

Why are we here? Our team has developed a concept called Applied Fiction over the past three years. James Merlo thought this would be a perfect concept to present at this NERC Human Performance conference and we agree. Applied Fiction is a non-traditional tool for improving human performance and we we've used it successfully several times at two companies. We would like to tell you about Applied Fiction as the tale of these two companies.

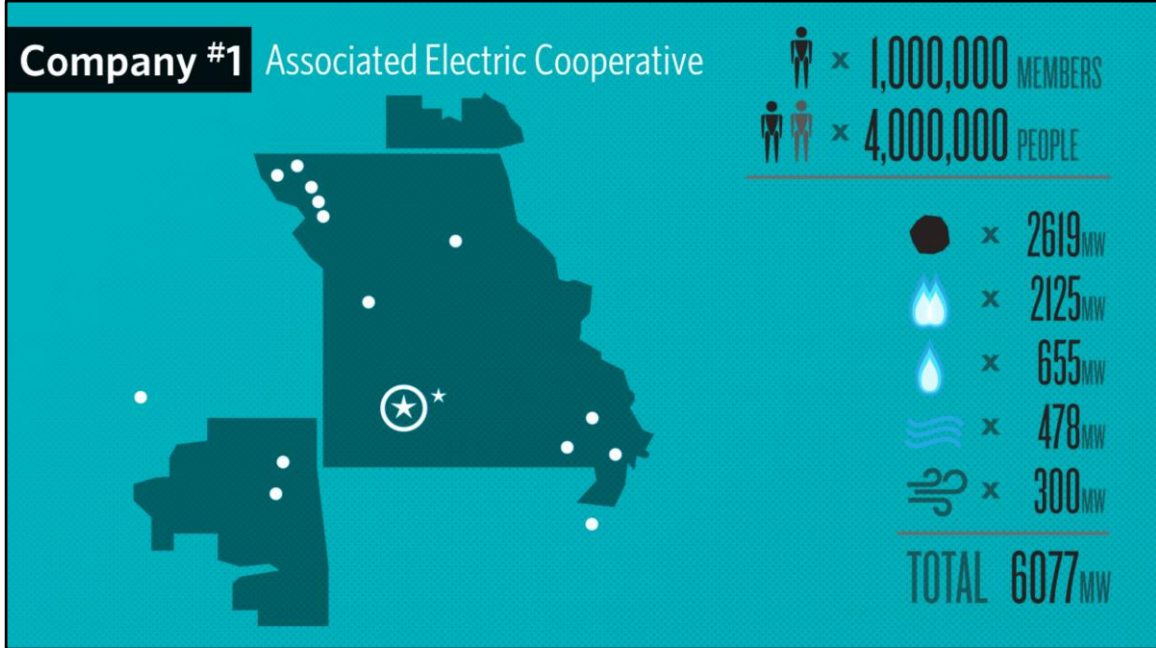
First, you may want to know who we are.



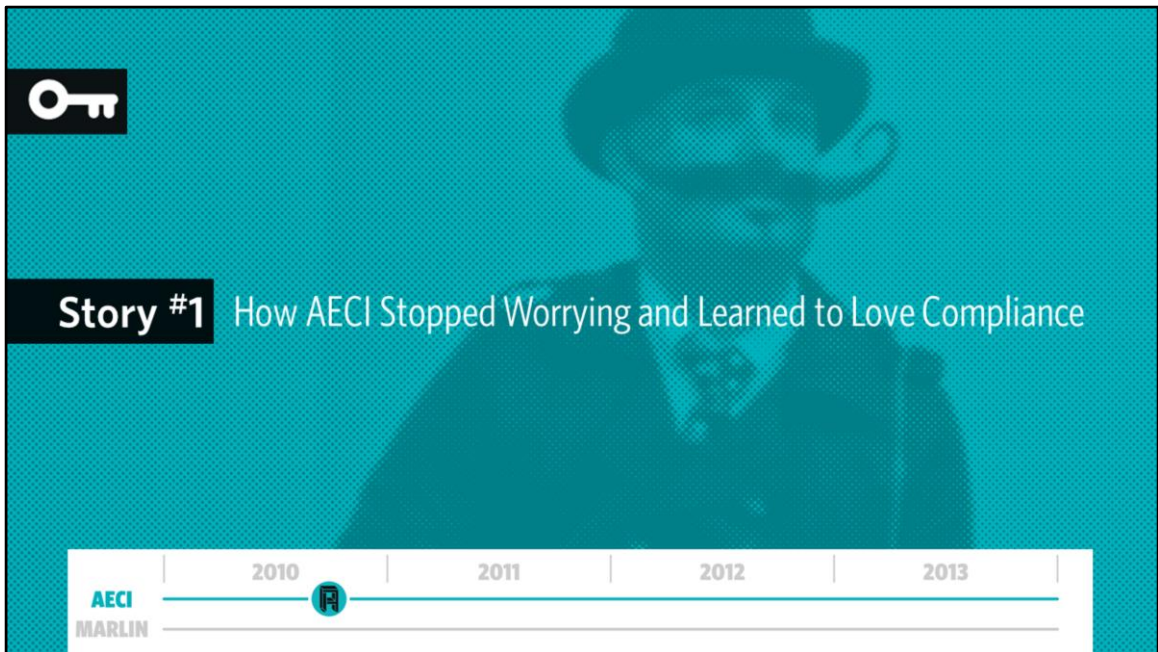
Charlie Evans runs the EMS system at AECI

Christopher Lazzaro runs the Energy Systems department at AECI which has Charlie's EMS team, and other teams that supports technical systems for power production, power marketing, resource planning, xmsn planning and system operations.

Our partner from the beginning Michael Dockery, who is a digital artist ([mindprizm.com](http://mindprizm.com)) and was unable to attend this meeting. Mike brings a lot of skills to the table with his experience designing games, 3D modeling, and other work.



Company #1 is Associated Electric Cooperative. It's a mid-sized power provider in the Midwest and for those of you in the industry, here's your standard company slide. AECI has a mix of generating resources from coal, to intermediate and peaking gas, wind and hydro. AECI serves three states and about 4 million people. AECI's story is about a problem called compliance:



You see, AECI had a number of new compliance regulations to follow. Many of you in the room are familiar with NERC CIP and other reliability compliance requirements. However, after two years of implementing these standards, AECI was failing. Even worse, they weren't learning from their failures. Employees were scared, management was trying all the classic ways to improve the situation. Discipline, punishment, and other ideas that didn't work.

Associated's story about Applied Fiction is <click> "How AECI Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love Compliance."

As we go through AECI's story, you'll see this timeline at the bottom of the screen. <click>

As we tell the story, we'll highlight important events with dots like this <click> And because we love to point out mistakes we made and things we learned, we'll highlight those with this symbol in the heading<click>

Before we dig into AECI's story, let's preview Story #2.

Agencies



Company #2 Marlin Network

Clients



Company #2 is the Marlin Network. The network is a holding company of five advertising agencies you can see here [<click>](#). You may not have heard of any of these agencies, but [<click>](#) I'm sure you've heard of some of their customers.

Marlin's story is a bit different, but applied fiction worked just the same for them. So what was their story?

## Story #2 The Founders Who Laid The Golden Egg: An ESOP Fable



Marlin had a problem called ESOP. An ESOP is an **employee stock ownership program**. Basically, the original founders are selling the company to the current employees. The upside is the employees get large amounts of free stock. And there really is no downside. There's no liability or anything on the employees. It's really cool but they had unexcited and unengaged employees even after training.

Part of the problem was probably the 30 page legal document they gave everyone. I have an MBA and I could barely read it.

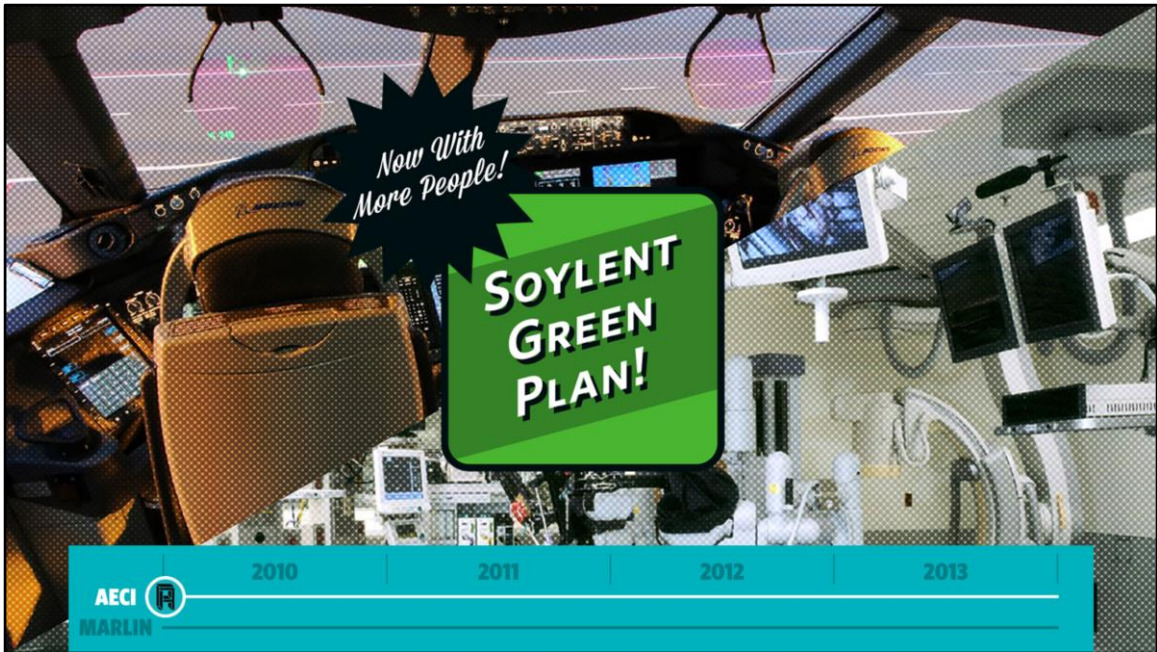
So what did applied fiction do for Marlin? <click> This tale is how employees discovered their founders laid a golden egg. It's an ESOP Fable.



