**Tim:** This is the Distributed Future Podcast. We've been away for a while and things have been happening in people's lives and generally, life has been complicated and so we've been off air for a bit. But we thought we'd try and get back into the habit, although to what extent we'll manage to be reliable weekly or bi-weekly or monthly or in any particular pattern is somewhat questionable but we'll see. And those of you maybe who haven't heard it before or it's been so long since you have that you don't really know we're doing, what we do in the podcast is simply to go out and talk to interesting people who are working in niche areas that are sort of sitting on the boundaries of technology and society, who might give us a hint about what the future looks, because they can see a little further into the future of their niche than the rest of us. Or at least that's the theory. And we've had a pretty good track record in the past on this and so hopefully we can keep doing that. I encourage you if you enjoy this to subscribe, send us emails, go and visit the website... all of the usual things that we encourage you to do on a podcast. And of course, tell your friends.

This episode's guest is going to talk with us about the idea of social spaces and well, let me see, to what extent the virtual and the real are crossing over from theatre technology into things like conferences and stuff like that. There's a lot of technology that's moving out of what used to be, I think one would say entertainment, and drifting into business and back again. I think that's the sort of space that we'd like to talk about. So, if you'd like to introduce yourself and then we'll get going.

**Caron:** What a fantastic introduction, I know what's going on now as well. Thanks, Tim. I'm Caron, Caron Lyon and I come from a theatre background. And I'm a creative theatre producer emerging from traditional theatre and really looking to explore the immersive nature of events and performance and experience going through theatre and art, through life across the business into the corporate events world, audiences, and then back to life.

**Tim:** I really should have used that 'events' word, that's the thing that was missing in the intro. Events, dear boy. Yes. Anyway, sorry.

**Caron:** Yeah. I've been a theatrical practitioner for my entire career and seeing the world change around me has been the reason why I've adopted technology. The only reason I learned how to use a computer is because I was using analog phono sound audio equipment and one day, I had a sound effect for a show that was an mp3 in my Windows 98 machine at the time of the BBC sound effects archive. And the CD rewriter really caught up with the rest of us and I was left with the conundrum of phono round peg with a USB square hole. And I really had to either get the digital thing into my analog equipment or take the plunge and go digital. So I kind of had to make that step into audio editing to stay relevant to my job as I saw it at that time. To continue doing the job that I did, I saw that I needed that skill. I don't think I really understood anything beyond that at that time. I mean, that was early 2000.

So I had a Windows 98 machine but I wouldn't say that I saw the internet coming and all that sort of stuff, I kind of learned what I needed to do my job. And then when I found myself wanting to do something other than touring-- so, still theatery-- that was when I discovered the worlds of 2002 2003 and I came out into this world of the proper world and going, "Okay. Well, what do I want to do?" And this web design thing was a thing. I was like, "Oh, I quite like the thought of doing something that was creative and art-driven that wasn't performance and didn't have me spending the entirety of my life crawling around on my hands and knees plugging things in."

**Tim:** Let's be honest, we've carried on having to do that. We haven't escaped it completely.

**Caron:** So, being aware of the computer world of 'you either network, engineer,' and I thought straight away, "I'm gonna spend my whole life on my hands and knees underneath somebody's desk in an office." And was like, "No, I don't want to do that." So the creativity part of it was kind of, you know, I don't get to do as much creative stuff as a stage manager so let's explore that. And people would say to me at the time there's a lot of people in web and creative stuff, it's hard to get work because everybody wants creative work and everyone asks you to do stuff for free. And I was like, "Ooh, this sounds like the entertainment industry." You know, that conundrum that happens in the entertainment industry for creatives. People always ask you to do stuff for free and don't value your skills and talents. It kind of bleeds into this internet and tech world and probably is happening now, but that journey is what really took me to meet the community of social, I think that's where the digital journey took me. And it was 2008/2009 when I started attending events that were social technologies. And this thing about social media started to be talked about, ironically, because I was at the time virtual world stage manager for Pilot Theatre in Second Life.

**Tim:** I was gonna say the rest of the world-- not you, and to some extent not me-- have followed exactly the same path you've just described, but they've had it compressed into the two years since pandemic. Everybody has suddenly had exactly that revelation that in order to do my job, I have to get up to speed with at least some of the digital technologies that have suddenly whacked onto my desk. And that business about, and this is what I think I want to kind of come on to, is that the business about how you present yourself in a virtual world. You know, we've had to learn how to stand up in a meeting and give a slide deck or how to deal with awkward bosses at lunchtime and all of that stuff, and we're learning all of those skills again in the virtual world. And some of them don't work the same way, which I think is really interesting actually. It seems to me that you've been on that journey for as long as anyone and possibly longer, and hopefully you're somewhat still further ahead so we can maybe look into the future and see where everybody else is going to be in 18 months' time, because to some extent you're already there. I think.

