

Comments on Dilbert's History of PowerPoint

Robert Gaskins

Scott Adams: "My guess is that people who work long hours get a sort of charge every time they complete a discrete task. People who don't get that charge, on average, probably find jobs where they can work fewer hours.

"I recall my corporate days, where I would spend eight hours refining a Powerpoint [*sic*] presentation that, in all likelihood, would have no impact on the business. I always felt a charge of pleasure when it was done. Each time I reviewed the beauty and majesty of my graphs and bullet points, I would get a new little surge."

Scott Adams,

http://dilbertblog.typepad.com/the_dilbert_blog/2007/12/work-pleasure.html

The archives of Scott Adams' Dilbert strips (<http://www.dilbert.com/>) begin in 1989, with over 8,000 strips catalogued since then and another added every day. In the popular mind Dilbert has become prominently associated with skeptical commentary about presentations, and the strip has given rise to several oft-repeated catch-phrases about PowerPoint. It is thus fairly surprising to discover that only about 100 strips out of the 8,000-plus deal with presentations, about 5 strips per year (but slightly more common in later years). Of these, 37 strips mention PowerPoint by name, the earliest in 1996. (All data through calendar 2011.)

The portrayal of presentations in Dilbert presumably are intended by Adams to be recognized by a wide audience as "realistic," so the range of presentation technology that appears is likely to be characteristic of the period when a strip appeared. The early depiction of the usage of overhead projectors and transparencies, and of 35mm slides, is mostly very accurate and consistent with the analyses used to guide PowerPoint's development. In recent years, direct video projection of PowerPoint from computers has become the most common format, in real life and in Dilbert. The earliest example of this in Dilbert was on 30 April 2000, more than eight years after I'd given the first public demonstration of PowerPoint 3.0 in Paris. It took a long time for equipment to support direct video presentations to be put in place in common meeting rooms, and this evidence for dating is very helpful.

The first mention of the word "PowerPoint" was on 28 June 1996, more than nine years after the first version of PowerPoint had been shipped, more than six years after the first version for Windows. It was 10 February 2004, more than seventeen years, before the word PowerPoint appears without quotation marks! This is consistent with other evidence, such as the frequency of the word "PowerPoint" in

books or in news articles. It took ten to fifteen years for PowerPoint to become an everyday topic of popular discourse.

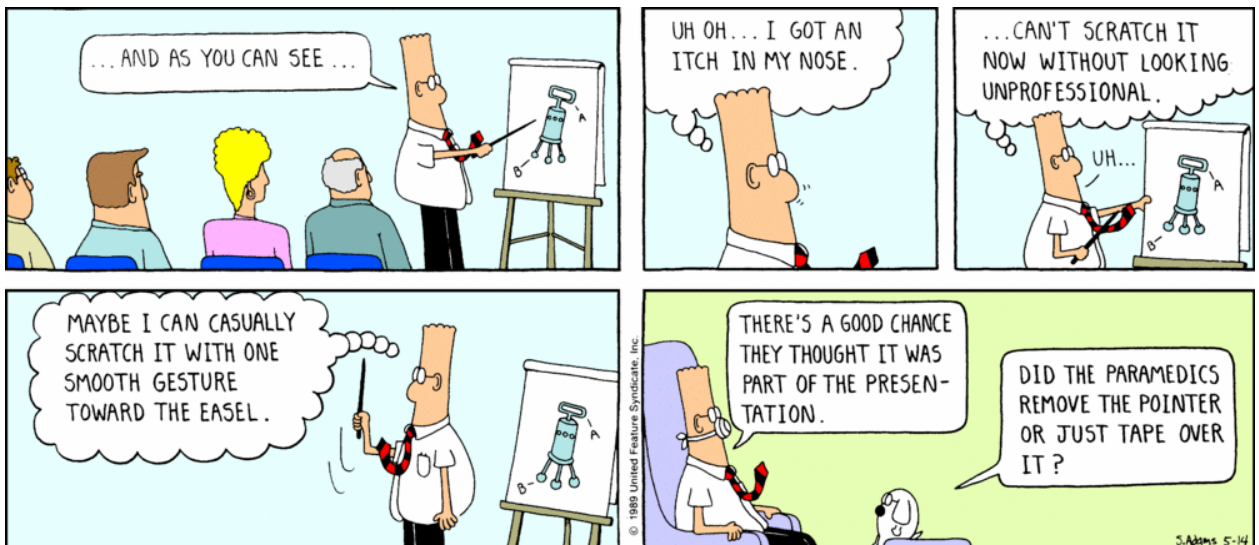
1989-April-20

The Dilbert archive starts on 16 April 1989. Just four days later, coincidentally on the second anniversary of the first customer shipment of PowerPoint 1.0, there is a strip about making a presentation. It contains nothing about visuals or computers, but it is a reminder that poor presentations could be made even in the good old days.



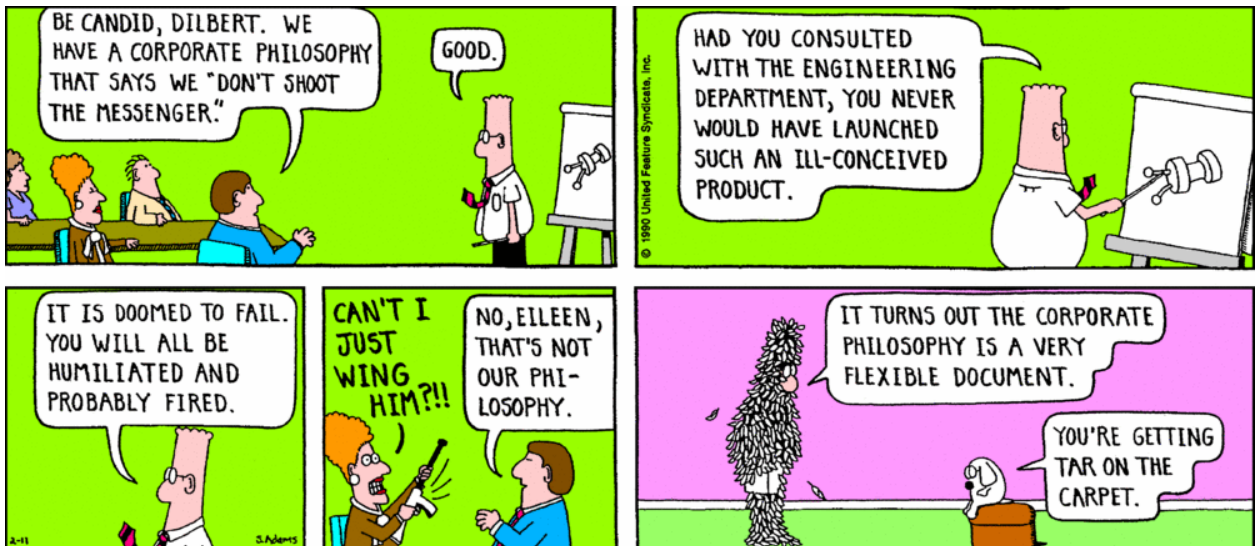
1989-May-14

The earliest presentation shown in the archive of Dilbert strips has Dilbert using a flip chart. This was nothing but a large pad of paper bound at the top, on which “slides” could be drawn in advance, and when needed flipped to blank sheets at the back to use like a whiteboard (but non-erasable, so frequently transcribed later for meeting participants).



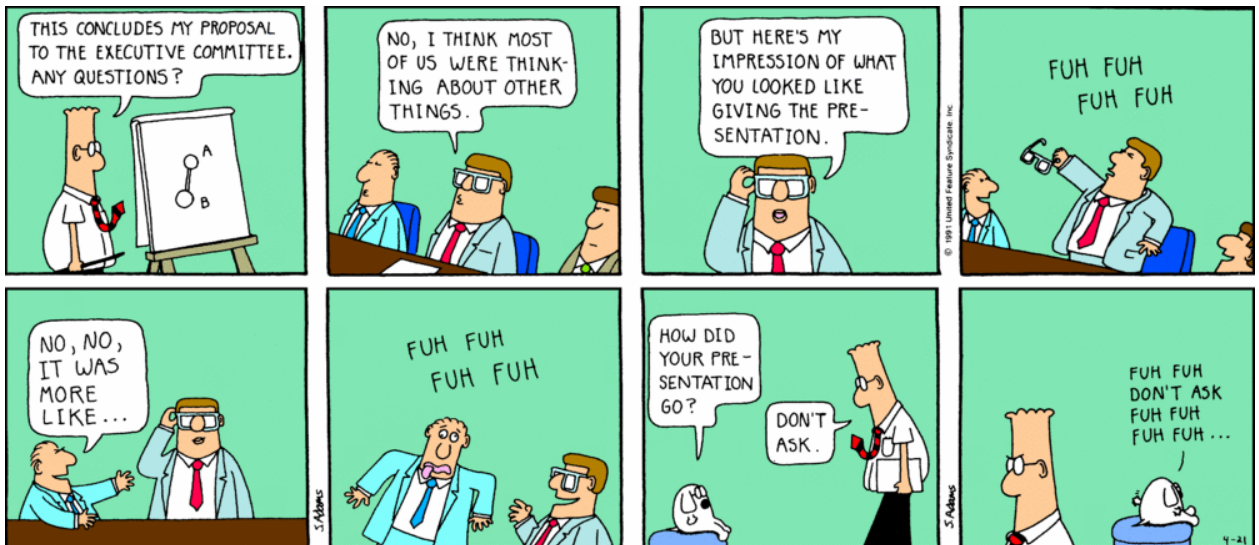
1990-February-11

About a year later, still the flip chart is the presentation visual of choice.



1991-April-21

Four years after PowerPoint's first shipment, and one year after PowerPoint appeared on Windows, computers still played no part in Dilbert's presentations, still using flip charts.



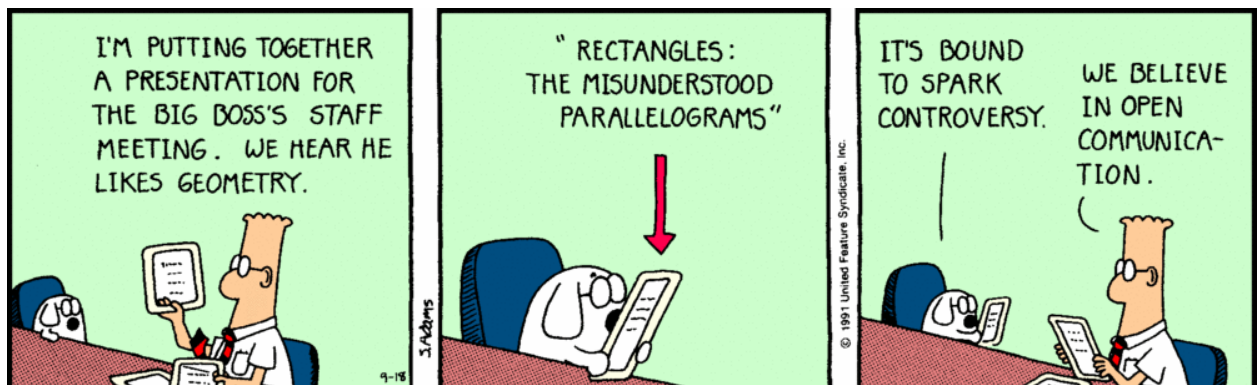
1991-September-17

Six months later, for the first time Dilbert appears to use a computer in preparing for a presentation. There's no indication what program he is using.



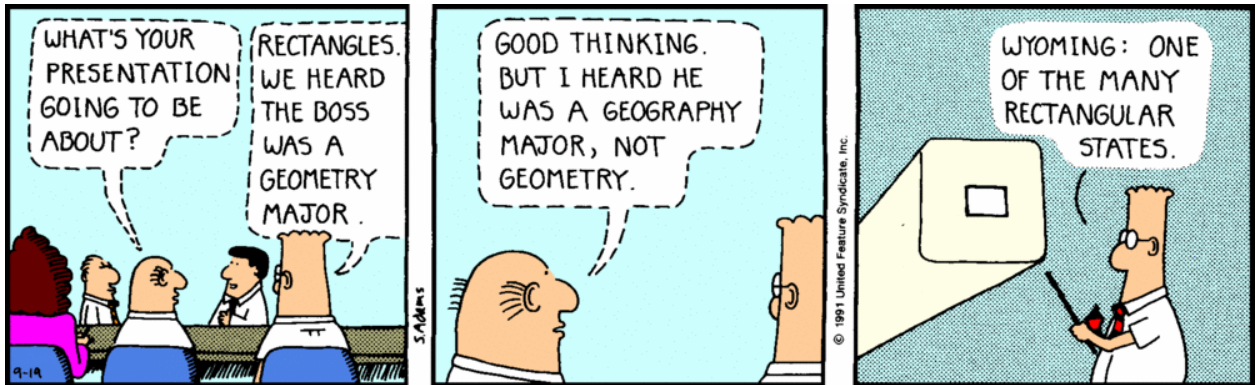
1991-September-18

(The next day). Dilbert examines overhead transparencies mounted in cardboard frames; the implication is that these mounted transparencies are the result of yesterday's computer work. The cardboard mounts invariably had rounded corners, and if an overhead had a printed border it was usually rounded at the corners to echo the mount. PowerPoint 1.0 made its default a rounded-corner border to provide this same cue. The mounts made it easier to change transparencies when standing at the projector by preventing their sticking together, and protected them for re-use (when they were harder to make manually). PowerPoint 1.0 transparencies were at first often mounted in those same cardboard frames, but decreasingly as years went on.



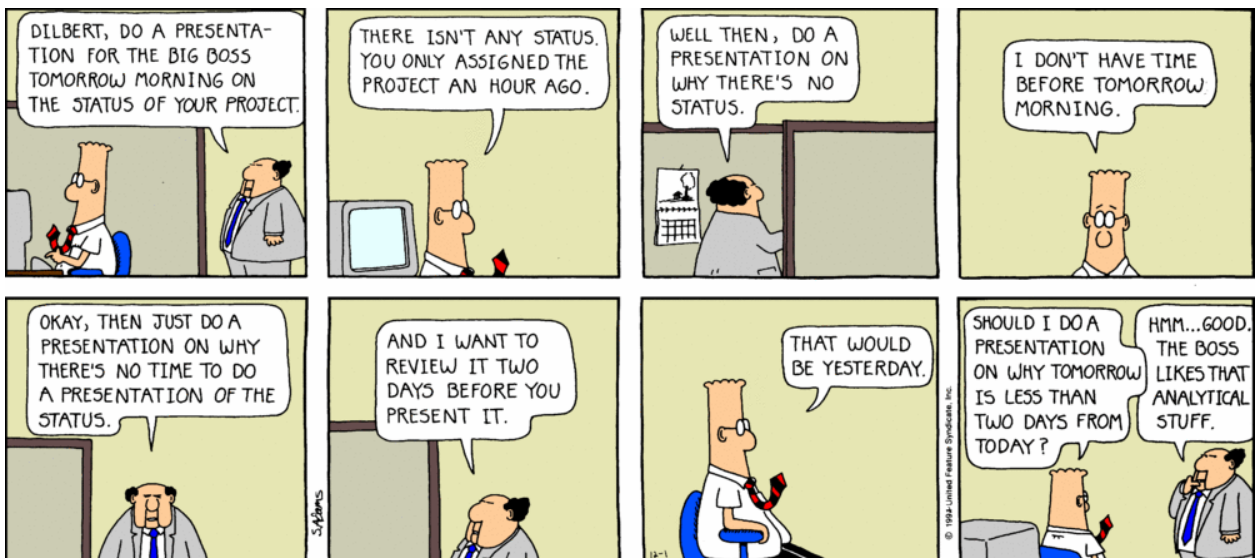
1991-September-19

(The next day again). Dilbert is projecting (projector not shown) an image with the rounded corners of the lighted areas caused by the shape of the inner edge of the cardboard mounts. The “stage” (lighted platform) of an overhead projector was usually square, and transparencies and their mounts were sometimes made square to match—as seen here. After overheads were mostly made on photocopiers (even prior to PowerPoint), mounts became available to match the shape of the transparencies (US Letter or A4) that could go through the copier, but overhead projectors remained square to accommodate either portrait or landscape transparencies.



