" and "I hope not" (*Figure 3, last row*). This sidesteps any definitive statements about the entitled behaviour of the wealthy Richard, whose closing comments shows his blindness to his own class privilege and lack of awareness about the circumstances of other people's lives. By allowing the audience to make up their own minds about Richard, Morris makes his point without coming across as preachy.

At the end, Paula and Richard also break through the confines of their separate narrative streams by having their lives converge in the last two rows (*Figure 3*). After the reader experiences their clearly separate lives, these two finally exist in the same geographical space—at a party thrown to celebrate Richard's success in his career. The last two rows are each two panels of the same scene, though Richard's column and Paula's column are still separated by a panel gutter, implying that these two are still living in different worlds despite Paula standing only a few feet away from Richard. Here, Morris uses irony to great effect—as waitress Paula literally hands Richard some food on a plate, while he proudly announces that he achieved everything through hard work, and that no one ever handed him anything on a plate. Through Richard's speech that bookends the tale, the narrative is therefore able to amplify the aforementioned irony of Richard's obliviousness on two levels. One, that Richard is so ensconced in his bubble that he fails to notice Paula at all, and two, that Richard's privilege blinds him to all the advantages his own parents have been handing to him from the start that Paula never had. That Richard is the focus of Paula's attention (but not the other way around) only highlights that the gutter between them is created by Richard and not her, since as a wealthy man, he can impose his will on others while the reverse isn't true. As such, both Richard's averted eyes and the panel gutter are working together in visual harmony, to paint the portrait of a wealthy man who is wearing self-imposed blinkers.

Morris' comic clearly has an activist agenda, but it isn't necessarily an easy fit amongst the current labels that comic academics give "comics activism". Since it was produced in digital, animated format, it can't be easily deemed "comix"—which are often the province of underprivileged and marginalized communities whose greatest

distribution tool is the photocopier. Secondly, while the story follows the lives of two individuals from their moment of birth to mid-career, its simple art-style and drab, limited colour palette aims to render the life experiences of these two people as universal rather than specific. This means that this isn't intended to be an autobiographical story or a journalistic account of *actual* lived lives, but rather the contours of two possible lives that is told in a manner more akin to a parable. The story also focuses less on the individual actions of its characters, and more so on the external forces that can influence a person's decisions and their life's outcome. Lastly, its focus is also largely on wealth disparity, the oft-invisible privilege of class, and the differences in circumstances between two individuals who are otherwise interchangeable. Intersectionality is therefore largely side-stepped within the strip, even though issues of gender, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, etc are often inseparable and enmeshed in that of wealth and class.

However, it's not that such considerations are completely absent. I note that one of the later panels (*Figure 3, top row*) show Paula, who appears female and to be from a lower social class, was spoken to in a gender-based manner when she applies for a catering job. In the panel, an authority figure points at Paula and says "Okay, you've got the job, but I'm watching you *sweetie*…", a term of condescension that is unlikely to be used if Paula was male. This insinuates that the creator is aware that women on the weaker end of a power dynamic could be subjected to possible forms of harassment that men often escape, though given the brevity of the strip, there was no real space for the creator to expound on this subject at any length. The same can be said for the skin tones of the characters, which due to the palette are all the same shade—a choice that suggests a deliberate colour-blindness on the part of Morris. Since the shade of his characters' skin, in a different comic, may be interpreted as a racially-ambiguous kind of tan that could imply anyone from a Middle Eastern to an Asian ethnic make-up, it's safe to assume that the characters are coded as "white". Just as the creator must have been aware of the racial dynamics on top of gender ones, they likely avoided addressing it directly for the same reasons as previously stated.

Finally, the comic was created to be a digital comic from the start, since it included limited animation of characters blinking, flashing colours from a TV screen, and other

such minor effects. This helps draw the eye's attention and offset the lack of bright colours, but the animation added very little to the content of the strip, and it can be fully read and understood without it. Again, this is not a criticism of Morris' work, since I have reiterated many times that "On A Plate" was produced under a specific context that imposed limits and expectations on the creator's output. Instead, this raises questions of how such an effective piece of work could be further enhanced under a different framework of production—which is the thrust of my next argument.

As previously stated, Morris was commissioned by Radio New Zealand to produce "On A Plate". While RNZ is a government body open to addressing on issues such as capitalism, its namesake suggests that it is an entity devoted to pushing radio rather than the artistic boundaries of comics as a medium. Due to the low cultural status of comics in Anglophone culture, official bodies in the west that aim to develop comics as an art form (especially in the digital age) are few and far between. As addressed in the first half of this thesis, digital comics may be globally pushed by countries such as South Korea in a geopolitical bid for soft power, but that kind of engine is used largely for monetary clout and transmedial dominance rather than social critique. For that reason, if one were to take the core arguments of a digital comic like "On A Plate" and push it in a new direction so that it can have a more expansive viewpoint that includes issues of intersectionality, it's unlikely to be achievable in the commercial sphere.

Instead, a space such as academia may be a more suitable place to explore the possibilities of digital comics, where time allowances and the non-commercial considerations of a PhD will make it possible. Even If universities don't operate outside a neoliberal structure, the confines of a thesis still represent a good place to explore the boundaries between digital comics and other mediums such as video games, and how it can be a space to deeper explore the themes that our case study touches on.

The Value of Hybrids: The Comic-Game

As previously established, "On A Plate" is a short comic that effectively challenges the rhetoric behind the logic of our neoliberal society, but does not adequately include issues of intersectionality such as race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, etc. While

the list of possibilities remains inexhaustible, and Morris is certainly skilled enough to write a comic that addresses these issues, the strength of the original comic is its brevity. If the story had been more ambitious from the start, would it be possible using the length, style and format of the original comic to address the aforementioned issue?

Unfortunately, it's unlikely. Morris' comic, despite being a digital comic without a printed counterpart that should otherwise be free to experiment more with form, still conforms to the skeuomorphic image of a book. Although it could have been presented horizontally much like a computer screen, or as a single, uninterrupted comic strip that scrolls down vertically like a webtoon, it was originally still divided into four separate JPGs with three rows each, making each page resemble the printed page in its width to height ratio. The separation of the comic into four JPGs could be the website aiming to lessen loading times or the possibility of transmission errors, but the fact that each page holds six panels exactly calls that into question. Regardless of whether it was the publisher who decided the format, it was simply easier for Morris to use a format that recalls the hegemonic, familiar medium of a printed book rather than try to reinvent the wheel and possibly draw attention away from his message.

The tendency of digital comics to resemble its printed counterpart is often labelled "remediation", which is a term by new media theorists Jay Bolton and Richard Grusin (1999) to describe the interplay between old and new media. By updating Marshall McLuhan's (1964) contention that "the medium is the message" by bringing it into the digital age, remediation refers to the tendency of new media to transform old media by retaining some of these pre-existing legacy features while discarding others—though this can go both ways. It is in this process of refashioning, intermixing, and paying homage to elements from the old and the new that new media achieves cultural significance and relevance. This can primarily be achieved in two ways—*transparent immediacy*, where the goal is directness and immersion by way of making the reader forget the existence of the medium; or *hypermediacy*, where attention is drawn to the medium. Although these appear to be opposing forces, they are actually two halves of the same whole, as new media often engage both these processes to carve out new aesthetics and cultural principles.

Applied to comics, digital comics that break away from a book-like format and fulfill Scott McCloud's idea of an "infinite canvas" that transcends the limits of the physical page would qualify as transparent immediacy, since it aims to engage the reader with a reading experience that is adapted to a free-wheeling, limitless cyberspace. Conversely, hypermediacy would be an eBook or PDF on a comic-reading web platform, which aims to digitise printed comics and display them as is, on a screen or tablet regardless of actual reading experience. Curiously, Morris' comic is a combination of both—its conformity to the page-like structure of a book recalls conventional printed comics, while its simple animation, presented as infinitely-looping animated GIFs, recalls some of the most commonly used forms of internet memes and self-expression. It is therefore a good example of new media mixing with the old, but the fact that it's closer to the printed page means that it also has all the pitfalls and limitations of the printed medium.

An example would be the two-column format of Morris' comic. Even if Morris wanted to break with the comparative nature of a dual column setup by adding a third column, this wouldn't be possible since a dual-column format is a common, pre-established, and well-understood layout in comics. Since printed comics evolved according to the finite edges of a sheet of paper, it has its own visual language and compositions that lend itself to particular effects, and it also has an audience that has absorbed and decoded its various storytelling norms through repeated exposure. Changing those norms won't necessarily allow for better communication of Morris' beliefs, so it's safe to say that the comparative dual-column setup should remain as is.

But if the hypermediated nature of Morris' comics mean that it would be difficult to marry the brevity of his comic with intersectional themes, would merging two mediums together—such as comics and video games—better achieve that? As the various inconclusive arguments between comics scholars have proven, digital comics are such a broad and poorly-defined medium that there no limitations to how it is expressed so long as it's digital. If that's the case, wouldn't it be possible to replace the simple animated gif portion of Morris' comic with the procedural nature of a computerised system, the kind that girds all digital representations? In other words, if one were to apply Bogost's ideas of "procedural rhetoric" in video games to a digital comic, it would result in a comic-game hybrid that will use a set of rules plus the underlying processes of a computer system to

argue its points and persuade the reader/player. When one considers the realm of ludic and narrative capabilities that video games can explore compared to the oft-linear nature of comics, a range of new possibilities suddenly open up. If one was to explore the hair-splitting nature of a single lived experience as seen through various intersecting identities, video games might be able to explore this complexity in ways that a printed or even a conventional digital comic cannot.

Comic-game hybrids haven't been explored much in academia (Rauscher et al., 2020, pp. 1–2). Despite games and comics having intersected since the 1970s— particularly in games that borrowed from the visual language of comics for their narrative scenes and even for their ludic ones—until recently, scholars have yet to delve deeply into these connections (Rauscher et al., 2020, pp. 1–2). While there have been video games based off successful comics, and comics versions of popular game franchises, the scholarship in this area lags behind that of video games and film, or that of comics and film. This is starting to change, however, as a new generation of comics and video games scholars are now beginning to examine the historic synergies and convergence of these two distinct mediums.

The methodology remains up for debate, as academics strive to examine these intersections from a variety of angles. One includes the idea of "hybrid medialities", which look at how "comics and videogames borrow, adapt, and transform a diverse range of aesthetic, ludic, and narrative strategies conventionally associated with the "other" medium" (Rauscher et al., 2020, pp. 2–3). Another is "transmedia expansions", where new interpretations of an existing media franchise that may have originated in one medium are adapted into another medium, whether as the same or as a new story, thus creating an ever-expanding set of media experiences for dedicated fans of a particular franchise to follow. Neither of these modalities are clear-cut and some may overlap, but they serve as a useful springboard by which discussions on synergies between video games and comics may begin.

