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## PROJECT ABSTRACT

*Compass* is a hypercomic: an experimental sequential narrative written and designed for the online interactive medium. It embodies an effort to develop a consistent visual language with which to tell stories on the infinite canvas of the webpage.

It tells the story of two travellers, the captain of a ship and a runaway, sailing the seas in search of the edge of the world. As the journey proceeds, memories they do not recognise as their own begin to surface in their minds, and they begin to dread that something terrible awaits them at their destination.

Drawing upon the metaphysical themes of several recent webcomics, *Compass* is a dreamlike story about memory and fate giving way to a slowly-encroaching existential horror.

# INTRODUCTION

## Log Line

“Two people sail towards the edge of the world. As they approach, they begin to suspect that something malevolent awaits them at their destination.”

## Synopsis

A young man named Cielo leaves his home in search of an adventure. In a small harbour town, he meets a sailor named Marin, the captain and sole crewmember of her ship. She plans to sail to the edge of the world in search of the goddess Thalassa, and asks Cielo to join her. He refuses her initially, but is soon drawn back by a feeling of *deja vu*.

Cielo becomes Marin's navigator. Together they sail from continent to continent, stopping at various ports en route to the world's edge. At one port, Cielo sees an oddly familiar pinwheel at a stall. By the time they begin their final journey across the ocean, they are deeply in love, but avoid speaking of it.

Cielo then discovers a storeroom below-decks that was not there before. On entering, he finds a diary detailing Marin's thoughts throughout the journey. He learns that she is being harangued by a voice in her mind, and that she is certain they are sailing towards their deaths.

Depending on his earlier actions, Cielo may choose to confront Marin over the diary. If he does, she reveals that she does not recognise it and demands that he show her the storeroom. Inside, they discover warning messages, as well as the pinwheel that Cielo saw earlier. Now aware that forces beyond their comprehension are at work, they begin to fear the true nature of their journey.

The two arrive at the edge of the world. At once, Marin is overcome by *calenture* and flings herself into the sea, leaving Cielo to decide whether to pursue her.

Marin encounters Thalassa at the base of a monumental underwater tower. She learns that they have made this journey hundreds of times, and that the diary was written by a past iteration of herself. The goddess offers to grant any wish of hers in exchange for her soul.

If Cielo does not pursue her, she demands to repeat the past two years so that she may meet him again. The story repeats from the beginning.

If Cielo pursues Marin, he meets her in front of Thalassa, and they avow their love for each other. Together they ask to exchange their souls for the chance to communicate with their past selves from the very first iteration of the journey. Once there, they telepathically prompt their past selves to abandon their quest.

They admit their mutual love for one another and decide to turn back to shore. The time loop is thus collapsed and the story ceases to exist.

## KEY DISCOURSES AND EXPERIMENTS IN THE HYPERCOMIC MEDIUM

### Multicursal Narratives

Electronic, interactive platforms promise exciting potential as vehicles for new forms of storytelling. Driven by a profitless environment, the absence of the gatekeepers typically responsible for barring certain types of content from being published, as well as a diverse audience, the internet has become a haven for stories that are experimental in every capacity—pioneering new techniques, structures, and themes not previously viable in traditional media such as books and film.

While nonlinear storytelling—that is, the relating of plot events in a non-chronological order—dates back as far as the sixteenth century with works such as *The Thousand and One Nights*, an overwhelming number of works are unicursal, prescribing but a single way to traverse the text from start to end, typically through physical restrictions such as the order of pages in a book, or the unidirectional progression of frames in a film.

The advent of digital media marked a shift towards multicursal narratives—narratives in which “there are multiple paths in addition to the one followed.” (Goodbrey, 2012). These stories are navigated by the viewer through “a series of critical choices” (Aarseth, 1997), entire tracts of the narrative going unexplored, as in a maze with multiple solutions. It was video games such as *The Legend of Zelda* that popularised such stories with multiple possible paths of traversal.

Before video games exploded in popularity, a lesser known electronic format for multicursal narratives emerged in the 1990s. Known as hypertext fiction, or hyperfiction for short, it is a medium native to digital platforms where stories are conveyed by means of hyperlinks or programmatic elements that allow the nonlinear access of plot segments. Hyperfiction enjoyed brief popularity after the popularisation of the internet, before losing favour as video games emerged as the dominant digital narrative medium.

