

**Death in the American Comic Strip – Differences in Dealing with
the Topic of Death in American Newspaper Comic Strips and
American Internet Comic Strips**

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Pro gradu -tutkielmassani tutkin kuinka amerikkalaiset sanomalehtistriipit ja amerikkalaiset internetsarjakuvastriipit käsittelevät kuolemaa ja onko käsittelytavoissa eroja. Lähtökohtainen oletukseni on että koska amerikkalaiset sanomalehdet ovat hyvin konservatiivisia ja koska sarjakuvat käyvät läpi kovan tarkastuksen ennen kuin ne painetaan lehteen, niiden sisältö on myös erilainen verrattuna internetissä julkaistaviin sarjakuviin joiden tekijöillä on täysin vapaat kädet. Tarkastelun kohteena on neljä suosittua sanomalehtisarjakuvaa: *Dilbert*, *Garfield*, *Calvin and Hobbes* sekä *Pearls Before Swine* sekä neljä suosittua internetsarjakuvaa: *Cyanide and Happiness*, *XKCD*, *Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal* sekä *Penny Arcade*. Analyysini perustuu huumorin teorioille.

Aloitan määrittelemällä mikä sarjakuvastriippi on ja kerron hieman sen historiasta. Kerron myös sarjakuvasensuurista ja osoitan kuinka paljon syndikaatit ja sanomalehdet rajoittavat sarjakuvantekijöiden ilmaisua yrittäessään miellyttää mahdollisimman suurta lukijakuntaa. Osoitan myös kuinka vaikeaa sarjakuvantekijän on saada sarjakuvansa julkaisuksi amerikkalaisessa sanomalehdessä ja vastavuoroisesti kuinka helppoa internetissä julkaiseminen on.

Tämän jälkeen esittelen teorioita huumorin funktioista ja siitä kuinka vitsit, varsinkin sarjakuvastriipeissä toimivat. Osoitan myös kuinka internet- ja sanomalehtisarjakuvat eroavat toisistaan aiheiltaan. Käsittelen lisäksi kolmea suurta tabua amerikkalaisessa sanomalehtisarjakuvassa, uskontoa, seksiä ja kiroilua. Esimerkkini osoittavat että internetsarjakuva on täynnä kaikkia kolmea, kun taas sanomalehtisarjakuvassa ei ainakaan seksiä ja kiroilua esiinny, ja uskontoakin käsitellään hellemmin kuin internetsarjakuvassa. Kuolemaa puolestaan esiintyy runsaasti kummassakin.

Analyysissäni tarkastelen esimerkkien kautta kuinka kuolema kussakin sarjakuvassa esitetään. Lähestyn aihetta sekä hahmojen että visuaalisen esittämisen kautta. Kuolema naurattaa emotionaalisen etäännyttämisen kautta jonka useimmiten aiheuttaa viimeisissä ruuduissa tapahtuva absurdi käänne joka on päinvastainen lukijan odotusten kanssa. Myös eläinhahmot vaikuttavat lukijan odotuksiin hahmojen oikeanlaisesta eettisestä käyttäytymisestä. Lukijaa ei häiritse että esimerkiksi Garfield syö toisia eläimiä. Myös tikku-ukkomaiset ihmishahmot etäännyttävät lukijaa kuolemasta ja helpottavat sille nauramista.

Loppupäätelmissäni kerään yhteen sanomalehti- ja internetsarjakuvan eroja, etenkin kuoleman kannalta. Totean että internetsarjakuvat käsittelevät kuolemaa aggressiivisemmin sekä visuaalisesti että muuten. Internetsarjakuvassa näytetään usein myös verta ja toisinaan myös kuoleman hetki kun se sanomalehdissä jää enimmäkseen ruutujen väliin.

Avainsanat: sarjakuva, kuolema, internet, sanomalehti, huumori

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1. INTRODUCTION

The comic strip medium was born in the final years of the nineteenth century. In the beginning the cartoonists experimented with different topics and styles but later, after comics received criticism from the public, who were convinced that comics were corrupting children's reading habits, and their minds as well, the printed comic strips were subjected to censorship and the cartoonists' freedom of expression was greatly limited. With the advent of the World Wide Web comic strip makers have found new ways of publishing their comics. Since internet cartoonists do not have editors telling them what they can and cannot publish, they have more freedom to decide what they want to write about and what topics they want to deal with.

As Michael Cart mentions in his article "The Funnies", America's newspapers are facing declining readership, and as advertizing revenues have diminished the comic strip pages have been one of the first sections to face reductions (Cart, 2008, 47). New comic strips have had troubles also, because newspapers rely on old familiar strips, some of which have been published since the 1930s or even earlier. Newspapers are also very sensitive about the comic strips they buy, and comics that the editors think may be offensive to some of their readers, simply do not get bought. This leads to syndicates buying strips they think most newspapers will buy, which means that they will often reject ones that are new and different in some way. On the internet, however, anybody's work can be published, no matter how different or offensive it is. The line between webcomics and newspaper comics has also been blurred in recent years, since some comics that started on the internet have been published in print form and some newspaper comics, such as *Dilbert* share their strips online with complete archives, in addition to special strips that may never be seen in newspapers.

Based on this, I think it is safe to assume that the medium will affect the content, at least

to some extent. In this thesis I want to examine how different cartoonists deal with the topic of death, both in newspaper comics, as well as internet comics. I want to see if the liberty provided by the extended freedom of expression the internet cartoonists enjoy changes the way death is dealt with in comics, or whether it remains the same. I will examine four internet comic strips and four newspaper comic strips and compare how death appears in them. Since there are only eight strips in total that I aim to study, I have chosen the strips by popularity. The four newspaper strips I have chosen are *Garfield*, *Dilbert*, *Calvin and Hobbes* and *Pearls Before Swine*. These strips are some of the most popular today, although *Calvin and Hobbes* does not seem to appear in North America anymore. However, *Calvin and Hobbes* is still quite a recent comic strip and it has become a classic. The four internet comics I have chosen are *Cyanide and Happiness*, *Penny Arcade*, *XKCD* and *Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal*. I chose these because, according to Alexa.com, they are the most popular internet comic strips, at least at the time I am writing this. *Dilbert* is still mainly a newspaper comic, although its website is among the most popular comics websites. I have limited my scope to humorous comic strips and left out traditional adventure and soap opera strips. I have not examined strips that have appeared after 31 December 2010.

Garfield is a comic by Jim Davis and it has been appearing in newspapers since 1978. It depicts the life of Garfield the cat, his owner Jon and Odie the dog. *Dilbert*, by Scott Adams, has been appearing since 1989. The strip focuses around an engineer called Dilbert, his dog Dogbert, and Dilbert's co-workers. *Dilbert* deals with the life of engineers and workplace relations. *Calvin and Hobbes* centers around the life and imagination of six-year old Calvin and his stuffed tiger Hobbes. Bill Watterson, the creator, drew the strip for ten years from 1985 to 1995. *Pearls Before Swine*, by Stephan Pastis, is the newest of the four newspaper comics. It has been appearing in newspapers since late 2001. The main characters of the strip are four animals, Rat, Pig, Zebra and Goat, whose lives in a suburb the strip depicts, as well

as the lives of their human and animal neighbors.

Penny Arcade is the work of two men, Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik. The comic has appeared on the internet since 1998 and focuses on video games and the digital world. *XKCD* is the work of Randall Munroe and has appeared since 2006. According to *XKCD*'s home page, *XKCD* is "a webcomic of romance, sarcasm, math, and language". *Cyanide and Happiness* is the work of four men: Rob DenBleyker, Dave McElfatrick, Matt Melvin and Kris Wilson. It appears on their website explosm.net, and has been appearing since 2005. It features stick figures in unusual, often disturbing situations. Lastly, *Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal*, created by Zach Weiner has been appearing since 2002. It began as a single panel comic, but has later evolved into a multiple panel format. It often employs absurd humor and features jokes about science as well as human relationships and human behavior.

I have chosen this topic, because there is very little, if any, previous academic work done on internet comic strips, and in my opinion they are too significant a force on the internet to be disregarded. There are thousands of comics on the internet. I have also chosen death because as a topic it is not as controversial in newspaper comics as religion and sex and thus it is not as strictly limited.

I think it is wise to first establish what comics are and what the comic strip is. After that I will examine the history of the comic strip and how the comics have been subjected to censorship, especially through the introduction of the comics code. I will also discuss the two media, the newspaper and the internet, in comic strip publishing.

My theoretical framework will consist of theories on humor, since I have chosen the humorous comic strip as my topic. I will use the theories by Simon Critchley, Arthur Koestler, Avner Ziv, among others. I will introduce these theories later in this thesis.

2. WHAT ARE COMICS?

In his book *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud, 1993, p. 9). According to Randall P. Harrison, comics can be divided into three categories: the comic strip; the comic book, which includes both traditional as well as underground “comix”; and the graphic short story and graphic novel (Harrison, quoted in Herkman, 1998, 22).

Thomas Inge describes the comic strip as an “open ended dramatic narrative about a recurring set of characters, told in a series of drawings, often including dialogue in balloons and a narrative text, and published serially in newspapers” (Inge, 1990, xi). Inge’s definition needs to be expanded, however, since comic strips are not bound to newspapers anymore. The number of comics and especially comic strips on the internet is growing and internet comics are becoming increasingly popular. Harrison identifies sub genres of the comic strip as follows: the humorous strip, the adventure strip with an ongoing plot, and the soap opera strip (Harrison, quoted in Herkman, 1998, 22). Since I need to limit the scope of my thesis, I will focus solely on the humorous comic strip. Humorous strips include famous strips, such as *Beetle Bailey* and *Dilbert*. Adventure strips include *The Phantom* and *Rip Kirby*, among others, and soap opera strips, for example, *Mary Worth*.

2.1 History of the Comic Strip

According to Couperie and Horn in *a History of the Comic Strip*, European picture stories are considered to be the predecessors of the American comic strip (1968, 11). Especially the stories by Swiss artist Rodolphe Töpffer, Wilhelm Busch in Germany and French artist

Georges “Christophe” Colomb, who did most of their work in the nineteenth century, are mentioned by Horn in *100 Years of Newspaper Comics* (1996, 21). These stories: “combined text and image to tell extended narratives.” (Horn, 1996, 21). The stories were usually a series of pictures with the narrative text placed below the panels.

In Horne’s opinion, most historians regard the year 1896 as the year the comic strip and comics in general were born. This is when the character Yellow Kid “a bald-headed, night shirted kid” (Horn, 1996, 21), whose first appearance was in a humor magazine called *Truth*, appeared in his finalized form in *Hogan’s Alley* by Richard Outcault (Horn, 1996, 21). David Kunzle, however, uses the term comic strip/picture story already in connection with Rodolphe Töpffer’s works (Kunzle, 1990, 1) and opposes the idea that Americans invented the comic strip (Kunzle, 1990, xix). If we look back at Scott McCloud’s definition of comics, as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud, 1993, 9), it is difficult to disagree with Kunzle. In this respect Rodolphe Töpffer’s picture stories with text could be seen as comics.

According to Couperie and Horn (1968, 21), in 1897 the Katzenjammer Kids by Rudolph Dirks first appeared:

Inspired in part by Wilhelm Busch’s “Max und Moritz,” the Katzenjammer Kids were the result of a half century of experimentation. Without fully realizing it, Dirks had just given birth to a new artistic method of expression that not until very much later would be given the name of “comic strip.”

Despite the apparent differences in opinion on what exactly constitutes a comic strip and what is simply a picture story, it is nevertheless quite clear that the modern comic strip was developed in the United States. Couperie and Horn state that before the beginning of the 1880’s Europe was far more advanced in telling stories with pictures. There were many talented artists in America, but they focused more on political and social satire (1968, 19).

This, however, would change when humor magazines, such as *Puck*, *Judge* and *Life* became popular. Couperie and Horn (1968, 19), say that:

This development of the magazines, and the competition that resulted, had a beneficial effect in American artists, who rivaled each other in originality and virtuosity of technique. From 1890 on, the essential elements of the comic strip – narrative by sequence of pictures, continuing characters from one sequence to the next, the inclusion of the dialogue within the picture – were combined in these magazines, and it was already possible to discover in their pages the artists who would later become famous through the comic strip: Richard Outcault, James Swinnerton, Frederick Burr Opper.

One thing that accelerated the development of this medium was the battle in New York between Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 19). According to Couperie and Horn, the two men both understood the value of the Sunday supplement and focused significant amounts of effort on developing it (1968, 19). Richard Outcault, the creator of Yellow Kid was first with Pulitzer's newspaper *New York World* but Hearst managed to lure Outcault to his paper, the *New York Journal* in 1896, the "birth year" of the comics. Outcault later traveled from one paper to the next and created new strips such as *Buster Brown* (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 19-23).

As the name suggests, "comics" were humorous in nature in the beginning, but other genres soon developed in addition to the humor strip. These included fairy-tale strips, suspense strips, mythological tales, as well as science fiction (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 23). Adventure strips would later become very popular. Couperie and Horn state that the father of the adventure strip was Charles Kahles, but his strips *Sandy Highflyer* (or *the Airship Man*, first appeared in 1902 (Horn, 1996, 38)) and *Hairbreadth Harry* continued only for a few years (1968, 23). In *100 Years of American Newspaper Comics*, however, Horn claims that Kahles drew *Hairbreadth Harry* until his death in 1931, and that the strip, which first appeared in 1906, continued until 1940, drawn by other artists (Horn, 1996, 138).

The comic strip evolved rapidly during the first decade of the 20th century and

cartoonists were very innovative at that time. Couperie and Horn mention Winsor McCay as the “greatest innovator of the age”, and they describe McCay’s comic, *Little Nemo in Slumberland* as follows (1968, 27):

His wonderful “Little Nemo in Slumberland,” a masterpiece of elegance, simplicity, and poetry, was created in 1905 and interrupted in 1911; re-created in 1924, it finally disappeared forever in 1927. Its plot is very simple: each night Little Nemo is carried in dream to Slumberland, and each morning he is brought back to the daily reality by the harsh shock of awakening. . . . On each of his nocturnal rambles, Little Nemo penetrates a little more deeply into the dream. . . . Ultimately, Little Nemo becomes ruler of his dream when he learns to be master of its powers and to interpret its laws.

As mentioned above, the two newspapers, led by Pulitzer and Hearst were fierce competitors and competed especially with the Sunday supplements. According to Couperie and Horn, for a long time the Sunday supplements of major newspapers were the only places where one could find comic strips. It was only in 1907 that Bud Fisher created the first real daily strip. In the beginning it was called *Mr. A. Mutt* but was later changed to *Mutt and Jeff*, when the character Jeff was added (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 29). Couperie and Horn see the advent of the daily strip as a very important event for the comic strip: “By becoming daily, the American comic strip increased its range and influence tenfold, and increasingly acquired the appearance of a genuine social phenomenon” (1968, 29). However, It took the daily strip 14 years to spread to the United Kingdom and 27 years to reach France (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 77). The authors mention a survey by F.E. Barcus in one American city: “The number of comic strip titles almost tripled in ten years, rising from 65 in the period 1900-1904 to 165 in 1905-1909, a figure that was never again reached” (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 29). Couperie and Horn mention that some people consider the years 1900 – 1910 as the golden age of the comic strip. They add that: “In any event it was the golden age of cartoonists, who were not yet laboring under the difficulties nowadays imposed upon them and were able to give free rein to their originality, talent and imagination” (1968, 29). As I will discuss in the following chapters, these difficulties have continued to this day, and the internet has provided

the potential to rid cartoonists of them.

Even though the comic strip had developed rapidly in America, in Europe it had not. It remained at the level of picture stories with text under the pictures (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 29). In America the evolution of the comic strip continued and cartoonists began to divide into two separate intellectual groups (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 35). Couperie and Horn call these groups the “entertainers” and the “thinkers”. According to them, the “entertainers” saw comics only as entertainment and fun, whereas the “thinkers”: “wished to “intellectualize” the comics, and attempt to explore all their possibilities, both formal and narrative” (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 35). Of the “thinker”-group, Couperie and Horn mention George Herriman and his comic strip *Krazy Kat*, as the best representative, and they describe it thus (1968, 35):

Herriman’s strip “Krazy Kat” utilized the most basic possible plot: Krazy is in love with the mouse Ignatz. The latter, exasperated by Krazy Kat’s attentions, bombards the cat with bricks. Offissa B. Pupp, the dog and guardian of law and order, is only too happy to collar Ignatz and fling him into jail. Each episode is simply a variation on this theme, and the brick is the instrument of the fate that links the three elements of the eternal triangle. The action, rich in suggestions and symbols, is bathed in an atmosphere of uncertainty and strangeness. Landscapes and objects are constantly changing and being transformed: a rock becomes a battleship; a mountain takes on the appearance of a cathedral; space loses its continuity; and strange shapes arise out of the void; language acquires an autonomous logic, and loses all intelligibility. The protagonists, witnesses of this cosmic disorder, show neither surprise nor curiosity, but tirelessly repeat the same ritual and absurd gestures. It is impossible not to recognize the methods of surrealism, adapted to the comic strip.

Krazy Kat was created in 1911 and was first called *Krazy Kat and Ignatz*, (also *Krazy Kat and I. Mouse* (Horn, 1996, 169)) but after 1913 was known simply as *Krazy Kat* (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 35). Couperie and Horn also mention Milt Gross and Rube Goldberg in addition to Herriman as artists who experimented with the language of the comics (1968, 35). They also include Elzie Segar, who they place between Herriman’s *Krazy Kat* and Rube Goldberg’s and Milt Gross’s works. Elzie Segar created a strip called *Thimble Theatre* in 1919, whose most famous character Popeye was added to the strip ten years later in 1929 (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 39 and 69).

Pulitzer and Hearst's rivalry continued in the background and this affected the comic strips as well (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 39). In 1912 Rudolph Dirks, the creator of *The Katzenjammer Kids* left Hearst's newspaper *New York Journal* for Pulitzer's *New York World*, which displeased Hearst so much that the case was taken to court. Dirks was allowed to continue his strip under a new name in Pulitzer's paper, whereas Hearst's newspaper retained the right to the same characters and the original title: *The Katzenjammer Kids*. This meant that there were now two versions of the same strip with different names: *The Katzenjammer Kids* and *Hans and Fritz* (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 39). According to Couperie and Horn, The First World War affected the content of these two versions, because Americans were fighting the Germans. *Hans and Fritz* became *The Captain and the Kids* and *The Katzenjammer Kids* became *The Shenanigan Kids* and the main characters became Irish. After the war *The Shenanigan Kids* returned to its original title, but *The Captain and the Kids* kept its new name (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 39).

According to Couperie and Horn, the first comic strip to achieve international fame was *Bringing Up Father* by George McManus, which began in 1913 and continued until McManus's death in 1954 (1968, 45). In *100 Years of Newspaper Comics*, John A. Lent says that the comic is about an immigrant worker couple, Jiggs and Mary who come into money. The wife, Mary, wants to use the money to move up in society, but Jiggs simply wants to live life as it used to be, and this leads to humorous situations (Horn, 1996, 65-66). One of the main reasons that helped make the strip known elsewhere was the syndicate system that was growing at the time (Couperie and Horn 1968, 45):

The syndicates were distributing agencies that served dozens and sometimes hundreds of publications. The first genuine syndicate, The International News Service, was established by Hearst in 1912; in 1914 this gave birth to King Features Syndicate which was followed several years later by the Chicago Tribune-Daily News Syndicate, the United Feature Syndicate (a subsidiary of United Press International), and numerous others on a smaller scale.

According to Couperie and Horn, the syndicates helped the cartoonists earn more money for

their work and spread their strips to far larger audiences. They add that: “However, it also imposed sometimes excessive limitations on the freedom of expression of the cartoonists, who, in their desire to reach the widest possible audience, selected their themes with a view to displeasing no one” (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 45). As I will discuss later, the syndicates are still the main operators when it comes to newspaper comic strips. In fact United Feature Syndicate and King Features Syndicate are still the largest syndicates in America with strips such as *Dilbert* and *Pearls Before Swine* with United Feature and *Beetle Bailey*, *Zits*, and *The Phantom* with King Features.

Since the cartoonists wanted their comic strips to appeal to the largest possible audience, they chose to focus on the family (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 45). There were many strips about the family, and in Couperie and Horn’s opinion, not all of them were very good. They mention an innovative strip called *Gasoline Alley* in which for the first time, the characters grew older with time (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 49). They also mention Frank Willard’s *Moon Mullins*, which began in 1923, and which Couperie and Horn say was a satire of family life and a black comedy (1968, 49).

During the 1930s, the adventure strip became popular. According to Couperie and Horn, *Tarzan* was the first genuinely modern strip and it first appeared in 1929 (1968, 57). It was very popular, but it was in danger when the cartoonist Harold Foster stopped drawing *Tarzan*. United Features Syndicate hired Burne Hogarth to draw *Tarzan* which in Couperie and Horn’s opinion was a very good decision: “Hogarth’s ‘Tarzan,’ the creation of a rare genius, marks one of the supreme moments of the comic strip” (1968, 57).

Another important adventure strip, which began at the same time with *Tarzan*, was *Buck Rogers* (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 57):

In this series, which was written and adapted by Philip Nowlan from his novel *Armageddon 2419 A.D.*, and drawn by Dick Calkins, we are immediately propelled into the future. Its hero, like Calkins a former United States Air Force lieutenant, is transported into the twenty-fifth century, where he battles his mortal

enemy and rival, “Killer Kane,” on land and sea, and in space. Kane’s dream is to conquer the entire world and lure away from Buck Rogers his sweetheart, the tender, trembling Wilma. This strip already contains the complete panoply characteristic of the science fiction genre: space rockets, death-ray guns, and interplanetary expeditions.

