

# ***The Elf Who Learned How To Test***



Mike Talks

# **The Elf Who Learned How To Test**

A book for testers and their  
children ... of all ages

Mike Talks

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# Introduction

First of all, a Merry Christmas to all testers and their families. But you don't need to be from a culture that celebrates Christmas to enjoy the following tale.

This story started from a conversation I had with fellow Testing Planet member Rosie Sherry about "*a world without testing*", which became her piece, [Imagine There's No Testing](#)<sup>1</sup>. This gave me the idea for a story about testing suitable children of all ages. If you are lucky enough to have children of the right age, try this tale out with them, together with the exercises at the back.

This is a free ebook, however if you enjoyed this story (*as I hope you will*), I hope you can make a small donation to [Starship NZ](#)<sup>2</sup>. It's a charity dedicated to providing paediatric care to children in New Zealand, which I've been supporting through work. Even the smallest of donations is going to what I believe to be a truly worthy cause.

But most importantly, best wishes at this time of the year to you and those close to you.

*Your testing comrade-in-arms,*

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<sup>1</sup><http://rosiesherry.com/2012/08/imagine-theres-no-testing/>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.starship.org.nz/foundation/how-i-can-help/making-a-donation-now/>

Mike Talks & Family December 2012



# **Chapter 1 - The Elf Who Learned How To Test**

## Story

At the very top of the world sits the North Pole, perhaps you've heard of it? It's a kingdom of ice all year around, which is in darkness for many months on end. It's harsh and cold, but there are still people here. Though when I say people, I would be more correct to call them elves.

Elves are four foot high, generally slender and pale, and look to many people's eyes like young children, with the exception of their distinctive pointy ears. Many people believe elves to be magical but they are not, they are just incredibly hard working, and because of this can get seemingly impossible tasks done, such as pulling an all-night shift to finish a bootmakers order of shoes. Much of this hard work ethic comes from living at the North Pole, where there is nothing "better to do". But it is also because since Santa moved his Workshop there many years ago, a job in Santas workshop has been a much desired career for many-an-elf. It certainly beats their previous activities, which mainly involved avoiding being eaten by ravenously hungry Polar Bears, who I am sad to say have developed a taste for elves over the years.

Our tale concerns a very special elf by the name of

Magnus, though Magnus never really saw himself as anything particularly exceptional. Magnus was one of Santas army of toymakers, and he'd worked for several years building small wooden trucks. Magnus loved to assemble them, and then paint them in bright colours. Each one looked so beautiful when finished, that he was often tempted to play with it on his workbench, to know what his toys were like when used. But that was a big *no-no* amongst elves, being strictly forbidden.

The Chief Elf put posters up around the Workshop saying things like "*Remember – You are here to work, not play! The children of the world are depending on your hard work*". He would also show a clock counting down the number of days until Christmas shipping, and show graphs of the Number Of Toys Produced for each month, to see if the Workshop was working to it's target.

It was always a close thing, every toy simply had to be ready for Christmas Eve, but the Workshop always managed to pull it off. Though many a time several toys would be drying as they were being delivered by Santa. Personally Magnus and a few other elves found themselves hoping that Santa added a few more names to the naughty list each year, just because it would help to keep their work down a little.

Then one year, on Boxing Day, the day after Christmas, Magnus came back to his workbench to start on the new year's batch of trucks. Magnus was feeling a little tired, the elves would celebrate Christmas Day with the Boss, but the next day the Chief Elf had them back at work for the next Christmas.

Magnus finished his first truck of the year, and it made him smile – with it's green body and shiny red wheels, he felt sure it was the finest he'd ever made. And that's when the thought came into his mind. He looked around him, and sure enough, all the other elves were hard at work and not paying him any attention. He took the truck in his hand, and pushed it along the bench, watching the wheels run and grind on the wooden surface. It was a very satisfying feeling. "Wow", he thought, and he tried to suppress a giggle, "that's what it feels like to play with one of my trucks".