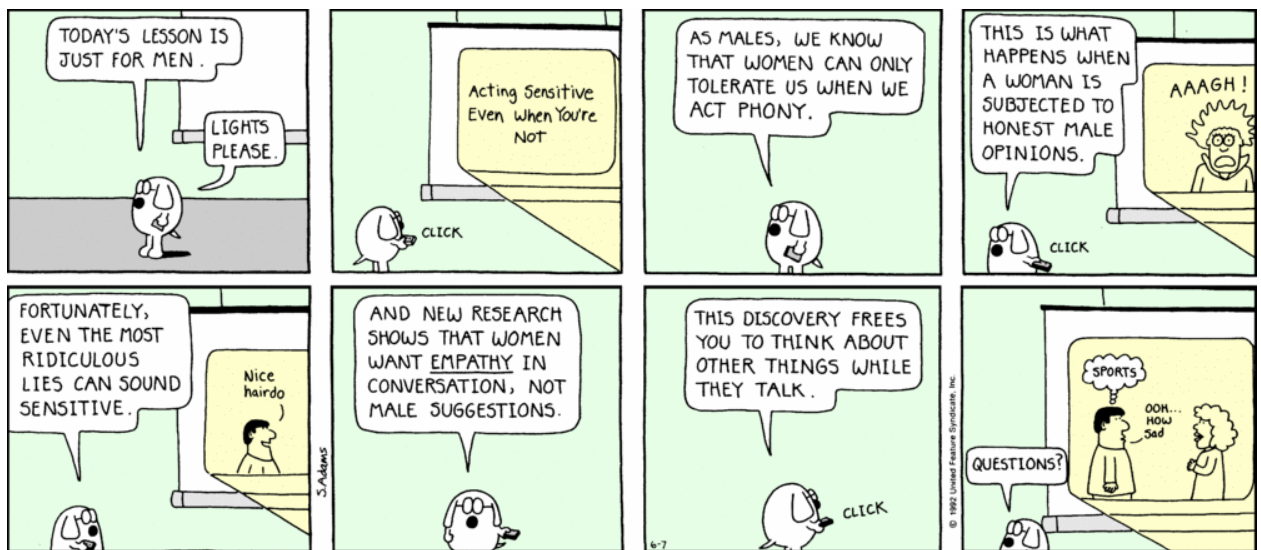
1991-December-01

Again Dilbert is using a computer when asked to “do a presentation.”



1992-June-07

The first sighting of 35mm slides in the Dilbert strip. Dogbert asks for “Lights, please,” reflecting the fact that 35mm presentations were made in darkened rooms (overheads were projected with room lights on, for discussion during meetings). The darkening of the room is indicated not only by that stage direction, but also by the fact that the projector beam is visible in the drawing. Dogbert also has a “clicker” remote control for the projector—common on 35mm slide projectors, but impossible for overhead projectors. The aspect ratio of the projected images is not square, as for the overheads, but approximately correct for 35mm slides (2:3). The inside edges of cardboard mounts for 35mm slides were very slightly rounded. Note also that a “formal” retractable screen is used.



1994-November-01

The first view of an overhead projector in the Dilbert strip. Unlike Dogbert's 35mm projector at the back of the room, requiring a remote control, the boss's overhead projector is at the front of the room where he can manually lay overhead transparencies onto its stage. The light source ("bulb") is in the big box below the stage; the small frame supported on a stalk holds only a mirror at 45 degrees to reflect the image from the stage onto the screen—or, as apparently in this case, the wall, without benefit of the retractable screen used for the 35mm slides. A cautious presenter avoided looking into the mirror.



1995-February-12

A standard term for overhead transparencies was “viewgraphs” or “vugraphs” or “vugraphs” as used in this Dilbert strip. The viewgraphs here are shown mounted in their cardboard frames, preserving them so “we use last year’s viewgraph.”



1995-November-05

The first mention of color overhead transparencies in the Dilbert strip. But this does not mean that color photocopiers capable of making transparencies have become common, because “Those are color transparencies. It would take hours and cost hundreds of dollars to reprint them.” Genographics produced such color transparencies in 8” x 10” and “professional” 7” x 9” sizes by conventional photography, and they were indeed very expensive. Color overheads were very uncommon, since most occasions that warranted the cost of color were formal enough to require 35mm slides in a darkened room; something like a board meeting of a F500 company might use them. (PowerPoint 1.0 provided an easy way to put the current date uniformly on each page of a presentation.)



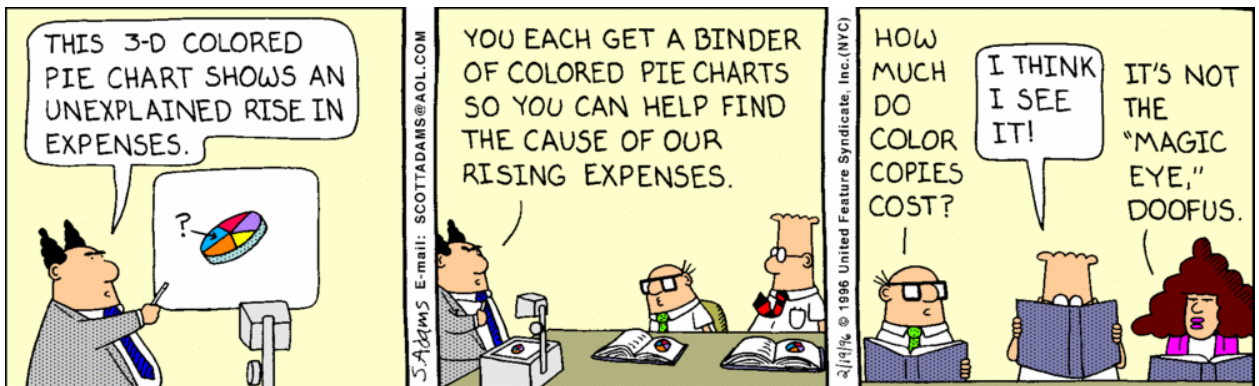
1995-November-11

Incomprehensible “spaghetti diagrams” have been blamed on the ease of complex drawing in PowerPoint, and it’s probably true that a diagram like this would only be made with a computer. The motivation of the presenter, preferring the fun of making complex slides over effective communication, is hardly unknown.



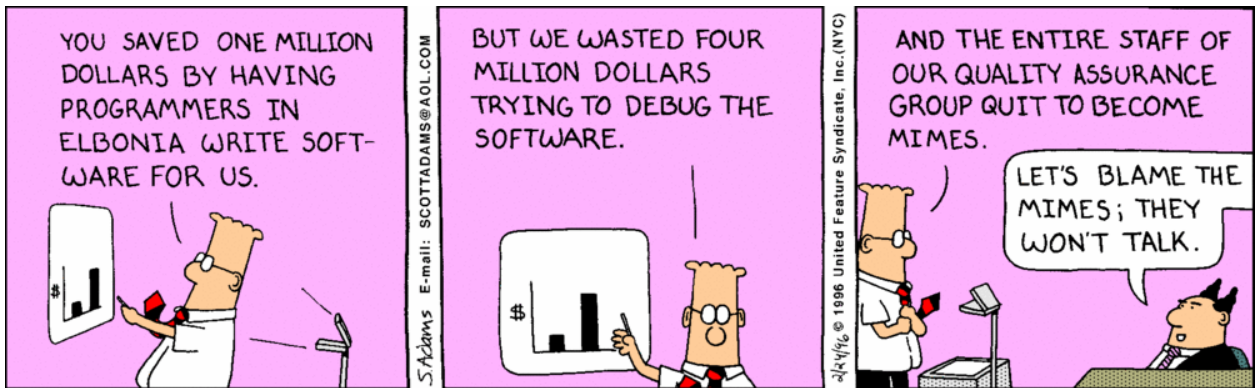
1996-February-19

Not long after the color overhead transparencies which “cost hundreds of dollars,” were mentioned, we have our first real view of a color overhead—again projected on a wall (rather than a screen) in a lighted room. This Dilbert strip also features colored hard-copy handouts, reflecting that color copiers capable of printing on paper had become more common—though still expensive. The “3-D colored pie chart” was probably made on a computer of some kind, since that’s the kind of thing computers do, useful or not.



1996-February-24

A more typical chart, 2-D rather than 3-D, and in black-and-white rather than color.



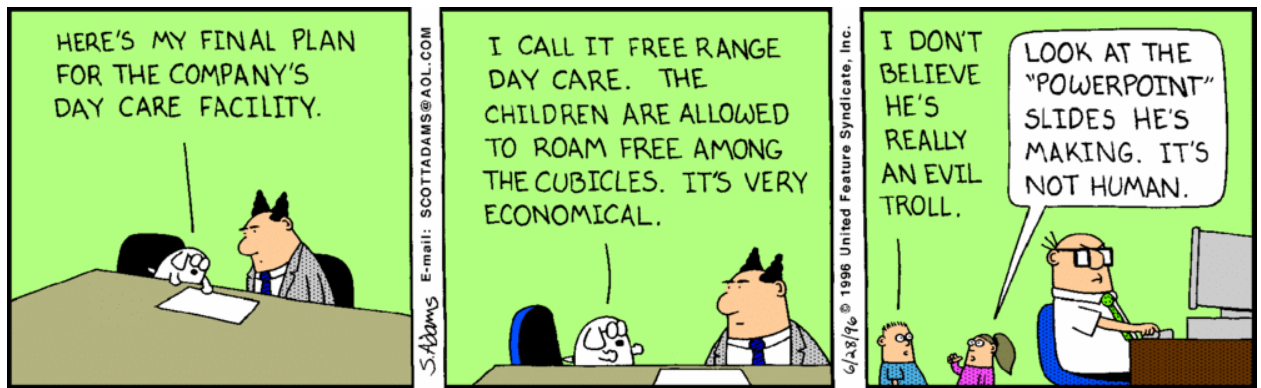
1996-March-21

If “everyone [is] to prepare a presentation for the executive review board,” then doing so must have become straightforward enough to be a general skill, not just the province of the AudioVisual department.



1996-June-28 (“PowerPoint”)

Here we have the first mention of PowerPoint by name in the Dilbert strips. PowerPoint is used in quotation marks, and the all-caps style of Dilbert speech balloons means that we can't tell whether the internal capital letter is present. The context is sitting at a desk with a computer, preparing (not presenting). This is more than 9 years after PowerPoint's first customer ship date; apparently it took that long before Scott Adams believed the name would be generally recognizable. All the PowerPoint people liked this recognition so much that this strip mentioning PowerPoint, unique at the time, was reproduced in the program for the GBU tenth anniversary reunion (April 1997). [Ref link: <http://www.robertgaskins.com/powerpoint-history/documents/belleville-peterson-somogyi-gbu-10-year-reunion-1997-apr.pdf>]



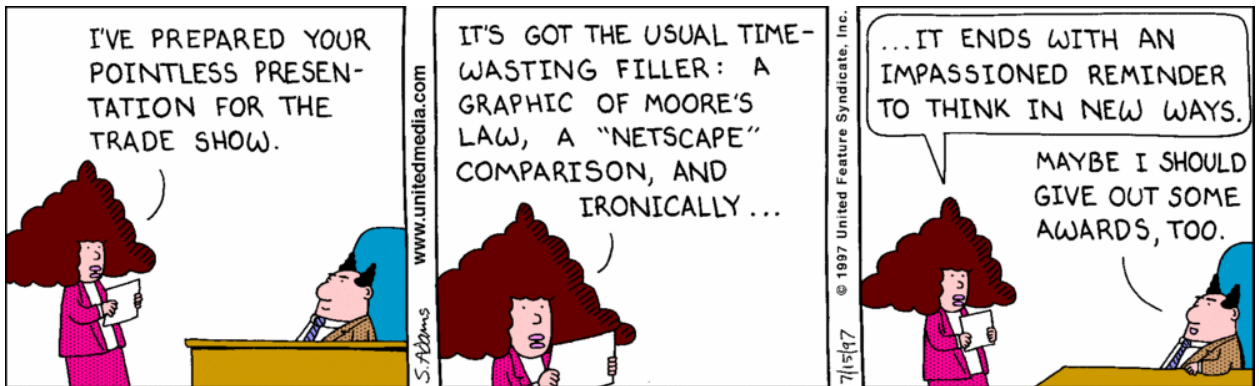
1997-January-23

The presentation advice parodied in this strip has actually been recommended seriously by more than one presentation guru.



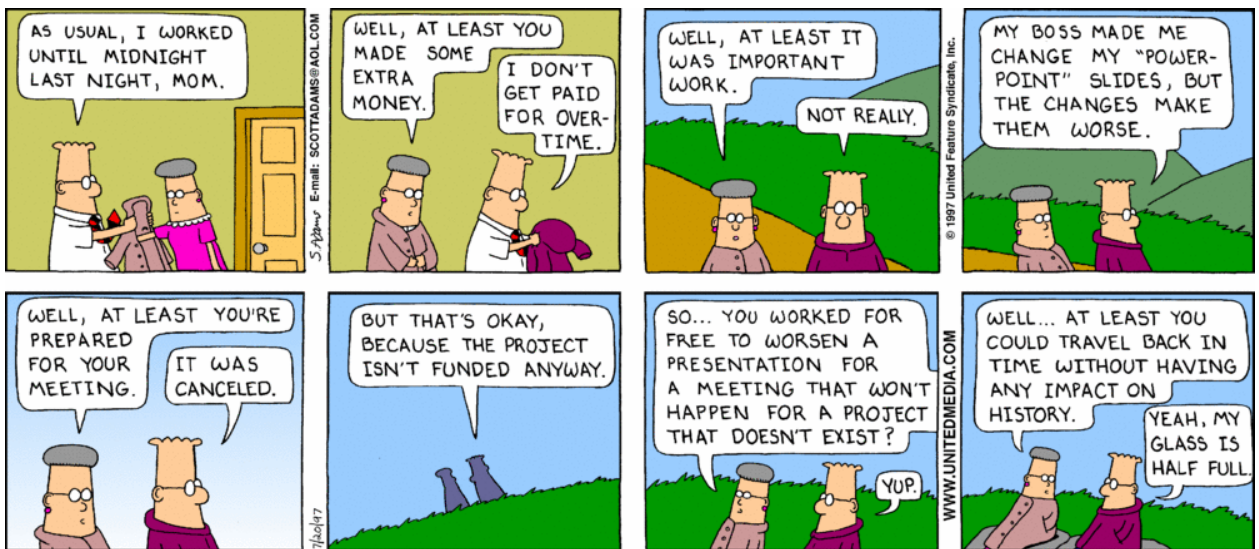
1997-July-15

This strip presents a new complaint, that presentations have too much of “the usual time-wasting filler.” Complaints in this genre are usually connected to the idea that computer-prepared presentations have made it too easy to pick up and repeat material only distantly relevant, without actually considering the communication goal of the presentation.



1997-July-20 (“PowerPoint”)

Here again a new sort of complaint, that computers have made it too easy for bosses to demand last-minute changes in presentations, changes which would before have been impossible (so that better advance planning and earlier review were mandatory). “PowerPoint” is again mentioned by name, for the second time, still in quotation marks.



1997-December-13

Presentations always seem to get done at the latest possible moment. One of the most appreciated features of PowerPoint has always been last-minute tweaks, and one of the forces pushing video replacement of overheads and 35mm slides was the ability to cut out the step of producing physical slides. Bill Gates used to change his PowerPoint presentations while waiting backstage to go on at a multi-thousand person event, much to the dismay of his PR handlers.

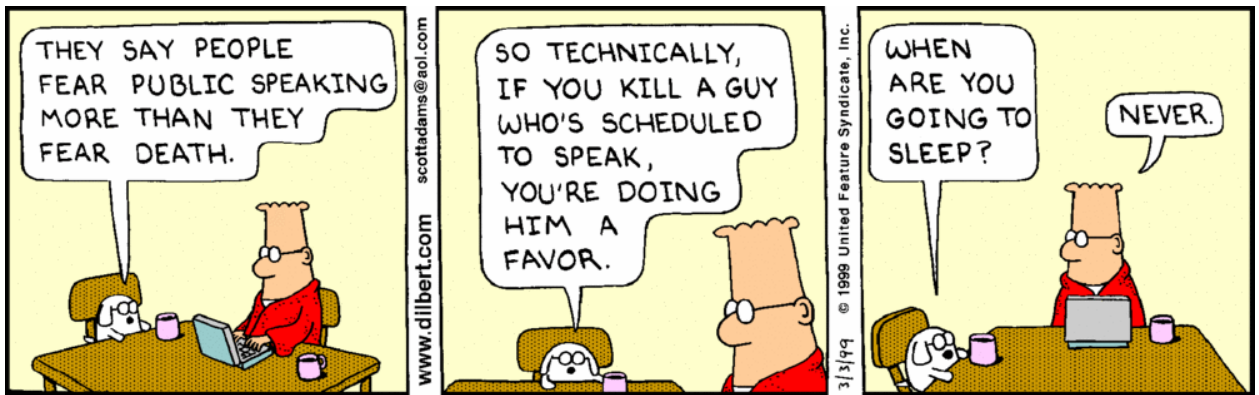


1999-March-02

Dilbert is still using a CRT monitor.



