STORYCODE™

StoryCode is a community hub, lab and creative consultancy for emerging and established cross-platform and immersive storytellers.

The StoryCode Ten: Questions for Christopher Sandberg

The StoryCode Ten is a short-form quarterly interview series that examines how leading cross-platform and immersive media storytellers around the globe are defining the medium.

Christopher Sandberg
Chief Creative Officer, Founder
The company P

Interview by Hal Siegel

1. It seems like The company P has been doing Transmedia type projects even before the term was invented. When was the company founded, and why?

I founded P in 2006, with the expressed intention to create drama with rich audience involvement. For our first broadcast show *The Truth About Marika* (2008 International Emmy Award Winner), the phrase "participation drama" was coined. Around that time a flurry of buzzwords describing the technical evolution started to emerge, like cross media, transmedia, social TV etc. I strive to focus on audience intimacy — and let the media channels for engagement and interaction stem from that.

2. Were there any early "a-ha!" type moments?

I've been on the search for methods to bridge massive, mediated experiences (such as broadcast productions) and deep participation (such as live events) for two decades. Early ventures include a company creating participatory events (notably for the Swedish UN), and a nationwide television

channel, integrating SMS text messages in the shows (together with TV4). The emergent and often very intimate and profound connection between us as creators of the drama and the participants — as well as between members of the audience themselves — really inspired continued experimentation.

3. Often there is a single project that catapults a company to a next level in terms of its visibility and its expertise. Was there any one project like that for The company P?

I'd have to say that *The Truth About Marika*, and more recently *Conspiracy For Good* with Tim Kring (2011 International Emmy Nominee), has pushed me as a creative and P as a company the most. The international recognition naturally opened doors, but more than that, the loyalty of the partners (SVT and Nokia respectively) allowed us to explore the forefront of what can be done in this uncharted field.

4. Let's talk more about *Conspiracy For Good*. Considering your interests, that project seems optimal in that you have the backing of a global brand in Nokia, and it combines fictional storytelling with a real world social cause. And let's not forget Tim Kring! It also seemed like a huge undertaking. How do you feel that all those engagement points changed the audience experience? What was the net result?

When Tim and I first met, we both wanted to figuring out how modern participatory storytelling could trigger real world change. I had just finished a series of research projects around this idea and he had great success with fans rallying around *Heroes*. Now for putting it to the test...

The pilot for CFG, which I produced, had an enormous amount of moving parts, numerous involved companies and shooting in the US, Europe and Africa. The entry points for the audience ranged from mobile games to viral video, graphical novels, online puzzles, fictional webpages, events, geocaching, a mobile augmented reality app and city based scavenger hunts, messages in music, street art, t-shirts, candy, fashion - you name it. It truly covered the transmedia landscape.

All this had huge effect — the mobile games were downloaded just shy of a million times for instance. More importantly, the experience design was based on real world direct action. The main way to be a part of the story was to engage in actions with our charities. People designed and manufactured food trollies for food outreach, collected toys for kids with bad home conditions, handed out flyers for medical aid to paperless people in the suburbs, joined a flash mob to clean the Thames riverbank. The main charity was about modern time literacy with Room to Read. CFG helped build several libraries in Zambia, stocked them with 50,000 books and gave scholarships to 50 young girls. All in all, audience participation and celebrity advocacy from people such as JJ Abrams, Ringo Starr and Andre Gregory — to name a few — created the global press to raise awareness about the underlying theme of greed. Notably WIRED Magazine listed CFG among the most important productions in transmedia to date. I think the net result is best measured in the engagement from all touched by the project all over the world.

5. Blurring the line between fiction and reality can be fraught with peril. Did you find that the audience had questions or concerns about whether or not this was "real", especially with regards to the social cause?

This is *the* one question I get in all productions, or when I hold a course or a presentation. It is very natural to worry about how others may perceive something, if maybe they will be offended. But rarely are we concerned for ourselves — we know what is real and not. We just have to accept that others do too. Naturally we had massive design efforts and security measures in place to assure a safe and fun experience. But believe me, it is much more difficult to suspend disbelief.

