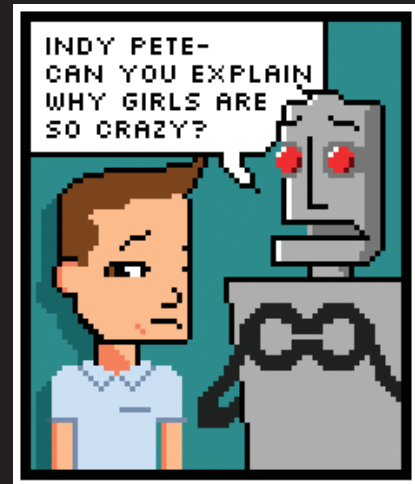


Girl is Interrupted

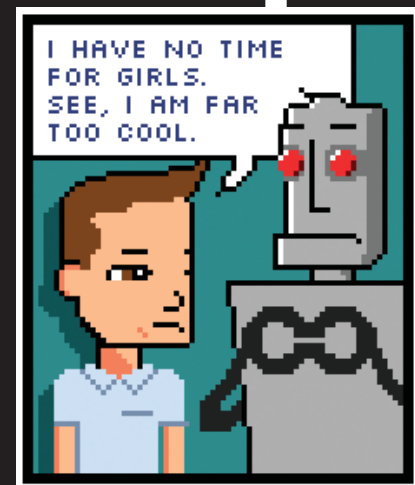
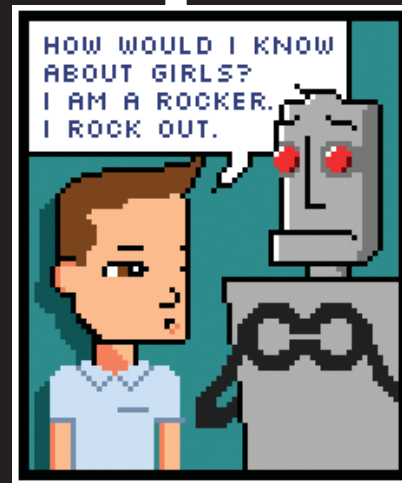


Cat and Girl

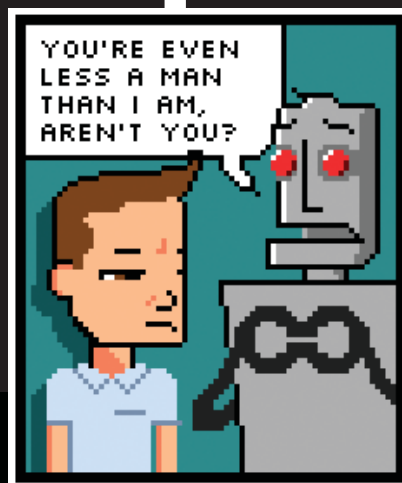
“Communicating with people – just being able to hold a thought in your head, make it into an object and be lucky enough that people are going to read it.”
 – Dorothy Gambrell’s, creator of “Cat and Girl,” favorite thing about making webcomics



Diesel Sweeties



“I figured that if I couldn’t stand out visually one way or another, I was wasting my time.”
 – Rich Stevens on “Diesel Sweeties”



Funny Pages

Comics flourish in the digital age

By Alexandra Jones
Daily Arts Writer

Say goodbye to “Garfield,” “For Better or For Worse,” “Marmaduke” and that god-awful “Family Circus.” The new wave of comic strips push the boundaries of the medium with fantastic content and innovations in visual style – and you don’t need a newspaper to read them.

“Diesel Sweeties,” drawn by Rich Stevens, features pixelated artwork, usually in four panels, about a group of humans and the robots who love them. “Achewood’s” animal characters range from the cute and clueless otter Phillippe to suicidal computer programmer Roast Beef; Dorothy Gambrell’s characters consist of Girl, wise beyond her years, and her wacky guardian Cat, with occasional appearances by Hipster Scout Grrl and the lovelorn and luckless Boy. “I was watching a student art film where everything was a metaphor,” says Gambrell. “The two female characters were named ‘Cat’ and ‘Girl.’ Combine this with having just read the spurious fake-pulp titles in ‘Meg McGillicuddy Series’ on the last page of the first McSweeney’s and about ten minutes of drawing and, well, there you go.”

