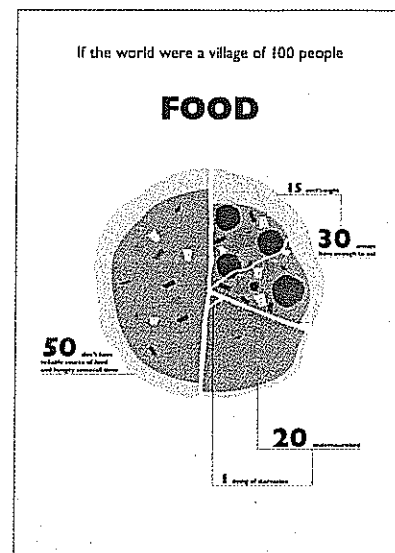
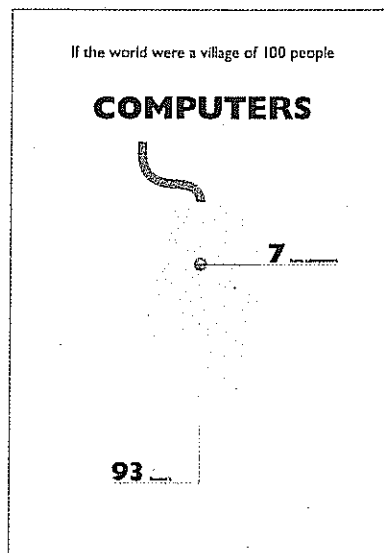
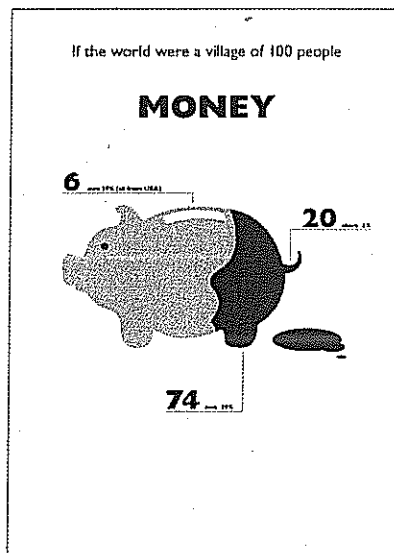


VISUALIZING ECONOMICS

Interview with Katherine Mulbrandon

Andy Moore



Katherine Mulbrandon created the website: www.visualizingeconomics.com and attracted a whole lot of attention! She directs her passion for graphic design and economics with a unique flair. You could be doing something like this...

What ignited your passion for economics?

When I was in college trying to decide on a major, my mother (who worked as a physicist) took some Economics classes to indulge her own curiosity in the subject. So it was through discussing economics with her that I became interested myself.

How did you develop your skills in graphical illustrations?

My first job out of college was at a financial consulting firm where I created Excel graphs and learned about the financial markets. But it was at the School of Design at Carnegie Mellon that I learn about graphic, information and interaction design. For my Master's thesis, I created a series of posters presenting data about the United States' economy but also studied Jacques Bertin's "Semiology of Graphics" in order to understand how to maintain the integrity of the data when you make a chart, graph or map.

Do you see yourself as an activist or a messenger?

I liked to think of myself as a messenger but given that economics can be such a politically-charged subject, simply by presenting economic data in a straightforward way can challenge other people's agenda.

You have prepared some wonderful historical illustrations of income tax policy settings. Why is it important for people to understand tax issues?

Taxes can have a powerful effect on a country's economy creating incentives and disincentives for different behaviors but it can also effect the overall distribution of wealth in that society. Many of the political debates in the U.S. are over tax policy yet there is very little understanding of the tax system as a whole. People may understand the tax rates they pay but not how it relates to what everyone else pays, which makes the debate over tax policy very susceptible to distortion.

How did you develop your craft of statistical economic research?

I studied statistics in college but I leave most of the analysis to experts working in government agencies and academics who collect the data. What I try to do is make sure the sources I use are reliable (they are transparent in their methodology and their data has been reviewed) and that I understand exactly what is being measured.