Let's start with AECI. I mentioned in the story preview that we weren't doing too well at compliance. Let's recap the results of the early years of compliance, from 2008 – 2010.

- Did we have many near misses? Yes we did.
- Did we accomplish 7 self-reports?
- Did we excel in having compliance violations? I think the record attests to this.
- Did an onsite audit go poorly? Absolutely.
- Further, did that audit result in three embarrassing findings. Exceeded expectations.
- And did we accomplish all these results in a mere two years? Yes we did.

Remember that story I told you about the person who was afraid? AECI was embarrassed, management was looking for people to blame and punishments to mete out and the results was that people were afraid of and hated compliance. We weren't sustaining it. Our CIO tasked us with coming up with a solution. So with this task in mind and being responsible for a good portion of compliance, what did we do? We did research.



Our part of this story doesn't start until a bit later. We had some reorganizations and other organization activities to go through in the first part of this year.

We started with high risk industries because we considered the fines and ramifications on not sustaining compliance a high risk area. So who else has high risk areas where if someone makes a mistake with compliance or following policies they pay large penalties? The Health Care and Airline industries. If you make a mistake, people die. Great fit.

We packaged up all our learning and called it the Soylent Green Plan. Why? Because we learned that we needed to solve the problem at the people level.

Good compliance cultures are made out of people.





Three changes came out of the soylent green plan:

- We had to create a learning culture
- We had to manage behavior choices based on the decision, not the consequences
- We had to build safe systems.

As we started down our implementation of this plan, something immediately stood out to us. How we train people will be critical to how this works.

Our training will help kickstart and provide the foundation for the learning culture, teach people what choices they need to make and training is really the first safe system in the organization. Training applies to all three areas, so we put a huge focus on the training program.

As we started working on our training, we remembered a training event that happened a year earlier. We had hired a vendor to come onsite and perform compliance training for our company. The training was one week long. It was comprised of the trainer reading through all the compliance standards with the employees. I sat through this training. It was one of the worst training I've ever received and to this day I can't think of one takeaway I had. You know what we call this training? <click>

## 🔑 Appropriate Training for the Skill Level

“Sheep-Dip Training  
is BAAHHHHD!”  
- Anonymous Trainee



Sheep dip training. Ever been to sheep dip training? You know, alien, toxic and temporary? - Line up unsuspecting employees, dunk them in a 3-5 day intensive event in an alien environment, devoid of connection to their day-to-day world and expect them to come out experts.

There are many problems with this. First, complex domains like legal or highly technical topics outside of their area of expertise are boring. If I gave an advanced computer science lecture here it would be challenging for you to stay awake even if most people tell me that they'd like to know how to program. Even if I gave this lecture to computer scientists, they still might disengage if the presentation is boring. Training is a hard thing and the standard documents are an advanced topic.

Second, we have a completely wrong view of expertise. You can't train expertise in a week. AECL expected employees to all be compliance **experts**. They couldn't possibly become experts through training. We needed a different way to think about this.



## Duty-Based Training FTW!

“Always two there are,  
a master and an  
apprentice”

- Frank Oz

What we needed was a better understanding of expertise. There's a big gap between a master and an apprentice and sheep dip training doesn't recognize this. We are not going to train compliance experts in one training session. Reading through the standards as a group would not work. We need something that matches the skill acquisition level of the audience.

The Dreyfus model of skill acquisition that helped revolutionize the nursing industry is very helpful here. It describes 5 levels of expertise. Beginner (follows recipes), advanced beginner (recipes with deviation and understanding), competent (knows the topic well), proficient and, finally, expert (expertise comes from 10,000 hours of progressive practice). We could only hope to bring people to an advanced beginner level at this point and maybe get to competency eventually. Our training needed to reflect this.

We called our approach **duty-based training**:

- Goal isn't to make the complex simple. It's to make the complex understandable.
- Divide into logical sections
- Explain the background of each section
- Drive to duties. What are your responsibilities? What will cause a violation?

- Recipes+
- Near misses

## Environment Change

Compliance  
+  
Coffee  
+  
Cell Phone  
=  
Handbook



AECI  
MARLIN

2010



2011

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So with this in mind we got out of the office, headed to our local coffee shop and spent several days poring over the compliance documents ourselves, re-writing them into our duty-based training format. When we came across something we didn't understand or know we pulled in the experts - called our compliance department for clarification. In the end, we had taken the standards and distilled them into 30 pages of an understandable handbook.

But we still had a problem. It was still boring.



## Story Captivates Us

Obligatory Audience Participation Slide



"If history were  
taught in the form of  
stories, it would never  
be forgotten."

— Rudyard Kipling

Let's think through this together.

- How many of you have seen Avatar? What color is the alien's skin? <click> Correct! Blue.
- Let's go back a little further. There was a series of 7 books written about a young wizard with spectacles. What was his name? <click> Harry Potter! Very good. I had to write down the names of the people I met yesterday. I talked to some people for 10 minutes and I have to do this to remember their names? That's important information. How can you remember this unimportant information?
- Let's go back farther. Who is Luke Skywalker's father?

That's amazing! You can remember plot points from 30 years ago. Why do you remember this useless information?

It's because stories captivate us. They cross generations and cultures and help us remember and remember is often the hardest accomplishment of training and the preventative of doing. It's not that we don't care, it's that we forget. What if our training program was in the form of a story?

## 🔑 Not All Stories Stick



“There is no doubt  
fiction makes a better  
job of the truth.”  
— Doris Lessing, Autobiography

We quickly searched for a story. However, we had been telling several stories and they weren't sticking.

<click> #1 We had to protect AEI from hackers. Who are they? Chinese hackers?

<click> Korean hackers? <click> Script Kiddies? <click>

<click> #2 we had to protect AEI from financial loss from fines. <click> What does this mean? AEI will lose their independence? AEI will lose our customers because costs will be so high?

All of these things are absolutely true. But they're so abstracted and disconnected from day to day reality of following a visitor access procedure. It wasn't sticking because the story was just a veneer. The antagonist had no face. The story had no plot.



Using fiction to tell the truth isn't a new concept. I find religions interesting because they allow a large body of people to retain a common identity over thousands of years. There are some things they can teach us. Here's an example from the East <click> The Bhagavad Gita is a Hindu scripture that tells the story of a young Indian prince about to enter battle but struggling with some existential issues "how can I kill my cousins and friends on the other side of the battle lines?" Krishna appears to him in his chariot and has a conversation with him about these issues. This story is not presented as a factual account – everyone reading it knows it's fiction.

We're a Western audience, so let's move to something that may be more familiar. About 2000 years ago the Christian religion was founded by Jesus Christ and this method of storytelling was central to his method. It even had a name – parables. Parables are purposeful fiction used to communicate a truth. Here's one parable <click>, the prodigal son. The prodigal son is a fictitious account of a son who takes his father's possessions and squanders them, returning home expects to be treated as a servant at best, but the father welcomes him and forgives him. It's a powerful message that people who don't even subscribe to this religion understand. <click>

Another is the Good Samaritan, the story of someone who is seriously hurt and the



people you'd expect to help him don't, while the one person you don't expect to help is generous with his aid. We even use this in popular language "that person is a good Samaritan". Talk about sticky.

Let's look for some modern application.

## Which is more memorable?

We're at war.  
Sharing information, even  
accidentally, could get  
people hurt or killed.

or



The WWII poster above works because we knew who the enemy was. There was a metanarrative to tie into. But when dealing with challenging faceless, nameless problems, sometimes a substitute is needed. Fiction can serve as this metanarrative.

## Which is more memorable?

We have to sustain effective compliance. If we don't, our system could be attacked or we could be fined.

or



Mike came into the picture at this point bring a set of skills to the table and we engaged in writing a fiction around the training. Here's what it looks like.

The government was engaged in a cover-up. Yes, there are hackers and such, but there's a more pressing problem. We're on the cusp of full scale robot invasion from outer space. They want to soften Earth up by infiltrating and disabling utilities first. That's why compliance exists!

The government knows this and has involved NERC and other agencies in this. Up until recently, this has been a tightly held secret.

We identified several key types of robots used in the attacks.

**[Top Secret]**

## Enemy Intelligence Briefing D-2405



**AUDITBOT**

“as you know, Jim...”



