

A WORLD OF OUR OWN

A 2D Illustrated Comic

Grace Brown

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Professor Michael Collins

The Pennsylvania State University

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

A World of Our Own is an eleven-page illustrated comic zine created for two purposes: to provide entertaining and visually enjoyable media to young cancer patients and to help validate their fears and questions they have going into treatment.

The comic is set in a fantasy universe and focuses on Elio, a young troll boy who has arrived at the infusion center for his first round of Chemotherapy. While in the waiting room, he meets two other children who are also awaiting treatment. Here, they offer reassuring words to Elio who expresses his worries and share their own struggles with their cancer battles.

The aim of this project was to fill the existing gap in media specifically geared toward pediatric cancer patients on their treatment journey. By creating a fantasy story with likable characters depicted on the same journey as the reader, this project creates positive role models, offers children a form of escape, and helps to answer some of the common questions many of these patients face before they begin Chemotherapy. The need to balance entertainment and escapism without sugar-coating the somber reality of pediatric cancer was key. The result is a soft-colored, heartwarming interaction between three children all undergoing a similar battle.

CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

At the start of the fall semester, my grandmother, who I live with, was diagnosed with cancer. Given we live together, I was able to accompany her to her appointments, from diagnosis through treatment. Very quickly, it was obvious that my grandmother was having a very difficult time wrapping her head around her diagnosis. To make matters worse, the manner in which her doctors' explained her condition and her treatment options ranged from sweet and understanding to patronizing and, in some cases, downright dismissive. Watching my mentally-sharp grandmother struggle to fully comprehend all the medical terminology that was thrown at her – or worse yet the oversimplification of the reality of her cancer, was so disheartening. Here she was, learning of a scary diagnosis, having many questions, and not quite getting the answers that would have given her the peace of heart she needed.

This experience led to me consider how overwhelming it must be for children to go through such an experience. Thinking of my young cousin who is a cancer survivor, I consulted my aunt who continues to be involved in pediatric cancer advocacy. She confirmed my impression, explaining that there is not much out there to help young cancer patients navigate the process in an honest, yet gentle way.

The experience with my grandmother and then considering how young cancer patients are emotionally supported through the process became the basis for my Capstone project – what can I do to help alleviate the uncertainty and fears that children experience when dealing with a cancer diagnosis while also providing them with something they can truly enjoy?

This question led me to research the resources available to children with cancer diagnosis and to discover the shocking lack thereof. From that point, I looked at existing media closely to discover exactly what was missing. What I found was a great need for something that created positive role models for pediatric cancer patients without sugar-coating reality nor being strictly educational in nature.

Going into this Capstone project, I already knew I wanted to create something lighthearted and visually appealing as I was looking for a 2D illustrated approach to my project. Initially, I was planning on creating a concept pitch that could be turned into a potential animated children's mini-series or book line. This approach would have produced polished character designs, storylines, and sample scenes. After feedback from my professor, I altered my deliverable into the form of a comic.

Due to the heaviness of pediatric cancer and treatment, I wanted to ensure I maintained a lighthearted tone throughout. Additionally, I wanted the readers to be able to relate to the characters and to be able to rely on them as a form of comfort and escapism. As such, I made the decision to set my comic in a fantasy world; the characters and their designs reflect this to add charm and visual appeal.

In terms of visual inspiration, works such as the show *Over the Garden Wall* (OTGW 2014) (Figure 1) and common depictions of fantasy media such as classic Disney movies were the main inspirations in terms of style and design choice. I wanted the visuals to clearly read as cartoon and for the characters to be youthful and charming.

Prior to deciding what story the comic would tell, I began work on character concept exploration and assembling mood boards to act as inspiration for character designs. I wanted the characters to be clearly recognizable as fantasy without being too unrealistic and dragging them into a realm where they could no longer be related to. I wanted to keep the cast on the smaller side due to the time constraint of the project, but I also needed to be sure I had enough characters to adequately tell their story. As I considered this, three main characters came to mind.

