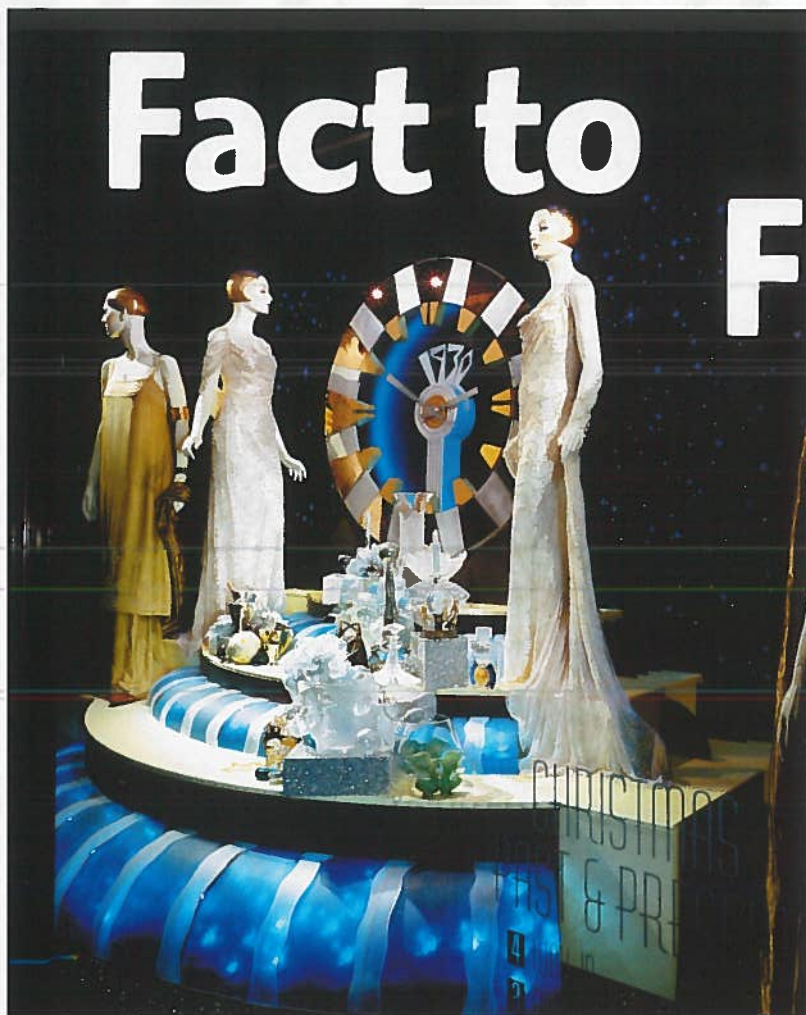


Fact to Fantasy



COMPANY PROFILE

spark of an idea to the finished ride, attraction or experience. This often starts with the research, conceptualisation and creation of a story – although this stage can also be bought, already formulated, into the project by the client. This is followed by the subsequent artistic direction of the story, creation of characters and storyboard and both freehand illustrations and CAD drawings to establish a workable plan.

The technical department provides the sound, lighting, special effects and animatronics whilst three sculptors design models, props and scenery – anything from robots, ghouls and buskers to syrupy reindeers and all in between. The costume department, meanwhile, designs and makes clothes for all the models and characters involved in bringing a story to life. A tour round the premises is a revelation in itself. Every room is a frenetic, buzzing hive of activity, with evidence aplenty of fun, stimulating things happening in every corner of the rambling premises.

In the run-up to Christmas the team were working on the creation of the lift ride for a visit to Father Christmas at the Bluewater shopping shrine in Kent. Being Santa's Grotto this was no ordinary lift cage! A 3D model mock-ups in the project office showed the layout of the lift – which has three potential exit doors at the top through which visitors pass into the grotto, following a maze-like trek towards Santa. Naturally, Farmer Studios also engineered the hydraulics for the lift – a good example of the variety of its work.

Music for the lift's 30-second ascension was being composed and recorded by Jim Bishop, secreted in the recording studios section of the factory – which features a selection of digital and analogue effects, samplers and recording equipment, including a new Yamaha 02R console. Composing music is something that Bishop often does, although his speciality is making animatronics for monsters!

Nick Farmer expands on the benefits of multi-skilling. He feels it's vital for employees to have a more rounded overall perspective on projects, enabling them to fully appreciate the breadth of the work that Farmer Studios undertake. The creative opportunities are also there for anyone to take advantage of if people have a good idea that's not necessarily contained in their department. For example, graphic designer Graham Edwards is a

The company is based in Leicester and was founded in 1976 by Nick Farmer who previously worked in marketing in the toy industry. Farmer Studios originally produced toy displays for product launches, department store displays, etc – a logical start given Farmer's background.