Jon Rosenberg describes “Goats” beginning as “a comic strip about (my) apartment,” but since then, human roommates Jon and Phillip and their animal sidekicks Diablo the Chicken and Toothgnip (the eponymous goat) have battled Gregor Mendel and a sentient cheese monster, encountered kinky aliens Neil and Bob, killed a bartender or two and drank untold amounts of upscale beer.

Comics reach children early; the combination of words and pictures to tell stories can make a significant impression. “I spent almost all my allowance on comic books and strip compilations,” says Rosenberg. “I studied (Berkeley) Breathed, (Bill) Watterson, (Charles) Schulz and others until I felt like I had gotten inside their heads and figured out exactly what they were doing to breathe that spark of life into their creations. I think it was just a matter of time before I moved on to creating my own worlds.”

Stevens felt a similar affinity for comics as a child; “I honestly can’t remember when I wasn’t drawing some kind of comic” he said. As did Gambrell: “I decided to be a cartoonist when I was nine because I thought it would be easy. Through a ruthless program of denying myself introspection, I am still one today.”

The Internet presents artists of all skill and experience levels with the opportunity to reach an audience, develop their talents, try out new ideas, start a career or simply indulge a hobby. Chris Onstad, creator of “Achewood,” started by drawing strips about his wife’s stuffed animals. “It was just a dalliance. In the end, I kept with it because I was getting good feedback from friends and a handful of strangers who’d come across the site.” Jeff Rowland took the plunge after college and a day job proved unfulfilling. “I wanted to try to have a new job that was easier and better-paying. Why I chose cartooning is beyond me.”

Predictably, webcomics artists often have backgrounds in graphic design or computers; Gambrell and Onstad both work in graphics when they’re not working on their comics, and Stevens is an adjunct professor of graphic design at Hartford Art School in Connecticut. Rosenberg does web consulting, “but there’s less and less of that these days. Hopefully, someday, there’ll be so little of it I won’t even notice it any more.”

Rosenberg’s hopes could easily come to pass. Along with merchandise sales, some comics offer “premium” content in which readers can pay a small monthly or yearly fee for access to extras like members-only forums, merchandise discounts and additional strips. Sites like Serializer.net charge \$2.95 per month for access to 36 different webcomics. Onstad posts additional color “Achewood” strips and a serialized crime/adventure novella, “Nate Small, One Tough Man.” This has enabled Onstad to focus on his art. “Achewood” is about 95% of (my career) now.”

Rowland describes “Wigu’s” cute, colorful, hand-drawn style as “governed entirely by my limited abilities.” “Cat and Girl,” while black and white, is also drawn by hand: “I like simplicity and utility. The drawings are there to serve a purpose, not wow people with technique ... I don’t like drawing. I know exactly how things ought to look, and I am never able to transfer that to paper as well as I would like.” Onstad favors a simple look as well, but creates “Achewood” with Adobe Illustrator, an optical mouse and a Wacom tablet. “I consider it minimalistic with a focus on subtlety. Both qualities simply come from me being an extremely lazy artist.”

Stevens developed the “Diesel Sweeties” computerized/nostalgic look in order to distinguish the strip from other webcomics. “It happened upon the pixel style when I was drawing computer icons for fun. Something about the pixels made me nostalgic and made sense to me that a webcomic about robots should have art with a ‘computery’ kind of feel,” he explains. “Goats” looks more professional now than it did at its inception in 1997: “It’s like a sculptor chipping a statue out of a block of marble – the statue is already there. Your talent determines how close you can get to revealing it,” says Rosenberg.

