



PHOTO: SORA MEDIA

SORA MEDIA

Finding a real market for VR

Content creators have to continuously look for new ways to tell stories. For Sora Media, this meant taking a leap into VR. **BY LISAYANI KRIWANGKO**

FOR Sora Media, producing virtual reality (VR) films is a very real business today.

But when the production house was founded in 2014, it dealt with a far more concrete subject matter: documentaries.

At the time, founders Kelly Lin and Ericson Gangoso had already worked in media companies for 10 and 15 years respectively, and were looking for more creative freedom.

“We’re each a bit of a rebel, that’s why we love to challenge ourselves,” said Mr Gangoso.

In 2014, the two started Sora House, focusing on creating historical and crime investigation documentaries for international broadcast cable channels A&E Networks’ History Channel and Crime & Investigation Asia.

Over the years, the company branched out into different media products, such as advertisements and digital content for corporations.

As its repertoire expanded, it eventually re-branded itself as Sora Media in 2017.

One of the new media types it explored was VR.

Initially, the founders were sceptical about VR, thinking that it might be “another gimmick like 3D”.

But after they saw that Google, Facebook and Hulu, among many others, were delving into VR, they felt that it would become big in the years to come.

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Though previously interested in producing VR

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content, Sora Media only began doing so in 2017, upon taking part in an initiative by the Info-communications Media Development Authority (IMDA).

The scheme brought together companies with VR capabilities and narrative content creators to tell stories through VR. IMDA matched Sora Media with VizioFly and Discovery Networks Asia-Pacific to create a mini series titled Dangerous Jobs.

Set to launch in September 2018, the mini series will be one of Asia’s first videos to premiere to a global audience on Discovery’s VR app.

Its two episodes tell the story of people with some of the most dangerous jobs in the world, namely sulphur miners and motocross stuntmen.

Many VR companies, including VizioFly, had previously only used the technology to create real estate, health, or training videos.

In contrast, shooting Dangerous Jobs involved experimentation and bringing cameras to unconventional places.

For example, before the team shot a scene of a character climbing a mountain, they mounted the camera on a helmet and walked around Fort Canning Park to test the weight and comfort level of the camera, to ensure the scene could be shot properly.

“It’s about being able to tell a story that someone can experience,” says Ms Lin.

“With the dangerous jobs, you’re essentially putting someone in someone’s shoes in a place or situation you wouldn’t normally go into. It (VR) helps people connect with that person’s story much more.”

DELVING INTO VR

Despite Sora Media’s extensive experience in the media industry, VR is still a challenging area to explore.

“In reality, developing and shooting VR content turned all the skills and rules that we had before on their head,” says Ms Lin.

Traditional 2D movies have quick cuts and close-ups to help set the mood of a story, but such features

are not applicable to VR. “It requires us to rethink how we can tell stories.”

Being one of the first movers in this field means that the company does not have much background information to draw upon, she adds.

“Basically you can’t Google how to film VR, there’s really nothing there.”

Each VR camera has its own set of parameters, such as the minimum distance from an object or the width of the image it can film, which can only be discovered after a period of trial and error.

This challenge was less profound when Sora Media worked with VizioFly, because VizioFly already had filming equipment with which it was familiar.

But Sora Media has since gone solo, acquiring its own VR equipment and working on a VR documentary about environmental waste. The movie will be released on free-to-air platforms such as YouTube or Vimeo and submitted to VR film festivals.

Unlike traditional films, VR movies allow viewers to choose where to look and which objects to focus on, meaning that the audience experience can vary greatly. “Factors as simple as scene duration can also affect viewer satisfaction. Some people will say it’s too short or it’s too long so we need to find that Goldilocks area where everyone is happy,” says Mr Gangoso.

To do this, during the editing periods, the video team often have staff from other departments watch the movie and give feedback.

To take its efforts a step further, Sora Media is also planning to collaborate with a company in the United States, which uses heat-mapping technology to track where viewers are looking.

Such information can guide video editors to place the most attention-grabbing part of the filmed landscapes at the centre of each scene.

KEEPING IT REAL

While focusing on creating content, Sora Media is also collaborating with other organisations to broaden its reach and share their capabilities.

It is currently working with the Ministry of Education to create VR content.

Separately, Sora Media also plans to develop a mobile application with 3D, animated, VR educational content for children, making it more interactive with a “choose your own adventure” feature, and is in early stage discussions with Mediacorp’s Mediapreneur Incubation Programme to do so. “This generation of kids, I think, will be the ones growing up in VR, so it will become sort of normal for them to learn in VR,” says Ms Lin.

