"Don't Be a Dilbert": Transmedia Storytelling as Technical Communication during and after World War II

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Abstract

Purpose: My goal was to determine whether the U.S. Navy's "Don't Be a Dilbert" aviation safety campaign during World War II was a fully developed example of transmedia storytelling and whether it could be used as an illustration of transmedia storytelling in technical communication.

Method: I located and gathered primary sources in the Navy's safety campaign from archives, museums, and military and civilian publications, and then analyzed these artifacts according to the definition and attributes of transmedia storytelling in Jenkins (2007, 2011).

Results: From my analysis, I found that the Navy's use of the Dilbert myth combined multimodality with radical intertextuality in order to foster additive comprehension; it also employed a robust set of transmedia storytelling techniques.

Conclusion: These findings suggest that transmedia storytelling was used to communicate technical information before the digital age and that the Navy's Dilbert campaign is a potentially useful historical example for illustrating transmedia storytelling techniques.

Keywords: transmedia storytelling, participatory culture, safety education, cartoon characters, history of technical communication

Practitioner's Takeaway:

- Examines the role of transmedia storytelling in a high-stakes training program in which entertainment supported education
- Provides a potential pedagogical tool for introducing technical communication students to transmedia storytelling
- Contributes to an understanding of the history of transmedia storytelling in technical communication

"Don't Be a Dilbert"

Introduction

Most people are familiar with Dilbert, the main character in Scott Adams' comic strip about an engineer who, in some ways, epitomizes the white-collar worker in corporate America. Adams developed this cartoon character and held a contest in his workplace to name him. A friend suggested the name Dilbert. Only later did Adams realize that the friend had borrowed the name from a cartoon character (Figure 1) used during World War II to promote safety among Navy pilots (Adams, 1997, p. 10).

The earlier Dilbert—who was nothing like the current Dilbert—was famous in his own right, beginning as a cartoon character on posters and appearing later in a live-action film, a series of technical manuals, at least one short story, poems, a recurring advice column about safety in *Naval Aviation News*, and even a magazine advertisement (Grumman, 1956). He took the form of a doll used in technical demonstrations, was hanged in effigy in more than one hangar, and served as the eponym of several awards that no one wanted to win. There was even a mechanical device, the Dilbert Dunker, used by the Navy to train pilots to escape from a submerged, upside-down cockpit.

Drawn by artist Robert C. Osborn, Dilbert the pilot became a focal point in a world of aircraft accidents, loss of human life and costly equipment, and aviation safety. Through transmedia storytelling, Navy pilots and others involved in aviation were trained in safety while being entertained—or, in the case of the Dilbert Dunker, terrified on a ride that one might like to find in an amusement park. Jenkins (2007) defined transmedia storytelling as "a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience" (para. 2). In the fictional world of Dilbert, though, the entertainment was subordinate to education—a form of storytelling that is sometimes referred to as *transmedia learning* (e.g., Fleming, 2013). Through Dilbert and other antiheroes and villains of aviation safety, the U.S. Navy and Army Air Forces taught its cadets and other personnel what to do and what not do in a multimillion-dollar aircraft.

Not only is transmedia storytelling not new in general, but it is not new in technical communication.
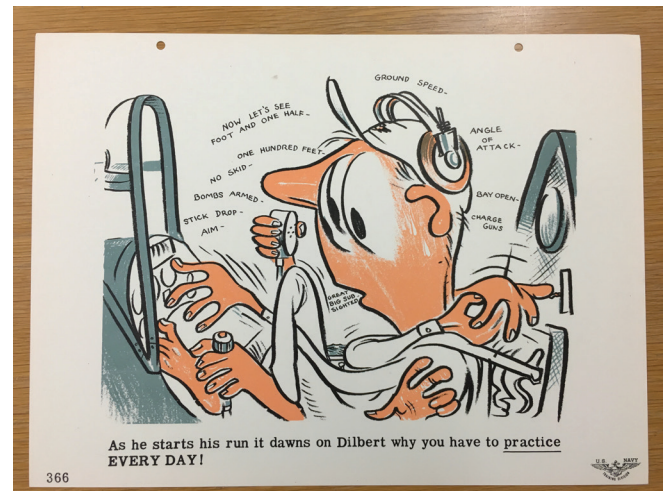

Figure 1. A Dilbert poster. I took this photograph of the original poster in the Library of Congress (LOT 8939 G, Box 2). Some Dilbert posters were printed in black and white, others in one or two colors. Notice the number in the lower left-hand corner. This poster was the 366th poster in the Dilbert the Pilot series. Osborn also drew posters about Spoiler the Mechanic, but they were numbered separately.

Jenkins (2011) pointed to the works of L. Frank Baum, Walt Disney, and J. R. R. Tolkien as historical antecedents of transmedia storytelling. The military's use of Dilbert and similar characters differs from these literary examples in that its primary goal was to instruct its audience in a technical subject. Nevertheless, the many exploits of Dilbert and his companions fit Jenkins' (2011) requirement for a transmedia story: They combine multimodality with radical intertextuality in order to foster additive comprehension.

In the following sections, I will use this definition to organize my discussion of the "Dilbert" myth, identifying the different media across which the story was told and describing the role of radical intertextuality in fostering additive comprehension. I believe an analysis of this historical example can elucidate contemporary transmedia practices, reinforcing Jenkins's (2011) point that transmedia storytelling is not about particular media but rather the way in which the media are used and the logics underpinning their uses. Rather than being an antecedent or prefiguration of current transmedia practices, the military's use of Dilbert was a fully realized example of those practices—one that predates the digital age.

Reintroducing Dilbert and His World

The United States entered World War II formally in late 1941, long after other countries, such as England, Italy, and Australia. Aircraft training accidents became a serious problem for allied nations. The British Royal Air Force (RAF) lost about 8,000 men in "non-operational flying," mostly accidents, during the war (Mason, 2018). The U.S. Army Air Forces (AAF) lost about 7,000 planes in training and other activities in the States, compared to about 4,500 planes in combat with the Japanese (Mireles, 2006, p. xi). Before the war, the average number of fatalities in AAF aircraft training was 51 per year; during the war, it rose to 3,675 per year (Pierce, 2013, pp. xiv–xv). The Navy's Bureau of Aeronautics also suffered avoidable losses in training during the war.

To reduce the number of training accidents, the United Kingdom tried various strategies, including posters. In May 1940, the RAF issued a series of non-humorous posters similar to "air diagrams" used in 1918 to promote aviation safety (Hadaway, 2006, p. 59). They were artistic and informative but not nearly as engaging as a cartoon would be. Two month later, the RAF issued a set of humorous "Once Is Too Often" posters, each drawn by Cyril Kenneth Bird, a *Punch* cartoonist using the pseudonym *Fougasse* ("Speaking," 1942, p. 11). In one of these posters, a stalling airplane was heading into some telephone wires, and the caption read, "I'm afraid this is going to cure me completely of taking off before my engine's warmed up!" In another, the pilot was about to crash into a tree (Figure 2).

Also in 1940, the RAF's No. 13 Group produced a small training manual for fighter pilots: *Forget-Me-Nots for Fighters*, written collaboratively by members of the group and illustrated with cartoons by Aircraftman William "Bill" Hooper. The manual covered such topics as "Evasive tactics," "Reporting the enemy," and "Bailing out," as well as a plethora of dos and don'ts. This serious-humorous manual was well received by pilots and reinforced the case for using cartoons in pilot training. It also brought Hooper to the attention of higher ups.

A commander in the British Ministry's Directorate of Operational Training was familiar with Assen Jordanoff's popular aviation books and wanted a "duff pilot" like Jorandoff's Cloudy Joe for the RAF (Hamilton, 1991). The Bulgarian-born Jordanoff was a successful World War I pilot who had immigrated to the U.S. long before World War II and had promoted aviation through illustrated educational books for novices, including children. Later, during World War II, he would head up a civilian company, Jordanoff Aviation, that produced technical documentation for military aircraft (Romero, 1945). One of the cartoon characters in his book *Through the Overcast: The Weather and the Art of Instrument Flying* (1938) was Cloudy Joe, a bungling pilot who often did the opposite of what was advised (Hamilton, 1991; Hadaway, 2006).

Anthony Armstrong, a humorist with *Punch*, was tasked with creating a monthly training publication as well as a Cloudy Joe character for the RAF. A memo from the Air Council described what was needed: "for our purposes we require something that is altogether lighter in touch and has sufficient 'pep' and literary merit to be read for its own sake. Title, cover, layout, illustrations and even type fount must all be selected with this end in view" (as cited in Hamilton, 1991, p. 14). Armstrong enlisted Fougasse to create the cover of the publication and Hooper to draw the cartoons.