### The State of the Hypercomic Medium

## *Hypercomic Theory*

Hypercomics unite two disparate narrative traditions: hyperfiction and webcomics. They transpose the latter's visual basis onto the former's experiments in structural organisation.

Daniel Merlin Goodbrey (2012), the author of *Six-Gun* and a leading hypercomic theorist, defines the hypercomic as "a comic with a multicursal narrative structure". Like hyperfiction, hypercomics make use of hyperlinks to connect narrative modules, allowing the reader to access them in a nonlinear fashion.

A later theorist, Sam Keeper (2012), further narrows this definition, proposing that a hypercomic is "a comic that can only exist within the confines of a digital environment...[and] can't be taken from the web and printed out unless you fundamentally change the core experience".

Various comic and hypercomic theorists have also attempted to describe the traits of hypercomics emergent from their nature as works native to the internet. Scott McCloud advocates in his 2000 book *Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology are Revolutionising an Art Form* the use of the spatial boundlessness of the webpage—the "infinite canvas", as he calls it—to position visual elements in creative new ways not confined by the linear formats of print media. Other theorists such as Keeper and Goodbrey extend McCloud's thesis by outlining other traits of hypercomics: multicursality, interactivity and time variability, among others.

## *Issues of the Hypercomic Medium*

The hypercomic medium has never seen lasting popularity. The potential of the webpage as a storytelling vehicle has, as such, remained largely untapped. As a testament to the medium's nascence and limited development, there is no definitive hypercomic canon, and consequently no codified visual, kinetic or interactive language, likely due to its diverse, fractious audience. This itself may have resulted from the tendency of hypercomic artists to view structural experiments as separate from narrative, either sacrificing experimental ambition for narrative cohesion, or vice versa.

On one end of the spectrum, artists such as *Xkcd* artist Randall Munroe have conducted ambitious browser experiments, with the game-within-a-panel *Hoverboard* practically being McCloud's vision of the infinite canvas given form. However, it, like many other comics, tends to showcase technical functions at the expense of coherent narratives, which suits the unorthodox tone of the comic but fails to demonstrate the medium's potential as an accessible storytelling tool. In her thesis, *No Borders, No Limits: The Infinite Canvas as a Storytelling Tool in Online Comics* (2005), theorist Alycia Shedd encapsulates the problem as such: "The goal of a form-based comic is primarily to showcase what can be done with comics on the web... Unfortunately, this often comes at the expense of telling an interesting or compelling story."

On the other end of that spectrum are the handful of comic artists whose experiments with coherent, long-form storytelling in the web medium are stymied by their relative conventionality. For instance, Michelle Czajkowski's fantasy epic *Ava's Demon* has played tentatively with the infinite canvas through panel manipulation, and made use of animation and sound for impact. However, these are not much more than window-dressing, taking place every several hundred pages or so and failing to have much significance

to the narrative on a whole.

## **Andrew Hussie's Homestuck: A Model for the Longform Hypercomic**

*Compass* is a deliberate effort to develop a formalised “hypercomic language”, by which meaning may be conveyed through combinations of web elements. In order that this language be truly coherent and comprehensible, *Compass* looks to several works of fiction as models and bases for the further refinement of these techniques.

The most important of these influences is *Homestuck* by Andrew Hussie. *Homestuck* is a ten-thousand-page comic, and one of very few webcomics that manage the balance between experimentation and narrative. It conveys its epic story through text, audio-visual material, and interactive games.

With themes of agency and simulated reality at its core, *Homestuck* is also unique in that it develops a *language* of multicursality and interactivity—of the carefully-controlled award and retraction of agency—as a means of lending weight to its underlying thematic discourse, rather than as decorative elements or technical demonstrations.

Nevertheless, despite the comprehensiveness of its exploration of the webpage, *Homestuck* leaves much of the medium’s potential untapped, with an almost entirely linear narrative and bifurcating segments that have no major repercussions on the narrative.

## **Compass as a Novel Experiment in the Hypercomic Medium**

Situated within this legacy, *Compass* is an effort to develop a coherent system of devices and conventions that structure the space of the webpage such that it may be utilised effectively in visual storytelling. This would allow the comic to achieve precise emotional effects, as with metaphor to poetry, or composition to film.

