# Gravity Falls on Switzerland

Switzerland just flirted with their own version of the social experiment that has already worked oh so swimmingly for the company [Gravity Falls](http://commoncents.blogwyrm.com/?p=275): guaranteed outcome regardless of the performance. Flirted but not consummated. Swiss voters overwhelmingly rejected a proposal to grant each citizen the security of certain level of income regardless of personal station or level of responsibility or work ethic or any of those things that society wishes incentivize with profit.

So does this mean that Switzerland is not the social-democracy that much of the rest of Europe is? Well, that is not a safe conclusion to make. While there seems to be a germ of common, economic sense in the average Swiss, the fact that the proposal made it up for a national referendum is worrisome. So too are some of the explanations for why the measure was defeated by a 3-to-1 margin.

Before digging into the analysis, some words are in order to describe what that proposal actually proposed.

[According to the BBC](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36454060), the central notion was that each Swiss citizen would receive a stipend each month from the government in an amount of $2,500 USD for basically, well…, breathing. In addition, for each minor child that is also sucking in air, the caregiving would receive an additional $600 USD. (Please note that the figures cited here are rounded down from their actual values.)

Let’s take a moment to look at this. A single person would make a gross income of $30,000 for just hanging out. A married couple would make $60,000 for just hanging out with each other. If they start having children then the value goes up. A family of four would then ‘earn’ $88,000. Not too bad. Certainly it palls in comparison with the [approximately $55,200 average net salary](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_Switzerland) for a working individual (or $110,400 for a family of four) under the current rules, but then again, the recipient of the proposed windfall would not have to deal with that pesky work thing.

For those wondering if a fairer comparison would use the average gross salary, realize that the about 1/3 of gross income goes to the government whereas this ‘free money’ would also be free of taxes since it is provided by the government, who, no doubt, already took its cut – or so its supporters likely think. The picture further tilts towards disengagement from honest work when one realizes that average incomes are always skewed towards the high end by the few very larger earners (bankers, CEOs, and entertainers).

Thankfully the Swiss recognize that such a method is a fast way to disengage people from working. However, it is fun to think about what would have happened if the measure had passed.

The first day after passage would find not much had changed. The same number of Swiss would go to work as had gone the day before. This would last until the first checks were cut, shipped, and cashed. Then suddenly there would be more money chasing the same number of goods. So step one is inflation.

Now everyone is more miserable, and the hard workers would start looking around for someone to blame. It won’t take long for some of them to act on their resentment and quit – [equity theory at work](http://commoncents.blogwyrm.com/?p=280). They would lose their salary but would have the guaranteed money to fall back on. Now things may briefly get a bit better, as the inventory will not immediately fall but a lesser amount of money is now chasing the same number of goods. Thus inflation drops. So step two is a modest recovery.

But the recovery can’t last for very long. For when the inventory shrinks the number of goods will as well since there are now fewer people working. So here come inflation again. Here come more resentment by those who kept working. And, no doubt, some more workers will drop out.

<bad cycle picture>

And the cycle repeats itself, with the only result being an ever-shrinking GDP and an ever-growing misery.

This pattern has been seen time-and-time again, starting with the classic story of the near failure of the [Plymouth Plantation](http://commoncents.blogwyrm.com/?p=298), to the case of Gravity Falls, where a minimum salary prompted some of the best and most valuable employees to up and leave. Other cases include the Soviet Union, Zimbabwe, and like economic situations. When the profit incentive to work is lost so is the society as a whole.

What is really interesting where the arguments both for and against the Swiss measure as cited by the BBC. On the pro loafing side, the proponents claimed that

<since work was increasingly automated, fewer jobs were available for workers. – Supporters of the Unconditional Swiss Salary>

Okay, let’s think about this for a bit. Who maintains the machines? Perhaps other machines, which are, in turn maintained by still other machines. Switzerland must have machines all the way down. Oh wait! There must be human workers who maintain the machines. And what about improvements? Surely, even the fine country of Switzerland must have problems. Perhaps the supporters of this idea might put their energies into curing cancer, or helping the poor, or… well you get the picture.

Now the fact that there are slackers who want a free lunch presents no surprise. Every society has them. The fact that they were able to mount enough effort to get this measure up to a referendum is mildly unexpected but given Swiss law still not shocking. The real shock came in the governmental response.

