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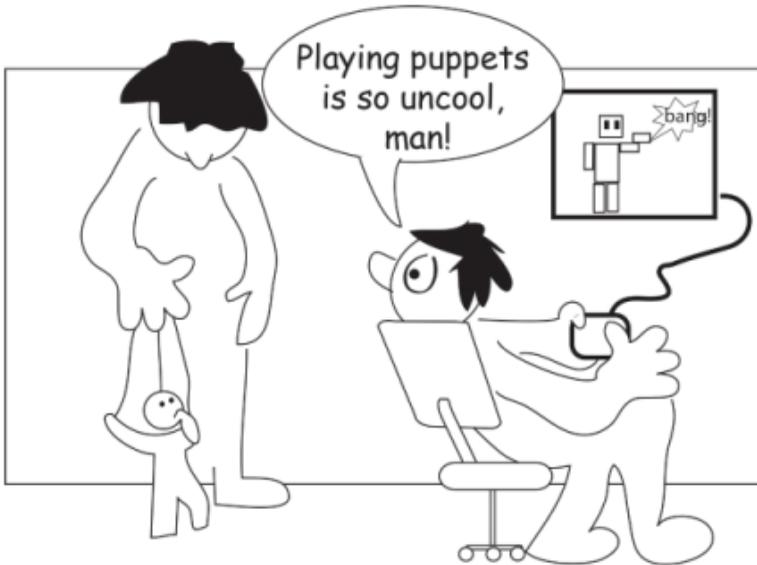
Why I play with puppets

The slideshow has been presented in 2015 to students at a design college. The last two slides have been adapted in 2016.

The format is that of a Pecha Kucha presentation. In case you are unfamiliar with this type of presentation: it consists of 20 slides and the presenter has exactly 20 seconds to speak to each slide.

The words were my rough prep notes. I prefer to speak off the cuff.

(1)



I arrived at puppetry from the visual arts' angle, not performance. From the outset my Dede were invaluable for self-exploration. For me, they are magical problem-solvers and I often call them my "voodoo dolls gone mellow."

Since I started a new job in an environment with a bullying culture, I have also become aware that these puppets are brilliant for developing emotional intelligence.

(2)



This is an image of a series of six unlikely couples I put together for an exhibition in 2013. Back then I still believed you can get on with whoever, simply by making enough of an effort. Yes, that was back then. In the meantime, I have learned a hard lesson.

This is the reason why I started to look closer at Emotional Intelligence (EI). It is one of those things some people unknowingly possess, others don't. The good news is, one can work on it.

Well developed emotional intelligence becomes increasingly sought after in the corporate world, particularly in leaders.

(3)



But what does Emotional Intelligence mean?

To say it in the words of a Dede: “it is the ability to put yourself in someone else’s shoes without being walked over.” And this is where the puppets are invaluable.

Here *Devil* takes measure of my feet to see if the shoe fits. To come up with all the puppet stories, one has to be an excellent observer and possess a good deal of willingness to truly understand human interaction.

Following I will explain the 5 pillars of EI (and the traits employers are looking for):

- Self-awareness
- Motivation
- Empathy
- People skills
- Self-regulation

(4)



The first pillar of Emotional Intelligence is **Self-awareness**.

This means an understanding of who you are and taking responsibility for your actions. Knowing your own strengths and weaknesses and how your actions affect others. It is not the same as being **self-centred**. Self-centred people believe the world owes them. Sorry guys, if you thought that, I have to burst your bubble: It doesn't!

Don't worry, in your late teens or early twenties, you are allowed to be a tad self-centred. This is the time when you find out who you really are; not who your parents, peers and teachers want you to be. By the end of your tweens the self-centredness should have morphed into self-awareness. If not – it's time to get worried!

(5)



Motivation is the second pillar of emotional intelligence. In particular where your motivation stems from. Emotional intelligent people source their motivation from within. External motivators such as money, titles or status symbols are less important, as is the approval from friends, teachers or any other people some might like to impress.

In my opinion – and you can argue with me here – your true motivation for your actions will indicate whether you are self-aware or self-centred. If you are motivated by your true and honest beliefs, you are *aware*. When you need approval from the outside you are *self-centred*.