He knew he should have left it at that, but after finishing each truck, he gave it a quick run on the bench to see how it felt. Each time he smiled to himself, as he really enjoyed playing with the trucks.

But then on the fourth one, something unexpected happened ... one of the wheels fell off. Magnus looked at it horrified, and worked out what had happened. He'd not secured the wheel onto its axle with enough

glue, and it had come loose. He quickly fixed it, and was glad no-one had seen he'd broken a toy.

Immediately Magnus vowed to himself "*this is why elves don't play with toys, you have to stop*". But as the paint on his fifth truck dried he thought about this more deeply. "*How many times have I not used enough glue in the past? How many of my toys will have arrived to children, and then broke when they played with them?*". It made him feel uneasy.

So Magnus decided he would keep on secretly playing with his toys, not for himself, but so he could make the best toys possible. Sure enough, by the end of the first week he found that,

- sometimes the wheels fell off if he didn't use enough glue. That was simple enough to fix, just try again using more glue.
- sometimes if he used too much glue, it would stick in the axle and the wheels wouldn't move around. This he could fix with sanding paper, to wear it down until it moved easily again..
- sometimes his wheels weren't perfectly round, and his trucks would waddle like a duck. So he would reshape his wheels to be rounder until the wobble went away.

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Magnus was pleased with what he was doing, but the other elves were noticing his un-elvish behaviour, and after a couple of months, Magnus was called into the Chief Elf's office. Unlike the rest of the workshop, which was painted in bright colours, the Chief Elf's office was almost grey, it was buried in mounds of paperwork, which was turning brown from years of being left out unfiled.

The Chief Elf was a nervous, tired looking, wrinkled man in thick, heavy spectacles. He sat behind a battered desk, shaking his head as Magnus came in, his face was just visible between two towers of papers.

“Oh … erm … yes Magnus. Please take a seat, I need to have a word with you.” Stuttered the worried Chief Elf.

Magnus was quite excited. He expected that the Chief Elf had noticed how good the toys he was now making were, and wanted to congratulate him. There wasn't a spare chair in the office, so Magnus sat on a wooden chest of paperwork marked “Urgent”.

“Now Magnus. You know Santa hasn't always been here at the North Pole …”, began the Chief Elf. Magnus rolled his eyes slightly as the Chief Elf was always giving this all too familiar speech. “Santa began as a startup business in Lapland supplying only the children of Lapland with toys. When he realised he

wanted to go global, he knew he'd need to move his operations offshore, and so we Elves bid for him to move his business over here.”

“You don’t know what it was like for Elves before Santa moved his workshop here, Magnus”. Magnus did, because again the Chief Elf was always telling this story. “We had to live as best we could fishing under the ice, and the terrible, terrible Polar Bear attacks ... well need I say more ...”

The Chief Elf continued, “what keeps Santa here, apart from the low rental and competitive work rates, is our hard work ethic. We work, we don’t play. But that’s exactly what you’ve been seen doing Magnus.”

This wasn’t the conversation Magnus had expected. “I’m not playing! I’m ... I’m ...”, up until now Magnus hadn’t had a word for the concept of what he was doing, and he struggled for the right ones to explain what he was doing, “I’m building better toys!”

The Chief Elf glared at Magnus, “we are not here to build better toys, we are here to meet this year’s quota so Christmas can happen”.

Magnus thought for a moment. “Are you saying I don’t make enough trucks?”. He knew that was a trick question – the last few years he’d won several rosettes for the most toys made in a month.

“You have always produced more toys than the average elf Magnus, as you know well. However I have noticed though you are continuing to do so, you are making less than usual. We are depending on elves like you to work flat out to meet our deadline Magnus.”

Magnus was swayed by the Chief Elf’s words. But then he thought about all the flaws he’d found in the toys he’d made. In the past those toys would have gone out, and made many a child upset when they broke. “No – this is the way I make my toys now, this is the way I need to make my toys now. This is Santas Workshop, it’s not about quotas and deadlines, it’s about making a child happy. Otherwise there’s no point.”