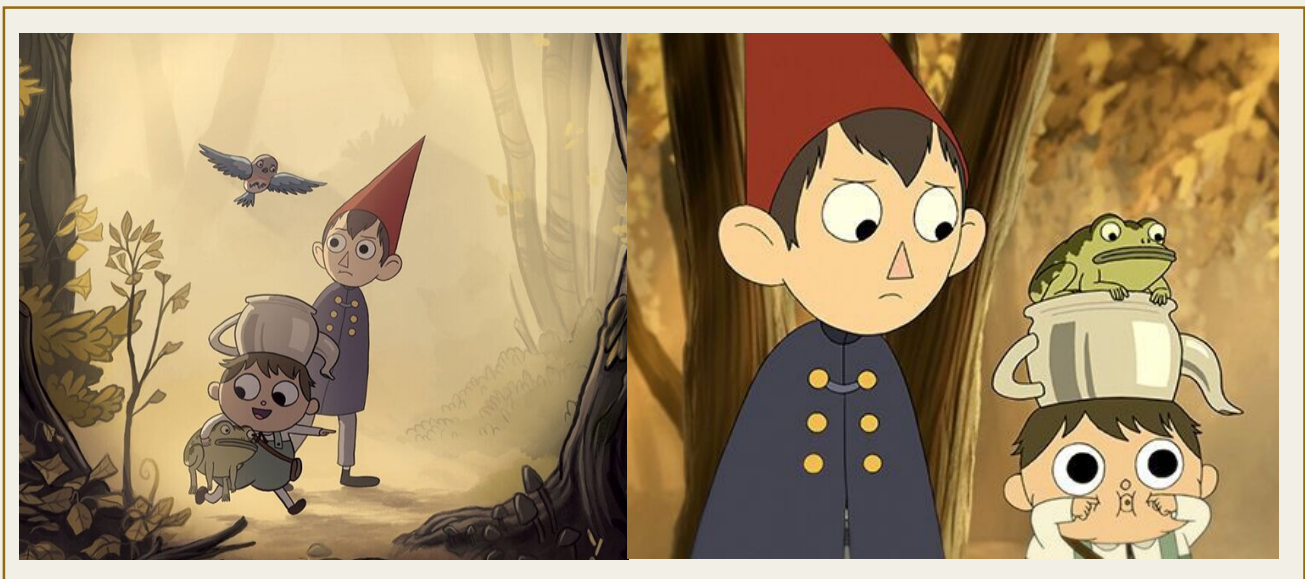


Figure 1

The first character that appeared in my mind was a young troll boy. I visualized him as being all green with pointy ears and an almost goblin-like appearance (Figure 2). I wanted him to appear a bit “rougher” and possibly struggle with handling his emotions or admitting his fears about treatment. For the second character, I envisioned a young princess (Figure 3) who would serve as a comforting figure and voice of reassurance in a manner that reflected her leadership and position as royalty. Lastly, I wanted to include a faun child (Figure 4) and have them embody anxiety within the cast of characters.



Figure 2

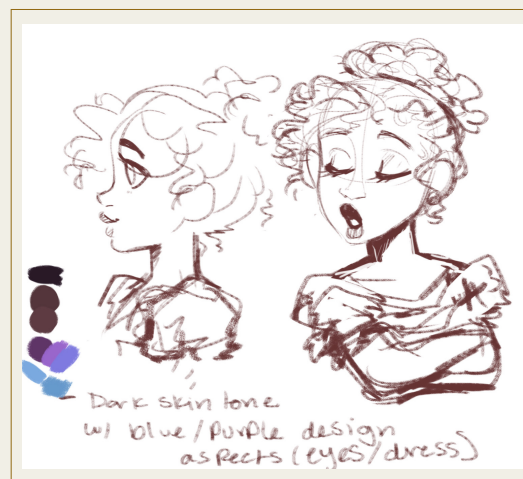


Figure 3

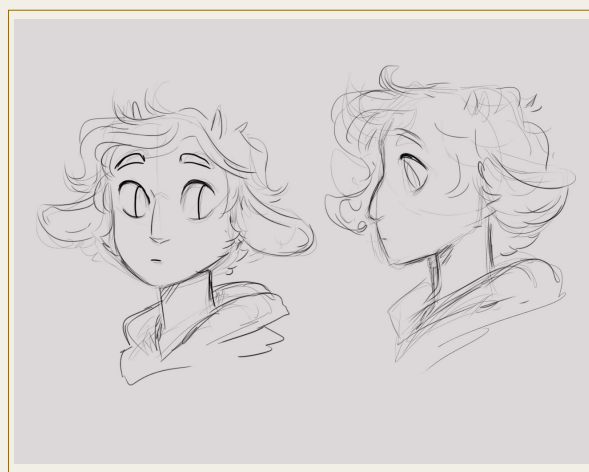


Figure 4

In terms of the story itself, due to the limited amount of time I had to complete the project, I decided it was most feasible to focus on one aspect of the cancer journey; specifically, the point in time prior to a person's first round of chemotherapy. Initially, this was going to cover the first round of treatment itself, however, attempting to condense so much in the time frame would not have been possible.

