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John Leverage 6



VR  
&  
AR  
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(From top left clockwise) DP James Hawkinson (l) and actress Alexa Davalos in *The Man In The High Castle* (photo courtesy of Amazon); Actor Jonathan Pryce (l) and director Jack Bender on location for *Game of Thrones* (photo courtesy of HBO); Claire Danes in *Homeland* (photo by Stephan Rabold/courtesy of Showtime).



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(L-r) Andy Clarke of Publicis NY; Stacy McClain of Camp + King; Dave Damman of Grupo Gallegos; and Libby Brockhoff of Odysseus Arms

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THE LEADING PUBLICATION FOR COMMERCIAL, BRANDED CONTENT & ENTERTAINMENT PRODUCTION



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## Creating Immersive Experiences

### The Mill organically moves into, advances VR and AR storytelling

By Robert Goldrich

In *SHOOT*'s just released Mid-year Survey, Vic Palumbo, partner, director of production at Deutsch, noted that the industry has seen virtual reality and augmented reality go mainstream. Palumbo observed, "We're just scratching the surface of what's happening. In the next year, we're going to see more VR and AR experiences change the game, much like *Pokemon Go*. They for sure are going to get better, especially as it continues to interact with the real world."

For The Mill, segueing into VR and AR came organically, explained Boo Wong, global director of emerging technology, who leads an ensemble of talent across The Mill's studios in London, NY, L.A. and Chicago. "Coming off of 20-plus years of heavy sophisticated visual effects work, we found ourselves in a great position to delve into immersive experience," said Wong. "It's a natural evolution of The Mill's core technical and creative abilities to move from linear content into the immersive and interactive space."

The Mill's emerging tech team works across VR, AR, real time, interactive and experiential formats to deliver powerful new ways of connecting with audiences. "Whether it's within a fully enclosed VR space or AR where you are integrated into the real world—either way The Mill looks

at it as 'world building,'" related Wong. "We strive to tell great stories, create compelling content, to build new worlds."

Part and parcel of that is to enable viewers to experience those worlds on their own terms. "We are the architects of the space but they are the ones who can experience it their own way," said Wong.

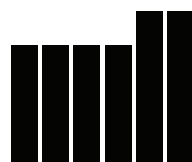
Facilitating this interactivity is where The Mill has positioned itself in the immersive landscape. "We are not in the business of making video games. But we very much do tap into real-time interactive game engines to further the VR and AR experience," said Wong. "We are—and very much like to be operating—at the intersection of cinema and games. This is how the viewer becomes more of a user. You open up the interactive world for many of them by making your content more gameified."

Yet more integral to success is the selection of stories and experiences that lend themselves to VR and/or AR. "In the early days of VR we would get scripts that

weren't really appropriate for a 360 or a virtual experience," recalled Wong. "We work with our clients to make sure we are creating content that makes sense for the space."

That process has yielded assorted experiences of high caliber, helping to break new ground in the immersive marketplace, a prime example being branded content for newspaper *The Guardian*—a documentary titled *6x9: a virtual experience of solitary confinement*. Placing the viewer inside a solitary confinement cell with little more than a bed and a toilet, *6x9* mimics a prisoner's experience of being locked away for 23 hours a day, delving into such psychological effects as blurred vision, hallucinations and a sense of floating that may occur after long-term sensory deprivation. Deploying game engine technology, The Mill London worked from first-person accounts and documentaries as references for both cell design and spatial audio capture. The cell was designed in Maya and further developed in Unity. Environmental binaural audio was also used, enhancing the sense of space and creating the effect of the sound continually moving with the viewer. *6x9* was a joint venture throughout production with Carl Addy, The Mill's creative director, working in close collaboration with co-directors Francesca Panetta and

From top left, clockwise: *6x9: a virtual experience of solitary confinement*; *Jack Daniel's Storytelling: VR Experience*; and *The Modern Games for The New York Times*.



<http://www.themill.com>



**Boo Wong**

Lindsay Poulton from *The Guardian*.

*6x9* served with its immersive experience to raise awareness of and spark discussion about solitary confinement. *6x9* was showcased at both the Sundance Film Festival and the Tribeca Film Fest this year.

The Mill also made its mark at this year's SXSW with its groundbreaking live-action cinema grade production tool, Mill Stitch, topping the VR/AR category at the SXSW Interactive Innovation Awards. This accolade underscores The Mill's multi-faceted involvement in the immersive arena, not only creating projects but developing and inventing product that advances the storytelling/experiential discipline. "We are constantly experimenting, discovering, making prototypes not only for VR and AR but also our visual effects endeavors," noted Wong. Much of this is done via Mill LAB, the space where creative technologists experiment, identify the correct applications for emerging technology, seek and realize ways to better connect with audiences. This initiative is creatively spearheaded by ECD Rama Allen and Wong.

Regarding Mill Stitch, awhile back it was difficult for a director to follow what was being captured during the course of VR production. The video village turned out what at best looked like a security camera feed. Mill Stitch, said Wong, "allows directors to see what they're shooting—stitching everything together real time on set so the director can view it in 360."

Directors can be Mill talent or from outside the studio. Whereas *6x9* was an example of the latter—teaming with directors from *The Guardian*—*Jack Daniel's VR Experience* exclusively involved Mill directorial talent, co-helmed by Allen and Mill+ director Bowe King for FCB Chicago. Mill+ produced the experience which transports fans of Jack

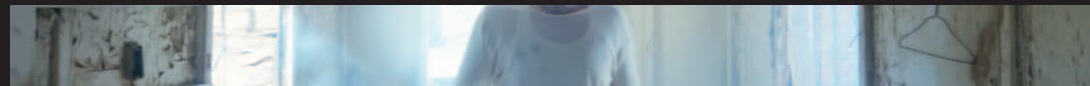
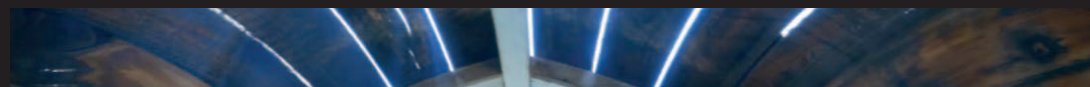
Daniel's to sensory rich locations on the hallowed grounds of the distillery. The visual style of "mixed time" was developed for the content where moments slow down and time seems to stand still. This style of film borrows from the visual language of cinemagraphs, allowing viewers to linger in moments of mixed time. Combining real-time and frozen elements in one shot, the mixed time film technique was developed by The Mill specifically for *Jack Daniel's VR Experience*.

Most recently, The Mill teamed with *The New York Times* on *The Modern Games*, a VR film that marked the start of the Summer Olympics in Rio and takes viewers through seminal moments in Olympic history. Led by creative directors Westley Sarokin and Eric Chang, The Mill ensemble used archival photographs and transferred them via 2D and 3D techniques into VR experiences—worlds which viewers could themselves inhabit.

Wong said that VR and AR are part

of an evolutionary process. "Five years from now, we'll have established much of what is needed for the best VR and AR storytelling. We'll be looking to innovate on some other emerging fronts. And our talent evolves along with each change. Our original composers for example are now our VR composers. Our talent, tech development, creative and production evolves. It's part of our looking-ahead philosophy, always searching, discovering, experimenting and innovating."

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