**MIME-BOT**

“I’ll show you my source code if you show me yours...”

**KETTLEHEAD**

“cyber assets ...nom nom nom”



**LVL 1**

**LVL 2**

**AECI**  
**MARLIN**

2010

2011

2012

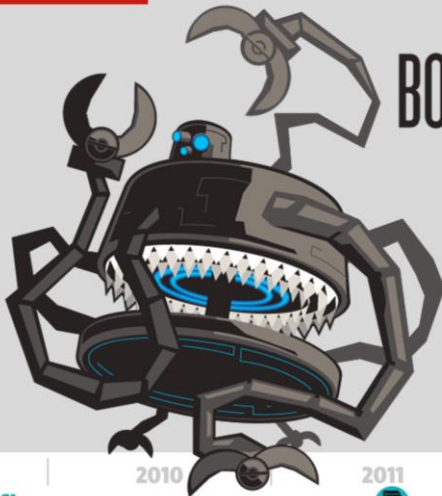
2013

First is the auditbot, who gains access to an organization posing as a NERC auditor and then uses that access to obtain intelligence. Some of the old models of auditbots are easy to detect because they start every conversation with the phrase “as you know, jim”. Newer models were given a briefcase, which strangely, fixes that software bug. Often paired with the auditbot is the mimebot who can disguise itself as anything. One of it’s favorite choices is to terminate your receptionist and take their place. It is rumored, mimebots are even looking to replace CEOs and directors at companies.

Once an organization is infiltrated and softened by audit and mime bots, the military units are engaged. Kettleheads are your ground shock troops, the grunts. They particularly like to attack PSP. This is why 6 walled enclosures are so important to an organization. Everyone knows that Kettleheads have arms and legs to attempt entry into a PSP, but they also have jetpacks and can dig to get over an under a PSP’s defenses.

**[Top Secret]**

Enemy Intelligence Briefing D-2405



## BOT-TRON OVERLORD

“whirl, clank,  
crunch, grind”



Finally, they send in the bot-tron overlords. Once engaged they can really chew things up so your people need to be extra prepared for this threat. Imagine a walking garbage disposal with the grinding teeth aimed at you.

So we now have a fiction, so how do we encode this fiction into the handbook we created?

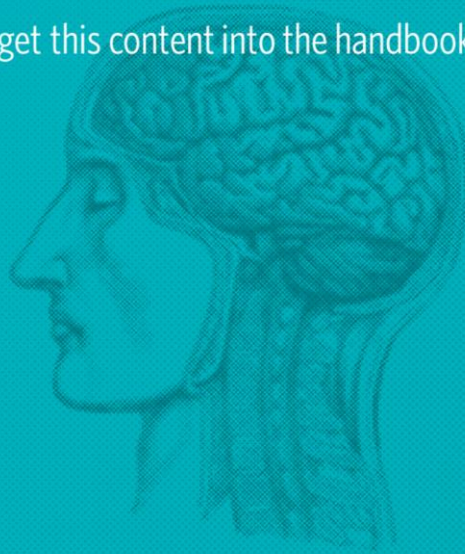


## Encoding

How do we get this content into the handbook?

Goal -

Every page will have content that personally surprises and delights the reader

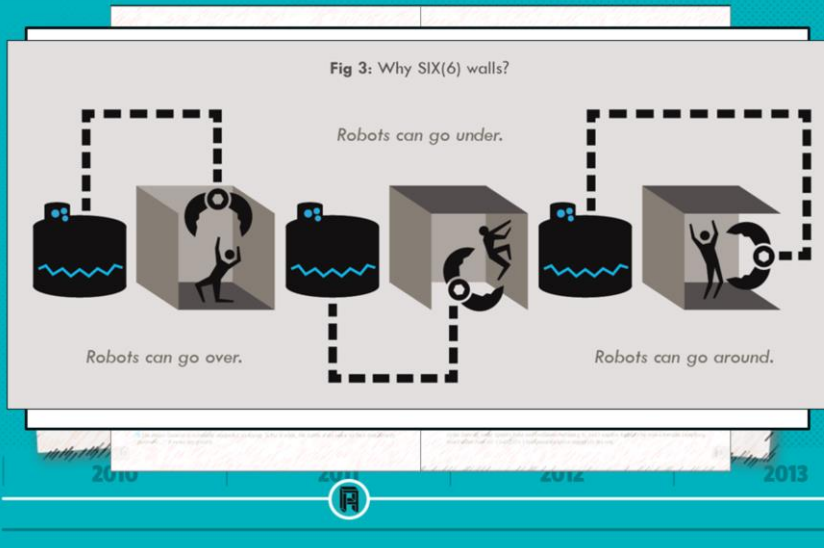


We've already agreed that encoding the content in the form of a story will help retention. What about our handbook? How do we get this content into the handbook?

- Memory is enhanced by creating associations between concepts and by engaging more parts of your brain. Verbal, visual, tactile.
- We remember things better the more elaborately we encode them, especially if we personalize them.
- Introductions are everything - the events that happen the first time you encode something play a disproportionately greater role in your ability to encode information.

Our goal was that every paragraph had something enticing and delightful.

## Handbook 1.0 Start the reality-fiction blender. It's smoothie time.



So believe it or not, it's pretty easy to make something confusing and extremely difficult to take information and make it easily digestible. Everything in this manual has a purpose. The information was broken up on the page so that it could be scanned for meaning at a glance. The color scheme and even the illustrations were kept relatively edited and simple so that the information driving their existence would seem easier to process for the viewer. Every piece and part was designed and placed to lead the viewer to the next with an ease that would allow someone to not feel overwhelmed by something that is often overwhelming---compliance.

Let me take you through a sample chapter to let you know the thing worked on a real scale.

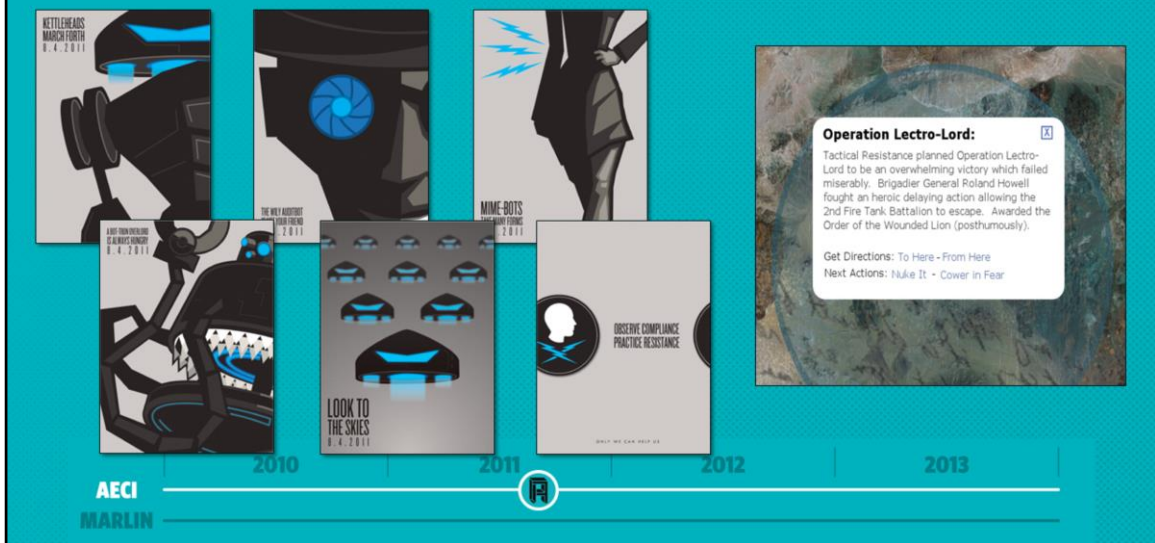
- First we have a logical title and reference the compliance standards the chapter is based on
- Then each chapter contains a quote from a employee. The idea was to make this personal by surprising people with their own robot-related quotes from their future selves. Each quote was humorous and personalized to the individual.
- Then we gave a layman's terms definition of the standard
- Then the specific duties of each team or job role
- Then a list of what we can do or not do to cause a violation

- Finally we ended with any stories about near misses and violations
- Each page had diagrams and charts that used the fiction to teach concept like why PSPs need 6 walls

In fact, we always teach our employees that when robots have you in a fix, run to a room whose walls are six.



## Buildup to Event Smoothie on order. But first ... some appetizers



We really wanted to build some tension and excitement going into the event as well as a healthy dose of fear for our adversaries. Every night during the week we'd hang posters like you see here or make marks on maps after people went home. When they came in the morning, they'd be surprised by a new poster that hinted at an event on August 5<sup>th</sup>. We also plotted the military stratagems and scenarios on existing aerial maps on our walls.

## The Main Event

Earth depends on us.

And compliance is  
our best weapon.

Seriously.



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We presented this as if it was really happening to the employees. We're presenting it to you as fiction, but we did not break face at any point.

They filed in and we said "guys, this event is compliance training" and their heads dropped. I'm sure everyone in this room has had a similar experience. We told them the main theme.

<click>Earth depends on us  
<click>And compliance is our best weapon  
<click>

We told them the seriousness of our plight, how we gathered evidence of this government coverup and needed to get them informed. We handed out the handbooks and walked through the material, chapter by chapter.

