Adventure Quest

I spent the spring break of my Junior year of college going through my basement. My mother had charged me with combing my things, throwing out everything I didn't need and picking what I would take when my family moved to Atlanta, Georgia later the next month. In a box of old papers and binders from high school, I found a notebook containing one of the many "choose your own adventure" stories my best friend, Josh Saville, and I had written. Flipping through the pages it became clear to me what I wanted to spend the next year working on. Excited at my idea, I quickly told Josh of my plans, and he joined my excitement for our future project. That summer we began writing the original story that I would adapt into a choose-your-own-adventure-style comic book that would become *Adventure Quest*.

Then, as well as now, my first interest when it comes to this project is branching storytelling. My first encounter with this type of narration, like many people, was with the classic *Choose Your Own Adventure* book series. As a child, the ability to have agency in the story in front of me was exhilarating. It wasn't until later in High School that I, along with Josh, became fascinated with the underlying structure and framework of these stories as well as the unique possibilities second person narration gives to a work of prose.

My second interest in this project is the problem of adapting prose in a visual way for a comic book. Josh and I had always imagined translating one of our choose your own adventures (CYOAs for short) into some visual medium. We had talked about turning our last collaborative project into an interactive video piece, where each segment of the story is narrated to you along with a simple animation of the events. But even in these discussions there was always a clear separation of the prose, and pictures. In this project, I seek to not just simply illustrate and annotate the text with visuals but create a new adaptation that cannot fully exist without either words or pictures.

Context:

Josh and I began writing these stories in high school to amuse ourselves during our lunches and free periods. They started off as simple quizzes that would tell you what Disney villain or prince you were but soon grew into fully fledged narratives. We would take turns scrawling each section of the of the story in a notebook, then pass it to each other and wait eagerly to see what strange and exciting thing the other would do with the story. They would

often start with a far-fetched prompt, such as an apocalyptic scenario involving meteors and an abandoned gas station, and a goal, like having all of the endings except one lead to a grisly death for the reader.

My main point of influence is other CYOA gamebooks. These include everything from the classic 1970s gamebooks I read as a child to the more modern versions of CYOA published within the last five years. One of these modern CYOAs that has one of the biggest impacts one me is *To Be or Not To Be* by Ryan North. This is the gamebook retelling of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. North takes the original story and rewrites the play in his own distinctive quirky writing style and expands it, allowing the reader to 'play' as Hamlet, Ophelia, and Hamlet Sr and make choices that affect the character's fate.. This book recaptures the fun and excitement that existed in the original 1970s series of my childhood and repackages the nostalgia for a modern, more adult audience.

Additionally, I also found inspiration from a handful of CYOA comics I found: *Meanwhile* by Jason Shiga, *Adventure Time* #10 by Ryan North, and *The Unwritten* #17 by Mike Carey. All of these showed me how nonlinear storytelling methods have been used in comics. I was able to study different ways to move the reader through the narration, and how these have an impact on the type, complexity, and scope of the story that can be told. The first way of movement, featured in *Meanwhile* and *Adventure Time* #10, is the panel to panel method.
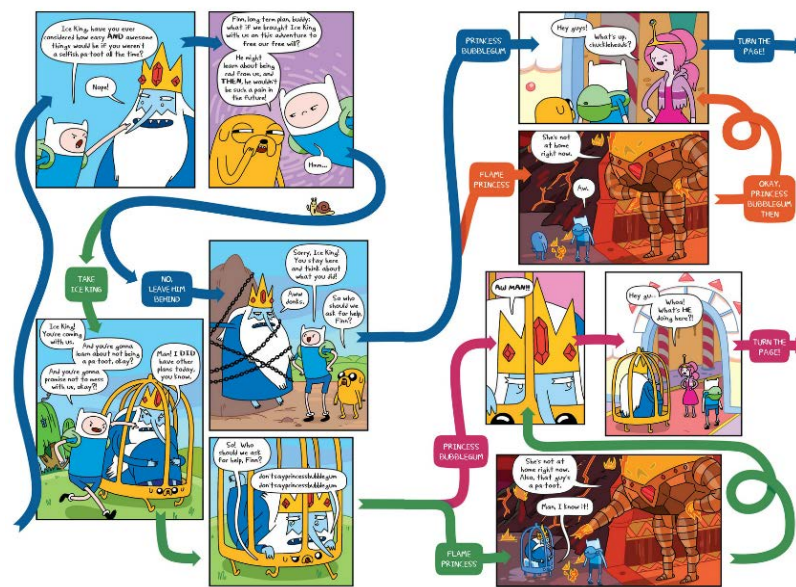
Spread from *Adventure Time* #10, panel to panel transition