Younger generations are not just potential audiences, but also potential creators. Sora Media is looking to



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partner educational institutions such as polytechnics and universities for an internship programme.

As many of Sora Media’s advertising clients are targeting younger generations, these young interns will also give the company insights into their demographic.

Students do not have to be very tech savvy to join as interns. On the contrary, Ms Lin and Mr Gangoso are looking for creative minds who are willing to learn about VR technology, because they want to focus on the storytelling aspect of their content.

“If it’s a tech person, to change their mindset is so different from going to someone with the background (creative) mindset that we want and saying ‘Here’s a new tool, you can learn how to use this,’ says Ms Lin.

Even while refining their VR skills, the founders have not neglected their original craft of movie-making.

IMPROVING THEIR SKILLS

They scour camera exhibitions for new technologies which they can adopt, and attend conferences overseas where they can learn from pioneers in the industry. The two also tap online learning platforms such as Uдеми and Masterclass to learn from some of the best names in cinematography, such as Ron Howard and Aaron Sorkin.

With the prevalence of online resources, Singapore-based filmmakers have no excuse for not improving their skills, says Mr Gangoso: “Some of the online learning should hinder you from saying ‘Oh, this place doesn’t have the best cinematography,’ or ‘It doesn’t have lessons,’ or ‘I cannot learn something because they don’t offer it here.’ Right now, because of this online thing, you can learn anything.”

As part of Sora Media’s philosophy of never being complacent, the two also conscientiously consume everything from television shows to YouTube videos and ads to identify media trends.

“You have to be open. You have to keep up with what’s going on, what’s new, and then you have to adapt your style also,” says Ms Lin.

VR may have been a huge leap forward, but Sora Media’s journey into the future of media is far from over.

New angles on the film industry

WITH the rapid development of technology, once-complicated techniques are no longer flights of fancy for smaller filmmakers.

Sora Media co-founder Ericson Gangoso, 35, came to Singapore in 2010 as a video editor, having previously worked in multimedia production in the Philippines.

In those early years, when a high-angle shot was required, the team had to rent out a helicopter and attach a massive gimbal or supporting frame for the camera, which cost a few thousand dollars in total.

Later, after unmanned aerial vehicles or drones came onto the scene, helicopters were no longer required. But companies still needed to obtain a permit from the Land Transport Authority and hire a person with a pilot licence to fly these drones.

“But now ... every YouTube video has drones,” notes Mr Gangoso.

The story is the same for slow motion cameras, which were very costly in the past but are now a common feature in consumer smartphones.

“The technology is so fast, you need to up your game. It’s not just knowing how to frame and to focus, but you also need to change your skills,” says Mr Gangoso.

On one hand, the accessibility and convenience of these features empower individuals to create professional-looking videos independently.

Yet this also drives down the value of the footage: drone and slow-motion shots are no longer special.

As a result, content creators have to continuously look for new ways to differentiate themselves from others in the industry. For Sora Media, this meant taking a leap into VR.

Yet VR cameras, too, are advancing speedily. In 2016, companies working on VR projects had to use six GoPro cameras to capture scenery from varying angles. But in 2017, a company released a camera which uses “stitching” technology to create images similar to what previously required six GoPros to capture.

According to fellow co-founder Kelly Lin, 31, the

VR industry is in a “chicken and egg situation”.

Some say consumer demand for VR content will drive companies to produce it. Others think companies should start producing more VR content to get consumers interested.

Sora Media takes the latter approach. Ms Lin says: “We produce content to give examples of how interesting VR can be.”

Whether driven by demand or supply, the team is optimistic that VR will become increasingly popular.

“Industry experts predicted that it would be as ubiquitous as someone having a mobile phone in 2022. It’s not going to replace a mobile phone, but the same way people have a phone and an iPad (now), people would walk around with a phone, iPad and VR (headsets),” she says.

Mr Gangoso expects VR to be consumed mostly by the younger generations, and for more than just film-watching purposes.

“Because VR is more interactive, it would be great with games – you can kill zombies or become a pirate.”

He believes the film industry is also moving towards interactivity, citing the example of companies such as Leica and Google which have started developing “6D” cameras to create interactive movies.

With such movies, the audience can “move around” an object on the screen, looking at it from varying angles. They can also move “towards or away” from the object, with the image changing accordingly.

This is different from current VR, which pins the audience at the centre of a scene. With VR, the audience can turn around to see an object behind them, but they cannot walk around to view the object from another angle.

As technology evolves, Sora Media, too, must constantly change how it looks at the world.

Sums up Mr Gangoso: “The way we run our company has to be adaptable and flexible, because things like technology and the way people consume media changes all the time.”