They read each chapter, laughed and enjoyed and after each chapter we engaged with Socratic dialogue. To ask questions and make sure they understood what they read They actually enjoyed themselves. We ended with a tour where we confronted life-size robots.

## Results

Pilgrimages from around the company to see posters?



Awake employees



Read entire handbook, laughing and enjoying themselves



Training done in a day



Standing ovation



CIO/CEO received thank-you's from every attendee



Positive compliance results for the following year



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## Rebel Leadership

Sometimes it's better to beg forgiveness than ask permission.

Be generous

Act in the company's best interest

Present the truth

How would your company respond to something like this? I believe that most companies have issues with this. Either fear of wasting money, or fear of not taking things seriously or fear of the resulting perceptions.

What sort of weird universe would this ever be signed off on? How high are the stakes. In our circumstance they were really high, so in our case.

So this was a crazy idea. Most cultures aren't ready for this. We didn't wait for culture to change, we started the change.

Principles of rebel leadership:

**Be generous.** At this point it was unproven and I was willing to fail small. Mike was willing to do this really cool project for low cost. We did this on our own time. This is how serious we took it. We spent hundreds of our own personal hours on this and minimized the expense to AECl. It has a fun face, but it's measured, purposeful fun. Plus if it fails, it was mostly my time.

**Act in the company's best interest.** This is why we started by writing the handbook.

Every part of fiction had to justify its existence. There needed to be no question that we were doing this for our own purposes.

**Present the truth.** It always helps to prepare some tangible results. We had employees take a test after the training which everyone scored high on and employees were encouraged to write senior management if they found the training valuable, which they did.



## APPLIED FICTION

Applying a fictional narrative to a challenging learning problem to improve engagement, understanding and retention.

We had discovered something really interesting. When faced with a learning topic that is challenging to pay attention to, weaving a fictional story can complement the message. It can complement it so significantly that something that is a thing of dread becomes a thing of fun. We realized we had discovered a new practice and we called it **applied fiction**.

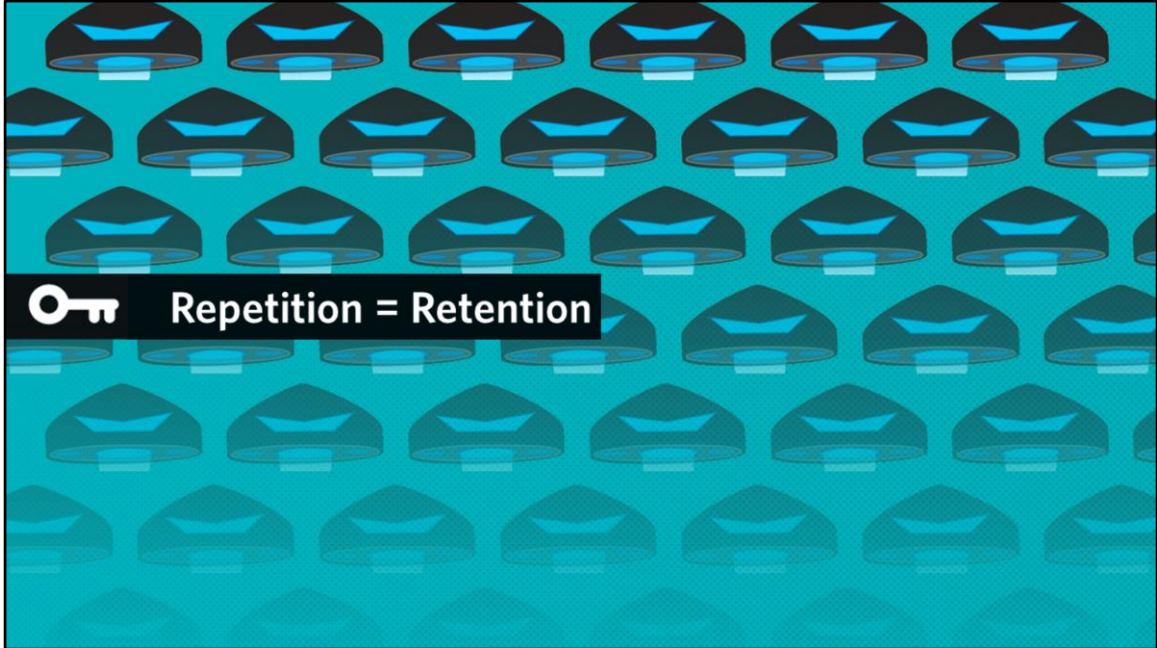


So that concludes Compliance 1.0

Wait! We're not done. One training event can't solve all our problems. Humans drift. Humans forget, even good training. We needed more.

Plus NERC is great at adding content - therefore we need to keep our employees up to date.

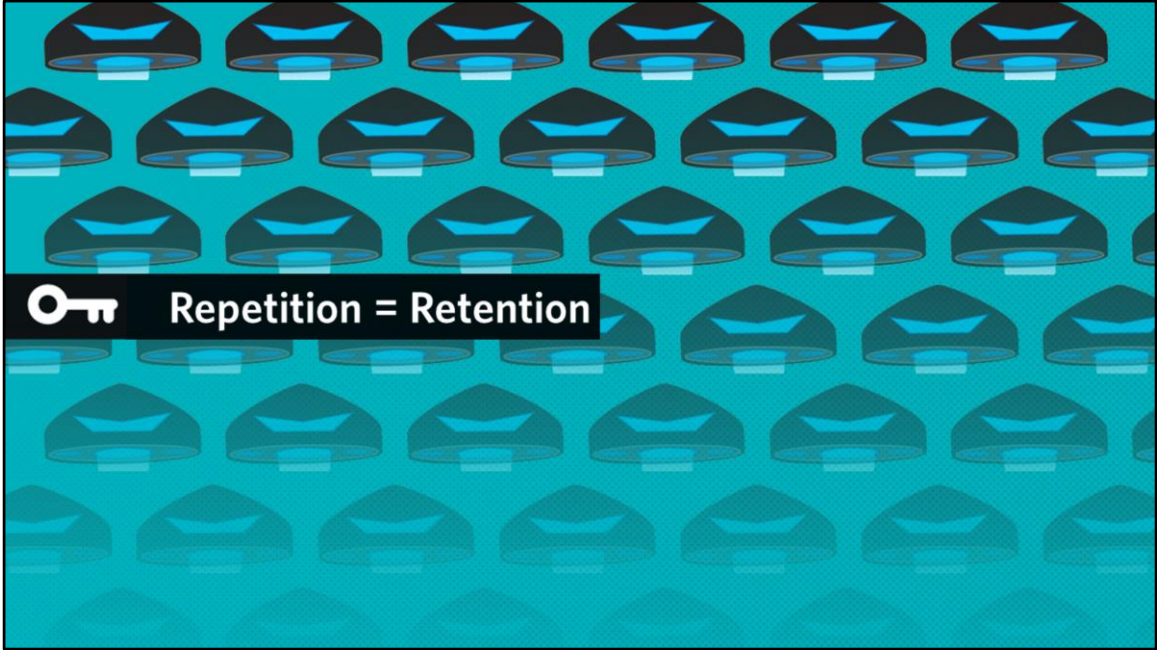
Let's rewind the timeline a bit.



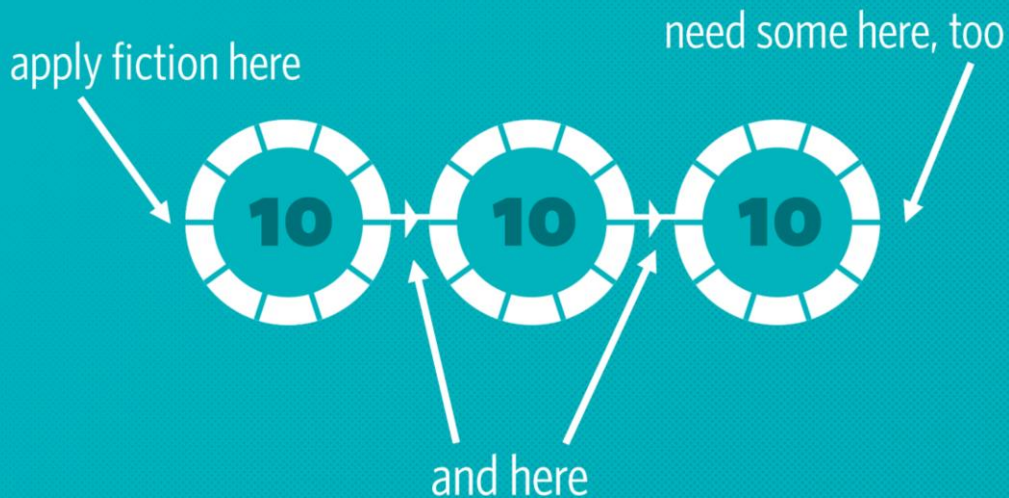
Just like working out your muscles takes repetition at intervals, One can increase the lifespan of memory by repeating it at regular intervals. The more repetition, the more likely the memory is to persist. The space between repetitions is the critical component for transforming temporary memories into persistent memories.