In April 1941, the Directorate began publishing the monthly training magazine *Tee Emm* (an expansion of the initials *T. M.* for *Training Memorandum*). Both light and informative, the magazine featured articles about proper deportment (dress, conduct, etc.) and other

Figure 2. A World War II flight safety poster by cartoonist Cyril Kenneth Bird (alias Fougasse). This is a scan of the original (n/a.obj-1310282845-m) in the National Library of Australia, Canberra. Each poster in this "Once Is Too Often" series began with the phrase, "I'm afraid this is going to cure me completely of . . ." Fougasse's posters were used in Australia as well as England during World War II.

"Don't Be a Dilbert"

serious subjects for officers, and it included cartoon characters such as Pilot Officer Percy Prune, Wireless Operator Waff Winsum, and Rear Gunner Sergeant Stooge, most of whom were drawn by Hooper. Prune, whose last name was a slang word for a fool, was the RAF's Cloudy Joe character, and he was used to teach (or sometimes just admonish) aviators by negative example (Fanthorpe, 1997). (Figure 3 shows a page from the March 1942 issue of *Tee Emm*.)

In the United States, quite a few cartoon characters emerged during World War II to instruct military personnel by negative example. In 1941, Jack Zumwalt created the bungling pilot R. F. Knucklehead, a short-lived predecessor of Dilbert, for the Army Air Forces
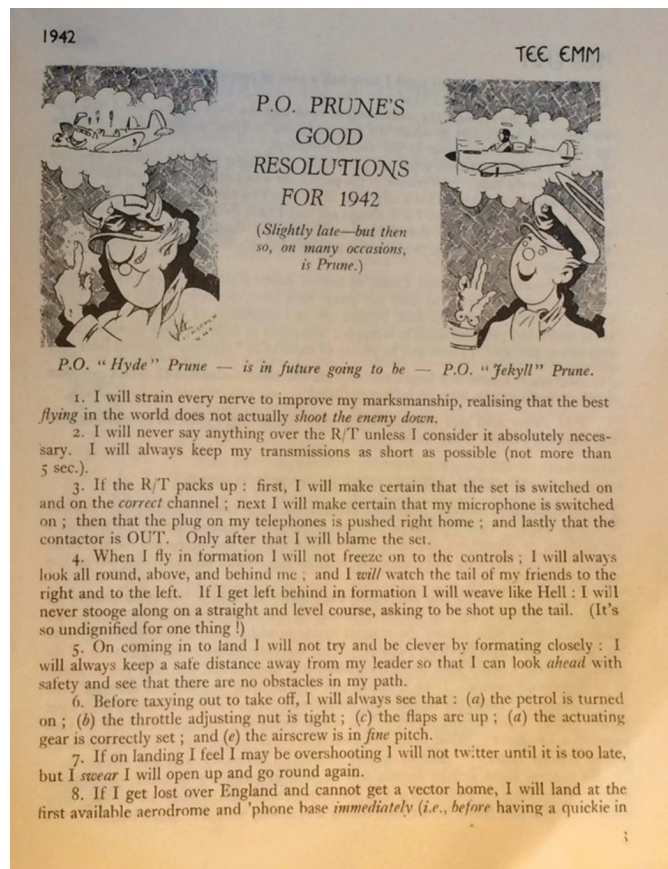

Figure 3. A page featuring Pilot Officer Prune from the British Royal Air Force's *Tee Emm*, Number 12, March 1942. I photographed this page at the National Archives (Archives 1) in Washington, D.C. (RG 313, UD-228, 11W3/8/29/2, Box 8). The list of resolutions suggests that the goal of pilot training was to turn the "Hyde" Prune into the "Jekyll" Prune. A collaboration between writer Anthony Armstrong and artist Bill Hooper, Prune was an antecedent of Osborn's Dilbert.

("Speaking," 1942). A year later, Dave Breger created G. I. Joe, always the odd soldier out, and George Baker created Sad Sack, both for *Yank* magazine (Breger, 1945).[1] Also in 1942, Will Eisner began drawing Joe Dope, a maintenance misfit, for a comic strip in *Army Motors* (Andelman, 2005).[2] The military used Dope on posters ("Joe Dope," 1944) and in illustrations in technical manuals (e.g., U.S. War Department, 1944, p. 22). Beginning in 1943, Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss), Chuck Jones (of *Looney Tunes* fame), Mel Blanc (the voice of Bugs Bunny, et al.), and other Hollywood animators, directors, and voice actors collaborated on animated films about Private Snafu, "the biggest gold brick and worst soldier in the Army" (Birdwell, 2005, p. 206).

Into this universe of military misfits, Dilbert was born in 1942, the artistic creation of Robert C. Osborn (1904-1994). When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, the middle-aged Osborn immediately tried to enlist. After trying unsuccessfully to join the regular service, he was offered a commission as a lieutenant in the Volunteer Special Service of the Naval Reserve. He had published a few how-to books with cartoon drawings before the war, and the Navy brass in Washington, D.C., wanted to put his talent to good use. Navy Commander Arthur Doyle was familiar with the Royal Air Force's use of Prune to promote aviation safety in Europe. Prune served as an inspiration, if not the model, for Dilbert G. Groundloop, a U.S. Navy pilot whose first name alluded to the phrase *pulling a dillie*, or making a big mistake (Benjamin, 1974, p. 12; Goodman, 1944, p. 132). In the various media in which he appeared, the character was usually called *Dilbert*, sometimes *Dil*, very rarely *Dillie*.

In the posters, Dilbert had many facets: the bungling newbie, the arrogant hot shot, the lazy student, the impish mischief-maker, etc. His appearance could change dramatically from one poster to another. Sometimes he was thin, other times fat; sometimes goofy, other times devious or impish. In one poster, he was drawn as a caricature of a Japanese aviator, with the cutline "Dilbert gets to looking more and more like a

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1   *In the late 1950s, Breger wrote an article about the use of cartoons in technical manuals and published it in a journal that eventually developed into STC's* Technical Communication. *See Breger (1958).*

2   *Issues of* Army Motors *(1940–1945) can found on the website of the Virginia Military Preservation Association (VMPA). For a list of those issues, see Virginia (2018).*

Jap every day" (Osborn, n.d.-c). In another poster, he looked like the Tin Man from *Th e Wizard of Oz* , with the cutline "Dilbert persists in flying mechanically" (Osborn, n.d.-a). In the mythology of Dilbert the pilot, Dilbert was the father of all gremlins, and they all looked like him (Osborn, n.d.-b).[3]

Other characters soon joined Dilbert's circle. Almost concurrently with Dilbert, Osborn created Spoiler, an aircraft mechanic who was prone to mistakes, more often imperiling pilots than himself. Dilbert and Spoiler appeared together on some posters. Relatively often, Dilbert had an unnamed "cousin" as a co-conspirator in mischief or incompetence. Some later posters pulled the audience into the posters by substituting "you" for "Dilbert."

In 1943, to contrast Dilbert's lack of experience and care, Osborn and a colleague, Seth Warner, invented another character, Post Script "Grampaw" Pettibone, an experienced pilot from an earlier age (U.S. Navy, 1943;

Wheeler, 1986). He emerged to provide commentary and advice on the accidents of the many Dilberts in the Navy, but Pettibone's main haunt was in a periodical, *Naval Aviation News*, rather than on posters.

Osborn identified personally and professionally with Dilbert. He said he felt like a Dilbert when he was learning to fly (Osborn, 1982, p. 79). Much later, when he was awarded the Navy Legion of Merit for his artwork, he drew Dilbert wearing the medal ("Dilbert Decorated," 1946). When Osborn left the military, so did Dilbert: He drew a picture of Dilbert on the back of his separation report (Figure 4). As a civilian, Osborn continued to draw Dilbert cartoons for *Skyways*, a magazine for military, commercial, and recreational aviators. At the same time, he also supplied illustrations of Dilbert, Grampaw Pettibone, and other characters to *Naval Aviation News*, postwar training manuals (*Jet Sense*, *Vertigo Sense*, etc.), and other military publications. Pettibone soon eclipsed Dilbert in visibility and popularity among Navy personnel.

