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Sound and Fury: Creating a Graphic Novel Adaptation of Macbeth

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Creating a Graphic Novel Adaptation of *Macbeth*

Benjamin Randall Merrylees
University of Vermont, 2017
Creative Undergraduate Thesis
“But why is it prohibited?’ asked the Savage. In the excitement of meeting a man who had read Shakespeare he had momentarily forgotten everything else.

The controller shrugged his shoulders. ‘Because it’s old; that’s the chief reason. We haven’t any use for old things here.’

‘Even when they’re beautiful?’

‘Particularly when they’re beautiful. Beauty’s attractive, and we don’t want people to be attracted by old things. We want them to like the new ones.’

‘But the new ones are so stupid and horrible… Why don’t you let them see Othello instead?’

‘I’ve told you; it’s old. Besides, they couldn’t understand it.’

Yes, that was true. He remembered how Helmholtz had laughed at Romeo and Juliet. ‘Well then,’ he said, after a pause, ‘Something new that’s like Othello, and that they could understand.’

‘That’s what we’ve all been wanting to write,’ said Helmholtz, breaking a long silence.”

-Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*
Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Like any good origin story, this one embellishes the collision of unexpected elements that happen to run into one another in such a way as to create an opening for something a bit different. “Sound and Fury: Creating a Graphic Novel Adaptation of Macbeth” is a project that resulted in a selection of finished products, but which really focused on the development of a process for taking a classic source text and recreating a novel version of the story within the relatively young medium of comics. In order to trace all the elements that contributed to this moment of creative genesis, I have decided to frame the written and visual material of my project within an informal reflection that attempts to explain the decisions that were made at various stages in the development of my adaptation while also demonstrating how the project draws on passions, knowledge and skills gained over the course of my study at the University of Vermont. For my adaptation and process really serve as just that – a culmination of my education, and a step towards something larger.

I’ve been drawing all sorts of creatures since I was kid. Drawers of my childhood desk are still overflowing with a collection of terrifying fangs, tentacles, and impractically huge claws borrowed from the legions of inhabitants dredged up to populate imaginary worlds. Dashes of Tolkien and Star Wars lore were incorporated as I gained access to fictional realities presented in literature and film, and the consumption of fantasy and science fiction became a pursuit inextricably linked to my own acts of creation, the two passions feeding each other in an ever-escalating positive feedback loop. With a bit of separation to reflect back across, it’s easy to say that the roots of this project were sown a long time ago.

My interests in art and writing were carried on through my education, nurtured and shaped by various wonderful teachers and mentor-figures. It wasn’t until middle school that I had my first real exposure to Shakespeare in the form of Romeo and Juliet. And to be honest, it really wasn’t that great an experience, and I don’t think I’ve recovered enough to face that particular play again anytime soon. While I’m not sure whether it has something to do with increased reading ability, the way I was allowed to interact with the text, or some inherent quality of the play itself, reading Othello in tenth grade definitely went better. I could appreciate the manipulation and bad luck that led to an ending that didn’t have to be nearly as bitter as it was. The joy of the poetry itself still evaded me, no matter how many times my Humanities teacher tried to force it upon me, but it was definitely a step in the right direction. High school also saw my first introduction to comics in the form of a number of Marvel trade paperbacks featuring the incredible visual appeal of the claws, big pointy teeth, and crazy tongue of the Spider-man villain Venom. He felt like a character straight out of my desk drawer – a somewhat volatile human bound to an alien symbiote that gave him remarkable superhuman abilities while also instilling a bloodlust certain to take the edge of anybody’s sanity. What wasn’t to like? Thunderbolts by Warren Ellis and Mike Deodato was packed with dark, complex characters that dealt with issues I never would have expected from the medium, and the art simply blew me away. I was hooked.

By the time I graduated, an Advanced Expository Writing class with one of my favorite teachers of all time had sealed my fate as a writer, and I had extensively explored all the art courses I could
manage to sneak my way into. I came into UVM without declaring a major. I dabbled around in my distribution requirements as I desperately attempted to avoid commitment, but inevitably got pulled back to the two departments I knew would become my homes from the beginning: English and studio art.

It was during this exploratory opening phase that my interest in comics developed into a full-fledged passion. I discovered a series called Uncanny X-Force by Rick Remender, and it remains one of my favorite stories ever, all considerations of medium aside. It follows a team of morally tarnished X-Men characters as they make some questionable decisions in the name of the greater good and have to deal with the immense fallout of their actions. I’m not embarrassed to say that I laughed frequently and even cried at a couple of different points in the story. It was the first time a comic had me on the emotional ropes, and it really opened my eyes to the potential of the medium, despite the way that it tends to be brushed away by the more self-respecting members of academia and society.

Art classes in drawing, painting, and pottery kept my creation skills sharp and pushed me to try novel techniques and communicate effectively using different materials. I took a course on graphic novels with Dr. Isaac Cates, where I saw a whole new world of comics that made the attempts at boundary-pushing I’d read in my superhero stories seem pretty tame. It turns out that people have been doing cool things in the format for quite some time, and artists continue to push the envelope even farther. It was at about the same time that I wound up in an Honors College class called “The Art of Literary Adaptation” with Professor Andrew Barnaby, which also turned out to be a pretty significant game changer for me. Through critical analysis of existing adaptations and hands-on experience creating our own, my class learned how material can be effectively reshaped and reinvented in a huge array of fashions. We saw source texts scavenged for the seeds of Hamlet, and then saw how Tom Stoppard interacted with Shakespeare’s text to create his play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, which underwent a final stage of manipulation across the boundaries of medium to become a film adaptation. Not only was it the most enjoyable Shakespearean tragedy yet, it illustrated just how far The Bard’s work could be taken, and all the fascinating places that could be explored along the way.