If you want memory retrieval to be the most vivid it can be, deliberately re-expose yourself to the information more elaborately and in fixed, spaced intervals. This applies at the macro level with another compliance training event and at the micro level, inside the training itself. Here's what we learned:





## 🔑 Lecture Improvements The Magic of 10



If a teacher can't hold a student's attention, knowledge will not be richly encoded in the student's brain

People don't pay attention to boring things. At about 10 minutes into any lecture, people lose focus so you have to regain their attention through an emotional and relevant action. 10 is the magic number.

Lecture design should be 10 minute modules with each module covering a core concept. The core concept should be large and general and explainable in a single minute. The other 9 minutes should provide a detailed description of the general concept. Upon completion of a module, give the audience a break through stimuli that triggers emotion and is relevant. This must go between modules.

Slowly revealing pieces of the story pulls the audience between sections.

So whereas the first training applied fiction to the handbook, we applied fiction in these gaps between learning sessions. So we applied it here<click>, here <click> and here <click>



With the success and the key learnings that we acquired from the first year, we were ready to setup out on another compliance adventure. Because the story had become a part of our culture, we wanted to expand it and give even more hooks for learning. We sat down 7 months before the training and started to brainstorm new plot points, items, and interactions. Our overarching rule was nothing is without purpose. And you can guess, we decided to add some more experiments to our laboratory.

## The Brainstorm Session

Earth depends on us now  
Earth depends on us.  
and in the future.

And compliance is  
Because all of us are  
our best weapon  
compliance heroes

## The Shopping List

two heroes  
one big gun  
bad guy concept  
a narrative  
five or six movies  
one glove of power  
a new handbook  
a bunch of artifacts

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With the new lecture structure and deeper purpose for the fiction in mind, we sat down 7 months before the training and started to brainstorm new plot points, items, and interactions. First we chose our new theme. You may remember the previous year's theme was "**Earth Depends On Us And Compliance is Our Best Weapon**". This year we changed it to "**Earth Depends On Us Now and in the Future Because All of Us Are Compliance Heroes**".

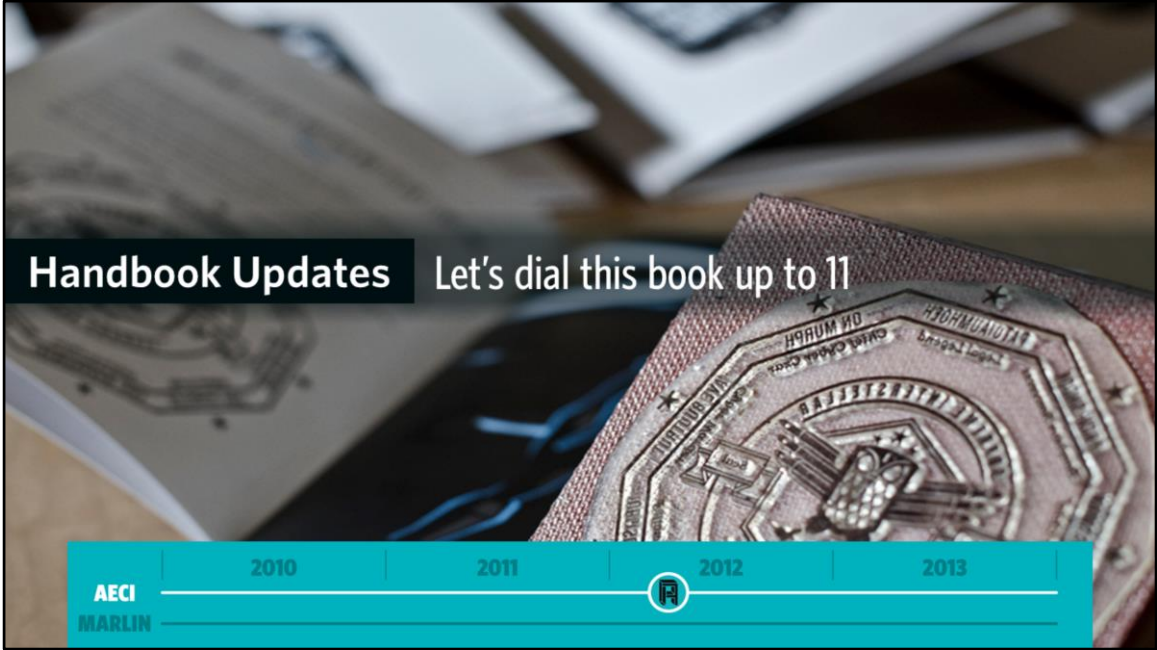
We needed a lot of stuff to make this fiction-in-the-gaps happen. Here's our shopping list ...

## 🔑 Bring in Other Talent

It's the best way to make a plan come together



Just looking at the shopping list that we have shown, you could probably guess that we needed help. With help of Mike, we put together an A-Team comprised of an improv actor, a game studio, a movie prop studio, a videographer, and two carpenters.



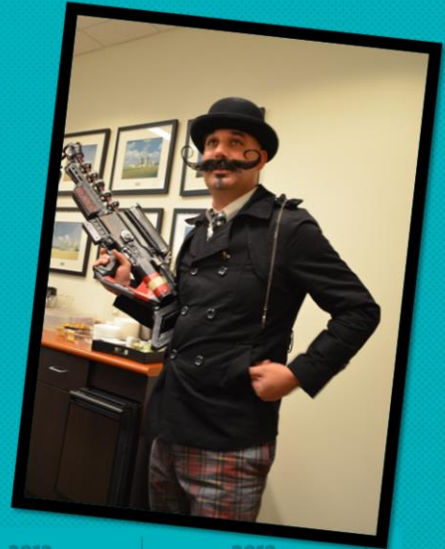
## Handbook Updates

Let's dial this book up to 11

We updated the handbook to add industry and internal changes to our compliance programs. We also added the NERC reliability standards that we're responsible for as well as including the compliance department members, calling them the Supreme Interstellar Compliance Council. We also updated the charts and diagrams and added some new robot enemies like the FlashBot.

## Building a Hero

## Dog's Bullocks!



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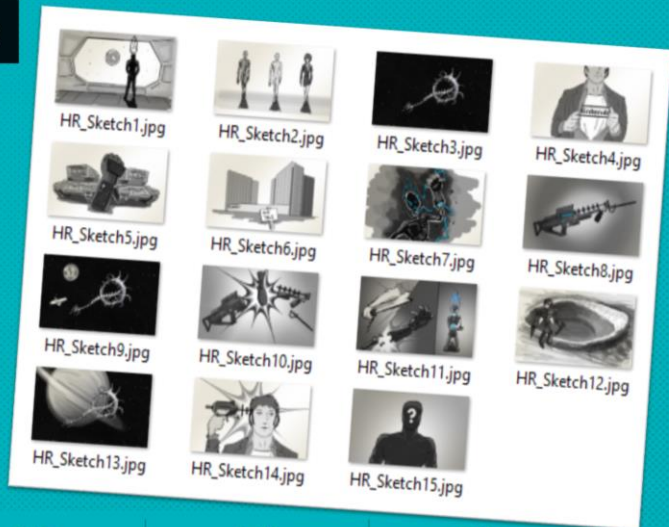
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Another item on our shopping list was a hero. This the Chad Harris, a local improv actor. Through a character development process and these clothes from Etsy and other online stores, Chad was transformed into Brit Beacon, leader of the Royal Highlands Robot Repulsors from the year 2040. Brit Beacon would be the hero from the future who would come back in time and help us give the training.