According to Couperie and Horn, it was the success of *Tarzan* and *Buck Rogers* that convinced syndicates that the future of the comic strip was in adventure strips (1968, 57).

The adventure strip expanded its themes from jungles and space into police themes. In 1931, *Dick Tracy* was created by Chester Gould. A few years later more adventure strips were introduced such as: *Secret Agent X-9*, *Jungle Jim* and *Flash Gordon*. Couperie and Horn mention Milton Caniff as one of the best cartoonists of the time and *Terry and the Pirates* as Caniff’s most famous work (1968, 65).

In the 1930s the comic book also was invented (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 65):

The first genuine comic book usually defined as an individual magazine, printed in color, about 7½ by 10¼ inches in size - was born in 1933. Entitled *Funnies On Parade*, it was distributed as a promotion stunt by The Procter & Gamble Company. This edition met with great success, which encouraged the Eastern Color Printing Co. to produce, in May, 1934, the first commercial comic book, *Famous Funnies*. At first the comic books merely reproduced the series that appeared in the newspapers. The first original comic book, *New Fun*, appeared in 1935, and contained a variety of humorous stories. But it was the adventure story, for the most part plagiarized from contemporary comic strips, which “made” the comic books.

In January 1937 a comic book named *Detective Comics* was devoted to a single hero and in June of 1938, Superman first appeared in *Action Comics* (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 65).

The Second World War had a much greater impact on comics than the First. Whereas during the First World War the comic strips were affected only superficially, for example the *Katzenjammer Kids* changing its name, the Second World War brought about more substantial changes, both for the strips and their creators (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 83). Even before the United States entered the war, cartoonists made their characters take part (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 83):

While some comic strip heroes joined the R.A.F., the Canadian Army, or the

Foreign Legion in order to fight the 'Huns', others who remained behind in the States engaged in an active and sometimes virulent pro-Allied propaganda, often in direct opposition to the newspapers that carried them.

Strips whose characters took part in the war include Milton Caniff's *Terry and the Pirates* and Ham Fisher's *Joe Palooka*. *Dick Tracy* and *Secret Agent X-9* fought against spies, and even *Tarzan*: "obliterated a Nazi commando who was just about to establish a secret base in Africa" (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 83). New strips also appeared, and, for example, Milton Caniff's *Male Call* was created especially for the soldiers. The characters were not the only ones who fought in the war, however. Cartoonist Bert Christman joined the navy air force and was killed over Burma. Alex Raymond, the cartoonist who drew *Jungle Jim* served as a public relations officer after he was recalled as a captain in the Marines (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 87). However, not all comics during the war were war adventures.

After the war, the strip was in trouble. According to Couperie and Horn: "the humorous strips were no longer amusing; the adventure strips seemed to have lost their spirit. It is understandable that after a conflict that had cost 30 million human lives, humorists found it a bit difficult to be funny" (1968, 91). Size reduction of the daily strips in newspapers brought additional problems for the makers of comic strips (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 91). The newspapers made the artists squeeze their strips into smaller spaces, which made each panel smaller and affected the detail in which drawings could be made. After all the war adventures, cartoonists Milton Caniff, Burne Hogarth and Alex Raymond wanted to take the adventure strip in a new direction (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 91). Burne Hogarth created *Drago*, Milton Caniff created *Steve Canyon* and Alex Raymond created *Rip Kirby* in 1946 (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 91):

Like Raymond a former Marine commander, who has become a private detective upon his return to civilian life, *Rip Kirby* does not depend solely on his physical prowess to resolve the difficult cases handed to him. He likes intellectual pleasures, plays chess, and can enjoy from a connoisseur's viewpoint both the complex harmonies of contemporary music and the heady aroma of a brandy from a good year. . . . With "Rip Kirby," Alex Raymond deliberately attempted to

present the intellectual as hero (in contrast to the trend of contemporary literature).

The men, each on their own wanted to create something different, but because the public did not want to be challenged intellectually, the cartoonists returned to previous formulas (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 93). Despite the attempt to revive the adventure genre, the adventure strip continued its decline. The three men's efforts were not wasted, however, since, according to Couperie and Horn, their discoveries opened paths for other artists (1968, 93).

In 1946, the National Cartoonists Society was founded. Cartoonists created it for "the protection and defense of their artistic as well as professional interests", but in spite of it, the comic strip was declining (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 93). As the comic strip declined, comics were also drawing negative attention towards themselves. According to Couperie and Horn, comics had been attacked numerous times ever since they were created. They say that before the First World War comics had been accused of "sowing disrespect and insubordination in the minds of children by their glorification of brazen, anarchistic rascals like the Yellow Kid or the Katzenjammer Kids, and of being a waste of time and attention for their young readers" (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 103). After the Second World War comics were blamed for the rise in juvenile delinquency. They were accused of corrupting the youth. The argument was epitomized in Fredric Wertham's book *The Seduction of the Innocent* which was published in 1954. After the controversy, the comics industry created a code to evaluate the content of comics prior to publishing. Syndicates were alarmed by the controversy and, according to Couperie and Horn they subjected the cartoonists to severe censorship (1968, 103). I will discuss the topic of censorship in comics more in the following chapter.

Couperie and Horn state that because of the strict censorship that followed the controversy "some artists, like Burne Hogarth, definitively abandoned the comic strip, while others were content to serve up to their readers an inoffensive gruel" (Couperie and Horn,

1968, 103). In the early 1950s, the comic strip was in a state of depression that had not been seen before, and some were already expecting the comic strip's demise (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 103).

However, the comic strip did not just simply degenerate and die. A man named Walt Kelly, who had previously worked for Walt Disney studios, created a comic strip called *Pogo* which would "revolutionize the style and content of the American comic strip" (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 103). *Pogo* was set in the Okefenokee swamps in Georgia and it featured numerous talking animal characters. The animals commented on current events and American politics. According to *100 Years of American Newspaper Comics* Kelly had more than six hundred characters in the swamp (Horn, 1996, 244-255). Couperie and Horn give Walt Kelly a great deal of credit for reviving the comic strip (1968, 107):

Walt Kelly, a philosopher even more than an artist, was the first to deal with the great moral, social, and political questions of his age. This won him many enemies (including Senator Joseph McCarthy, whom he attacked violently in 1952, depicting him in the guise of a jackal), but it also won him the respect and admiration of the intellectuals, thereby contributing to the rehabilitation of the comic strip.

In 1950 Charles Schulz created *Peanuts*, which further helped the rise of the intellectual comic strip. Couperie and Horn list Johnny Hart's *B.C.* as a representative of this group too, as well as Jules Feiffer's *Feiffer*. According to Couperie and Horn (1968, 109):

Feiffer's universe is the blackest and most depressing ever depicted by the comic strip. Drifting young men, neurotic young women, lovers who are strangers to each other, introduce us to a dehumanized world in which all communication and exchange of ideas are impossible, in which nothing happens and nothing is done. Like robots, the protagonists come and pour out, in plaintive, toneless voices, the account of their disappointments, the sum of their misfortunes. . . . A parody of a parody, "Feiffer" can claim unchallenged the title of "anticomic strip".

These days, however, the internet provides much worse in the form of *Cyanide and Happiness*, among others.

According to Couperie and Horn, during the 1940s and the 1950s many old cartoonists retired and died, which had a great impact on the traditional humor, and especially adventure

strips (1968, 113). During this time soap opera strips started appearing as well, the most famous of which is *Mary Worth* which began already in 1932, but which received its final form only in 1947 after having gone through several artist and name changes (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 109). According to *a History of the Comic Strip*, the 1950s and 60s were a time of renaissance for the American comic strip.

These days, however, the newspaper comic strip is not doing as well as it did in the past. New comic strips have appeared from time to time, but older strips dominate the newspapers. Many old strips such as *Beetle Bailey* and *B.C.* are still being published. These old strips occupy the comics pages and do not leave space for new ones. Stephan Pastis, the creator of *Pearls Before Swine* mentions in one of his treasuries that he is concerned about the aging readership of newspapers. He says that “One worrisome topic for a lot of syndicated cartoonists is the lack of young people reading the newspaper. Of course, having a comics page from the 1920s probably doesn’t help” (Pastis, 2008, 35). His comment also reflects the problem of old strips. Moreover, newspapers have further reduced the available space for comic strips, which limits the cartoonists’ artistic freedom.

2.2 Comics and Censorship

In this chapter I will expand upon some of the topics I mentioned in the previous chapter. Probably one of the most important factors that affected the content of comics after the Second World War was the comics code. The comics code was mainly focused on the comic book instead of the comic strip, but as Couperie and Horn mention, the controversy that led to the creation of the comics code alarmed the syndicates that distributed comic strips to newspapers, and they started censoring the content of the comic strips as well (1968, 103). Moira Davison Reynolds claims the same in *Comic Strip Artists in American Newspapers*

1945-1980. She says that “The syndicate exerted censorship over the cartoonist; for instance references to divorce, racial characteristics and religion were forbidden, and controversial matters such as politics were banned” (Reynolds, 2003, 4). These restrictions appear to be even stricter than those of the comics code. In the comics code it says that “Divorce shall not be treated humorously nor presented as desirable” (Nyberg, 1998, 168), but according to Reynolds, in the comic strip, even referring to divorce was forbidden in the newspaper strip. In the following I will discuss the comics code more closely.

The comic book, which was born in the early thirties, became popular later in that decade and in the early 1940s. However, it did not receive much criticism until after the war, since “The American public had more pressing concerns” (Nyberg, 1998, 18). After the war comic books were linked to a rise in juvenile delinquency, which led to people worrying that comic books were corrupting children. According to Nyberg, attacks on the comic book from Sterling North and other critics in the early 1940s helped the public form the opinion that comic books were exclusively children’s entertainment (1998, 4). Newspaper comic strips were appreciated more, since the fact that they appeared in newspapers gave them a different kind of legitimacy, compared to comic books, which were mostly purchased by children themselves (Nyberg, 1998, 5). Before linking comics with juvenile delinquency, comic books were seen as corrupting children’s reading habits. Adults were concerned that children would not appreciate “good” literature after reading comic books, and that they would not read books anymore (Nyberg, 1998, 4). According to Nyberg, even the early comic strip received similar attention to that of the post-war comic book (1998, 2):

The emphasis on vulgar humor (often featuring the misbehavior of urban slum children) combined with the crude production values of the time offended the literary and artistic sensibilities of the middle class. The disrespect for authority and the cruelty of the pranks depicted in the strips also concerned parents and educators, who worried about the impact that such depictions would have on children, and groups in several cities organized a highly focused protest against the comics.

The comic books that caused the most alarm among parents and other adults were crime and horror comic books. As the superhero comics lost their appeal after the war, comic book publishers sought other topics. They chose themes from pulp fiction and crime and horror were among them. While the violence in superhero comics was placed in fantastic settings, the crime and horror comics could be quite realistic and the violence quite graphic (Nyberg, 1998, 17). As comic books were seen as children's entertainment, parents and other groups reacted and thought the comic book industry had gone too far.

There were community decency crusades that were usually organized by church groups, women's clubs and so on. They urged local newsstands that sold comics to remove "bad" comics from their selections. They were often very successful (Nyberg, 1998, 23). Nyberg notes that there was no organized national effort against comic books, and that the decency campaigns operated in isolation from each other. There were, however, two groups that produced lists of comics they approved and disapproved of, which the decency crusaders used in their own efforts. These groups were the National Office of Decent Literature, which later became known as the National Organization for Decent Literature, and the Committee on the Evaluation of Comic Books in Cincinnati. The former was a Catholic Church organization and the latter's work was publicized by *Parents' Magazine* (Nyberg, 1998, 23). According to Nyberg, even the police in communities used these lists to clear newsstands of objectionable material, even though it was not obscene according to state law (Nyberg, 1998, 26).

The man who is said to be the main reason comics were "cleaned up" in the fifties, however, was Fredric Wertham. In his article "Comics... Very Funny", published in 1948, Wertham claimed that children were imitating the violence and crimes they saw in the comics (Nyberg, 1998, 34). In the same year the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers announced they would adopt a code that would regulate the content of comics. In the end, however, for different reasons only about a third of publishers supported the code, and by

1954 there were only three publishers in the organization (Nyberg, 1998, 35). This was the first attempt at self-regulation. According to Nyberg, Wertham wanted legislation that would ban the sale of comic books for children under the age of sixteen. There were those, however, in addition to the comic book industry, who were afraid that censorship would lead to further censorship, and that self regulation was the best way forward.

In 1954, Wertham published a collection of his articles and lectures on mass media violence in a book called *Seduction of the Innocent* (Nyberg, 1998, 50). The book drew on case studies of children Wertham had dealt with, and it also contained single panels of comic books that were taken out of context (Nyberg, 1998, 50-51). In 1954, the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency conducted an investigation on the comic book industry, and Wertham was a consultant for the committee (Nyberg, 1998, 53-54). During the three days of hearings, there were twenty-two witnesses (Nyberg, 1998, 53). Wertham himself, in addition to another psychiatrist, Harris Peck, witnessed against crime comics, that they were a bad influence. Two other expert witnesses, Gunnar Dybwad and Lauretta Bender, on the other hand, stated that there was little evidence that comics were harmful for children (Nyberg, 1998, 59).

In the end, the Senate Subcommittee did not come to any conclusion on comic books and juvenile delinquency and did not propose any legislation (Nyberg, 1998, 83). Nyberg continues (1998, 83):

the hearings themselves prompted the industry to do what several years of criticism and threats at the local and state level failed to do – adopt a strict self-regulatory code to which most of the publishers would adhere. The industry formed the Comics Magazine Association of America in fall 1954 and implemented a code.

In *Seal of Approval: the History of the Comics Code*, Nyberg lists the content of the code in 1954 and its two revisions, first in 1971 and again in 1989. In the 1954 code, in addition to general Standards, there are rules covering dialogue, religion, costume and

marriage and sex, as well as code for advertising matter. For example, the code forbids the use of profanity and vulgarity and encourages the use of good grammar where possible. Nudity is prohibited, ridicule of any religious or racial group is prohibited, divorce is not allowed to be treated humorously and “respect for parents, the moral code, and for honorable behavior shall be fostered” (Nyberg, 1998, 167-168). Crimes cannot be shown in a way that creates sympathy for the criminal, policemen and other government agencies must not be portrayed in a way that creates disrespect for authority. “Scenes of excessive violence shall be prohibited. Scenes of brutal torture, excessive and unnecessary knife and gun play, physical agony, gory and gruesome crime shall be eliminated”; “In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds” and “females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities” (Nyberg, 1998, 166, 168). These are just some of the rules in the 1954 code.

As I mentioned above, the code has been revised twice. Nyberg states that: “However, each change in the code reinforced the idea that comic books were intended for the child reader and should contain nothing that would be inappropriate for young readers. Restrictions on violence, sex, and language, while modified, remained at the heart of the code” (Nyberg, 1998, 129). In the 1989 revision the code was changed so that not all comics had to go through the review process, and comics could be published even without the seal of approval. In Nyberg’s opinion, this means that publishers had started admitting that comics are not just for children anymore (1998, 153-154).

Self-regulation is not the only form of censorship the comic strip and comics have faced. In his book *Free Expression and Censorship in America*, Herbert N. Foerstel claims that during the Second World War there was an Office of Censorship “to control the dissemination of military information” (1997, 171). Foerstel says that on April 14, 1945, a Superman comic strip mentioned an “atom smasher”. The syndicate that distributed the comic

strip was contacted by the Office of Censorship saying that: “any discussion of atomic energy should be discouraged for the remainder of the war”(Foerstel, 1997, 173). The comic strip was changed and any references to atom smashing were removed.

As we have seen, there has been self-regulation as well as genuine censorship. The rules on what can be printed in a comic strip still apply, and there are people in newspapers who edit the content of comic strips. The next chapter will deal with the stages a comic strip goes through before it is published in an American newspaper.

3. PUBLISHING IN THE TWO MEDIA

In this chapter I will discuss the differences in publishing comic strips on the internet and publishing them in newspapers. It is important to look at each individual medium of publishing separately, because they are very different from each other and they are governed by different rules and freedoms. After making this hypothesis, I have found reassurance for my claims in Norman Fairclough's *Critical Discourse Analysis*. Fairclough argues that an important principle for critical discourse analysis is that: "analysis of texts should not be artificially isolated from analysis of institutional and discoursal practices within which texts are embedded" (Fairclough, 1995, 9). He goes on to clarify the following: "This principle would mean for instance that in analyzing the text of a TV programme one should also have regard to the routines and processes of programme production, and the circumstances and practices of audience reception" (Fairclough, 1995, 9). This is exactly what I have based my hypothesis on: because newspapers and the internet are different kinds of media, and because they have different conventions in publishing, their differences deserve and need to be taken into consideration. I will begin the following section with the newspaper.

3.1 Newspapers

Couperie and Horn mention that before the syndicates, cartoonists were employed by a newspaper and their comic strips would appear only in that paper (Couperie and Horn, 1968, 129). The syndicate system changed things, and it is still active to this day. For a cartoonist to get his comic strip published in a newspaper, he has to go through different stages. As the submission instructions for King Features Syndicate reveal, the road to possible success for

the comic strip starts when the cartoonist gathers a selection of his best strips and sends them to the syndicate. According to King Features, the syndicate chooses which strips it thinks it can sell. King Features alone receives around 5000 offerings a year, of which it chooses only three for syndication (King Features Website). After choosing the best cartoonists, the syndicate signs a deal with them to keep writing strips regularly. From there on: “the syndicate edits, packages, promotes, prints, sells and distributes the comic strip to newspapers and other outlets in the United States and around the world on an ongoing basis. In short, a syndicate is responsible for bringing the cartoons from the cartoonist to the public” (King Features Website).

As mentioned above in describing King Features Syndicate’s submission instructions, the syndicate edits the strips. However, the syndicate is not the final editor. Newspapers themselves have editors in charge of the comics section. According to his article “They Do More Than Peruse the Funnies” in *Editor & Publisher*, David Astor says that newspaper editors who are responsible for the comics sections: “meet with syndicate salespeople, decide which comics to buy or drop, check comics for controversial content, respond to reader complaints, conduct reader surveys, and more” (Astor, 1994, 34). If an editor decides a comic strip might be too offensive or not fit to print for other reasons, they have the power to prevent it from being printed in the paper. According to Astor’s article, if this happens, an old strip by the same cartoonist is printed instead (Astor, 1994, 34). The newspapers are very careful and try to avoid reader complaints.

Newspapers are also very sensitive about the language used in the comics they carry. This is one of the factors that limit the content of newspaper comics. According to Dave Astor’s article “Serious Discussion About the Funnies” in *Editor & Publisher*, the comics pages in newspapers are subjected to even closer editing when it comes to language than other sections of the newspaper or other media, because the comics pages are seen to be for

children, although it is mostly the adults who read them on weekdays (Astor, 2000, 24). Stephan Pastis the creator of *Pearls Before Swine*, mentions in a comment on one of his strips that he cannot use the word “porn” on the comics page of a newspaper (Pastis, 2006, 29). Commenting on another strip where a burrito is swearing in symbols only, and does not use any letters for the swear word, Pastis states that: “Originally, it said ‘#*\$%ing’, but using the last three letters like that too closely telegraphed a certain swear word, so I changed it. Using the word ‘#*\$%ing’ on the American comics page is a good way of not staying on the American comics page” (Pastis, 2006, 20). These cases are a good example of how sensitive newspapers are when it comes to language.

The amount of space reserved for comics is limited in newspapers as well. Many newspapers rely on old strips and new ones do not appear very often. Old strips that keep appearing year after year, even though the original cartoonist has passed away or stopped making the strip altogether, prevent new strips from getting published. The syndicates have often found new makers for old strips that have lost their original artists. If we take a look at the strips that King Features publish, we can see that many of them are old ones. The list of strips syndicated by King Features includes, among others, *Mary Worth*, *The Phantom* and even *The Katzenjammer Kids*. Lev Grossman has very strong opinions on comics in newspapers and on the internet. In his article “New Zip for the Old Strip”, he says that (Grossman, 2007, 50-51):

Comic strips in newspapers are dying. They’re starved for space, crushed down to a fraction of their original size. They’re choked creatively by ironfisted syndicates and the 1950s-era family values that newspapers impose. But on the Web there are no space restrictions. Need I add that the same goes for family values.

3.2 The Internet

As I have mentioned above, the comic strip is under strict scrutiny before it gets printed in a

newspaper. The strip goes through the syndicates' screening as well as the newspaper editors' judgment. That is a double dose of editing, before the strip reaches its audience. On the Internet, however, the cartoonist has much less to endure. All the cartoonist needs is a website and he can get his work published. If the cartoonist has an idea, he does not have to ask anyone for permission, he can simply upload the comic on his web page. The internet-cartoonist does not have to worry about censorship either, or letters from angry readers. The cartoonist can, of course, get angry feedback from his or her fans, but it is easier for people to avoid a website than a whole page in a newspaper, if they find the content inappropriate or offensive. Also, the feedback is more direct, since many comics have a comments section, and the cartoonist can create a closer relationship with his or her readers. On the internet the audience selects the content they want to read and they are not limited to comic strips someone else has selected for them.

On the internet, there are no space restrictions either, as Lev Grossman mentions. He goes on to say that "The Web also frees comics from the iron cage of the traditional strip format" (Grossman, 2007, 50-51). In his article Grossman also quotes Mike Krahulik, one of the two makers of *Penny Arcade*, the man who draws it, who says that there is no reason why their comic should consist of three panels that are located close to each other, although that is the way the comic usually is structured. Krahulik says that *Penny Arcade* can have full-page comic book style layouts as well as regular strips, if the makers of the comic so wished. There are no reasons that prevent them from doing so (Grossman, 2007, 50-51). Grossman adds that: "Webcomics aren't shackled to the grinding schedule of the daily paper either; *Penny Arcade* publishes three times a week. And *Penny Arcade* is always in color. On the Web, every day can be Sunday" (2007, 50-51).

