

# They Typed Questions, I Typed Answers.

Interview by Daniela Baldry for *Fresh Meat* - March 2011

## **When did you first find a love for drawing?**

The truth is that I don't really love drawing. I like the satisfaction I get from making a decent picture but I don't really like drawing itself. I do love stories though, and I realized from an early age that the thrill of spinning a yarn is probably worth spending all day every day doing something that you don't love.

## **How did your interest in comics come about?**

I think that was something that manifested early on. I remember reading Footrot Flats before I could even read. I think some people just have these weird warped brains that communicate best in sequences of simplified shapes and symbols. It's probably hard-wired. Those people are the ones who grow up to be comics nerds and cartoonists.

## **What do you think makes comics so special?**

There are a million things that makes comics so great but here's one: Comics is one of the only storytelling mediums that combines some of the characters of performance with the characters of books. The performance that I'm talking about is the act of drawing, that specific way of moving a body that brings a good cartoony shape into being. Performance is a big part of most forms of communication but comics is the only performative art that you can carry around with you, read on the tram, swap with friends, store under your bed. With comics we get the benefit of embodied storytelling arts like mime, oral storytelling or dance, which are really visceral, emotive artforms, and we combine it with language based storytelling, like prose fiction, that can handle extreme complexities and abstract ideas. It's a heady combination.

## **Which Artists/ Comic Artists inspire you the most?**

This changes every five minutes according to what media I'm devouring. Right now, I'm obsessed with the ballad lyrics written by Benezra in this great Melbourne band called The Broadside Push. In terms of comics I'm thinking a lot about Bottomless Belly Button by Dash Shaw.

## **Did studying Communication at University equip you with any skills for creating your Artwork?**

Absolutely. You have to make loads of really bodgy awkward art for years before you make anything good. Universities are great places to get through the bodgy phase and if you're lucky you'll meet some other artists who, later in life will be honest enough to tell you when they spot any new bodgy bits.

## **How often do you draw? How long does an average comic (say the length of 'The Share House' take you?**

I spend 60 hours a week making comics because for the moment I'm lucky enough to have been given a few grants and a scholarship that allow me to work full time. With that in mind it still takes about 40 hours to make one big page of comics. The Last Share House took me two to three months but I was working a day job and freelancing at the time. If I did it start to finish with a full-time workload I think I could have done that one in a month or so.

## **What materials do you use to create your comics?**

I draw on ivory board with a hb mechanical pencil or a blue pencil. I ink with a Windsor and Newton No.2 Series 7 sable brush and india ink. I scan with a cheap scanner and noodle around in Photoshop until the page is completely ruined.

## **What inspired you to create 'The Last Share House'? Can you tell us what it's about?**

I moved into an old house in Carlton North, in Melbourne, that had been a share house for the last 10-15 years. There was all of this junk left over from these mysterious flatmates who came before us. I thought it was a good starting point for a story with no characters, just a narrator and a house. Sort of like hipster archaeology. In the telling it turned out to be a story about that dull melancholic feeling you get when landscapes and places change.

**Your comics always seem to have a humour to them. Does each comic have a different aim? Or are they mostly intended to make people laugh?**

I'm not sure what the humour means in my work. Often the humour is there so that I can deal with "serious" or "literary" content without things getting so pretentious that I disappear up my own cakehole.

**Waiting for Something to Happen: The Cronulla Riot Comic seems to have a more serious intent, yet it still incorporates humour. What was your purpose behind that comic? How long after the Riot did you create it?**

I wrote it one year after the riot. There was certainly a sense of catharsis with that one and it's a good example of a story that would completely suck without a bit of humour. All of that earnest, preachy and ultimately ill informed writing that was in abundance after Cronulla got me down.

**What are some of the reactions you've received to the Cronulla comic?**

Everyone seems to like it. I think it was certainly a turning point in my comics trajectory. Despite the truly awful drawing in that comic it was the point where I started taking the comics seriously and I think people started to notice that. Maybe some people didn't like it but nobody said anything.

**What sort of environment do you like to work in?**

I like my studio. It's a cubicle in a crusty warehouse in Brunswick. A good workspace has to be warm in the winter must to be completely unplugged from the internet. Bedrooms seem to be where most cartoonists work but bedrooms are bad news in my opinion.

