Virtual Reality Begins Here

REMEMBERING Kenneth Hall and Ian Sander

Andrew Marlowe on CASTLE’S EPIC RUN
Message from the Dean

At the School of Cinematic Arts, we have always been good at reimagining our real world. Now we are bringing that storytelling prowess to conjuring up virtual worlds and experiences and making them central in compelling films, episodic shows, games, and interactive media. Our SCA motto, Reality Ends Here, has taken on new meaning as we explore virtual reality across our divisions.

Our goal is not only to integrate virtual and augmented environments into our storytelling but also to be part of the conversation around the establishment of best practices in this nascent but exploding field. This year we launched a Virtual Reality Content Development Initiative, organized around four critical areas: classes, research, projects, and internships. You’ll find information about these efforts in our cover package which features VR work being created by our students and faculty, some of it under the auspices of our new Jaunt Cinematic Virtual Reality Lab, a partnership with Jaunt, the groundbreaking cinematic VR company.

SCA’s focus on both media creation and research is most apparent in the curriculum of our Media Arts + Practice Division, which is in its final season, and Eric Fleischman, who is building his company, Diablo Entertainment, by focusing on microbudget projects, and hear from producer Jason Michael Berman, whose latest project is The Birth of A Nation.

Our summer was bookended by sad news. At the end of the spring semester we learned that alum and lecturer Ian Sander had died, Ian taught producing and writing for television for many years and was a mentor to countless students and alumni. As was Production Professor Kenneth Hall—who was a master of conjuring up virtual worlds and experiences and making them central in compelling films, episodic shows, games, and interactive media. Our SCA motto, Reality Ends Here, has taken on new meaning as we explore virtual reality across our divisions.

I hope these articles will inspire you to reconnect with us as you reminisce about the last time you were on campus. We would love to hear from you on social media (@USCCinema), by email (communications@cinema.usc.edu) or by updating your profile on the SCA Community. We always look forward to hearing from family.

I hope you have a wonderful holiday season!

Elizabeth M. Daley
Steven J. Ross/Time Warner Professor and Dean
GAME DEVELOPER’S CONFERENCE

USC Games’ Director Tracy Fullerton welcomes students, alumni and special guests at the celebration at the 2016 Game Developer’s Conference

AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON

Professor Leonard Maltin with J.J. Abrams at a screening of An American Werewolf In London

FIRST LOOK

Tom Sito, Chair of the John C. Hench Division of Animation & Digital Arts, welcomes the audience at the Division’s annual First Frame Festival at the Director’s Guild of America

First Pitch is a round robin-style showcase where students pitch their projects to agents, managers and producers at the Four Seasons Hotel in Beverly Hills

This year the First Look Film Festival went directly to the talent agencies. Here students are at Creative Artists Agency at a post screening mixer, discussing their films

Alum Aaron Rashaan Thomas welcoming guests at First Pitch

SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL

USC Alumni outside of the Riverhorse Tavern at the Sundance Film Festival

SCA Filmmakers’ Breakfast at the Sundance Film Festival

USC DAY OF SERVICE

At the USC Day of Service, The Trojan Entertainment Network (TEN) tours labs with local kids

USC Day of Service hosted by SCA in the Michelle & Kevin Douglas IMAX Theatre of the Robert Zemeckis Center for Digital Arts

JACK REACHER

Don Granger, Alum David Ellison, and Professor John Watson after an SCA Network screening of Jack Reacher: Never Go Back in the Michelle and Kevin Douglas IMAX Theatre and Immersive Lab.

REMEMBER SCREENING

Professor Leonard Maltin, filmmaker Atom Egoyan, writer Benjamin August, executive producer and SCA alum Larry Gutterman, and Martin Landau at the screening of Remember

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

Director/SCA Alumnus Rawson Marshall Thurber with SCA Comedy members

SCA Network Mixer

BAFTA

Cynthia Caldwell, Teddy Park, Aaron Hong, Gracie May, and Mac Goldwhite receiving the BAFTA “Ones to Watch” Award for their game “Sundown”
TRIBUTE TO ROBERT TOWNE
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MASTERS OF COMEDY
22 Jack Epps, Jr., David Isaac, SCA alum Tim Story, and Barnet Kellman at the Jack Oakie and Victoria Horne Oakie Masters of Comedy Lecture Series which honored Story

AMERICAN FILM SHOWCASE
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BACK TO THE FUTURE
26 Rick Carter, Bob Gale, Tim Dowling and Christopher Lloyd after the 30th Anniversary Screening of Back to the Future

JOHN C. HENCH
27 Professor Candace Reckinger; Chair of the John C. Hench Division of Animation & Digital Arts, Tom Sito and Professor Michael Patterson with Jose and Leonor Deetjen

MARK BURNETT CHAIR
28 President of MGM Television and Digital Group, Mark Burnett and actress, Roma Downey, Pierce Brosnan, and Keely Shaye Smith at the dedication of the Mark Burnett Endowed Chair to Honor the Director of the Summer Producing Program

YOSEMITE
32 Presentation of Yosemite followed by a Q&A discussion with Actor/Producers James Franco and Producers/SCA Alumni Clara Anenovich and Nicolaa Bartalini, moderated by Alex Agi

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33 Producer and SCA alum Susan Downey ‘95, her husband Robert Downey Jr., and SCA alum, writer/director Paul Feig ‘84

34 Cedric Berry Assistant Chair of the Production Division recipient of the SCA Staff Recognition Award

35 SCA alum and Faculty member, Landi Malamed with wife Rebecca Malamed and son Justin Silverman

36 Production students at Commencement 2016
This year marks Dean Elizabeth M. Daley’s twenty-fifth as Dean of the School of Cinematic Arts, easily making her the longest tenured dean in the School’s history. In honor of the School’s tremendous growth under her leadership, and to celebrate the accomplishments of our alumni community over the past year, the Alumni Development Council honored Dean Daley by establishing a fund in her name that would support the School. “Elizabeth’s been honored many, many times, but we decided to take it up a notch,” said Bob Osher, Chair of the Alumni Development Council. “First, we’re establishing the Elizabeth M. Daley Fund here at the School of Cinematic Arts. It’s a fund that allows the Dean and future deans to have additional money in their budget to get the little things that need to get done around the School. Second, we’re giving Dean Daley the honorary alumni award. She didn’t go to USC, so making her an honorary alumni is our way of thanking Elizabeth for her first twenty-five years as Dean. We’re expecting another twenty-five.”

Dean Daley was also celebrated at this year’s commencement day faculty luncheon where she was presented with a crystal obelisk commemorating her 25 years of unparalleled leadership.

For more information and to contribute to the Elizabeth Daley Fund, please contact Justin Wilson at alumni@cinema.usc.edu

DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY • 25 Years of Visionary Leadership

In Review

CREED
Director and alum Ryan Coogler (right) discussing Creed in Professor Leonard Maltin’s Theatrical Symposium

Actor Sylvester Stallone

Full house during the Q&A session for Leonard Maltin’s Theatrical Symposium “Creed” screening

CREED Q&A panel: Writer and Director Ryan Coogler, Actor Sylvester Stallone, Screenwriter Aaron Covington, Composer Ludwig Göransson, and Editors Claudis Castello and Michael P. Shawver

HASKELL WEXLER CHAIR
Vice Dean of Academic Affairs Michael Renov in front of the Haskell Wexler Endowed Chair in Documentary plaque

Mary Jo and Caleb Deschanel, 69’

Michael Renov with his family, wife Cathy Friedman, daughters Maddie (L) and Veronica (R)

Rita Taggert Wexler, wife of Haskell Wexler

Michael Renov, the first holder of the Haskell Wexler Endowed Chair in Documentary, is surrounded by Board Chair Frank Price, Provost Michael Quick and Dean Elizabeth M. Daley. Renov was celebrated by a packed house

JACK EPPS JR.’S BOOK SIGNING
Screenwriting is Rewriting, an event with Chair of the Writing for Screen & Television Division, Jack Epps, Jr.

