

Barry Fox spreads his wings for a VR flight across the Dome but **hits trouble** with the techies.

Virtually pointless



Some time ago I wrote about English Heritage teaming up with Intel to put a virtual reality replica of Stonehenge on the internet. At its grand launch at the Planetarium we took a virtual ride through the stone circles. The ride was

smooth because the images were being sourced from the hard disk of a high-spec workstation. Accessing the site with a PC involved downloading the VR Viscap software from Superscape and persuading it to work. Superscape admitted problems, as did the English Heritage IT department.

I wasted hours getting it up and running. Then, last October, Intel teamed up with the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) to try and boost the Dome's tattered image with a VR flypast. Hoping for a smoother ride than at Stonehenge, I logged on to the Dome site <www.intel.com/intel/showcase/guide/sites/dome2000.htm> or <www.dome2000.co.uk>, following all instructions to the letter. It took 30 minutes to download Viscap's software but finally I was all set to "enjoy the ride". But all that came up on the screen was the message "Superscape Error, Configuration File viso.svr invalid".

I faxed Intel and the NMEC, itemising the problem. I heard nothing from the NMEC but Intel got Superscape to call. It was Stonehenge *déjà vu*. "Oh yes," said Superscape's techie when I recited the error message. "We've got it, too. We're in the process of setting up a support site to tell people what to do." One week later, there was no trace of any support message. The trick is to delete all the PC's temporary files and cached web pages — tough luck if you wanted to keep them.

After some prodding, the NMEC Press Office stated: "We've not received any negative feedback [on the Dome site] from our users" — except mine, of course, which had conveniently gone missing. "*Has the NMEC ever tried accessing the site and downloading the software?*" I asked. (The Superscape techie had admitted he hadn't tried a live download.) "Of course," said the NMEC spokesperson just a little too glibly to give me confidence. "*What's your office system?*" I enquired. "How would I know?" quipped Ms NMEC. "*Well, can I speak with whoever set up the system?*" "No," replied the spokesperson "but I'll relay your questions." So I recited the error message.

Back came a gloriously off-the-point email: "Configuration problems occur when you don't allocate the correct operating system or navigator — in reality there are about five different options, in terms of the download. A problem can arise if you don't choose the exact one. After downloading Viscap the entire system should be closed down and the PC rebooted. Go back to the site at www.dome2000.co.uk and go to the 3D Dome. Everything should then run smoothly. While we're happy to provide you with as much information as you desire, we cannot provide direct support to you from our IT department." I had by then made the system work and taken a pointless ride over the empty egg structure.

My dialogue with the Millennium exhibition organisers has made me even more curious about what they'll be putting inside the Dome, and whether it will be worth a visit. I still have vivid memories of visiting a

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high-tech Expo in Japan — the British Pavilion was exhibiting a collection of tea bags.

■ **While CompuServe's md**, Martin Turner, protested that his service didn't make it easy for crooks to scam banking details from new users, I was signing up to CompuServe as a new user, under a pen name. Within hours I got a dodgy email from someone called "russian sexy". Then came two "Urgent Messages" from different sources, each signed off as "CompuServe Account Manager, John Debri" and titled "Problem with Your Account".

Both messages asked for my password, address and credit card details. The scam emails were addressed to the new trap account by number, not name. Clearly, the scammers were targetting my *new* address number. I called CompuServe's Help Line and asked about John Debri. "We already know about him. Delete the message and don't reply," they said. "There are a lot of hackers out there trying to get members' details."

Perhaps Martin Turner could try setting up a new account and calling his own Help Line?

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