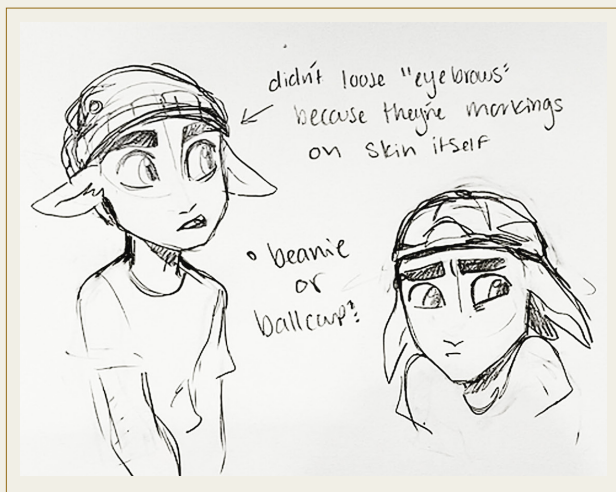


Figure 5

This led me to various iterations in the character designs of the troll boy (Figure 5) and the princess (Figure 6) as I neared a more solid picture of the direction I was taking the project in.

Instead, this gave me the time to further explore ways to depict diversity in each individual's cancer journey without directly showing the details of said journey.

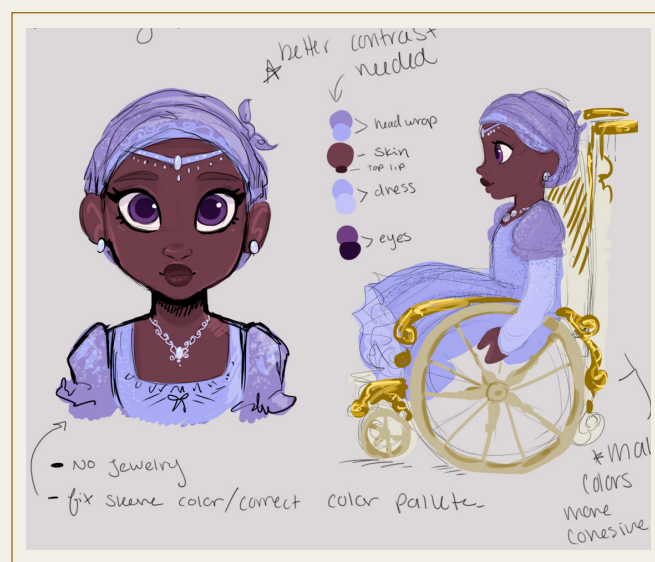



Figure 6

RESEARCH

Due to the topic and purpose of this comic, extensive research was needed to properly understand pediatric cancer patients and their struggles to accurately depict their treatment journey. The first step of research was to explore what media already existed as a resource for children. The search yielded a shockingly low number of results with most existing works largely being illustrated books for children around the ages of 6-8. Additionally, most of the works that exist are not specifically geared towards any one medical diagnosis, rather they focus on the general experience of going to a hospital, undergoing a vague medical procedure (Bourgeois & Clark, 2014), or have no medical context whatsoever and simply highlight themes of bravery in the face of difficult situations (Kinneer, 2020).

While more specific media geared towards pediatric cancer patients can be found if one is willing to dig deep in the search, they are few and far between. Those that can be found often leave something to be desired in terms of the illustrations or entertainment factor, as most of them highlight on educating. On the other side of the spectrum, chemo journals and chemo activity books exist as a more entertaining resource. However, these are not largely produced resources, mostly being sold by small businesses on sites such as Etsy. What became clear is the lack of media that combine these two aspects: something that can reassure children through positive character representation and entertaining visuals.



I had the privilege of connecting with Kate Nixon, a clinical adolescent specialist at Dana-Farber's Jimmy Fund Clinic. Here, Ms. Nixon works with cancer patients to plan their visits and runs activity-based support groups. When I inquired about what resources are recommended or offered to pediatric patients at the clinic in terms of books or media, Ms. Nixon informed me there was not anything specific they often recommended. Upon hearing about my idea, she voiced her excitement and support for such a resource. She stated that one of her coworkers had created her own children's book to fill this gap at the Jimmy Fund Clinic with a stuffed bear they have in the waiting room, using him to create a picture book detailing the process of getting a port put in for chemotherapy treatment.

In my conversation with Ms. Nixon, she informed me of the common struggles or questions children often face when recently diagnosed with cancer. As she works directly with patients and their families, she emphasized many of the children's worry about losing their hair because of chemotherapy, as well as a fear of feeling ostracized because of it. Additionally, she shared with me the importance of emphasizing how different the cancer journey can look from one patient to the next.

Through our communication, as well as in my research and communications with family members involved in the world of cancer charity work, my project proposes a solution to the need for informational and entertaining media for children before, during, and after treatment. While the timeline for this project was limited, ultimately, a hospital or clinic could purchase the rights and continue the story—depicting the unique journeys of each character and using them to create more resources.