For the purposes of my creative thesis, I will be focusing on the idea of a hybrid comic-game. I intend to create a digital comic that functions primarily as a comic, but which borrows elements from the medium of video games to add randomized branching narratives to something that would otherwise be a straight-forward narrative like Morris'

"On A Plate". This is not without precedent—while the majority of known comic-game hybrids tend to be video games borrowing from comics, there are some creations that begin in comics, and then deliberately incorporate elements from video games. One such example is the work of academic Daniel Merlin Goodbrey, who borrows from Jesper Juul's 2005 classic game model to produce comic-game hybrids through practice-led research. Goodbrey's own analysis of his prototypes *A Duck Has an Adventure*, *Icarus Needs* (2013), and *Margaret Must Succeed* (2013) can provide some theoretical basis by which my own comic-game can be compared and contrasted with.

Not that hybrid comic-games are necessarily the only form of interactive digital comics. Within South Korea's Webtoons, there are also a fair number of webtoons which have attempted to evolved the format by incorporating technological bells and whistles. Over the years, Webtoon giants Naver and Daum has experimented with augmented webtoons that have added dubbing, music, sound effects, limited animation, augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), mixed reality (MR), haptic feedback, etc. which has blurred the boundaries between comics and other mediums (Yecies & Shim, 2021, pp. 129–140). However, while the range of experimentation is to be lauded, demand has been tepid from readers. Meanwhile, the dearth of academic studies on webtoons itself also means that even if there were attempts at comic-game hybrids in enhanced webtoons, it might have passed unnoticed by scholars of the form.

Nor has the concept of "comic-games" been universally accepted. While Goodbrey's research is commendable, academics such as Hans-Joachim Backe (2020) have pushed back on the concept of hybrids as incoherent. Backe's general argument is that research into the interrelations between games and comics are still in their infancy, and while the concept of a "hybrid" is widely-used and understood, it tends to refer to "a blend of otherwise rather distinct yet hard to define concepts" (Backe, 2020, pp. 62–63). This is problematic since both games and comics, as distinct media forms, do not have clear definitions that are universally agreed upon by scholars in either sphere. By that logic, labelling something as a "hybrid" and then subjecting it to a regimen of checkboxes that its original forms never had to meet is contradictory. This is further complicated when one considers that leading game scholar Espen Aarseth has characterized video games as a "hybrid" form to begin with (Backe, 2020, p. 64), while some comics theorists

such as Thierry Groensteen (2013), Anthony Rageul (2014), and Dittmar (2012) maintain that digital comics is a "hybrid" medium separate to traditional comics. Further hybridizing forms that were hybrids to begin with would be self-defeating and postulate an impossible task to quantify, so while Backe doesn't advocate abandoning the idea of "hybrids" completely, he argues against using the word to categorise complex cultural artefacts (Backe, 2020, p. 64).

Regardless of the pushback, I choose to categorise my game as a "comic-game" and to ignore all on-going semantic debates as to whether that term or concept should exist at all—or whether the proper term should be "game-comics" rather than "comic-games". I'm side-stepping the issue due to the focus of this section, which is on using digital comics and the procedural nature of computer systems for activist and persuasive reasons. The core focus is on intersectionality, and highlighting the problematic nature of the neoliberal system shaping our lives. Using the template established by Toby Morris' comic "On A Plate", I look to overlay ludic qualities to the underlying comic, thereby addressing some of the core themes Morris could not, and hopefully in an interesting way. The plan is to use the free game engine Unity as my tool of production, which will allow me to create a comic that has the functionality and narrative/ludic possibilities that a game does through the basis of a computer program.

Goodbrey: The Theory of "Comic-Games"

As previously discussed, while Goodbrey's theories of comic-game hybridity is not without its flaws, it still provides a useful guideline for what considerations my own practice-led research should entail. In his article, he first highlights Jesper Juul's theories of what underpins a game, and names six characteristics: which includes the idea of rule-based play, variable and quantifiable outcomes that have differing values to which the player is attached to and needs to exert effort to earn, and the ability to replay the same set of rules (Goodbrey, 2015, pp. 4–5). A game may or may not have all these qualities, but suffice to say, they should have most.

Apart from this, games can also be loosely divided into two main types, which not unlike the earlier debates about procedurality VS player agency, revolve around the

rigidity of the game experience. The first is the "emergent" game, which is a common form of game structure due to the fact that the rules are few and the outcome has a wide variation and deviation in its manner of play. The other are "games of progression"—by way of the adventure genre in video games—which tend to be games that require the player to perform a set of pre-defined actions before progression can be achieved (Goodbrey, 2015, p. 5). It is important to note that this definition can also fit the medium of comics—which means that for Goodbrey at least, there lies a possible intersecting point in the category of "games of progression" where games and comics can find common ground (Goodbrey, 2015, p. 5).

In considering the kinds of video games which use the comics medium more directly rather than just aesthetic or narrative bridge reasons, Goobrey mentions the examples of *Redhawk* and *Dice Man*. Made in 1986, both games attempt to marry text-based input or a choose-your-own-adventure style of gameplay that displayed the player's choices in a series of comic panels, which can produce a series of wide-ranging possible outcomes. Despite the fact that both games were intended to be video games, their presentation of the player's choices and their use of sequential panels classifies them as "hypercomics"—defined by Goodbrey as "a comic with a multicursal narrative structure" (Goodbrey, 2013, p. 190). Such a comic is defined by the deliberate choices that a reader must make as they progress through a narrative, which is a mainstay of digital comics due to the medium's ability to play with the spatial relationships between panels in the McCloudian "infinite canvas". This creates an underlying linkage between these types of "games of progression" and the idea of the "infinite canvas".

As previously established, there has been no agreement among comics scholars about what entails a "comic", but even within the borderless realm of a digital canvas, some key rules can be established. Without going too much into comics theory, it's safe to say that most comics are primarily word-image blends with reader-controlled pacing, that uses the juxtaposition and closure of images arranged in spatial networks that denotes time. These have various graphic schema that is tied to genre, culture, tradition, or publishing process, and while this definition is far from all-encompassing since it excludes single-panel gag or political cartoons, digital comics has only helped push the importance of spatiality in defining the comics medium (Goodbrey, 2015, pp. 5–7). This is

significant, because apart from the concept of "progression" treading similar ground in both the comics and games medium, spatiality is also a way that video games can be defined. An example is the way players are often motivated to progress in a game by exploring an infinitely expanding space, while certain games may include the manipulation or exploration of space as a mechanic, or use the unlocking of new space as a player reward (Goodbrey, 2015, pp. 7–8).

This motivates Goodbrey to use spatiality as one of the defining features of his practice-led research, leading him to create two hypercomics called *A Duck Has an Adventure* and *Icarus Needs*. The former begins with a single panel and has the player guide a duck to unlock new temporal spaces, while the latter involves moving a character through a game world presented as a series of comic panels, which allows the player's choices to reveal and shape the space. In other words, these are game-comics that blend both emergent and progression games together while expressed in the visual schema of comics, unfolding in a manner not unlike a choose-your-own-adventure book, where the player builds their own narrative through their choices.

My own comic-game is much in the vein of Goodbrey's—as it must be, to fit his definition of a hybrid, but also because with Morris' "On A Plate" as its base inspiration, there is much of Morris' comic to keep in my own creative practice. However, it is interesting to note that Goodbrey is adamant that "it is always up to the player to determine his own path through the world. This freedom of choice is a key element of videogames" (Goodbrey, 2015, p. 11), which theorists such as Baerg (2009), Oliva (2018), Pérez-Latorre & Oliva (2019) and Tulloch et al. (2019) also assert through an agentic, neoliberal lens. While I don't disagree with the argument that player agency is an important and pleasurable part of gameplay, in this creative thesis, it is possible to subvert player agency through game design choices, while using the subversion to make a political statement as will be discussed below.

PART 5: MY COMIC-GAME— "CAPITALISM: PARALLEL LIVES"

Introduction

Now that I have analysed Morris' comic strip and highlighted some of its weaknesses, I aim to use the format of my own "comic-game" hybrid to address some of these shortcomings. Since his work focused almost entirely on class differences, one of the missing vectors of his approach was the lack of intersectional issues such as racial and gender-based inequality, which is something I can improve upon in my own work. One way to do this in my comic-game is by allowing multiple player-chosen personal identities and branching story paths, which will help inject diverse experiences into the narrative. Since my goal in my own practice-led research is also party to experiment with digital comic formats outside a commercial context and to mount an argument using procedural rhetoric, I will *not* be following the path of Goodbrey by exploring the spatiality of comic-game hybrids. Instead, I will be taking the comparative, parallel narrative aspects of Morris' comic and inserting character configuration and branching storylines. I will also reconfigure the format for the computer screen, thereby upending the dual column layout of the original. In doing so, it can radically alter the reader experience, particularly when you add various ludic aspects that grant the reader a different sense of personal investment.

One of the reasons why Morris' dual-column layout was effective was because of the original page ratio—with the height longer than the width, the reading direction of sideways and down a page is comfortable for the reader, and supports his story of comparative parallel lives. However, within the context of a game engine that uses the landscape ratio of a computer screen, it gives the opportunity to recreate Morris' narratives in side-scrolling, horizontal format where the reader will read the comic from left-to-right, and with its pacing controlled by the reader. In other words, instead of two lives presented in two vertical columns of panels denoting *equality*, I intend to present two lives in two horizontal rows of panels denoting *hierarchy*. I believe that in a neoliberal world, this better represents the contrasted experiences of various

disadvantaged groups with others who are closer to the ideal neoliberal self of "white middle class" (Pérez-Latorre & Oliva, 2019, p. 794).

Since Morris had side-stepped issues of race and gender by focusing on the core theme of class only, in my version, I will directly address these issues by using branching narratives determined partly by the reader's designated race, gender *and* class. Instead of two characters whose experiences are informed only by class, there will be two characters whose experiences are shaped by an intersection of identities, some self-selected by the reader at the start of the comic-game, and some randomly assigned. This approach will inevitably lead to the privileging of certain characteristics over others in an arbitrarily-created hierarchy determined by me, but this is done with the intention to create a heightened awareness in the reader of such identities in the first place, and the specific sorts of difficulties they may encounter. Since presenting dual lives in a "top row" versus "bottom row" fashion is a subtle visual signifier of status, few will question being presented with a "wealthy light-skinned male" on the top, and a "poor dark-skinned woman" on the bottom. However, if we are being presented with a "wealthy dark-skinned male" and a "wealthy light-skinned female", how will the two be placed in a hierarchy? What about a "wealthy dark-skinned female" and a "poor light-skinned male"? These combinations obviously exist in real life, but they are rarely mentioned in everyday discourse.

Since this part of the thesis addresses neoliberalism and the capitalist goal to accumulate wealth, wealth will always be privileged over any other, although the order of gender followed by skin tone is an arbitrary choice. This choice arises not because I believe sexism (such as in gender-based expectations) is a more potent source of oppression compared to racism (such as in police profiling)—there is no way to quantify that, and experiences vary from person to person. Instead, it's to shed light on the fact that there are various intersectional identities that get more press time that others, and therefore occupy a larger space in the public consciousness than others. For example, while one imagines the life of the "wealthy light-skinned male" to be quite different to that of the "poor dark-skinned female", would that of the "wealthy dark-skinned male" be that much different to the former? What about the "wealthy dark-skinned female"?