*Compass*’ ambition is to demonstrate the largely unproven potential of the hypercomic as a viable storytelling medium for stories whose appeal lie outside of their nature as technical showcases. It seeks to combine the disparate techniques attempted by precursors—multicursality, the infinite canvas, animation, and interactivity, among others—in the conveyance of a narrative that is simultaneously poetic, harkening back to earlier narrative traditions, and undeniably contemporary in its inseparability from the web browser.

## NARRATIVE AND AESTHETIC INFLUENCES OF *COMPASS*

Although they were not specifically examined for the story, *Compass* is meant to recreate the spirit of nautical folklore, through various tropes common to the genre, such as that of calenture or sea madness and the synonymy of the ocean and death, as well as the shape of the story's overall arc, which chronicles the characters' movement through progressively unfamiliar settlements into uncharted territory.

As a story that experiments with notions of time travel or unconventional timelines, *Compass* takes cues from classic takes on time travel, such as *Groundhog Day*, as well as more recent incarnations: one key influence is the Japanese animated series *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*, from which *Compass* borrows the philosophical and psychological examination of the repercussions of repeating a series of events with futile perpetuity. It also looks to *Homestuck*'s deconstruction of time travel as a genre, and its explorations into its philosophical significance, as a basis for its own story.

Branching endings are themselves a format well-developed in video games, particularly in the Japanese role-playing game (RPG) and visual novel genres. Of note are the games *Off* and *Undertale*, both of which tie the branches of their respective endings with key moral decisions, and were deliberately consulted as models for the employment of such an ending.

## THE MAKING OF *COMPASS*

### Writing for Hypercomics

#### *Idea Generation*

As a project, *Compass* is founded in the intellectual intention of creating a story that made full use of the web medium. From the outset, the storylines pitched were grounded in the assumption that the final product would be a hypercomic.

As was detailed previously, one capability of the web medium that the story is centred around is that of multicursality, or, a branching storyline. It was determined that this technique would be best employed in a plot involving an irregular or nonlinear timeline.

Four story plots, all involving some sort of non-chronological experimentation, were pitched; among these, two were rejected, and the third merged with the fourth to give rise to the core plot of *Compass*.

### Plot Revisions

*Compass* is adapted from a short story written in 2010. Over the course of adapting this story for a visual medium, several issues concerning the process of adapting this work of prose into a hypercomic emerged. On a narrative level, the story is unconventional, departing from the traditional initiation/complication/resolution structure and almost lacking a coherent plot made up of causally-related events: it would be more accurate to call it the travelogue of two fictitious individuals.

Through extensive discussion with mentors, the plot was revised and several key changes introduced. In the interest of not having to grapple with a non-traditional plot in addition to multicursality and an unconventional medium, the story acquired a more classic three-act structure.

It was discussed and agreed on that a comic—particularly one with interactive elements—had to have meaningful events that led logically from one to another. The looping timeline, which was only hinted at in the original story, was solidified and made literal through having the comic literally loop back on itself in the browser window.

The characters, Marin and Cielo, previously acting as symbols of world-views rather than being full-fledged individuals on their own, were given proper goals and internal conflicts. Instead of merely embarking on a journey for the sake of it, they sail in search of a goddess rumoured to live at the edge of the world. The goddess Thalassa herself, and the core conflict—the curse that dooms Marin and Cielo to infinite repetitions of the same journey—were added during this phase to give better justification to the structure of the plot.

### Narrative Experiments

Distilled to its basic structure, only two parts of *Compass* are particularly experimental: a middle chapter in which the reader may access various port cities in their preferred order, and the ending, which branches into two (illustrated in Figure 1).

The former complicated the writing process, as it required that several substantial sub-chapters be written for the sole purpose of modulating the pacing of the story—a fact that required a restructuring of the project schedule.