This class was closely followed by another course with Professor Barnaby – this time focusing on Shakespeare and tragedy. I had the chance to reread Hamlet, experienced all the tragedy of King Lear, and dove into a play entitled Macbeth. This was a story that, for a number of reasons I still sometimes struggle to pin down, really resonated with me and pulled me in. I love that you can’t really put your finger on the witches or figure out where they came from and why they do what they do, and the best part of all is that it doesn’t even matter within the context off the narrative. The haunting beauty of Macbeth’s “sound and fury” soliloquy easily became my favorite piece of Shakespeare, as the titular character seems to realize his own role as a hapless pawn in the grand scheme of an uncaring universe. We watched Rupert Goold’s film adaptation, which alters the end of the story slightly to let Macbeth reclaim a bit of agency before meeting his end at the hands of Macduff, and my take on the play shifted again. It wasn’t just about realizing one’s insignificance, but also about fighting back against the unstoppable onslaught of fate. Despite all the betrayal and murder, this kernel of unnamable awareness allows Macbeth to inhabit a bitter but ultimately heroic role that I find endlessly compelling. Of course,
I’ve always had a soft spot for stories driven by fallen heroes, lots of tragic death, and maybe a glimmer of redemption mixed into a sad ending. So I never really stood much of a chance of resisting the draw of *Macbeth*.

“Comix Workshop” was a class I enrolled in the following summer that explored the process of creating comics – the perfect complement to the course I’d taken on reading them. An intensive handful of weeks packed with assignments and activities introduced me to a whole selection of tools and procedures that now feel like a familiar arsenal of requisite skills. One last class with Professor Barnaby on Shakespeare and performance familiarized me with the way in which the world has historically been exposed to The Bard’s work – performance. Pairs of performers and filmmakers teamed up to create short versions of soliloquies from a selection of plays, and regardless of the scope of the creative decisions made, each provided insight into the ways Shakespeare can be adapted. An independent study added to one of my drawing classes for a then-vague and threateningly looming thesis provided me the opportunity to make some of these decisions for myself as I sought to represent Shakespeare in the artistic media I’ve always been more comfortable with.

It was in the aftermath of these courses that Professor Barnaby and I set foot on the path that would lead very directly to my thesis project. With a Summer Research Award from The Office of Undergraduate Research, I was able to delve into the surprising number of graphic novel adaptations of Shakespearean plays. There have been a wide range of approaches taken, from adaptations that function like faithful performances with illustrated actors, to reimagings that modernize the prose and attempt to visually capture the poetry of Shakespeare’s language. Of particular interest were the treatments given to the soliloquies (the speeches delivered by a sole actor on stage to his or herself or the audience directly) within the plays. Seeing how artists dealt with these particularly challenging snippets of text provided insight into recreating Shakespeare in comics, which proved invaluable for the next stage of the project. I took particularly compelling and interesting soliloquies from a range of plays and adapted them into short cartoon vignettes. Striving to seek a balance between faithful preservation of the original text and capitalizing on the ideas and poetry behind it, the soliloquy adaptations present new novel takes on Shakespeare in a fresh medium. The process felt like the ideal fusion of the twin pursuits of art and English that have driven me for so long, and a perfect chance to capitalize on the interdisciplinary potential of the comics that had become such a huge part of my life.

This thesis builds directly out of the breakthroughs and mistakes I made over the course of my summer research. Drawing on interests that have fueled me for as long as I can remember, and bringing to bear skills honed through a unique combination of courses taken at UVM, I sought a work of adaptation on a larger scale. I wanted to begin a graphic novel version of Macbeth that captured everything that made the play so compelling to me while also creating something entirely different – a new work of sound and fury.
The Concept Sketches

I really began work on my adaptation and on the development of my process when I was taking an Honors Enrichment Credit with my drawing instructor, Professor Meg McDevitt, during the spring semester of my junior year. By that point, I had only a rough idea what I wanted to do for my thesis project, and Professor McDevitt was helping me find ways to represent Shakespeare in visual media. In addition to a number of self-contained drawings illustrating and even juxtaposing drastically different moments from Shakespeare’s plays, my work led to a number of sketches representing different routes I could take in my recreation of Macbeth. He starts as a faithful-to-the-source-text medieval lord, is reincarnated as a superhero who takes a wrong turn somewhere along the way (a story I would still love to tell at some point), and finally settles as a high-tech warlord from an era fraught with science fiction violence. This was the concept that immediately stuck out to me. As a huge science fiction nerd, the future with all its speculative wonders was a realm I felt more than comfortable occupying, and as an artist I felt that the take would lend itself to really engaging visuals to both read and create. As I continued my visual experimentation with Shakespeare over the course of the summer, I continued reinventing Macbeth’s characters within their new temporal locale. Some characters developed in a remarkably organic fashion, while others were harder to wrap my head around conceptually or visually. I had to push harder to find representations of these key players that fit into the new version of the classic tragedy. It was fascinating to see how, as these individuals were flushed out, they influenced the way I thought about their rapidly developing world and the grim narrative they were destined to play out to the bitter end. In essence, my art and its creation very directly influenced my thinking and thus my writing, which wasn’t how I imagined the process in my unrealistically tidy preconception, but which felt very natural and yielded some interesting facets to my “finished” vision of Macbeth’s new world.

Presented here are a selection of these concept sketches.
Macbeth Concept Sketch
Macbeth Concept Sketch
Macbeth Concept Sketch
Macbeth Concept Sketch
Macbeth and Cawdor Concept Sketch
Banquo and Lochbar Concept Sketch
Macduff Concept Sketch
Ross, Malcolm, and Macduff Concept Sketch
The Script

After deciding how I wanted my adaptation to look and function in a very broad sense, the next step involved determining how I wanted to treat the text of *Macbeth*. I’ve read and watched Shakespearean adaptations that attempt to recontextualize a play while also maintaining the original prose as penned by The Bard. It often works, but can also result in a jarring disconnect between the visual realities of the characters and the words coming out of their mouths. I decided to completely rescript the opening act of *Macbeth* partly to avoid what felt liable to be a very ungainly union of text and image in my futuristic setting. But my primary motivation was to give myself total freedom to work with and change the story and characters in what would prove to be a much loser adaptation of the play than most of the versions I’d encountered in the graphic novel format. In the process of rewriting the tragedy, I had the ability to shape dialogue and story arcs to help build characters in a way that was more accessible to the reader. I could explore and develop certain elements of the story, and even add in whole scenes and narrative strings to build what I felt would be a strong whole by the time my adaptation had run its course. So I attempted to do all of these things! Scotland’s heath became a desolate, swampy moon that’s been seized by a faltering, corrupt splinter branch of mankind known as the tetrarchy, intent on wringing it dry of its surprisingly bountiful resources of naturally-occurring fuel.

