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Get Serious

Kalamazoo has a thriving comics scene

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Comics and graphic design artist Paul Sizer created this special art for the September issue of *Encore*



From *Archie* to *The Avengers*, from *The Far Side* to *Speed Bump*, comics intrigue and entertain us. But, for

a few folks, creating those comics is the stuff of dreams.

“There’s a lot of weird things going on in my head, and I need to put them down on paper,” says Joshua Gaunt, 30, who just moved from Kalamazoo to Chicago. He’s an artist currently working on his online comic series *Wintry*, which tells the story of a suburban neighborhood in a never-ending winter.

Wintry is designed to be read on a computer screen the same way one would read a page in a book. Gaunt, who posts his work at wintrycomic.com and finished the first chapter of *Wintry* in April, says the comic is mostly an outlet to exercise his artistic skills. He continued working on the tale this summer, along with a new comic about “adapting to the changes life throws at you.”

“It’s an experimental place — I know how to (draw), but I want to know what’s my style,” he says, referring to the detail of his illustrations and the tone of his story (so far, kind of grim: One character is having a discussion with a zombie).

While Gaunt is in the early stages of developing *Wintry*, 33-year-old Neil Bryer’s work is a little more developed. The Kalamazoo artist returned to an old companion this summer in his online series, *Wombat* (wombatcomic.com). Neil the wombat, like Mickey Mouse, stands on two legs, wears clothes and gets into trouble with Kalamazoo city staff (the comic is semi-autobiographical). Like Gaunt, Bryer started *Wombat* to practice his drawing and writing. He produced comics regularly from 2006 to 2013, when he took a break. He now works on marketing campaigns for United Bay Community Credit Union, and while he says designing marketing materials can be considered “creative,” it’s not the same as creating a comic strip.

“Recently I’ve been feeling that itch,” Bryer says. “If you’re creative, you want to create.”

Most people are probably not familiar with Gaunt or Bryer or their work, but they may have heard the name of another Kalamazoo comics artist: Paul Sizer. His self-published science-fiction books *Little White Mouse* (2006) and *Moped Army* (2005) can be found at the Kalamazoo Public Library. Half of Sizer’s workweek is spent teaching graphic design at Western Michigan University; the rest is devoted to design work for clients, including video game companies and universities (he created the Buster Bronco logo that inspired the costume for WMU’s mascot). Sizer is also working on a new comic book, *Daughters of the Octopus*, to be published in 2016. He writes, draws and edits his comics and then sends them to several vendors to print paperback copies of the finished books. Another company helps distribute the books to comic book stores and libraries. Sizer also sells his books on his website, paulsizer.com.

“I do stuff that will advance my career,” Sizer says. “When I did work that I wanted to do, people started finding me a lot more.”

A Comics Primer

Printed comics come in several forms. The smallest is the strip, which tells a story short enough to fit on one page or even in a single panel. *Wombat* is a comic strip, as are most classic newspaper comics,

like *Garfield* and *The Family Circus*.

Next is the comic book, usually 32 to 48 pages (including ads) and published monthly to tell part of a larger story. Batman, Iron Man and other superheroes are most often found in comic books.

Graphic novels are next on the size scale. The largest works, like Sizer's *Little White Mouse*, offer epic tales that range from larger-than-life adventure stories to intimate personal narratives. *Maus*, a 1991 graphic novel by American artist Art Spiegelman about the Jewish experience during the Holocaust, won a Pulitzer Prize in 1992. Japanese comics, also called manga, are even larger, often collected into telephone book-sized volumes. And while sometimes comic drawings are called cartoons, the term cartoon usually applies to animation on film, TV or in YouTube videos.

Many local comics artists say they got their start by reading superhero comic books and newspaper comic strips and imitating what they saw, creating their own drawings of Charlie Brown and Spider-Man. They quickly moved on, though, working on original characters and plots and developing their own "look" for faces, clothing and technology. For example, detailed pipes and wires fill the background in Sizer's comics. The zombie in Gaunt's *Wintry* is very realistic-looking and definitely not for young children. Artist Blake Eason, 31, of Kalamazoo, draws women of all shapes and sizes, mostly on his Instagram page ([instagram.com/blakeinobi](https://www.instagram.com/blakeinobi)). While Eason's Wonder Woman doesn't look like the one published by DC Comics, the character is attracting attention online.

"(People) are usually surprised that they see people like them in the comics," Eason says. "Women want more representation of different-sized women."

Comics artists like to have print copies of their work available for readers to buy, but nearly all of their work is published online first, unless it's been created for a specific client. The most popular place on the Web for comics art is DeviantArt ([deviantart.com](https://www.deviantart.com)), a gallery of photos, paintings and drawings, though many artists will also post their work on Facebook, Tumblr and other sites. On DeviantArt, artists can show off their latest work and get feedback on their experiments with new styles of art. Bryer, Sizer and Eason all have work on DeviantArt, and Gaunt says he wants to put his drawings there as well.

