

This document contains an excerpt from the book “Integrated Storytelling by Design: Concepts, Principles and Methods for New Narrative Dimensions” by Klaus Sommer Paulsen.

*Dear reader,*

*The stories we create and spread can have enormous power. We use storytelling to make connections, and most of the time, we use it with good intentions. However, there is also a dark side to storytelling, which we don't often talk about but can learn to recognise when we encounter it. I encourage you to read these chapters with an open mind and share them further if you find what you read helpful.*



*Klaus Sommer Paulsen*



## Chapter 34

# Acknowledging the dark side of storytelling

One thing seldom addressed in books and papers on storytelling and narrative structures is the potential negative impact of storytelling when ethics are put aside. While some disregard the full capabilities of storytelling in terms of changing opinions and mobilising crowds and see storytelling as a one-dimensional entertaining pastime activity, others know and utilise the same powers for less-than-benevolent purposes.

The tragedy surrounding the Slenderman urban legend mentioned earlier is just one example of what can admittedly dramatically be called the dark side of storytelling and how it can impact lives. To the storytelling professional, knowing both the good and the bad that can come from wellexecuted

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storytelling adds an essential perspective to what can be achieved with the craft – not to replicate, but to recognise the manipulative and hostile intentions that are also being applied to the craft. Even as this sometimes happens by accident, without the intention of causing a negative impact they on people and people's lives. With great power comes great responsibility, and with the media and technology enhancements and amplifications of the twenty-first century, the storyteller needs to be very aware of his or her responsibility. For

the Integrated Storytelling designer and creator, that notion carries even more weight, as the immersive capabilities and reach of the discipline can influence audience profoundly and maintain a comprehensive and constant reach of them. As discussed earlier, experience design can be used to create very compelling scenarios that elicit a state of transformation, effecting the mindset and forward choices by those who lived the experience.

For the story experience designer and creator, knowing some of the common practices of explicit or subtle manipulation will help avoid doing them by accident, while also help discover and counteract them in storytelling and story experience produced by other creators, emerging on social media and elsewhere. A well-established storytelling skillset can be utilised as an analytical tool to identify and counteract adverse and ultimately harmful content.

Many of the storytelling principles that can be categorised as the dark side of storytelling have been present since long before the current state of media and technology. However, evolution and widespread reach of online media have helped empower and accelerate the distribution of what one may call influential negative content.

Some of the indicators that should call for vigilance include the principles below.



## **CREATING A VICTIM SCENARIO TO ALIENATE A GROUP OF PEOPLE**

In 1915, the movie *The Birth Of A Nation* was released in the U.S. Originally called *The Clansman*, the three-hour movie production was in many ways a landmark in cinema history. However, it was also highly controversial, with black men (many played by white actors adorned in blackface) as unintelligent and sexually aggressive towards white women, and the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) presented as a heroic force. Following the release of the movie, the membership numbers of the KKK soared, effectively making the movie the propaganda that helped rebirth the KKK in the United States. More than a hundred years later, mere allegations of men of colour insulting or assaulting white women can still conjure up a state of mob-rule lynch mentality, now accelerated by attention-hungry media and persons on social media, with neither spending time on adequately researching the details of what has actually transpired before spreading the story – a story that in the end can be proven to be entirely fictitious.

To the story designer and creator, it is crucial to be vigilant whether the story experience has the mechanics of creating a victim scenario that will demand revenge against any particular group or person.

## **POSITIONING A GROUP, COUNTRY OR GEOGRAPHICAL REGION AS THE ENEMY TO TAKE ATTENTION AWAY FROM CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS**

It is one the oldest trick in the book of the rulers of countries, kingdoms and empires. If the people are not happy with the inner workings managed by the ruling class, distract them or point their growing hostility outward rather than inward. With a clear, external enemy or threat the kings, queens, emperors, prime ministers and presidents can maintain a classic helper or hero position with the population. This practice is still widely used by those in power. Following several incidents where what was deemed definitive evidence of other countries was exposed as less definitive or even not being provable, a healthy scepticism has been rooted within most of the media, political opponents and not at least common people.

