

Comic Books and MSU: A Professional and Scholarly

Synthesis

My name is Ben Chabala and my passion is comics. No, not the people that stand up and tell jokes, but the books that open up and tell stories. With the advent of new technologies that increase the consumer's ability for digital readership, the conventional paradigm of print comic distribution has seen a slow but increasing shift towards the digital marketplace. My fascination with comics prompts me to discover, research, and study comic books as both an industry and a form of multimodal expression. It is within this context that I am applying for entrance into the Masters program in Professional Writing and Digital Rhetoric at MSU.

Michigan State University is the perfect place to conduct research on these new models and trends in the world of comics for multiple reason, the primary being it is the home to the Special Collections Comic Art Library. The Special Collections unit of the MSU Library is the premier establishment for the study of print comics on the planet. It contains the largest collection of comic books and comic art anywhere and will be a tremendous boon to all of my research opportunities.

Michigan State University is also the site of a burgeoning comics community. The annual MSU Comics Forum brings industry professionals, scholars, and fans together in a friendly, open environment for examination and discussion of the medium. Also, in recent years there have been an increasing number of comics-related classes offered in a variety of departments. Ryan Claytor teaches "Comics

and Visual Narrative” as a part of the Residential College of Arts and Humanities, Ethan Watrall taught “History of the Modern Comic Book” for the History Department, and Gary Hoppenstand taught “Comics and Animation in America” for the American Studies program.

While not widely regarded as a comics hub, Michigan does have its own professional comics creator community and hosts a number of conventions each year. Guy Davis, David Peterson, Katie Cook, Ryan Stegman, and Jason Howard are just a few creators in the area that could provide unique insight into the topics I wish to explore during my tenure as a graduate student.

After working as a Web Editorial Intern at Marvel Comics in New York City and subsequently hired as a Freelance Writer by Marvel, I was inspired to increase my knowledge of professional writing in the digital space. Then while working as an Editorial Intern for author Kelly Roman’s graphic novel *The Art of War*, I realized I want to edit comics. My goals finally became clear when I sat in on a meeting with the author and artist of *The Art of War* and their editor from Random House. He broke down their book panel-by-panel and boiled it down to its most pure form. It was a truly eye-opening experience and after that I knew exactly what I wanted to be. My goal is to become a professional comics editor and I know a Masters in Professional Writing and Digital Rhetoric will be a major step in achieving that goal.

Through the program I am hoping to gain a more focused understanding of the emerging models of digital authorship, distribution, and consumption, their implications for web-based comics, and the future of print and digital comics. How do comic books change in their transition from the printed page to a digital viewer?

These are the topics I hope to study and I believe this will be required knowledge for the comic editors of tomorrow. A Masters degree from MSU will help me more fully assert myself at the forefront of comic scholarship and utilize my knowledge from a professional editorial position. It will be a testament to my dedication to comics, professional writing, and digital rhetoric.

The Digital Rhetoric and Professional Writing Masters program will aid me in nearly every facet of my scholarly and professional goals. One of the programs key strengths, an interest in new models of digital authorship and consumption, will help to guide and focus my own parallel interests related to the comic book industry. I know that the Masters program does not offer any comics-related courses specifically, but MSU seeks out new and exciting avenues for multimodal expression, something comics are uniquely tailored for. Digital and web comics add another layer of intriguing complexity to standard multimodal systems and are topics I will study at MSU.

The program is open to exploring a range of cutting edge ideas in the world of digital rhetoric and professional writing. This is one of the major reasons why I want to pursue my Masters at Michigan State. The mainstream comics community is so insular and homogenized that it tends to stifle its own creativity and ignore truly original ideas and experiments. The Digital Rhetoric and Professional Writing Masters students are pushed to discover the new and different, to experiment with narrative form, and defy the status quo. It is this mindset, a focus on the experimental and theoretical, built on a firm foundation of tried and true writing and publishing traditions that I will take to my professional editorial positions.

In closing, the Digital Rhetoric and Professional Writing Masters program at Michigan State University is the ideal place for me to research and study comics, publishing, digital rhetoric, and professional writing at the highest academic level. It boasts the most amazing collection of comic art on the planet, is currently supporting a burgeoning comics community, and hosts meaningful forums for examination and discourse into the medium. My interests and professional goals, my passion for comics and desire to become a professional comic book editor, will be bolstered by the program's own support of avant-garde multimodal authoring and editing projects and by its dedication to exploring new forms that challenge the rhetorical tradition.