Probably the first, most basic adaptive decision to hurdle was the treatment of the witches. These enigmatic denizens can be read in a number of ways in the original text – it’s brilliantly and terrifyingly impossible to say whether they actively curse Macbeth and seal his fate, or simply get the right ideas brewing in his head which, when acted upon, lead him to his unpleasant end. And either way, the reader can never say what motives drove the fateful prophesies, or even if there are any motives in some grander scheme at all. It was my hope to maintain as much of this ambiguity as possible while recrafting the witches to fit within a dark future defined by a sense of constant violence, crazy technology, a few different species of aliens, and the occasional western-style revolver. It was actually surprisingly early in the game that I came upon the idea of an Artificial Intelligence that had been damaged and split into multiple facets – a sort of schizophrenic collection of opposed personalities and goals that can latch on to the abundant forms of technology on The Heath. These witches have a similar incorporeal nature, and can go so far as to directly infiltrate the armor and tech of a hapless mortal like the misguided, power-hungry Cawdor, or the unlucky Macbeth. It’s unclear whether the A.I. is a remnant of a long-extinct alien civilization trying to enact some grand protocol, a broken fragment that regurgitates records of the past as prophecy in a damning cycle, or just a sick, malicious sentience determined to lash out at the universe and inflict as much suffering as possible.

Another concern I was eager to address boils down to the very nature of Shakespeare’s titular character. Despite some exposition of his previous heroics, it doesn’t take Macbeth long to get caught in a spiral of rapidly escalating violence and decisions that seem questionable at best. While it can definitely be done, it is challenging to have such villainous protagonist and maintain much sympathy and interest in his actions. So I set out to build Macbeth into a compelling, likeable hero that the reader could get a bit more invested in from the beginning, hopefully keeping them on board through the
duration of character’s doomed descent, and upping the level of heartbreak that goes along with it. Because in my reading, Macbeth isn’t a villain. He’s just another unlucky plaything of fate, caught up in an endless cycle of pain and death with little to no room for agency, let alone escape. The first step towards achieving connection with Macbeth was to make him the “narrator” of my adaptation. In my beloved superhero comics, text can appear in a speech balloon or in a rectangular caption which has regularly been used for detached exposition, but which has recently come to sometimes replace the thought balloon as a feature where an audience can read a character’s thoughts directly, narrated in the first person. Giving direct insight in to Macbeth’s head definitely brings him closer to the reader, and proves to be a remarkably useful tool for both character-development and story-telling.

My next move was to bring Macbeth into the opening of his own story. In the original text, it takes a while for the character to make it onstage, and the reader is instead treated to a lengthy explanation of Macbeth’s hand in putting down a violent rebellion in a suitably bloody fashion as relayed to King Duncan by a wounded soldier. I chose to insert a brief scene introducing Macbeth and Banquo right after the witches have their eerie opening lines. After a bit of hopefully somewhat organic plot explanation from the stoic Macduff and the insufferable Duncan, the reader gets to watch Macbeth perform his own heroics before the fateful encounter with the broken A.I.. This allows me to build Macbeth’s character as a roguish officer and caring friend, quick with a joke and prone to acts of totally unnecessary but well-intended heroism. It was my goal to give the sense that Macbeth and Banquo function as a dynamic duo that are never quite on top of things, but who always manage to scrape by through some combination of grit and luck. It’s a layer to the characters that isn’t developed in the source text, but which raises the stakes provides the context needed to make Macbeth’s fall seem that much more crushing.

A third choice I made to reshape our doomed hero sought to provide him with a bit of motive, and to hopefully make the reader a bit more open to his quickness to murder Duncan. After making Macbeth more relatable, I made a concerted effort to turn the Tetrarch into as unlikeable a character as possible. He became an incompetent, corrupt leader more interested in profit margins than conserving human life. Add to that his totally detestable decision regarding the fate of Glamis (my version of Lady Macbeth) and her troops, and Duncan’s violent end seems pretty well-deserved. Because if there’s one thing my experience with Gerard Butler action movies has taught me, it’s that nothing makes it easier for the audience to accept gruesome levels of “heroic” violence than a good, old-fashioned revenge plot.

There are numerous other tweaks that distinguish my adaptation from Shakespeare’s play. They vary in scale and importance from making Banquo a crustaceous alien with a painfully upbeat and misfortune-bound translator who can look inside anyone’s head by touching them, to consolidating the number of villains at large in the beginning to streamline the plot and prevent myself from having anyone named McDonald making a mess of things. Thus did I strive to preserve Macbeth’s overarching narrative and characters while also pushing my adaptation in a new direction as a compelling and self-sustained creation in its own right.

Presented here is a portion of the rescripted story of Act I.
ACT I

SCENE I: The witches’ introduction – Cawdor losing it.

Start in on a black panel – gradually zoom out of the socket of the signature Macbeth helmet. Cawdor’s wearing it, and clearly in significant pain. A dark, haunted swamp stretches up to a cliff, upon which the distinctive outline of the citadel can be made out.

FIRST WITCH: Wh – when will we meet him?

SECOND WITCH: Soon. When the battle’s been lost and won.

CAWDOR: Grghhhhh....

THIRD WITCH: After this useless slab of meet has had his meeting with the butcher.

CAWDOR: STOP!! Please...

SECOND WITCH: He’s coming.

CAWDOR: Please... please get out.

THIRD WITCH: Macbeth.

SCENE II: Macbeth and Banquo making their way towards Cawdor.

Start in on Macbeth’s contorted face. Zoom out to struggle with a number of murderers. Macbeth gets a round off into one of them, and then knocks its skull-mask off.

I’ve always had this lingering suspicion that I would die on the Heath. Some things just seem inevitable. Of course Cawdor’s terrifying alien mercenaries aren’t helping with that sense of doom.

MACBETH: Banquo! You have a second?