PRODUCTION

Moving past the concept stage of this project, but prior to the creation of the visual elements of the comic, I drafted the story script. Once I had the script written, I sectioned the dialogue into “pages” and began work on the thumbnail sketches for the comic itself using Adobe Photoshop.

As I received feedback, I finalized the script and was able to continue polishing the color palettes and character designs by producing character headshots for reference (Figure 7) and a color palette reference for each character (Figure 8). Once the thumbnail sketches of the pages were complete, I was able to produce more polished sketches in preparation for lining the comic (Figure 9, see next page). At this stage, I also began tentatively mapping out where dialogue boxes would be placed in each frame and how I wanted it to flow.

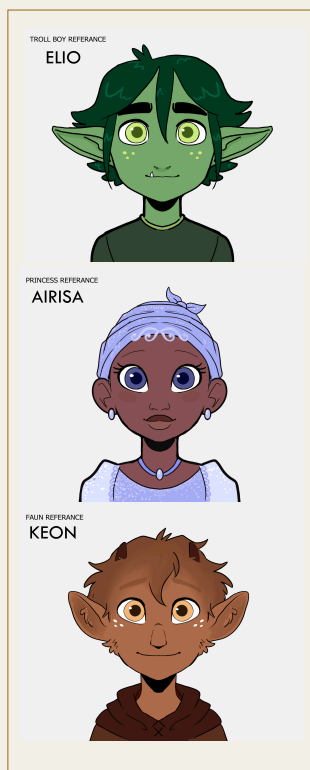


Figure 7

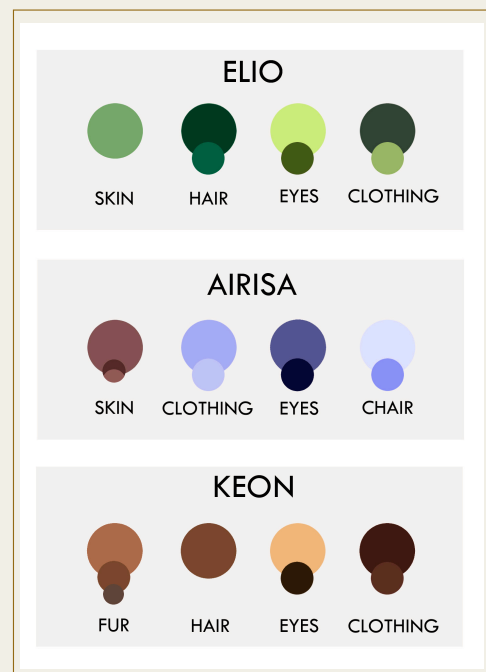


Figure 8

Once the comic was sketched in its entirety, I was able to move on to the line art (Figure 10). After the lining, I began the process of coloring, however, it quickly became clear to me that the colors I had initially chosen did not create the right visual tone for the work. When all combined on the page, the colors appeared too intense and carried too much visual weight, bringing down the overall atmosphere of the illustrations. After taking a step back, I was able to rework the palettes to be in brighter and warmer tones which lightened the feel of the comic significantly.



Figure 10

Following the completion of the coloring and shading, I placed in the speech bubbles using Clip Studio Paint and added in the dialogue. The final steps entailed ensuring each page was formatted and scaled evenly and prepping the piece for printing. I wanted to produce the comic into a zine; a small, self-published booklet I could easily assemble.

To format the images for printing at this size, I placed four comic pages to one 8.5 x 11 page of paper and printed them double sided. Then, I cut the pages in half horizontally and assembled the pages into a booklet, adding in a front and back cover with thicker cardstock and stapling the pages together at the spine (Figures 11-12).



Figure 11



Figure 12



1



2



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4



5



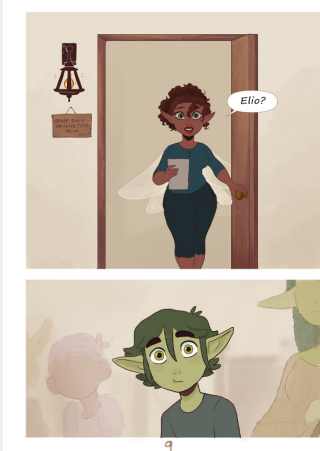
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11

CONCLUSION

The end result of this Capstone project is a bright, visually charming comic that is perfect for any child facing a battle with cancer. Within the book, children will find relatable characters who are also undergoing treatment and experiencing anxiety about the future. However, these characters not only show courage, they also offer support to one another, speaking openly and honestly about the challenges ahead while still maintaining a tone of encouragement.

The project offers pediatric cancer patients positive representation and comfort through fiction. This story touches on important issues children might experience, such as hidden fears or unvoiced questions they might push aside for being silly while placing the less-than-glamorous life of a cancer patient within a more light-hearted world of fantasy.

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