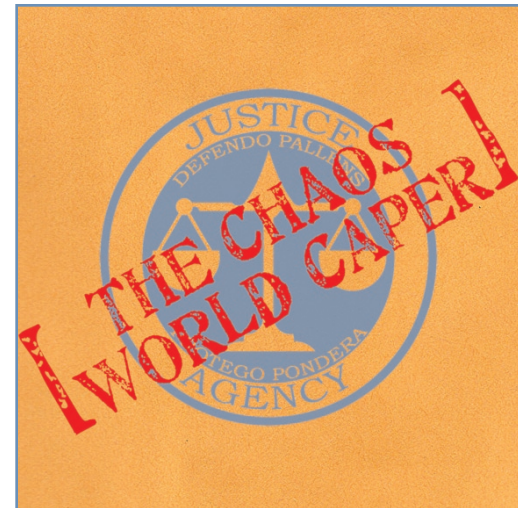


The superhero story presented through comic books and graphic novels has become like a retired athletic all-star, constantly discussing the “good old days” but never able to show us in the here and now what they were in their prime. We should not look back into the past stories of old but forge new tales and experiment with the genre in order to prevent its decline into intellectual stagnation, and to explore the concept of the superhero outside of comfortable settings and forums. From this we come to my senior endeavor. Out of a love for this genre of story telling I have decided to create my Integrative Project around the superhero tale, by creating my own world and cast of characters. My Integrative Project deals with the experimentation of the superhero myth through a hyperlink website that functions as a “choose your own path” adventure game. It acts as a means to explore the myth outside the combination of illustrations and written word, the form most common with the graphic novel and comic book.

The Story

My project takes the form of a hyperlink website that functions as a “choose your own path” adventure game where the viewer actively participates and interacts with the world presented. The viewer enters my tale as a member of the police force, whose goal is to arrest 13 criminals who are pulling a series of thefts and felonies with their endgame being world domination and/or destruction. Titled *The Chaos World Caper*, my project carries with it the tag line, “Can you save the world from chaos?” giving the audience the heavy burden of saving this world.

My narrative contains people with incredible abilities, what some would call “superpowers.” Set in a world where a large portion of the population has these unique talents and has had them for hundreds of years, these characters have lived with the extraordinary so long that it has become the every day, their landscape having evolved out of a populace that can do the impossible. As such, this is a world where there are no superheroes or supervillains, only police and criminals. The police, a worldwide organization known as *the Justice Agency*, defend the weak and keep the balance of power between those with abilities and those without. The criminals featured in this story are a group known as the Chaos Organization, made up of 13 members, some with powers and some without, but each of them with unique reasons for turning to



The Chaos World Caper

The Justice Agency



crime.

The Justice Agency plays the role of the superhero in this narrative. They are the agents for good against the forces of evil. But in truth a superhero only keeps the status quo of the story, they are there to keep their narrative from changing. When an outside force enters to change to story, the villain in most cases, the superhero acts to keep that change from happening, thus maintaining the balance. I created the Justice Agency as a police force because the police are keepers of the status quo for reality. As superheroes keep the fictional the same, the police keep the actual the same.

The story begins with a quick summary about the world the viewer is in, informing them briefly about the history and characters they will meet. The detective chooses their first assignment, going after members of the Chaos Organization that have split in four different groups. Each group seeks a particular item and the detective will travel through the plot line to hopefully uncover what they were after and why. Certain plot threads within the story will lead the detective to different outcomes and miss major plot points entirely. One may journey back to the office to discover a break out in progress while another may uncover the main hideout of the criminals. The story is very reliant on what choice is made where. Every choice made will culminate into which of three conclusions the detective receives. Each conclusion acts to portray certain aspects of the superhero myth. The “good” ending acts as the perfect world scenario. The bad guys loose, the good guys win, and everything is safe and sound. The “normal” ending speaks to the futility of villainy. The intricate plot the Chaos Organization had constructed throughout the narrative is halted by one small flaw at their moment of victory. The “bad” ending punishes the viewer for poor participation. There is no real resolve to the story in the “bad” ending. If you work hard and unravel the plot around you, you will be rewarded in the end. The outcome is entirely up to the viewer.

For entertainment purposes the story contains an air of humor amongst the intense situations. I have always placed a form of humor in my work and my story is not an exception. I do not openly joke with the viewer but I slip in some humor every now and then. Some of the instances of death are rather silly when read in the context of the overall serious plot. When the viewer starts to slack off in their duties the narrator’s tone turns sarcastic and insulting. I don’t want to have people laughing loudly, but a chuckle every so often.

