

#### ***Oliver Harris // Creative Approaches to Interactivity – Production Analysis4***

‘Where’s Woolie?’ was the conclusion of an ingenious insight by a production member at the beginning of the project that QuickTime VR functions similarly to the nature of the ‘Where’s Wally?’ visual books of the early/ mid nineties, where ‘Wally watchers’ partake in a voyeuristic game amongst a busy scene that is won by finding objects, and ultimately the red/white striped Wally himself. After realizing the possibilities this could entail, the ideas started to flow as to how the game could be presented, and which audience to aim it at. The versatility meant that presentation was everything – depending on context and appearance the game could be aimed at anyone. Myriad Fairy Tales and Nursery Rhymes were researched online and recalled from childhood although it was obvious this presentation was fine for small children but needed a greater edge if teenagers or adults were to play and enjoy. The next ideas to be drafted together was to play with ‘Gangsta Rap’ culture and have ‘Little BO Peep’ try and find her lost sheep in amongst the ghetto of the West English country. The juxtaposition of a charming Nursery Rhyme and quiet farm life with the noise and extravagance of ‘Gangsta Rap’ was thought to be highly amusing, yet was felt this now alienated a young audience. The QuickTime VR panoramas were a perfect medium for finding lost sheep, and the idea process came full circle when it was realized that obviously wool is made from sheep yet the phrase ‘Where’s Wally?’ could be subtly recycled as ‘Where’s Woolie?’ and at that point the Wally inspired Woolie was born – a character for any audience to enjoy.

Where the Director project represents an idea process that evolved through different stages, the stage was already set for the ‘Mencap’ Website – the pitch allowed little for experimentation in the same way; the vision was already crafted which could be argued as both being a good or bad thing. A definitive positive difference was the separation of roles within the group, which allowed everyone to work on their particular specialized area without creative clashing. The audience definition was also far more transparent; whereas the Director project allowed almost free reign of creativity, the Mencap website had to reflect its audience at every stage of creation if the end product was to do the same. The users were not be thought of as examples or exceptions, indeed the whole of the pitch hinged on ‘spotlighting creativity’ so careful implementation of text and video had to be considered so concurrent straightforward communication had to be achieved to reflect whether a general member of the public was viewing the site or one of the interviewees themselves.

QuickTime VR requires twenty photographs to composite a 360-degree rotatable panorama, and environment was paramount to getting the right end effect. Not knowing anyone with private farmland, it was taken upon the group to scale the Purbeck Hills and take 120 pictures - a set of twenty in six different areas. These were subsequently bound together in QuickTime VR and exported into Photoshop as a single large image, which is where the sheep were to be added. Compositing each of the sheep so they all look individual in one way or another proved to be the most time consuming part. The vector illustration abilities of Flash were employed and powered with a Wacom graphics tablet and pen to create the cartoon world. A ‘Mr Potato Head’ approach was taken where many different props were created, as well as many different facial features and these were added to the same couple of sheep bodies generated – this was deemed a suitable

compromise between potential quality and the time consuming process of generating over a hundred different sheep per panorama. To keep it interesting special examples such as the sheep in the sun lounge were built to add to specific props. Perspective and proportion were two very important factors that had to be taken into account when compositing the PNG sheep over the flat panorama; for the illusion to work when the player rotated around, the sheep towards the back of the screen had to appear smaller than those in the foreground. Originally the six panoramas were to be used, but upon realization of how long it took to composite one it was settled that two was enough, although another decision was made that to increase replay value there was to be three of each panorama generated with each having different objects in different places. The idea was that hopefully a player would play through once and play again, and realize that the objects have changed position. These six were then opened again in Quicktime VR where the various hotspots were added over the objects in question before the final generation. 'Interface design is responsible for creating a strong subjective impression as well as an easily understood overview of how the site works<sup>1</sup>'; the screen was therefore divided into two initially with objects to find underneath the main panorama window. Director was the last program to be used where animations for the introduction, win and lose sequence were produced and the main game screen was composited together – a last minute addition was the keys to the right of the screen to aid the user in navigating the panorama; zooming in and out was to prove essential which is not possible only with the mouse, and if the user was using this alone then straight away it became clear during user testing that an audience needed clear directions as to how to use the game. 'Like any effect background effects can be used well or badly. In the worst cases, complex backgrounds with high-contrast patterns make the text on top almost impossible to read<sup>2</sup>'; and with this in mind it was decided to stick to the 'Wally' colours used on the front of the books of yellow and red with blue and white text over the top.