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3   Gremlins were folkloric creatures who sabotaged airplanes. They were associated with the Royal Air Force long before they gained public notoriety in Roald Dahl's 1943 children's book *Th e Gremlins.*
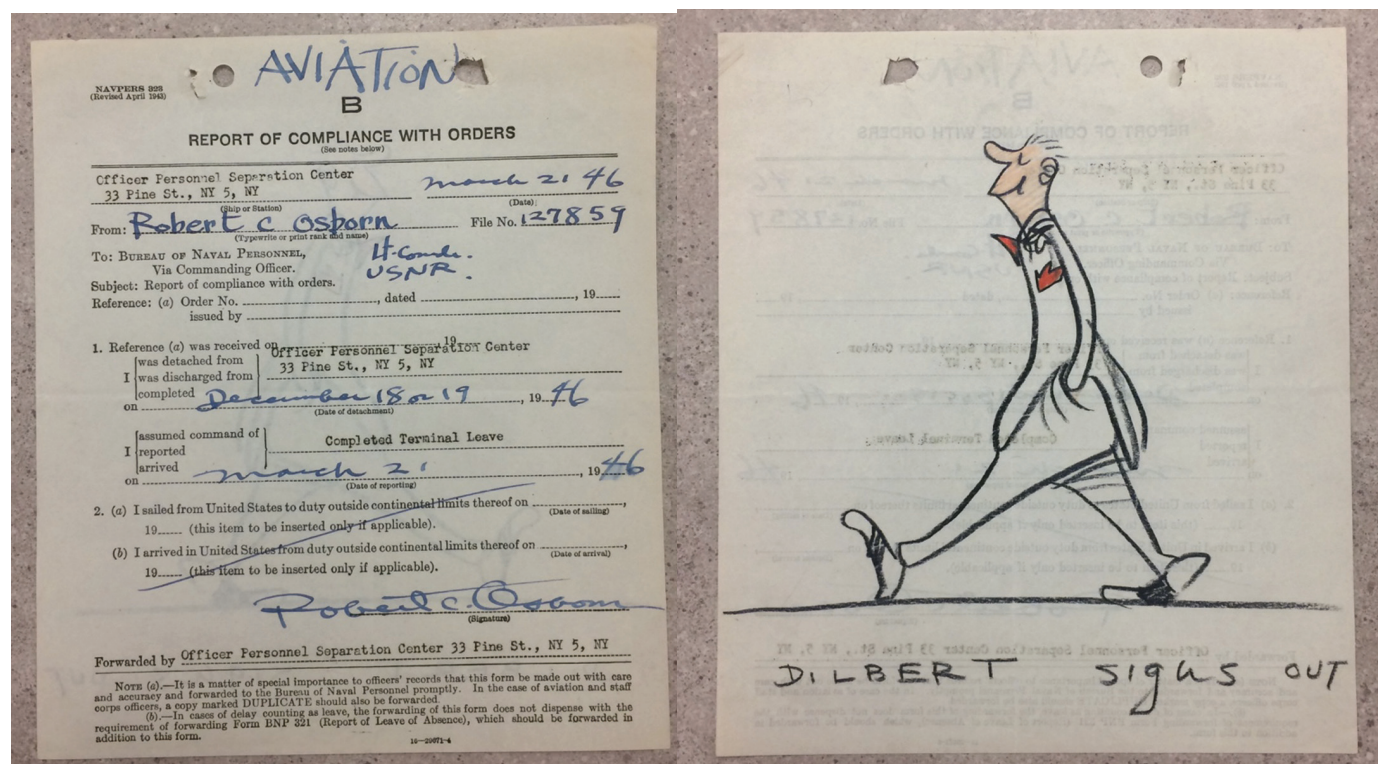

Figure 4. Pages from Robert C. Osborn's separation papers in his Navy personnel file. I photographed these pages at the National-al Personnel Records Center, a facility of the National Archives and Records Administration, in St. Louis, Missouri. Note that Dilbert is dressed in civilian clothes.

"Don't Be a Dilbert"

Multimodality

A key part of the definition of transmedia storytelling is multimodality or telling across multiple media. As mentioned earlier, no specific type of medium is required in transmedia storytelling. The media do not have to be digital, although, nowadays, most or all usually are. What is surprising about the Dilbert story is that it predates the digital era and yet includes so many different media as well as genres within media—from posters and films to training devices and rituals to books, manuals, and other print genres, such as magazine columns (with letters), poems, and a short story.

Of course, in the last few decades, much of this analog material has been digitized and is readily accessible only in digital format. I made heavy use of the HathiTrust Digital Library for old issues of Navy magazines and World War II technical reports and manuals. Although I inspected more than 300 Dilbert and Spoiler posters in the Library of Congress, scores of these posters have been digitized and posted online. And Dilbert lives on in new analog media. For example, from 2016 to 2018, the Intrepid Air, Sea, and Space Museum hosted an exhibition, *Don't Be a Dilbert: U.S. Navy Safety Poster*s, on the hangar deck of the USS Intrepid (Intrepid, 2019).

Posters

Osborn's Dilbert posters played a critical role in the war effort. As one journalist wrote, "It costs the Navy $27,500 to train an aviator. The plane he flies after he has finished his training may be a $90,000 fighter or a $200,000 flying boat. Dilbert is the little man on cardboard who helps the Navy protect its investment in men and airplanes" (Goodman, 1944, p. 132). Osborn estimated that he illustrated more than 2,000 of these posters between 1942 and the end of the war (Benjamin, 1974, p. 11). He may have written the captions as well, although his unit included well-known authors. To find ideas and ensure technical accuracy, Osborn completed flight training as a pilot, interviewed subject-matter experts, visited training centers in the States and ships in the Pacific theater, and even flew with pilots on their missions (Goodman, 1944, p. 132; Benjamin, 1974, p. 11).

The posters were organized in themed series. The first series of 265 posters—issued in mid-1942—featured Dilbert and focused on common pilot errors, such as not using a checkoff list before takeoff or not

using an oxygen mask at a high altitude (Osborn, n.d.-h). The Navy printed 3,500 of each poster, for a total of more than 900,000 posters. So onerous was this work that the printing of later posters had to be outsourced to the Government Printing Office (GPO). The next 244 posters featured Spoiler the Mechanic and focused on mistakes in aircraft maintenance. Another 100 posters were devoted to submarine warfare, yet another 24 to swimming, and so on (Goodman, 1944, p. 132). Some of the posters were in black and white, but others used one, two, or more colors. Orange dominates the posters in the swimming series while aquamarine dominates the posters in the submarine series.

The typical poster consisted of a single cartoon drawing, an instructive but humorous caption, a control number, and the insignia of the U.S. Navy Training Division, and later the GPO insignia, as well. Within a drawing, there might be text representing the thoughts, speech, or (in a very few instances) writing of one or more characters (see, for example, Osborn, n.d.-f). Rarely was this text enclosed in a bubble, but bubbles were sometimes used for thought pictures. The point of view of most of the posters was third person omniscient: Dilbert is seen through the eyes of a spectator who is commenting smugly on Dilbert's failings. (Figure 5 is another example of this kind of poster.) On rare occasions, a drawing might take Dilbert's perspective, or nearly so, but the point of view of the caption would still remain omniscient (see, for example, Osborn, n.d.-g).

In orientation, most of the posters were landscape, but some were portrait. Although loose posters might be hung in bathrooms, on bulkheads, and on lockers (Korchin & Patterson, 1949, p. 104), the posters were supposed to be displayed in a wooden box with a glass cover. Figure 6 shows a set of carpenter's instructions for building such a box. These boxes were fastened to walls in hangars, mess halls, and other common areas. The typical poster had two punch holes at the top so that it could be hung from screws in the box. Presumably, the poster in the box was changed every day or two.

Books

I inspected two books featuring Dilbert drawings: one in which the text was subordinate to the drawings and one in which the drawings were subordinate to the text. Both types were introductions to safe flying for a civilian audience.

Figure 5. A poster featuring both Spoiler and Dilbert. I took this photograph of the original poster in the Library of Congress (LOT 8939 G, Box 2). In World War II, pilots sometimes mistook whales for enemy submarines. As an Australian pilot said, "A whale from the air looks very much like a submarine ... I don't know how many whales I sunk!" (Bennett, 1995, p. 106). The technical information in the poster is that submarine swirls do not move whereas whale swirls do. Animal cruelty was less a concern for the Navy than was the loss of perfectly good bombs.
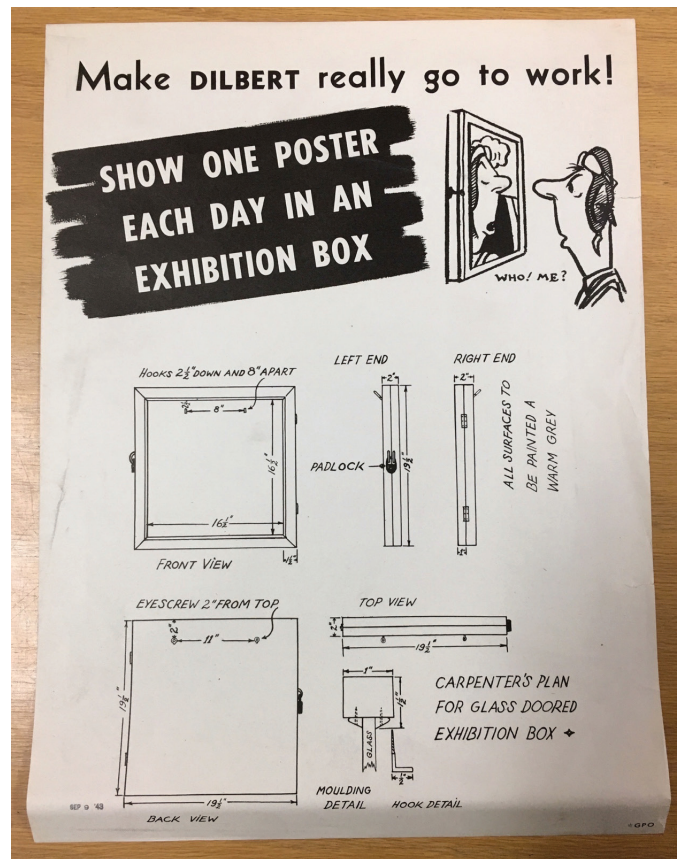

Figure 6. Carpenter's plan (dated September 9, 1943) for a glass-doored exhibition box for displaying Dilbert posters. I took this photograph of the original sheet in the Library of Congress (LOT 8939 G, Box 2). Notice that the pilot in the drawing has a perturbed if not angry expression on his face, and he is wondering whether he is looking at himself. Presumably, the exhibition box could accommodate a poster with either a landscape or portrait orientation.