Grossman's point about cartoonists' visual liberties on the internet is a good one. In newspapers, usually only the Sunday comic strips have been printed in color. Dave Astor

notes in “Serious Discussion About the Funnies” that daily comic strips have been colored as well, and that the number of colored dailies had grown slowly. According to Astor’s article, cartoonists such as Mort Walker, the creator of *Beetle Bailey* like the addition of color to their daily strips, but others, however, are against it. The ones who oppose coloring dailies claim that daily strips are drawn to be black and white, and that colorizing changes the effect (Astor, 2000, 25). On the internet, the cartoonists do not have to worry about other people affecting the way their comics will look. If a cartoonist wants his or her comic to be black and white, it stays black and white.

Although a webcomic is easier to publish, syndication provides a guaranteed audience for a strip, once the syndicate has been able to sell the work to newspapers. On the Internet the possible audience can be counted in the millions, in theory the whole world is the audience, but the fact that there are thousands of other comics out there reduces the strip’s possibility of becoming a success a great deal. The amount of content on the internet does not help new, previously unknown cartoonists, find an audience. However, there is a significant amount of co-operation between internet comic strip cartoonists. Many post links to their friends’ comics’ pages and sometimes cartoonists do guest strips for each other’s comics.

In many ways the internet can be seen as a new beginning for the comic strip. In Lev Grossman’s opinion, internet comics and their writing resemble early newspaper comics such as *Krazy Kat* and *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (Grossman, 2007, 50-51). The internet gives artists freedom of expression, far greater than they can achieve in newspapers. The culture on the internet is different and the audience is different as well. Usually internet users are younger than the people who read newspapers. This is why I think it is justified to expect that internet comics deal with topics such as death differently from the traditional newspaper comics.

4. HUMOR THEORY AND THEMES AND TOPICS IN COMICS

In this chapter I wish to discuss the functions of humor as well as some theories of why jokes or something like comic strips make us laugh. I will also take a brief look at how internet comics and newspaper comics differ in their themes and topics. I will begin with humor theory and use it to discuss the comics.

4.1 Functions of Humor and Incongruity

From a psychological point of view, humor has many functions. In his book *Personality and Sense of Humor*, Avner Ziv lists five functions of humor that are: the aggressive function, sexual function, social function, humor as a defense mechanism, and the intellectual function of humor. Even though all of the comic strips I have studied are mainly entertainment, they can serve other functions as well.

Ziv mentions that aggressive humor is a way for us to gain superiority that: “humor that points its arrows at a person of high position is actually an expression of aggression toward him” (Ziv, 1984, 8). He goes on to say that aggressive humor is a socially acceptable way to release feelings of aggression and an antitaboo device (Ziv, 1984, 14). This is similar to what Sigmund Freud said about humor that: “one can make a person comic in order to make him become contemptible, to deprive him of his claim to dignity and authority” (Freud, 1960, 189).

Sexual humor, according to Ziv lets us deal with sex in a socially acceptable way (Ziv, 1984, 17). He also suggests that sexual humor is a way of enjoying sex without having it, that humor enriches our sexual experience (Ziv, 1984,19). On the other hand, he claims, sexual humor lets us deal with the frustrating and disappointing side of sex in a less serious manner

(Ziv, 1984, 25).

Ziv also suggests that humor can work as a social corrective. It can show things that need improving or changing in a ridiculous light, which helps people understand them and perhaps start working toward changing them for the better (Ziv, 1984, 39). Humor can also be used to treat the relations within a group (1984, 38).

Among other self defense mechanisms, such as self-disparaging humor, Ziv mentions black humor. He argues that: “The use of black humor enables a person to defend himself from things that frighten him. Through his laughter at those very things he tries to show himself that he isn’t afraid” (Ziv, 1984, 51). Of course, the biggest fear Ziv mentions is death, which I will be discussing more in later chapters.

Finally Ziv deals with the intellectual function of humor. He says that to find something humorous, we must understand the message. He continues that: “the intellectual activity that accompanies the production and enjoyment of humor represents the intellectual function of humor. Intellectual activity that leads to understanding causes enjoyment and satisfaction” (Ziv, 1984, 70). He then mentions incongruity which he sees as the “basis for understanding the intellectual aspects of humor” (1984, 72). Ziv also says that absurd situations are created by the incongruity of humor. He also mentions Koestler’s bisociative humor.

In *The Act of Creation* Arthur Koestler argues that “Humour depends primarily on its surprise effect: the bisociative shock” (Koestler, 1964, 91). Koestler talks about matrices and codes. He suggests that a code is, in a way, the rules of a game and a matrix is the allowed moves one can make in that game (Koestler, 1964, 40-42). He claims that: “When two independent matrices of perception or reasoning interact with each other the result. . . is either a *collision* ending in laughter, or their *fusion* in a new intellectual synthesis, or their *confrontation* in an aesthetic experience” (Koestler, 1964, 45). What Koestler means is that when someone makes a move that does not follow the rules of the game, the resulting shock

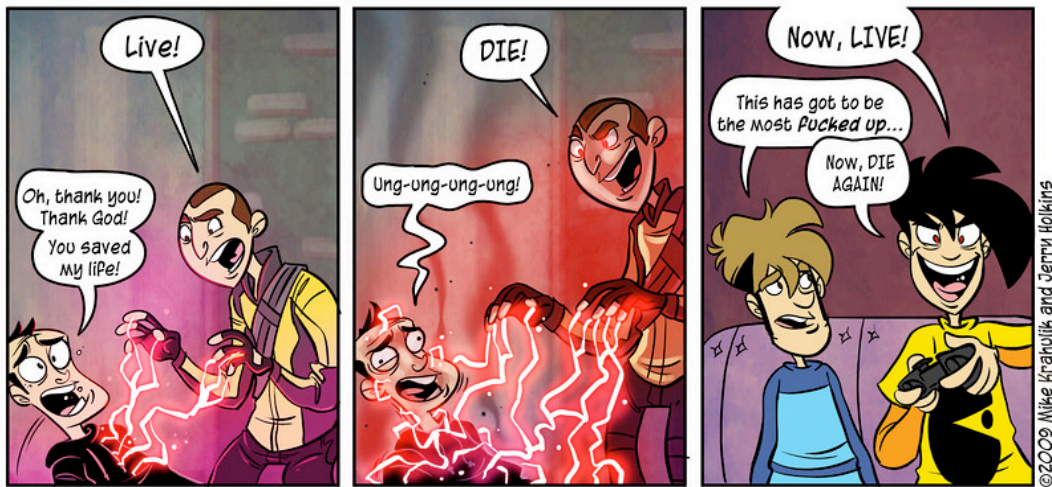
has the power to induce amusement and laughter. In comic strips especially, incongruity is often the cause for laughter.

In *On Humor*, Simon Critchley points out that for people to find something incongruous and amusing, they have to have an understanding of congruity, that they have to play by the same rules (Critchley, 2002, 4).

4.2 Themes and Topics in Comics

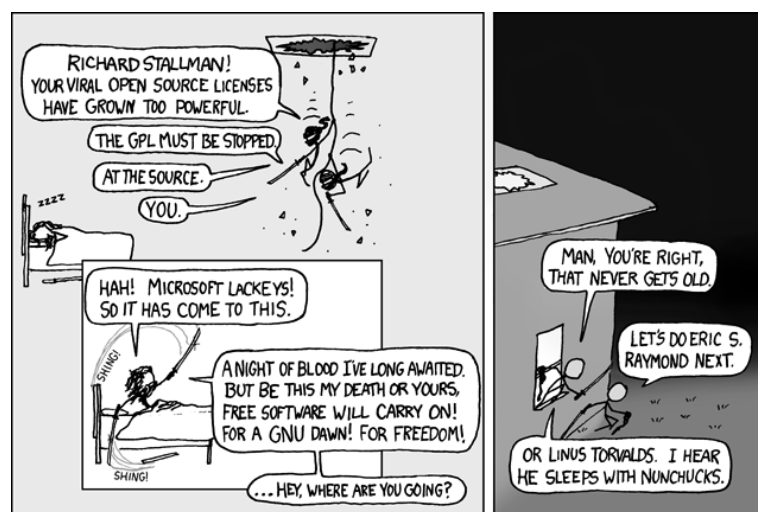
For a newspaper comic to gain a large audience, the theme or the main topic of the comic cannot be too specialized. As we can see in the newspaper comics I have chosen, such as *Garfield*, the comics focus mainly on life and ordinary things that most people can relate to on some level. *Calvin and Hobbes* deals with what it is like being a child, *Dilbert* deals with working in an office and so on and so forth. These are things that are familiar to most people and the jokes therefore are quite accessible for the majority of readers. Internet comics, however, often require some specialized knowledge to understand the joke, or at least to understand the whole joke.

Penny Arcade, for example, is a comic that mainly deals with video games and the digital world and often the reader will be lost if he or she does not have some previous knowledge of the topic. This is where the intellectual function of humor is evident. Even though the joke may work on many levels, to fully appreciate it, one must understand all aspects of the joke. The following strip which comments on the game “Infamous” where you have the power to both kill and heal people, is a good example of this (*Penny Arcade*, 25.5.2009):



Even though the message that human nature is easily corrupted when in possession of great power is evident here, the reader will not fully understand what game is being commented on unless he or she is familiar with video games.

XKCD is another comic which occasionally demands the reader to know some things to fully understand what the strip is about. This following strip is a good example. The reader will not fully understand what is going on if he does not know that Richard Stallman is an advocate for free software and the founder of the Free Software Foundation (*XKCD*, 19.2.2007):



Cyanide and Happiness does not focus on very specific topics, *Saturday Morning*

Breakfast Cereal (henceforth as *SMBC*) sometimes requires the reader to have some previous knowledge to understand what the joke is (*SMBC*, 23.6.2010):



A lucky break for John Venn.

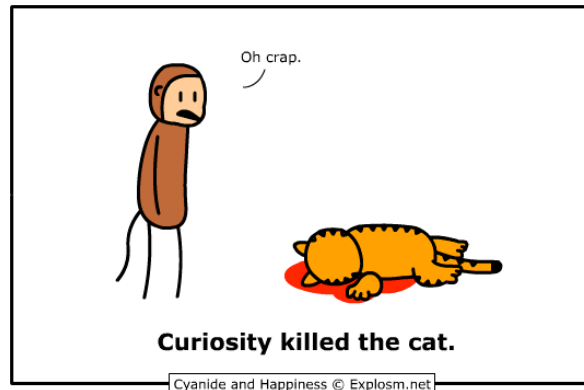
This is another good example of having to know what is being referred to in order to find the joke funny.

Compared to newspaper comics, internet comics often comment on more current events, because they are often written and drawn the same day or week they are published. For example *Penny Arcade* uses humor in an aggressive as well as social function, when it parodies, for example a news program that feeds on the fears of the public, although it mostly comments on video games and the digital world (9.2.2007):

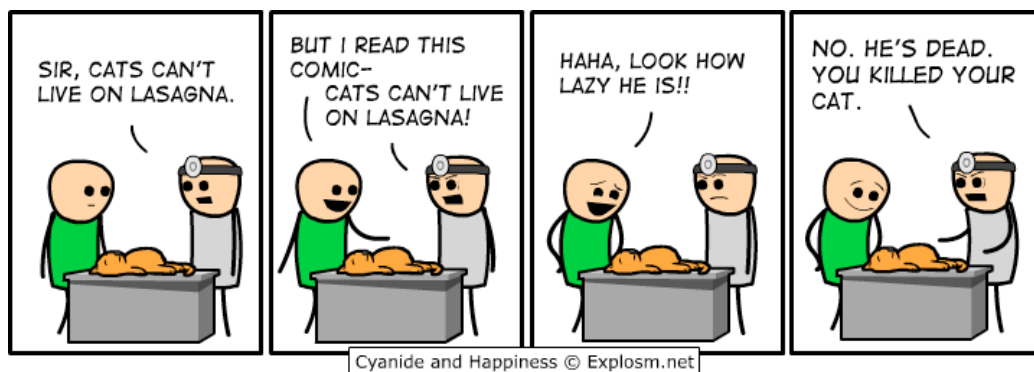


The function of this strip is clearly social corrective, but it also lets the creators of the comic deal with their frustration. This comic lets the reader feel superior to this type of reporting and the public who believes whatever the news tell them. As Avner Ziv mentions, jokes do not always fulfill only one function at a time, but sometimes many or all of them (Ziv, 1984, 80). This is a good example of that.

Internet comics also seem to rebel against their newspaper counterparts. Many internet comics comment on *Garfield* in some way. *Cyanide and Happiness* does this rather aggressively through a striped orange cat that is dead in a few strips, for example (13.6.2007).

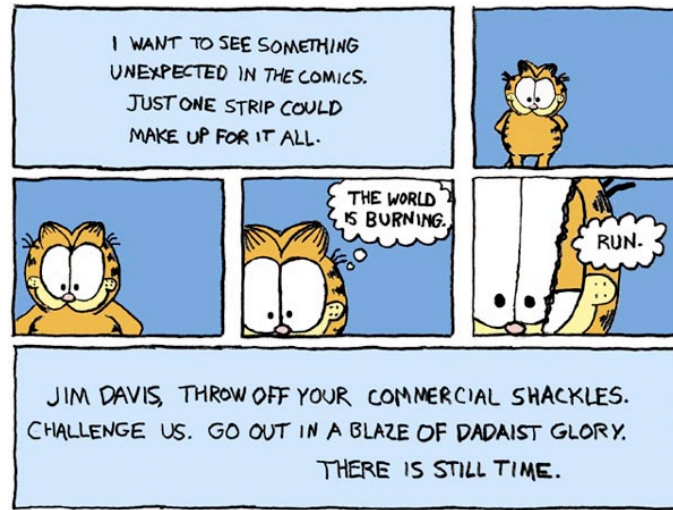


In another strip a man has brought his cat to the vet and thinks it is very lazy. The veterinarian on the other hand tells the man that cats do not eat lasagna, and that his cat is dead (*Cyanide and Happiness*, 1.10.2009):

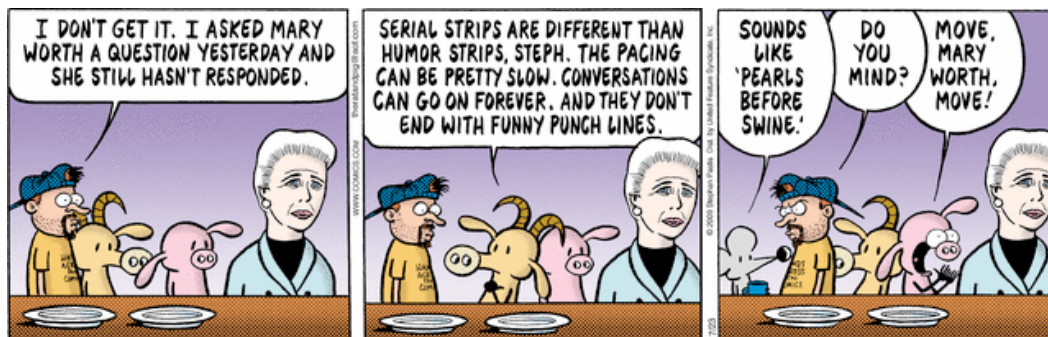


This is a clear comment on *Garfield* and it can be seen as an attack against old newspaper strips that repeat the same jokes from decade to decade. It can also be seen as a way to gain superiority over people who believe anything they see, even comics.

XKCD on the other hand has addressed *Garfield* and its creator, Jim Davis, directly in a strip. It is a straightforward comment on the repetitive nature of *Garfield* and the same jokes that appear in the strip (*XKCD*, 20.3.2006):



Even *Pearls Before Swine* which is a newspaper strip, although a newer one, has often commented and made fun of old strips that keep going for years and years and reserve the space in the comics pages so there is not much room left for new comic strips. Here he makes fun of *Mary Worth*, an old serial strip where the narrative is quite slow (*Pearls Before Swine*, 23.7.2009):



In addition to trying to gain superiority over an old comic, Pastis uses self-disparaging humor as well, when he makes fun of his own strip through Rat. *Pearls Before Swine* is a different kind of strip also in the way that it uses the creator as a character sometimes.

So, it seems that the internet comics as well as some of the newer newspaper strips are using aggressive humor to gain superiority over the old comics that will not go away and try to change the status quo among the world of comic strips.

5. TABOOS IN COMICS

In this chapter I will look more closely at some taboos that some comics avoid and others embrace. As I have mentioned above, newspaper comics have had strict rules as to what can be printed in an American newspaper and that limits artists to some extent. Also, to obtain as large an audience as possible, newspaper comic strip artists need to deal with topics and ideas that do not necessarily require the reader to have detailed knowledge of a specific field. The conservative nature of American newspapers makes the content on the comics pages shy away especially from things such as sex, religion and profanity, of which there is an abundance on the internet. In the following sections I will discuss these three things with examples, as well as violence and, eventually, death, my main subject of interest in this thesis.

5.1 Religion

When dealing with religion, cartoonists have to be careful if they do not want to offend their readers, because when it comes to newspapers, offensive strips may soon result in the comic's creator being out of work. Religion, especially Christianity, is a very sensitive topic in American culture and newspapers do not want to scare their readers away by offending them. The internet is not always as gentle as newspapers are. For example *SMBC* deals with religious and philosophical topics frequently, and even portrays God himself occasionally, as well as Jesus. I will now present some examples of strips of this kind from *SMBC*.



Fortunately, it turned out he was
sacrificing the heart to baby Jesus.

As we can see, the imagery in this comic strip (*SMBC*, 25.11.2007) is quite graphic and it brings forth the idea that crude, barbaric methods of worship are acceptable as long as you are doing it in the name of the correct faith. The image itself is not funny. Once you add the text, the relaxed absurdity of the situation, the incongruity makes us laugh. It makes religion seem ludicrous. Newspapers might feel quite uneasy with showing a heart being cut out of someone's chest and a priest accepting it, because they would be afraid of it offending people.

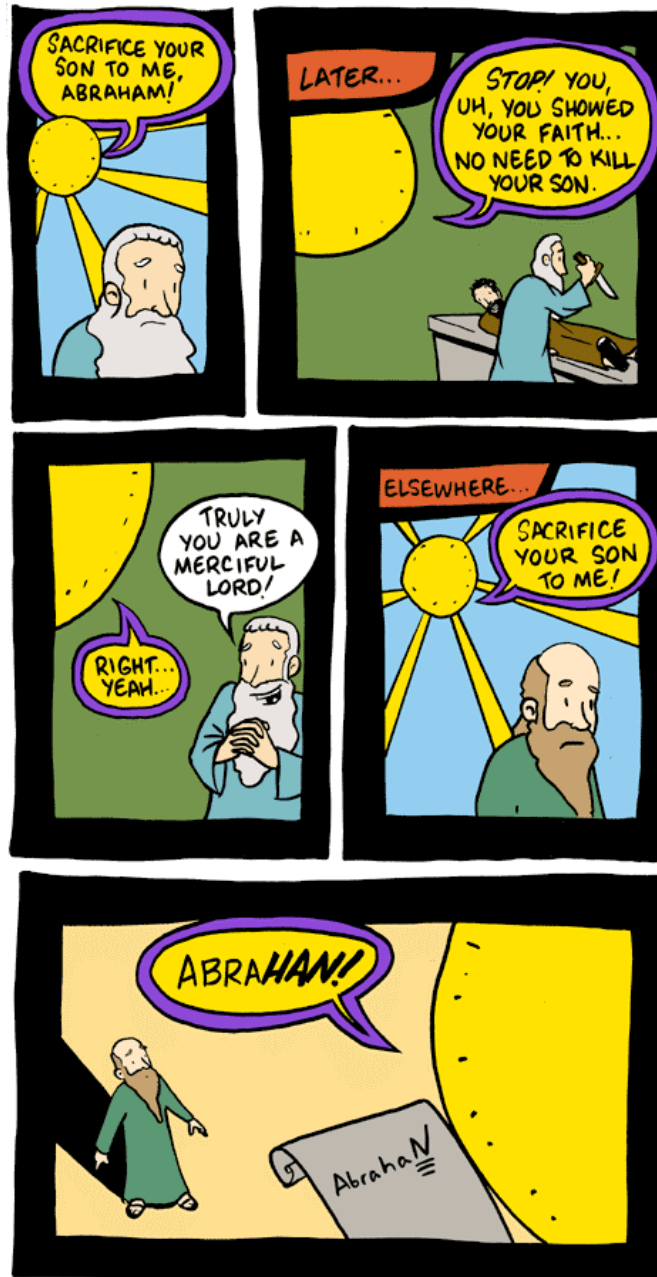
Jesus himself often appears in the comic, as in the following *SMBC* strip (13.6.2009):



According to the Bible, Jesus suffered and died on the cross for the sins of mankind, but in this strip he does not seem to take his task very seriously. It seems that for Jesus, hanging on the cross is just a game. The joke here is that Jesus behaves like a cheerleader who forms letters in the air with her arms, spelling, for example, the name of her team and trying to get the audience cheering. Since Jesus is nailed down from his hands, the only letter he can form

is the letter “t”. This might be offensive to some people. At least for people who take their religion very seriously.

In addition to Jesus, even God himself is pictured in the strip but not in human form.



