Ever wonder what it would be like to suit up as a school mascot? Now, anyone with access to an iPhone or iPod Touch can take on the role of Bucky, The University of Texas-Pan American’s mascot, when they download the UTPA-themed application from the iTunes app store.

The application, which was created by Reel to Red Productions, is a sports-themed game called “Bucky Challenge,” in which the user guides Bucky through a series of athletic challenges by using the touch screen.

Chelse Benham, the director of Reel to Red and the game’s creative director, led five Reel to Red team members along the journey of creating the game.

“It’s actually a marketing tool to expose the youth to the University,” Benham said. “The idea of doing a game app became interesting because The University of Texas at Austin had a utility app that was popular. It was number seven on the most popular free apps in the iTunes App store. I wanted an iTunes game that could be used to market UTPA.”

The idea behind the app is to expose the public to the University behind the mask of a fun game free to download.

What is novel about “Bucky Challenge” is the entire game takes place on the UTPA campus.

“‘Bucky Challenge’ is a multi-level sports game where we literally took photos of the campus and incorporated those into the game,” Benham explained. “We figure that if it takes someone anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour to play the game, what they’re seeing are the real University buildings and signage all that time. At the end of the game, the University’s website is displayed. It’s a new way to market to the youth on their terms.”

Not only are users exposed to images of the campus. A few familiar faces will be present in the game as well.

“The game has humor. It’s meant to be funny. I and our other graphic designer, Hilda Del Rio, made the Reel to Red team into bubblehead characters that can be seen in the game,” said Alexis Carranza, graphic designer and assistant director for Reel to Red. “We also arranged a photo shoot with Ricardo Gonzalez of the Visitors Center who plays Bucky. We did a one-hour photo shoot with him dressed in costume and posing in different sport poses. That was a lot of fun.”

Designing the game was no easy task. The group had no coding or app-building knowledge, and learning the software development kit from Apple to create an app that functions with the iPhone was an enormous undertaking.

“It required learning everything from the human interface guidelines for Apple to trying to learn Xcode, which is C++ and Objective-C-based coding. That’s almost impossible trying to learn overnight and still put a game together,” Benham explained.

After about six weeks of trying to figure out Xcode, Benham’s son assisted the group by informing them of a program called GameSalad, created by Gendai Games. The Austin-based company’s freeware seemed perfect for the team, but it came

with software glitches that were almost impossible to solve.

“GameSalad is freeware, but it’s a beta and it’s constantly having problems. It’s hard to work with. There are quirks about it you have to figure out what is causing the problem,” explained James Hernandez, the game’s technical engineer. A beta is software that is in the second stage of testing and is used as a prototype, or preview for potential buyers. It is often free or at a discounted price because it typically contains glitches. “I’m sure it’s much easier on a second game. Mind you, our game is one of the very few being built with GameSalad that’s multi-level.”

Despite the trouble brought on by working with a beta, GameSalad turned out to be a simpler program to work with than Xcode.

“We were kind of discouraged at first working with Xcode, but once GameSalad came along, the game building went from some impossible idea to being a real product in a short period of time,” Del Rio said.

Ultimately, the project was started as a learning curve for the members of Reel to Red.

“There was a lot of trial and error on trying to fix the movements of our characters, especially in the editing portion when we put the levels together and how those levels would interact with each other. It was challenging,” said Hernandez, who initially underestimated the amount of physics that went into the creation of a game.

“It’s just another creative product from Reel to Red where we expand the skill set of the team and showcase the University in a unique way,” Benham said. The group recently won state-wide and international awards for exhibiting the University in a documentary, website, and commercial campaign including a Lone Star Emmy, a Webby People’s Voice Award, and a Telly Award.

Benham documented the entire process of creating the game app in a blog called “The Novice App Builder,” with the hope of aiding others who would like to create a game using GameSalad.

The blog can be found at noviceappbuilder.blogspot.com. Screenshots of “Bucky Challenge” are available at www.reeltored.com.[**Reel to Red Productions website**](http://www.reeltored.com/) The app is free to download from iTunes.