



## PROJECT BIRRONGGAI FRENETIC STUDIOS (VIRTUAL REALITY)

*Project Birronggai* is an interactive Virtual Reality storytelling experience that explores a dreamtime narrative unique to each player. Through immersive and engaging narrative, the audience are exposed to Indigenous culture, stories and language. This VR experience is the brainchild of Jeremy Worrall, Joel Davison and Keenan Parker, three young Aboriginal professionals working in the tech industry.



JOEL DAVISON  
Operations



KEENAN PARKER  
Lead Developer



JEREMY WORRALL  
Creative Lead

**Joel Davison** is a Gadigal and Dunghutti man who is passionate about the revitalisation of indigenous languages. He's currently employed at CBA as a Robotics Analyst. Focusing on the concept of marrying language revitalisation with tech to achieve better outcomes for his community.

**Keenan Parker** is a Bundjalung and Torres Strait Islander. For the past 10 years he has developed games, websites and apps, working with Indigenous businesses and organisations. His dream is to create games and experiences using immersive technologies like VR, to better express the concepts behind them and to let the player see a world through a different set of eyes.

**Jeremy Worrall** is a Ngarabal man and a proud member of the Kamilaroi nations, from Emmaville, Armidale. He has a passion for the arts, and specialises in utilising his culture and background to create a bridge into the digital space. His dream is to help bring our culture into the digital art space and show the world the beauty and wisdom of his peoples.

## INTERVIEW



**Angie Abdilla:** So I just wanted to start with a personal introduction to yourselves and an outline of what Frenetic Studios is and what your roles are in the project.

**Joel Davison:** I'm Joel Davison - Gadigal, Eora. My 'day to day' is as a robotics analyst at Commonwealth Bank, however, I'm also heavily involved in the language revitalization of my people's language, the Gadigal language. And that brings me into contact with all kinds of interesting projects, like the one that we're working on at Frenetic Studios.

**Keenan Parker:** I'm Keenan Parker. I am Bundjalung, and Torres Strait and I currently work as a web and app developer at Ngakkan Nyaagu [NGNY] and I'm the lead developer for the project, so the programming side of things.

**Jeremy Worrall:** My name's Jeremy Worrall. I come from the Gamilaroi nation up in Emmaville. I work for Cox Inall Ridgeway at the moment, and also work for Ngakkan Nyaagu as a graphic designer and an animator. Mostly just doing Indigenous art and campaigns like that. I am the, I suppose you call it, the creative lead. I do all the modeling and texturing, and visual sides of things.

**JD:** Frenetic Studios is our passion project. It's our chance to just do what we love to do and work with each to make that happen. I am on the business side of things, so I'm essentially just managing operational risk and making sure that everything

is provided for Jeremy and Keenan to work their magic on this one. And also voice my opinion where maybe it isn't wanted half the time.

**All:** (laughing)

**Josh Harle:** So it sounds like you all come from different professional positions and working on outside projects. So Frenetic Studios is just specific to this project, or you've done other projects that have been your own creative drive out of Frenetic Studios with that?

**JW:** Definitely, just the first project for us as a team. Obviously, we've worked together and Ngakkan Nyaagu, which is at least how I came to know JD and Keenan. But yeah, this is the first major project we've done together outside of work.

**AA:** Can you describe *Project Birronggai*, the features within the virtual space, and what the players are doing within this world?

**JD:** 'Birronggai', in my language, means, in a basic translation to English, belonging to the stars. So the project of the stars, or project belonging to the stars. And the virtual space is essentially a story told through a semi-randomized collection of small scenes that the player participates in. And each of these scenes will expose the player to an element of the Dreamtime, or living in pre-colonial Australia. Each will be accompanied by narration that will impart either some knowledge of the Dreamtime stories that we've



grown up with, or our history, or our languages. Hopefully, if we do it well: all at once. And as the player journeys, it becomes more and more influenced by the Dreaming. And when the player walks away, they will have their own story that was told throughout. It'll be different to the next person's who goes through the experience.

**JH:** So the randomization means that you're creating a new story from the different components where these different components of the story come in and mix in different ways, and therefore, each person will have a completely new reading of the mix that they get from it.