So answer truthfully: What motivates you! No need to reveal your findings to us. Being honest to yourself, is the first step in the right direction.

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Empathy is compassion and understanding of human nature. It enables you to respond genuinely to others' concerns. Empathy doesn't mean you take on other people's fights, rather you support them to find their own way. Establish why you are fighting for a cause: is it because you feel obliged by others. Is it because you benefit, or is it even for the benefit of society at large.

Playing with puppets is a wonderful tool to understand how others tick. But understanding is only part of the deal. Sometimes you become fully aware of injustice. It is disheartening indeed, when you have to watch helplessly how others in a powerless position are walked over by people with self-serving motivation.



The 4th pillar of Emotional Intelligence: **People skills**.

Those who are emotionally intelligent avoid power struggles and backstabbing. They usually enjoy other people, and can honestly give credit where credit is due. They easily earn respect from others. Keep in mind, respect has to be earned, it cannot be demanded. If it is not freely given, but insisted on, it is called 'fear'.

In fact all these characteristics (self-awareness, self-motivation, empathy and people skills) go hand in hand and follow each other.

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Self-regulation is the last pillar of emotional intelligence. It is absolutely wonderful when you have all these skills, unfortunately not everyone has them and there are people who will try to take advantage and lord it over you. It is important to know when to step back and let go. Smile when you can't make a change. Show emotions when it is safe and helps the team.

I have read a lot about emotional intelligence lately and so far I only came across one article that said it is all a load of crap. In this particular article it said the bullies will simply walk all over you. I still believe one has to stand-up to bullies, or at least try. They will hate you, when you don't bow to them and will step it up big time. When it starts to affect your health though, it is best to get out. Life is too short! There is always another door.



When I first started with my puppets, I was particularly intrigued by their completeness. They are visual, sculptures, actors, storytellers all rolled up in one. Puppetry has been an anarchic and subversive art throughout history and Peter Schumann, the founder of *Bread and Puppetry*, said: "It is an art which is easier researched in police records than in theatre chronicles."

Puppetry resurges in situations when freedom of speech is impeded.

(10)



The Dede puppets started out as “no bodies”. They were simply observers of life.

These two are pals from the book *Hermit's web or the few friends I need I handcraft myself* (2012). The brainy *Professor* and his buddy *Pig*. They are a couple. The professor loves to talk and drink and comes across as being intelligent. His mate *Pig* loves to drink. Full stop! He doesn't say much. And in the book the story goes, he is by no means a connoisseur, he just quaffs down the wine until he is plastered.

Lovely chums in a social setting. In the workplace, rather not.



Hermit's Web was the first public appearance of the Dedes. I was advised to write a blog to keep track of their progress. After the book was published the story continued there. In the beginning the Dedes were mainly in clinch with their artist (that would be me) and the blog helped me to get a clearer picture who I am as an artist. To be honest, they don't have much bite. They are funny in a very subtle way. Sometimes I might be the only one who gets their jokes :).

This picture was taken on Halloween 2012. I am not a big fan of Halloween, but obviously the Dedes are.



At the end of 2012 the Dedes came up with the Super Dede competition, a three-week-long talent show leading up to Christmas. In the first week they had to talk about themselves, in the second week they had to answer questions and in the third week they had to show a special talent. The readers of the blog voted five of the puppets into the competition and in the end they also decided who was the overall winner.

Pig was put forward by *Professor*. And the readers voted him into the competition along with *L'Artiste*, *Harvey*, *Mouse* and *Cash Cow* (from left to right). The story of the competition is available as ebook on smashwords.com.

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I can't stress enough how amazing puppets are to foster understanding. For example *Pig*. In the first week of the Super Dede competition *Pig* froze on stage and it became clear he is an alcoholic. Though it's not his fault. In the competition he told the blog readers, that the farmer had fed beer to the mother sow to make farrowing easier (it does happen). Poor *Pig* basically suffers from foetal alcohol syndrome. It also became clearer, that *Professor* and *Pig* are co-dependent. A very common trait in alcoholics.



In the third week the candidates had to perform a skill. You know by now *Pig* can't do anything but drink. Surprisingly he turned his perceived weakness, the stage fright, into a strength. He performed a modern play called "the unveiling" together with his mate *Professor*.