There is no way to provide any kind of definitive answer to such questions. However, in a creative thesis about capitalist society where wealth is presumed to hold the most sway, I made a conscious choice to depict the life of the "poor light-skinned male" as closer to that of the "poor dark-skinned male" than the "wealthy light-skinned male". In our everyday discourse, we often bisect people on basis of race, gender, or class and combinations therewith, but rarely touch on configurations that are little seen or discussed—even though they exist. This creative thesis aims to bring direct attention to the experiences of these groups in a comparative manner, thereby challenging some of the assumptions a reader may have about the functions and pitfalls of a capitalist society. By juxtaposing randomized combinations of these identities in two parallel lives arranged in a hierarchical order, some startling revelations about how race, gender and class function in capitalist societies may be uncovered. Since this project aims to take a pedagogical approach and challenge the presumptions of the general public, this may serve as a useful educational tool to raise questions, even as it cannot (nor does it aim to) provide answers.

However, the weaknesses of this approach are also manifold. While this project aims to add intersectional viewpoints to Morris' original setup, many limitations exist in my setup–not least due to my own personal life experiences and also the boundaries of what is achievable within a doctoral thesis. I will discuss these problems next, and while there are no resolutions to be had by trying to box in what would otherwise be an infinitely-expanding project, there are solutions that may help alleviate some of the problems with this project.

Limitations and Solutions

My goal may be to transform the basis of Morris' "On A Plate" into a digital comic that can include intersectionality in its class discussion, but my approach is not without many limitations—one of which is its narrow scope. The subject matter of class, gender and race is a controversial one to begin with, and this sort of project can touch on some sensitive topics that readers may latch onto, and derail the activist argument. Due to the way popular narratives have been embedded and disseminated in conventional

discourse, I have been careful to avoid appearing as if I am specifically targeting or criticizing a certain group, particularly for people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

For that reason, I have gone out of my way in scenario setup and in the narration to avoid talking about the personal. Instead, I created situations that are largely the result of external forces imposing themselves on the individual, with a focus on the way random emergencies and tragedies can strike a life, and the restrictions in terms of monetary ability for that person to dig themselves out. To show that, I deliberately used a style of artwork that is cartoony and simplistic, to the extent that all the characters look very neutral and non-descript. All the familial relationships in the story are also mostly depicted as loving and supportive, even though many people regardless of class, skin tone or gender do not come from such families.

While this is helpful when it comes to arguing that individuals under neoliberalism aren't as agentic as its rhetoric believes, this approach ultimately places me in a double-bind. Due to its broadness and commitment to universality, the narrative is also unable to achieve truly impactful emotional moments. Even though the branching narrative approach allows for the inclusion of gender and race-based discrimination, it also does this in an arbitrary manner, and depicts both gender and race in a binary and therefore superficial fashion. This makes this project a good starting point for the average person to think about intersectionality in a capitalist society, but its current setup is not much more than that. Although it is a project capable of makes its point quickly, for the already converted, there is little more that this particular variation of the project can add to enrich their experience.

There is also the problem of my own personal background as an upper-middle class heterosexual Asian woman from a privileged immigrant background. There are many aspects of my *own* life that are not reflected in the scenarios that I've presented, and I'm aware that there are many *more* scenarios that are also not being reflected. Even with the scenarios that are, my own specific background means that I can't adequately depict them, particularly the lived experiences of those from disadvantaged segments of society. There are no orphans or wards of the state, no refugees, no migrants, no homelessness, little LGBTQ+ representation, no disability, no depiction of mental illnesses and/or neurodiversity, and so on—the list is endless. Oddly enough, there are also no depictions

of the superrich 1%, the truly destitute, or even the middle class. Even in a comic-game that is ostensibly about class, these are stratified solely within the binary of upper middle-class and the working-class only, whatever these terms even mean these days.

I can argue that this comic-game was produced under the limited scope of a doctoral thesis, and that this comic-game was intended to be pedagogical outreach to a general public that is underinformed on neoliberalism. The reason for this is because while it could also have been a hybrid targeted at comic creators to educate them about creative labourers in platform capitalism (as befitting the topic of this thesis), I felt that as an activist comic-game, reaching a wide an audience as possible should be a priority. Unfortunately, comic creators are just a tiny population of the average population, so creating subject matter that can engage the attention of the average person was the more potent choice. I can also point out that the secondary goal for this creative portion, as previously stated, is to create an open-source format for digital comics outside the sphere of a commercialized webcomics-space dominated by Webtoons and the multi-national conglomerates that operate within that space. By operating under a university-funded (but still neoliberal) context, I at least can avoid the usual questions of ownership and profit-generation that labour-intensive mediums like comics are typically subjected to.

Under those auspices, it is not unreasonable to suggest that this project has achieved its stated aims, but these goals can also be expanded in other ways, and in turn, reduce the limitations of this project. Having been aware of the more problematic nature of this comic-game from the start, it occurred to me that there *is* a solution this issue, though it cannot be solved by myself alone due to the blinkers of my own lived experiences. Instead, it can be solved by opening the source code of the game to the general public and inviting them to have their own input—by giving them the capacity to create their own version of the narrative. Since the game is built using Unity, a free-to-use game engine that can be downloaded, and the game's art and source code is licensed under a "Creative Commons" license, sharing it in the public domain is possible. This means that I am creating an open-source, free-to-use engine which anyone can utilize for their own remixing purposes, whether it's to create their own versions of my story, or for something else.

This act is in alignment with another general purpose of this project, which is to address intersectionality within the overarching premise of a capitalist society. The conception of intersectionality is that each one of us is socially-enmeshed and historically-constituted within our own lived experiences and intersections of structural oppression (some more so than others)—but small-scale stories can still coalesce around and contribute to a large-scale movement, such as in the maxim "the personal is political". Since the structure of this comics-game entails two individual lives to be compared with each other stage by stage, the characters can easily be swapped out or expanded to include different variations, and so can the situations they encounter— making it a "character builder" and "scenario engine" of sorts.

This also proves to be a useful way of pre-empting criticism of an already imperfect activist comic-game. Since the nature of this project is bound to attract criticism from all sides of aisle, there is no better way to moderate a vibrant discussion than to allow people to create their own spin on a narrative if they feel it doesn't adequately address their experiences. A reader who wants more situations or more character variations can thus be empowered to become part of the conversation, by shifting the power imbalance that is traditionally held by the game designer into something a bit more equitable, and dare I say—democratic.

The act of releasing a comic-game's source code as *part* of the comic-game itself can also radically alter the way that the comic-game is evaluated, read, and perceived. For starters, in an activist project where the target of critique is the neoliberal rhetoric of personal agency in a world of supposed equal opportunity and endless choices, this invitation to directly tinker with the project's game rules is just one more subversive dig at neoliberal ideology. Secondly, this action challenges the sort of analytical framework this hybrid was originally classified under—not quite one of Goodbrey's "hypercomics" due to lack of player agency with its branching narratives, it has also shifted its place on Skolnick's spectrum of "strong/weak procedurality". While previously, the designer-centric nature of the comic-game, its pointed agenda, and the deliberate and ironic lack of player agency may situate it as "strongly procedural", the release of the source code as part of the experience may pull it back towards open-ended rules and player interpretation. However, this is not a universal experience for all readers, since a sizeable

number of them would not have the interest or technical know-how to use the source code to create their own version of the game.

This is also a pitfall of this approach—it may alleviate some criticisms and have other side benefits, but it is hardly accessible to the groups who may benefit the most from this open-source approach to code. Much like my original critique of activist digital comics, anything that is beyond a pen, paper and photocopier already disadvantages groups that have trouble accessing a computer and internet connection, let alone understanding how to decipher computer code well enough to use a game engine. After all, what I'm doing is not much like "modding", where a game developer creates in-game tools to encourage their player base to build their own in-game scenarios, thereby creating new content for other players to enjoy. Something like this is often done for commercial benefit, and is closer to an appropriation of a player's base free labour, as well as a way to lock-in a player's base time and investment with a game due to the sunk cost fallacy. I provide the source code as is, without any integration with the comic-game or any attempt to explain how and why I programmed the game that I did. Since I am not a professional programmer, I doubt I'm following the industry's best practices.

However, computer code can also be evaluated alongside the game itself, since games can be studied not just through its public interface alone, but also its code. The tendency of academics to overly focus on the computer screen, dubbed "screen essentialism", treats a computer screen as the "sole object of study at the expense of the underlying software, hardware, storage devices, and even non-digital inputs and outputs that make the digital screen event possible in the first place" (Sample, 2013). However, Bogost's ideas on procedurality represents an acknowledgement of the underlying computer processes behind a video game, and computer code isn't just the specialist language of machine-speak—instead, it can also be read as text, and is "rife with gaps, idiosyncrasies, and suggestive traces of its historical context" (Marino, 2006; Sample, 2013). Focusing on the functionality of code alone ignores the fact that code can bear intellectual, socio-historical significance to humans, not just to programmers, but to others who may have access to the code (Marino, 2006). It also neglects that paratextual features such as history of the program, the language, and even its funding sources, which all help shape meaning within a human context—as does more specialist aspects

such as specific coding choices, expressions, modules, and data inputs/outputs (Marino, 2006).

While certain pieces of code may be incomprehensible to those without programming knowledge, not every piece of code is intended for machine use—some of it, like "comments", are plain text sentences ignored by the computer, and meant for other human programmers to read. While most comments describe a piece of code's functionality due to their origin as a form of communication between human programmers, they are also texts that come inscribed with various social and institutionalized contexts (Marino, 2006; Sample, 2013). Since these comments are also not meant to be read by the general public, they can sometimes include inappropriate sentiments expressed by the game's coders that go against the agenda of the game, such as the misogynistic comments against Jackie Kennedy in the code of the *JFK Reloaded* (Sample, 2013)*.*

Since I'm releasing my own code voluntarily, my comments in my code will be unlikely to betray any obvious signs of going against my overall argument (at least not intentionally). However, as previously stated, it is possible to discern the goals and biases of a programmer by how they write and structure their game code—as there are "implications in the way a code tries to perform a function that bear the imprint of epistemologies, cultural assumptions about gender, race and sexuality; economic philosophies; and political paradigms" (Marino, 2006). For example, in my creative practice, I have made an effort to program my comic-game in a way that is accessible for a new programmer to understand—which includes, but is not limited to—comments written in a helpful manner. Likewise, legibility of code is also important; when I use a variable name to hold a piece of information such as the class of the main character, I chose to use "*playerClassVal*" as opposed to "*pc*", which is more cumbersome, but also more legible with its descriptiveness and capitalization. Likewise, the scenarios which the game is built upon are also created in an expandable way that allows more individual scenes to be added, rather than by hardcoding a limit of five scenes per branch even though it would have been easier. There is also clustering all the randomised chance percentages in the same file, which allows easy access by anyone looking to examine the code, and is probably the first place a new programmer would look to tweak with the

game's hard-coded parameters. These all point to the intention and desire of the original programmer to make it easier for readers who wish to create their own narratives using the game's source code.

