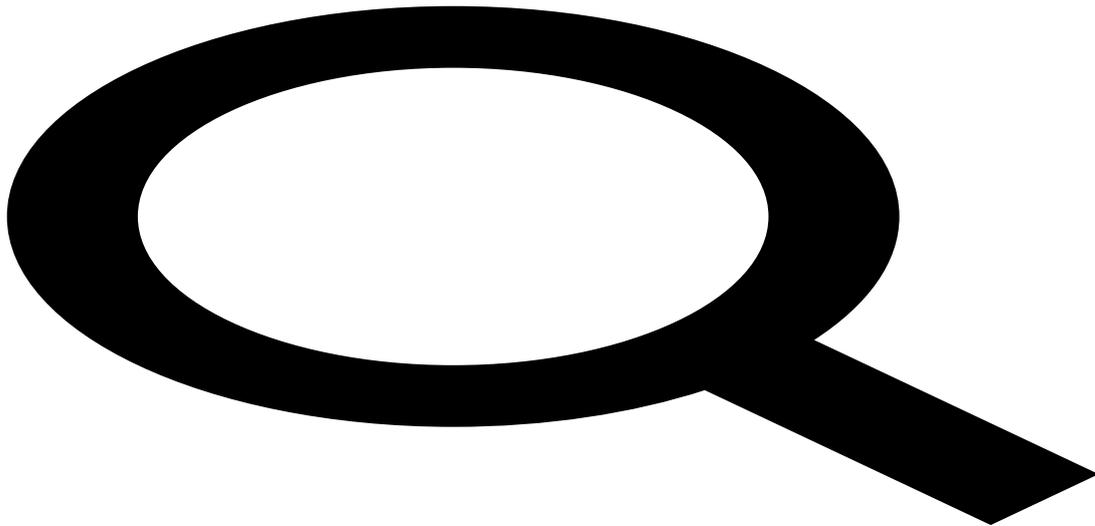


In Jonathan Franzen's latest book, [The Discomfort Zone](#) (highly recommended), I found a nice couple of paragraphs dwelling on the psychology of cartoon faces. Franzen is reminiscing on his fascination for Charles M. Schulz's Peanuts. Here's what he writes:

Our visual cortexes are wired to quickly recognize faces and then quickly subtract massive amounts of detail from them, zeroing in on their essential message: Is this person happy? Angry? Fearful? Individual faces may vary greatly, but a smirk on one is like a smirk on another. Smirks are conceptual, not pictorial. Our brains are like cartoonists - and cartoonists are like our brain, simplifying and exaggerating, subordinating facial detail to abstract comic concepts.

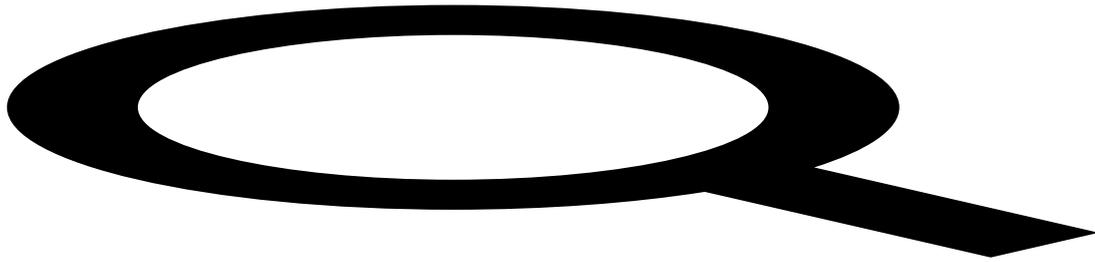
Scott McCloud, in his cartoon treatise *Understanding Comics*, argues that the image you have of yourself when you're conversing is very different from your image of the person you're conversing with. Your interlocutor may produce universal smiles and universal frowns, and they may help you to identify with him emotionally, but he also has a particular nose and particular skin and particular hair that continually remind you that he's an Other. The image you have of your own face, by contrast, is highly cartoonish. When you feel yourself smile, you imagine a cartoon of smiling, not the complete skin-and-and-hair package. It's precisely the simplicity and universality of cartoon faces, the absence of Otherly particulars, that invite us to love them as we love ourselves. The most widely loved (and profitable) faces in the modern world tend to be exceptionally basic and abstract cartoons: Mickey Mouse, the Simpsons, Tintin, and - simplest of all, barely more than a circle, two dots, and a horizontal line - Charlie Brown.