Osborn's 1943 book *Dilbert: Just an Accident Looking for a Place to Happen!* was a selection of Dilbert posters adapted for the new medium. For example, one poster had a black-and-white line drawing of an airplane flying erratically over a field (Osborn, n.d.-e). The poster was reprinted in the book, but the field of grass and plane were filled in with shading—in black and white, not color (Osborn, 1943). Cartoons that had one or two colors on the posters were completely black and white in the book. In at least one case, the words written on a cartoon were removed. Facing pages in the book often featured thematically related cartoons and captions—for example, Dilbert flying badly on one facing page and a "check-pilot" looking angry on the other (Osborn, 1943).

More interesting, the captions were adapted, some heavily. Whereas they were written in past tense on the posters, they were written in present tense on the book pages, giving the drawings in the book an immediacy that was lacking in the posters. Whereas Dilbert was mentioned by name in almost every poster, in the book his name was often replaced by a pronoun or a rhetorical ellipsis. The reason for this change was that the posters needed to stand on their own, whereas the book pages were consumed one page after the other, probably in a single sitting.

Many single-sentence captions from the posters became clauses in sentences that extended across two or more pages in the book. For example, on the recto side of one page, there was a drawing of two planes colliding on the runway. The caption read, "To begin with, he taxis too fast" (no terminal punctuation). On the verso side of the same page (requiring a page turn), there was a drawing of a plane being upended. The caption read, "Or stops too quickly" (Osborn, 1943). The poster version of the latter read, "Dilbert found you could stop quite quickly with brakes!" (Osborn, n.d.-d).

"Don't Be a Dilbert"

The biggest change from poster to book was the target audience. As stated at the beginning of the book, "Since all pilots throughout the years have stumbled upon the same difficulties, it is reasonable to believe that there is a little bit of Dilbert in all flyers, whether they be Army, Navy, or civilian" (Osborn, 1943). Dilbert was still clearly in the Navy, and there were military references in the captions, but the selection and presentation of the cartoons were noticeably less military. The lessons about flying were applicable to civilian pilots as well as military pilots. This was where adaptation began to grade into extension as it attempted to draw in a new audience.

Whereas Osborn's book was a collection of cartoon drawings with captions, Frederick M. Reeder's *Safe for Solo: What Every Young Aviator Should Know* (1947) was a book about flying with illustrations featuring Dilbert. The reference to "Every Young Aviator" in the book's subtitle suggested a juvenile audience, perhaps teenagers. Rear Admiral Reeder must have felt that Osborn's Dilbert drawings would make his book appealing to young readers interested in aviation, so he enlisted Osborn as illustrator.

Training Manuals

Osborn was part of a technical communication dream team—an elite unit of writers, artists, journalists, educators, and advertising professionals at Navy headquarters in Washington, D.C. This group included the following individuals, among others:

- Robert Lewis Taylor (1912–1998), at the time a writer for the *New Yorker* but later the Pulitzer Prize–winning author of *The Travels of Jaimie McPheeters* (1958)
- Lawrence Watkin (1901–1981), an English professor and author of *On Borrowed Time* (1937) and later a Disney scriptwriter
- regional writer Roark Bradford (1896–1948), the author of *Ol' Man Adam and his Chillun* (1928)
- another regional writer, Jesse Stuart (1906-1984), the author of *Taps for Private Tussie* (1943) and, later, the poet laureate of Kentucky
- the great American photographer Edward Steichen (1879–1973)
- two more academics: Russell I. Thackrey (1904–1990), a journalism professor at Kansas State University, and George H. Foster (1912–1959), an English instructor (and later professor) at Washington and Lee University

Table 1. Partial List of Sense Manuals

1943	1950
Arctic Sense *Flat-Hatting Sense* *Fuel Saving Sense* *"G" Sense* *Manners Sense* *Patrol Sense* *Prisoner Sense*	*High Altitude Sense* *Night Vision Sense*
	1951
1943 & 1944	*Discipline Sense* *Electrical Sense* *Public Relations Sense* *Shoot Seat Sense*
Air Information Sense *Aleutian Sense* *Dunking Sense* *Gunnery Sense* *Oxygen Sense* *Parachute Sense* *Carrier Sense* *Pilot Error Sense* *Security Sense Shark Sense* *Taxi Sense*	**1952**
	Air Controller Sense *Jet Cruise Control Sense*
	1954
	Helicopter Rescue Sense *Instrument Flying Sense* *Shipboard Training Sense*
	1954 & 1955
	GCA Sense *Night Flying Sense* *Swept and DeltaWing Sense*
1944 & 1945	**1956**
Night Fighter Sense *Radio Discipline Sense* *Recognition and Identification Sense* *Rescue Sense* *Support Aircraft Sense*	*Weekend Warrior Sense*
	1958
	Ditching Sense *Bail-Out and Ejection Sense*
1947	**1959**
	Flight Simulator Sense
Compressibility Sense *Instrument Sense* *Jet Sense*	**1960**
	Collision Sense
1948	**1961**
Carrier Cold Starting Sense *Carrier Cold Weather Flying Sense*	*Recognition Sense* *Flying Fitness Sense* *Slow Flight Sense*
1949	
Vertigo Sense	

- Hannibal Coons (1909–1977), a writer for *Collier's* and later scriptwriter for television series such a *Dennis the Menace* and *The Addams Family*
- Donald Keyhoe (1897–1988), a pulp-fiction writer and later (in)famous ufologist

Assembled by Navy officers Arthur Radford and Harold "Min" Miller, this unit worked on a variety of projects, but one of their most significant achievements was the so-called sense manuals ("Sense," 1954).

The sense manuals were a series of topic-specific training manuals, written in a lively manner with plenty of humor and cartoon illustrations. Table 1 presents a list of the manuals in this Navy series. Dilbert was invoked by name in many (but not all) of the sense manuals—for example, three times in *Fuel Saving Sense* (1943), 13 times in *Jet Sense* (1947), nine times in *High Altitude Sense* (1950), twice in *Helicopter Rescue Sense* (1954), and three times in *Bail-Out and Ejection Sense* (1958). Even when his name was not mentioned, he was recognizable in many of the illustrations. And he played a larger role in some of the manuals than in others. For example, Watkin and Osborn teamed up on *Night Fighter Sense, or Who Killed the Japanese Sandman?* (1945), a manual about flying and engaging the enemy at night. It was written as "an English whodunit" with Dilbert as one of the characters (Watkin, 2018, p. 223).

As a recurring figure in the sense manuals, Dilbert continued flying for the Navy throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s. Most of the sense manuals published after World War II were illustrated by Osborn and written by English Professor George Foster who, like Watkin, was at one time a scriptwriter for Disney.

In addition to the sense manuals, Dilbert appeared in at least one other training manual: *Swimming* (1944), a volume in the Naval Aviation Physical Training series about sports, such as boxing, football, and soccer. The swimming volume included a section of 22 Dilbert posters on the theme of swimming. There is no direct relationship between the posters and the manual other than the topic of swimming (U.S. Navy, 1944).

Training Films

Not long after the posters started appearing, the Navy produced a training film featuring Dilbert: *Don't Kill Your Friends* (Bureau of Aeronautics, 1943). Huntz Hall, one of the original Dead End Kids, played Dilbert. Hall had moved from the Broadway play *Dead End* (1935) into a successful string of films, including *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938) and *Hell's Kitchen* (1939). Hall had played characters with names such as Goofy, Dippy, and Pig. By association, these characters reinforced Dilbert's reputation as a misfit, but it also gave him an air of criminal delinquency.

