Meet Me in the Middle Ages: Engaging with fantasy, reality, and collaborative world-building

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Abstract
This critical essay accompanies and describes my thesis project, Medievalia Miscellany, a magazine for middle-grade readers which explores the world of medieval fantasy through art, comics, stories, and activities. Throughout the essay, I use my own term "archaeological upcycling" to discuss and explore a variety of relationships between ideas of parts and a whole. I then use it to characterize the way stories are created out of many different parts and how these parts help a reader to relate to both the world of the story and the world in which they live. I describe the genre of medieval fantasy and how the cultural concept of medievalism is formed through popular media. Throughout the essay, the imagery of curiosity cabinets is evoked as a way of describing modular formats which provide space for the individual while maintaining a cohesive sense of the whole. I describe and summarize research into the contemporary renaissance faire, using both it and personal experience to critique and examine interactions with imaginary worlds created through stories which have real world outcomes. Finally, I describe examples from my project that relate to the themes of interactive stories, identity and community, and the cross-section of history and fiction present throughout the essay.
From archaeology comes an interest in the individual, often fragmented, object—both physical (scraps of paper, rusty bits of metal, dusty knick-knacks, etc.) as well as conceptual (processes, formats, tropes). The archaeological process is that of the detective—involving all manner of investigative activities, a willingness to dig for clues, and an eye trained to wonder at details often overlooked—in order to discover, uncover, and piece together things which used to be. All objects, from the smallest fractured pat- shered to the most colossal structures, have a history and life and are themselves records and witnesses to people, times, and places which no longer exist.  

In adding the word upcycling, I switch from the aim of the archaeologist—understanding the past through the objects which remain—to that of the storyteller, repurposing those objects to create new narratives. I have a respect for history and those who pursue its study and explication. That is why I leave to the archaeologists, historians, and other academics of related varieties the pursuit of accuracy and the verification of historical facts. As art historian Jules David Prown says: “the past is over and done with.” I’m not interested in creating for the past. I’m not interested in trying to explain it. Instead, I prefer to lean into history as fiction—not, as Prown does, to “explain how the world in which we live came to be,” but to offer ideas about how the world in which we live might be by making use of those things which the past has left behind.

I intentionally use the word upcycling rather than recycling because of its upward and outward-facing connotation. Recycling implies reuse in ways identical or similar to an object’s original purpose. Upcycling carries a greater sense of forward momentum, of progress, change, and transformation, bringing new value and relevance to an object. I mainly refer to the smaller-scale use of the term when used to describe how artists, craftspersons, and ordi- nary individuals make use of objects that might otherwise have become obsolete and discarded, turning broken china into planters and birdfeeders, old suitcases into vanities, or worn-out clothing into a variety of soft-furnishings. In this context, the object or objects retain many of their original features and are still recognizable while being incorporated into a new purpose and often to fulfill a dif- ferent function.

At its core—the nucleus around which my artistic practice orbits—archaeological upcycling is about tak- ing all these individual objects and finding and creating connections between them. It’s about looking, searching, noticing, and digging; it’s about learning, discovering, see- ing, and recognizing; and it’s about changing, creating, reinventing, and remaking. Archaeological upcycling is about fostering a sense of self as well as community. It’s about delighting in the details while constructing a cohe- sive whole.

archaeological upcycling

verb
A term which endeavors to describe both process and content within my art-making practice; it is both compass and destination; starting point and aspiration.

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At its core—the nucleus around which my artistic practice orbits—archaeological upcycling is about tak- ing all these individual objects and finding and creating connections between them. It’s about looking, searching, noticing, and digging; it’s about learning, discovering, see- ing, and recognizing; and it’s about changing, creating, reinventing, and remaking. Archaeological upcycling is about fostering a sense of self as well as community. It’s about delighting in the details while constructing a cohe- sive whole.

4 The larger-scale use of upcycling refers to industrial pro- cesses in which recycled items are used to produce goods which have a higher value than the objects they were created from. In this usage, the original item is usually reduced to raw material before being refashioned and doesn’t retain any other of its identifiable qualities. Carl A. Zimring, “Upcycling in History: Is the Past a Prologue to a Zero-Waste Future? The Case of Aluminium,” RCC Perspectives, no. 3 (2016): 45-46.