**Caron:** I think the scariest thing is every single horizon you reach, there's already loads of people on the other side already. It doesn't matter how far ahead or how ahead of a curve or riding a wave you think you are, because the people who are behind you are going, "Oh, you're really ahead of the curve, you really know what's going on next." From my perspective, I'm already following the other people. And I think this emergence of the notion of influences is another thing that is not new, there was always these people that you arrived somewhere with little knowledge and the people that are there have all the knowledge, and that's something that I think social technologies has opened up more than anything; just being able to connect. I mean, my first experience with Twitter, so from being safe manager with Second Life to operating my job in a virtual world for part of the time, the people that I met within there who were doing events asked me the flip question, "Do I do events in real life?" And I was like, "Well, yes, but it depends where you are in the world." They happened to be in London, so I did my first physical event for that community who I'd only ever met digitally. There was a period where no one really knew anybody except by their Twitter handle, and you'd leave someone and-

**Tim:** Yeah, [unintelligible 00:09:12] But that's almost gone. I feel kind of old by having a Twitter handle that isn't just my name with a string of digits after it.

**Caron:** Yeah. As I said, there was the old Hotmail crazy name, hotmail.com, which kind of says something about your reputation and also sort of says something about your credibility sometimes, whether you're Hotmail, Gmail or MTL or one of those proprietary ones. But yeah, I think at the beginning of Twitter finding a one-word name- I think because they all went, all the good ones went so people have had to default maybe to their own name. Also, when people sign up they are presented with options, whereas I think having a username-- and I still do to this day when I do technology consults where I'm looking to audit an identity. It's very rare now that you'll find someone with a completely blank slate. And if they've got a blank slate, you can give them a name, and that name can then be anchored. The name that you were given at birth is often the name that has followed you now through digital.

**Tim:** I was gonna say that I think that is to do with the fact that digital is now more representative in a higher percentage of our lives or accepted as being a higher percentage and more important in our lives. And the inability to do, you know, we all did in Second Life, which was to play somebody else. Like, the joy of Second Life and I think the joy of a real Metaverse is that you don't have to be yourself in it, you can be somebody else. But I think that's gone, I don't think that aspiration is really there except maybe in games still.

**Caron:** I think that was always the worrying thing. For me, I have an avatar in Second Life. I have Katie Reeve, and the name Katie Reeve I also take to all of the Metaverses that I'm starting to sign up with. So, Katie is emerging from Second Life and I want her to be able to go into all of these. So that interoperability of can I take my assets and my avatar, the essence of Katie from Second Life, and take that to other places? Because it's as much a part of me. I've always tried to be very transparent with my identity online because I value my sanity. Over the years, I've seen people fracture their personality because they want to be something slightly different online than they are offline. And this way of fantasizing how you might be if you weren't real, it's like, 'but you are real?' And that, ultimately, is the anchor. If the electricity goes off, you're left with yourself.

**Tim:** But the live-action roleplay folks, they have these personalities that are not themselves, but they're disposable. It came as a complete shock to me, but they discard them. Once a character is played out after nine months or so and has done the battle scene or whatever it is, or has been a poet or whatever it was, then they're gone! They ain't after them. And now we're going to invite a new one.

**Caron:** That is really interesting! Because I've never thought of it in terms of- Because from a theatre background, I have done some acting, and when you play a character, you live that character for the moment that you're on stage. And there is a certain amount of self-preservation that goes on within theatre companies, especially if you're playing a role that has quite a traumatic past. Learning to leave that character in the wings is really important, and being able to live outside of the character that you're playing every night for probably three months. And if you're on tour, you taking that character away with you. Although I've never acted professionally, I think my approach to avatars has always been to have someone that I want to like my avatar, and I want to like the character that I adopt, but I've never wanted to be them and there has been a separation. But that's really interesting about the live-action roleplay and equivalence.

**Tim:** This leads on to one of the other things I want to talk about, which is doing stuff in the virtual world; maybe in a conference or any other kind of theatre space that you can't do in real life. Things that do with magic. I mean, one of the joys of the theatre is to kind of literally suspend disbelief because something flies in through the wings from the wings or pops up through the floor, stuff that you can't do in real life but you can do in the theatre because smoke mirrors and tech. I wonder to what extent that stuff is leaking over into things like virtual events and virtual conferences.

