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## Computer animation sends a message for good health

### Organisation Profile and Objective: Marvin

Leading software technology developed in the Northern Territory (NT) has been used to create one of the most exciting and affordable animated computer programs in the world. Known affectionately as 'Marvin' (Messaging Architecture for the Retrieval of Versatile Information and News), the software is revolutionising the way important health messages are delivered to remote NT communities. It has also generated widespread international interest from developing countries and regions.

Marvin was created in 2003 to tackle substance abuse in remote communities, and features animated three-dimensional characters which resemble community leaders and which can speak in their own Indigenous languages.

Marvin was developed by Mr Easterby-Wood in Alice Springs, and by Nick Russell from Melbourne, as a collaborative initiative of the NT's Department of Health and Community Services (DHCS), the Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET), computer software developer, InChain, along with input from a number of stakeholder groups.



Avatar character, 'Uncle'

### Getting there – the Framework connection

The development of Marvin resulted from a collaborative partnership between industry, community and government in the NT over the past three years and attributes its existence to the Australian Flexible Learning Framework's (Framework) LearnScope professional development project.

The Framework was established in 2000 to support the vocational and educational training (VET) system to meet the rapidly increasing demand for flexible learning, including e-learning, from industry, enterprise and clients. It is a five-year national strategy collaboratively funded by the Australian Government and all States and Territories to achieve a shared vision of a skilled Australian workforce.

Mr J Easterby-Wood is the NT DHCS Management Support Systems Manager. As a result of his success, innovation and vision, this year Mr Easterby-Wood was selected by the Framework as a Flexible Learning Leader. Since 2000, the Framework has provided funding and support to more than 200 Flexible Learning Leaders who are leading the way in flexible learning within their organisations.

## **The challenges**

Mr Easterby-Wood said he believed the Territory, and indeed Australia, was a driver of innovation because of the barriers it faces - its geography, isolation and limited access to technology.

"These barriers have challenged us enormously to push us to the forefront of information and communication technology and realise what it can do for our businesses, our governments and our communities," Mr Easterby-Wood said.

Language is an additional barrier that has faced health professionals in their attempts to communicate important health messages and information to Indigenous communities in remote areas of the NT and other parts of Australia.

Marvin allows community members to develop the learning and training resources themselves, typing in their own messages and recording their voices in their languages. The onscreen result is walking, talking, computer generated characters modelled on elders within the community or on the learners themselves.

Despite these barriers the Consortium has had to overcome, Mr Easterby-Wood said his team's philosophy when developing Marvin was simple.

"Literacy and language challenges will always be a part of the learning process, but it's your choice as a trainer as to whether you allow them to be barriers or instead choose to perceive them as tremendous and exciting challenges and assets, which is how Marvin evolved.

"We wanted to transform learners into trainers by having our students actually create the resources that they would be learning with. Marvin is all about bringing animation to education and learning to life. For us in health education and promotion, our role as trainers is to provide information to help minimise harm and save lives - literacy is not our end goal - information sharing is," he said.

## **The end result**

The reason Marvin has been so successful is that it allows community members to develop the learning and training resources themselves, typing in their own messages and recording their own voices in their own languages.

A further strength of Marvin is its ability to translate languages by taking text based documents such as emails, letters, newsletters and policies and converting them into sound files. For example, a trainer can send an email message to a student in Chinese, but the student can receive the message in Japanese, both in written text and via a personalised character.

Mr Easterby-Wood said he was amazed at just how far the Marvin Consortium team had come in such a relatively short period of time.

"Four years ago, for me personally 'PowerPoint' was something I plugged an overhead projector into, and now, with the support of an amazing group of passionate and creative people and because of the Framework and LearnScope in particular, we are working on next generation systems which are revolutionising how people interact with technology and with each other.

"The more time we spend with this type of Avatar (character-based) technology, the more time we'll spend on blending training boundaries between the best of what technology and humanity has to offer and between trainers and learners and vice-versa. We are considered by many of our national and international peers as being world drivers and leaders in this particular field of IT and that is extremely rewarding for us as Territorians and as Australians," Mr Easterby-Wood said.

Marvin has been widely recognised for its achievements within Australia and internationally during 2004. Recent accolades included:

- four awards at the NT 2004 Training Awards –
  - NT Training Initiative Award
  - NT Adult Learner Award for Outstanding Provider
  - NT Adult Learner Award for Outstanding Program/Project
  - NT Adult Learner Award for Outstanding Learn @ Work Activity
- the 'Overall' Award and 'Achiever of the Year' Award at the inaugural NT Information and Communications Technology ICT Awards
- the Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management International Innovations Award in Singapore in October.



The Hon Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi (centre), South Africa's Minister of Public Service & Administration presents the CAPAM International Innovations Gold Award for Innovations in Governance Award to Commissioner John Kirwan (right) from the NT Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment and MARVIN software developer and NT-based Indigenous education specialist, Mr J Easterby-Wood (left).

The Marvin technology was also a finalist at the 2004 National Training Awards held in Melbourne in November.

## Contact details

To find out more about Marvin or to see a demonstration of the program, contact Mr Easterby-Wood, tel: 0427 250057 or email: [J.Easterby-Wood@nt.gov.au](mailto:J.Easterby-Wood@nt.gov.au) or visit the Inchain website under development at: <http://www.marvin.com.au/DesktopDefault.aspx>

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