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Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators
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Inspire with comics

Joaquim Baptista used comics in three different situations, and explains why and how you could use comics yourself.

"An image is worth a thousand words. Why can't you draw me that picture? Or create a five-minute video to replace those manuals?"

I have heard similar sentences over the years. Although a good image may make me think of a thousand words, I could never take a thousand words from a manual and create an image that expressed the same detail. And, as a technical communicator and engineer, the challenge is not to do it once, but to do it repeatedly.

However, I have used comics in three different situations to inspire students, buyers, and partners. The comics did not replace the training or manuals, but they provided a fun and inspiring overview of the products.

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Complexity at Altitude Software

I worked at Altitude Software between 1997 and 2014. During those 17 years, Altitude Software evolved its suite of software products for contact centres.

Each customer would have a subset of the software suite installed on its own servers, configured in a customised way, and integrated with its own telephony switches and existing software. Typically, Altitude Software staff would integrate and set up a system as needed, and then train supervisors and system administrators to run and re-configure the system when necessary. Larger customers would send their staff to Altitude Software for product training, which over the years grew to a total of 19 days, with 5 days dedicated to supervisors and system administrators.

Contact centres that suffered from poor rates of staff retention often refused to send new supervisors for classroom training. Therefore, new supervisors at small contact centres would often lack the skills to recognise situations that the software could handle.

In 2006, I attended a presentation by Kevin Cheng at the SHiFT conference in Portugal. Kevin was a user experience designer at Yahoo, exploring how new digital services could change the behaviour of people in the real world. Kevin explained how he used comics to help project stakeholders visualise the effect of proposed features on customers.

I came away from the presentation with the feeling that comics could raise the awareness of supervisors on what Altitude Software could do for them. But, at the time, the idea just stayed dormant because I had no immediate way to act on that insight.

Motivation for lessons at Altitude Software

Chance dictated that Patrícia Magrinho would join the team in 2010 as an illustrator. At the end of 2012, we started to explore comics, with the help of the new Kevin Cheng (2012) book published by Rosenfeld Media. We strived to create comics that looked professional, that would be politically correct, and that would be accepted by the company and by the customers worldwide (Baptista 2014). Some unexpected difficulties shaped the final result. For example, Patrícia could not draw the human face, so the comics grew into abstract, artistic and, dare I say, universal representations as shown in Figure 1.

Since training for supervisors was already chunked into meaningful and tested lessons, we started to create comic strips for the concepts of each lesson. Comic strips typically depicted the experience of callers and agents in specific scenarios, or showed the impact of some specific configuration. After two years as a side project, we had 34 comic strips.

I decided to use the comic strips at the beginning of each lesson, together with the learning objectives. Trainers reported that the comics engaged the students into sharing and discussing their personal experiences before delving into how the software could help with the situation described.

I left Altitude Software before I could explore how to incorporate the comics into the more traditional documentation and online help.

Figure 1. Comic panel at Altitude Software

Product overview at Thales

I worked at Thales during 2016 as an outsourcer, on a business unit that created software to manage announcements to public transportation passengers. The software was installed in national and metropolitan train networks' management systems.

After documenting the staff user interface and some configuration files, Thales asked me to create a 10-page overview of the software. I set out to explain how the software improved the experience of staff and travellers:

1. I used the user interface and the configuration files to enumerate features.
2. I identified the impact of each feature on travellers, staff, and the overall organisation.
3. I used the approach of Dan Roam (2008) to create a diagram for each audience with the features affecting that audience.
4. A professional illustrator converted my hand-drawn diagrams into very detailed professional drawings.

The final document had one section for each audience. Each section started with a diagram that organised a relevant subset of features, and then explained the features in more detail.

As the document gained form, it dawned on me that I could craft a story that showcased most features. This would sit better with Thales who did not care for comics, but that looked forward to a short video that could promote the product.

