

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the opportunities for people to use telecommuting and e-business to work remotely in rural and regional Victoria

Horsham — 31 July 2013

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Mr D. Jones, director, Transience Animation.

The CHAIR — Before we start I hereby advise that all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided under relevant Australian law. I also advise that any comments outside this hearing may not be afforded such privilege. For the benefit of Hansard, please introduce yourself and give your address.

Mr JONES — I am David Jones, and I live at 88 Main Street, Natimuk. I am an animator; I run an animation business out there and have been doing so for the last 15 years or thereabouts.

Video shown.

Mr JONES — I think it was in about 1999 that I moved to Natimuk, and it was really kind of the advent of the internet that made that even possible. Prior to that I had been working in animation for about five years but freelancing in studios. It was very much about being location based. When you were doing a contract you were in the building working on their computers. A lot of it was traditional film, so there was physical film that had to be taken and processed.

It really was in the late 1990s, when the internet started to happen and then with programs like Flash you could create animation for the internet and I started doing some work like that, that I had an epiphany. I was actually off in Switzerland. I had taken a laptop with me, and I was finishing off some work for a client and I just thought, 'Hang on, if I can be in a shack in the mountains in Switzerland for this, I can be anywhere. I don't actually need to go back'.

Mr HOWARD — So why did you?

Mr JONES — Well, I left Switzerland, but there are nice spots in Australia too. I guess the primary reason I chose to be out here was the rock climbing. I was doing that most of the time. In fact I think at that point the animation was a means to accrue cash to keep myself fed while I went climbing.

Mr HOWARD — My next question was 'Why Natimuk?', so the answer is 'Mt Arapiles'?

Mr JONES — Yes, Mt Arapiles; it is 10 kilometres away from arguably the best climbing in the country. It is only a little town; there are about 500 people there. I did that. I stopped going and doing the gigs in Melbourne. It suited me quite well at that point. You would get three months of work, and you would do that and you would be all cashed up and you would go off until you ran out of money. I thought, 'I don't need to do that cycle; I can just base myself in Natimuk with a phone line'. I had a 56 kilobit modem. Stylistically what I was doing was I sort of adopted a very minimal style at the time because it was all instructions that could be fed down the phone line and I could work for a few of my clients in Melbourne. I knew at the time I was coming out here that there would be no work for me in Natimuk or probably even in Horsham. I came out with some clients from Melbourne, but I just put my feelers out, I suppose.

I made a website, Transience Animation, and I made short films and put them in festivals. Some of those were in Europe and France. I can remember you would literally click a button to submit your film. I did that and then got an email saying, 'Yes, your film is in the festival and it's on at this date. Here are some flight details; come on over'. That sort of thing snowballed; other festivals wanted the work. There was a real thing about an internet film festival. Now it is completely commonplace and everyone has YouTube, but at that point there was still not a lot of actual video on the internet; it had too big a bandwidth. So there was a nice little spot in the sun marked out for me for a few years there when I was just making these very minimal kinds of animations. I will quickly click through. This has gradually grown, and I have added more films and games and things like that to it. I will just let that play as I talk.

The way it worked was by basically sending mathematics and equations down the phone line rather than whole pictures, and the computer at the other end would generate the animation. From this I guess I did not even have to chase clients; I started getting a lot of work from American and European companies just wanting animation for their websites. It was quite a novel thing, so I sort of built this business around that. As you can see, it is very simple. This is very late 1990s to early 2000. Really since then in that time you can almost see stylistically that what my work is doing is what the internet has enabled me to do. Rather than compromising, going back down to Melbourne and being stuck in a studio, I have I suppose worked within the confines of the internet or the bandwidth.

The CHAIR — Who buys this?

Mr JONES — Probably not many people would buy that film, but they might see it and they might want something with their character to advertise their product. Some sites — I do not know what they do with the traffic — get an amalgam of films, and so they want new content constantly so that people are going through their website. Probably the majority would be people who would see the style or the animation and say, ‘Yes, we want that for our website’ — not that very film, but that film I suppose is showing my wares. I could just sit down with those, rather than sort of going empty-handed.

The CHAIR — And they can then say, ‘Could you do something for me?’.