To the story designer and creator, looking across multiple layers beyond the obvious can uncover hidden intent and help focus on the real problem, not the symptom or the distraction.



## **ALTERING THE PERCEPTION OF HISTORICAL FACTS**

The winners of war write the history in times of peace, and sometimes the stories are skewed to a worldview of absolute good or absolute evil. However, sometimes history is altered by those who did not win, as is the case with a practice of Rameses II, who ruled the 19th dynasty of Ancient Egypt from 1279 to 1213 BC. Many of the impressive depictions of Rameses overcoming the Hittites at the Battle of Kadesh, which can still be seen in Egypt today, are now widely considered mere propaganda, celebrating a victory that never was. This practice does not only apply to times of war. In times of peace, some will maintain a claim of a victory or a level of a victory there never was, and in tenaciously repeating their claim repeatedly, it will become truth to some, if the claim is not challenged.

To the story designer and creator, making certain having verified content is the only way to know if the story being presented, not at least in a political and newer historical context, is in fact not a rewriting of facts to push a political or religious agenda.

## **RALLYING AGAINST SOMEONE OR SOMETHING TO CREATE SUPPORT FOR A HIDDEN AGENDA**

More often than not, when adversity is built against a specific group of people or a cause they are supporting, someone stands to gain a benefit from negative opinions and actions that will follow. The agenda behind the actions may be to move public opinion in favour of a person or a company or remove an obstacle to grow or maintain power and wealth. The level at which this transpires is one of high stakes and high ambition, as impactful and convincing narratives are distributed across television, movies, books, the press and in ways that fully utilise the transmedia and audience-centric principles of Integrated Storytelling.

To the story designer and creator, it is essential to consider and understand the purpose of the story, and whether it alienates innocent people and makes enemies where there none.

## **OVERLOADING WITH CONSPIRACY THEORIES TO ESTABLISH A CULTURE OF DISTRUST**

The Netflix documentary *Behind the Curve* (2018) pursues the reason why an increasing number of people can come to the point of believing that the Earth is flat, when the discovery of it being round dates back to calculations made by the ancient Greeks in the third century BC, and has since been proved with the application of many different sciences across the centuries. Historically, it has not been a consistent mainstream belief, with much knowledge being lost in the dark ages. Scientists and philosophers have suffered ridicule, persecution and prosecution with fatal outcomes for standing up for that which is considered scientific truth and common knowledge today. The documentary presents the path from distrusting lesser issues can lead to a state of belief in something most deem ridiculous. With an increasing number of conspiracy theories, alleged and actual fake news in the so-called post-truth society, a culture of distrust have been established. It has not just



paved the way for a desire to be able to differentiate lies from the truth, but also the way towards believing in what most would deem unbelievable. Enter the right opportunist at the right time, and the situation could go from peculiar to perilous.

To the story designer and creator, conspiracy theories offer a lot of great possibilities for entertaining stories. However, it is crucial to frame the story in a way that makes it abundantly clear what is fact and what is fiction, whenever there is a chance of the story being misunderstood and misused to push forward the culture of distrust.

## **OVERSIMPLIFYING ISSUES OF DISCUSSION AND DISAGREEMENT TO ABSOLUTES**

With the longing for simpler times arguably being a widespread sentiment, the promise of living in a world of good and evil, with no grey areas in between, has an almost deceptively utopian appeal. It is part of why so many escapist adventure stories speak to us with its predominant well-defined groupings of heroes and villains with their own good and bad intentions. In support of their agenda, some public persons and political persons will push the notion that real life is absolutes as well, with few or no nuances worth considering. Some have even won general elections in even well-educated countries pushing this concept. The inherent danger within, of course, is that this mindset leaves no room for understanding those who are or believe differently. People are decimated to either friend or foe.

