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Short Circuits

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Beyond [Adobe] Flash™

Flash: Hans Bordahl's and David Farley's Online Comics
as Short Digital Narratives

Ernesto Priego



The presentation accompanying this paper may be viewed [here](#)
(requires Adobe Flash).

HAVING BEEN AMONG US for at least nineteen years, online or web comics are not new. In spite of the rise of Adobe Flash and Javascript-based web applications, motion and mobile comics including audio and other interactive features are an important part of contemporary digital visual culture; an archeology of online comics (and a debate about the need for their digital preservation) has yet to be made.

In this paper I focus on two of the earliest examples of the form, *Where the Buffalo Roam* and *Dr Fun*, which were quick to explore the possibilities offered by the Internet, embedding the language of comics strips onto the online texture while remaining loyal to the basic narrative mechanics and spatial parameters of print. They both produced texts at breakneck speed and rearticulated the form and format, timing and tempo of the comics strip within a network that allowed individual units of graphic narrative to become longer,

multidirectional or ergodic texts.

Hans Bordahl's *Where the Buffalo Roam* is one of the earliest examples of the migration of the comic strip to the networked screen. It started in 1987 as a syndicated strip on various American college newspapers and on invitation of network engineer Herb Morreale the strip was posted on a daily and weekly basis for two years from April 1992 to late 1994 on its own alt group, alt.comics.buffalo-roam.¹ Bordahl's strips were very conventional single-page cartoons that were often subdivided into different panels (figure 1).



Fig.1. <<http://www.shadowculture.com/wtbr/archives/week-1.html>>
[accessed 11 July 2011].

The creative process behind the strips was traditional and used the Internet first and the Web later merely as a form of distribution. In comparison to most printed comics, the drawing style seemed amateurish, but in practice it made a direct reference to its new computational environment, telling fragmentary mini-stories about academic life (hence predating in theme and audience Jorge

Cham's ongoing *PhD Comics*, figure 2).

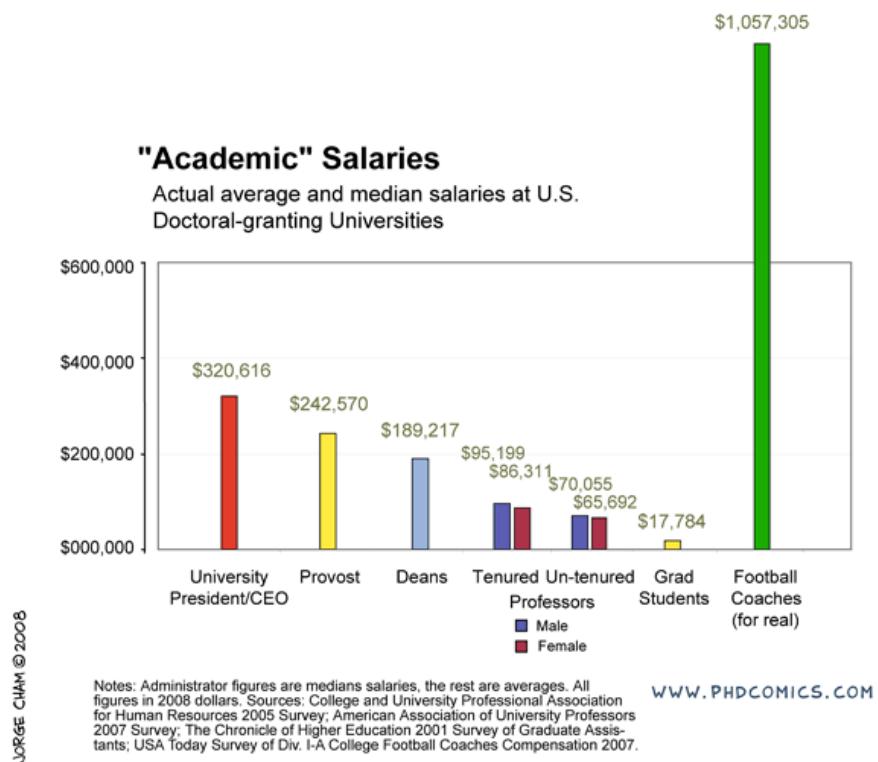


Fig.2. <<http://www.phdcomics.com/comics/archive.php?comicid=1086>>
[accessed 11 July 2011].

Though its narrative mechanics are essentially traditional, the comics page had been augmented by paratextual information such as the navigational icons, sponsors' banners, copyright notice links, etc. The simplicity of the black and white illustration and lettering reflected the demands of online image display and real-time speediness, even reproducing in detail the stylistic limitations of Bordahl's hurried drawing style. The strip was available for free throughout the two years of its publication, which eventually led to its interruption² and the appearance, in print, of two compilation volumes available through the site itself.³

David Farley's *Doctor Fun*, on the other hand, limited itself to one-panel gags (figure 3).⁴ Running between 1993 and 2006, it used very bright, flat colouring, and it was technically more of a cartoon than a strip. Farley had been uploading cartoons he had been drawing since the mid-1980s, but unlike Bordahl the work he published after 1993 was made digitally for the Web.⁵ Like *Where the Buffalo*, it offered a bizarre, academic yet silly, popular culture and computer-related sense of humour based on idiomatic, metaphoric juxtapositions.

Like other online comics, *Doctor Fun* was defined by a hybrid process of creation, the individual strip/panel as narrative unit and a struggle for survival.

