How Humor Helps
or Why Whimsy Wins

Using humor in your talks and blogs.

Greg Bulmash
@LetMyPeopleCode

Hello and welcome to "How Humor Helps or Why Whimsy Wins". I'm Greg Bulmash and you can find me online using the handle LetMyPeopleCode.

How to add humor to your content

I'm here to talk adding humor to your content. And here's how you do it..

Steal memes

Thank you and good night!!

I can't do it. I'm not funny.

Okay... You might say... I can't do it, I'm not funny.

Steal memes

But...

BUT!

Steal memes

Immature artists imitate. Mature artists steal.

But...

STEAL MEMES

"Immature artists imitate.
Mature artists steal."
--Genghis Khan--

You know who said that? Genghis Khan.

We'll have more howto content as we go along, but let's break down the humor techniques used so far, just in the first minute or so of this talk. There are four to point out.

The first is the unexpected answer / oversimplification. You set people up to expect you to say something complex, then give them something unexpected and simple. We'll come back to this technique, because it has a number of variations.

The second is the pretend ending. This is another variation on oversimplification, or in a way, doubling down on it. I just gave you the entire talk in two words… aaand that's it. Thank you! Buh-bye…

The third is repeating a joke. There is a fine line in humor between reinforcing a joke with repetition and running it into the ground. But when used correctly, repetition can make a joke funnier or carry through enough humor from the previous use. A variation on this is a technique called "the callback," and that would be landing this joke early, then re-using this joke in 10 or 15 minutes or maybe right at the end.

Last is the obvious incongruity… here it's attributing the quote to a false authority who is HIGHLY unlikely to have said it. Variations on this actual quote have been attributed to Pablo Picasso and T.S. Eliot, and if I'd cited either of them… Citing an actual source can add authority to a quote. Citing an obviously fake source can add levity.

But you don't have to use historical figures.

But...

STEAL MEMES

"Immature artists imitate.
Mature artists steal."
--The Dread Pirate Roberts--

You can also use a fictional character. You might even use one where people wonder "wait, *did* they say that?" Now, as someone who has seen "The Princess Bride" many, many times, let me assure you that this quote appearing in it is quite (pause)...
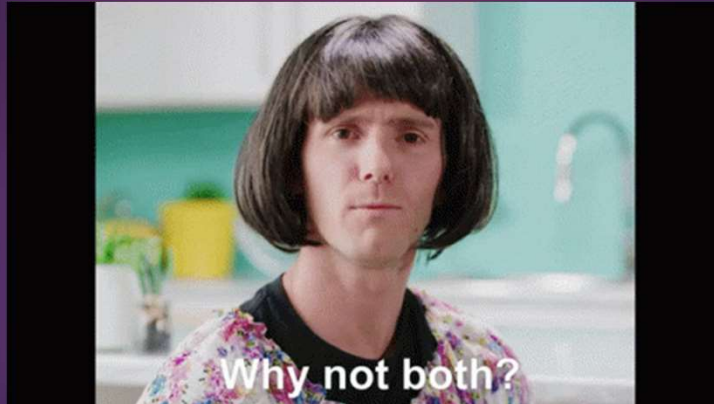
inconceivable

Now some of you smiled at this slide. Maybe even chuckled. But while the "steal memes" slide gave you something unexpected, every one of you who is familiar with The Princess Bride saw this slide coming at least a second or two before it hit the screen. But you still enjoyed it, because it brought you in on the joke. This is the kind of joke you don't want to use often, because then your humor feels predictable in a bad way. But when used sparingly with some signal that you're expecting the audience to know where you're going, they feel like they're in on it, and that can make a predictable pay-off enjoyable instead of tiring.

Funny or Serious?

When considering when and how to use humor in your talk or blog, the first question to ask is WHETHER you should. Now if I was just joking, my answer to the question on screen would be…

Funny or Serious?

To steal a meme… In this case, a parody of a meme, just to make it a smidge more unexpected. Now, before I move on, I could explain the meme this parodies, give you a little history… But a primary rule of jokes is any joke you have to explain isn't funny.

Funny or Serious?

