

DESIGN ARTS THESIS / Oral Defense

I. Introduction / 5 minutes

Hello! Thank you all for coming here, whether you're returning from my proposal or showing up for the first time, or you traveled here from halfway across the country (hi mom, hi dad), it's great to have you here for my thesis, Ride Like Hell!

Ride like Hell is a comic pitch about a wayward angel, who after losing their human friend in a car crash on earth, journeys to hell to compete in an all-out race in order to restore his soul back to the living. It's a story about identity, friendship, and how far you'd go for someone you love. And also cars. Lots of cars.

But first, let's talk about myself for a bit. Growing up, comics have always been a part of my life. I've always found ways to get my hands on them, from random comics in a bin at summer camp, to the popular books at my school library that were always getting checked out, to finding webcomics online in various corners of the internet (and, also, actually buying them.) I have also been making them on my own for quite a while now, as you can see, and after going to PNCA that has not changed, if me taking the graphic novel course is anything to go by. But comics are something that's massively shaped my love for reading and visual storytelling, and I want to return that sensation back to other readers in my line of work. It's also helped shape my love for unique and out-there story ideas, ones that aren't afraid to get a little bizarre with their executions and take themselves seriously in that regard. Ride Like Hell is the kind of story that very much appeals to me personally, and a comic I am excited to introduce to all of you today.

So! Let's get into the nitty gritty of it all. Starting with the plot. What the heck is this even about?

II. Overview / 10 minutes

The story focuses on the main character named Angel who is, an angel. And they have spent all of their eternal life in service to heaven and protecting the humans on earth, from a distance, because it's what they were created to do. But that life is not only extremely strict and limiting, it's also very dull. So, in an effort to get away from it all, Angel starts sneaking down to earth in disguise as a human, and sparks a newfound passion in two things. The world of cars and street racing, and the closest friend they've made, a human named David. Over time, cars and racing turn into an outlet for them, a way to experience a freedom they're not allowed, and a friendship Angel's never had before. But suddenly, that secret life is shattered, when a ominous new driver at a rally crashes into David and kills him. With suspicion of otherworldly foul play at hand, and with Angel's secret now being exposed to the eyes of Heaven, that life they've worked so hard for is now at risk of being shut down. But not wanting to give up that independence, and not willing to wait around for Heaven to finally make a decision on what to do with David's soul, they decide to take matters into their own hands.

Enter Hell, another realm full of demons and devils and the souls of the tormented. And one of the only reprieves from the grind of torture is an annual no-holds barred race, where the only rule is that there are none. Whoever crosses the finish line first (and mostly in one piece), gets whatever wish their heart desires, and anyone can compete. Sinners, demons, interdimensional beasts, but never before has an angel dared to enter the race. And Angel is hellbent on entering and *winning*. If they succeed, they get to restore David's soul back to the living, and even if things have a *slight* chance of going back to normal, at least he'll be alive. But if they fail, well, Hell is certainly no place to be trapped in, especially for an angel. Will it be worth the risk? Do they have what it takes to put it all on the line? Will they succeed in saving their friend? I guess you'll have to read it to find out!

I originally got the idea for this comic after going through a previous focus week, and I was wondering what I could potentially do for my own thesis. Usually with these things, I just get the idea from one place or another,

something someone said or a dream or a vague concept, but if they feel fun or grip me especially, I decide to pursue it. And the idea of an angel doing rather...un-angel-y things, like whipping around a muscle car in a place like hell with all these other crazy Mad Max-esque vehicles and characters, sounded like something I would LOVE to read. So I put a pin in it, continued to think about it, and developed it more. Why is this angel racing and what was their motivation? And that got me to the starting line.

