

**The practical application of McCloud's horizontal
'Infinite canvas' through the design, composition and
creation of an online comic.**

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'Infinite canvas' through the design, composition and
creation of an online comic.**

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Abstract:

The term 'Infinite canvas' was established by comic creator and theorist Scott McCloud in his book *Reinventing Comics* (McCloud, 2000). The term was created by McCloud to describe his theory that the web page, with its ability to be any height or width in a digital environment, would free comics from the constraints of the printed page and revolutionise the way comics were created for the Internet. *Reinventing Comics* (McCloud, 2000) was one of the first theoretical texts to be published about comics on the Internet and is seminal text that has been widely applauded¹ and criticised² by the comic book industry since its publication.

This research examines the application of McCloud's theory of the Infinite canvas, specifically the horizontal example outlined in *Reinventing Comics* (McCloud, 2000). It focuses on the useability and effectiveness of the Infinite canvas theory when applied as a practical example of a comic outcome for the Internet. This practical application of McCloud's horizontal Infinite canvas model has been achieved by creating a digital comic entitled *Sad Reflections*; ³ a continuous horizontal narrative that is 20cm in height and 828cm in length and was designed to be viewed in a digital environment. This comic incorporates traditional comic techniques of gutters, time frames, line, with combining words and pictures, as outlined by McCloud (1993) in his first theoretical text *Understanding Comics*. These techniques are used to ensure that the

¹ 'McCloud very accurately and level-headedly takes time to explore the origins of the Internet and the World Wide Web making this as much a history lesson as a manifesto. He develops very reasoned explanations on how he reaches his conclusions too, particularly when it comes to the business and distribution side of digital comics. Most appreciatively though, he doesn't offer up any wholesale criticism without being willing to try and offer solutions to those problems. He takes the time to explain why certain revolutions in each of the three internet-related areas are important, and builds on the previous chapters of the book. Although a little long-winded, with the history lessons gaining more and more prominence towards the end of the book, it is a fascinating road map for the future of comics' wrote Butcher (2000) in his online review of *Reinventing Comics* (McCloud, 2000).

² 'Like much of McCloud's writing, it's overly broad, ignores much of the existing world of online comics and written ... with no discussion of why such systems have failed in the past, suggestions for how such schemes could exist in the real world, or addressing the potential drawbacks of alienating an audience that is used to getting content for free' wrote Rosenburg (2000) in his online review of *Reinventing Comics* (McCloud, 2000).

³ Written by Daniel Flood, *Sad Reflections* is a one act play script, featuring two characters and one location. Permission was granted by the playwright for the adaptation of the *Sad Reflections* play to be used for this project.

project fulfilled the technical criteria used by the comic book industry to create comics. The project also incorporates McCloud's personally devised Infinite canvas techniques of trails, distance pacing, narrative subdivision, sustained rhythm and gradualism as outlined on his website.⁴ These new techniques are applied to assess their effectiveness in the creation of the horizontal Infinite canvas and their ability to be integrated with traditional comic techniques.

The focus of this project is to examine the strengths and weaknesses of McCloud's Infinite canvas theory when applied to the practical online comic outcome *Sad Reflections*. Three key questions are used to guide this research. These questions are:

1. Does the application of traditional comic techniques affect the effectiveness of the Infinite canvas when implemented to a horizontal format?
2. Are the new Infinite canvas techniques as outlined by McCloud⁵ able to be applied to a horizontal format and what impact do these techniques have on the process?
3. Is the application of a horizontal Infinite canvas of benefit to future developers of web comics?⁶

Based on the outcomes of the above questions, this paper will nominate strategies, considerations and suitable production processes for future developers of web comics.

⁴ Scott McCloud, 'I can't stop thinking #4', *Online Comics*, viewed 1 March, 2006, <http://www.scottmcccloud.com/comics/icst/icst-4/icst-4.html>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Web comics, also know as online comics, are comics primarily created for the Internet. Some creators use web comics as a promotional tool to find print publishing employment, while others create only works that can be shown within a digital environment.

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Introduction:

In 1993 comic creator and theorist Scott McCloud⁷ wrote *Understanding Comics* (McCloud, 1993). It was the first of two theoretical texts by McCloud that examined the medium of comics; the origin, design, construction and creation. In *Understanding Comics* McCloud (1993) reworks much of the same content as *Comics and Sequential Art* (Eisner, 1985) a theoretical text written by the elder statesman of comics Will Eisner.⁸ Despite this, McCloud's text was widely applauded⁹ as a clear, definitive deconstruction of the history, meaning and art of comics. Much of this praise surrounded McCloud's innovative use of a comic book format to discuss comic theory.¹⁰ In *Understanding Comics* McCloud (1993) employs this technique by introducing the reader to a hand drawn cartoon avatar of him. It is the cartoon McCloud, with the assistance of word balloons and panels, that 'walks' the reader through a technical discussion of comic book theory via the application of the comic book format. *Understanding Comics* (McCloud, 1993), by

