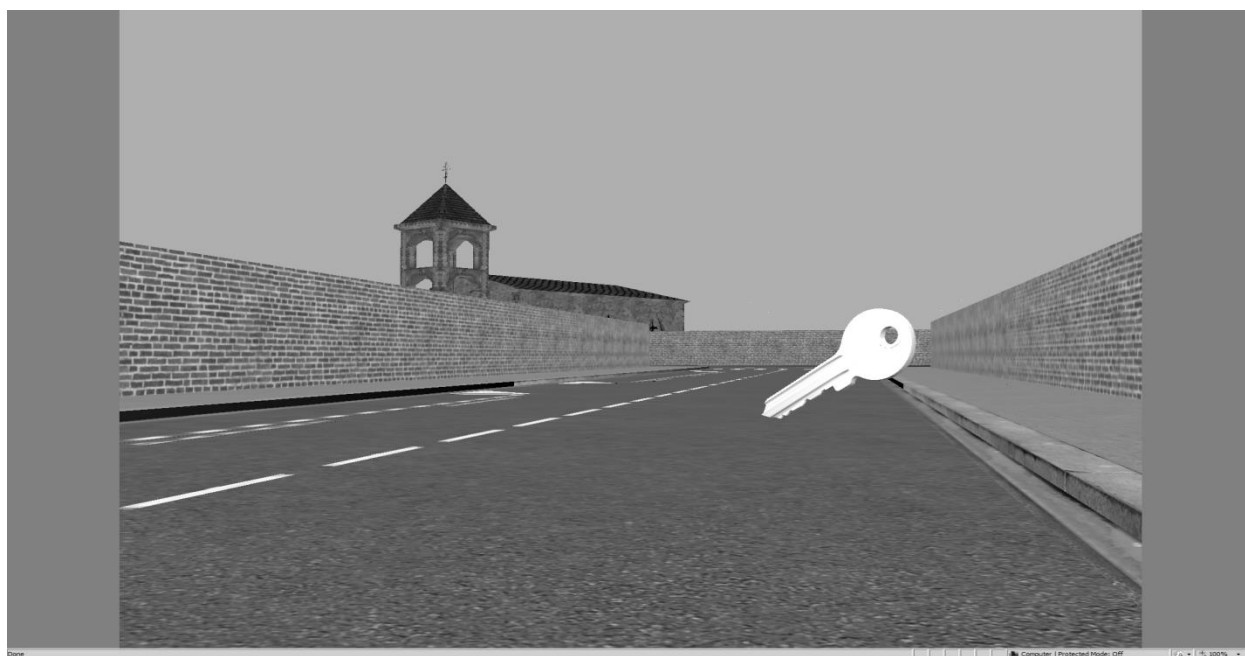


‘FINDING OUR WAY’ PROJECT

We’d like to thank everyone at Bounds Green School who helped us with the ‘Finding Our Way’ research project! The project is all about how children get better at finding their way as they get older: what abilities develop that enable them to get to the shops and back without needing help?

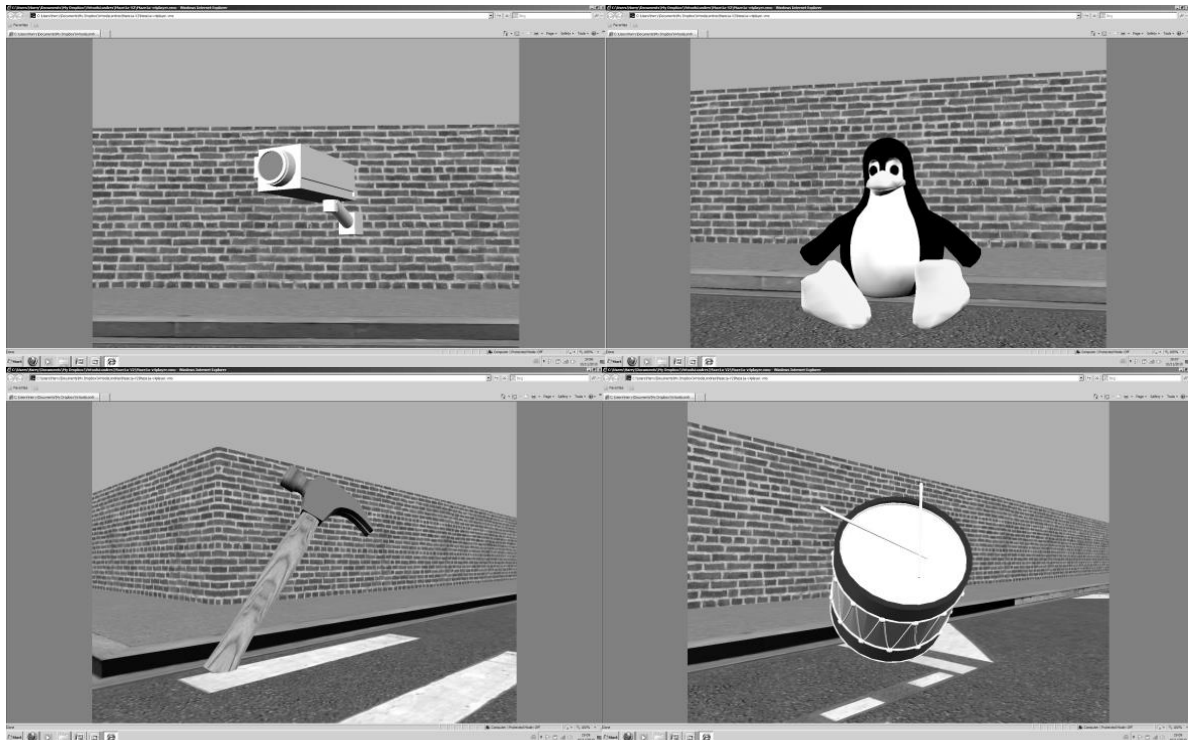
It’s important to try to answer to this question, because some children (and adults!) find learning new routes harder than their friends might. Being proficient at wayfinding is important for independence and self-esteem! If we know what abilities support good route learning, then we will be able to develop a training programme to help people to find their way around better.



In a first step towards this goal of a training programme, we devised a virtual maze with lots of different landmarks in it (see the picture above). We showed children the way through the maze and then asked them to see if they could do it. Some older children got it exactly right on the first go; some of the Year 1 children found it a lot harder! Children then had several goes at navigating through the maze, getting better each time. Finally, we went through a few memory and language games with the children, along with some measures of visual and spatial ability.

Our results

Unsurprisingly, we found that children's wayfinding ability improved with age! However, this improvement with age was mediated by one main factor: concentration. This is very interesting to us, because some psychologists have claimed that it's +specific+ visual and spatial abilities that support wayfinding, but we found that it's the more +general+ factor of concentration. In other words, if someone seems to have a great sense of direction, it probably means that they're paying more attention to where they're going! And, of course, you can't remember something unless you paid attention to it in the first place (as all teachers know very well).



The next stage of our project is to identify what kind of features of the environment we need to encourage people to pay attention to, at different ages. What is it that's most useful to pay attention to, and does that change with age? For example, maybe 5-year-olds don't know that landmarks at forks in the road are useful to remember. A 10-year-old might benefit from encouragement to look at more distant landmarks (like the BT Tower or a church spire).

THANK YOU!

Harry Purser & Lauren Willmott