1 Jules David Prown elaborates on this when he says that “an artifact […] is an historical event, something that happened in the past. But unlike other historical events, it continues to exist in the present and can be reexperienced […]” Prown, “In Pursuit of Culture: The formal language of objects.” American Art 9: 1 (1995): 9.

2 Prown, n.

3 Prown, 3.

Above and Opposite
Excerpts from the comic “Tilting at Windmills,” Medievalia Miscellany vol. 1: Knighthood.
From Secondhand Stores, Secondary Worlds

That state of mind has been called “willing suspension of disbelief.” But this does not seem to me a good description of what happens. What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful “sub-creator.” He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter.


In approaching the project that has become Medievelia Miscellany, my primary concern has been to integrate this idea of archaeological upcycling into a pursuit and exploration of the kinds of stories I’m interested in telling and the ways in which I want to tell them.

Throughout this essay, I will make frequent use of the terms primary and secondary worlds which are discussed at length in both J.R.R. Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy-stories,” as well as W.H. Auden’s “The World of the Sagas.” In the most binary of explanations, the primary world refers to that of factual reality—“the objective world outside ourselves”—while secondary worlds are those of fiction.

As the Tolkien quote which opens this section suggests, secondary worlds are the worlds created and experienced through stories. Some of these worlds can look almost imperceptibly similar to the world around us, while others are at once recognizable in their otherness. Stories, and the secondary worlds which they hold, are constantly being made and remade through the process of archaeological upcycling—drawing on the familiar elements of human experience, borrowing from stories which have come before, and attempting to reconfigure the world into something new, to draw greater attention to that which we find delightful, haunting, garish, and so on.

Successful storytelling relies upon individual objects excavated from the primary world and assumes certain understandings about those objects in order to fashion a believable secondary world. For, as Auden says, “a poet cannot create ex nihilo.” Tolkien gives a succinct demonstration of this in his essay using the following example: “we may put a deadly green upon a man’s face and produce a horror.” Elements which each separately exist as facts in the primary world (the color green, a man’s face) are here combined and rearranged to evoke a different sort of world, one which might not physically exist outside the pages of its story, but which, when successful, feels as though it could and produces a primary world reaction (horror).

In a 2013 blog post from The Paris Review, short story author Amina Cain muses on the role of settings in writing. In it, she expresses a desire to achieve something that feels more like a landscape painting than a story because of a painting’s ability to “hold possibilities, not exclude them.” These are the kinds of stories I find myself interested in telling—stories with a lush secondary world, which the reader can easily imagine extending beyond the page, and in which individual narratives can be told while still leaving room for the possibilities of countless others.

As with archaeological upcycling, I find myself drawn to stories that accomplish this through close attention to detail and an elevation of the mundane. I prefer secondary worlds which are covered in mud, caked in genre details, and swimming with background characters. These are the things that really make a secondary world come to life for me, that allow my mind to enter into them. Such considerations give the story a concreteness, even when used to describe the most fantastical or impossible situations. The films of Japanese animator and director Hayao Miyazaki provide a veritable masterclass in this. Whether they’re set in World War II era Japan or an enchanted bathhouse for the spirits, Miyazaki’s films are brimming with detail, each background character seeming to have distinct qualities and a personality while simultaneously blending into the world around them. The plot may not be about the objects or the passersby, but their presence gives credibility to the plot merely by existing. As Tolkien declares, “it is precisely the colouring, the atmosphere, the unclassifiable individual details of a story, and above all the general purport that informs with life the undissected bones of the plot, that really count.”

As both project and research have developed, I’ve come to think about the ways in which secondary worlds aren’t exclusively bound or isolated to the individual stories from which they come. Nor do I see stories as fixed points in a wider secondary world. Rather, I’ve come to see the two as in conversation both with each other and with networks of other stories and secondary worlds. In the same way, we are all impacted by the conditions of the primary world and other individuals while, at the same time, having an impact on them.

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6 Auden, 51.
9 Tolkien, 18-19.
10 Tolkien briefly touches on this idea of interconnection in his characterizations of the Tree of Tales and the land of Faërie. Tolkien, 19-21.
11 These views have also been shaped by the work of art historian W. J. T. Mitchell in his article “The Surplus Value of Images,” which describes the relationship between physical images and the ideas they represent as evolutionary, each new image both shaping and being shaped by the collective understanding of the idea. W. J. T. Mitchell, “The Surplus Value of Images,” Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal 35, no. 3 (2002): 1–23.

