

# On learning by doing



Comic book writer and artist Matt Kindt on breaking into the industry, writing himself into the *Star Wars* universe, and collaborating on a graphic novel series with Keanu Reeves.

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As told to Rebecca Hiscott, 3612 words.

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## **When did you first realize you could make a career out of making comics?**

It was probably only when the third issue of *MIND MGMT* came out, which was [around] 2003. I had a day job. I went to school, got a degree in art, then I got graphic design jobs out of school, thinking, "If I design books and do packaging, that'll serve me so I can make my own comic books. I can draw it, I can write it, I can letter it, I can put the design together, do production, do everything so I can just send it to the printer. All I need is some way to pay the printing bill." That was my plan.

I grew up reading Marvel and DC comics, but by the time I got out of school, the kinds of stories I wanted to tell weren't those. I was like, "There's no way for me to make a real living in comics [unless I'm making] superhero books." I was like, "I'll just do my own books. I'll do graphic design and that'll pay the bills, and I'll make my own comics."

I did a bunch of mini-comics, probably 300 pages of hand-stapled mini-comics that I would take to local comic shops and drop off. Then I would never go back, because if they didn't sell, it was going to be depressing. It was never about the money or getting money. To me, it was learning how to do it, learning the process of making comics and doing a 20-page story, then doing a 100-page story, then figuring out production and the cost and the paper. It was about: I love comics and I was figuring out how they work by just making them.

*Pistolwhip* was my first book that was published. I had a day job, and it was really hard having a day job and doing comics on the side that didn't pay me money. I was like, "I'm going to do this book, and if this book doesn't work, then maybe I'll have to come up with a different plan." I did that book, took it to San Diego [Comic Con] back in 2000, and had 20 copies printed up. It cost me a lot to get them done. I gave it to Dark Horse, gave it to Top Shelf and Drawn and Quarterly, Fantagraphics, places I thought might be interested.

A week later, Top Shelf called, and they were like, "Hey, we love this book. We want to publish it." That was how I broke in, just by brute force. "Please take my book, it's done."

## **Is there anything that, looking back, you wish you knew when you got started?**

Just technical stuff about how the art is made and scanning it in. Basic things like that. Back in the day, '91 to '95, the internet was just starting, so you couldn't google something and figure out how to do it. But I don't think there's anything I really wish I knew. Every step I took I felt was part of the process, like I had to learn it. You've just got to learn by doing.

Back when I was trying to get started and breaking in, I had to wait until everybody went home at my day job, then photocopy my comics and put them together and hand-staple everything. Then they would only reach the handful of shops I could drive to. I would sometimes ship books to a shop just to hopefully have them carry it. Now, you can do a comic and build a following online so much easier. I know there's more competition, but there's also a more creative atmosphere to work in.

**You said that when you started out, you felt like you could only make money by doing superhero comics. It feels like there's a broader understanding now of just how much more is out there. Indie comics are everywhere, and they're recognized as this art form. Maybe it enables people to feel like, "Oh, yeah, the weird idea I have actually could be a commercial success if I find the right people."**

Yeah, exactly. What's funny is I ended up doing some work with both Marvel and DC, superheroes and mainstream stuff. I backed into it. The editors, the people who work at Marvel and DC, they love comics. They're looking at the comic shop every week and reading books that are not theirs, trying to find good storytellers and stuff they like. Just by doing my own thing, telling the stories I wanted to tell, the way I wanted to tell them, I ended up getting invited to do stuff for Marvel and DC. If I ever give advice, it's to just do your thing and let people find you and come to you for your voice, rather than trying to fit into a mold or write to someone's expectations. Just do your thing and people will find it.

**When you work for these well-known properties, like if you're doing *Star Wars* or *Justice League of America* or *Spider-Man*, how does it change your process?**

It doesn't change how I approach the story or how I tell it. There might be more editorial [notes], like, "Hey, this character's going to be over here later, so you can't put them here." Especially with something like *Justice League*, where it's a big, shared universe. There's a bigger picture that I'm only a small part of. That never really bothered me, because the story's not getting messed with, or the intent. As long as that's there, the superficial stuff doesn't really matter.

I remember when Dark Horse asked me to do the *Star Wars* limited series, I was like, "No, I don't want to do that." I'm a huge fan of *Star Wars*. I grew up on it. That was the first movie I remember seeing, and the original trilogy was burned into my brain, in a way that it forms you when you're seven, eight, nine, ten years old and those are coming out. I really was afraid—there's a lot of continuity, and the characters, and they're very protective of the property. I just didn't want to have a bad experience.

Then, I was in the shower the next day, and I was daydreaming about what I would have done, and I had an idea. You do the main characters, like Chewie and Han and Leia, through a bystander. There's a stormtrooper that interacts with Han Solo, and some other random, nobody characters, who were basically just stand-ins for me. I was able to write four issues, centering one on each character, but almost through my eyes, as somebody who would get to be in that universe, and what would it be like? With Chewbacca, I was like, "Aw man, he kind of smells bad." Just describing somebody smelling Chewbacca for the first time when he comes into the room, because it fills the room.

