Married to the Web

An Interview with Natalie and Drew

Natalie and Drew are full-time cartoonists living in Columbus, Ohio. Among their various projects are the online comics Toothpaste for Dinner and Natalie Dee. Recently, they began collaborating on Married to the Sea, a daily webcomic mixing Victorian-era clip art and the couple's singularly smart, often outlandish sense of humor. In addition, they keep individual weblogs, Natalie writes an advice column, and Drew works on various musical projects.

—Mark Leahy

Sycamore: Drew, you've written recently about your dissatisfaction working with a publisher on the Toothpaste for Dinner book. Would you consider working with a publisher again, or are you strictly DIY from now on? What would you recommend to other web artist?

Drew: Well, my recommendation to other web artists is to do what's best for them. I certainly would have looked at my book income and sales (about 24,000 copies have been sold in retail stores in the past year) differently if I had 4000 hits a month instead of 40 million. Toothpaste For Dinner has approximately half a million "regular readers", meaning viewers who visit the site at least once a week over a three-month period.

My book deal ensured distribution through all the major book chains in the US, but at the same time, I received widespread complaints from my readers that they were not able to find copies of TFD in stores.


PANFLUTE FLOWCHART
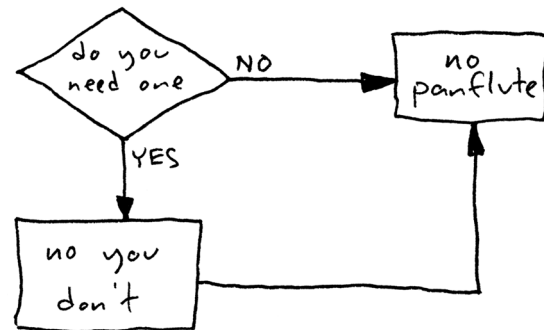
It looks good on paper until you visit every Barnes & Noble in your city and they don't have the book you wrote.

My readership is large enough that it makes sense to publish future print volumes of TFD and/or Married To The Sea. I've sold 3500 copies of TFD through my site in addition to the retail sales. The choice between DIY and DIFM ("do it for me") publishing on future books will have more to do with the promotion and intellectual-property rights than anything else.

Sycamore: You've both recently lifted a ban on posting pictures of yourselves online. Why did you decide to give up what seemed to be a fair amount of anonymity after all these years?
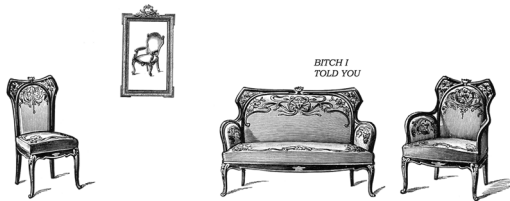
"Love Seat… in the case of one-year-old Padded Chair, you are… *Not the father.*"

Drew: I used to be a research chemist who would get fired if his bosses found his cartoons about working in a stifling office environment. Now I am a professional cartoonist who is not going to be fired from his job as a cartoonist for having a webcomic.

Natalie: In addition, I was never really working for recognition, and thought that the anonymity of my site made it easier for people to identify with my point of view. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, people tend to assume you are just like them. In the past couple years, however, both of our sites have rocketed in popularity. It seemed silly to veil myself in a cloak of secrecy, then try to publicize a college lecture or art show where I would obviously be speaking to people. I was also getting recognized when I was out and about by people who must just have internet clairvoyance or something. It just seemed dumb to keep hiding when I no longer had a reason to, and was making public appearances anyway.

Sycamore: Natalie, you wrote about your reader's reaction to posting pictures of yourself and how it differed from the reaction (or lack thereof) of Drew's. What happened, and what do you think that was about?

Natalie: I was really disappointed in how that turned out. I think it is obvious by my writing, and by information about myself that I had posted on my site in the past, that I am a pretty simple person. I'm not real glossy, or flossy, or whatever. Drew took a picture of me

that looked nothing like how I usually look. It was set up, in fact, to be as absurd as possible. The picture was funny, and I decided I would post it on my blog to let everyone else in on the joke. I didn't even preface it by saying it was the first picture of me on the internet, or anything like that. I just snuck it in at the end of a blog post.