1999-March-03



1999-March-04

Dilbert is still using an overhead projector, but now with flexible transparencies, NOT in cardboard mounts. This became increasingly common as transparencies became easier to make, less often re-used, and less important to protect. Simply putting sheets of paper between transparencies made them easy enough to handle. For more important occasions, with outsiders, cardboard mounts continued to be seen.



1999-March-05

Overhead, square format, projected on a wall or board. The diagram is the typical “boxes and lines” style of drawing for which PowerPoint 1.0 was optimized.



1999-May-04

A bit surprising that as early as 1999 the rudeness of a boss talking on a cellphone during a presentation is documented. Fifteen years earlier I'd experienced having higher-ups read magazines while I was presenting billion-dollar strategies which I'd spent six months away from home working on. These days it would be laptops and tablets.



1999-July-26 (“PowerPoint”)

The third use of the name "PowerPoint," still in quotes, and still in context of being in a cubicle, “creating slides” (not presenting).



1999-August-28

This is the first Dilbert strip mentioning a "laser pointer" in a presentation with overheads, no connection with type of projector. There was a vogue for fancy laser pointers, some combined with a remote that could control a PowerPoint presentation from a computer (via a receiver that plugged into the keyboard connection and injected keyboard commands).



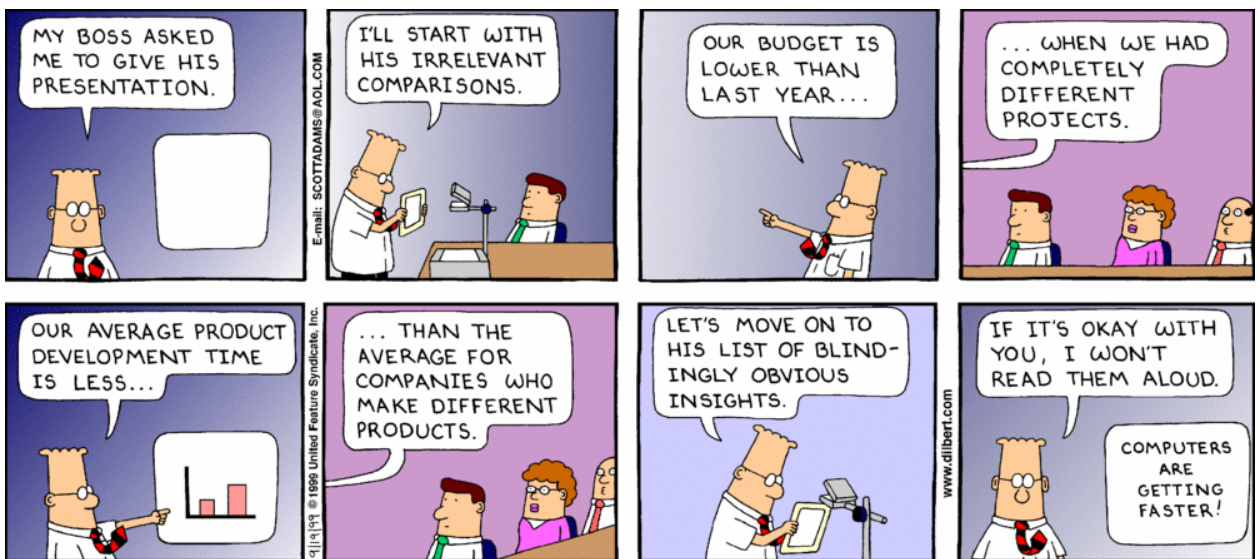
1999-September-07

This strip is a bit puzzling. The first panel implies a darkened room, though overheads are being used and projected on a wall, perhaps because the overhead transparencies are expensive colored ones in cardboard mounts, and the closely-related colors can be better distinguished with less ambient light.



1999-September-19

Perhaps the earliest version of the complaint about presenters reading the content printed on the slides. Again, here, colored overheads in cardboard mounts, wall projection.



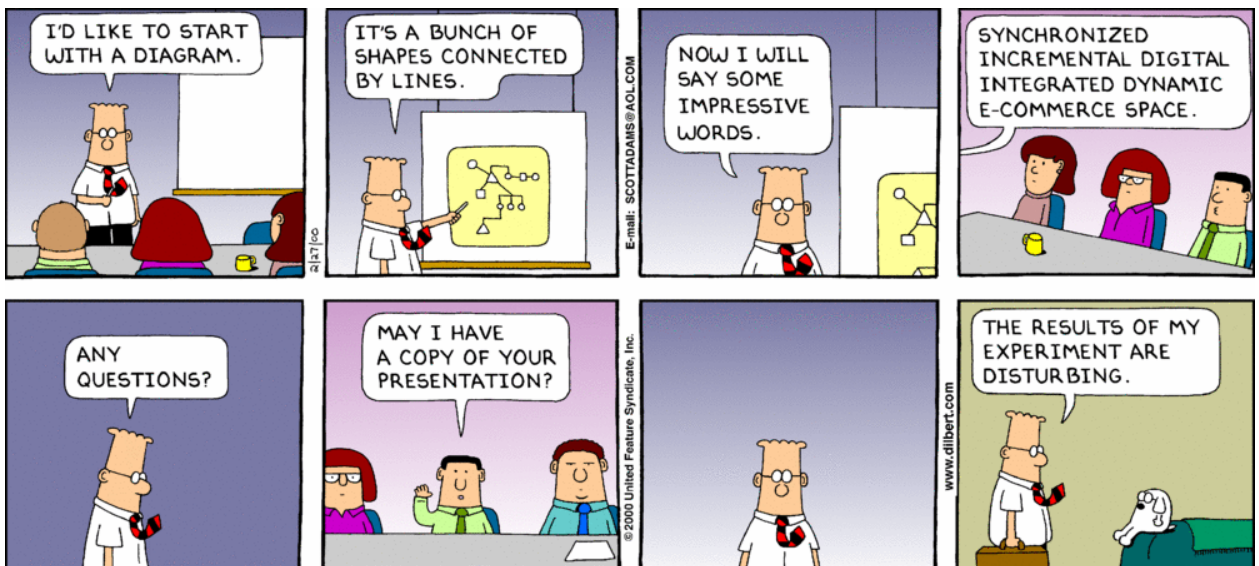
1999-December-27

One of Adams' frequent observations is that people confuse a presentation with actually doing work. This is perhaps the earliest formulation, although much better examples are to come later.



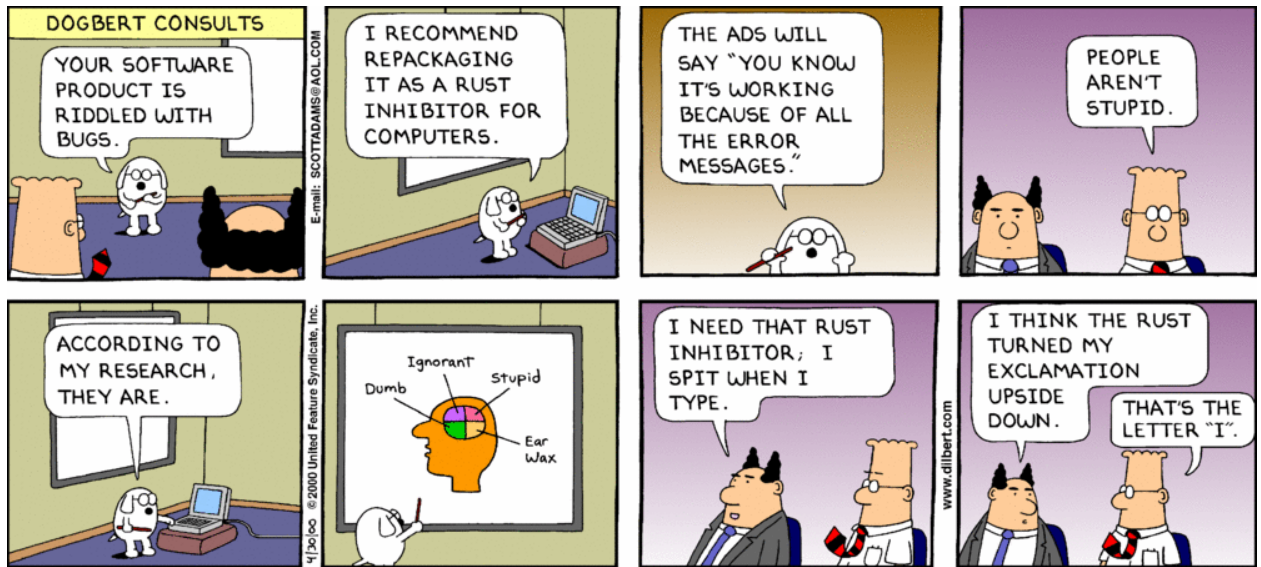
2000-February-27

Dilbert's "bunch of shapes connected by lines" is precisely the characterization we made of common diagrams in the sample corpus of manual presentations that was examined and tallied for PowerPoint 1.0. Here we have overheads, but projected on a screen.



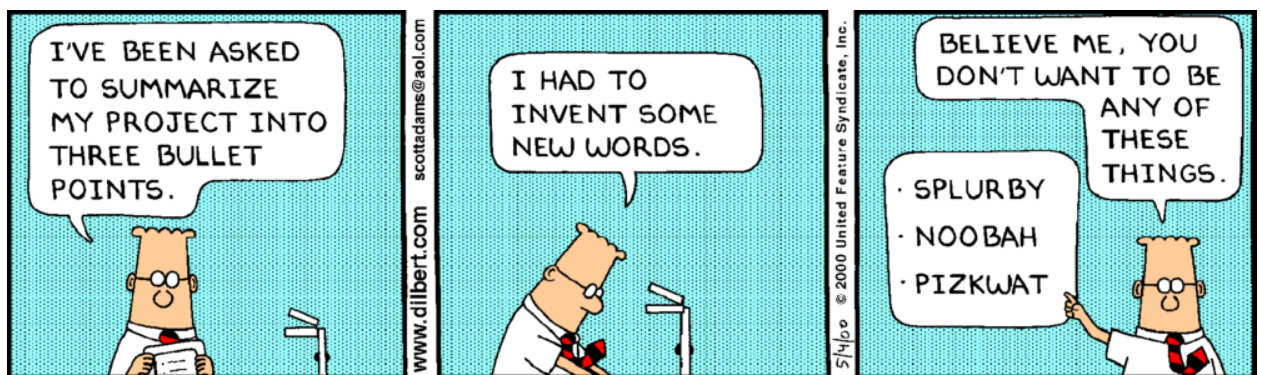
2000-April-30

A big breakthrough comes in early 2000: we have the very first image of direct video projection from a computer in the conference room. Dogbert is presenting—perhaps as a consultant, which explains the fancy setup? The computer may be a bulky early laptop, or may be intended to represent a compact desktop with CRT. This was just about eight years after I'd made such a presentation for the first time in public, in Paris, using PowerPoint 3.0 and Windows 3.1. Good screens like this one were often used, because early video projectors were so dim and a reflective screen helped. Color came for free.

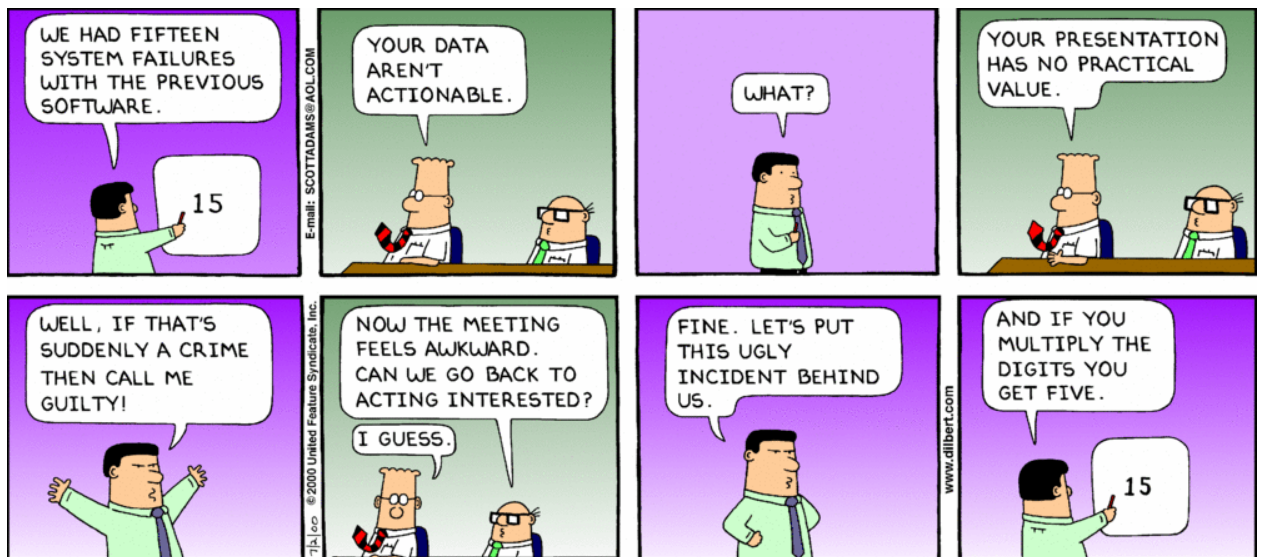


2000-May-04

Back to conventional overhead transparencies and bullet points, in black and white.



2000-July-02



2000-August-16 (“PowerPoint”)

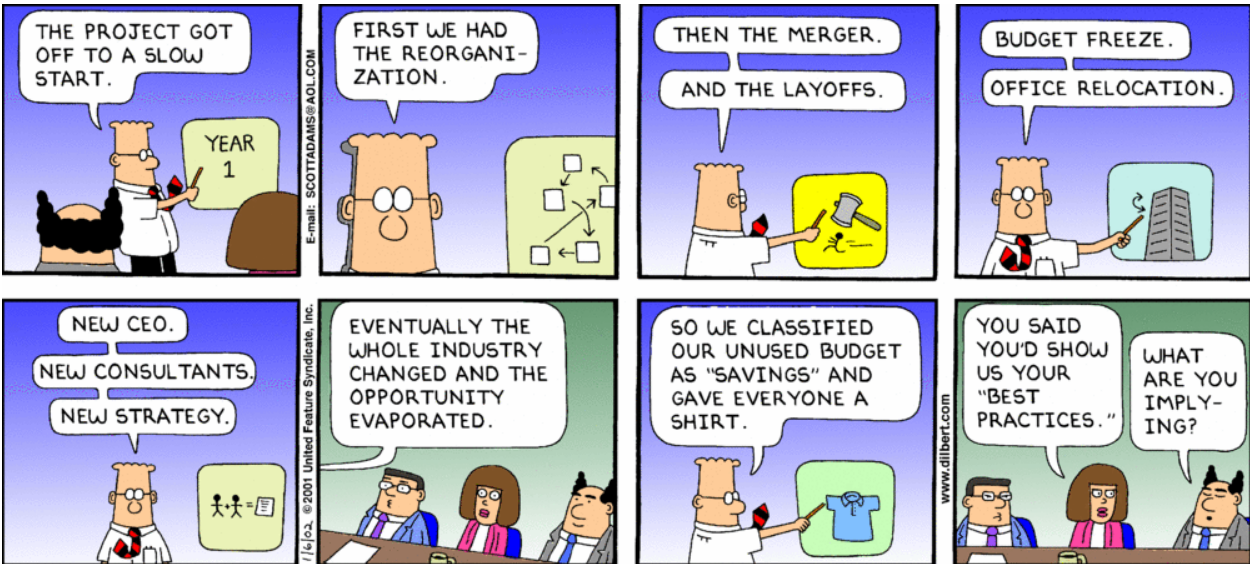
The fourth mention of PowerPoint, still in quotation marks after thirteen years. Dilbert’s being at slide 397 implies that it had become all too easy to make presentations overly long. The diagnosis of “PowerPoint poisoning” became briefly popular. (This strip also seems to be a source of the common phrase “death by PowerPoint,” which I don’t find in the Dilbert canon; the phrase becomes common in Google elsewhere during the final months of the year 2000, just after this strip appeared.)



