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FOREWORD

I'm ten years old and I'm about to make my first comic.

The comic is going to be one page long and once it's done I'm going to photocopy it and sell it in my parents' antique shop. When I make my second comic it's going to be two pages long and I'm going to figure out how to make the photocopier print onto both sides of the paper. When I make my third comic it's going to be a proper little booklet: eight pages long, constructed out of two pages of folded A4 and stapled in the middle. It's going to be part of a series of six or so issues about a talking sausage and an egg who fight against an evil frying pan. But that's not really important right now.

This is the first comic. I have a pencil, a ruler, a black pen and a blank sheet of paper. A blank space. I take the pencil and the ruler and I divide up the blank space into nine smaller blank spaces of exact and equal size. Happy with my handiwork, I take the pen and the ruler and make the borders of each space permanent. I pause. Nine blank panels await me, each measure of page space carefully outlined in black.

I pick up the pencil and I start to draw.

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It's ten years later and I don't make comics anymore.

It was the drawings that were the problem. I never could make the pictures on the paper match up satisfactorily to the ones in my head. I'm in the first year of my degree in multimedia design and I'm learning bits and pieces of 3D modelling, image manipulation and animation. I'm writing collaborative fiction online and picking up the basics of coding but I'm still not making comics. Then at some point something sets me to wondering. Could I use a computer to create the artwork for a comic? In my second semester I read a book called *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud. Something in my brain goes click.

Two years pass. I finish my undergraduate studies and start working towards a Master's degree in interactive narrative. Somewhere along the line I also start dabbling in digital comics. I use a mix of 3D and photo manipulation to solve my drawing problem and create a handful of little experimental pieces. Most significantly I provide the artwork for an early webcomic series called *Rust*. *Rust* does some interesting things with its layout, incorporates pop-ups and animation as storytelling tools and gets appreciative nods in the right places. It pushes me to develop my digital art skills further and causes me to consider what else might be possible for comics on the web.

On my Master's programme I'm learning about multicursal stories with branching pathways and ergodic narratives that change each time they're read. I start to think about what it would be like to apply these ideas in my webcomics. I read another book by Scott McCloud called *Reinventing Comics*. There's a chapter in the book entitled "The Infinite Canvas" in which McCloud makes his case for the unrealised potential of digital comics. I look around online and wonder why more people aren't exploring the ideas McCloud outlined in that chapter. Something else in my brain goes click. This time it's a louder click, followed by a series of increasingly impressive, pixelated explosions.

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It's twelve years later and I'm writing the foreword to this book.

I'm sitting down at my computer and I'm thinking about space. I'm thinking about the last twelve years of my work in comics and how I've used space and made spaces. I'm thinking about how that use of space has changed between the page and the screen and the gallery wall. I'm thinking about interconnections between space and time; between story and shape; between word and image. And then I'm thinking further back. To that first little comic I made when I was ten. That first division of space into nine little blank boxes. They could have contained anything, those boxes. The potential of everything that followed was encoded right there in the space of that very first page.

Nine little blank boxes. It seems as good a place to start as any.

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In traditional printed comic books, space is a finite resource. Every event depicted within the comic has to be allotted a share of that resource. The total space that constitutes the comic's narrative is divided into panels of various sizes and those panels are organised around fixed, homogenised groupings that we call pages. Stories are told across fixed, pre-determined page counts. For a comic creator working within the confines of print, space immediately becomes a premium commodity. Accordingly, creators quickly learn to get the most narrative impact possible out of every page and every panel available to them.

In my own work for print I tend to favour simplicity in terms of page layout. I start by writing dialogue and sometimes short stage directions, then break that text down into panels and pages to get a feel for how the story might lay out. When it comes to arranging the panels on the page, I often use compositions consisting solely of page-wide panels of landscape proportions. These are easy for the reader to follow and give a nice smooth rhythm to the action on the page. Their dimensions also recall that of the cinema screen and allow for similar compositional tricks in the artwork. For more conversational or condensed narratives I like to work a variation of a grid, most often either six panels or a classic nine panel grid.

If I'm writing for another artist to illustrate I try not to give too much direction at all on page layout, preferring for the artist to decide themselves on the best

way to tackle the space of the page. Although even then, specifying the number of panels in each page of script has a big influence on the story. Three or four panels and you've got a fast, pacey read. Cram in twelve or sixteen and suddenly you've got room for a lot of plot-per-page but you're likely to wear your artist out pretty quickly. A good sweet spot for commercial work seems to be somewhere around six to eight panels; enough panels to carry a good chunk of narrative on each page but still plenty of room for the artist to have some fun.