**How long have you been working on your latest work, the Graphic Novel, 'Blue'? What's the basic premise of 'Blue'?**

I started blue about a year and a half ago. It took me a whole year just to draft and pencil the thing. The finished art is rolling off the drawing table now though and I should be finished with book 1 in July. The story follows three pimply and unpleasant little teenagers as they grow up in a fictional coastal town called Bolton. The schtick is that Bolton is being inundated by immigrants. Strange blue skinned foreigners with funny tentacles legs. The book is an extension of a lot of the stuff that I have been clumsily poking around in all the work I have done previously about localism, racism and the beach.

**Has the funding from the Australian Council for the Arts made an impact on your ability to work on your Art?**

Hell yeah. Money always greases the cogs in the comics machine. Aside from having my bills paid for a little while an arts grant is an excellent mandate to get the ball rolling on a project. We all talk about these big projects that we'd like to do one day, but when the traditionally mistrustful government takes it upon itself to transfer several thousand of the taxpayers' dollars into your bank account then your time for talking is finished. You'd better put your head down and make sure the work gets done and is worthy of that trust.

**What is the difference between your painting and illustrating? What sort of places do you seek out to paint on?**

I'm pretty sure that you're talking about mural and graffiti work with this question. I don't paint much outdoors these days because I'm a big wimpy loser. I don't like staying up late. Painting graffiti usually means spending half the night in preparation and the rest of the night running around in the dark climbing fences, dodging freight trains and getting high on sickly sweet paint fumes. It's fun and the exposure is significant but to get any good you have to make it central to your art practice. You also have to be a night owl. That's not me unfortunately. These days I'm more about getting up early to go to my studio and draw comics. Not very rock. Occasionally I do an outdoor painting but it's got to be a lame-arse legal thing that happens on a Sunday and I have to be home before the Sunday night BBC period drama comes on TV.

**The articles you've had published in Voiceworks are also humour based. You clearly have a knack for wording short and punchy phrases. How did that opportunity come about?**

Voiceworks is a magazine for under 25 year olds. To get published there you just have to write something that's not terrible and send it to them. That's what I did and eventually I ended up as a

regular columnist. I wrote and drew pictures for them for years but when I turned 25 I was put out to pasture. That's how it goes.

**Can you bust another myth for us, please?**

You don't have to be able to draw well to make good comics. As a matter of fact most of the time when people start out making comics they'd be better off if they can't draw. The ability to draw is usually just a string of bad habits that tend to get in the way of good story telling.

**Do you put together your own zines, or contribute you work to other peoples?**

I make my own. Zines that are hand made by one or two individuals tend to be the best zines. Anthology zines are usually boring and ugly. I still do anthology work occasionally but I'd rather just make my own.

**Your website is like no other I've seen. It really expresses your style in a really honest and clever way. Was it difficult to create?**

No not really. I just taught myself really basic html and fiddled with it for a few months till I got it right. I hate the look of most websites. I only really like the simple, uncluttered ones, so it was pretty easy to do exactly what I wanted. My approach to making a website is to just draw it on a piece of paper then figure a way to chop it up and re assemble it using code. Coding is really fun when you get the hang of it. It's like a logic puzzle from year nine maths class.

**Comic artistry, unlike a lot of activities young people take part in today, requires a lot of patience and thought. How would you describe your personality and has it always been suited to this type of Artwork?**

There are three things about my personality that have helped me make comics:

1. I'm typical of my Irish catholic bloodline. I'm an emotionally self indulgent, melancholic type who dreams a lot of impractical dreams and believes more in various mythologies than in reason. People like this end up being the story tellers of the world and contribute nothing at all to the economy.
2. I like learning new skills. Most of comics is technical work and it takes a lifetime to learn all of the different techniques in a solid cartooning vocabulary. At the moment I'm trying to learn how to paint so that I don't have to rely on Photoshop for colouring so much. This year it's watercolours. Next year it's oils. Then woodblock printing. Then collage. Then I'm going to try a 3d diorama comic, then I'm going to screen print comic on wooden pages, then I'm going to do an entirely digital ipad app, after that I'm going to..... (and so on into infinite)
3. Despite contributing nothing at all to the economy I still have this sick belief in the virtue of hard work. I picked it up from my mum who worked all her life and never took a sick day. This sort of attitude is important for cartoonists because 90% of their job is unfathomably tedious labour. You have to be a real sucker for punishment. I like to think of comics as a form of self-flagellation.