I developed a storyboard by putting together a series of decisive moments that showed the software at work:

1. A passenger makes a series of everyday transportation decisions with the help of automated announcements.
2. A pipe breaks and starts flooding an underground platform.
3. Emergency announcements direct passengers to evacuate the platform.
4. Staff react and use the software to divert passengers away from the flooding platform.

The draft comic panel in Figure 2 shows the moment when the pipe breaks.

The illustrator turned the storyboard into a short animated video, with further input from the client. However, due to a lack of cinema direction skills, the video failed to draw attention to the decisive details and was ineffective.

Business processes at Farfetch

I have been working at Farfetch since late 2016. Farfetch is a fashion retail and technology company with unique capabilities. While customers see just an online store, Farfetch employs thousands of people and a network of suppliers to fulfil orders and engage customers through digital marketing.

As a new joiner, I felt the immediate need for a detailed overview of the Farfetch business capabilities and their interactions.

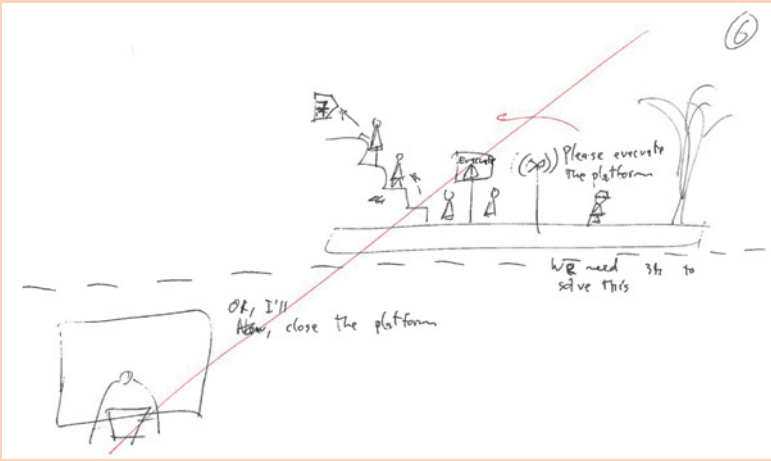

Figure 2. Draft panel for storyboard at Thales

In June 2017, after documenting the API (application programming interface) that supports the buying process, I took a day to draw some comics explaining the buying process as experienced by the customer. For each step, I picked a name and drew a single panel.

I had no access to a professional illustrator, so I just drew the comics myself with pen and paper, as shown in Figure 3. If the comics worked, I figured that Farfetch would eventually provide the illustrator.

The initial reaction from my boss was scepticism: "*You can draw those comics, as long as you keep meeting the other milestones*". Again, comics became a side project. It took eleven days over the next six months to grow the initial dozen panels into 58 panels. For most of the panels, I had some textual explanations that added business detail.

In November 2017, I printed the comics as a 16-page A5 booklet and started to distribute copies as I talked to people. The reaction was amazing, and my boss became a believer and

Figure 3. Comic strip at Farfetch

champion for the comics. My hand-drawn panels were praised internally and were seen as good enough for internal use, even though they were supposed to be a raw draft.

Following on, it took 17 days over the next year to reach 75 panels, and to incorporate the comics into the online help. From each comic panel, readers can navigate to related programming tutorials or parts of API reference.

Neither the documentation nor the comics are currently available publicly. However, Farfetch has been using the comics as part of the negotiation process with partners, as a means to convey what Farfetch does.

Figure 4. Running man

Figure 5. Dog

Why are comics effective?

Will Eisner was the first scholar to study comics. His ground-breaking book (Eisner 1985) was the result of his lectures at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. He defined comics as sequential art: words and art placed in a sequence.

Comics are a universal form of communication, more easily understood and older than words (Cheng 2012). Kevin Cheng regards cave paintings as the oldest form of comics. For example, Figure 4 shows a running stick man that is both easy to draw and easy to understand.

The balloon in Figure 5 is also quite universal. Kevin had a colleague with a similar figure on a t-shirt. Surprisingly, his two-year son understood the figure and laughed without the need for any explanation.