In this method, the reader is presented with a choice at the end of each comic panel and a line directs the reader forward in the comic. This type of movement allows for a moment by moment reader choice and is good with shorter works, but becomes increasingly complex and hard to follow the longer the story gets. The second type of movement is the page to page transition of *The Unwritten* #17.

Page from *The Unwritten* #17, page to page transition

This method is very similar to how a standard *Choose Your Own Adventure* book directs readers though, with a small written choice at the bottom of certain pages that direct the reader to a new page number. I found this method removes the reader slightly from the narration, but offers a much more pleasant experience when dealing with longer or more narratively driven CYOAs, and is what I decided to use in *Adventure Quest*.

I have read a few traditional comics for inspiration in visual style and mood. The first is Hawkeye written by Matt Fraction and art by David Aja.

Pages from *Hawkeye*

I'm heavily inspired by the clean geometric lines and limited color palettes of Fraction's run on Hawkeye. Under him, the comic has visually paid homage to the boxy layouts and flat colors of classic comics from the 50s and 60s but has stark and modern feel in the writing and pacing. The next is Lumberjanes written by Noelle Stevenson.

Pages from *Lumberjanes*

The story of Lumberjanes is what attracts me to it most, but the bright and loose visual style create a lasting charm that keeps me from putting it down. It is a fun, all-ages fantasy romp through the woods with a humor style that I feel meshes well with that of my own comic. I also love that it is a comic written by women for girls because far too often it is hard to find female driving comics written by women in the comic world.

During the course of working on this project, I have also been looking at some illustrators. The first is Will Eisner.

Illustrations from *A Contract with God*

Eisner is a master of combining the written word with the image. His books and illustrations are amazing examples of how to convey narrative and emotions through character poses and the shots in comics. The second is Mike Mignola.

Illustration and page from *Hellboy*

While my drawing style seems vastly different from the dark, heavy, and often geometric nature of Mignola's inks, he is no doubt one of my favorite artists of all time. I find his work resonates with me on a deep level that is hard to explain. I can stare at one of his illustrations or comic pages and get lost in the world it creates and story its telling. There is a sense of history to everything he draws that inspires me to put more thought into the details of the worlds I create.

Probably one of the most helpful and unexpected sources of inspiration came in the form of a recommendation from my professor, Seth Ellis, to look up hypertext fiction. In doing so, I found an enormous amount of scholarly writing about a genre of fiction that, even though, differs in the medium has much in common with *Adventure Quest*. Hypertext fiction is a type of interactive fiction that uses hyperlinks to direct the reader through the narrative. Most commonly associated with electronic fiction written in the 90s and early 2000s, the term can also be applied to traditionally published nonlinear works such as Jorges Luis Borges' *The Garden of Forking Paths*. I found the most relevant information to me from essays in the book *New Narratives: Stories and Storytelling in the Digital Age* edited by Ruth Page and Bronwen Thomas. These essays gave me perspective on my work in the context of hypertext and other digital types of fiction from visual novels to text-based adventure games. Even though my work is printed, it shares a common heritage of nonlinear storytelling with hypertext

and other types of interactive fiction. The knowledge of principles and ideas of this type of narrative thought was helpful for me to place my work in a larger context than just that my artistic inspirations.