**What encourages you to stay so committed to, and passionate about your work?**

I don't know. I learn so much in the making of art that it makes it hard to look at my older stuff. I tend to loathe the sight of each page of comics well before I've finished it. When the job of art making is done the artist takes what they've learned from the process and they move on, but the artworks remain unchanged. They stay there as a record of all of the artist's inadequacies. Most of the time what gets me back to the drawing table is the feeling that I have to prove that I'm better than those old artworks say I am.

**Where do you hope to take your Art?**

All I want is for art to make me happy. All I could or should hope for is a full belly, a warm studio, the time to follow my interests. If I'm lucky one or two people out there will want to see the results.

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**Interview by Devin Taylor for a college paper at Memphis College of Art for Illustration - May 2011**

**What are some personal goals you'd like to achieve with your art.**

Short term I want to finish book one of Blue, get it published and into as many shops as I can. Long term depends on the success or failure of that book. If people want me to continue the series I'll finish the four book run of the story. If it crashes and burns I might move on to something that is more sustainable.

Basically I just want art to make me happy and not ruin my relationships. I don't care about being full time or 'professional' but I do care about having an art practice that is satisfying, sustainable and reaches the public in some way.

**Are there any books or documentations that represent really good biographical info of your career.**

No. You have to be famous to have those sort of book. I am not famous.

**How long exactly have you been making art.**

I made my first zine in 2003 and since then have been gradually cranking up the intensity and ambition of my projects.

**When did you realize that you wanted to be a professional cartoonist and what made you realize that? What age and time period of your life?**

I remember telling people that I was going to be a cartoonist at age six or seven, but no one really believed it until really recently, least of all me! I still feel like a bit of a goose telling people that am a cartoonist when I'm asked what I do with my working life. Even though it is what I do all day and it is the way I earn my money I still feel like a fraud. I think most artist have that feeling.

**What inspires you most to make the type of art you make and is it a complicated procedure to come up with something you're satisfied with? Where do you often pull ideas from?**

I get this question a lot and I have to say I'm never able to give answers that are satisfying. There's this mystique around art and artist that is really tied up with these ideas of inspiration, and the horrible truth is that it's mostly all bunk. My art practice is rarely 'inspired', most of it is just drudgery. I get myself to the drawing table using the same motivators that get any working stiff to his or her job every morning.

Yes, comics is a complicated procedure and the key to getting things right is just to give things time so that I can spot all the shitty bits before they go to print. My ideas usually come from experiences that I have had in my life that I feel like I need to explore or unpack a bit more. Art is only worthwhile for me if it helps me make sense of the world, so most of my ideas come from this process of trying to understand things that I can't let go of.

**Do you consider yourself an artist or illustrator?**

I'm a cartoonist. An illustrator's 'art' is a completed image but a cartoonist's 'art' is a little bit less tangible. In cartooning the 'art' is normally something abstract, like a story or an idea, and so you can look at the images and the writing as vehicles for arriving at that story or idea, not as artworks in and of themselves.

**What's your favourite media to work in?**

I love working with ink on paper. I love rich blacks, bold line work and the tactile sensation of the brush on smooth paper.

**Do you find thumbnails to be helpful or do you just freestyle numerous drawings until you create something you find worthwhile to take to the next level of completion?**

This depends on the sort of story being made. Thumbnails are really useful for working out a long story because you can save yourself a lot of time by making the mistakes in a really rough draft, but they often rob a project of its spontaneity. Sometimes the best pages are the ones that are composed at the last minute.

**Was your comic *Blue* something you always wanted to do or just an idea you randomly started to work on and thought ‘this could be bigger’?**

No, I always conceived it as a big thing. I did a lot of work about surf culture, localism and race politics before starting on *Blue*. I felt like I was in a good place to do something bigger and more sprawling around these themes.