**JD:** Yeah, absolutely. This kind of gameplay was heavily inspired by Game Set which Keenan, Jeremy, and I enjoy. When we were kicking around ideas, we were thinking maybe more of a *Rogue*-like [a randomly generated dungeon game], and that's where the random element came in. I think the random element really stuck. This idea of each player coming away with their own story really stuck when we consider the individualistic nature

of our people pre-colonization. This idea that no one person's journey is the same is something that really appealed to us.

**AA:** I'm intrigued by that, Joel, because at the same time also, an Aboriginal kinship system is very much collective in its organisation. So how do you navigate that when thinking about the way in which your players are going to move through the VR experience?

**JD:** Yeah, absolutely. I think for me, my knowledge of the kinship system isn't as strong as my knowledge of other parts of our culture. In particular, the totemic system. The ways that we constructed these systems, the totemic system, the kinship system, and how those interrelate, are really strong mechanically. They were very clearly designed with each of these mechanics in place to play their certain parts. And that makes a lot of sense to me when you're thinking of ways to create a balanced story for each individual player. For example, totemic system, you might have a family totem, an individual totem, you have a scale, a feather, a plant. And each of these that inform who you are or you're going to be, or the kind of things that you're going to do, and there will be very few people who have the same combination of totems. But they give you a way to relate to other people. So I would say that we took more inspiration from the totemic system, and my understanding of that, than my limited understanding of the kinship system.

**AA:** Have you considered how that's going to work with the direction of your players and the intended experience?

**JD:** Yeah, so at the moment, it's fairly limited, what we've planned. It's fairly limited in that we want people to apply their own meaning to the collection of things that they've experienced. And have that be a way to differentiate that from each other and connect to each other. So we mostly leave that up to play interact, but that might not be enough for what we want to do because you might have someone who comes in alone and experiences it, and leaves thinking that they've experienced the same thing as everyone else, for example.

But one thing that I think Keenan can talk about more than me because I'm not gonna be as hands-on in terms of the design of the mechanics or the development of the mechanics. But we want to be very strong mechanically. Any mechanics that we put into the game and experience to hold their own and be compelling on their own. But we also don't want them to be barriers to entry. We don't want young people or elderly people, or less able people to not be able to enjoy our experience be of certain mechanics that we put in the game. So we are very conscious of the mechanics that we want to put in the game that essentially tells these stories. And that's something that's going to come later on in development after we've already achieved what we

want to achieve from telling the story. Do you have any thoughts on that, Keenan?

**KP:** Yeah, definitely. I think definitely the accessibility and having these mechanics interacting with each scene, not be a barrier to our guests completing the scene and moving on between them. Instead, just letting the player experience each scene, even how they choose to, is a big part of it.

**JH:** Do you have any examples of what type of interactive mechanics these would be?

**JD:** There's one that I love that Jeremy came up with that I definitely wanna make in the game. It's not a part of my Lore, so I haven't grown up with this story, but Jeremy, do you remember that conversation we had about that particular game around the creatures that would come at the player. And you essentially have to look away when you need to look away and look back to something in their tracks.

**JW:** Yeah. I'm in the same position though, because it comes from another mob [tribal group], so it's all up in the air. We'd have to obviously consult with Elders on it, but I suppose the general idea of it, is there is a spiritual entity [ name ]. Essentially, they are these vampiric spirits, if you like, that will sit up in fig trees and wait for travellers to rest under them.

And what they do is they drop down onto the traveller and they have these

little suction cups where they will suck the blood out of travellers. Not so much to kill them, but more to feast on them and keep them tied, so they can keep them there consistently and eventually drain them of life. So whilst that's very dark, we had the idea to turn it into a scenario of almost red light, green light. I suppose you call it the gimmick, but the way to get past the spirit based on Lore is if you're pretending you're dead, if you're playing dead, then they won't bother with you, because obviously if you're dead, then you have no life to offer them.