The BBC quotes one Luzi Stamm, a supposed right-wing member of parliament as stating

<Theoretically, if Switzerland were an island, the answer is yes. But with open borders, it's a total impossibility, especially for Switzerland, with a high living standard,

If you would offer every individual a Swiss amount of money, you would have billions of people who would try to move into Switzerland. – Luzi Stamm>

Right-wing huh? More like right out to lunch. This quotation is perhaps one of the stupidest things I have ever heard. What does being on an island have to do with it. The [Pilgrims were effectively on an island and their communal economics nearly killed them](http://commoncents.blogwyrm.com/?p=45). And the Earth is the most ideal definition of an island as you can get. Isolated by space, with nobody getting on or off (except by birth and death) the planet has the most perfectly implemented closed borders. So following Stamm’s logic, we should all print ourselves money and, theoretically, it will all work out.

Thank goodness there are still hard working people in Switzerland with some sense in their head. No sooner had this measure’s defeat become news then we started hearing rumors that Washington D.C. was starting to explore the possibility of the same kind of handout. Whether the people of the nation’s capital have sense remains to be seen.

# Milling Around

Arguing about cause and effect is a difficult enterprise even in the best of circumstances. Rarely is it as clean, or as boring, as introductory texts on logic make it out to be. Examples of simple cause and effect – it is raining and therefore the ground is getting wet – are neither controversial nor are they fun. Most everyone agrees on the matter and that’s that. But arguments over new things undiscovered or unseen are one of the best things going. Who isn’t thrilled by the prospect of figuring something out that none else have done?

Interestingly enough, almost all of us use standard methods for arguing from effect to cause. Most likely, we’ve all learned these methods by first watching others apply them and then by next jumping into the game and trying out the methods ourselves. As will be discussed in more detail below, these methods worm themselves into almost every aspect of life; often without our notice. They form the backbone of most editorials, advertisements, and dinner-table arguments. And despite their anonymity, they do have a name: [Mill’s Methods](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mill%27s_Methods).

First codified by John Stuart Mills in his book *A System of Logic* (1843), these methods, which no doubt date back to antiquity, go by the obscure names of:

* Method of Agreement
* Method of Difference
* Joint Method
* Method of Concomitant Variation
* Method of Residues

As unfamiliar as these terms may be to the ear their use and application is familiar to the thinking of anyone who has ever tried to figure out what food at dinner last night didn’t agree with them or some similar scenario. Indeed, many of the examples presented in the community deal with food and indigestion. (In fact, application of Mill’s Methods to epidemiology is the core component of the TV show *House*).

Not wanting to dwell on food related illness (since it is done to death in the literature), I propose illustrating the methods using a more interesting question faced by parents and teachers across the country: what factors contribute to good grades.

Consider a group of 10 students from a local school. After circulating a questionnaire, their teacher compiles a table listing various activities they pursued and the study method they used (written homework or online quizzes). The teacher wants to see what caused half the students to pass where the other half failed and so he looks for a factor that is both necessary and sufficient to explain why the first group passed. He suspects that those students who play video games have been poisoned and that students who avoid this digital scourge are the ones that pass. But being a man of integrity he decides to pursue the answer with an open mind. To do this he employs Mill’s Methods in succession.

To apply the ***Method of Agreement***, he looks to see what features all the passing students have in common. He starts by looking at a subset group composed of Amy, Carl and Walter.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Student** | **Recreation** | **Musical Instrument** | **Teaching Technique** | **Exercise** | **(Pass/Fail)** |
| Amy | Video games | None | Written Homework | None | Pass |
| Carl | Drawing | Piano | Written Homework | Swimming | Pass |
| Walter | Blogging | Clarinet | Written Homework | Yoga | Pass |

He notices that these 3 students have nothing in common in terms of their recreational pursuits, they don’t play the same musical instrument (in fact Amy doesn’t play any), that that they don’t all engage in the same exercise. But all three of them were taught using the same technique of written homework. He concludes that there is very likely possibility that written homework is the cause of their success in the class.

To apply the ***Method of Difference***, he then looks for a pair of students, one who has passed and one who has failed, that have almost everything in common. Any difference between them being a strong indication that it is the cause of success/failure. He finds such a pair in Ben and Stacey.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Student** | **Recreation** | **Musical Instrument** | **Teaching Technique** | **Exercise** | **(Pass/Fail)** |
| Ben | Blogging | Guitar | Online Quizzes | Running | Fail |
| Stacey | Blogging | Guitar | Written Homework | Running | Pass |

Both of them enjoy blogging, play guitar, and exercise by running. The difference between them seems to be that Stacey was required to do written homework while Ben was required to do online quizzes. He concludes that there is a very strong possibility that written homework leads to good grades.