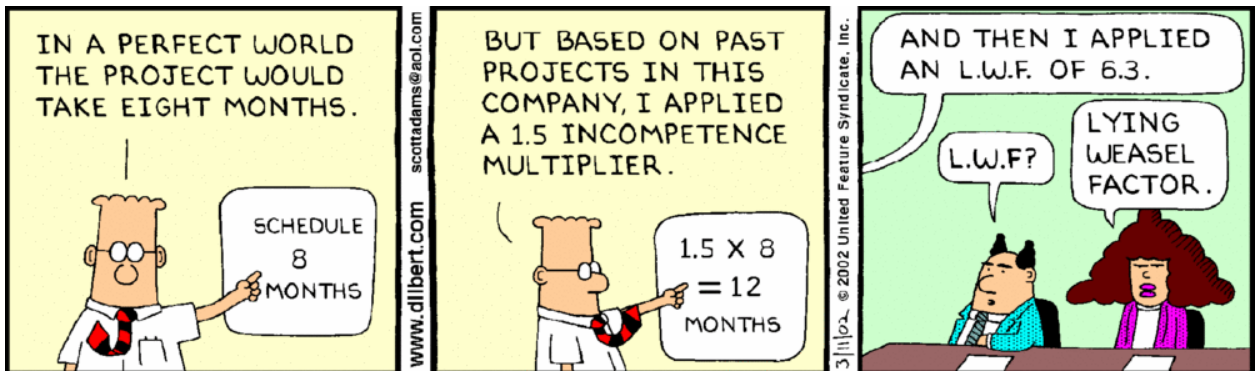
2001-June-16



2002-January-06



2002-March-11



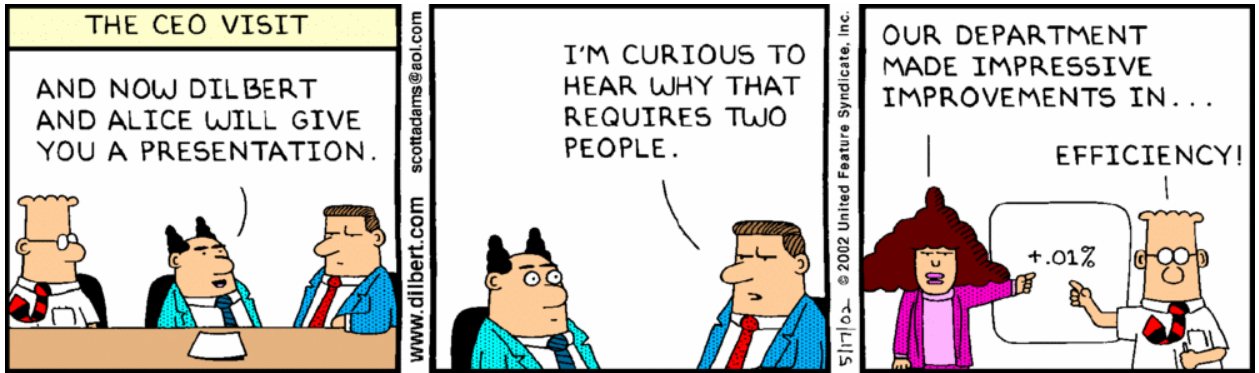
2002-May-15 (“PowerPoint”)

The 5th mention of "PowerPoint" slides, still in quotes. Again the context is working at computer in a cubicle, the stage of preparing not presenting. (Now, however, Alice is using a flat-panel monitor.)



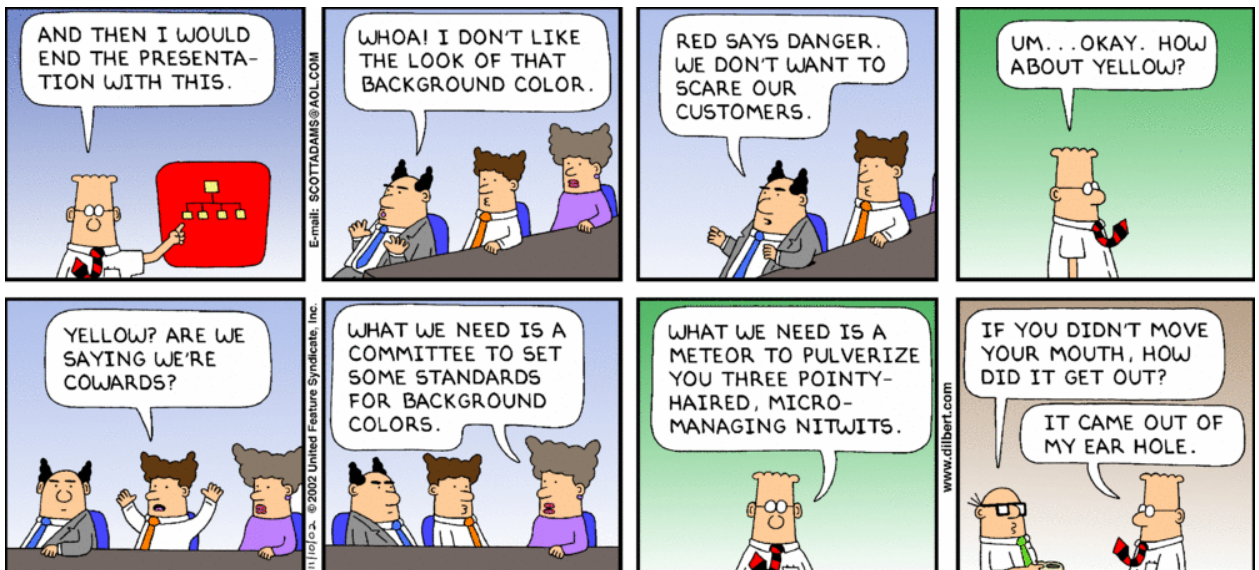
2002-May-17

Two days later, the presumed product of the request for a presentation. The square projected image with rounded corners suggests conventional overheads.



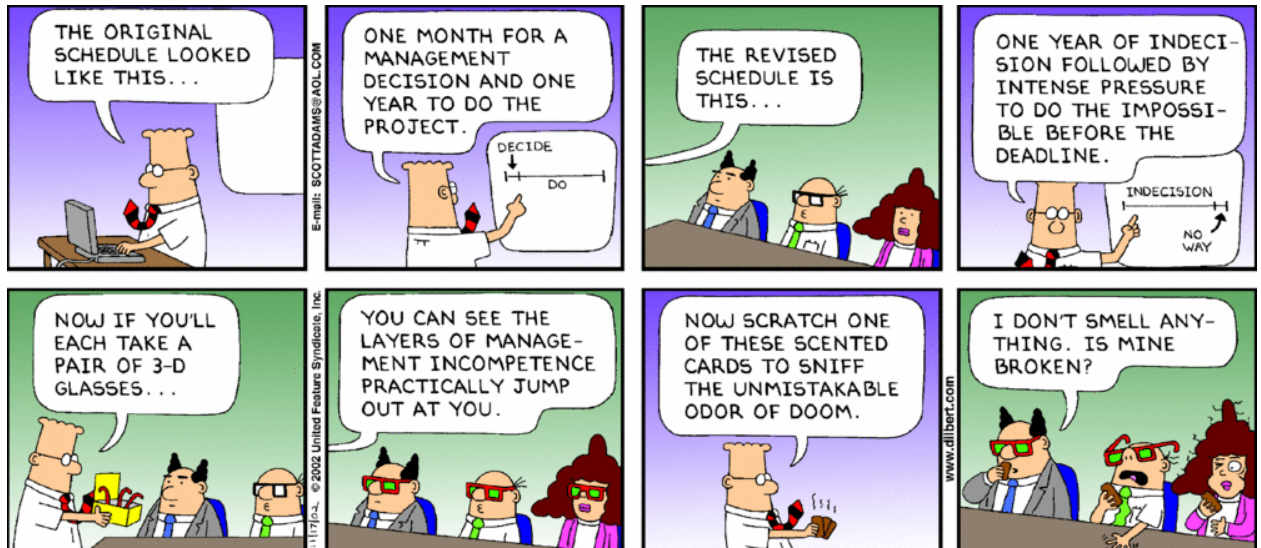
2002-November-10

I saw this often. Some authoritarians in large companies wanted to have controls to set “standards” for all corporate presentations. Individual presenters did not benefit from such ideas.



2002-November-17

Dilbert presents for the first time using a boxy laptop on the table in the presentation room. This is two and a half years after Dogbert first did something similar, but now the computer is unmistakably a laptop. Dilbert's use of a laptop and direct video takes place more than ten years after I had done the same thing for the first time in Paris. The projected image still is shown with a square shape and rounded corners, presumably a cue left over from portraying overhead projectors; video projectors more often had landscape-oriented rectangular proportions, like monitors.



2002-December-30 (“PowerPoint”)

The 6th strip to mention of “PowerPoint”—still in quotation marks, but now “PowerPoint presentation” is used instead of “PowerPoint slides.”



2003-April-26

Only the second mention of laser pointers, after a gap of four years since the previous mention.

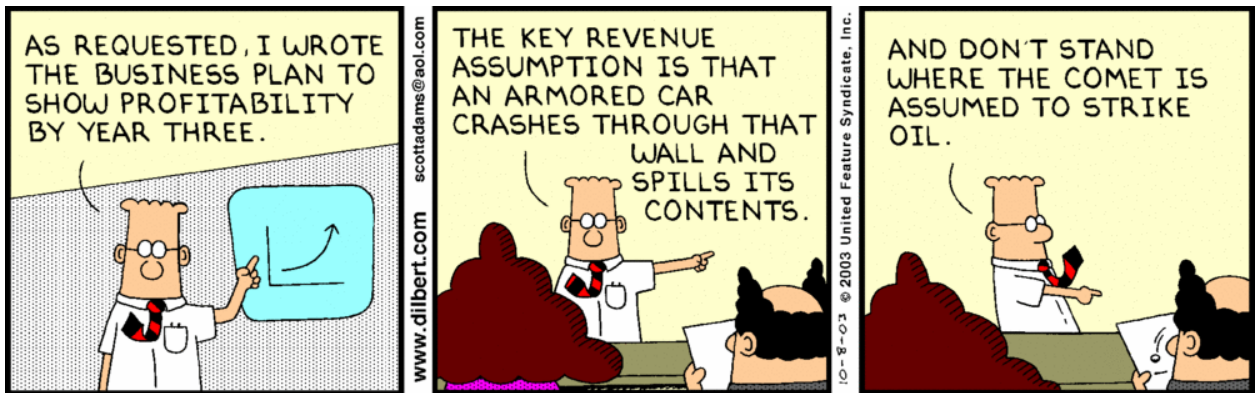


2003-August-09 (“PowerPoint”)

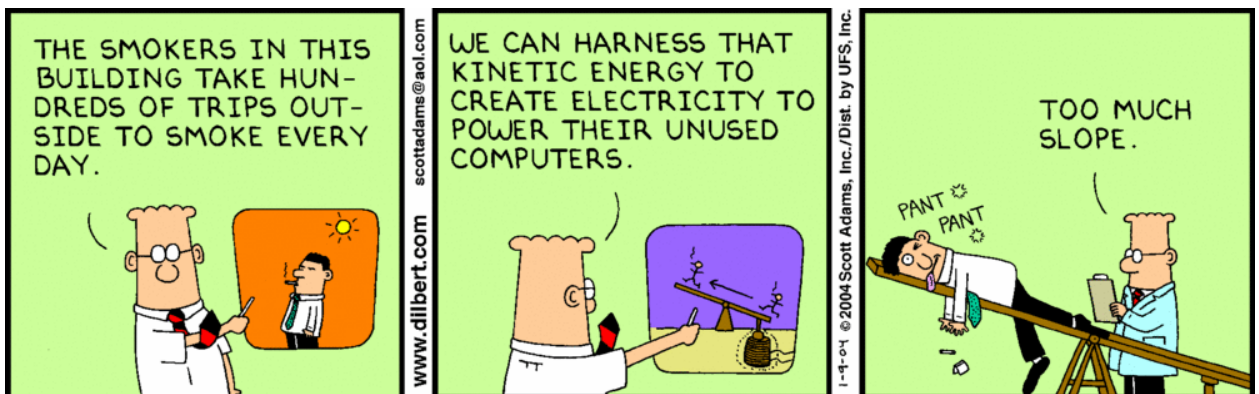
The 7th mention of "PowerPoint" (still in quotes). I don't recall that "PowerPoint disability" ever caught on.



2003-October-08



2004-January-09

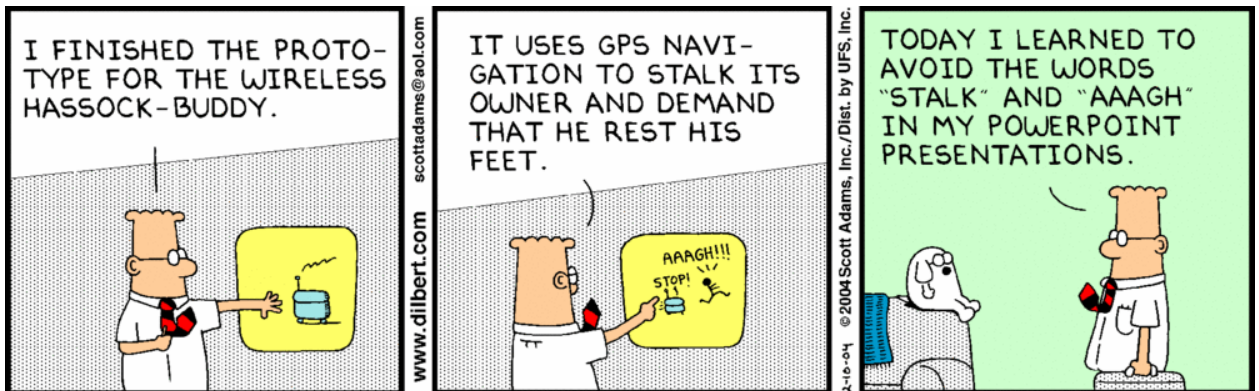


2004-January-19

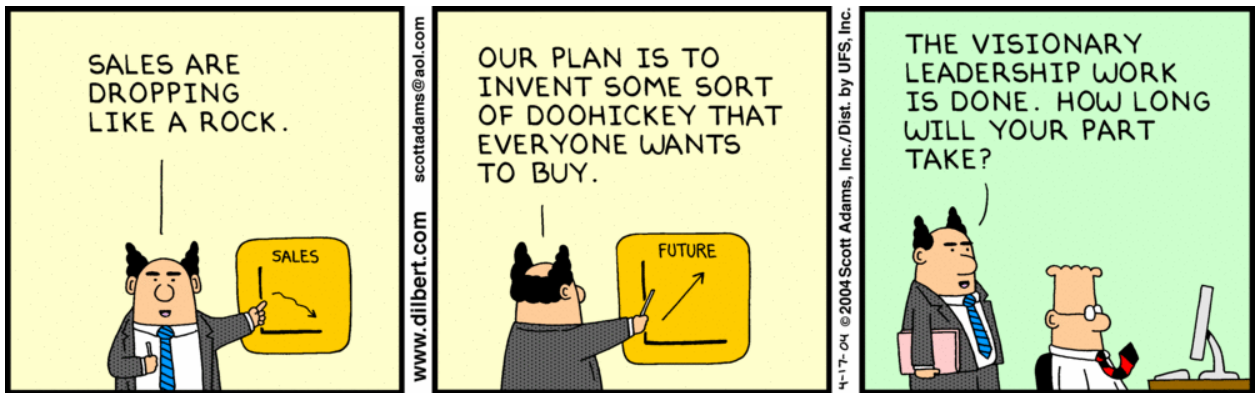


2004-February-10 (PowerPoint)

The 8th mention of PowerPoint, nearly eight years after it was first mentioned, and for the first time there are no quotation marks needed—seventeen years after PowerPoint was shipped. No way to tell whether the projection is from video or conventional overheads, but during this period the coloring of the projected images becomes more vivid, suggesting video.



2004-April-17



2004-June-19



2004-December-08

A conventional overhead projector being used with a wall for a screen.