I am also a big fan of the “how far would you go” type stories that like to challenge their characters, that make them question what they’re willing to do to achieve their goal. But one thing I noticed in these kinds of stories was that, almost always, it’s done in service of a family member or love interest. We’re all familiar with the dead wife motivation trope, or doing something for a lost family member, but I always felt like it was a bit odd that you couldn’t do that for a friend. Like it’s impossible! That’s not something a friend would do! If you went through all this stuff for them then you secretly romantically loved them! But also, well, why not? Why wouldn’t you go through hell for someone you loved, including your friend? Does a friend not change your life? Would you not want to do anything to protect that if it was threatened? So in a way, it was something I wanted to challenge. David is someone who means the world to Angel, giving them an entirely new life outside of their station in heaven. It’s a deeply personal friendship and relationship, and it’s something that Angel actively goes out of their way to try and save. Of course I obviously can’t control what people take away from this, but that angle of Platonic Love was crucial to me, even though I’m very much a romantic myself.

Another aspect of this story that cemented itself the more I thought about it was the theme of identity, and how that would be explored in this comic as well. As I mentioned before, Angel’s station in life is very restrictive, a noble life in service of others but never really for themselves. And while that’s not a bad thing, it’s not the life they want to live. When I was doing research on cars and car culture for this, there was a quote that stuck out to me from the book *Customized* by Nora Donnelly, “From its earliest days the car was recognized as a great liberator, symbolizing the freedom of movement, the

ability to innovate and a means of rebellion.” And it made me think about what cars would *mean* to someone like Angel, and suddenly everything clicked into place. To Angel, cars and car culture grant them a sense of freedom and identity outside of being a holy servant, a space to connect with humanity up close rather than from a distance. And by participating in this race in hell, it’s another more confrontational act of rebellion, not just against a divine status quo, but also in an effort to preserve this independence. I don’t want this story to be Angel having to prove themselves and who they are to others, but rather them fighting to protect what’s most important to them, regardless of what anyone or anything else thinks.

Originally, I aimed to complete 20~24 pages for my thesis, but it was suggested that a goal of 4-6 complete pages would be more realistic and easier to accomplish. And they were right! I found out it took me much longer than I thought it would to produce the pages, and my wrist and back were killing me, and I kinda need those to make art. I still plan on turning this into a longer form narrative in the future but for now, I am happy with the sample pages I’ve created.

My audience still remains unchanged, and I’m mostly aiming for a younger demographic around the teen-YA spectrum, or middle to high-school, which was around the age when I started getting into more “mature” comics, but also something still enjoyable for older readers as well, or for anyone who likes dramatic action comics that take place in hell.

III. Project Description + Process of Making / 15 minutes

Like the comic itself, my process of creating the work was both straight forward and and chaotic. Initially, I started off with creating concept art for the characters, because I wasn’t comfortable jumping straight into thumbnails for each comic page without knowing what they’d look like. I started by creating concept art for the main three characters, Angel, David, and The Mystery Driver, digitally in procreate, but then switched to traditional media like pencils and watercolors for the two minor antagonist characters, the Announcer and The King of Hell, who came together surprisingly easy.

Along with that, I decided to start making a rough script/dialogue sheet to also help with thumbnailing, I had done it before as part of one of the graphic novel assignments where we had to swap scripts for someone else to illustrate, so I figured this would be pretty easy. And then Jason said my initial draft sounded like the ramblings of a madman, so we switched over to making a beat sheet to lay out what would happen individually for each page or every two pages. The page layout for the book was another thing I had to keep in mind while writing out what would happen, especially when it came to something like pacing and page turns.

After that I finally got to roughly thumbnailing sketches for a select few pages that I really wanted to highlight most of the action/storytelling, and after that I dove right into doing the lineart. A lot of this was easy, like drawing the dramatic effects or the clouds of dust or the characters, but there were also a lot of things I wasn't used to drawing as much, such as massive backgrounds, or crowds, or car engines, so that was definitely something I had to learn how to simplify effectively while still having it read clearly.

And after that came speech bubbles and text! Probably the least finicky part of the process, but still important to figure out. I wanted the characters to have their own individual speech bubble types, especially since non-human characters like The King of Hell and The Announcer would sound way different compared to someone like Angel or David. So to emphasize that, I decided to make the King's speech bubbles more rough and scratchy around the edges to emphasize his harshness (you can see that in the final result), and kept the announcer's balloons more round to try and exaggerate his sports commentator voice, while Angel's is simply the normal round speech bubble.

