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Mathematicians rule out Ministry of Silly Walks

By Roger Highfield

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• Audio: Roger Highfield on the Ministry of Silly Walks

Almost four decades after John Cleese performed his "silly walks" sketch on *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, mathematicians have concluded that they are, indeed, silly.

The sketch from Monty Python's *Flying Circus*, where Cleese plays the Minister of Silly Walks, first aired in 1970 and became a comedy classic for its daft satire of the civil service.

Now, in the prestigious Proceedings of the Royal Society A: Mathematical and Physical and Engineering Sciences, a detailed mathematical analysis of walking and running is given by Dr Manoj Srinivasan of Princeton University and Professor Andy Ruina of Cornell University, New York that sheds new light on the silly walk.

The team explores two legged movement to see why humans like to simply walk and run, rather than adopt stranger ways of moving around. After 19 pages of detailed workings, the team concludes that walking and running are the most efficient forms of two legged locomotion, which will be of interest to engineers studying how to make robots move efficiently.

"Our legs are capable of much more than just walking and running," explained Dr Srinivasan. "We could, for instance, use one of John Cleese's silly walks. We prove that for a very simple mathematical model of a biped, walking and running minimize the amount of leg work required per distance at low and high speeds, respectively. Cleese's silly walks are all worse."

"There is no explicit reference to Cleese in our walking/running paper," added Prof Ruina. "But he is in there implicitly. Basically, the paper says that the Ministry of Energy should cut off funding to the Ministry of Silly Walks."

"And there's no point in making a Ministry of Silly Runs either. All of the silly walks and runs waste valuable calories. At least according to our theory of human locomotion."

As the years have passed, Cleese himself has demonstrated what the mathematicians have now found with their detailed calculations. Because silly walks are so inefficient, he found them increasingly difficult to perform.

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