

around the world like the Google VR filmmaker in residence, we brought out Oscar Raby, a very talented Unity based VR Chilean artist based in Australia. We took a very multidisciplinary approach: we had writers, photographers, fashion designers, conceptual artists. We had a mixed bunch of people. It's very important while developing VR to have this kind of multidisciplinary approach.

The thinking was to not only have filmmakers because they are not always the best people to produce VR. We were looking for people who could think out the box, out of the frame so to speak.

The outcome was to start to exhibit and to produce VR work and encourage other people to do the same.

The result of the workshop was the completion of four VR pieces that have been traveling to festivals such as Sydney, Tribeca, Sheffield and many other festivals around the world, and also to many African countries.

**D: Do you think VR is set to take-off in Africa?**

**S.M.:** I feel very positive about it. There is great potential for VR to take-off in Africa. As the technology gets cheaper, more accessible, it will travel further. In Africa, we need to find our own solutions on how to make VR, distribute VR, and bring audiences to VR. In Africa we have very strong mobile phone penetration, and the percentage of smartphones is rising all the time. I think it's a great and accessible way to view VR. But there is still a long way to go.

Today it's right at the beginning, in its' infancy, but it's definitely growing on the corporate side of things: tourism, property, mining, education etc., it hasn't been yet become a mass market platform in any part of the world. We can walk into a store and buy a pair of headset but numbers are not huge at the moment. But definitely, in Africa, VR has a potential to grow far and wide. We just have to work at it and adapt as we go.

**D: Are African's producers well positioned to work in VR? Why?**

**S.M.:** Why not? Producers have to look for new avenues to communicate and to produce. If you look at the advertising world, a lot of ad agencies and brands are producing or commissioning VR content, and that's growing steadily. Similarly we observe interest in education, as well as in training and tourism, properties, etc. Thus I think like producers anywhere of the world, we need to follow where the opportunity is. In Africa we have some advantages over others: we can produce things quite cheaply here, and we are also very good at innovating, finding low tech solutions on how to produce and implement a project. There is opportunity for producers, but as any new format, it's a start-up phase, and it needs producers who are open to taking risks, who are looking more for a medium term gain, instead of short term one or instant gratification. You have to take a start-up approach, to have the opportunity to experiment, to try things out, and to bring expertise in this area.

**D: What would you advise to producers who want to film in virtual reality but they don't know how to start?**

**S.M.:** VR is one of those things that when people think about producing in VR, it looks difficult. But once you have done it once or twice, you become an "expert." So like anything in life, you just need to go out and make it. You can set up to produce VR for a thousand dollars; it's not a lot of money to get started. Just buy a cheap VR camera, make sure you have a decent computer and you can start making VR tomorrow. People often debate: "oh, which camera should I get, what technology do I need," but actually the technology changes so fast, there is no perfect time to buy equipment. So just get out and buy cheap equipment, start making things and develop a VR language around your shoot, how you produce.

The other thing about VR which is really great is that it is a very open source: people all over the world are sharing information all the time, so it's much more open and less competitive than TV or film where producers keeps things close to their chest.

This is an environment where one can pick up information very quickly, and it's very cheap to get started, so I encourage producers to come and just start making things, collaborate and over time there will be a model on how to earn money from VR.

## IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD, PASSION COMES FIRST

**Q&A** with Antoine Cayrol  
Partner and producer, Okio-Studio

Interview by Urszula Gleisner

**Antoine Cayrol, Pierre Zandrowicz and Lorenzo Benedetti are France's virtual reality pioneers. Since Okio-Studio's opening in Paris in 2014, they have produced documentaries, dramas, live action series and virtual experiences. They are now leaders in their field with several international awards to their name.**

**Antoine Cayrol relates here how he fell in love with a project run by two female African directors and urges African producers to immediately try VR.**

**Disbook: Why did you dive into virtual reality?**

**Antoine Cayrol:** Okio-Studio develops immersive contents. Our aim is to create programmes that place the viewer right in the centre of the story. If we are recognised today for our virtual reality work, it is in fact only the tip of the iceberg as we also produce augmented reality games and mixed reality plays. Therefore we don't exclusively produce virtual reality but also immersive contents. Yet, the best way of creating an immersion effect is through virtual reality.

