

Comic-style documents and information design

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Illustrations produced by Jan Pitkäsalo

Introduction

One way of making complex documents more accessible for their users is to turn them into comics. Comic contracts – legally binding employment contracts presented as comics – were developed by attorney Robert de Rooy in South Africa in 2014.¹ In addition to employment contracts, comic-style documents have been used, for instance, in fields of medicine and technical communication. In this article, we present our own work with comics produced for social welfare communication.

We consider the production of comic-style documents as *information design*. In other words, our focus is on the users of the documents. To create a comic-style document that is as accessible as possible to its users, the illustrations and the overall comics' design aim to

- make content *simple*
- make information *meaningful* for a particular user
- help the user *navigate* through a complex document

The design is informed by questions such as: *Who are the users of the document? What do the users need to know and do based on the information they gather from the document?*

One of the challenges in creating comic-style documents is that images are more *concrete* than text. For instance, one of our examples below discusses illustrating the word *parent*. The word can refer to any gender, any age, and any physical appearance, but the illustrator needs to choose certain characteristics for the parent in the images. In a sense, the illustrations are visual examples of what the text could mean. A lot of decision making is involved in the process. In this article, we present examples of such decision making from one of our own comics projects.

Contract for supervised exchange

Our examples are from a comic-style document that we have created in collaboration with *The Finnish Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters*, which is a child welfare organization that helps children and families in difficult and insecure situations.

The documents we have converted into comics involve their services that support child–parent contact in difficult situations. The first is a contract for a supervised exchange of a child from one parent to another, needed, for instance, in conflicted divorce/separation situations where parents cannot be in the same room at all. The second is a contract for supervised visitations, where a parent and child only meet at a supervised facility, due to, for instance, the substance abuse or mental health



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¹ See Haapio, Plewe and de Rooy “Next generation deal design: Comics and visual platforms for contracting” in *Networks. Proceedings of the 19th International Legal Informatics Symposium IRIS 2016*).



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issues of the parent. The contracts are signed by the parents and a supervisor who represents the federation. In this article, we present examples selected from the supervised exchange contract. It includes the instructions of the exchange and the rules of the exchange facility. These details outline how the exchange happens, what is allowed and what is not at the exchange facility and what should be done, if, for example, one of the parties is late for the exchange. The contract also contains some references to the law and other legal documents, for instance, a court decision.

Transforming contract text into comics

A comic contract typically includes both images and text in plain language. Images and other visuals such as flow charts are great for depicting actions and processes, but some details need to be expressed in writing for the comic to be unambiguous and legally valid.

Creating the comic starts with deciding the most important turning points, moments, and actions that will be depicted in the comic panels. We recommend having both content experts and the visual artist involved in deciding the contents and overall style of the comic.

Characters

One of the first decisions that needs to be made when creating the comic is how to depict the characters. There are some important aspects to discuss when deciding on how the characters look like:

- Are the characters human?
- Are they realistic or artistic and stylized?
- What are their physical characteristics?
- How old are they?
- How is gender presented?

These questions may also stimulate debate because the characters need to stand for a diverse readership. The following are examples of the characters we created for the example comic. These characters appear throughout the comic contract in different scenarios. These scenarios represent the rules of the exchange service as well as the consequences of the parents' problematic behavior.

The separated parents who sign the contract are represented in the comic as a female and a male character (the mother is the blond-haired person in the second image and the father is the dark-haired person in the first image and the drunken dark-haired person). This heteronormative family structure does not represent all families, of course, but it represents most of the clients who need the support services of our project partner. We aimed to depict the child and the exchange supervisor (the dark-haired person in the second image and the person protecting the child in the third image) in a gender-neutral manner.



Creating a story

The contents of the document are often transformed into a story or a *narrative* when creating a comic-style document (for instance, a certain character carries out different steps of a process in a particular order). In addition to rewriting the document text into plain language, creating the narrative may require adding text that isn't a part of the original document. An example of such text is the character's speech, typically presented in speech bubbles. This text helps the reader understand the story – and hence the document contents – better.

The following is an example from the beginning of our comic contract. The contract text has been rewritten into a story where the father arrives at the exchange facility for the first time to get to know the place. The story then goes on to present how the exchange of the child takes place in practice.

In these four panels, the father arrives at the exchange facility. He is welcomed by the exchange supervisor in the third panel. In the fourth panel, the supervisor offers him coffee and tea, and the father asks for coffee.



Visual examples

The illustration of the contract contents requires a lot of decision making. All activities, no matter how simple, can be visually represented in countless different ways. The following panel is the illustration of a part of the contract that states that both parents and the children visit and get to know the exchange facility before starting the service.

This information could have been illustrated in various ways, depicting either one of the parents and/or the child, doing different things (entering the facility, leaving the facility, doing a range of different things at the facility). Our decision was to include the supervisor and the child sitting on the floor, looking at a book, and having a good time. Our aim was to depict a cosy, friendly atmosphere. Our partners at the federation felt that this could ease some of the prejudices and fears their clients often have before starting the service.



In a way, the image is an *example* of what the sentence can mean. It is one of the possible activities that sentence can refer to. Visual examples are also needed for illustrating ideas that are more abstract. The following image is the illustration for a part of the contract that discusses unforeseen and acute reasons that might suddenly cause the cancellation of the exchange.



The image shows the child lying in bed with a thermometer in his or her mouth. It is only one of the possible situations that might lead to the exchange being cancelled, but it serves as an example.

Symbols

Abstract ideas and concepts can sometimes be illustrated with visual symbols – small images that become established to mean certain things. A judge’s gavel is an example of a symbol. In our comic contract it is used as an illustration in part that discusses a court decision and articles of law.

The names of the exact clauses of law, naturally, need to be included in writing for the contract to be unambiguous. Yet using the gavel as a visual symbol can help the reader orient the reader: it suggests that this part of the contract discusses something that is related to law. This can be particularly helpful for readers who are not fluent in the language of the document (Finnish, in our case).

Conclusion

A lot of decision making goes into creating comic-style documents. There seldom is only one, “correct” way of creating an illustration. The process of creating the illustrations needs to start and end with the consideration of the target audience: why are they reading the document, and what do they need it for? Simplicity and comprehensibility are more important than artistic intent.



All in all, comic contracts and other comic-style documents hold great potential as a form of plain language. The medium is particularly useful for illiterate or low-literate readers, or readers who are not fluent in the language of the particular document.

The comic contract introduced in the article can also benefit the children who use the supervised exchange service: the comic shows the child what will and what will not happen at the facility and assures the child that they will be taken care of the whole time.

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