On the other hand, other aspects of the code may also betray the programmer's attitudes towards certain topics. For example, the word "race" is not used when it comes to the variable that describes a character's skin tones—only the terms "Light" and "Dark" is. Likewise, while the comic-game allows the reader to choose a non-binary alignment for their gender in a hidden function at the start, resulting in the character wearing green rather than the stereotypical pink or blue—there is only two genders listed, "Male" and "Female". Instead, a separate "isNonBinary" Boolean variable is available in the character file, with the option set to false at the start. This implies that all characters, even those who identify as non-binary, has a default gender that is either "Male" or "Female", and that the non-binary designation of a character exists on top of that gender identity. This speaks to my own bias as to how non-binary and gender should be handled in a game system—while some people would choose to have three genders in Male, Female, and Non-Binary, my own arbitrary choices declare non-binary to be a separate category that overlays "Male" and "Female". This is something that others may disagree with, but with the source code, they are free to change it.

Subverting Player Agency: The Paradox of Choice
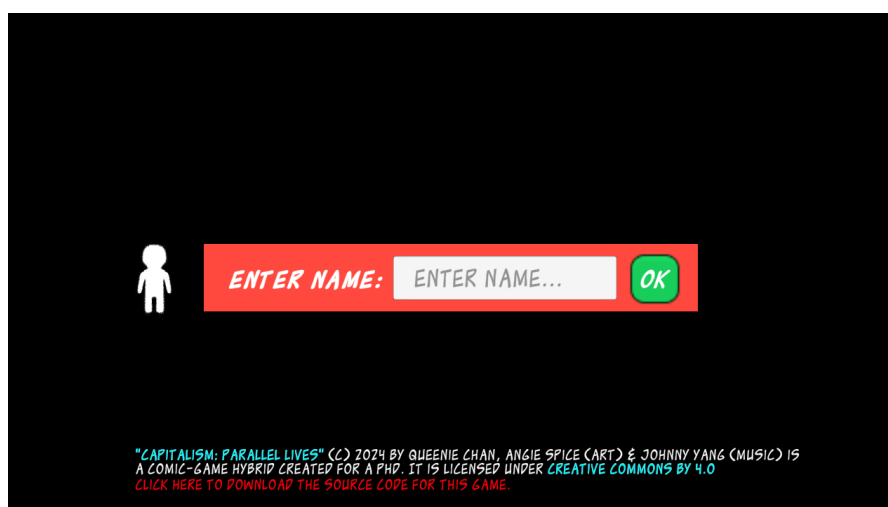
Figure 4 – Enter Your Name Screen

Now that I have described my comic-game's more problematic aspects and my attempts to provide solutions, I will now discuss the actual content of the digital hybrid itself and the goals and reasoning behind each creative or technical choice. When the comic-game begins, player is prompted to enter their name (*Figure 4)*, a function intended to add a feeling of personal investment to the reader. Presented with little but the title on a black screen, a stick figure meant to pictorially represent a human in its most basic form, and a text box prompt, I aim to offer a neutral setting devoid of any context (political or otherwise) that might imply any activist leanings. The goal of this is to present the reader with as clean a slate as possible, so they can enter into the character trait selection phase with few preconceptions.
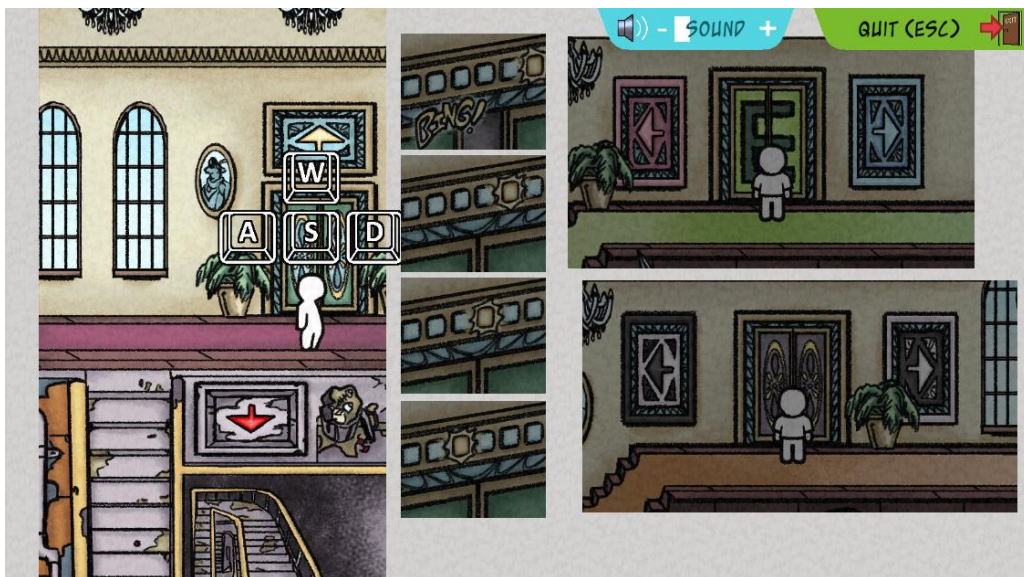
Figure 5 – Choose Your Characteristics

Once the reader enters their name, they will be taken to a character selection screen divided into three panels: one to choose their class, their gender, and their skin tone (*Figure 5)*. These panels are visible all at once to the reader, though only one panel is "active" at a time—the others being "greyed out" so as to properly direct the reader's attention. It is, however, important to note that *none* of these panels are labelled as what they are with words. Instead, I rely only on visual cues to imply what choices the reader is *actually* being presented with. First, the reader begins in the "class" panel, presented as a skyscraper with the option of an elevator to the penthouse or stairs to the ground level, and once they've made the choice of whether their character is "wealthy" or "poor", only then do they get to progress to the next panel where they make the choice of "gender",

and so on. In a touch of irony that I will later explain, this may be the only time in the game where a reader can be termed a "player", since this is where they get to control the stick figure from the opening scene using the arrow (WASD) keys.

As the reader broaches each new panel, they will be prompted visually (and through the limitations of where the stick figure can walk) to make one of two choices—though in the "gender" panel, the player can choose a third option of "non-binary" should they wish. Each panel presents themselves as a corridor of some kind, where the reader has to manoeuvre left or right to a doorway, or in the case of the "class" panel, either up or down. As the reader moves through the game space towards their choice, their avatar will change slightly to reflect the choices they made—though the outcome consists mostly of crude colour-coding to depict the changing shirt (to imply gender) or skin tone of their character. Likewise, the art-style still remained as simple as possible to allow universal identification.

The reason why a simple character selection screen is made into something akin to an interactive side-scroller rather than a series of boxes for the reader to check is rooted in my desire to push back against some of the flaws in this creative project. As previously stated, this project presents the reader with the lives of two characters, each with their own traits of class, skin tone, and gender, but once the narrative begins, these categories will be presented as binary and immutable. This is not an accurate reflection of reality—there is great diversity and variation in the range of identities that can exist within each of these groups, and it is only the limitations of the project's setup that this situation exists. To mitigate that, I use the free-roaming (but limited by design) nature of the character selection screen—and the changes in the player avatar as they move around—to suggest that identities are not fixed, but on a spectrum.

This applies to all three categories, whether class, gender, or skin tone. In fact, one can argue that the starting platform the avatar is on when the reader is choosing their "class" counts as "middle class", although it avoids that textual label. Likewise, gender is presented as a spectrum as the reader walks their avatar from the "female" side to the "male" side, with "non-binary" being represented with the colour green in the middle. It is an option accessible by pressing the "E" button when standing in the starting doorway, though it also has a 7% chance of randomly appearing in a player's run even if they chose

"male" or "female". Even something as largely superficial as skin tone is presented as varying shades of light to dark, thus including the experience of groups that have dark or ambiguous skin tones, but are not on the darkest end of the spectrum. The desire to represent a broader swathe of society rather than the group that the idea of "race" most commonly brings to mind is the reason why I avoided using the term "race" altogether. People of African descent may be most popularly associated with structural racism due to the dominance of American racial politics in our discourse, but many are also not dark-skinned. These people are thus imbued with a "white-passing" privilege, whereas many dark-skinned non-Africans are often treated just as poorly. Avoiding using the word "race" in the character selection screen and using the visual signifier of light VS dark skin instead can go some way into highlighting this issue.

Last of all, I felt the need to add brief visual and ludic cues to denote hierarchy in the gender and skin tone panels. Much as the "class" panel uses an enclosed vertical space with one up and one down staircase to express the visual idea of "wealthy" VS "poor", the other two panels place a small downwards staircase when the reader moves their avatar towards the "female" and the "dark skin tone" part of the panel. This is intended as a visual representation of the everyday difficulties that being female VS male, or being dark skinned VS light-skinned, can bring. Since the reader may struggle a little bit to move their avatar past the small staircase to get to or from the more disadvantaged end of the spectrum, this small stumbling block is meant to act as a nod to these struggles.

After the player has named and customized their character, we now arrive at the main gist of the content—the comparative depiction of two parallel lives in a capitalist world, loosely divided into five stages of life. This segment begins with a short narrative sequence that shows the birth of the reader's avatar and his parent's circumstances, followed by a second, unrelated character with a randomly-generated name, also with their parents. After that, we shall begin the first stage of life, where the lives of these two characters are laid out in two horizontal rows of comic panels that depict a scene, followed by narration.

This layout is hierarchical. No matter what character traits the reader has selected in the preceding stage, there is a very high chance that the second character will have the

opposite traits to that of the main character. If the reader has chosen "wealthy, dark-skinned female", then the most likely configuration of their comparative partner will be "poor, light-skinned male", with the chances of other configurations being completely randomized. Since most readers will likely start the comic-game by inputting their own name and recreating themselves, this may encourage the reader to replay the game, and toy with a different identity on their second round. This serves a useful purpose, namely in engendering empathy for the imagined lives of people from different groups, but it will also expose the reader to groups that are rarely discussed in popular discourse such as the "wealthy, dark-skinned female" and the "poor, light-skinned male".

The one certainty of this secondary character is that they will never have the *same* three traits as what the reader chose. That will defeat the purpose of this exercise, which is to draw attention to the way how different identities in capitalism are subordinated to each other. The traits of the comparative partner are also immutable and locked in at the stage the reader finishes selecting their traits, and will not change throughout the game—much like that of the reader. This "finality" supports the theme of this thesis and also that of the first 2 rows of Morris' comic—that in a neoliberal world, your life path is largely determined by familial circumstances, and the last time that you might be truly equal was at your moment of birth.

After the opening sequence that explains the origins of our two, the first stage will begin. From henceforth, the reader cannot control the events that happen—only the pace at which the comic-game moves from panel to panel as each chunk of narration ends. There are five stages of life: birth, childhood, schooling, working life, and a sudden disaster, at which the narrative ends and the reader is encouraged to return to the start of the game and choose a new identity. Narratively-speaking, these stages are short, consisting of groups of panels that are no more than five or six panels long, but its brevity is a necessity. As a comic with a political agenda, being overly-long and be-labouring the point might lose a reader's interest and thereby dilute its message, and so to maintain that attention, it's best to keep the situations simple and the variety high.