The 14-minute training film opened on a full-length poster of Dilbert. Through a special effect of the camera, Osborn's cartoon character turned into the actor Hall, as if he was materializing out of the poster. In Figure 7, Hall is shown in front of the poster shortly after his appearance. Hall dissolved back into the cartoon character at the end of the film.

Like the Dilbert in posters, this live-action version of the character was a representation of many pilots in the Navy. After proclaiming that he could look like anyone, Dilbert bragged, "That's how I can get away with so much. No one can recognize me until it's too late." No one could find him, either, because he moved around, surfacing first in Alaska, next in Guadalcanal, and finally on an aircraft carrier in the Pacific.

The narrator asked, "When are you Dilberts going to get wise to yourselves?"

Dilbert defended himself as an entertaining character: "What do you mean? We're good for a lot of laughs, ain't we? We panic 'em. We're a very funny character."

But the narrator would have none of it: "Sure, when you're on a poster, but when you're in the air, you're just about as funny as a blast from a Jap zero."

This exchange amounted to a rejection of the humor of the posters, in which Dilbert was often

Figure 7. Huntz Hall as Dilbert in my screen capture of a frame from the Navy training film *Don't Kill Your Friends* (1943). Hall was already famous as the goofy member of the Dead End Kids, stars of the Broadway hit *Dead End* (1935) and later feature films such as *Dead End* (1937) and *Crime School* (1938). Hall was chosen to star in this training film because of his comic performances as a likeable but dippy troublemaker. (The Dead Ends Kids evolved into the Bowery Boys, and Hall is now remembered mainly as Bowery Boy "Sach.")

"Don't Be a Dilbert"

funny and sympathetic. In the role of a U.S. Navy pilot, he had heroic potential, even though he displayed unheroic qualities and actions. He was, in other words, an antihero. In the film, however, he was despicable rather than funny. The narrator did not want to reform him; he wanted to eradicate him.

Dilbert was featured in the four negative examples that punctuated this otherwise serious training film for pilots. In the first negative example, he was told not to charge the plane's guns over a populated area, but he wondered what would happen if he did, and so he did it anyway. A dummy cartridge fell from the plane and killed a young woman on a sidewalk. There was no humor in this tragedy.

In the second negative example, Dilbert flew into another plane and killed that pilot as well as himself. He was resurrected for a third negative example in which he parked his plane improperly, and members of the ground crew were killed by accidental gun fire from the plane. The narrator described this accident as "cold blooded murder." In the fourth and final example, a streaming target on Dilbert's plane decapitated a man on the ground when Dilbert was landing the plane. The visuals of these deaths were graphic and gruesome, and Dilbert's behavior was wholly unsympathetic—not merely antiheroic, but almost evil. The narrator actually described Dilbert as a "villain."

As far as I know, *Don't Kill Your Friends* was the only training film featuring Dilbert, but there were several animated training films featuring Grampaw Pettibone. In each of these animated shorts, which had the common title *Gripes*, Pettibone narrated several accidents, commenting on what went wrong in each case and how it could have been avoided. The pilots were referred to as "the lame brain," "the pinball," and "the show-off" rather than "Dilbert." (U.S. Navy, c. 1945).

Magazine Columns

Starting in mid-1946, Osborn and Seth Warner, a retired Navy pilot, collaborated on a monthly Dilbert column for the commercial magazine, *Skyways*. The cover of the July 1946 issue announced that Dilbert was now "Exclusive with *Skyways*." Warner wrote, "This is the 'Kick-in-the-pants Department' and will operate on the psychological principal [sic] that you learn more from seeing someone make a mistake and

come to grief thereby than by watching one of the experts do it right" (Warner & Osborn, 1946, p. 46). This statement summed up nicely Dilbert's function in the Navy's safety literature.

The typical installment of the column consisted of a full-page Dilbert poster (sometimes new, other times recycled from Navy days) and several narrative vignettes of mishaps with commentary and smaller illustrations (some of Dilbert). Dilbert was now a civilian pilot, albeit prone to some of the same mistakes and antics as in his Navy days. He was shown in a wide selection of outfits, hats, and civilian activities, although flying was still his primary pastime. The Dilbert column ran in *Skyways* until September 1952, when Osborn teamed up with a different writer, Jerome Lederer, on a new column, "Performance Pitfalls," also about flight safety but without Dilbert.

At least one civilian newspaper—the *Southwest Times* of Pulaski, Virginia—imitated Warner and Osborn's Dilbert column with its own Dilbert column. Called "Flying with Dilbert," the column was written by Walt Viohl, first under the pseudonym "Dilbert" and later under his own name (Dilbert, 1950; Viohl, 1950). Each installment offered "true accounts of what can happen (and in these cases did happen) when you don't take time for pre-flight briefing of your airplane, yourself, the weather, and fail to file a plan of flight" (Viohl, 1950, p. 4). Viohl's initial use of the "Dilbert" byline conflated the error-prone amateur pilot with the safety-conscious expert pilot in a self-deprecating joke.

Meanwhile, for decades, Osborn continued to illustrate the Grampaw Pettibone column for *Naval Aviation News*. Pettibone first appeared in the January 15, 1943, issue of what was originally a newsletter. He was introduced as "an old-timer" who flew in the early days of airplanes, and, with his beard and cane, he bore a striking resemblance to Rip Van Winkle (U.S. Navy, 1943, p. 2). Pettibone was the older, wiser pilot who provided advice and instruction to cadets and others by commenting on actual accidents. Dilbert was Pettibone's "scapegoat" for all inexperienced, careless, and thrill-seeking pilots (Sorrells, 1957, p. 234).

A representative installment of the Pettibone column can be found in the April 1955 issue of *Naval Aviation News*, by then a full-fledged magazine. The installment consisted of a staff-written story of an accident and two letters relating a mishap and a close call, respectively. The story was accompanied by four

Edward A. Malone

illustrations—three of Dilbert and one of Pettibone—whereas the two letters had one Dilbert illustration each. Pettibone commented substantially on all three incidents. The letters, in particular, illustrated the collaborative nature of the column and the way the Dilbert myth was perpetuated and extended.

Written by someone identified simply as CDR USN, the first letter began with a testament to the "tale's" authenticity: "The official record will no doubt confirm the accuracy of my tale but, just in case it lacks a moral, what do you make of this version?" (Parsons & Osborn, 1955, p. 7). The rest of the letter used Dilbert as a character but added a fictional relative, Filbert, a cousin of Dilbert's. The two aviators—Dilbert, masquerading as a commander, and Filbert—walked up to a plane from behind and climbed in without first doing a walkaround inspection of the plane. They did not notice that a fire bottle (i.e., an extinguisher) had been left in front of the plane, and the bottle got caught in the propeller when they were taxiing on the runway. After jumping out of the plane and discovering what they had done, they ran off into the woods. The consequences of their haste and carelessness became another lesson for all pilots.

The letter was illustrated with a cartoon of two naval aviators hurrying toward their plane—obviously, Dilbert and Filbert. The former was wearing an officer's uniform and saying, "We are too hurried to walk around the plane!" The latter was following closely behind, saying, "We're real busy!" The illustrator was presumably Osborn (Parsons & Osborn, 1955, p. 7).

In his response, Pettibone joked about leaving fire bottles in front of a plane with "Dilbert on the loose." More significant, though, was that he added to the letter-writer's narrative: "Incidentally, we heard that Dil stumbled into a gas pit and broke his nose while fleeing the scene of the crime" (Parsons & Osborn, 1955, p. 7).

This story of an actual accident was retold and analyzed by three people: through the letter of one person (a letter writer appropriating the Dilbert character), the illustration of a second person (Osborn), and the response of a third person (probably Samuel G. Parsons, one of the thirteen Pettibone writers who wrote the column from 1943 to the 2010s). This was the kind of participatory culture that sustained and enriched the transmedia story of Dilbert, Pettibone, and related characters. When Osborn died in the mid-1990s, another artist, Ted Wilbur, took over, and, although Wilbur died in late 2018,

Pettibone remains a fixture of *Naval Aviation News* (Newman, 2019).

At an early date, the Navy recognized the value of the Pettibone character and real incident reports in its ongoing safety campaign among aviators. In a survey conducted in 1948, Navy pilots credited Pettibone as contributing more to their safety than Dilbert had: "Although Dilbert cartoons . . . were valued by the squadron commanders, pilots did not think they contributed too much to safety" (Thorndike, 1951, p. 123; see also Korchin & Patterson, 1949, pp. 24–28, 47–50). The young pilots may not have liked seeing themselves in the character of bungling Dilbert; they may have felt less threatened by a retired, experienced, and funny (albeit grumpy) pilot such as Pettibone. The squadron commanders, on the other hand, may have enjoyed thinking about the recruits as Dilberts.