One of the last surviving so-called Heathans, I’ve really come to appreciate Banquo’s refined subtlety in a tough spot.

A blast of energy blasts murderer out of the frame. Flash to Banquo wielding a pair of alien-looking weapons and going to town on the murderers.

MACBETH: Thanks buddy.

He’s also a much better person than almost any of the so-called humans who’ve come to The Heath since. Even if I do have to put up with his irritatingly optimistic translator.

LOCHABER: My lord Banquo says it’s his pleasure.
**Macbeth gets up and puts one last round in a twitching murderer.**

MACBETH: I’m sure it was, Lochaber. Macduff said Cawdor was on his way to the central exhaust control hub, right?

*Banquo clicks in affirmation.*

MACBETH: Alright. Let’s bring the traitorous creep in.

**SCENE III: Duncan’s mid-flight update.**

*Macduff runs through a hectic landing pad and vaults onto a gradually rising escape transport. A terrified Duncan almost jumps out of his skin.*

DUNCAN: Ah. C-Commander. Finally. Wha- what took you so long?

MACDUFF: Ross and I just secured Malcolm. She’s being taken to a different fall-out shelter.

DUNCAN: I see.

MACDUFF: You’re sister will be fine, sir. Time to get you out of here.

DUNCAN: Yes – that’d be appreciated.

*The transport takes off and flies over the citadel, out over desolate swamp and fall-out desert. Macduff takes off his helmet. Duncan finally seems to relax a bit*

MACDUFF: Macbeth and Banquo are on their way to Cawdor with an EMP that should knock the reactor systems offline long enough to prevent him from detonating the gas stores. Full evacuation of the citadel is underway as a precaution.

DUNCAN: What about the situation on Rictus Prime?

*Macduff pauses, looking at him.*

MACDUFF: Sir, we have no evidence that Cawdor’s actions are related to the labor uprising.

DUNCAN: I disagree, Commander. Launch the warheads.

MACDUFF: Sir, we can’t. We told Glamis her troops would have another hour to clear out before we dropped the biophage. We’d be poisoning our own men!

DUNCAN: That was an order, Commander. Before it was a matter of getting the foundries back on schedule, to meet our quotas. Now it’s clear our entire operation teeters on the edge. As Tetrarch, I cannot let it fall to ruin.
MACDUFF: You can’t be serious – this is a comple-

DUNCAN: This is how the system works, you stupid vat-orphan. Now do what you were grown to do, and follow orders!

*Macduff clenches a fist, looks briefly at his knife.*

MACDUFF: Yes Tetrarch.

DUNCAN: Good. Does this thing go any faster? I don’t want to be in the blast radius of Macbeth’s idiocy.

**SCENE VI: Flashback to Glamis’ command and the bombing of Riktus Prime. Hearing about Macbeth’s encounter from her sickbed.**

*The outskirts of a key transportation hub on Riktus Prime. Zoom in on Glamis in full riot gear.*

GLAMIS: No one gets through, we clear? Duncan needs these last shipments off-planet yesterday!

SEYTON: Captain– we’ve got a priority transmission coming through. It’s Macduff.

Glamis takes the headset. The final transports begin to take off.

GLAMIS: Commander. What can I do for you?

MACDUFF: Glamis. You have to get out of there. Cawdor came to ignite The Heath, and Duncan is using it as an excuse to jump protocol and drop the biophage. Get your troops on whatever transports you can find before the bombers get there!

GLAMIS: Wait- what?! How long do we have?

MACDUFF: They’re on their way. I’m so sorry. GO!

*Glamis sees the silhouette of a bomber of the horizon.*

GLAMIS: We have incoming. Seyton, get on the line and make sure everyone gets out. Everybody, make for the transports. Calmly. If the crowd bolts none of us are getting off this rock. Now.

*The troops begin to file back towards the ship. One young man snaps, and makes a run for it, yelling. The crowd is confused, and then catches on.*

CROWD: What-

CROWD: Look!

CROWD: -bombing run?!

GLAMIS: Dammit. Go! RUN!
The troops sprint for the ships, the crowd close on their heels. They begin throwing things, a few of the troopers get caught and tackled. Glamis smashes a man with a riot sheild, then sees Seyton fumbling with the transmitter.

GLAMIS: Seyton! Drop it and move!

Seyton looks up in a panic. A man smashes the side of his skull with a brick. Glamis runs back, pulls out a pistol and fries the man before he can finish Seyton off. Glamis crouches to pull a dazed Seyton to his feet. There are people everywhere. Glamis tries to make for a shuttle.

TRANSMISSION: Transmission received from Macbeth. Playback stored and ready.

The bomber drops a terrifying warhead. It detonates. Glamis runs up to a shuttle. A rushing cloud of biophage hits the crowd. People begin to dissolve. Glamis climbs in – beginning to look dark around the rims of her eyes, pulls Seyton after her.

GLAMIS: Come on, Seyton!

The cloud hits the transport just as Glamis gets the door closed (edges of cloud rushing from the edges of the frame). Glamis crumples against the bulkhead as the shuttle begins to rise. A weak whisper.

SEYTON: Ma’am...

Glamis looks at him. He’s being eaten away at the edges. Fluid streams from his eyes and mouth. She reaches out to him tentatively, puts a hand on his chest. Tears and fluid begin to stream down her face.

GLAMIS: Oh... oh no. Seyton. Hang in there. Don’t you give up on me, we’re going to be alright. Do you hear me? We’re going to be alright. I promise

This scene is interwoven with shots of a sterile hospital room. Zoom in on a unhealthy vase of flowers. The foot of a bed. A withered, dying hand. An emaciated body covered by a sheet. Overlay snippets of Macbeth’s transmission:

“I think I got the gist of it. Let’s do it. Let’s ride, pardner.”

“We’ve all heard the reports, Cawdor. You’ve been tampering with artificial intelligence. Fools have been doing that illicitly for centuries – when has it ever ended well?”

“Oh – guys? Something’s wrong with the display over here...”

“Wait! Keep going -- what do you know?!”

“Transmit full capture to Glamis.” Playback complete.