The Chief Elf was flustered. “Very well Magnus, I am really disappointed in you. Just beware, I’m keeping a very close eye on you, and if your numbers drop below the average, we will have a talk about your future in Santas Workshop.”

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Magnus was frustrated about that conversation, and it upset him for many days afterwards. Not even his beautiful, colourful trucks could cheer him up. But he knew he was doing the right thing.

The year passed, and the elves found themselves putting in later hours once again as Christmas loomed in order to meet Santa's Workshop's targets. It was close, but once again they made Christmas happen on time. Everyone looked forward to the next year being a Leap Year, with a whole extra day to catch up on.

Then into February, the Chief Elf appeared next to Magnus's workbench. "The Boss wants to see you", he sneered.

"What does he want?", asked a worried Magnus. The Chief Elf delivering this news could not be a good thing.

"I expect he finally read my report on you and your attitude", the Chief Elf grinned as he spoke with an unpleasant smile.

Magnus took a deep breath, and left the shop floor for Santas office. Behind him elves were whispering to one another about what fate awaited Magnus, until the Chief Elf eventually told them to "stop gossiping and get back to work!".

Magnus knocked nervously at the Boss's office, and a deep voice within boomed, "come in". Magnus pushed open the door and there he was, the Boss himself – Father Christmas, Papa Noel, the legend that is Santa Claus.

Magnus had seen him address the elves at presentations in the past, but had never been so close to the man before. He was an imposing and intimidating figure to an elf at well over six feet tall, with thick white hair and a neat trimmed beard. He was dressed in a deep red business suit with a matching tie, and sat behind what looked like a gingerbread desk propped up on candy cane legs. The office was much brighter than the Chief Elf's, full of the dark reds and whites everyone associated with the Boss.

The Boss fixed Magnus with a calculating stare. "Magnus?", he asked, to which the little elf nodded. The Boss looked him up and down for a moment as if measuring him up, "Magnus ... we seem to have a bit of a problem".

Magnus felt faint, this was it, the Chief Elf had won, and Magnus was going to lose his job. He'd be out and trying to evade Polar Bears with an appetite for young elves before the night was out, he could feel it. He found himself collapsing into a red leather seat in front of the Boss. "Do we?" gulped Magnus.

"Yes ... yes we do. What can you tell me about the letters Santa gets?" asked the Boss.

"Erm ..." Magnus wondered if this was a trick question. "Every boy and girls writes to Santa to ask for things they'd like for Christmas?".

“Yes, yes ... everyone knows about those ones. I receive them from September right up to Christmas Eve. What about the ones I get in January?”

“We get letters in January?” replied a baffled Magnus.

“Yes ... and they’re not very nice ones either. Usually they’re from parents.” The Boss picked up a letter from his gingerbread desk. “Take this one ‘Dear Santa, my Jimmy was pleased to receive his skateboard on Christmas Day. But imagine his disappointment when the next day the wheels came loose whilst he was using it, and Jimmy fell off, breaking his arm?’”

“That’s terrible”, said an aghast Magnus.

“Yes indeed – the worst thing is such complaints happen, and then the children involved never write to me again. It’s so frustrating to lose my customers this way. We get thousands of these letters every year, and I find out who makes the toys, and keep tabs on them. Every elf makes such an unfortunate number of defective toys each year there has never been a pattern until now.” The Boss sighed and took off his spectacles to rub his eyes. “But then this year something happened I didn’t expect. In fact at first I didn’t notice it at all, it was so subtle. And when I did see it I found myself having to check it twice ...”

Magnus found himself giggling at that remark, until the Boss put his glasses on, and fixed him with a stare.

The Boss continued, “It seems this year your number of defective toys is down. And I mean seriously down compared to the other elves. I’m aware of the run in you had with the Chief Elf, and he wrote a full account to me on the subject. Supposedly you’ve been playing with our toys?”.