Creative Process:

Mapping:

When first approaching this project I started where Josh and I always did when we write CYOAs, mapping the story. We sit down and make a visual key of the different story paths the reader will be able to take. This early mapping played a key part in how the story would evolve over the course of the year. Traditionally, Josh and I would construct our stories with a tree branching pattern that resembles a tournament bracket.
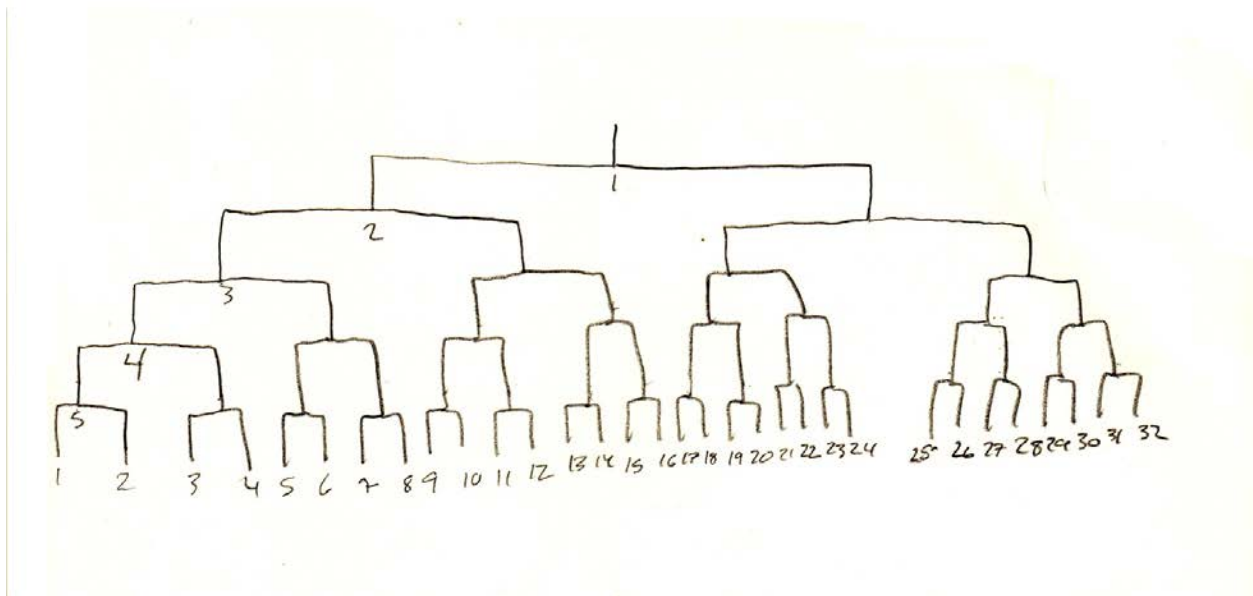
Early map from my sketchbook

Each vertical line represents a story section, and each diverging horizontal line represents a choice that could be taken by the reader. While this structure is simple it has major flaws, that I sought to rectify in writing *Adventure Quest*.

Firstly, as a reader of CYOAs, I was always disappointed when I felt I was not given enough choices from the beginning to the end of my path through the story. From experience, anything less than five choices leaves the reader wanting more involvement in the story. The problem with using the branching system for a comic is that as soon as you increase the number of 'tiers' in a story the size of the work exponentially increases in length.

Even early on, I knew my main issue with this project would be balancing the length of the story I wanted to tell and the number of pages I could feasibly make during the course of the year.

Secondly, I felt this type of bracketing system was quite boring. As a writer, I don't want my readers to be able to easily trace their paths through the story with a straight line. And in my research where I read a few CYOAs and mapped their story progression, I saw that these stories made use of interweaving plots.

