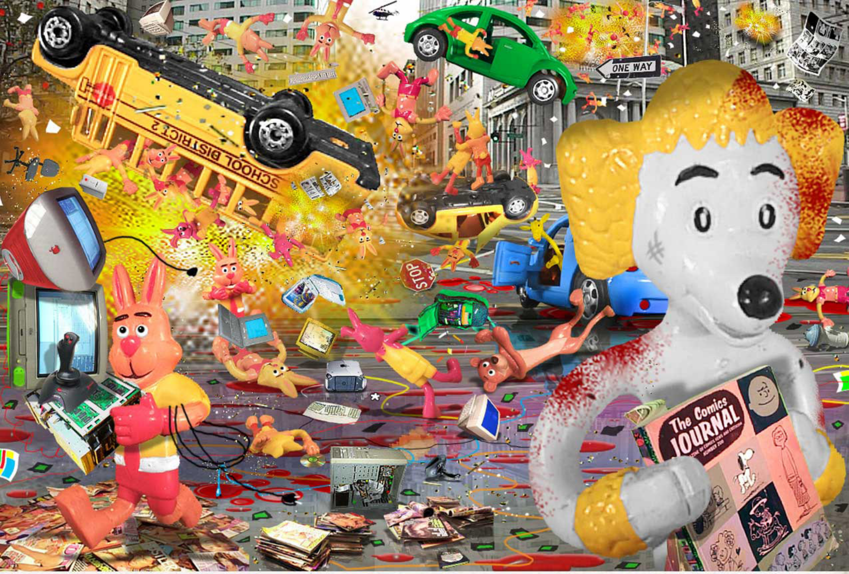


Tristan A. Farnon is the artist behind the largest, most elaborate and gut-punchingly funny body of work on the Internet today. A strange relative of the photo-comic (and the only photo-comic, if we can call it that, that isn't a tiresome bore), www.leisuretown.com looks wholly unlike any comic that has ever preceded it. The whole story is essentially a cut-and-paste digitally assembled photo-montage: all of the backgrounds are too-bright photographic cityscapes or interiors. Farnon's characters are created from images of ridiculous, brightly colored plastic bendy toys. All text is big, chunky and easy to read. It seems the combination of these elements should render any story absolutely unreadable, particularly when the storylines concentrate on the base pleasures with which Farnon seems preoccupied, yet Leisuretown.com somehow makes it all work. Farnon's work is overall indelicate and deliberately idiotic, yet manages to remain touching and undeniably human.

Contributor Jordan Crane conducted this interview over dim sum and General Gao's Chicken at a small Chinatown eatery in San Francisco. The interview was recorded on a mini-disk player, imported as an AIFF file, then converted to a text document using a speech recognition program, which was e-mailed to me with Farnon's 28.8kbps (!!!) modem.

A Silly Little Coat Hanger for Fart Jokes:
Talkin' Comics with Leisuretown.com's Tristan A. Farnon

by Jordan Crane

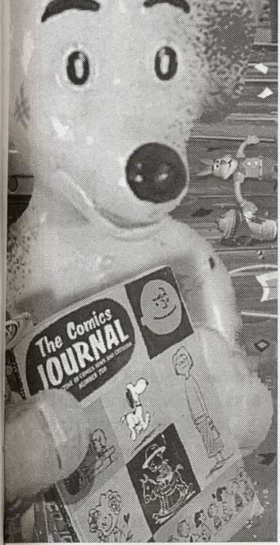
Background

CRANE: *Where were you born?*

FARNON: America. I don't really know any more than that.

CRANE: *What's your birthday?*

like to call them comics. At first, it was just a silly little coat hanger for fart jokes. But over time, a stupid thing happened: I started caring about how it looked, where it was going, what I was doing. Partially because my name was on it, I guess. A pretty exhausting effort for what it is. I'm trying to tread carefully and demonstrate a respect for the proceedings rather than just using a computer to squirt everywhere.



FARNON: April 20 — a birthday I share with Hitler, Napoleon, Joey Lawrence, the Columbine anniversary, and Louise Jamison, who played Leela on *Doctor Who*. And the generic 4:20, of course.

CRANE: *Your middle name: what does the "A" stand for?*

FARNON: Amateur. Or Anonymous, maybe? I'm trying to distance myself from James Herriot's character from *All Creatures Great and Small.* I'm not "the" Tristan Farnon, I'm Tristan "A." Farnon. It's a matter of indefinite articles.

CRANE: *Did you go to art school?*

FARNON: No, just charm school. Art school might help me, if only to lengthen the skills section on my resume by two or three lines. I just imagine it being exactly like Dan Clowes' "Art School Confidential," where I end up feeling dumb for a few years and then disposed of. Thus far, I've had no difficulty serving sandwiches without a degree.

CRANE: *Why and when did you start doing Leisuretown.com?*

FARNON: Well, in 1997 I found myself trying to figure out what sort of comics might look best on the Web. I observed only two kinds: comics drawn on paper and scanned in for online display, or comics drawn directly with a computer, sometimes resold in print form. I guess they both felt like cheating to me. On one level, it's a good intersection of activities that interest me. Writing, comics, dumb jokes. I'd

I've gone through critical beat-downs of myself about the hows and whys of creating online comics for total strangers. Neither my e-mail nor my contact information is on the site, I'm doing it all pretty much anonymously. It's hard to live in a complete vacuum of user feedback and still enjoy doing it. Making online things which inspire *any* kind of emotional reaction in the typical Internet reader (a smile, a chuckle, a slight change in mood) is almost impossible.