Magnus felt this was his opportunity, he’d been replaying his conversation with the Chief Elf for far too long, and really wish he’d handled it differently. Now was his chance. “No Santa, not playing, using them. I call it erm ...”. Ever since that day in the Chief Elf’s office he’d been thinking about this, but he still hadn’t come up with a suitable name. “Erm ... testing? You see how can we tell we’ve made a great toy unless we use it as a child would, and make sure the wheels roll, make sure we can apply weight to it without anything snapping, give it a shake and make sure nothing falls off. When I did this with my toys, I found small defects, and fixed them. All year I’ve been sure it makes for a better end product for the children ... I mean our customers.”

The Boss turned around in his high backed red leather chair so that Magnus could only see the great man’s giant back. The Boss remained silent for what seemed like an age to Magnus, then he turned back to him, and put his hands together as if in prayer. “Magnus, I’d like to make you our Quality Assurance Chief”.

“Erm ... that would be great ... what’s a Quality Assurance Chief?” Asked a relieved elf, although he wasn’t sure if he’d just jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

The Boss explained the role as he saw it, “you’ll be in responsible for the quality of what we produce, you can build up a team, and find faults with the toys we break so our customers don’t.”

“Wow ...” Magnus was overwhelmed. “That sounds great.” This sounded like just doing what he’d been doing all year around but with more toys, it sounded easy.

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True to his word, the Boss gave Magnus a team of two dozen elf men and women to work in his Quality Assurance group. He taught them the things he’d learned from play testing his trucks, and they worked out ways to do similar checks on all the other lines that the Workshop produced. Every day the team play-tested products coming from the Workshop, and returned any defective ones to be repaired, back to the original toymaker.

This actually made the Quality Assurance group initially disliked amongst the other elves, as they only

appeared to speak to them when there was a problem. This was frustrating to Magnus, and something he'd not expected. When he tested his own work, he was motivated to fix problems he'd found in his own work.

Worst still was the Chief Elf's attitude, he would follow members of the Quality Assurance team around to compile a "Naughty Elf" list of toymakers who made bad toys, which would be displayed for all to see. This Magnus felt did not help, and they found that toymakers tried harder to explain that the toys they made were not really broken when the Chief Elf was around making notes.

Next February, Magnus was called back into the Bosses office once again.

"Well I have to say Magnus", began the Boss reading from a report, "that I'm a little bit disappointed. I brought you in to take ownership of quality, but we're still getting complaints".

Magnus's heart was in his mouth. His mind was racing. "Last year you said the complaints about the toys I made were seriously down, but there were still complaints?"

"Erm ... yes a couple. I have the file here." The Boss opened it and began to go through it.

"And this year, the Workshop still got complaints?",

enquired Magnus. The Boss nodded as the little elf continued, “but were they noticeably less than last year?”

“Well yes”, explained the Boss, “but I was rather hoping we’d not have any at all. You obviously need to do more tests”.

“That’ll be hard, we were stretched last year as it was. Let me look at the file on me there ...” Magnus looked at his fail file for his toys from the year before. “Hmmm ... so one complaint was about a mother stood on a truck and it split the axle. Is the axle really supposed to take an adults weight? It’s just a toy car after all, not a roller-skate. If it is, perhaps we need to redesign it? How much weight should it be designed to take?”

“I suppose looking at it like that, yes that’s down to the way it was used and not a fault of the toy”, mused the Boss as he stroked his beard.

“And this one ‘my son Jonny threw Mary’s truck into our fireplace, and to our horror it caught fire’. We could perhaps look at using a more fireproof paint, but the bottom-line is a wooden truck in a fireplace will most likely burn because it’s still made of wood. But we’d want to make sure they don’t go up in flames if they get close to a match or a cigarette, but put anything where it’s hot enough and it will burn. Do

you have the list of letters for this year's complaints Boss?".

The Boss handed Magnus another file, which he flicked through. "Well some of these are people just being silly with our toys then blaming our toy. But some are good points, and things we've not thought about." Magnus shut the file, and it was his turn to give the Boss an intense look. "The problem is we can get quality better, but we'll never get it zero. There will always be ways to use toys we've not thought about or perhaps tests we simply cannot run on every toy, we were very stretched at work last year."