The theme park industry and the 'Experience Economy' as we know it was non-existent in the mid-seventies. However, Farmer found he was increasingly being asked to produce sets and costumes for the more amusement-style visitor attractions that were beginning to germinate during that period. At that time they were involved more in the amusement end of that market, rather than the more sophisticated, high-tech theme park, museum and science-based exploratoriums which have burgeoned in the last decade.

Farmer Studios now has a staff of 45. They originally moved in to one unit of their trading estate – at what is now the up-and-coming end of Leicester, and have gradually spread out across the whole estate, taking over units as and when they have become vacant.

Nick Farmer himself is modest and unassuming about his business and its obvious success. He prefers to concentrate on talking about the more unique elements of Farmer Studios, like its ability to produce creative and novel ideas, the lively and fun working environment and its investment in multi-skilled staff who can comfortably switch between roles within the company.

Farmer Studios is completely self-contained and has the ability to produce everything in-house – from the initial

Farmer Studios produce the stuff that fairytales are made of – literally. They are one of the UK's leading suppliers of imagination, talent and technology for the theme park, visitor attraction and experience market as Louise Stickland discovered



Left, one of Harrods Christmas windows from last year

Above, the company's fully equipped recording studio

Inset, the design team working on a model

published science fiction author. Farmer admits that for some this does bring problems in focusing, but as an overall strategy, employing dynamic people has worked for him: "It's a far more exciting way of working and it delivers a far better product."

In an employee he looks for people who are passionate and committed to making things and tinkering and those who have that creative spark, whether it's mechanical, musical or artistic. "I guess it's because I've always been into everything - so I imagine everyone else is too," he explains.

Across the road in an atmospheric Victorian warehouse - blessed with a fantastic influx of natural light - is 9,000sq.ft of space newly acquired by Farmer Studios. There I meet Patsy Pearce, making all the garments required for the models destined for Lollipoppet Castle, a new attraction for Sundown Adventureland near Newark, currently undergoing a complete make-over. Being based in Leicester with its large Asian sub-continent population gives Farmer Studios the advantage of being able to choose from a constant and rich source of exotic yet reasonably priced fabrics from those regions.

The Lollipoppet concept was designed by Dean Weal and features caricatures of a royal household. Patsy was partially dressing a model with a Prince Charles face and very pert pair of bare buttocks to illustrate The King's New Clothes section of the attraction. Farmer raises his eyebrows, commenting: "Our clients often allow us to inject a sense of humour into their projects! Just as well!"

Fabrics, materials and technology used and constructions produced at Farmer Studios must be robust enough to withstand the rigours of theme park life, which is hugely more demanding than anything used in a conventional concert or theatre stage application. They also have to comply with the most rigorous safety regulations.

At the end of the sewing room is a detailed 3D model of one of Farmer's favourite rides which opened this summer - Storm Force 10 at Drayton Manor Park in Tamworth. The ride has been endorsed by the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) - the first time any ride has been approved by a charity in the UK.

Farmer, who loves the theme park industry, but also has specific reservations about some of the naffer imitations around the world, likes the additional credibility given by this type of arrangement. Both the park and the RNLI benefit from the publicity. There is the chance of increased public awareness for the organisation and its role, and financially the RNLI receive a percentage from those who use the ride. The massive water ride cost £3million. Farmer Studio's task was to design the exterior of the ride, reduce the scale and

overpowering feeling of physical enormity of the concrete boat launch building - achieved by clever architecture, scaling and coloration of the building structures - and to design the queuing route.

The pre-ride queue line is a long, complex and highly important part of any attraction - short boredom thresholds must be alleviated while anticipation should rise as punters get nearer the experience - even for us Brits for whom the activity is an institution! The surrounding buildings through which the Storm Force 10 queue passes have a seaside good-time feel to them and are bright, lively and entertaining.

Farmer doesn't really have a 'favourite' project as such. They are all demanding and challenging in their own right; naturally, they are all completely unique, and they all "Have exceptional charm and imagination." However, there are a few that stand out from the crowd. At the time of our interview, Nick Farmer had just returned from Hollywood, where he collected a Themed Entertainment Association TEA Award for Excellence on a Limited Budget for a dark-walk show at Liseberg, Sweden's largest theme park. A limited budget in theme-speak is under \$5million!

The show is set in a dilapidated grand 1930s hotel which turns into an increasingly nightmarish supernatural scenario as the experience progresses. For Farmer Studios it was interesting from the outset as accurate replication of the interiors of the hotel required meticulous research in terms of attention to period detail. The walk descends into the cellars of the hotel, inhabited by an ancient sea captain who has stashed his various plunders from civilisations around the world.

The client invented the story and presented the initial ground plan. Farmer Studios then developed the layout and the creative and scenic design of each room in the hotel. They then constructed and installed the animatronics, sound system, lighting (not substantial as it was a dark show!), interior props, décor, graphics and scenic painting. The creative directors from Liseberg and Farmer Studios then collaborated on the overall production direction of the attraction.