Professor Jack Epps, Jr. signs copies of his book Screenwriting is Rewriting

DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY • 25 Years of Visionary Leadership
Bob Osher announces support fund honoring Dean Daley’s tenure
Dean Daley with members of the SCA Alumni Development Council
Award given at Commencement acknowledging Dean Elizabeth M. Daley’s 25 years of service as Dean of the School of Cinematic Arts
Vice Dean of Faculty and Academic Affairs, Akira Mizuta Lippet presents Dean Daley with an award commemorating her 25 years of service

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USC Comedy Feat, Vol. 3
SCA alum and Showrunner Prentice Penny (l), with stars Issa Rae, Yvonne Orji and Jay Ellis for Spotlight on HBO’s Insecure

Professor Barnet Kellman and SCA alum Judd Apatow

SCA alumna Suzanne Todd, Nicole Byer, Maria Bamford and Carmen Esposito particpated in Women In Comedy - Stars of Their Story

SCA alum Jay Roach moderated the panel The Changing Face of Politics - It’s All Comedy with Norman Lear (inset)

Join the conversation @USCcinema
“So Andrew, give me a snapshot of you as a kid?
You know, like, what was your brand as, say, an eleven year old?”

The question was one of my first for Castle-creator and award-winning screenwriter Andrew W. Marlowe. And yes, it came off just as lame as it reads. Worse, in fact I really hit the word brand—braaaand.

At least I warned him. The basic concept was a piece on him written from the perspective of another screenwriter, though I may have said “through the lens.” I hoped not. Also I hoped my label as screenwriter, i.e. non-journalist, would excuse the clunky start to the interview.

Andrew paused for just a second after the question, but long enough that I was convinced we were thinking the same thing: wow, you kind of suck at this. I then added the curious prompt, “You know, like, don’t know, were you an athlete?”

What am I doing?! Luckily it was a phone interview so he couldn’t see me fake slamming my head on the desk, over and over. I’m interviewing the creator of one of the most successful primetime television shows of the past decade, an Ivy Leaguer, USC School of Cinematic Arts graduate, a Nicholl Fellowship recipient, and this is what I go with? I want to know if “athlete” or “fencer” was Andrew W. Marlowe’s brand as a pre-pubescent boy growing up in Silver Spring, Maryland?

Turns out, it was a great question.

Or to be more precise, it was a great answer: “I actually was an athlete, in that I fenced and I went to the Junior Olympics in fencing.”

“Really? Fencing. Huh.” I was trying to decide if this was cool.

“Yeah, I fenced because I was a member of the Star Wars generation so it was as close as I could get to a lightsaber.”

The question was one of my first for Andrew W. Marlowe, former screenwriter, to document Andrew Marlowe’s journey from SCA to his epic hit series. He takes us back to the real beginning of it all.

All three are gifts. The first—a unique flair for transforming the mundane into something intriguing and cool—insofar as the craft is concerned, is a gift from the writing gods just like “star quality” for an actor; they say you either have it or you don’t. The latter two, however—curiosity and work ethic—are gifts bestowed upon him by his parents during what was, at least in the beginning, a fairly unconventional upbringing.

Marlowe was born in Thailand to a pair of cultural anthropologists doing field work abroad. They moved back to the States when he was eighteen months old and, as he explains, “switched languages on me,” effectively delaying his ability or at least desire, to speak for another full year. That year of watching and listening was a disposition born of necessity for a toddler but would eventually cement itself as the social perspective he preferred as an adult. “I was kind of a typical writer and a bit of a wallflower, on the edge of a bunch of different groups. And I think that between that and my parents being cultural anthropologists, I had the observation bug early, watching people’s behavior or watching how all the dramas played out.”

The Marlowes also shared with young Andrew their love of film, and from the time he was seven years old, began hosting a movie night once a month for friends and colleagues. “They bought a beat-up sixteen-millimeter projector from a local school system and would check out movies from the Prince George’s County Library,” he recounted, enjoying the memories. Wine and cheese was served during the first reel, coffee and desert for the second, and when the lights came up after the final reel, a lively discussion would inevitably ensue. “I saw Abel Gance’s Napoleon for the first time in my living room—Preston Sturges, Alfred Hitchcock, Ingmar Bergman. So I had a pretty good film education growing up.”

You think? I was starting to wonder if his parents might have been conducting a covert anthropological experiment on how best to engineer a successful filmmaker.

After high school it was off to Columbia’s School of the Arts where he ran with an eclectic group. “I had friends who were pre-med, some who were pre-law, and I was clearly pre-unemployment because I was an English major with a Philosophy minor.”

“Uh huh. And how did your parents like that?” I asked with a jaded chuckle, expecting to expose at least a small crack in the foundation. His response was matter of fact. “They just assumed that they would be paying my health insurance into my fifties. They were very supportive.”

With Castle in its final season we sent one of the show’s fans, a fellow screenwriter, to document Andrew Marlowe’s journey from SCA to his epic hit series. He takes us back to the real beginning of it all.

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Okay, wow. Unabashed parental support of a child facing extreme odds of success. I’m certain parents like this exist in the real world but, like the Arctic fox, I don’t know anyone personally that has ever actually seen one. My anthropological experiment theory was gaining traction.

Post Columbia, Marlowe continued to steer into situations that seemed incongruous and random but once assembled create a definite symmetry. He interned for a company producing educational videos, then worked on a low-budget film shot in Manhattan and learned to work fast while wearing multiple hats. He took a job as a literary agent’s assistant and got to know some local playwrights—you know, guys like David Mamet. “Yeah, I was able to pick his brain, and that was a really remarkable thing for a 22-year-old.”

He applied to USC’s School of Cinematic Arts, then abruptly moved to Seattle “because it was voted America’s most livable city.” And his Gumpian knack for timing had him showing up right at the apex of the grunge rock explosion—a moment in which he admitted he was pretty cool to experience firsthand but by no means what he values most about his stint there. You see, Seattle is where Andrew Marlowe learned how to sell.

I was poor. I had no money, and at this point, I knew I had gotten into USC but I had no way to pay for it. So I got a job selling theater subscriptions, “Nasher Art.” In one of his last jobs before entering the showbiz gauntlet, Marlowe added the ability to sell and close a deal to his expanding quiver. In the business, it’s called being good in a room, and it’s critical. “I’m calling 9/11 unimaginable. But at that time, there were actually a lot of writers in town that had eerily similar plots. So the CIA and some people from military intelligence actually came out to interface with the Hollywood community and said, ‘Hey, what else are you guys thinking about? What are we missing?’”

Marlowe took the little known but very real situation—screenwriters helping agents apprehend terrorists—and tweaked it. “So, if a guy is a crime novelist who is spending his time thinking about how murders are committed, why people commit murders, what the story of those murders are—would that person have any value to a homicide detective? Would they have anything to add?”

I’m going with yes. And so did ABC. They bought the show the day it was pitched, and Marlowe was off to the races once again. His first challenge was creative. He had a nifty hook, but was it enough to separate his show from the existing sea of crime procedurals? Well, never knowing, because he never intended to rely upon the concept. What did separate Castle were the character and his hook—his love and his throwback, light-hearted tone, the lincopn for all it being Castle himself. So finding the right Richard Castle was a task Marlowe knew he needed to get exactly right. Zero wiggle room—he had to nail it.

Done.

“Marlowe felt Nathan Fillion might be his Castle; Fillion knew he was. ‘I sat down for a meeting with Nathan in his trailer, and he just said, you can stop looking. I am this guy.’”

Marlowe agreed, and even took it a step further by adding a dash of pure Fillion to the role. Nathan can walk that line between being dickish and charming, where you don’t hold the dickish against him because he’s so charming. I found myself slightly altering the trajectory to write towards Nathan’s set of skills because it would have been a crime not to take advantage of his talent. He can do it all.”

Stana Katic was then perfectly cast as Castle’s muse, Kate Beckett, “He’s so charming. I found myself slightly altering the way I was writing for him.”

They certainly did.

Like a lot of great shows, Castle got off to a rocky start, ratings-wise, but eventually found its audience and thrived. It aired for eight seasons totaling 173 episodes, garnered too many awards to name, and launched a New York Times Best-Sellers franchise. Marlowe, of course, correctly attributes the show’s overall success to the entire team. “Everybody starts adding to the stew and, if you’re a good showrunner, you take the really great stuff and use it to elevate the material.”

But ultimately, Marlowe was the driving creative force behind Castle, and its fearless leader—and fearless he was. Castle is a study in taking creative chances. It was all over the map but in a good way, in a way that kept it fresh and fun for its devoted audience—counter-programming to the slick, cold, and much darker CSI-style crime procedurals.

Did this just become an opinion piece? Whatever.