The key to this project’s presentation truly lies with the pieces of real world evidence I have created. These are the police reports, disaster reports, and series of photographs that are used to tell each part of my plot. To craft these items and give them a realistic feel I contacted and met with retired Ann Arbor Police Detective Cynthia Avery. We discussed the paper work of an officer of the law and the process that happens with each incident. Our discussions helped in crafting the visuals for my plot, in understanding how an actual police force would tackle a situation of this magnitude.

The Characters

I fully believe that a superhero story is only as good as its villains. The villains are the characters that act outside the status quo. They are the enablers of change and present conflict and interest in the narrative. Without them nothing tries to change. I originally created the Chaos Organization for various narrative projects in the past, but I have used my Integrative Project as a chance to revisit and improve the designs of these characters. The original forms have been broken down to their base traits and rebuilt to develop a character with more depth and interest. Here I will expand on two of the 13 members of the Chaos

Organization: Lord Chaos and Antlion.

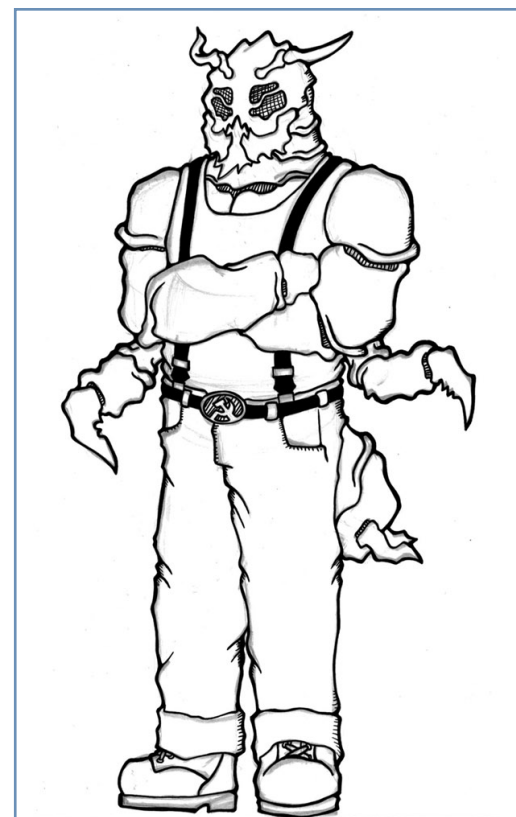
Lord Chaos is the leader of the Chaos Organization, a man driven by his psychosis and lack of moral understanding. In his past Lord Chaos served as an officer of the Justice Agency, a man driven by the need to do good and help the world. A training accident left a bullet lodged in his left frontal lobe. The outcome was similar to the case of Phineas P. Gage, a man whose damaged left frontal lobe gave him a changed moral outlook. This incident gave birth to Lord Chaos, a man wishing to do harm and damage to the world. His body expels a black mist and from it he can form solid constructs. Focusing on his fractured psyche, I looked to the work of Wayne Barlowe, an illustrator working on depictions of Dante's Inferno, to give ideas into portrayals of hell. Hell being humanity's ultimate nightmare these illustrations gave me inspiration in figuring out what nightmare forms Lord Chaos's broken mind would create.

Antlion was born during an event known as the Gene War. In our world, where weapons of war equate to power, we had the Cold War against the Soviet Union. In the world of the narrative, individuals with abilities equate to power. Thus the Soviet Union made an army of genetically altered soldiers and started the Gene War. Antlion was raised from a young age to be a soldier, and when his superior officers thought he was ready he was genetically altered with insect D. N. A. He was altered into an insect humanoid and became one of the faces of the Soviet Union during the Gene War. He needed a base in the Russian era he was brought up in, and I turned to depictions of Soviet Propaganda. I found the image Then and Now by Vladimir Kozlinsky to be very influential. He embodies the working class citizen, the proletariat. He clothes himself with a simple attire and memento to his Soviet past in the form of a belt buckle.

Each character is depicted within the narrative in a form chosen to display aspects of their past, information about the certain power they possess, or tell the viewer why this character has turned to a life of crime. Antlion and Black Rose, as children of a type of Cold War experimentation, are presented through proletariat propaganda, posters and depictions of the working class. The Hitman, a character of mystery and the world's greatest assassin comes in the form of his business card, the only real evidence of his existence other than hundreds of bodies. Lord Chaos is featured in the illustrations of those lucky enough to only be driven mad by him. I present these characters this way to have them feel real and yet to retain an air of mystery around them.