Mr JONES — That is right, yes: ‘You’ve obviously got the skills to create and deliver’. It is there; it has won an award in France, in America and in Germany. That has worked really well. It is probably making those few films in early 2000 that still gets me quite a bit of work. In mid-2000 the ABC were doing a lot of online animation and content. Broadband had sort of started at this point, and so you could make more fleshed-out animation. You can see that there is more texture and things are a bit more complicated. They commissioned a series of works based on Aboriginal stories from the Northern Territory. The only prerequisite was that they did not look like fake Aboriginal art. They wanted my own stylistic take on things.

This one was all made with clay and real props and things. It was too much work for me to do. At that point there were not many animators, and there still are not. Anyway, it was beyond what Natimuk could supply in terms of animation of these, so I was actually working with a couple of animators who were down in Melbourne. They did most of this one. It is all stop motion, so you take a picture, you move the clay a little bit and take another picture. It is very labour intensive. They had their studio down there all set up. At that point I could sit down and literally look through the camera on my computer. They would say, ‘Yes, this is how it’s looking’. The DOP was there tweaking the lighting and getting the framing and the focus, and I would say, ‘Yes, that’s it. Great; animate that shot. I’ll speak to you in two days’. I would be editing the film as they finished the shots. They could just email me a low-resolution version, and I could put that into the edit. The sound person was in Adelaide. There were two animators in Natimuk working on it and a couple in Melbourne and the sound guy in Adelaide, and it was broadband.

At that point the raw files they were taking — a day’s work or a couple of days’ work — would be several gigabytes of data, which at the time was too big to realistically send. So they would generate more stuff in a day that I was comfortable with. Now you would just get that at the end of the day, and that would be fantastic. At that point I would just get a low-resolution video of what they had done and work with that. Then on a weekly or biweekly basis one of us would go to and fro or we would just get a disk in the mail. This would be much more streamlined now. Again, on the offers of work, I did not really try to seduce the ABC. I think they had seen films that I had done at festivals or on other websites. Generally, I have just said yes or no to people who have approached me.

This is one of the few local jobs I have done in the past 15 years, I think. This was a series of animations for the Wimmera Catchment Management Authority. Again, I think they had seen some of the ABC animation and they said, ‘We liked that’. It was all about the waterways and their health. I interviewed a lot of people — local farmers and sportsmen — on how they felt about the river and what the river meant to them. Then I created it, working with another local artist, Mary French, who made all the puppets and things out of papier-mâché and made her daughter make all those blades of glass. They were all handmade by children in the Wimmera and then animated in Natimuk. I will just turn up the volume.

Mr HOWARD — How long is this presentation?

Mr JONES — This is 30 seconds long, so I thought it was a good one to pick. I guess that is a good example of local work being generated by a very strange path to the other side of the world and back via the ABC in Melbourne and Sydney.

I will finish up with some current directions. A lot of the work I have been building towards in the past 10 years has been combining live performance and animation. This was a show that really started this back in 2003. It was on the side of the silos. I created the animation, and there is another Natimuk group, Y Space, who do aerial performance, and so we covered the whole silos in light and projections. This has been I guess a big part of my

work for the past 10 years. Sadly it is something that has to be done in the flesh. A lot of the work and the development you can do on a computer wherever you are, but then ultimately you have to be in one place.

For some of this work I received a fellowship from the Australia Council at the start of this year, so I basically got a year and \$100 000 to just play around with pushing this form, whether it be in a theatre or on an outdoor venue. If we have time, I can show you some more. A couple of years ago at the festival in Natimuk we built this giant puppet. It was all projected with animation and it took 10 people to operate it.

Again, it is all promoted through the internet. Everything you do, even a work in progress, is all part of the package. Here are shots of us putting up the rigging. It all just generates interest, and that helps build numbers for the festival; it is the kind of self-perpetuating. Here is the puppet full of lights at night.

This is a theatrical project I am working on at the moment, which is all live performers and again projections, but in a theatre, in a controlled space. Behind that screen you can see that in the car there are two performers. They are actually standing behind a screen which is being projected onto. Their movement is being tracked by a camera, so the car is wherever they go. It is not precomposed animation that they need to follow along with; it responds to them, so if they walk that way, the car stays on them. That is really the focus, I suppose, of my next year's work and future direction — that whole thing of capturing motion and combining that with animation.