BENEFITS OF HUMOR:
1. It's inviting & disarming

A shared joke, a laugh, early on can ease tension and bring the audience along on a journey WITH you rather than watching you walk the path alone. Even more, if you're considered an authority figure or someone who might intimidate some members of the audience, it makes you more human and relatable.

Funny or Serious?

BENEFITS OF HUMOR:
1. It's inviting & disarming
2. Reduces friction

Benefit 2: What happens to an engine that's not lubricated? It seizes up. A sprinkling of humor here and there can be like oil in an engine. It keeps things from getting too dry so the vehicle of your talk or blog moves along smoothly.

Funny or Serious?

BENEFITS OF HUMOR:
1. It's inviting & disarming
2. Reduces friction
3. Memorable

Benefit 3: A good laugh can not only make your talk memorable but can help you reinforce ideas. If you were going to take one bit of advice away from this talk so far, what would it be?

We've been through about a couple dozen slides, give or take. Anyone kept count how many times I've used this image?

Funny or Serious?

TEN!!
TEN SLIDES!!

[Count laugh] That was the tenth time. Now, if you you grew up with this character, maybe you heard his voice in your head. I could have read that out when the slide popped up, but because his voice is going to be familiar to many, I let them hear it as they remember it. And some of you will remember it differently than others, because Count von Count has been a part of a dozen or more national versions of Sesame street. In my head, I hear the American count, but some of you heard the French Count, the Japanese Count, maybe the Israeli Count…

You might have noticed there's another slide I didn't read because the character voice is so associated with that word that many of you heard him saying it. What word was that?
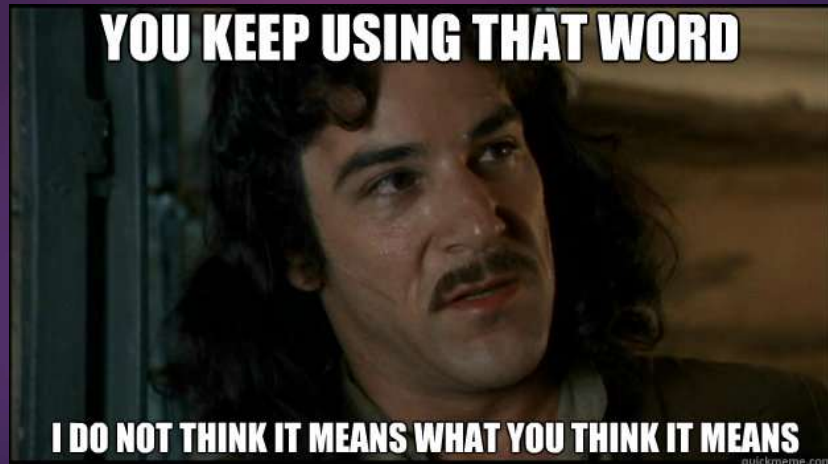
And a great meme to steal for tech talks is a response to that word. For example, I could say I think this talk is quite…

Idempotent (pause)... I also bring a printout of this meme to coding interviews.

Funny or Serious?

DOWNSIDES OF HUMOR:

1. Inappropriate for the audience.

I had a dozen slides going into when where and why you shouldn't tell jokes. But the important considerations are *really* around whether a joke is appropriate. The first consideration is your audience. For example, everyone knows you do not tell jokes at airport security… because they might not think you're joking.

Funny or Serious?

For example. This gag. I had to think about whether or not to use it. There is nothing controversial or taboo about the Count to my knowledge. But I had to ask myself how much of my audience will even know this character. So I googled him. Count von Count has been on enough national editions of Sesame Street, I figured the odds were good.

If you're giving a talk to a group you don't share cultural ties with, you might want to skip the jokes because they might land *badly*. Or you can google their humor and…

Steal memes

Funny or Serious?

DOWNSIDES OF HUMOR:

1. Inappropriate for the audience.
2. Inappropriate for the topic/setting.

The second question is whether the joke is appropriate for the topic or setting. Sometimes a topic is too serious and levity just feels out of place, or the theme of the site/conference is very serious. Some comedians will see that as a challenge, but in general, if you're talking about something most people consider serious and wouldn't find funny in that context, don't add jokes. For example, when you're presenting the post-mortem of a high-severity incident…

A meme with Count Von Count is not an appropriate way to express the damage.