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A Visit to The World of Medievalia

Nowhere is the magic of this world more powerful than what lies in the craft of the hands. For this is a land of workmanship, stitched together on the weaver’s loom, given breath from the blacksmith’s bellows, sheltered by the hands of carpenter and stonemason, preserved upon the pen of the scribe, and given light and color through the glazier’s art.

(Author’s notes, unused description from an early draft of the welcome letter at the beginning of Medievalia Miscellany.)

Write what you know—that’s how the adage goes. And, while I may not be any kind of expert, I’m at least familiar and comfortably acquainted with the world of medieval fantasy.

You can find this world at the intersection of history and fiction, sprawling out in all directions, supported and venerated, to various degrees, by the writing, beliefs, knowledge, and even actual relics from that time period in Europe known as the Middle Ages. It is imbued with magic and enchantment of all sorts. The cast of characters inhabiting this land range from known figures spanning both history and legend (Joan of Arc; various kings and queens of England, Spain, France, etc.; Merlin, King Arthur, and the round table knights; King Richard, Prince John, Robin Hood and his merry men; the list goes on and on) as well as a multitude of stock characters and tropes (the roguish jester, grim bandits, wizards both useful and useless, dragons of every temperament, feudal lords, armored knights, mysterious clergy, and of course hundreds upon thousands of everyday peasants.)

In choosing to explore and tell stories that are of this world, my intent is not to romanticize the Middle Ages—though I acknowledge that this is a likely and inevitable result—not is it to vilify them. I recognize that my own
Post-Raphaelite painters and from the rise of the fantasy novel spurred by J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. They also come from films of every category—early Disney classics, of which *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Sword in the Stone* stand out as particularly formative to my own interests; musicals like *Camelot* and film adaptations of Shakespearean plays; thrillers, dramas, even science fiction as with the movie *Timeline*, which is based on the Michael Crichton novel; and of course, the quotable comedy classic, *Monty Python* and the Holy Grail. They even come from internet memes.

I fully accept and embrace that my deference to medieval fantasy comes from an appreciation of a romanticized aesthetic. There is a problematic nostalgia which comes with that and which I have had to wrestle with throughout this project. I will discuss this in more detail later on. However, I would also propose that the romanticism and escapism often associated with secondary worlds of all types have the ability to encourage a more positive awareness and desire for interaction with the primary world.

interests in this time period are based more upon the idea of medievalism as opposed to the realities of medieval history. The term medievalism refers to “the continuing process of constructing and reconstructing the [Middle Ages] in postmedieval times” and while it does include academic and scholarly work, it has more to do with currently held cultural conceptions of that time period.” These conceptions are shaped by the ways in which we encounter depictions of the Middle Ages, both personally and collectively, through all kinds of media for all kinds of purposes. They come from true archaeology and genuine artifacts of the time period—architecture in various states of ruin or preservation, such as castles, stone and timber houses, cobbled streets, and grand cathedrals; books like Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*; imagery in the form of illuminated manuscripts, sculptures, paintings, and the wide array of religious objects. They come from the way we’re taught about history in a variety of educational settings both formal and informal. They come from the romanticized imagery of the


Left
Labelled as Medieval Tapestry Edits, memes like the one shown here date back to as early as 2002, originating with a Flash application that allowed users to combine text and images sourced from the Bayeux Tapestry. (https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/medieval-tapestry-edits)

Opposite
Enter the Curiosity Cabinet

Having identified the personal importance of secondary worlds as it relates to my own desire to tell stories, I began to further pursue the idea of crafting worlds which allowed for that open-endedness described by Amina Cain while embracing the specificity of individual details.

Enter the curiosity cabinet. Distilled, a curiosity cabinet could be described as a container containing containers. It represents the sorts of relationships between individuals and communities that archaeological upcycling seeks to highlight. Each individual object is itself a curiosity, full of unique and multifaceted qualities, and merits consideration and interest for its own sake. Placed in relation to each other, the objects make up and are contained within the structure of the cabinet, creating a cohesive but fluid whole wherein objects can be removed, added, rearranged and reconceptualized through countless relationships and narratives.