What really encouraged us to take the leap was, first and foremost, a project that we tested in VR 4 years ago which stirred strong emotions in us. It was only a test, very vague at that, but it allowed us to see the technology's potential. We also did some research to make sure that it was a viable venture and concluded that VR was bound to develop and that it would not go away.

The other trigger was analysing what had happened from the Lascaux caves to the ipads. That is how we came to understand that the viewer is always looking for more immersion. Screens are getting closer to us: first with cinema, then TV, then computers, then ipads, then phones. Nowadays we're only a few centimetres away from screens. This phenomenon is replicated in other fields with, for instance, photo then video, black and white then colour, stereography, mono sound then stereo, then 5.0, then Dolby Atmos... Everything is moving towards enhancing the

viewer's immersion. Virtual reality is a logical step forward in this evolution.

Finally, the main reason for our desire to produce virtual reality is passion.

**D: You were a jury member of Digital Lab Africa at DISCOP Johannesburg in 2016. What have you learnt from this experience and from this project?**

**A. C.:** I was very honoured to be asked to be on the jury. I accepted as I thought it would probably be very interesting to see projects from other cultures than mine. And it was!

I had no idea what projects would be submitted. And finally, out of the 20 projects received, 3 were in my opinion rather average but the other 17 were excellent. Based on my own assessment, some were even significantly better than most of those I receive from French producers.

The pre-selection phase was therefore very difficult. There was one project for which I really fought and which did make it into the final 5. I was then invited to DISCOP Johannesburg to attend pitch sessions. I had a favourite project on arrival and I was definitely impressed after hearing Shariffa Ali pitch "Round Round".

So all it took was a quick cigarette to deliberate and we were in agreement! It was not only a heartfelt artistic selection, but also a practical one. It is very rare for both aspects to be present. We were impressed by certain pitches - the quality was there but it was a question of whether the project had a chance of realisation in the future.

The whole experience was very exciting.

**D: How have you been supporting the "Round Round" authors since then?**

A. C.: I am going to answer this in two parts. Because there is what I have committed to with DLA and what I have decided to do.

The commitment with DLA was to mentor the winning project. This means advising them and incubating the project in Paris for 2 weeks. In other words, to be a "tutor" as I usually am for other festivals.

However, as I liked the project a lot, I offered to produce it. My role therefore goes beyond my commitments with the DLA. We collaborate extensively with Shariffa Ali and Yetunda Dada. I pushed them to put together a funding application that we will now submit to the Centre National du Cinéma en France (CNC). And I think that the project will secure funding because it is really very good.



Yetunda Dada and Shaffira Ali during their 2-week incubation program in Paris

During the two-week incubation period in Paris, Shariffa and Yetunda did a lot of work and thinking, and I switched from tutor... to producer.

**D: Explain your heartfelt interest for "Round Round".**

A. C.: I have learnt one thing over the past few years - what is most important is the person, not the idea. There is this quote by writer Milan Kundera which goes: "Few ideas for many people." We all have the same ideas. In the field of VR, it is common to hear catchphrases like: "What about doing something historic about...". Ok. But who is THE person who is going to do it?

What I really liked with "Round Round" was meeting two personalities. I wanted to meet Shariffa Ali, the project's autor, before committing to produce it. I like to meet people in person, to share a beer, to take time. I met Shariffa Ali and Yetunda Dada when I was in New York for the TRIBECA film festival. I worked out what I liked about them. I had a good feeling. Shariffa's artistic vision filled me with confidence. That is what really triggered my decision. I said to myself: "That's it, let's do it!" The director and co-producer personally convinced me to work with them on their project.

**D: How do you rate African VR projects and do you believe that collaborations between France and Africa could emerge?**

A. C.: African VR projects have as much potential as any project from elsewhere. What appeals to me as a French producer is that African producers tackle subjects with which I am unfamiliar. For example, "Round Round" will address the issue of sex change, and talk about people who aren't comfortable in their own body and feel they weren't born with the right gender. This is an issue that has been addressed before and that any producer in the world could pitch to us.