## The Unsuspecting Hero



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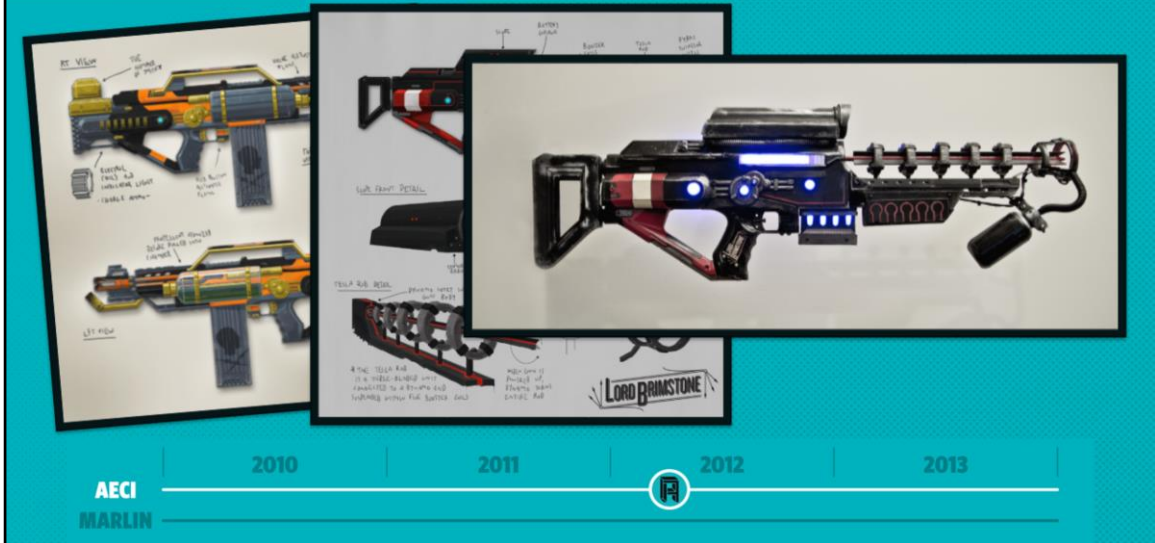
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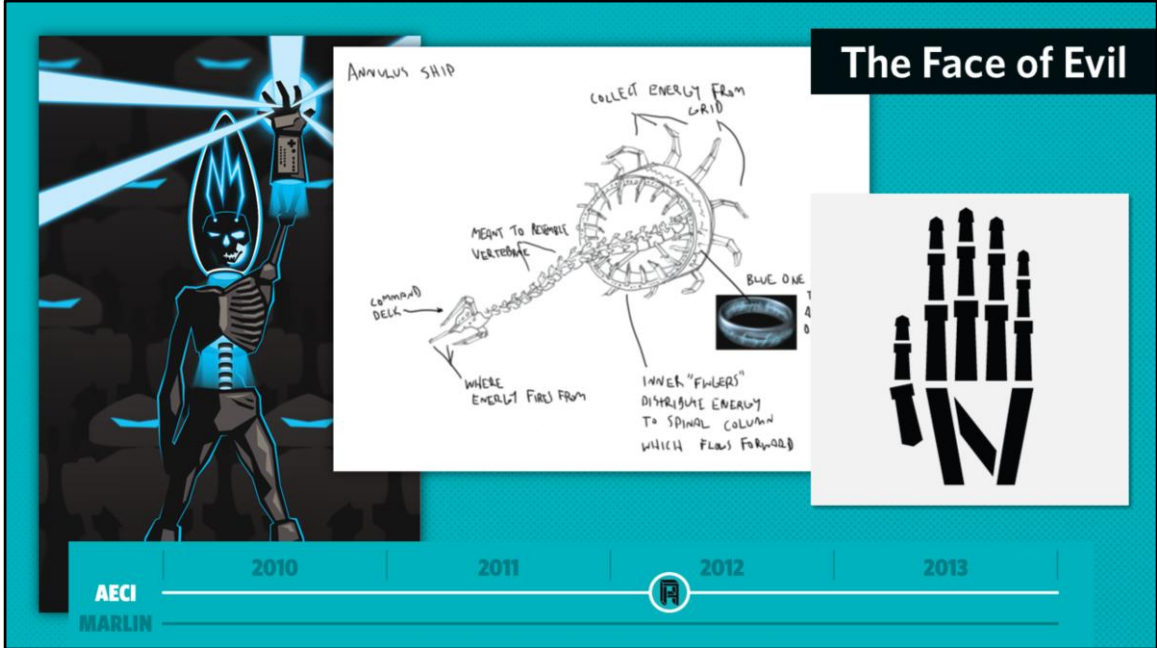
We also needed another hero. This is Kenny Tillman, a 40 year employee who is an amazing part of our team. Not everyone knows how great of an employee Kenny is because he lives in the basement most of the time getting things done, so we wanted to highlight him as a hero of the team and bring some recognition to him. Kenny did not know this, but we created an entire backstory for him where he saved Earth from robot invasion in the early 80's and mind-wiped himself so he doesn't remember it. We would use this theme throughout the entire training to pull Kenny into the training and build him up as a hero in front of everyone.



## The Power of Spectacle



Our heroes needed a weapon, an ultimate robot-killing weapon to bring attention-grabbing spectacle and give authority to our hero. Here you can see the initial designs for Lord Brimstone and the final version crafted by a movie prop studio. Yes, it lights up, makes sound, the barrel rotates and it even fires a high energy plasma beam that incinerates metal... OK, everything is true except for that plasma beam part.



The first year we introduced the robot horde as our enemy. This year we gave the enemy a face, Nemitrus, the robotic overmind who attacked us in the early 80's with his battleship, the Annulus Ship. He was thwarted by Kenny Tillman, but is back to regain control of his battleship through use of the Glove of Power which Kenny hid somewhere in our building. You can see the design concept of Nemitrus, the Annulus Ship concept art and Nemitrus' logo.

# Crafting the Story

## SCRIPT KEY

### COLOR CODING

- Human Section
- Video Section
- Animation Section

### OTHER HIGHLIGHTING

- Scene Dialogue
- Scene Setup/Context

### HEADINGS

#### ACT HEADING

#### SCENE HEADING

#### SUB-SCENE HEADING

## SCENE 3 (8:50 AM)

*Video goes blank as Brit runs into the training room.*

**BRIT** Charlie, Chris! I came here from the future help with your training, thwa  
of the **Overmind** and save you and the others from the M-1000 Mime-Bo

*Pauses, shaking his head looking at Chris and Charlie.*

Blimey, it's good to see you chaps - I haven't seen you for donkey's year

*Walks over and hugs Chris and Charlie. Charlie appears to really enjoy the  
rubbing Brit's back. From this point forward, Charlie continues to exhibit  
behavior, showing little tics like stutters, repeating words, scratching his  
itchy "human" skin. Brit looks around for other faces. Brit catches Kenny's*

Kenny Tillman...

*Brit races to him, kneeling down at his feet, recites*

"I, sir, am a trustee of the Order of Tillman, future generations honor yo  
Would you sign my autograph book? *Brit stands.* I shall not allow any p  
your backstory by The **Overmind's** Annulus probes!

*Appears surprised that Kenny isn't more honored by the team.*

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The handbook provided the structure to hang the fiction in the first year's training. Since we were applying fiction in the gaps between handbook sessions, we needed to script all these interactions with ourselves, the audience and the actor out. Here you can see some of our script with each scene broken out.

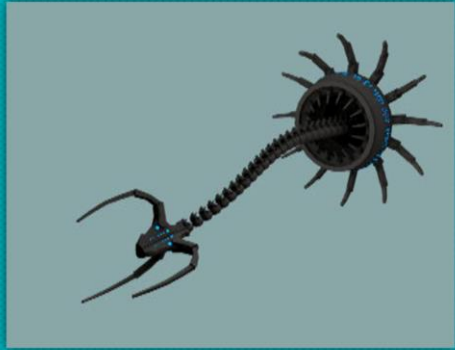
## Making Some Videos

Storyboard sketches and annotations:

- Sketch 1: Starts to zoom out and pan left (turn towards right)
- Sketch 2: very fast, fast pan across space.
- Sketch 3: dark side of earth, camera, need to see light at cities
- Sketch 4: light side of earth, camera
- Sketch 5: laser beam, zoom out and side left
- Sketch 6: Laser hits the head, stop shiny to glow...
- Sketch 7: BOOM!
- Sketch 8: explosion
- Sketch 9: coming out, actually falls slowly to find

Timeline: 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013

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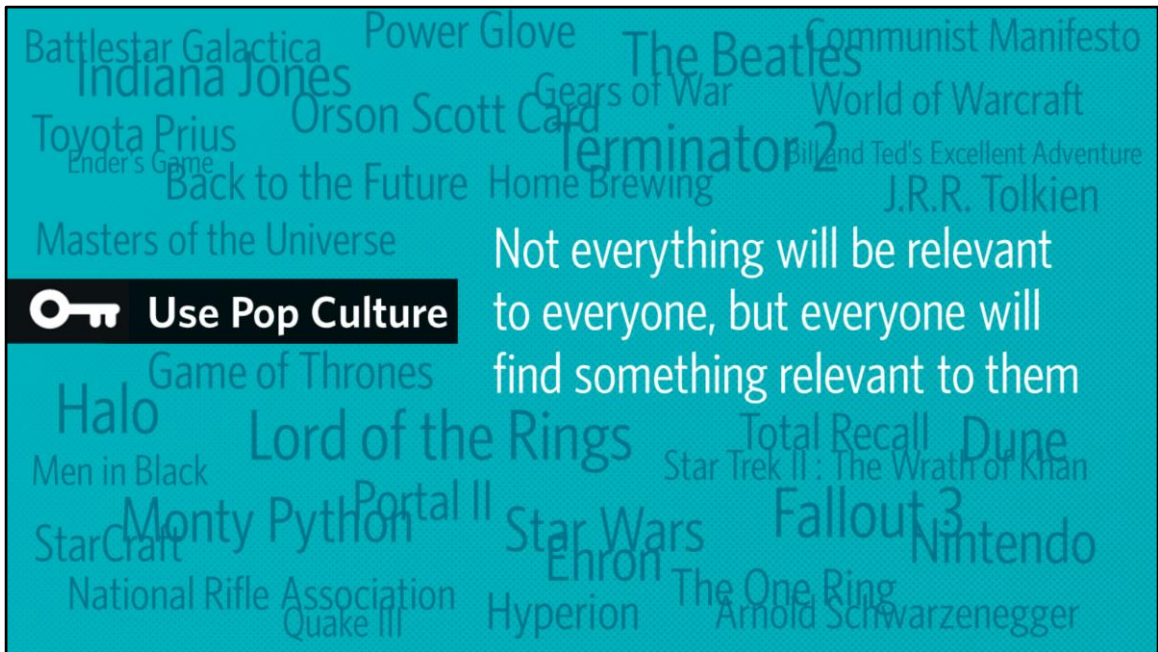
We used videos to fill in some of the gaps and make parts of our imagination more tangible to the audience. For example, we can describe what the Annulus Ship looks like, but we thought it even better if we could show what it looks like. Here's the storyboard from one of the videos and a 3D rendering of the annulus ship. This was used in just one of several videos we created.



