



Camera operator Chris Miller talking shots through with camera assistant Josh Etu

Digital dance routine

– using iPads on *Strictly*

As TV productions start to look at ways to improve their carbon footprint, *Strictly* is leading the way by cutting down on its paper waste in a move that also makes life easier for the camera operators. Zerb guest editor **Sally Garrett** visited the *Strictly* studio to find out how iPads have been introduced for the camera shot cards.

In 2017, *Strictly Come Dancing* became one of the first BBC shows actively to reduce the amount of paper and printing used in the making of the show, in the process improving its carbon footprint. For the latest series, the camera department replaced traditional paper shot cards with iPad tablets. Despite the initial outlay on the iPads, line producer Kate Jones predicted that by the end of this first series using them, the money saved by not printing out shot cards each week would offset the cost of supplying the tablets for 10 cameras. The studio floor is not yet completely paperless – but they are heading in the right direction, allowing the albert carbon footprint logo to be added to *Strictly's* credits (see more about albert on pages 75–77).

Former GTC TiCA winner, Steadicam operator Dom Jackson has worked on *Strictly* since the very first series and first came across the idea of using an iPad from outside broadcast (OB) camera supervisor Chris Goor while working on the *Trooping the Colour* a few years ago.

Chris (also a GTC member) joined BBC OBs 20 years ago, going freelance in 2008. He has been a camera supervisor for the last 10 years. I spoke to Chris and he explained that he originally thought of using an iPhone to view his shot cards while operating a camera on the top of the Millbank Tower for a BBC events show: “The wind was blowing and my shot cards wouldn’t sit on one page, so I photographed them all and then overnight searched for an app that would allow me to write notes.”

Chris originally chose an app called Good Notes as it seemed the best one for annotating PDFs quickly. More recently he has been using Adobe Acrobat as it has some other good features, including the ability to write very rough notes across the page then shrink them down, which makes them neater. “Having tried out my system, I then decided to look at other outdoor scripted programmes to find more shows on which I could benefit from using electronic shot cards and, as a result, I’ve been using them on *Trooping the Colour* for a few years now”. Chris went on to explain: “I also do a lot of theatre work for cinema broadcasts and one of the main benefits of this system is the speed and quietness of the page turns. People pay a lot of money for their tickets, so we want minimum disruption for those sitting near the cameras during these recordings.”