**When you receive commissions what’s the first thing you do to start preparation for the project?**

I wrote a big post about this sort of stuff here → <http://www.patgrantart.com/boltonblue/blog/?p=104>

**Would you say your current style of drawing was evolved out of trial and error with several different approaches, to finally find something you considered likable and professional?**

Yeah. I think when you are learning to draw you have to spend a lot of time copying people, trying to mimic the work that you really like. Then you have to take of that tangle of techniques you’ve learned and try and draw out the things that are unique to your particular way of seeing and your particular way of moving. It’s pretty obvious to see who my influences are at this point, but slowly, as I spend more time drawing and less time reading comics, my exposure to my own drawings will start to transcend my exposure to the work of other artists. I think that this is the point where a personal drawing styles manifest. Let’s hope it happens soon.

**Have you received any awards or honors for your art to date?**

My mum said that she thinks I’m a special snowflake. That’s it so far.

**Are you highly critical of your work or ever overwhelmed by anything you do?**

It’s important for an artist to be highly critical of their work because that’s often what motivates them to create new things and to learn new techniques. I basically hate almost every thing I’ve ever done. That’s just normal, right?

**Were you one of those in-class doodlers during your school and college years?**

Absolutely. When I was younger I’d find that I have big jumps in my cartooning chops whenever I’d take a boring class. I could take an art or graphics class in high school but it was almost better for my art if I took dry classes like Business Studies or Law because it meant hours and hours of unstructured free-form drawing.

**Was drawing considered a sanctuary for you as a kid? If so Why?**

No. I don’t enjoy drawing now and I don’t remember ever really enjoying it. Mainly what I enjoyed as a kid was the praise I got when I made a good picture. Even from the start it was all for popularity. And chicks, don’t forget the awesome chicks that cartoonists pull.

**I likes to draw syndicated characters a lot when I was growing up, Did you do this? if so what are some of those characters you enjoyed drawing?**

Nah, I didn’t do this. I did become obsessed with this Kiwi comic strip called *Footrot Flats* but I never tried drawing the characters. I remember trying to do elaborate fantasy portraits of William Wallace from *Braveheart* but they totally sucked and even then I knew it. My sister knew it too and she told me that they sucked. I think if I’d spent more time copying newspaper strips at that age then my cartooning fundamentals would be more sound. It’s a missed opportunity really.

**What did it feel like to receive your first commission and what was it?**

Oh fuck. I have no idea. I think that these things are kind of muddy because the first 50 things I did were posters for mate’s bands and pro bono things like that. I do remember the first \$50 cheque I ever got for art. It was for a shitty comic that I did in class and submitted to an under 25’s literary journal.

That sure felt great. I put it on the wall for a few months and then hit the skids and cashed it to get my car registered.

**We all have habits as artist that we have a hard time breaking when adapting to doing things the correct way, what is one of your most memorable habits.**

Good question. I had this funny way of drawing people's arms when I first started cartooning seriously in my 20s. The arms were all stiff and stupid, like the sort of arms you would draw for an angry posture. For some reason I had picked up this muscle memory that made me keep replicating it. I unlearned that by adopting the methods of the rubber hose school of cartooning, where every limb looks like it's made out of a pipe cleaner. I haven't drawn an elbow in years.

**What has been your most exciting job and what has been your least favourite?**

I can't tell you about the worst job because the client will probably find it and get offended and put a flaming bag of poo on my doorstep. But the best jobs are the ones where the clients are specific about what they want and then trust me to do what I think is best for them, the worst ones are the ones where the client is vague about what they want then pick the job to pieces once its finished.

**Do you have any finished works in print that are your favourites and any that you don't like?**

I did issue #7 of my zine *Lumpen*, last year and in it is this comics about a couple of blokes called Douglas who like to smear poo on the wall. I'm still very proud of that one. *The Last Sharehouse* is still pretty good too. At least I think it is. Everything else is out of print because it sucks.

**Do you tend to revisit your childhood at times when making your art?**

Always. *Blue* is almost completely about my childhood. All except for the funny blue skinned octopus people. There weren't any of those in my childhood.

**What makes up a good/solid portfolio to you?**

I hardly ever look at anyone else's portfolio and I think that's because I think portfolios are a pretty dumb idea. My approach to attracting work is to make zines and mini comics which shows that not only can I draw and tell a story but I can make a nice publication as well. Almost all of my big breaks have come from my efforts to get my zines into the right people's laps.

**What are you often approached and asked to make art about?**

I think most cartoonists get approached to make art about the following five things: Girls with big boobs, sick cars, skulls, burning guitars and people with spiky Japanese hair fighting each other. I find all of this stuff pretty boring but I don't mind the odd skull drawing. I like drawing waves and the surfing media seems to constantly need wave drawings, so that's my lucrative little niche.