This strip (*SMBC*, 10.10.2007) presents us with God who is not in the form of a human, but has human flaws. God makes a mistake which is not a divine quality. The strip also makes fun of a story from the Bible. In the story, God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son to Him, but only

a moment before Abraham is going to kill his son, God tells him he does not have to do it, and that He has seen proof that Abraham is so devoted to God that he would have sacrificed even his own son. The story shows that God is compassionate and reasonable, but this strip suggests that the reason for God to spare Abraham's son was not love and compassion, but simply a case of mistaken identity, that God had been talking to Abraham when it was Abraham whom he wanted to sacrifice his son.

SMBC appears to contain rather many strips featuring Jesus, God or religion in general. Here is one last example from *SMBC* that could be taken as quite a direct strike against religion itself (*SMBC*, 3.10.2007).

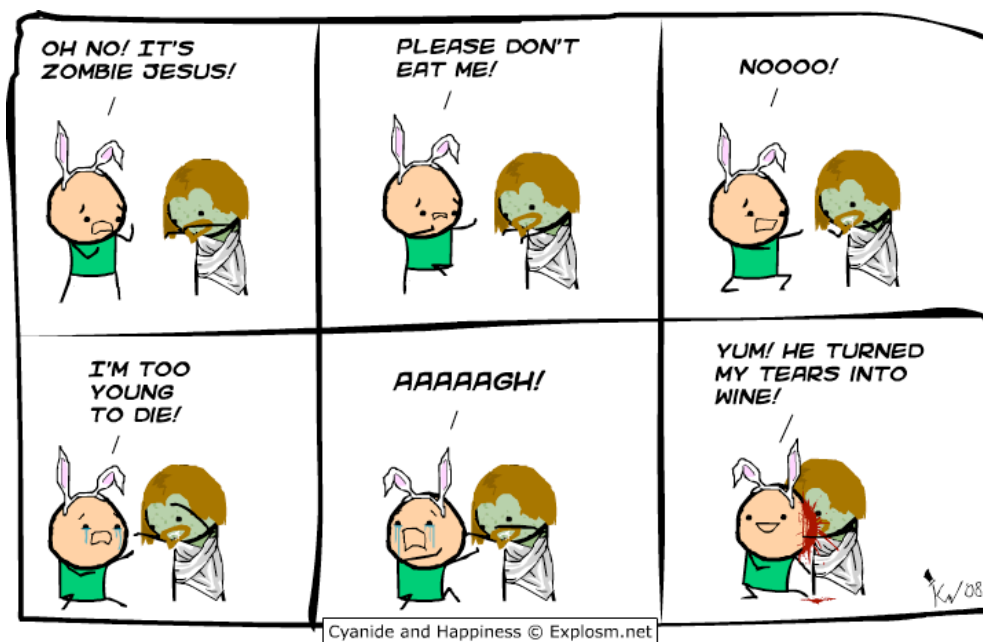


**When God was mathematically disproven in 2054,
the Vatican was forced to find a new source of income.**

As a comic that has many science themed strips, this could be seen as a representation of the artist's own personal views. Especially the makers of *SMBC* and *XKCD* seem to have a very scientific view of the world and religion is something they often comment on with their comics. In the comic above nuns have become obsolete since it has been proven that God

does not exist. The Vatican has decided to make money arranging for the nuns to fight animals in a setting that is similar to the Roman Colosseum, where Christians were sacrificed in Roman times. In this sense Christians have fallen from a place of power back under persecution, but this time it comes from within and for the sake of profit.

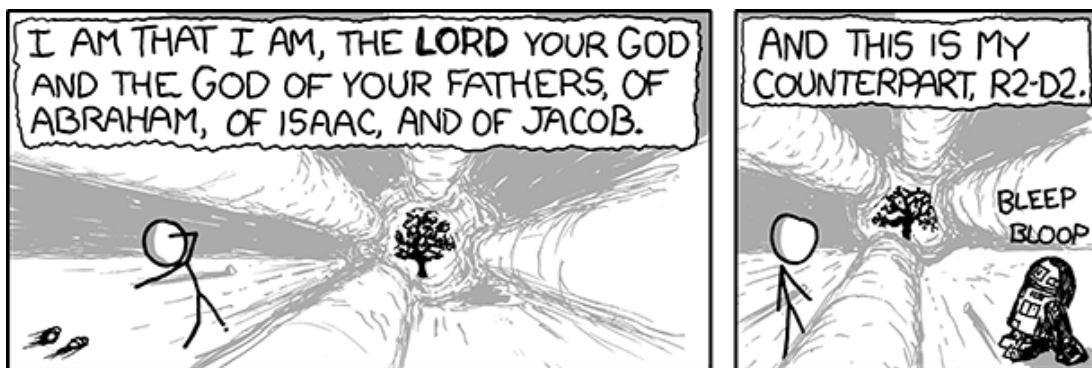
Even though other internet comics that I have chosen to examine do not have as many religion related strips as *SMBC*, they can still be found, and also found quite offensive. Such as the following Easter strip from *Cyanide and Happiness*:



Some might consider this strip (23.3.2008) blasphemous, but the style of *Cyanide and Happiness* is mostly offensive humor. In *Penny Arcade* Jesus usually comes to visit the main characters to play video games with them. The Jesus in this comic is not as offensive, but he is hardly humble and meek (4.8.2004).



The last internet comic about religion I want to mention is from *XKCD*. *XKCD* has many science related strips and its creator seems to have a scientific approach to looking at the world. The following strip might be deemed offensive if printed in a newspaper because it can be seen comparing Judeo-Christian religious mythology to Star Wars. It can be seen as saying that the stories in the Bible have no more value than a science fiction adventure (*XKCD*, 3.3.2010).



As I have shown in this chapter, the style in which religion is dealt with in these internet comics would very likely result in a ban from most American newspapers for these particular strips, apart from *Penny Arcade* if the language was cleaned. Religion does appear in newspaper comics, there is no denying that, but the approach is not as offensive as in these

strips that I have shown. For example *Dilbert* makes fun of religious fanatics through Dogbert who forms a cult to make money and to get people to worship him. In some of the newer strips Dilbert dresses up as God when he goes to the Vatican on business because his boss tells him to always dress one level better than the customer (17.6.2003).



In addition there is a storyline where there is a new worker called Jesus (pronounced hay-soos) who fixes Wally's eyesight and makes his hair grow back but eventually gets betrayed by Wally for forty shares of stock. In the end Jesus comes back as a consultant to save the workers' pensions. The approach in *Dilbert* seems to be very gentle and more respectful towards Christianity, whereas some of the examples above work in a more criticizing, even offensive manner. Dilbert's potentially blasphemous attire appears to result in some form of retribution from God, who in the next day's strip turns out to have been a man with a large hand who "thought it would be funny". It appears that the aggressive function of humor is definitely being utilized when it comes to internet comics and religion. It seems that the creators of these comics want to show religion in a ridiculous light.

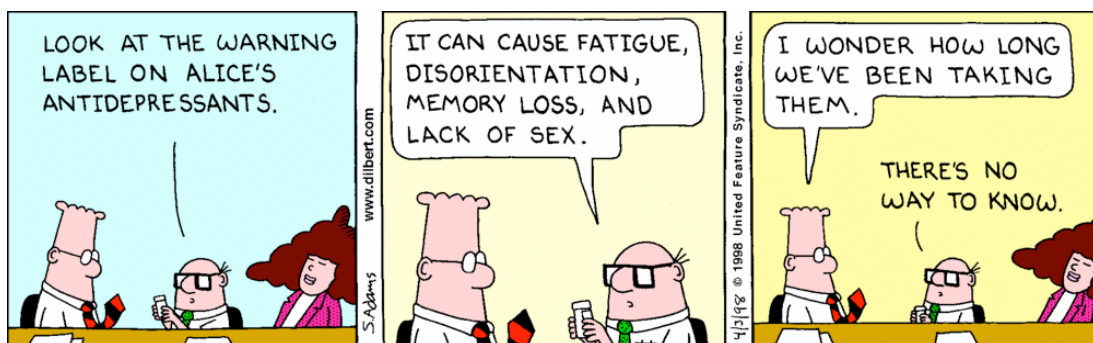
What is interesting, however, is that Judeo-Christianity is almost the only one being depicted in these strips. There are some Buddhist jokes in *SMBC*, and *Pearls Before Swine*, which seems to be the most daring of the newspaper strips I have chosen, mentions the fatwa a few times when it depicts Osama Bin Laden, but Judeo-Christianity is almost always the one in the spotlight.

5.2 Sex

Sex is another taboo that American newspapers take very seriously. Comic strips are not allowed to show sex, or nudity for that matter. Even though the British comics character Jane took her clothes off in the 1940s and tried to enter the American market, she was not very successful. An article in *Time* magazine from 1947 says that:

“Jane manages to get to bra and panties at least once a week in London’s tabloid Daily Mirror. Fleet Street agrees that she is the only strip that actually boosts a paper’s sales. Yet Jane flopped in the U.S. last year: ‘I’m afraid’, said a British syndicate salesman, ‘that the lady wears too little clothes for you papers’” (Time magazine, 25.8.1947).

As I have mentioned above, the comics pages in American newspapers are still mostly seen as the section meant for children and sexual content is not seen as proper reading material for children. Comics like *Dilbert* have references to sex, but not in a particularly erotic manner (3.4. 1998).



Here the engineers in *Dilbert* are described as quite bad at social relationships and therefore it is impossible for them to know whether their lack of sexual encounters is due to the pills they have been taking or whether it can be attributed to their own shortcomings when it comes to sex and relationships.

Internet comics often deal with relationships and thus sex is an integral part of most of these comics. However, full nudity is very rarely, if ever, shown in the comics I have selected, but the sexual themes in them can be stronger than in newspaper comics. One exception to the rule is a strip in *XKCD*, which differs from the usual style of the comic. Even in this one, the

speech bubble covers some of the picture in the second panel (2.9.2009):

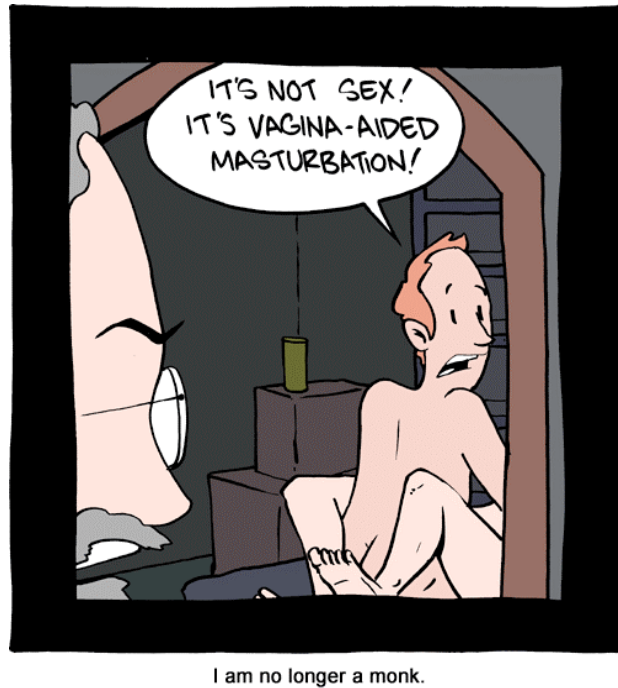


Again, especially *SMBC* is very active in this topic as well.



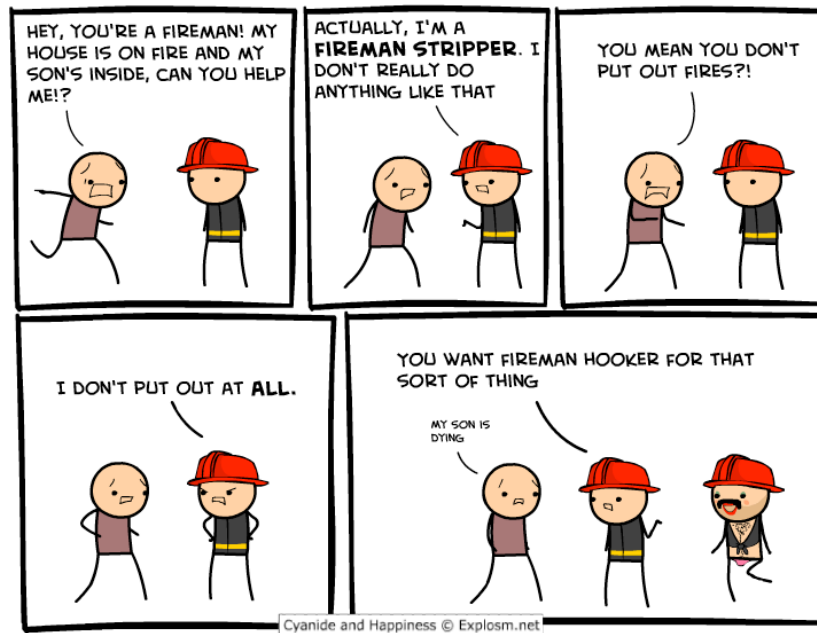
This strip (*SMBC*, 11.11.2010) does not contain any nudity, but many newspapers do not want their comics pages to talk about prostitution. Or handjobs. There are also strips where the

characters are shown having sex, although their nudity is not shown graphically (*SMBC* 10.7.2010).



This strip ties itself nicely with the previous chapter and religion, because in this strip we see a monk having sex even though he has given a vow of celibacy.

Cyanide and Happiness as well often refers to prostitution in its strips and in many cases contains rather dark humor (9.6.2010).



Cyanide and Happiness also makes jokes about sexual molestation which is a strong taboo in most cultures. The next strip deals with molestation in the digital age (1.10.2010).

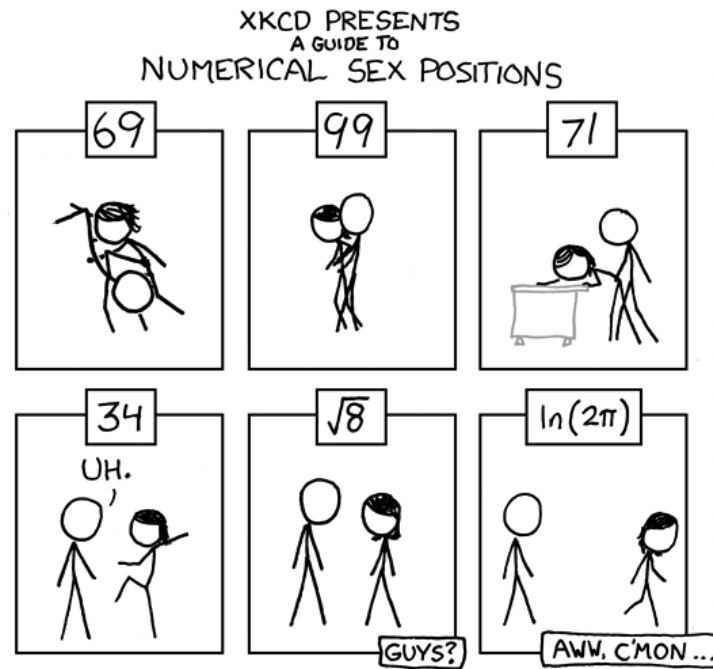


Even though *Penny Arcade* focuses on the world of video games, sex is mentioned or referred to several times in the comic's history. In many cases sex appears in the form of prostitution or sexual deviance. There is also an appliance, a juicer, called the Fruit Fucker. As the name suggests, extracting the juice from the fruit can occasionally look rather graphic.

However, sex acts are not shown. They are merely implied in the conversations the two main characters have, or we get to see the moment before or after something happens. This next strip, for example, begins with the talk of possible nudity in a video game and progresses to reveal to Gabe, one of the two main characters, more than he might want to know about Tycho's, the other main character's rather unusual sexual preferences: (*Penny Arcade* 19.9.2007)



XKCD, has a few sex themed strips of which this following one is a good example. The strip presents different numerical sex positions, and as the comic is, in the author's own words, "a webcomic of romance, sarcasm, math, and language", the mathematics part quickly takes over creating complicated positions that leave the stick figure characters flustered. (*XKCD*, 10.10.2008).



As I have shown, sex, while not very much present in the world of newspaper comics, is a part of many internet comic strips. However, although sex is a topic used in these comics, realistic nudity is not present in these four comic strips, except for the one strip in *XKCD*. In *Cyanide and Happiness* the stick figures do get naked from time to time, but similarly to characters in *XKCD*, they are merely very simplified representations of the human form with simplified anatomy. Even though there is nothing preventing the makers of these comics from portraying realistic looking humans in sexual situations, they simply seem to choose not to. Even the example from *XKCD* was realized in a similar manner to textbooks, and the speech bubble covered most of the picture of the vagina. Perhaps the characters in, for example, *SMBC* are not presented naked so the nudity would not draw too much attention away from the jokes in the strips themselves. The taboo of nudity might be too strong, or maybe realistic nudity would just seem gratuitous and unfunny. These strips are meant to make us laugh after all.

In addition to sex and nudity I would like to mention sexuality. Newspapers seem to be

very cautious when it comes to portraying homosexual relations in the comics pages. Stephan Pastis, the creator of *Pearls Before Swine* mentions in one of his treasuries that he had to change the name of one of two talking appliances. A talking washer and drier both originally had clearly male names, Bob and Dave, but he had to change Dave to more ambiguous Pat because the syndicate got nervous when one appliance said to the other he was “feeling frisky” (Pastis, 2004, 133). Apparently the fear of offending or alienating their readers is so great that newspapers are afraid of the sexuality of household appliances.

Internet comics seem to be a lot more tolerant and do not shy away from dealing with homosexuality. Once again *SMBC* presents us with a fitting example, (*SMBC*, 3.7.2010):

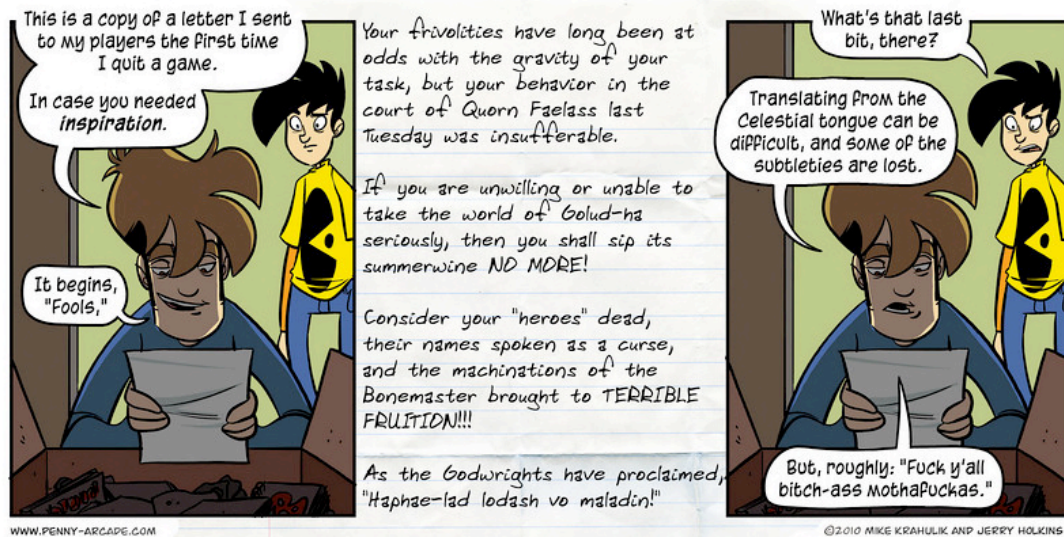


Fact: There are gay engineers.
Fact: Their lives are better than yours.

5.3 Profanity

Now that I have covered religion and sex, I come to the most clear-cut taboo. There are certain words that you cannot say in a newspaper comic. ‘Fuck’ is one, and it is used quite

often in *Penny Arcade*, in addition to other words of similar type, where it is commonly mixed with more eloquent dialogue, as in the following, (*Penny Arcade* 15.12.2010):



As I have discussed previously, Stephan Pastis also mentions that even the ending –ing preceded by four characters, commonly symbolizing swearing in comics, bore too close a resemblance to a certain swearword that he decided to replace it too with symbols, because he was afraid it might lead to negative consequences. This is a good example of how sensitive the newspapers are to bad language in the comics section. *SMBC* previously censored itself when it comes to swearwords, but has recently given up on that and has begun using ‘fuck’ instead of ‘f—k’, or something similar. Swearing appears also in *Cyanide and Happiness* as well as *XKCD*. There are a myriad of examples and because this is a simple case of yes and no, I decide not to show any more examples on profanity.

5.4 Violence

I have discussed several taboos that newspapers are very sensitive about. Violence, however does not seem to be a taboo at all, although one would think sex and religion are more humane and natural topics than violence. Violence is one topic that appears in many comic

strips, both in newspapers as well as on the internet. Since it is so closely connected with death, I will not dwell on violence here very much. I will show examples of death in the next chapter, and those will naturally cover violence as well. To mention a few examples of violence of various degrees in these comics, there is Garfield who kicks Odie, Alice who punches people in *Dilbert*, Guard Duck in *Pearls Before Swine* and so on and so forth.

6. DEATH

So far, I have discussed many topics that newspapers have been known either to avoid or deal with very carefully. In this chapter, however, I will focus on the main topic of this thesis, the many faces of death, and how it has been handled in the strips I have chosen for study. Death is a taboo, but unlike sex or religion, no one can escape it, and thus it must be something that is more easily accepted even in newspapers. What I want to examine is, how death is shown in newspaper comics compared to internet comics. Is the attitude towards death different? Is there a difference in how death is portrayed visually? I will focus especially on the characters, because the characters are the ones performing the action in these comics, including death.