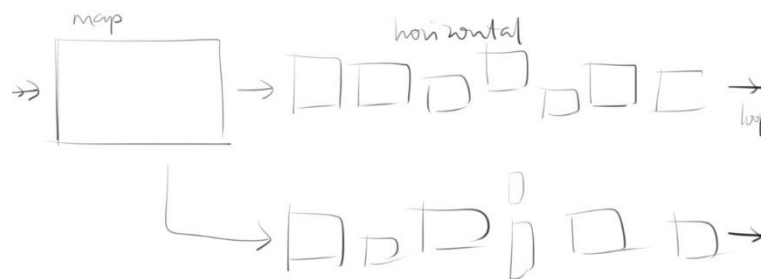


Figure 1

The ending realises a similar idea with greater simplicity and far more gravity. An important conceit of



the story that was pitched impromptu, it came to define the entire work. However, this aspect of the story was poorly-developed up until the first industry review, at which one reviewer proposed that the choice not be a literal one, between endings, but rather be a discrete moral decision related to the plot that ultimately implicates the path taken by story events.

This led to the development of the key moral debate of the story: that of the tension between false but happy realities, easily preserved but ultimately futile, and a “true” reality that may only be attained through loss or death.

This, and further tightening of character motivations, plot continuity, and logical coherence was conducted before the commencement of visual development.

A third feature that one might consider experimental is the use of an embedded narrative. At the two-third mark approximately, the main narrative temporarily halts to give way to a second layer of narrative, presented in the text as an interactive diary. A classic technique borrowed from stories like *The Thousand and One Nights*, it was designed to establish a sense of history and depth to complement the main storyline.

## Visual Development and Preproduction

### *Development of Style and Character Design*

*Compass*' visual development was greatly informed by the concerns of supporting the sparse style of the narration that had emerged in the script, as well as ensuring that the work could be completed within the given time frame, considering the length of the script, which was in the excess of 4,000 words.

Efficiency, visual appeal, and sufficient complexity to allow for the establishment of setting and atmosphere with as few verbal cues as possible were the main factors considered in the stylistic choices that were made throughout the preproduction process.

A distinct art style was arrived at quickly. Initially, several concepts were produced (Figures 2.1 to 2.3) and presented to the co-supervisor for feedback.



Figure 2.1



Figure 2.2



Figure 2.3

The suggestion immediately put forward was that the painterly style seen in Figures 2.1 and 2.2 was appealing and efficient in conveying the desired atmosphere, making the best display of the colour palettes. The art style shown in Figure 2.3 was deemed too commercial, in addition to being unnecessarily complex for a project of this length.

These first drafts of the character designs were succeeded by a more painterly version that suited the recommended background style; these are shown in Figure 2.4.



Figure 2.4

*Worldbuilding and Environment Design*

Subsequently, more explorations into colour and style were conducted. Figure 5.1 shows a set of location concepts that were designed and sketched as visual cues to accompany the script, concurrently being written. This step solidified the art style, which was approaching a level of simplicity that would make it usable in the production of the comic.

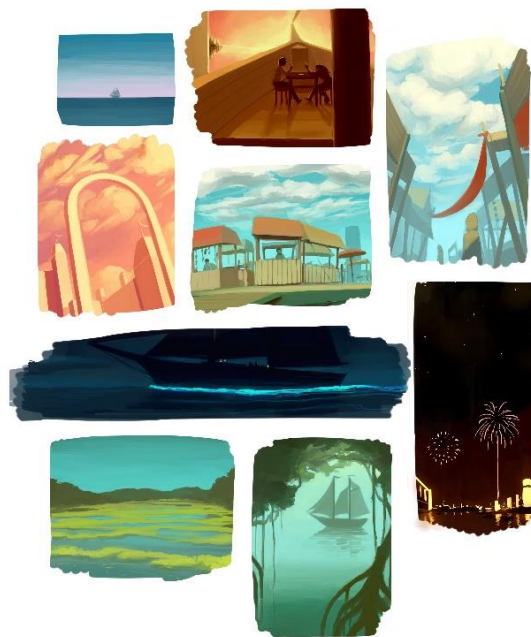


Figure 3.1

Once the script was complete, further experiments with scenes and moods were conducted, giving rise to the key panels shown in Figure 4.2. Here the palettes for the corresponding scenes were developed, most of which were largely preserved in the final product.

This was a key step as, within the comic, colour would be used as a shorthand for both setting and mood; specific palettes would ideally evoke recognition of specific locations, such that textual introductions would be unnecessary. Each separate locale and scene is coloured such that it is almost unique in relation to the others.