It is a 12-minute experience - a long time in relative terms - and the soundtrack in particular is complicated. It consists of over 20 different soundtracks, synchronised together so as one travels through the hotel the music appears completely seamless, gradually becoming increasingly menacing and sinister.

The attraction is controlled by one of Farmer Studios proprietary show control systems which triggers lighting, animatronics, sound and AV effects. It works under Windows

"I can't think of many other industries," comments Farmer, "where the client relies on you to deliver something they don't necessarily understand. They have to have absolute faith in the fact that we can do it and that they will love it!"





Left, climax to Hotell Gasten, a dark walk at Liseberg, Sweden; above, the Entrance Arch to L'Oxygénarium, Parc Astérix's new spinning rapids ride; below, one of the team working on a clay sculpture for an animatronic crocodile designed for a crocodile farm in Singapore

NT and constantly monitors where everyone is in an attraction in order to cue the events. Various triggers can also be operated by actors within the attraction. Farmer comments: "It may appear to be a decaying old thirties hotel, but it's bristling with nineties technology."

Their control system is called Animation Workshop and, in Farmer's own words it is "in a continual process of development!" Each version is customised to suit the individual attraction, experience or ride. It evolved because there was nothing available in the UK that would provide a specific type of overall control for the projects in which they were involved.

Another recent and enthralling project for the company was the development of L'Oxygénarium - a new water ride at Parc Astérix. Farmer Studios invented the story - an eccentric French inventor at the time of Le Grand Exposition in Paris in 1860 who toured his 'LunaPark' device in a travelling fair. It was a machine aimed at elevating stressed-out city dwellers to a higher altitude so they could inhale clean air specially piped in from Mont Blanc. After a couple of minutes, they felt revived, invigorated and ready to fight on! "It's really a piece of French dottiness," says Farmer - but it's also charmingly plausible - you could just imagine some barking Victorian scientist devising the very contraption!

The ride resembles a Victorian air-conditioning plant - Heath Robinson meets Albert Robida - the (real life) French satirical cartoonist whose work was one of the inspirations for the stylistic

development of L'Oxygénarium. It is colourful, absurd and eccentric, an amalgam of many creative influences, carefully guided by the creative gurus at Parc Astérix to ensure that it retained a distinctly French flavour.

Farmer Studios designed the entrance arch with the beam engine (which takes mountain air, delivered by balloon to Parc Astérix, and pumps it into the system and up to the top of the ride) and an extraordinary set of pipework, nozzles, air vents and associated effects leading up to the start of the ride. They also wrote music and sound effects, installed sound, lighting and bubble and water spray effects and customised a version of Animation Workshop to work in conjunction with Programmable Logic Controllers (PLCs) that activate and synchronise the numerous moving parts with the music. They also designed and built all the themed features in the station building and ride conveyor.

"I can't think of many other industries," comments Farmer, "where the client relies on you to deliver something they don't necessarily understand. They have to have absolute faith in the fact that we can do it and that they will love



it!" He continues by saying that they also often have situations where the project is in a constant process of evolution, so the client benefits from the flexibility of the contract.

Today's audiences are also very demanding in the quality - although not necessarily the scale - of what they expect during their 'experiences', which in turn is pushing out the technical boat for those who produce them.

Farmer doesn't feel that technology is the be-all-and-end-all - it's purely a mechanism to enhance storytelling. One of the most revolutionary advances in the theming industry for Farmer Studios has been in the availability and total reliability of digital sound techniques. Gone is the fear of the tape not starting in sync with the animatronic. The more recent advances in digital video and its easy controllability are also now transforming their work.

"Electronic technology does give you the ability to play with elements that are of immense value and we'd struggle without them," he says. Recording technology has also changed radically and it's now possible to have high quality sound recording and playback systems at a reasonable price, a fact which has done much to improve the overall quality of these Experiences.

Farmer also agrees that there's plenty of mediocre and naff theming happening alongside and often on the back of that which is highly innovative and superbly produced. I ask whether he thinks that theming is now being heralded as a catch-all panacea for a whole variety of businesses with little or no charisma? Farmer, naturally, feels that their own projects and many of the one-offs avoid this pitfall, while acknowledging that there are plenty jumping on the contemporary bandwagon! He feels that the restaurant business is one area that's in danger of theming itself into complete banality. "You need good food and a great atmosphere to make a restaurant buzz," he says. "No amount of embellishment can compensate for a dearth of these two elements."

For attractions to work, a good story is at the very essence. The narrative criteria can also be applied to other expressive mediums like film which is why *Trainspotting* and *Four Weddings And A Funeral* succeeded where mega-budget and instantly forgettable blockbusters like *Waterworld* bombed.

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