

JAKE SALLY WANTS TO AUGMENT YOUR REALITY

THE EMMY-NOMINATED, AWARD-WINNING PRODUCER IS AN XR INDUSTRY LEADER WHO IS DETERMINED TO BRING AUGMENTED REALITY TO THE MASSES THROUGH A MOBILE VIDEO GAME.

WRITTEN BY DARON JAMES

Jake Sally is infatuated with augmented reality (AR). The executive producer of the miniseries *The Messy Truth* in VR with Brie Larson and former head of development at RYOT—Verizon Media’s branded content studio—Sally is the chief operating officer of Jadu. The company launched in 2000 and has since evolved from creating shareable social holograms to producing one of the most immersive, next-gen multiplayer AR fighting games for mobile devices.

In his career, Sally has produced more than 35 different extended reality (XR) experiences. XR is an umbrella term for augmented reality, virtual reality (VR) and mixed reality (MR). His first major project, *Terminal 3*, was an interactive documentary that allowed viewers to determine the fate of airline passengers entering the U.S. He followed the effort with festival favorite *A Jester’s Tale*, a VR experience recreating Martin Luther King’s march on Washington for *Time* magazine, and a holographic concert for the band Palaye Royale called *Curse of Calypso*, allowing fans to listen to music and interact with the rock stars.

With Jadu, Sally is fixated on scaling the community while also producing the game, pitching potential investors and overseeing a thriving tech company. “We have a team of 35 AR and VR experts, and now that the tech stack in your phone is capable of delivering a high-end AR experience, we are building a scaled mobile game.” The downloadable app (iOS or Android) is akin to iconic games like *Street Fighter* and *Mortal Kombat*. But what separates Jadu is that players can use avatars to combat each other in different parts of the world. “You can be in Tokyo, I can be in Denver, and we can have a shared AR experience,” says Sally.

The biggest hurdle in building a successful XR company has been user adoption. “There’s a fundamental fear people have of new technology, but once you get them doing the experience, all of that changes,” Sally says. “Even with



AR headsets like the Microsoft HoloLens that has won a lot of awards, at the end of the day, you are showing it to more or less the same people who at most are paying a ticket price. If you can tell people to go to their app store and download a game, and in 30 seconds you're in, that's great."

The ability to download Jadu from an app store and play without a specialized headset are keys to the company's growth. But the niche also puts Jadu in competition with any video game on any platform. "When you're making something on AR, you have to ask why this is a better game in augmented reality than a traditional mobile game," says Sally. "Because you are asking more of people, we focus on speed of iteration."

The Jadu team has built a flexible production system that allows it to shift toward emerging player behavior, unlike traditional studio games that are created and released with limited updates, or none at all.

Jadu finds itself in a sweet spot. It's more than sitting on your couch playing Farmville, but it's less than putting on a headset and moving the coffee table. For player behavior on mobile devices, Sally finds that "shorter AR sessions are perfect." Jadu players can get into quick sparring matches with their friends that are not ultratechnical but still create a high-intensity, adrenaline-pumping moment that brings a lot of novelty to everyday life.

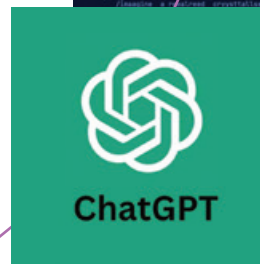
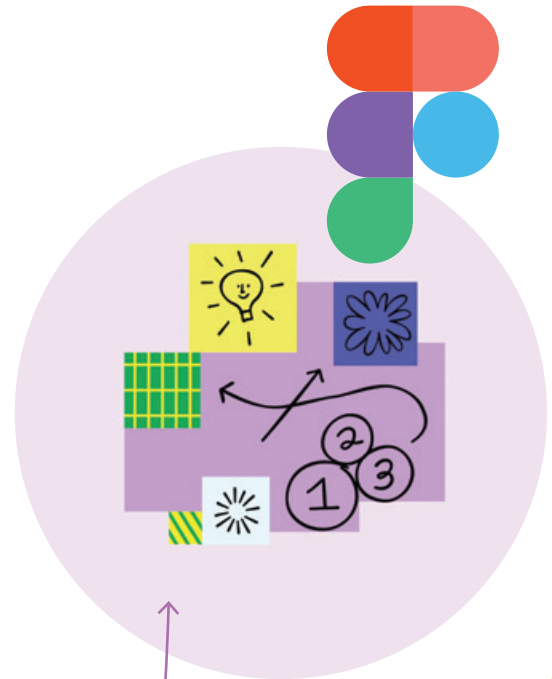
From a community outreach standpoint, Jadu has created grant programs where people interested can build IP with Jadu to expand the ecosystem. "It's been a fun community engagement tool. A lot of traditional games don't take that approach," says Sally. Community feedback and implementation is an area where Jadu continues to thrive.

Sally admits that the project never ends, and that it "may sound fun or horrible, (depending on) whoever you are." With Jadu, they want to take AR to the mass market where every single person can have the same "wow" experience on their phone.

"The best quote I have gotten the last couple of years from a player is it's the first time their phone felt magical," says Sally. "That's the crux of it. Jadu means 'magic' in Urdu, which is very poignant for us."

TECH STACK

"For large file storage we use Google Workspace and for project management we use Asana pretty religiously, but it only works if everyone commits to it. For complex problem-solving, we use Figma,



and for brainstorming sessions, we use FigJam, which is one of their subtools. I am design-illiterate, so I think Figma has the easiest ability to make something look really good. If you like Google Slides, Figma is a better version of it with no constraints.”

AI INTEGRATION

“We have been using ChatGPT and Midjourney to streamline teams. For someone who is not creative, Midjourney is unparalleled in being able to quickly get everyone to dream the same dream. If we need to do something with one of our fighters, like a cosmetic breakdown of the look and feel of it, we’ll put together variations using Midjourney. It gets everyone marching to the same beat before we move into a more formal production process.” (In layman’s terms, Midjourney is an AI-based program that generates images based on what a user inputs. Here it’s being used like storyboards, in a sense, allowing the team to visualize concepts faster.)



WINDING DOWN

“I play a lot of video games. *The Last of Us* is my favorite game of all time. I find that the ability to step out while still doing something moderately active and social refills my cup.”

FUTURE THOUGHT

“It’s a bit of a fool’s errand to predict the future of the XR space. A lot of things are colliding simultaneously. We have 5G networks, pixel streaming to mobile is viable, LIDAR is being built into the multiple phone generations, and the raw processing power of mobile devices has gotten so much better. Not to mention machine learning and computer vision is really getting robust. Our tech is built around a remote multiplayer, so you and I can do a shared game experience with our avatars. Most AR is first-person, where you are the character, but we took a traditional third-person approach—you are manipulating an avatar in space. It is a viable and an enjoyable experience. Long term, we want millions of people to find magic in the phone in their pocket. I think that’s a very achievable goal, especially looking at the arc of where the tech is at now.” ■