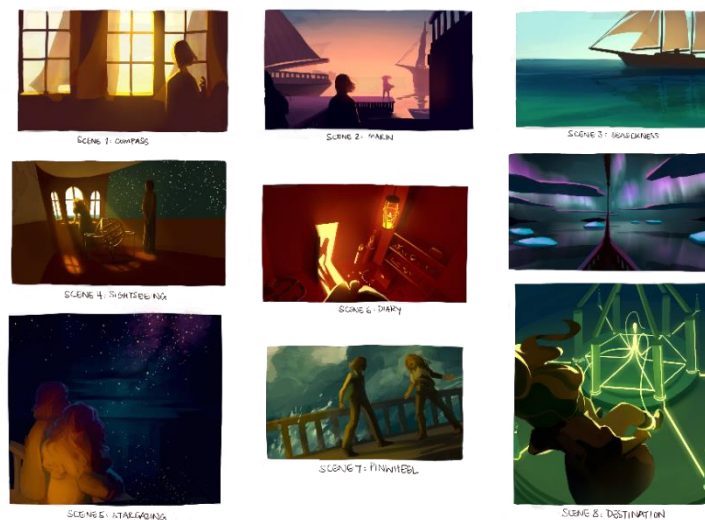


Figure 3.2

## Production

### *Thumbnailing*

Production commenced simultaneous with the polishing of the script, beginning with the conversion of dialogue into thumbnails. In this stage, the major creative decisions concerning composition, the spatial positioning of panels, and the interplay of page and panel were dealt with.

As described briefly earlier, the comic is designed to be an experiment with the infinite canvas. The utilisation of the infinite canvas was one of the key problems tackled during the thumbnailing stage of production. A simple methodology developed early in the process was that of establishing an “anchor” panelling style before deviating from that pattern, in order that the effect of the shift be felt fully.

As such, most strips in *Compass* take on the regular format of a vertically- scrolling page that occupies the full width of the browser window, for instance the one shown in Figure 4.1.



Figure 4.1

Once this rhythm was established as a default, variations on the layout were introduced. The most straightforward of these experiments involved the use of a horizontally-scrolling page to represent a horizontally-extending physical space, such as a small passageway under the deck (Figure 4.2).



Figure 4.2

Another of these variations involved dispersing the panels across the page and even extending diagonally beyond the bounds of the browser window such that the reader would have to search for panels manually (Fig. 4.3). This would herald a change in the tone, specifically representing the fragmentation of

the relationship between the two main characters in the wake of the discovery of a secret.

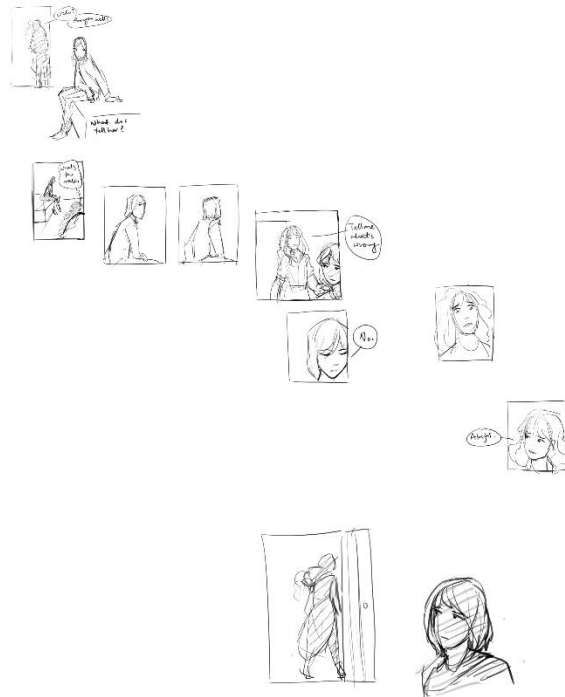


Figure 4.3

Another technique played with involved the manipulation of panel shapes themselves to convey shifts and changes in the fabric of the story's psychological, and then physical, reality. As the story enters its climactic stretches and the solidity of their reality begins to come into question, rectangular panels give way to irregularly-shaped ones (Figure 4.4).