2005-February-20

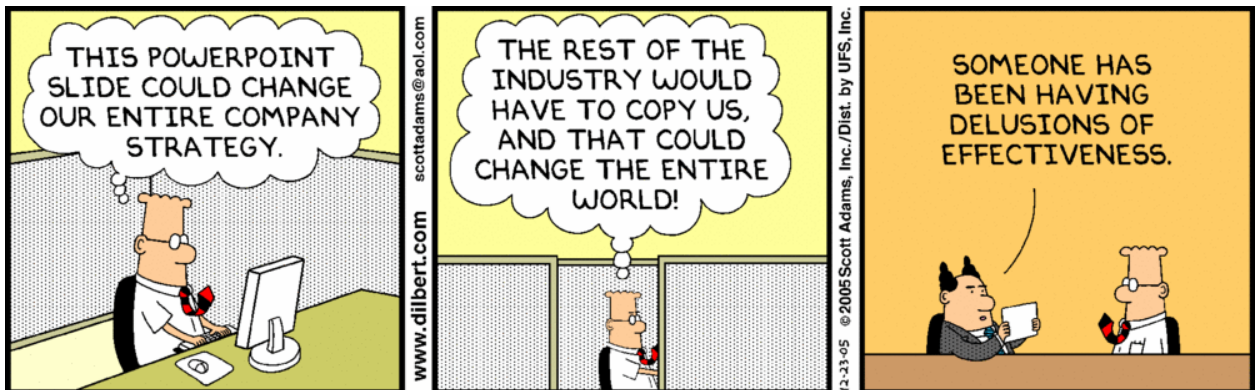


2005-December-22



2005-December-23 (PowerPoint)

The 9th mention of PowerPoint, for the second time with no quotation marks, a couple of years after the previous mention. Again the name is used in the context of preparing in a cubicle. The only output shown is a printed paper handed to the boss for 1-on-1 reading, perhaps reflecting the continuing substitution of PowerPoint documents for conventional full-text documents.



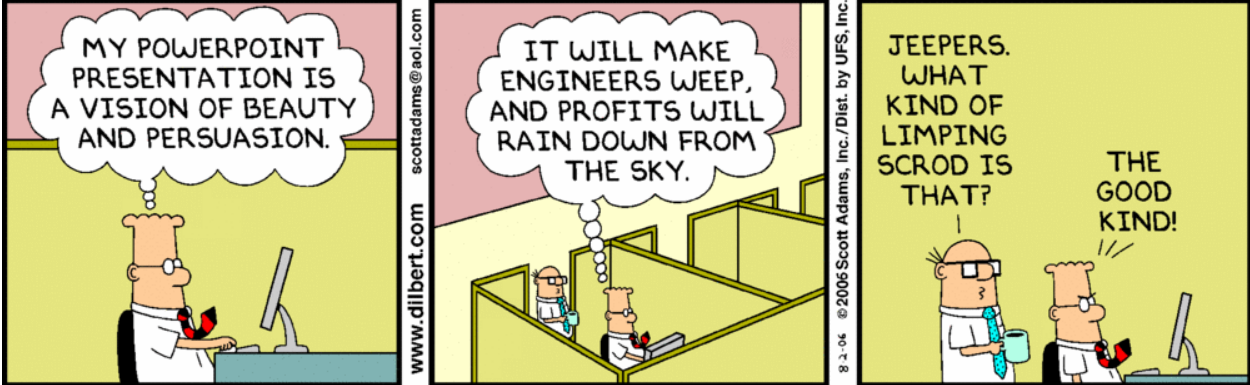
2005-December-24 (PowerPoint)

The 10th mention of PowerPoint is the next day, now common without quotation marks. The usage ("I am entering the PowerPoint zone") makes PowerPoint sound like a very familiar concept, nearly twenty years after it was first shipped.



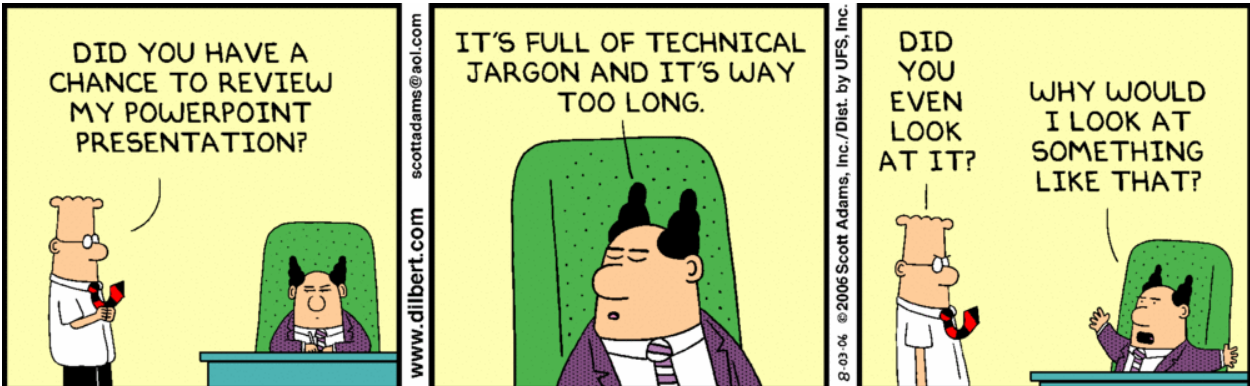
2006-August-02 (PowerPoint)

Another eighteen months later, there are 3 mentions of PowerPoint in 3 successive days, none with quotes, (from now on PowerPoint is used very familiarly). The first day shows preparation on a flat-screen monitor in a cubicle.



2006-August-03 (PowerPoint)

The second day concerns reviewing the output from yesterday. There's no way to tell whether it was reviewed electronically or on paper.



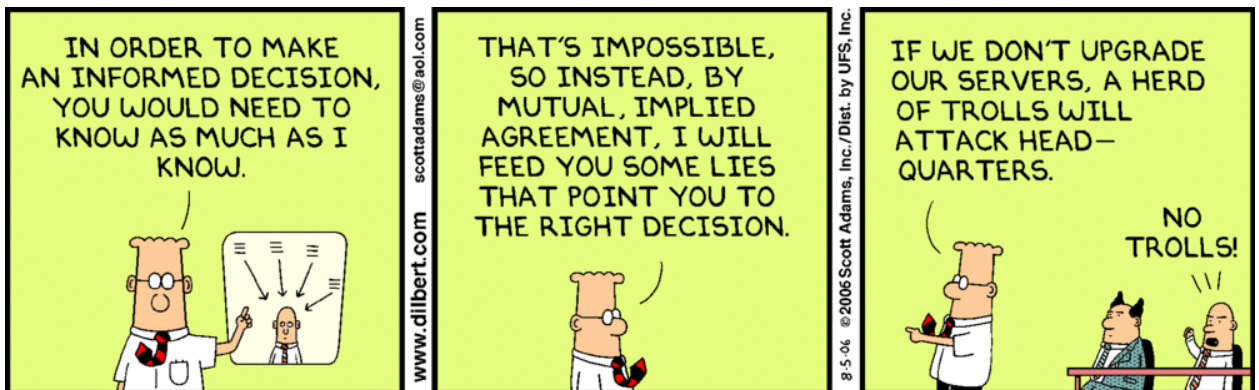
2006-August-04 (PowerPoint)

The third day shows a sleek laptop in the conference room, presumably being used to present. The first view of a Dilbert with a laptop in a conference room was four years before, and since then we've seen him use conventional overheads.

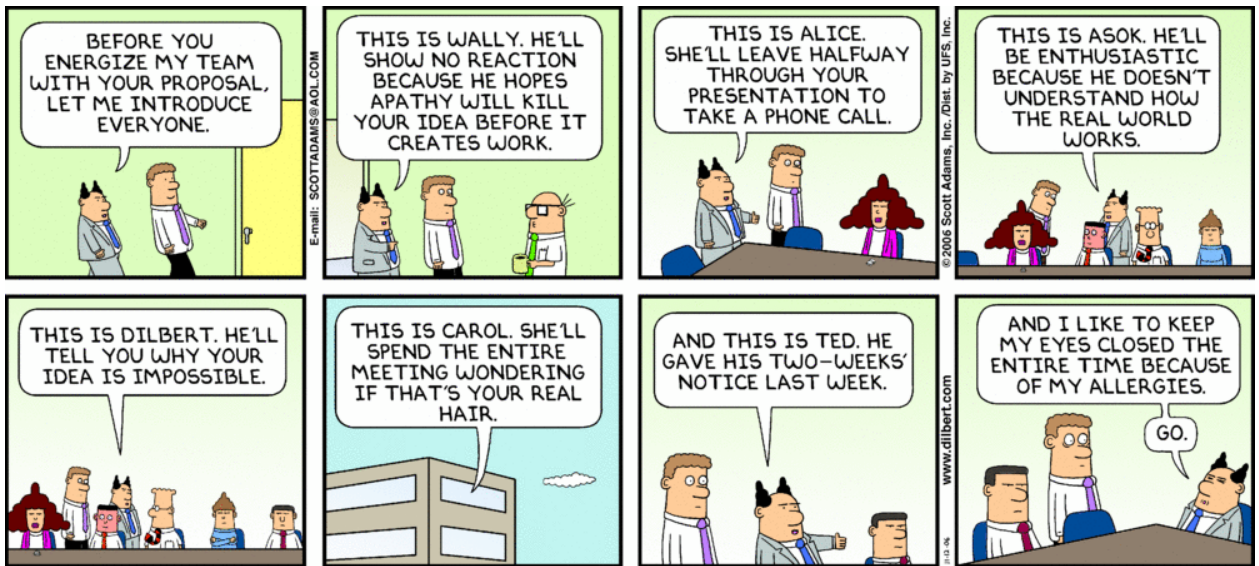


2006-August-05

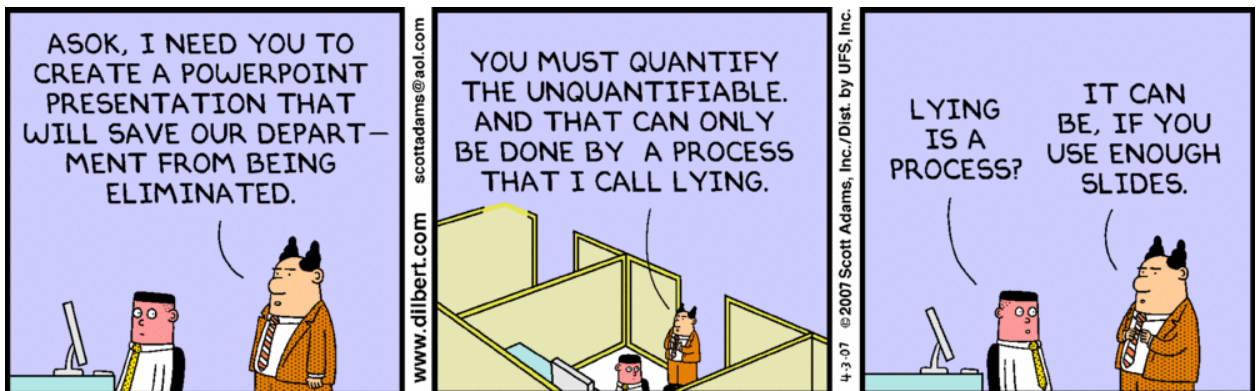
The following day, shows a square-format round-cornered projected image, again a convention not really consistent with the video projection that is implied.



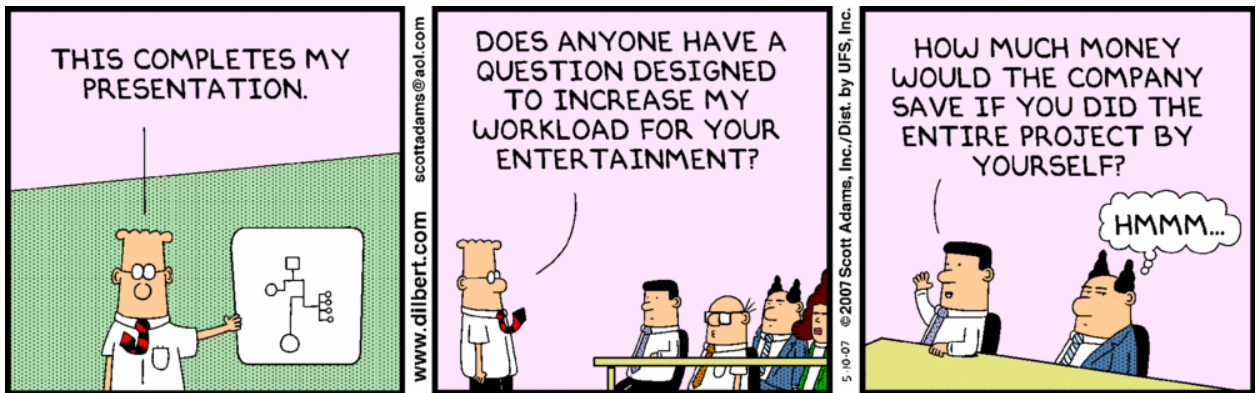
2006-November-12



2007-April-03 (PowerPoint)



2007-May-10



2007-June-05 (PowerPoint)

PowerPoint as a secret weapon for the military. This was at least seven years after Peter Feaver had famously said about PowerPoint "We should give it to the Iraqis. We'd never have to worry about them again." Quoted in Wall Street Journal by Greg Jaffe, 26 April 2000.



2007-October-06 (PowerPoint)

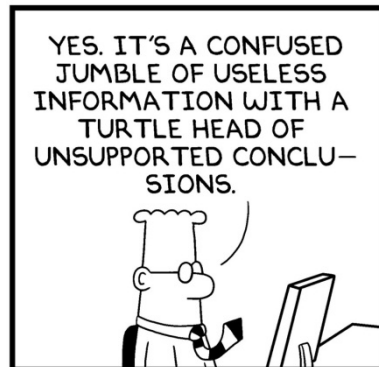
The strip comparing a PowerPoint presentation to “a confused jumble of useless information with a wino’s spittle of unsupported conclusions” is well known, but Scott Adams wrote a blog post saying that he was actually disappointed in it.

The Day I Will Be Slightly Amusing

On Saturday, 10/6/07, my Dilbert comic will only be slightly amusing. It would have been highly amusing but I had to change two words for my editors. I can't show you the entire comic because it hasn't run in papers yet,

DRAFT 20 April 2012. Not for quotation or citation until published.

but I'll show you the one panel that caused a problem. The context is Dilbert's coworker asking for an opinion on his Powerpoint presentation. This is Dilbert's response in the middle panel.



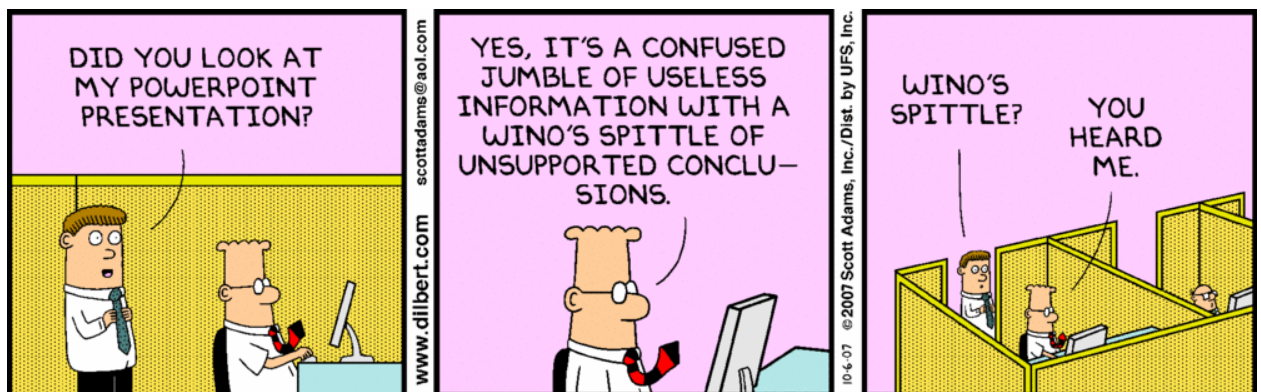
I thought I could get away with “turtle head” because the naughty meaning isn’t universally known and an actual turtle’s head would fit Dilbert’s analogy just as well. So there was a degree of deniability built in. And turtles are cute, damn it!

There is nothing more frustrating than writing a perfect sentence and not being able to publish it. That’s why I love having this blog. Otherwise, it’s just me and the cat having a laugh at how witty I could have been. And it’s creepy when the cat laughs because I can never be sure we’re laughing at the same thing.

So I changed “turtle head” to “wino’s spittle” and you’ll see that on Saturday. Sigh. It could have been something special.