**What were your best attempts at getting yourself recognized and what advice would you offer a fresh illustrator on the scene to make themselves known?**

I really believe that in the current media landscape good quality work will rise to the top of the pile without the need of too much of the hard-sell. As I said earlier, the best thing I have ever done was make the best work I can, publish it myself and make sure that it gets into the hands of the right people.

I'm as obscure as hell so I don't think that my advice on self promotion is worth a pinch of shit, but for what it's worth here are a few things.

- Make all of your work available on the internet. Don't kid yourself, no one wants to steal it. No publisher is going to turn down a project that has had 100,000 hits on the internet. The worst thing that can happen to your work is that no one ever sees it. That's exactly what's likely to happen if you leave it under your bed until a publisher picks it up.

- Don't build your art practice around the whims of publishers and editors. Embroil yourself in projects that can and will happen even if none of the powerful types pick it up. A project that can only go ahead if Fantagraphics or Drawn and Quarterly gives it the nod is a doomed project from the start. You make the art and *then* people that matter will notice you, not the other way round.

- Don't be a douche. Make your work available and share it with people as often as you like, but as soon as you start name dropping, big-noting yourself and pitching you shit all over the place then you'll irritate people and they'll remember you forever as the annoying person rather than the person with the sweet skills

- Snail mail is your best friend. People that can make things happen for you are invariably busy people and, in direct contradiction of my first piece of advice, you should assume that busy people will not look at your work on the internet. Also assume that anyone over 30 will not look at your work on the internet. Assume that no editor or publisher will read your emails unless you have made sure that a hard copy with a hand written note has been posted to them beforehand. Print it big, print it well and then post that sucker. They'll be far more likely to give it a good look.

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### **Interview by Mark Hobby for an article in the film and multimedia mag Metro - Feb 2011**

**In your opinion, what has been the positive/negative consequence that the internet has provided, both in terms of exposure for your work (either as creator or publisher) and the Australian comic book industry in general (creating communities/fans)?**

Firstly, I have always had a bit of a problem with the word "industry" in this context. Australian comics is an artistic community that is populated mainly by self publishers and hobby-publishers with artistic motivations rather than commercial ones. We have neither an agreed upon mode of production and distribution nor a readymade market for Australian comics and as such it is hardly an industry.

I feel like a bit of a tool saying that first-up, but the thoughtful use of language is really central to good scholarly writing on comics. I feel like the importation of word like industry from the USA or Japan, which is to say places where comics are a commercial concern, and the importation of many assumptions about the way comics are made and consumed immediately works to obscure many of the unique and wonderful things about the nature of comics in Australia.

Now, to answer your question, I must confess that I never made a comic in a pre-internet world. I have always used it to some extent as a part of my creative process or publicity strategy. The positives are fairly straightforward. It makes the dissemination of artwork easy, speedy and affordable and with social networking tools like Deviant-art, Facebook, Livejournal a comic of quality will very very quickly be noticed by the artists immediate community and the core community of people interested in specifically local comics. The internet also bolsters a sense of an artistic community in local comics and a strong support network of practitioners can only be a good thing for any artist.

The negative consequences are more complex.

The biggest problem with the internet as a platform for communication with readers is that you can only reach those internet users that inhabit the space as an environment for reading. Only a small amount of internet users would be interested in reading comics online, and only a small amount of them would be interested in reading a graphic novel online. My personal approach to online environments is that if I'm in front of a screen I'm either working, or wasting time. Now, I work very hard and waste very little time, which means I would probably read no more than one page of web-comics every day. I assume that most of my audience are like me. So I am fairly confident that the only people who will read my graphic novel online from start to finish are teenagers who haven't yet developed busy lives or adults who have an absurd amount of spare time and nothing better to do than noodle around on the web. That's fine. Great even. But I need to do a bit more work to reach those other potential readers who I believe are more likely to be interested in the stories that I have to tell. This includes things like making mini comics, going to zine fairs, going to conventions, schmoozing with real publishers, sending snail mail, presenting at writer's festivals and so on and so forth. The web becomes a problem for those cartoonists who aren't prepared to do that extra offline work because they may be getting readers but only a certain kind of reader.