6.1 Death and Characters

Simon Critchley argues that when an animal displays human features and traits, we as humans find this amusing and funny. When it is the human behaving like an animal, we find it disgusting (Critchley, 2002, 33). Henri Bergson writes in his *Laughter: an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* that: “You may laugh at an animal, but only because you have detected in it some human attitude or expression” (Bergson, p.4). The feature that all the newspaper comic strips I have chosen to study have in common is anthropomorphic animals. In *Garfield* the main character cannot speak human language but he has many human qualities and sometimes even appears to think he is human. The reader can see Garfield’s thoughts and they are very human-like. All the main characters in *Pearls Before Swine* are talking animals who live in houses like humans and even drive cars. In *Dilbert*, the director of human resources is a talking cat, and Dilbert’s dog Dogbert often tries to take over the world, and is occasionally even seen as the C.E.O. of Dilbert’s company. *Calvin and Hobbes* takes a slightly different

approach. Hobbes is a talking tiger, but in reality he only seems to exist in Calvin's imagination and adults and other children see him merely as a stuffed toy.

The internet comic strips share features too. *XKCD* and *Cyanide and Happiness* have characters that are stick figures. *SMBC* and *Penny Arcade* feature slightly more detailed human characters, but even those are very simplified in their style and are in no way realistic-looking. As Scott McCloud suggests, because the human characters in comics are often very simplified representations of the human form, they share features with a wider audience thus allowing a larger number of people to identify with the characters (McCloud, 1994, 31).

A similar goal is achieved when using animal characters with human features. When the main characters are animals, it does not necessarily make a difference where the reader is from and what their ethnic or cultural background is. For example *Garfield* is very popular all over the world. The animal features make ethnic differences unimportant, because the underlying human traits the animal characters share are enough to make people, the readers, identify with the characters.

Also, when the characters are animals, the reader will still see them as animals and does not necessarily set similar moral requirements to their behavior as he or she might if the characters were more clearly human. Garfield often eats other animals, especially birds and fish, even though they are shown to think in a similar way as Garfield. This can be seen in the following example (*Garfield*, 4.4.2000):



This strip is also a good example of Garfield's behavior (5.3.1998):



In addition to eating birds and fish, Garfield often swats spiders (Garfield, 7.2.2006):



In some cases it is not always clear if the spiders die: (Garfield, 24.9.2009).



In others it is emphasized (Garfield, 26.9.2009):



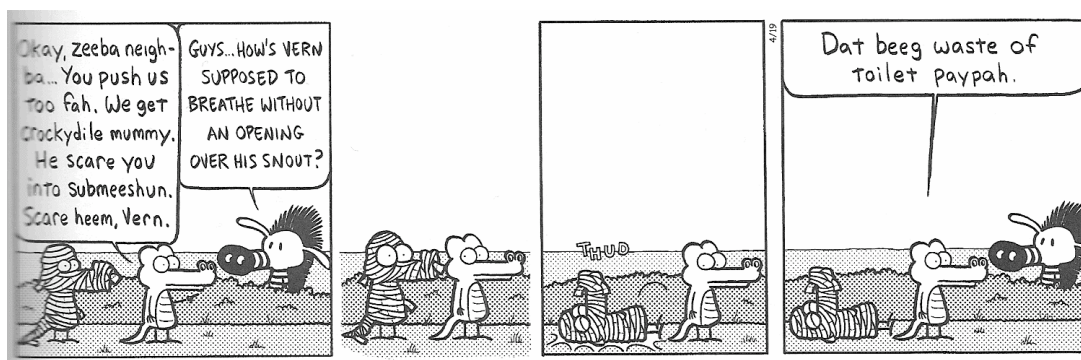
Garfield ruthlessly kills other creatures, but this does not trouble the reader because Garfield

is a cat and cats naturally prey on small animals. Even though Garfield acts in a very human manner, we still see him as the animal he is and accept his actions accordingly. If we follow Critchley's line of thought, if it was a human behaving this way, killing and eating other creatures that appear to be on the same intellectual level and capable of communicating with him, we might find it somewhat disturbing.

In *Pearls Before Swine*, the animals live like humans. Their neighborhood seems to be a suburb of some kind and the animals live in houses. They also have human neighbors so the world of the comic strip does not consist only of animals. Even though the animal characters drive cars and have jobs, natural animal instincts are still present, and with them death. The crocodiles try any scheme they can possibly conceive to kill the zebra so they can eat him (*Pearls Before Swine*, 7.1.2005):



Fortunately for Zebra, these crocodiles are extremely stupid and they usually only succeed in killing each other (*Pearls Before Swine*, 19.4.2005).



At the beginning of the strip, however, Zebra's other zebra friends were constantly being

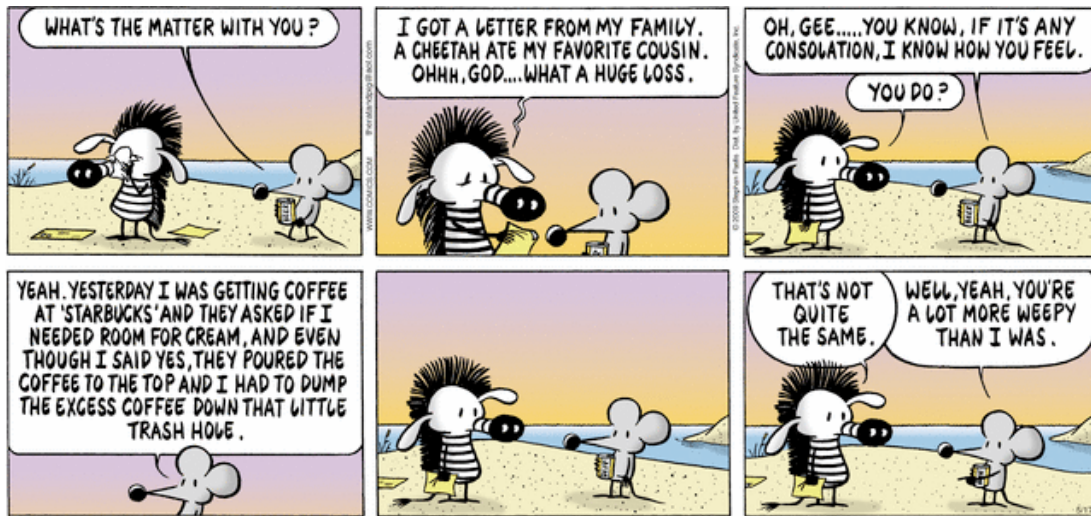
killed by lions (*Pearls Before Swine*, 16.4.2002)



Sometimes Zebra will watch a nature show and see a relative being eaten by a lion (*Pearls Before Swine*, 7.2.2002):



It would be very disturbing for a human being to see his or her relatives being killed on television, but we do not react very strongly when we see animals eating each other on nature shows. Nature shows are considered to be something the whole family can watch together, but in this case it becomes something horrific. The natural order of things is distorted with all the human features the animals possess. A family-friendly nature program becomes a snuff film when viewed by an animal of the same species as the one shown on television. Even though Zebra behaves in a very human way, he does not always react very strongly to his kind being eaten, although sometimes we see him very sad (*Pearls Before Swine*, 17.5.2009):

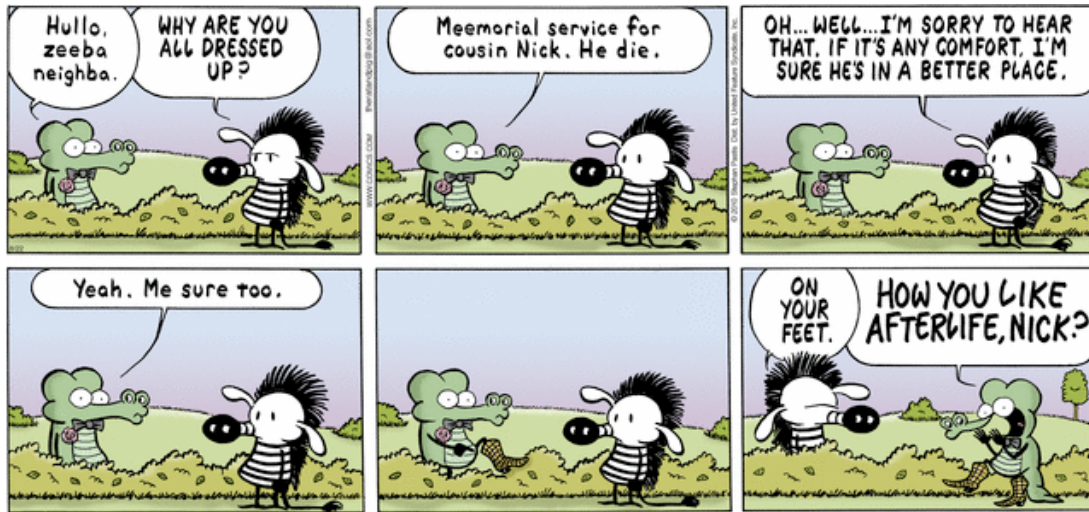


Perhaps Zebra's animal side understands that is the way the system works. His human side, on the other hand, tries to invent ways for the zebras to escape the lions, such as coating themselves with lotion, as seen in a strip above.

The way the crocodiles react to their kind dying is not very empathetic. Often they are more worried about something else going to waste than their friends' lives, as seen in the strip above. Sometimes they even purposefully kill each other or take advantage of each other's deaths, as can be seen in the following examples. (*Pearls Before Swine*, 1.10.2010):



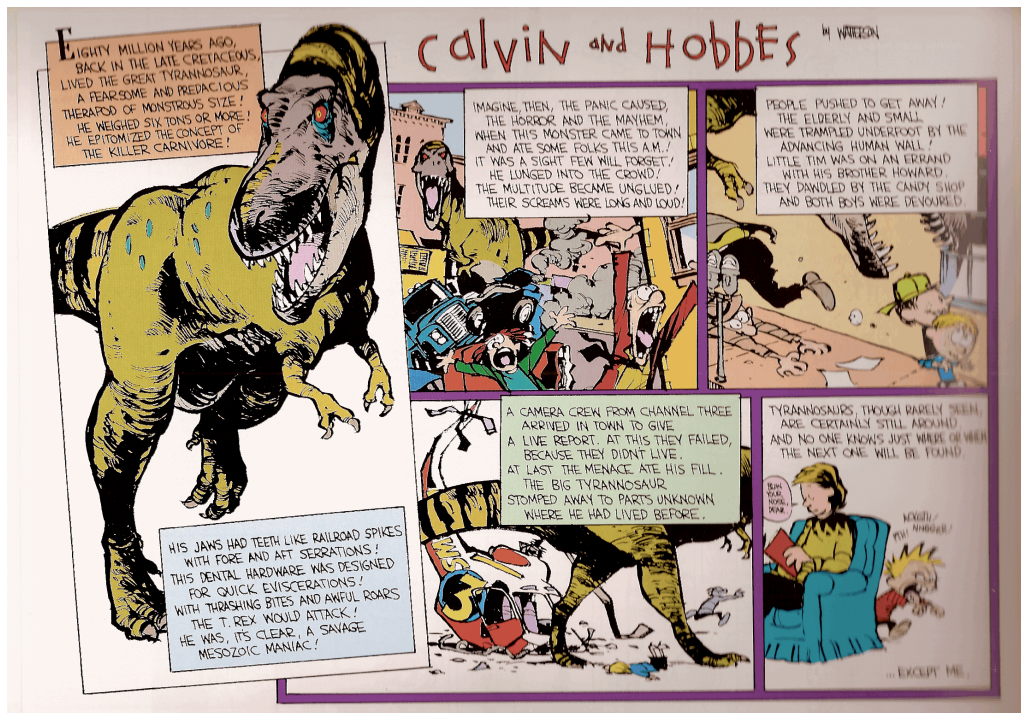
(*Pearls Before Swine*, 22.8.2010):



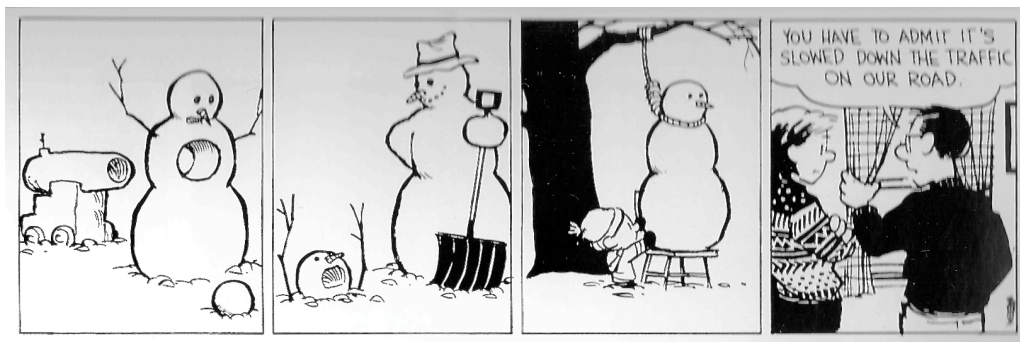
Even though this is basically tragic, the reader finds it amusing. Henri Bergson suggested that for us to find things comedic and funny, we would need to look at them from a distance and without emotion. He said that: “To produce the whole of its effect, then, the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart” (Bergson, p.4). Simon Critchley agrees with Bergson and adds that this coldness can also be disturbing. He mentions humor noir and that the lack of sentimentality: “...has the effect of emphasizing the sheer horror of the events being depicted” (Critchley, 2002, 88). The example Critchley is referring to is the film *Fargo*. In a film this may very well be true, because the characters are real human actors. However, this effect would not be likely in a comic strip where the characters are very simplified human or animal forms, made to look amusing. It is this detachment from emotion that makes us laugh at the misfortune of the crocodiles as well as the zebras. Because the characters in the strip do not react with emotion, the reader does not have to do that either. Also the incongruity of these strips makes them quite absurd. When the crocodile talks of a better place, the reader automatically thinks about Heaven, but once we see what was meant, these two matrices, as Koestler calls them, collide and produce laughter.

In *Calvin and Hobbes*, death seems to be separated into two different worlds. When Calvin is in his fantasy world where he, for example, pretends to be a dinosaur, death appears

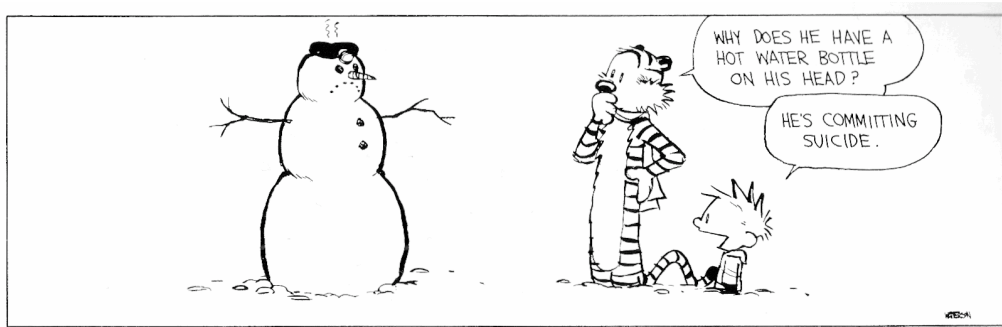
in a more humoristic form and also in the form of animals. The comic shows the dinosaur eating people and other animals, but in the last panels the “reality” is revealed and we see this amusing contrast between Calvin’s imagination and the less than thrilling real world: (*Calvin and Hobbes*, 9.2.1992).



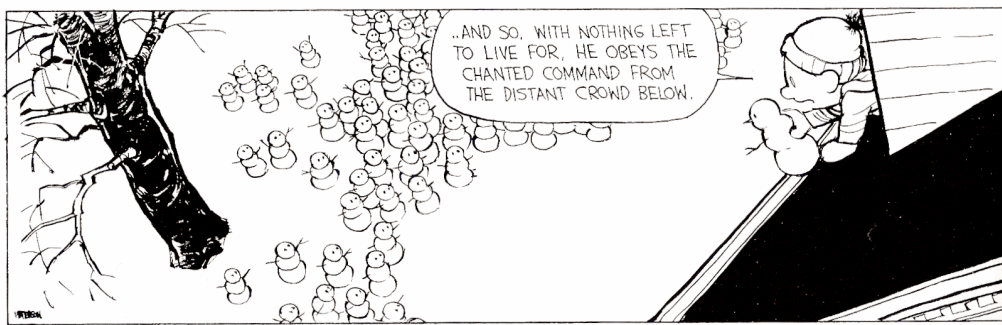
Also, when Calvin makes snowmen he often creates even rather terrifying and grotesque scenes of snowmen killing each other (*Calvin and Hobbes*, 21.1.1991):



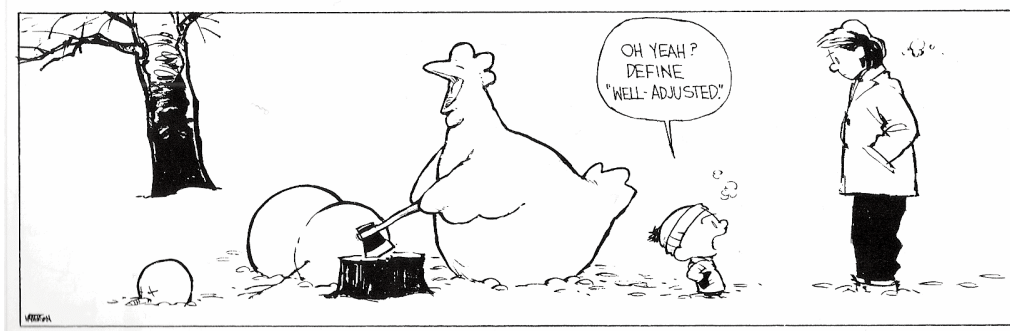
He also makes the snowmen commit suicide as in the following examples: (*Calvin and Hobbes*, 4.1.1994).



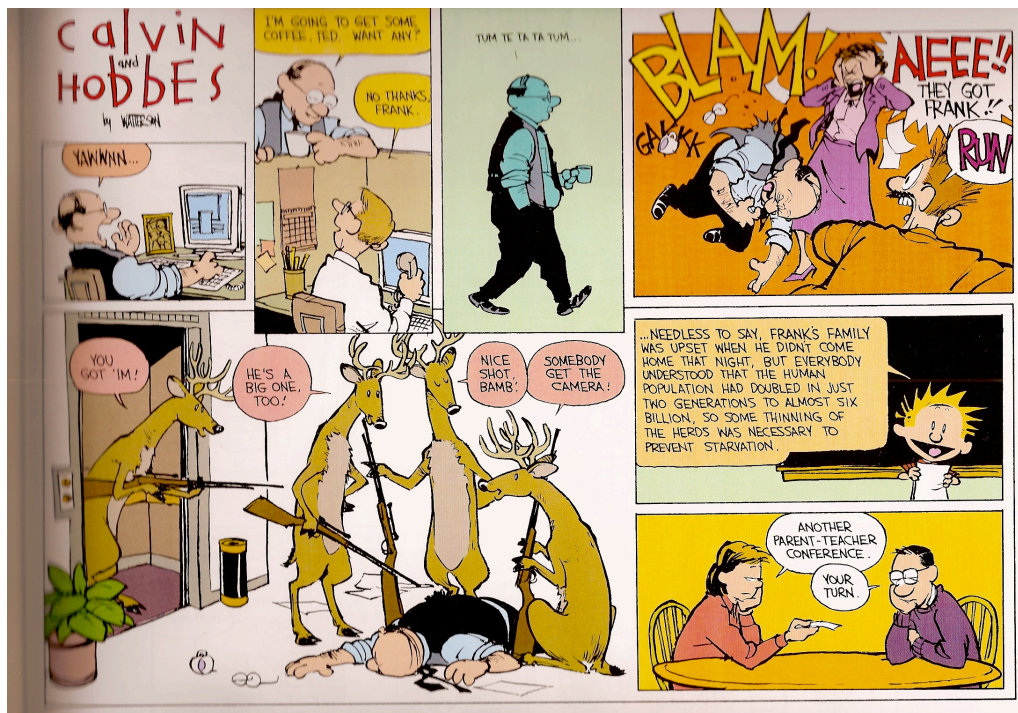
and (*Calvin and Hobbes*, 12.1.1995):



Sometimes Calvin's snowmen are really absurd as this following example proves: (*Calvin and Hobbes*, 6.1.1995).