The ***Joint Method*** marries the two approaches together looking for support that this one factor, the teaching technique, is the primary cause of classroom success. To this end, our teacher combines all the students into the following table

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Student** | **Recreation** | **Musical Instrument** | **Teaching Technique** | **Exercise** | **(Pass/Fail)** |
| Amy | Video games | None | Written Homework | None | Pass |
| Ben | Blogging | Guitar | Online Quizzes | Running | Fail |
| Carl | Drawing | Piano | Written Homework | Swimming | Pass |
| Diane | Blogging | None | Online Quizzes | Yoga | Fail |
| Ethan | Drawing | Piano | Online Quizzes | None | Fail |
| Vanda | Video games | Guitar | Written Homework | Yoga | Pass |
| Walter | Blogging | Clarinet | Written Homework | Yoga | Pass |
| Thomas | Video games | Clarinet | Online Quizzes | None | Fail |
| Ursula | Drawing | None | Online Quizzes | Swimming | Fail |
| Stacey | Blogging | Guitar | Written Homework | Running | Pass |

and he notices that in each case, the only factor that correlates with passing or failing, is written homework or online quizzes, respectively. Despite his preconception that video games were dangerous he finds that two of the three students (Amy and Vanda) who play actually passed the course.

The final two of Mill’s Methods deal with matters of degree. They help to answer how much written homework really helps and if there is another factor that might contribute to success. To this end the teacher modifies the table to list the hours each student spends completing their written homework and their GPA.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Student** | **Recreation** | **Musical Instrument** | **Homework Hours per Week** | **Exercise** | **GPA** |
| Amy | Video games | None | 12 | None | 3.8 |
| Carl | Drawing | Piano | 7 | Swimming | 3.5 |
| Vanda | Video games | Guitar | 5 | Yoga | 3.2 |
| Walter | Blogging | Clarinet | 10 | Yoga | 4.0 |
| Stacey | Blogging | Guitar | 8 | Running | 3.6 |

In the case of the ***Method of Concomitant Variation***, the teacher notices that in there is a strong correlation between the number of hours of homework each week and the student’s GPA. Vanda does the least amount of homework each week and she has the lowest GPA. Carl and Stacey are in the middle in terms of time invested in homework and so is their GPA. And finally, Amy and Walter have the highest time spent on homework and the highest GPA. This behavior is a strong indication that requiring students to complete written homework causes students to have high GPAs.

The ***Method of Residues*** helps to point towards additional factors that have not been considered but which contribute to the cause and effect relationship. In the case of the two top performing students, the teacher notices that although Amy spends the greatest amount of time on homework each week she doesn’t have the highest GPA. Of course, this minor difference between her and Walter might be explained in many ways (e.g. her courses are harder). But let’s suppose that the table exhaustively lists all the relevant attributes and that Walter and Amy are in the same class in elementary school so that they see all the same material and are assigned the same homework. Our teacher might be inclined to conclude that either playing a musical instrument or exercising might be the cause of the remaining difference. This method can also be applied to the situation were the differences are a matter of quality rather than quantity.

One of the most famous examples of the application of the Method of Residues was to the motion of the planet Mercury. After all the known contributions of Mercury’s orbit had been accounted by astronomers of the late 1800s there was still a remaining 53 arcseconds/century of precession that could be ascribed to any particular cause. This difference, though small, helped to spur Einstein to create the theory of General Relativity.

While the discussion above was both illustrating and interesting it is hardly the only nor primary application of Mill’s Methods. As [Prof. Dave Beisecker points out on his discussion](https://faculty.unlv.edu/beisecker/Courses/Phi-102/Mills_Methods.htm), Mill’s Methods are used in all sorts of persuasive arguments about products, policies, and the like. I would encourage the reader to visit his page as some of his examples are both educational and laugh-out-loud funny. Consider this gem used to illustrate how the Method of Difference is used in advertising

<Jiffy Squid fries are the best, and you know what the secret is? While the recipe, the potatoes, and everything else is the same as at Burger Thing, the fries at Jiffy Squid are cooked in oil that has been through the crankcase of a '57 Desoto. The result - mmm-mmm fries! – Dave Beisecker>

Of course real life is never so clear cut as the contrived examples seem to imply. But that’s what makes it so fun. Putting one’s skill to the test to find what causes what can lead to amazing discoveries and brings out the best in us.

# YAR’s Revenge?

Please, dear reader, have no worries. I haven’t co-opted this column to provide a review of videogames; even that really fun old Atari game [Yar’s Revenge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yars%27_Revenge). No, in this case, YAR is an acronym standing for ‘Yet Another Reboot’ and it applies to the big new re-alignment and retconning effort that is coming out of DC comics.