The formula of having an expert pilot commenting on the mistakes of inexperienced pilots was imitated by another Navy magazine, *Approach*, which turned the successful Anymouse program into a safety column for pilots. After World War II, pilot Trygve Holl (1918–2008) had devised a program whereby pilots could file anonymous (hence, "anymouse") reports of close calls and accidents ("Pilots Reveal," 1951). The reporting form even sported a mouse's head wearing a pilot's cap. The long-running column in *Approach* featured anonymous letters by "Anymouse" and replies by "Headmouse" as well as illustrations of both (see, for example, "Man Overboard," 1963).

Training Device and Drill

In 1943, engineer Wilfred Kaneb invented a training device that he called the Underwater Cockpit Escape Device ("Birth," 2013). Used in cockpit escape drills, the device was soon christened the "Dilbert Dunker." It consisted of a "complete cockpit . . . mounted on twin rails 25 feet long and set at a 45-degree angle at an end of the station swimming pool" ("Crashes," 1945). The cockpit would be pulled to the top of the rail; the trainee would climb in, and the cockpit would be released; it would slide down the rail, flipping upside down after hitting the water. The pilot had to remain calm and escape quickly from the submerged and inverted cockpit. This training exercise was designed to simulate what happened when a plane failed to take off from an aircraft carrier and plunged into the water. Without this training, a pilot might

have panicked and drowned—and many, in fact, did so before the Dilbert Dunker was invented.

During the training exercise involving this device, each trainee became a Dilbert: if not the cause of the crash, at least potentially the cause of his own death underwater ("Rehearsal," 1951). Only through repetitive training—enacting one crash after another in the role of Dilbert—could a pilot gain the knowledge and skill to survive in such a situation.

Video footage of the Dilbert Dunker: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aUoLTGQA_jk

Technical Demonstrations

During World War II, Dilbert was also a doll used in training. There was more than one of these dolls in circulation at the time. The doll in Figure 8 (now in a museum) was used by an instructor at Saufley Field near Pensacola, Florida, to show cadet pilots how to eject from a cockpit and use a parachute pack. The name tag on the front of the doll's jacket says "Dilbert." In the class, the instructor probably shared anecdotes of pilots' mistakes. As he explained what *you* should do when bailing out of *your* plane, each student would become a vicarious Dilbert. The pilot's responsibility was to complete the mission and bring the plane back in one piece. Failing that, he had to be able to save himself. If he needed to bail out, there was a good chance he had done something wrong—in other words, that he had been a Dilbert.

Rituals

The Dilbert story was used in Navy shaming rituals. At more than one station, the pilot who had made the worst mistake of the day was given "a 'Dilbert for today' placard either to be put around his neck, like the Congressional Medal, or at his place at the mess table" (Goodman, 1944, p. 55). At Corry Field in Florida, an effigy of Dilbert was used to shame pilots for their mistakes: "Whenever a boner is pulled, resulting in damage of an aircraft, 'Dilbert' is adorned with an appropriate sign and left dangling in the hangar for all students to see." One such sign read, "I pulled my wheels up while taxiing out to take off" ("Training," 1949).

In the late 1940s, a group of amateur civilian pilots routinely made weekend breakfast flights from Utah,

Figure 8. Dilbert doll used in technical demonstrations. I took this photograph at the MAPS Air Museum in North Canton, Ohio. The few surviving Dilbert dolls are reminders of the extensive use of Dilbert in the training, entertaining, and shaming of Navy pilots. This prop became obsolete as aircraft evolved and cockpits and equipment changed (Griffin, 2019).

Nevada, and California to towns in Idaho and Montana. Prizes were awarded for various accomplishments, such as the pilot who had flown from the farthest place. On rare occasions, a Dilbert prize was awarded to "a pilot for foolishness" (Arentz, 1949, p. 59).

In each of these rituals, the careless, mischievous, or unlucky pilot created their own story—not a fatal accident, but an incident—and in doing so temporarily became Dilbert. The placard, effigy, or prize served as a reminder of the story, which was probably recounted many times as members of the class or squadron asked what happened and learned the details.

Nose Art (on a plane's fuselage)

A form of folk art, nose art has long been a means of individualizing aircraft, including military aircraft. Many World War II planes had text and images painted

on their bodies, especially near the front end (or nose). The text (e.g., a name) and visual (e.g., a cartoon) might be patriotic (Liberty Bell, War Eagle), vulgar/erotic (Lak-a-Nookie, Take Off Time, Shakes All Over), nostalgic for home (Georgia Peach, Memphis Belle, Arkansas Traveler) or family (Enola Gay, KreJan, Punkins), boastful (Tough Boy, Ruff Stuff, Potent Cock), threatening (Avenging Angel, Tojo's Nitemare, Grim Reaper), erudite (Nulli Secundus, Upupa Epops, Hippomenes), or superstitious (Royal Flush, Talisman, Lucky Bat) (Taylan, 2019). Nose art was subversive because it was not officially sanctioned, although it was widely permitted.

One Navy plane in World War II sported a cartoon drawing of Dilbert under the name "Demon Dilbert." Figure 9 shows the crew of this plane, probably a Consolidated PB4Y-1 Liberator at Carney Field, Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, in 1943. The nose art in this case was doubly subversive because it expressed humorous contempt for Navy training and safety by flaunting the epitome of pilot recklessness. At the same time, the pilot and/or crew were attempting to insert themselves into the mythos of the famous Dilbert with his penchant for mischief.
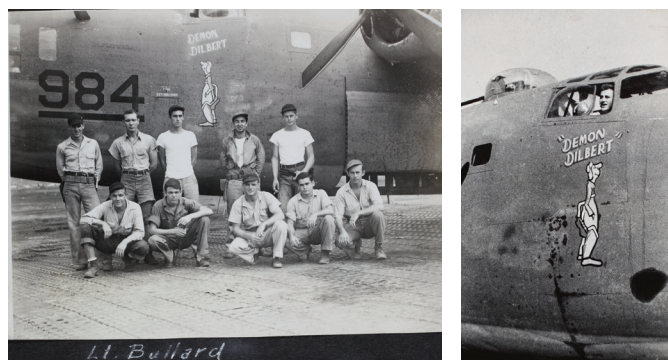

Figure 9. "Demon Dilbert" nose art on a plane in World War II. These photographs are part of a collection of World War II photographs in the San Diego Air and Space Museum ("VB-102," 1944).

Other Media and Genres

Over the years, Dilbert was the topic of poems, at least one short story, and amateur plays. Two poems written by readers of Navy magazines are good examples of the poems. Published in the late 1940s, "The Sad, Sad Story of Dilbert" began with a declaration of Dilbert's multiplicity: "You know a Dilbert, and YOU know a Dilbert, / But I know a Dilbert with a special twist"

(Biehl, 1949, p. 9). What followed was an account of an accident in 22 lines of verse. The Dilbert in this poem was college educated and claimed to have memorized his checkoff list, so he did not check the list before takeoff, and the resulting mistakes were tragic. Written 32 years later, "Dilbert at the Bounce" was a 12-stanza poem about an arrogant pilot who flamed out (Butler, 1981). The jargon in the poem made the poem all but inaccessible to the lay reader. The poem, however, was generously illustrated with cartoons over a two-page spread, suggesting that even pilots with considerable technical knowledge enjoyed their funnies.

In the late 1940s, Osborn and Foster (the Washington and Lee University professor) co-authored a short story about Dilbert for *Ford Times*, a magazine published by the automobile company. The story was told in the form of a letter from Dilbert to his friend Clovis. Dilbert was now attending college, presumably on the G.I. Bill, and he had a car, a California Special with a fox tail, which he drove as recklessly as he had flown his plane in the Navy. A dean at his college insisted that he take a safe-driving class at the local high school, so he went to the class and unwittingly made a fool of himself while a state trooper was talking to the class about safe driving. On the way home, Dilbert was taken hostage in his car by a criminal, but his bad driving caused the aforementioned state trooper to pull him over, and, in his panic, Dilbert accidentally helped disarm the criminal, thereby becoming a hero in the town and on campus (Osborn & Foster, 1947). This is Dilbert the antihero, not the villain.

In the 1950s, an instructor at the Naval Air Station in San Diego wrote Dilbert plays to teach students. Each play was "usually built around some Dilbert who does everything wrong, violates regulations and suffers the consequences, as opposed to other characters who attempt to guide him" ("Plays," 1952, p. 23). I do not know whether the focal character in these plays was actually called *Dilbert,* but it is likely that he was in some of the plays. A student would assume the central Dilbert role and become the negative example for the class.