October 03, 2007

http://dilbertblog.typepad.com/the_dilbert_blog/2007/10/the-day-i-will-.html



2007-December-24

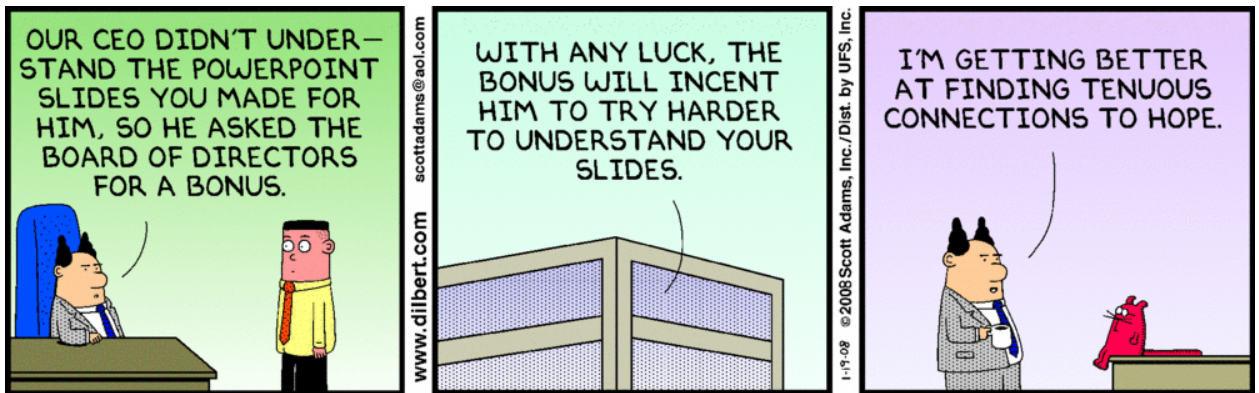


2008-January-18 (PowerPoint)

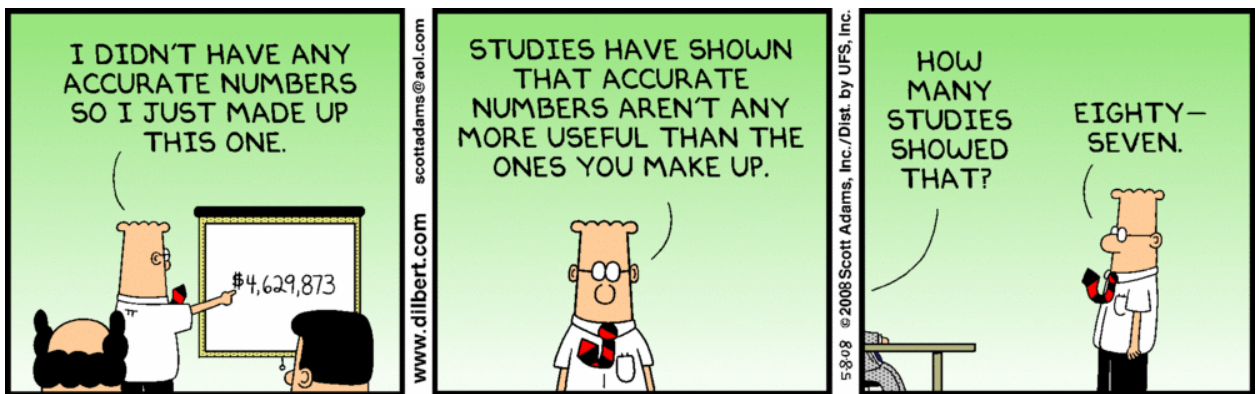
Far from the idea that a presenter could have personal leverage by making his own visuals, inevitably there were bosses who delegated both the ideas and the visuals to subordinates.



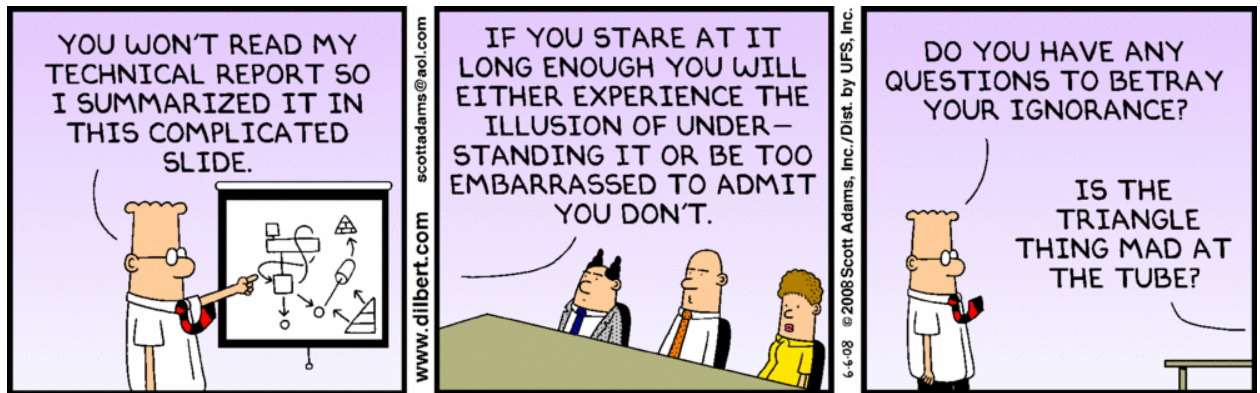
2008-January-19 (PowerPoint)



2008-May-08

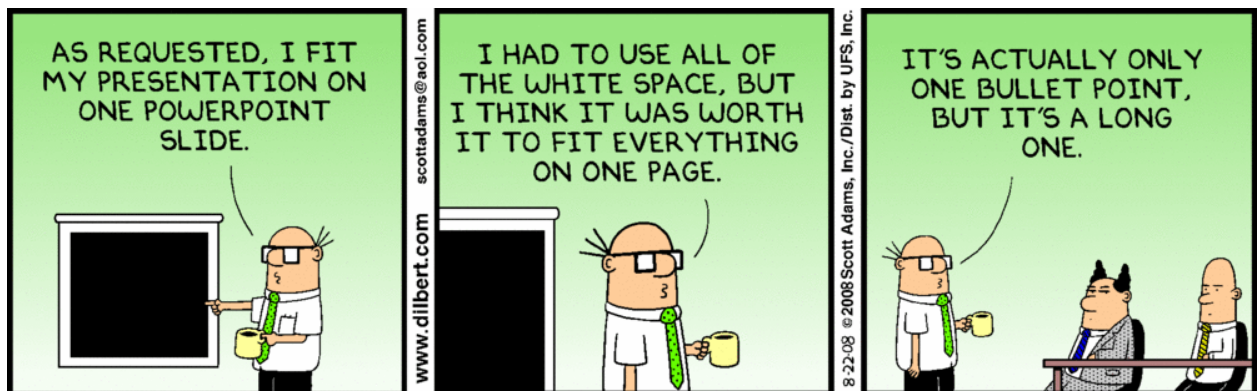


2008-June-06



2008-August-22 (PowerPoint)

It's an insidious temptation to keep reworking a single slide, adding words and points where they will fit. I was personally well known for PowerPoint slides packed with words from top to bottom and side to side. Sometimes I used up all the white space and had to reduce the type size of the slide body to make more words fit in. Sometime after I left Microsoft (I'm not sure in which version of PowerPoint), this process was automated as a new feature: when you tried to add more than would fit on a slide, the type size was automatically reduced to accommodate you. This feature seemed like it had been designed just to help me, but I could see the danger: as I kept working, adding and extending, eventually the type size would make itself so small that it would be unreadable.



2008-October-05 (PowerPoint)

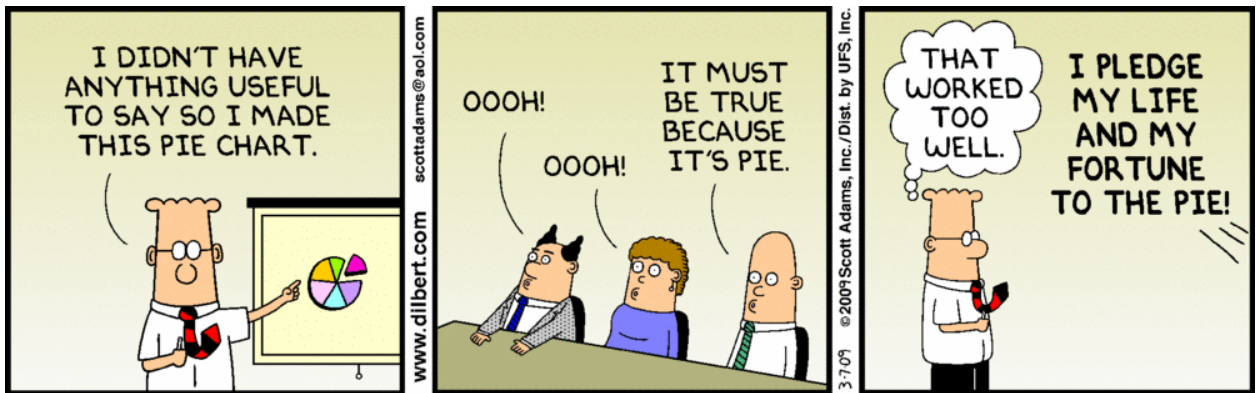
Borrowing a client's watch to tell him the time, in PowerPoint.



2008-November-01

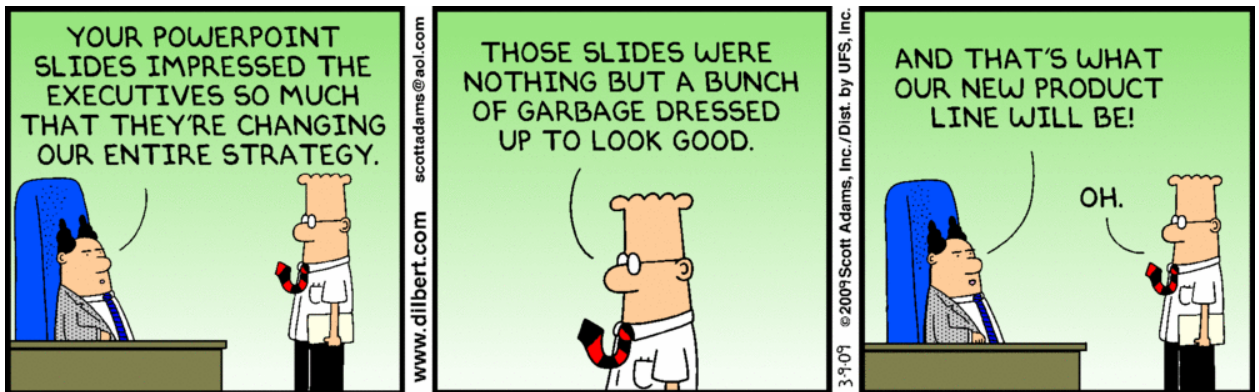


2009-March-07



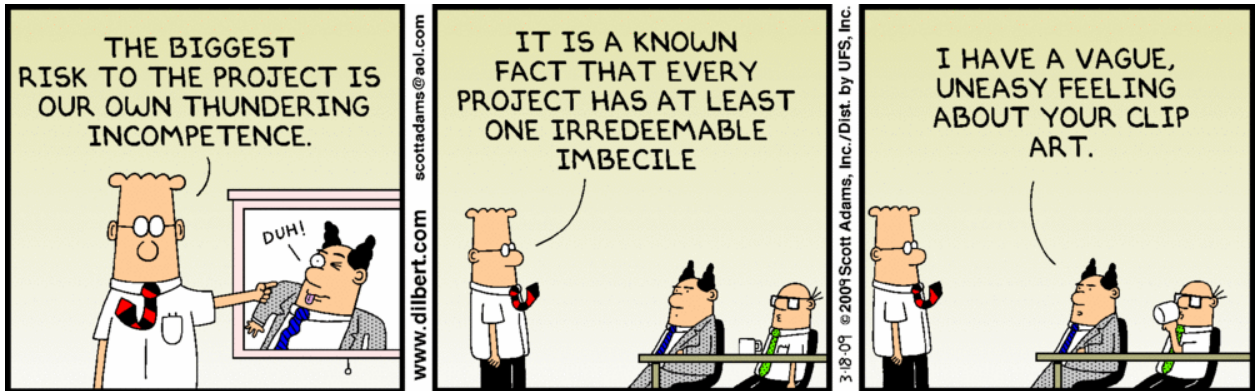
2009-March-09 (PowerPoint)

There's always a suspicion that fancy presentation effects that "look good" will be able to conceal the fact that the content is "garbage"—bamboozled by PowerPoint.

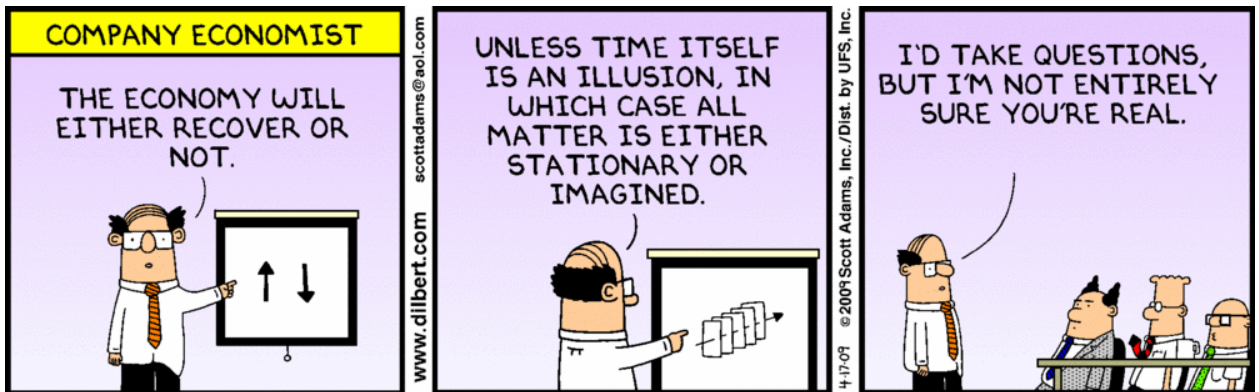


2009-March-18

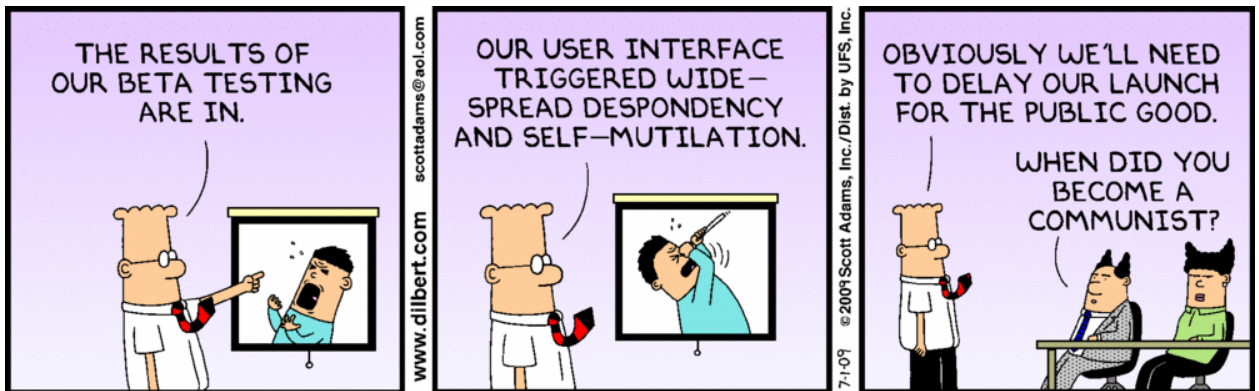
By now digital photographs had become commonplace, and trivial to include in a PowerPoint presentation. Back in PowerPoint 1.0 days, they were so rare as to seem almost impossible to use.