Again, as the bandwidth takes another big step forward, there is huge potential for that, to have performers in Melbourne or performers in Europe just capturing their performance and sending it. So you could actually collaborate in real time with people on the other side of the world. You could have a performer in Tokyo who was doing something that was controlling one of the characters in this. That is really exciting and something that I am hoping will happen. This puppet was being controlled by somebody. In this case it was someone in the room, but there is no need for that to happen, and I think there is some really interesting potential there. I am hoping that as the bandwidth gets to the point where that sort of thing is possible and reliable that is going to be an exciting direction.

Already Natimuk has quite a good reputation for developing new theatre that is using some of this technology. I think because we have been so remote we have almost had to. It has been a blessing and a curse. We have had to do things and make use of the internet or make use of the new emerging technologies, and I think that has pushed us and kept us in a good spot. We are sort of hoping in Natimuk to almost have an incubator where we are building new works. There is a festival that has a good reputation that comes out every couple of years, and we hope to use that as a sort of launching board for this and to be in a position to be developing this kind of theatre.

The CHAIR — So Natimuk as an incubator for the arts?

Mr JONES — For the arts, yes — a high-end, next-generation theatre.

The CHAIR — Right. So what would we need for Natimuk to become that, other than yourself being there and attracting other skilled people who like climbing mountains as well?

Mr JONES — There are quite a few people already there, primed and ready. There is a lot of the skill base. It is possible that a premises or a space could be dedicated, or at least booked and used, that was set up with that kind of thing in mind. This is in the town hall in Natimuk — this old memorial hall — which is a nice old building, but it certainly was not really built with all of that sort of thing in mind back at the start of the last century.

The CHAIR — With you winning the contract — what did you say; \$100 000 for one job there — I suppose perhaps it could be self-generating, could it?

Mr JONES — I think it has the potential to be. A lot of these things we have done almost as a speculative thing, and almost invariably they have rolled on to contracts. Natimuk basically did the Federation Square Christmas calendar for all of 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009. All of the key players were Natimuk based, and it was from the work we had done on the site of the Natimuk silos in 2004 and ideas and things that we had experimented with there that no-one else, really, was doing at that point. Again, at the same time that was happening I was commissioned to do the visuals for the Commonwealth Games cultural centre. There was a

sort of projection and live performance on the site of the arts centre during the Commonwealth Games. Again, we spent a few years doing that sort of thing before anyone else, really, was doing it.

I think when you open it up and you do this and you break new ground there is a good window before everyone sort of catches up and starts copying, as long as you keep innovating. So I think if you bit the bullet and went, 'Yes, we're going to go hard now. We're going to do these works', there would be this flow-on effect. There was a lot of work from those. The stuff we did in 2003 generated work for me from 2005 to 2008, and then the odd bits and bobs of experimentation I did then kind of keep me going. It is those sorts of investments you take in yourself. If you have an idea that you think has potential and you sort of go with it — I guess some of them do not, but for the ones that do — on the whole, just from having had that approach and mentality, you kind of reap the rewards for any time you spend developing that sort of thing.

Mr HOWARD — So you have been able to work out of Natimuk even though their internet connectivity is a bit basic.

Mr JONES — Yes. I am not still on a dial-up! It has come a way since then.

Mr HOWARD — What are you on now?

Mr JONES — On broadband — ADSL. It is quite passable. One of the good things with animation — a good and bad thing — is that it takes a very long time. It takes me a long time to make a minute of animation. It takes me a lot longer, whereas with a high-definition camera you can film a minute of footage in a minute, and with animation, if I got that in a week, that would be a good week. I guess that has helped me along the way, but this sort of thing where we are talking about real-time, you really do need a significant — —

Mr HOWARD — So you are periodically seeing the limitation of the connectivity, and greater bandwidth would clearly enable you to do more?

Mr JONES — Yes. There is a good pool of talent in Natimuk, but if you want to have the ability to just at the drop of a hat collaborate with someone in Melbourne or New York, at the moment there is still a bit of a lag. It is slightly impractical. It is certainly better than nothing, but if you reduce that barrier as well, it would sort of open up Natimuk to some extent. There is going to be a limited number of people who are prepared to move to a small country town of 500 people because they want intermittent animation work, and by its very nature you kind of get this intensive burst if there is a project and it is all go for three months, and then there might not be something for a little while. I spend those times developing the next step, which is fine for me. I can support myself.

