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The Revenge of Tintin? Belgium Plots a Comic- Book Comeback

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Lawmakers and artists are looking to make the country the capital of the speech-bubble industry again.



Don Duncan

During the recent annual Belgian Comic Book Festival, enormous balloon characters paraded down the main streets of Brussels. Roadrunner sauntered along, followed by a bouncy SpongeBob SquarePants. And yet something was missing. None of the gigantic,

parading balloons were of a Belgian cartoon character.

That fact might come as a surprise to anyone familiar with Belgium's reputation as the "home of the comic book." The title has its roots in the 1920s, when Belgian artists started to blaze a trail of innovation in comic-book art. They invented the speech bubble, for example, as well as the drawing technique called "*Ligne Claire*" (or "clear line"), which moved comic books from cartoonish blobs of color to a sharper kind of realism. Belgians also debuted the weekly comic-strip-magazine format with titles like *Spirou* and *Tintin* selling, at one point, as many as 250,000 copies each a week. Today, though, those achievements are a fading memory, even as the country's comic-book creators eye a comeback.

Tintin, which still sells more than a million comic books a year worldwide, was the industry leader between the '20s and the '70s. It helped position Belgium as No. 1 in comic books, producing about 80 percent of all comics in Europe by the 1970s. But by the 1980s, Belgium had become a victim of its own initial successes.

"*Tintin* and other big Belgian comics couldn't reinvent themselves because they had developed a very clear, loyal fan base, and they were also trapped in a very Catholic Belgium at the time," says Thierry Bellefroid, a comic book critic and historian. "This is how Belgium got its market share eaten up, initially by new, edgier French comics."

It was not only French comic-strip magazines like *Pilote* that began to nudge Belgium aside. American publishing giants like DC and Marvel also began to impinge on Belgium's European sales. More recently, new

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centers of comic art innovation, like Japan and Argentina, have emerged. And as Western economies globalized, most of the Belgian publishing houses were bought up by multinationals, so that today, the business-side of the comic-book industry is mainly controlled from Paris or London.

Sales among these comic-book publishing majors have been on the decline for the past five to 10 years, accentuated by the Eurocrisis. Most of the erstwhile Belgian leaders in the weekly comic-magazine format have folded, with just *Spirou* remaining, and even its sales have dropped from 280,000 a week in the early 1990s to just 150,000 today.

In order to bolster their bottom line, many of the publishers have adopted the policy of simply creating more and more titles a year to slow the decline of overall sales. Some publishers, like Casterman (a Belgian imprint of French publishing giant Flammarion), have refocused on their core titles, like *Tintin*.

"Our strategy is to open new revenue streams and generate new readers by working with other industries, such as Hollywood," says Jean-Philippe Thivet, Casterman's head of marketing. While Steven Spielberg 2011 *Tintin* movie didn't bring direct revenues to Casterman, it served as a valuable opportunity to reinvigorate the franchise's market appeal. "The film repositioned *Tintin* as No. 1 in sales," Thivet says. "We managed to convince *Tintin* fans to complete their collections of the books, but we also managed, through the film, to gain a new readership, and to put Tintin back in the hands of kids again."

The Belgian government is also fighting back by attempting to position the country as a center of innovation and excellence for the rest of the industry. In 2007, it set up the Comic Book Commission, a department in the Ministry of Culture with an annual budget of \$170,000. The commission funds 30 to 40 new projects a year with the aim of advancing technical and aesthetic aspects of comic-book publishing in

Belgium. The goals of the initiative go beyond mere paper and ink.

"The symbolic element of all this is that it helps the comic strip emerge from the category of subculture or subgenre," says Commission Director Bruno Merckx. "A comic-book author is a literary author in his own right."

After five years of such state support, signs of success are beginning to show. GrandPapier.org, a small Belgian comic-book publishing house that receives grant money from the commission, is trying to capitalize on the next frontier in comics publishing: the Internet.

The group started with a comic book-dedicated website five years ago. Grandpapier.org works both as a platform for artist-authors to publish their work and for readers to access new work, electronically.

Belgium invented the speech bubble, the "clear line," and the weekly comic-strip-magazine format.

The website has 400 visitors a day and has published some 2000 comic book stories to date. But creating that platform is only the beginning, its founders say. The site's technology now is such that its comics must be read directly from the site, and can't be shared, reposted, or transferred to other devices like tablets, smart phones, or e-readers. While novels have the e-book, comic books do not yet have a digital equivalent, and so Grandpapier.org hopes to develop a digital format that will be adopted as a standard by the industry.

"We are trying to see how we can automatically generate digital formats

from comic stories posted to our site," says Grandpapier.org founder Sacha Goerg. "That way people can either go on Grandpapier.org to read a comic or download a comic book as an e-comic."

If Belgium succeeds in developing an e-comic standard, and implementing its other innovations, it will once again play a crucial role in the global comic book industry. It may be a big "if," but considering the country's history and culture, it may not be so far-fetched.

"There is no reason why we won't have more great authors because we have very good [comic book art] schools and these schools discover many new and interesting talent," Bellefroid says. "On the creative level, the innovations that have been started here aren't yet finished yet, but they are in the process of changing the comic book market."

So if all goes right, parading down the streets of Brussels in years to come will be new balloon figures—ones that were dreamed up not too far away.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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