Case study

Marketing using visual effects and augmented reality

Play Nicely Ltd.

Scott Fletcher, Director

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Background

Play Nicely make original digital content for arts, cultural and entertainment organisations. This increasingly involves experiential developments where the audience is immersed in the title, through a dynamic combination of technical and creative processes, technologies and disciplines. In one recent example we were commissioned to create a web-based app for the movie, 'The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey', with the aim being to engage fans and boost sales.

Objectives and target audience

Our key objectives were to raise awareness of the movie and increase ticket sales. We wanted to generate positive social media activity, while providing an engaging and original experience for new and existing fans. We also aimed to create a means of visual, tactile engagement so fans would feel a part of the franchise.

The solution

To do this, we targeted existing Hobbit franchise fans, existing Tolkien fans, avid web and social media users, bloggers, and adopters of exciting new technology such as Augmented Reality (AR).

The app we developed allows fans to depict themselves as any one of the thirteen dwarves featured in The Hobbit in real-time, with the option of recording a video. We used AR face-tracking technology, extending it way beyond its off-the-shelf functionality.

The 3D face tracking experience allowed users to become one of the thirteen Dwarves from the film as well as change their natural surroundings to a variety of locations from Middle Earth. A bespoke video recorder system gave users the chance to share not only a still photo of the experience, but also a short film with audio.

Process

After receiving the initial brief from our client, we discussed the creative and technical options, such as what new technological approach we could take, and how we could tie it into the movie narrative. We then began an iterative process of creation and amendment. After creating early visuals and wireframes, we agreed a cost and schedule; the client sent over the assets, such as photographs and 3d models of the cast, and we began production. On completion of the app, we sought film-maker approval before releasing it to the world. We notified key audience targets and then tracked the social uptake of the app.

Outcomes

Most of our entertainment industry-based projects involve using a camera, either online or at a live event. In this case, the outcome was that fans could produce and share their own content that featured them alongside strong branding for the film the app was promoting. This outcome is desirable to both the fan and to the film studio, so the app creates a mutually beneficial social media relationship – one which encourages fans' friends to spread the brand further, too. The excitement generated builds up until the movie is released – and then has a second run when the DVD is released.

Using augmented reality through a webcam-based app, or even through a low-cost device such as Microsoft Kinect or Leap Motion, allows an instant and personal level of engagement that other media campaigns cannot.

In the case of The Hobbit AR development, we were particularly keen to include a new approach that we developed to record video from Flash. This seemingly simple task is actually very complex; nevertheless, we kept to the deadline and managed to provide fans with the facility to create and share a 15-second video of themselves as a character from the film.

Key points for effective practice

- Understand both the established and the potential audiences
- Ensure that any new approach/technology is able to reach enough viewers and that they are impressed enough to make a noise
- Have a clear social media tie in for every activity and if possible/suitable track user data to inform subsequent developments.
- Encourage creative input from the client from the outset to avoid the need for it later on
- Keep a broad perspective of the campaign and its ambitions as well as ensuring the small details aren't overlooked.

Conclusion

Play Nicely have been fortunate, in that our AR developments have been mainly for high-profile movie releases, and therefore generally received a wide audience. This has given us creative, technical and financial freedom to keep playing at the forefront of commercially-viable new technologies. The most recent incarnation of this was a 45 minute live audio-reactive animation performed with the Royal Philharmonic Concert Orchestra and Daniel Hope in Bristol Old Vic.

We continue to undertake a range of developments, and so will always be very much involved in design, visual effects, web developments and online experiences; as a result we can bring those skills together to create more unexpected projects – which, in turn, informs our commercial developments.

http://playnicely.co.uk/content/the-hobbit-ar http://apps.warnerbros.com/thehobbit/ar/us/