For content to work online then cartoonists need to tailor it to be read within that space, and of course the great web cartoonists of our time have done a great job of developing a new form. A book may sit in someone's lap for half an hour, but the average viewing time for most webpages is less than 30 seconds. Thus webcomics work best for me when they echo the traditional newspaper strip form, which is a wonderful form, but I'm really not that interested in working within these constraints because I feel the episodic strip with a payload at the end is a tough place to tell literary stories (See Dan Clowe's *Wilson* for a scathing rebuttal, come to think of it, why wasn't *Wilson* a web comic?).

**2) In your opinion, do you believe there has been a long term sustainable growth in the Australian industry with the introduction of digital media, or has it facilitated more a consolidation of a largely niche interest, with limited appeal? What do you believe needs to be done to sustain the industry in the long term (the answer does not have to relate to digital media)?**

With the first point I made to the answer of the last question in mind, I think this is a very strange question. Was there long term sustainable growth in the industry? Cartoonists and comics publisher's profit from comics has gone from \$0 in the mid 90's to an all time high of \$0 in 2010. Do you mean that there has been more productivity on behalf of the cartoonists?

I believe that there are more and better paper comics coming out of Australia and a lot of this growth is a result of the access that cartoonists have had to the online environment as a space to develop skills and a dialogue with an audience without having to take the risks associated with paper publishing. I can say that this was the case for me. My first fumbblings with comics were shared with friends online and the warm response I had spurred me on to develop my cartooning skills and pursue comics as a career. Online environments have also provided a great space for skill-sharing and project management among cartoonists leading to new anthologies, collaborative projects.

Online content will always veer toward niche interests with limited appeal but that is not to say that the cartoonists of Australia have a limited contribution to the media landscape. There may be someone in this country drawing a strange badly drawn webcomic about the impact of Keynesian economic theory in a post recession global economy but the chances are that none of us will ever know about it unless we are interested in pop-economics. It is really impossible to get a sense of the scope of growth in Australian online comics because of they might show up buried in niche interest nodes of the web and don't emerge to stake their claim as part of an Australian comics industry. That is how the media works these days right? We can't discredit a contribution because it doesn't have mass-market appeal.

**In your opinion, what consequence, if any, will digital media have on the way stories are created, both from a technical aspect (ink or photoshop? for eg) and from a narrative standpoint (infinite canvas or rules governing the printed page)? Is this a positive or negative change? Do you use these techniques in your work? If not, would you do so in the future?**

My biggest beef with online movements in comics is the wholesale disregard for the 150 year tradition of cartooning as a craft and a trade. Maybe it's because webcartoonists tend to be younger people with less exposure to pre-photoshop comics, maybe it's the influence of Manga, but it feels to me like the cartoonists of yesterday spent their lifetimes working out the best way to make comics and the cartoonists of tomorrow (ie. The webcomics kids) have forgotten it all already. Your average amateur web cartoonist begins with a shoddily conceived and badly drafted comic and then spend endless hours overlaying it with cheap Photoshop tricks, gradients, terrible lurid colours and then the worst digital lettering I have ever seen. What you end up with is the classic Mutton dressed up as lamb scenario. Bad comics in a frilly Photoshop frock.

In a pre-photoshop world good draftsmanship, good hand lettering, and meaningful colouring were at the core of well made comics but these days the restriction-free canvas provided in Photoshop is distracting new cartoonists from developing these core skills especially when artists use a Wacom or Cintiq interfaces. Because of Photoshop we all have to look at more badly made comics.

From the narrative standpoint I'm a little more hopeful. The infinite canvas is really great for reader immersion. Online comics like *Bodyworld* by Dash Shaw really make use of that technology well. Personally, I still design and lay-out my comics for a printed page and so my use of these narrative



techniques is limited but I suppose if I was doing a project solely for the web I'd consider working with a form that was uniquely suited to an online environment.

**Do you think digital media will change the way we read comic book stories? If so, in what way? If not, why not?**

It has already. We read syndicated episodic comics on a daily basis far more than we did in the 90's. The sources of stories have been decentralised with the mass media being replaced by a rhizomatic network media and thus the kinds of stories we read are more idiosyncratic and less likely to be licenced or franchised as most comics were in the pre-digital era. I'm not going to speculate on the future because I have no idea at all how things will look even a few years from now but I imagine that all of the big changes to the way we read comics will have something to do with this great push toward digital media that has been one of the defining forces of our time.