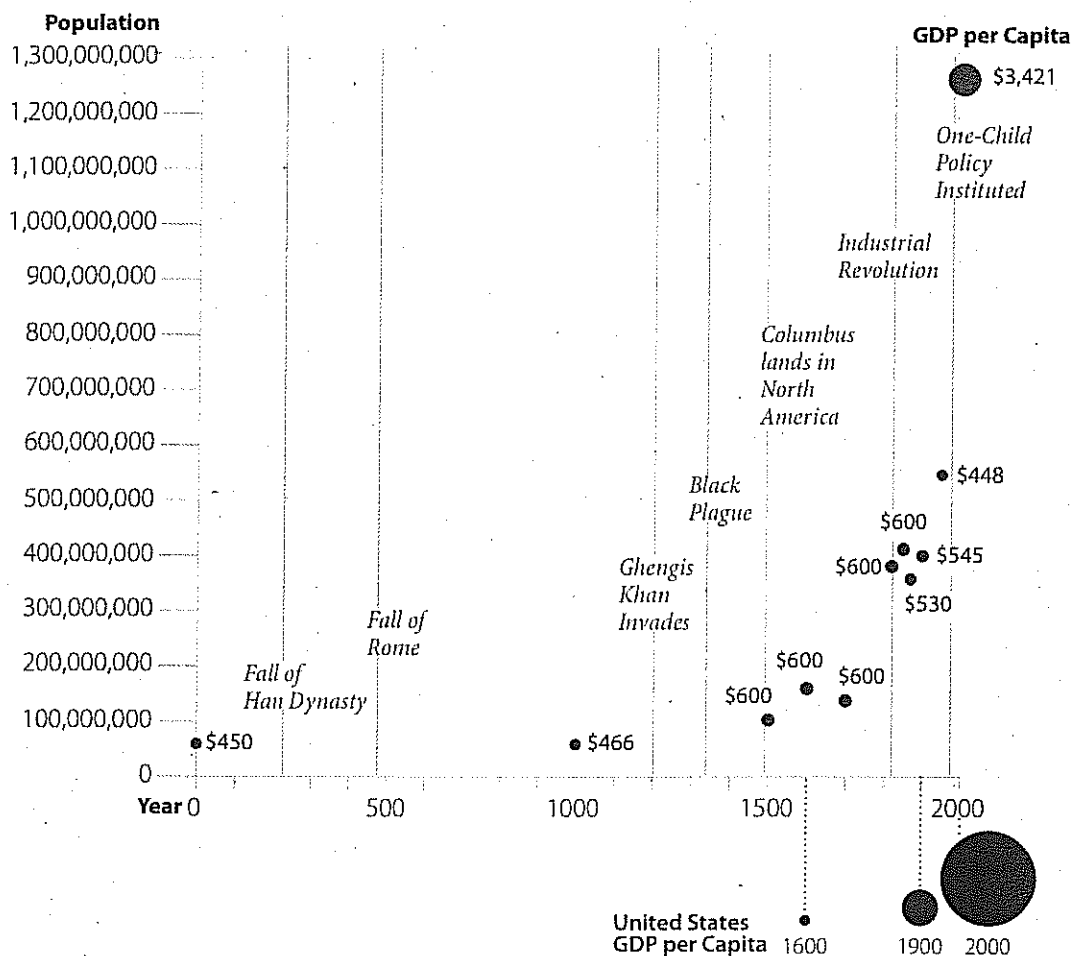
How long does it typically take to develop one of your illustrations, including the research?

A few days to a few weeks. I will start with what I think is interesting and create a sketch of the graphic. Then I show this sketch to someone else to get feedback, or put it aside for a couple of days to let it lie fallow. Once I figure out exactly what I want it to look like and what information needs to be used to annotate it, then the execution of the final graphic will just take a few hours.



China Income and Population for last 2,000 Years

Adjusted for inflation using 1990 International Geary-Khamis dollars



Source: Angus Maddison, University of Groningen

You seem to have found a niche for yourself, can this practice develop into a full time occupation?

Yes, I think the timing is right to try this full-time. I have seen the demand for this type of work increase in the last couple of years, even in a bad economy. Also, I have received funding for the first time this year from two sources: first from a crowd-source fundraising site called Kickstarter. The second from America University J-Lab's 'New Media Women Entrepreneurs' initiative supported by the McCormick Foundation.

Does the world need more economists to be graphically literate? Why?

I think anyone who is dealing with data and wants to present it to others needs to be graphically literate. When it is done well, it is the best method to help people develop insight into the meaning of the data. However, a poorly done visualization gets in the way of people's understanding.

Can you impart any advice about the use of graphic illustrations for people aiming to influence economic policy?

Annotations are very important to add context around the data but you don't want to overwhelm it. Show

too much and it becomes visual clutter. You can help people understand what is a large or small value by showing the entire historical data series and add the average, median or trendline to the graph. Provide a timeline with historical events that help explain the changes in the values. Or add another data series to compare to the main dataset and illustrate the relationship between the two. Also the visual hierarchy needs to make the most important information pop in the graphic. For example make a few important items red or orange and use gray for everything else; bold or increase the size of the text that you want the viewer to read or add white space around this text so it stands out.