One remarkable creation in the Dilbert myth was an aviation safety display with moving parts (Figure 10). The display featured statistics for 1957 on the left-hand side and photographs of accidents (the "Cost") on the right-hand side. In the middle was a cloud-shaped area for moving planes powered by a motor. At the bottom center, Dilbert looked on while Pettibone whispered advice

"Don't Be a Dilbert"

into his ear. The advice in the dialogue balloon could be changed as often as needed. This 3-D display connected Pettibone's nuggets of advice with the bigger picture of annual flight hours, accident rate, and cost in human life and expensive equipment (Mazza, 1957).
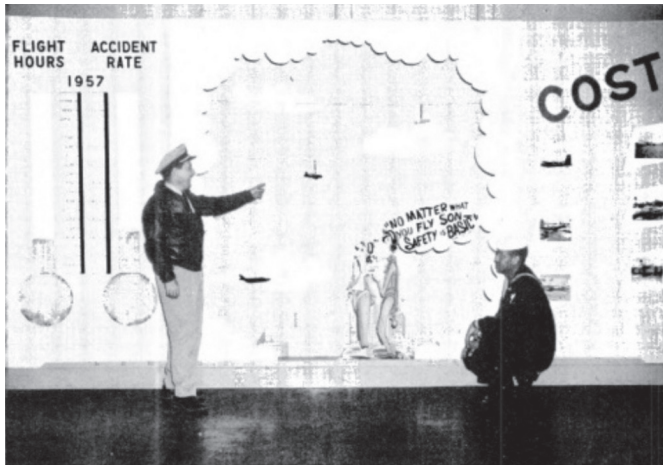

Figure 10. 3-D safety aviation display featuring Dilbert and Grampaw Pettibone. Developed by personnel at the Naval Air Station in New Orleans, this display included moving planes and a dialogue balloon that could be changed daily. This photograph appeared with an article in the Navy's *Approach* magazine (Mazza, 1957).

Radical Intertextuality and Additive Comprehension

In transmedia storytelling, the different texts must be extensively interconnected (radical intertexuality) across multiple media (multimodality) for the purpose of enlarging and deepening the audience's understanding of the story (additive comprehension). In this section, I discuss the ways in which radical intertextuality fostered additive comprehension in the Dilbert myth. To explicate the myth, I also use other concepts that Jenkins (2007, 2011) associated with transmedia storytelling, including adaptation vs. extension; chunking, seriality, and dispersal; the "encyclopedic impulse" of audiences; interactivity vs. participation; and continuity vs. multiplicity.

With its enormous resources and diverse activities, the military functioned like a media conglomerate during and after World War II. The military pressed Hollywood into its service, and most of the propaganda and training films were created by the movie studios and/or their producers, scriptwriters, directors,

actors, and film crews. Those in the military who had experience in journalism, advertising, creative writing, teaching, or the fine arts were called upon to produce print media. Graduate engineers helped to produce training devices. For example, Naval Reserve Officer Luis de Florez, who had a degree in mechanical engineering from MIT and was part of the same training division as Osborn, founded the Special Devices Section (later a separate Division), which produced hundreds of synthetic training devices during the war (Dawson, 2005).

Visual technical communication reached new heights during World War II as the different branches of the U.S. military and the different militaries of allied and axis forces experimented with all available types of media. These militaries had to educate young soldiers and sailors with short attention spans, if not low literacy levels, and visual media such as films, posters, and comics were better received than traditional textbooks and technical manuals. The U.S. Navy produced and disseminated its own posters, magazines, manuals (with cartoon illustrations), films, and training devices, such as the Dilbert Dunker and the Dilbert doll. In some ways, the Dilbert doll anticipated the action figures of contemporary media franchises.

The Dilbert stories (each poster, each accident report, each drill on the Dunker) comprised a course in pilot training. The course used each audience member's ability, if not desire, to compile and connect discrete lessons (never all of them) into a comprehensive understanding of safe flying practices. New stories (whether broaching new themes or subtle variations on old themes) were authored unwittingly by pilots in accidents and close calls and were related firsthand or secondhand to other pilots. This form of storytelling was heavily dependent on the vagaries of weather, mechanical failure, and human error. It was not possible to control the development and structure of the myth because it was being built by accretion and sometimes serendipity as more and more incidents occurred and the technology evolved. There were more safety lessons than any one pilot could absorb, but the hope was that enough pilots would absorb enough lessons to reduce accidents and therefore casualties and loss of aircraft.

The larger Dilbert myth was comprised of many narratives of specific types of errors (on the posters), actual incidents (in the magazine columns), and personal experiences in training in the Dunker. These

narrative chunks were self-contained (i.e., they could be understood and were useful on their own) as well as connected to other chunks (i.e., in something like a refresher course in aviation safety). Not only were they spread across different media, but they were often serialized—for example, in themed and numbered series of posters, monthly installments of the magazine's columns, and repetition of drills and rituals.

There was considerable intertextuality within the same medium—for example, within posters or manuals. In the posters, Osborn developed themes (pilot error, swimming, submarine warfare, etc.), brought together characters (e.g., Dilbert and Spoiler in later posters), and repeated details (such as referring to Dilbert's "cousins"). Not only did the drawings have a similar artistic style that distinguished them visually as part of a common set—the work of a single artist—but the representations of landscapes (or seascapes) and technology (planes, ships, etc.) were sometimes the same. And some gags were used more than once—such as bats in the belfry or cobwebs in the attic or daydreaming about women.

The sense manuals, too, were all part of the same documentation set and had many textual and visual connections. All the manuals included the word "sense" in their titles, had the same general format (e.g., size) and appearance, and were written in a similar style (informal, humorous). Dilbert was recognizable in many of the sense-manual illustrations, even when he was not identified by name. Each textual mention of Dilbert tapped into the readers' familiarity with the character and the mythology surrounding him.

The Dilbert and Pettibone columns used Dilbert in the same way, exploiting his well-earned reputation as someone who always did the opposite of what he was supposed to do. It was this failing that provided continuity in all the stories about Dilbert even though his appearance and circumstances varied. Dilbert embodied multiplicity: a pilot with many faces and many haunts. No matter how many times he died, he always came back (though in somewhat altered form) to die again. Any cadet or pilot was potentially a Dilbert, whether in an airplane on a mission or during training in a simulator, such as the Dunker.

The Dilbert Dunker created its own form of intertextuality across the drills on a given day or even from day to day. The cadets would watch one another

perform the drill; the instructor might allude to one cadet's performance in critiquing that of another; the cadets would be influenced by their observations of the drills as well as the instructions they had been given and their own experiences in the Dunker. Thus, although each ride was structurally the same (climb in, slide down, flip over, and escape), the escapes varied in time and execution with occasional complications.

Some adaptations sought to extend the audiences for the posters. Pilots in the British Royal Air Force told Osborn (1982) that, "during the North African campaign against Rommel, the English found batches of our Dilbert posters at the captured German airfields, reprinted in Germany and recaptioned in German" (p. 81). The term *recaptioned* suggests that different captions were used (perhaps to ridicule the Americans or to localize the humor, geography, and other details). Or it may have been the case that the English captions were merely translated into German.

Although there might be considerable intertextuality within a medium, there was also considerable intertextuality among media. The training film *Don't Kill Your Friends* (1943) is a good example. It began and ended with a Dilbert poster—a full-body drawing of Dilbert in profile. A group of Navy aviators commented on the poster, so did the narrator, and so did Hall after he materialized out of the poster. In a serious vein, the film revised the slogan "Don't Be a Dilbert!" (popularized by the posters) to be "Don't Kill Your Friends." Dilbert was painted as a villain as accidents were depicted in gory verisimilitude. Hall's bad boy reputation from the Dead End Kids movies imbued Dilbert with delinquency and criminality.

Each installment of the Dilbert column in *Skyways* (1946 to 1952) combined a full-page Dilbert poster (sometimes recycled from the World War II posters), several anecdotes (such as accident narratives) mixed with commentary, and several smaller cartoon illustrations, many of which featured Dilbert. Each full-page drawing tied the column to the earlier tradition of posters, but at the same time it had to relate thematically and didactically to the textual content and other illustrations of the installment.

In the Pettibone column, reports of actual accidents were retold as didactic stories, sometimes by the magazine's staff, other times by readers in their letters to Grampaw Pettibone. To preserve the anonymity of the actors and enliven the stories, the

"Don't Be a Dilbert"

offending pilot might be referred to as "Dilbert." Fictionalizing accident reports in this way turned specific incidents into illustrations of general lessons. Donning the Pettibone persona, an expert pilot, such as Seth Warner or Samuel Parsons, would find and convey the lesson in each incident, while Osborn's illustrations would provide their own commentaries on the incidents or lessons.

The movement into a new medium often extended the Dilbert myth. Whereas posters might sum up an accident in a single visual and provide criticism in a single-sentence caption, the *Skyways* and Pettibone columns allowed for more detailed, textual accounts of accidents, richer critiques of the accidents and their causes, and more visual commentary. The Pettibone column, for example, offered another character's perspective on the accidents. Pettibone's commentary turned Dilbert's antics into more substantial and meaningful lessons for pilots.