So the idea for the player, in our first-person perspective you can imagine it, is you'll be sitting under a tree, or you'll find yourself in a place where there are a lot of fig trees. And on your journey, you're prompted to rest by Wugan, the character that's guiding you. You'll rest and you'll notice a bit of rustling in the trees. And essentially, without going on too much about it, you encounter this being and Wugan advises you of what it is, gives you the rundown of the Lore and advises you the only way to get past it is to act like you're dead, but at the same time, you have to get away from the fig tree.

So, the first-person player would essentially be looking up at this vampire as it stares at you maliciously, you would play dead, and keep your body as still as possible. And as you look up at the fig tree, you would see him looking at you. And then he'd lose interest or maybe look at something else, and that's your chance to move.

You just wanna drag yourself forward away from the fig trees as fast as possible whilst watching him, but stop the second he looks at you again. Yeah, I suppose that's one example that we're having a lot of fun with and trying to figure out innovative ways to incorporate that into a game mechanic.



**JD:** Something that we really wanted to talk about is how we research and now, create history, and how we consult with other mobs, and their stories. From a business perspective, we consider anyone who's Lore or language we're involving. We consider our stakeholders if they're a knowledge holder of that Lore or of that language. We have to answer to them just as crucially as we do anyone who's provided funding or technology, or mentorship. That's our responsibility to them. If, at the end of the day, mobs who have this as part of their Lore aren't comfortable with us sharing this, or aren't comfortable with how we've portrayed the spirits, or what they do, or what they look



like, then we're not going to be releasing that to the public until they are comfortable with that.

**AA:** So does that mean, Joel, the culmination of an Australian Aboriginal Lore because you're incorporating a variety of different Aboriginal languages, customs and Dreaming?

**JD:** Yeah. So this actually ties into our distribution plan. We are planning to distribute this through installations and museums, and galleries and schools, mostly because people don't have access to the thousands of dollars of technology required to run these kinds of experiences. We want it to have some sense of longevity. We also wanna tell our story, but we also wanna allow other people to tell their stories through this framework that we're building.

So the plan at the moment is for, this

initial release of this project, is going to be our stories and the Gadigal language specifically. And I don't think we're gonna go too far outside of the stories that are a part of our upbringing and our mobs. But post-release, we want to collaborate with other mobs and let them tell their stories through our platform.

**JH:** Do you want to talk about the two figures that you interact with in the environment?

**JW:** Yeah, these two characters, one of them is obviously traditionally cemented in the Lore, Biame. So he varies, actually, and you can find him in any of the cultures around the area. But essentially, Biame is what they call the Sky God, or the All Father, and he's featured in the game. He's pretty much the first character you encounter in the game.

So basically, you enter this game, what we call the Dreamtime. It's this surrealist environment that mimics Country or the land. But it has stylistic, surreal attributes to it, as well. You're in this vast landscape, and you're prompted to move forward. It's very foggy, very dark, mysterious. There this cinematic spectacle of these two bright eyes that pop off in an inescapably fast direction upwards, like a very tall being's eyes come out of the fog. Then there's this spectacular sound from this giant moving over a mountain and comes down to you with his long arms, and lifts up the very earth that you're standing on.

So he digs his hands into the earth and lifts it up as you would just soil in the palm of both your hands. As he brings up the landscape with you, and he brings you to his level, in the clouds. The fog clears and Biame is revealed, as he is talking to you in language. I suppose he'd introduce himself, in a sense and impart this journey or quest onto you. And the character, Wugan, he is this little creature. He's based off a bird native to my mob in the area, and he is the personification of Biame. So I should clarify, Wugan is a name that we decided upon. JD, I think the direct translation is 'large bird', or am I mistaken?

**KP:** I think it was crow specifically.

**JD:** Yeah, it's a type of crow, I'm fairly sure.

**JW:** Yeah, and so this Wugan character is formed next to you as you're experiencing this entity and this play

zone that he's created just by lifting the earth from the ground. Wugan, basically is Biame, but he is, I would just say the personification. He is a champion if you like. So, Wugan will stay with you throughout the entire experience, translating or telling you the wishes of Biame, guiding you through the game and all the different characters you meet. So I suppose, yeah, that's the two characters. Biame is traditionally in Lore, and Wugan has been created by us as a way of guiding the player throughout the experience.

