

AN INNOVATOR'S QUIVER

VICTORIA BOUSIS CALLS ON ANALOG, DIGITAL, AND CAFFEINATED TOOLS TO CREATE IN HER VR/VX WORLD.

WRITTEN BY CELINE YU

In the ever-evolving landscape of technology and storytelling, few figures have made as impactful and soulful a debut as Victoria Bousis.

Renowned for her groundbreaking direction of the virtual reality film *Stay Alive, My Son*, Bousis and producers like her are not only changing the way we consume content, but redefining the essence of storytelling. The MIT graduate's passion for virtual and extended reality (VR/XR) immersive experiences has earned her a 2023 PGA Innovation Award.

Bousis' journey into the realm of VR/XR was ignited by a 2015 TED Talk by Chris Milk. The potential of VR as an "empathy machine" resonated with her amid the Syrian refugee crisis. Witnessing a "diminishing sense of empathy, sensitivity and compassion in the world toward the displaced and silenced," Bousis felt compelled to act. "It was an epiphany for me," she says.

This awakening fueled Bousis' exploration of the transformative capacity of experiential filmmaking, which she saw as a way of fostering a more empathetic future using the power of compassion-action virtual reality, or Compaction VR. Today, her content company UME Studios offers creative services in virtual reality, augmented reality, virtual production, brand experiences, Metaverse events and Web3.

For Bousis, a former prosecutor, a call for action is innate, bridging her transition from a career in law to media creation. "While my tenure as a prosecutor was deeply fulfilling, I found that its impact was often confined by geographical and political constraints," she says. Bousis saw an opportunity to break free from those limitations and amplify the narratives of ordinary yet remarkable individuals through media creation.

To Bousis, law and filmmaking share more similarities than one might guess. "My background honed my abilities as an orator, writer and storyteller," she says. "It made



me adept at distilling complex information for a diverse array of audiences." During her law career, an audience may have comprised a judge, a jury, the defense or witnesses. Now it might include investors, producers, talent, agents, crew and viewers.

The film that earned Bousis and her nine-member team the PGA Innovation Award showcased technological breakthroughs in creating the first-ever high-fidelity, interactive digital humans. To achieve this, the team had to develop a new pipeline while being highly intentional about the textures, polygons and skeletons of characters to maintain a high frame rate in VR.

Based on a memoir by Pin Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son* ventured into the Cambodian war and genocide while aiming to create a new genre—somewhere between cinema and gaming. In doing so, Bousis invited audiences to step into the shoes of a hero: Yathay, a father forced to abandon his son in the hope of a better life for him while Yathay becomes a refugee seeking help from international communities to unify his family. "Story is the driving force, while game mechanics are secondary," Bousis says.

To Bousis, gaming is not mere entertainment, but a deliberate intention and catalyst for societal evolution,

combining pleasure with purpose and profitability. "This principle of elevated content is universal, applicable to films, series, theater, literature—any medium that we absorb," she says. For producers venturing into XR experiences and narrative gaming, Bousis emphasizes the importance of aligning the story with the medium, advising that a narrative should only be adapted into an XR experience if immersion and interactivity will enhance it. "Otherwise, it lacks authenticity and effectiveness," she says.

Once the material is adapted, preproduction and prototyping are crucial. "In the XR realm, the intricate balance of gameplay and narrative must be meticulously calibrated from the early stages of prototyping," Bousis explains. "There's no fallback of 'fixing it in postproduction' as there is in film."

The success of *Stay Alive, My Son* establishes a blueprint that Bousis intends to replicate to drive a movement at UME Studio. With a strategic focus on adapting franchisable IPs and existing indie film projects, she aims to position the studio as an industry leader.

In the dynamic intersection of technology, narrative art and social impact, Bousis has emerged as a visionary storyteller who bridges the gaps between traditional filmmaking and immersive experiences. In Bousis' hands, the tools of her trade are not just instruments, but doorways for creativity and human connection. These are some of those tools:

PEN AND PAPER

Bousis' haggard Moleskine notebook accompanies her everywhere she goes. At heart, she is a traditional geek who relishes putting pen to paper, jotting down daily tasks and mental meanderings—lists, words, diagrams, pictures, doodles—in her notebook. "There's a certain ritual for me in putting pen to paper as I sketch out my initial thoughts and visuals."