I tell producers that they shouldn't force things: you either like VR or you don't. But if they have a passion for VR and still hesitate, I tell them: "Just do it!". Because, in truth, it is easier to succeed in VR than it is in other fields. VR is a springboard for making connections.

The "Round Round" producers approached this topic by using a well-known African myth, which describes how one can change gender by walking around a Mugumo

tree 7 times while asking to change sex. In Africa, prior to colonisation, matters of sex change or homosexuality were not frowned upon. It was Europeans who brought their own concepts and their Christian taboos with them to Africa. African myths then gradually disappeared. The "Round Round" project is about reviving this myth and turning it into a dance performance. This is not a project I could have received from French producers.

And even if we had received it by email, we receive so many that there would be no guarantee we would read it in the same way. That is why meeting people is important. I selected this project, I liked it, I asked my business partners for their approval, and everyone was keen to produce it because it was different from what we usually see.

Another example: we receive projects about Syria or refugees in Paris every single week. These are good projects that match the daily experiences of Parisians and Europeans, but this topic has been overly discussed.

French producers need to seek talents in Africa if their aim is to mix cultures and bring in a perspective that can only be found on that continent.

**D: What advice can you give African producers who are not sure about virtual reality and 360° content?**

A. C.: I am going to be very frank in my response. Today, we all want to do cool, gratifying work. But it is very difficult to be an actor, a director, a screenwriter or a producer. The cinema business is very crowded and chances of success are slim.

I tell producers that they shouldn't force things: you either like VR or you don't. But if they have a passion for VR and still hesitate, I tell them: "Just do it!". Because, in truth, it is easier to succeed in VR than it is in other fields. VR is a springboard for making connections.

Today I work with the biggest names in the global audiovisual industry whereas, 12 years ago, I already had a company but those people didn't bother responding to me.

Sometimes the investment needed for VR can be daunting but, in fact, it's all much simpler. It is easier to succeed if a story is told well. There should be no fear. And this applies for the next 18 months. After that, it's all over, there will be too many of us!

Africa is a rapidly-evolving market. Everyone has their eye on Africa. Once there are 10 VR producers in a country, it's over because the big studios and the major players will put their trust in the first 10. That is why we have been successful with the US ma-

jors: we met 4 years ago, they were pleased to find French contacts and today they trust us. Big studios and major companies will be pleased to find African contacts.

Oculus has a programme called "VR FOR GOOD". They give out grants to project authors and put them in contact with NGOs to bring those projects to life. I am sure that they will have lots to accomplish in Africa.

African VR producers will find contacting Oculus easier than it is for French producers because the French market is saturated.

**D: What will virtual reality look like in 5 years or 10 years?**

A. C.: 5 years is too short a time period. Headsets will be of better quality and simpler to use, they will probably be wireless, less bulky and cheaper. There will be many more equipped rooms and "Locations-Based Entertainment" (LBE). This will be critical because people want to test things out before they buy. So in the next 5 years, it is likely that everything that has been in development for 2 years will continue to

be developed. But overall we will still be dealing with what we know today.

On the other hand, development in 20 years' time will be much more interesting. We will probably have small glasses or contact lenses. And in 40 years' time, image technology that is broadcast straight into the retina! Why not?...

**"French producers need to seek talents in Africa if their aim is to mix cultures and bring in a perspective that can only be found on that continent."**

**Insights into projects under development at Okio-Studio:**

How to relive or recount an experience with a Peruvian shamanic plant that induces trance for 24 hours? ("Cosmovision" or "Cosmic Journey" by Jan Kounen)

5 days before the end of the world, 8 people find themselves stuck in a hotel in Switzerland. How does one manage the final weeks of one's life? ("Lights" by Julien Mokrani)

Just imagine what goes on with paintings once museums shut their doors and models no longer have to pose. ("Mona", produced with Michel Reilhac)

A female astronaut who sets out to discover another planet will realise that her memories can take a life of their own there. She will find her late daughter and husband, and her past happiness and face a moral dilemma: would I rather live this lie or return to reality on earth? ("Miroir" by Pierre Zandrowicz)