iPads on *Strictly*

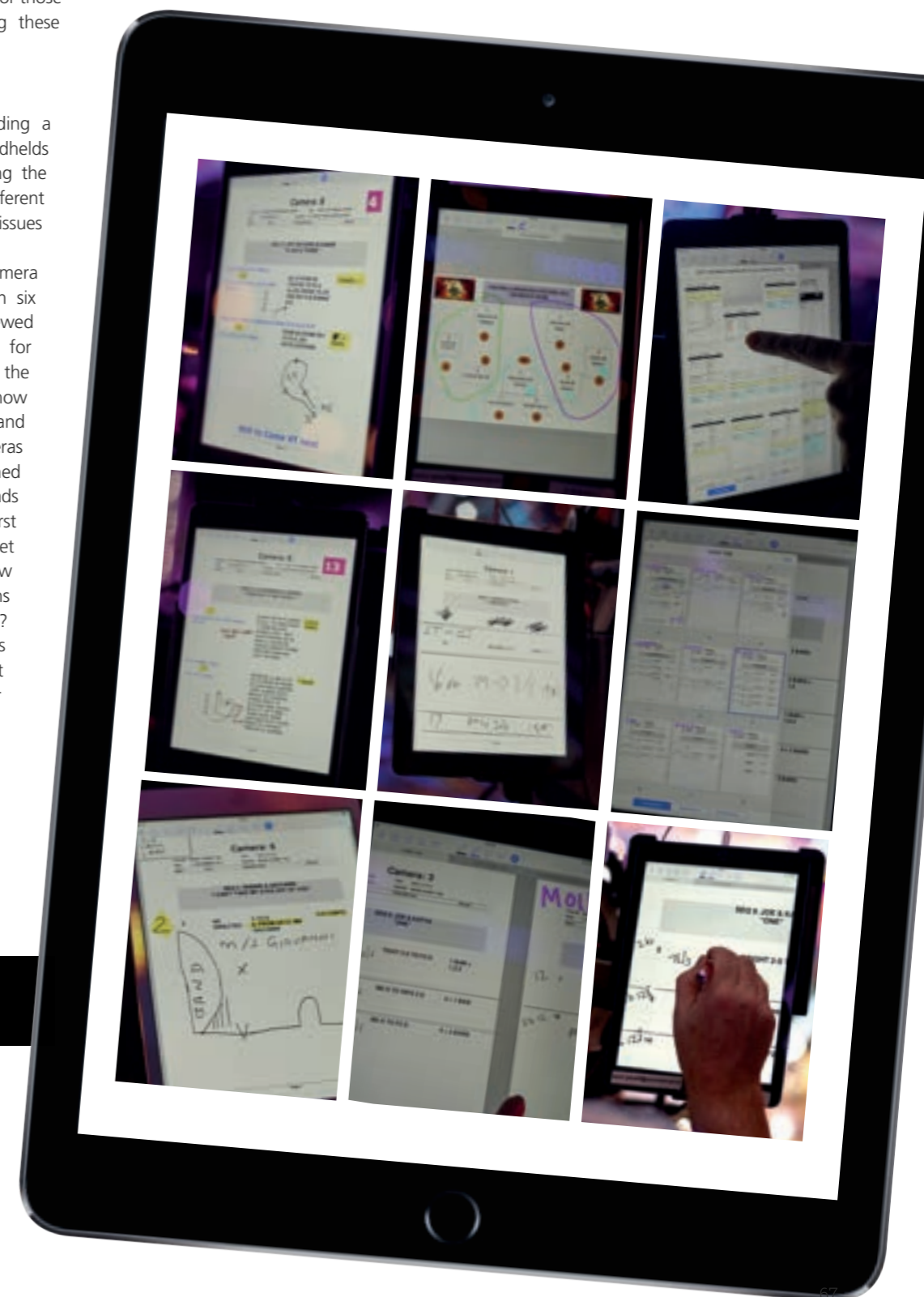
Strictly uses 10 cameras, including a Technocrane, five peds, three handhelds and an RF Steadicam, so making the iPads compatible with all the different formats initially presented various issues that had to be overcome.

Tom Hackett has been a camera assistant for 10 years and, with six years’ experience on *Strictly*, is viewed as the head camera assistant for the show. I spoke to Tom about the introduction of the iPads and how the issues around mounting and charging them on different cameras have been dealt with. He explained that when the notion of iPads replacing paper shot cards was first talked about, it was initially met with some reservations from a few of the operators: What happens if the iPad battery runs out? What if the app crashes? But, as an operator myself, I know that paper cards are not without their problems either. I can remember working as an assistant many years ago on *Children in Need*; we were about two hours into the live show when one of the operators realised that half his music cards were missing.

Each operator has worked out their own way of customising the system – notes can be added with a stylus, your finger or using the keyboard.

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GTC member Chris Goor originally had the idea of using an iPhone to view his shot cards while operating a camera on the top of the Millbank Tower for a BBC OB.





After a frantic search we finally found them in a box with the music scripts; we never did figure out how they got there but it was a pretty stressful time until we found them! And, as Chris Goor mentioned, using paper shot cards on OBs can cause numerous problems, especially when exposed to the elements.