Marlowe was not afraid to go out and make the show he wanted to make. If it’s a little rough around the edges, I would argue it is by design, I think he deliberately traded slick for soul. Castle is an unapologetic throwback to the kinds of TV shows and movies and characters Marlowe grew up on.

“I love James Garner in the Rockford Files, having that personally counterculture balance. I love the bicker-banter, will-they-on’t-they stuff from Moonlighting but even before that, Rosalind Russell and Cary Grant, Hepburn and Tracy, the Thin Man series.” Great stars playing great characters that, no doubt, Marlowe watched for the first time as they were projected onto his living room wall as a kid. In fact, I’m starting to think Andrew W. Marlowe created Castle to be his own personal time machine, with each new episode providing him another opportunity to be transported back to Silver Spring for movie night.

Marlowe and actors Nathan Fillion and Stana Katic celebrate Castle’s 100th episode with a cake-cutting ceremony on Wednesdays, February 27, 2013. (ABC/Maury Lano)

(Right) Marlowe with his wife and collaborator, writer/producer Terri Eddleman Miller.

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Animation alumna Alicja Jasina Wins at this year’s Student Academy Awards

Alicja Jasina, recent alumna of the John C. Hench Division of Animation & Digital Arts won the gold medal at the 2016 Student Academy Awards for her film Once Upon a Line. The animated film follows the story of a man who leads a dull life until he falls in love.

Jasina said she was grateful for the attention she’s gotten for being nominated and for the subsequent win. “I think that every artist sometimes has a moment when they question themselves and have doubts if what they’re doing is the right thing. Such an award is a great encouragement to carry on and stay true to my vision.”

Jasina, who graduated from SCA in May, was born in Poland and went to university in England before enrolling in the graduate Animation program. Her inspiration for the film, she said, was simplicity, which is reflected in her use of line drawings, albeit beautifully detailed ones. “One of my big inspirations was the American illustrator Saul Steinberg,” said Jasina. “His work is smart, conceptual, and often minimalist. I wanted to convey complex ideas in a simple way as he does.”

Another recent SCA graduate received a nomination for narrative work. Halima Lucas of the Film & Television Production Division was recognized for her film Amelia’s Closet. The animated film follows the story of a man who leads a dull life until he falls in love.

Lucas told USC News that she made it on a “dull life until he falls in love.” The animated film follows the story of a man who leads a dull life until he falls in love.

Four and a half years ago, I, along with fellow USC School of Cinematic Arts alum and classmate Michael Jenson, approached Dean Elizabeth Daley, Larry Auerbach, who heads the School’s Industry Relations Office, and Michael Taylor, who was then the Chair of the Film & Television Production Division, with an idea to develop a course called “The Entertainment Entrepreneur: Getting Your First Project Made.” Since graduating in 2006, several of my professors had asked me to speak to their classes to share my own journey of becoming a film producer. In the ten years since I have graduated, I’ve had five films premiere at the Sundance Film Festival, helped to develop and start the Sundance Catalyst Forum, and went from being an independent film producer with no office to Vice President of Mandalay Pictures. In early 2017, I will begin production on my twenty-first feature film.

Our idea for the course grew out of conversations with former professors who would invite me to speak to students because they thought I might be able to provide some insight into the ins and outs of the industry, particularly in the independent film arena. And that is basically what I do for my students. Now in my fourth year of teaching the course, one of the first questions they invariably ask is, “What’s the best piece of advice you can give a filmmaker about to graduate?”

Of course there is not just one roadmap anyone can use to navigate the terrain that lies ahead, but I can offer what has—and has not—worked for me thus far. Some of those things are internal—unbridled passion, a sense of unlimited possibilities, and an unrelenting persistence. But some of those things come with time and experience—most importantly, building and maintaining solid relationships and showing resilience when you encounter obstacles. I also emphasize the importance of taking a holistic approach to your career (understanding all aspects of the industry), as well as the benefits of collaboration. And bear in mind that where you begin isn’t necessarily where you’ll end up.

These lessons all culminated in the experience of my largest budget project to date. In June of 2014 my producing partner Kevin Turen sent me an email with the subject line, “The Birth of a Nation”. The body of the email began: “For your eyes only. Script and mood reel attached.”
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BUILDING A CAREER

The Birth of a Nation will undoubtedly be a milestone film in my career regardless of what I do next. And I look forward to showing my milestone film in my career regardless of what the Birth of A Nation producers (left to right) Kevin Turen, Jason Michael Bluma, Nate Parker (who also wrote and directed) Preston L. Holmes and Aaron L. Gilbert at the Los Angeles premiere of the film

Sheldon Candis (who also directed) and Justin Wilson—with Michael Jenson, my co-teacher at SCA. By the time it opened at Sundance in 2012, LUV was my third film to premiere at the festival. In 2013, I began to foster relationships with the incredible team at the Sundance Institute Feature Film Program, which afforded me the opportunity to produce projects for their screenwriting and directing labs fellows and to help develop and start the Sundance Catalyst Forum, a new lab that helps connect forward-thinking, creative investors with independent filmmakers.

The common thread I notice through all these endeavors is the value of relationships. Making those connections is not enough. Maintaining even nurturing those relationships, even some that may have seemed incidental at the time, remains one of the most fundamental components of my career. Bear in mind that it is not simply what advantages those relationships can provide for you, but also how you can be of service to others as well. This is a key cornerstone I convey to my students, that this is truly a two-way street.

I also tell them symbiotic relationships often lead to prolific collaborations. I was introduced to Kevin Turen, one of my frequent collaborators, by Andrew F. Renzi, a filmmaker I met through the Sundance Labs. The first film Kevin and I produced together was Andrew’s film The Benefactor. Kevin and I then went on to produce Mediterranea, which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2015, before working together on The Birth of A Nation. I quickly learned that when you find a producing partner or co-creator you work well with, try to find as many projects as possible on which you can collaborate. Another example of this is Benjamin Renzo, a co-producer on The Birth of A Nation, whom I have worked with since LUV to put financing together for multiple films. Kevin and Benjamin are not only close colleagues, but have become very close friends and confidants. Value these connections: This synergy might be difficult to find, but it is nearly impossible to replicate.

I’ve had a very fulfilling career for the last ten years and I’m very grateful for the accomplishments and the friends and colleagues I’ve made along the way. But I know I have many miles ahead of me in my own marathon, and I’m certain (almost hoping) there will be more twists and turns, new and valued colleagues I’ll meet along the way and try to enjoy it.
SCA’s divisions and labs are innovating the art of VR storytelling.

School of Cinematic Arts faculty have been involved in VR innovation from its beginnings. Today, virtual reality and augmented reality projects of every scale are underway across SCA’s divisions and research labs. The ETC is also working on helping to define best practices, whether in creating big, immersive experiences for multiplex-sized crowds or those that could allow someone to travel the world from their bedroom. And SCA students are active participants in VRSC, the university-wide club that allows students to create original work for VR platforms.

This year the School launched the Virtual Reality/ Augmented Reality Content Development Initiative aimed at partnering with leading companies and content creators to develop comprehensive, cross-disciplinary approaches to teaching, developing, and creating compelling VR/AR content. A partnership with Jaunt VR created the Jaunt Cinematic Virtual Reality Lab where SCA faculty and students are working on projects that address questions like how to edit in VR, move characters in and out of the frame, and, notably, avoid making viewers sick. The lab is focused on learning by doing, with a roster of projects that will help define the genre.

SCA’s VR efforts will be organized around four critical areas: classes, research, projects, and internships. Internships are especially important for students interested in learning and experimenting on their own. Through VRSC, students from across the University are also creating teams that can facilitate each other’s VR projects.

This prevalence of VR projects is bringing new meaning to our motto Reality Ends Here as SCA faculty and students are eagerly engrossed in the task of creating new realities.

The promise of virtual reality is very real. According to SCA’s Entertainment Technology Center (ETC) think tank, industry estimates say the VR market will top $30 billion by 2020. In the past year hardware companies like Oculus, Samsung and Sony released new headsets aimed at demonstrating the power of games, live-casting, and even narrative entertainment in VR, with the goal of bringing the virtual experience into the home entertainment space.

As Interactive Media & Games Division Professor and Vice Chair Richard Lemarchand explains, “Virtual reality gives designers opportunities to explore the fundamentals of human perception, cognition, and emotion in ways that jump boundaries in terms of a certain kind of immediacy and impactfulness.” In the world of VR, this immediacy is termed “presence”—the sense that you, the viewer, have been physically transported to, and are completely spatially immersed in, a different place.