CRANE: *But why the Internet? Why not just do a print comic?*

FARNON: I can't draw, plain as that. Or pencil. Or ink. It's pretty much just cut and paste. The artistic process is limited to the hows and wheres I can position key elements, like Colorforms. I can add shadows, or reflections, or Zip-a-tone lighting effects to flesh out the illusion a little bit. I can put props in their hands or make the characters drive cars, but I can't change their facial expressions. They're plastic toys. The default state of their big empty eyes or dopey smile has to draw the reader in long enough to care, and draw me in long enough to complete a piece of work which survives multiple viewings. I feel like Richard Dreyfuss in *Close Encounters*, trying to sculpt Devil's Tower out of mashed potatoes. [Crane chortles.] I can't letter either, which I'm now very uncomfortable with. To me, one of the most meaningful things about print comics is that you get to see the artist's handwriting. Even with a drawing tablet, computer-based comics can't afford you that; they're loaded down with fonts like Comic Sans or the Spiderman

I know deep down I'm probably not talented enough to move beyond the word "fart."

"THWACK" font we've seen a million times. At least my tired, wheezing fonts might be misconstrued as part of an overall "joke," and maybe the limitations of computer-rendered lettering might force me to expand creatively elsewhere. I'm not allowed to use word balloons anyway, because they obscure the background. A colorful background photograph can be the biggest joke of all. It makes people stare goggle-eyed in disbelief that a human being would actually go "on location" and spend time assembling this complicated shit.

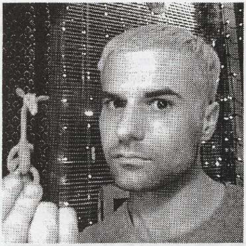
CRANE: *Do you do Leisuretown.com full-time, or do you have a day job?*

ing high on the tippy-top of my own unmistakable genius, free to bounce up and down on that one singular achievement until I'm nominated for a Pulitzer.

Leisuretown.com behind the scenes

CRANE: *How do you feel about your own work? Are you particularly happy with any of the comics you've done?*

FARNON: Some of them. A few images worked out here and there. Internet-based comics need to remain ostracized from the rest



FARNON: I've been living off my savings since last June. I probably have another year or so to develop something workable with Leisuretown.com before I'm bussing tables again. I need a day job, I think all artists do. Without something horrible happening to me every day, I don't have a foil to work against when I come home to make comics. Nothing comes out. No pages, no jokes or artwork. When I don't have a job, there are only two or three subjects I can talk about with any authority: masturbation and killing myself. It starts to feel like the same themes over and over. It's difficult reducing the amount of dick jokes because it feels like a desperate, transparent attempt at different material . . . I know deep down I'm probably not talented enough to move beyond the word "fart." The "best" comics I've ever done were developed while I was employed somewhere exasperating.

CRANE: *Pretty much everyone I know with a computer is a big fan of Leisuretown.com. It seems to be an Internet institution, up there with Suck.com and* The Onion *(www.theonion.com). Exactly how popular is your site?*

FARNON: A million and some-odd hits a month is all I know. Clicks and counters reflect the math of the site, hardly the quality. I used to go through obsessive phases where I'd study the numbers, review the logs, track and analyze them like an idiot. If I witnessed someone skipping from page 2 to page 17, I'd completely flip out. I'd go mirror their actions, staring at my art, wondering what I did to bore them or lose them. I'd count the hits and divide by this and multiply by that and the final number would be my "stock price" of the day, how much my product was worth. It was a horrible, ridiculous game and I can't bear to look at my logs anymore.

Weirdly, Leisuretown.com was nominated for a 2000 Webby Award alongside the online versions of *The Onion*, Comedy Central and *McSweeney's*. How that works, I have no idea. But clearly nobody can touch me now, I'm riding the coattails of the party for a few more years. That's really the only way they'll get any better. Besides, I'd be absolutely mortified if any of my influences ever saw Leisuretown.com. It's come to look very embarrassing to me. I stare at each pixel for so long while I'm doing it that each page grows equally and interchangeably meaningless, assaulting all of my senses at once.

I give up, I don't know. Sometimes they feel like glorified storyboards and not much else. There are 23 stories, a total of 902 pages — I'm not allowed to take them down, though. That's cheating, trying to hide the "sucky" ones. Full-suck disclosure is the only way to go. When thousands of people are viewing your hideous cocktail napkin scribblings, a shame-based motivational effort is created which forces you to get better, faster. We can't forget that the only thing lower and less respected than being a Web designer is being a Web cartoonist.

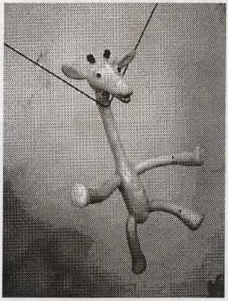
CRANE: *What process do you go through when working on a story?*

FARNON: I'll pick a vague theme like "guy at the mall causing trouble" and illustrate it for awhile. Slowly the images develop a sequential order. If the narrative changes around a little, I can chop and re-chop and shuffle things. Each page is a living, breathing document that expands or contracts to fit my mood of the moment. Puffs of smoke billowing out the top of a bong often hinder that moment, unfortunately.

What I dislike most about the process is that taking so many photographs and stitching them together is more labor intensive than improvisational. There's no "flow" from hand to paper, I don't get to play like that. It's drippy molasses without a guaranteed formula. The best thing for me is to think of a topic I might be able to stomach for a few months, and just start assembling things. The closest I get to a script is maybe a few post-it notes here and there. Post-it notes are great, you can draw stick figure mini-comics and arrange them in a notebook over and over.

I figure if I throw enough colors and nice photographs at the reader, I've earned the right to make the world's most expensive and complicated dick jokes.

Above: Farnon awaiting his Pulitzer.



