

The Inclination Compass

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Abstract

‘The Inclination Compass’ is an interactive artwork where audiences use hand gestures to control a digital image of a rotating compass. As the compass turns it samples a random selection of 23 lines from the book of the same name, *The Inclination Compass*. This artwork is the culmination of the narrative within the book and a way that audiences continue to ‘write/rewrite’ the narrative by creating their own ‘cut’ of the story. The artwork and the book are examples of transmedia storytelling.

Keywords

Transmedia storytelling, sampling, collaboration, intra-action, nonlinear narrative, versioning, synchronicity, coincidence, deep assignments.

Introduction

‘The Inclination Compass’ was created by longtime collaborators, myself, Dr Gareth Sion Jenkins (writer/digital artist) and Dr Jason Lam (programmer/digital artist). It is part of my book *The Inclination Compass*, which was published in 2023. The book utilizes transmedia storytelling - video, audio, and interactive media are embedded throughout the text via QR codes. The whole book itself explores nonlinear modes of storytelling where ‘narrative’ is a product of fragmentary repetition and versioning. At the core of the narrative is an immersive video and 3-Dimensional sound installation I created in 2003 called Owen’s Waiting.



Figure 1. Still image of the installation Owen’s Waiting, 2003. QR code provides access to a time lapse video of the installation install, its running, and its deinstall.

The Inclination Compass is an attempt to bring together the many versions of this original (whatever that means) work that have existed between now and its first display. To end the book I wanted to create a new interactive artwork which collapsed the past, present and future of the text by live sampling from the entirety of the book to release future versions written by the audience themselves.

The Compass

The motif of the compass and the phrase ‘the inclination compass’ is central to the book’s narrative and is drawn from the German research paper: ‘Directional orientation of birds by the magnetic field under different light conditions’. Images from the paper are displayed throughout the book and a link to the paper is provided via a QR code. Permission to use the material was sought from the researchers and granted. The inclusion of this information within the book and access to the article itself are important aspects of the transmedia storytelling being employed. By giving the audience opportunities to reach out beyond the text they have the potential to return to it with fresh perspectives.

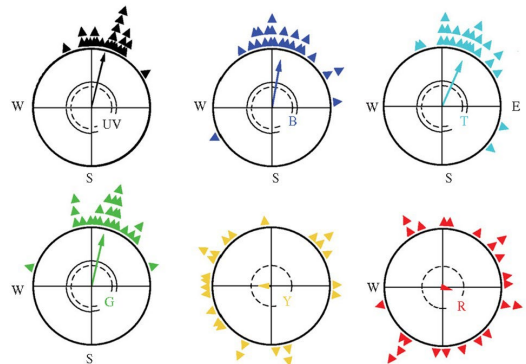


Figure 2. Extract from the research paper, ‘Directional orientation of birds by the magnetic field under different light conditions’. Image displays ‘Orientation of European robins during spring migration under monochromatic light of different wavelengths...the

triangles at the periphery of the circle give mean headings of individual birds based on three recordings each.’ © Permission granted. [1]

‘The inclination compass’ is the term used by the researchers to describe the internal mechanism which ‘allows birds to locate courses of different origin.’ [2] This paper was read many years after the creation of the original (whatever that means) installation but is of core relevance to its themes. For instance, the installation’s opening scene references the death of 87 migratory birds on a Wollongong beach where I was living at the time. As the diagram in figure 2 illustrates red light waves create significant disruption for the inclination compass of migratory birds – did the flame from the nearby steelworks have an impact on the death of the silvereyes? ‘They died on their winter migration, fell right down into the installation.’ [3]

For this reason the primary inspiration for The Inclination Compass interactive artwork was the red compass illustration and its array of 23 directional triangles.

Interactive display

Using the compass diagram as a generative site and a formal constraint it was decided that there should be a maximum of 23 lines of text sampled at any one time arrayed from the point of each triangle.

Jason created the interactivity using LEAP motion hand tracker into Touch Designer software and python coding to generate the digital compass which pulls lines in from the book in a plain text format.

The first prototype used lines from the book as they are in the published version but they were so long that most of the lines could not be easily displayed or read on the screen. I then went through the book and created a plain text version where the maximum word length of each line was 70 characters.

Lines are drawn into the artwork and arrayed randomly whenever an audience member’s hand moves over the LEAP motion hand tracker. Opening and closing the hand controls the number of lines being displayed, moving the hand closer or further away from the sensor controls the size of the displayed image and rotating the hand rotates the compass’ inner dial and outer triangle array. Originally the text was arrayed in straight lines but as the work developed Jason introduced a fluidity to the display so that they better evoked the flight lines of birds.

The lines stabilise when the hand is still and can be read to create new fractured versions of the work.

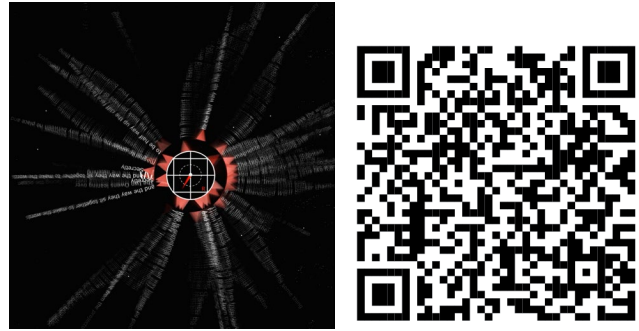


Figure 3. Still image of The Inclination Compass display and a QR code providing access to a video of the display in motion.

Intra-action with the book

It was always my intention to use this new artwork as the culmination of the book and Jason was creating the digital display as I was finalising the text.