Looking over the top of Glamis’ bed towards door – watch Macbeth run in and almost collapse by the side of the bed.
MACBETH: Glamis? Oh, Glamis – I, I can’t – I’m so, so sorry, I should-

GLAMIS: Seyton is dead.

MACBETH: What?

GLAMIS: Seyton. He’s gone. In my arms. So many of them. All those people. Me.

MACBETH: It’s going to be alright Glamis. We’ll be alright. I’m sure there’s a way-

GLAMIS: I saw your capture.

_Mabeth looks at her._

MACBETH: Glamis, I-

_Flash to Glamis’ ravaged, skull-like face, surrounded by the melting, torturous visages she still sees._

GLAMIS: I saw what you saw. And it’s going to happen. I swear. You’ll be tetrarch. Duncan will die. I swear by all of them.

_Macbeth’s tears mirror the fluid staining Glamis’ gaunt cheeks._

**SCENE VII:** Macbeth teeters on the edge of the assassination. Glamis pushes him over.

*Macbeth leans over a floating sink in a restroom. He looks up into his reflection.*

I should do it. Pull the trigger and put that monster in the ground. Tonight. Make it look like one of the cells already reported to be seeking retribution for the bombing of Riktus Hives or – hell! – even one of the dwindling alien populations Duncan has persecuted, like his father before him.

*Macbeth runs a hand over his face._

MACBETH: No.

THIRD WITCH: No?

There’s no question Duncan deserves it. But the tetrarchy – things are on the edge of disaster. And … and people don’t just murder each other.

THIRD WITCH: That so?

FIRST WITCH: But...

Tell that to Duncan.

Macbeth smashes a fist into the mirror. A spider web crack ripples over the surface. Drips bounce off.
MACBETH: Rahhhh! I... I can’t.

Glamis shambles in. A skin-tight suit covers every inch of her body, over which she wears a loose-fitting uniform and a few plates of armor that really can’t cling to her body anymore.

GLAMIS: There’s our hero.

MACBETH: Glamis?! How – you should be resting. What’re you doing here?

He runs over and puts an arm over her shoulders, stabilizing her somewhat.

GLAMIS: I couldn’t stand to lie there, marinating in pity. It’s sickening.

MACBETH: I – Glamis – I don’t know if I can do it. It’s not right.

Glamis looks at him with a tilted head.

GLAMIS: Not right. Heh. Tell that to my troops, who melted within their armor after their tetrarch bombed them. Tell that to people of Riktus Prime – they weren’t all rebels or rioters you know. Some were just normal people. Innocent – more innocent than us, but a long shot.

Glamis peels the mask from her ravaged, sunken face, fluid oozed from her orifices, and Macbeth almost starts sobbing. He grabs her hand, and she shakes it free.

GLAMIS: Look at my face, and try to talk to me about what’s right.

There it is. The grief and the anger come flooding back in. She’s dying. She’s already dead.

Macbeth cups her cheek lovingly, gently. She covers his hand with hers, both get covered with her fluids. Glamis begins to calm some.

GLAMIS: You’re a good person, Mac. And I’ve always loved you for that. But there is no right here.

I’m going to have to watch her melt away. And it’s Duncan’s fault.

MACBETH: What if we fail?

GLAMIS: We won’t fail – you won’t fail.

Macbeth puts Cawdor’s helmet on. Glamis drags her fingers over his mouth, leaving streaks of blood that look like skeletal teeth. Macbeth takes her hand, then slowly lets it drop as he turns to leave the room.

MACBETH: It will be done.

THIRD WITCH: Yes.
The Rough Draft

The script I wrote functions a lot like a screenplay with dialogue, narration, and stage directions. In the mass-production of main-stream superhero comics, this is how an artist might be presented an author’s story as they embarked on the mission of turning written word into visual image. There was less room for difference in interpretation with the same person handling both of these stages in the process, but I was surprised to see how my vision changed from a sort of vague inking into a very real, specific reality on paper. It was both challenging and liberating to reshape images and ideas to suit the logistical confines of each page, and to present them in a way that would be accessible to the reader. I was a bit taken aback at just how long this stage in my process took – it was a struggle for me to find a balance between the speed of rough thumbnail sketches and the utility of more detailed drawings. The nature of my images varies pretty dramatically from page to page, and often even between individual panels. I don’t know that I actually found the most effective way to scratch out a rough draft, but I definitely wound up with a pseudo-legible document that proved to be a crucial steppingstone towards the realization of my vision.

Presented here is a portion of the rough draft of Act I.
Scene I

1. "When is it going to happen?"

2. "Soon."

3. "After the battle's been lost, findidon."

4. "After this worthless slab of meat has had his appointment with the butcher."

5. "Stop!"

6. "He's coming. Please, let us."

7. "Macbeth."
Scene III
I see.

The sister will be fine. It's time to let you out of here.

Yes - that'd be appreciated.

Maibek and Bauer are on their way to cover with an EMT that should knock the system offline long enough to prevent him from detonating the last storage.

Full evaluation of the Citadel is underway as a precaution.

What about the situation on Frakthar?

B-19. We have no evidence (and yet) actions are related to the last uprising.
I disagree, Commander. Launch the warheads.

Sir, we can't. We told Grim's her troops would have another hour to clear out before we dropped the 3D phase. We'd be poisoning our own men.

That was an order, Macbeth. Before it was a matter of getting the countries back on schedule to meet our quotas. Now it's clear our whole operation rests upon the edge. As Tuppence I cannot let it fail to burn.

You can't be serious—this is a compile.

Good. Does this thing do any damage? I don't want to get caught in the same place as Macbeth's

This is how the system works, Van Orphan. Now do what you were spawned to do and follow orders.
I'm just quite sure how long the unmanned fuel body can go without existing, and have no intention of finding out.

End of Scene IV
HEH.
ALL HAIL BANQUO

WHAT WAS THAT?
HOW DO THEY KNOW US?

MY. MY LOYD BANQUO,SUGGESTED YOU FORGET IT. PROBABLY A FLAW IN THE INTERFACE.
A DAMAGED MESSAGE FRAGMENT TRIGGERED BY THE REBOOT?
What are you talking about? I'm pretty sure Dinero hated me.