However, as VR creators are discovering, applying the idea of presence to a live-action narrative comes with a unique set of challenges. In this omni-directional world, traditional 2D composition is irrelevant. With a 360-degree narrative space, designers must find alternate ways of directing the viewer’s attention, whether through narration, staging, action, lighting, or music. Traditional editing techniques must also be reconsidered. Because VR cuts between physical locations, instead of between shots, causing nausea in the viewer is a very real concern. So a new language is needed, one which references film, theater and the fine arts, but which takes into account VR’s 3D narrative space and the physical effects of immersion on a viewer.

Virtual reality’s maturation depends on these kinds of experimentations. While VR finds its legs, it will probably be used mainly as an extension of current media, a bonus feature added on to the price of a ticket. But soon, says Eric Hanson of the John C. Hench Division of Animation & Digital Arts, “VR will be its own medium unto itself. This will probably come from mostly experimental artists doing something very compelling that’s not rooted in tradition. And that’s where the Jaunt Lab is great, because we have students that will take those chances.”

Here are some of the projects currently being incubated in the Jaunt Cinematic Virtual Reality Lab.

**MINmax**, by Richard Lemarchand

A co-production with USC’s Game Innovation Lab, MINmax is a music-driven, experimental game design project that creates a highly immersive live-action environment and atmosphere, interspersed with short sequences of playful interactivity. While there is no traditional story, the game aims to juxtapose human experiences of despair with the hope that allows us to transcend those same emotions.

MINmax continues Lemarchand’s research into VR as a perfect platform for “experiential” games, which focus on exploration instead of competition. The open and expressive nature of experiential gameplay is especially enhanced by the way the human gaze traverses a virtual 360-degree scene and by the “gaze control” interactivity capabilities of VR (where a player can interact with an object just by looking at it), leading to a completely new kind of audience engagement.

In this new game, players will move through environments via instantaneous teleportation. For Lemarchand, the momentary disorientation that occurs when we are teleported is a creative opportunity. He hopes to orchestrate the sequencing of these teleportations to evoke a particular state of mind, the “hypnagogic” point where we’re not sure if we’re asleep or awake. In the end, teleportation becomes an immersive editing technique that, combined with music, can create poetic, personalized and meaningful narrative experiences.

**Jaunt Cinematic Virtual Reality Lab**

The new Jaunt Cinematic Virtual Reality Lab is dedicated to exploring the art of storytelling in virtual reality. Headed by John C. Hench Division of Animation & Digital Arts Professor Candace Reckinger, the lab is funding a diversity of short projects, from the script-based to the experimental, in hopes of maturing VR from an exciting new technology into an artistic medium capable of meaningful and transformative experiences.

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Stagecoach, by Eric Hanson

For his *Stagecoach* project, Eric Hanson is visualizing archaeology professor Lynn Dodd’s research on Catalina history into a narrative format. In this piece, a young newlywed couple makes their way across Catalina Island. As they do, a series of transitions based on narrative cues brings us back to a similar couple making the same journey 100 years earlier. Historical photography is combined with modern footage to create an immersive vision of the past.

To create the feeling of riding in a historic stagecoach, Hanson and his team scanned an actual stagecoach to create a 3D model of the artifact, shot the trajectory of the ride with the Jaunt camera rigged to a Jeep, and are warping historical photography to make it experiential and immersive. The background footage will be authenticated to make it more period and the 3D model will be composited over the moving vehicle shot in such a way that, as you look down in VR, you will physically feel that you are riding in this carriage 100 years ago. You will be present in this special place, feeling the echoes of what came before.

Going Home, by David Beier

*Going Home* is an intimate portrait of an elderly man who is suffering a heart attack. As he is rushed to the hospital, his life flashes before his eyes and we witness some of his past experiences, particularly with his late wife. The narrative jumps between his memories and his current condition, creating a dream-like reality in which we, the viewers, are fully immersed.

By taking live-action elements and compositing them in a surreal way, Beier hopes to exploit the subjective nature of VR to create a visually stunning experience that is truly personal—an immersive dream state that mimics the altered levels of this man’s consciousness.

Undertones, by Bryce Morgan & Ilan Benjamin

In *Undertones*, Bryce Morgan & Ilan Benjamin put the viewer right in the middle of a crowded family dinner table with one conspicuously empty seat. Shot in one long take, every family member reveals a piece of the story, but we, the viewers, create the actual narrative by choosing whom to focus on and when. As our focus shifts to a particular character we hear that character’s inner thoughts, which are often in sharp contrast to their actual proclamations. By interacting with the characters and learning their true positions we can solve the riddle of who is missing and why.

For these creators, VR is a way to take a classic storytelling trope—the family drama—and explore it on a deeper level. Not only are we given insight into the characters’ motivations in a unique way that is only possible through VR, but we are also active and interactive participants in the story by choosing the direction of the narrative at any particular time.

1969, by Kathy Liu

*1969* is a fable in the form of an immersive music video. It creates a world full of animal-people who terrorize our shrouded heroine with their taunting as she escapes a mysterious and violent murder scene. We follow her through crowds of protestors and exploitative images, forced to confront her hyper-sexualized objectification head on as we are occasionally subjected to heckling ourselves. When she is finally caught, the tale unspools in reverse, revealing the true nature of the crime and the culpability of those closest to her.

1969 plays with collage and 3D worldbuilding to condemn the glamorization of sexual violence and female exploitation. Surrealistic, saccharine-sweet 2D images of an anthropomorphized pin-up culture are adapted to stereo-360 degree video, while experimental immersive editing techniques compel us to face the disturbing nature of today’s society.
The Virtual Reality Thesis

More SCA Students Are Tackling the Challenges of VR to Create Standout Projects

By DESA PHILADELPHIA

Ante Cheng
Film & Television Production Division
MFA 2017
Project: Kunde

An immersive experience in which the protagonist is on a first date and relies on the audience’s advice on how to proceed. It features dance and music set against the backdrop of Los Angeles’ Walt Disney Concert Hall. It transports the viewer into a performance by classical musicians and ballerinas, surrounded by Disney Hall’s mesmerizing architecture. Cheng is a director and cinematographer from Taiwan whose portfolio already includes commercials for major brands like Microsoft, Samsung and Lexus and music videos for top-selling Asian artists.

On creating for a cutting-edge platform: “It is fun and liberating. Virtual reality has the potential to be an advancement as from stills to motion picture, from black and white to color, from silent to sound. It is the closest we have come to capturing and playing back real life, and it’s only at year one of hardware distribution. Now it’s time for the filmmakers to create good content with the new tools. Films have been bounded by a rectangular frame until now. It’s going to be an exciting challenge to tell stories when the audience has the new freedom to look around.”

Robin Cho
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Project: Nightshade / USC

Cho posed the elusive question “What is USC?” to faculty from different disciplines, and their answers narrate this time-lapse portrait of the University at night. Korean-born, Hong Kong-raised Cho left USC after his freshman year to fulfill his military-service requirement in Korea (he served as a translator for joint drills with US forces) and returned to filmmaking just as VR was taking off.

On bringing VR to new audiences: “I went home to Hong Kong and showed my family a VR short that I had created during my junior year. To be honest, it wasn’t that great and they soon began to play around with the other VR features, but that didn’t matter to me. What mattered was that between my sister, mother and father, a fully-charged battery was entirely drained during one shared sitting. That’s about three hours, and when they weren’t talking about how cool it was, they were talking about what would look really cool in VR. Moments like that remind me that I’m part of something far beyond myself and my creative endeavors. It’s going to change our relationship to stories.”

Frederico de Sa Fernandez (AKA F3d)
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Project: Animal Kingdom (AK)

AK, which features a talking bear whose mission to harvest food is interrupted by an invader, is about exploration and interactive engagement and is a hybrid between an animation short and a video game. The artist has been a virtuoso artist from Bahia, Brazil, F3d spent a year coding and designing the project and describes his final creative approach as “tapping into a new language.”

On problem-solving in VR: “There were many challenges. For example, I had to implement path-finding AI to let the character avoid obstacles and decide where to move on his own, because I wanted the animations to blend with the player interactions in real time, so that a character can move anywhere despite the animation assigned to the scene. It was part of the design of the let the user make choices on the journey or narrative. The more common sit and watch experience is less effective in VR, something that most people would not think. One of the first signs of immersion in virtual reality happens when a user tries to reach out and touch an invisible character or object with his real hand.”