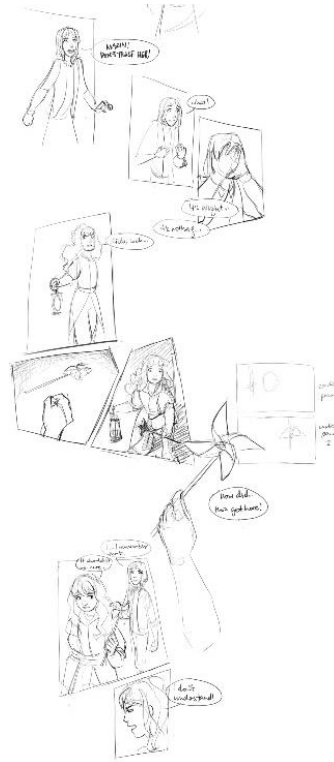


Figure 4.4

Eventually, the panels themselves are visually dissolved to represent radical shifts in the timeline: for instance, the first ending concludes with the final panel breaking down into several ever more minuscule ones (Figure 4.5). Another instance of this takes place near the end of the second ending (Figure 4.6), in which a key decision brings about the end of the story, symbolised by the breakdown of the panel into increasingly smaller rectangles.



Figure 4.5



Fig. 4.6

### *Colour and Lighting*

An advantage afforded by visual media over literary media is that visual images can often hold a great depth despite being literal representations of events within the story. Translating the abstract language of the story to visuals was made possible through more concrete articulations of tone and mood in the form of



colour and lighting.

The comic's introduction is shown in Figure 5.1. Wistful nostalgia is evoked through the gold tint of the entire scene, static imagery and stark shadows dividing the scene into sub-frames and creating visual pauses to further reinforce the quietude of the scene.

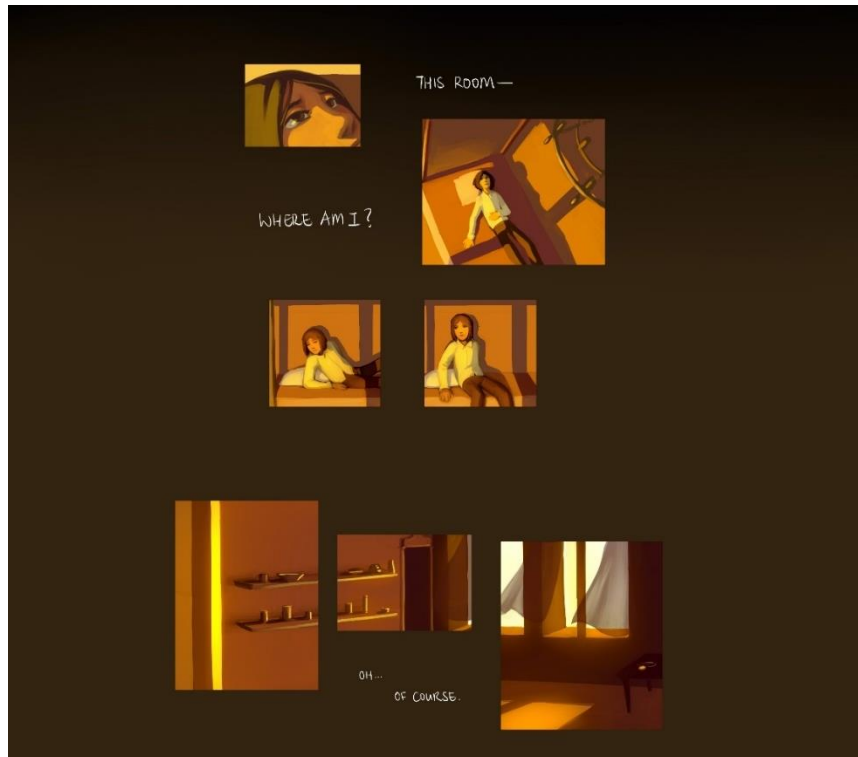


Figure 5.1

Colour and style also made it possible to recreate the dreamlike tone of the story. One of the strategies employed involved the use of a painterly rendering style. Simplicity, vivid colour and impactful light and shadow were favoured over detail.

Scenes such as the one shown in Figure 5.2 demonstrate the use of visual abstraction in lieu of textual abstraction: figures are rendered as silhouettes, and composition is largely dictated by the shapes and forms. Panels present impressions of scenes rather than precise representations of them: these retain a certain degree of realism without becoming too mired in unnecessary detail.



