

# Attractions management

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## Doctor Who Experience

Be a part of the adventure

## COPERNICUS

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Poland's first science centre

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museum prepares to open

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VS

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OPERATORS CHOOSE?



# FLIGHT OF FANTASY

Watching a crack in time open up before your eyes and being invited to step through into another dimension isn't your average Saturday afternoon. But offering something decidedly not-average is exactly what Sarner, the creators of the new Doctor Who Experience, set out to do.

For those unfamiliar with *Doctor Who*, it's a cult British tv programme following the adventures of an extra-terrestrial Time Lord as he travels through time in a police phone box, known as the Tardis. He battles aliens (his greatest enemies are robot-like Cybermen and the menacing Daleks) and brings the earth back from the brink of a crisis on a weekly basis. The programme is the UK's longest running sci-fi series and has had children gleefully covering behind sofas since 1963. The most recent series centered around a plot involving a crack in time, hence the dramatic opening

Taking inspiration from the theatre and cinema, Sarner has created a dramatic, interactive show which immerses visitors in a Doctor Who adventure. Kathleen Whyman finds out how the sci-fi tv series was brought to life

sequence to the Doctor Who Experience. After this unexpected start to the show, visitors enter a spaceship, see a full-scale Tardis magically appear, then walk through the doors into the Tardis itself and learn to fly it. An emergency landing on a Dalek's spaceship results in a CGI battle scene followed by a 3D finale. After the 25-minute show, visitors can explore the free-flow exhibition dedicated to all 11 series of the programme at their leisure.

## THE CREATORS

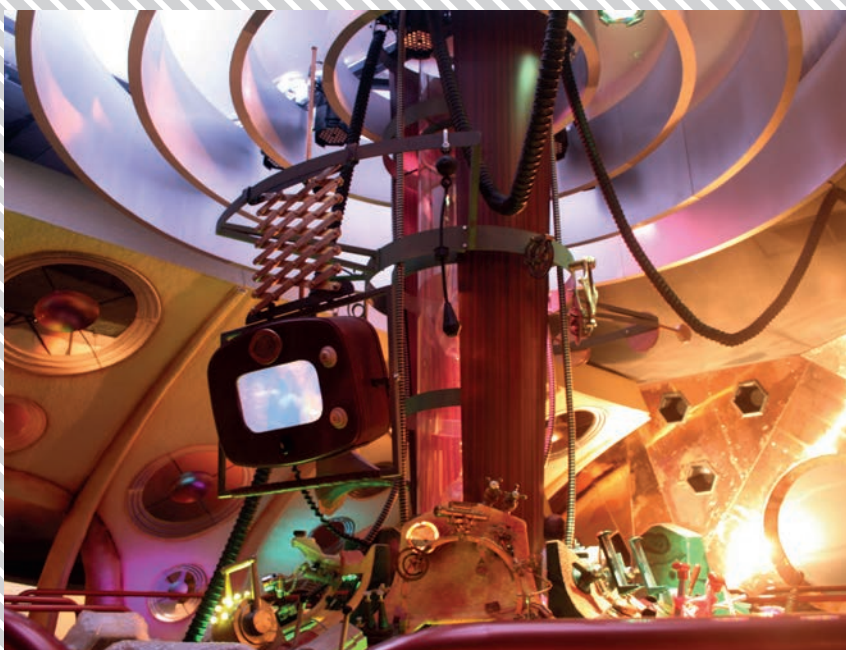
Having been a fan of *Doctor Who* since he was a child, creating an experience

about the show was a dream come true for Sarner's creative director Michael Bennett. Although, when he and managing director Ross Magri were first approached by the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation, which makes and airs the programme), they had no idea what the project would be. "The BBC approached us two years ago to say they liked our work and planned to use us in some way, so would be in touch when something came up," recalls Magri. "Six months later they asked if we were interested in an undisclosed project. We went to a meeting at the BBC office in London, not knowing what it was they wanted us to do. When they told us it was the Doctor Who Experience we said 'of course!'"

Determined to win the contract, Bennett and Magri spoke to the hardcore *Doctor Who* fans (known as Whovians) to find out what they'd like to see. Armed with this knowledge, their aim was to recreate the emotions of excitement, anticipation and slight terror that viewers of the programme experience. The result was the free-flow exhibition plus an immersive, timed, dark walk show that uses film-making techniques to plunge visitors into the world of *Doctor Who*, so they are actively involved in the adventure rather than just observing it.

The BBC acknowledged that this design was much riskier than a traditional exhibition, but the Whovians voted for it and Sarner won the tender.