Oh, definitely. But he's a businessman first, and you guys just saved the day. He'll see opportunity for a new publicity stunt. Eh, General?

Sorely? You're there, ain't ya?

General?

How's Malborne? I've got Malborne's head. He wants to talk to you. Right. What can I do for you, Commander?

Malborne.

The Helmet. Take it.

Right.

What's happened?

Don't drop the b-phrase on the player. Prime Rules. Larry, not all our men made it out. Take Glam was with them. She's alive, but it's not good.

On my way.

Oh... he's going to hurt, isn't he?

Pain is an inevitable Byproduct.

Yes it is.
Scene V

Malcolm: I understand that, but he's a person. A person you've already put through hell, and you can't just use him and throw him away when it suits you that's not what people do.

Simon: You keep telling yourself that. What you're a bit older and wiser, aren't we? Then we can talk. Make sure you're ready for the ceremony.

Simon: Our father would be pleased.

Simon: Hey kid. Just another day in the office, right?

Simon: My brother is an ascetic, neat-freak, and a terrible leader.

Simon: He's just another failure.

Simon: Human doing the best he can. Any of us could.

Simon: Feel like the Jedi need that a lot recently. It's fine, Malcolm. Maybe it is a hero. You know I feel we're the pilot nothing of those about now.
LUMS I MEAN... HE'S NOT DEAD IS HE NO? I MEAN... "MAL WILL BE NEXT IN LINE FOR THE TETRAKHY. I MEAN, HE'S 10 YEARS OLDER THAN YOU, BUT... DON'T JUST THROW SOMEONE INTO A POSITION LIKE THAT. IT'S INSANE.

IT'S DEFINITELY A POOR TASTE.

MY MOUTH IT BEGINS TO SAY IT. I'M AFRAID YOUR BROTHER HAS A QUARTER MILLION YEARS IN HIM. IT'S A BIT LONGER THAN I THOUGHT. WE'LL GET THROUGH IT. AND IF IT COMES TO IT, WE'LL GET ME THROUGH IT.

I KNOW... S-T... LOOdR! I SAID IT. AND YOU'RE RIGHT. IT'S A BIT INACCURATE.

FEMALE LEADER IN AND COMMANDER RAGNAR.

PLEASE STAY WITH ME T. DEATH WITH SOMETHING EXTREME. DOES WHAT DO YOU WANT THIS TIME, RAGNAR?

JUST WANTED TO CHECK IN. YOU KNOW, CORRELATE OUTFIT FOR TOMORROW. KINDA THING.

I TAKE IT BACK. LET'S GET FEED-ABLE. LET'S GET THIS SHOW ON THE ROAD, MALCOLM.
Scene VI
Seyton, he’s gone in my arms. So many of them... all those people.

It’s going to be alright. It’s going to be alright. I’m sure there’s a way.

I saw, I saw. And it’s going to happen. I swear. You’ll be Tetrarch. Don’t let anyone die. I swear by all of them.
Scene VII

MALCOLM: Hi. I know they put me in a fancy suit, but it's still me.

MALCOLM: I'm so sorry.

MALCOLM: About Glady's... I can't even imagine... it's unfathomable... and I'm so, so sorry.

MALCOLM: Thanks, Malcolm. Not your fault, but that means a lot.

MALCOLM: Thanks, Malcolm. I'll be telling you. How is he?

MALCOLM: Your wife's too. K.D. and she does wonders with standard distribution ratios. We have Glady's patched up; we'll have everyone together.
AND I’M RECONSIDERING MY OPTIONS BY MYSELF. I’M GETTING WORSE.

Yeah. Duncan told me they’ve already pummeled her full of all kinds of antidotes. Only a matter of time now.

MAL...

WHAT?

I... I DON’T... NO. IT CAN’T BE.

There isn’t a cure. Is there?

I’m so sorry. I—the development team didn’t get through enough tests! Duncan shouldn’t have even known about the weirdness, but someone assumed we would have the sense to be freaking out—never should have happened.

Part of me knew. It. It’s my world.

But it did.

I could do it. Right now.

I taught you. You think I need someone.

I just made things worse, didn’t I?

Truth can hurt. He needed to know, but now he’s needed some time to heal.
Scene VIII

MAKE IT LOOK LIKE ONE OF THE COLDS ALREADY REPORTED TO BE SEEKING REVENGE FOR THE BITCHES OF ENU ONE OF THE DWINDLING ALIEN POPULATIONS DUNN PERSEVERED LIKE HIS FATHER BEFORE HIM.

THERE’S NO QUESTION DUNN DESERVES IT. THE TITANIC THINKS ARE ON THE WAVE OF DISASTER AND PEOPLE DON’T JUST OTHER.

THAT SO?

BUT...

TELL THEM TO DUNN

WWW

THERE’S OUR HERO GLAMISTO
I couldn't keep lying there, marinating in pity. It was sickening.

I knew... I don't know if I can do it. It's not right.

...Not right. Heh.

Tell that to my Torq, who melted inside the room when the trees came down.

Tell that to the people of Rit. They weren't all rebels or tourists and you know it. Some were just normal people, innocent - more innocent than you or I.

Look at me and talk to me about what's right.

There it is, the grief and rumors flowing through me. She's dead.

She's already dead.

You're a good person, Mal. I've always loved you for that. But there is no right here.

I'm going to have to watch her melt away.

And it's Duncan's fault.
WHAT IF WE FAIL?

WE WON'T FAIL.

YOU WON'T FAIL.