**Focusing on the Australian industry, in what ways will digital media (eg digital comics like Ipad apps/CBR files) change traditional printed comic books? Will it supplant or dominate it or co-exist with it?**

This is really interesting terrain. Firstly the book will not die. People said that about radio on the 50's and now radio is really going through a renaissance with the advent of podcasting and digital distribution. Traditional printed books will simply become more bookish. The content has been taken out of the equation because the digital network is better at disseminating content and the role of the book will be as an appealing packaging for content. In a world where content is free and abundant then our occasion for buying books will be an aesthetic one. Appealing colours, pleasing papers, that new book smell, beautiful bindings and the like will be the reason we buy books. There will be a lot of attrition, sure. Borders just went under this week as did Angus and Robertson and all of those similar booksellers and publishers who's only business model was hocking content will fail. I say let them burn in their mansions built out of terrible paperbacks. Book buyers will be walking across the street to where the independent bookseller are still trading and they'll find stores full of lovingly designed, lovingly crafted books that have appealing smells and wonderful textures. In this context the comic book will thrive as long as the comic book is well produced because a well produced book designed by a cartoonist, and here I'm thinking of the Books designed by Chris Ware or Seth, or the books released by Buenaventura or Picture box, are among the most seductive examples of publishing ever created. These will stand as the benchmark for tradition paper comic book production. People will buy the Scott pilgrim series as an e-book instead of a paperback and the real Bryan Lee O'Malley fans will gladly hand over hundred of dollars to buy the limited edition box set with a hand screen printed covers, textured Japanese end papers. A good printed comic book is more bookish than most books and as such will do just fine in a digital media landscape.

One other thing to think about is that the online space is a really good place to prime an audience for an on-coming printed book. This is my main incentive for posting my graphic novel *Blue* online. Because while I'm pretty sure that few will have the time nor the interest to read it on a screen, I'm also quite sure they will spend enough time with the story to know whether it's something they want to investigate further in the future. When it arrives in the printed version they will already be softened up and will be more inclined to fork over the dough for the printed version even though the content is there online for free. New York Cartoonist Sam Hiti did this with his book *Death Day* (<http://www.samhiti.com/>) and sold some thousands of pre-orders for his book based on the popularity of the very same content online.

Focusing on the Australian community I think that the collapse of geographical economies of content distribution can only be a good thing for any cultural producer living in a place like Australia with the geographical disadvantages we have here. For the first time in history an antipodean cartoonist can remove distribution from their list of challenges to their popularity. The website for my graphic novel has had more traffic from North America than from anywhere else and so it stands to reason that, when I have an e-book to sell, then it will most likely sell best directly to North American readers without the need for a US distribution deal. This is really a powerful and unprecedented situation and at the heart of it is the principle that, as the power of big content is eroded, as the publisher and the distributors become more and more irrelevant, there is less obstruction to good content rising to the top based purely on the quality of that content. In Australia, on the geographical fringes of the global media

landscape, it is becoming more and more apparent that the only excuse a cartoonist has for not reaching readers is the quality of their work.

**Do you believe multimedia has a place in comic book story telling? Does its use invalidate the work as a comic book?**

I'm sure you've seen this multimedia comic called Nawlz (<http://www.nawlz.com/>). This is done by an Australian guy and is without a doubt a harbinger of the future of online multimedia comics. The reader interaction, sound effects and animated transitions are incredible while still maintaining a hand drawn quality. This is important because it shows the extent to which multimedia can be used while still maintaining that very important mainstay of comics as a medium the intimacy of the auteur. This is still the product of just one person and thus it is still has that powerful personal and intimate qualities that separates comics from almost all visual storytelling media. I believe that inclusion of multimedia element can actually invalidate the work as a comic book if the auteur nature of the comics is compromised, which is to say, as soon as the project becomes the work of a large team then the project becomes a video project, or animation, or a video game or whatever. I understand that the last point is likely to be a contentious one. I probably feel the same way about more traditional comics. As soon as I can sense the input of more than one or two authors, as soon as it feels like a pop culture production I quickly lose interest.