The construction of the Mencap site was almost all done entirely in Flash, except for the use of Final Cut Pro in editing the interview videos. A fair proportion of the overall project was Actionscript driven code (the main timeline is only one frame long) attached to library members, which powered the sense of perspective of the main title page and the 'crossfader' effect of the sound when navigation is panned left and right across the interviewees. Photoshop was used to get the motion blur effect that occurs on clicking one of the Mencap groups and these were exported and used accordingly. The overall feel was of a satisfactory modernist, minimal feel where functionality and aesthetics go together without over complicating where any of the content lies. Accessibility was key to the brief if it were to be adhered to, so special features such as the ability to enlarge text and narration options were deemed suitable. Many of the elements were created by the project manager such as the music and the main vector graphic, and combined with the head coder left little for the remaining team members to complete – another dichotomy of both the good and the bad because little is left to creative indifference although this has to be balanced with input from all team members.

Working on producing the proposed 'Mencap' website and the 'Where's Woolie?' game highlighted how different group production is from working on a project alone. Careful meticulous planning became clearly at the core of a successful and polished end product, and in both production cases erroneous mistakes that could have been ironed out remained - yet had more time been devoted to planning then consequently more time would have been available for more extensive testing. Another area that could be tightened was the eroding of role boundaries, especially with the

‘Where’s Woolie?’ project where concrete roles are adhered to loosely but not close enough – the result is confusion amongst all involved in the production as to where responsibilities lie when things go wrong.

Another lesson learnt involved unpredictable problems occurring, but ultimately problems that could have been avoided with foresight nonetheless. One member of the Mencap production team traveled to a Bristol based Mencap institute; only to be turned away on the door that filming was not allowed to take place - a simple phone call or e-mail to double check this assumption would have saved time. Similarly the Director project was setback by two days due to a hardware fault; after scaling the Purbeck hills to get the best view for the panoramas it became painfully obvious that the tripod to be used was missing any measurement of degrees – the panorama was therefore constructed out of very loosely estimates of twenty-degree rotations of the camera. Accordingly, once put into Quicktime VR the various parts failed to match up and the shooting had to be completed at a later date.

Both projects have the potential to be expanded upon as many ideas were put forward but never acted upon mainly because of time issues. The Mencap project could have a whole back-end programmed using PHP for ease of updating of information of events and possibly a news diary, and even a community based forum for the sharing of ideas and opinions online. ‘Where’s Woolie’ could have many extra levels added in many different environments – the project is highly malleable for future use. ‘As Martin Amus put it in an early and engagingly enthusiastic book on videogames, *invasion of the space invaders*: ‘to appear on the Great Score sheet is a powerful incentive in space-game praxis – a yearning perhaps connected with schooldays and the honour or notoriety of having your name chalked up on the board, white on black<sup>3</sup>’ - a high score system based on fast times could also be included but to work satisfactorily it would be necessary to include many different examples of each panorama with the objects hidden differently each time, or else the player may just memorize each location and jeopardize any challenge.

Personally this project allowed the chance to reflect on coding skills that could be improved in both Flash and Director. Communication between members in both productions proved to be creatively stimulating and worthwhile, and whether working to a tight brief or having free reign over creative input many lessons proved to be learnt throughout each construction.

<sup>1+2</sup> Dinucci/Giudence/Stiles 1998. *Elements of Web Design*. Peachpit.

<sup>3</sup> Poole 2000. *Trigger Happy*. Fourth Estate.