Hackled by another Dede he came close to having a heart attack. Pigs are prone to that when they are scared. If you want to know how it all ended, you have to read the blog or the ebook. ☺



The next step up from storytelling on the blog was the puppet films. Puppets are performers and they want to move. One weekend, I created the film "[Life of an Artist](#)". It describes the plight of an artist creating work that nobody gives a toss about. Most of us can relate to that, eh.

This led to me running workshops where a small group of people get together to create impromptu stop motion films. Similar to "theatre sports" or "who's line is it anyway". I simply facilitate and observe and I put the film together in the end. This picture here is from a different workshop called "My friend the Dede." In this workshop I work with senior citizens to elicit stories.

This particular picture is one of my favourites: the elephant and her lady puppeteer display such a wonderful rapport.



The Dedes and I had an amazingly carefree life in the beginning. I did workshops and wrote every morning between 7 and 9, before I trundled off to work.

In those early days the puppets were mainly equalisers of my behaviour. They told me off, when I pushed myself or my other artwork too much to the fore or when I became a slacker.

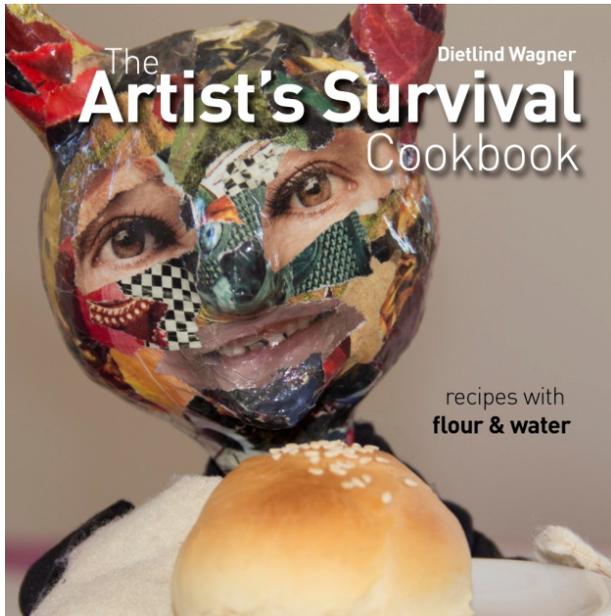
Then without much warning my graphic design business lost two major contracts and I also lost my part-time teaching job – all at once. Followed by a period where everything I touched, seemed to turn to custard instantly.



Losing your job and your livelihood is a very unsettling event and you will go through a serious grieving phase. It would be strange if you wouldn't.

Back then my favourite puppet *Devil* (the first puppet I ever made) donned dark sunglasses a lot.

At this time I would have liked my puppets to get more bite and be more negative and scathing on the blog. But they ignored me. Negativity is not in their make-up. It doesn't come naturally to them. Instead they got quieter and quieter.



The saying goes: “Necessity is the mother of all inventions”. Out of desperation the puppets came up with the idea to put together a book full of recipes with flour and water: *The Artist's Survival Cookbook* (2015). It is not political correct, as it doesn't outlaw white flour. We know it is not the healthiest option, but what can you do if you have no money and still want to eat reasonably well. You make your own staples and grow your own vegetables. The book is available on CreateSpace.com or Amazon.com. It was launched with a pop-up kitchen, where the visitors could try their hand at a recipe from the book.

The project also helped me to survive the most poisonous workplace I have ever encountered. It was then when *Top Dog* arrived on the scene.



I lasted in that situation for 17 month. And while I tried hard to make a change, in the end I had to walk away. It was the first time I encountered blatant post-truth behaviour and it shook me to the core.

I finally left in November 2015 and as painful as those months were, I am grateful for the experience. Without it, I would never have spent so much time researching narcissistic behaviour and it's detrimental impact on others.



In December 2015, I was given an old smart phone and the Dede's jumped on Instagram. They took to it like a duck to water. The format suits them to a tee: One image and little text. They renewed their creative spirit and picked up on a few projects they had done in previous years. They ran, for example, another very enjoyable Super Dede competition.

Then, in mid 2016 they've got the shock of their short lives, when England voted for the Brexit. That was when the Dede's became political – virtually overnight – and *Top Dog* got his wig.

And so they will continue to evolve...