2009-April-17

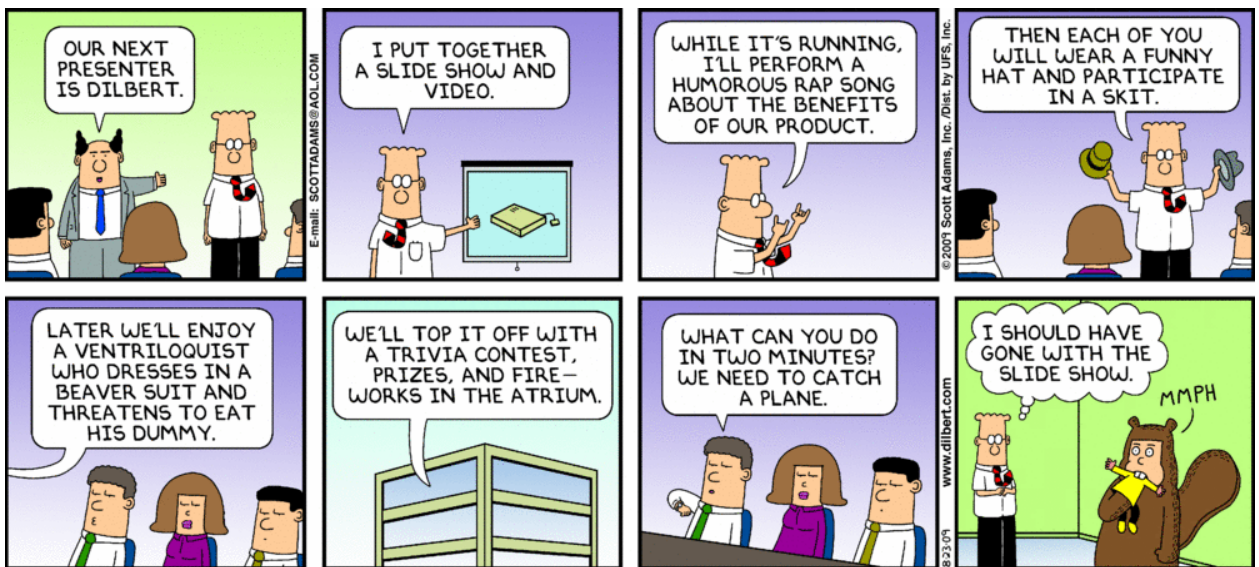


2009-July-01



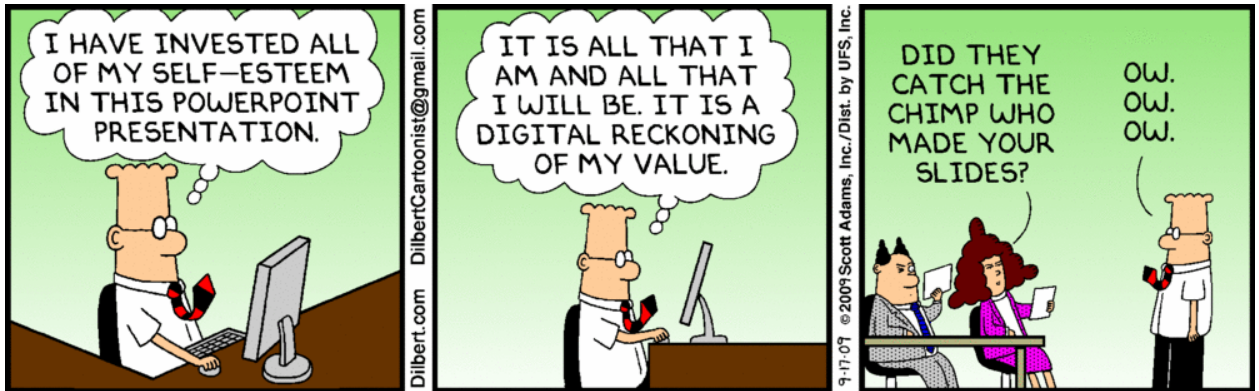
2009-August-23

The first suggestion that a video can be projected, although it's not clear whether the video has been inserted in the PowerPoint presentation (easily done by this date).



2009-September-17 (PowerPoint)

Apart from the insightful humor of the presenter's self-esteem in this strip, it seems to possibly be an example of a very small meeting in which the PowerPoint slides are handed out as hard copy for participants to read, often with no projection and the readers instructed to turn the pages in unison.



2009-September-20



2009-October-24

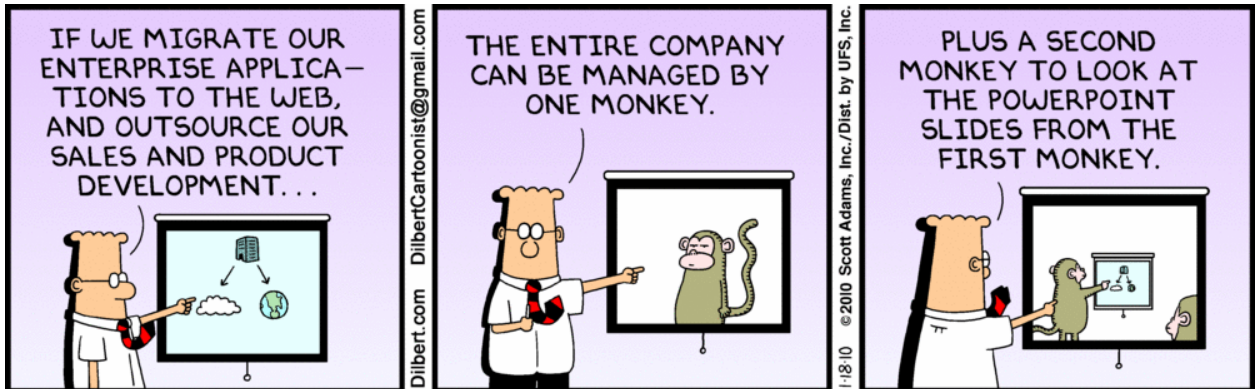


2009-December-03

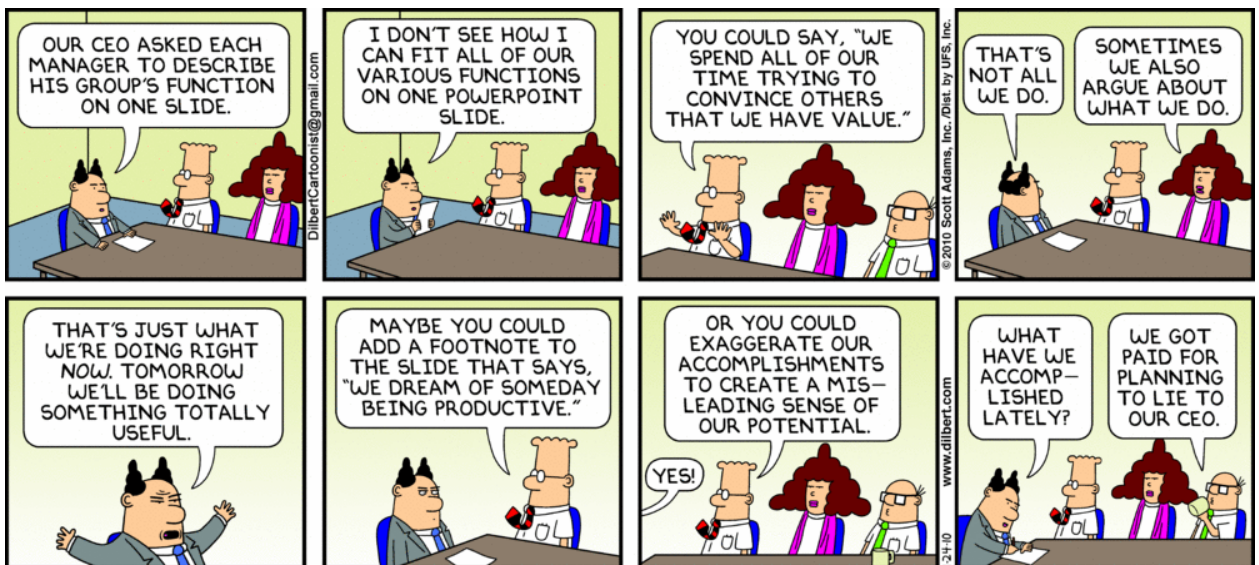


2010-January-18 (PowerPoint)

With suitable outsourcing, the two irreducible functions in a company are (1) preparing PowerPoint presentations and (2) being the audience for the presentations.

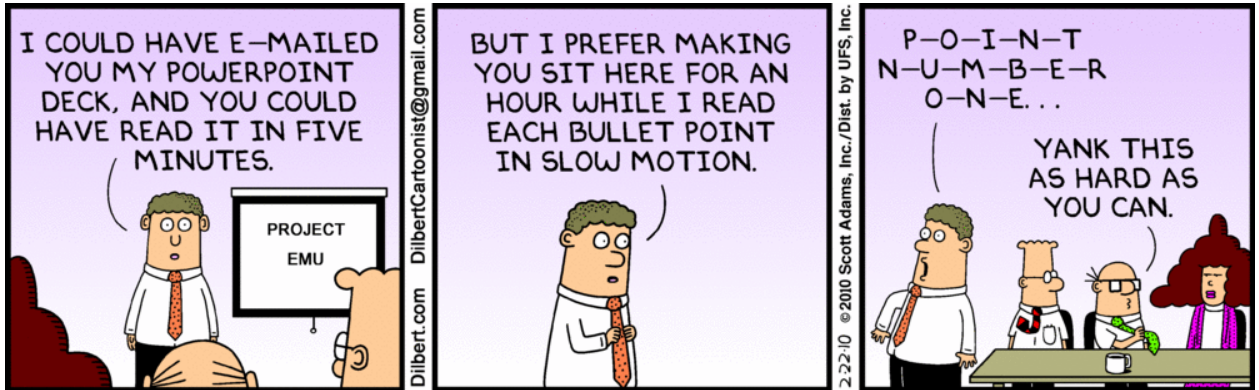


2010-January-24 (PowerPoint)

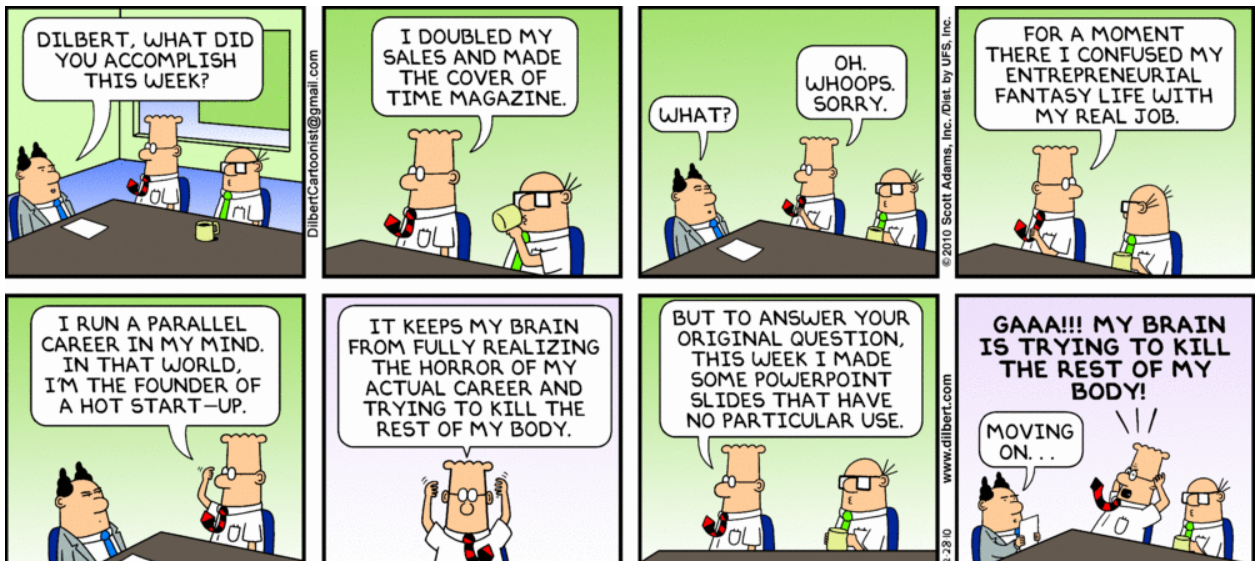


2010-February-22 (PowerPoint)

The very common complaint that presenters use their slides as full text, and then merely read all the words to their audiences. This also seems to be the first use of the word “deck” to describe a presentation. The term goes back to the time before electronic presentations, when frequent presenters maintained a large collection of slides or mounted overheads, and selected a subset of them to make a “deck” for a particular occasion, shuffling the order and selecting some cards to show and others to conceal.



2010-February-28 (PowerPoint)



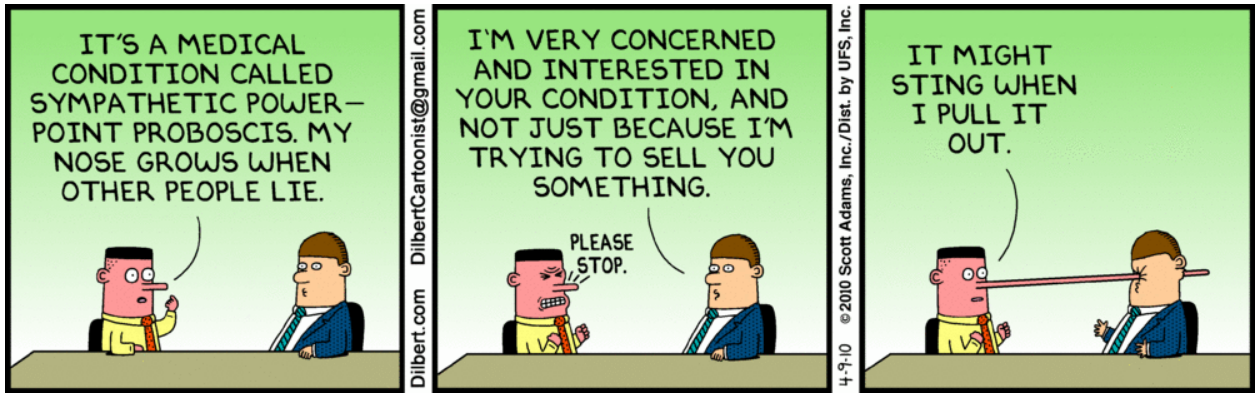
2010-April-06



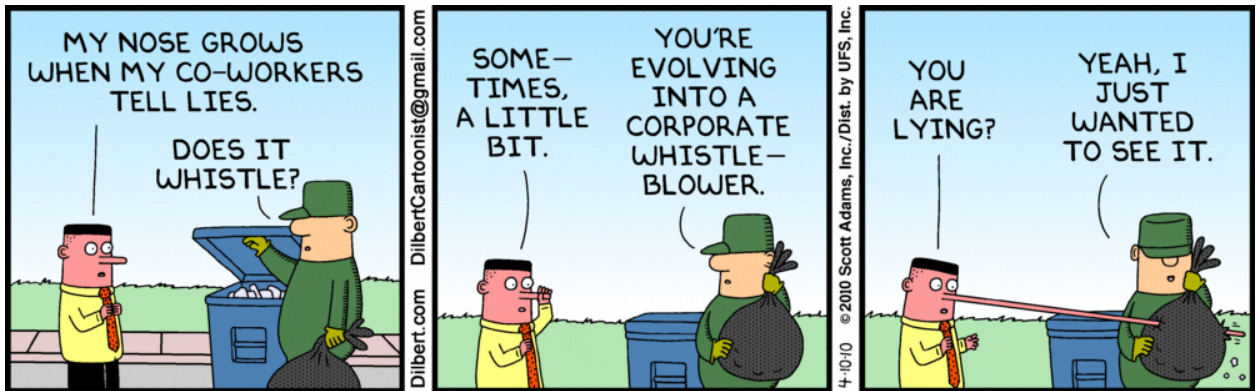
2010-April-08 (PowerPoint)



2010-April-09 (PowerPoint)



2010-April-10



2010-June-12 (PowerPoint)

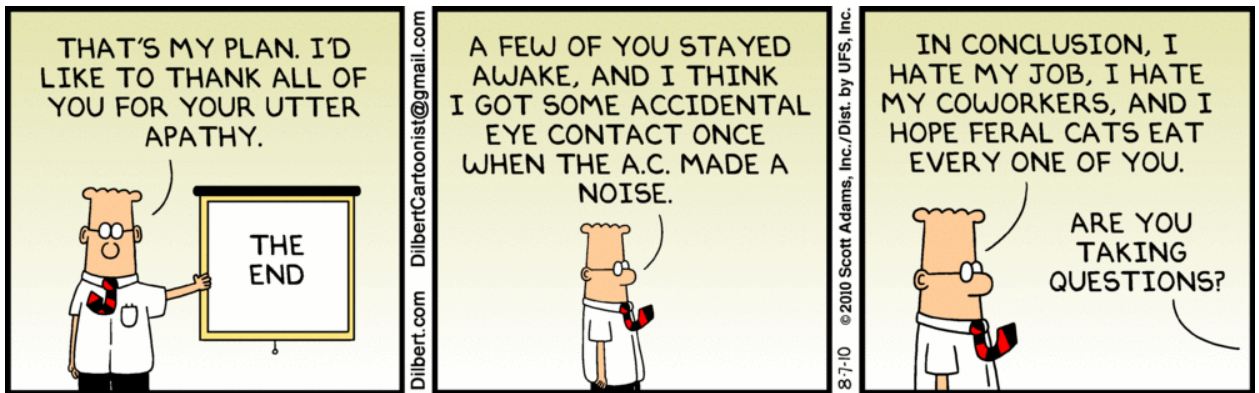
PowerPoint as the Matrix, an alternative to reality.