Funny or Serious?

DOWNSIDES OF HUMOR:
1. Inappropriate for the audience.
2. Inappropriate for the topic/setting.
3. Just inappropriate.

I know it feels like this last one doesn't need to be said, but people have gotten fired over jokes. Ask yourself, would you tell this joke in a meeting with HR? Also... do not repeat any jokes you hear from politicians. They're likely to be divisive even if they seem innocuous.

Sources of Humor

OLBCPMAUA

But enough of why not to use humor. Let's delve into some other sources of humor, for example this one… Olbicpumawa… I like to use it as a mnemonic. It stands for Overly-Long Barely Comprehensible Plainly Made-up Almost Unpronounceable Acronym. And yes, I did google it to make sure it did not exist elsewhere on the web, but seriously…

Sources of Humor

#OLBCPMAUA

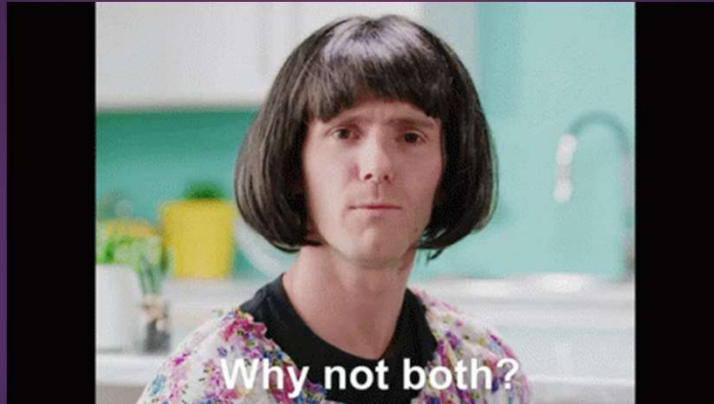I'm okay if you want to make it trend. Hashtag Olbicpumawa.

Sources of Humor

More oversimplification

Any of you who took freshman physics in college heard this joke… "Is light a particle or a wave?" Yes.

You probably didn't find it funny when your physics professor told it because it's one of those jokes that needs to be explained. But a method of oversimplification is to ask an either/or question, then use "yes" as an unexpected shorthand for…

Do developers prefer to get their caffeine from coffee or mountain dew? Yes.
Is React a back-end or front-end technology? Yes.

Also... Callback.

Another source of humor is finding a silly or cute way to express a common frustration.

Sources of Humor
Exaggeration

Exaggeration can be funny. For example, this clip from a commercial combines an unexpected result with exaggeration. I'm not sure the audio will come through here, but it's a visual gag.

Sources of Humor

Rephrasing to create/highlight absurdity.

Listen: strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government.

Then there's rephrasing something serious to make it sound absurd (or more absurd). For example, this Gif from Monty Python and the Holy Grail rephrases the legend of King Arthur's sword.

Sources of Humor

Things that are obviously out of place.

Things that are obviously out of place can provoke laughter, like this gif of Steve Buscemi pretending to be a teenager.

That brings us into cluelessness and failure. They can be funny. For example, the Muppets Character Fozzie Bear... his primary source of humor is the fact that he's a terrible comedian. Another great source of failure humor is...

Animal fails. The caveat here is to use these for your own failures or the failure of a system. If you were talking about someone else's mistake this could go from funny to insulting.

Funny or Insulting?

Lemmings: implies lack of reasoning skills and mindlessly leaping to their deaths.

Duck parade: massively following the leader, but not necessarily implying low intelligence or a bad result.

And this is an important consideration… Whether the people the joke might reference would be insulted. For example, if you're talking about people following a trend, which of these GIFs do you believe would be more appropriate?