In contrast to creating a comic for print, creating a digital comic means operating in a medium where space is neither fixed nor finite. Instead, space becomes plastic. It becomes slippery; it becomes mutable; it becomes infinitely configurable and reconfigurable. Gone are homogenised groupings of panels and fixed page counts. Gone is the constant nagging inner voice telling you to cram as much content as you can into the smallest amount of space possible. Hell, if you want them to be, gone are pages altogether.

And even if you decide to keep them around, your relationship with the page in the digital world is changed. Of course there's the obvious difference in dimensions; comics native to the screen tend to be in landscape layout rather than portrait. Beyond that though, there lies a more fundamental change; put simply, you just can't trust pages on the screen. They change. The panels swap about or turn up one at a time or slide around without warning. Images that used to have the decency to keep still can suddenly move when you're not looking at them. Worse, they can even move when you are looking at them. A page can be different every time you read it. Only the page and the page's creator would know; sitting together somewhere in the dark, laughing at you behind your back.

With such potential for spatial and narrative trickery, it's no wonder I fell in love with digital comics. The first bloom of that love was the hypercomic *Sixgun*, which I created as the major project for my Master's degree in 2001. In essence, a hypercomic is a comic with a multicursal narrative structure. Cursality is an idea that relates to the concept of the maze and the realisation that multiple different and divergent pathways might exist within a maze. A unicursal maze has only one path, no matter how convoluted, while a multicursal maze has many different possible pathways to explore and navigate. Multiple paths through a comic narrative mean that the reader is faced by repeated choices that can have a direct impact on the shape and outcome of the story they are reading. In a hypercomic, these choices may typically determine either the sequence in which events are encountered, the outcome of events or the point of view through which events are seen.

It wouldn't be too unfair to describe the rationale behind *Sixgun* as a desire to throw lots of different ideas about hypercomics at the wall and see what sticks. But at the core of the piece I was trying to resolve an essential conflict about the use of space. Comics is a spatial medium; all the elements in a comic exist in a fixed spatial relationship. In a hypertext like the World Wide Web, pages are linked together via hyperlinks. The only spatial relationship between pages is the one inferred by the hyperlinks, which typically do not provide a fixed visual element to tie pages together spatially. So the question became how to best preserve the fixed spatiality of comics within the less spatially-fixed hypertext medium.

In a typical hypertext a hyperlink might be a single word or image within the larger body of text. The solution I found for comics was to always treat whole panels as hyperlinks rather than any smaller component. The contents and position of the panel acting as the hyperlink would then be kept the same across both of the pages being linked together. When the panel is clicked the reader is linked from one page to another but, while the panels surrounding the hyperlinked panel change, the hyperlinked panel itself is unchanged. In this way the hyperlinked panel becomes the spatial constant tying the comic's multicursal network together.

Somewhere in the planning process of the stories that made use of these hyperlinked panels, I began to draw out flow diagrams to show how all the pages linked together. For some reason I found these diagrams fascinating. Fascinating enough that I started to insert them into the artwork of the comic itself. *Sixgun's* protagonists would occasionally encounter them – as a mural on a wall or in the design of a tattoo – and speculate obliviously as to the nature of what they were seeing.

In *Reinventing Comics* McCloud proposed the concept of the 'Infinite Canvas' – in essence the idea of treating the screen not as a page but as a window onto much larger configurations of panels. As part of this idea he proposed that the shape of an entire comic's layout could be directly linked to its narrative or thematic content. I became increasingly interested in figuring out how to make this idea work for a hypercomic. I began work on a new piece called *Doodleflak* that consisted of a series of branching pathways of panels configured into the shape of a snowflake. The shape of the whole flake would be visible at the beginning of the comic and then clicking on one section would zoom the canvas to focus on a single section of the narrative, with even smaller branches available at a further level of zoom.

It was the addition of this ability to zoom that really started to change the nature of space in my comics. The reader didn't just start with the overall shape of the narrative and then zoom in to read the comic; at any point they could zoom back out to see how the current position within the narrative related to the shape of the story as a whole. The zoom added a level of continuity to the reading experience and opened up ideas of relative scale as a new storytelling tool. I continued to explore the possibilities of the form for the next few years, across a whole series of zooming *Infinite Canvas* hypercomics.