Natalie Grazier
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MFA 2016
Project: Southland

Inspired by LA car culture, Southland is an exploration of historical but forgotten aspects of the city, with the goal of creating awareness of its layered past and inspiring appreciation. Grazier, who grew up in Miami and now lives in Los Angeles, says the piece was inspired by her own love of long drives through cityscapes.

On working in VR: “The newness of the platform leaves many questions unanswered. A lot of experimentation, trial and error and headaches went into developing Southland. A difficult part of VR is that now we design with the player’s health in mind, not just their enjoyment, since many people are prone to motion sickness in VR. Rapid iteration of mechanics and constant testing in VR helped my team and I polish Southland into an experience thoughtfully and carefully designed from scratch specifically for the medium.”

Deena Khattab
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Project: Womenography

An immersive experience that invites viewers to experience the streets of Cairo, Istanbul and Beirut as a woman, and witness the social problems women confront in these cities. It’s a map-based archive of urban women’s realities in the Middle East, which is undergoing political change, particularly with regard to women’s rights.

On using a cool technology to influence change: “Most of my potential users aren’t actively interested in women’s social issues in the Middle East. I wanted the project to be as immersive as possible in order to make the subject matter more exciting and also encourage users to empathize with these difficult problems. I think it ended up being the perfect medium for that reason.”

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On the importance of a VR student club: “It was hard for students at USC to find a place to meet and talk about VR, to get involved with VR. The goal of VRSC is to create a community of students, staff and faculty who are interested in virtual reality interested in learning more about it, interested in developing it. For those who are eager to work on new projects, this industry is so new; Everyone has equal chances.”

By DESA PHILADELPHIA

Now that School of Cinematic Arts students have virtual reality cameras, headgear, and software at their disposal, they are starting to create content for VR platforms. Not surprisingly, students in the Interactive Media & Game Division (IMGD) were among the first to embrace the technology. VR projects from the Division’s advanced games class include Project Modokub/Wild Skies (2012-2013) and Elementerra (2015), both of which are now fully funded companies. IMGD thesis projects, shot in VR, include Science for Cinematra by Patrick Meehan (MFA 2014), and Share by Julie Griffin (MFA 2012). Not to be outdone, students in the other SCA divisions are catching up, creating group and individual works. These students and recent alumni have embraced VR to great visual effect. We asked them to talk about creating for the burgeoning field.

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Origins of VR @ USC

The emerging new medium of Virtual Reality (VR) is a significant example of how USC faculty, staff and students are helping to shape new forms of immersive experiences. This exhibit traces the complex evolution of VR from seminal early work in the field through the ongoing development of unique immersive content and design tools.

1985-1990
VR AT NASA’S AMES RESEARCH CENTER

From 1985 to 1990, Scott S. Fisher was Founder and Director of the Virtual Environment Workstation Project (VIEW) at NASA. VIEW developed the “goggle and glove” system commonly associated with many VR technologies.

1986
VIEWLAB

The Virtual Environment Workstation Project
NASA VIEW developed a system consisting of a stereoscopic display unit, glove-like devices, speech recognition, gesture tracking, 3D audio, and computer graphics and video-image generation equipment. This resulted in imagery that appeared to surround the user in 3D-space.

1987
BOOM DISPLAY

3D OMNI-DIRECTIONAL MONITOR

Until now, technology lacked the nuances needed to achieve what is now called “presence.” The BOOM display solved this problem. The handheld BOOM was able to provide a high-quality performance that became the gold standard of VR displays.

VIRTUAL ESCALATOR

This was an early interactive virtual experience programmed by Warren Robnett with simple vector graphics in the VIEW system.

TELEPRESENCE MOBILE ROBOT

The Molly Remote Presence system was developed by Telepresence Research (Scott Fisher) and FakeSpace Labs (Mark Bolas) for Matsushita Denki, Japan. The camera system was mounted on a mobile robot platform to enable positional changes with joystick or speech commands.

VIRTUAL WIND TUNNEL, NASA AMES

Use of the VIEWlab technology for Computational Fluid Dynamics applications enabled scientists to interactively change viewpoints of the data. Developed in collaboration with Steve Bryson and Creon Levit.

SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN

The Personal Retrospective Projector showed that mobile phones would soon be able to render and track fast enough to do VR. The system was designed to unobtrusively deliver mixed reality experiences, placing no glass or optics in front of a user’s face. The retroreflective approach can now be seen in products such as Jeri Ellsworth’s castAR system.

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HEAD-MOUNTED PROJECTOR

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2004-2007
WIDES HMD

In 2002, the School of Cinematic Arts and FakeSpace Labs secured a contract with the Office of Naval Research to create a new type of head-mounted display (HMD) that was lightweight and had a wide range of view. This new system demonstrated how immersive VR could be, introducing VR to luminaries such as Palmer Luckey and Brendan Iribe of Oculus.

SIGNAL AMERICAN

1986

NASA VIEW

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“AIL NEW MEDIUM: DESIGN AND VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS”

While working at the VIEWlab and Stanford University, Mark Bolas developed a thesis project with 10 different environments to map the new medium of VR.

SCA GROUNDBREAKING

SCA formed the Immersive Narrative and Interactive Technology (INIT) Lab in 2005. INIT used early WIDES prototypes for cinematic exploration of the VR medium — such as a virtual fly-through of the new Lucas and Spielberg building.
**Augmented Reality**

While Virtual Reality experiences completely replace the real world, Augmented Reality overlays a virtual world on top of the real. USC and PhaseSpace Inc. developed the first AR display to leverage the power of smartphones.

**MED VR**

Skip Rizzo and his team at the USC Institute for Creative Technologies used the Scuba HMD to help treat stress disorder in Iraq veterans. Using a cognitive behavioral therapy approach—in which patients relive the trauma under controlled conditions—the clinician guides the patient through the VR environment.

**HUNGER IN LA**

Nonny De La Peña’s immersive journalism experience utilized the ‘Antler HMD’ to explore the issue of hunger in the Los Angeles area. The participant is fully immersed in the experience as if they are an actual witness to the event.

**Tales from the Minus Lab**

Tales from the Minus Lab was an immersive sneak peek into the IMGD thesis project of Alex Beuchum. Robin Gray ported the design to VR with Perry Hoberman’s Stereoscopix package.

**2011 MXR LOW COST HMDs: “FRANKEN-VIEWERS”**

At USC, there was an urgent need for a lower-cost, portable HMD alternative that could maintain an immersive field of view and be easily replaceable. A team at Mark Bolas’ Mixed Reality Lab (MxR) chipped in to help make these commercially viable “Franken-viewers,” with parts provided by Bolas, Palmer Luckey, PhaseSpace, and Thai Phan & Evan Suma.

**2014 SMARTPHONE HMD**

A design for a smartphone-based HMD laid the groundwork for the push toward making low-cost VR a reality. This solution also provided a new type of experience: mobile VR.

**FEBRUARY 2012**

**FOV2GO MODEL A**

CARDBOARD SMARTPHONE BASE VIEWER

To truly disrupt the trend of high-priced displays, a strong statement was needed. In 2011 the lab created a cardboard viewer and complete Unity3D library that was dubbed “VR in an Envelope.” While it had a narrow field of view, the software and design laid the groundwork for USC’s future VR designs.

**FOV2GO MODEL D**

CARDBOARD SMARTPHONE BASE VIEWER

The Wide65 display was programmed to simulate a 90-degree field of view. The lab found a suitable lens and the FOV2GO Model D was born.

**APRIL 2012**

**2012-2013 PROMOTION OF THE SWEET SPOT**

The FOV2GO(D) hit the sweet spot of immersion—the moment when first-time users of VR say “wow” and get the hype. Because of its low cost and open-source design, the FOV2GO(D) lent itself to a number of form factors and commercial products.

**SHAYD**

This mixed reality installation led by Juli Griffo encompasses an HMD, motion-capture, and multiple Kinects to produce a sensorial immersive virtual experience in an extraterrestrial world.

