Virtual Realities: Immersive Documentary Encounters Commissioning Call

Watershed, in partnership with UWE Bristol, University of Bristol and University of Bath invite bold and distinctive proposals to create nonfiction experiences in virtual reality.

We are seeking to commission three original works, each receiving a £50k production budget and support from the commissioning and research teams.

— About the call

We are delighted to announce a call through which we seek to commission three original pieces of VR nonfiction. We are open to ideas that engage deeply and creatively with the potential of VR for documentary or journalism. Proposals might ask questions of the relationship between participant and subject, reflect on the ethics of immersion, or give voice to underrepresented communities or individuals. This opportunity allows for ideas that push boundaries and challenge the orthodoxies that are emerging in immersive nonfiction.

We are looking for projects that explore the potential of the platform to convene urgent conversations about our shared world, rather than demonstrators of the latest technology innovation. We are interested in work that takes risks, and points to future directions for the field.

Immersive Histories: Dam Busters by All Seeing Eye. Image © All Seeing Eye

— About Virtual Realities

Funded by the UK's Engineering & Physical Sciences Research Council, Virtual Realities - Immersive Documentary Encounters is a collaborative research project that is examining production and user experience of nonfiction virtual reality content. The project is led by University of Bristol, with UWE Bristol and University of Bath. With partners including BBC and Guardian, researchers from human-computer interaction, psychology and documentary studies are investigating engagement, understanding and emotional reaction in experiences of immersive nonfiction. The project looks at where nonfiction VR production has come from and how technology and creative form are developing, while keeping the interests of audiences and subjects centre stage.

vrdocumentaryencounters.co.uk/

Phase one of the project has involved surveying industry stakeholders - both producers and commissioners - to provide some context about their engagement with VR nonfiction and a sense of directions in the field.

We're also mapping VR nonfiction work created to date, in an interactive mediography which is in development. vrdocumentaryencounters.co.uk/vrmediography

Phase two consists of two audience studies - a lab based psychology exploration of the impact of immersive nonfiction on users, and an ethnographic study of how households engage with VR at home and at a mini-festival which we will curate.

This commissioning process is led by Watershed and forms Phase three of the programme.

Bristol VR Lab Image © Linford Lowe

— What are we looking to commisson?

— Three works of nonfiction, each with a different approach to immersive storytelling

— Works that are predominantly or entirely experienced through a virtual reality headset (e.g. HTC Vive/Vive Pro, Oculus Rift, Oculus Go, Playstation VR, Samsung Gear VR, Google Daydream View, Google Cardboard etc.) *Note: our research questions are connected to experience of commercially available virtual reality head mounted displays, so on this occasion we are not seeking to commission AR/MR experiences or those experienced via experimental (pre-release) hardware*

— We are flexible as regards content and format, but anticipate that scale and duration of experiences created will take a realistic approach to what can be developed within the time and budget available, as well as giving consideration to participant's comfort levels and accessibility

— We are not expecting all three commissions to be developed to a fully realised/published stage within this commission. Work should be developed to at least a 'proof of concept' stage that can be experienced within a head mounted display. We will work with all teams to identity further development opportunities towards the end of the programme

— We are open to proposals for completely new creative works, or for significant development of existing works that may have been prototyped to an early stage. In the latter case, please make it clear in your application what already exists, and what tangible evolution of the work this next phase of development will enable

— We would also consider co-production/co-funding works with additional partners, commissioners, or those that have additional resource/investment by the commissioned team

— We are agnostic in terms of publishing platforms, but are particularly interested in works that have the potential to be experienced by audiences outside of a one-off showcase, festival-build or installation context

From the Light of the Fire Our Dancing Shadows by Kaleider Image by Paul Blakemore © Watershed

— Who should apply?

We are excited to hear ideas from those with direct experience of this field who are keen to build on that experience and push boundaries. We are also keen to hear bold new ideas from creative practitioners from different disciplines, particularly those whose voices are currently underrepresented in VR and in the nonfiction sector.

In order to create space for both, we are offering two distinct pathways for submissions:

— Open Call

— New Voices

Open call:

— Teams or companies with a demonstrable history of making high quality creative content
— We expect there to be some expertise within the team working with nonfiction content
— We expect there to be some expertise within the team working with immersive technologies
— Teams will have the skills and capacity to research, develop, test and iterate their idea, developing the work to at least a proof of concept stage that can be shared and showcased at the end of the programme
— Teams can be based anywhere in the world.