**Caron:** There's been this massive upsurge of immersive experience. And those immersive experiences, things like Doctor Who Fractured Time is a big show in the West End at the moment. They've taken over a whole house or a whole warehouse, and there are spaces and worlds within that space. You turn up at the beginning of a performance and you get taken through that. I think it extends from what would have been called Promenade Theatre. But with Promenade Theatre, you aren't expected to believe that you are somewhere else, you are an audience promenading between stages. Whereas in this new immersive experience entertainment layer, it's almost that augmenting the reality of the space with the suspension of disbelief. And there's a whole show that wraps around that. But you can fall out of the suspension of disbelief and you can find yourself being the audience member at the back that I've heard one particular person I talked to about immersive audiences quite a lot, "It's always the person entering the room as the action moves on." [laughs] So you can have this sense that you've paid for this experience, but you're not sure you get it. It's the same with branch narratives in some of these immersive works, the notion of being able to choose the narrative you follow through an experience, which you can do with a game-- whether it's a sandbox game or a video game-- that you can have multiple endings, and the live work is starting to offer that. But then the expectation as an audience member if you get to the other end, is that you want to feel that you have got your money's worth.

**Tim:** I was gonna say, is that variable ending as satisfactory? I remember kind of... Oh, I'm trying to think. There was a game I played which had variable endings, and the only way to deal with that is to try all of them. And that's just somehow unsatisfactory.

**Caron:** And that's when the business of show business comes to fore, that if you can make an audience come back three times... And there are people who go to these immersive experiences three or four times, but then there's people who just go to Sondheim shows over and over again. I did a stage production of A Little Night Music at the Leicester Haymarket when it was still the Leicester Haymarket. And we were warned that there would be people at the stage door waiting to meet the characters of the show, that queue at stage doors all around the country to get different programs signed for different Sondheim shows. You know, they'll go and see the same show, it doesn't matter who the cast is, they want to see the show. I suppose it's like rewatching your favorite film.

**Tim:** I wonder to what extent the difference turns out to be. Is that just kind of collecting, or is it about spotting the differences between one performance and another, and getting the nuance out that way?

**Caron:** I think there's a bit of both, but I think some of that particular behavior is collecting.

**Tim:** Right. One of the things we were talking about there was the idea of a member of the audience not quite knowing where they should be. I think that's another thing that's kind of really interesting that we're seeing increasing in the web and generally online, is this business of signposting. Of being able to kind of hint to an audience or to a recipient what it is that they should be doing next or what they should be expecting and things like that. It's a very old sort of skill, I think the UX people call it-- is it affordances? Like this thing about door handles, the classic example is door handles. That on a door, one side has a flat plate and the other one has a hooked plate. And you know, just by the shape of that piece of metal, which way the door goes. You don't need pull and push because you can see if it's a plate, you can push it. And if it's a handle, you're expected to pull it. The computer scientists have been terribly bad at that. We write instructions, if we do anything at all, but I think the visual arts and in particular performing arts is all about setting the thing up so that you know when you think you know what's gonna happen next.

**Caron:** It all depends on how much chaos and how much security you want the audience to think they have. Because at the end of the day if it feels chaotic, it's either free chaos, which is actually a dangerous and risk-assess nightmare. Or it's actually framed in such a way that the audience can never hurt themselves, but they might feel that they have the freedom to relax. And I think with live performances and with live events or even a conference, you want someone to turn up to the front door, walk straight in, get over all of the bits that mean that you know they're in the building, so that they can get to the bit that you've actually put the whole event for, which is the content. And it's the same with the show, you want to get everybody into the space prepared in such a way that at the right time, the lights go down, the curtain goes up, and they see a show. Or they take part in an experience. And how visible the mechanism is to the audience making that happen is part of the craft of events theatre film where you don't want the audience to see that how the magic is made.

I find it very hard to go to the theatre sometimes because the first thing that I'm doing is looking up at the ceiling and trying to work out, you know, what lights have they got? What's it? You know, I'm very conscious of the technical mechanism of theatre, but that's part of the magic for me. I was followspot operator for an illusionist for a whole tour. And when I first followspotted this particular illusionist, I was only- You don't have a script as of followspot operator and you might not even see the show the first time, you're swapping in with someone who's done it before. And you're listening to someone calling in your ear where the person is that's going to be spotlighted. And with an illusionist on a stage, I was followspotting him into a tank of water. "Tank of water, and he gets in, and everything gets tied up, and I'm the spotlight on him and it's great." And then I had a voice in my ear going, "Right, you can pick what's up downstage left." And I was like, "Oh, but I've just followspotted him into a water tank!" He did the thing and he put his head down and I was like, "Oh my God! How did you do that?" And he had to show me. Once I had been shown, I was kinda like, "Oh, yeah, it's obvious." Some people don't like to know the magic, some people do like to know the magic. And I think balancing that within your audience is really important for a live piece if you want people to suspend the disbelief. But I think that's why if you're moving into film and into cinema, where you walk into a cinema space there's a big screen, the lights go down, there's no physical interaction... We kind of moved away from that with film and now we're moving into combined mixed realities, you know, virtual reality with glasses or a headset. The body has become more part of the participation of the world. Ironically, the digital 2D screen has finally started to break down and is moving into virtual spaces and how they augment whether it's virtuality or actual reality. We're getting this blending of spaces now with technology laying over the top of it, some of it being clunky and some of it's not.

