THE EVOLUTION OF CARTOONS

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October 30, 2004

PURDUE UNIVERSITY
ABSTRACT

“The Evolution of Cartoons”

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Cartoons have been and continue to be an integral part of mainstream societal culture. From the ancient Greeks and Egyptians, to John Lasseter at Pixar, cartoons have been shaped by the cultures and individuals who use them to express themselves. This report discusses this history and the cultures that influence and are influenced by them. Cartoons were not always as they are not. At one point, cartoons were painted on pottery as well as scrolls of a paper-like material. The report also brings to light the different purposes cartoons have held over the years, from motivational to entertainment. As cartoons have evolved, certain individuals have had more of an influence than others. Those individuals include (but are not limited to): Walt Disney, Charles Schultz, William Hanna, and Joseph Barbera. This report provides a thorough history of cartooning and its most influential artisans.

Keywords: cartoons, scrolls, animations, color plates, Walt Disney, Charles Schultz, William Hanna, Joseph Barbera, Chuck Jones, Pixar
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Introduction

Cartoons have been and continue to be an important part of our societal culture. Expressive, comedic, and at times political, cartoons appeal to all audiences—both children and adults. “Cartoon” comes from the Italian word “cartone” which means “large paper” (Lobo, 2002). In its simplest form, cartoons are large, pictorial images that serve the purpose of telling a story or commenting on a social or political issue. What makes cartoons so effective despite their simplicity? According to Pulitzer Prize winning author and cartoonist Art Spiegelman, “Comics are the way brains think. You have small clusters of words in the mind when you speak to someone. These clusters become iconic, abstracting images indicating a visual that becomes real in your brain (Enriquez, 2000, p. 3A).” It is important to know the origin of cartoons and how they have evolved over the centuries to fully appreciate the cartoons and animations that are produced today. With this knowledge comes the realization that little has changed in the purpose cartoons serve.

Earliest Cartoons: Egyptians

The stories and the messages found within cartoons are in reality another means of mass communication. In their most primitive form, cartoons can be found as far back as 1300 BC. In Scott McCloud’s Understanding Comics (1994), he theorizes that cartoons have been with us since those ancient times. He points to various murals found along the sides of pyramids and monuments that depict stories. One, for example, describes the daily trials and tribulations that farmers would go through. At the end of the mural, the farmer is beaten to death by one of the pharaoh’s tax collectors. It is during this beating that the farmer exclaims, “I hate Mondays!” (Lobo, 2002) Here, the Egyptians display their sense of humor and they tell a story through the
use of pictures. Therefore, they are implementing the use of what we now consider to be cartoons.

Figure 1: Example of Egyptian “cartoon” which tells about the life of a farmer (Lobo, 2002).

Greek Animators

Egyptians were not the only ones that implemented the use of cartoons in their culture. The Greeks did as well, however theirs are present on their pottery. Greek vases are broken down into two genres: the black figured, and the red figured. The black figured vases from 6th and 5th centuries BC are much more pictorial than the earlier vases. These vases were painted with black figures on reddish orange clay. The paintings give us a unique understanding into the Greek legends, myths, and the lives of the ordinary people within their society. Examples of stories painted onto the vases are from the Trojan War, the adventures of Odysseus, and those of Dionysos, the Greek god of wine (“Greek vases”, 2001). The red figured vases had a more three-dimensional look to them. It is evident here Greek culture tried to gain more depth in their
artwork. The characters were usually outlined in black leaving the bare, red clay to show through as the design. This technique also allowed the artist more freedom and therefore the designs on these vases were much more pictorially complicated. It is amazing because from these primitive cartoons we can see how they influenced the foundations of our own society: our government, our literature, and even in our architecture ("Greek vases", 2001). Here again is a group of images that tell a story and or express social and political ideas. What we now consider to be cartoons existed even back then.

*Japanese Art*

On the other side of the world, the Japanese culture had also developed their own cartoons. These were the first to be on a paper-like substance; they depicted their cartoons on scrolls. Their cartoons told continuous stories. These scrolls first appeared around the 11th and 12th centuries. The “Tale of Genji” picture scrolls are some of the most famous in the Japanese culture. They are also very similar to the ukiyoe prints from the 18th and 19th centuries. In both cases, the figures have the same facial structures and are expressed with simple lines and flat coloring (Kaichiro, 1997, p. 4B). In the case of the “Tale of Genji” scrolls, an entire novel is told by the pictures with bare minimal text. This is also one of the earliest examples where pictures are combined with some text to tell a story (Moriyasu, 1999). Cartoons continue to be an important aspect of the Japanese culture. Their modern cartoons are called “mangas” and are obviously descendents of these early scrolls and ukiyoe prints. They maintain the same line quality and
coloring. The Japanese culture is another example of a culture that has stories told by means of pictures as an important part of their history.