Note: We expect to award two of the three commissions through the Open call

New Voices call:

— Teams or companies with a demonstrable history of making high quality creative content
— A distinctive point of view that is currently underrepresented in VR and/or nonfiction
— Teams may have little or no experience creating nonfiction and/or VR content
— A sense of what additional resources and skills the team might need to bring to achieve their proposal. We will work with the successful team to identify and contract with a collaborator to bring their ideas to fruition.
— Teams can be based anywhere in the world.

Note: We expect to award one of the three commissions through the New Voices call

The Collider by Anagram. Image © Anagram

What do we expect from you?

— An open and inquisitive approach to R&D
— An interest in the research questions posed by the Virtual Realities: Immersive Documentary Encounters (See: http://vrdocumentaryencounters.co.uk/)
— Production and delivery of an original piece of nonfiction content using virtual reality technology as an integral part of the work
— Commitment to full attendance by those leading the commission at 3 cohort workshops in Bristol or Bath, UK to share progress and learning, connect with the wider research activity of the programme, and to support the other teams as an active peer network. For non-UK teams, remote/virtual attendance is possible. See timeline for details.
— Making the commissioned work available under a non-commercial license as a case study that contributes to the wider research project, Virtual Realities. This will include consideration of the production process and an audience study of the resulting project.
— Attendance and participation in a showcase event likely to take place in Bristol on Wed 26 June 2019.

What you can expect from us?

— The opportunity to spend up to six months creating a new work of nonfiction virtual reality
— A facilitated programme of support, led by experienced commissioner, Watershed
— Engagement with a world-leading research team. More about the team below
— A grant of up to £50,000 will be made available to each of the three commissions. This is expected to cover full production costs including team time, research, equipment, development, testing and travel
— Access to an international network of practitioners, researchers, producers, commissioners, funders, festivals and exhibitors through the partner universities, Watershed's Pervasive Media Studio and Bristol VR Lab

— Timeline*

31 Jul 2018
Call open for applications

28 Sep, 17:00 GMT
Application deadline

10 Oct
Shortlisted candidates notified

15 & 16 Oct
Interviews

23 Oct
Successful commissions notified

1 Jan 2019
Commissions commence

9 Jan
Workshop #1

5 Mar
Workshop #2

14 May
Workshop #3

14 Jun
Commission complete

26 Jun
Showcase event

Indicative timeline. Subject to change/negotiation.

— What non-fiction VR has inspired us?

We look forward to being inspired, challenged and intrigued by your ideas, but to share some of things that have had resonance for our team:

Notes on Blindness: Into Darkness

2016 // France & United Kingdom // Amaury La Burthe, Arnaud Colinart, James Spinney & Peter Middleton

http://vrdocumentaryencounters.co.uk/vrmediography/detail/32/

"Multi-award winning and quite rightly so, the masterful use of sound and visuals in Notes on Blindness exploits beautifully the capacity of VR to enable audiences to perceive the world in ways that are otherwise far beyond their sensory capabilities."

Assent

2013 // Australia // Oscar Raby

http://vrdocumentaryencounters.co.uk/vrmediography/detail/10/

"Raby's audacious approach puts the user into the role of his father as he revisits a shocking incident in the aftermath of the Pinochet coup in Chile 1973. This is VR that makes you think."

The Quipu Project

2013 // Peru & UK // Chaka Studio, Matthew Brown, Karen Tucker, Ewan Cass-Kavanagh

http://www.react-hub.org.uk/projects/future-documentary-alumni/quipu-project

"Quipu may seem an unusual source of inspiration, as it does not involve VR. However, we are inspired by the way that low and high tech methods are combined to tell powerful stories about the forced sterilisation of Indigenous people in Peru in the 1990s, resulting in a living documentary by the people affected, and reaching worldwide audiences."

Step to the Line

2017 // Brazil & USA // Ricardo Laganero

http://vrdocumentaryencounters.co.uk/vrmediography/detail/19/

"We like the way this piece situates us in the middle of a simple exercise, but in doing so gives us a privileged insight into social divisions, social bonds and the thin line between freedom and incarceration"

Zero Days VR
2017 // USA // Elie Zananiri & Yasmin Elayat
http://vrdocumentaryencounters.co.uk/vrmediography/detail/253/
"What strikes us most about Zero Days is the sheer sense of scale. We were impressed by the way relatively simple visuals and clever use of darkness are combined to create a very visceral sense of the vast interconnected – and otherwise invisible - landscape of cyber warfare."

