

# “The fantasy world of kids far exceeds whatever AI can generate”

A CONVERSATION WITH SIMON STAFFANS\*

*You began working with children and AI before most of us did. What was the idea behind it and the starting point of *The Christmas Miracle*?*

**Staffans:** I got a call to be the producer and project leader for a yet unnamed project in late 2022. The idea was to create something together with indigenous Sámi school children from the north of Sweden. The goal was a 24-episode series, an advent calendar running from December 1st to December 24th. The unique aspect of the project was that the story would be created with the school children and together with artificial intelligence.

*How did the project develop?*

**Staffans:** I had been working with generative AI for quite some time before, since early 2022, experimenting with tools like *Midjourney* to create imagery that I thought could be used in different productions. And of course, *ChatGPT* had made its first inroads into the public consciousness around the same time. I realised it was possible to make simple drawings – more like doodles –, and feed them into AI tools like *Midjourney* to generate interesting and high-quality visuals in the other end.

I thought that if we had the children reflect their own realities through text and in drawings (Ill. 1) that input could be used as prompts to create images that we could then incorporate into the series.

I must admit that I’m not familiar with the Sámi culture and the Sámi story world. And I’m also not familiar with the year-round realities of living so far North – even though I’m from Finland

myself. So we wanted the children to tell us about their realities, making them the experts in this project.

*What was the framework of *The Christmas Miracle*?*

**Staffans:** The framework of the story was Santa Claus deciding to modernise himself. He builds a turbo sled with rockets to travel around the world faster. Despite warnings from his elves, he goes on a first test drive. And of course, he crashes into a forest in northern Lapland. Different characters in the story have to work together to rescue him and save Christmas.

We collaborated with Annica Wennström, a writer who is familiar with Sámi storytelling and the Sámi story world and together with her, we developed the basis of the story. We created brief descriptions of the different characters and sent these to the different schools, asking the children to enhance them: “Please, tell us more

about the reindeer herding family, the school children who are out on a school trip and get lost, the tourist family who are vacationing in Lapland for the first time, about the animals of the forest. Tell us more about them, their dreams, their wants and their needs. Please describe the characters and also draw them.” Using the children’s input as a basis, we started to create imagery. And, luckily, it turned out we could produce images and content we could use for our series. Later, we visited the schools to film with the children. Most of them were 11 and 12 years old, the youngest participant was 7. She joined in because she did not want to be left out.

*What kind of stories and characters did they develop?*

**Staffans:** Some of the material they sent us reflected the story worlds they were familiar with. For instance, there were almost magical reindeer herding



Ill. 1: *The Christmas Miracle*: the children’s drawings were transferred into prompts which were used to create images for the series

dogs and foxes from the forest. However, many of the characters also represented their own modern, everyday realities.

One example is the girl who became one of the main protagonists of our story, a reindeer herding girl called Astrid. As it turned out, she was basically the twin of the girl who had created her. This Sámi girl had moved from the capital into the forest, transitioning from having her friends next door to living 50 kilometres from the nearest neighbour. I felt we really got to feel the realities these kids experience living up in the Sámi communities of Gällivare and Tärnaby up in the north of Sweden (Ill. 2).

#### **How did you proceed?**

**Staffans:** We went to the schools and had 2 weeks to film with them – one week in one school and one week in another school. We went to the classes with the camera team and filmed as we were working with them to move the story forward: “What happens in this situation? Can you tell us how your character would react? Can you draw how the scene would look like?” We filmed as this was happening. We also took them out into an interview room asking, e.g.: “You just drew this and this. How did it feel? What did you think when that happened?” etc. This allowed us to capture the reactions to the material they were working on. As they created their drawings and images, we fed them into generative AI, which produced different versions that we could work forward from. Then we asked the kids which AI-generated images best represented their vision. It took 15 to 20 minutes until the first girl was saying, “Hey guys, we’re not working with artificial ‘intelligence’. This is an artificial ‘idiot’.” She was right, because it was really difficult



Ill. 2: Many of the students’ stories reflected the reality of Sámi children living in the north of Sweden

to get the AI to produce exactly what we wanted (Ill. 3).

Anyone who has worked with generative AI knows that the hardest part is getting it to specifically create what you want it to do.

#### **How did the story evolve?**

**Staffans:** We had a starting point and we knew we needed to reach an ending point by Christmas Eve, when the 24<sup>th</sup> episode would show Santa Claus being rescued and Christmas being saved. However, the journey in between had a lot of gaps and we didn’t know how they were going to get to the ending point. That was the part of the story we worked out with the kids. What surprised me most was how agile they were. They were so quick to think, “Okay, they need to go there, so they need to do that. Then they have to do this. No, no, no, she would never do that. No, it’s too cold at that time of year. They couldn’t be sleeping in tents. Or could they?”

At the end of each day, we had a story that was quite unruly, quite chaotic, but it had a beginning and an ending for the chapter that we did each day. We sent the text and the images to the writer who was on standby. Over the phone, we explained how the story had

unfolded over the course of the day. She turned it into a coherent chapter that she then read and recorded as an audio file. We always started the next day by playing this next chapter of the story to the kids. They were, of course, amazed, like, “How did she know what we were talking about yesterday?” It was magic! (laughs) We then had a firm starting point for next day’s work. So even though everything seemed chaotic, we could always tie the knot at the end of the day and got a solid story to work on.

#### **How did they save Christmas?**

**Staffans:** Long story short: everyone comes into this story with different wants and troubles in their lives. For example, the tourist family is always fighting. The school kids who are on their trip and get lost in the forest just want to get back home. Astrid, the Sámi reindeer-herding girl, wants friends. And the retired, old reindeer-herding dog needs a new purpose in life. All these needs are fulfilled within the scope of the story.