Lord Chaos



Antlion

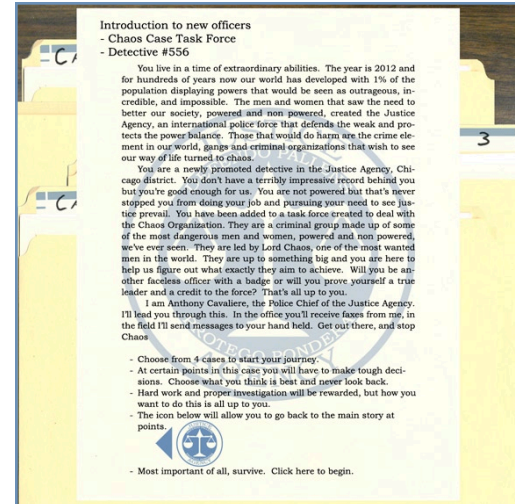
The Site

The plot is presented through real world evidence, each juncture of the story being displayed through police reports, wanted posters, and series of photographs. Because I found it easiest to access a wide audience with a [website](#), a hyperlink adventure displays the story. The viewer must point the mouse and click in the correct spots to journey through this world. They arrive in this story as a detective of the aforementioned Justice Agency, the police force of this world. The detective has been assigned to a special task force dealing in cases that are connected to the Chaos Organization. The Chief of Police, known under the title of The Swordsman and acting as the leader of the Justice Agency, narrates the tale, informing the viewer of the current situation.

Messages present the current situation in differing ways for when the viewer finds themselves either in their office or in the field doing work. When the detective is in the station and office, letterhead paper informs the audience of the assignments they are able to embark on or the tasks they must fulfill within the confines of the police station. A personal digital assistant presents the detective with the story when the player finds themselves in the field. During intense situations following the criminals or looking for evidence of their activities messages appear with places to click and enable the viewer to access information on the case that they are currently working. This information will be key to finding out what the criminals are after and what they are really trying to accomplish. Many of the messages also carry with them several choices the viewer can make on how to proceed with their investigation. The viewer can choose to follow after one lead while ignoring another, rush in to make an arrest, leave the job to some other cop and other similar choices. These decisions culminate in the conclusion, where the choices the viewer has made through the narrative resolves which of the three endings they receive.

The Installation

The Chaos World Caper debuted at Wanderlust, the 2010 Senior Show for the School of Art and Design at the University of Michigan. For the presentation of the narrative I constructed an environment in which a passerby could enter a small piece of the world I created and explore my narrative. The [installation](#) consisted of a large and bulky computer to display the hyperlink website, a metal and wood top office



Website

Installation



desk, two large bulletin boards, and a comfortable office chair. I created psychical versions of the pieces of real world evidence that make up my narrative and placed them within the installation. The bulletin boards were covered with wanted posters of each of the 13 criminal members of the Chaos Organization with post-it notes containing small notes on some of the characters. The desk was filled with some of the case files found throughout the story and the identity files that gave a deeper look into a few of the members of the Chaos Organization. I even hid some interesting odds and ends within the installation that would help the viewer successfully navigate the story. The installation functioned as a way for the viewer to explore and physically interact with the environment of my narrative.

My Influences: Superheroes, Narratives, and Art

One of the most recognized superhero tales in the graphic novel and comic book form is that of Superman, created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster in 1933, maybe the very first comic book superhero. He is the definition of the superhero, a character with other worldly abilities using them to make the world better or fend off characters with similar and different extraordinary talents from causing harm. However this same representation embodies the problem with the modern myth. One can only do so much with the same clichéd characters and events before the story becomes boring to the reader.

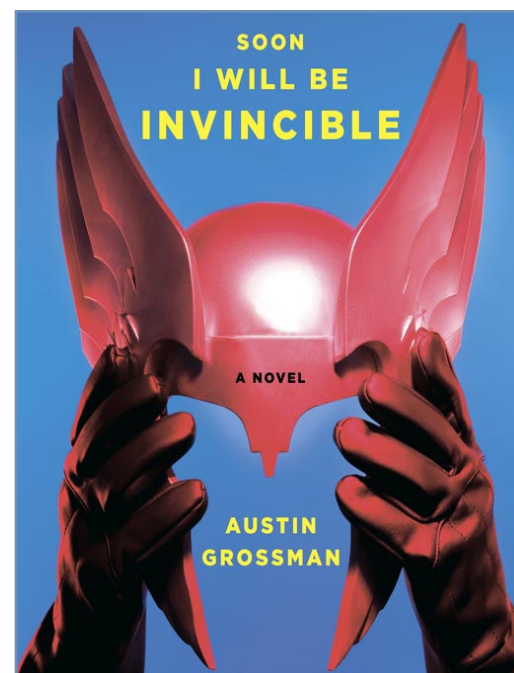
The work of Alan Moore and Peter Gibbons within the graphic novel *Watchmen* also influences my work. The story itself presents a Cold War allegory that questions the superhero, asking why we place our lives in the hands of such god like characters and critiques the authenticity of the superhuman in reality. The story further develops with outside and real material such as newspaper clippings and autobiographies of the characters from the story. I took this use of real material further, not just adding to the story through it but crafting the story with it. This way, the audience is brought into this project with a visual reinforcement that this is real, that makes it seem like these characters and world truly exist.