The Tardis' console had to be redesigned when it was updated following a change in actors playing The Doctor



PHOTOS: LIAM DANIELS



Footage of The Doctor (currently played by actor Matt Smith) was filmed specifically for the experience

"We're still projecting onto the screen as visitors walk through the crack into a space ship. It's smoky, it's dark - they're actually going into the story"

Next came the tricky part – creating the experience and exhibition with precision, so it would pass the close scrutiny of the Whovians. All this in only three months – half the time Sarnier would normally devote to an attraction of this scale. "It was a very tight schedule and very full-on," says Magri. "The exhibition is at Olympia in London, so we had to work around other events that were taking place, one of which was a chess championship which required a quiet setting, so we couldn't do any drilling."

The venue itself also presented challenges. The main exit is through a 6sq ft (0.5 sq m) service lift, so everything had to be brought in in small pieces; nothing could be bigger than 2m x 5m (6.5ft X 16ft) and installed here."

"There was another major challenge," adds Bennett. "One of the key pieces in the show experience is a replica of the interior of the Tardis. As if the complexity of recreating this precisely wasn't difficult enough, the Tardis changed with the exit of David Tennant and the arrival of Matt Smith [the actors playing the 10th and 11th Doctor – he can regenerate, hence why he's been around for so long], so we had to completely change our original design."

## THE DESIGN

Covering 4,000sq m (43,000sq ft), the experience is donut-shaped around a closed-off atrium in the middle, so traffic goes around the space.

Timed tickets are sold online and visitors are batched into groups of 55 before going into a preview theatre. Standing in a black space with a 3.5m (11.5ft) projection screen, visitors watch a high impact film presentation of the past series in 3.5 minutes. "Part of the design philosophy, and why we won it, is that I wanted to get the visitors to walk into the screen and into the adventure," explains Bennett. "The crack in time appears at the end of the film sequence with CGI animation and starts to open up. We're still projecting onto the screen as visitors walk through the crack into a space ship, into a set. It's smoky, it's dark – they're actually going into the story."

The first zone is in the basement of a spaceship. "The big moment at this point is the appearance of the full-size Tardis, which is what a lot of the fans want to see,"

says Magri. "We used a transition gauze effect, which is a great theatre reveal effect and is dramatic and powerful."

The Tardis doors open and The Doctor tells everyone to pile in. For fans of the programme, entering the Tardis is one of the big magic moments. Light and sound effects create an exciting atmosphere, then the motion platform gives the illusion of being on a bumpy flight. "It's very disorientating because you can't quite work out if the centre's moving or the platform is, so it's an unusual effect," says Bennett. "It's exciting and immersive as we take off."

The next stop is inside a Dalek spaceship. "All these sets are in the round, so you're surrounded," says Magri. "It's not like being in the theatre when you have the audience and the stage. You're immersed in the set. The Tardis and the Dalek spaceship are based on sound effects. We haven't got a music score, other than at the beginning or the end, as we wanted to create the feeling that you're there. It's all based on iconic sound effects and voices."

Within the Dalek spaceship, a large, mechanical eye comes down, scans visitors with a radar and displays them on screen, first as they are in the flesh, then as skeletons. To create this, Sarner used a slit-scan gobo effect. During the scanning sequence, one Dalek comes up behind the visitors and another two at the front so guests are penned in. At 2m (6.5ft)-high and 1m-wide, they're quite intimidating.

Next, the view ports at the front of the ship fade away, again using a transition gauze, to reveal a large space scene. Set against a 24m x 4m (79ft x 13ft) painted backdrop, a 7m (23ft) CGI animated

sequence of a battle scene is projected onto the centre. The last part of the show is a dramatic 3D film showing the iconic *Doctor Who* monsters coming at the audience. "There's one moment when the huge eye of the Dalek comes out into the audience," says Magri. "It's not dissimilar to a 3D film you'd see at a theme park, so we're really thrusting things forward in the world of show experiences."

### THE TECHNOLOGY

With such a ground-breaking exhibition, it would be expected that Sarner had to design some ground-breaking technology, but this isn't the case. "We haven't invented anything new for the project," says Magri. "What's unique is the integration of all the technologies to create this immersive experience."

Each element of the visitor attraction is synchronised using a multiprocessor computer. "We've used very sophisticated control equipment so the show's fully automated," Bennett explains. "It just needs a person to press the start button and it goes. It's very important to use reliable, robust technology because the last thing we want is for the show to go down on a busy Saturday afternoon."

