



WOMEN PUSHING FOR A DIFFERENT REALITY

Byron Bay International Film Festival MDR producer Beverley Calloz.

The entrenched gender imbalance within the film and television sector is well-documented, and in recent years there have been great strides to reverse this. However, what of VR – essentially a new medium? Are there parallel issues, given it emerged from the male-dominated tech world? Or could this be a more diverse and inclusive space from the outset? Byron Bay Film Festival director and virtual reality producer Jaimee Skippon-Volke explores diversity initiatives within the VR sector and talks to other women working in this space.

After receiving our first Oculus DK1 developer's kit in 2013, the Byron Bay International Film Festival has been excitedly introducing Filmmakers to VR since 2014. Back then, content was thin on the ground, but it was easy to blow minds through the concept alone.

In 2016 we presented, to our knowledge, the first federally-funded VR arts initiative *ncube8* – a program which introduced the medium and its potential to hundreds of creative practitioners for the first time. BBFF2016 also birthed *Co_Lab_Create*, an industry driven weekend developed to connect and strengthen our Australian VR/AR Practitioners as individuals and as an industry.

New developments and hardware are now unveiled annually at

Co_Lab_Create, and new business and creative partnerships formed. In 2018, with Create NSW's support, we were also able to roll-out *Make Diversity Reality*, at first an incubator, and now an accelerator for women and people from diverse backgrounds and their projects. Each participant receives support and knowledge from the leaders and experts who stay on after *Co_Lab_Create* as mentors.

What has been strikingly clear, is how invested our mentors are, both male and female, in building diversity in their industry, at all levels, and how rewarding the process is for all involved. An emerging and growing medium provides a fresh environment from which new cultures and pathways can grow.

Virtual reality's re-emergence sprouted with vigour from

Silicon Valley in a male-driven and dominated environment. The inflated market predictions and expectations of the medium were perhaps a symptom of a testosterone driven eco-system, and they gave way to some harsh realities and an excess of scepticism from 'non-believers'.

However, the timing of this decade's VR roll-out has aligned with Western society's fresh understanding of individualism, gender diversity, the importance of inclusivity and of the need to put male-dominated/sexist work cultures behind us. As a result what is emerging is an industry, although still intrinsically male-dominated, but which, in the circles I run in at least, is working hard and from the heart to add gender diversity to its mix.

Undoubtedly Australia's most renowned VR practitioner is Lynette Wallworth, who first started in the field in 2015, after she received a residency through Sundance New Frontier which placed potential VR practitioners with US specialists. In Wallworth's case it was a Disney-backed start-up Jaunt VR, with whom she created her first VR work *Collisions*.

Wallworth says: "Walking into those offices in Silicon Valley at

that time, you had to strain to find a woman amongst all the developers in those large offices. The technology was being developed in a vacuum, and the challenge is now finding how we can get diversity in terms of who is imagining what the capacity is for these technologies. Because it's not just about the content – it's also about the hardware – and who is developing the hardware".

Wallworth sits on the World Economic Forum's Global Council for VR and AR. She has been pleased to see new voices recently added to the council – including Mikaela Jade, an Indigenous Australian woman and founder of start-up Indigital, which is working with various Indigenous communities to help them tell their stories through AR.

"For me that's where we need to go – I'm interested in the incredible capacity of this technology and the only limitation is in who is developing it," Wallworth says.

"In comparison to other fields and areas that I've worked in it's really evident that when you move towards a more hardware/technically-reliant field you definitely get a shift in terms of diversity and who is working in those fields. There's jargon that's attached to these fields and exclusivity around who's comfortable and exposed to it – and



Photo credit: Donn Avelino

MOD's Michela Ledwidge



Make Diversity Reality mentee Jody Toomey (centre) joins international experts (L-R) Raqi Syed, Timur Musaby, Weta Workshop's Mhairiad Connor and Michelle Brown on stage at *Co_Lab_Create*.

all those things can shift really quickly with access and education... you have to be familiar with it in order to push it in new directions".