Constrained to the depiction of a single situation/moment, the individual cartoon wasn't necessarily narrative *per se* and it could be read independently from other panels. But the recurring characters, themes, motives and situations gave cohesion to the isolated panels, and the hyperlinking gave the entire project a multi-referential narrative structure whose length and pace was decided by the reader, which a printed book would not allow. Since the files weren't heavy they could be downloaded without delay and allowed for easy sharing via email, even in the age of dial-up connections. For ten years it was one of the most popular online cartoons due to its brevity and periodicity.

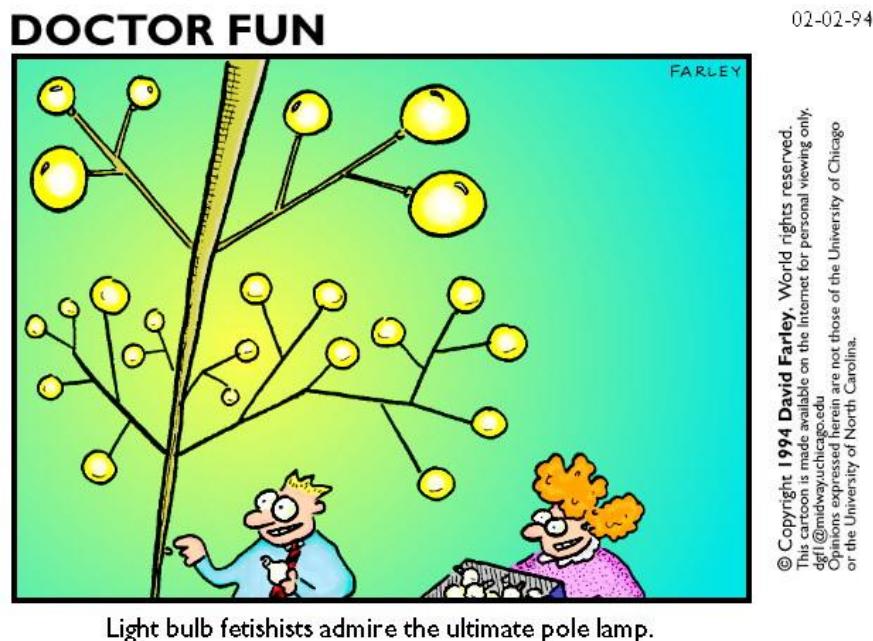


Fig.3. <<http://www.ibiblio.org/Dave/Dr-Fun/df9402/df940202.jpg>>
[accessed 11 July 2011].

These two cases of online comics opened doors for a long queue of up and coming artists and writers that had been waiting for an opportunity to share their work. The hybrid cultural space built by these comics, where print and computer technologies were not exclusive while remaining distinct, put the spotlight on the interdependence of specific media and the content created for such media, as well as on the new possibilities for non-professional authors in need of exposure. Randall Munroe's <http://xkcd.com/> (figure 4, 005-present) in which computational geekery and coding wizardry collide in mini-poetic-narrative strips and single panels that are algorithmically interconnected and randomised, is a successful example of the living influence of Farley and Bordahl, and is closer to their simple yet tech-savvy aesthetics than to the Flash and Javascript-obsessed gimmicks of many mainstream web and mobile comics of today.

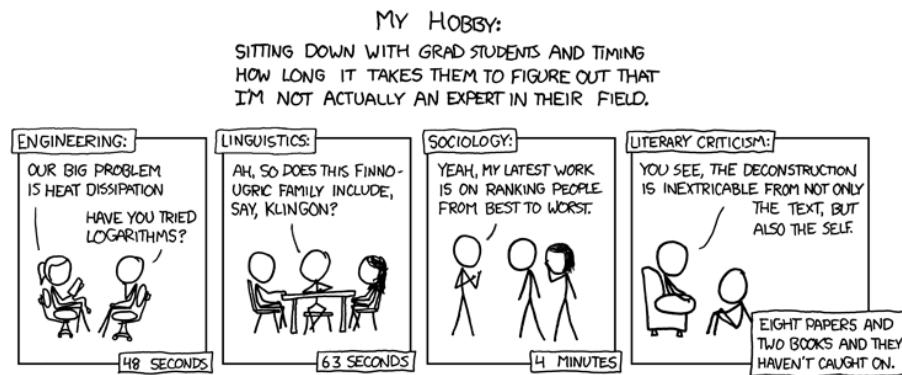


Fig.4. <<http://xkcd.com/451/>> [accessed 11 July 2011].

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Notes

¹ <<http://www.shadowculture.com/wtbr/index.html>>. Re-accessed 10 May 2011.

² "It's difficult to get into a discussion on the comics industry without quickly lapsing in the kind of "I didn't want it anyway" whining usually found in high school newspapers under the headline "Why I Hate Senior Prom." And yet, it has become painfully obvious that two simple words define the state of comic strips today: Death spiral." *The Biz*, "A Note on the Comics Business" <<http://www.shadowculture.com/wtbr/biz.html>> [re-accessed 10 May 2011].

³ "You can order "Where the Buffalo Roam" books right online! If you like what you see on this site, you'll love these books (yes, actual books, each over 170 pages!)". *The Books*, <<http://www.shadowculture.com/wtbr/books.html>>.

⁴ David Farley is not to be confused with Patrick Farley, a pioneering webcomics artist whose work has also been highly influential and varied. Patrick Farley's webcomic *Electric Sheep* is now a classic of the form. <<http://www.electricsheepcomix.com/>> [re-accessed 10 May 2011].

⁵ As JPEG images of 640x480 pixels and 24-bit color.