**Tim:** I think that the thing with technology, though, is that in some ways we've realized how unsatisfactory the 2D experience is. And I think that's part of the driver of things like the Metaverse. But I mean, even [unintelligible 00:24:26] stuff. Like, we've done an app-- I've got a very small financial interest in this but we've done an app for remote viewing of conference venues with the idea that you might, you know, so you can check the place out. And one of the things that they do is, you know, it's a 3D flythrough and all of this stuff you can expect, and guided. But one of the things we spent a lot of time trying to make it was more tactile, which sounds ridiculous because it's a remote thing. But what we ended up doing is we spent a lot of time getting the audio right.

The other thing that they do is they send out a goodie bag with the invite to this tour. The goodie bag has things like the napkins so you get to feel the linen, or it might just be a bit of scented wood, but that tells you what the desks smell like. Or, you know, you have the signature scent if it's a hotel. So you have a tactile experience that goes with the thing. Now, that was fascinating. And that's an attempt to try and make it less virtual, which I think is really interesting.

**Caron:** The invisible link between that, and it doesn't matter if you're doing physical to digital or digital to physical or to virtual or any of the combination, there has to be an anchored presence. And I think point of presence is really important more than ever. If you are digital and you're observing something that is physical, having someone in the physical space reassuring you to camera that you are there, you are relevant, you're being looked after, and guiding you through the experience that's taking place in the physical space, the extended experience for those that are digital becomes much more heightened. Because quite often, people who are attending through an extended mechanism, it's usually either because they don't have the time to travel therefore they can't be there, they don't have the mobility to be able to physically be in the space and be comfortable, and then you've got the economic component to it. You've also got the eco component to being able to extending an audience to not have them traveling around. It's much, much better on the environment. But it still means that you need to give them a valid experience that won't be the same as coming into a space and walking all the way to the hall and not knowing where the toilets are. And having a great food, finding that you're sat at the back of the auditorium, and the speaker is on the main stage and you can't see them. Or you have someone sat in front of you that's six and a half feet tall. [Tim laughs] So, there's those.

And the physical space as well. I think my exploration of these different overlapping extended realities is because as much as I like physical space, I always joke that I'm much happier either behind the keyboard, or you know, behind the sound desk or in front of the keyboard. I like physical space but being in a crowd is just too much for me. So if I can get a good digital experience with genuinely interesting people that I'm going to talk to between sessions, I would consider doing the digital. Being in the physical space is an experience in itself. And sometimes you don't want the distraction of too many people talking to you in the corridors because otherwise, the whole point that you're there hopefully is to see good content. And if you spend all the time stood in the corridors talking, I would much rather have a fantastic virtual event and then go to a party afterwards where we can all stand around and talk and you're not missing anything. So I think there's there's a mixture of components. But going back the other way that I found recently, I attended a physical event that was about liveness. And this is something that's sort of come out post-pandemic, this notion of liveness and 'is something that's digital actually live, and what is live about theatre.' But this particular instance was a bad liveness experience where the speakers on stage weren't introduced properly, and it suddenly dawned on me that if I had lost interest in a digital event, I could have either hovered my mouse over the screen and found out the person's name. I didn't even know this person's name so I was thinking, "I'd even have a better experience in Zoom at this point." But also, you'd have a chat potentially to either contact the speakers, or you'd have some dialogue with the audience. But it also dawns on me that I was in this physical space for the first time in two years and the people that were most interesting were potentially sat around me and not actually on stage. So there was that conundrum which I found myself being flipped in when I've attended VR events in old space trying to sort of go, "Oh, people are starting to hold events. What's going on? Let me attend." And I attend mimicked physical events where they wouldn't have been particularly engaging in real life and placed in a static sterile 3D environment that again- Actually what I wanted to do in those events was talk to the avatars that were stood beside me because they were somewhere else in the world. But I could still in a virtual environment, point my controller at them, click and find out their profile. And friend them. Which is something you can't do in physical events, you can't automatically just click them with this profile.

**Tim:** I think there was a brief kind of play with that. I've forgotten what the technology was but there was some sort of physical presence device that would broadcast your ID as you walk around the conference. I can't remember what it was but it was the sort of thing that I just didn't want to do. It's weird that we do that very happily, you know, we wander around on Google and leave traces everywhere but we're less keen on doing it in real life. Actually, I wanted to track a long way back in this conversation because you said something interesting about spotlights, and it occurred to me that we haven't- What's the kind of equivalent of a spotlight in a virtual environment? There's all this kind of autofocus where, you know, my avatar gets bigger or my screen gets bigger or maybe I get louder, but that's not same as a spotlight. It's not a followspot.