In one of these stories, *The Ring of the Ruby Dragon*, if the reader makes a certain choice at the beginning of the story that doesn't mean that they are prohibited from visiting most parts of the story. This is done by creating circular narratives and loops with choices that lead back to earlier "trees" of the story. Where in a traditional bracket structure the choices made early on in the story prohibit the reader from experiencing half the available paths of the whole story. With these two things in mind I created a rough story structure for Josh and I to write with, that remained fairly consistent through the entire time working on the project.
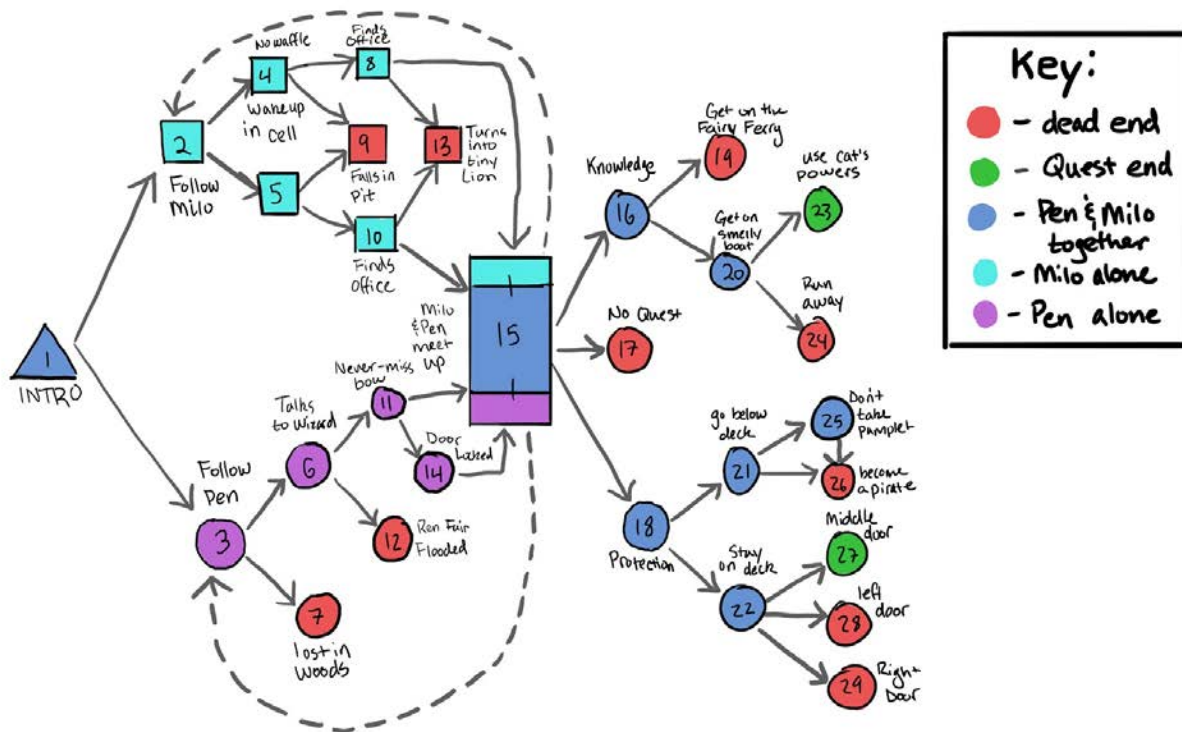
Example of one of the many inprogress story maps of *Adventure Quest*

Writing/drawing:

When I create a comic I start with words. I may draw a picture or two to explore ideas, but the first real work always comes with words. This was especially true with this project. Since I had already decided early on that Josh's involvement with the project would be limited to helping to write the prose, it was very easy to keep the writing I was doing with him separate from the visual development I was doing myself.

Our writing process was mostly unchanged from high school, except for the addition of technology. Instead of a shared notebook we had a shared Google Doc and in-person

meetings were replaced by Skype calls. We took turns writing sections; ending with a choice for the other person to build off of. It is sort of like a game of round robin story telling, where one person starts a story, the person next to continues it, and so on and so on. Usually, we try to have no idea about where the story could go when we hand it off to the next person to keep an element of spontaneity in the story, but in this case I had certain story beats planned out beforehand to help wrangle the size of the story. For example at the end of the first tier the two main characters enter the fantasy world, in the 5th they reunite, and in the 7th one they find the object of their quest. This was done to make working with a more complicated story easier, as well as to create a more cohesive narration, as our joint writing has a tendency to lose a focus if left unchecked.