Because the Internet provides artists with freedom to experiment with content and style, individual artists can tailor their work to certain audiences. Onstad considers “Achewood” “occasionally adult” and posts a disclaimer on his site that the strip is intended for readers over 18. Rowland chose to create “Wigu” as “something that might be a little more friendly for all ages, yet edgy at the same time ... It seems like a lot of these cartoonists go ‘Sweet, I don’t have an editor! I can cuss and show bathing suit areas in my comic!’ I wanted to provide an alternative to that.”

Cartoonists attribute the popularity of webcomics to this specialization: “There’s about eight Dumbrella.com comics that share message boards, and a lot of the people who use those don’t read all the comics, but they find a place where other clever and like-minded people are hanging around,” says Rowland. Rosenberg adds, “Webcomics have a huge potential reach, but actually realizing that potential takes time and a lot of work.”

According to Stevens, the popularity of webcomics mirrors the popularity of comic books in their heyday. “Comic books used to be wildly popular when they were simple and people could get ahold of them easily ... Think about it. A good comic is pretty much impossible not to read when it’s in front of you. You’ve got these little faces looking out at you, or doing goofy things you wish you could do ... how do you avoid reading that?”



Goats

“I think the look and feel of ‘Goats’ has come out of a natural progression over the last seven years ... As I learn how to handle the pen, I can get the characters to look more like what I envision in my head.”
 – Jon Rosenberg on “Goats”



