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TVB EUROPE

DECEMBER 2024

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VR production company Light Sail VR made a big splash with a unique focus on creative storytelling and performant capacity from OpenDrives' data storage platform

This is the story of how two good friends set about changing the way immersive storytelling is done in the emerging, highly competitive world of virtual reality (VR) with their company, Light Sail VR.

Founded by managing partners Matthew Celia and Robert Watts and based in Los Angeles, Light Sail VR specialises in "story-first" content that prioritises compelling narratives, dynamic characters, and entrancing visuals. Since 2015, the company has been pushing the boundaries of immersive content, working with Lionsgate, Amazon MGM Studios, Paramount, and more. Their projects have immersed audiences in both 180- and 360-degree experiences, spanning genres that include music and concerts such as *Sabrina Carpenter: A VR Concert*, and live-action TV series like Eli Roth's *The Faceless Lady*. But before they found their niche in VR, the two college friends really just wanted to tell better stories together.

The genesis of Light Sail VR

Celia and Watts met as students and shared a passion for film, production, and emerging technology. Their college years laid the foundation for a lasting friendship and professional partnership. After graduation, they pursued different paths in production — Celia in technical and narrative and Watts in content development and business operations — but reunited over a shared vision of telling great stories through technology. Watts, who is also the company's executive producer, was the driving force behind starting Light Sail, and it was he who convinced Celia, the company's creative director, to look into VR as a storytelling medium. But despite being impressed by VR's action, 3D effects, and gaming experiences, the two agreed that there was still something missing: the story itself.

"Everything to me lacked the kind of stories I wanted to see," Celia reveals. "There wasn't a lot of character. There wasn't a lot of emotional resonance, the reason why we should care about content. And since then we've been putting this story-first focus on all of our content. It's not just a job to us. You can teach anybody how to make VR content. It's a lot harder to teach someone how to tell a good story."

Pioneers in 'story-first immersive narratives

For nine years now Celia and Watts have continued to explore all the ways that VR could change the immersive storytelling experience. "We are both very passionate about this as a medium," Celia says. "We are struck with how powerful it can be, the kinds of stories we could tell, and the challenge of birthing a new medium and writing all the rules. For every project that we touch, we are always asking, 'What is this adding to the canon of immersive media?'"

One of Light Sail's first success stories was around Paramount's *Paranormal Activity* movie. After going viral and amassing 10 million views, Watts felt this was proof Light Sail could be a successful commercial production company if they continued to focus on telling immersive, story-first narratives. From there, Light Sail went on to work with Google, slowly building and expanding the company brick by brick.

Light Sail is also eager to teach the world more about VR, along with helping their partners be more successful in using it. According to Watts, "Basically, we've continued that story-first mantra through our company's history. We're always story-driven and always asking, what is the end user getting out of VR?"

"That kind of ethos is really powerful in VR because it's very much an observer medium… you're transporting audiences into this world where there's no screen, nothing separating them from the story," Celia agrees. "VR unlocks a lot of storytelling techniques and different kinds of stories that you can tell," he continues. "The most exciting thing about working in this medium is using technology in service of the story. But I will say this technology is also the single thing that can destroy the story."

A good story needs great characters, great camera design, great writing, and great acting, not a reliance on fancy effects. It's easier

for a bad 2D story to hide behind fancy effects, but with VR there's no hiding if there's no story.

Watts explains that VR storytelling involves educating viewers on how they interact with the cameras, why they interact with the cameras, and how the cameras are placed.

"We want our talent to look at the camera and play to the camera because in VR, the camera is the audience. It's like having a personal one-on-one connection to their fans. So how do we balance creativity with the technological limitations that exist in VR? I would say we actually flip that. We take the technological limitations, and we use that to foster our creativity."

Navigating uncharted waters in technology

With the pair's combined storytelling chops and VR technology expertise, you would think they had everything needed for smooth sailing ahead. But it wasn't so simple. A centralised storage platform to keep Light Sail VR's disparate team efficient, productive, and organised was missing. Their growing success also meant they needed a way to cost-effectively scale and evolve to prepare for choppy and unknown murky waters. "The reality is you can't derive a good story if you can't work. We want to spend less time fighting technology and more time being creative," Celia says. "Because when your technology breaks, when it doesn't work, when it's frustrating, it takes you out of that creative zone."