Conceptually there was no greater guidance than in the novel *Soon I Will Be Invincible* by Austin Grossman. Setting out to change the superhero story his own way, Austin created a novel narrated from the viewpoint of a supervillain and a small time heroine. His creation of the superhero myth found in graphic novels and comic books in prose may have lost visual cues but it achieved, “so much of everything else ... It gives a grittier, richer, realer, funnier world” (Johnson



Watchmen

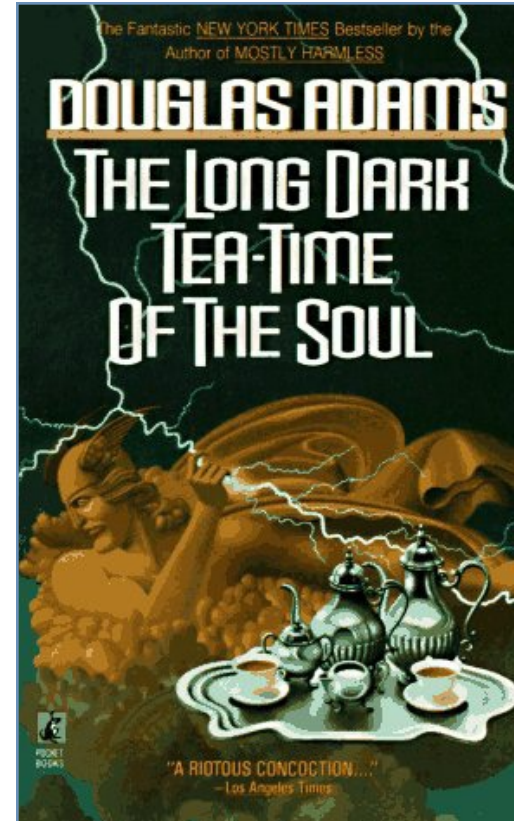
Soon I Will Be Invincible



interview).

The fictional worlds developed by author Douglas Adams in his *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and *Dirk Gently* series have influenced my work. How Adams carefully created the universes within each series, every single minute detail given careful consideration how it fits individually and as a part of the whole story. This is the part of his work that drives my own. Each story is one single, large-scale plot that is presented through pieces of interaction between the main characters. These interactions do not interfere with the whole story, but fortify its complexity. I put the same careful consideration into every part of my story, the story at large and each individual part crafted neatly to culminate in the end to add complexity to my narrative. Every part being its own collected tale while keeping to the story at large. Adams also influenced my in his humor. Not the same dry wit and matter-of-fact humor that is apparent throughout his worlds, but the fact that he uses it as a tool to entertain. I have always thought it better to enjoy ones self with laughter in a novel than with sorrow.

Chicago based artist [Deb Sokolow](#) has also been a large influence on the presentation of my work. Each of her pieces, from large-scale installations to small page sized illustrations, work as a narrative map that brings the audience on an adventure. A paranoid, nameless narrator leads the audience to uncover a sinister plot. My examination of her work focused on the appearance of her installations, keeping with her own visual cues of the large and small scale flow charts acting as narrative maps and presenting points of interest that are cued by illustrations, notes, and other pieces of work. Studying her interesting choice of story presentation and the chance given to the viewer to change the outcome by making differing choices at set junctures helps in understanding how I could utilize the same practices with my work.



[Dirk Gently](#)

[Deb Sokolow](#)



Conclusion

Experimentation is key for the growth and evolution of any human endeavor, be it artistic or scientific, and so testing must be done if the superhuman story is to evolve. My narrative changed the super into the everyday and gave the viewer the task of being the impossible hero. It combined real world items and concepts to very fictional characters and events. My installation presented an environment that could be interacted with, further bringing this narrative into reality. These are only small steps taken in the experimentation and evolution of the superhero myth. I wish to see how far we can bring the story away from the graphic novel and comic book and yet keep the feel of having it fresh in your hands. There remains so much to be done with these impossible beings that sore through the sky and save the world on a daily basis.

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Christopher F. Fiore

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