One must also be careful to sidestep the depiction of the wealthy and the poor as people mired in circumstances that are absolutes. The assertion that poor people cannot ever transcend their class and enter the echelons of the wealthy is questionable—it's just

unlikely. Likewise, it is not impossible for a wealthy person to fall into poverty, family circumstances notwithstanding. Despite that, it is important to acknowledge the fact that those in poverty often remain so because they have *less* (not zero) opportunities to aid them to make that leap. This will be expressed throughout the narrative part of this comic-game, which aims to use branching narrative paths— supposedly a "hypercomic— to make that point. The way in which I use these branching narrative paths, however, represent a subversion of the usual way player agency occurs in games, one that I wish to use as a subtle critique of capitalism.

Figure 6 – "Birth" stage at the hospital

But first, let me explain how the narrative proceeds from the reader's point of view, and why. At the start of the first stage, the two characters will be with their parents at different hospitals—tailored at the level of their wealth. As one might expect, the well-to-do can afford to enjoy better equipped private hospitals with fewer patients and more doctors, while poorer people would have to make do with overcrowded public hospitals and overworked staff who encourage birth parents to return home earlier. This is where the first instance of narrative branching occurs—when the babies leave the hospital, there is a random chance that they will catch a cold that will permanently affect their health. At this juncture, the reader will be prompted to press a button that generates a random number from 1 to 100—shown on a pop-up screen that will also show both characters and what each of their odds in catching a cold is (*Figure 6*). As you might

expect, the possibility of a poor baby catching a cold in an overcrowded public hospital is much higher than that of a wealthy baby, though neither are zero.

Random number generation is a common ludic feature of all games that allow a wider range of outcomes for the player, but in this case, it is used in deliberately restrictive manner that reduces the reader to a passive observer. This is unusual—not least because player choice and agency are frequently regarded as a defining feature of video games (Andrew Baerg, 2009; Oliva et al., 2018; Pérez-Latorre & Oliva, 2019; Tulloch et al., 2019), to the extent that Goodbrey defines hypercomics—with their branching narratives and hybrid comic-game approach—to be girded by user choices (Goodbrey, 2013, p. 190). However, the game mechanic in my creative thesis is essentially one of "anti-choice", and here, it is happening on two levels.

The first is "ludonarrative dissonance", which is a term coined by game designer Clint Hocking that describes a "clash between the ludic and the narrative structure of video games" in a player's mind (Pérez-Latorre & Oliva, 2019, p. 782). This is done to subvert the idea of player agency, found in games such as *Bioshock Infinite*, *The Stanley Parable, Spec Ops: The Line* and *Gone Home*, where the narrative may present the player with the theme of endless choice or personal freedom, yet has game design that deliberately restricts the ability of the player to make choices (Pérez-Latorre & Oliva, 2019, p. 789; Tulloch et al., 2019, p. 341). This is not unlike the rhetoric and function of neoliberalism, which simultaneously advocates choice and personal agency while creating a deregulated society that places responsibility of outcome on the individual alone, regardless of their starting position. Much like how game designers tout their games as offering a wide variety of in-game choices, despite the fact that all in-game experiences are created with a set of rules and limitations in place so as to drive the player along a certain designated path.

For that reason, there is a strain of academic thought that argues that video games, with their discourses of choice in a limited but concealed environment, are inherently neoliberal in their nature (Andrew Baerg, 2009; Oliva et al., 2018; Tulloch, 2010). Video games as a medium are therefore shaped by a neoliberal society to resemble a training program to live as the ideal neoliberal subject, one that internalizes its messages of unlimited freedom while engaging and accepting the limitations built by the game's

design and ruleset as the natural order. Here in this comic-game, it is expressed in the manner in which the comic-game asks the reader to build and name their own character in the anticipation of a life simulator—only to realise that the only thing they can do in "their" life is to roll a dice and watch as external factors decide "their" fate. That there is an option to press a button and perform a function whose outcome is ultimately decided by chance and traits assigned at birth like class, skin tone, and gender is the point—this is a function that *simulates* agency and control, but is very clearly not. The inherent irony of this is meant to subvert player expectations of choice and agency, while placing them clearly within the context of a capitalist society where the accumulation of wealth has started long before the reader's "birth".

The second level of the "anti-choice" approach is to give the reader not one but two lives to experience, again subverting expectations. This "companion" to the reader's avatar is one who has different traits to what the reader chose, but for all intents and purposes is presented as a random person who happens to be interchangeable with the reader. However, as the narrative progresses and the reader rolls the dice in key events, the differences in the odds of certain events occurring—sometimes large, sometimes minute, and based on class, skin tone, and/or gender—will slowly come to surface. As the narratives split and start to differ, whether in the art or in narration, it will bring to the reader's attention that despite one of the characters being named by the reader, "they" could easily have been the "companion" character should the parents be switched at birth. This can encourage empathy towards people with traits different to the reader, but most of all, it highlights that fact that both lives are operating in a society with outcomes that while not predetermined, are severely limited.

This approach is important, because it pre-empts the kind of complaints that is often directed at critiques of capitalist societies—the idea that it is *impossible* to succeed if one were to be born poor, or that societal oppression is driven *entirely* by race or gender. The mechanics of random number generation is such that it is possible for a poor person to enter the white-collar, upper-middle class—it just requires the random number generator to output a rare series of numbers. The argument thus shifts from the blanket statement that capitalism in the source of inequality, to the argument that there is no mechanism for neoliberalism to upend class relationships. In such a world, class mobility

is *not* non-existent—it's just difficult for poor people to enter the echelons of the rich, and for those that do, it's not easy for them to stay there. It also demonstrates that while a wealthy person can apply minimal effort despite being given many advantages (as measured in academic achievement), they won't necessarily fall into poverty if they have a patient and supportive family.

And then, there are the accumulative disadvantages of things like health issues, and stress caused by personal debt. In this comic-game, should a character be exposed to an environment where they can get a permanent health issue and does so due to chance, the side effects are permanent and additive. In the course of my design, I struggled with finding the best way to express the psychological and physical effects of poor health and debt to the reader, eventually settling on a function that impacts the reading experience of this comic-game. A more stat-driven approach was initially considered, but was ultimately abandoned because the insecurity and volatility of poor health and stress should not be depicted by easily-measured gauges as in a typical video game.
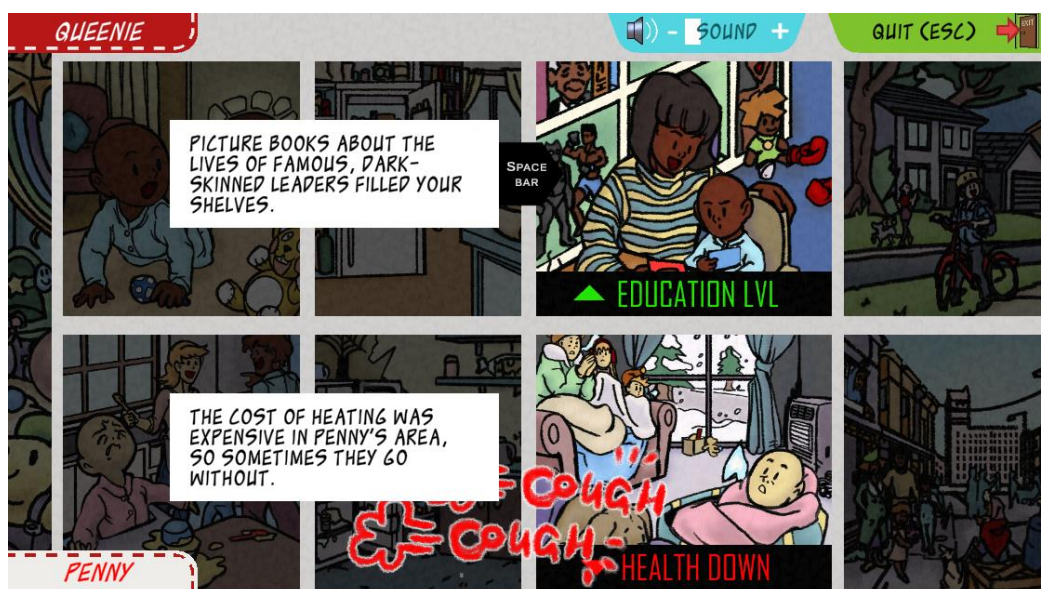

Figure 7 – "Childhood" stage of life with health problems

Instead, I settled on crayon-like words and drawings that expressed that character's inner thoughts, which I then overlaid over that character's row of panels (*Figure 7*). This is intentionally meant to obscure the reader's reading experience, since as you accumulate more health and debt issues, the more crowded and difficult to read that character's row of panels will be. This is a fourth-wall break and a form of hypermediacy,

which as previously described, aims not to provide a seamless, immersive experience but to harken back to old media and play homage to its features—in this case, a printed page with scribbles.

The purpose of taking this approach is two-fold. Firstly, while depicting an ill and debt-laden character should logically draw them as looking haggard, the time and budgetary constraints of a PhD project makes it impossible as that will require multiple versions of the characters to depict a wide range of problems. Secondly, the disruptive, immersion-breaking nature of this depiction draws explicit attention to it, which is the point. Since health and debt issues often express themselves in psychological as much as physical ways, the intrusive nature of these scribbles is meant to simulate the mental anguish of the character, and hence is a better reflection of the world through that character's eyes than just their appearance. Naturally, a person born into wealth suffers from much fewer health and debt problems compared to the less fortunate, even if the dice rolls all ensures that all flags for these two states occur regardless.

Creating Branching Scenarios that Highlight Intersectionality

Once the reader leaves the hospital, they will be taken to a new screen where a "full vertical" panel will appear showing a generic depiction of a happy family welcoming a new addition to the household. These kinds of panels occur sporadically as the narrative progresses, and is deliberately designed to fully cover both rows of panels, thus visually linking two separate lives together like a bridge. These are necessary to symbolize universal events in life—even if the lives of the two characters are radically different and don't intersect, there are still milestones such as graduating school and random disasters that don't discriminate between people. Having an advantageous position in class, skin tone, or gender does not protect a person from the emotional trauma of a parent falling sick, or a burglary. In fact, in the comic-game, the chances of the aforementioned disasters happening in the character's lives in the designated narrative spots are the same for both characters regardless of class, skin tone, or gender: 33%. What separates the rich from the poor, however, is the former's ability to recover from such setbacks. As

one might expect, wealthy individuals have health insurance and are unlikely to go into debt to cover medical costs, just like burglaries for the rich tend to be less financially ruinous compared to the poor. If at the designated point in the story, a poor individual is unlucky enough to have *both* pre-scripted disasters occur, it will have far-reaching effects on their working life and therefore earning capacity as I will later detail.

After the characters arrive home as babies, the narrative will continue by depicting their contrasting environments and the side effects that it may have on the growing child—with the most obvious being the vast differences between rich and poor neighbourhoods. These appear as branching narratives at various junctures that are decided by a hidden dice roll, and which will alter the outcome of each character's panels to reflect the outcome. This is done so to add variety to the experiences, but it is also important to reflect the diversity of experiences that individual parents can bring to their child's upbringing. While it's safe to assume that the wealthy live in warm, spacious houses with well-stocked pantries and child enrichment toys, and the poor live in environments that are more deprived, it would be incorrect to assume that *all* rich parents are attentive to their children's education. For that reason, about 40% of the time, wealthy parents will give their children a good environment and not much more, while the remaining 60% actively try to tailor what they provide to their child based on their gender and skin. That is, those with girls attempt to teach female empowerment, while those who have darker skin tones often surround their offspring with positive portrayals of dark-skinned people (*Figure 7*). These are the sort of things that wealthy people with more time and resources are capable of sourcing for their kids, and which prime these children for self-confidence and mental resilience in later life. There are also businesses that target those kinds of consumers, which is another little-noticed advantage of wealth—there are always services willing to customize their products to meet the demands of the wealthy.