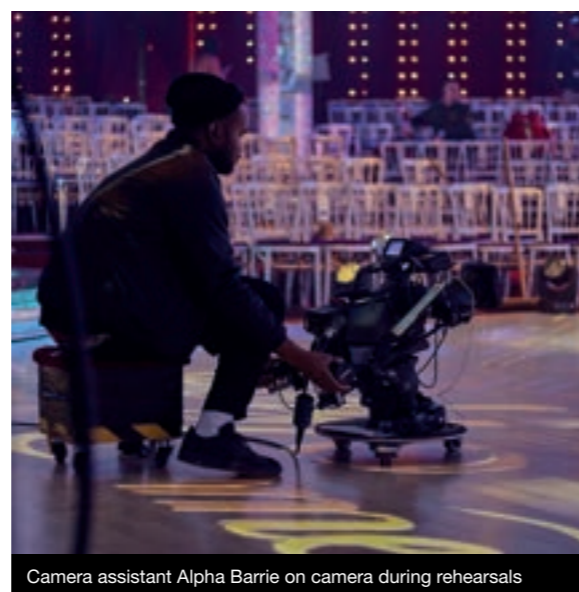
Getting used to the iPads

The first week the iPads were used on *Strictly*, all the cameras had a paper copy as a backup while people got used to the system and worked out how to customise it for their own needs. A few of the operators experienced some problems, but it turned out that this was actually due to malfunctions on the iPads rather than the way in which they were using them. By the third week all the operators were using the iPads without any backups on paper.

I asked Tom and line producer Kate to talk me through the day-to-day running of the iPads. As *Strictly* owns the iPads, they are kept locked up in the production office. On the Thursday they are put on charge and that night *Strictly* PA, Amanda Church, emails out the shot cards. Each iPad has been set up with its own individual email address (for example, camera1@, camera2@). Then, on Friday morning during the rig, Tom gets out the iPads and opens up the email PDFs in Good Notes.

As well as the shot cards, everyone receives an emailed copy of the running order and any other information they need. The music scripts are still on paper though as people have found it hard to scroll through that amount of information.

The app Good Notes allows you to make notes on PDFs either with a stylus, your finger or a keyboard. Each operator has adapted this to their own needs and comfort.



Camera assistant Alpha Barrie on camera during rehearsals

Adapting for different camera types

As mentioned before, *Strictly* uses various camera formats, so the mounting and powering of the iPads has had to be specifically customised for each one. The peds have an adapted script card holder, with the iPads powered directly from a 13-amp socket on the cradle. Special power boxes have been made up for the handhelds and Steadicams but many of the operators choose not to charge them and have realised that if they turn off everything on the device except the app itself then the charge will last all day. On show days they are recharged over the meal break before the show.

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By the third week all the operators were using the iPads without any backups on paper.

I asked PA Amanda if this has had any impact on her work and she replied that it probably adds about 10 minutes extra work on the Thursday night to email the shot cards to the individual email addresses, but she doesn't mind as the amount of material going to print is cut down so dramatically.

I then spoke to all the camera operators on the show for their take on the good and bad points. Of the Technocrane crew, only the operator uses the iPad; the tracker and swingers prefer paper, saying they haven't found a suitable mounting for the iPad yet. All the handheld ops find the iPad much easier than having a fistful of shot cards attached on a croc clip and having to unclip them all just to turn over a page. One op also mentioned that it reduces eyestrain as the whole page is illuminated evenly rather than a crib light that lights up only part of the page (which can also be distracting for actors in front of camera). It was also suggested that with the new changes to the IR35 rules, if each operator supplied their own tablet, then they would be supplying equipment as required by the rules.

Camera supervisor Lincoln Abraham, who has supervised *Strictly* for the last 12 years, was very positive about the

migration to iPads. Lincoln actually uses two: the one supplied by production and also his own, as he likes to be able to view the shot cards and running order simultaneously. All the operators can swipe between these, but Lincoln's personal preference is to be able to see both together.

Another plus is that the app stores all the shot cards, so each week is logged in its own folder. This means that near the end of the series, when the dancers reprise their favourite dances, everyone already has their shot cards, and any changes they made the first time around are available without needing to go back to print. Apart from the teething problems in the first week, not one person had a negative word to say about using this new system.

Future uses

My final question was whether they envisaged iPads/tablets becoming the norm and replacing all paper shot cards on all programmes. Chris Goor's reply was: "Yes, but not until we get the perfect app. Good Notes or Acrobat wouldn't work well on *Later with Jools*, for example, as that show has frequent running order changes." (That said, functionality of the apps is improving all the time and this is now easier.) Dom, Lincoln and the rest of the *Strictly* crew said that they certainly would have no problems trying out the iPads on all the other shows they work on.

All in all, this seems to be a positive move that not only makes the job easier but also helps the environment. Hopefully, if more productions take this up, then a 'TV-specific' app will be developed to make live updates on schedules and other changes instant.

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