**Caron:** I think the emergence of spatial audio is interesting. The closer that you walk to someone the louder the conversation gets, and that can be problematic when the bubble of audio isn't large enough. But I think that being able to focus attention in groups-- as human beings, we grow up learning those skills of filtering out background noise and standing in a circle so that you can suitably see the people around in your area, you close off to what's behind you when you're looking in a certain direction. It's controlled. And in film there's the emergence of 360 film, which is partly a little bit of a nightmare for a creator because the whole point of creating a film is that you're guiding and focusing the perspective of your watcher. Whereas if they can just blindly look around, you've got to prepare 360 degrees of attention. [laughs]

**Tim:** Right. And that makes following the narrative much more difficult. I remember playing-- if you've ever played it-- but [Revenant Mist] where they were beautiful wells to explore. And okay, you wanted to play the game, but to some extent they almost shot themselves with the filming quality. I mean, it's not that quality, and I'm sure if I looked at it now I'd be disappointed. But at the time, it was the beauty of it. It was quite something.

**Caron:** Yeah. You get to a point where you're kind of, "What's the story? What's the point of me being here?" Story has become a massive buzzword of late, storytelling narrative, that a strong clean narrative is even more important for probably the reasons we're discussing that you don't have the spotlight mechanism really. I mean, in an immersive stage environment or an entertainment environment, there will still be lights that are used to show the audience where to go next. Lights will be dropped behind them and things will come up in front. So they will be ushered in the direction. And I think progressing through a level and the level behind you closing down as you complete it, is kind of that way of ushering people along a timeline without a narrative, I guess.

**Tim:** Yeah, I think that's probably. But that then you're talking about the flowing event, somehow, where the audience isn't static. And I guess that leads to another thing we were talking about earlier and you touched on earlier, which is about accessibility and how one of the things that we're in danger of either winning or losing, and I'm not sure which, is about accessibility. I mean, it's the transport issue, which in theory makes it easier for you to go anywhere at any time. And using your own devices that you're comfortable with. But on the other hand, a lot of experiences assume vision and good hearing and good manual dexterity. And if you don't have those things, a lot of these experiences are pretty hard to navigate.

**Caron:** One of the things that the pandemic really heightened was the need for digital accessibility. And a lot of the arguments for trying to preserve some of the digital advances that we've encountered during COVID is to maintain that accessibility. People still need to be able to take part in physical experiences, and those provisions still need to be made. But in terms of being able to have closed captions- I mean, that's something that I've even used closed captions on occasions to maintain my attention on things when audio isn't that clear. Just having the closed captions is useful. Or if you're in a space where you can't have the volume very loud, closed captions can mean that you can watch a webinar and still get an idea of going on and hear the sound cues. That's quite similar experience for people who are struggling with their hearing or have auditory issues. Is that closed captions aren't just for people who are deaf silent, closed captions offer a whole range of auditory prompts for them. So the closed captions being able to have that facility, having BSL interpreters on screen, and being able to have that at all of the events as opposed to in theatre, you might have two performances a month that are BSL interpreted or audio described. You can have that much more accessible-

**Tim:** Can I just have a little nerdy side thing? Like, how does that work? Do you... Where are the interpreters? Do they interpret every night separately or is it a one-off recording? Like, the process of it, the mechanics of it just started to boggle my mind there. How do you do it?

**Caron:** BSL for British Sign Language is this is pretty much the same process for a digital event as it is for physical event. The BSL interpreters, there tend to be two, one on either side of the stage when you're doing stage or even two when you're doing a Zoom call, because people obviously have a conversation. So there will be BSL interpreter for either side of the conversation. In a show, you'll have someone who always does a particular character assigned to them and they will always interpret the same character. They do spend time with the script and they spend time watching a few rehearsals to get a sense of what's going on because with shows as well, there might not be signs for all the characters, so they have to spend time making up some language or at least working out which signs need to combine. But for digital, we tend to start off introducing both interpreters and then one interpreter does 10 minutes or 15 minutes and then they'll swap in. And if you've got someone in the audience of the digital event--and the physical is kind of there's a parallel. In the physical event if there's only one BSL interpreter, they tend to make sure that the people who are going to be watching the BSL interpreter have sat by them so within a few chairs. On Zoom, it's more enabling them to pin the BSL interpreter to their screen. So if you've got a BSL interpreter, the whole notion of Zoom controlling of how you set up the spotlighting of speakers or the pinning of speakers, enabling people who need to to be able to pin a person to them.