This was the sort of structure I have sought to emulate in Medievalia Miscellany. I wanted to figure out a way to tell the kinds of stories I was interested in that embraced these ideas of multifacetedness and fluidity. Auden, in describing some of the reasons he sees for telling stories, provides a list of inescapable “grievances” which are often being addressed. Among these is that “too many of our experiences are profane, unimportant, boring” and that “evil and suffering are an insoluble problem.” Auden goes on to explain that in stories we can make worlds which are simpler, where good is good and evil is evil and extraneous, unsightly, contradictory details can be cleanly swept beneath the rug.15 Simplification in storytelling is, to a certain extent, unavoidable. However, rather than create worlds in which the extraneous is ignored and omitted, I actively try to embrace it—to make the unnecessary necessary and celebrate multiplicities of meaning.

Enter the Curiosity Cabinet

By no means is this a new concept. In fact, it is stories that do these things which have continued to stick out in my mind and inform my current work. Principle among these is the book Tales from Outer Suburbia by author and illustrator Shaun Tan. The book is a collection of short stories that vary in length and are told and illustrated through multiple styles. Some are short, a paragraph or two, accompanied by a single illustration; some are written as comics; some are mysteriously ambiguous with melancholic undertones, while others are delightfully fun. There’s no overarching narrative that connects the stories, but together they paint a portrait of suburban life which is both beautiful and complicated. As someone who spent a majority of her childhood in a suburban neighborhood, there is a resonant feeling of familiarity to me in the world Tan has constructed, despite the fantastical and surrealistic qualities of a foreign exchange student the size of a leaf, an all-knowing water buffalo who lives in an empty lot, or sentient paper balls made from the coalesced bits of forgotten poetry.

The creation of a secondary world that is both contained and complex is successfully achieved through the book’s modular format. By collecting the stories into one book and framing them as from the world of “Outer Suburbia,” Tan achieves that sense of cohesion and containment that is desirable in stories, which makes them manageable. And, at the same time, by creating individual stories which can exist independently from each other—like objects in a curiosity cabinet—room is made for possibility and multiplicity. The reader can place themself in the gaps. They might connect more to this story or that, and perhaps imagine tales of their own hometowns, or the folklore of their own growing up.


15 Auden, 96.
Amanda Greene

Meet Me in the Middle Ages

The grounds of the Renaissance Faire are steeped in the world of medievalism and ripe with opportunities for and examples of archaeological upcycling. And in many cases, this can become quickly overwhelming and in others, disheartening. In October of 2021, I attended the St Louis Renaissance Festival partially as a patron and partially as a field researcher. Despite (or perhaps because of) my personal attachments to the genres and aesthetics of medievalism and medieval fantasy, my experience was largely uncomfortable and disappointing. An ethnographic study of contemporary American Renaissance Faires by Kimberly Tony Korol-Evans, Renaissance Festivals: Merrying the Past and the Present (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 20-23.

When Primary and Secondary Worlds Meet

In thinking about the form of curiosity cabinets as a metaphorical, modular, storytelling device, I initially found my way to the Renaissance Faire. Begun in the early 1960’s by theatre and folklore enthusiast Phyllis Patterson, the phenomenon that is the contemporary American Renaissance Faire gained traction among the many other countercultural movements which occurred in the later years of that decade. Since then, its popularity has ebbed and flowed, and festivals now occur all over the country, varying widely in size and atmosphere. Some faires have permanent structures on grounds dedicated specifically for that purpose while others appear beneath collapsible awnings on local fairgrounds for a single weekend and then are gone again, making way for the farmer’s market scheduled the week after. Unlike living history museums, where performers dress in period-appropriate costumes and perform historical activities for the visiting public, generally for educational purposes, the Renaissance Faire varies more widely in purpose and scope, blending elements of past and present with reckless abandon. The result is a secondary world in constant flux, shifting and changing and being rewritten by all who enter the gates.