To the story designer and creator, when presenting the audience with adventures, there is the possibility of presenting them with a world of absolute good or evil, benevolence or malevolence, as the imagined world, characters and crisis are not real. When being presented with a story that is supposed to be perceived as reality, the persons involved and crisis will seem extreme, and sometimes unbelievable, when dealing in absolutes for the real world. This lack of realism can be used to identify and point out the shortcomings of that which poses as truth, but actually, is not.

## **MAKING PEOPLE FEEL THEY ARE PLAYING A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN A CAUSE BIGGER THAN THEMSELVES TO OVERPOWER OTHERS**

Everybody has a desire to belong and achieve some significance through their actions. Our social and tribal mindset predates civilisations rooted in the early human needs of the safety and comfort in numbers, and in present days awarding of countries the title of the happiest nation on earth, individual freedom and control of one's fate and life is a primary parameter for defining happiness. The propaganda movies such as *Triumph Of The Will*, chronicling the 1934 Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg, and overwhelming events and rallies held by fascists and tyrannical rulers throughout history are all utilising pride, glory, nationalism on a larger-than-life scale. Part of the purpose is to make the attending audiences feel that they belong to, and sometimes fight for a cause bigger than themselves. Sometimes, the cause may be more significant than the conventional concepts of right or wrong.



The story designer and creator, especially those working in movies and shows, should acknowledge that much of the fascism moviemaking, events and iconographies have already been adapted into contemporary pop culture. The inspiration from *Triumph Of The Will* is clearly visible when the forces of Saruman or the Galactic Empire congregate under their banners in *The Lord Of The Rings* or the *Star Wars* franchise. However, in these depictions, the inspiration is used with a direct link back to the Nazi regime and its arrogant celebration of power, nationalism and contempt for those who are different and seen as lesser beings. The use of the powerful instrumentation of the grand-scale experience becomes problematic when there is no longer a distancing to the beliefs such as celebrated by the Nazi party. In designing grandiose storylines and events, sometimes creators has to be adamant in maintaining a differentiation between the hero and the villain and what is right and wrong. Especially when presenting the content to impressionable minds. This should not be considered a call for censorship, but rather a plea to use common sense and acknowledge responsibility.

## **CONVINCING PEOPLE THAT THEY HAVE LOST WHAT THEY NEVER HAD TO SOMEONE ELSE**

As in many other countries, many grown-ups in my home country Denmark have a nostalgic mental imprint that the summers used to be warmer, and every Christmas was a perfect Yuletide white, with the country covered in snow. Contradictory to this popular notion, which is often mistaken for actual memory, in the twentieth century White Christmas has only occurred nine times. This phenomena of believing that something was better or different than it was is actively being used as part of propaganda to push an agenda of alienating specific groups of people, enforcing the claim that they stole or will steal that which never there in the first place.

To the story designer and creator, portraying the 50s as a fun, musical experience with cool cats and sweet ladies enjoying themselves forever at the ice cream parlour is in the same vein as painting a picture of the lives in the old European kingdoms being nothing but romance and adventure. After all, these unrealistic, and to the vast majority of people living in a chosen period, unachievable, lifestyles, romances and adventures make for better stories than the routines of the workers and the commoners, repeating the same tasks and chores day in and day out.

It is not always criticisable about presenting a time as more alluring to what it actually was. There are many great movies and stories that do so. However, if this imagery of the mind has the added notion that it was taken away not by the change of times; but by some invader with bad intentions, it may signal that the story is not about what was, but an attempt at targeting someone for taking something away nobody ever had anyway.





## CONVINCING PEOPLE THAT THE END RESULT JUSTIFIES WHATEVER MEANS NECESSARY

In fictitious tales, unless the character building is of a straightforward structure to the point of being black and white as the principle mentioned above, the well-developed villain has another motivation than simply being mean. He or she has a cause that is pursued relentlessly and fanatically which has brought the antagonist to and beyond the point of believing that goals should be achieved by any means necessary and that those who do not agree are obstacles that need to be obliterated. It is a warped version of achieving a better good for the many or those who deserve it – at the cost of the few, or the undeserving. With regard to any case, personal, political or religious, this kind of single-minded fanaticism is dangerous and with the reach of social media, sadly more and more widespread presented as determination to achieve what is seen as the only solution.

