

It's hard to imagine Paul Treffner sitting still for long. Then again, he doesn't have what you'd call a "normal" office seat. His chair of choice is one of those oversized, ergonomically sound rubber balls. It's appropriate for an academic who teaches his students to juggle and obviously has energy to burn.



"I had a fairly active childhood growing up in Northern Ireland, trying to keep up with two older brothers and attempting to ride or run faster than them," Paul recalls.

His fascination with human movement started early and can be traced back to a time when he and his best friend were action-figure fanatics.

After putting "Action Man" through his paces when he was younger, Paul put his own body on the line when he took up skateboarding as a teenager.

"When they first came to Northern Ireland in about 1976 they were horrible things - like planks of wood with two roller-skate

wheels."

That didn't stop Paul from attempting to break the world high jump record using a newer skateboard. He admits his memory might have suffered from too many falls, but he thinks he was about three inches shy of the record height.

"I ruined quite a few pairs of jeans, but thankfully I never broke any bones. The closest I came was when my brother almost cut off my big toe by chasing me with a lawn mower."

It seems there wasn't much the Treffner boys wouldn't try. Paul remembers having to huddle at the

bottom of his Dad's tinny against a hailstorm on one of many family fishing trips to the freshwater lakes of Northern Ireland.

Then when they were old enough to take the speedboat out on their own the boys turned to waterskiing.

It sounds more like the life of a would-be stuntman than a budding scientist, but friends of the family were always telling Paul he'd grow up to be a professor because he was keen on chemistry and wore glasses.

He and his best mate would raid the local pharmacy - owned by another friend's father - and create all kinds of concoctions, including gunpowder.

"We'd steal all these chemicals, without knowing exactly what they were, and we'd mix 'em up in the attic. But when I got to high school and had to actually study chemistry I lost interest in it!"

Girls were a distraction until he was banished to boarding school where he scored, in his words, somewhat more acceptable academic results.

On his first visit to America in 1980, his brother's Macintosh flashed the words "Hi Paul" in green text and inspired him to enrol in a computer science degree at the University of Manchester.

In 1996, after completing his PhD and post-doctoral research in the United States, Dr Treffner decided it was time to head to Australia - the focus of his father's bedtime stories.

"He used to put me to sleep by spinning yarns about a man and his little boy sailing around the Great Barrier Reef. I vividly remember those images and it sounded like a wonderful part of the planet so I thought it was time to check out this great Land Down Under."

In 1998 he moved to one of the jewels in Australia's crown - the Gold Coast.

"Surfers Paradise is a wonderful place that some people who are born here probably don't quite appreciate."

"You have to live in the UK where there's 11 months of winter and one of really bad weather to appreciate how nice life is here in Queensland."

"The water sports are wonderful and the beach, treacherous as it can be, is a great place to splash around in."

ACTION man



"I've been perennially trying to learn to surf and hopefully now I'm going to be able to make some progress because I finally got contact lenses!"

For the last few years Paul has been a mover and a shaker within Griffith University's School of Physiotherapy and Exercise Science where, among other things, he teaches students about perception, motor control and how to juggle balls, devil sticks - and their lives.

"They get credit for explaining in scientific terms how they juggle. Some of them become really good at it - doing tricks like throwing the balls behind their backs. I'm not that coordinated, but I can teach them where to start. And how to think."

Paul's fascination with human movements and computers will serve him well when he takes up a new position at Griffith University next year.

He has been appointed Director of the Centre for Active Visualisation within the School of Information Technology.

"It will be a facility that creates large-screen computer graphics and allows human interaction with them, so instead of just watching a computer display you will be able to influence what it does."

This kind of virtual reality has the potential to lead to lifestyle improvements for patients with traumatic brain injuries like stroke.

"For example, patients with Parkinson's disease can begin to walk quite normally if they are presented with visual images that people normally see when they're walking - like objects that appear to get bigger and bigger when you approach them. In a sense it's like tricking the brain."

"The problem is trying to reactivate parts of the brain that have been traumatised, jump starting their motor control system by short circuiting the normal circuits and going straight from the eyes to the muscles."

Paul Treffner's own world view was in many ways shaped by his father, an Estonian immigrant who settled in Northern Ireland with his wife in the aftermath of World War II.

He was a horticulturalist - famous for growing Ireland's biggest chrysanthemums - whose former nursery in Templepatrick has been transformed into the Hilton Hotel and boasts a restaurant called Treffners.

"I think that sensibility of horticulture and the importance of living things that I learnt from my father has led to my scientific perspective."

"I study something called ecological psychology, which looks at the relation between organisms and environments, perception and action."

Paul now considers himself a world citizen who makes his home where he lays his hat. He recently bought a hatstand.

The Gold Coast represents the perfect playground for such an active academic, and Griffith University's most energetic campus offers fertile ground for his bright ideas to bloom.

Gold Coast

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ISSN 1036-3395



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