So one of the things in COVID, I was always interested in different platforms and which ones do things better and which one I was going to adopt. And for adopting platforms for me, it used to be longevity; is this platform going to be around in two years' time or three years' time? That was always really important, platforms come and go. When COVID hit, I needed to make sure that the accessibility was paramount. Because I really saw an opportunity to integrate that as something that needed to continue, because I was trying to do digital live streams and events before COVID and actually really, really struggled. I'd given up. In January 2020, I had decided I was not doing streaming digital anymore, I'd had enough. [Tim laughs] No one wanted it. No one wanted it, no one wanted to pay for it. I'd done some proof of concept events. I was wanting to take my box of tech to events that were about 50 to 100 people was kind of where my target audience would have been. To use a webcam that I'm using now in a position that was close to the audience isn't sound. I used to get a sound feed out of the sound desk if they had a PA, or I would have a shotgun mic and make sure that the audience was on a platform that I could talk to them. And as long as they've got decent audio and they can see what's going on and they're engaged, that's kind of the experience I was trying to find a way of selling. No one was interested. So yeah, I'd kind of given up on that and when COVID happened, I knew that everybody was going to be doing what I'd already been doing for the last couple of years so that was not going to be anything new at the end. But I wanted to try and maintain the things I could never establish, and one of those was the digital. And still, it pains me that Zoom is really the only one that covers all of the accessibility bases in a way that I can sell to a client. I would love some of the others to be able to do that.

**Tim:** What's missing in for example, in Google Meet?

**Caron:** Google Meets, I'm not sure about the complexity of the capability for the viewer to selectively pin different audience members or different attendees. You can close caption now. I mean, Otter, does do closed captions into Google Meet. And I believe Google Meet does now have its quite substantial multiple languages, which is something that's interested me about Google Meet especially, is that you can have a meeting in French and if you wanted to interpret that into English, Google do now have a matrix that can live translate, not just live close caption.

**Tim:** It's a Babelfish, really, isn't it?

**Caron:** It's a Babelfish, yeah. So this is the interesting thing about all these platforms, the ease of access and the hurdles for the participants. Any platform can have a handbook written for it that you can give to an audience member to get them in smoothly. So if you really wanted to use any of these platforms, you could make them as easy to access as possible. But Google Meet seemed to get a little bit left behind when it came to registration components and being able to screenshare and be able to control it from a point of view of a show caller. If you're doing a meeting for everybody, there's less show-calling capacity where-

**Tim:** Less hierarchical calling, in a way. It's kind of-

**Caron:** Yeah, yeah. And not that I don't like or never liked Zoom, Zoom was always the thing that I would never dream of being able to get people to use before COVID because it was just too complicated to access. Anything prior to COVID that required the downloading of a new app or a new piece of software would immediately just put it out of the question. So I've been using Whereby for a while. Whereby and Crowdcast were my two go-to platforms. Whereby because it was browser-based, and as long as they were using Firefox or Chrome, it was click and connect. They didn't need to have a sign up, no software to download. Given the link, straight in. And as an entry experience for those people, the majority of them would always say, "I'm in. I can't believe it!" That initial wonder of "something actually worked for me." Once you've got them through that, "This bit of software works, I will take you on a technology adventure that you will be supported under," after that point you could probably get them to download anything you like. There's a certain trust, I think, that as a host, you can take an audience to places that they might not have securely felt like doing.

**Tim:** Well, I think they have to feel like it was worth their while. You know, that the experience was worth the effort, the cognitive effort. Which, you know, learning a new platform is a cognitive effort, right? Any new software. And particularly as we get older, we're just less and less willing to waste cognitive effort on things that don't matter. [laughs]

**Caron:** Yeah. One tip to kind of add a different dimension in, I think it's always worth remembering that there are also technology have-nots. There's people who still do not have the ubiquity of technology in the way that some of us that operate at this level in the industry actually have. It's always important to remember that. I had to do a video call from my mom's last week, and she had internet and I was kind of, "They've got Wi-Fi, it'll be fine." And luckily it was just on the verge, but it was the first time in a long time that a standard internet connection that I encountered was just one meg down. And I was like, "Oh, a few years ago I would have been shouting and being very pleased that I had one meg down."

**Tim:** I'm trying to think who it was, somebody was very interesting about internet access and saying that actually, there's a lot of communities where for children, the best internet access is outside McDonald's in the car park. That's the most reliable internet access in their community. Or the local Starbucks and they buy a coffee and they sit there for four hours and do their homework, because that is the place where they get internet connectivity. You're absolutely right, we've all been streaming at 20 megabits or whatever it was and it's very easy to forget that that's actually not possible for a lot of people. Or it's possible, but it's difficult. You know? It requires them to go and sit in a car in a car park or hang around on the steps or whatever.

**Caron:** And how slow sometimes, I mean, I've got reasonably fast processor on my computer and it connects fast to basic internet sites. But I know I've been to people's homes where the internet it's only two seconds slower, it's not much slower, but it's slow enough on a regular basis for them not to feel that it's instantaneous to them. There's a labored effort to getting places on the internet.