I’ve only experienced a handful of Renaissance Faires, but each one has presented its own unique cabinet of curiosities—every booth, stall, and event, a different compartment housing all manner of weird and wonderful specimens. Vendors hawk their wares featuring all manner of items including silver jewelry, pewter mugs, artwork, glasswork, corsets and costumes, wooden swords and real swords, hand-carved coffins and kitchenware, pottery, stickers, self-published novels, and almost anything else you could imagine. I’ve seen performances of circus acts, falconry demonstrations, poetry readings, magicians, stand-up comics, jousts and armored combat, belly-dancing, Shakespearean plays, puppetry, and (a personal favorite) the history of arms and armor delivered in a theatrical Scottish accent. The Renaissance Festival playlist includes such genres as Latin hymns, Welsh choral music, rowdy Irish drinking songs and sea shanties, New Age, and the recently popular bardcore (that is, contemporary pop music made to sound as if played on medieval instruments). The people, both paid and paying, create a swirling, churning, kaleidoscope of identities and communities: a company of men and women promenade through muddy paths and sidewalks in elaborate Elizabethan garb; a gaggle of kids on a school field trip crowd each other to watch a blacksmithing demonstration; buxom, corseted women lounge on painted styrofoam rocks, sporting gauzy fairy wings and spandex mermaid tails; a family picnics on the grass with their dog, a stuffed dragon strapped to the harness on its back; a teenage boy and girl share a fried potato on a stick, the blue of the girl’s Bo Peep-style dress perfectly matching the hue of the face paint on her fur-cloaked date.

Tony Korol-Evans became a useful resource to me throughout this project, providing a means by which to better analyze and understand pertinent aspects of the faires, as well as my own reaction. Audience engagement is a primary theme in Korol-Evans’s book, Renaissance Festivals: Merging the Past and the Present. As a long-time performer at the Maryland Renaissance Festival, she focuses her research on performance studies and actor-audience relationships. She constructs a three-tiered system of what she terms the “intrastitial,” a space where seemingly contradictory beliefs or frames of mind are allowed to occur at the same time.16 In relation to her study, Korol-Evans focuses on the reality of the carnivalesque, which separate accounts, Korol-Evans makes the claim that carnivals,20 following September 11, 2001. Through these accounts gathered from multiple sources and renaissance faires, she focuses her research on performance studies and actor-audience relationships. She discovers a talent for drawing dragons that briefly raises her to a level of popularity among her sixth-grade peers she is unlikely to ever achieve again. She reads and reads and reads and then fills notebook after notebook with the cheesiest, most cringe-worthy poems, comics, and stories. I want to write for children. Perhaps because I consume a lot of children’s media and seem to find a lot of things specifically made for adult audiences to be too cynical, depressing, and just plain boring. But mostly, I want to write for children because I believe they are particularly adept at navigating between the boundaries of primary and secondary worlds and treat both with equal gravity.

Audience

So it is the writer’s duty to present in the way that the world is not a simple place. Far from it. The world is an infinitely rich, strange, confusing, wonderful, cruel, mysterious, beautiful, inexplicable realm. We can see a riddle. We can’t see where we come from or where we are going, we are surrounded by layers of meaning that we can only dimly apprehend, however much we try to learn.

In addition to pursuing what kinds of stories I was interested in telling, I also had to consider who I was talking to and the interactions I hoped to create. For the reasons cited above, I tried away from focusing on the traditional renaissance faire as subject matter for the actual project, though remained in the world of medieval fantasy. In publishing terms, Medievalia Miscellany falls into the category of fiction for middle-grade readers, which is generally considered to be the ages of eight and 12 years old. From the beginning, I imagined my ideal audience as a version of my own 11-year-old self—a quirky, awkward, tomboy girl with a strong aversion to brushing her hair. Most of her friends are the goofy, class-clown types of boys who all hang out together to watch Star Wars and Lord of the Rings and then reenact their favorite scenes at recess the next day. She tries hard to hide the growing anxieties about not fitting in at school and about standing out at home. She discovers a talent for drawing dragons that briefly raises her to a level of popularity among her sixth-grade peers she is unlikely to ever achieve again. She reads and reads and reads and then fills notebook after notebook with the cheesiest, most cringe-worthy poems, comics, and stories.