The final scene is set in the glass pyramid atop the building One Canada Square in London near where I lived in the years before creating the original (whatever that means) installation. This scene obliquely references many other ideas and events in the book as if the book is beginning to sample and write new versions of itself. Here The Inclination Compass artwork Jason was finishing is described as being operated by a character that stands in for future audiences – Narrative Technician 1 (NT1). Here in this final scene ideas of synchronicity – particularly Carl Jungs writings on the subject – speak of a collapsing of past, present and future as NT1 draws ideas together from many parts of the text:

“if only our fear opened synchronicity the two
willing the one to entangle the unwilling says Jung
If only one remembers the darkness and the cold
we may be conflating it is not entirely their fault
just mostly just *is* just willing the
*unwilling to postulate a pre-established harmony of
physical and psychic events,*
now *then* cut before later remember
they can only be in a state of interaction
between now cut then a surface tension
before after yesterday an intra-action tomorrow
the moon still hovering out there over the deepest
like unlike like the lost skull of the world all
indeterminacy folding in towards a square opening the cliff
face on wings of dark salt waves.” [4]

To get even closer to Jason's work in this final scene I incorporated some of his code into the text:

Dear Shigeaki clapping NT1 into the centre of the room high chamber of air sky pit cathedral under the glass pyramid above the marina the factory the carpark the ambulance the whale The (final) Installation (whatever that means) lights up the movement of our body who is performing? black stone from under our tongue across lips in to the eye intra-acting the coded parameters manipulating the flowing stream of spatialised elaborations the order in the baffle of chance reflections and obstructions 'colour-Rand')['randR' radiate me.inputPoint. at the centre point me input into the cube I move I like I unlike like dancing rotation offset(0,4),0 it is all about number on the 'outerRimCHOPNull' but you knew that already the Feedback Delay Net-works algorithm generating cut after cut of *The Inclination Compass* along the dotted line spinning under embankment fingers the negative space of my body creating recreating scenes and ambisonics flight lines extending in every future direction searching the last order in chance letters appear and disappear wavelengths flowing red spectrum irregular phases of warning attracting and deranging is some time else? at rest there are no coincidences [5]

As the book reaches the end of its final (whatever that means) scene Jason's coded phrase 'me.inputPoint' was the prompt to reintroduce the 'I' of the speaking text.

I am the body slowing mind not resting energy dissipating margins narrowing parameters contracting final form (whatever that means) zero point (me.inputPoint.index+(op('newSeed-Null'))['newSeed']) new new new seed cut now seeding now myself now cutting me.input + + + replication permutation of the deepest assignment a shadowed projection the drawers slide in out in out of my own inclinations inmost of my cause if only Dear Dear me if only this the last? sequence lifted into breath rotating in out in out in time with the movement of my fingers in side the dotted line *The Inclination Compass* turns sampling itself flight lines arrayed triangular bird's beaks searching the geomagnetic field for pathways of meaning all the letters all the words migrating upwards into the glass pyramidal roof of the world axis mundi flashing its red pulses calling The Transport its ever repeating signals its always evolving signs again later before we'll hear again Black Square empty oven lost skull burnt book great metaphor plotting Dear casualty O Dear

something has followed us into the homing from the mountains the chambers the gardens speaking what is forgotten

if I am not the object we are the instrument
if we are not the instrument I am the measurement
the readings shifting it's not entirely our fault just
mossy just mostly just slippery down by the creek
creaking the always speaking always crawling
through that right eye I am performing my body and the
mind of our bodymind your meanings unlike my meanings
but like them too now now cut now soon we'll
say remember I'll say before after later soon
we'll say imagine like unlike like it is an instruction
and it is an instruction like it is an invitation
into intra-action and it is one [6]

Following this text in the book are images from the digital artwork and a QR code that links to the video of the compass in motion supplied earlier in this paper. At the launch of the book the digital artwork was also on display.

The deep assignment

There are many ideas from the book left unexplained in this paper: who is Shigeaki?, what is intra-action, what are the chambers, whose is the lost skull of the world, those embankment fingers, the black book, the right eye, the plotting and casualty, the now cut now of our constructed perceptions happening the meanings again again again.

Perhaps it will help (or not) to leave you with the book's epigraph from J. G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*:

"Deep assignments run through all our lives; there are no coincidences." [6]

If nothing else *The Inclination Compass* is certainly my deep assignment, the culmination (whatever that means) of 20 years work. It's an assignment that has afforded me many deep experiences, friendships and collaborations – like the one with Jason Lam which spans the entire length of this project.

Creative practice can bridge the space between people, between meanings, your meanings unlike my meanings but like them too – here in the zone of intra-action there are indeed no coincidences. Our hands reach forward and the space between object and instrument becomes ambiguous, we mingle there, making and remaking sense of the flight-lines of our collective selves.

References

- [1] Roswitha Wiltschko, Katrin Stapput, Peter Thalau and Wolfgang Wiltschko, "Directional orientation of birds by the magnetic field under different light conditions," *J. R. Soc. Interface* 7, (2010), accessed March 1, 2021, <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsif.2009.0367.focus>
- [2] Roswitha Wiltschko, Katrin Stapput, Peter Thalau and Wolfgang Wiltschko, "Directional orientation of birds by the magnetic field under different light conditions," *J. R. Soc. Interface* 7, (2010), accessed March 1, 2021, <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsif.2009.0367.focus>
- [3] Gareth Jenkins, *The Inclination Compass*, (Newcastle: Puncher and Wattmann, 2023), 17.
- [4] Gareth Jenkins, *The Inclination Compass*, 189.
- [5] Gareth Jenkins, *The Inclination Compass*, 190-191.
- [6] J G Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, (London: Flamingo, 2001), 16.