I was immediately hit my hundreds of e-mails. Hundreds. People seemed to be 50-50 split between being mad at me, and being extremely offensive and nasty. I am a married woman, and people know this, but they still would write disgusting, nasty things to me. I won't go into specifics, but I will say that people immediately went from treating me like a person who makes interesting content to treating me like I was running a porn site.

I think it is a double standard that Drew was able to post pictures of himself shirtless, and receive no response. I would have thought that providing good, funny content daily for years and years would have endeared me to my fans, but they got a glimpse of skin and all bets were off. It was like a feeding frenzy.

Sycamore: Do you wish that you had remained anonymous and kept your image off the blog, or do you feel emboldened by the response?

Natalie: I don't really make it a practice to regret anything I do, so no. It is impossible to gauge how people are going to react to something, and I can't move through my career feeling bad about people who don't understand. I have never run my life based off what other people think, or have tried to curry favor based on what I think they want.

Sycamore: Why did you decide to launch Married to the Sea, and why as a collaborative effort?

Drew: We were both making unbelievably funny comics out of Victorian lithographs we scanned in out of old books. So we made

up a list of names for the comic, picked one, registered the domain name, and there it is.

Most new webcomics today start with a line of t-shirts and try to figure out the comic as they go. As you can imagine, this doesn't bode well for their comic, or their witty t-shirt business. I say you should make up about a hundred comics before you start your site. If you can't imagine where you would ever get the ideas for a hundred comics, don't start a webcomic.

Is the mystery object...
a pilgrim?

God damn it.
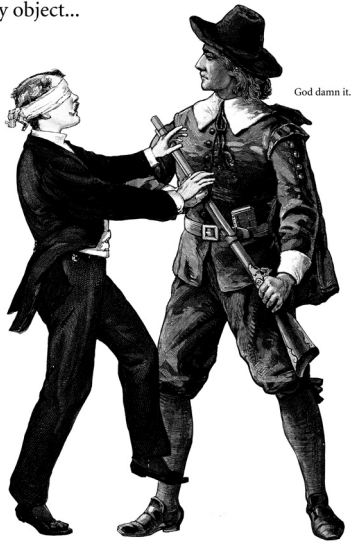
Sycamore: How do the two of you collaborate on MTTS? Do you work separately, and if so, do you think there is any difference between a Drew MMTS comic and a Natalie?

Natalie: We don't really collaborate. We both make comics using the same stock of images, and that is it. We don't write jokes together, or help the other out in the process of making their comic. I am sure you could tell the difference between the ones I have done and the ones Drew did. Hint: Drew does a lot more of them than I do.

Sycamore: Who came up with the "Shakespeare got to get paid, son" comic for MTTS, and did you feel the hand of God moving through you at the time?

Drew: The comics aren't individually credited, but I'm glad you like it.

Sycamore: In addition to updating your comics every day, even on weekends, you've both been keeping regularly updated web logs. What do your blogs add to your reader's experience?

Natalie: Not everything I do translates well to my comic style. Writing a blog just lets me make more involved jokes, or write seriously about something, or make jokes that might not fit into my comics otherwise. I do it for my own edification, really. I like to write, and if people like to read what I write, they are more than free to. I see it as something

completely separate from what is happening on the front page of my site. If anything, I think it just adds personality to my site, since a lot of my comics are seemingly non-sensical to some people. It gives people reason to believe I might be sentient.

Drew: The blog is the context for the rest of the site. Being an anonymous artist on the internet and pumping out huge numbers of comics leads directly to people thinking you are subnormal. The blog is a separate aesthetic outlet for me, and also serves to remind people that I am not Rain Man.

Practically speaking, the blog adds more text, and buttons.

Sycamore: When did you realize that you could work on your sites full time?

Drew: Everyone over-dramatizes this thing where we quit our jobs, but it's not that big a deal. I'm an engineer by trade, and I keep track of everything in my life using spreadsheets. When I figured out that I could quit my job as a research chemist and make an (admittedly spare at the time) living as a webcomic artist, I did it. The next day, as a matter of fact.