In my general, not interested in creating work which is trying to say something. I’m not interested in explaining to others what my work means. Rather, I’m far more interested in the meanings other people ascribe to it. I’m curious to see how they upcycle it within their own context, how it sits in relation to objects from their own curiosity cabinets, and what new considerations or features their perspectives add and highlight. I’m interested in creating connections, not just in my work, but also through it. And I have found that children tend to be far more receptive to these kinds of stories.
The Magazine

There were several factors that eventually led me to settling on the magazine format for this project, many of which I have already touched on. First, it provided a modular layout—similar to that of the curiosity cabinet and Shaun Tan’s short story collections which I so greatly admire. Adopting it would allow me to explore the secondary world of medieval fantasy from a variety of angles and, hopefully, present a multifaceted view that didn’t adhere to any singular conception.

In early iterations of Medievalia Miscellany, I explored a newspaper format, but found this to be too prescriptive of the sort of content I felt I could create. I felt trapped in pseudo-nonfiction and reportage parody that wouldn’t allow me to approach the world or storytelling in a way that felt genuine. Also, I realized I simply wasn’t interested in newspapers. I had no real connection to them, other than the stacks my parents always stored under bathroom sinks which were used for cleaning mirrors and windows. Magazines, on the other hand, I do have a connection with and my relationship with them is far more nuanced.

Like the stacked newspapers beneath our sinks, magazines have had an almost constant presence in my life. Unlike the newspapers, I interacted with these ubiquitous items of ephemera in a variety of more intentional ways. Early on, there was Ladybug and Cricket—magazines—a byproduct of having two schoolteachers for parents. There were the monthly magazines produced by my church, The Friend for kids, The New Era for teenagers, and The Ensign for adults. There was National Geographic—and, for a short stint, National Kids—which brought along expedition catalogs every summer and gift guides every winter. There was the occasional Better Homes and Gardens or Family Circle and, most recently, a mysteriously unsolicited subscription to Parents. (Seriously, how am I getting these? Why are they addressed to me? I’m not paying for them.)

The interactions I’ve had with these magazines, as well as many others like them, cover a wide range of activities. They’ve been used as teaching tools, instructing me in things like reading, religious practices, and, in one instance, how to understand the vacuum of space using marshmallows. I’ve read magazines from cover to cover, occupied myself by filling in coloring pages and dot-to-dots; I’ve cut them up for collaging and various art projects; I’ve perused product pages and constructed my own personal secondary worlds in which I can afford prime real estate with luxurious furniture and home décor and embark on all manner of exciting and exotic vacations. The mass-produced and quickly consumed format of the magazine invites a relationship between object and reader that is intimate and also experimental, bypassing a sense of preciousness or inaccessibility that often limits individualized interaction with traditional books. This relationship between magazine and audience seemed to embody the relationships I wanted to highlight between primary and secondary worlds.

One of the interactions possible through magazines, further justifying the choice in format, is a connection to the ideas of both identity and community, integral to my concept of archaeological upcycling. Though magazines can be purchased in stores or accessed online or through libraries, my own experience with them has primarily been through subscriptions delivered by mail. Magazine subscriptions were a common gift from parents and relatives when I was growing up and there has always been a sort of validating feeling when opening a mailbox and seeing your own name printed above the address on a glossy, new magazine. This was especially exciting as a kid, when I was yet unaware of the bills and ads and other such clutter that would perpetually clog my mailbox as an adult. The moment it arrives, the magazine declares the person it is meant for, validating and confirming your individual existence. Curated around nearly any sort of hobby or interest, no matter how niche or broad, magazines can serve as identifiers of certain qualities of a person’s identity. At the same time, there is the knowledge that dozens, hundreds, even thousands of other people are receiving the same issue on the same day, people who you’ve never met but which are all connected through this one common interest.

And so, Medievalia Miscellany, a middle-grade literary magazine exploring the secondary world of medieval fantasy began to take shape.

Medievalia Miscellany, vol. 1: Knighthood

The final result of this project is a 32-page, staple-bound magazine which includes a welcome letter, one multi-page comic, a series of illustrated poems, a how-to article, and a couple single-page comics and activities. As content began to develop, I decided on constructing the theme of this issue to ideas and tropes of knighthood within the medieval fantasy world.
This became the premise for “Tilting at Windmills” and the details of the story began to emerge as I continued to iterate on this idea. The result is not an adaptation of *Don Quixote* is there, certainly, but there’s also elements from the *Boy Who Cried Wolf*, mixed together with personal experiences of children facing traumas which the world around them seems to ignore, all packaged in a line-heavy penciling style influenced by etchings and drawings by Albrecht Durer and Pieter Brueghel as well as contemporary comic artists.

