

**Nigel Holmes**

Owner, explanation graphics, westport, USA



Nigel Holmes does explanation graphics. He graduated from The Royal College of Art in 1966, and worked for newspapers and magazines in England until 1977, when he was hired by Time Magazine in New York.

As Graphics Director of Time, his pictorial explanations of complex subjects gained him many imitators and some academic enemies. To this day he remains committed to the power of pictures and humor to help readers understand abstract numbers and difficult scientific concepts.

After 16 years, Time gave him a sabbatical, and he never went back. Now he explains things to and for a wide variety of clients, including Apple, GE, United Healthcare, Nike and the Smithsonian Institution, and he continues to do graphics for publications such as The Atlantic, Harper's and The New York Times.

He's written six books on aspects of information design. Wordless Diagrams, first published in the US 2005, now has Chinese, German, Dutch and Swedish editions (probably because there are no words to translate.) A book-length interview with Steven Heller, Nigel Holmes on Information Graphics was published in 2007.

With his son Rowland, he makes short animated films. The latest, on Vampire Energy, was produced for Earth Day 2008, in collaboration with Good magazine.

He has lectured in India, Japan, Brazil, Singapore, and all over Europe and the United States.

**A Place for Humour and Wit in Information Graphics**

Abstract:

The idea that designers should avoid using humour or wit in datagraphics is promoted by those who see graphic explanations as inherently serious subjects. Their theory is that lightening the load of understanding trivializes subject matter.

Of course humour is not appropriate for many subjects, but that does not mean it should be shunned in other cases.

Wit has been defined as the ability to perceive and express in an ingeniously humorous manner the relationship between seemingly incongruous or disparate things. In simpler words: wit is putting things in interesting contexts.

Since much data is best understood through context, wit clearly has a role in explanations. (It's not just: "How big is that number?" but instead: "How big is it compared to other, perhaps unexpected numbers?")

Most of all, there's a place for humour in information design just because it's fun. Readers, web users, viewers of all media like to smile. And if the designer can make someone smile, the job of educating and helping the intended audience is well under way. Readers are more likely to understand the subject matter if they are relaxed and happy, rather than feeling they are plodding through homework.

This paper/presentation will show examples of humour and wit in information design; some of them successful, some not, even some that do trivialize the subject matter!

Humouring readers—indulging, pleasing, satisfying them—can be a powerful tool when it comes to helping them understand.