That said, we were very careful not to mess with the causes we set out to help. In the end we found that all the charities with which we worked were incredibly positive and cherished the attention from press and assistance from the participants.

6. The broadcast element of *Conspiracy For Good* was done as a web series and therefore could be consumed anywhere, whereas the real world experiences were limited to specific locations. Do you think it will be possible to scale real world experiences to have the same reach as mass media, or is the nature of physical experiences that they are local and thus have limited reach?

We did stage participatory events all along the path of the narrative, from Zambia, through Europe, to London. But yes, figuring out how to have mass participation *and* rich audience intimacy at the same time, is at the heart of what I explore in our productions. I would be lying if I pretended we have it all figured out, but we are getting there. It is all about how you design the experience, so that the participants are as important to the story as it is to them. Participation just for marketing becomes chores, and the audience is getting hungry for more.

7. Let's talk about your process at The company P. Creating a production like this involves integrating processes from theater, film-making and digital design and programming. How much of your process is a combination of these different elements, or are there ways in which you've had to throw the traditional techniques away and start over?

The greatest force in our design process has been live action roleplaying, no doubt about it. For those unfamiliar with larping, the book *Nordic Larp* is a very nice starting point about this highly immersive phenomenon. In these early productions I first acquired my taste for truly rich and intimate audience participation. Here are some examples of earlier projects done by me and my amazing colleagues. They range from building fantasy villages in *Three Villages* and *Dragonbane*, to spaceships in *Carolus Rex* and staging a nuclear crisis for the UN in *The Global Council*.

Academically I have a background in film theory and as the acting studio manager of a pervasive games research studio. This, and the founding of the interactive TV channel, merged into a new form of massive participation productions. In the interfacing with broadcasters and showrunners, I have since then found ways to bridge linear script with the highly emergent stories of an active audience.

8. You seem to be using technology to create experiences in ways that were simply not feasible before now. Do you feel at all beholden to technology? Does the tech create it's own set of limitations on the story?

Certainly. The affordances of social media and penetration smartphones especially, dictates a lot of the

narrative space. We have developed an orchestration engine with several research institutes in Europe at the Mobile Life VINN Centre of Excellence, to keep track of what everyone is doing a any given time. Still, augmented reality, locative apps and online games, can't begin to compete with bodies on the ground and in the editorial room. Real-time reflex writing and acting is very valuable.

9. Can you tell us what's next for The company P? And are there any other non-P projects in Europe that are particularly exciting to you?

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Right now I'm developing a show about what we all treasure most in life, together with Craig Wright (*LOST*, *Dirty Sexy Money*, *Underemployed*) and a stellar team of Canadian partners. It has also been very interesting to be a mentor at both CFC ideaBOOST and TIFF Studio, and to see how the discourse is very similar all over.

And, forgive me, but to be completely honest, I'm not super-mesmerized by anything I hear about right now. The first wow-seeking transmedia projects are becoming rapidly outdated, and we are all scrambling to figure things out to find the next dimension of participatory storytelling. Though it feels like we are seconds away from something radically new.

10. Like you, I am a father. I see the ways in which my child uses computers and media, and recognize that her experiences of media consumption will be entirely different than those of our generation. In terms of your work, what are your hopes for the next generation? What are you trying to give to them?

The first big thing on the agenda for me is to break through the hedonistic need for being constantly entertained. To instead inspire people to participate and act, and be creative. Dig into stories, into what is going on in the world, and act on it, rather than tweet on it. More angry people and less Angry Birds. It is important to be bored, and realize that true joy comes from being alive and passionate, rather than happily numb. That is why even though I do TV shows, the sofa is the nemesis and the world the playground.

Hal Siegel is a partner at Murmur, *a hybrid studio/technology company that pioneers new forms of immersive, cinematic experiences.*

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