Calvin's imagination, as can be seen from the examples above, is very wild and even quite aggressive at times. His snowmen and the games he plays often deal with death to some extent. Death appears even in his schoolwork, as the following Sunday strip shows: (*Calvin and Hobbes*, 26.2.1995):

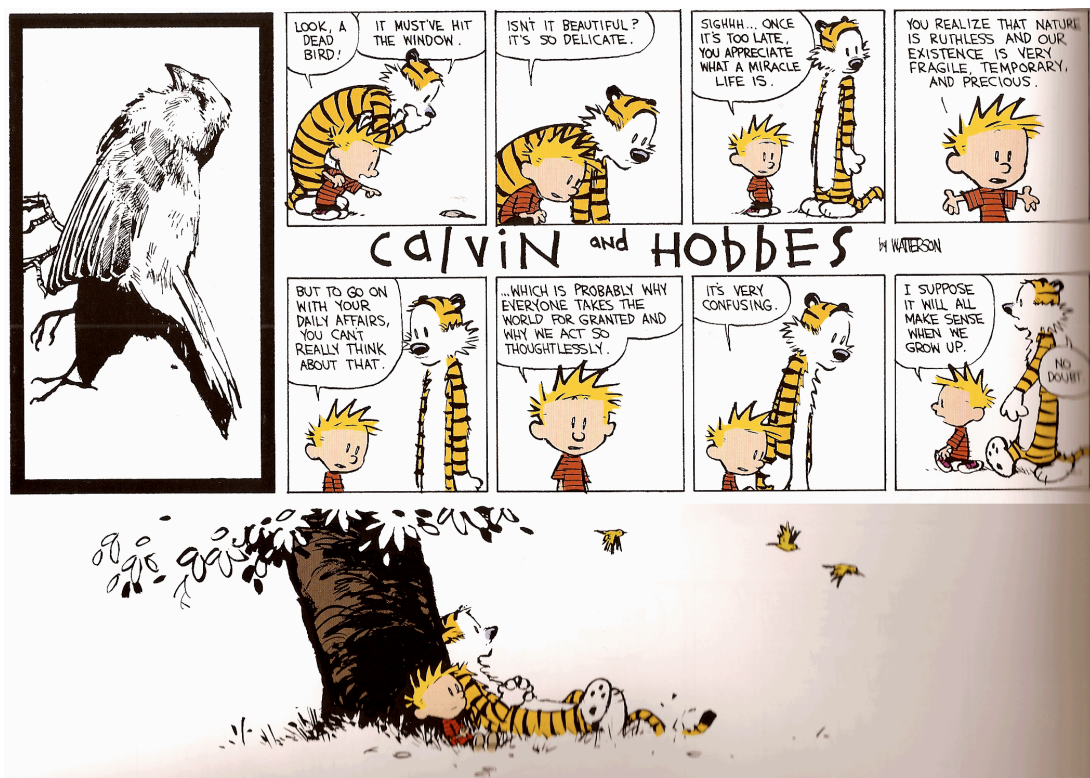


The scenes that portray Calvin's imagination can seem quite disturbing at times, but many of them have a serious point. The snowmen act in a way that humans would not normally act. They seem to be eager to end their lives when humans have a basic urge to stay alive at any cost. However, they can also be seen as a comment on how humans are often very cruel to each other. The incongruous nature of the Sunday strip works on an intellectual level, as well as social and aggressive levels. We see deer "thinning the herd" which is something humans usually do to deer. Calvin's comment, however morbid, still has a valid point and makes the reader think about overpopulation.

The feeling of unease the reader might experience is relieved by the fact that the final panels of the strip show that they are merely the boy's illustrated imagination. Also, the things Calvin makes his snowmen do are rather shocking, but since the snowmen are sculpted by Calvin and are merely simplified representations of the human form, their fate does not shock the reader. In addition, Calvin and his parents are rather simply drawn comic characters and not realistic-looking humans. Sometimes the people in Calvin's imagination look slightly

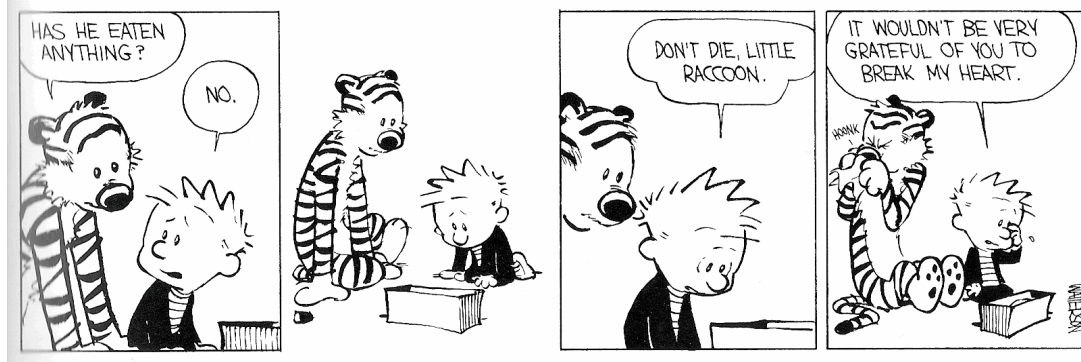
more realistic than him. Also, as shown in the example above, the dinosaurs are often drawn with a larger degree of realism. The more realistic style of drawing usually only appears when Calvin's imagination is being depicted.

Although Calvin plays with scenes of death in his imagination, in the real world, however, when six-year-old Calvin faces death, he reacts to it very emotionally and philosophically. The following example is a rare occurrence where something outside of Calvin's imagination is drawn with a greater degree of realism and detail (*Calvin and Hobbes*, 19.9.1993):



Calvin ponders upon the meaning of life and death and this is dealt with in a visually delicate and simplified way. As the dead bird is drawn in a very detailed and realistic manner, the reader is reminded of his or her own world. The reader is detached from the safe world of the comic strip and this may actually make the reader think about life and death. This is not a funny strip, even though most strips in *Calvin and Hobbes* are.

There is also another good example of death occurring in Calvin's world and the way he reacts to it. A series of strips show how Calvin and Hobbes find a baby raccoon in the woods and how they try to nurture it back to health (*Calvin and Hobbes*, 12.3.1987):



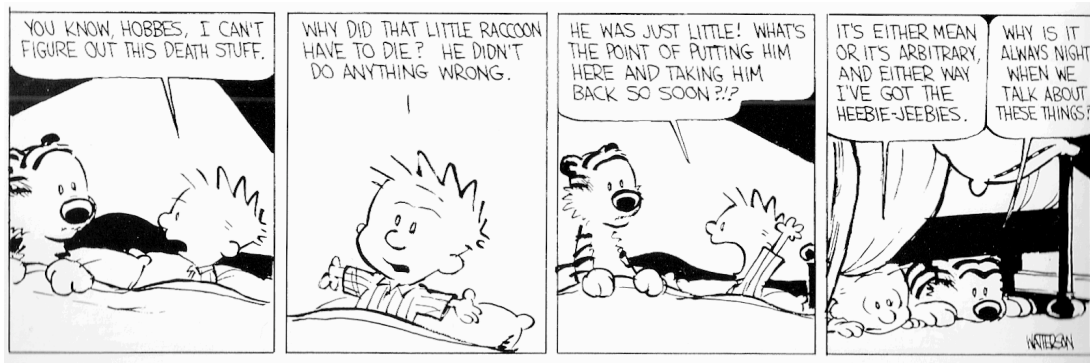
Unfortunately, the little raccoon dies (*Calvin and Hobbes*, 14.3.1987):



In the following three strips Calvin and Hobbes talk about death and try to fathom it (*Calvin and Hobbes*, 16.3.1987):



(*Calvin and Hobbes*, 17.3.1987):



and (*Calvin and Hobbes*, 18.3.1987):



Even though the raccoon is not shown like the dead bird mentioned above, the effect of the strips is more moving than amusing, although humor is not forgotten completely. When Calvin is shown to be sad about the death of the raccoon, it is difficult for the reader to distance himself emotionally from the strip.

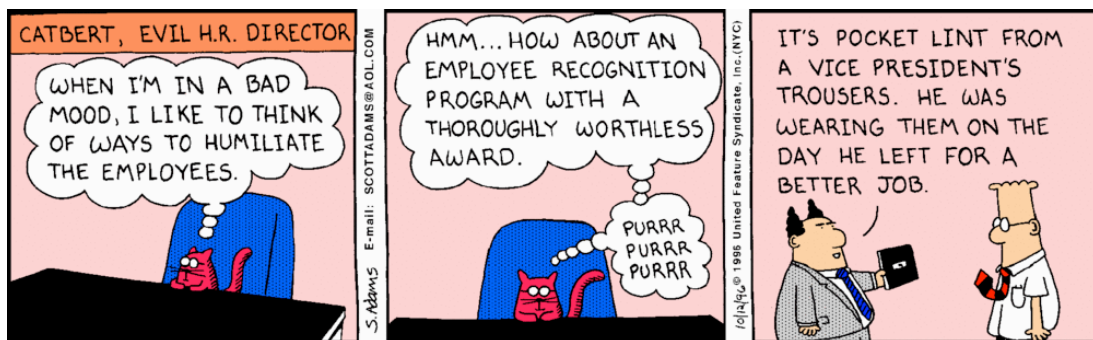
When it comes to Hobbes, who is a talking animal in a way, he is not a fierce killer, although that is what Calvin tries to make everyone else believe. Hobbes attacks Calvin when he comes home from school, but it is a sign of affection more than anything else. After all, Hobbes is a stuffed toy who lives in Calvin's imagination, although sometimes there are occasions where Calvin ends up in situations where it would have been difficult for him to get to without an accomplice, such as tying himself to a chair.

In *Dilbert* death is often present, but people rarely react to it with emotion. *Dilbert* is another good example of comedy through avoiding emotion. The human characters are drawn

in a very simple way, as are the animal characters. Above I already mentioned that animal characters do not have to act according to a similar moral code as humans and in *Dilbert* this is definitely true. Catbert the evil director of human resources thinks of many ways to torture his subordinates, for example the following (*Dilbert*, 1.11.1995):



(*Dilbert*, 12.10.1996):



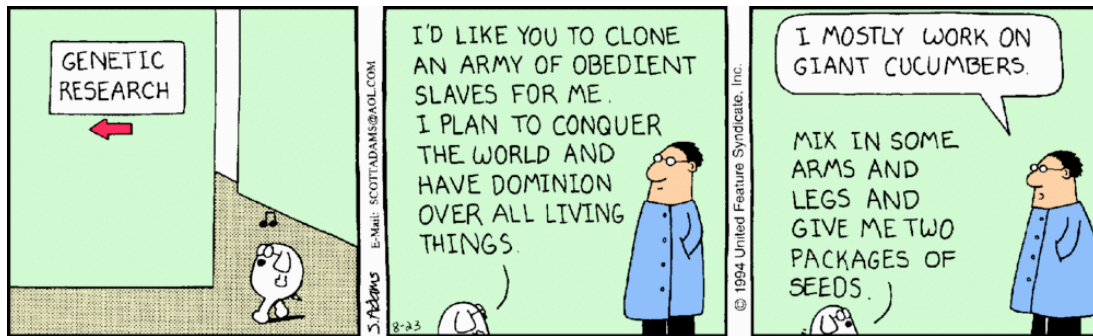
As a cat, Catbert purrs when he is feeling happy and the things that make him happy are making everybody else miserable. Catbert acts in a very cat-like way in other respects as well, for example he wants someone to rub his belly (*Dilbert*, 7.8.1996):



If Catbert were human, this would count as sexual harassment, but since he is a cat he can get

away with it.

Dilbert's dog Dogbert also walks on two feet and talks. He does not really care about ethics. His plans include world domination and making large amounts of money (*Dilbert*, 23.8.1994):



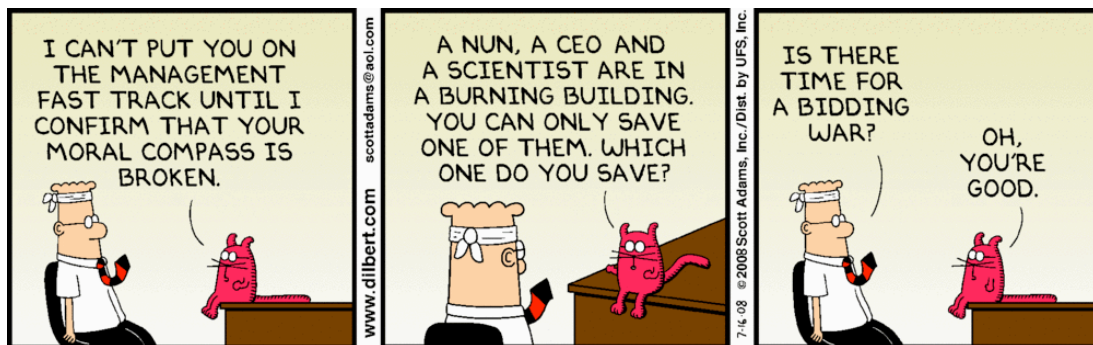
(*Dilbert*, 16.10.2001):



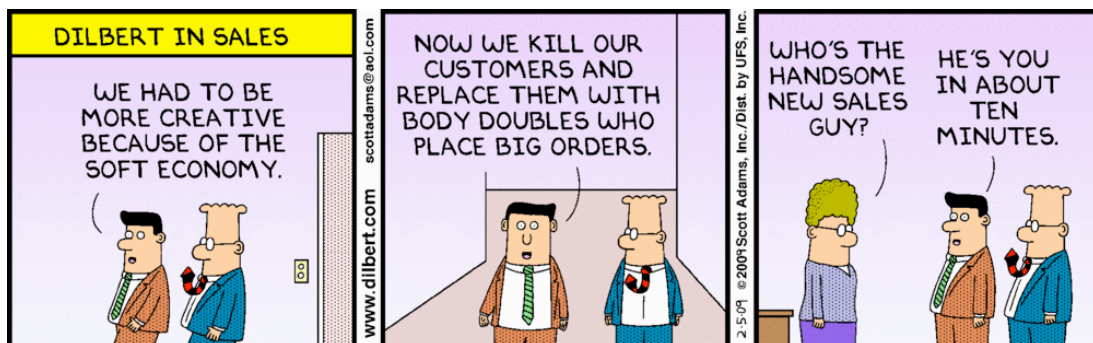
As we can see from the example above, since he is a dog, Dogbert likes to wag his tail when he gets excited. Dogbert is very successful in his plans and is occasionally even the C.E.O. of Dilbert's company. Since Dogbert acts without morality, he takes advantage of what he can and often exploits people who are not as intelligent as him. However, Dogbert is Dilbert's best friend, and occasionally helps him out of trouble, as can be seen in the following strip (*Dilbert*, 12.4.1996):



If the animal characters behave immorally, so do the humans in *Dilbert*. In the comic the managers are devoid of ethics the most. The following example is proof that to be a manager in the world of *Dilbert*, you must have no scruples (16.7.2008):



The management in *Dilbert* usually have no morals whatsoever, even when it comes to death (5.2.2009):



Of course Dilbert, being the protagonist of the comic, refuses to do such a thing, because he has some morality left in him, (6.2.2009):



However, even though Dilbert is not willing to kill, he is not too perturbed by finding a co-worker dead in the workplace, (6.11.2006):

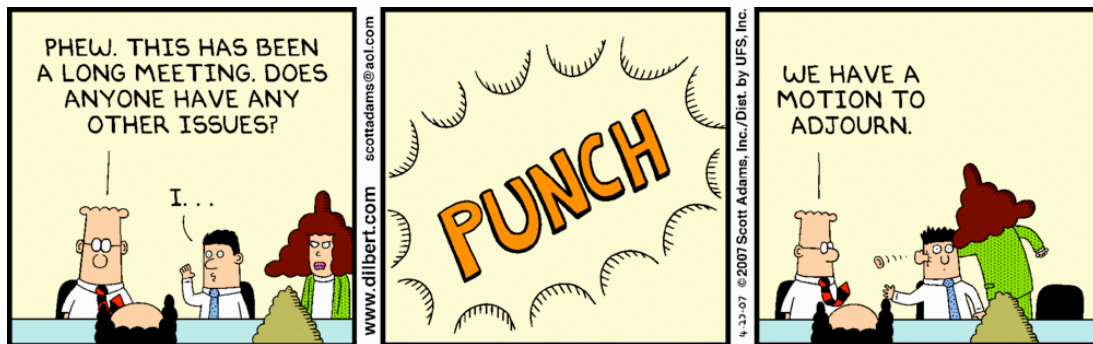


The next strip also shows Dilbert talking to Alice about it, and neither one seems too shocked, (7.11.2006):



Dilbert and Alice are engineers and they look at life through logic and mathematical solutions, so this kind of reaction can be expected from them, in this twisted world of *Dilbert*.

Alice is quite an aggressive character and she often punches people with her “Fist of Death”. As we can see from the following example, the punch is quite strong and her fist goes through the man’s head, (23.4.2007):



Even though we see the man's ear popping out of his head, the situation is made amusing by Dilbert's nonchalant comment in the final panel.

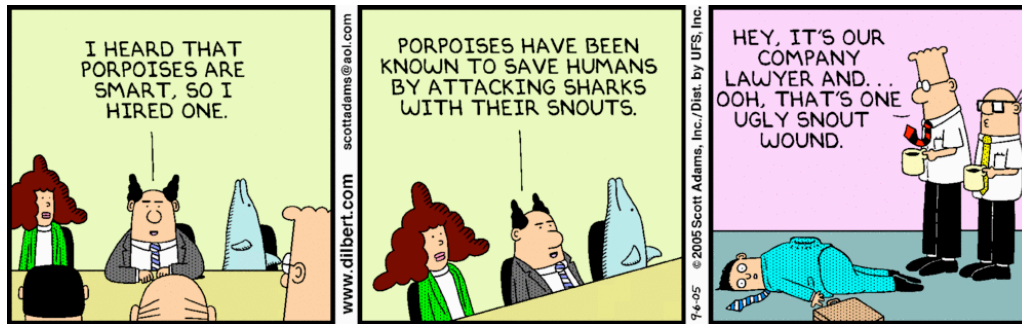
Sometimes Alice even kills someone with her punches (31.5.1999):



The next example reveals the consequences that Alice has to face for her actions (2.6.1999):



The lack of emotion and the absurd situations are what make many of these strips amusing, even though they deal with death. One final example of the absurdity of the world of *Dilbert* is the following, where the intellectually challenged pointy haired boss has recruited a new employee who does not quite seem to match his surroundings, (6.9.2005):



Once again, there is no penalty for death. Rather, it is rewarded (7.9.2005):



Because the characters are simple and funny-looking and the events depicted in the comic are greatly exaggerated and fantastical the readers do not have to feel empathy, but can laugh at something that would be terrible in real life.

The characters in the internet comics I have chosen are mainly centered around human, or at least human-like characters. As I have mentioned earlier, in *XKCD* and *Cyanide and Happiness* the characters are merely stick figures who have very limited features. In *XKCD* the characters do not even have faces, and are even more simplified than the characters in *Cyanide and Happiness*. In *Penny Arcade* and *SMBC* the characters are slightly more detailed than in the other two comics, but they are very clearly cartoon characters, caricatures of the human form. Also, *Penny-Arcade* is the only one of these strips that has main characters that the comic centers on. The other three do have recurring characters, but there is no one single protagonist.

If in newspaper comics the most immorally behaving characters are usually animals, in the internet comics the human characters are the ones behaving badly. In *SMBC* and *Cyanide*

and *Happiness* it is the poor defenseless animals that are being killed or treated badly in other ways. For example in this following example we see a cat hurled towards a man with a baseball bat, who is going to hit the cat with the bat (*SMBC*, 1.5.2006):



The image is quite absurd to begin with. The man appears to be on a field that looks like a golf course, but the sport is not something people would play. When the text is added to it, the reader feels even more uncomfortable because the text suggests that the man is probably a priest and priests are usually connected with ethical behavior and helping others, not beating cats with bats. The comic seems to suggest that priests need to take time off from ethical behavior.

Another example of cruelty towards animals in *SMBC* is the following (*SMBC*, 18.2.2007):



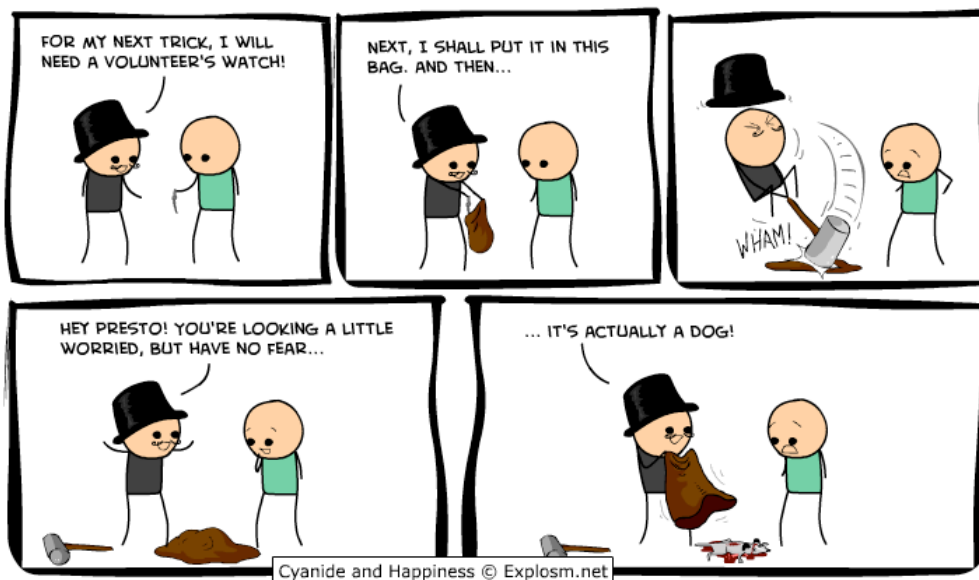
**Maybe she would've been happier if she hadn't
just watched me kill Spot.**

This example is very dark. The picture and the text make the comic quite self-explanatory. As in the previous example, the comic depicts psychotic behavior in a very graphic way. In this example, incongruity adds to the dark feeling of the strip. The information provided by the text makes the picture even more shocking than funny.

