

Can comic books replace scientific articles?

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Cartoons can give a clearer description of complex scientific issues than a conventional scientific article can, argue researchers.

Scientists need to get rid of the heavy prose and move towards a more graphic approach when they describe their research.

The combination of text and images in a comic book makes it easier to grasp complex scientific issues, such as how computer programming works or how pesticides make their way through nature and into us humans.

So argue two Danish researchers, who are currently applying for funding for an interdisciplinary project – Comicscience: the potential of comics in science and science communication.

“Comic books have the potential to explain complex scientific issues. We aim to examine how we can use comics to map out complex relationships,” said Rikke Cortsen of the Nordic Network for Comics Research at the University of Southern Denmark when she presented the idea at the recent Copenhagen Comics festival.

Cartoons clarify the big picture

Cortsen has found her scientific sidekick in Chris Kjeldsen of the Department of Agroecology at Aarhus University, Denmark.

As part of the ‘academic comics day’, Kjeldsen told the festival audience that their research will primarily be based on comic books, but that they will also include diagrams, maps and other graphic material. These are the visual elements used in most of today’s scientific articles.

However, they argue that unlike a map or a diagram, a cartoon allows the researcher to jump back and forth between many complex processes without confusing the reader.

A regular text can easily become difficult to understand if the information isn’t sufficiently well structured. But in a cartoon, the images help the brain to quickly pick up old threads. For instance, two images of a certain cell can be ‘linked’ even though they appear in different places in the cartoon.

“It is very interesting that we’re capable of forming these connections. This is one of the starting points in a practical demonstration we’re working on,” said Cortsen.

A ‘cartoon template’ for scientists

It is probably unfair to expect many scientists to be brilliant at drawing and also to have a solid understanding of how comics work.

To overcome this hurdle, Cortsen and Kjeldsen are working with professional comic book artists to develop

what they call templates for how to take on the challenge.

With this novel way of working with their data, scientists may even discover entirely new correlations and, ultimately, the comics genre may thus become incorporated into the scientific process.

“We expect that comic book artists will be able to contribute to the story development in a way that helps the reader to grasp the scientific issues. We hope this can ultimately help us find some simpler ways of solving scientific problems,” said Cortsen.

Cartoon explains computer science

Kjeldsen said that they are starting more or less from scratch. Very few scientists have tried to disseminate their research using this medium. One of these is the cartoons researcher Scott McCloud, who is the man behind one of the standard works in comics research, ‘Understanding Comics’.

“Scott McCloud made the comic book part of the scientific process. In ‘Understanding Comics’, he examines the comics genre in a comic book format,” said Kjeldsen.

“He does something similar in his ‘[Google Chrome Comics](#)’ [6], which provides an overview of the various elements of computer science. He explains the object models in programming in a way that makes it not only understandable, but also fascinating.”

[Read the Danish version of this article at videnskab.dk](#) [7]

 [Not many scientists have tried using comics as a way of disseminating their research. The few who have tried have typically been comics researchers. But now two Danish researchers encourage scientists from other fields to also start presenting their scientific articles in a cartoon format. \(Cartoon: Scott McCloud, 'Understanding Comics'\)](#) [8]

 [mccloudontime.jpg](#) [9]

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Dann Vinther

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