**Tim:** That completely rules out all of the AR and VR stuff. Two seconds delay in playing Virtual Tennis isn't gonna work.

**Caron:** And then we've got 5G on the horizon. So for those of us that adopt to 5G-- and there are more cities with 5G now than I realized. I hadn't realized it was rolled out quite as much yet. But my phone doesn't do 5G, and that is going to be another leap in separating those that have technology and those that don't.

**Tim:** Yeah, I think one of the things that's very interesting that I've heard in the 5G world but I'm not sure I totally believe is that they're going to start putting very high capacity 5G into event spaces so that when you're in an event space you will get super high-quality 5G. So things like stadia and railway stations or even hotels will have very good 5G as sort of local to the spot. I wonder if there's something you could do with that, for example with augmented reality, because you know that's there.

**Caron:** There are some trial projects that have done just that, but the technology that the audience is receiving it on needs to be 5G. The case study that I saw that blew my mind was how production companies are starting to use it. And the example was the Helvellyn mountain run. So, going up to the top. And I think it's Helvellyn, one of the peaks. And in the past, if they were doing TV live broadcasts, they would have their studio at base and they would have their mesh network established so that they could live broadcast to certain distance. But they couldn't follow the lead runners all the way up to the top of the mountain. That would have to be captured on the way, brought back to the studio, edited in, and then put out afterwards. What they've been able to do with 5G is have a 4k drone follow the lead runner, live streaming all the way to the top of the mountain broadcasting live back at the base. And not being able to follow a runner up to the top of a mountain with zero latency internet access is a thing you go, "Oh, that's what's going to change."

**Tim:** What strikes me about is that you're now no longer able to edit it. That changes the production flow in the sense that live streaming is live within a second or two at most. How do you do- How is it directed? Do you control that experience in the same way that used to?

**Caron:** Before pre-record, television was live. You know? We're kind of going back.

**Tim:** When was that? When do you think the bulk of TV switched over from being live to being recorded? Is that the '60s?

**Caron:** I'm not sure when. I don't know. Because there's videotapes of the Doctor Who stuff, some of them got lost and things got recorded over but there was some recording. I'm not sure, that's not part of my...

**Tim:** It's interesting, though. I'd really not thought of it like that. But I suppose radio stayed live mostly. No, entirely. I mean, you think about-

**Caron:** Which is podcasts, isn't it? I always thought podcasts was program-on-demand but apparently it's not that. But I like the fact that as an acronym, program-on-demand as opposed to live radio really came to it into its own. But yeah, it's a different process. I mean, news have different programs that are live and TV programs that end up being live. They do have a gallery of 30-40 people are supporting it, but there's always one person calling the show. It's the same show-caller that you have in live theatre of someone saying, "Let's go to camera two," and it goes to camera two. And then they go, "Okay, we're gonna go to next camera." And they already have it in their head, they know where they're cutting to. So you're seeing it in a real-time version of what they'd already edited in their head. I guess. [laughs]

**Tim:** Interesting. I'd really never thought about the practicalities of that. That's fascinating. So, where do we think- You know, we've been talking about kind of how things have evolved over the last few years and with some emphasis on the kind of sudden change that the pandemic's brought us. But how much of that is going to stick? And what do you think, does any of it act as a building block for the next five years or is it all gonna kind of settle again?

**Caron:** Different industries are recovering at different paces and I think the corporate events industry is really trying to find its feet and find out how it moves back. At the beginning of COVID, there was the whole pivot to digital and then the inevitability was well, at some point you're going to pivot back to physical. But some of these industries that existed before COVID, they were so heavy and they were so rigid and controlled, and had a lot of moving parts and a lot of engaged people that they come out of COVID finding that it's not really practical. And I think there's a certain amount of realism that's been introduced. I definitely attended events before COVID that did not have as many people attending as the social media made out, you know? And I think a lot of people believe their own hype, and now they're coming back to physical events. It's hard to build an audience. It is hard to get people through a door. Especially if it's not like a work gig where everybody's been told to turn up. I think people want to go back to physical and there's a- And people should go back to physical, because we are physical entities. No matter whether we exist in digital or whether we decide to exist in the virtual, our physical body and our health still needs to be looked after. Unless you plug yourself into a drip and are on some kind of weird treadmill, you know, matrix-like. We do have to look after our own external. Also, the resolution of the real world is phenomenal.

**Tim:** We haven't- The smell-o-vision hasn't happened yet.

**Caron:** Yeah, the five senses. But yeah, what's going to change I think there's going to be a mix. I think those companies that are really embedded in accessibility are going to hold on to the notion of incorporating digital. But I think people still hold this- I think the notion of hybrid was always a myth. When your audience is digital, they're focused, and you want to give them digital content. If your audience is physical, they are present on the ground and they need to be looked after as a physical audience. And both audiences might exist to give you revenue for your event, but those two audiences might not care whether they have to interact or not. And that's fine. If physical audiences interact with physical audiences, you've got that event running. But you're layering and augmenting your events now to have different layers.