Some extensions provided back story but not many: In high school, Dilbert dated a girl named Ruthie James and had a rival named Larry Platt (the short story in *Ford Times*), and he once blew up the school's physics lab (*High Altitude Sense*). We are told a great deal about what Dilbert never learned, but we are never given the kind of family history that Anthony Armstrong gave to Prune in *Prune's Progress: Th e Genealogical Tree of Pilot Officer Percy Prune* (1942).

Some extensions charted Dilbert's life after the war. Dilbert became a civilian pilot (the *Skyways* column); he went to college and helped to catch a criminal (the short story in *Ford Times*). In a concurrent line of development (as documented in the sense manuals published in the 1950s), Dilbert remained in the military and kept up with the latest aviation technologies, finding ways to misuse them and injure himself and others. The multiplicity of the character, who represented many rather than one, militated against the development of an extensive biography.

Some of the Dilbert media, such as the Dunker and the doll, were interactive, but participation was far more important than interaction. A common goal of the posters, advice columns, and training devices was extension by participation. The audience was supposed to use the knowledge and skills from the various lessons to keep themselves and their aircraft safe. Through performance, perhaps in a moment of crisis, Dilbert's negative example should be transformed into

correct action. Presumably, the drills in the Dilbert Dunker saved lives when the cockpit escape had to be performed in real situations.

There is some anecdotal evidence that this kind of extension occurred. Osborn received reports from pilots and others that they enacted the lessons in the posters. Osborn gave the following example: "I recall one flyer, shot down a half mile off a Japanese-held island. 'Enemy soldiers were shooting at me,' he said, 'and I was about to inflate my life raft when I vividly recalled a poster of Dilbert caught in a similar situation. The lesson on the poster was: Don't inflate the raft and make a bigger target of yourself. I didn't and was eventually rescued'" (as cited in Benjamin, 1974, p. 14).

In one letter to Grampaw Pettibone, the commanding officer of a squadron reported that one of his pilots had tried a solution that he had read about in Pettibone's column. One of the wheels on his plane would not open for landing, so the pilot tried to open it by bouncing the other, open wheel on the ground. Although this solution did not work, the commanding officer described the solution that eventually did work. This example illustrates Jenkins' (2011) observation that, in transmedia storytelling, "Participants pool information and tap each other's expertise as they work together to solve problems."

In the transmedia universe of the U.S. military during World War II, there were multiple worlds with their own characters and concerns—for example, naval aviation, army air forces aviation, and army ordnance maintenance. After the war, the universe that Dilbert inhabited expanded to include the worlds of amateur aviation and commercial aviation. Figures 11 and 12 show attempts in the late 1950s to acknowledge this larger universe of aviation safety.

Nearly sixty years later, in 2014, a magazine editor called for a revival of these characters and compared their universe to other, better-known transmedia universes: "we're finding out comic strip characters are wildly popular and profitable. Marvel has something like two movies a year planned through 2028. . . . there are very many [aviation safety characters] who can be interwoven and given story lines, and some of these pre-date Rex Riley by decades. Could Rex Riley be rebooted and redone, along the lines of, say, Captain James T. Kirk and the 'Star Trek' universe?" (Jacobs, 2014, p. 7).
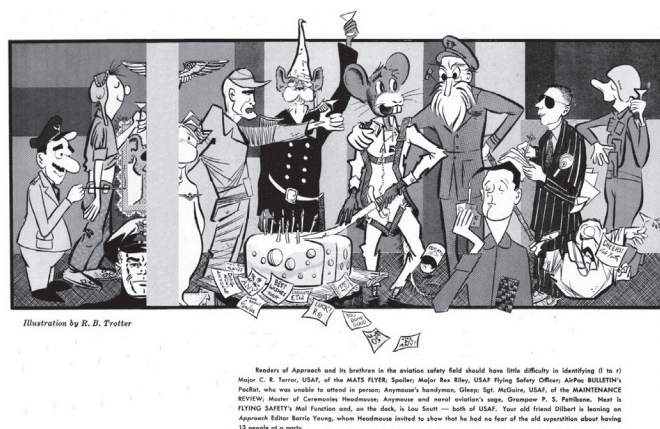
Edward A. Malone

Figure 11. Party celebrating Anymouse's 10th anniversary.
Trygve A. Holl believed that his fellow Navy pilots would be
more likely to share their accidents and close calls if they
could do so anonymously. At his suggestion, his squadron
created an "Anymouse" form for filing anonymous reports.
Each form was illustrated with a drawing of a mouse's head
wearing a pilot's helmet. Later, *Anymouse* **became the pseud-**
onym of each aviator whose story was featured in *Approach*,
the monthly magazine of the Naval Aviation Safety Center.
Both Navy and Air Force safety characters (including Dilbert,
Spoiler, and Grampaw Pettibone) attended Anymouse's 10th
anniversary party. The gray strip on the left-hand side of the
cartoon replaces part of the cartoon that was lost in the
fold of the magazine. Reprinted from the Navy's magazine
Approach **("Happy," 1957, pp. 4-5).**

Conclusion

Like the U.K. Royal Air Force and the U.S. Army Air
Forces, the U.S. Navy was suffering avoidable losses
during the training of pilots and in operational flying:
Pilots and their crew were dying and aircraft were being
destroyed. The Navy found a poster boy in the cartoon
character Dilbert: a negative example of what a pilot
should be. Later, other media were used to extend the
Dilbert myth. No one person planned the direction
and scope of this story's growth. It was a product of
exigencies and the participatory culture supporting
Navy aviation. Every fledgling and experienced pilot
dreaded the prospect of becoming a Dilbert. Their
accidents and close calls fed the developing story as
instructors, commanders, and other experts crafted
lessons from their mishaps.

The Navy's use of Dilbert is an instructive historical
example of the use of transmedia storytelling in
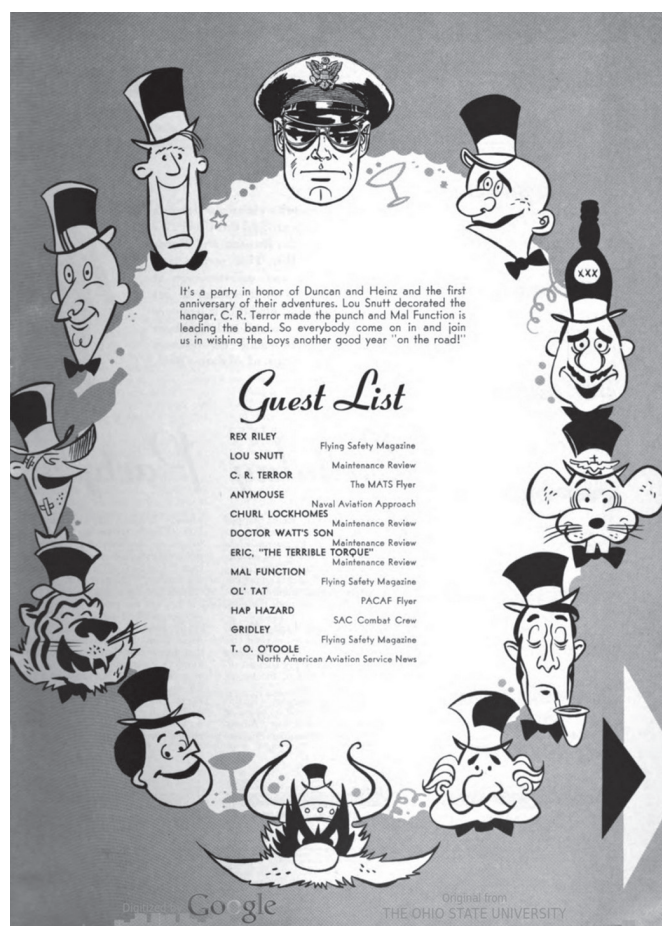technical communication. Not only does it show the

Figure 12. Party celebrating Duncan and Heinz's 1st anniver-
sary. Sergeant Lancelot Duncan and Lieutenant Malcolm
Heinz, two cartoon characters, made their debut in the Febru-
ary 1958 issue of *Aircraft Accident and Maintenance Review*.
The personnel behind these personas visited Air Force
bases, evaluated their transient maintenance and services,
and published a list of recommended bases and later
awarded certificates to the bases. Notably absent from the
anniversary party were Osborn's characters: Dilbert, Spoiler,
and Grampaw Pettibone. Reprinted from *Aircraft Accident*
and Maintenance Review **("Birthday," 1959, p. 13).**

potential benefits of using this type of storytelling in
safety education, but it also provides a pre-digital age
illustration of transmedia narrative techniques, such as
adaptation and extension; chunking, seriality, and
dispersal; interactivity and participation; and continuity
and multiplicity. These techniques have been used in
technical communication for at least 80 years, and yet
transmedia storytelling is only now becoming a topic of
research and study in our discipline.

"Don't be a Dilbert"

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