Shortly after we started writing, I started to visually develop the look of the comic, specifically the characters. In early brainstorms, we decided on two protagonists, male and female friends where one is bouncingly happy and the other is curmudgeonly. These were the beginnings of Pen and Milo. After figuring out basic elements to each of their characters with Josh, I began sketching. I quickly decided that Pen's design would be based on circles as if her endless optimism was struggling to burst out of her like air in a balloon, where Milo's design would focus more on straight thin lines to go along with his more reserved and withdrawn nature. I began drawing silhouettes for each of the characters until one felt right and then refined it until I finalized designs for both of them.
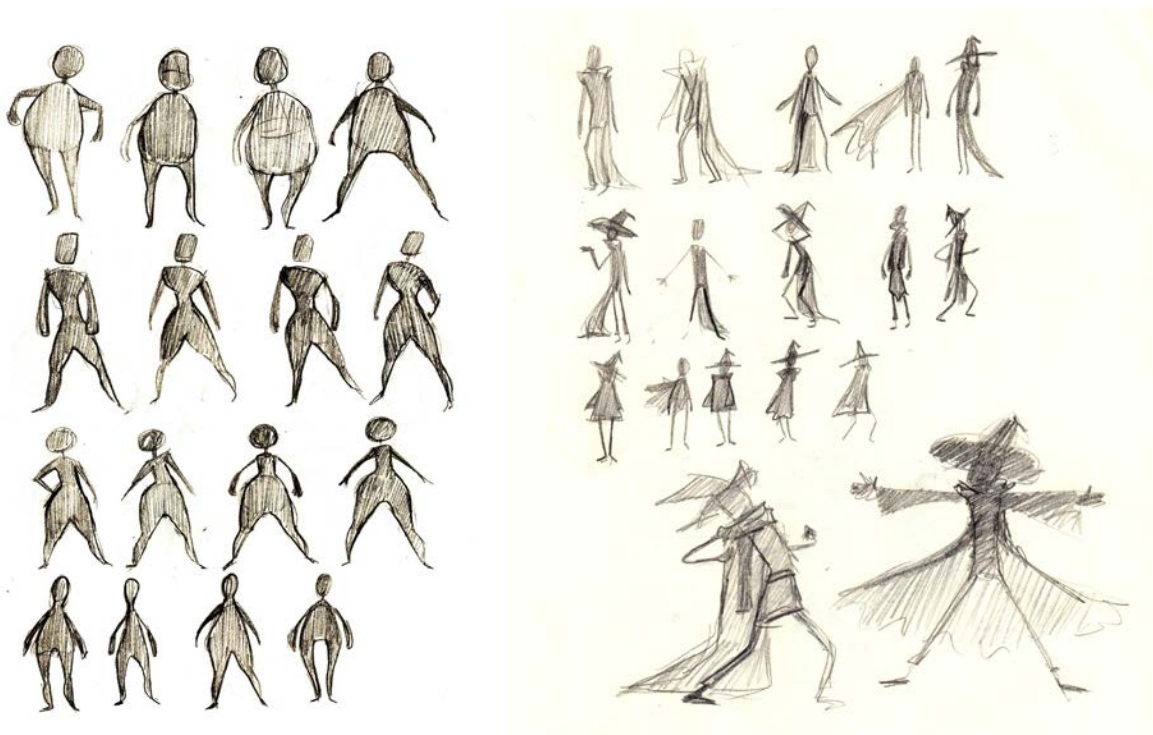

Silhouette Studies of Pen and Milo

Final designs of Pen and Milo

Combining Words & Pictures:

      I first started to combine words and pictures after Josh and I had finished a few drafts of the story. This began with thumbnailing and creating life-size roughs of each page. I worked like this for a few weeks, dutifully trying to replicate each story section as best I could until the IP review in December. There I took the advice of my panel, to one, make the comic shorter, and two, to play more with interweaving storylines rather than having many choices and dead ends. So began the biggest overhaul the story went through. While only a few plot points actually changed, in this editing I was thinking about both words and pictures together. My writing was thumbnails, my pictures were words. At the same time as I reworked story sections, I was drawing what the pages for those sections would look like. In some ways, this was very challenging because it's not how I normally approach comic making, but at the same time I think it allowed me to quickly make the changes I needed to the story.
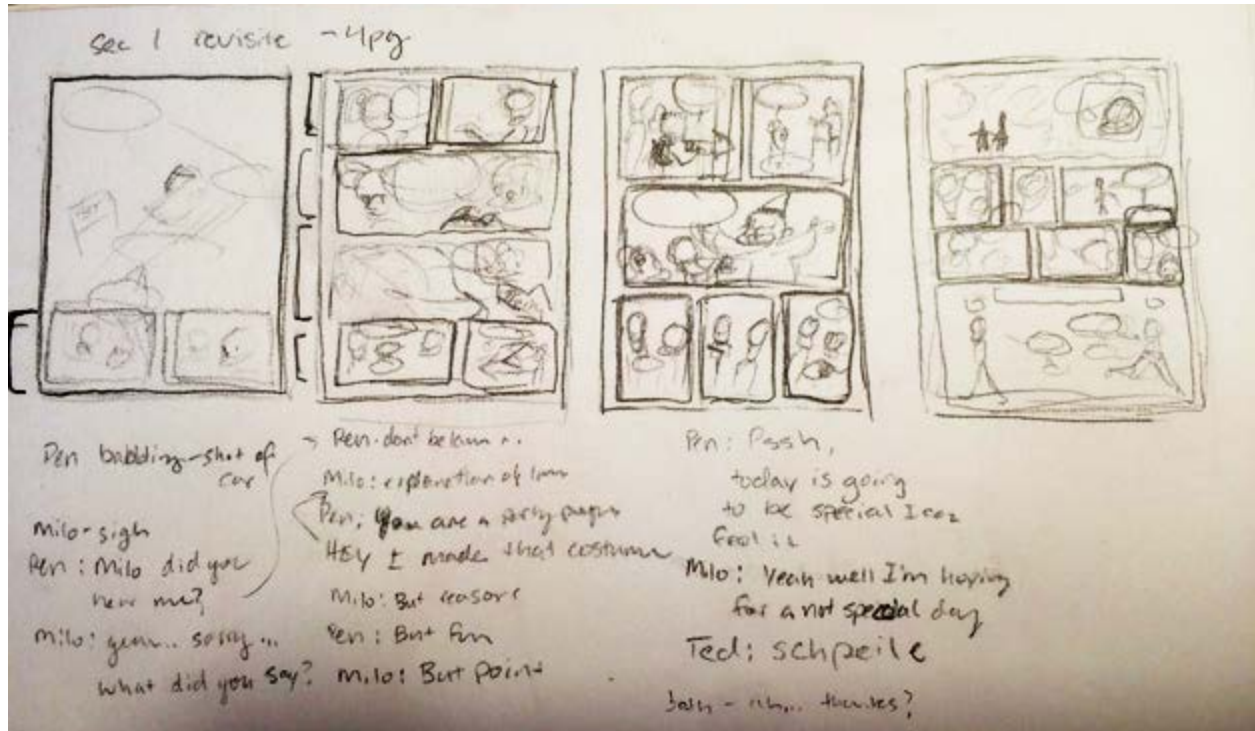
Thumbnails of the first four pages

The Story:

When we started brainstorming the story itself, Josh and I agreed on a few aspects. First, we wanted the story to be funny. In our previous CYOAs, humor was always incredibly important. We wrote them with the aim of making each other laugh, and we wanted to keep that light fun atmosphere in writing this story. Second, we also wanted the story to be a pseudo parody of the fantasy genre. Growing up Josh and I both developed a deep love for fantasy as a genre. And it being traditionally associated with escapism makes it a great partner for interactive fiction, which seeks to increase the reader's involvement, and by extension, emersion with the story. We wanted to take this love of ours and poke fun at the genre's tropes and flaws, but also to play with the readers expectations. For instance normally it is the female character who is kidnaped and it is up to the male character to go on a quest rescue them, but in our story we switched this. It is our male character who is kidnaped and it is up to our female character to rescue him. We also got rid of the standard good vs evil dichotomy by trying to humanize the dragons and vilify Theowandical, who would normally play figure senex, the wise old man helping figure.