**2014 GOOGLE CARDBOARD**

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**SAMSUNG GEAR VR**

On their first prototypes for GearVR, the Samsung team started by buying boxes of the 7X magnifier used in the FOV2GO(D). The UltraOptix 7x aspheric magnifier was the lens that helped to kick off a number of consumer product efforts. The Rift DK1 lens was based on it, as were the first GearVR prototypes.
The Makers of Entertaining Games Association (MEGA) is a five-year-old student group hosted out of the School of Cinematic Arts (SCA) but open to students from across the USC campus. MEGA is leading the charge in making that supportive space for any Trojan who loves video games and wants to get their hands dirty. MEGA provides a welcoming environment (and a new group of friends) for anyone who wants to drop by and make something interactive and fun. By hosting game jams, skill sharing workshops, and video game study groups (which they call “games book clubs”), MEGA is SCA’s open arms for any student who wants to play.

“I’ve made several friends by working with MEGA—typically over pizza,” said Manolo Rosenberg, an Interactive Media & Games student and the President of MEGA. “Since everyone has different areas and levels of expertise, they’re always excited to try something new, whether it’s making a text adventure or modeling and rigging a character for the first time.”

The Importance of Doing
One of the things students gain by joining MEGA is a place to make games without the pressure of an investor or a grade. Students who regularly attend MEGA events can make two to three times as many games as students who don’t attend. While the expressed intention of MEGA is more about community than skill building, the lessons learned on MEGA games often find their ways into the classroom and even the commercial world.

MEGA’s game jams and skill-sharing workshops not only allow MEGA students to work on skills outside of their core competency, but also the chance to meet people with whom they can collaborate in their careers. MEGA members also meet other students they may not encounter in the classroom. MEGA is giving students the ability to work on many projects quickly with their peers in a loose, fun environment.

Past MEGA events have included participating in the Global Game Jam 2015, an event where video game design teams from around the world come together, make games overnight, and share them online. MEGA fielded 264 jammers which was the second largest group in the United States. MEGA also hosted a study group of the classic horror video game Silent Hill, which served as a lesson on how horror elements are best incorporated into video games. On a less serious note, MEGA hosts potlucks during the more stressful times of the academic year for students to come together and commiserate about their struggles and play games with other gamers.

“Making games isn’t necessarily a big, high-end, up-on-a-pedestal thing that you have to work to obtain. I learned that in MEGA,” said Jocelyn Kim, a MEGA board member. “You could literally sit down one day and say, ‘I’m going to make a game,’ and you could do it.”

MEGA is one of the youngest student groups on campus, but it’s already one of the fastest-growing and most vibrant at the entire University. One of the greatest assets to attending this School is that the people you meet become people you work with for the rest of your career. Because of the efforts of MEGA’s current students and alumni, there’s now a new place to meet people and make things. Which is what this whole thing is all about.
The Council on Diversity and Inclusion's Statement of Purpose

In the fall semester of 2015, the School of Cinematic Arts (SCA) re-launched regular meetings of the SCA Council on Diversity and Inclusion. The renewed effort came as a response to the growing concern over lack of diversity on and off the screen in Hollywood and the larger media industry.

There have been three previous iterations of the SCA Diversity Council, headed by professors Mark Harris, Michael A.Ionic, and Don Deveau. These efforts primarily involved faculty, whereas the current Council includes faculty, staff, and students. Mayer says those councils were focused on goals specific to SCA. “The biggest thing on my own agenda was a more diverse student body, which we now have — not perfect but much better.” The current Council is continuing to build on previous efforts, including proposing a seminar on diversity for faculty within SCA. “The biggest thing on my own agenda was a more diverse student body, which we now have — not perfect but much better.” The current Council is continuing to build on previous efforts, including proposing a seminar on diversity for faculty within SCA. The renewed effort comes as a response to the growing concern over lack of diversity on and off the screen in Hollywood and the larger media industry.

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The Council on Diversity is currently co-chaired by Christine Achar, Program Coordinator for the Byron Singer Division of Cinema & Media Studies, and Helaine Head, Associate Professor in the Production Division. Its first major initiative was a school-wide, student-led Town Hall meeting on February 18th, 2016. Students, staff, and faculty attended the event, but the well-attended event. She also led a similar training for the production division's faculty and staff.

In the fall 2016 semester the council introduced the SCA Diversity Speaker and Screening Series. MPIA Production student Sam Shaih chairs the subcommittee charged with bringing speakers to campus who can address diversity and inclusion in the media industries at large. “The speaker series is a necessary next step in furthering the discussion about inclusion within the SCA Community. Students, staff, and faculty within SCA must have an opportunity to connect with industry leaders and emerging artists on this subject to understand how these scenarios manifest and exist in the real world,” says Shaih. The series kicked off with AMPlE President Cheryl Boone Isaacs who told the audience, “Coming up with strategies to increase diversity is the core of what we have been doing. Not necessarily telling the industry a new way of thinking, but telling the audience about new ideas and projects that are working.”

The Council on Diversity and Inclusion also coordinated a diversity training event for SCA faculty and staff, held on April 14th, 2016. Dr. Eko Carvalho, a freelance facilitator who specializes in leading organizational diversity workshops, led the well-attended event. She also led a similar training for the Production Division’s faculty and staff.

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recently inquired about seeing his collection. "In many cases," Garcia-Myers says, "once we get the collection, it’s just the beginning of the relationship.”

Thriving amid competition from Turner Classic Movie auctions and other institutions, the library continues to attract gifts from unexpected sources including actress Elizabeth Scott. Noted for her femme fatale roles in film noir features like Dead Reckoning, Desert Fury, and Too Late for Tears, she died in 2015. "Elizabeth Scott mentioned USC as the top place she wanted her papers to go," Garcia-Myers explains. "SCA Dean Elizabeth Daley got a letter from her estate and passed it over to us. We talked to the estate managers and picked up the collection. She has some fabulous photos in there.”

In conjunction with its Hugh M. Hefner Moving Image Archive—which holds more than 70,000 items including film negatives, sound effects and prints—and Louis B. Mayer Film and Television Study Center, SCA’s Library of Cinematic Arts’ collections provide richly detailed inspiration for student filmmakers and scholars alike. Loadwine says, “In a lot of ways, the film and music collection is the jewel in the crown here at the University. We founded the first film school in the country in 1929 and we’re now on the cutting edge of new technologies.”
Anatomy of a Microbudget

FROM AN UNMARKED white building tucked away on Larchmont, just beyond the shadow of Paramount Pictures, Eric B. Fleischman quietly conducts his micro-revolution from Diablo Entertainment headquarters. The 26-year-old founding producer and USC School of Cinematic Arts alum paces the sun-bathed third-floor office delegating production preparations—fourth this year—with decorous assertion through a set of Apple EarPods. On the surface, the scene brims with all the professional polish of aCAA executive suite; but the engine that drives it—a three-person team with six-figure production budgets—purs with a youthful vigor and efficiency you’d sooner find in a Silicon Beach basement.

Professionalism and efficiency are the cornerstones of Diablo’s business model, which is, in simplest terms, to produce professional-quality genre films on a do-it-yourself budget. “A lot of that involves working in the non-union world with our crews,” says Fleischman. “All our movies have gone through SAG, and if we have WGA writers we go through WGA, so it’s not like we skimp out. It’s being fiscally responsible and realistic.”

Incidentally, Fleischman got his first taste of the micro-budget model just up the street at Paramount, where he had interned every summer as an undergrad. In 2010, Paramount announced a new program called Insurge, a small cult horror film written by then-Blumhouse intern Mickey Keating, who gave it to Fleischman to produce. Blumhouse gave him permission to shoot on weekends, and with a production budget of $275,000 donated by friends and family, they completed the film by the end of summer 2013 and sold it to Lionsgate in the fall for six-times the budget upfront.

Fleischman’s work really does define one smart and effective business model,” says School of Cinematic Arts Professor Jason E. Squire, who had been researching emerging DH/low-budget filmmaking since about 2007. Squire describes his early research as “mostly speculative.” “Now, I get back in touch with my excellent student only to realize that he is actually doing the kind of process and style of moviemaking that I was researching, which proved that the process worked and that people were doing it.” As a result, Squire has dedicated an entire section of the fourth edition of his industry tome, The Movie Business, specifically to the DH model. He later invited Fleischman to write the chapter on producing.

Fleischman and Diablo Entertainment have undoubtedly benefited from good timing. Despite its exponential growth in recent years, micro-budget filmmaking still is a relatively young phenomenon one that would not have even been possible a decade ago. Advancements in both the affordability and quality of digital resources have been instrumental to the growth of the independent and micro-budget movements, and have also fueled the fires for those seeking new means of creative and professional growth outside the impenetrable gates of the Hollywood studios.