Webcomics are not for pussies. You have to wake your own self up in the morning and

*gettin real inopportune like a bowl of saskatoon but you know i'm where it's at like MEDICINE HAT*

my theoretical future rap career includes a song where i give shout-outs to canadian cities whose names i like

work all day. You may have to do hours of manual labor by yourself. You have to make decisions, by yourself, based on data that you have collected. Webcomics is engineering, with a lower cancer rate. (Engineering is not for pussies, either, by the way.)

Natalie: I hated my job, and had some savings, so I decided to quit for a few months. Before I knew it, though, the extra time I invested in my site once I quit my job paid off in spades, and I never had to look for another job like I was planning. It wasn't a big internal struggle. Things just took off on their own at a very convenient time.

Sycamore: Have either of you considered using your expertise to help younger artists and writers? You both share a lot of insight in your web logs, so I guess I'm asking about

becoming involved with other artists, help them promote themselves, that sort of thing.

their first album was better! their first album was better!
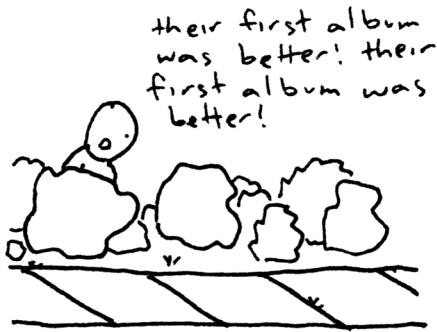
to hunt the wild hipster, one must replicate its mating call exactly

Drew: Any advice beyond "keep doing what you like to do and do it every day until you die or find a place in society for your work" is not really useful. There is nothing I could say to someone to imbue them with the values of determination and hard work.

Natalie: I think a younger comic could benefit from finding their own way like I did, and hone their craft with blinders on, rather than relying on a mentor. Nobody ever told me what to do, I just did what felt right for me. Nobody ever helped me with promotion, or

told me how to be an independent artist, or how to run a business. I just worked hard on making something I liked, and handled everything else with common sense.

There is so much involved in what we do, that I couldn't condense it to spoon-feed to the younger generation in a million years. A lot of this expertise is in running my own business and knowing my own audience, anyway, so other artists might not even find what I would have to say useful. Most e-mails I get for people hoping to start their own site start off with the question "How did you set up your webstore?" or "Where do you get shirts printed?" People aren't interested in starting for the art, or they would approach me with art. They see that most webcomics have merchandise, and think that means that webcomics rake it in. That is not the case, you have to really be on top of your game in order to make any money, and that takes a long time. If you want to just make shirts, make up a couple slogans on Cafe Press and sell them there, because you are going to lose money if you think that you are going to throw up a webstore and get rich off shirts when you don't have the content to back it up.

Webcomics were on the fringe, but their recent popularity has resulted in a lot of people getting into it for the wrong reasons.

You know that public perception of what we do is skewed when we get requests from business magazines for interviews. We are as popular as we are, and make as much as we do, because we work extremely hard, but people see it as a quick way to make a buck. If that is how you are looking at it, you will be very disappointed.

Sycamore: A lot of webcomics artists seem to be doing a brisk business selling t-shirts. John Allison of Scary Go Round and Jeff Rowling of Overcompensating have both recently expressed concern over the continued prosperity of their merchandising lines. Do you have any anxiety about the future of the witty t-shirt business?

"But where were you, Lord, when I paid for two bags of chips, yet only received one from the vending machine?"

"It was then, my beloved child, that I carried your chips. Here they are."

Drew: I don't really run a witty t-shirt business, so I can't speak for anyone else. I will, however, tell you that our own merchandise sales have slowly increased over the past five years, along with our traffic, and that I haven't seen any downturns in sales or traffic to my site apart from standard seasonal variances.

Natalie: Judging by projects we have in the pipes, and our own recordkeeping, we should be seeing a good amount of growth in the next couple years.

Like Drew said, we're not in the "witty t-shirt business," so even if there was some catastrophe, and people stopped buying shirts, I am sure we would be able to make a living by doing freelance projects or other outside gigs. My comics are not a vehicle for my t-shirts. I made comics for a long time before I started selling shirts. Shirts are not my passion and driving force. If you are making comics to make shirts, then the quality of your comics is going to suffer.