

## What If?

Site ponders the great mysteries of life using math, science and silliness

What if you had a degree in physics and used to work on robots at NASA's Langley Research Center, but decided you would rather draw cartoons? What if you could combine your mastery of math and science with your sense of humor to give scientifically sound answers to ridiculous questions? Would you start a webpage called What If?



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InSites

That's what Randall Munroe did. The site, [What-If.xkcd.com](http://What-If.xkcd.com), is actually a section of his main site, [xkcd.com](http://xkcd.com). The main site focuses on his cartoons, which I can't say that I'm a fan of. They're geared too much toward a certain segment of the population so obsessed with technology that I'll just refer to them affectionately as nerds. Plus they're not drawn very well.

### No stupid questions

But his What If? site is engaging, funny, interesting and educational. It's a simple site with a simple premise. Readers submit absurd questions and Mr. Munroe, using

advanced mathematical equations, principles of physics and simple sketches, answers them in a humorous, easy to understand fashion.

Each page on the site is devoted to a single question. Previous and next buttons allow you to go back and forth through all of the questions he's answered so far. An archive link at the bottom of the page lets you browse previously answered questions.

Reading the questions and answers quickly becomes habit forming. Mr. Munroe uses a wonderful blend of logic and humor in his answers that has you marveling at the wonders of the universe one minute and laughing out loud the next.

### Wise guy

No matter how silly the question is, Mr. Munroe attempts to answer it. His solutions often reference the research he does, which is pretty impressive. It seems that being really smart isn't just knowing a lot of stuff, it's also knowing where to find the answers to a lot of stuff. He displays some Spock-like logic just figuring out how to find the answers to the questions.

The site has a simple, effective design. The questions, answers and sketches are

displayed over a background that looks like graph paper. Besides the navigation links, there are also links to his main site and his store. Finally, there's a link to submit questions.

What If? is a silly site where you can easily spend a lot of time browsing through the crazy questions. But it won't feel completely like wasted time because you will actually learn a thing or two.

**KEVIN O'NEILL** is a staff artist for The Times-Tribune. Share your favorite websites and apps with him at [koneill@times-shamrock.com](mailto:koneill@times-shamrock.com).

### What If questions

- What if a rainstorm dropped all of its water in a single giant drop?
- What would happen if everyone on earth stood as close to each other as they could and jumped, everyone landing on the ground at the same instant?
- What if everyone actually had only one soul mate, a random person somewhere in the world?
- Is it possible to build a jetpack using downward firing machine guns?
- When (if ever) did the Sun finally set on the British Empire?

- What if everyone who took the SAT guessed on every multiple-choice question? How many perfect scores would there be?
- From what height would you need to drop a steak for it to be cooked when it hit the ground?
- How many model rocket engines would it take to launch a real rocket into space?
- If the Hubble telescope were aimed at the Earth, how detailed would the images be?
- If you suddenly began rising steadily at one foot per second, how exactly would you die?

Would you freeze or suffocate first? Or something else?

- What is the longest possible sunset you can experience while driving, assuming we are obeying the speed limit and driving on paved roads?
- If a T-rex were released in New York City, how many humans per day would it need to consume to get its needed calorie intake?
- If you went outside and lay down on your back with your mouth open, how long would you have to wait until a bird pooped in it?