The other thing that might muddy things up are the point when the language of comics is changed by the multimedia content. Comics at its core is a way of communicating that produces sound and movement while remaining silent and still. Animation and music can really mess that up. I once saw a band play a soundtrack to Shaun Tan's amazing book *The Arrival* and it was terrible. They played all this awful Schindler's List violin music over the top of visuals that already did the job of conveying the appropriate emotion. What remained was this over the top moment reminiscent of bad cinema.

So to sum it up. Multimedia in comics is really exciting but creators in this area must be aware of those qualities that give comics their power, and not make the mistake of detracting from those qualities for the sake of a few bells and whistles.

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**Interview by Leah Burgess for [www.invurt.com](http://www.invurt.com) - November 2010**

**Okay so you can start by telling us a little about this graphic novel you're working on.**

Well, There's a short answer and a long answer.

The long answer is that it's called 'Blue'. It's about three kids growing up in a coastal town and coming to terms with these funny-looking blue-skinned foreigners that move into their space and start changing the landscape around them. It's partly a response to the Cronulla Riot, which I was unfortunate enough to have seen with my own eyes, and partly an unpacking of my own memories of growing up in a small coastal community.

The short answer is that it's like "Puberty Blues", but with tentacles

**Where do your ideas come from?**

Gosh. If you'd read *Mad* magazine in the 80's and 90's you know that this is the worst thing to ask a cartoonist. I seem to remember that classic *Mad* artist Al Jaffe doing a whole double page spread of snappy answers to that question.

I don't know really. Who knows where anything that goes on in your brain comes from? I tend to draw from genre narratives and pop culture then combine it with some sort of autobiography. One thing I do know is that ideas themselves are totally overrated. What is of more value to an artist or a writer is the

ability to DO something with an idea. What you find is that ideas change and morph in the doing, and then, when the doing is all done, you can hardly recognize the idea that started you off.

### **How does it feel to be able to project your ideas via comic art?**

Well. I kind of have mixed feelings. On one hand I absolutely hate comics. Making a comic really is the silliest way of communicating. It's just so obscenely tedious and it takes so much time and effort to tell even the shortest of stories in comics. I listen to audio-books a lot while I'm drawing and sometimes I just get blown away by these beautiful images a writer can evoke with one good sentence bashed out in a moment of creative energy, meanwhile I'm spending hours agonising over the way light bounces off a bloody air conditioning unit in the background of one of my panels. Making comics is such hard work that it's sometimes difficult for me to make connections between the spontaneous 'fun' that people have reading comics and the things that go on in my studio.

On the other hand I think about all of the other forms of visual story-telling, like film and animation, and I think about the people working in those industries and all of a sudden my life with comics seem like a blissful ride down easy street. To be a film-maker you have to be a well heeled megalomaniac and to be an animator you just have to be either a mindless cell-drawing drone or some sort of cartoon masochist. Comics is really the only visual storytelling medium that can come about through the work of just one artist, and in that sense I feel incredibly lucky to be working in comics. Cartoonists don't have to compromise with some lousy studio or deal with a horde of collaborators to get their story told and because of that the stories we tell have an intimate quality that you hardly ever see in visual communication. Who am I kidding? It's a privilege. I need to get over myself

### **Can you talk more about the societal based ideas that crop up a lot in your work?**

I'm not sure exactly what you mean by societal based ideas. I think what you're looking for is a question about the undercurrent of politics in my comics so I'll talk about that. Not that long ago I was putting much of my spare time into what you would probably call activism. I wanted to be a proper ratbag but I never really had the firm political convictions you need if you want to be a good activist. I went to a lot of rallies, about a million meetings, did some organising in Tasmania and on University campuses but I didn't ever feel like I was doing anyone any good with this enormous amount of energy that I was expending. In the end I got burnt out and cynical, and all of my anarchist friends became burnt out and cynical, and the "activism" I was doing was more like drinking longnecks at protests and fighting with cops.

When I channelled that energy into art however the political uncertainty that made me a lousy activist became useful. People who have really unwavering ideas about what is right or wrong tend to make really boring art. It's sort of like: art as manifesto, or art as political rant. You know what I mean? I like art that is political but I'm more interested in art that pushed towards uncomfortable places where what is right or wrong becomes uncertain. That's where interesting political and ethical thinking tends to happen.