Brainstorming

In the abstract, I promised some brainstorming. It's a bit hard to do in this time frame with a virtual presentation, so I'll simulate it and you can share your own ideas in the chat to entertain your fellow attendees. Our topic, since the last slide was about people following a trend…

Brainstorming

NFTs

Is NFTs. And we'll apply some of the techniques we've covered to making up some jokes about NFTs. First, we'll go with the oversimplification I used to start this talk.
"I'm going to tell you everything you need to know about NFTs"

Thank you. I hope you enjoyed my TED talk.

Brainstorming NFT Jokes

We can also use a variation on...

Brainstorming NFT Jokes

#OLBCPMAUA

Hashtag olbicpumawa! Make it trend people! – But since we already have the acronym, we can change the words instead. NFTs stands for….
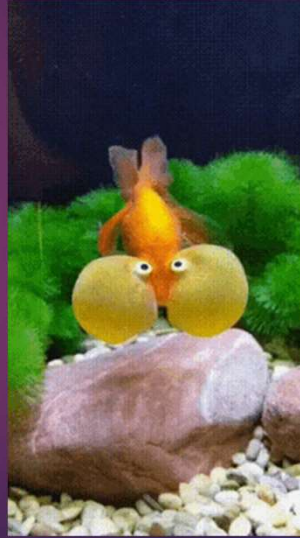
Brainstorming NFT Jokes

Naturally Flavorful Tacos… or maybe NFTs stands for…
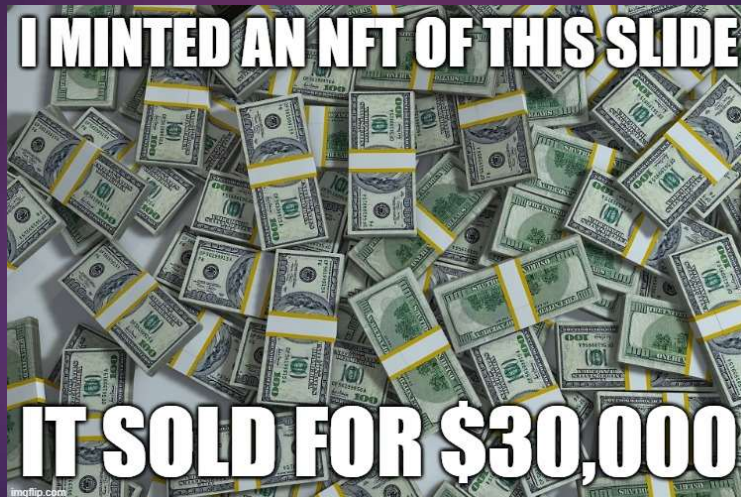
ANNOUNCER VOICE: NUTTY FISH TRICKS
Remember, folks, we're brainstorming here. Not all of them are going to be winners.

Brainstorming NFT Jokes

I don't know about you, but I've found some of the prices paid for NFTs to be absurd, so why not work with that for an absurdity joke?

Brainstorming NFT Jokes

Or maybe you can "borrow" a common meme image and add your own text to rephrase the concept, for example playing on the perceived absurdity of paying big bucks for something that can be easily copied. No one needs to send me angry corrections, I know it's the image that can be copied, but the token is unique and that's what you're paying for. When explaining NFTs to my wife, who's an artist, I told her an NFT is like a certificate of authenticity. I get it. I'm just having fun with it.

So we've come to the end… reinforcing my slide title with a visual pun. I know… 15 minutes isn't a lot of time, but I hope you got a few useful bits. And if there's one thing you should take away from this talk, it's…

use callbacks.

Greg Bulmash

- **https://LetMyPeopleCode.com**

- **@LetMyPeopleCode on Twitter**

- **LetMyPeopleCode on Twitch**

- **github.com/LetMyPeopleCode**

- **LetMyPeopleCode#0412 on Discord**

- **linkedin.com/in/gregbulmash**

Thank you for joining my virtual DevRelCon talk! Find me online, follow me, say hi. I'll leave this up for a second if you want to screencap it. (pause… two… three). You can also find my powerpoint deck on my Github.

Party On!

And in the words of the philosophers, Bill S. Preston and Ted "Theodore" Logan… Be Excellent to Each Other & Party On, Dudes! Thank you.