**AA:** Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences are going to receive the experience differently, so who is the intended audience?

**JD:** We wanna be able to say that this experience is for everyone. We hope as much of our family and our mob come to see it, they love it, and they're proud, and we hope we can take it around to show some mobs in Australia and see their reaction; learn from them about how close it might be or how different it might be from their Lore, or their understanding, or their experiences. It may be a good conversation starter about language as well. But I also, think white Australia would have an extremely different experience because, for all of us, these are stories that we've grown up with, or on our periphery, and we're all familiar with it.

It will be a fresh take on something that we're all very used to. But for many white Australians, it might be their first genuine interaction with Dreamtime stories, and experiences.

They might come away from that being like, “Whoa.” I hope getting a real sense of how different from Eurocentric storytelling Dreamtime stories are. And then, of course, in almost everything that I do surrounding culture heritage and language, there is an insatiable appetite from tourists for genuine Indigenous made content and stories. So we really wanna hit all those marks and I don’t think that’s gonna be too difficult to do. Well, not impossible, anyway.

**KP:** I definitely think also it lends itself towards slightly younger audiences, even ones that are gonna be teenage.

**JW:** Yeah. I think Keenan’s right in that a younger audience would be drawn to it. I think our goal is to fit everybody in. Obviously, there’s a limit to who we can put the VR headset on, but we would like to create the stories that are accessible by all age groups, and perhaps, all walks of life. Indigenous Dreamtime learning, it’s amazing, but it’s fundamentally important for our mob, and just other folks to see it and realize the majesty of it. So, I suppose in the development process, in terms from an artistic perspective, you’re working with these Dreamtime stories. A lot of them are quite dark in the sense that they are warnings. I think with the art style that we’re using, it should be accessible to most, it shouldn’t scare off too many people.

**AA:** How is *Birronggai* going to enable or leverage the revitalization of Aboriginal languages?

**JD:** I’m glad you ask this question because there’s a very direct answer to it. And that is that one crucial part of revitalizing our language is finding uses for it. We live in a capitalist, liberal society where things need to prove their worth by providing some kind of value to people’s lives. Usually, monetary value. But also, artistic value, or the ability to improve someone’s life, or outlook, or even let them unwind so that they’re more effective in different parts of their lives. So a big part of my job in language revitalization isn’t just researching the language, isn’t just teaching the language, isn’t just using the language myself, but it’s also finding uses for the language, not only for myself but for others.

And not only just for my language but for other Indigenous languages as well. Because what I found is that the revitalization of one of our languages sets off a chain reaction.. It’s intimately tied with the revitalization of the rest of our languages because the same conditions required to really revitalize one language are the same conditions to revitalize another. So if you can create those conditions for one language, you can do so for all the others. So hopefully, me finding a use for my language in this and having that be a use that others can find for their language in this format some of those conditions where they’re revitalizing their languages that will flow on to the market and vice versa.

**AA:** Is there a strategy for the incorporation of various different language groups within this one VR

experience and game?

**JD:** Yeah, at the moment, the model that we're after because of lack of imagination, is the standard video game post-launch DLC model. Where you have the base game, which is the project that we want. And then we will create essentially packs of content in collaboration with other mob, and release it, essentially, siloed as it's own thing with some generic content from the initial release mixed in with it. But now that you've mentioned it, there can be some interesting possibilities with how we can have those interplay. And that's something I've been thinking about semi-recently with some more revitalization work that's been coming up.

**JH:** We could ask the question of why you chose to use VR rather than any other approach. So as a first-person game, for example, what do you think the VR brings to the experience?

**JD:** I think there's plenty of answers to that one. That's easy.

**JW:** Yeah. We all flew to the idea of it unanimously. Naturally, it was weird. Joel has a VR headset that was lent to him by a friend that we had in the office. So he showed us what the HTC Vive was like. I'm sure you'll understand when I say that it's nothing like you have ever experienced before. It's this bizarre feeling of immersion that you don't necessarily would get from a computer screen or a TV screen. I think testing this on my Mum, I noticed that generally, she's very against video games, but the one time I showed

her, she was almost sold on the idea of video games entirely. That spoke to me in a way personally, that you can create a video game and show it to all walks of life. It's so intuitively easy for them to pick up and understand because of how immersive it is.