According to DC Comics Previews, this effort, known as *Rebirth*, promises to evolve the original universe into something that mixes traditional values with a modern aesthetic.

<insert DC cover art>

The central figure of the DC Comics Previews is not Batman, or Superman, nor is it the Flash or Green Lantern, or anything mythic trope. Rather it is DC’s Chief Creative Officer, Geoff Johns. Johns has been involved in many of the ‘adjustments’ and isolated ‘rebirths’ that DC has carried out in recent memory and he seems to be the central force in this particular one.

<Picture of Johns>

Johns is quoted in both an open letter, printed on page 1, and in the feature article talking about Rebirth on page 3.

In his open letter, Johns says

<”Rebirth” has come to mean something very important to me. It’s not a brand or a marketing tool; it never has been. To me “Rebirth” is about how to approach mythology – about how to honor and celebrate the characters and their respective universes and embrace the values they embody. It’s about the past, the present, and most importantly, the future.

GREEN LANTERN: REBIRTH wasn’t only about the return of Hal Jordan and the Green Lantern Corps. It was building on a great foundation with tales like “Sinestro Corps War” and “Blackest Night” – stories that challenged out heroes, redefined their villains and introduced new threats and adventures built on the core essence of the Green Lantern myth.

And if we were going to do a “Rebirth” across the DC Universe, we needed to take a hard look at where is was now. And a “Rebirth” starts with bringing something back that’s been missing…>

and

<[I]t’s about more than just heroes and villains we might not have seen in a while; it’s about the intrinsic values of what DC Comics and its universe stands for.

That’s epic storytelling.

That’s legacy and honoring the past, while moving it all to the future.

That’s hope.>

<Insert the other pic on the heroes>

That all sounds fine but before taking it at face value it is reasonable to spend some effort putting Rebirth in context.

There are two aspects to the context that are worth considering. The first is the storytelling aspect that Johns mentions, including that piece of the DCU that was/is missing. The second is the business aspect that Johns dismisses with his comments about branding or marketing but which are, nonetheless, important.

The first front – the storytelling aspect – needs to be placed within the real world timeline of the various soft and hard reboots and retcons that DC Comics has published in the last 30 or so years. During this 30 year period, the DCU has been significantly modified 7 times (counting Rebirth). That is approximately once every 4.5 years.

The first, and arguably the best, reboot was the *Crisis on Infinite Earths (CoIE)*. This storyline was a logically driven way to clean up many of the continuity issues that had collected in the DCU for the prior 50 years; although it didn’t quite accomplish this goal.

Since *CoIE*, DC has revisited that event, tweaking and re-tweaking the continuity. The following table summarizes the various efforts.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Series Name*** | ***Years*** | ***Synopsis*** | ***Impact*** |
| [*Crisis on Infinite Earths*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crisis_on_Infinite_Earths) | 1985-1986 | [Krona of Maltus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Krona_(comics)), peers back in time and somehow splits the universe into a multiverse spawning the Monitor and Anti-Monitor. The latter then kills off most of the doppelganger universes before being stopped. | Simplified DC’s 50 year continuity; ended the multiverse; fixed continuity issues.  Violates causality and reason (how can time travel from a future-time multiverse be the cause of the splintering of a the universe in the past?) |
| [*Zero Hour: Crisis in Time*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zero_Hour:_Crisis_in_Time) | 1994 | An insane Hal Jordan, no longer a Green Lantern but now the villain [Parallax](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parallax_(comics)). He tries to undo the destruction of his home of Coast City by tampering with time. Stopped by the collective heroes of the DC Universe resulting in a new timeline. | Follow-up to *Crisis on Infinite Earths*  Cleaned up inconsistent future timelines such as the [*Legion of Superheroes*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legion_of_Super-Heroes). |
| [*Infinite Crisis*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Infinite_Crisis) | 2005-2006 | A group of ‘lost characters’ eliminated in the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* return from a pocket universe into which they had been squirreled away after the simplification.  The Multiverse (original 52 universes) is respawned via the machinations of Alexander Luthor and Superboy-Prime. | Rebuild of the multiverse; prelude to changing/eliminating series;  Lead in to *Final Crisis*. |
| [*Final Crisis*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Final_Crisis) | 2008 | Conflict amongst the [New Gods](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Final_Crisis), causes damage to the DC Universe. [Darkseid](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darkseid) manipulates the DC Universe into essentially being destroyed with a Deus Ex Machina/Superman restoring everything. | A softer reboot which tells the story of the [final saga of the multiverse](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crisis_on_Infinite_Earths#Relationship_to_other_crises_and_possible_nullification). |
| [*Flash Point*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flashpoint_(comics))*/*[*New 52*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_New_52) | 2011 | [Barry Allen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flash_(Barry_Allen)) is the central character here. He awakes to find the DCU similar but clearly different from what he remembers. He finally sets things right but in the process merges the DCU with the [Vertigo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vertigo_(DC_Comics)#Relationship_to_DC_Universe) and WildStorm Universes creating the new 52 parallel universes. | Yet another change in the DC Universe. Launched the New 52.  [WildStorm](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wildstorm_Universe#Earth-50), which had separated from Image is one of the 52 new parallel universes.  New 52 also started with a renumbering of all the titles. Considered a ‘soft reboot’. |
| [*Convergence*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Convergence_(comics)) | 2015 | Braniac gains access to all past/future timelines and alternate realities. He then experiments on the moribund ones for his own ends. | Undoes some of what happens in the original *Crisis on Infinite Earths*.  Ends the *New 52* branding but keeps the *New 52* continuity. |
| [*Rebirth*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DC_Rebirth) | 2016 | Remains to be seen. | Tinkers with *Flashpoint* and maybe unites *Watchmen* universe with the DCU, |