In its final form, the story is that of two friends, Pen and Milo and their misadventure of their trip to their local Renaissance Fair. Pen is very excited, but Milo not as much. They have a disagreement and separate when they get to the fair. Milo is then kidnaped by a

dragon and taken through a portal to a real fantasy world. Pen comes in right as Milo is disappearing into the portal and runs in after him. Once in this fantasy world they must work to find each other and get back home. Pen has to deal with the wizard Theowandical who wants her to go on a quest that she wants no part of while Milo finds that the dragons who kidnaped him aren't quite what they seem. Through the course of the story, the reader has the ability to follow both Pen and Milo on their journey, from sailing the high seas to exploring lost catacombs. It is up to them to make the right choices to bring Pen and Milo together and get them back to the real world.

Production:

      The actual production of the comic is fairly similar to how I normally work when it comes to comics. I started with small thumbnails of each page then translated these to the size of paper I'd be working on for the final. Then I used a light box to transfer these drawings with a red pencil onto nicer paper. I then inked over top the red pencil with micron pens. Originally I was planning to ink with a brush pen, but after completing a few pages I was not happy with the inks nor the time it was taking me to do them. So I switched to micron pens, which allowed me to work much faster. Then I scanned each page and cleaned them up in photoshop, adding color and word balloons. Finally in inDesign I laid out the book and the text. Once the book was all laid out, I then got it printed at a local printer. The final product is a square-bound soft cover comic book.

Images of the final printed book

Conclusion:

My main intention in completing this year-long project was adapting prose written collaboratively with my creative partner, Josh Saville, into a comic, and in that I feel that my project is successful. Josh and I have always worked collaboratively on projects, but this was a first test of how to transform that collaborative work into a personal studio practice. There was the added challenge that most of the work happened remotely, as I was in Ann Arbor and he was in New York state. In the past, most of our work and brainstorming came from in-person sessions and shared notebooks. We had to adapt these into Skype calls and a well-organized Google Drive. Though, for the most part, things went smoothly, but there are always some hiccups along the way, particularly when it came to adapting the prose we wrote into rough comic pages. That marked the boundary between the collaborative part of the project, to the part that was my individual work. I had to prune the story to make it work as a comic while not having my partner to ask if things were working or to bounce ideas off of. But through the process of this past year I've learned valuable skills that I can apply to a future collaborative practice with Josh.

I also want to continue exploring interactive narrative by building off of these plans for future collaboration. I am proud and happy with the final product of the comic, but I know there is much to expand upon. Because of time constraints, I was forced to cut down much of the prose that was originally written, as well as scrap the second person narration of the original prose. In the future, I'd like to investigate incorporating second person narration and more intricate story paths into a comic. I also hope to import more ideas from network and hypertext fiction into my work. I see *Adventure Quest* not the end of a stream of thought, but the foundation to build and expand my creative work post graduation.

Bibliography

Borges, Jorge Luis, and Andrew Hurley. *Collected Fictions.* New York, NY, U.S.A.: Viking, 1998. Print.

[Carey, Mike (w), Gross, Peter (i).] *The Unwritten*, #17 (Jan. 2014) [Vertigo].

Eisner, Will. The Contract With God Trilogy: Life On Dropsie Avenue. New York: W.W. Norton, 2006.

[Ellis, Grace (w), Stevenson, Noelle (w), Allen, Brook (i).] *Lumberjanes* #1-12. (Jan. 2014). [Boom! Studios].

[Fraction, Matt (w), Aja, David (i), Pulido, Javier (c) .] *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon*, Vol. #1 (Mar. 2013). [Marvel].

Mignola, Michael, and Scott Allie. Hellboy: the First 20 Years. First ed. Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics, 2014.

[North, Ryan (w), Lamb, Braden (i), Paroline, Shelli (i).] *Adventure Time*, #10 (Nov. 2012) [Boom! Studios]

North, Ryan, William Shakespeare, and Christina Marlowe. *To Be or Not to Be: A Chooseable-path Adventure*. N.p.: Breadpig, 2013. Print.

Page, Ruth E.. New Narratives: Stories And Storytelling In the Digital Age. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011.

Shiga, Jason. Meanwhile .... Oakland, CA: Jason Shiga, 2000