On the other hand, poorer parents often struggle to provide for their children, though poverty is a spectrum and it would be problematic to imply that there is no variation in such experiences. To show this for characters from poor families, 60% of them are implied to live in smaller spaces with their cousins, and often share bedrooms, books and toys. For the less fortunate 40%, there is the risk of difficult living

environments such as mold, cramped spaces, and lack of heating that has a certain chance of causing another permanent health problem in the character (*Figure 7*). If the character has suffered illness during their birth in hospital, then this will be compounded onto the existing ill health, and expressed via more health-related scribbles overlaying the art and obscuring the reading experience.

After early childhood, the focus of the next section will then be the character's neighbourhood, and how that shapes a character's life as they start going to school and using the available community resources. As expected, wealthy households tend to congregate in safer areas with more expensive postcodes, which often translates to better health, school and other public utilities such as parks and libraries. As a result, another hidden dice roll for a branching narrative will occur here, this time divided into five institutional challenges faced by the poor: high crime, lack of parks and good libraries, predatory lending practices through payday loan providers, poorly-funded schools, and food deserts. These are not the only external difficulties that the poor face, nor do they necessarily only face one problem as they do here, but this segment serves to highlight that a person's life is shaped by their community as much as their family. For example, when poor neighbourhoods lack access to fresh food or the knowledge of healthy eating, they also run the risk of poor dietary choices that can lead to long term disease. It is ironic to consider that it is the wealthy who are the ones with the best access to the healthiest food and dietary information, when it is the poor who are also the least financially prepared to deal with the consequences when poor health becomes a problem.
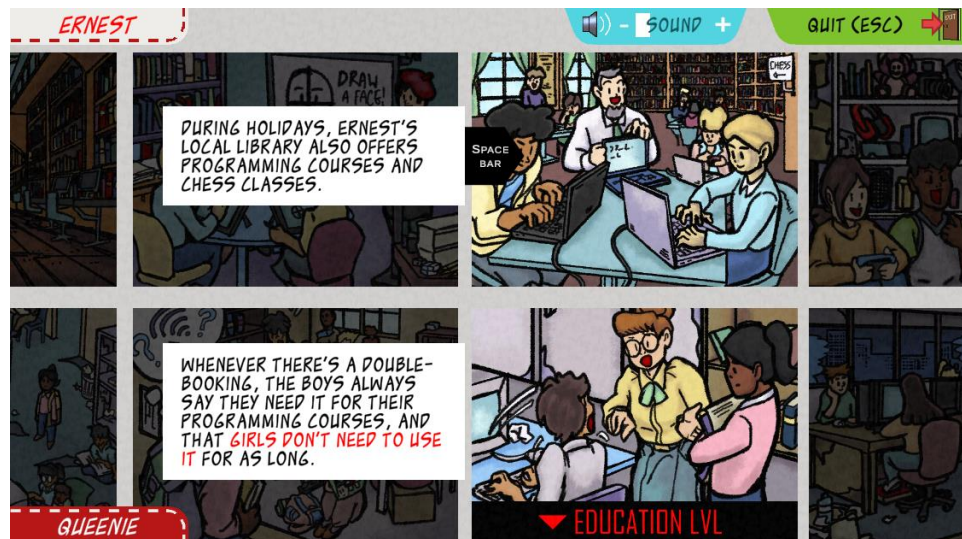
Figure 8 – "Neighbourhood" stage of life with public utilities and gender issues

Some of the other scenarios also come with variations—some big, some small—in experience based on gender and skin tone. For example, in the public utility scenario, poor girls will find it harder to compete with poor boys for computer usage in underfunded libraries, since it is usually assumed that boys are more interested in technology than girls (*Figure 8*). When girls do get access to computers, they are also forced to leave earlier than boys because of fear of staying out too late, a universal fear of women which men suffer less from, and which can lead to fewer continuing education opportunities for poor girls down the track. Naturally, wealthy households will have their own computers and internet access, so when wealthy children visit libraries, it will often be to learn high-tech activities and special classes that will teach them new skills. In other words, while poor children try to use public libraries to do routine school work, the wealthy use the same facilities for resume-padding self-improvement, which can improve their career prospects. Likewise, in the banking scenario, the wealthy children are often the recipient of money-related discussion around the dinner table, though girls are at a slight disadvantage since they are often socialized to be less concerned with personal finance. Meanwhile, poor children tend to be less exposed to such financial knowledge and for that reason, can often end up with habits that encourage impulse buying and poor monetary decisions. Even if a poor child establishes good money habits, poor communities often lack banks, and are instead flooded by payday loan providers. Predatory lending practices—with their hefty interest rates and large fees—are geared towards exploiting the poor by encouraging behaviour that entrench them further into

debt. These are often what shape poor children's attitude towards money, a problem that can also follow them through their adult life and onto the next generation.

The most divergent and significant scenario, however, is the scenario of high crime and how that might influence a character in a later situation. While one might expect characters to have an unpleasant relationship with the police in a high crime neighbourhood, that is not always the case—wealthy light-skinned people do get stopped by police too, just at a rate of only 1%. It would also be incorrect to assume that only dark-skinned people are victims of police profiling, or that it only happens to poor people—as previously said, the purpose of this project is to dispel these popular narratives and ask the reader to consider fresh angles.

Figure 9 – "Neighbourhood" stage of life with crime, with police profiling

One example would be that police tend to be more lenient in cases involving poor girls, since young girls are perceived to be less likely to be trouble makers than young boys—even though girls also suffer from trauma should they see male family members treated poorly by police. Likewise, while poor boys are more likely than girls to be police profiled, dark-skinned boys are three times as likely to be stopped by police than their light-skinned counterparts—at a rate of 33% versus 10% (Haynes, 2020). Conversely, while it's a well-known fact that poor dark-skinned boys are often the target of police, it is noteworthy that wealthy dark-skinned boys are police profiled 80% of the time (*Figure 9*) compared to the 33% of poor dark-skinned boys (Barrett, 2016). The reason for that is

that wealthy communities tend to have fewer dark-skinned families, so a dark-skinned boy in a wealthy community is more likely to be seen as trouble due to racial profiling in ways that a light-skinned boy will never be. Wealth does not protect the dark-skinned from police-profiling—in fact, it raises the risk of it, to the extent that wealthy dark-skinned women are disconcerted by the presence of police in their safe, well-lit neighbourhoods due to the stories they have heard from male family members.
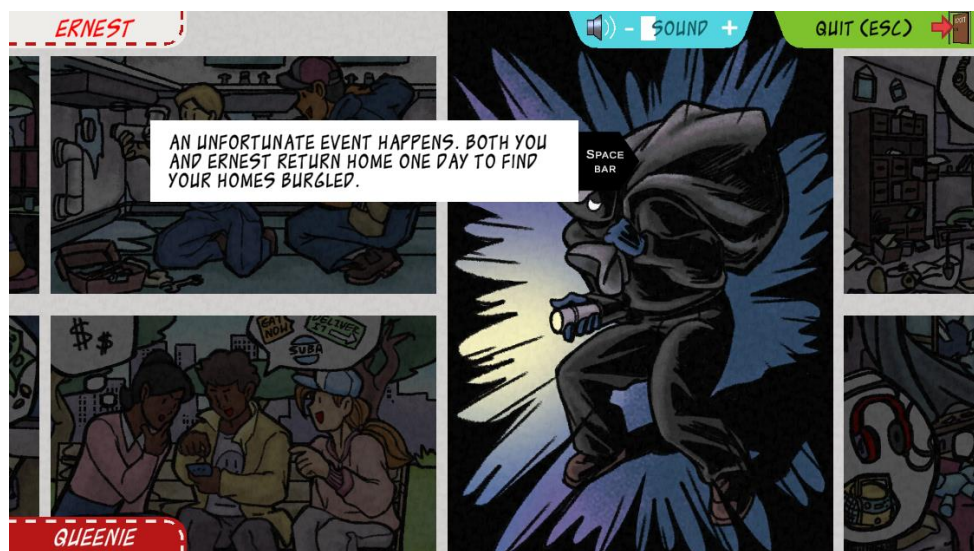

Figure 10 – "Burglary" disaster, with a 33% of it happening

However, the side effects of racial profiling vary widely by wealth. If a character has had such negative experiences with police, one would assume that, regardless of wealth, they will avoid all future encounters with the police due to mistrust. This is not quite true—in a later branching narrative where a pre-scripted burglary may occur (*Figure 10*), if the character was a poor victim of police profiling, they will not report the burglary to police since they do not think of the police as helpful. Conversely, if the character was wealthy, they will report the crime to the police regardless of their skin tone or experiences. That is because the purpose of law-and-order institutions such as the police in a capitalist society is to protect private capital, and by extension, the sanctity and safety of its owners. This means that if a wealthy person was robbed, even if they have the racialized marker of a presumed criminal, they are still entitled to police recourse since the upholding of personal wealth is fundamental to capitalism—in other words, wealth trumps race in capitalism. The rich dark-skinned characters are subconsciously aware of this—as wealthy people living in a wealth-based world, they must subordinate

themselves to its rules to continue enjoying their privileged position. This is even as they (and others) of their skin tone are often subjected to the humiliation of racial profiling.

Apart from these scenarios, there is also an additional situation of a parent falling sick that can occur, presented as a vertical panel to indicate that the emotional devastation of such an event is universal. Located midway through this section, this is intended to be a sudden event that can happen as a random perfidy of fate, but has far-reaching consequences for characters from poor backgrounds. For wealthy characters, sudden illness is often covered by insurance, better access to good healthcare, which often leads to better and faster recovery with the possibility of hiring outside help if it's required. Conversely, poor families often lack health insurance, and the loss of a breadwinner can cause financial hardship, not to mention the possibility of going into debt to pay medical bills. Worse access to subpar healthcare can lead to slower recovery times and even permanent disability, leading to less career opportunities for other family members since they can often become full or part-time carers for ill parents. This is something that disproportionately affects women (33% chance) compared to men (5% chance), since women tend to be socialized into caretaker rolls (WGEA, n.d.). This can permanently affect the next stage of the character's life by limiting their career advancement opportunities—once again, while the chance of a character suffering a setback is the same for the poor and the wealthy, the recovery chances for the poor is much lower, particularly over time.

As the characters graduate school and move onto the next stage of their life, their education level and their gender and skin tone can have a profound effect on what career path they take, and whether they are successful in that career path. Again, the narrative branches here, but this time, the reader has the chance to instigate two consecutive dice rolls and be presented with the chances of each character's graduation and career opportunities. Regardless of wealth, all characters have a chance of either dropping out, graduating high school, going to trade school, or going to university. As expected, the chances of a wealthy character going to university is 70%, while that of a poor character is 5%—unless that poor character is also a parental caretaker, in which case their chance of trade school and university is zero. In those instances, their future earnings are also

hampered—once a character becomes locked into a particular level of education, their chances of entering a particular career and therefore upward mobility are stymied.