⁷ Prior to the creation of *Understanding Comics*, McCloud (1993) established himself as a force in the comics industry through independently published print comics such as *Zot!* (McCloud, 1984); a light hearted superhero comic series, and *The New Adventures of Abraham Lincoln* (McCloud, 1998); a printed graphic novel created through the use of computer-generated and digitally drawn images. These publications by McCloud were roundly condemned by Garry Groth, editor of the *Comics Journal* in his scathing article 'McCloud Cuckoo-Land'. Groth stated 'Previously, McCloud was best known for *Zot!*, a manga-inspired comic's series about a teen-aged superhero published in the 1980s. This was competent enough superhero work, sentimental, charming and almost endearingly old-fashioned in those pre-*Dark Knight* days, but against the backdrop of Art Spiegelman's groundbreaking *Maus*, the Hernandez Brothers' innovative visual vocabulary which they used to explore characterological and social issues in *Love & Rockets*, the anthologies of *RAW* and *Weirdo*, the liberating humor of Peter Bagge and Chester Brown, new artists pushing the boundaries of what we had come to know as comics and older artists doing the best work of their lives, *Zot!* was by general consensus inconsequential, even regressive'. Groth goes on to discuss *The New Adventures of Abraham Lincoln* (McCloud, 1998) stating 'Between *Understanding Comics* and *Reinventing Comics*, McCloud went back to narrative fiction and made the mistake of indulging his theories, particularly his new-found love of computer technology (and apparently his hatred of beautiful drawing) by producing - or do I mean manufacturing? - a miscarriage called *The Adventures of Abraham Lincoln*, a book that failed on every conceivable level: satirically, visually, conceptually, even technologically. If an author could refute the practical value of his own theorizing about art and technology, McCloud succeeded in doing it in this book'.

Groth, G 2002, 'McCloud Cuckoo-Land', *Comics Journal*, vol. 232, viewed 1 March, 2006, http://tcj.com/232/r_cuckoo.html

⁸ Will Eisner 1917 – 2005. One of the earliest comic book creators Eisner began his career in the 1930's. For 12 years he wrote and created the weekly newspaper comic *The Spirit* which was syndicated world wide. For many years he created educational comics for the army of the United States of America releasing monthly technical manuals in comic form. In 1978, Eisner is best remembered for his graphic novel *A Contract With God* (Eisner, 1978). His text *Comics and Sequential Art* (Eisner, 1985) was created from several years teaching at the New York School of Visual Arts.

⁹ Will Eisner describes *Understanding Comics* (McCloud, 1993) as 'a fine book' in his text *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* (Eisner, 1996)

¹⁰ This use of a comic to examine comics had not been used before; however the use of comics as texts had been, by Will Eisner in the 1942. Will Eisner created posters, illustrations and strips for the education and entertainment for the army of the United States of America during World War II.

this show and tell method, clearly examines traditional comic techniques such as gutters, text, time frames, line, as well as combining words and pictures.

In 2000, McCloud released a second theoretical text titled *Reinventing Comics* (McCloud, 2000).¹¹ This text outlined McCloud's expansive and enthusiastic vision for comics on the Internet.¹² In *Reinventing Comics*¹³ McCloud (2000, p. 207) theorises that a 'technological landscape' such as the internet offers a greater potential to comics than print; greater communication between creator and reader, wider genre availability, and more innovative design opportunities. McCloud also states that comics need to find a durable mutation from their current online form to survive successfully on the Internet. One such 'durable mutation' is McCloud's personal solution the 'Infinite canvas', a spatial model which focuses on the ability for the Internet page to be any height or width in a digital environment.

¹¹ Reprising his cartoon avatar, McCloud once again 'walks' the reader through the theoretical text. The success of this format reused in *Reinventing Comics* (McCloud, 2000) is questionable. McCloud (2000) admits in *Reinventing Comics* that the comic panel structure such that 'the artist may have to reorganise, lengthen or shorten a sequence to accommodate them'. McCloud (2000, pp. 221) goes on to confess to the reader that 'I do it all the time! Go back and see if you can spot my various stalling and compression tactics throughout this book'. This reuse of the comic book format by McCloud as a means of relaying information was criticized by Groth as an ill conceived attempt to capitalise on the success of *Understanding Comics* (McCloud, 1993), without due regard for the newer, more complex subject matter.

Groth, G 2002, 'McCloud Cuckoo-Land', *Comics Journal*, vol. 232, viewed 1 March, 2006, http://tcj.com/232/r_cuckoo.html

¹² Groth criticises McCloud's untempered enthusiasm for the internet as 'wholly uncritical, indeed, breathless and drooling enthusiasms for technology irrespective of their grounding in reality or even commonsense'.