Leeland Chee is a big name in the Star Wars universe. He manages what's called the Holocron which contains thousands of years of Star Wars history from the movies, books and other media created over the past 30 years. There are hundreds of planets, countless people and over 30,000 separate entries.

Very quickly we realized we needed to create our own Holocron – our own universe guide. Why? Because people like consistency in stories. We have a natural, excellent ability to spot holes in narrative and it distracts from the storytelling. We didn't want people to leave the training saying "well, THAT story had some serious plot holes in it."

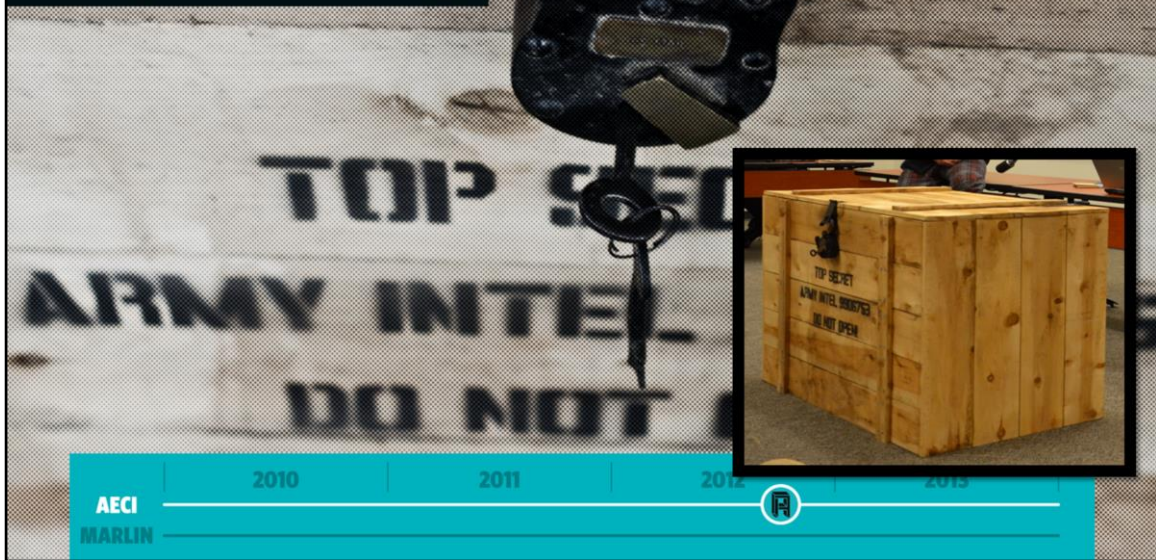
Our universe guide ended up being over 30 pages long and contains every bit of backstory and context we created. Much of this never made it into the script, but it ensured that the parts we told were consistent with each other.



When you're creating an applied fiction, there's a huge amount of content out there in pop culture that can be used for idea fodder and to make the training more relevant to each audience member. Our handbook and training had over 200 references to pop culture that our audience would know like Indian Jones or Terminator 2. It not only added good content to the fiction but gave more hooks to delight and personalize for people.

This gives you an idea of our shopping list for the event. It took several months of preparation to make this work, so let's move onto the event itself.

## The Mysterious Package



It all started when a mysterious crate appeared in AECI's lobby a few weeks before the training. The crate looks suspiciously like the crates from that secret government warehouse where the Ark of the Covenant is stored. What was in it? The huge lock on the create prevented people from getting in, but they tried.

## The Unexpected Visitor

"All great literature is one of two stories; a man goes on a journey or a stranger comes to town."

— Leo Tolstoy



2024

2028

2032

2038

2040

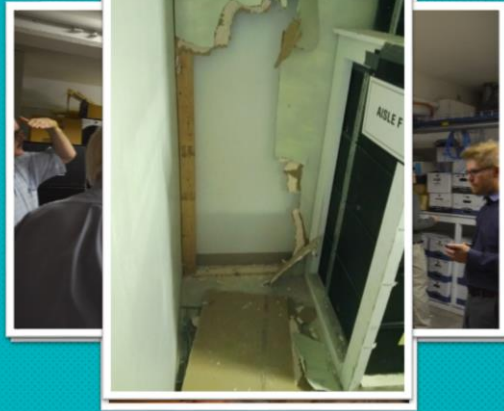


Brit (the embodiment of repetition, voice of authority, the unexpected, the source of entertainment, the savior of the training) was the person who appeared from the future that tied all of these pieces together - tying the story with last year and informing everyone in that room that they were compliance heroes.

In the middle of our opening presentation, the screens went dark and then switched to this live video feed showing a man time traveling back. We watched as he teleported around our facility and interacted with past and present employees. It was soon evident that he was getting closer and closer to our training room. As the video finished, he burst into the room in person.



## The Event Path



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During the day long training, Brit was our guide and protector.

He created interactions through

- Telephone games

- Gifts (nuts from robots he had recently dispatched)

- Shadow puppets

- Stories of the future

- Stories of the past

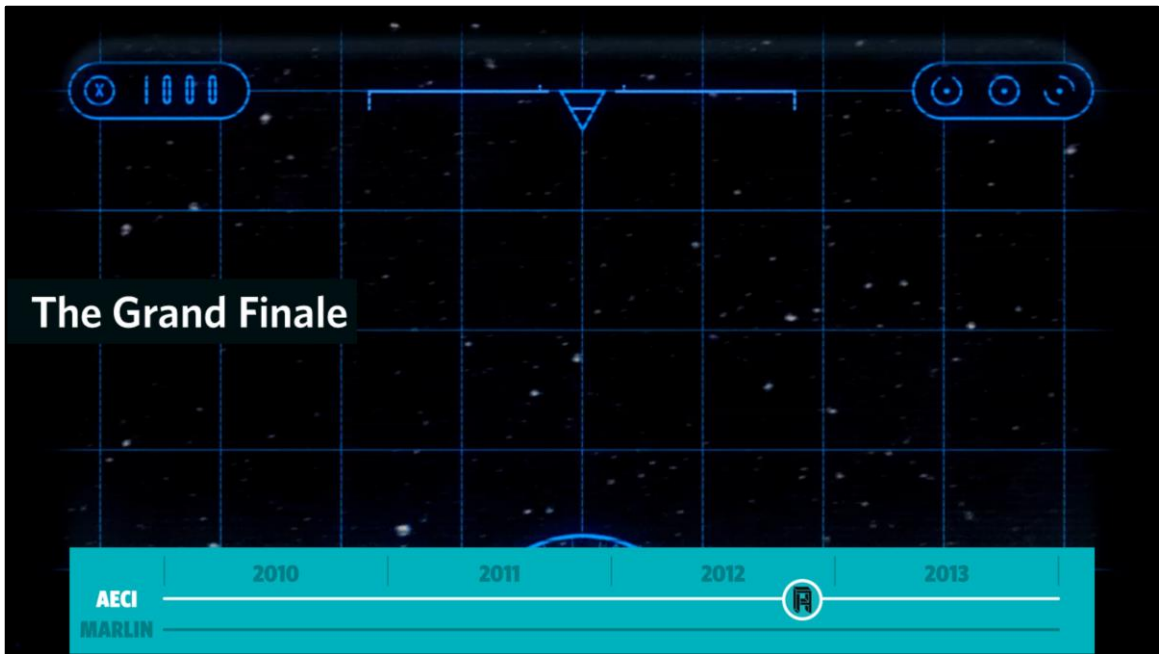
- Termination of a mimebot

- Karaoke

- Training Videos

- Artifact Hunts

- Defeat of the robot Overmind – Nemitrus



A successful story as well as a successful training should have a satisfying resolution. For our training, this was the destruction of Nemitrus' ship – the Annulus presented through video.

## 🔑 Make It Personal

“If a story is not about the hearer, he [or she] will not listen . . . A great lasting story is about everyone or it will not last. The strange and foreign is not interesting--only the deeply personal and familiar.”  
- John Steinbeck



A story that is used for Applied Fiction must connect to the individual. This is the quickest way to trigger an emotional tie which engages the entire brain in the training. For us, this was about becoming future hero's with a purpose of finding the Glove of Power. Coming out of the training, people still refer to themselves as their future names. They still have their name placards on their desks.

## Results

Daily pilgrimages from around the company again



Engaged compliance department



Featured in Springfield Business Journal



Passed 2 Audits with Flying Colors



SERC Workshop Guest



Featured in PRINT Regional Design Annual



NERC Human Performance Conference



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## 🔑 Rebel Leadership 2.0



Even as resourceful as we were, this training cost \$15,000 which we covered with our training budget. Compare this to the vendor provided training which cost 20,000 and we were still more cost effective.

However, there were still questions. Why? There were smiles. Compliance training should not have smiles. No one says anything when you spend 20,000 on the open bar at the stockholder annual meeting, but spend a portion of this on training that makes someone smile and laugh and you get another reaction. However, the management at AECl completely supported the training and that's what matters in the end.

