



The Visual Miscellaneum: A Colorful Guide to the World's Most Consequential Trivia

by David McCandless
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A review by Ron Kaminski

When asked “Just what is a computer capacity planner?” I often respond with “Just think of us as machine to human translators.” The trouble is that many of the things that may be obvious to capacity planners from a table of numbers are sometimes really hard to convey to management or project leaders, so I am constantly searching for new, often graphical, techniques. I consider the work of [Edward Tufte](#)¹ to be the finest examples of how to think about graphics that clearly and accurately convey information. His one day courses, taught around the nation, are the single best use of your training budget that I can recommend. When I saw this book on his recommended list, I rushed out to buy it.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then *The Visual Miscellaneum: A Colorful Guide to the World's Most Consequential Trivia* may well be a set of encyclopedias. The author purposely sheds many conventions of the text publishing world in order to pursue a graphical way to portray the same information and succeeds beautifully on many pages. Even his bibliography has pictures of recommended books accompanying text to keep to the theme. Given the technological shifts that have made graphics so much easier to design and use, this may well be one of the first of a much more visual style of publishing and, if so, I say hurrah!

This book is fascinating. It’s graphically intense style draws people in. I’ve lent the book to others and found each reader loves different graphics! Clearly, not all of the style ideas are applicable to portraying computer consumption information, but there are some great examples that can bust you out of an Excel graphics rut and into new ways of conveying information. For example, I particularly recommend the graphics about “Types of Facial hair” on despotic rulers and the notes on how many each may have killed. My family spent a hilarious time matching the facial hair archetypes to people we knew. There is a “Behind Every Great Man...” section on dictator’s wives and their peccadilloes. Particularly striking was a section called “Some things You Can’t Avoid” which outlined ailments you can get or which seem to be less likely from various behaviors. Each of these examples “busted my frame” of limitations on how to use space, color and context.

Could all of this data be shown in text? Sure, but I bet that I wouldn’t have read it. If your goal is to transfer information to decision makers, getting them to even look is very important. The best graphics draw the reader in, making them want to explore further. This enthusiasm leads to increased perception and is one of the reasons that I insist on graphical portrayal of capacity planning results. As my patient editor points out, how often are you hearing from management that they want “dashboards”? They want your results in ways that they can accurately perceive very quickly. Graphics are often the answer.

Is the book flawless? No. Anyone who has made graphics of any complexity knows that is nearly impossible when there are a lot of them (I've certainly found plenty of mistakes in early versions of my graphics over the years). A few nits here or there do not materially detract from so much that works so well. Indeed the few nits mentioned by other online reviewers are a testament to how intensely they studied the information, the hallmark of great graphics working well, and they will very likely be edited away in future versions. One of the key reviewer gripes, about size issues in the billions graphic, [is now updated](#)ⁱⁱ. Where I believe the book succeeds so brilliantly is in stepping away from the "text is everything" mantra and using visual cues to convey more information faster than words alone ever could. It may well be the first example of a seismic shift in publishing. If so, I say "I can't wait!

You don't have to wait either. You can go to the [author's web site](#)ⁱⁱⁱ to see some great examples. Go to "Visualizations" section and explore graphics both from the book and some of his other work, as well as great examples of other's work. His passion for great graphics conveying information is clear and infectious.

Anyone who has worked with me or seen my sessions already knows that I'm a tremendous graphics fan (some would say maniac). I will code for weeks to be able to produce the proper graphic consistently for my users. I urge you to curl up with this book and let your explorations not only lead you to intellectual stimulation about the topics, but also to think about how you might change your outputs, at work, at CMG, and in other parts of your life to a more graphical interaction with your audiences. Just be sure to have picky pals and editors to check your graphics and listen to their comments!

Ron Kaminski, June 25, 2010

ⁱ <http://www.edwardtufte.com/tufte/index>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.informationisbeautiful.net/visualizations/the-billion-dollar-o-gram-2009/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.informationisbeautiful.net/>