I feel that would definitely benefit a project or a subject matter like this because it's the best platform to do it the most justice. The Dreamtime, it's so deeply rooted in our cultural think the only way to truly portray it, at least the best we can currently, is through the VR space, I would say. I'm not sure if you guys would agree with that, Joel and Keenan.

**JD:** I would say the caveat to the intuitive new to VR is if it's well designed.



**JW:** Definitely, yeah. There's a lot of shockers out there, so we're obviously gonna learn from that, hopefully. And I'm confident that we can bring an experience that is intuitive and well received, hopefully.

**AA:** Was there an immediate conclusion that this experience that you're creating in VR is being led by a gamification model as opposed to, say, for example, a pure immersion experience?

**JD:** I would say that we definitely approach it from a gamification lens. But with how accessible we want it to be, there's definitely room to argue that it's more of an experience. But I think, at that point, it's more semantics than anything. We would like mechanics, but we're not gonna get anyone for not being able to do certain things. And I just wanna add on to the emotion side. For me, personally, I think the ability to immerse people into the mythical, to really sell them on the idea that I believed when I was camping when I was younger. That there's a hairy man just over the ridge, watching us while we're sitting around the fire.

That's something that's incredible. That's something I want other people to feel. Yeah, so the emotional element is very important to the kind of story you wanna tell about the Dreamtime to other people.

**KP:** Yeah, I think me and Joel actually talked about this early on in the conception of the scheme. But I definitely brought up that we need to make sure that we're doing things like game mechanics, to really gauge someone's progression through our experience with it. That more of the experience was towards those art games. Josh mentioned Dear Esther earlier, which I was a big fan of. We

take more of an expression from those while having the game's mechanics as an additional side part to the game in a way.

**JH:** Are there any game mechanics that you think would be beyond just being an extra bit to what's going on in the story, ones which are absolutely fundamental to the story? And these could just be moving through the space in a certain way rather than some complicated form of interaction. So rather than things that might add to the story that are not necessary for progression, because you don't want to lock people out if they're not interacting, for example, an interactive element where you don't have to worry too much about the level of abilities, but that is fundamental to the way that the story is being told or what is happened in the story.

**JD:** I would say that the only necessary interactive element is the ability to hear or read the narration and look around and experience it. That's really the key to it. We don't have any other solid interactive mechanics locked in place, I would say. Is that correct, Jeremy?

**JW:** Yeah, I mean there's obviously a few that we talked about. There is Traditional Spearfishing. Interactions with the vampire spirit, as we said, but there isn't anything fundamentally that would stop the progression of someone that could physically not do. Obviously, it's challenging if you'd like it to be, but if you're there

for the experience overall, to learn the languages, and to experience the different stories, then I would say, and you guys can correct me here, that it would be as accessible as possible.

**KP:** Yeah, definitely. And I think another thing that you could see as the core mechanics in the experience is we've talked about walking around and pointing out things that are narrated in language. So they could tell you about the language for a river and we're gonna walk over to the river and show you that that's what it's relating to.

**AA:** And how is the story within *Birronggai* being revealed and experienced within the game?

**JW:** I think the way we're trying to initiate a play zone that is created, like a hub world, if you like. That's basically what Biame is holding. and is the place you go to ... It's the middle point in between stories, or progressions if you like. The best way to describe it is that there is this stone which will change. The stone will feature loose sand or loose dirt. Wugan will stay there and whilst you're in the hub world, creating patterns or trails of art in different forms as a place called 'rituals'.

**JW:** Those rituals will open. It's like a level selector. So it will open you up to a certain experience depending on what he draws in the sand and what you select. You will then be transported into that ritual or that story in which you will experience. Then upon completion of the story,

you'll be taken back to the hub world and the process starts again.

