

URL: <https://stvp.stanford.edu/clips/making-vr-come-alive-with-animation>

Maureen Fan, co-founder and CEO at Baobab Studios, talks about her first experience with virtual reality and how the poor resolution motivated her to create her own company to make the experience even better. Fan shares how her vision for virtual reality animation taps into a deep human connection to storytelling.



Transcript

- So, the first time I put on a VR headset I hated it.. I was watching that Paul McCartney music video and he's like, oh you can be right there, but all I could notice was the poor resolution and the pixels cause the headsets weren't advanced enough.. But, when I put on the headset when I was at Zynga we hacked our game into it for fun.. It wasn't even moving.. There was no animated image.. It was just a cartoon right in the background, and I realized that this is the future of animation because when you watch animation, it's suspension of disbelief.. You don't expect it to look real and you get completely sucked in.. So, you're not noticing the pixels versus when you're doing real life or special effects.. We care so much about whether or not it looks real or not, which is why sometimes, if you guys watch the old Final Fantasy movies, it feels kind of weird.. You can tell that they're not really human..

So, I was really excited.. I'm like, oh my gosh I need to go do this immediately.. I need to join a company.. But, I couldn't find a company that did what I wanted to do.. So, that's why I had to start a company.. (mumbles) because I always thought I want to be an entrepreneur cause it's really hard.. Totally worth while, but really hard.. I kind of stumbled my way into it.. I love storytelling.. So, there's this theory..

How many of you have read the book, "Sapiens"? So, there's this theory evolutionary theologians, not theologians, researchers believe that the reason why homo sapiens might have been survival of the fittest and won out is because of rumors which is our ability to tell stories.. You can say, "There's a lion over there.. Don't go over there." Or, someone's like, "Hey, Hector killed the lion with this chisel in this way." and all the kids around the campfire are like, "Oh my gosh, I want to be just like Hector!" It's about putting yourself in another person's viewpoint and putting yourself in other scenario and you kind of wonder what would I do if I were in that situation? But, in VR you don't have to wonder.. You actually are in that situation.. You actually have to act and it reveals who you are.. The storytelling is extremely powerful because it gets you to care so much about a character that you want to watch to the end of it, right? Because, you wanna know what happens to that character.. You want them to fail.. You want them to succeed.. And, we believe that VR and AR lets you care about that character even more so than all its previous mediums.. So, to give you an example, we see this scene right here in "Invasion" which is the first experiment that we ever did..

This little bunny comes up and sniffs you.. (sniffing sounds) Now, this isn't crazy because if you think about if you've watched "Deadpool", right? Deadpool comes up and talks to you.. It's called breaking the fourth wall.. You don't usually, in cinema, break the fourth wall.. The actors don't acknowledge you because you're in your theater seat and you kind of know that Deadpool's not actually talking to you.. But, this weird thing happens in VR.. People would actually get on the ground and start bouncing around, mimicking her motions absolutely sure that she was reacting to them when actually it was canned animation at the time.. They would try to reach out and pet her.. They would coo at her.. They would talk to her..

They would wave at her.. And, there's this scene where the aliens have their lasers pointed at you, and she's hiding behind you.. And, people say, "Oh my gosh! I'm a bunny shield! I need to save her!" And, "I can feel the snow and her breath on my shoulder." And, it was really the air conditioning in our office.. But, they just believed it to be real, because when you're in VR, your animal brain makes you believe that this thing is real.. And, how powerful is that, if you start believing that she's real how much more do you bond with her? How much more do you want to see what happens? How much more responsibility do you feel you have for her and want to actually help her? And this ended up at the beginning, no one gave us the time of day..

We started our company because they were like, "No one wants to watch animation and comedy.. They only want hardcore zombie shooting games." This ended up becoming the number one downloaded experience across all headsets beating out all the games, beating out all the licensed IP and all that, and we think it's because of this specific moment.. Because afterwards people were like, "I want that bunny!" And, we made a plushy bunny so they can hug it.. Then, tell your friends about it.. And then, if you're a person and you buy at Christmas and you want to share it with your kids or your nieces and nephews, or your grandma what are you gonna show them? You're not going to necessarily have them shoot zombies..

But, you love showing them a cute bunny that's going to come talk to you...