By this stage, it is all but assured that wealthy characters tend to go to university and are likely to enter a white-collar office profession through either networking or family connections, or perhaps they may take the entrepreneurial route and start their own business. A handful may enter the casual service industry or the gig economy, though their comfortable backgrounds and lack of debt means that they work when they want to, and won't tolerate bad bosses or difficult working hours. For poor characters who are lucky enough to enter university, most need to work to support themselves and so miss out on valuable networking opportunities, and are also unable to rely on their family to funnel them contacts and industry positions. Another disadvantage is the difference in access to credit that poor and wealthy people have—even if the entrepreneurial spirit is the same, wealthy characters can tap their family and friend networks for investors, while poor people have to work to save money, but also has to pay off debt from schooling, and can also fall victim to exploitative labour practices as they embark on trade apprenticeships. As for those who end up in service jobs or the gig economy, with their low pay and their irregular hours, many end up taking up multiple jobs to make ends meet, taking a further toll on their health. In this section, should the reader roll an unlucky number and the character ends up with a burglary, they will sink even further into debt. Needless to say, by this point, the character's career path is already somewhat settled, and mobility between the different career tracks is not really an option.

Eventually, the characters will progress to a point in their career where they evaluate their success or failure, since the measurement of progress isn't just only whether they can enter a path, but also whether it's sustainable. In the end, any character regardless of class that has a white-collar career will have the highest chance of staying if they are a wealthy light-skinned male, lower if they are wealthy but otherwise, and the lowest if they are from a poor background. A fair amount of this is that corporate culture tends to be geared towards those who have occupied it for the longest, which until recently, still tended towards light-skinned males from privileged backgrounds who favour others just like them (Wilson, 2020). Overall, as previously suggested, class

accounts for success more than skin tone or gender, and nearing the end of the comic-game, rare is the character from a poor background who can survive untouched by the burden of debt or ill health.
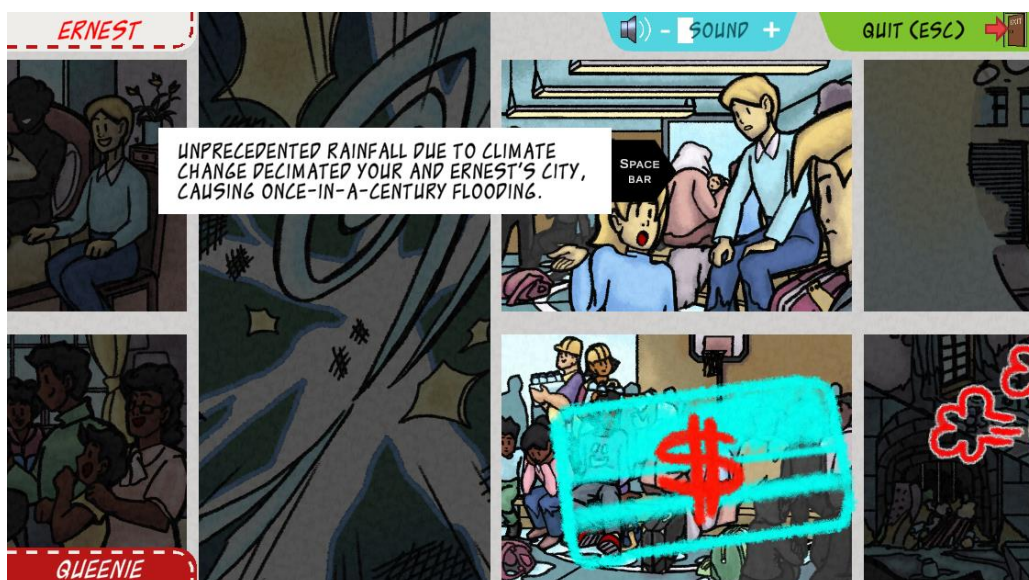

Figure 11 – Prescripted "Natural disaster" event

The final event that concludes this narrative is an unavoidable, scripted natural disaster that has permanent consequences—either a flood, earthquake, traffic accident, or pandemic (*Figure 11*). As per my earlier assertion that wealthier people have an easier time recovering from city-wide disasters due to their accumulated capital, these are the same situations where poor people tend to fall through the cracks and become permanently mired in debt. Since this is the last scenario in the story, it exists as pushback against the neoliberal ideals of deregulated government and personal responsibility. If a large-scale natural disaster occurs and underfunded government entities are unable to respond effectively to give everyone equal help, then wherefore the rhetoric of the agentic individual? Since better funded emergency services tend to exist in wealthier areas, the poor are often left to fend for themselves. So, as our narratives draw to a close, I use the comic-game's horizontal, hierarchical visual approach to illustrate this literally—as both characters survive this disaster, the panels show the top row largely unchanged, but the bottom row ends falling out of the reader's sight altogether (though only if the two characters are from different classes). This is an effective visual metaphor for the vast underclass that will inevitably grow larger as the

wealth gap widens, and governments fail to redistribute wealth in a more equitable manner. Those who are now at the bottom rung of society will vanish from view, a group that will only grow larger over time, with each successive disaster, until it becomes a politically explosive force.

After this, the narrative ends and the reader is encouraged to return to the beginning of the game to enter a new name and choose a new identity. Overall, the experience is short, with only about 30 panels for each "life", and is intended to be so to encourage experimentation and replayability. If analysed through the lens of procedural rhetoric, this game thus argues its points through an "iterative" experience—where the reader is intended to gain insight into the workings of capitalism by living variations of certain identities over and over again to illuminate some of the less-considered nuances. That many of the random experiences are based on chance is part of the experience, since arguing that luck plays a large role in a person's success is also an argument against the neoliberal rhetoric of meritocratic free markets.

Closing Thoughts

Creating this comic-game hybrid has been an eye-opening experience, due to the array of experiences it depicts, however limited they are due to the confines of this thesis. Despite being able to use Morris' "On A Plate" as an example to expand upon, and being able to add dimensions to each scenario that the original strip did not have, I feel that its bigger contribution to academia was perhaps in creating a comic-game engine under the license of "Creative Commons" and releasing it to the public. That aspect of the project allows me to be upfront about the flaws of what my creative thesis is depicting to its audience, and also expands the array of ways said audience can interact with my project. Without this part of the process, I would be preaching to the reader in a one-way form of communication rather than opening up that space to a community that may discuss and debate with each other. Even if a reader lacks the technical skills to effectively use the engine, giving them the option to tinker with it and peer under the hood already encourages some form of critical engagement. Although some have previously argued that releasing the source code of a game does not always encourage

critical thinking from a player (as in the case of "SimCity"), in this instance, the code was released to induce experimentation rather than deep analytic thought, which primes a different mode of behaviour. What that leads to will remain to be seen.

That's not to say that the actual content itself isn't of value. While a story that blatantly draws attention to how much our station in life depends on the starting resources our parents have isn't new, the controversial nature of such creative works can always stimulate public debate. What's clear about this kind of work is that its message is beyond reproach—just like no one could plausibly argue against the premise of Morris' original comic, few can argue against this one. Where disagreements could come about is likely in the depiction of race and gender, which due to the somewhat abrasive nature of online discourse these days, is bound to draw attention. In that regard, the juxtaposition of lesser-seen and discussed pairings of individuals, such as putting the life of a "rich dark-skinned man" versus that of a "poor light-skinned man" can be enlightening to some members of the public. For ordinary people whose exposure to gender or race discussions revolve largely around what traditional media limits them to, this aspect of the project can be illuminating.

Lastly, the way this project links class, gender and race together is also a method of inserting class back into conversations about gender and race. Despite the greater focus on race and gender in discussions about "privilege" in recent years (especially in traditional media), it is telling that class is often the one "privilege" missing from that debate. Whether this is deliberate or accidental is beside the point—what is significant is that people have become accustomed to arguing about race and gender but not class, despite the growing social discontent around the wealth gap. This part of the creative thesis at least forces them to be mentioned in conjunction with each other, and therefore goes some way into changing the skewed manner in which we regard these vital issues in the public sphere.

CONCLUSION

After the world exited the COVID-19 pandemic and entered a new and uncertain phase, the ever-increasing wealth gap between the rich and poor show no signs of abating. To blame the current state of the western world on COVID-19 (or even the 2008 financial crisis) alone, however, would be incorrect. The seed of neoliberal policy had already started half a century ago in the 1970s, with Chile and the brutal regime of Pinochet as its crucible. Meanwhile, its philosophical foundations as an offshoot of liberalism had already taken root in western thought centuries earlier.

As an ideological justification for the excesses and endless accumulative nature of capitalism, neoliberalism has been very successful. Its emphasis on the power of the deregulated free markets, the self-sufficient agentic individual, and the reduction of all aspects of life to units of profitability, has exposed it as a project to restore class power and suppress the rights gained by organised labour. As a socio-political-economic system capable of adapting to an innumerable number of countries and contexts, it has also weathered many external shocks and challenges.

However, one cannot argue that this system can go on indefinitely. Nor can we deny that neoliberal economic policies often sweep into a country accompanied by US imperialistic manoeuvres and military intervention—making it a not-so-distant relative of 19th Century colonialism, albeit under a different name and context. The resulting upheaval and reorganization of society under this ideology has reshaped the globe and penetrated all aspects of society—though it does not represent a clean break from our past. Instead, the current system is a continuation of the old one, replete with the same inequities that had always existed, albeit with different personalised markers that denote hierarchy. Instead of a feudal system where birth decides life trajectory, it is now based on wealth, and so on. The importance of bloodline has been commuted by the rhetoric of liberated individuals free to sell their skills in an open, democratised marketplace. That we are all recipients of what our parents already have (regardless of birth) is deemphasized, as is any conception that we are all bit players in a society or a community that is larger than ourselves.

Since capitalism and neoliberalism are hegemonic systems that have an innate drive to privatise and own all aspects of life, it appropriates what was previously known as the "commons"— natural and cultural resources that should be accessible to all members of society. By using the strong arm of the government to fence off, sell and buy these resources, the capitalist class therefore controls the means of production, most of the raw materials, and also where the profit is to be reinvested. The end result is that the rest of society who are unable to ascend to the capitalist class then becomes locked into a system which either exploits them as cogs in its machinery, or as obedient consumers that feed that system, or more likely—both. Since the "commons" has become privatized and there is no physical escape from the system, participation is therefore mandatory. Furthermore, once there are no more aspects of the physical world left to privatise, the attention of the system thus turns to the bodies and minds of the workers—in particular, the cognitive abilities of its workers as denoted by their ideas, skills, free time, and creativity. The last, in particular, is an especially important resource, as it can be captured into "dead knowledge"—intellectual property rights, patents, trademarks, copyrights and other instruments of legal ownership that can be bought, sold, and profited off.