In addition to the links contained in the table above, the interested reader may find the [overview of the ‘*Crisis Trilogy’* by Dan DiDio](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crisis_on_Infinite_Earths#Relationship_to_other_crises_and_possible_nullification), the succinct summary of the retconning that is found in the [overview/background to Convergence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Convergence_(comics)#Background), and James Whitbrook’s post entitled [How to Keep Track of All the Insane Changes DC Comics Has Been Going Through](http://io9.gizmodo.com/catching-up-with-dc-comics-biggest-changes-1749460637) to be helpful.

So what to make of DC’s 30-year evolution? Well, the simplest and least cynical viewpoint seems to be that the original mess of untangling the continuity was a lot harder than anticipated. This conjecture is reasonable since the DCU was strewn with numerous examples of the [three best ways to screw up comics](http://aboutcomics.blogwyrm.com/?p=47). For example, what to make of Earth-2 and so on. Should the reader really care about these doppelgangers?. How can Superboy go forward in time to help the Legion of Superheroes in the 31st century without violating the 20th? And so on it goes. This storytelling devices were (and still remain) quite charming and maybe if continuity didn’t matter (different versions of the story of Oedipus didn’t matter to the Greeks) then it all could have been tolerated. But the instance on logical consistency that opened the door for *CoIE* demands a high cost. Each of the subsequent tweaks is needed to fix some problem in an earlier one and, in turn, each one spawns additional problems.

However, there is a more cynical explanation that deserves some discussion as well. DC is a for-profit company and they need to sell product. Nothing wrong here – capitalism is the backbone of the American way of life. But there is often a pattern in the entertainment industry of eschewing originality and to continue going to the well until it runs dry. [Without much in the way of marketing support](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crisis_on_Infinite_Earths#Crisis_resolution), *CoEI* did extremely well and it was both a commercial and a critical success – it became the proverbial well. This was during a time period when DC ruled the movie circuit (*Superman* franchise, 1978-1987, *Batman* 1989-1995) but was struggling with it comics arm despite some notable exceptions including *Swamp Thing* (1982) and *Watchmen* (1986-1987) under Alan Moore and *Batman: The Dark Knight* (1986). *CoEI* provided a much needed boost to sales and the DCU along with the companion Vertigo imprint soon had DC running high.

I enjoyed the run of almost all their books from *CoEI* until *Zero Hour*. This next tweak was the subsequent trip to the well and the waters were nowhere near as refreshing. Like any stimulus based on solely on an emotional high and adrenaline, the thrills had be more shocking and the scope bigger in order keep the same level of excitement. Each of the following crises continued the escalation leading to the reboot more frequently.

*Rebirth* is just the last in a long line of ‘wash, rinse, repeat’ reboots designed to attract attention – this time by bringing in the one truly critically acclaimed work from DC in recent memory, *The Watchmen*. However, I am not sanguine for its chances of success. I don’t think the mythic content of [Superman and Batman has gotten stale nor do I think that comics can only succeed through escalating novelty](http://kotaku.com/crisis-management-why-dc-comics-is-always-changing-eve-1684714600). Rather I think that there is combination of unimaginative management and uninspired writing that drives this cycle. Meaningful stories that could be told are dropped by the wayside because building a solid narrative requires time and skill. Fortunately, this downward cycle has to stop soon. Ultimately, there won’t be enough time to publish comics with the new status quo before rebooting to the next one. Hopefully, once the dust clears, DC will give up on the reboot gimmick and actually realize the gold mine they have.