Left to right, Top to bottom: Siddhartha (Osamu Tezuka, Buddha), Tintin (Hergé), Homer Simpson (Matt Groening), Charlie Brown (Charles Monroe Schulz), Fido Dido (Joana Ferrone and Sue Rose), Dora the Explorer, Mickey Mouse (Walt Disney), Astroboy (Osamu Tezuka), Son Gôku (Akira Toriyama, Dragon Ball).

Pop-psychology already has a theory of what makes cartoon faces attractive, but it is completely different: it was spread by [Stephen Jay Gould's 1980 paper on Mickey Mouse](#). Gould, who never refrained from telling a just-so-story when he had a good one in store, proposes that the reason why we find Mickey Mouse attractive is due to our innate attraction for all things baby-like. Gould dwells on Konrad Lorenz's theory of neoteny. Neoteny is the set of facial characteristics peculiar to babies. The theory states that, in the course of evolution, our species (and many others besides) have evolved neotenic features for our youngsters, in order to tap this innate mechanism that attaches us to round faces, big eyes and soft features - what so many languages have a word for: the cute, the [kawaii](#), the mignon, the moutik. Gould spectacularly illustrated his point with the ontogeny of

Mickey Mouse, who evolved, in a somewhat spooky trajectory that reminds me of Mickael Jackson, from a real character with features and peculiarities to a big simplified balloon of niceness.



The evolution of Mickey Mouse, reproduced from Gould's paper.

To give these observations the cachet of quantitative science, I applied my best pair of dial calipers to three stages of the official phylogeny—the thin-nosed, ears forward figure of the early 1930s (stage 1), the latter-day jack of Mickey and the Beanstalk (1947, stage 2), and the modern mouse (stage 3). I measured three signs of Mickey's creeping juvenility: increasing eye size maximum height) as a percentage of head length (base of the nose to the top of rear ear); increasing head length as a percentage of body length; and increasing cranial vault size measured by rearward displacement of the front ear (base of the nose to top of front ear as a percentage of base of the nose to top of rear ear).

All three percentages increased steadily—eye size from 27 to 42 percent of head length; head length from 42.7 to 48.1 percent of body length; and nose to front ear from 71.7 to a whopping 95.6 percent of nose to rear ear. For comparison, I measured Mickey's young "nephew" Morty Mouse. In each case, Mickey has clearly been evolving toward youthful stages of his stock, although he still has a way to go for head length.

Stephen Jay Gould, *The Panda's Thumb*.

The theory of Franzen and McCloud seems to me much more interesting and testable: popular cartoon faces seem popular to us not because they are particularly neotenic – many of them are not – but because they are transparent, which makes it easier to project our mental states on them. This in turn may render them sympathetic, but not because of their natural cuteness. I have aligned below some very popular comics characters – some of them arguably kawaii, like Astroboy and Dora, some others not so much – it's difficult to be less neotenic than Flido Dido, that adolescent growth spurt made into an advertisement icon.

This is all anecdotal evidence, of course, but it would be quite easy to test – does the sympathy a character elicits vary in function of its neotenic features or in function of its simplicity? The experimental testing seems straightforward. I also bet we could find a similar dynamics in other artistic fields – I remember my professor of *Commedia Dell'Arte* explaining why the good guys have the simpler masks (or no mask at all), using arguments similar to Franzen's.

One might also argue that these simple faces owe their success to their simplicity itself, which makes them easier to process and to memorise, a crucial feature for a character who struggles for life in a market full of other interesting comics characters. That would be another story, but not, I suspect, an entirely different one. (Olivier Morin's website is [here](#).)