Sometimes creating a new comic meant finding a shape for the story and other times it meant finding a story in the shape. So with some hypercomics I started with a story or theme I wanted to explore and let the final shape of the comic evolve alongside the development of the narrative. But with others I began by laying down a certain structure or shape to experiment with and then let that specific configuration of space drive the creation of the story. I've always found a few self-imposed restrictions to be a useful drive for creativity. Focusing first on the underlying spatial or interactive structure of a piece has often felt like the natural place to start. Here the real advantage of digital space is not in the leaving

behind of all limitations but the ability to choose and configure your own limits to best suit the work in question.

Another advantage of the screen is that space ceases to be a carefully rationed commodity. With space no longer at a premium, the potential to experiment with the spatial relationship between panels becomes a much more appealing prospect. Larger gaps between panels can suggest a longer passage of time between each moment. Stretched out panels or the same image repeated across multiple panels can suggest time being dragged out and slowed down. Without the constant of the page turn, you're free to establish your own panel groupings and your own rhythm of advancement through the story. Even better, that rhythm doesn't have to remain fixed for the entire story but can instead be adjusted to underscore key shifts or transitions within the narrative.

As I built a reputation for experimental comics, opportunities arose that pushed my work in new directions. One such new direction saw me shift my exploration of hypercomics from digital to physical space. This shift began with my involvement in the Potential Comics project at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London. The original *PoCom* wall comic to which I contributed was a collaboration between eighteen cartoonists that measured seventeen meters long and two meters tall. This hypercomic was designed specifically to work with the flow of the space in which it was displayed, running from right to left rather than the traditional left to right in order to match the flow of foot traffic in the gallery.

The reversal of reading direction may seem like a small change, but for me it pointed the way towards a whole new avenue of enquiry. I began to wonder what comics might become once they were totally freed from the constraints and legacy of the printed page. What new spatial configurations might be possible? How could you create comics that really used and became part of the physical space in which they were displayed? I got the chance to explore these ideas further with the *Casita Situations* – a collaboration between myself, architect Valerio Ferrari and cartoonist David Baillie. Together we created a customisable hypercomic installation for the walls of a children's mental health clinic in Biobigny, Paris.

The *Casita Situations* consisted of a series of large panels featuring a recurring cast of characters that the staff could arrange in various different configurations around the clinic. The environments depicted in the panels began as extensions of the interior of the clinic but then opened out to reveal fantastical situations and locations beyond the walls of the building. The children would be left to create their own stories out of the characters and situations on show, influenced by the different panel arrangements chosen each week by the staff. This use of comics to extend the spaces of the building out into the territory of the imagination was an idea I found fascinating. I was able to explore the idea further in my next major gallery piece, *The Archivist*.

The Archivist was an installation that took up one floor of the Pumphouse Gallery in London as part of the *Hypercomics* exhibition in 2010. The piece documented the life of a lone archivist working in an alternate reality where the Pumphouse had become an archive to the life of a fictional rock star. The space of the building itself and the surrounding grounds featured heavily in the piece, shifting

in appearance as the line between reality and videogames blurred together in the protagonist's dreams. The comic was divided across three walls of the floor while a fourth, virtual wall was represented by the printing of a web address on the room's main window. This web address moved the hypercomic back into digital space, where the story grew and expanded online over the course of the exhibition.

In trying to design a comic that worked both in the real space of the gallery and the digital space of the web, *The Archivist* brought me back full circle to examine the medium of the screen with fresh eyes. It started me thinking about videogames and comics and how both, on some fundamental level, were about explorations of space. How might the two media hybridise together to make something new? On a related tangent, I started thinking about depth; about how the relationship between panels changes when you start to position them in three dimensions instead of two. What does it mean to be able to stand in the space between two panels? And how might that experience be transferred back from the physical world to that of the screen? I find myself today with more questions than answers. What a wonderful condition in which to try and write a conclusion.

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It's right now and I'm writing the foreword to this book.

I'm sitting down at my computer and I'm thinking about what I've just written. About the last twelve years of my work in comics and how I've used space and made spaces. And what I'm thinking is this – I'm not ready to make any conclusions. There's still too much out there to explore. Too many questions left to ask and too many comics still needing to be made. I open a notebook to an empty page and start to doodle a new configuration of panels across the page. I stare at the arrangement of little blank boxes in front of me. Perhaps they could contain anything, these boxes. But I can see a shape to them. I can see a pattern and a story and a potential laid out before me. I know exactly what they need to contain.

I pick up the pencil and I start to draw.