This is also a good example (*SMBC*, 18.5.2007):

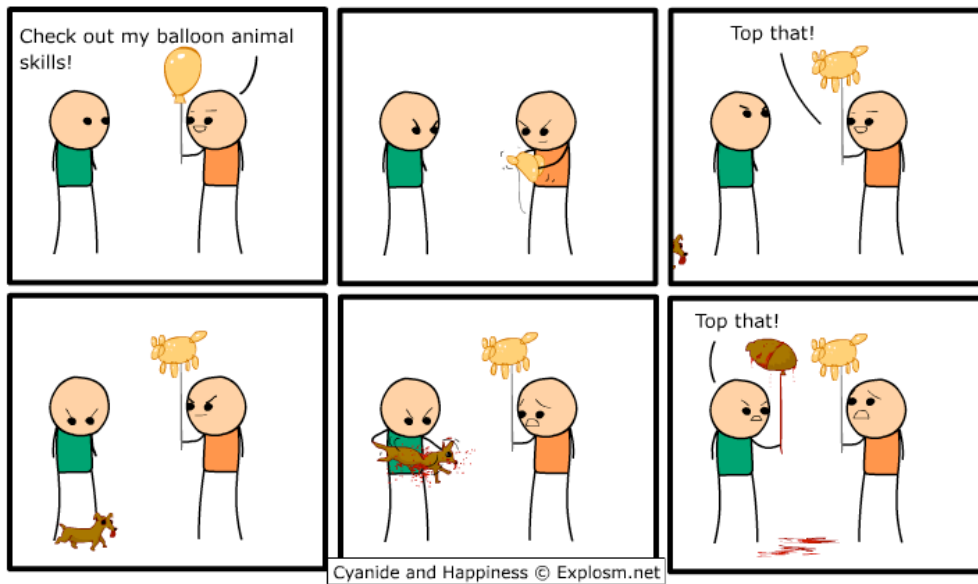


Animals are harmed in *Cyanide and Happiness* as well. (*Cyanide and Happiness*, 3.10.2009):



The magician clearly does not care about the animal at all and willingly smashes it with his hammer.

Also (15.8.2008):



Here, instead of making an animal out of a balloon, the man turns an animal into a balloon.

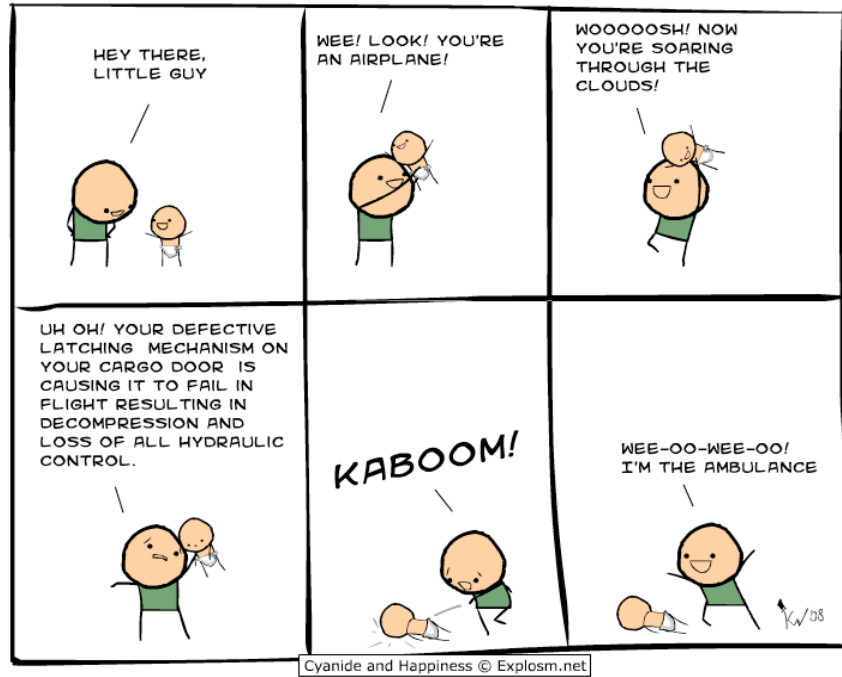
(19.2.2010):



Here the incongruity in the final panel changes the tone of the strip. The reader thinks that the man in green is upset. Instead, he is completely distracted by what the other man says and once again neither one shows any feeling of shock in the last panel.

It seems that both in *Cyanide and Happiness* and *SMBC* the innocent and defenseless

get abused more than in other comics. In addition to animals being killed, even children are harmed or killed in many strips, as for example in these (*Cyanide and Happiness*, 6.1.2008):



(23.10.2006):



Similar examples can be found also in *SMBC* (29.10.2005):



Dr. Ericson flashed a soft avuncular smile as he shoveled another three year old into the time machine's reactor core.

Who knows, maybe someday it would work.

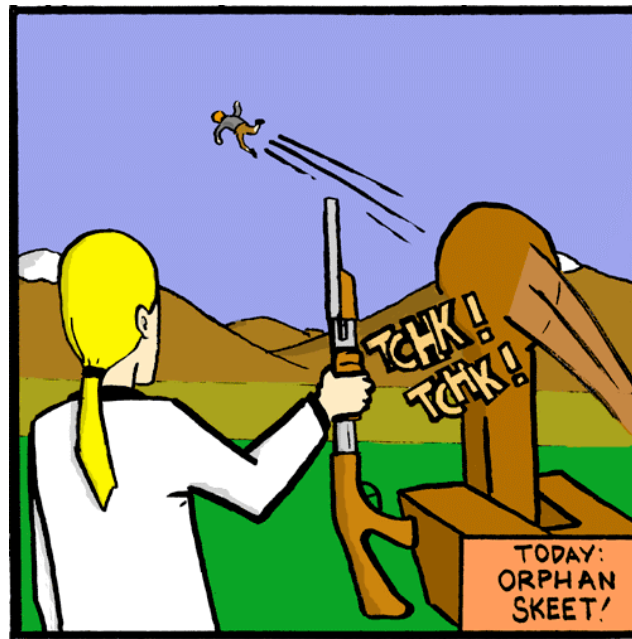
As well as the following (*SMBC*, 31.8.2005):



The advent of psychic advertising was not without its drawbacks.

Fortunately, Ted soon figured out a way to combine the two viewpoints.

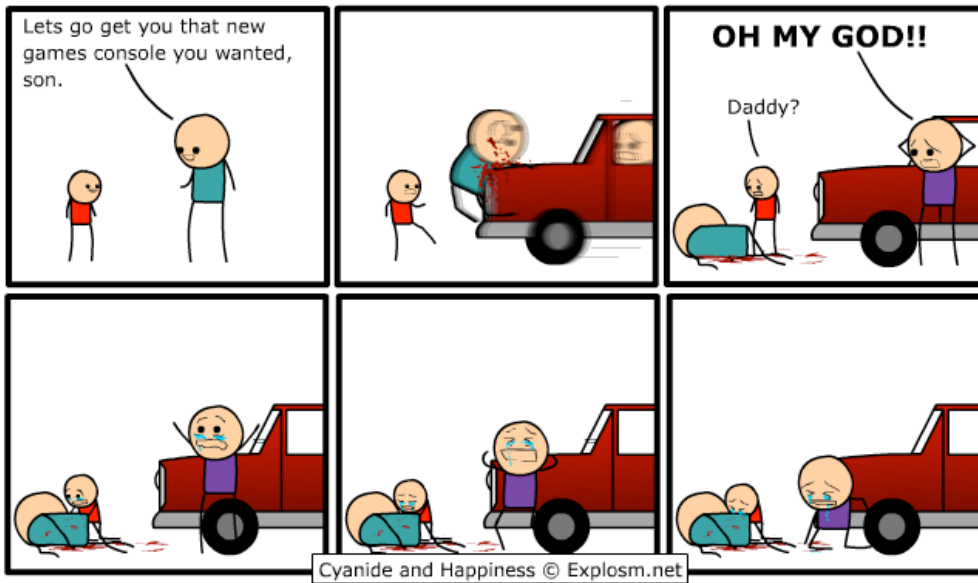
(SMBC, 16.4.2004):



Admittedly, your honor, I occasionally wondered if I was doing the right thing.

It seems that since the targets of the violence are weaker and less capable of defending themselves, these examples seem even more disturbing and shocking. Arthur Koestler argues that any situation can either be comic, tragic or a purely intellectual experience depending on the emotions of the viewer (Koestler, 1964, 46). Because children and animals are seen as innocent, their deaths are even more shocking to the reader than the deaths of adults. However, some of these scenes are so absurd that the reader is distracted into feeling amusement instead of sadness.

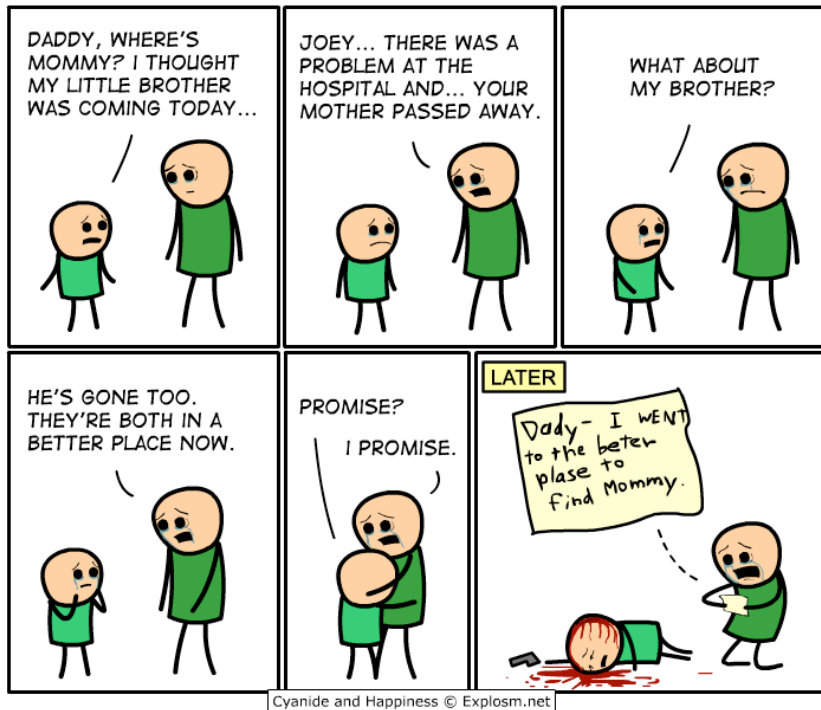
An interesting feature in *Cyanide and Happiness* is that every year the makers of the strip hold a week they call “Depressing Comic Week”. These strips are very much similar to their regular strips but there is one crucial difference, the last panel does not contain a joke. The strips are just sad and depressing, as these following examples will testify (20.11.2006):

DEPRESSING COMIC WEEK!

(21.11.2006):

DEPRESSING COMIC WEEK!

(29.8.2009):

DEPRESSING COMIC WEEK 3

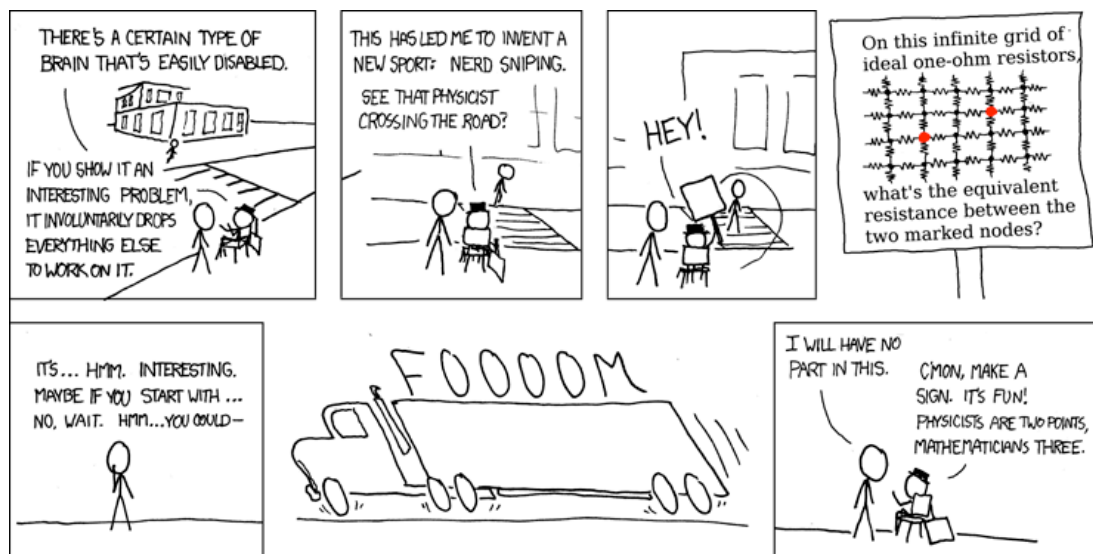
And also (13.4.2008):



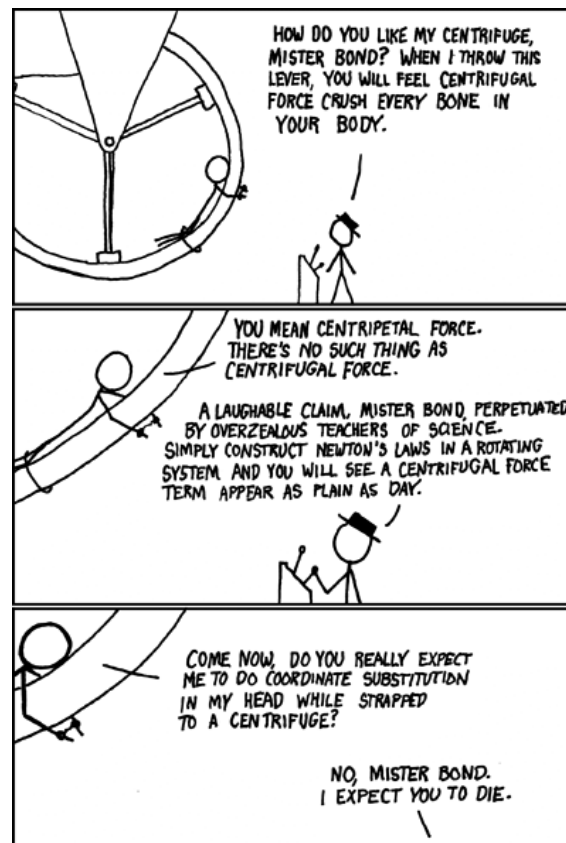
“Depressing Comic Week” proves how small a difference there is between something being amusing and it being tragic. When the incongruity is removed, the result is not laughter, but rather an uneasy feeling, because there is no “trick” to help the reader detach himself from the

events emotionally.

XKCD has the least detailed characters of all the comics studied in this thesis. The stick figures do not even have faces. The occurrences of death are also fewer than in *SMBC* and *Cyanide and Happiness*. However, one recurring character that often has something to do with death as an active participant is the man with the black hat. He looks like almost every other stick figure in the comic, except for this one distinguishing feature. He seems to be quite a sociopath, as these following examples indicate (*XKCD*, 12.12.2007):

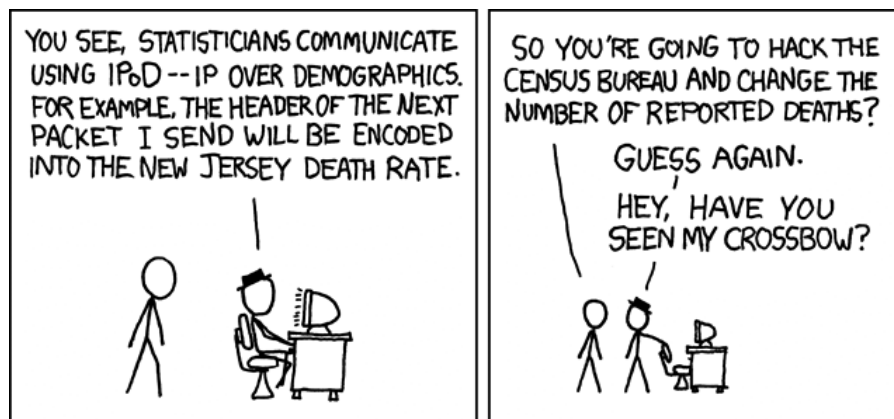


(*XKCD*, 3.7.2006):

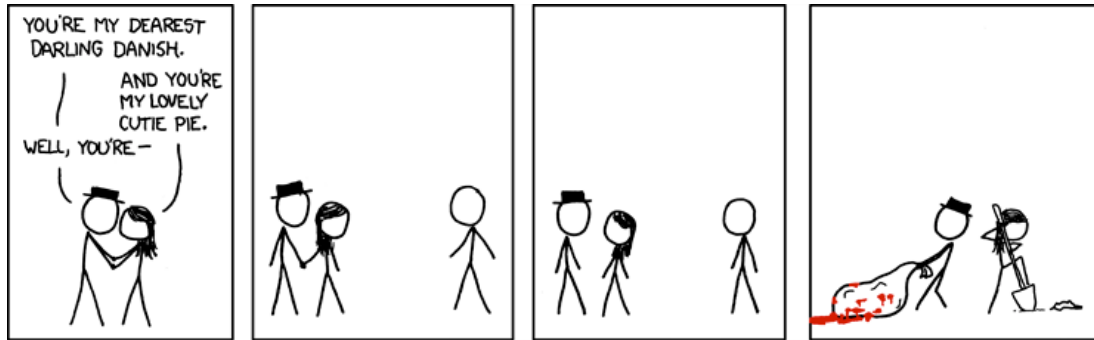


This of course is a take on a famous scene from an old James Bond movie done in the style of *XKCD*.

(*XKCD*, 29.11.2006):

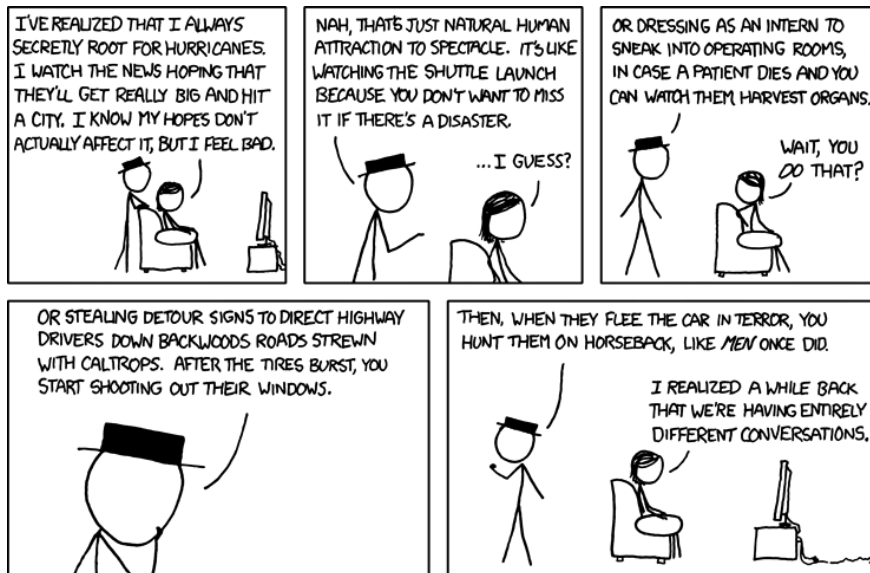


(*XKCD*, 10.12. 2008):



In this strip we see the softer side of the man in the black hat. He and his girlfriend, however, do not want anyone else to see it.

And also (XKCD, 17.7.2009):



Death is connected with other characters as well, but in most other cases they are the ones dying or they are not as active in causing death directly, unlike the man in the black hat.

Sometimes science and technology are the cause of death as can be seen in the following (XKCD, 5.5.2008):

WE VISIT A BIO LAB:

THESE ARE CUTTLEFISH.

THEY'RE FRIGHTENINGLY SMART, HAVE MANIPULATING ARMS AND TENTACLES, HAVE INK JETS, CAN DART BACKWARD, AND SEE THE POLARIZATION OF LIGHT THROUGH THEIR W-SHAPED PUPILS.

AND THEIR SIDES ARE 200 DPI DISPLAY SCREENS WHICH THEY USE FOR CAMOUFLAGE AND COMMUNICATION.

WHEN WE REALIZED HOW INTELLIGENT THEY WERE, WE BEGAN TO TEACH THEM.

THEY'VE ADVANCED QUICKLY.

CUTTLEFISH: GO.

KILL THE PHYSICISTS
KILL THE PHYSICISTS

OH GOD.

I KNEW IT.

XKCD
SALUTES BIO MAJORS

IF WE JOIN YOU AGAINST THE CHEMISTS, WILL YOU TRAIN YOUR FLESHY MINIONS TO LEAVE US ALIVE?

(*XKCD*, 7.6.2010):



Here the book burners have tried burning e-book readers with copies of the book in digital form, which has led to their demise.

(*XKCD*, 3.12.2010):



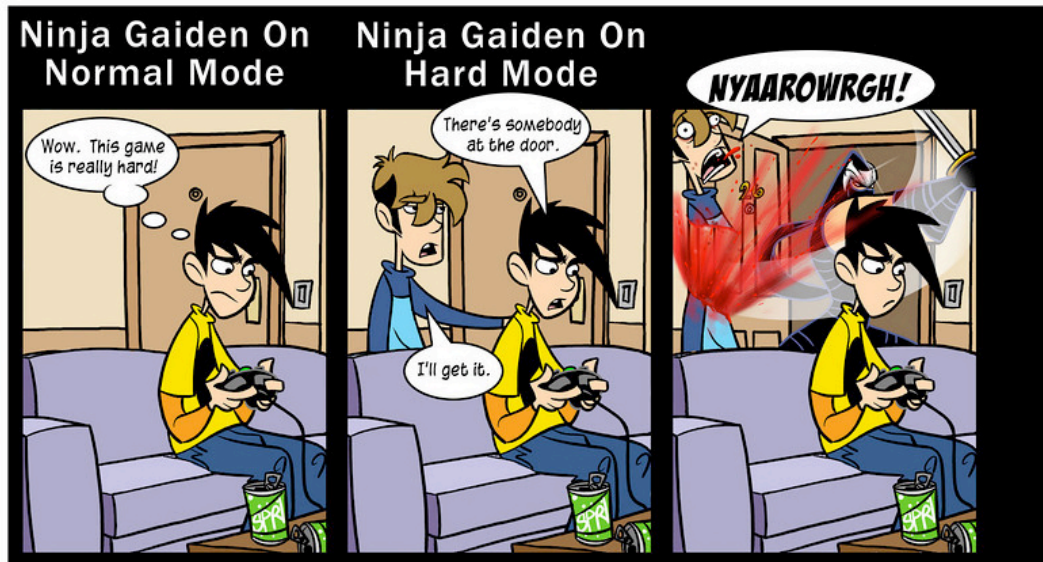
Here the scientists have apparently served the reporters arsenic, which suits the theme of their event, but ends up being fatal to the reporters.

