Chapter 3

Look at Me!!

It was the fall of 2003 and life as I knew it was about to change forever. We were in Tucson AZ for the debut of the Presentation Summit, the annual conference that I have hosted across two-plus decades, and PowerPoint expert Glen Millar had traveled from Australia to lead a session on animation. Glen is a brilliant crafter of presentations who has dreamed up and forgotten more techniques than you or I will learn in our lifetimes.

Glen was upfront about what he was about to show his audience. "You're about to see some really gratuitous stuff here," he said in his Down Under drawl, to much audience laughter. "In order to discover the potential of what the software can do, sometimes you just have to experiment."

With similar irreverence, the slide was entitled "Absolute Nonsense," and it looked like Figure 3.1. You'll want to take a trip to the whypptsucks.com web site and download 03-01.pptx to see what Glen showed his audience that day. Gears turning, pistons pumping, paddles flapping, balls bouncing…all controlled by PowerPoint animation.

▶ To download any of the files referenced in this book, point your browser to www.whypptsucks.com and find the file by its figure number. Depending upon your browser, you might be prompted to choose between opening the file in your browser window or downloading it. We recommend downloading the file to your computer and opening it in PowerPoint.

Each of the elements on this slide are carefully timed to become part of a working, almost organic, system of motion. Most in the audience had never seen anything like this and had never considered the use of animation in this way. If you look up *epiphany* in the dictionary, it really should reference Glen's October 18, 2003 workshop on animation.

The buzz lasted all day; I knew, however, the impact of this presentation would be more lasting. And I was a bundle of conflict. After all, what better advertisement for a conference in its rookie season than 180 disciples returning to their colleagues and saying, "I can't wait to show you what I learned at the Presentation Summit!"

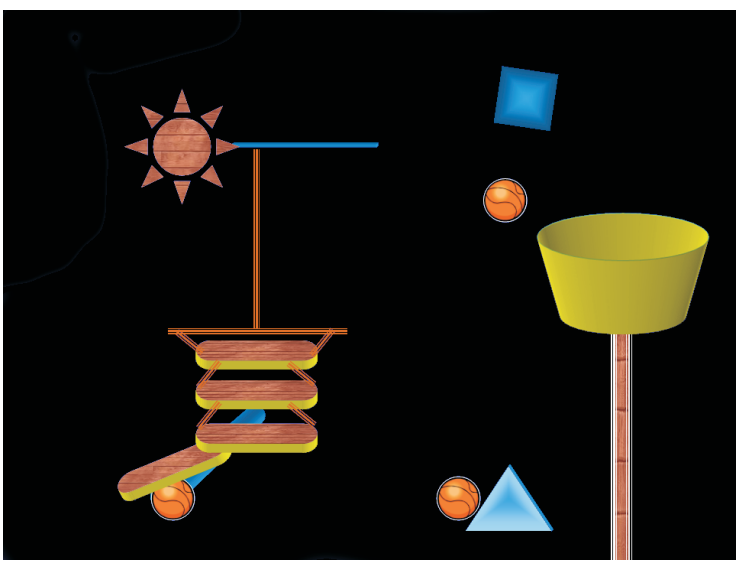

Figure 3.1
When the audience saw Glen's animation contraption in 2003, their lives changed. They saw an entirely new dimension to the potential of attracting the attention of their audience.

But the specter loomed of those same disciples returning to their places of work and wasting not a moment finding an occasion to use these new skills. This tendency is remarkably human and cuts across all disciplines and all ages. My wife Becky and I can remember as if it happened yesterday the moment that our daughter Erica, six months old at the time, discovered that she could flex a muscle in her throat and emit a sound. The cause and effect relationship was captivating to her and nothing short of a tranquilizer would stop her from demonstrating her new skill that night. And I'll show you the very essay in which our other daughter Jamie, then in third grade, discovered adjectives.

In software parlance, I refer to this as use of a feature based on recency of discovery, not appropriateness to the task. You use it because you just learned it. Rounded corners on rectangles back in the desktop publishing boom of 1986…dressing up your `C:\>` prompt in 1988…drop shadows in 1993…"Absolute Nonsense" in 2003…all the way through to colored backgrounds on your Facebook posts today.

The urge to place into operation that which you have just learned might be one of the finest human traits ever. Imagine the innovation that has come from this tendency and the advances across all disciplines and pursuits. Intellectual curiosity is a wonderful thing; watching it play out in human achievement is even more wonderful.

Unless, of course, you practice your craft in public. Then it has potentially lasting implications of a different sort. You can usually tell when a person has just learned, say, how to make bullets go dim after appearing, or how to make a title fly in letter by letter, or how a motion path can turn static objects into ambulatory ones. When you see the effect in action, but it has no context or purpose whatsoever, there's a good chance that recency of discovery is the driving force behind its use.

I should note that we who considered ourselves Glen's colleagues that day were not left out of the epiphany. When he showed a little-known trick of hiding the background and showing pieces of it through other objects (see Figure 3.2), he sent us all scurrying to our notepads or notebooks.

To this day, many of us on that debut teaching team in 2003 still look for excuses to use this background trick, even if it is not suitable to the context of the presentation. We too cannot always resist saying "Look at me!" in public.

By its nature, PowerPoint is an extroverted activity. People turn to it for the purpose of communication—often in person, often to large audiences. You put your ego on the line when you do this, so it helps to have a sturdy and healthy one. In fact, showing off is almost an essential nature of the discipline and should not be viewed as a necessarily negative trait.

Figure 3.2
Even the experts at the Presentation Summit learned something new when Glen Millar showed how to place a photo on the background, cover it up with a full-sized rectangle, create an object on top of the rectangle (the ellipse), and fill it with the background image.

The insatiably curious among our readers can deconstruct this cool technique by downloading 03-02.pptx.

But there are right ways and wrong ways to get attention, and there must always be purpose behind it. This chapter's pain is brought to you by the compulsion to add gimmicks to PowerPoint-driven presentations when there is no legitimate reason to do so. *The fact that you just learned how to do it does not change anything.* If it doesn't contribute to the message, it has no place on your slides. Let's say that again:

> **If it doesn't contribute to your message,**
> **it has no place on your slides!**

All of Part 3, beginning on page 111, discusses some of the healthier ways to show off in public.