**Early American Cartoons**

Along with the development of the printing press, artists and philosophers feared that the new technology would further sequester men. As a result, they strived to develop a “new language” where pictures and words could be combined; cartoons are acknowledged for the first time at this period. Early artists such as William Hogarth used this new art form as if it were a stage play that incorporates balloons with text. Zincography and photoengraving aided in this new art form’s explosion in popularity. Pictures combined with text gave new means to consolidate the advances of all other forms of communication in a cost-effective manner (Lobo, 2002). Thus the birth of cartoons as we know them today.

As time progressed, the printing press, zincography, and photoengraving enabled cartoons to be mass-produced and widely distributed for the first time. This in turn enabled cartoons to be reached by and to affect a larger audience. The printing press reproduced cartoons in black and white and the first political cartoons emerged from its development (James, 1997). Benjamin Franklin designed one of the first political cartoons in 1754 and to this day it is one of the most famous political cartoons: the “JOIN, or DIE” snake. It discussed the need for the colonies to work together, and while it was most potent during the Revolutionary War, it was originally intended to unite the colonies against the threat of the Indians (“Join”, 2001).
20th Century Cartooning

Modern cartoons first appeared around the early 1900s. Different types of cartooning began to emerge and they are classified into the following five groups: illustrative, comic strips, gag strips, animated, and political (Mankoff, 2002). Some form of these five different groups appears in most, if not all, newspapers and magazines today. Illustrative cartoons explain stories. They are used in teaching materials and in advertisements. These cartoons have little meaning and are mostly found in schoolbooks. Comic strips are more often than not found in newspapers and magazines and their purpose is, in essence, to be funny; their intent is to induce laughter from their readers. One of the most famous comic strip artists was Charles Schultz, creator of the *Peanuts* comic strip. Gag strips are usually composed of a single picture combined with one to two sentences and also have the job of producing laughter. Animated cartoons are the latest of the cartoon form. They can be done by both hand and by computer and appeal to children as well as to adults. The main characteristic of animated cartoons that differentiates them from the other types is that animated cartoons also involve the medium of movement (McCloud, 1994). Political cartoons are intended for adults and usually convey a point of view concerning a
societal issue current to its time of publication. These also appear in newspapers and magazines (Mankoff, 2002).

**Walt Disney**

Cartoons did not evolve on their own; various influential people made their own lasting mark on this art and communication form. The first and foremost important person from the field of animated cartoons is Walt Disney. His first cartoon character was named Oswald Rabbit (Murphy, 2000). This was his first comic strip as well as his first cartoon series. He created this character as well as the strip along with his brother. Following the creation and success of Oswald Rabbit came Steamboat Willie, one of the most famous cartoon characters. Steamboat Willie led the way for Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse, Donald, Daisy, and the other Disney characters. Disney created the first full-length animated film back in 1937 with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Isbouts & Disney, 2001). This was also Disney’s first attempt at a musical, and it was a tremendous success. The success of this film spawned the creation of many other animated, musical, and feature films.

![Figure 6: Scene out of Disney’s Snow White (“Snow White”, 1996).](image)

**Chuck Jones**
Another influential person in the field of cartoons is Chuck Jones. While his name may not be as well known as Disney, his characters make up for it. Like Disney, Jones created characters for predominantly animated cartoons. In 1932, Jones was a cell washer at Ubbe Iwerks Studios and he later joined the Leon Schlesinger Studios. Not long after, Warner Brothers bought these studios. The characters he created there are part of what put Warner Brothers on the map. These characters are an integral part of our society: Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Elmer Fudd, and Porkey Pig. Jones not only created the characters but also did their animations as well as their voices and personas (Jones, 1999). However Jones did not solely work for Warner Brothers, he also created some characters on his own. These characters may also seem familiar: Road Runner, Wile E. Coyote, Marvin the Martian, Pepe le Pew, and Gossemer. Jones may not be as well known as others like Disney, however his impact upon the cartooning community is just as immeasurable.

Figure 7: Bugs Bunny with many other Warner Brothers cartoons on the bottom (“Bugs Bunny”, 1998).

Hanna-Barbera
Another group that made their mark on cartooning is William Hanna and Joseph Barbera; this duo is better known as Hanna-Barbera. From 1960 to 1966, Hanna-Barbera’s cartoons “The Flintstones” and “Atom Ant” were broadcast. Their success led to the creation of other memorable cartoons such as “Yogi Bear”, “Johnny Quest”, “The Jetsons”, “Tom & Jerry”, and the very memorable “Scooby Doo.” There are many others that joined the Hanna-Barbera cartoon family; these are just a few examples (Rozakis & Smolinski, 1994). For over 60 years these two cartoonists and animators shaped what we think of when we hear, “Saturday morning cartoons.” William Denby Hanna was born in Melrose, New Mexico, in 1910. Soon after, his family moved to Los Angeles. There he was an active member of the Boy Scouts. Joseph Roland Barbera was born in 1911 in the Little Italy section of New York’s Lower East Side, but was raised in Brooklyn. In 1937, Bill Hanna and Joe Barbera joined forces (Murphy, 2000). Coming from different backgrounds and experiences, and possessing different talents, they were worried about their compatibility. However the gamble was a success and they completely complimented each other.