And at the same time, Santa Claus – rescued through the combined effort of all of these characters – realises that the most important thing in life isn’t having shiny, new things or being the

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fastest Santa Claus on the planet. The most important thing is to take care of each other, ensure everyone's needs are met, and listen to his Christmas elves, instead of always thinking he knows best. He also learns that you don't have to strive to be something you're not. So, there are a lot of feel-good stories within the framework of one story.

### *Were the stories the children wrote or imagined close to reality?*

**Staffans:** As 11- to 12-year-olds often are, their fantasy world was quite lively. But it was also interesting to see how their perception of the world around us differed from what I'm used to. For them, it was natural to notice things in this world that we don't see unless we're prepositioned to notice them. For example, in their world, it's totally natural and logical that there are beings in the forest and certain traditions that you should always uphold. If you go to a specific place in the forest, you can feel if you are welcome there or not. If you want to cut down a tree to take it home as a Christmas tree, you should ask the tree for permission first. For these kids, this was just normal, this is how you do it. For me, though, it felt like it's not the world that I'm

familiar with. They put a lot of their own experiences and their own culture into the stories they created for us.

### *Can you give us an example where reality, fantasy and tradition are combined in the story?*

**Staffans:** For instance, we wanted 2 characters – a reindeer-herding dog and a fox – to work together, but we didn't know what they were like or why the dog should be retired. This is something the kids came up with. They explained that when reindeer-herding dogs get too old, they aren't killed or anything, but they don't have the same purpose as before. The kids gave the dog a new purpose in another context, which felt like a really good solution. Then there were those elements connected to the Sámi story world, such as stories about a being called Stállo – a troll figure that varies in different parts of the Sámi story world. The kids were convinced that Stállo is the troll that visits you on Christmas Eve. If you haven't cleaned your house, he'll take his metal straw and suck out the brains of the kids. (laughs) So this is how the world looks from these kids' perspective, I believe.

Storywise, there was a mix of raw, more traditional story elements that

we might not have included into a story, but the kids wanted to put them in. Of course, they were also clearly influenced by what they see on Netflix and other platforms and by more modern story arcs, where protagonists face these challenges and then they overcome them and it becomes this storyline.

### *Children's imagination is much more vivid and has much more possibilities than AI*

### *Is there a difference between children's fantasy and AI fantasy?*

**Staffans:** Based on our work on *The Christmas Miracle*, I would say that the kids' fantasy world and imagination far exceed anything AI can produce, unless, of course, you put a lot of effort into AI. But just as a baseline, their imagination is much more vivid and has much more possibilities than AI. AI is trained predominantly on existing material and struggles to match the originality of children. For example, when the kids fantasise about a special fox in the forest – pink with a blue tail and a horn on its forehead – that turned out to be nearly impossible to get AI to create.



III. 3: The images generated by AI from the students' drawings often did not match the children's ideas

### *How did you manage to turn this creative chaos into a well-rounded programme?*

**Staffans:** That was one of the challenges we faced. We structured one story around actually 2 storylines. Storyline 1 is the AI-powered storyline with the anime images depicting Santa Claus's rescue and what happens to all the characters (III. 4). Storyline 2 shows the kids working with AI to create the story, capturing their reflections, laughter,



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Ill. 4: One storyline of *The Christmas Miracle* features the AI-powered story with the anime images to rescue Santa Claus

shouting and drawing – the feeling of kids being creative together in the classroom. This approach allowed us to explore media literacy in the context of AI.

#### **Which media literacy goals did you follow?**

**Staffans:** As a public service broadcaster, we felt the need to use this series as an opportunity to reflect on how to work with media literacy in a world of AI.

We talked about a lot of the things that come up with regards to AI. For instance, all the kids wanted to create avatars of themselves and have AI make images of themselves. That was a golden opportunity to make one episode and talk about why it's important not to upload photos of yourselves to databases outside the European Union, where the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) does not apply – especially not onto platforms like TikTok, where the location of the service is actually unclear. Instead, we encouraged the children to draw images of themselves and create avatars from these drawings. That's what we did in one episode.

#### **Is AI the solution to everything?**

The children came into working with AI with a lot of excitement. So we took the opportunity to talk about what artificial intelligence is, how it creates images, how it uses their input to create something else from it. They also learned that AI is not the answer to anything. It's a tool you can use to create things, but there's no guarantee that it will do better than what you would make on your own.

In the second-to-last episode we reflected on their work with AI and talked about everything that AI had done wrong. That episode, which was 5 minutes like all the other episodes, could have easily been 5 hours. The children loved pointing out when the AI got things hilariously wrong, like "Do you remember when it tried to make Santa Claus and the sled and the reindeers? And it put the reindeers in the sled."

#### **Media literacy means understanding algorithms**

Most kids today are not necessarily very computer-literate. They are more used to having an intuitive interface, which is most often an app, and don't really think about what happens behind that app, like what happens when you write a prompt and upload an image. It's not magic, it's an algorithm. Media literacy means understanding algorithms, where they take place etc. (see also Herzig in this issue) There are so many different layers to it.

#### **Trust the kids**

#### **What have you learned?**

**Staffans:** One of the most important things I learned was to really trust the kids. We made a conscious effort not to have any adults in the images wherever possible, because we wanted this to be the kids' story. We have the narrator, who is Swedish, it's me, and then in the Sámi languages – Northern Sámi, Southern Sámi and Lula Sámi – it's other people. But they are more like companions in the situation because they talk with the kids, react to them and are a part of the situation. They're not imposing themselves on the kids in any way. The biggest takeaway for me was to trust the kids. They know what they want to do and they know how to do it. And if you trust them, you will get something great out of it. ■

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