Groth, G 2002, 'McCloud Cuckoo-Land', *Comics Journal*, vol. 232, viewed 1 March, 2006, http://tcj.com/232/r_cuckoo.html

¹³ There has also been some criticism of McCloud's redefinition of what comics are, originally established by Will Eisner. McCloud begins the chapter 'The Infinite Canvas – Digital Comics' by reiterating on his definition of comics as a 'juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence'. McCloud first developed this definition in his text *Understanding Comics* (McCloud, 1993) to expand on the previously accepted definition of 'sequential art' coined by predecessor Will Eisner in 1978. McCloud's full definition as stated in *Understanding Comics* (McCloud, 1993) was a 'Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer'. It is worth noting here that it is not discussed in *Reinventing Comics* as to why McCloud (2000) does not use his previous longer definition. For the purpose of the chapter 'The Infinite Canvas – Digital Comics' we are reminded on several occasions that the definition is a 'juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence' (McCloud, 2000, pp. 200).

Reinventing Comics (McCloud, 2000) focuses extensively on the Infinite canvas and it is best known for this controversial promotion¹⁴ of digital technology and the creation, delivery and marketing of comics on the Internet.

Other issues outlined in *Reinventing Comic* (McCloud, 2000) that were hotly debated by industry members were:

1. The viability of online payment and distribution of digital content through a micro payment system,¹⁵
2. McCloud's rejection of multimedia¹⁶ as an internet comic tool,¹⁷
3. The viability of the Infinite canvas¹⁸ as a comic format in a digital environment.¹⁹

McCloud has also been criticised for the Pollyanna-ish tone of the text,²⁰ with his boundless enthusiasm seen as shallow and unrealistic. McCloud's loose and incorporative theory of comic book history was also attacked as '*...irrelevant at best, a historical sophistry at worst*'.²¹

¹⁴ Groth, G 2002, 'McCloud Cuckoo-Land', *Comics Journal*, vol. 232, viewed 1 March, 2006, http://tcj.com/232/r_cuckoo.html

¹⁵Sean Barret, a game developer, presents a measured discussion expressing his concerns of the micro payment system on his website. This article is directly linked from McCloud's website as an acceptable discussion of the micro payment system supported by McCloud.

Barret, S 2001, '[Micropayment Barriers](http://www.nothings.org/writing/upay.html)', *Home page of Sean Barrett, dysfunctional programmer*, viewed 20 January 2006, <http://www.nothings.org/writing/upay.html>.

Not all industry professionals shared Barret's views. A flame war erupted primarily between Scott McCloud and [Jerry Holkins](#), also known by his online persona 'Tycho', a founding member of the popular online comic centre Penny Arcade. A visual condemnation of McCloud's micro-payment systems can be found on the Penny Arcade website on <http://www.penny-arcade.com/news.php3?date=2001-06-22>. Much of the flame war has been removed from public viewing such as Holkins pointed attack of McCloud and his micro payment system <http://www.penny-arcade.com/news.php?date=2001-06-22#braying> after retractions by both McCloud <http://www.scottmccloud.com/home/xtra/backlash.html> and Holkins. In a recent post on the Penny Arcade website Holkins, while stating that he still does not totally agree with McCloud's stance has relented on his hard line anti-micro payment approach <http://www.pennyarcade.com/2005/11/14#1131997200>.

¹⁶ McCloud, S 2000, *Reinventing Comics*, New York, pp. 207-210.

¹⁷ Jung-Hoon Seo, J 2002, 'Digital comics and Multimedia', *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*, viewed 20 January 2006, <http://plw.media.mit.edu/people/jseo/courses/cms871/final-paper.html>

¹⁸ McCloud, S 2000, *Reinventing Comics*, New York, p. 222-228.

¹⁹ Zabel, J 2000, 'Focus on Reinventing Comics', *Amazing Montage Magazine*, viewed 20 January 2006, <http://amazingmontage.tripod.com/am200006.html#intro>

²⁰Zabel, J 2000, 'Focus on Reinventing Comics', *Amazing Montage Magazine*, viewed 20 January 2006, <http://amazingmontage.tripod.com/am200006.html#intro>

²¹ Groth argues that McCloud's arbitrary selection of radically different historical visual narratives from several cultures is opportunistic and academically unsound stating 'Clearly, the Tomb of Menna, the Trojan Column and the Codex Nuttall come from a different tradition than that of mass culture and invoking them to legitimise the application of digital technology to comics is irrelevant at best, ahistorical sophistry at worst. Digital comics will succeed or fail on their own merits, not because of any theories based on ancient uses of drawn narratives'. It is interesting to note that Groth does not reference an alternative historical time-line to challenge McCloud's theory, nor does he direct readers to more appropriate text.

Groth, G 2002, 'McCloud Cuckoo-Land', *Comics Journal*, vol. 232, viewed 1 March, 2006, http://tcj.com/232/r_cuckoo.html