CRANE: *So, dumb irony: there's a paper trail for each of your online comics.*

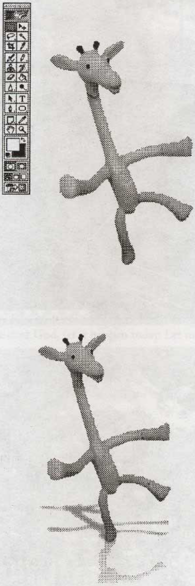
FARNON: I used to compose everything directly inside the intended display rectangle, but the images grew so complex I started composing frames elsewhere and importing them in. When I discovered that other cartoonists do this too, I was a bit relieved. My gutters are moveable, I can shift or split them, stretch them out, jerk each one around until five in the morning. I have a library of recyclable elements, like telephones, or broken glass, or explosions. I don't want to take pictures of everyday objects every time I sit down. What I don't reuse are pictures of the characters. Each one is different, I'm very proud of that. You'll never see the same exact pose twice. That's the artistic "penance" I have to perform for doing everything digitally.

CRANE: *Pretty complex. Yet when it comes to putting the story together, you're doing a lot more improvisation . . .*

FARNON: Sometimes I'll have finished three or four decent pages, and I'll need to bridge them together somehow. Connecting scenes is the hardest part, and often I give myself only then I'll do the three or four panels which come before it. That way, I can "surprise" people because I'm really surprising myself. I can distract people with trivialities for awhile, hiding a punchline until the very last minute. It's all misdirection: leading the reader one way, yanking him another. It should feel like a nice ride, though. Not a random-number generator.

CRANE: *The vast majority of your best comics are drawn simply yet charmingly: all the necessary information, no extras, all wrapped up in a pretty package. Despite the visual complexity of your photographic images, your images retain a simplicity . . .*

FARNON: When you're limited by pixels, you learn how to conserve information. If you have a character standing in front of a hot-dog cart, and the hot-dog cart has the word "HOT DOG CART" written on it, chances are the character doesn't need to announce he's standing at a hot-dog cart. The reader gets it already. Your character is now free to discuss anything else in the world, like how he has an eating disorder or whatever. Use that space for more meaningful text. The process of buying a hot dog at the hot dog cart then becomes a nice touch, a charming



Above: Farnon's complex process.

one tiny panel in which to do it. I'll think to myself, OK: how do I get these girls from the liquor store to the airport in one connecting moment. I know I can use words like "and" or "later that night," but then I'm not being very original. Remember, everything feels like "cheating" to me. I have to do actual work of some kind. Each page has to be proofread and checked for bugs many times. I have to make certain that shadows cast are actually *under* the characters, and reflections aren't poking out into other panels, etc. I stare at them for so long I gloss over obvious, embarrassing mistakes.

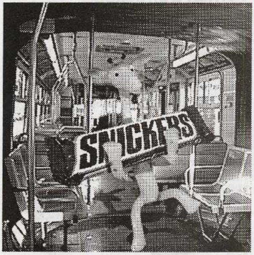
CRANE: *It sounds like a combination of hard work and complete haphazardness. Have you found this creates a happy synergy, or is it more of a hindrance?*

FARNON: If I write the story first, I have to go take pictures. If I take pictures first, I have to massage a story around them. I'll be staring at a picture and think "it would be great *if*," or "it will suck if I don't at least do this, this, this and this." So I've come to work backwards. I'll put a single panel together which works for me, and

bit of side-business the reader can appreciate unconsciously. These are standard practices though, I shouldn't feel too proud of myself for decoding them.

CRANE: *What is the most labor-intensive aspect of making an episode of Leisuretown.com?*

FARNON: Christ, everything. The fact that I play with dolls? It's hard to describe what I ended up doing without sounding truly retarded. I ended up building a small studio. It's a bunch of strings and hooks and lights which swing and bonk around and burn my fingers. I take pictures of the characters — wireframe plastic bendable toys — giraffes, little horsies — one at a time against a plain green backdrop, and pipe them into PhotoShop for extraction and horrendously uncoordinated color correction. Getting all the pieces together for a crowd scene can take awhile. The bendy toys then get re-scaled and superimposed to match the environment of real-world backgrounds. By real-world backgrounds, I mean I go out into the real world and take pictures of streets, cafes, adult bookstores, junior high schools. I wait for a clear shot with no people. The photographs serve as a stage that I can re-populate later with these characters. I add props and dialogue, and stitch the sequences together.



Bottom right: The final product, dropped onto a photographic background.

Anyway, doing all that in front of a computer is not where I want to be 24 hours a day. Maybe that's where the on-location photography comes in, so I'm forced to leave my house and pay attention to the world around me. Even then things will happen, like: if I think of a scene which takes place in a snowy meadow, I can't just immediately start working on it — first I have to rent a car and look up the weather and arrange travel to a snowy meadow worth photographing. Not only does that disrupt my in-studio character-extracting time, but it turns out I don't know how to put snow chains on

> Not to instigate a gang war, but quite frankly I don't think online comics should move. I don't think they need animation, or sound effects. They don't need to squeak or squawk or blink or flash or make noise or magically reach a hand out from the monitor and jerk me up and down.

tires by myself.

CRANE: *How long does it take you to complete a comic?*

FARNON: Between concept and implementation, to writing and photographing the whole deal and attempting some kind of narrative flow, it's an ongoing disaster with no deadline. Elements like, oh, the pupil of an eyeball existing in a layer separate from the surrounding white. This allows me to change my mind about anything at any point during development. Some of these images have over 300 layers, I can nudge and tweak and re-adjust the art for days at a time just to get something right. Then I have to stuff it all inside a tiny 600 x 300 rectangle and make the whole thing look as realistic as possible. Plus none of these characters have names, so I'm confined to stories where information can be conveyed on a more unconscious level. I think I'm unconsciously confessing to some poor work habits here.

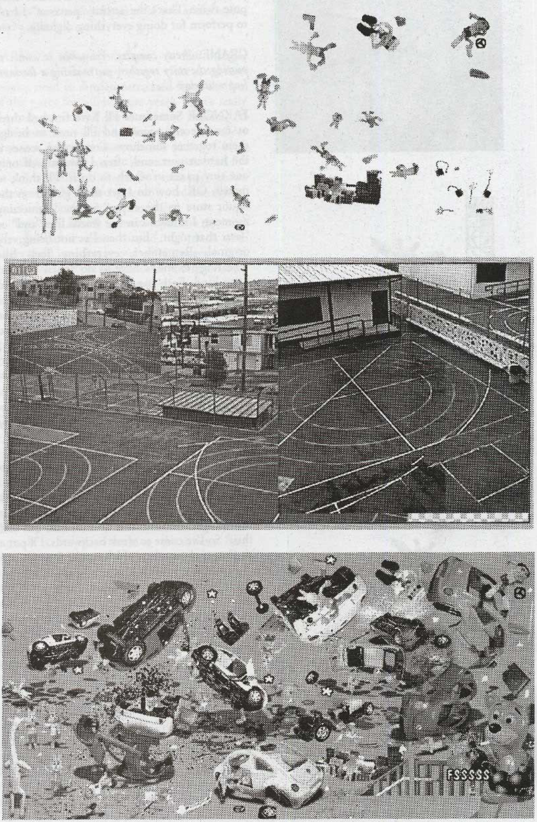
CRANE: *Any idea who your audience is?*

FARNON: My stuff is read by people stuck in their cubes all day. Or people awake at three in the morning, searching for something. The goal is to take them outdoors for awhile, show them something new and different. Or at least colorful. I figure if I throw enough colors and nice photographs at the reader, I've earned the right to make the world's most expensive and complicated dick jokes.

Farnon Defrocked

CRANE: *Tell me why you're making comics.*

FARNON: I came to enjoy reading so many different comics out there, I guess I just wanted to play along. I knew I'd never really be allowed inside the big comics clubhouse, but, gosh darnit, I became the little engine that almost could. For the longest time, developing Leisuretown.com was all I could think about. I sacrificed two jobs, a nice house, several girlfriends and a dog so I could dork my life around like this. And all the while, I knew deep down that nobody would ever see them or care about them. I figured I was on some weird path. I wanted to follow it.



Above: The 3 main image planes (left) are combined with text to create the final (right).

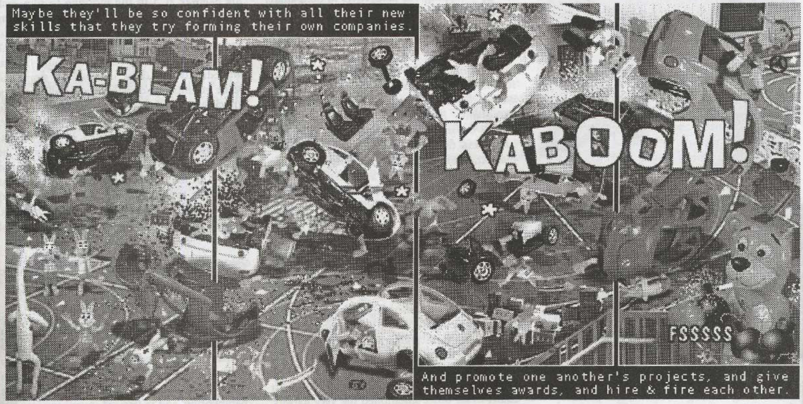
CRANE: *Like what?*

FARNON: Oh, God. I would find two tubes, maybe glue them together into fake binoculars. Then I'd loop string through it and wear it around my neck and spy on people. I also did magic tricks until I was around 20. Can we please discuss anything else in the world?

CRANE: *Aw, c'mon . . . Let's talk more about your childhood. Did you have lotsa friends? Any childhood illnesses?*

FARNON: Well, pretty much no friends. I

answered questions about my home life to anyone's satisfaction; it would just wear me down. That's the hardest part about having a weird background: having to recite a big long story with ten million components ten million times. From start to finish, there was little or nothing I could identify with at home, or desired to emulate. To this day, I can barely imagine what it's like to have blood-relations to anyone, to have parents who "conceived" me in the common sense. When I see a pair of siblings, or a mom and daughter who look even the slightest bit similar, I get a queasy feeling. Like when someone says "incest."


Maybe they'll be so confident with all their new skills that they try forming their own companies.
KA-BLAM!
KABOOM!
FSSSSS
And promote one another's projects, and give themselves awards, and hire & fire each other.

My stories ballooned up in size because I wanted there to be hours and hours of entertainment for people to look at. It takes months to make them, and they're devoured in two minutes. They ballooned up from around 17 pages to 52, 90, 102 pages? I mean seriously, what's wrong with me? That's a lot to ask of anyone. Possibly I'm suffering from a slow-motion brain aneurysm, which allows me to enjoy a brief burst of creativity before I shut down for good. Please dear God, let it happen today. Let me die today.

CRANE: *Your work is filled with desperate and fed-up characters. Do you have a similar outlook on the world?*

FARNON: Possibly, yes. About stupid stuff. I attach huge emotional value to certain props. A scrap of paper on the floor will have a history attached to it and I'll let my mind explode backwards in time as to how it got there and why. When I was young, I would break down and cry whenever mom made me throw an empty toilet paper tube in the trash can. I just imagined it sitting at the dump, all cardboard and sad. It was such a neat object, a perfect cylinder. It asked so little and I was destroying it. I wanted to do something useful with it.

CRANE: *What was your family life like?*

FARNON: The concept of family is hard for me to wrap my mind around. I was adopted into a relatively fragmented environment. A single mom in the lead, her husband until he died when I was in second grade, and four younger children from Korea. They were also adopted, with a handful of behavioral problems here and there. It was an absolutely impenetrable, impossible structure for me to figure out. It was difficult on my mom, but my brain had already shut down. I stopped paying attention after awhile, I knew I could close my door and none of them would exist. A big strange house with small strange people. It was a situation I'd have to explain to people over and over. I never went to school every day, came home and sat in my room. I didn't do anything useful there, either. I never felt like playing with toys or action figures. That might explain why I'm doing all my toy-bending now. I can't say I read books or listened to music. I had maybe one Tom Lehrer album, and that made me extremely happy. He saved my life on so many occasions. My interest in the world wasn't switched on yet. I guess that's a childhood illness, the inability to notice things.

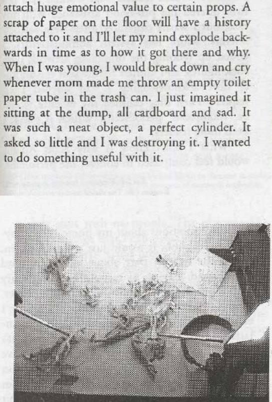
The only scene I'm familiar with is every man for himself. I stayed locked in my room for 16 years and never spoke to anyone. I just had my own interests I didn't bother sharing. I don't know, interests like attaching straws together or drawing the same stupid optical illusion over and over, or practicing magic tricks. They weren't spectacular interests, but I can tell you that people from banged-up backgrounds don't always fail. Unless doing online comics is a form of failure.

CRANE: *"Attaching straws together?"*

FARNON: Yeah, take a big bundle of plastic drinking straws and tie a string around the middle. Pull the string real tight, and the straws kink out in all directions like a Sputnik satellite. Or a snowflake. Or a Christmas tree decoration. It's very satisfying.

CRANE: *Were you a good student?*

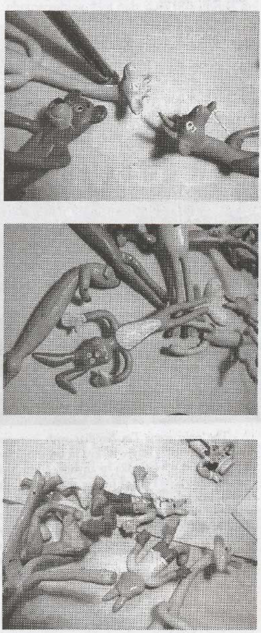
FARNON: Of course not. I was busy watching *Doctor Who* on PBS. I was the only non-Mormon kid at a tiny, private high school. I'm still not sure how I ended up there. All the other students knew each other, went to church together, drank juice together. When I



appeared, the jukebox record would scratch to a stop. It was like being on another planet. I barely spoke to anyone the entire four years, and I certainly didn't come away with any friends. But I can't imagine a better time in anyone's life to be utterly invisible. The anonymity made me want to cause temporary disruptions in the general workflow of things.

CRANE: *[Laughter] What kind of "temporary disruptions?"*

really vandalism. Xeroxing awful photos of staff members from the yearbook into oversize proportions, and postering them around campus in groups of nine or ten. I would make large grids on different colored paper. They looked like Andy Warhol's silk-screened Marilyn Monroes, only with the P.E. teacher. I didn't have a reason or a motive. The only statement it made was "hey look what I did." All my pranks were paper-related. I was regularly busted for wasting resources. I thought I was being anonymous, but everyone knew it was me.



FARNON: I got in trouble for weird stuff. Like stealing school stationery from the principal's office and typing out fake letters to the parents of fellow students. These memos would arrive at people's homes, perfectly legitimate-looking. The message would be, "Dear Mr. and Mrs. Whomever, your son or daughter was caught masturbating in the library and we'd like to schedule an important conference." The text would degenerate over the course of several paragraphs into all-uppercase cocksucking sounds or fart noises. I thought they were very funny and that they'd be received in a playful manner, but in fact I was causing serious friction between random parents and the administration. Exactly what you'd expect from a ninth-grader. At least I got the spelling right.

CRANE: *So eventually they caught you.*

FARNON: I was the only non-Mormon, remember? It turns out I wasn't so invisible. They had their eye on me so completely that whenever I threw something in the garbage can, an authority figure would go rooting after it. They really were going through my garbage. One time I threw away a beta version of a fake note, and the librarian found my crumpled-up school stationery. I was pulled out of class. Four adults in an office questioned me very harshly. They asked me *why* I did it, which is just an impossible question to answer.

CRANE: *What did you say?*

FARNON: I said it was a joke. I thought the students themselves would manage to intercept the letters. They grilled me for twenty minutes and never brought it up again.

CRANE: *Any other youthful shenanigans?*

FARNON: Sometimes vandalism that wasn't

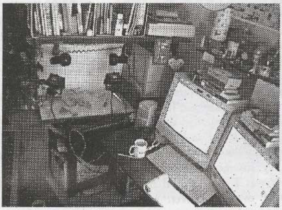
When I finally made some modem-friends outside of school, we'd take a video camera to the Safeway at 3 in the morning to film each other smooshing things. We'd set the camera down on the tile in front of a bunch of bananas and step on them. Then we'd move on to pink Sno-balls or fruitcakes. Security would find us immediately and chase us from the store, and while running we'd wobble and fall down or knock over displays because our shoes were so slippery. At home, we'd watch the videotape, we'd watch ourselves get busted. We'd hear security barking at us again, the camera would be picked up from the ground and get bonked around in the ensuing scuffle. Often there was insightful roundtable discussion [afterwards] about our individual smooshing techniques. [*Covers face.*] I refuse to remember any more of this.

CRANE: *In 1997 you had some* Dilbert *parodies in a comic you did called "A Comedy Crisis." Which got you in some trouble . . .*

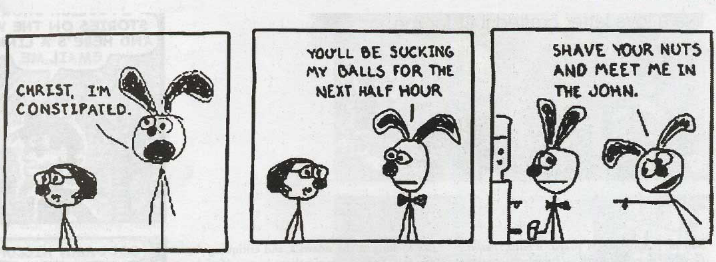
FARNON: Well, the whole *Dilbert* incident was pretty straightforward. I chopped up a bunch of *Dilbert* cartoons for a story about a guy who chops up *Dilbert* cartoons and puts them up all around the office. I sampled his handwriting, and re-lettered everything into fart jokes and toilet humor, homoerotic escapades and sexual harrassments. I know, real mature. They stayed up on Leisuretown.com for about six months until United Media sent me a registered cease-and-desist letter. They cited specific examples, too. Words like "flatulence" and "erection" in this formalized legal document on ribbed, creme-colored stationery.

Even Scott Adams (scottadams@aol.com) sent me a one-line note: "Do you want to go to jail?" No, I don't want to go to jail. I'm not going to be a martyr for *Dilbert*, I complied and took them down. I understand the Fair Use copyright act and I know there are *Dilbert* parodies everywhere, but I wasn't interested in making noise or getting junk mail from the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund. A group of Leisuretown.com readers who worked at a law firm offered me pro-bono assistance with my case, but I wasn't convinced they were actually lawyers. More like system administrators. I ended up redoing the offending artwork with stick figures, and United Media sent me another note acknowledging I had obeyed their request. Then they claimed my website would be "monitored" periodically. Which is good. I need more readers.

What I don't know is why Scott Adams would feel compelled to contact me personally.



Far left: Farnon: a fun guy to party with.
Bottom left: The digital comics creator's studio.


CHRIST, I'M CONSTIPATED.
YOU'LL BE SUCKING MY BALLS FOR THE NEXT HALF HOUR
SHAVE YOUR NUTS AND MEET ME IN THE JOHN.

I'm allowed to disrespect *Dilbert* if I want to, I've suffered through years of insipid *Dilbert*-related merchandise staring at me from other people's cubicles. I've worked on software products code-named "Dogbert." It just got annoying. After awhile each strip ballooned up with industry keywords, and they grew indistinguishable from any other rectangle of syndicated bumper-sticker humor. Let's all honk if we love *Dilbert*.

CRANE: *Has your mother ever seen your work?*

FARNON: I have to say no. I can barely explain my work, I wouldn't know how or where to introduce it conversationally. I could send her the link, I guess. Possibly I'm too busy sharing my work with *your* mother, if you know what I mean?

CRANE: *You mean fucking her.*

FARNON: Yes.

CRANE: *Are you a fun guy to party with?*

FARNON: Not long ago I met a girl who was pregnant. She was extremely depressed about it. Eventually she was able to get an abortion, and I threw her a surprise party the next day. I commissioned my magical friend Delfina to make an abortion cake, a four-tiered white cake with white frosting. There were plastic baby heads and doll parts sticking out of it every which way, and red frosting squirted around to make it look more drastic. There were long, thin candles on colored slurpee straws inserted diagonally, like needles. I really went back and forth on whether or not an abortion surprise party with cake would be something she'd appreciate, but she loved it, thank God.

Technical Details

CRANE: *Assembling an episode of Leisuretown.com sounds like a pretty huge undertaking. Describe your computer set-up.*

FARNON: I have a couple Macs, a G3 and a G4. Each has two 20-inch monitors attached because I need a great deal of screen real estate. There's a Windows box in the corner for testing HTML layouts across different environments. I've stayed with the Sony line of digital cameras because they're small, with nice viewfinders. I can't hold a large camera up to my face like a shoebox and expect any privacy. If you're out in public and you pull out a rectangular piece of technology, every doofus in the world wants to have a conversation about it. Then I have to explain the hows and whys of what I'm doing. Finally my Powerbook G4 arrived, so now I can do work out in the field instead of at home in my underwear.

CRANE: *What are your technical considerations when you make a comic for online viewing?*

FARNON: I've done everything I can to ensure a pleasant, uniform viewing experience for everyone. I've tested a reasonable combination of browsers, modems, monitor sizes, speeds and so forth. Each page is roughly 80K (distilled from 2-3 megabytes of original image data per picture), which I don't think is unreasonable. If someone is legitimately interested in the contents of an image called "blowjob.gif," — I promise you they'll sit there and wait while it slowly unfurls like a flag down their screen. You just have to give them something worth the time it takes to download. I try to put punchlines or key visual elements at the top and bottom of that flag, so people feel rewarded for their patience. Connections will continue to get faster, but until then online comics are sold by the pound.

Talkin' Comics

CRANE: *What are your favorite comics, online and off?*

FARNON: If it doesn't involve video games or unix jokes or "furry" anime-style creatures scampering around, there's a greater chance I can relate to it. It's widely known the greatest online comic ever made is *Pokey the Penguin* (www.yellow5.com/pokey). I'm also fond of *Jerkcity* (www.jerkcity.com). *Jerkcity* uses Jim Woodring's artwork as commissioned by Microsoft for Comic Chat. The dialog is lifted from private talker sessions between me and a few colleagues as we beta-test stupid one-line gags or bits of business on each other. "Rands" owns the site, "Pants" does the strips, and I'm the "Spigot" character. Jim Woodring knows about *Jerkcity*, I think. He's credited.

My list hardly ever changes. Chris Ware, Daniel Clowes, Julie Doucet. Crumb. Sam Henderson, Tony Millionaire, Kaz. Throw in some Charles Burns, Chester Brown, Seth, Adrian Tomine. I think Pete Bagge's latest work at *Suck* and *Hate Annual* is just plain great. He's using words, he's writing, demonstrating competence in a decidedly non-comics format. I'm more interested in listening to Bagge than Buddy. He's decoupled text from illustrations in a way that plugs into any structure, online or off. We should all follow suit.

CRANE: *And what kind of stuff makes you cringe?*

FARNON: If your characters dork around in capes or spend each panel grimacing with their machine gun, it's guaranteed to bounce right off my brain. I've never understood that genre, I don't even see it. If your work is available at the Warner Bros. store in the mall, I'm probably not interested unless I know you personally. I'm just so unwilling to give new things a chance. I gravitate towards stuff that looks like a love letter crafted just for me.

CRANE: *It seems as if online comics and print comics are two different worlds. The print comics world certainly has its little foibles. What are some of the pressing issues and dirty linen from the world of online comics?*

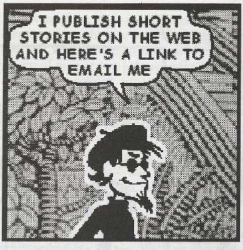
FARNON: I wish I had more "dirt" to dish about online comics. I just don't spend very much time looking at them.

CRANE: *Do you have anything specifically against doing comics for print?*

FARNON: Nothing, although I think newspaper syndication is sort of a false goal these days. Even if I did work of superior quality, I don't think seeing my work showcased alongside Garfield would necessarily make me feel more accomplished. If what we perceive as a newspaper comics page ever unfolded into, say, a full

Top: These recreated *Dilbert* strips caused United Media to threaten to monitor Leisuretown.com. Farnon is thrilled by the prospect of increased readership.

I gravitate towards stuff that looks like a love letter crafted just for me.


I PUBLISH SHORT STORIES ON THE WEB AND HERE'S A LINK TO EMAIL ME

wall of Kaz, *Maakies, Magic Whistle, Pathetic Geek Stories* and so forth — I might be working harder to be taken seriously. Read any interview with an established cartoonist and you learn how miserable they are with the state of the comics industry. They're all getting screwed over, or not making enough money to stay alive. The primary obligation of online creators should be to heed such warnings directly, investigate different paths and secure different revenue streams.

CRANE: *"Revenue streams" isn't something a person would normally hear in the context of comics.*

FARNON: It had better be, and pretty damn quick. The online comic which makes money is the anchor to which all others will want to be attached. Your work won't generate any significant interest until it's able to give back to the community somehow, to pull in some dollars. All we need is one successful model to come along and everyone will piggyback on its success.

Comic books have ads, Web pages have ads. The window of opportunity for ad programs to succeed on a comics site is rapidly closing. Everyone's getting bored with banners. They don't fool us, we just nudge them away. We're all developing the ability to selectively edit out rectangles of unnecessary visual data.

What we can't ignore is pornography. As society "expands its consciousness" or whatever by way of the internet, there are fewer and fewer family-safe ad banner schemes capable of attracting attention. Even as we speak, Yahoo, AOL, Altavista, Netcenter, Infoseek — the big names, they can no longer afford to ignore the millions and millions of dollars to be made from adult advertising. They love to go back and forth, one hand keeping the Web "kid safe" and the other hand distributing porn. The largest dot-coms not only have the whole yin/yang thing happening, they're actively lobbying our government to pass legislation severely restricting how smaller content creators can receive a slice of the action. Consider the market very nearly cornered.

CRANE: *There are many bad online comics out there. Can you tell me some of the things they're doing wrong?*

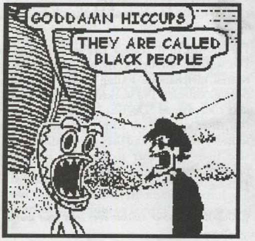
FARNON: Critiquing someone's Web page is like looking at the sidewalk and critiquing the dog shit. They're just out there, as part of of the whole structure. It's hard not to feel jealous when other people publish something every day and it takes me a year and a half to get up off the floor. I have no idea if online comics artists like each other or hate each other.

Not to instigate a gang war, but quite frankly I don't think online comics should move. I don't think they need animation, or sound effects. They don't need to squeak or squawk or blink or flash or make noise or magically reach a hand out from the monitor and jerk me up and down. They should be happy to lie there quietly on the page. Maakies.com is the exception — Tony Millionaire's *Sock Monkey* can do whatever it wants.

I wish I could evangelize everything and speak about it with some sense of accomplishment, but I don't feel it yet. The truth is I have a lot more really stupid work in me that needs to be expelled before I start making good comics. I can only hope I eventually figure out how they're supposed to look.

CRANE: *You don't think comics should bleep or squawk. You're making online comics that have the stillness of an image in print. You're obviously not using the image display capabilities of the Internet to their fullest extent. So then: Why should the images be still?*

FARNON: Didn't Dan Clowes talk about how we live in a society where nothing is considered "real" until it's turned into a movie? If your images are dancing around or making noise, you're not doing comics. You're involved in some kind of techno-riffic multimedia nonsense. For hundreds of years, the universally accepted definition of comics has been sequential art, not sequential Flash animation. I want text, maybe some dialogue, and a static, quiet piece of art you've spent a little time on. How is your story supposed to "explode" inside my brain unless you've placed it there gently, panel by panel? I'm not interested in googly eyeballs that follow my mouse around, or neon signs that buzz on and off, or scrolling backgrounds. It punches me in the face like a cheap banner ad. Don't yank my focus away from the narrative and onto your dopey cleverness. Why not just do a fucking Terry Gilliam deal and make your character's mouth flap open and shut next to a word balloon? Enough already, just stop it. If

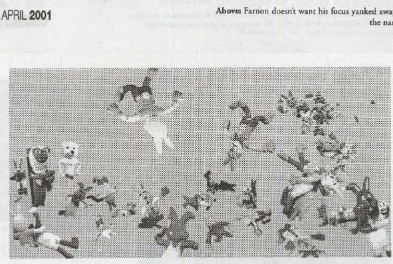

GODDAMN HICCUPS
THEY ARE CALLED BLACK PEOPLE

Kids do everything online from day one, I'm sure they can wrangle my complicated documents just fine on the toilet.

Above: Farnon doesn't want his focus yanked away from the narrative.

you want to do animated cartoons, go right ahead. But offer them to the public as cartoons, not comics.

I've worked at Apple, Adobe, Netscape, Macromedia — each at a time when Internet content tools were empowering young people to focus their energy into hideous, noisy creations that went nowhere. Dumb animation, or glorified movie credits. My job at each of these places



was to do the builds: to distill all the engineers' code into the actual application (the Netscape browser, Flash 5, etc). I'm intimately familiar with just how poor the DNA of these structures is. I can offer accurate, elegant reasons why people should not waste time developing online content for certain platforms. In many ways, I'm ashamed to have been part of these companies. I feel like a Nazi doctor hiding his past.

CRANE: *OK, so what's the best part about online comics?*

FARNON: They get you laid. Plain and simple, they get you laid, laid, laid. I shouldn't have to say anything more than that. When you do online comics, you broadcast to the entire universe your artistic sensibilities, a sense of humor, and abstract concepts like "commitment" and "dedication." Girls love it. Mysterious, beautiful creatures from other dimensions will track you down, insinuate themselves into your life, repair all your internal damage and inspire you toward greater achievement. I say again: online comics get you laid.

CRANE: *Fair enough.*

Future Plans

CRANE: *Your comics are incredibly lush and colorful. I can't help but think how nice they'd look in a big book, full color with glossy pages, nice cover. Any plans to release the online stuff in print?*

FARNON: I have no confidence schlepping around town peddling this kind of portfolio. I don't think a book version would work. These images only look good on the screen; when printed out they're really quite appalling. They're designed for online viewing, or display devices that just don't exist yet. A few years ago we all thought e-books were going to come along and save our lives, but they didn't demonstrate much beyond very light bitmaps. Possibly handhelds will evolve only when the right content is ready for broadcast. You never know when a lovely assortment of full-color back-lit comics wrapped in a modular HTML framework might be just what America's searching for. That's gross. I apologize.

One complaint I hear over and over about online comics is "you can't take them with you to the toilet." Who cares already? That's supposed to be my intended target audience? An equal number of arguments can be made against printed comics. You need light to read them, the wind can come along and blow pages around, they fall apart in the tub. Kids do everything online from day one, I'm sure they can wrangle my complicated documents just fine on the toilet.

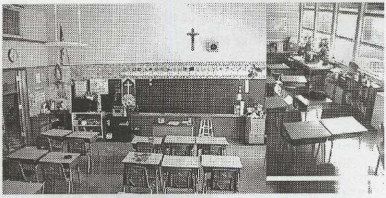
CRANE: *You were on a panel at APE where you talked briefly about a new format for Leisuretown.com. Can you elaborate on that?*

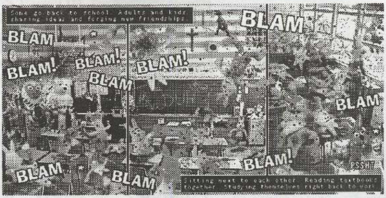
FARNON: What's next for Leisuretown.com: it will become more of a magazine-style publication. I know, another miserable comic that's degenerated over time into a "zine." Hopefully I can avoid falling into a hole. It will be full-screen, very much designed for what people are used to seeing as content on the Internet: articles (text) and illustrations (comic panels, with or without dialogue).

Basically it's [going to become] a big activity book, divided up into sections. I'm trying to help here, to make online comics appear more legitimate. Some of them are one-page bits of business, others are longer. The goal is to start publishing things regularly, to give myself actual deadlines. It's got the same arrow-based, pop-up menu interface, only everything is now "curvy" and "soft" and "more approachable." There are also randomized built-in flip-book minicomics, like Sergio Arragones' gutter drawings for *Mad* magazine.

I've spent a year getting the framework together. It kind of looks like a Salon.com for kids. It's automated: when I add a new story, I just click one button and the whole front-page gets regenerated with a splash screen and sample text describing the content. The goal is to make online comics appear more legitimate and dignified. And, most importantly: searchable, so the whole thing feels like a reference book, something more dynamic and "real." What Chris Ware [brought to] printed comics (dignity, respect) I'm trying to do for online comics, and what *The Onion* does to news (bends it over, assaults it repeatedly) I'll be doing to the Internet. I'm sacrificing a certain level of detail and craft in favor of just doing more things so I don't get burned out again.

It will be plugged into a number of adult ad-banner services which, while sounding inane, actually enhances the overall legitimacy of the site. It looks like the content is being taken seriously and sponsors are present. Besides, I have to make money. I had a choice: I could adorn my comics with Ford trucks and Pepsi bottles and VISA logos, or boobs and blondes and blowjobs. Which do you think might generate more dollars? ☒




Some go back to school. Adults and kids sharing ideas and forging new friendships.
BLAM
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PSSHT
Sitting next to each other. Reading textbooks together. Studying themselves right back to work.

Top right: Farnon feels images such as these will get him laid.