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## Home to Tintin and Smurfs, Belgium looks to reinvigorate comic industry

The 'home of the comic book,' Belgium wielded outsized influence in the comics industry until the 1980s. Now it's trying to regain that sway via government-supported innovation.

By Don Duncan, Contributor | OCTOBER 29, 2012



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BRUSSELS — It may now be dominated by American superheros and Japanese manga, but the comic book industry was once associated with no country more than Belgium (/tags/topic/Belgium). Through much of the last century, this small, Western European nation played an outsized role in shaping comics through iconic characters like Tintin and the Smurfs.

But over the past few decades, the industry has fallen on hard times. Now, Belgium is fighting to regain its influence by positioning itself as a center of innovation and excellence for the rest of the industry.

“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 much new and interesting talent,” says Thierry Bellefroid, a comic book critic and historian.

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“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.”

### 'Home of the comic book'

In the industry, Belgium is referred to 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. They debuted the weekly comic strip magazine format with titles like Spirou and Tintin, selling, at one point, as many as 250,000 copies each week.




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The Belgian comic book became so famous and established because of the success of Tintin,” says Mr. Bellefroid.

Tintin, which still sells more than 1 million comic books a year worldwide, was the industry leader between the 1920s and the 1970s. It helped position Belgium as No. 1 in comic books, a country 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 Bellefroid. “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, but American comic-book publishing giants like DC and Marvel (/tags/topic/Marvel+Entertainment+Inc.) also began to impinge on Belgium’s European market share. More recently, new centers of comic art innovation, like Japan (/tags/topic/Japan) and Argentina (/tags/topic/Argentina), have emerged.

In parallel, 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 its sales have dropped from 280,000 a week in the early 1990s to just 150,000 today.

## Going digital...

The government set up the Comic Book Commission in 2007, 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 merely 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 on the once-stagnant Belgian comic-book landscape. GrandPapier.org, a small Belgian comic book publishing house that receives grant money from the Comic Book Commission, is trying to move the comic book into 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 comic book artists to publish their work and for comic book readers to access new work, electronically.

The website has 400 visitors a day and has published some 2,000 comic book stories to date. But creating such a Web platform is only the beginning, its founders say. The site uses a kind of streaming technology to display its comic strips and this means that the comics must be read



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"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."

## ...and going Hollywood

To bolster their bottom line, many of the publishers have adopted the policy of simply creating more and more titles a year in a bid to slow the decline of overall sales. Some publishers, like Casterman (a Belgian comic book imprint of French publishing giant Flammarion), have adopted the strategy of focusing on 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 (/tags/topic/Steven+Spielberg)'s 2011 film of Tintin didn't bring direct revenues to Casterman, it served as a valuable opportunity to bump up book sales. "The film repositioned Tintin as No. 1 in sales," says Mr. Thivet.

"We managed to convince Tintin fans to complete their collections of the books," he adds, "but we also managed, through the film, to gain a new readership, and to put Tintin back in the hands of kids again and this is great news."

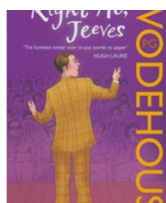
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