"To get this to work Santa, some things will have to change, like the idea that only my team is responsible for quality, we're not. We aren't Quality Assurance, we're testers. Everyone is responsible for quality. The toymaker delivers quality by doing the best job they can, even if there are occasional faults. But the testers aid quality by helping to have any problems fixed, and ensuring the Workshop produces the best toys we can. That's why the Chief Elfs 'Naughty Elf' list needs to stop. People need to see the important thing is producing great toys for children on Christmas Day, and not focusing on the fact that they occasionally make defective toys which need to be fixed. As long as we are finding these problems before a toy gets into the hands of a child, that should be all that matters."

“We also need to teach each toymaker to check their own work for the basics, so they can fix the obvious problems before they come to us. It will save us so much more time if toymakers fix issues as they find them. We need to have my testers near to the toymakers to help them do checks when they’re not sure, and to guide them about what testing is all about.

“But most of all, you need to talk about the Complaints Letters and about the need for quality in what we do. I’d never heard of the Complaints Letters until last year, and every toymaker believes the focus of Santa’s Workshop is on meeting quotas, not building quality. We need to tell the story of the boy who broke his arm on a defective skateboard to let toymakers understand why we’re trying to build the best toys we can.”

The Boss sat behind his gingerbread desk for a moment with his mouth open, taking in Magnus’s speech. It felt like a eternity of silence, and then, slowly the corner of his mouth started to raise into a smile. “Well Magnus ... that’s quite a piece of analysis. I’d better watch my step or in a decade or so you might be sitting behind this desk.” And for the first time since Magnus had met him, the Boss let loose his trademarked, ‘ho, ho, ho’ bellylaugh.

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Change happened, but not all at once. There was some resistance amongst toymakers at incorporating play-testing in with their building. Magnus went around the toymakers, and talked about the Complaints Letters, about the need for quality for their customers and for the Workshop's reputation, and most importantly he tore up the "Naughty Elf" list in front of the factory floor. The toymakers realised to ensure quality was to ensure pride in their work, and over time saw play-testing as a way of assuring this. With the toymakers covering the basics, Magnus's testers could test all other kinds of things, like how fireproof the new paints were and how much load the truck design could take.

The number of Complaints Letter dropped, but never got to zero. But Magnus kept going through them with the Boss to work out the ones which were important, and needed investigation. Magnus found as long as he kept talking to the Boss about the letters, he kept his expectations realistic, and kept Santa comfortable about what the elves were doing.

After a while even the Chief Elf was satisfied that Santa was not going to move toy production from the North Pole, and that the Workshop was in good hands, so decided to take a much delayed retirement, including a cruise to the South Pole.

And the children of the world? Well they could look forward to their happiest Christmas ever ... thanks to Magnus ...

## Activities

Dear testers and children-of-testers, I hope you enjoyed the story of Magnus the elf, and it's had you thinking?

Well congratulations, Magnus has recruited you into his toy testing team as an honorary elf. Here are a few exercises for you to try out together ...

1) Along with toy trucks, some of Santas main toy lines include,

- bicycles
- baby dolls
- toy prams

*How would you try and test some of these items to make sure they were ready for Santa to deliver on Christmas Eve?*

2) Don't try this with your toys – but Magnus's test team would occasionally test a sample toy until it was breaking by either,

- Seeing how much weight it could carry until it broke
- See how high it could be dropped until it broke

The Chief Elf saw this originally as a waste of time and toys. *Why do you think doing these kinds of tests might be useful?*

- 3) The Chief Elf believed that Santa wanted the workshop to produce enough toys for every child in the world by Christmas Eve. Magnus believed that Santa wanted the workshop to produce good toys that would make children happy. *Who do you think was right?*
- 4) Do you think Santa ever told the Chief Elf about the Complaints Letters he got?
- 5) Every year the elves had to work long hours to make all the toys they needed for Christmas Eve. When the Chief Elf left, a new elf named Katrina took over. Within a year she had made changes which meant that the elves didn't have to work such long hours in the run up to Christmas any more. *What changes do you think she made?*