J. MILES DALE REVELS IN THE PROCESS OF DISCOVERY

A SELF-DESCRIBED LOW–TECH GUY STRETCHES NEW MUSCLES BY HELPING CREATE IMMERSIVE REALITIES, AND IS ENCHANTED ANEW BY DISNEY’S ANIMATION LEGACY.

WRITTEN BY STEVE CHAGOLLAN

J

Miles Dale, the producer best known for his work with Guillermo del Toro on such features as Nightmare Alley (2021) and PGA and Oscar Best Picture winner The Shape of Water (2017), admits he’s low-tech—even though he’s the creative team leader behind the deeply technical Disney Animation Immersive Experience.

“I make movies and TV shows for theaters and people at home,” he says. But when he saw the immersive Carney y Arena installation from the Mexican-born director Alejandro González Iñárritu, which used VR headsets to approximate the treacherous experience of undocumented migrants crossing the border from Mexico into the U.S., it amounted to a game changer. “I had done some headset stuff before, but that’s the thing that got me into a very emotional place,” he recalls.

Fast-forward a couple years: A friend had introduced Dale to Corey Ross, president of Lighthouse Immersive, which had staged the wildly popular Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience exhibit.

“He had done Van Gogh and he was in the process of doing Frida Kahlo,” recalls Dale. “But he felt it was time to expand beyond the fine arts and was looking to do something more narrative.” Dale mentioned Disney, since it now owned the two del Toro theatrical releases he had produced for Fox. “I guess he had already tried to make some inroads there and hadn’t been able to.”

So Dale did what producers do: He broke the logjam, reaching out to Alice Taylor, VP of Disney’s StudioLAB, which drives technical innovation in support of the creative process. Taylor helped open further doors for him up the food chain. The timing turned out to be perfect, since post on Nightmare Alley had just been completed, and shooting on Guillermo del Toro’s Cabinet of Curiosities, an anthology series for Netflix, was now behind him. (Del Toro and Dale’s next feature is Frankenstein, which is now in prep for a January 2024 start.) But more importantly, 2023 represented the 100th anniversary of Disney.

“They had been thinking about doing something to honor the animators—everything that had come since Steamboat Willy,” says Dale. “They realized Lighthouse Immersive was an industry leader. And yep, they’d like to do it, which was amazing to me because Disney doesn’t take partners lightly. It’s a very high creative bar in terms of the magic they create.”

Dale was tapped as creative producer of the resulting 53-minute show, the Disney Animation Immersive Experience, which incorporates scenes from 45 animated features, 14 memorable songs, sketches by Disney’s most acclaimed artists and drawing tables for the kids. The exhibit launched
projectors. They have created an immersive King Tut show, says Dale. "They did a lot of the technical stuff," says Dale. "They are experts in immersive entertainment."

"And here I had asked more than normal. I first asked those questions, and then they gave me the crash course for dummies: How does it work? What's an MBox Pro server?"

"By nature I ask a lot of questions," he says, "because it was so multigenerational. You know, my mother loves Snow White and Pinocchio. And I like The Jungle Book and Dalmatians, and my kids like The Lion King and The Little Mermaid. And their kids, when they have them, will like Encants."

Those who have seen the traveling Van Gogh show know that it’s a living, breathing, interactive, 360-degree experience that allows the viewer to roam freely while being inundated by sights and sounds, but without goggles. Dale wanted to push it further, incorporating the five senses and triggering more interactive features by using things like wristbands with sensors.

"We wanted the floors to be interactive," he says. "When you walked along the floor during Encants, the lava would spread and create a trail of your own pixie dust. When you walked along the floor, if it was during Tinker Bell, you would create a wake. Or during Fantasia 2000, you would see walls and floors feel like one, and the corners of the room look seamless."

"It’s just really the discovery process for me," he says, "and stretching new muscles in a new medium that’s exciting. Because new mediums don’t come along that often."

"Walt Disney would love this show because he was always at the forefront of whatever innovation was available to him," he adds. "I think he would have been tickled by this kind of new medium and the way it can bring people together to share that Disney magic."

Compared to all the technical wizardry on this project that has enveloped Dale’s life over the past year, his day-to-day needs as a producer are relatively simple. In his words:

### THE ESSENTIALS

Well, my assistant, Ashley Cowie, for sure. She keeps me on schedule, and is more technical than I. And as boring as it sounds, the keys for me are my laptop, my phone, my headset and my notebook. Plus various apps, of course.

### MULTITASKING HEADPHONES

My new fun headset is called OpenBun Pro by Shokz. It’s great because it isn’t in my ears; it goes right onto the side of my head. It’s really opened things up for me because you can do two things at once. You’re aware of your surroundings and what’s going on around you.

And they’re voice-controlled. I can say, “Turn it up, turn it down, turn it off.” If you’re really wanting to dig in, you can do two things at once. You’re aware of your surround ings. And they’re voice-controlled. I can say, “Turn it up, turn it down, turn it off.”

If you’re really wanting to dig in, you can do two things at once. You’re aware of your surroundings. And they’re voice-controlled. I can say, “Turn it up, turn it down, turn it off.”

### ACCESSING DAILIES

There’s some software I use to watch dailies that makes my life easier now. It’s QTAF. I can be anywhere and watch dailies, so it gives me a little freedom. For example, I was exec producer on Sex/Life, which ran for two seasons on Netflix. I wasn’t around much because the showrunner had a great handle on it. I was also busy as co-showrunner on Cabinet of Curiosities. Being an anthology series, it was phenomenally difficult and time-consuming, so I was able to watch (Sex/Life) dailies on QTAF, and that made life easier.

### PAD & PEN

I still take notes in a book. I’m decidedly old-school, as I see my friends and my colleagues and even my wife scribble in their iPads.

### REMOTE MEETINGS

A lot of unnecessary travel has been eliminated for me via Zoom. It’s amazing how before COVID, nobody had even heard the word “Zoom.” Then all of a sudden, it became an indispensable part of your life. Now my day is linked up with Zooms, which is such an incredible time-saver for me.

### INSTANT MESSAGING

Typically, the way I do things like WhatsApp and Telegram increase my productivity. My brother turned me on to Telegram. It’s a little nimbler than texting in certain cases, and it lets people know what you picked up. But I can’t migrate every week to something new. You’ve got people who are on text; you’ve got people who are on WhatsApp; you’ve got people who are on Telegram. Can we all just pick one? Play rock, paper, scissors for the winner?

### KEEPING PENRY

I’m heavily caffeinated. The office machine that keeps me going at work is a Lavazza. I was introduced to it at the Italian Canadian Film Festival. As soon as I saw how versatile it was I knew I had to get one immediately. Total winner, and perks me up when I need it!

### KEEPING TRACK

I definitely use that little Apple thing that keeps you from losing things. It’s called an AirTag. Sometimes I’m in a hurry, so it’s gone from “find my laptop” or “find my iPhone” to “find my golf clubs,” and “find my knapsack,” which I left in a rental car. It had everything in it.