MARKERS AND WHITEBOARD

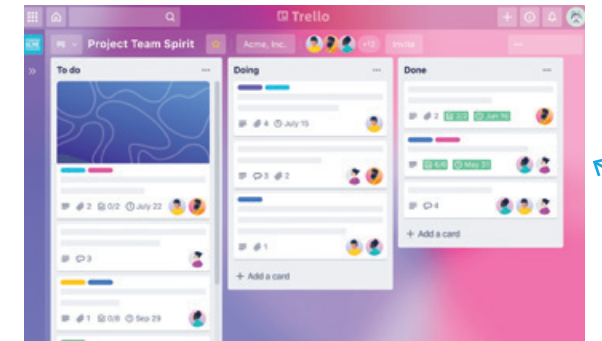
"My life would be incomplete without my whiteboard," Bousis states. Whiteboards are bolted in Bousis' homes in Los Angeles, in Athens and in her grandparents' village of Nestani in southern Greece. They act as multiuse mega canvases for everything from UME teamwide communications to some of Bousis' monthly and yearly goals. "There's



a tangible necessity for me to physically interact with the words and images—to feel their presence and let them consume the space around me, just as they swirl through my thoughts—before they transition into and are committed digitally."

STYLUS AND IPAD

Bousis' iPad and stylus pen are must-haves for providing quick feedback on 3D assets. "Visual support is often more productive than words."

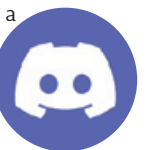


TRELLO

"The project management tool Trello is perfect for managing team tasks during production or while traveling," Bousis says. Trello provides teams with the tools to brainstorm, plan, execute, and commemorate their collective work in a collaborative, efficient and well-organized manner.

DISCORD

The social platform Discord offers customers different modes of communication that are indispensable for Bousis. Through voice or video calls, text messaging, or media/file transfers, "Discord maintains clear, organized communication with the team across various projects, with subject-specific channels for each aspect of a project's life cycle."



APPLE VISION PRO HEADSET

"The prospect of exploring the Apple Pro headset's capabilities excites me," Bousis says. "The ability to connect intelligible and personalized content that not only reaches across product lines but also seamlessly connects spatial computing to our physical space blows my mind."



META QUEST 3

Bousis was inspired by a recent experience with Meta Quest 3, the newest release to the Quest series. "It's a significant advancement over its predecessor, offering enhanced resolution, augmented processing capabilities and a wider canvas for creative expression," she says. "The advent of pixel streaming technology promises a severing from the wires, reduces the hardware's bulk and provides access to high-quality content for a broader audience."



ICED COFFEE

Loads. Of. It. "It's the essential fuel to endure the endless hours required to create while juggling roles as a director, writer, producer and founder of UME Studios." ■



1 Hand guides player from base through hole

2 Player lands on a makeshift bridge, looking up at the temple, lamps are off

3 Player picks up photo frame in which family message is playing - Temple decays further, water turns red, streetlamps turn on

4 Encrusted into the walls of rock - the face of an apt building is visible - Rocks, vines, decay, trinkets & flowers & objects in window

5 Interior of Apt - vines rock on the ceiling & top of walls. Prison style around museum etc. End scene - Player throws airplane - room fills with clouds/sun & black

6 Ribs, Prison, Jungle, Flight, Landing, Enter Heart as usual

7 Temple is a bit restored, but not quite there yet. Garden soil & veg due to water. Player puts in the last piece into Apptown Shrine -> beam on

8 The vine layer dissolves & reveals gold architecture. Path, rises obstacles & temple is accessible

9

10 Player is able to enter small temple & have a happy memory. Temple interior is restored too

11 Old Thag. kneels over the picture frame as rays of sunlight shine through the window

12 The End credits roll