IT WILL BE DONE.
The Pencils

Penciling was the first step in the procedure where I interacted with my story in what would be its finished format. I transferred my rough draft from the pages of my sketchbook onto the large, high-quality Bristol board that would host the rest of my creative process. I was naïve enough to think in the beginning that I would be able to crank these drawings out after making some pretty detailed pages to work form, but I was very wrong. From carefully laying out each page, recreating and improving the images in every panel, and attempting to lay out my text in a neat and effective manner, the penciling process turned out to be the most time-consuming, painful step of all. It was at this point that I also had to settle on some of my aesthetic decisions—filling in the portions of my rough draft that were woefully neglected or even left pretty much blank. I decided to stick with the ragged, rough-around the edges look I’d begun to envision. Life in this new imagining of Macbeth wouldn’t be easy on people, and each individual seemed determined to show it with their plethora of face wrinkles, injuries, and all-around disheveled state. It was my goal to maintain the relatively high caliber of drawing I’d tapped into during my Summer Undergraduate Research project, which made the hours of drawing that much more painstaking and rewarding. This also marked the first point at which it became clear I would have to pick which portions of my adaptation to work on, because there simply would not be time to recreate all the pages I sketched out. My initial goal was to work my way through Macbeth and Banquo’s interaction with the witches. While this landmark doesn’t fall all that late within Shakespeare’s play, the additional scenes I added meant that achieving this point would get me through the setup of main story, characters, and setting while also showcasing some of the more extensive changes I incorporated into my take of the story.

Presented here are the final pencil drawings I created for a portion of Act I.
Scene I

When... when is it going to happen?

Soon.

After the battle's been lost and won.

After this worthless slab of meat has had his appointment with the butcher.

STOP!

He comes...

Please... please get out.
I've always had this lingering suspicion I would die, on the heath.

Of course, Cawdor's terrifying alien mercenaries don't exactly help with that sense of doom.

Banquo? You have a second? One of the last surviving so-called heathans; I've come to appreciate Banquo's refined subtlety.

Particular in a tough spot.
THANKS BUDDY.

HE'S ALSO A MUCH BETTER PERSON THAN MOST HUMANS.
THE TETRARCHY SHIPS TO THE HEATH. EVEN IF HIS TRANSLATOR IS SO UNBALATABLY OPTIMISTIC.

ALWAYS.
MY LORD BANQUO SAYS IT'S HIS PLEASURE.

I'M SURE IT WAS, LOCHIBAR.

MACDUFF SAID CAWIDOR WAS HEADED FOR THE CENTRAL FUEL CONTROL HUB. RIGHT?

THEN LET'S BRING THE TRAITOROUS CREEP IN.
Scene IV

We have to do this the old-fashioned way.

I've always fancied myself something of a space-age cowboy.

My Lord Banquo suspects you're... Uh... Messing with him.

My Lord Banquo?

I don't feel comfortable translating that.

Nam. It'll be fine. After the E.M.P., Cawdor will be trapped in his armor all helpless-like. Everything will be under control by the time the systems come back online, so we can stop the moon from getting blasted to bits.
GLAMIS... THE RIOTS WERE HEATING UP THE LAST TIME WE CHECKED IN.

BUT IF ANYONE CAN HANDLE A CROWD OF VIOLENT, DISILLUSIONED LABORERS, IT’S MY GLAMIS.

NOW’S NOT THE TIME.

LET’S RIDE, FARDNER.
MACBETH, I WONDERED IF YOU'D ACTUALLY BE THE ONE. DUNGAN'S LAPDOG, HERE TO BRING ME TO JUSTICE FOR TRYING TO USE THE TECHNOLOGIES BURIED ON THIS BARREN ROCK.

I SUPPOSE HIS VOICE IS THE ONLY WEAPON HE HAS LEFT.

WE'VE ALL HEARD THE REPORTS CAWDOR. YOU'RE JUST ANOTHER IN A LONG LINE OF FOOLS TAMPERING WITH ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE. WHEN HAS THAT EVER ENDED WELL?

MY POINT, CAPTAIN, IS THAT I'VE SEEN POWERS YOU CAN'T IMAGINE. EXPERIENCED THINGS... BEYOND HUMAN COMPREHENSION.

DO YOU REALLY THINK I'M INCAPABLE OF HARDENING MY SUIT AGAINST A SIMPLE EMBE?
Gunslinging dreams crushed.

Yeah.

Exeunt two hapless fools.

This is going to hurt.
EVEN WITH FULL GEAR, I'M NOT SURE WE COULD DEAL WITH THAT ARMOR.

TIME TO IMPROVISE.

OUCH.

YOU-YOU CAN DO IT!

GRRRRRRRRRR!!!!

THE HELMET.
TAKE IT.
NOT SURE IF IT'S MY SHOULDER OR THE SEAL ON CAWDOR'S ARMOR THAT FINALLY GIVES OUT. DEFINITELY FEELS LIKE IT WAS THE SHOULDER.

GOOD.

VIOLATING PROTOCOL.

I'VE LOST TOO MANY FRIENDS ON THIS MOON ALREADY.
WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER WITH A GOOD ONE-LINER.

YOU ALRIGHT BUDDY?

TOOK A COUPLE GOOD HITS THERE.

UGH. NO TIME FOR THESE HINTS OF GUILT. I DID WHAT I HAD TO.

I CANT TAKE CAJDOR ALIVE BUT WE STOPPED HIM FROM BLASTING THE HEATH OUT OF THE RIKTUS SYSTEM. OH... SPEAKING OF...

MY LORD BANQUO?

MISTER MACBETH, YOU DID IT?

EH. MORE OR LESS. HOW LONG TILL THE SYSTEMS COME LIVE ONLINE?

CLICK...

UH... FIVE MINUTES?

GREAT. YOU MIND COMING DOWN HERE TO HELP BANQUO?

MAYBE LESS.
I'm not quite sure how long the unmanned fuel body can go without combust ing, and really don't have any interest in finding out.

Oh dear. I don't remember that being part of the plan.

Good to know I can still use a control panel.

Wait...

What the?...

Uh... guys? Something is wrong with the display...
MACBETH?
IT'S YOU!

ALL HAIL CAPTAIN MACBETH.

CAPTAIN?
ALL HAIL GENERAL MACBETH.

MACBETH, WHO SHALL BE TETRARCH HEREAFTER.

TETRARCH?

WHAT... WHAT ARE YOU?
"My Lord Banquo doesn't like this. Can you turn it off?"

"Ah yes... Banquo."

"Oh, oh he's not going to be happy, is he?"

"Not so happy, yet much happier."

"Your brood will find its way to the Tetrarchy heaven, though you won't."

"What's going on?"

"Could it be true?"
HEH.
ALL HAIL BANQUO

ALL HAIL MACBETH.