Figure 5.2

### *Stylistic Changes*

During the production process, it became clear that the original art style proposed during preproduction would eventually prove too time-consuming for a project of its length. It became necessary to scale back even further on the amount of time and attention spent on each individual panel, particularly as the scenes became more complex and painting them individually became unfeasible.

Scenes involving crowds and numerous background details, such as those shown in Figure 6.1, made it practically impossible to paint the entire panel as a single image. Rather, these were constructed from image planes that could be edited individually without affecting the others. As such, the panels more closely resemble paper collages than paintings, making the effective use of colour palettes more crucial.

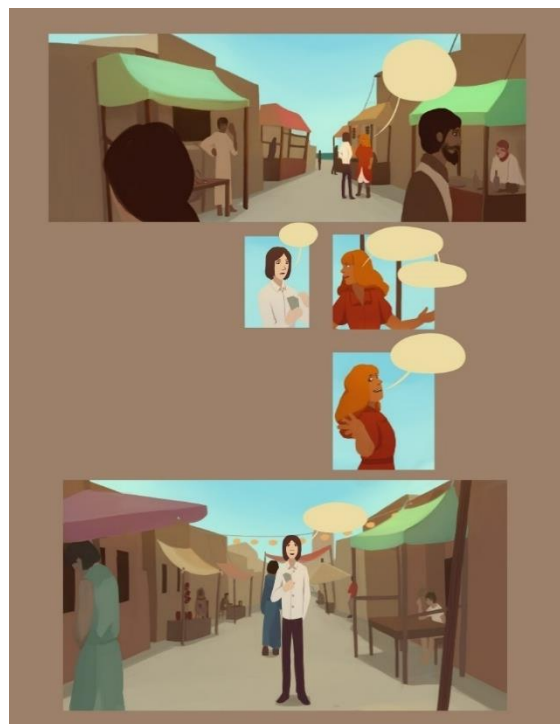


Figure 6.1

To further streamline the processes, scenes were rendered in multiple passes, rather than all at once (Figure 6.2): on the first pass the basic shapes of the background and foreground were painted, giving a rough finish. On the second pass, details such as textures and subtle geometry on background features as well as background characters were added, and the highlights and shadows refined.



Figure 6.2

Eventually, the comic reached its final form at about 550 panels in length: that is, approximately a hundred and ten pages.

## Programming Interactivity

Interactivity was intended to be a key feature of *Compass* from the start. This set of features in the comic was realised through various browser scripting languages, such as HTML, CSS, JavaScript, AJAX, and PHP. While majority of the pages could be presented on the browser page as drawn, several pages would feature effects involving individual panels appearing or vanishing, or even moving in parallax, importing panels into web-pages was oftentimes a complex procedure that required pages to be exploded into individual transparent layers and each layer subsequently positioned manually on the page.

Additionally, since text was to be placed digitally such that dynamic changes to the text were possible, it, too, had to be positioned manually via code, instead of visually with an image editor. This was easily the most time-consuming process throughout the implementation phase.

As a direct consequence of the use of the infinite canvas, it became necessary to programme the page so that the user did not miss crucial panels: the solution that was employed involved having the page scroll to the relevant panels instead of vertically or horizontally as expected. A few scenes also featured a background that moved independent of the panels, which proved another challenge to programme.

## CRITICAL POST-PROJECT EVALUATION

With *Compass* nearing completion, several noteworthy features as well as critical issues worth

addressing have come to light.

As a work, it largely succeeds in conveying a complex long-form narrative—particularly noteworthy considering the time frame in which it was completed. The storyline is well-conceived and refined, and the comic's use of webpage space has been noted to be unique and refreshing.

Perhaps the most notable of *Compass*' shortcomings is its relatively conservative use of the infinite canvas, especially considering that it was first pitched as a formal experiment. Majority of the comic is organised into vertical strips, with less than a quarter of them deviating from this layout. Interactive elements were not realised with the extensiveness and finesse initially planned: many of these omissions are directly related to the challenges of processing and exporting the artwork such as dimensional limitations imposed by the art software used. More attention could have been paid to making these experiments more frequent and effective.

Artistically, it suffered from the narrow time frame in which it was created: the art is not as detailed as would have been ideal, nor entirely stylistically coherent. The comic was simply too long to be finished at a reasonable level of polish within six months, and these are issues that would easily be resolved with the investment of additional time.

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