The Emerging Genre of Data Comics

Benjamin Bach  
Harvard University

Nathalie Henry Riche  
Microsoft Research

Sheelagh Carpendale  
University of Calgary

Hanspeter Pfister  
Harvard University

As we rely more and more on data to understand our world, and as problems require global solutions, we need to effectively communicate that data to enable people to make informed decisions.

Visualizations can be effective in showing data, but a single picture alone may not be able to explain nor engage an audience in decoding a message.

There are many ways of data-driven storytelling. One of them being comics. Although comics are familiar to everyone, they are rarely explored for data-driven storytelling.

This comic presents our viewpoint on data comics and how to leverage comics to tell stories with data.
Here, we explore data comics as a new genre, inspired by how comics function, to convey information in data, tell a story, and communicate through visualizations.

Early examples of data comics paved the way...

Four Essential Components of Data Comics

Visualization Flow Narration Words and Pictures

Our goal will be to spot the Island of Data Comics...in the ocean of storytelling.

We believe it is timely to start this journey now. We start exploring different angles, trying to describe what makes data comics special and show their potential.
Data comics are inspired by other visual forms concerned with the presentation of change and sequence.

We call this component visualization, ranging from iconic realistic pictures to abstract and conceptual visualizations.

Realistic | Visualization | Abstract

While all of these pictures are visualizations, not all of them show data.

Data visualizations provide a visual form to something otherwise invisible.

In fact, data does not actually have to exist, nor can we be sure the representation is true.

Data comics can vary in style and detail to support a message.

or use alternative representations to highlight a different point.

A chosen visualization must fit the data, but

most importantly, it must be understood by readers, even those who have never seen a visualization.

Data visualizations are designed to allow for a variety of discoveries and insights:

## Trends

## Relations

## Outliers

## Change

## Clusters

## Comparisons

## Distributions

May/June 2017
In storytelling, it is important that people understand the presented content easily, especially when data and visualizations are complex. Yet, comics offer a fascinating and simple way.

We call this component flow, ranging from an undirected non-explicit flow to a directed flow indicated by the order of the panels.

Undirected ← Flow → Directed

No reading order requires readers to explore by themselves.

Comics can explain complex processes by splitting them into less complex units.

Linear order provides guidance and aids argumentation.

This requires transition.

For example:

Visualization-to-Visualization

Moment-to-Moment

Detail-to-Detail

Level-of-Detail

Data-to-Data

Visualization-to-Context

Message-to-Message

But sometimes, a linear order is not desired or just too simple.
We call this component **narration**, ranging from **factual** array of visualizations to richly **narrated** graphic novels.

A good story has a rhythm, it draws readers in, it immerses.

But most important, it has a message to the world.

Data never comes alone, data always has a context.

Context creates story, which wants to be narrated.

A good narration requires balance.

It can use different types of narrators:

- **Universal**
- **Human**

It makes use of transitions between panels, and separates the important from the detail.

But storytelling is an old art and learning from the masters... can help to create truly dramatic walkthroughs.

May/June 2017
The narrative power of comics comes from pictures and words in symbiosis.

Words can be considered the realm of the verbal:
- the logical
- the sequential
- the abstract
- the learned
- the slow

Pictures can be considered the nonverbal:
- the factual
- the parallel
- the concrete
- the perceived
- the fast

We call this component Word and Picture, ranging from almost entirely verbal, to nonverbal and visual.

In data comics, pictures are mostly visualizations that show evidence in data.

Pictures can be more reference to the logic in the words or can stand alone where no words are required to convey the intention. *Understanding can come from context, but more text may be better than less.*

Words can help understand a picture, explaining and telling us what to look at.

Data comics embrace both words and pictures to create a better understanding.

A combination can mean associating paragraph with pictures or integrating text into pictures, or pictures into text.

 Eventually, text can become more annotations, leaving more space for the visualization and for the observer to explore.

We can show an increase or any other pattern in temporal data. *Other showed soccer games, or the amount of change in data changes in networks and social maps.*

IEEE Computer Graphics and Applications
References


5. E. Segel and J. Heer, “Narrative Visualization: Telling...

Benjamin Bach is a research fellow at the Harvard University School of Engineering and Applied Sciences. Contact him at benj.bach@gmail.com.

Nathalie Henry Riche is a researcher at Microsoft Research. Contact her at nath@microsoft.com.