“Starting around the turn of this century, filmmakers frustrated by the traditional process started looking to the new digital tools,” says Squire. “And so, slowly many of the forward-thinking independent-style filmmakers began to recognize the new tools as providing access directly to the customer, which was something historic in the business. Only since digital is it possible to distribute directly to the customer.”

“I think this is a cautionary tale for our students, who should not be waiting for that $10-million or $5-million movie,” says Squire. “You can get your 480 team together and start looking for private money.”

Micro-budget is tailor made for “those who are serious about being filmmakers,” says Squire. “Like a magic carpet unfolding before them.” However he adds that it’s important to understand that success is incremental. “You’re not doing it for the money, initially it’s really all volunteer or for very low pay, but that’s the tradition of the movie business; you start with nothing but you’re getting great experience and also screen credit.”

Above all, however, whether a film costs one hundred million or one hundred thousand, as Fleischman likes to say, “content is always king.” “If someone comes in and pitches an idea that I’ve heard of—Pass, hard pass,” says Fleischman. “What’s the point? I’m trying to make product that you haven’t seen before, that pushes the boundaries of what cinema can do.”

That’s perhaps the lesson that Squire and Fleischman most hope to bestow on today’s students. It’s not just about how far you can stretch a budget. If you can show the audience something new, something that stays with them, that they’ve never seen before—that will always be the true formula for success.

From left: Director/Writer JD Dillard, Actor Jacob Latimore (“Par”), and Eric B. Fleischman on the set of Sleight.

From left: producer Eric B. Fleischman, writer/director Thomas Delo, Bello (The Man), Matt Griffin (producer, Fast & Fire: The Firing Line volumes 1 & 2), Professor Jason E. Squire, writer/director JD Dillard (Sleight), producer Alix Theurer (Sleight).
A MA+P to Graduation

THE DIVISION’S FIRST B.A. COHORT IS IN ITS SENIOR YEAR

In 2013 when the first complete cohort of Media Arts + Practice (MA+P) freshmen started classes, the division’s curriculum was still a bit of a mystery around SCA. Although the school was home to the interdivisional Media Arts + Practice Ph.D. program, which spans all divisions, the actual MA+P division was not launched until 2013. However, a few undergraduate students—many of whom were enrolled in an honors program through the School’s Institute for Multimedia Learning—started asking for the opportunity to take the same kinds of classes as the doctoral students, which married deep critical thinking on media theory and history with the ability to actually create media. Between 2011 and 2013 a handful of students were essentially allowed to create their own MA+P majors and affirmed the potential for a Bachelor’s program in Media Arts + Practice.

“In some ways, MA+P was created in response to student demand,” says Holly Willis, the Research Professor who is Chair of the division. In May 2017, the division’s first official cohort of twenty-two students will graduate. During their four years at SCA, the division has honed and cemented its curriculum’s focus on marrying research with practical experience. MA+P students make media with purpose. This year’s thesis projects include a study of how web technologies (HTML, CSS, JavaScript) impact global culture, an exploration of best practices for virtual reality experience design, and a study on whether public art can be designed in such a way as to influence specific conversations and emotions.

MA+P graduates will go on to careers in a variety of fields, as media creators, filmmakers, game designers, researchers, analysts and media managers—the kinds of jobs in which creating the media product isn’t necessarily the end goal. Willis says that rather than simply learning how to use tools, MA+P students take it a step further, questioning their prescribed use. “They are actually in the labs, working with brand new tools and rather than teaching them how to use tools while teaching them how to question, and misuse and take apart the tools,” says Willis. “It’s not a vocational school where you learn how to do one thing very well and how to play by the rules. It’s a place where you are constantly questioning: Who is this for? Why was it made? What can I do with it that upsets those things in some way? And how can I be a leader by making a powerful contribution in this context?”

The MA+P faculty is made up of artists, scholars, technologists and big thinkers who are united by their interest in exploring the usefulness and impact of the latest platforms. For the students they attract, a part of the appeal of the MA+P curriculum, says Willis, is that they will get a crash course in how ideas go from the lab to the mainstream. “If you think about the last four years, the Oculus Rift and other VR technologies had not yet been publicly introduced. Fast-forward four years, and suddenly we needed a VR curriculum. Snapchat also arrived and is now part of everyday communication systems. And the Apple Watch—wearable technology wasn’t really on people’s central radar but with the watch, suddenly people have this device. Things that are sort of on the edges really come quickly into the center and we keep pace with that.”

Add to that the idea that MA+P students can create anything of media they want—from traditional platforms like film and video games to emerging areas like wearable technologies, interactive architecture and VR. “You’re really encouraged to think big and believe that any idea is possible,” says graduating senior Justinפוטs.

“The interdisciplinary (curriculum) attracted me to MA+P,” says MA+P graduate student Jordan Fowler. “I would consider myself a generalist and the idea of choosing one very specific field to focus on frustrated me, and still does. The fact that I could combine my interests in music, film, games, shared experience, design, art, and more into one major seemed like a match made in heaven.”

Another senior, Anna Schwartz, has been working at Activation for the past year, doing intellectual property research and pitching ideas for adapting game-world characters and stories into films and television shows. She hopes to continue working there after graduation. “I never imagined that I would find a position that combines my loves for video games, multimedia and movies. Now that I have, I hope to stay there as long as possible,” she says. Holly Willis says the challenge for MA+P isn’t inspiring students to explore nascent ideas and develop new projects but keeping up with changes that are constantly coming down the pipe. “For the faculty we constantly have to adjust and readapt to keep pace,” she says. “We have a lot of experience in these areas and have been working on them for a long time, so it’s not a total surprise to us. But for the students, these changes are happening rapidly. They enter and by their second year there will be a brand new technology that they’ve never heard of. For the program, the main thing is we have the historical legacy and context, but we really need to keep abreast of the changes that are happening.”

Graduating senior Jordan Fowler says that for the program’s success tools to down to its focus on practical applications. “In the real world I have found the following three things are crucial to success: the ability to think creatively, the ability to think critically and the ability to work with your peers,” she says. “This major prepares you to excel in all of those areas.”

With this first graduating class, MA+P is hoping to create a legacy of teaching creative people how to question and remake things before they become so entrenched in our everyday reality that we may even stop seeing them. Senior Eric Liu, whose interests lie in exploring remin mix culture, has an after-graduation plan that illustrates this goal. He’s planning a visit to The Museum of Printing in Haverhill, Massachusetts. “It contains an extensive collection of artifacts and ephemera that pertain to typography,” he says. “The goal is to make it a road trip, and along the way document the vestiges and history of old road signage, for example.” The cross-country drive, an American staple, is about to get a MA+P remix.

BY DESA PHILADELPHIA

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has had her film Storyville from a script by Brian Baugh ’95 the New York Times YA Hardcover Bestseller List. Sword Glass Victoria Aveyard ’12 receive the WGA with Roaring Brook 1974 are writing a script for Amazon about the sculptor of and Bryan Bertino of Unbroken an independent film set to be released on Netflix. Jason Michael Berman ’06 chosen as one of the nine films selected for Tale Weissman ’10 along with hired as a writer’s assistant on APB the new Fox series has been named Showrunner of Take 5: Justice in America. We hope we missed anyone. Thanks for your updates. We apologize if we missed anyone. Jonathan Abramas ’00 sold his dark family drama pilot to ABC Network’s A&E Studies. Scott Alexander ’23 and Larry Karaszewski ’35 are writing a script for Amazon about the autobiography of Pitbull’s Ramarau. Also, their script for the remake of 1971 Who’s Doin’ It? is being filmed. Judd Apowitz ’95 has received a series order from HBO for his comedy pilot Crash. He has also been honored with the Generation Award at the Just for Laughs Awards.

Jonathan Chinn ’34 is teaming up with Lisa Joy to produce Comrade. Ron Howard and Lucas Mirabella will executive produce the pilot for an Amazon project centered on the world of Star Wars. Beau Willimon has joined the Show Factory as an Executive Producer. He’s Out also produce a film adaptation of the graphic novel Krypton David Goyer ’88 will write a film. 