**You're absolutely right. Chewbacca would not smell good.**

You know he doesn't. Like a wet dog. I felt like that was a way I could enjoy *Star Wars*, and it had nothing to do with the continuity of anything. I wasn't trying to do anything new with the characters. I was trying to do those characters from my point of view as a regular person.

**And you get to be a character in the comics.**

Yeah. I really was just like, "Hey, I'm going to visit *Star Wars* for four issues to see what it smells like."

**What's your story development process like?**

My process is haphazard. I randomly get ideas all the time, like if I'm watching a movie or reading a book or

laying there daydreaming. I keep a list of fragmented ideas. Sometimes it's real vague, like, "a perfect murder—how would you do it?" That kind of thing. I can't read a book or watch a movie in a normal way, because you're always analyzing it. Like, "Where's this story going? What does this character mean?" You can't turn it off.

A lot of times I'll read a book, and I'm like, "Oh, this is cool. He's going to go here and do this thing, and then that's going to happen." And then it veers off into some other thing. And I'm like, "Oh, it should have gone there. He should have done that." There's a path not taken that leads to a whole new story. And that gives me an idea because I'm like, "That would have been the better story," or, "That would have been more interesting to me."

Then I'll write up an outline, my pitch or the first version of the story. It usually reads like I'm just telling it to you. My wife, we've been married for 22 years, so she hears it all the time. Like, "Ooh, I got an idea for a story. The guy does this, and this happens, and then there's a twist..." The first outline of my story reads just like that. Just telling you the basics.

Then, from there, it's just like in art school, how they teach you to draw, writing's the same way. You don't start at the hand and draw the fingers and then work your way up to the arm and to the shoulder. You do a big gesture drawing, which is the overall [picture]. That's the outline. Make sure you get the proportions right, which is the outline and the structure. Then you work on details. You work on scenes, like the opening scene, where you're drawing the head and the shoulders and the arms. You're working on the whole thing all at once.

Then I go back over and over and over again until it's right. It's funny, having been an artist, to me the plot is almost the most boring part. It's the part you have to get to so you can get to the good stuff, which is character, and how the story is told, which I think is the most interesting.

Whether it's comics or prose or movies, every medium has its own superpower that you can exploit. What's fun to do then is figure out, this is a comic book, so how can you do this in a way that can't be done in any other [medium]? What cool thing can we do? If we're telling a story about a perfect murder, it's like, "Okay, you've read that before, but how can you show it in a way that is unique?" The visual, to me, starts to intertwine with the storytelling, and you can't really separate them.

**The stories you work on have some common threads. Espionage and deception are often big in your stories, and a lot of your comics are set in the past. What attracts you to certain themes, or keeps you coming back to them?**

I just love genre fiction, and I grew up in superhero comics. That introduced me to a very specific genre of storytelling. You start to see Frank Miller's *Daredevil* was crime stories disguised as superheroes. You look at it and you're like, "Oh, he wanted to tell crime stories, but there was no way to do that in comics in the '80s. It had to be superheroes. He figured out a way to do it."

I feel like I figured out a roundabout way to tell stories about real characters who were thinking about deeper things, like dealing with loss and memory and the passage of time. On the surface, those are boring. Those aren't stories, those are just concepts and feelings. That's what I want to do—I want to tell stories about a guy who becomes more isolated and he's sad about it. But also, that sounds like a horrible book. I don't want to read about it. But if you put it into the genre... I tell a story about a giant man who grows three stories tall and becomes disconnected. That's science fiction, but it's not. It's like I'm trying to use the genre to tell interesting stories about characters and bigger ideas, but make it entertaining.

My mom's always recommending books to me, and I'm always like, "Is there murder in it? Does somebody die?" And she laughs. There needs to be something, like a surface excitement, some kind of genre candy coating. I feel like all my stories have to have something like that. Not for the reader, but for me. Visually, a pulp story is cooler to look at. It has more color and there's action, something crazy's happening. Then you sneak in the other stuff, like the character stuff.

**It's almost like this alchemy where on its own, the genre and the plot would be familiar. And on its own, the character development would be not very gripping. Then, together, they make this entirely new experience.**

Exactly. That's the formula. You take those two things and jam them together. Don't tell anybody. I made a career off that.

**What changes when you're collaborating with other writers and artists on a comic? Not necessarily a *Star Wars*, but maybe a *Cosmic Detective*, where you're co-writing or working with another artist.**

Every one of those collaborations is completely different. Some of them are great and healthy, and some of them are super toxic and horrible. I've had a little bit of both. The more you collaborate, the more you can tell if it's going to work. You can tell if it's not. Then, if it's not, you just don't do it.

The best collaborations are better than their sum of the parts. It's a cliché, but it's totally true. If you're bringing out the best in each other, then it can't be better. Me and Jeff [Lemire] on *Cosmic Detective*, and working with David Rubin, we've all worked together before on other things, so we knew we all worked together and got along. Working with Jeff is unique in that we like the same kinds of stories and we like telling them in similar ways.

When we work together, we'll sit over coffee or dinner or whatever, and we'll hatch the plot. Then we'll type up the outline of everything we talked about, and we'll chop it up until it's even. Like, I want to write this scene, so I'll take that, and then he'll take another one.