Comics can abstract the unimportant details, encouraging the reader to focus on the areas of the story that are most important (Cheng 2012). The imagination of the reader readily provides the missing detail.

Kevin tells a story when Yahoo was exploring how an online list of local services might influence the behaviour of people. This was an innovation at the time, and Kevin was using comics to convey the user journey. A particular panel had a person using a mock-up of a web page, similar to the left side of Figure 6. Reviewers would invariably start arguing about details of the mock-up that were completely irrelevant to the user journey.

Figure 6. Mock-up and imagination

Figure 7. Expression in faces

Reviewers stopped being distracted when Kevin replaced the web page mock-up with just the functionality needed at the panel, as shown on the right side of Figure 6.

Comics can express emotions just by changing the eyebrows and mouth in a face (Cheng 2012). In Figure 7:

- Only the mouth changes in the first line of faces.
- Only the eyebrows change in the second line of faces.

By combining words with simple facial expressions and body gestures, comics can provide more meaning than either words or pictures alone. In Figure 8, note how the faces change the interpretation of the same text.

Figure 8. Faces and words

I don't draw expressions, because the first designer that I worked with could not draw faces at the time (Baptista 2014). Faceless comics can be made to work in simple situations, and Randal Munroe shows how characters with the most limited expression can explain complex topics

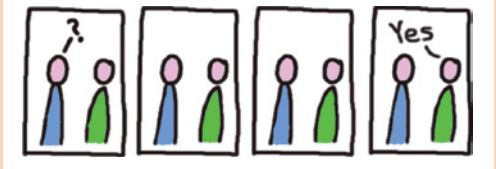

Figure 9. Time

(Munroe 2006). However, you probably need faces and emotion to show the aftermath of a Hurricane (Sou and Cei Douglas 2019).

Comics can express time through the creative use of white space, panel size, and reference points (Cheng 2012). Figure 9 repeats panels to express time.

At Farfetch, I try to concentrate on the 'moment of truth' that captures the essence of change. In particular, I need each panel to stand on its own, so that each may be used as a starting place for further navigation.

Can technical communicators make comics?

Finding the right illustrations is definitely part of technical communication, and comics can be a systematic way to create illustrations.

How can communicators make the right comic panels? Instead of creating boring stories about abstract technical stuff, create engaging stories about people interacting with the product:

1. Enumerate the features to convey.
2. Identify the different people affected by each feature.
3. Identify the effect of each feature in each kind of person.
4. Identify before and after situations, or look for change.
5. Collect the situations, the actions, and the actors.
6. Craft stories and panels that show people experiencing the change.
7. Add captions and just enough dialogue to make the comics stand on their own.

Most people, especially those that stopped drawing soon after kindergarten, believe that others would laugh at their drawings. However, given the right story and the right panels, even childish doodles (Munroe 2006) will work. You can always get a professional illustrator later to revamp your doodles into art (Sou and Cei Douglas 2019).

Good comic (Figure 10) panels instantly convey a message through the effective combination of situation, actors, action and dialogue. Different parts of the brain perceive different aspects of the comic (Roam 2008) in a way that engages the reader.

Figure 10. Perhaps a good panel

Figure 11. Probably a bad panel

Bad comic panels (Figure 11) tell instead of showing. Comic strips become a sequence of talking heads with long dialogues. It is even worse when a single head engages in a monologue.

Most technical concepts impact people somehow, and technical communicators are uniquely equipped to bridge the gap between the product and the people experiencing the product.

Google surprised everyone by using a 40-page graphic booklet to introduce the Chrome web browser (McCloud 2008). Would you like to surprise your audience in the same way? C

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Joaquim Baptista is a senior technical writer at Farfetch. Joaquim has documented large and evolving software products that require industrial writing instead of just writing craftsmanship, since 1997. Before tackling documentation, Joaquim worked as trainer, programmer, system administrator, and academic researcher.

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