I suppose, too, it would be good if there were some kind of incubating thing set up that could tide people over, if there were that more permanent infrastructure in place. I have toyed with doing that over the years. I have settled with it. It is just safer for me at the moment to have a small pool of people working and then to either bring people in or connect remotely when a big job comes in than for me to personally try to take responsibility for managing the livelihoods of a whole lot of people.

Mr HOWARD — Where did you learn your skills to get you started in animation?

Mr JONES — I studied animation in 1994 at Swinburne at the time. It was the VCA, which then moved to RMIT. I did that as a postgraduate. I studied maths and science at university first and then sort of knew fairly quickly that it was not for me. I do not regret any of that; from a problem-solving perspective it is probably actually more relevant than the actual animation I studied. All the technology that was there when I was learning animation has gone away or has changed. Everything is shifting so fast in that world. It is really the ability to learn and solve problems that I think keeps you able to compete.

Mr HOWARD — Okay; very interesting.

Mr JONES — That is the kind of thing that is happening in Natimuk, and I think there would be really massive benefits to having that connectivity and supporting it with some kind of hub. There was the Arapiles Community Theatre, which again, like the town hall, was a body that did Gilbert and Sullivan and musicals. It sort of continues to exist, but it has broadened its thing and it is now responsible for, really, the promotion of any arts activities in the area. It is the body that puts on these or applies for funding, and it runs the Natimuk

festival. It does those things which are crucial but which I would not be prepared to take on by myself. I think it is great that there is that body there. There is that kind of level of stuff in place, and they have applied for triennial funding at the moment to try to push this model forward. Fingers crossed that that happens.

The CHAIR — That is very good, Dave.

Mr JONES — Thank you. I am not sure if you have any sort of specific questions.

Mr HOWARD — It is nice. It is just interesting to hear that you can operate, doing a business like yours, from Natimuk and develop from there.

Mr JONES — Yes, and it is completely removed from the fact that it is in Natimuk, really. There is obvious farming potential in Natimuk and there are some mechanics and things, but I guess — —

The CHAIR — You were sitting in Switzerland in a hut and thought, ‘Why couldn’t I do this in Natimuk?’.

Mr JONES — Yes.

Mr HOWARD — So on the slide we are looking at at the moment, behind the person is a screened animation, is it?

Mr JONES — Yes. It is sort of semitransparent. It is almost like mosquito netting, I guess. It is slightly more technical than that, but you can see through it. The light on the left is behind it, so it is sort of transparent, but it catches the light. What is great about that is that you can move in and around it. If I go back to that, they are standing behind the screen, and it is dark where the windscreen is and you just see their faces. They could be lit a bit better than they are, but the sky and everything that is washing them out is just being projected from the front, and that is me in the foreground. I am just having a play with controlling the car remotely.

We had a few systems set up, but what I think is the most exciting is when they are wearing a sort of tracking device or you are using a camera to actually track their positions, and then they can just move wherever they are and the camera tracks them. It is like those classic old movies where the people would be sitting in the car and they would be projecting the film behind them, but in this one they could completely turn around and drive the car off into the sunset.

There is really not a lot of that sort of thing being done. It is only just becoming possible, I think, with the technology, that you can do that sort of stuff and that you can generate the visuals in real time. You can see the ‘No exit’ sign at the back of the hall in the distance there, but then there would probably be second-tier projections. We had several portable little screens on wheels with the projectors mounted, so you could move them around. So with the set for this particular piece, you could build rooms on the fly, you could put these two panels together or make a flat wall, and we were projecting onto them, and you could control them remotely as well. All of that sort of stuff is happening just 20 kilometres that way.

The CHAIR — All right, Dave. Thanks very much for coming in and giving us a very valuable presentation of what can be achieved and of the jobs that are being created in Natimuk because of your access to the internet. It is good, you know, the idea. It is not a hub — what did you call it?

Mr JONES — Incubator.

The CHAIR — The incubator — that is an idea that we are probably interested in. Thank you very much for your time here today.

Mr JONES — You are very welcome.

The CHAIR — In about 14 days time you will get a draft copy of what has been recorded by Hansard. You will be able to correct obvious errors, but other than that it will remain as it is. Once again thank you very much for coming along, and I quite enjoyed your presentation.

Mr JONES — Thanks for the chance to show off.

Witness withdrew.