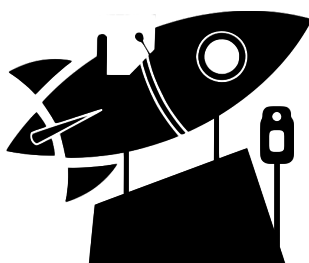
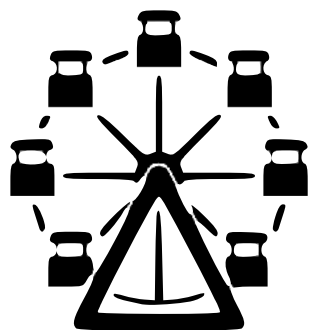
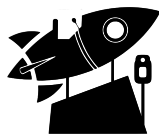


the
playground
project



by david w. griffith



the playground project

don't bring a bat and glove to a quidditch match.

The advertising industry takes great pride in being myth makers and storytellers. It makes sense. Agency networks and industry legends were built by being skilled at it. However, there is a danger in focusing exclusively on the story. For marketers, storytelling is a security blanket. A familiar thing to cling to because it brings comfort. Because it is a safe refuge it gets morphed to fit modern constructs: "We are story builders, not storytellers," "We believe in interactive storytelling," "Storyscaping," and so on. Ultimately it interferes with what brands should be striving for – creating engaging, organic, eco-systems of proactively designed chaos.

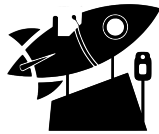
With every new medium, marketers apply the same old strategy. Using each new channel to **tell** people what we want them to hear, we build campaigns with sound and images, and a bit of interactivity. Through it all, clinging to the story, "the brand narrative" carefully underpinning it all. But mobile, and ad blocking, and time shifting, and millennials, and transparency, and 24-hour news, and big data are forcing a new agility and flexibility, which requires a recasting of the role of storytelling. Storytelling is now an element, albeit a hugely Important one, that operates within a greater experience. The goal is not to leave consumers with an understanding of the narrative, but instead to leave them feeling something good about the brand. Something they just might not be able to put into words.

Taking on today's marketing challenges using old storytelling tools is the equivalent of showing up to a Quidditch match with a baseball bat and glove. How can you compete with wizards on broomsticks? The bat and glove aren't only useless; the wrong gear gets in the way.

This is not a case against storytelling, but a caution about the constraints using the language of storytelling can create. The analogy of storytelling has a neurolinguistic programming element to it: The words we use and what we tell ourselves determine what we do, how we behave and ultimately what we accomplish. The linear and immutable constraints of the myth makers become hard to shake.

A brand's story is a critical part of any marketing eco-system, however holding tightly to narrative as an organizing principle sets up thinking and creativity in a way that is losing relevancy. A new operating system is needed.





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storytelling is dead?

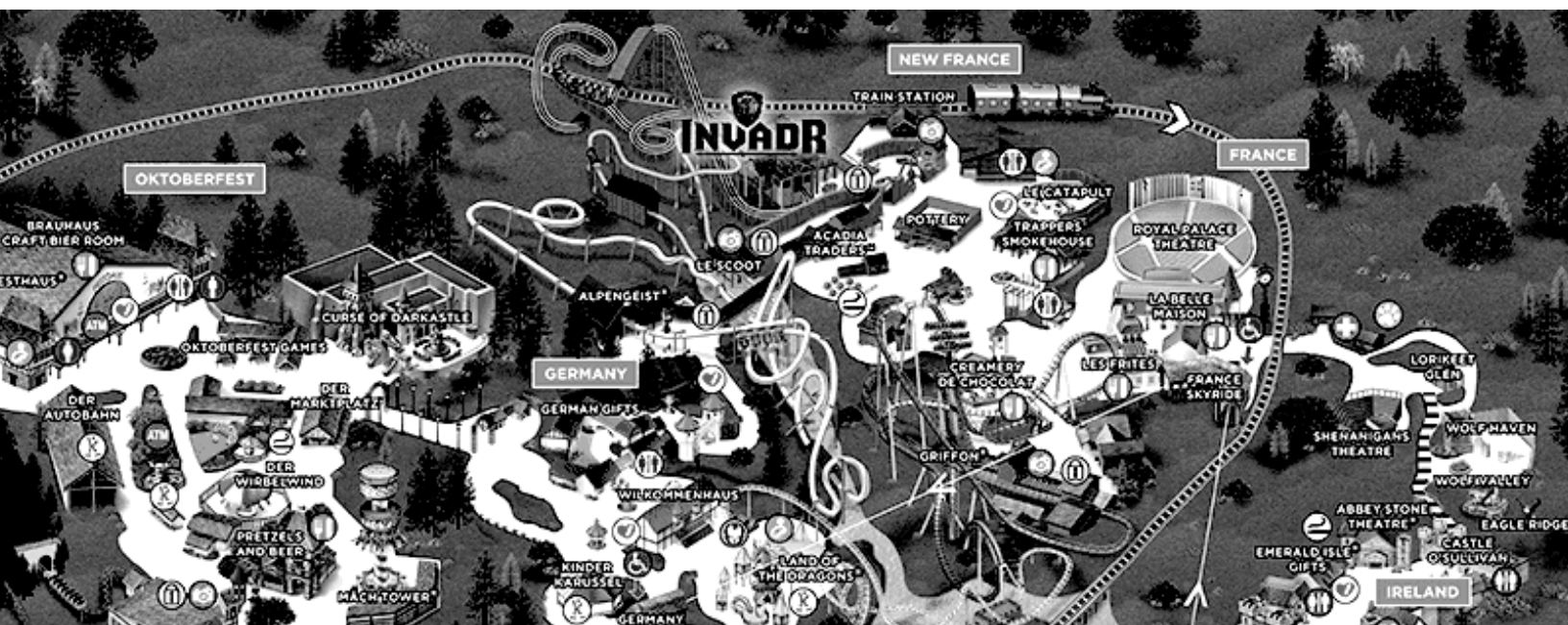
No, storytelling is not dead, and neither is advertising. However, in case anybody is wondering, there are some key reasons why storytelling alone doesn't really work anymore — those immutable constraints. In this consumer led economy, marketing has to adapt to the way consumers digest messages. These new systems diverge from storytelling in all its forms: spoken, written, staged, filmed or videoed:

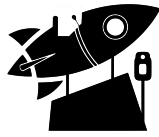
- Traditionally, stories are linear with a beginning, a middle and an end.
 - Now people enter our brands from whatever angle, whenever they please and continue on their way, in any direction.
- Storytellers once controlled the narrative.
 - Today, consumers participate in creating a brand's reputation and image. Thus, we can no longer "spin" the narrative however we please.
- Stories, once told, are fixed.
 - Brands operate in organic, ever-changing markets.
- Stories only reveal what the storyteller wants exposed.
 - Transparency makes everything available.

The point being that consumers no longer form brand affinity based on the stories marketers want to tell them. People form attachments based on what brands do and what they, as consumers, experience within the brand ecosystem.

So, what is this new role for storytelling?

Companies and their partners still need to create the things that will ultimately yield the experiences that support the ecosystem. That whole "consumers are now in control" thing is kind of bogus. Marketers (ad agencies, product design firms, digital shops, CMOs and creative geniuses) still must create the elements. The job of the modern marketer is the curation of objects and content of all kinds that will most effectively create experiences for consumers that will leave them feeling connected to brands.





the playground project

a creative wonderland

Build playgrounds instead.

Think back on being at an amusement park or even a neighborhood park on a particularly busy day. It was absolute CHAOS, but in the best way, right? What park planners know is that they cannot and should not try to control the experience, their challenge is to put the right elements in the right places and let guests do the rest. Any good park has these set pieces. Children's playgrounds have slides and jungle gyms with gravitational pull. Central Park has the Belvedere Castle, the great lawn and the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis Reservoir. Each offers something different for unique visitors to use when and how it suits them, but are essential to the park experience as a whole.

Therefore, brand builders have to plan for and create communication and experience set pieces that deliver all the elements of traditional work, but organized for joyful chaos:

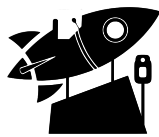
- Products need to fulfill the brand promise.
- Campaigns still need a core concept, a central theme.
- Grabbing the attention of consumers is critically important.
- And, differentiation in a sea of sameness creates advantages.

Today's new set pieces will act as foundational experiences. Among the very best you will find great brand stories. For example, a while back a wonderful film detailing the birth of Polaroid was released. It was a great piece of storytelling. Nobody wants to diminish that; however, the Polaroid experience seemed to end there. There was no organic connective tissue to other brand or product experiences. It was like walking into an amusement park with only one good ride. A playground with no swings, picnic tables or baseball diamonds – Belvedere Castle without Strawberry Fields.

Do not be mistaken, just like the old days success will come to the best ideas and creativity will win, but it all lives in a different framework.

Using parks as an organizing principle comes from the fact that parks have critical things in common with marketing ecosystems. They each have discrete elements (content and set pieces) that also have to work together as whole. They both have to take into account practical matters such as entries and exits. Each should be adaptable and organic in its own way. And they both have traffic metrics to meet — if nobody visits it needs to be redone, an attraction that is not used gets removed. Importantly, good playgrounds and marketing systems are a wonderlands chock full of creativity, imagination and innovation.





the playground project

the happiest place on earth

Perhaps the best, longest enduring creative brief ever written is for a park. Written by Walt Disney, it is only five words: “The Happiest Place on Earth.” This simple, straightforward idea has endured and guided the park for more than 60 years. It’s an idea specific enough to create differentiation, but large enough for the park to expand (both literally and figuratively) and still remain on brief.

Disneyland has focal points like the Storybook Land Canal Boats, the Matterhorn and Pirates of the Caribbean. Relatively easy to navigate with paths and sections that make sense, the content is well organized with sections by both theme and target demographic (Main Street, Tomorrowland, Fantasyland, etc.), and yet Disney is also always evolving and modernizing to maintain relevancy and increase appeal – e.g., Star Wars’ attractions and the new Toy Story Land.

Viewing brands with an eye toward a similar framework means asking some important questions. What is the core idea, its version of “The Happiest Place on Earth”? What assets are available to bring it to life, as Mr. Disney did by leveraging the equity his brand gained with film? What is the plan for building outward and beyond those core elements to increase the appeal of the brand and to ensure longevity?

To optimize impact there has to be blueprint for arranging engaging content – the experiences we want consumers to immerse themselves in – hierarchically, with connections and paths and signs to guide the way from element to element. With all of our planning and crafting, we must build it all in a way that lets consumer explore, discover and enjoy their own way.

It is time to embrace that discovery and drop the script.