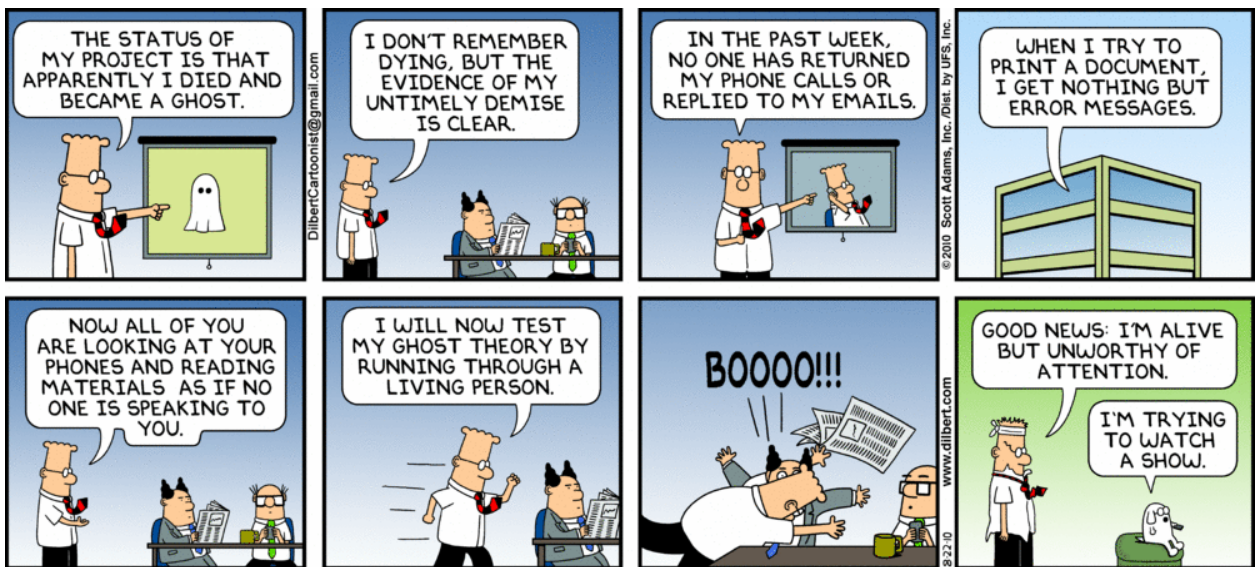
2010-June-25 (PowerPoint)



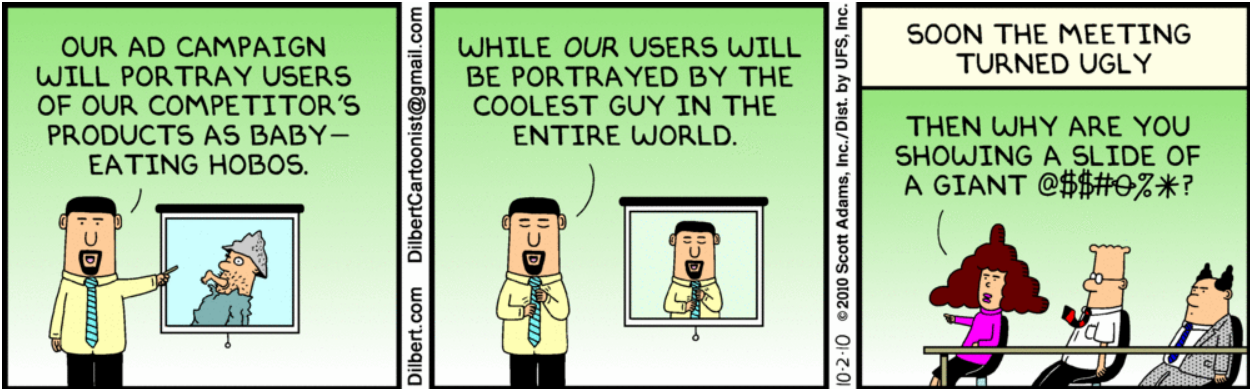
2010-August-07



2010-August-22

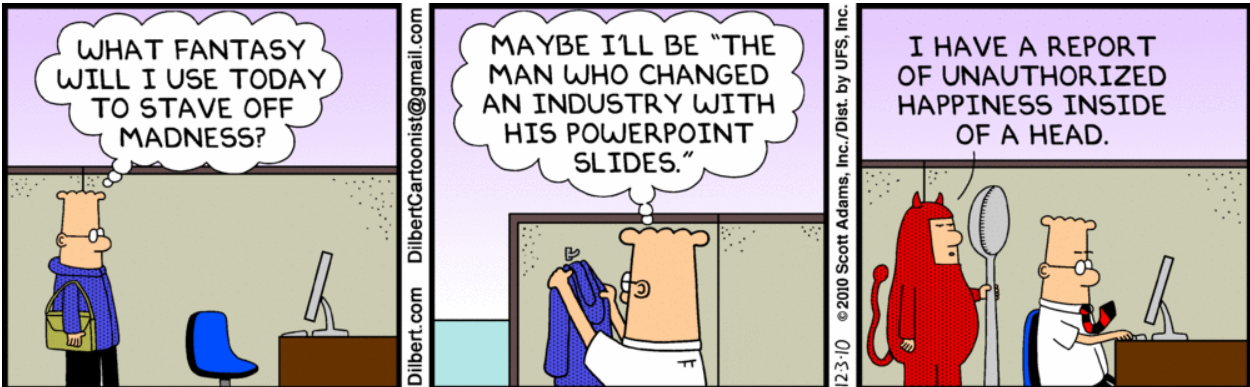


2010-October-02

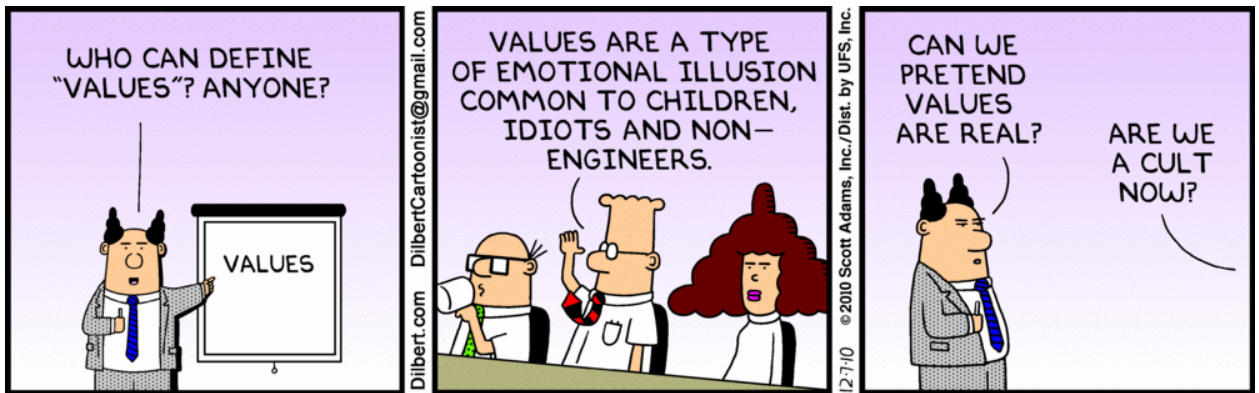


2010-December-03 (PowerPoint)

“The man who changed an industry with his PowerPoint slides.”



2010-December-07

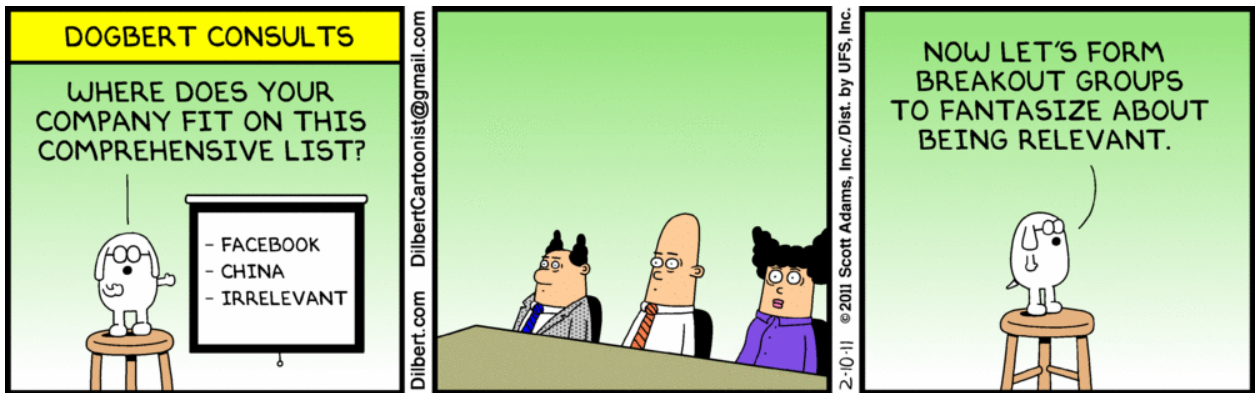


2011-February-07 (PowerPoint)

"My PowerPoint slides are in the Louvre."



2011-February-10

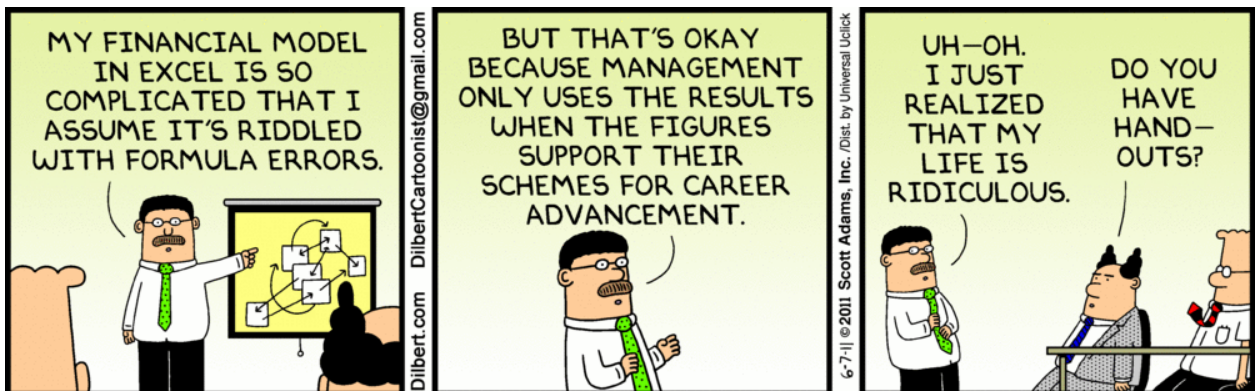


2011-April-07 (PowerPoint)

By now "PowerPoint" is dropped into a strip casually, with no serious function.



2011-June-07



2011-July-03 (PowerPoint)

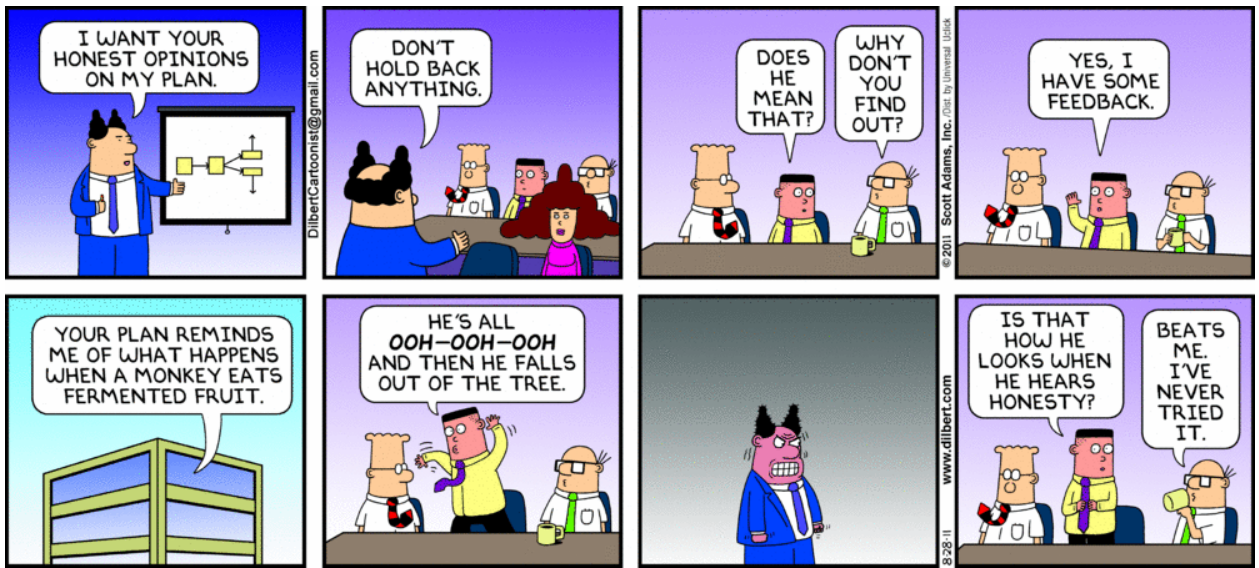
Another use of “deck” to describe a selection and arrangement of PowerPoint slides.



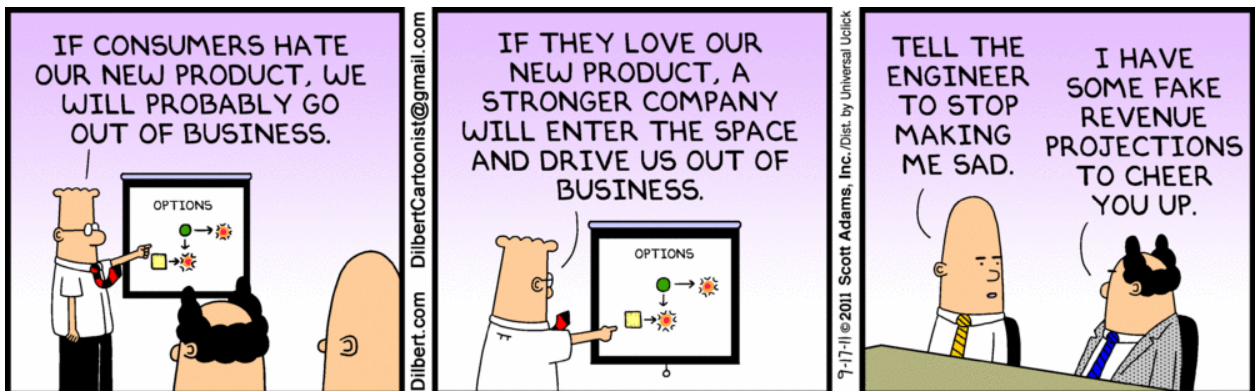
2011-August-16



2011-August-28



2011-September-17



2011-September-20



2011-September-27 (PowerPoint)

PowerPoint as a portal to a realm where fantasy and reality are reversed.

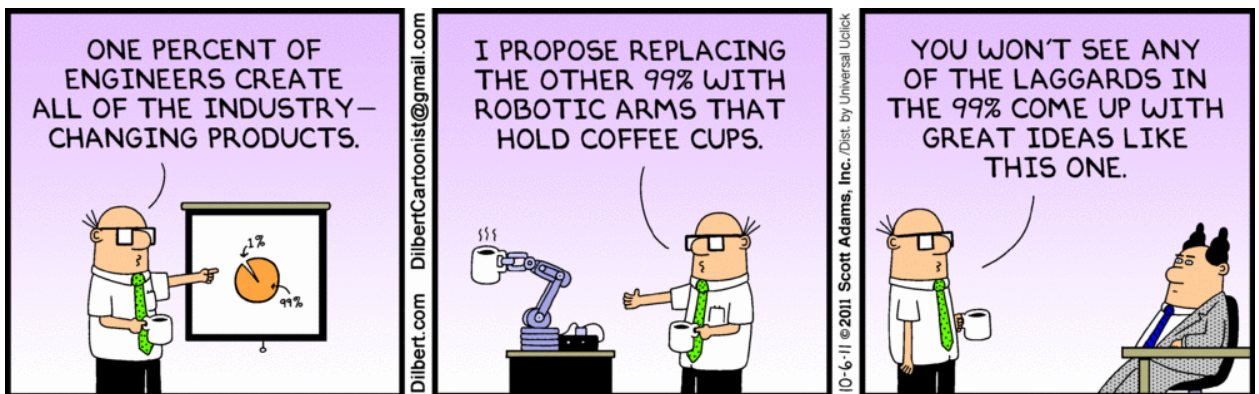


2011-September-28 (PowerPoint)

PowerPoint: "too much can kill you."



2011-October-06



2011-October-11



2011-November-24



2011-December-07