And while the online world has been helpful to popularize *Wombat*, Bryer says he suspects some of his website traffic may be accidental. "I get a lot of clicks from Australia," he says. "I'm not sure why, but the wombat is an Australian animal."

For a face-to-face encounter with comics fans, artists head to conventions where artists and writers talk about their work. C2E2, held in Chicago each spring, is one that several Kalamazoo artists have attended, either sitting at their own booth meeting readers or as visitors themselves. At the conventions, Bryer hands out business cards featuring *Wombat*. "If you say the comic is free, people will tend to take it," he says.

On a more local level, Gaunt credits Kalamazoo's monthly Art Hop for exposing visitors to new artists. He is one of the artists operating Exquisite Corpse, an art studio and gallery in the Park Trades Center,

in downtown Kalamazoo, that is part of the monthly event.

“Comics are opening up to a lot more people,” Gaunt says. “It’s still in some people’s heads that comics are for kids, but who makes the comics?”

Origin Story

The roots of Kalamazoo’s contemporary comics scene date back about 20 years, to the Kalamazoo City Comics Coalition, a gathering of several dozen artists and writers. The group assembled several issues of *Bulk Comics*, a brief comic book series that showcased their work. Out of print now, it was available at Kalamazoo comic book shops in the 1990s. Sizer was a member of the Comics Coalition, as was Aaron Warner, whose *Adventures of Aaron* comic was published by the *Kalamazoo Gazette* starting in 1990, was picked up by the *Detroit News* and then syndicated nationwide by Tribune Media Services in 1995. *Adventures of Aaron* was published as a comic book for several issues in 1997 by Image Comics, a California-based company best known for *The Walking Dead* comic book series that inspired the TV show. Another *Bulk Comics* artist, John Fountain, now works in animation for Disney and Nickelodeon.

“Kalamazoo was a hotbed of comics creators,” Sizer says. “It was fun to see all these different styles together.”

After *Bulk Comics* came *Kalamazoo Comix*, in 1996, another anthology series. Sizer and Bryer were in that one and so was Kenjji Jumanne-Marshall. In *Kalamazoo Comix Issue 3*, Jumanne-Marshall drew a story of a pizza-delivery superhero. For 10 years after that, he published his own comic, *Witch Doctor*, featuring a supernatural hero protecting the people of New Orleans. He’s working on a new horror-themed series, *Frankie*, which is part of a bigger project that includes short films, music and animation. It’s set to appear on Kalamazoo’s public-access TV channel, Public Media Network (PMN), in October, and a sneak peak can be had at facebook.com/FRANKIElives.

“My passion is for comics that aren’t mainstream,” Jumanne-Marshall, 41, says. “They’re hard to find, but if you did find one, you were glad because it was so rare.”

Live and Let Draw

Nearly every comics artist dreams of drawing comics as their full-time job, but to do so doesn’t always mean signing on with a publisher like Marvel to draw Spider-Man. Most artists say they would rather create and publish their own work and characters, engaging in every step of the process, from conceiving, writing and drawing comics to designing page layouts, getting books printed, advertising the books and selling copies at comics conventions or anywhere else they can. For example, Bryer had copies of his strip collected into a book, *Wombat*, which has been sold at Fanfare Sports and Entertainment, a comic book shop in Kalamazoo.

“Freelance is the way to go,” Gaunt says. “You get to keep the rights to your work.”

On a more practical level, Sizer says being entirely self-published means an artist takes on all the risk of

printing a book but also receives all the reward if the book does sell. That's why he's taking the self-publishing route for his upcoming *Daughters of the Octopus* comic. While he continues to work on that book, Sizer has other projects in the works, including design work for games and advertising firms. Sizer says one of his most unusual projects was the cover art for musician Thomas Dolby's 2011 album, *A Map of the Floating City*. Sizer won an online contest to create the cover art for Dolby, who is best known for the 1982 song "She Blinded Me With Science." Sizer also helped design a computer game that shared the look of the *Floating City* album.

Collaboration is a path several Kalamazoo artists are taking to be able to continue drawing. Jumanne-Marshall is working with several local models as he puts his *Frankie* story together. Gaunt is teaming with Kalamazoo writer and comics artist Richard Carbonneau on a comic Gaunt describes as a "book about monsters and what they mean to you."

"We'll try to see if any (publisher) will pick it up, or we'll try to Kickstart it," he says, referring to the crowdfunding website where individuals can contribute money in return for a copy of the book once it's completed.

While some artists are able to spend most of their time on their comics, others have to fit it in alongside their day jobs. Gaunt and Eason both work at restaurants; Bryer, as mentioned, works in marketing at a credit union. Eason says he's looking for a big break, but until then he'll use the time he has available to practice drawing.

"For now, I'm taking the opportunity to work on my own art," he says. "You have to work the Clark Kent job and be Superman at night."

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