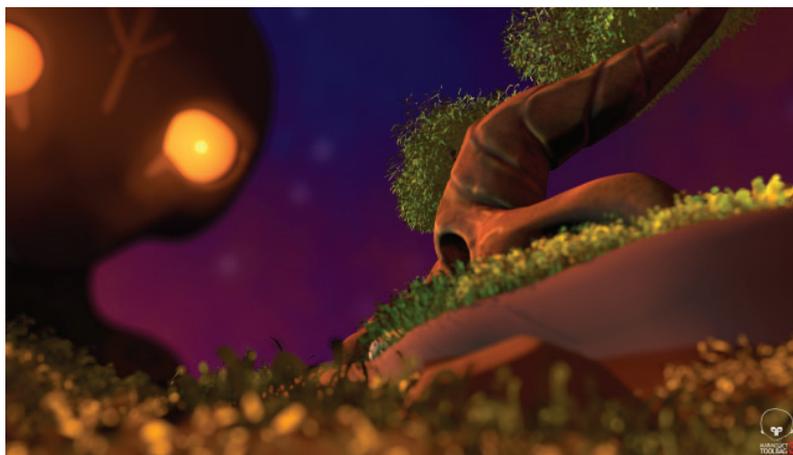
**AA:** So is it narrated by the two main characters, Biame and Wugan?

**JD:** Yeah, so essentially each of the stories, we haven't really nailed down the terminology that we're using, so we should probably steer away from that. But we look into the stories that the player's gonna play through. It's essentially just a collection of scenes, and each of the scenes is an environment with narration and potentially an interactive element. They are semi-randomized in their order and which you may or may not see. So it's not a clearly defined story in terms of the hero's journey, where they'll always be a beginning, a challenge, an end. It'll be more like a disjointed trek across Country with all the notable experiences along the way being experienced by the player.

**JD:** And yeah, shared through narration or subtitle.

**AA:** Coming from a film background I'm interested in VR because of its potential to break out of that traditional three-act structure: beginning, middle, and end. There's a huge opportunity to explore Aboriginal circular story-telling, which is far more akin to a 360 environment than traditional storytelling structures that are squeezed to fit inside the box of TV or rectangle of cinema because it's linear.

**JD:** Definitely.



**AA:** So have you thought about the story and the traditional ways that story and Lore is passed down? As with the traditional transmission of Aboriginal knowledge being through the act of singing that same song over, and over - through repetition and time that the knowledge is revealed, the deeper code to that knowledge. Is that something you imagine you're able to tap into for your player's experience?

**JD:** I don't think that's something that we've explicitly discussed, but I do know it's something implicit in each of our experiences with game design, and each of our experiences with Dreamtime stories. So we haven't said explicitly, "Hey, the repetition and replayability play into the story that we wanna tell." It's more of the story that we want to tell will naturally create this kind of experience. And that's because Dreamtime or the Dreaming is strictly nonlinear. It's not something that's 1400 AD, et cetera

happened and now we're here. It's never present, as the past was the future, and the future is now the past.

**JD:** Just knowing, the video games that we enjoy do heavily feature that kind of cyclical gameplay. I think the main inspiration I can cite for that is the *Dark Souls* series, one, two, and three, and *Blood Born*, and *Demon Souls* are very much so these kinds of games you play the first time and it's its own experience. And then you start over again with a new game plus, and new game plus plus, and plus plus plus. It's a completely different experience. You experience all these different things, and uncover all of this that you didn't the first cycle around. Even the Lore in those games is heavily focused around this cyclical storytelling, maintaining the cycle, or breaking the cycle. Yeah, it's a heavy inspiration to all three of us, I can safely say.

**JD:** Is that correct, Keenan and Jeremy?

**JW:** Yeah, definitely.

**KP:** Yeah, I can definitely agree.

**JH:** In some of the other interviews people are coming more from a creative space without the technical background, and they've had to go and work collaboratively with tech people, find people to work with, and their exposure to technology has come about in more sort of accidental way. Whereas you all have technical skills.

Keenan, with your computer science background, it would be interesting to know how you feel the creative process has manifested through coding as well. And don't worry Jeremy, everyone appreciates the creative process of what you do!