...WHAT JUST HAPPENED? THOSE THINGS... HOW'D THEY KNOW US?

WAIT? WHAT ARE YOU?? WHAT DO YOU KNOW?

MY... MY LORD BANQUO SUGGESTS YOU FORGET IT. PROBABLY A DAMAGED MESSAGE FRAGMENT TRIGGERED BY THE REBOOT. OR... SOMETHING?
The Inks

After some final revisions and really helpful insight from Dr. Cates, it was finally time to pull out the bottle of India ink, the set of interchangeable nib pens and finally commit to the pages as had been laid out during the penciling stage. I was remarkably reluctant to do this, as some part of me felt that I could never turn back and change my ideas after they were inked onto the Bristol. This particular trip through the inking process reminded me that the images themselves become pretty hard to edit in a meaningful way, but the ideas are as flexible and alive as ever. I really hope I remember this earlier in the game next time. While you can go over pencil drawings in ink pretty quickly, I once again found it to be a reasonably pleasant practice that would have been downright enjoyable if I hadn’t put it off till a remarkably late stage of my project. The adaptive and creative decisions made during this phase were minimal, but the decisions regarding time management made while penciling were compounded. I wound up taking on a smaller subset of the pages I laid out on Bristol, focusing on the opening page and Macbeth’s encounter with the witches. I felt that these sequences did a good job capturing not only the general aesthetics of my larger project, but also the crucial treatment of the witches as a broken, unstable A.I. – a decision that really shapes my adaptation in a lot of ways and proves to be pretty visually interesting.

Presented here are some of the final ink drawings I created for a portion of Act I.
when... When is it going to happen?

Soon.

After the battle's been lost and won.

After this worthless slab of meat has had his appointment with the butcher.

Grragh...

STOP!

He comes...

Please... Please get out.

Macbeth
My Lord Banquo doesn't like this. Can—can you turn it off?

Ah, yes... Banquo.

Oh, oh he's not going to be happy, is he?

Not so happy, yet much happier.

Your brood will find its way to the Tetrarch's Heathen, though you won't.

What's going on?

Could it be true?
The Finished Page

If my line drawings began to feel more complete after being retraced in ink, the sense of resolution that built as the finishing touches are applied to the inked pages was pretty heady and incredible. The first step towards completion is really a continuation of the inking phase. My nib pen was swapped for a selection of paintbrushes, used to apply a series of watered-down ink washes. The washes add shading, color, and depth to images that had spent months as flat pencil drawings. After first experimenting with ink washes over the course of my research on Shakespearean soliloquies in comics last summer, I've come to realize that this is the crucial step in my process that brings my drawings to life and turns them into something that I almost always feel genuinely proud of. After the washes had been applied, all I had left to do was scan my inked pages and do a bit of editing in Photoshop. While I have used these remarkable digital tools to alter my drawings and text, I try to limit my retouching on the computer to tidying up the borders around panels, captions, and balloons – little corrections for a crisp and clean image that was essentially created by hand.

Presented here are the finished pages I created for a portion of Act I.
when... When is it going to happen?

Soon.

After the battle's been lost and won.

After this worthless slab of meat has had its appointment with the butcher.

Grragh...

Stop!

He comes...

Please... Please get out.
I'm not quite sure how long the unmanaged fuel body can go without combusting, and really don't have any interest in finding out.

Oh dear, I don't remember that being part of the plan.

Good to know I can still use a control panel.

Wait...

What the?...

Uh... Guys? Something is wrong with the display...
MACBETH? IT'S YOU!

ALL HAIL CAPTAIN MACBETH.

CAPTAIN? ALL HAIL GENERAL MACBETH.

MACBETH, WHO SHALL BE TETRARCH HEREAFTER.

TETRARCH?

WHAT... WHAT ARE YOU?
My Lord Banquo doesn't like this. Can you turn it off?

Ah - yes, Banquo.

Oh, oh he's not going to be happy, is he?

Not so happy, yet much happier.

Your brood will find its way to the Tetraphis. Heathen, though you won't.

What's going on?

Could it be true?
HEH.
ALL HAIL BANQUO.

ALL HAIL MACBETH!

...what just happened? those things... how'd they know us?

wait? what are you?? what do you know?

my... my lord banquo suggests you forget it. probably a damaged message fragment triggered by the reboot, or... something?

...clik...
Conclusion

These are many of the influences and decisions that shaped my adaptation and the process that led to its creation. It’s a process that is imperfect and ever-shifting, but which has served me well and which I would love to carry through to the end of Macbeth’s plot. I want to see Macbeth don a harness that renders him invisible to detection by any security measures so that he can muster the nerve to confront Duncan face to face and cut him down in a vengeance and witch-fueled act of violence that will leave our protagonist shaken to the core. I think it’d be really interesting if Lochi bar touches Macbeth in an attempt to comfort him somewhere along the way, and accidentally catches a brief glimpse of the havoc the witches are wreaking inside the acting-tetrarch’s head. In a desperate attempt to mask detection, the sick A.I. sends Macbeth on a mission to end the tactile telepath before he can cause trouble, and Banquo simply ends up as an emotionally devastating piece of collateral damage. Glamis will eventually succumb to the bioweapon slowly eating her alive, shedding light on another death that seems rather abrupt and not entirely justified in the source text. And in the end, part of me is toying with the idea of letting Macduff spare Macbeth in a moment of forgiveness that finally breaks the cycle of death and suffering. But most of me believes that the unending cycle is the point, and that this show of mercy may bring me dangerously close to an unpalatable happy ending.

My thesis has served as a really rewarding culmination of my undergraduate career by combing ideas, passions, and skills gained during my time at UVM, but it also serves as a solid platform from which I hope to continue working and advance on to further projects. While this portion of the project is coming to a close, the process itself is a tool I will always have access to. And there’s no shortage of source material just waiting to be recreated in a context or medium totally unimaginable to the original author. Who knows – maybe it’s about time to revisit Romeo and Juliet after all these years – there could be a few glimmers of redemption worth digging up there.

Or maybe I should take a couple more years on that one.
Influential Works:


