When Real Things Happen to Imaginary Tigers

By Philip Sandifer  
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"Sometimes I think all of my friends have been imaginary."
- Bill Watterson

In recent years, several fields of theory have, seemingly independently, made moves toward temporal conceptions, and away from theories rooted in spatiality. Christopher Castiglia has objected, for instance, to a fascination with "the issue of 'queer space?' at the expense of queer memory" (Castiglia 155). In Marxist theory, Jameson has written of "The End of Temporality," but concludes ultimately that "far from demonstrating the end of temporality I have been able only to show the impossibility of such a demonstration" (Jameson 717). And psychoanalysis has been bound up in these concerns from its origin, when Freud cautions against "a set of ideas relating to a struggle for a piece of ground," noting that the psychoanalytic model is an attempt "to replace a topographical way of representing things by a dynamic one" (Freud 649). Despite this, Freud also admits to the necessity of using the topographic metaphor despite its flaws. To some extent all of psychoanalysis can be read as an attempt to escape from this bind – to create a model of consciousness that does not depend on any sort of fixed spatial map, but has a dynamic, temporal structure. This quest reaches its pinnacle in Lacan's rejection of writing in favor of the temporal, performative phenomenon of the seminar and its oral repetition.

It may seem odd to bring this move from the spatial to the temporal to comics studies. After all, Scott McCloud defines comics as making the exact opposite move – as representing time in space, fundamentally situating spatiality as a dominant presence in the medium's form. But on the other hand, comics have always been serialized. As a result, they have always had temporal dimensions: the gap from day to day and month to month waiting for the next strip or issue, or, in the case of comic books, the temporal transition of turning the page over, replacing one set of panels with another. I would argue that although comics have a clear spatial dimension, they have always been a temporal form, to the point where the page, so often read as a spatial representation of time, can in fact subjugate the spatial constraints to the temporal. My aim is to use Bill Watterson's classic newspaper comic Calvin and Hobbes as a ground to illustrate what a temporal view of comics would entail, both in terms of comics narrative and in terms of the structure of the page. The view will be one that is based, at a fundamental level, on a fluid motion that depends on the looping structures of memory and imagination, and is grounded in the psychoanalytic work of Jacques Lacan, particularly his vision of the essential interplay of the registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. I oppose this vision of comics with one based on a spatial fixity whereby the diegetic world of the strip is mapped out and anchored in fixed and immutable moments, represented directly on the page with its (allegedly) rigorous symbolic system of panels and boxes.

But all that in, forgive the phrase, good time. Let us begin more simply – with a straightforward observation about Calvin and Hobbes. The observation is this: Hobbes is imaginary. On one level, this is perfectly obvious. Whether it is true is less clear. Watterson himself comments that
he does not "think of Hobbes as the product of Calvin's imagination" (Watterson, Tenth 22), and goes on to say that he actively tries to make both possible interpretations of Hobbes – that he's an animate tiger and that he's a stuffed tiger – equally supported by the strip. It seems more accurate to say that neither interpretation is consistently supported by the text. Throughout the comic, in panels in which Calvin, Hobbes, and another character all appear, Hobbes is always in stuffed-form, suggesting that his animate nature is restricted to Calvin's perspective. Furthermore, several plot arcs – most notably the title plotline of Yukon Ho! in which Hobbes is lost in the woods and found by Calvin's father (Watterson 9/30/87) – seem impossible to square away with any interpretation of Hobbes as a tiger that can actually move of his own volition. On the other hand, there are strips in which Hobbes clearly possesses knowledge that is denied to Calvin, as with a strip in which he clearly knows the definition of an obscene word that Calvin does not (Watterson 4/30/86). Even stranger is his occasional ability to directly interact with the physical world, as when he has apparently gone through a chunk of the woods and put a sign by a creek indicating that it is "Hobs Crk" to Calvin's surprise (Watterson 8/5/86). Further complicating the dynamic is the fact that, at times, Susie Derkins behaves as though she has some awareness or sense of Hobbes as an actual person (Watterson 2/12/89).

Certainly elaborate explanations could be constructed to make either side of the argument plausible. Even without such pedantry, though, it seems clear that Hobbes is, on some level, a creature of Calvin's imagination. If nothing else, Hobbes is the only character in the strip that reliably has access to Calvin's imaginary worlds, traveling with him through time, playing with the transmogrifier, etc. As Watterson never attempted to argue that, for instance, Spaceman Spiff might be real, this is at least a sign that there is an imaginary dimension to Hobbes. Whether Watterson conceives of (or writes) this imaginary dimension as having a "reality" in the conventional sense rapidly becomes immaterial – it is sufficient to note that Hobbes exists in Calvin's imagination.

Given that Hobbes is imaginary, then, we make the non-obvious statement that because Hobbes is imaginary, he is, in the Lacanian sense, Imaginary). Lacan uses this term to refer to concepts as constructed on a moment-to-moment basis by the psyche, including the psyche's conception of itself as an "I." Regardless of whether Hobbes "exists" in the fictional world of Calvin and Hobbes, his entire being is continually being constructed as a presence by Calvin. Hobbes, existing as he does wholly within Calvin's world, is forever bound up in the narrative strands that Calvin is offering. Thus Hobbes is, as a personage, constructed – situationally dependent on Calvin's imagination. As such, he resides firmly in the Lacanian Imaginary – a dynamic construct, formed through a moment-to-moment process.

This dynamism is clear enough in the strips. He can be a somewhat highbrow appreciator of classical music (Watterson 10/24/86), an agent of aggression (12/10/86), a verbal foil to Calvin (9/15/86), a partner in Calvin's mischief (9/9/86), or very much a tiger (12/8/86), depending on what the narrative that Calvin is enmeshed in dictates. These changing roles are perhaps most clear in relation to Hobbes's sexuality – on the one hand, he is an explicitly libidinous character (1/2/86), while on the other he's perfectly willing to play a part in Calvin's negation of sexuality in the form of his plans to get back at Susie Derkins (11/12/95). Hobbes is and has always been somewhat ineffable, occupying all of the available roles as foil to Calvin instead of one or two particular ones. In this regard he is profoundly unlike the secondary human characters, who are mostly very consistent concepts – Suzie is an overachiever who is disturbed by Calvin, Miss Wormwood is a burnt-out teacher, Moe is a bully, etc.
Complicating this line of analysis is the fact that Hobbes does have a concrete real existence, at least in a diegetic sense— he is a stuffed tiger. This does not separate him from the rest of Calvin's fantasies, however. Quite the opposite, most of Calvin's fantasies have some real-world object, and one of the most common jokes in Calvin and Hobbes is the revelation of what one of these objects is. Regardless, this does make the claim that Hobbes's existence is purely a product of Calvin's imagination difficult—especially since, as stated before, there are plots in which Hobbes's stuffed nature becomes relevant to Calvin. So while Hobbes's personhood is clearly an Imaginary construct, it is also clearly a property of an actual, physical object. It is either possessed by or imbued into a real stuffed tiger that, for instance, sometimes has to get cleaned in the washing machine (Watterson 12/11/85).

This image of a toy granted some sort of spirit is the basis of Lois Rostow Kuznets's analysis of Watterson's strip in When Toys Come Alive, and provides a perspective on Watterson's strip that comes close to my own approach. Kuznets notes several common aspects of narratives centering on living toys, including that they "embody human anxiety about what it means to be real," and that they "replicate 'divine' creation" (Kuznets 2). These themes can certainly be found in Calvin and Hobbes, although one has to perhaps broaden one's definition of "what it means to be real" to a slightly broader set of philosophical concerns, as in the strip in which Calvin and Hobbes discuss finding a dead bird (Watterson 9/19/93) or a discussion of predestination (Watterson 11/30/85).

In Kuznets's reading of the strip Hobbes becomes a mediating force (Kuznets uses the term "transitional object") between Calvin's child's world and an adult world, serving to make his fantasy life function properly. Kuznets refers to Calvin's fantasies outside of Hobbes, but treats them as a separate and somewhat second-class case— the fantasies that Calvin is capable of "in school, where the presence of transitional objects is usually not tolerated" (Kuznets 55). This view seems to me fundamentally mistaken. For one thing, there are numerous examples of this fantasy world existing outside of both Hobbes and school, focusing often on Calvin's parents (Watterson 11/5/95), or on his fascination with destructive and violent narrative (4/11/93). Furthermore, this fantasy world is not so delineated from the world with Hobbes as Kuznets proposes—in the case of the violent narratives, Hobbes is often a participant, albeit a critical one (1/1/95). Hobbes also plays a role in many of Calvin's fantasies that do not focus especially on Hobbes—for example, he appears and is aware of Calvin's scheme to create duplicates of himself (1/10/90). These schemes, like Hobbes, are semi-visible to the world beyond Hobbes—Calvin's mother encounters his duplicates, for instance, though she does not believe that they are duplicates (1/13/90).

Further complicating Kuznets's interpretation is her claim that fantasies other than Hobbes are fundamentally a different sort of fantasy in which Calvin "moves from playing out fantasies with objects to taking on roles himself" (Kuznets 55). Save perhaps the claim that Hobbes does not generally appear in the genre-based fantasies like the Tracer Bullet (Watterson 2/6/90) or Spaceman Spiff (10/1/95) stories, there does not seem to be a good line between fantasies where Calvin interacts with Hobbes and ones where he takes on a fictional role. But even this seems an arbitrary distinction based primarily in a desire to maintain a level of "purity" in those fantasies, both in the narrative sense of not fitting talking tigers into bunches of genres and in the visual sense of not disrupting Watterson's finely tuned artistic pastiches. The arbitrary and flexible nature of this distinction is shown in the storyline in which Calvin, as the superhero
A second aspect of Kuznets's claim that I find problematic is the claim that Calvin's fantasies, most particularly Hobbes, exist to capture adult desires and translate them into a language Calvin can understand. Kuznets uses a strip in which Hobbes suggests that heaven would be playing "saxophone for an all-girl cabaret in New Orleans" (Watterson 1/8/86) to illustrate this, noting that Hobbes's "sophisticated frame of reference is made to support adult male fantasies" (Kuznets 55). But this reading, which argues that Hobbes is more sophisticated than Calvin, is flawed on two levels. First, it is easy to find strips in which both Calvin and Hobbes act with an equal amount of childishness — any strip in which the two play sports (Watterson 6/7/87). Second, Calvin is just as likely to be the one using signifiers most associated with adulthood — as when, in the midst of a destructive fantasy, he says "Here we find a thriving city: brand new buildings, a bustling economy. A scenic thoroughfare winds through this happy municipality. Here, a farmer drives his livestock to market. Tragically, this serene metropolis lies directly beneath the Hoover Dam" (Watterson 11/27/85). This is, to say the least, not the language of your average six-year-old.

This is indicative of a larger failing in Kuznets's argument. On the one hand, she treats Calvin and Hobbes as a sort of sequel to Winnie the Pooh, titling her section on it "Tigger Bounces into the Syndicates" (Kuznets 53). On the other hand, she admits that Calvin and Hobbes is not "an unmediated glimpse into the mind or manners of a six-year-old: only that Watterson's medium works to foster this illusion" (Kuznets 54), a statement which implies an adult reader. Ultimately, Kuznets defaults to treating Calvin as a representation of a child in a literal sense, even if he is an inaccurately portrayed one. Though there are instances in the strip where this interpretation is productive, it seems to me on the whole unhelpful. Calvin seems better considered as a signifier of a particular set of desires that can, broadly considered, be described as "childishness." In this role as a signifier he does not always (or even necessarily ever) embody those desires, but rather puts himself in a position where he can serve as a commentary upon them. This is most clearly shown in the Calvinball strips, which tend to feature Calvin admitting, on some level, to the absurdity of Calvinball (Watterson 9/24/95). This complexity is not well-represented in Kuznets's position, largely because of her position's reliance on the idea of imbuing a physical toy with life. This idea fundamentally bases her entire model on a theory of spatial fixity. If Hobbes is a specific, physical toy he, by extension, becomes attached to a specific, physical six-year-old, as opposed to a more nebulous signifier.
This problem does not plague the interpretation of Hobbes as an imaginary figure. Under this interpretation, Hobbes does not have to have a consistent identity – he has to have an identity that is constituted by Calvin’s moment-to-moment psyche. Even if Hobbes has a physical existence, this physicality is better construed not as the site of some mystical act of animation, but rather as the Symbolic moment – the, to borrow the phrase from Lacan, instance of the letter that signifies the dynamic, Imaginary personage. This is further evinced by the fact that, other than the first strip, which shows how Calvin met Hobbes (Watterson 11/18/85), Hobbes’s nature is never granted fixity through narrative exposition. Watterson has since noted that he doesn’t think the initial "origin strip" was necessary (Watterson Tenth 29), and notes also that the strip did not appear in many newspapers, leading the origin to be, in the context of the strip as a newspaper strip, essentially unknown. Though Calvin and Hobbes may have progressed to an art object, existing in bound collections and a lavish $150 box set, it is important to remember that it is, first and foremost, a newspaper strip, and one that the vast majority of its audience came into midway through its run, missing the origin strip.

As a result, there are no clear anchoring points where aspects of Hobbes’s personage are firmly and initially established. Nor could there be – the disposable nature of the strips prevents a reliance on past events, as the past events are unlikely to be available to a current reader. Generally speaking, there are no instances of Hobbes doing something for the first time. Although there are first strips where a particular trope appears, within the world of the strip, everything that Hobbes does is already familiar behavior to Calvin. By the third strip (the second strip also deals with the origin), Calvin and Hobbes are already essentially a double act, and the dual stuffed/animate nature of Hobbes is considered established (Watterson 11/20/85). Admittedly, Calvin’s father would eventually abandon the notion that it was worth arguing with Calvin on whether or not Hobbes really does things, but the bulk of the point remains. By the third strip, Hobbes has clearly already integrated into Calvin’s home life, become Calvin’s close friend, and his parents are at least peripherally aware that Calvin believes Hobbes to be real. Likewise, common gags related to Hobbes, such as his violently pouncing upon Calvin when he returns home, do not have an established first incident. The first strip in which this takes place ends with Calvin complaining that his mother always takes Hobbes’s side when this sort of thing happens, making it clear that by the first moment, this is already a well-established pattern (Watterson 1/12/86).

This is not unique to Hobbes’s tendency to maul Calvin, however. In fact, most characters in Calvin and Hobbes do not have proper “introduction” moments – the only one other than Hobbes to get an introduction is Susie Derkins, who is introduced as a new girl. But even in our first visible interaction with her, Calvin falls into his usual mode of thought about her – complete hatred – without any prompting (Watterson 12/4/85). The lack of proper introductions is perhaps most clear in Miss Wormwood, who first appears, along with Spaceman Spiff, without introduction on 11/29/85. But later Miss Wormwood strips featuring Spaceman Spiff are functionally indistinguishable – they could serve just as satisfying an introduction. For instance, the strip from 9/7/89 has an identical structure to the 11/29/85 strip. Both feature two panels of Calvin as Spaceman Spiff, then move to a panel of Calvin behaving inappropriately because of his indulgence in his fantasy. Both end with Calvin sent to the principle’s office. The later strip moves the Spaceman Spiff to the beginning, whereas the earlier one starts with Miss Wormwood then goes to Spaceman Spiff, but ultimately, the two strips are the exact same joke, told in more or less the same way. A similar claim can be made about a character like Moe, whose debut on 1/30/86 is not meaningfully different from his appearance on, say, 3/28/94.
From the first moment, then, it is fair to say that Hobbes, along with most of the characters in the strip, is always-already constructed. Facets of his personality are revealed as though they were already in place, revealing their past only through implication, and making every instance of Hobbes indistinguishable from the first. As a result, there is no master signifier for any given facet of Hobbes's personage – no clear and fixed moment that serves as a guide point for the system of signifiers and characters that make up the strip. This is consistent with a vision of Hobbes as an imaginary character – in both senses of the word. As an imaginary friend, he has no real existence or history – any history given to him is always a part of Calvin's imagination as well – something that is made up and then immediately established as already in place. Likewise, as an Imaginary friend, Hobbes is always being actively constructed – every moment of his existence is an active decision to construct a Hobbes, and so Hobbes is always an act of continual creation. Hobbes can be said to exist in an eternal present, with a past that is always implied only by the needs of the current moment. The narrative of Calvin and Hobbes is not the spatial form of the continual line, but a temporal form based on models of memory and forgetting – one constructed of moments that do not have seamless or even existent borders with one another, but are rather intersubjectively defined.

In this regard, we bring in the second portion of Lacan's trinity – the Symbolic. The Symbolic, for Lacan, is the register of language and signification that underlie and structure all thought and Imaginary formulations. On the one hand, the Symbolic is, of the Lacanian registers, the most rigorously defined – its units are clear – words, letters, images. But despite these strictly defined and delineated units, the relationships between and among them are enormously complex and unfixed. As Lacan puts it, each term in a sentence is "being anticipated in the construction constituted by the other terms and, inversely, sealing their meaning by its retroactive effect" (Lacan 682). This sense mirrors the intersubjective definitions of individual moments in Calvin and Hobbes – each rigidly linked to a particular physical strip, but also arranged in a borderless and shifting structure of memory and association.

Curiously, Lacan utilizes what is on the surface a spatial metaphor to describe this structure in his image of the signifying chain – "links by which a necklace firmly hooks onto a link of another necklace made of links" (Lacan 418). This metaphor is significant in that it is at once spatial and profoundly non-spatial, with its conceptions of the individual points – the links – fundamentally lacking a point of clear distinction from one another such that a link can be treated as a discrete element. This metaphor contrasts with the Saussurean paradigm of the
The Blakean worldview, like the Lacanian one, does not reject space. Blake's visionary physics still has locations in the form of Golgonooza and Ulro, just as Lacan still depends on a fundamentally spatial metaphor in the signifying chain. Rather, it is a rejection of spatiality — of the idea of a rigorous and ordered index of space. One might plausibly object, as Blake does, that time, with its subdivisions of years, days, hours and seconds, is just as indexed as space. Indeed, the Newtonian system that Blake rebels against is based on just such a conceit, relying on the idea of contiguously ordered Particles of Time for its account of temporal passage (Ault, *Visionary Physics* 101). But this atomist, spatialized view of time is contrasted in Ault's reading with Blake's concept of Eternity, a space which is not so indexical.

One need not go to the extremes of Blake, however, to get a sense that time is not so coherently ordered. It is significant to note that the passage of time necessitates that our accessing of time not follow this index. While our conception of our lives and the passage of time may follow an indexical notion of time, all of our thought about time, based as they are in memory, association, etc, are, at their core, non-indexical.

It is clear that Hobbes occupies such an un-indexed role in the diegetic world of the strip, as evidenced by his status as not only in a state of Imaginary flux but also in a state of Symbolic flux as he moves between being a stuffed animal and a real tiger. But on the other hand, it is striking that the diegetic world of *Calvin and Hobbes* is similarly un-indexed. Characters, events, and even the question of where Calvin resides lack any origin that could serve as a spatial anchor for the signifying chain. Instead, when they exist, they exist only in the present and constructed moment, which is itself the only directly accessible moment in the strip. This eternal present can readily be seen as a product of the context in which *Calvin and Hobbes* must be understood — as a newspaper strip. *Calvin and Hobbes* appears without the expectation or implication of an archive. It is always a piece of ephemera. The current strip is presented, but cannot reasonably assume that its reader has the previous strip to reference. At any given moment for a reader, only a few panels of *Calvin and Hobbes* exist — the strip is very much whatever appears in a newspaper on a given day. The publication structure of the strip itself causes its past to be signified instead of being imminently present. One cannot necessarily talk about the history of the strip, because from any given newspaper reader's perspective, there isn't a history as such — there's only what's introduced in a given strip. In fact, the reader is often expected to specifically forget things — for example, the character of Uncle Max, who Watterson admits was a mistake to introduce, and of whom he says simply "Max is gone" (Watterson, *Tenth* 76). This is telling — the audience is expected to forget Uncle Max. He is gone — not a part of the strip. It is important not to underestimate the radicalness of this forgetting. Forgetting is a misleading term, since forgetting implies a past moment of remembering. Forgetting is an act of negation, of what Lacan distinguishes as *Verneinung*. That is to say, it does not erase, but merely appends a negation to the signifier of Uncle Max. What is required to read further in *Calvin and Hobbes* is not this, but the more radical *Verwerfung*. Where *Verneinung* takes as a precondition the existence of the object being negated, *Verwerfung* serves to deny the basic existence of the object, or, more accurately and
A complicating factor in this analysis is the fact that *Calvin and Hobbes*, as is fairly normal for newspaper strips, regularly engages in plotlines spanning multiple strips, and even, in the case of *Calvin and Hobbes*, spanning a month or more. These storylines do, at least on the surface, imply a history rather than a spontaneously constructed past – especially when recollected in book form, which is the form they are most commonly encountered now. Even in these cases, however, it is not clear that the continual narrative makes sense. To use an early example of a two-strip story sequence, in the 1/27/86 strip, Calvin is shown to have inadvertently flooded the house. In the next day's strip, he complains to his father about his mistreatment, to which his father explodes, "Calvin, you didn't get dessert yesterday because you flooded the house!!" This follows from the previous strip, but it does not rely on the previous strip. It is not surprising that Calvin would flood the house. The strip's humor depends on the fact that Calvin flooding the house can be part of a business-as-usual day. It is not something that requires a previous strip where he actually does flood the house in order to work as a premise. More to the point, for the punch line of the second strip to work, the reader has to not be expecting continuity – if the reader goes into the strip expecting it to be the sequel to the previous, then the revelation of why Calvin is being treated the way he is does not surprise, and is not funny. Despite the apparent continuity, the joke still relies entirely on continuity's absence to work – the nod to the previous strip amounts to little more than an in-joke for readers who remember the previous strip.

Even in the later, longer storylines, there is the sense of continual invention of the present. For example, in a storyline where Calvin accidentally pushes his parents' car into a ditch, Hobbes remains a clear and variable figure of the Imaginary. Early on, before Calvin pushes the car, he acts as a conscience – suggesting to Calvin that "I still think you should ask your mom to move it" (Watterson 5/22/89). Later in the story, after the two have run away from home in fear of their mother's retribution, he acts as a comic foil, asking if he can have Calvin's sandwich when Calvin suggests he is too worried to eat (6/3/89). Still later in the story, he acts as a close mirror of Calvin's thought when he realizes that his mother has found them (6/8/89). The continuity of the narrative is still illusory – there is an apparent narrative running through the strips, but with each strip Watterson is free to reinvent the characters to serve the need of that particular episode of the story.

Of course, the characters are not reinvented wholly – or, at least, not so wholly that there is no consistent core to the strip. We are, after all, dealing with a process of signification – not a random draw. Calvin, for instance, is always characterized by an aggressive desire for escape into an independent existence – whether it be in any of his fantasies, in a more autonomous position in relation to his parents, or in an ability to do more. He, in short, wants an idealized vision of adulthood. Note that this drive is at least partially independent from the textual fact of his being a child. Although he is eternally six years old, he does not exactly act his age. Not only does he indulge in the moments of adult thought that have already been described, but his basic lifestyle often seems to be the lifestyle of someone a fair deal older – at age six, he goes to a school with organized sports (Watterson 4/27/90), where he is expected to research and write reports (11/15/93). Furthermore, the amount of autonomy given to him by his parents
Calvin’s fantasy world of dinosaurs is interrupted by the practical concern that Moe can and will beat him up. (From *Calvin and Hobbes* 9/10/95). © 1995, 2005 Bill Watterson.

The freedom to freely stroll around the seemingly vast woods – is not the sort of freedom normally associated with six-year-olds. Nor are his responsibilities typical of six-year-olds (1/26/94). On the other hand, many strips feature his father reading him bed-time-stories (2/2/86), and he is afraid of monsters under the bed (11/25/85) – both characteristics that one would assume would be outgrown by the age in which organized sports and research reports are expected. But although Calvin is variable and just as Imaginary as his imaginary tiger, his variations are all clear extensions of his Symbolic status as a signifier of a particular desire for adulthood.

Other characters similarly signify a range of positions relative to Calvin’s appropriate to their roles – his mother has open to her any response that a mother would plausibly have towards a child like Calvin, Susie can be any female friend of a boy like Calvin, Moe any dumb bully[6]. Thus the ordering schema of the strip is not character-based, but thematic – the strip is always about some configuration of concerns about a desire for adulthood. These configurations do not take place over some psychic landscape, or, as discussed before, over a linear, spatialized narrative. Rather, they take place over what we might call a momentscape – an endless configuration of discontinuous and discontiguous moments that are nonetheless connected and interconnected.

That, however, only describes the ordering of the characters – the range of situations that they can find themselves in, and how they can act. It ignores what is the most prominent organizing feature of *Calvin and Hobbes* on a day to day basis, namely punch lines. The comic, after all, is a humor comic. Every given moment formulated by a given strip is ordered to produce a punch line. Since the basic format of a joke is to set up a situation and then in some way break the rules of the situation, these punch lines work in contrast to the situation – by rupturing the schema of the present. So, for example, in the strip from 9/10/95, the strip sets up a story about an Allosaur who is waiting for a “big stupid Ultrasaur” to finish drinking so he can drink. The Allosaur vows confrontation, is shot a withering glare from the Ultrasaur, and backs off. Then the strip cuts to Calvin standing behind Moe at the drinking fountain, noting that “this Allosaur is the patient type.” The strip’s ostensible setting is about dinosaurs, with the Allosaur being big, tough, and vicious. But the strip’s point is the rupturing of that fantasy with the intrusion of the non-fantasy world, which subsequently negates the fantasy world. Obviously, this rupture does not always have to be so explicitly an intrusion of the real world – a deprecating comment by Hobbes, a sudden self-awareness on the part of Calvin, or any other sort of reversal of direction in the strip can work. The punch line is just as often a sudden intrusion of Calvin’s absurd sense of the world on a seemingly sensible scene (Watterson 11/7/89). But in all cases, the punch line functions by in some fashion undercutting the world that seems to be constructed by the setup.

Thus the strip is doing two things at once – it is simultaneously constructing an Imaginary present that fits within the larger Symbolic schema of the strip, and undermining that Imaginary present with a punch line. In addition to its rupture of the Imaginary, this punch line also serves as a sort of temporal trump on the Imaginary present of the strip. The nature of the punch line is to be momentary – it evokes laughter, but once it has evoked laughter it generally loses its power to do so again, since the rupture that it depends upon has already taken place, and so
Thus the punch line is a doubly momentary instance – a hyper-present that is more-present than the existing presence of the act of reading. Although the strip always has an eternal presence – it is always happening now – the punch line is even more present. Its existence is shorter than a moment, so short that its existence cannot even be spoken of – we cannot meaningfully live in the moment of surprise or amusement that produces our laughter. This is a deeply reductive event in that it momentarily reduces the established Imaginary presence of the strip to something that can only narrowly exist. In it, then, we see the third element of the Lacanian register – the Real. The Real, in Lacan, is that which is experienced without and prior to the mediation of the Symbolic. It is, as Zizek notes, “the pulsing of the pre-symbolic substance in all its abhorrent vitality” (Zizek 19). Its temporal life is, by its nature, so brief as to have already passed by the time we turn the eye of language upon it. By the time we can speak of it, its disruption has already taken place, and a new formulation that incorporates the disruption has already manifested.

We see now the importance of the Verwerfung of the past necessary to enjoy the strip. The capacity to foreclose the past of the strip (as opposed to simply negating it) is fundamentally connected to this process of functionally eternal resetting. Just as the erasure of Uncle Max is not a forgetting or negation but rather a foreclosure, the constant resetting of the strip is not a negation of the previous day’s strip’s negation of the previous, and so on until the final strip. The disruptions must be taken as more radical and fundamental disruptions than that. The strip works by beginning to constitute an Imaginary present and then suddenly trumping that Imaginary present with a hyper-present that erases both itself and the Imaginary present, disrupting the Imaginary momentscape and clearing the slate for the process to begin again, which it must because, as Zizek suggests, the register of the Real is fundamentally monstrous, necessitating an endless cycle of erasures.

This process of wiping the slate clean is an essential part of the indefinite-running comic. As has been frequently observed, characters in newspaper strips do not, as a general rule, age – there are only a few exceptions to this rule, and a few more strips like Doonesbury that decided to change from ageless characters to aging ones midway through its run. Generally speaking, newspaper strips rely on the fact that no strip forecloses future strips. That is to say that no strip inserts any events that would disturb the ability to construct future presents. Any configurations of Calvin’s desire for adulthood that are open at the beginning of the strip must be allowed to remain open, or else the strip will either change to something that is recognizably different from Calvin and Hobbes (as Doonesbury did) or will simply cease to be.

Which is, of course, exactly what Calvin and Hobbes eventually did, which enabled it, in its final days, to engage in several stories that break the rules of how the strip works, and do so in a manner that clarifies, I think, how the strip works. The first of these is a two-week storyline that features the final appearance of Rosalyn the babysitter. Rosalyn, being a figure of enforced authority and a clear marker that Calvin is not adult, is necessarily bound into an antagonistic relationship with Calvin, which, up until this plotline, has always constituted the point of their relationship. Watterson himself comments that “Rosalyn’s relationship with Calvin is pretty one-dimensional, so baby-sitter stories get harder and harder to write” (Watterson, Tenth 27). The final Rosalyn story works through a complete subversion of this pattern. In it, Rosalyn offers to let Calvin play any game he wants if he finishes his homework. He does so, and forces Rosalyn to play Calvinball (Watterson 9/7/95). Although Rosalyn initially resists the game, she eventually comes to understand its freeform nature (9/12/95) and finally comes to enjoy it (9/13/95). She then ends the game by touching Calvin with the “baby sitter flag” which allows...
her to demand that he goes to bed. Since this is entirely within the rules of Calvinball, Calvin does so, and the evening ends peacefully and without conflict (9/16/95).

Although this storyline is more powerful to a reader who has read the past conflicts between Rosalyn and Calvin, it does not require it – the storyline begins with a clear summary of Calvin and Rosalyn's relationship that quickly shows Calvin's nature, his opinion of Rosalyn, and the fact that this has been going on for some time (Watterson 9/5/95). What it does mean is that no further Rosalyn stories in the old mold can take place, because Rosalyn has established herself as something Calvin has never had before in the strip – a non-imaginary friend. This undermines her previous role as an enforced authority figure. Since, unlike Hobbes (the other character that fills a friend role to Calvin), Rosalyn is not constructed in such a way as to make broad reinvention of character on the fly possible, without an act of aggressive amnesia, the previous structure cannot be restored. And an aggressive act of amnesia would unnecessarily destabilize the construction of an imaginary presence. The Rosalyn storyline only works because it is the last Rosalyn story – because the strip, ending imminently, is freed of the obligation to render future strips possible.

Interestingly, the final Calvin and Hobbes strip takes an entirely different tack from the Rosalyn story. In it, Calvin and Hobbes enthusiastically discuss the possibilities of a fresh snowfall, and Calvin concludes that "It's a magical world, Hobbes ol' buddy... let's go exploring!" before taking off down a hill on his sled (12/31/95). This strip is notable for not having a punch line – rather, it is simply the construction of an imaginary present. This is a peculiar moment, in that it is not an intrusion of the Real. Instead, it is simply the establishment of an Imaginary moment that exists undisturbed by the Real. The strip does not end in rupture, but in the Imaginary – in the present moment before the hyper-present punch line asserts itself. This does not erase the 3,149 ruptures that precede the strip, nor does it imply a future for the characters without rupture. Rather, it asserts the enduring presence of the Imaginary momentscape into which the Real ruptures.

A final comment on the matter of permanent rupture – its necessary exclusion from the strip is itself an opportunity for parody and subversion in the work of cartoonists other than the creator. Within Calvin and Hobbes, this can be found in a fan-made strip composed after Watterson ended the strip. This strip, simply titled "Calvin," works in a familiar scene – Calvin struggling to complete a homework assignment. In it, Hobbes encourages Calvin to come outside to play. Calvin declines, noting that he has to work on this report, and commenting that "Mom says the pills must be working." Hobbes, ignored, turns from his animate form to his stuffed form, with the clear comment being that the new, Ritalin-drugged Calvin no longer has the ability to imagine Hobbes ("Calvin"). This strip is, obviously, a wholesale betrayal of the concept of Calvin and Hobbes. It is something that never could have been printed in the newspapers, as it is so great a rupture to the imaginary present of the strip that no further strips can possibly follow it. But the destructiveness of this rupture – the fact that it not only parodies, but threatens to undo the possibility of further continuation of a theoretically infinite text – gives the parody teeth that are denied parodies of finite texts.
At this point, we may seem to have fallen far from my initial claims regarding the symbolic system of comics as a medium. After all, these observations seem, on the surface, to be observations not about the comic as such but about serialization. Comics, one could fairly argue, are a primarily spatial medium that has been, as a historical accident, serialized, leading to certain temporal effects. Such a hypothetical reader might point to Scott McCloud’s definition of comics, already mentioned in passing, which includes the claim that “comics substitutes space for time” (McCloud 2). Such an objection would, however, be unfounded. First of all, I am greatly skeptical that the serialized delivery of the comic strip (and of most comics) can be treated as in any way incidental. Even if one were to grant the exclusion of seriality, one cannot readily avoid a temporal reading of the strip. This is clearest in Watterson’s later Sunday strips, which show the degree to which the spatial representation of time can be done so as to privilege time and its disruption of space, rather than space’s ordering of time. Watterson’s craft in these strips – which remain unparalleled by anything else in the recent history of newspaper strips – provides an uncanny sense of comics that transcends the normal constraints of the form, especially the form as it appears in contemporary newspapers. In doing so, he provides an example of how the Lacanian understanding of the comic’s narrative can be translated into an understanding of the page itself.

First, some context: following a nine month sabbatical, Watterson returned to the strip and insisted to his syndicate that his strip be run in all papers at half-page size. This was a radical rule. For the most part, newspaper comics are done so as to be easily rearranged to the particular desires of a given newspaper editor; the first two panels have to be able to be cut, therefore, without ruining the joke, and the remaining panels have to fit specific sizes. Watterson demanded to be freed from these restrictions, and that he always get a half page so that he could do whatever he wanted with his panel structure. He later justified this decision, noting in both the *Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Collection* and the introduction to *The Complete Calvin and Hobbes* his admiration and fascination with early full-page comics such as *Krazy Kat*. And the later Sunday strips utilize the comic form in a way that cannot readily be compared to the work of anyone since Herriman and McCay.

Watterson used the newfound freedom in a number of ways, but one of his most common techniques is to add a sense of depth to the page so that some panels occur on top of or
underneath others. The result is a paradoxical conception of space – one where the page is something more than can actually be contained within itself. This allows him to do things like differentiate between one of Calvin's imaginary worlds and the non-imaginary world by adding a third dimension into the transition point between them (Watterson 1/22/95). The result is to make the two narratives – the one of Calvin writing "Calvin is great" legibly across the moon, the other of his conversation with his father – into overlapping narratives – ones that happen simultaneously but in opposition to one another. The linearity of how we read the panels becomes an imposition on the events of the narrative – in truth, the panels do not provide a spatial path through it. The structure of the page, with the punch line in the lower-right, still means that the reader goes through the setting up of the Imaginary prior to the intrusion of the Real. Inaccurate as it may be to read the punch line as happening last in diegetic time, it is still the last thing we come to. But the nature of this rupture, which depends on the interplay of two separate Imaginary presents, is played out visually as well, such that the two moments are segregated. Note also that the two panels that form the punch line are given a firm relationship only with the bottom layer of the fantasy panels – they have no relationship with the panels that are "higher" within the fantasy (which are themselves a spatial movement – a zooming out from the focus on Calvin to the view of the moon as a whole). This allows Watterson to use the depth of the page in two different ways without the methods conflicting – he can use layering for the zoom and for the switch to the "real world."

![Figure 8. The varying narratives of Calvin's worlds exist in an uncertain temporal relationship communicated through various spatial layers of the page (From Calvin and Hobbes 1/22/95). © 1995, 2005 Bill Watterson.](image)

The strip from 5/14/95, on the other hand, has a similar effect, only in reverse. The base world, in this case, has no panels or background, making it exist at the level of the page itself. The superimposed world is marked by a black background, thus laying it over the page itself, and then the events in it take place within white panels, arranged unevenly, not as a contiguous progression, but as a flurry of discontinuous moments. In this strip, the base world is the one with Hobbes and Calvin's belief that wearing his "lucky rocketship underpants" will make his life better, whereas the superimposed world is the real world of school. The strip works with the imaginary world of Hobbes serving as the intrusion of the real upon the constructed imaginary present of Calvin's bad day at school, although in doing so it also reminds the reader of the ineffectualness of Calvin's imaginary world where rocketship underpants can ensure a good day.
Watterson’s subversion of space, however, doesn’t always rely on the transition between the Imaginary and Real worlds. The 2/19/95 strip, for instance, is drawn from Hobbes’s first person perspective, and the intrusions are Hobbes closing his eyes when the sled ride gets too rough for him, or having snow thrown in his eyes. Here, the intrusions of space serve to make the narrative of the sled ride discontinuous – to break down even the present of the strip into a pattern of moments and ruptures. It’s also worth noting that the subversion of space is not always a necessary factor of the joke. The 5/21/95 strip, for instance, is basically the same joke as another black and white strip, even though the Sunday strip has considerable spatial antics, whereas the black and white strip does not (Watterson 6/16/95).

This also suggests that the seeming dominance of the spatial formatting of panels and lines is non-essential to the form of the strip – that we ought not read its use of space to represent time as a spatializing of time. It is just as plausibly a temporalizing of space. And with so much else in the strip being temporally (dis)ordered, this makes sense. In this regard, our understanding of the strip is similar to the understanding of comics offered by Don Ault in his Lacanian reading of comics in “Imagetextuality: Cutting Up Again, pt. III.” Ault argues that the structure of the comics page mirrors Lacan’s Borromean knot of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. In his view, the page “invokes Lacan’s ‘imaginary’ order through its pictorial dimension (its visual images); the ‘symbolic’ order through its linguistic dimension (its letters, words, and syntax); and the ‘real’ through the interruptions or cuts in the body-space of the page which leave blank spaces between the panels that correspond to (or mark the absence of) events that are assumed to be occurring “between” the panels” (Ault “Imagetextuality”). I will admit that I am skeptical about Ault’s situating of the Imaginary and Symbolic in the page, simply because I am unconvinced of the necessity of graphemic language to the comics page, especially considering the multitude of wordless and near-wordless comics. I would suggest that both word and image serve the role of the Symbolic in the comics page, and that the Imaginary comes into play through the translation of images, word balloons, sound effects, motion lines, etc., into the assumption of a diegetic world. In this regard the Imaginary and Symbolic of the page mirror the Imaginary and Symbolic of the narrative, with the characters and their actions serving as signifiers for the constructed diegesis of the narrative.
Ault, however, is to my mind squarely on the mark in his view of the Real. The gutters between panels, spaces between pages, and, in the case of the later Sunday Calvin and Hobbes strips, spatial gaps between stacked panels do serve as the means for the Real's intrusion, fragmenting (but not disassembling) the coherence of the page and enforcing/creating the gap between the Symbolic images and Imaginary diegesis. Furthermore, it is through these gaps of the Real in the page that the Real of the punch line manifests. I mean this not only in terms of the observed ways in which these intrusions structure the Sunday strips — how the punch line is on a different plane than the rest of the comic in the moon-signing strip, for instance, or how the ruptures caused by Hobbes closing his eyes punctuate the sledding strip. The observation can just as easily be applied to the (structurally) simpler daily strips, where the transition to the punch line is generally marked by a panel break, and thus by a Real disruption of the Symbolic representation.

We can thereby see that Calvin and Hobbes can, from top to bottom, be viewed as radically temporal. But it is not as though this temporality is unique to Watterson's strip. True, the existence of an imaginary tiger in the strip makes it a good illustration of the argument, but the basic aspects — seriality, ephemerality, organization around a rupturing moment, a lack of consistent progression of diegetic time, a lack of necessary chronological ordering, and characters that are more defined as roles than as people — are common to most newspaper strips, and even to many comic books. Contrary to appearances, then, the comics are far from an illogical place to look for an alternative to purely spatial thought. They have always been a deeply temporal medium. Daily, they rely upon the fact that the past disappears — that the story starts over brand new, with a fresh, clean start. Each strip is full of possibilities — a world unto itself. As Calvin would have it, let's go exploring.

Notes

[1] All references to Watterson are, unless otherwise specified, references to comic strips. The dates listed correspond to the dates given for strips in The Complete Calvin and Hobbes.

[2] I will capitalize the term, along with Symbolic and Real, when referring to Lacan's concepts, as opposed to the more colloquial usages of the three terms to mean, respectively, "made up," "metaphoric," and "existing."

[3] Wai Chee Dimock has offered a more radical rejection of the indexicality of time based on both relativity and Blake in his essay "Nonbiological Clock: Literary History against Newtonian Mechanics." In this essay, he proposes a Blakean model of literary history that is "diachronically extended, irregularly inhabited, not based on the biological individual, not governed by the unidirectional passage of a single life span" (Dimock 161).

[4] Even Kant points toward the fundamentally different roles of space and time as reference points. Kant, one ought remember, views space and time not as concepts that exist externally, but rather as a priori conditions of intuition. In the Kantian system, spatial vision is an "outer sense" in which objects' "shape, magnitude, and relation to one another are determined" (Kant 67), whereas temporal vision "has to do neither with shape nor position, but with the relation of representations in our inner state," an inner state that "yields no shape [though] we endeavor to make up for this want by analogies" (Kant 77).

[5] It is interesting to note that Lacan considers Verwerfung to be essentially and necessarily the act of a psychotic.

[6] The exception, as mentioned previously, is Hobbes, who serves a double role. As a collection of pencil marks and ink, he signifies the generic imaginary friend to the reader. But
as a particular stuffed/real tiger, he signifies a particular set of desires and responses to Calvin.  

[7] One might validly and sensibly ask why an act of amnesia such as this would not work while the Verwerfung of Uncle Max's erasure is. It is here that the observation that Verwerfung is associated with psychosis becomes key. When Uncle Max is foreclosed, the consequences are minimal, since he also never appears again. For Rosalyn's newfound friendship with Calvin to be foreclosed and then for Rosalyn to appear would too closely approximate an actual state of psychosis within the strip, as opposed to a potential one.  

[8] This also helps explain, I think, both the appeal of and the reaction against comics like Air Pirates Funnies – the fragile nature of the rules on which these continuing narratives rest is an appealing target for the parodist's pen.

References

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advantageous for their survival to be white. A Question of Biology. Kenny, a white tiger with deformities—courtesy Big Cat Rescue. It’s hard to imagine he’s really real though, because we’re not shown the tragedy of this type of breeding. Can someone provide more info on him, please? Reply. I think when things happen like Kenny that it shows the world exactly how inhumane humans can be. Profit has become more important than simple respect for life. I am just happy that Kenny and all the other abused, neglected, and inbred animals that have suffered in vain and finally passed, are resting in peace. Real things are always in part imaginary, since we have a location and can only see one aspect of an object at a time. The “back” of things we see is always imaginary, although we may have examined it earlier and be familiar with its back, nonetheless what is not visible from our vantage point is imagined. Just as my bedroom is now imagined when I am in the living room and thinking about going to bed. We imagine places we’ve never been when we hear others talk about it. Even though our imaginings will significantly differ from the actual places, nonetheless, we are imagining real things. What Happened to Imagination? Did we misplace it somewhere? Jamel Rottier. Not only did I realize that, but I noticed how my imagination was pushed when I was younger watching things like Winnie the Pooh and reading old comics like Calvin and Hobbes (which was my favorite). You would find me reading those on the stairways, under the piano and many other random places. I’m not saying movies like UP, Inside out and Finding Nemo are bad, I’m not saying anything like that at all, but I feel that the older movies were different. They inspired you in different ways. I feel they had a kind of innocence to them, let me explain myself by what I mean here. Calvin and Hobb