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Immersive tech gets in the game

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Video game designers are using their skills to create solutions for the health and resources sectors.



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IMMERSIVE technology businesses have been among the surprising beneficiaries of lockdowns during the pandemic.

The ability to see a remote mine site without flying hours to get there or undertake safety training within a life-like simulation have proved useful in a world living with COVID-19.

Viewport VR founder and director Julius Jeppe, whose business creates custom virtual reality and augmented reality solutions for clients, said the pandemic had cemented the fact that the technology was here to stay.

The business's recent projects include creating a mechatronic ride for Rio Tinto, which takes the user on a tour through a mine site, and a product called Measure and Quote, which can measure all the walls in your home and tell you how many litres of paint are needed.

Mr Jeppe said large businesses had started allocating money in their budgets to invest in VR, especially miners in Western Australia.

While many other countries had more advanced VR training programs in other industries, Mr Jeppe said the state was leading the way in mining and safety training.

"We're the ones with the money and the toys, and we're spending money on

it," Mr Jeppe told *Business News*.

He said this had translated into interest in his business's services.

"We can't keep up with sales enquiries," Mr Jeppe said.

"We get more and more every day, from big businesses from all around Australia and around the world."

While the pandemic had accelerated interest, it also made it harder to attract talent.

"We're in competition for salaries globally now because of work from home," Mr Jeppe said.

"Before ... COVID, people would have to leave to chase that higher Silicon Valley salary, whereas now we're in competition with any sort of salary range or any job worldwide, especially for software engineers."

The level of demand and interest is a far cry from when the firm started in 2016, when few people knew what VR was.

"We started early before the business, or the concept, was commercially viable," Mr Jeppe said.

"It was an interesting time, not really many people had heard of VR technology."

Emerging

Richard Sowada has watched the immersive technologies sector grow

rapidly over the past four years.

As director of Revelation Perth International Film Festival, and a self-described "flattie" (a term for someone from the 2D screen industry), Mr Sowada has immersed himself in the field after winning a state government contract to organise an exhibition in 2019.

With funding from the Department of Local Government, Sport, and Cultural Industries, Mr Sowada set up XR:WA, a conference and public exhibition showcasing the ideas and work of the VR, AR and digital screen industry.

The fourth iteration of the festival is due to take place from September 15 to 18 and will explore all applications of the technology, from art to training software.

It will feature exhibitions, workshops, panels and VR and AR experiences.

Panel discussions will focus on topics including the funding and financing environment, the use of games for advocacy, international distribution, and VR in medicine.

Mr Sowada said when he started the exhibition four years ago, people were working in VR across industries but were not communicating with each other.

"They're working with the same software, they're working with the same hardware and they're working



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with the same kind of people in the development of the projects,” he said.

“But in many instances, even in Perth, they were completely unaware of the existence of each other.”

Mr Sowada said opportunities to apply the technology were vast, as it could be used in a range of sectors from arts and entertainment to resources, training, and architecture.

“It is wide open, absolutely wide open for opportunities, and all it takes is people to think differently,” he said.

Medicine is one of the other sectors using VR and AR technology.

ASX-listed Subiaco-based Singular Health, previously called MedVR, operates in this space.

It was founded in 2017, when a doctor approached some game designers to help visualise a patient’s tumour.

The designers figured out a way to take a CT scan of a patient and convert it into a 3D model, but the original technology was bulky.

“When it first ran in 2017, it needed a high-end computer, a big GPU or graphics processing unit, and then all of these tethered headsets and base stations and stuff; it was an entire ordeal to set it up,” Singular Health chief operating officer James Hill told *Business News*.

The company embarked on two years of research and development, before Mr Hill and chief executive Thomas Hanly joined Singular to commercialise it in 2019.

The pair quickly realised the equipment was too expensive.

They hired game developers who had knowledge of the platform Unity, which can be used to build games and simulations using VR for Windows and Mac computers.

“What we ended up doing is employing a lot of game developers,

people from SAE Institute in Northbridge, computer software developers from UWA,” Mr Hill said.

“The common theme is that all of them are avid gamers, and all of them use this game development platform.”

He said the new hires, who were about 23 years of age on average, along with improvements in VR technology, had vastly improved the product.

“With improvements in our development and improvements in technology as a whole, we’ve now gone from a \$7,500 set up with wires everywhere and big gaming computer to being able to do it on a standalone virtual reality headset that you order from Amazon for \$600,” Mr Hill said.

The company launched its product to the market in May 2022.

Mr Hill said it had been downloaded a few hundred times so far and the business was hoping to drive more demand by creating mobile applications.

According to its financials for the year to December 2021, Singular Health made a \$3 million loss.

Mr Hill attributed this to years of research and development, which had stretched longer than expected.

“A lot of the things we’re doing are things people haven’t done before,” he said.

“It’s not really just bolting a number of plugins together or going off a number of precedents, it’s really having to work things out from the ground up.”

Mr Hill said there had also been less support for the sector in WA than other parts of the world, especially in fields outside of mining.

“My feeling is that, just like everything else in WA, the key things around VR have been based around the resources industry, whether that’s educational games or taking families on site to see where

their parents are working,” Mr Hill said.

He said while there was growing support for the broader industry, more could be done.

“There’s various associations, and obviously XR:WA is the peak event at the moment for the industry,” Mr Hill said.

“But I don’t think there’s a huge amount of awareness from the general public, and certainly, more can be done to support game development and virtual reality here in Australia.”

In the past few months, state and federal governments have shown more support for the sector.

Australia was the official partner country for this year’s Gamescom, an international computer games event in Germany.

The state government awarded \$50,000 grants to five game studios—Black Lab, Hungry Sky, Big Bench Games, SpaceDraft and EarthLingo—to attend the conference.

The announcement was made alongside a \$2 million boost for the sector.

Administered by Screenwest, the funding will assist game studios access the Federal Digital Games Tax Offset, as well as supporting content development, capability development and strategic industry building opportunities.

Meanwhile, Screen Australia announced \$3 million in funding for emerging or small to medium independent game studios in March and upped it to \$4 million after receiving a large number of applications.



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Richard Sowada organises XR:WA.

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- Julius Jeppe



Julius Jeppe founded Viewport VR. Photos: David Henry