Figure 8: Scooby Doo
(“Scooby Doo”, 2000).

Figure 9: Tom & Jerry
(“Tom & Jerry”, 1999).

Charles Schultz
Since the masterminds of animated cartoons have been acknowledged, the comic strip area of cartooning must not be forgotten. As previously mentioned, Charles Schultz is the Walt Disney of this type of cartooning. From when he was little, Schultz knew that he wanted a job as a cartoonist. After returning from the war, Schultz began his working career lettering tombstones in St. Paul, Minnesota, however this did not last long (“Charles”, 1997). From there he took a job at a Roman Catholic magazine called Timeless Topix. He did work there – both pictorial and written. Working for Timeless Topix was his first real job in cartooning. He took a second job as a teacher to pay the bills and it was as a teacher that he met many of the people he would later use as models for characters in the Peanuts strip. Then, on October 2, 1950, the world was introduced to some characters that would change their lives forever. During the time when America was still rejoicing from the war and no person was supposed to be unhappy, Schulz introduced us to Charlie Brown, Snoopy, Lucy, and the rest of the Peanuts gang. At our first introduction, we were introduced to the “L’il Folks”, but we came to know them as the Peanuts crew (“Charles”, 1997). His work was new and different. Everyone could identify with main character who had the same problems as they did. The only difference was that that character acknowledged his problems. Charlie Brown represented the inner psyche of the American people. Schultz had the pulse of the every American in his hand and to this day the Peanuts strip is the most widely syndicated strip ever. It has appeared in over two thousand six hundred different newspapers in seventy-five countries and in twenty-one different languages (“Charles”, 1997). Charles Schultz and his most popular character, Charlie Brown, will forever impact the American people and the way they view themselves.
As times change, cartoons and the way in which they are made change as well. Back in 1995, Disney joined up with Pixar to create *Toy Story*, the first full-length feature film created entirely on a computer. *Toy Story*’s success led to the production of other computer-animated movies such as *A Bug’s Life* in 1998, *Toy Story 2* in 1999, and more recently, *Monster’s INC.* in 2001. It is particularly true of these cartoons that they appeal to all audiences. Some of the dialogue and situations are so that only an adult would be able to fully appreciate the humor and wit behind them. On the other hand, the bright and playful colors, the characters, and the basic story lines are for the children (Thomas, Johnston, & Johnston, 1995). Either way, this new type of cartoon continues to entertain any and every person.

Since these films are made completely by a computer, the production aspects of these films vary from the traditional animated films. The animators at Pixar, in creating the films, neither draw nor paint each successive scene like done in traditional animations. Using Pixar’s animation software, the animators choreograph the movements and facial expressions in each of the scenes and then computers generates the “in between” frames, which are adjusted as needed. Currently, computer animation in the cartoon genre is at its peak. At present, that is where the money is.
Figure 10: Woody and Buzz, the two main characters from Disney-Pixar’s *Toy Story*

Cartoons have marked the changes in society over time, from the Egyptians and the pyramids to today’s *Toy Story*. Cartoons reflect the changes in our society as well as evolve with it. Some form of cartoons inhabit most every aspect of our lives, from teaching our children to read, to watching commercials on television. The styles of cartoons have changed over time from the more factual and serious in nature to the more comedic and lighthearted in nature. There are obvious differences between the figures painted on the Greek vases and Sully from *Monster’s INC*. Today, cartoons are becoming more universally entertaining where adults and kids alike enjoy watching what has traditionally been enjoyed by just children. For example, *A Bug’s Life* appealed to a larger audience than *Oliver and Company* (an animated Disney movie made in 1988). For all these different areas and characteristics of cartooning, we have people like Walt Disney, Chuck Jones, Bill Hanna and Joe Barbera, and Charles Schultz to thank. Their
contributions have affected our world in immeasurable ways. Can you think of a world devoid of Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny, Scooby Doo, and Charlie Brown and Snoopy? What a boring thought that is. Whether we are aware of it or not, the cartoons are there, teaching us, guiding us, and forever entertaining us. According to Spiegelman (Enriquez, 2000, p. 3A), “The essential magic of comics is that a few simple words and marks can conjure up an entire world for a reader to enter and believe in.”
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