My mother, Jessica Skippon, was a pioneering female director in the 70s and 80s. Along with my father Tom Cook, she quite literally introduced the UK to video, and she encouraged me from an early age to play with the technical tools she had at hand.

As one of the first female runners in one of the UK's largest post-production houses, I'd aspired to be a Harry operator (3D animator). However, I was met with opposition when I pointed towards the machine room as my preferred next placement with the suggestion I should be thinking about joining Bookings instead. Had the culture been different I have no doubt, I'd have taken a very different career path. I had thought even back then that by focussing on 3D eventually I'd be able to work in VR, so when it re-emerged, now accessible and affordable, I dived back in.

I first met Bethany Jones from Fairground Pictures when I was working as a VFX producer. Prior to working in VR she produced a number of film and television projects including documentary

Molly: The Real Thing, TV mini-series *Molly* and feature film *Boys in the Trees*, as well as having previously produced and directed theatre shows. Jones wanted to learn to tell stories in VR because it requires a completely different way of thinking than film and television. *The Unknown Patient*, directed by Michael Beets was the first VR production she produced.

"VR gives you the ability to think about space and how you interact with space. I have a background in theatre so what I find really interesting about VR is how we are combining theatre techniques and craft with film techniques and craft. It's really exciting to see existing storytelling techniques be re-shaped with new technologies," Jones says.

"There are excellent women directors and creators already creating ground-breaking and superbly creative VR works. But I'd love to see more women involved in the tech side of VR too. I think this is a similar issue to film and television. I personally believe that teams benefit from a number of different voices and perspectives, and it is fantastic to have that balance within departments across the project."



Making Diversity Reality mentee Priscilla Koukoui with mentor Raqi Sayed at BBFF2019.



(L-R): Anna Brady, Lester Francois and Erinn Stevenson with their SPA Award for 'Rone'.

Producer/editor Anna Brady recently won Screen Producers Australia's Interactive Production of The Year Award for *Rone*. Brady agrees there are a lot of women making ground-breaking experiences in VR, noting that many of the immersive pieces she found most interesting at this year's Tribeca Film Festival were from female creatives.

Brady is currently developing an interactive narrative VR experience that she will write and direct. "I'm trying to move from editing to directing and I believe this will be an important step for me. It will be built all in game engine and I haven't made any projects this way before," she says.

"There is so much for me to learn about interactive storytelling and so many problems to solve – we're still in the early days of VR and there is a lot of experimentation and learning happening in the space. The language of VR is still being written and it is really exciting to contribute to that."

MOD is a long-standing production studio founded by Michela Ledwidge and Mish Sparks, which has moved from an online and transmedia focus into interactive, immersive and virtual production. At Siggraph Asia in Brisbane they launched both a new

data-visualisation app *Grapho* and an interactive VR documentary, *A Clever Label* which aims to promote inclusion and non-discrimination by exposing hidden sources and motivators behind anti-equality messaging. It encourages users to connect real data and unearth links between anti-LGBTQI lobbyists, senior Australian politicians and international organisations based in the US and elsewhere.

Ledwidge says: "In the process of working out how a presenter can tell a story in VR, we discovered and developed a refined interaction mechanic which we're going to bring to market. It's an exciting time for studios like us, the kind of tools that big studios use have never been more affordable, so barriers are crashing down.

"I don't actually see interactive technology or any particular part of the games industry being more inclusive than others. I just think, overall, there are more opportunities now for shifting the balance. It's not just about the old guard and people with power recognising the need and importance of diversity it's also about newcomers claiming their place. This is a new thing so there is literally no excuse for women and minorities not to jump in because there is no establishment in this new space." 

EOI's for Make Diversity Reality 2020 open in February 2020 for more information visit - www.bbff.com.au/makediversityreality



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