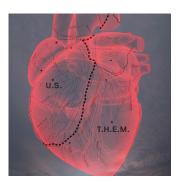### Titchener's Cage
2017 // USA // Nadav Assor
http://vrdocumentaryencounters.co.uk/vrmediography/detail/345/
"We appreciate the way in which Assor allows you to see your own body rendered in real time, alongside that of previous participants as they recount their memories and monologues. We particularly like the agency that you have to untether from your own body as you fly away from and above yourself."

Ferguson Firsthand
2015 // USA // Dan Archer
http://vrdocumentaryencounters.co.uk/vrmediography/detail/208/
"Ferguson Firsthand allows us to investigate the scene of the 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown. It uses the exploratory and non-linear capacities of VR to highlight the tensions that differing testimonies and evidence create in accurately reporting the shooting."

Carne y Arena
2017 // USA // Alejandro G. Iñárritu
http://vrdocumentaryencounters.co.uk/vrmediography/detail/39/
"What stands out for us here is the sense of mystery, anticipation and occasion. We love the way Carne y Arena mixed physical theatre, movie sets and room-scale VR to create a depth of multi-sensory immersion that is so much more than the sum of its parts."

— About the Team

Kirsten Cater / Principal Investigator

Dr Kirsten Cater is a Reader in Computer Science at the University of Bristol, specialising in Human Computer Interaction and Tangible User Interfaces.

Mandy Rose / Co-Investigator

Mandy Rose is Director of the Digital Cultures Research Centre, UWE Bristol and Co-Director of i-Docs.

Danaë Stanton Fraser / Co-Investigator

Danaë is a Professor in Psychology at the University of Bath and Director of the CREATE Lab.

Chris Bevan / Research Associate

Dr Chris Bevan is a Research Associate in Computer Science at the University of Bristol, specialising in Human Computer Interaction and human-centred design.

David Green / Research Associate

Dr. David Green is a research associate at the UWE Digital Cultures Research Centre. He has expertise in documentary making, immersive media, computing, prototyping, human computer interaction, co-creation and participatory methods.

Harry Farmer / Research Associate

Dr. Harry Farmer is a Research Associate at the University of Bath CREATE lab his research focuses on the role of the self and the body in social cognition.

Helen Brown / PhD Researcher

Helen Brown is a psychology PhD student at the University of Bath. Her research is exploring emotional and physiological responses to virtual reality encounters.

Verity McIntosh / Producer

Verity McIntosh is Managing Producer at Watershed's Pervasive Media Studio and is a co-founding member of Bristol VR Lab.

Jo Gildersleve / Research Administrator

Jo Gildersleve is the research administrator for the Virtual Realities project at the University of Bristol.

— Further reading/food for thought

— Ingrid Kopp - Who is VR for?
https://immerse.news/who-is-vr-for-20b3f077a912

— Sam Gregory - Brave New Worlds - Feelies for Human Rights
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0QE_FTZBfaU&feature=youtu.be

— Janet Murray Not a Film and Not an Empathy Machine
https://immerse.news/not-a-film-and-not-an-empathy-machine-48b63b0eda93

— Kate Nash - Virtual Reality Witness - exploring the ethics of mediated presence
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17503280.2017.1340796

— Mandy Rose - Technologies of Seeing and Technologies of Corporeality - Currents
in Nonfiction Virtual Reality https://vols.worldrecordsjournal.org/#/01/11

— Kamal Sinclair Making a New Reality https://makinganewreality.org/

— Ainsley Sutherland - The Limits of VR. Debugging the Empathy Machine
https://docubase.mit.edu/lab/case-studies/the-limits-of-virtual-reality-debugging-
the-empathy-machine/

— How to Apply

To apply for either the Open call or New Voices call, visit
https://watershedbristol.typeform.com/to/v8VEVl

You will need to complete this form online in one go, but can copy
and paste text from elsewhere.

We are continuously updating a set of frequently asked questions,
including a downloadable list of the questions from the application
form that you can use to draft your responses offline.

FAQs: http://wshd.to/i1

If you have any further questions, contact Watershed Creative
Team Coordinator, Jo Kimber at jo.kimber@watershed.co.uk
+44 (0)117 370 8870.

In My Shoes: Dancing With Myself by Jane Gauntlett. Image by Verity McIntosh @ Watershed

— Project Partners