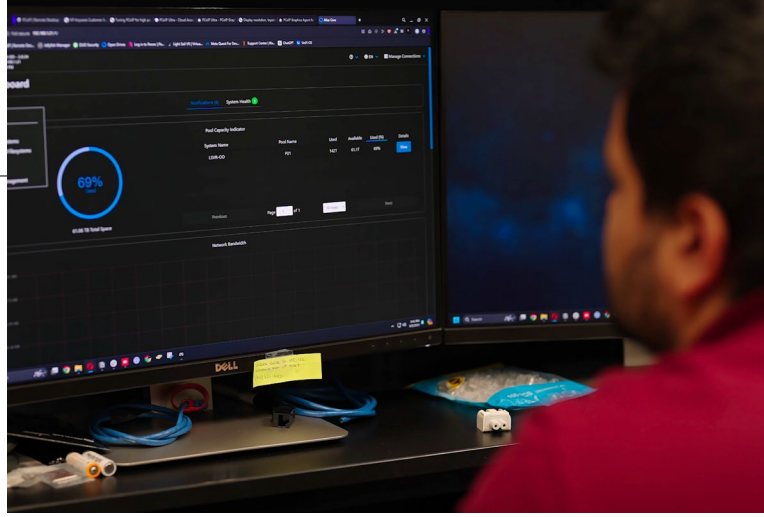
The company set out to find the fastest, most reliable data storage platform available. "And that's what I found in OpenDrives," Celia explains. "I'm so impressed with how fast the system is, and how they continue to invest in the software that makes it grow. I felt like this was a product that was going to scale with us and grow with us and help us reach the next level."

Unleashing the creative storm

Light Sail was first introduced to data storage and workflow solutions provider OpenDrives a few years before putting them to the test for *The Faceless Lady*. With an ultra-tight deadline and a widely distributed team working out of multiple cities and countries, a fast, reliable centralised storage platform was necessary to help the team accomplish the seemingly impossible: deliver more than 300 visual effect shots that were massive in size (8K and 60 frames a second) in less than two months.

Celia's decision to host everything on a central server made it possible to deliver the project in a short amount of time. The team also achieved speed and efficiency by inventing a new process where they could send the VR signal from headquarters back to any remote location and view it in a VR headset without having to plug back into the box.

"Centralising everything is the fastest way to work, and combining it with our NDI remote preview allows artists to utilise their VR headsets to QC their work anywhere in the world," Celia says. "OpenDrives helped us to plug more artists into scale and not worry about copying files, shipping drives, or organising updated versions.



In OpenDrives, Light Sail VR found a centralised storage platform to keep its team efficient, productive, and organised

"It was kind of a miracle, to be quite honest. It was really, really awesome to have that kind of stability, to maintain that real-time playback, to maintain all the exports working, and witness nothing crashing. We had our render farm cooking out shots 24x7 for six weeks. And I don't think we could have done that with any other system today."

Watts adds, "We have tens of terabytes worth of data that we are shipping back and forth daily, and what's nice is OpenDrives enables us to have that all worked into our technology in a very seamless way so that my teams can operate between editing and finishing and post and distribution all in the same server, all, whenever they need."

Light Sail now stores all of its critical, active files on OpenDrives with the system's centralisation fundamental to the company's success.

Light Sail ahead: what's next?

The future of VR is promising, and as content continues to get bigger and heavier, and technology grows more complex, Watts believes storage is going to play an increasingly larger role in the space. VR companies like Light Sail will need data storage and management solutions that help drive efficiency and interoperability as workflows are ever-changing and never the same.

As demand for VR content increases, as evidenced by key players like Meta and Apple heavily investing in the business, Light Sail is already targeting how to support more projects in narrative and episodic television.

According to Celia, "There's very few certainties in life, but one of the most certain things is we will always need more hard drive space because VR projects are enormous. So as we continue to film longer shows and create longer content with more cameras, it means that we're going to have more data to work with. That's going to require us to scale, and one of the greatest things that I love about the OpenDrives system is that it is very easy to scale.

"How we got here, and where we'll end up going is down to our ability to iterate extraordinarily quickly. We couldn't do that without OpenDrives, who understand not only how to build a system for today, but to build a system for the future. I like that, because I'm not going to close up shop in a year. I'm looking forward to the next 10 years of Light Sail VR." ■