And just like some of the glasses and looking through your phone at augmented content, audiences are looking for that augmented experience. If they can go physically, they'll go, "Oh, yeah. I'm gonna go. What's the logistics of that? Okay, I've got travel, I've got accommodation. But is that enough to pay off?" And if people do spend that accommodation and they get down there and experience is bad, goodness help people because they're going to be really opinionated about whether they've wasted their time. Whereas physical and digital people are reluctant to pay if they're not already assured of the quality they're going to get. People don't want to pay for something they don't know what they're going to get. But there is revenue there and I think that's going forward with the cost of living crisis with things be more expensive. If you are an events organizer or you're a theatre producer or you're a venue, the biggest question is; can we feed, clothe our staff? Can we gather enough money to continue our business model? You know, businesses need money to survive and plan for a strategy. So I think digital that works-- and a lot of people have had a lot of success-- in terms of business strategy now that some of the people who know how digital works, it just makes sense to include business digital into your revenue stream.

**Tim:** And run them in parallel with a physical event either actually the same event or a comparable event.

**Caron:** Yeah. And deciding whether you choose to do it or not. It's better to do a digital event and do it well than to invite a few people and not really pay attention to and it falls flat. I have come across some physical events; one, I'm going to the Immersive Experience Summit on the 31st of May. They have made a distinct decision not to offer a digital option. It's just physical option. All of immersive experiences, I am going to go down there because there's the exhibitors on the ground, there's going to be installations for me to talk to the exhibitors about the technology that they're using. So there will be on-the-ground immersive experiences, but the extended remote observational experience is not in this package.

**Tim:** That's interesting.

**Caron:** And it doesn't have a cost. And I think people who want to offer a digital package, you're either offering it because you want to provide access. Either the ticket holders pay for that. And it may just be a host, and it may be the basic video basic audio with a decent host which you can do for a thousand pounds. Or whether you want it to be integrated with your documentation and your capture for archive. Can you slot the two together?

**Tim:** Interesting. It sounds to me like there hasn't been a kind of breakout moment of a thing that you feel is going to totally stick and is going to change. It's more of an evolution than a sudden like, "This!" I mean, we've had the Zoom burst but you haven't seen the equivalent thing for AR that-

**Caron:** I think it's more AR is here in a way, and VR is here more in a way than it was first time round. My first experience of virtual reality was in the late '90s with Legend Quest and Dactyl, which was you stood in an electromagnetic U-ring with a great big headset on and you could bash around with a sword. That kind of died within five to 10 years in terms of entering the mainstream. I think things have been around, and as I've looked back on VR, I can see people have continued to push that arena all the time. It never went away, but it wasn't in the mainstream. And when the Oculus Quest came out, that was where I felt I was about to enter VR deja vu. And it's continued to start entering the mainstream. I think the gaming component with VR has given it traction in the mainstream world with the younger generation than the old, static, only-three-people-could-do-it-at-once-but-hey-wasn't-it-cool? So I think technology has made things smaller and more scalable quicker.

**Tim:** Okay, interesting. So, what we try and do with the podcast is if there's anything you think you've mentioned in there that we can generate a link, you can put some links, I'll put them into the show notes. Or any other kind of things of that ilk that need to go into the page so people can read up on them later. I mean, interesting experiments you know about or anything like that. Drop me an email and let me have those, and I'll put them up when I put the podcast together.

**Caron:** Yeah.

**Tim:** It's really quite revealing thinking about all this stuff and seeing how it has changed, but maybe not quite as much as I thought it had. Because a lot of it is kind of the same stuff again or kind of turning around again. Is there any other things you think we've missed in the conversation that people have to know about, or we kind of covered most of it?

**Caron:** I think the only thing really is people who are very tech future need to consider built-in obsolescence and think about that as a thing. I always resist updating to the latest technology, partly sometimes because financially I can't always afford it, but I also have always tried to rein back my technology to be the same as the audience around me. If I'm struggling to access and I have to upgrade, the question then becomes, what implication does that have on your mainstream audience? And we've got a lot of that going on at the moment that if you run ahead with tech as a [inaudible 01:03:40] technology and a geek that likes playing with new shiny toys, you can get lost in the shiny and forget a little bit just how far in front of everyone else you are. And I think it's important to maintain that perspective.

**Tim:** I think that's a really good place to end it. Thank you so much, I think that's a thing for people to really keep in their heads. Thank you for your time, I do appreciate it. And for those of you listening, as I said at the beginning, I strongly encourage you to like and comment and all of the usual things, but definitely tell your friends about our podcast because, you know, that's where we get listeners from. So until the next time, thank you very much for listening.