## Future

“Whoever tells the best story shapes the culture.”

- Erwin Raphael McManus



All departments at AECI this year will participate in Compliance 3.0. The culture is changing and spreading. This year we are planning on handing off the development of the training and world to a new set of leaders. In fact, Applied Fiction is not just growing at AECI, it is growing in Springfield, MO.

...and they lived happily ever after.

**Nope, Try Again**



# Observe compliance, PRACTICE RESISTANCE

From tedious government training to a robot-filled battle for Earth. Associated Electric reworks its training program in a unique way.

By Emily Lettermann [emilylettermann@springfieldjournal.com](mailto:emilylettermann@springfieldjournal.com)

**Extra, Extra - Read all about it!**

**2010** **2011** **2012** **2013**

**AECI**  
**MARLIN**

*[Partial text from article:]*  
 Robots from outer space are taking over Earth. Their plan? Ignoring all the planet's energy to make their own.  
 The federal government knows. If the public finds out, more power will mean.  
 The only solution: Compliance.  
 The federal government's part of Associated Electric Company's latest strategy to train its engineering and operating department employees.  
 Compliance is a large body of regulated activity and Chris of employees. Compliance is a large body of regulated activity and Chris of employees.  
 Chris Lettermann, Director of Compliance, is leading the charge. He says that 2010 was a big year for compliance training. He says that 2010 was a big year for compliance training.  
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 He says that 2010 was a big year for compliance training. He says that 2010 was a big year for compliance training.

Like we mentioned before, the Springfield Business Journal wrote an article on the Compliance training that we did at AECI. This article captured the interest of an executive at the ad agency, Marlin.



## But does it work when almost all variables change?



Let's shift gears into a different company. Marlin was a completely different problem domain for us to tackle.

Are they in the Utility Industry? No

Do they deal with Compliance? No

Are they predominately Left Brain? No

Did they have complex technical information to communicate? Yes

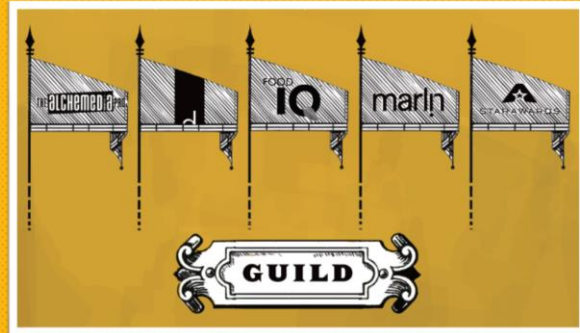
They had rolled out an Employee Stock Ownership Plan the previous year and could not understand why employees were not excited about it. They had communicated the news to the organization via a 40 page summary of a 75 page legal document. In discussing the program with their employees, we received a different answer about the plans workings from every employee that we talked to. There was definitely a need to improve the understanding.



When we evaluated the problem and tried to use applied fiction, we had an issue. With our previous compliance training, we substituted the story for one that connected better with the audience. This put a face on the story and worked well. This method didn't work for Marlin. They already had a great story. The founders were giving ownership of the company to the employees. If we substituted this story, it would be a disservice to the founders. What we came up with was a new model – Complementary Applied Fiction. When you already have a great story, applied fiction can be used to augment/complement the story.

This took the form of adding a mythology to the founding of the company and a magical purpose to the continuation of Marlin.

## Start with the Fiction



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Fiction needs to be specifically chosen for each audience  
Exercise

Which would most likely connect with geeky programmers – Farming, Robots, Princesses

Which would most likely connect with power plant mechanics – War, World of Warcraft, Legos

For this audience we chose a Harry Potter. It was familiar. It was magical. There was already a known number of employees who liked the story. The multiple house concept in Hogwarts fit Marlin's multiple subsidiaries. Because of all of this, it just felt right. In fact, this was part of the original pitch to the Marlin executives to get them to agree to spend money on this training.

Unfortunately we followed up the pitch by going into great depths in creating the fiction. We started with the backstory and then began creating the Universe Guide.

## Never Start with the Fiction Always Start with the Business



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Going into depth on the fiction created many problems as we tried to apply it to the business concepts that we wanted to teach. It didn't fit the concepts well. Imagine if you picked a fiction first – say Pirates and then said it has to teach CIP Compliance. This just doesn't mesh well and any correlations will be difficult stretches. Pirates don't even have computers!

We had to rework almost everything from the original pitch. The lesson learned is to always start with the business first. Find out what you want to teach, distill it down, and then begin crafting the fiction to use.



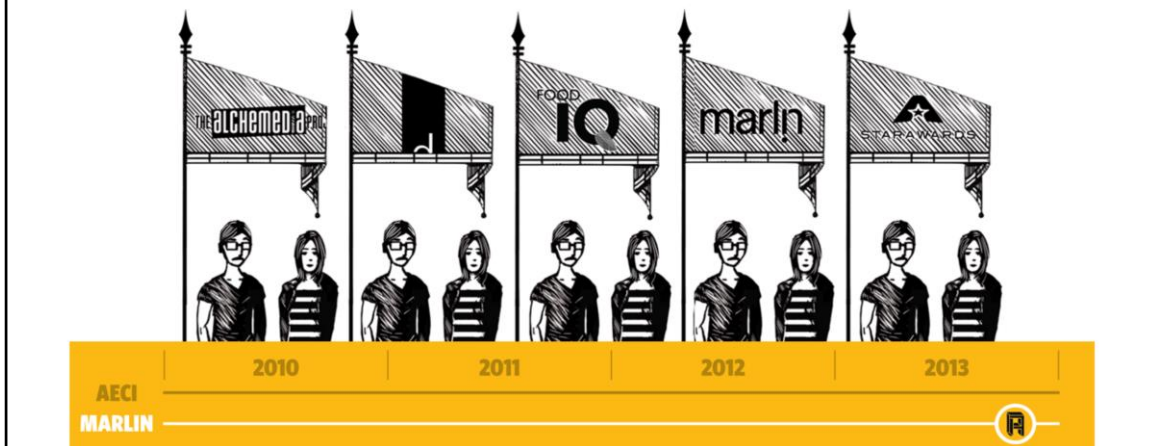
We went back to the original documents and spent quite a bit of time researching, questioning, and studying the concepts. It was vital that we knew this completely before we attempted to weave it into a fiction. We received great support from the founders as we worked through interpretations.



We used a lot of the same principles that we had learned before. Integrating fiction into every page, drawing quotes from the members, keeping the content fun and simple. For communicating the complexities and the benefits of the ESOP, we thought it best to follow a real/fictional employee through multiple years of their career, showing the benefits that they get and how the program operated. Each year, we quantified the amounts to make it real to the employees.

## 🔑 The Magic of an Infographic

### YEAR 1 DISTRIBUTION



Being an Ad Agency, the audience was very visual. In addition, the technical detail that we were trying to communicate was a completely interdependent process instead of independent requirements.

The infographic allowed for a quick reference during the training allowing them to maintain context with the part we were discussing. It actually became the core communication.

Let's give a 20 second overview of the ESOP to show you how it works.

At the top we have the hipster ad agency employees working for each subsidiary. They generate profits. These profits are used to pay off a bank loan and the sale of the company by the owners. The remaining amount is delivered to the Trust which is managed by the Trustee. She evaluates the profits and releases a portion of the shares from the cask of unallocated shares. These are distributed to the employees individual loot bags. Any shares that are collected from employees that have left are also reallocated.

## The Event



Now that we had our content ready, we were ready for the live event. The employees filed into the venue expecting a standard company annual meeting. They quickly found out this was not an ordinary meeting. Snaer served as a constant distraction trying to attack the employees and disrupt the event. The Spirit of Creativity served as a host and moderator for the event, even protecting us from the wiles of Snaer. We distributed the handbook and went through the story of a fictional employee to see how they are impacted by the ESOP. As a method of engaging this audience, we pulled them up on stage to enact the mechanisms of the infographic. To cap the story, we captured Snaer – sealing her away with a magical seal.

It worked. People were engaged. People understood. People were excited.



## Learnings

Start with the business first, not the fiction



Complementary versus substitutionary applied fiction



Know your audience



Some problems require a picture



Live events require tremendous amount of coordination



Senior engagement required with company history fiction



Interaction brings unpredictability



Is this really the end?

Nope



# What is your Story?

This applied fiction tool has proven to be effective and provide value as demonstrated by our compliance performance, employee engagement and industry accolades.

Our goal today has been to plant seeds in your thought about what you can do to enhance the memory of your trainings. Now its up to you to choose what you do with this. If this concept connects with you, we definitely want to hear your stories because we're excited about what fiction you can apply to your people and business problems. Your fiction will be different than ours. Ours was robots from outer space and a Harry Potter/H.P. Lovecraft universe. For you it may be Zombies, Dinosaurs, Bear Cavalry, Steampunk, or something entirely novel.



**APPLIED FICTION**



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<http://vimeo.com/84541000>

Contact us and let us know how we can help.

Watch our video of the Marlin training

We may be teaching an Applied Fiction class at UXWeek in San Francisco in September. Keep an eye on their website for news.