Helen Childress ’99 has had her script Model Woman ordered to pilot at ABCK. Jon Landau and Cameron James are executive producers. Shann Levy ’94 will direct a feature film based on the autobiography of legendary music producer Bill Graham. A film production deal for La Guerra of the project, the film adaptation of Pablo Atencia’s si-fi novel, is worth $20 million has been acquired by Netflix, and the si-fi actioner Kin, a big-screen adaptation of the novel of the same name, has also been acquired by Netflix. Doug Liman will direct WB’s Justice League Dark. His Q&A Film Aces has been remitted America Made and The Mountain Man. Melissa Rosenberg ’90 was awarded one of the inaugural Power Women awards for excellence for her work on MARVELS Jessica Jones.

Ben Affleck has been cast in the Warner Brothers crime series based on the nonfiction novel Black Panther. Ron Howard will direct, and Bryan Singer ’89 and Ori Marmur will team with Diablo Cody and Jez Butterworth to produce the drama Bag Man, a big-screen adaptation of the novel of the same name. Jeff Wadlow ’01 directed Kanye West’s newest music video, and will produce an adaptation of his book X: The Life and Art of Malcolm X. Richard Lawson has been named the new Showrunner of the NBC series Bag Man.

Shonda Rhimes ’92 will receive the 2016 Norman Lear Achievement Award from the PGA, and will be working with him on an epic docu-series called America Divided. Jay Roach ’88 received the Cinema Audio Society’s 2017 Career Achievement Award. Adam Robinolt ’01 will direct Inscapes Chapter 1. Mike Rome ’04 has written and directed a new web series called Donny the Virgin. Elizabeth Allen Rosenbaum ’93 has directed Carey! Hell”s Kitchen Web for Cemetery Mids.

Mike Wise will direct the drama Greyhound from a script by Tom Hanks. Evan Schiff ’04 will edit Liongione’s John Wick: Chapter 2. Josh Schwartz is developing Mac in LA, based on a memoir by the founder of Juicy Couture. He will shoot the Apple TV series later this year. He will also be the showrunner and executive producer, along with Ryan Condor, for the American version of the Russian adaptation of Marvel’s popular Runaways comics.

Stacey Sher ’92 has been named the new President of Action-Adventure-Blazers, where she will be creating and filming TV and film titles from the company’s deep library of games including Call of Duty, Skylanders, Sci-Fi, Scoop: Action-Adventure-Blazers. Cinecinema TV’s first television series Skylanders Academy produced by Sher, has received a broadcast order at Netflix. Lindsey Skepley ’97 has sold her spy drama Unit Zero starring Tom Cotulite to ABC. Ian Shar ’08 has joined the writing staff of CBS’s The Orville. Andrew Silver ’85 will be the supervising music director. Bryan Singer ’89 will direct and produce a new TV adaptation of the classic Jules Verne novel 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea. The Jason Taylor ’00 will also be producing.

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This year the School of Cinematic Arts lost two inspiring faculty members who were as well known for their generosity as for their talent—alumnus and lecturer Ian Sander, and Production Division professor Kenneth Hall. Dean Elizabeth Daley said the loss would be felt throughout the SCA community. “Ian and Kenny both embodied the very best in everything they did as instructors, as professionals, and—above all—as people,” she said. “Both were such amazingly generous and warm spirits who inspired all those who knew them. I speak for many when saying that I feel truly lucky to have known them and will miss them greatly. This was truly a difficult year for our SCA family.”

We will remember them for their celebrated work, their inspiring mentorship and, most of all, for their friendship.

Kenneth Hall

Kenneth Hall, holder of the Ken Wannberg Endowed Chair in Music Editing, at the USC School of Cinematic Arts, passed away August 25. Hall joined the SCA faculty as the inaugural Wannberg Chair holder in 2005, overseeing and teaching many courses on sound. His best-known class, “Directing the Composer,” was so popular that alumni would return every year for the final session of the semester. This warm and welcoming spirit that brought so many students back to his classroom years after graduating was well known throughout the SCA community.

“Ken Hall was one of the most generous people I’ve ever known,” recalls Richard Hyland, SCA Sound Department Manager, and a close friend of Hall. “He was more than willing to share his time, incredible talent, words of inspiration and positively with the students, staff and faculty of Cinematic Arts. He was a joy to be around and is greatly missed.”

Production Division Chair and Professor Michael Fink echoed Hyland’s sentiments: “Kenny Hall was a friend and mentor, and illuminator of my life and the lives of so many, especially his students. His good will and humor were limitless, and in a time when such qualities are rare, his loss is even more keenly felt. We miss Kenny, and will do our best to continue to honor the light he shed on our lives.”

Prior to joining the SCA faculty, Hall worked with some of the most respected film composers in the industry, such as John Williams, Jerry Goldsmith, Alex North, Henry Mancini, and so many others. As a music editor, Hall contributed to hundreds of films and television shows—including many Oscar winners like I, The Terrestrial television shows—including many Oscar winners like I, The Terrestrial, and The Young and Prodigious T.S. Thunberg. His work on television included hundreds of primetime television dramas and reality shows, including many Oscar winners like Desperate Housewives (ABC), Ghost Whisperer, and Six Feet Under.

Hall is preceded in death by his son, Timmy, and survived by his wife, Marie, as well as their three children—Terry, Darrell, and Chris—and seven grandchildren.

Ian Sander

USC Alumnus and Professor Ian Sander, the veteran executive producer behind over 600 hours of primetime television, died in May at the age of 68. Sander co-headed Sander-Moses Production with his wife and producing partner, Kim Moses, with whom he also co-taught the popular “World of Television” course at SCA since 2006.

“Ian was a true role model and a tremendous mentor who cared deeply for his students,” says Professor Michael Fink. “He approached his role as an educator with the same heart and generosity that characterized his entire career, always welcoming current and former students alike with an open door. He will be greatly missed.”

A New York native, Sander executive produced and directed sixteen episodes of the Emmy-nominated series Ghost Whisperer, which ran for five seasons on CBS from 2000 to 2005 before airing in syndication on three U.S. networks and in 170 territories worldwide. He also executive produced and directed Pilfer (NBC), Reddix (CBS), and I’ll Fly Away (ABC), for which the PGA named him as Producer of the Year.

Sander was also at the forefront of the new digital movement in entertainment. For the past ten years, Sander co-created and produced entertainment event programming under his SLAM digital media shingle, including all digital media IP for Ghost Whisperer as well as content for DeepHousewives (ABC), Ugly Betty (ABC), and Comic-Con.

Sander is survived by his wife and their two sons, Aaron and Declan.

James Eddy Hatch

Alum James Eddy Hatch died on October 9, 2015. Hatch was an accomplished playwright, photographer and documentary filmmaker, and taught at Indiana State University for 38 years. He was known for creative work that was funny and insightful in its commentary on everyday life. Hatch’s photograph Sterling Vineyard is included in the permanent collection of Indiana’s Swope Art Museum. His documentary work includes the award-winning films The Wild Tales of Tobias and The Adventures of Superman.

Howard Rieder

Clio Award-winning advertising executive, documentarian, and alumn of the School of Cinematic Arts Howard Rieder passed away on September 16th, 2016. Rieder worked as an executive at companies including Thomas Organ, Revell Toys, and Nissan Motor Company. Rieder used his gifts as a documentarian to help the Prescott Police Department by writing, producing and directing civic films for the city. His work with the Prescott PD won the Remi Award at the Houston International Film Festival.

Jack Larson

Playwright, actor, and philanthropist Jack Larson died on September 20th, 2015. Larson was the benefactor of the James Bridges Endowed Scholarship at SCA, to benefit graduate students in the Film and Television Production Division, named in honor of his long time partner. Larson was a mentor to many students and alumni of the School and a valued advisor to School of Cinematic Arts faculty.

As an actor, Larson is best known as portraying Jimmy Olsen in The Adventures of Superman.

Benjamin Brunkhardt

Graduate of the Production Division Benjamin Brunkhardt passed away in his hometown of Kansas City, Missouri on August 30th, 2016. A respected editor and cinematographer at USC, Brunkhardt is remembered as a gifted and enthusiastic technician and tinkerer who experimented with transferring digital content to 35mm film as an undergraduate. He also became active in experimentation for large-format filmmaking.

Professor Emeritus at Vassar College, editor, and alum of the School of Cinematic Arts Ken Robinson passed away on January 28th, 2016. Robinson is credited with being one of the primary visionaries at the Vassar College Film Department and shaping the Vassar’s film department into its modern form. As an editor he’s best known for editing Prince’s Purple Rain. He is also remembered for his enthusiastic opinions on proper editing and his hands-on approach to teaching.

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