

Creatives collaborate with scientists on webcomic series *Planet Divoc-91*

Planet Divoc-91, a nine-part sci-fi satire webcomic series, was launched earlier this year on WebToon, focusing on a fictional pandemic outbreak which takes place in outer space. The series, which was inspired by the current Covid-19 pandemic, aims to empower young adults with a platform to engage in conversations about their experiences and views on the coronavirus as well as other issues they face.

“The project is using visual storytelling to speak to young adults in a way that they can relate to and understand, talking about topics and sharing information that is often difficult for young people to engage with and relate to,” explains Nabeel Petersen, co-founder of the South African-based NPO, the Pivot Collective, and director of Interfer, a company focused on storytelling and research, which leads on the project.

Based in Kenilworth, Cape Town, Petersen works closely with young adults, using creative methods and storytelling to inspire and challenge research communities to think about the best ways of actively involving young adults in ongoing and future research.

Contributing to future scientific research, policy

“As well as helping young adults understand the world around them, this project will also share young peoples’ thoughts and views about pandemics, which will then be fed into future scientific research and policy. Seeing and understanding how young adults tackle the issues of a fictional pandemic can help scientists, doctors and governments around the world better understand how to respond to the very real coronavirus pandemic, and how to genuinely involve citizens voices in their responses,” he continues.

The webcomic series is interspersed with short articles, links to videos, and other pieces of art by young adults about issues related to Covid-19, merging the world of science and comics. The web-series explores themes of diversity and misinformation and the effects of a global pandemic on the mental health of the youth.

Each chapter, released monthly, features the collaboration of a different creative team and cover artist, including some of the biggest names in the comic industry. The global cast includes The Walking Dead artist, Charlie Adlard; Friendo writer, Alex Paknadel; UK Comics Laureate, Hannah Berry; colourist and designer, James Devlin; and letterer, Hassan Otsmane-Elhaou.

“I’m thrilled to be working on such a project. It’s in times like these that we all need to pull together and help, and, in my own little way, this is something I can feel useful in doing,” said Adlard.

SA creatives collaborating on the project

Local creatives are also involved in bringing the series to life. South African singer Toya Delazy is contributing an electronica mix to one chapter of the series, as are Cape Town-based artists house/Gqom DJ, NV_Funk and electronic DJ, Angel Ho. Local visual artist and muralist Mohamed Hassan aka Fok, will be designing the cover of chapter six, which is written by Petersen.



The project has since grown in scale and ambition with a young editorial team from the UK, India and South Africa who interview experts, from scientists to historians, ethicists to anthropologists, and from that material, curate articles, creating art and videos in reaction to the interviews.



Petersen got involved in the project after being approached by project producers Sara Kenney (Wowbagger Productions) and Bella Starling (Vocal) in early 2020 to assist in putting out a call to young adults in Cape Town, offering them the opportunity to work on a project focused on reimagining research and creating art that challenged perceptions of mental health. That project has many similarities to the themes explored in the *Planet Divoc-91* series and led to the current collaboration.

Tackling serious issues with humour

“I am thrilled to see so many issues tackled in this comic. I love the direction of the story, that the protagonists are Black and that one sibling is non-binary. These are necessary segments of the story that we need to explore. We need to instil a pride in the stories we tell about being Black or being a minority, and we absolutely need to challenge the way minorities are presented and 'created' in creative media. Imagination and the freedom to dream are our first steps to realise the futures we all deserve,” explained Petersen.

“Although the topics we’re discussing in the series are incredibly serious, *Planet Divoc-91* is full of humour and is occasionally ridiculous,” said Kenney. “We’re aiming for more of a *District 9* or *The Good Place* feel than, say, *Star Trek*.”



“It has been such an awe-inspiring journey to join this project that involves the collaboration and cross-pollination of creative minds from different countries, backgrounds, cultures, generations and expertise, and to watch how all of these ideas are brought to life in a comic that most can relate to in these uncertain times,” says project coordinator, Adilah Petersen.

View the series on [WebToons](#).