The onset of the information age and the collision of capitalism, neoliberalism, digital technology that accompanied it would soon bring an emphasis on the power (and profitability) of human creativity. The speed and global connectivity of the internet brought on internet platforms that harnessed the power of networked effects, and the economies of scale they effected. This gave companies the ability to harvest information from users in the system to resell at a higher value, and lent these platforms towards monopolization since the value of a network is intrinsically tied to the number of users that are on it, and who stay on it. Unsurprisingly, as the internet became enmeshed in our everyday lives, the consumption of media through various supra-national internet platforms also become the norm. It is in this context that I bring my personal experiences and concerns into the mix, to shine a light on the condition of the lone creative worker who plies their trade as a part of this inescapable digital landscape.

As a practicing comic book artist, my focus is thus on an oft-overlooked but important part of the academic discourse on the medium of comics. Instead of focusing on the creative process of artists or analysing their output—which is what most creative

thesis grounded in comics tend to be on—my interest lies in how neoliberalism and digital capitalism shape the choices that creators take *before* they even put pen to paper. Artists don't exist in vacuums, and due to the all-encompassing nature of neoliberalism, all creators and their seeds of inspiration now begin life already enmeshed in a system that demands mandatory participation. The analysis of the neoliberalism section undertaken in this thesis was precisely an attempt to understand that system—to parse the various forces that exert commercial and market demands on an artist, one which requires them to turn a profit on all creative output. Gone are the days where an artist can be funded through a patronage system—now, artists are expected to compete with each other on an open internet marketplace in a globalised popularity contest.

The end result is that whatever work a comic artist creates, their point of entry into the world will likely include some kind of internet platform where eyeballs and therefore readers are known to congregate. An example would be South Korean conglomerate Naver's Webtoon comics platform, which along with their rival Tapastic, has captured an almost monopoly share of a particular kind of digital comic. These are largely internet platforms interested in data harvesting (traditional gatekeeping publishers still exist), but as more and more artists join these platforms, the chances of gaining an audience become slimmer due to supply outstripping demand. The low barrier of entry also means that readers often graduate to becoming creators, which further creates competition amongst existing creators for readers. This effect creates a downward pressure on an artist's earnings on these platforms, and shifts the balance of power away from the artists and towards the platforms who are thus able to harvest data, resell them to advertisers, and identify and profit off trends as they gain traction. Likewise, these platforms are also able to use their same domination to suppress trends and punish creators they don't like, thus demonstrating that despite the democratizing rhetoric of the digital age, these new platforms function much like the gatekeeping publishers of traditional media.

What has changed more dramatically are the circumstances of the creators. With a glut of content, the burden of production—both emotional in finding new readers, and financial in terms of the creator's personal costs of creation in a labour-intensive medium—is now borne almost entirely by the artist. A few superstars may profit

handsomely, but the largest beneficiary is the platform itself, which apart from benefiting from the networked effects of new readers added to the network through the efforts of their users, is now also in a prime position to identify and capture valuable "dead knowledge" to buy and own. This gives the platform a bargaining over the artist unlike any other—both as a monopoly power in the marketplace, and also as the holder of data trends that only they (and not the creator) are aware of. Should such a platform decide to buy the intellectual property of a creator for a below-market price, the creator typically will not refuse, lacking in options as they are due to a dearth of competing platforms. In such a system, artists increasingly become not owners of original ideas that they can profit from, but cogs that work for next to nothing on intellectual property owned by large corporations who are interested only in profit. The fact that most artists are just individuals while these platforms tend to be billion-dollar conglomerates only highlight that the unequal power dynamics are now supra-national, and therefore outside the reach of any sovereign government who might want to protect worker's rights in their own countries.

The logical conclusion of monopolistic hegemony within an industry is usually ossification, as the need to squeeze profits supersede all other concerns such as originality or new ideas. However, data-harvesting platforms such as Webtoons also has another effect on media—the convergence of all media into just "content". Since the value of data-harvesting companies lie not in the content they distribute but in the number of users on their network, cross-subsidisation is a strategy they often employ, even if they have to run these networks at a loss. To continue expanding their userbase and ensure that users stay on their platform, they buy up adjacent media businesses to consolidate them into a single platform as a strategy to retain users. Prose fiction, webtoons, movies, gaming, music, social media, and shopping are thus all mixed into one larger super-network, which inevitably flattens all media into something that is interchangeable. This also puts platforms like Webtoons into a position where they can directly influence not only the development of emerging mediums like digital comics, but also create and own the software tools that will undergird whatever format that digital comics will eventually evolve into.

The dominance of companies like Webtoons is obviously a concern, not just for the welfare of the individual creator working within this network, but for the medium of digital comics in general. While such companies have a vested interest in merging comics and technologies such as VR, AR, mixed media, and animation with more traditional webcomics to produce something new, there is the danger that if a new format does take hold, all the underlying software associated with its production will be owned by private corporations. In a worst-case scenario, this will slowly and gradually reduce what is currently available to creators to use via "digital commons", which are the digital resources and technologies that was widely-available and free-to-use at the conception of the internet. Few can dispute that the democratizing freedom that existed in the early days of the fledgling internet was crucial to its growth and world-wide adoption, and a cornerstone of much of our current technological development. To see digital infrastructure (which was once free) fenced off into "walled gardens" owned by private corporations is a source of dismay, and it will ultimately stultify and inhibit new ideas and advancements.

Since capitalism entails that the end result will undoubtedly be driven by profit concerns, this ensures that future expressions of digital comics will have few opportunities for challenging or politically-motivated works. It may also reduce the bargaining powers of creatives even further, as the value of all platforms come not in the content they carry, but in the user data they've gathered and the black-box algorithm that manipulates what a user can and cannot see. This data is often kept away from the eyes of both users and content producers, so that the company itself can identify trends that are starting to take off, or suppress voices they disagree with so they don't get seen or become popular. The ability to identify an organically-created trend before it reaches critical mass is *especially* important, because it allows the platform to hire artists and crank out a number of near-identical products to take advantage of such a trend. By doing this, the platform can ensure that any users that discover this trend will be presented by clones whose intellectual property will be owned by the platform itself, and not by the original creator(s). This effectively spells the death of organic reach, and destroys any chance of an individual gaining any kind of bargaining power through the regular channels of popularity. This is even worse than the gatekeepers of traditional

media—at least individual creators have a chance of catching lightning in a bottle in such environments, whereas the denizens of digital platforms are destined to have their chance taken from them through algorithmic manipulation.

Lastly, it is prudent to remember that the dominance of Webtoons did not come about through the grassroots efforts of independent publishers or creators who all coalesced into a single movement through popularity. Right from the start, Webtoon was part of the "Korea Wave", a South Korean government-backed initiative that aims to project their country's "soft-power" on the world stage. Unlike other countries, the South Korean government also has organisations such as KOCCA and KOMACON that help promote this industry and their adjacent counterparts, which not only ensues a steady source of public funds to compensate unprofitable projects, but also the (supposed) protection of Korean creative workers from exploitation. Unfortunately, these safeguards are not extended to foreigners working within the Webtoon network, which are left to struggle on their own. Instead, this strange marriage of government with platform capitalism just goes to show that the reduction of the "digital commons" is happening not purely by the profit-drive of capitalism, but also through government intervention.

This brings my creative thesis, a comic-game hybrid, to the forefront. This is a project done more so for context rather than content (in terms of academic value)—namely, to create a variation of digital comics that occurs outside the commercial landscape of Webtoons. While universities do not exist outside the neoliberal matrix, I'm at least able to operate without the usual commercial pressures, which also allows me to critique capitalism and neoliberalism to a willing audience. More importantly, freed from the need to generate profit, I'm able to publicly release the source code for my game (built especially to allow expansions to the existing in-game scenarios) under the license of "Creative Commons". While far from overturning the monopoly power of Webtoons, the goal is less to compete with hegemonic corporations, and more so to stake a claim on the landscape of "digital comics" and allow the public use of the underlying technology for a non-profit context. With the "digital commons" increasingly becoming enclosed by moneyed interests, this is an important symbolic move, which apart from allowing people to freely use the code I've released, hopefully also draws attention to the dangers of platform monopolies in the area of the arts and culture.

That's not to say the creative component of my thesis isn't without its flaws. As a re-interpretation of Toby Morris' "On A Plate" comic about class privilege—with intersectionality and branching narratives added—the scenarios it generates are not necessarily representative of the groups they feature. Some of that comes from the limitations of a PhD, while another reason is that I personally lack the range to be able to authentically depict the life experiences of others from a background different to mine. There is no way for me to address this, so part of the reason why I'm releasing the source code is also because I hope to address these limitations. By allowing readers dissatisfied with what I have created to remix and rewrite my work to better tell their own stories, I turn what would otherwise be a unidirectional narrative into something resembling an interactive conversation.

However, that is not to say that the actual content of my comic-game is without much to contribute. Regardless of the lack of authenticity in the narratives presented, the format of the comic-game—comparing two lives on the vectors of class, race and gender—allows for some combinations of ideas that are not often addressed by theory, or even in every day discourse. When attempting to write stories under these restrictive circumstances, I noticed that I was forced to confront and contemplate situations I have never even thought about before. An example would be the relationship of the wealthy dark-skinned man and the police, and how dark-skinned men living in wealthy communities are much more likely to be targeted by police for profiling, even though the mode of engagement would be different and rarely fatal. After all, law enforcement in capitalist societies bow to money and all its trappings, so a dark-skinned man raised in a wealthy, majority white area would know how to affect the mannerisms and authority of a wealthy light-skinned person, thus diffusing the tensions that might otherwise come with such police encounters. On the other hand, said dark-skinned man would also adopt the attitudes of their wealthy white peers, meaning that while they personally would find the police treatment humiliating, they would not distrust the police's ability to protect their private property.

Other times, I was able to consider subjects that I have come into contact with, but from new angles. An example is the relationship between poor dark-skinned women and the police, which in my comic-game, is the only group that can gain the "fear" status

effect. Our public discourse concentrates on the violence done by the police to the black community, but the fact remains that those being targeted tended to be overwhelmingly male, regardless of skin tone. In real life, police are more likely to target poor light-skinned men rather than any dark-skinned woman, which means that while dark-skinned women are not direct victims of police profiling, they gain a fear and distrust of police through stories they hear through their fathers, brothers, and other male relatives. These women then raise sons and daughters that similarly fear and distrust the police, perpetuating the cycle of hatred in such communities.

As one-dimensional and simple as some of these scenarios are, they still bring forth topics of discussion that are rarely seen, which itself has some value as a way of shedding light onto neglected subjects. Likewise, it also brings the issue of class privilege back into the conversation, and links it together with intersectional concerns such as gender and race. It couldn't have gone further than that, given the scope, but that is what releasing the source code and encouraging community-based remixes of the comic-game is for. It is therefore a pushback against some of the neoliberal discourse about meritocracy, self-sufficiency, and the ability for the free market to solve all problems—a discourse which has a tendency to pretend intergenerational wealth isn't a reason for the widening wealth gap. Unfortunately, the fraying social fabric of our society shows that neoliberalism isn't serving the majority of people, and that it is incapable of solving many of the current problems in our society. There are no easy solutions for the problems of neoliberalism, but finding ways to bring class, race, and gender together and back into the public consciousness as an interconnected issue is a worthwhile start.

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