

Special Report

Be Here is back with better VR

by Bob Connolly

It seems to me that everywhere you travel via the Internet ultimately leads you to a “Virtual” site of some sort or another. As I see it, the word “virtual” implies that there is 360 degree content involved, whether it be Panoramic photographs or rotating objects via *QuickTime VR*, or some other sort of file format.

But what about Virtual Video?

Well, it's here, and it's being brought to you by the people at Be Here (www.be-here.com). You may remember that several issues ago I wrote an article about Be Here's method of shooting VR panoramas using a lens that takes a 360 degree still picture in one shot (GX April/May 1999). The dome shaped lens fits on a standard Nikon 35mm camera, and a combination of mirrors and de-warping software allows you to take great panoramic still pictures on one frame of film.

I have had tremendous success with

Be Here's new 360lens (right) is the centrepiece of the company's iVideo suite of website-enhancing products which also includes Be Here Live! software which supports live capture of 360 degree content, iVideo Create software for content captured with NTSC, PAL, Betacam or DVCam, and iVideo Extensions software which lets users view and navigate iVideo.



this lens and many of my friends coveted it. Then, all of a sudden, the lens was discontinued and Be Here went silent.

“Oh, no, another victim of the dot-com crash,” I thought.

To my pleasant surprise, an email arrived recently announcing Be Here's new invention—Virtual Video they call iVideo. Employing the same design as its still camera lens, the new virtual video lens fits on the front of a Betacam or professional DV-CAM camera.

It's really quite simple. Using a megapixel digital video camera, you shoot pointing straight up and the image is recorded off a small dome-shaped mirror mounted on the end of the lens. The Be Here 360lens captures the full 360 degree environment surrounding the camera in a single image; it allows instantaneous or live capture of a normal “eye-level” point of view. The optical approach eliminates multi-camera “stitching” with its associated artifacts and retouching.

The video is digitized and then processed using Be Here's *Live!* software to unwrap the image into a long panoramic video (super-duper wide screen). You then edit the video using traditional tools such as *Adobe Premiere* or *Apple Final Cut Pro*. The completed digital video is then compressed for playback via DVD, CD-ROM or the Internet, using tools such as *Media Cleaner Pro*. You need to download a new VR *QuickTime* compression codec from behere.com (not a plug-in) and you're ready to play back “Virtual Video”.

The *iVideo* package also offers Be Here's *Create!* software for working with broadcast quality content captured in NTSC, PAL, Betacam or DVCam. *Create!* applies proprietary immersive video algorithms to output industry-standard .avi video files.

iVideo Extensions software is a free viewer extension to *QuickTime*, *RealNetworks RealPlayer*, or *Windows Media Player* for panning, tilting and zooming in *iVideo* on the Web.

Samples at behere.com demonstrate the wide variety of applications and uses for

this new “Virtual” iVideo format. Music videos, sporting events, travel—even short movies. Picture yourself standing on a busy street corner and being able to look around to see and hear a bustling city in full motion video. I like it!

While I'm on the subject of Virtual Reality, let me bring you up to date on the “Virtual Canada” project we have been producing here at BC Pictures.

As you may know from my past articles, we have been busy capturing Canada in both video and virtual reality panoramic photographs. Several VR photographers from across Canada have also contributed their time to participate in this production and we will profile them in a TV special that will air on Canadian Learning Television. Their VR photographs will be featured on the companion web site, virtual-canada.tv, and their tricks-of-the-trade will be unfolded here in the pages of Graphic Exchange.

This project has taken us from sea to shining sea to film and photograph distinctive Canadian attractions, from lighthouses on the coast of Newfoundland to the grand suites of the Empress Hotel in Victoria, all in VR. The project will showcase a variety of Canadiana: Canada Day celebrations in Ottawa, Winter Carnival in Quebec, landmarks and natural wonders such as Niagara Falls and Banff, dinosaur museums in Alberta, and quaint fishing villages such as Peggy's Cove in Nova Scotia. We even have “Virtual” cooking segments featuring the huge variety of foods grown locally across Canada.

We are currently editing many hours of video and processing over 400 virtual reality photographs submitted by our readers or freelance staff over the past two years. If you have gone “virtual” and have VR panoramic or object movies that you want to share with the world, there's still time to get your ideas into our TV special. We want to showcase and award prizes to the best and brightest “Virtual” photographers living in Canada.

For more information, e-mail us at b.connolly@sympatico.ca. 📧