With *Cosmic Detective*, it's almost like an exquisite corpse, where we had an outline and we knew where we were going, but every chapter we would switch on and off. I wrote the first one, he wrote the second, I wrote the third. We would cliffhanger the other guy, so he would figure out how to recover from what the last person did and start the new scene. We're trying to one-up each other on the way. We did have a roadmap, so it's like, "Okay, as long as you get to this point, I don't care how you do it." It was fun because we were writing for each other. He was my audience and I was his, so we were trying to entertain each other.

**You're also co-writing a graphic novel series, *BRZRKR*, with Keanu Reeves. What has that collaboration been like?**

Collaborating with him has also been amazing, and not what I had expected. BOOM! called me and they were like, "Hey, we have a project. Keanu Reeves has this idea for an immortal warrior character. Would you want to come in?" He wanted to collaborate with a comic book writer, because he hasn't written comics.

These have happened before, where someone comes in from a different medium, someone famous or whatever. They come in and they want to do comics and everyone wants to have their name on the book, almost as a PR stunt. I was skeptical. I was like, I'll take the meeting because I love Keanu. Who doesn't? I'll talk to him. Then I can brag to my daughter that I met Keanu.

I went there, and I basically told him what I just said: "Hey, I'm skeptical of this. I don't want to be the writer on the book all by myself and we're just trying to cash in. I don't think it's fair to the comic book industry or the medium, and I don't want to be the guy who has to type it up." Also, the idea of an immortal warrior, how do you do that? How do you do that in a new and unique way? I have three or four versions of similar ideas sitting in my folder that I just abandoned.

Then I started talking to Keanu, and he pitched me his idea. He pitched his idea of this character and his mindset and everything. I could tell he'd been thinking about this for a long time. He had a twist—I won't spoil the story, but it's a twist that does make this different than anything I've ever read with a character like that. I was like, "Oh, that's really great."

He was just so animated, and he was acting some stuff out, and he was so excited about it. At that point I was like, "Okay, let's figure out, how do we do this together? I don't want to write it and then you approve it. That's not really collaborating." We figured out a way where, when we could still travel, I was flying out there every couple months. We would have two or three-day epic meetings where we would talk all day about the story,

and then break the story down and work on the outline and go back and forth. I would type all that up and go through it, and then we would add more to it and go through it. It was this really intense process.

It was just a totally different type of collaboration. Working with an actor, too, he was writing dialogue, but almost as the character. He would act stuff out. I'd think, "Ooh, that's a good line." I would type up some of the lines, like, "That's got to go in there. We'll figure out where."

With the pandemic, it's changed a little bit. We've been Skyping like twice a week for a few hours, doing the same thing.

**This comic will be a Kickstarter project. I know you've been involved in a few Kickstarter campaigns for your work already. What appeals to you about crowdfunding? What has your experience been like?**

My first Kickstarter, I did it because I wanted to do a read-along book and record, and Dark Horse was like, "We don't know how to do records." I think it was the first time I came to them with an idea that they're like, "Alright, that's a little too crazy." I was like, "You know what, I'm just going to do it. I'll figure out how to make records and I'll do it on Kickstarter." Initially that's what appealed to me about it, the idea that I could do any idea I wanted. It didn't matter how crazy it was, there was an outlet for it. There's a way to get people excited about it and get it funded and make the thing actually real.

Kickstarter lets you do some production things that aren't really practical when you do traditional publishing, like doing foil edges on pages and hardcover editions. There are a lot of things production-wise that I've done in the past and we're doing with the *BRZRKR* book that we just wouldn't be able to do without direct support from fans. What's most exciting to me, coming from a graphic design background, is being able to do a lot of production tricks that make a nicer book. We can sort of announce, "Hey, this is the cool thing we want to do that doesn't make sense financially to do." It's a way to involve the readers directly in getting a thing made that wouldn't be able to be made any other way.

**What advice do you have for people who want to do what you do?**

I will say that I had an easier path to travel because I was able to do everything. Being able to write and draw was the biggest benefit. You can be self-contained. You don't have to rely on anyone. Early on, I didn't really want to collaborate. I definitely am an introvert. If I didn't have to talk to anybody, I wouldn't. I would just stay home and work. If you can produce the whole thing without having to worry about someone else flaking or not having time, that's the biggest thing.

Once you establish yourself and learn how to tell stories, doing collaborations becomes fun. Now I look forward to it. It's a nice break from being alone and doing your thing all the time.

I don't know if that's advice for other people on how to do it, but that's the thing that was a key to making it happen for me. Don't wait for somebody else, just do it on your own. Also, there's not a lot of money in comics early on. Not having to split that money two or three ways helps, too.

**Matt Kindt Recommends:**

Book: *Our Man in Havana* by Graham Greene

Comic: *Perdy* by Kickli

Album: *RTJ4* by Run the Jewels

Album: *Dreamland* by Glass Animals

Movie: *Long Day's Journey into Night*, directed by Bi Gan

Name

Matt Kindt

### Vocation

Comic book writer and artist

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