Courtesy of goats.com

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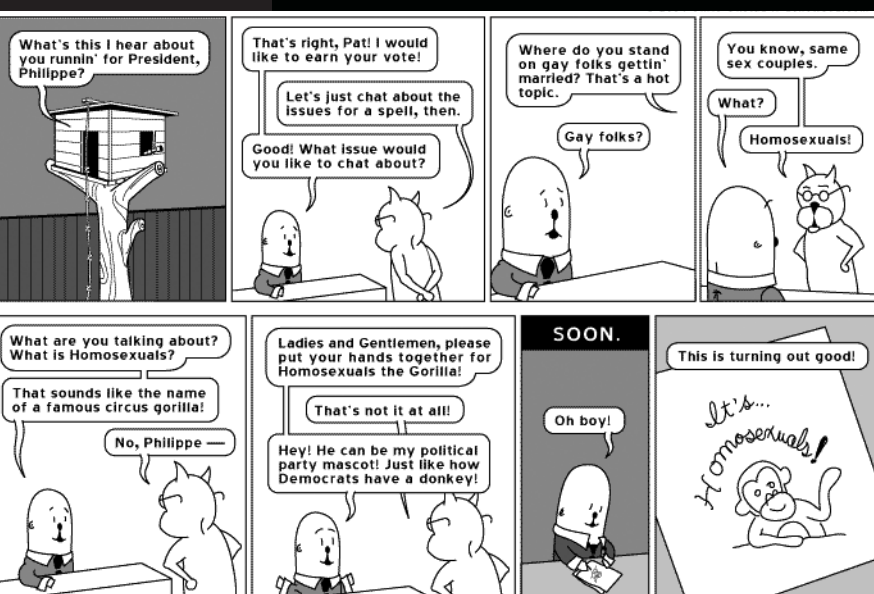
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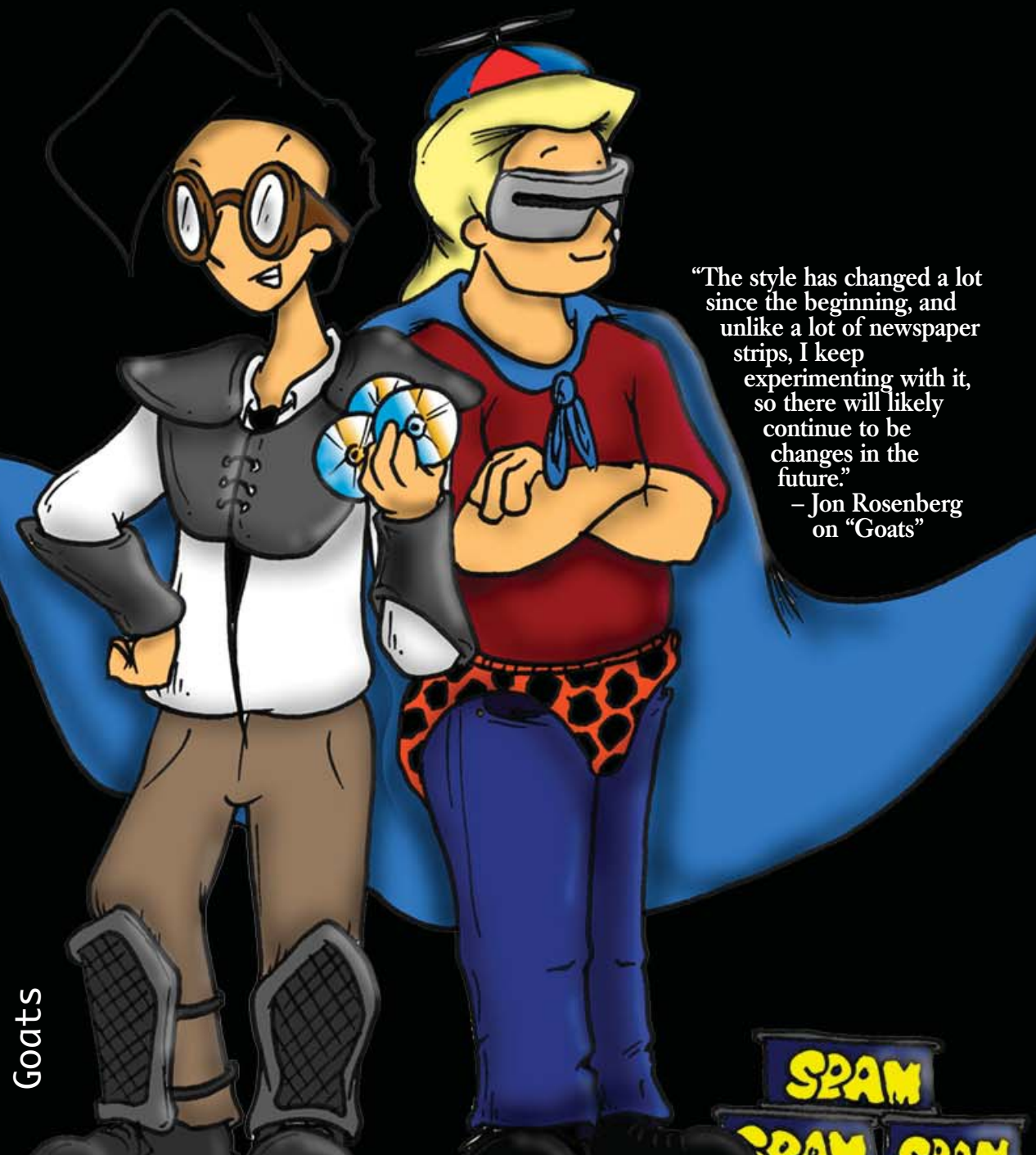
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Achewood



“It’s not the characters that allow surreality and absurdity, it’s the decision of the writer. Pretty much everything that happens in ‘Achewood’ could have been done with human characters instead.”
 – Chris Onstad on “Achewood”

Goats



“The style has changed a lot since the beginning, and unlike a lot of newspaper strips, I keep experimenting with it, so there will likely continue to be changes in the future.”
 – Jon Rosenberg on “Goats”



“I think the ‘Wigu’-style is sort of a suicide blend of ‘Peanuts’ and anime with a dash of ‘Calvin and Hobbes.’” – Jeff Rowland on “Wigu”