To the story designer and creator, emotions are invoked to create connections between the story and the audience. Feelings and emotions have the power of outshining rational deliberation,

Emotions are so powerful that the audience will cheer on when the hero brutally slays the villain, even when the bloodlust becomes all too evident.

and that has helped build relationships between the audience and movie gangsters, hustlers, monsters and others that by all rationale should be considered antagonists, not protagonists or anything in-between the two. Emotions are so powerful that the audience will cheer on when the hero brutally slays the villain, even when the bloodlust becomes all too evident. With

feelings controlling decisions, people will allow for human rights of others to be disregarded, give up their own claim for privacy and ultimately, allow for villages, towns, cities and even countries to be destroyed. The warning sign to the story designer and creator is when the causes and the people targeted are no longer of fictitious character, and the narrative acts as a conduit for the encouragement of action, sometimes violent, in the real world.

The principles and methods above do not make a definite list, but addresses some of the critical examples of the negative influence that is being used as you read these lines. The indicators of the dark side of storytelling can and should be addressed within new story experiences or at public discussions, such as the ongoing dialogue about the role of the press and the impact of social media. The point is that to be able to recognise indicators of the negative impact of storytelling, the story creator has to acknowledge both the constructive and destructive power of one's craftsmanship to avoid using dark side of storytelling inadvertently and to call out those who do it deliberately.



## Chapter 35

# From theory to practice: Uncovering hidden agendas

Storytellers are capable of creating emotion, changing minds and motivating people to take action. The power of the word is greater than the power of the sword, and with great power comes great responsibility. Not just to avoid but to recognise the indicators of the dark side of storytelling. As one builds an understanding of it, and how it is used as a propaganda tool by opportunists – not at least opportunistic leaders craving power – one can recognise how it is used throughout media channels and platforms.

To unlock this perspective and test how the dark side of storytelling may apply, walk through the steps below. You may be surprised how you find other communicators, creators and storytellers than the obvious are using some or all of them for their own gain.

- Choose any story that relates to society or community, it may be political statement or news presented in any form at any platform.
  - Does the story create a victim scenario to support or alienate certain persons or groups of people?
    - *What could the purpose be for doing so?*
  - Does the story position a group of people, country or region as the enemy?
    - *What could the purpose be for doing so?*
  - Does the story take attention away from challenges and problems that should be dealt with?
    - *What could the purpose be for doing so?*
  - Does the story alter facts, recent or historical?
    - *What could the purpose be for doing so?*
  - Does the story rally against someone or something, seemingly to push a hidden agenda?
    - *What could the purpose be for doing so?*
  - Does the story unsubstantiated claims of conspiracy?
    - *What could the purpose be for doing so?*
  - Does the story oversimplify issues to absolute statements of good or evil?
    - *What could the purpose be for doing so?*





- Does the story make audience feel that they are part of a cause bigger than themselves, the one that calls for overpowering others?
- *What could the purpose be for doing so?*
- Does the story support the nostalgic notion that the audience has lost something they never had to someone or something else?
- *What could the purpose be for doing so?*
- Does the story convince the audience that the end result it presents justifies whatever means necessary?
- *What could the purpose be for doing so?*

This is not a check list; it is certainly not a complete list, and you may find that some of the considerations do not apply. However, as you analyse and write down potential purposes, you may, piece by piece, put together what the story is really about, not just in content, but also in the intended impact through its audience by pushing specific buttons for motivation, mobilisation and them to take action.



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
### About the author

Klaus Sommer Paulsen is an award-winning concept developer, designer, storyteller and creative director. His expertise in the convergence of storytelling, digital innovation and experience design has been built through a career spanning decades and disciplines. He has collaborated with VIA University College Film & Transmedia, Aarhus University, University of Southern Denmark and University of Tartu Pärnu College. He was also the contributing editor of Create Converge's 2019 anthology *Storytelling Beyond The Screen*.



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