The minimalistic appearance of the stick characters lessens the empathy the reader feels for the characters. Also, unlike *SMBC* and *Cyanide and Happiness*, *XKCD* is less cruel in many ways. There are also more philosophical instances in *XKCD*, where death is at least mentioned, for example the following (*XKCD*, 25.11.2007):

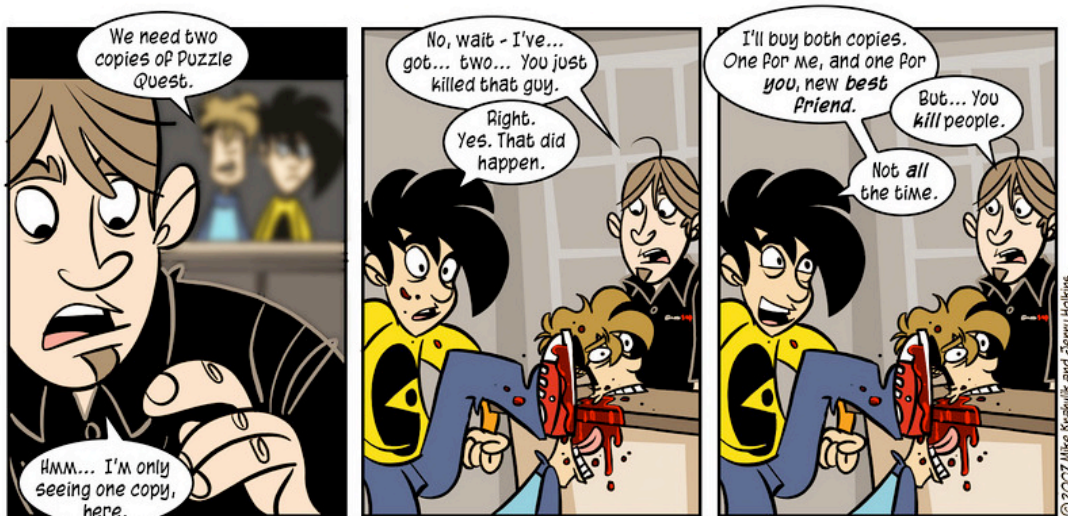


Penny Arcade has two main characters, Gabe and Tycho who are the alter egos of the creators of the comic. Death appears in this comic in the main characters' world as well as the

world of video games, which the protagonists comment on in their strips. Sometimes these worlds mix and videogame characters enter Gabe and Tycho's house as in the following (*Penny Arcade*, 8.3.2004):



This game comments on the difficult nature of the game “Ninja Gaiden”. As in the example above, the protagonists often get killed, but return in the next strips as if nothing has happened. Many times the characters are violent towards each other and even kill each other as can be seen in the following examples (*Penny Arcade*, 26.3.2007)



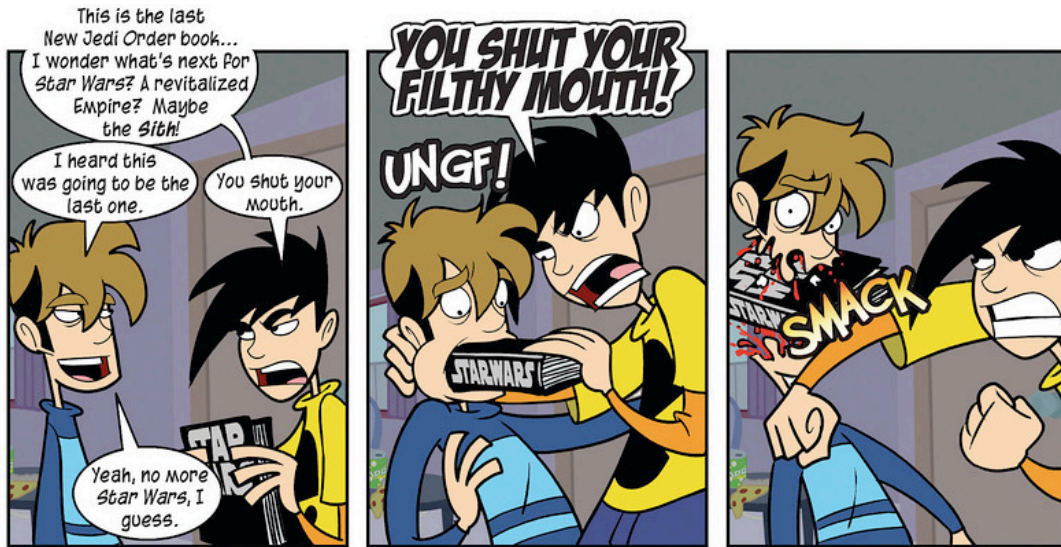
(Penny Arcade, 4.4.2003):



(4.10.2000):



(24.11.2003):



As the characters are the creators' alter egos, they can vent their aggression in the strip and make their counterparts behave as immorally or aggressively as they want. Through these characters they can also explore the dark sides of human nature.

Often death appears inside a videogame and death is portrayed through the characters in that particular game as in the following examples (*Penny Arcade*, 2.5.2008):



This strip deals with the game “Grand Theft Auto IV” where the player gets to steal and drive almost any vehicle. Sometimes when the player tries to get somewhere, he or she occasionally runs over some pedestrians in the process. Here we see the main character of the game, Niko

Bellic who has arrived at the door of his date.

(*Penny Arcade*, 23.11.2009):



This example deals with the game “Assassin’s Creed II” where the player controls an assassin in Italy during the Renaissance. The characters in this strip are speaking Italian but the words are merely types of food.

Even though the imagery in these comics is much more graphic than in some of the others mentioned above, the reader can take comfort in the fact that, even though the main characters seem to die, they always come back in the next strip. This allows the reader to safely laugh at the violence and death displayed. Also, when death occurs in a videogame the reader knows that it is only a comment on a work of fiction, seen through another medium of fiction.

As we have seen with these internet comics, even though the level of detail varies when it comes to the human form, the characters react to death with very little emotion. This is what is needed to laugh at even some of the more shocking comics, and that is what internet comics and newspaper comics have in common. As with the example above where the character from “Grand Theft Auto” has come to get his date, even though the woman can clearly see all the

blood and body parts on the front of the car, instead of being shocked she merely asks the man whether he had trouble finding the place. This is absurd and this is why it makes us laugh instead of feeling horrified.

6.2 The Visual Representation of Death

In this chapter I would like to take a closer look at the ways in which death is visually shown in these comics. Since comic strips are a combination of words and pictures I find this relevant. I have, of course, touched upon this previously, but now I wish to take a closer look.

As I have shown in the examples above, often when Garfield eats a bird or a fish we see him talking to his victim and in the next panel we see his cheeks bulging as if his mouth is full of something. We may also see feathers floating in the air that strengthen our belief in the fact that Garfield has eaten a bird. We do not see Garfield swallow the creature, nor do we see him take a bite out of it or maul it. The reader is only shown the two moments before and after the event.

Sometimes, when Garfield swats spiders, the reader only gets to see a visual sound effect instead of Garfield's hit. This can be seen in the examples above. On the other hand, we sometimes do see him hit one with a newspaper or stomp on one with a boot as can be seen from the following examples (*Garfield*, 10.11.2010):



(*Garfield*, 13.11.2010):



Even though we see Garfield physically harm the spider, the spider does not die in either of these examples. Neither does he show any verbal signs of being in pain, but rather makes an amusing remark. In one of the earlier examples above the other spiders are gathered in another spider's funeral, but in that case the reader is not shown Garfield hurt the spider. It seems that, when it comes to death in *Garfield*, the comic relies more on what Scott McCloud calls closure, by which he means "observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (McCloud, 1994, 63). Death happens in what McCloud calls the gutter, the space between panels (McCloud, 1994, 66).

Sometimes death is used as a visual clue in emphasizing that something takes a long time. In *Garfield* we see this on occasion in the form of skeletons as in the following examples (*Garfield*, 23.4.1984):



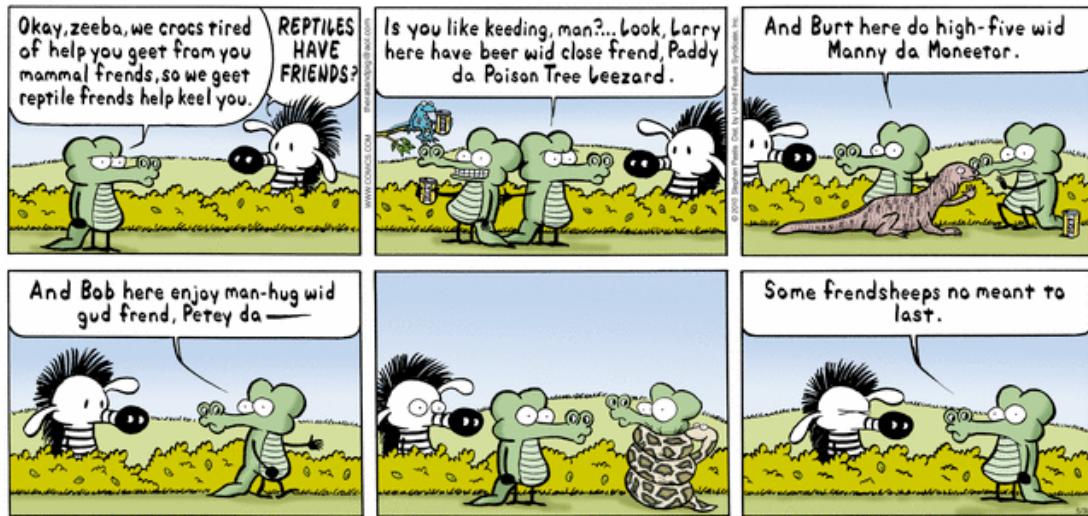
(*Garfield*, 27.6.1995):



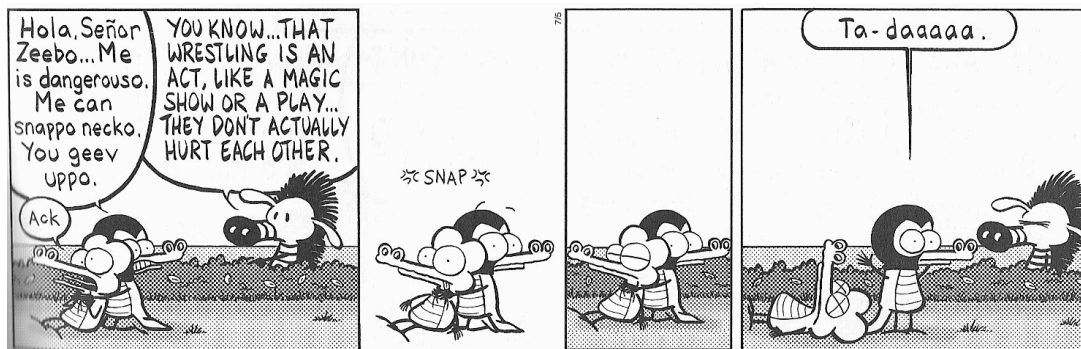
Closure, of course, is used in all the comics I have chosen to study, because in strips with only a few panels, the story must be told in a concise way. If every single moment was depicted, some of the effect and surprise would be gone, and at the same time the amusing nature of the comic strip. In the examples I have shown above in the previous chapter, such as the crocodiles in *Pearls Before Swine*, when the crocodiles die, we often only see them fall down dead, or we see other crocodiles commenting in a manner that lets the reader assume the crocodile has died. Often we see the action that is leading to a crocodile's death, but we do not see the moment of death itself as in the examples above and the following examples (*Pearls Before Swine*, 11.7.2010):



(*Pearls Before Swine*, 30.5.2010):



There is, of course, one exception that Pastis mentions in his treasury, *Pearls Sells Out* (5.7.2007):



Pastis says the following: "This generated many complaints and letters to the editor. The complaint was that the crocodile was killed. At first I didn't understand, because the crocs are always being killed. The difference here? The moment of death is shown" (Pastis, 2009, 153). As this proves, newspapers, or at least newspaper readers can be very sensitive as to how death is depicted in a comic strip.

In *Dilbert* when Alice punches people we see her fist having gone through people's heads, but the punch itself is often replaced with a sound effect. The reader does not always even know that the other person is dead until someone comments on it, as in the examples of *Dilbert* I have shown earlier.

As I have mentioned before, in *Calvin and Hobbes*, in events such as the one where the deer shoot a man, this happens in Calvin's imagination and is therefore described in more detail. We see the man get hit with a bullet, but the interesting thing is that there is no blood anywhere.

In the internet comics we often see lots of blood and the situations contain more gore. The examples of *Penny Arcade* I have shown show the characters or their heads cut in half and there are even severed heads as in the example above, or this one (*Penny Arcade*, 1.3.2010):



SMBC is no exception as these following examples testify: (*SMBC*, 25.11.2006):



As final thoughts go "unicorns are real"
is one of the better ones.

(*SMBC*, 22.10.2007)



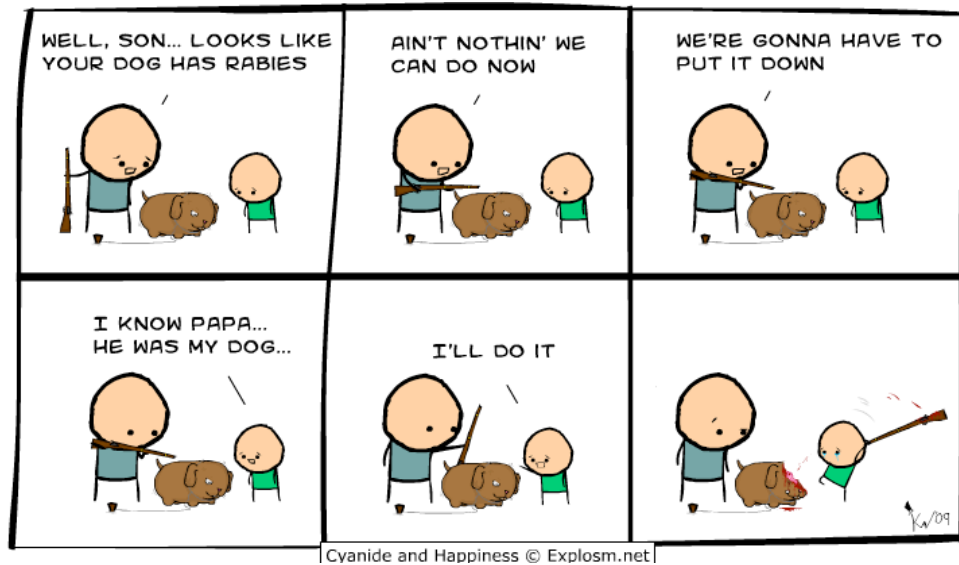
and (*SMBC*, 2.3.2005):



By 2025, shampoo commercials have taken a strange turn.

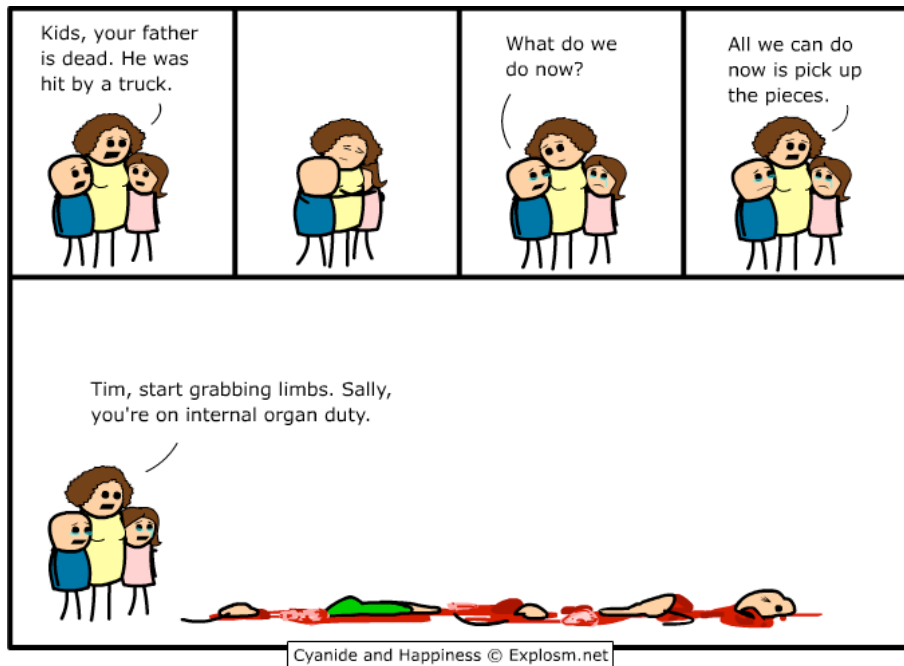
Of course, you'll never know. You get stabbed to death by your own mother in 2022.

Cyanide and Happiness is also a gory comic (28.7.2009):

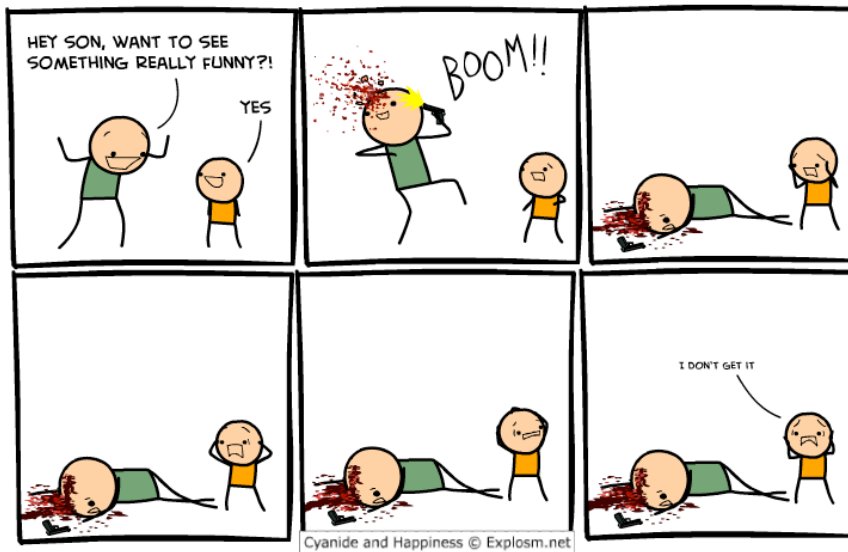


Cyanide and Happiness © Explosm.net

(29.1.2008):



(3.7.2010):



Even *XKCD*, which is more subtle than the other internet comics I have studied, when it comes to death, uses blood as an effect as can be seen from the examples I have presented previously.

So, as I have now shown, even though the use of closure is present in all these comics, it appears that internet comics show death and even the action of death more freely than their

newspaper counterparts. In addition to just blood and dismemberment, internet comics show people being hanged, shot and getting hit by vehicles.

7. CONCLUSIONS

My hypothesis was that since it is easier to publish one's own works on the internet, and because newspaper comics go through many phases and more scrutiny before being published, the content on the internet would differ from that in newspaper comics, since the creators of internet comics had more freedom. I have proven this to be true and have shown that internet comics often focus on a specific topic, such as video games, whereas newspaper comics deal with more general topics.

I showed the conservative nature of newspapers when dealing with taboos such as sex, religion and profanity. Bad language is used in most internet comics, whereas it is simply not allowed in newspaper comics. Internet comics also often treat religion in an aggressive manner and try to make it seem ridiculous. Newspaper comics are more respectful when it comes to religion, but probably mainly for the reason that the syndicates and newspapers try to avoid offending their readers. Also the jokes around religion seem to be mainly focused on the Judeo-Christian religion and other religions are used in comics far more seldom. Sex is a taboo in American newspaper comics, but interestingly the internet comics I have chosen for study do not show their characters in very revealing situations either.

My main topic of interest, however, was death and how it is depicted in internet comics compared to newspaper comics. I found that the internet comics show death in a visually more aggressive manner. They show severed limbs, blood and suicides, whereas newspaper comics would leave death in the "gutter", the space between panels. Both in the newspaper, as well as internet comics, death is used as a humorous device, but in the internet comics the attitude towards death is often somewhat different. It is used in a more aggressive and shocking manner and violence and death are often directed towards the weak and the innocent to a degree where the reader may not find the joke funny anymore. The "Depressing Comic

Week” comics of *Cyanide and Happiness* increase the shock effect that many of their strips have even when coupled with the incongruity of the joke in the last panels. Death could also be seen used in the social function of humor more on the internet than in newspaper comics. *Calvin and Hobbes* occasionally uses death in a philosophical function and has the characters reflect upon the meaning of life and mortality, although *XKCD* sometimes does the same thing.

Some internet comics also seem to use their freedom of expression in an aggressive function to comment on and rebel against some older newspaper comics, such as *Garfield* that appear in the traditional medium where comic strips are established. However, *Pearls Before Swine*, which is a relatively new newspaper comic strip also comments on old newspaper comics, although in a less aggressive way. Although internet comics are somewhat more daring than newspaper comic strips and even though their topics may be a little different, they still largely rely on similar conventions.

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