### FEEDBACK

The Doctor Who Experience opened on February 20th and received 25,000 visitors in its first month. The original running time of the show element was estimated at 30 minutes but has been reduced to 23 minutes, as visitors were travelling along

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the two walkways quicker than anticipated in their eagerness to get to the next stage. "Feedback has been very positive. Even the real fans say it's accurate," says Magri. "The BBC is delighted with it too," adds Bennett. "It's not unusual for the initial presentation of a project to be so impressive that it's not possible to achieve as high a level in reality, but the BBC has said that the actual experience is better than the presentation. Designers tend to go over the top with their visuals, but we went over the top with the sets and they're better than the illustrations, which is quite unusual."

"So many projects get changed along the way but our concept has come off the page and come to life," Bennett continues. "And of course it's Doctor Who – such a great subject matter. Going into the Tardis and being involved in an adventure is something many people dream of. It's a unique opportunity."



Props used in the series include a Henry Moore-type sculpture featuring an animated human face

### ABOUT DOCTOR WHO EXPERIENCE

■ The Doctor Who Experience will be at London Olympia Two for nine months. It's the longest running show to be held at Olympia and will stay until November when it will move to a permanent home in Cardiff, Wales and open in 2012.

■ Tickets are priced from £15.50 (€18, US\$25) for adults, £12.50 (€14, \$20) for children and £46 (€52, \$73) for a family ticket.

■ The show element of the attraction is 23 minutes, but the whole exhibition is designed with a total visit time of 90 minutes.

■ The suppliers used are Artem, CTS Scenics, CUK Audio, Peavey, Panasonic, AV Stumpfl, Harkness Hall and Havells Sylvania.



The appearance of the Tardis, using a transition gauze effect, is among the highlights for fans of the programme



The finale is a 3D show in which The Doctor's enemies seemingly come out of a crack in a wall

## FIRST PERSON EXPERIENCE

Kathleen Whyman



**L**ike so many Brits (and fans in Australia, Canada, the US, Germany and Portugal where the show is also popular), I watched the show through splayed fingers as a child. While no Whovian, I'm still enjoying the programme as an adult and looked forward to the Doctor Who Experience.

The attraction is suitable for children over five. Bennett and Sarner are aware that some parts of the experience may be a little alarming for younger visitors, so have included exits along the route if people want to step out of the show.

The opening film gives a great précis of the last series and really gees you up. Then the crack opening in the screen is a dramatic and powerful start to the show.

When first entering the TARDIS, I must confess to exclaiming "wow" out loud when I saw the central console and time rota and felt rather envious of the children with remote controls who got to "fly" the time machine. The attention to detail throughout the attraction is fantastic. The metal interior of the dalek's spaceship is cold to the touch and the dalek's themselves are enormous and sinister. At this point I wished I'd brought my four-year-

## THE EXHIBITION

### Artefacts include:

- The actual studio Tardis exterior and a waxwork figure of Matt Smith as The Doctor
- A Tardis exterior used in the series in the 1980s
- The costumes and information about all 11 doctors and many of their companions
- Two authentic Tardis sets used by previous Doctors
- Models of many of the aliens The Doctor has encountered
- The evolution of the Cybermen and the daleks including Davros (head of

the Daleks), showing the progression through time from 1963 to now

- Walk Like a Monster, an interactive exhibit where children learn to mimic a Cyberman's walk
- An art department set showing models, visuals and scenics
- The Sounds of Doctor Who, an interactive sound effects studio giving visitors the opportunity to hear their own voice transformed into a Dalek or Cyberman
- A changeable area to update the attraction with scenes from the most current series. It's currently showing props and outfits from the Christmas 2010 special

olddaughter so I had a hand to hold. The battle scene is extremely impressive. Rather than observing a CGI animation on a painted backdrop, it was as realistic as watching an actual fight between spaceships through a window (not that I've done this very often).

For me, the walkway through the forest of Weeping Angels was too rushed. I understood the other visitors' haste to move onto the next stage of the story, but I would have preferred to linger and peer into the trees for longer than I was able to.

The 3D finale was impressive and the plot and script throughout the experience were very in keeping with the programme and of the same calibre. It was written

by Stephen Moffatt, the creator of the tv programme, and includes footage of the current Doctor, Matt Smith, who was filmed specifically for the experience. This attention to detail further enhances the show.

The free-flow exhibition was well laid out and contained enough artefacts, props and interactives to keep me entertained for an hour. Finding the toilets was a bit of a mission in itself – at one stage I wondered if they were in another galaxy – but perhaps too much signage would have spoiled the magic of the experience.

The exit is cannily located through the shop, which is full of so much Doctor Who merchandise that I congratulated myself on leaving my children at home. ●