After lastly came coloring and rendering, which was absolutely the trickiest and most time consuming part of the process. I initially planned for Hell to have a lot of bright, saturated colors to contrast with Heaven and Earth, so trying to figure out how to do all that in a cohesive way without it looking too oversaturated or chaotic was certainly an interesting challenge, and also involved me fooling around a lot with the layering modes.

IV. Influences / 5 minutes

Now onto what inspired me to make this thing in the first place.

Ride Like Hell was primarily influenced by three pieces of media. The movies Mad Max Fury Road and Redline, and the old 2012 Disney XD show Motorcity, among the many other pieces of car-related media out there. But those three had the same concept I liked of taking a car, its driver, and putting them in the middle of the wildest scenario imaginable. There are no rules, it's a fight for their life, there's stuff shooting at them, maybe lasers, and they are getting through by just the skin of their teeth. It's enthralling, it's bonkers, it's fun! You want to know what happens next! And I feel like that's something you don't really get to see a lot in mainstream media, or usually when it is, it's kinda joked about. "Why is this all happening, this makes no sense!" Maybe, but isn't there some fun in that absurdity? Isn't it interesting when a creator unapologetically commits to the zaniness? Or when a piece of media takes you by

the hand and says “just trust me” and takes you along for the ride? That’s the kind of stuff that fascinates me, and that mentality is something I wanted to capture in this comic.

In terms of actual comic formatting and pacing, my biggest influences have been Jeff Smith’s *Bone*, Bryan Lee O Malley’s *Scott Pilgrim*, and also Matias Bergara’s art for the *Coda* series. I wanted *Ride Like Hell* to be something that was relatively easy to follow, and wasn’t afraid to let some moments linger without immediately jumping off to the next thing and overwhelming the reader with speech bubbles, which have been some of my biggest pet peeves when it comes to reading certain comics. I felt *Bone* and *Scott Pilgrim* were good examples of that “show don’t tell” storytelling I wanted to emulate, given how they tend to have more panels of something uninterrupted, like just shots of a character going through a series of emotions, or a sequence of events. It’s not a one two and done, it’s willing to take its time with certain moments to really sell it.

And the art in *Coda* was a major influence in the style and colors of this comic, as the bright saturated hues in a post apocalyptic fantasy world worked well with the setting. Matias Bergara has a very loose, textured, and vibrant art style, one that really stands out among a lot of the semi-realistic airbrushed art you see in most comics, and one that I wanted to try and emulate in *Ride Like Hell*. So I decided to lean into getting more bold with my color choices, lots of oranges, lots of reds and hot pinks, electric greens and neon blues for the flames, etc etc.

V. The Project in Culture / 5 minutes

And last but not least, what am I gonna do with this project after thesis? Well,

Even though I only have a few pages at the moment, this is definitely a project I want to continue later on after graduation, either as one long graphic novel or a series of smaller releases that make up the larger narrative. There’s many more ideas and characters in this project that I want to explore and flesh out, and I want it to have a life beyond just Thesis. So, I’ll be using these pages as portfolio pieces to show to potential clients, but will also continue to do it on my own time, possibly producing copies of the book through kickstarter and/or submitting it to publishers when its further along.

As for where it’ll exist in the cultural zeitgeist, it’ll exist primarily for me first and foremost. I like comics! I like making comics! Has anyone made a comic about an Angel competing in a race in hell so far? I don’t think so (at least not to my knowledge.) Would you pick that up off the shelf in a bookstore? I sure hope so! You might be in the wrong room otherwise.

VI. Conclusion / Closing Remarks / 5 minutes

From what I can say from all this, it’s been a very educational experience in making comics, but surprisingly not as hard as I thought it would be, just more time consuming.

Even though there's a lot more to this story that I have yet to tell, with its additional theme of redemption, exploring Angel and David's relationship more, and showcasing the other drivers, I hope it's at least enough to get some of you interested in what'll happen next with this comic.

Thank you all for coming and for giving me your time, I will now open up the floor for questions from the panel.

45 Minutes Total

Q + A / Approximately 30 minutes.