As the most straightforward narrative in the magazine, “Tilting at Windmills” is also the least interactive. However, in it, I continue to explore the ideas of archaeological upcycling. In ending the comic at the moment where the windmill creature is finally revealed, the hope is for the reader to imagine for themselves what interaction between boy and beast is to follow. Additionally, concepts of identity play out in the transformation of boy to knight through the armor upcycled from everyday objects. The identity of the boy is not lost through this transformation; rather, he is able to accentuate and strengthen the bravery he’s already shown in choosing not to ignore this unknown intrusion.

“The featured story of this issue is a 12-page comic loosely based on the iconic windmill scene from *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes. In it, a young boy is exploring the hills near his village when he comes upon a towering windmill. There’s something about it that feels not quite right, so he runs back home and is met with a variety of dismissive reactions. Feeling unsettled, our young hero cobbles together a makeshift suit of armor and rides out to face his fears (accompanied by Roz, the goat). The story ends with the poor little Quixote tumbling down to the foot of his foe, coming face-to-face with an enormous, half-windmill, half-hermit crab creature.

I learned a lot about storytelling, and my own process in particular, through the making of this comic. My starting material was the character of Don Quixote (in and of himself, a fabulous specimen of archaeological upcycling). I wanted to draw on the recognizable literary figure, a classic in the canon of knighthood, and see what else he might become. I especially wanted to play around with the windmill scene in which, coming upon some windmills in the Spanish countryside, Don Quixote believes them to be giants and attacks them, only to be comically caught and dragged by the wooden blades. The phrase “tilting at windmills” has since come to be applied to great blunders and follies, or else is used in reference to a willful disregard of the truth. But what if Don Quixote was right? What if they really were giants?
This Spread
Final page from “Tilting at Windmills” plus Windmill Creature preliminary sketches and value studies.
"The Order of the Lady Knight" is a series of illustrated poems drawing on the trope of female knights in this secondary world. Each image and accompanying stanza depict and describe the character of a different warrior maiden. I wrote five poems altogether, but ended up selecting three to include and illustrate, although I do hope to add Sir Morgan May and Sir Rosalind at some point in the future. Creating each of the lady knights provided a space for me to explore not only this trope, but also relationships between gender, identity, and connections within community.

While referencing familiar aspects of the trope, I wanted to tell a story that left room for the individual and nuanced personality. I explored ideas of having the characters interact, but eventually decided to keep each of them separate and self-contained. In these individual portraits, as with the individual stories in Tales from Outer Suburbia, the characters can be viewed as a sampling of lady knights, rather than the definition.

"The Order of the Lady Knight"
The Order of the Lady Knight
Is one that stands apart,
Bestowed on those most daring,
Fierce, and true of heart.

"Sir Imogene is royalty
And stalwartly guards the skies
With dainty feet and flower crown
She battles the dragonflies."
Craft Your Own Paper Knight

Two full spreads are given to a how-to article on creating posable knight dolls from paper and brass fasteners. Though my initial priorities going into this project were about practicing storytelling, I came to realize through exploration and research a distinct interest in creating things which encourage the reader to interact with both the primary and secondary worlds in more deliberate ways. By following the instructions, which were intentionally minimal and encouraged creative liberty, the reader is invited to become a collaborative creator and tell stories of their own using items which they constructed from simple materials existing in the primary world.
Conclusion: The Journeys that Lie Ahead

The months spent ideating, researching, planning, writing, iterating, drawing, rewriting, building, painting, and re-rewriting which have resulted in both the project of Medievalia Miscellany, as well as this critical essay have constituted a fruitful, though often frantic, journey. I set out with an idea which I called archaeological upcycling, a concept emphasizing relationships between history and fiction, identity and community, disparate parts and multifaceted wholes. I went in search of experience in the storyteller’s craft and discovered new interests in becoming collaborative world-builders with my audience. I examined personal influences and was forced to look closely at some of the problematic pieces.

This journey has no real conclusion. Rather, it continues to point me further on and down side paths which I was unable to follow at the time. As I continue on this road, I am turning my attention to even closer examinations of the blurred line between fact and fiction and the part I do and can play in mediating that relationship through images and stories.
Honorary Knights of Medievalia

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