**JW:** The programming is creative, that's for sure.

**KP:** Yeah, so for this project, as of yet, we've mostly been learning around the *Unreal* engine process and developing VR using that. I've definitely enjoyed experimenting with creating things in a way that you open up gateways for the designer, like Jeremy, to pop in and change some things on the back end within limitations that you give them. It just seems like there's a lot of collaboration between Jeremy seeing a lot of the same things I do. Working together and actually building out the physical side as well as him ... It's not just him shipping models and things

like that to me, and then me building everything based on that.

It's a very collaborative process, though we haven't had much experience in that yet with how it will lead us in development.

**AA:** Do you think that there's been a different approach to learning *Unreal* from an Indigenous standpoint? Do you have alternate development processes that reflect this alternate perspective and understanding that everything is connected and interrelated as one complex system as opposed to a traditional linear development approach?

**KP:** Yeah, that's definitely an interesting question. I can't say I've really thought about that too much. But yeah, I think that's definitely something to think about moving forward, even just looking how some of those things may have subconsciously affected me. But I can't say that's been a really conscious decision in any way so far.

**JD:** We haven't really talked about it in these terms because it was most explicit and obvious when we did the exact opposite. When we chopped up the process and divided the labour, and said, "Okay, Jeremy, you're gonna sit over there, and at the end of the day, you are delivering assets to us. And you're not gonna know how they're used, and you're not gonna see how they're implemented until we're in the testing phase where you can see it." When we divided the process up like that and stopped collaborating

as closely as tools like the *Unreal* engine let us collaborate, that's when we started having conversations about the nature of the work. So I think it is definitely something that was in our subconscious and that's definitely shaping how we're going to be structuring our processes and our inclination towards tools like the *Unreal* engine.

**JW:** I agree completely with what JD was saying. And I think, Angie, that question that you posed is a fantastic one and I think it's something that I'll take forward with me throughout the development process. I suppose if I had to think about it now, the collaboration with Keenan and JD, it's very open and very transparent. I would say it's considerate in the sense that with game development especially, you can't separate yourself from the developers as a creative, because then you're just going to be stepping on toes constantly, providing assets that they can't necessarily use, creating bumps along the way. I think as a group, and me and Keenan, during the development process will be so closely knit that with the *Unreal* engine specifically, they have a blueprinted engine now implemented that allows creatives to, as Keenan said, get into the back end of it, and the front end of it and really see what's going on so that there is a constant communication between dev and creative that maybe once wasn't there.

I may be working alongside with him constantly. I will know exactly what he needs and why he needs it, and

vice versa. I think that'll create an environment that would just simply prosper even in the learning phase of it.

**JH:** So you have already talked a little bit about that process of consulting with different stories from different groups, but do you want to talk in general about that process of composing different scenarios, how you got access to them, researched them? And maybe a little more about the consultation presence?

**JD:** What we do plan to do is whenever we do presentations, appearances, or demos anywhere, we'll always ask if there is anyone who is a knowledge holder in relevant fields who wants to join us along the journey and become a stakeholder of ours to ensure we do things the right way. I think this is gonna be a bit of a learning journey for each of us three to take these stories that we may have grown up with or grown up around, but we don't strictly know enough about it, or the history to create solid content for the experiences. Then, to go back to our own families and learn more thoroughly from them and pursue other resources in the community. I know that we're for sure going to be spending a lot of time in as many universities as we can get our foot in the door at, and speaking to as many Elders who are knowledge holders, and reading from knowledge holder's past, as well.

**AA:** And why universities?

**JD:** So I think if we're going to

our families, we're going to the community's universities just to present that other side of the spectrum, where you have people who ... Well, we hope we will find people who are very passionate about their study of it and have a different perspective than family and community resources. Students, professors, faculties. Anyone that'll talk to us.

**AA:** So it's expanding the knowledge, not necessarily about the technical assistance.

**JD:** Yes, exactly. Although that being said, we're not gonna rule out the possibility of discovering some interesting technical knowledge about storytelling or history and having that shape how we're going to go about the process.

**JH:** It sounds almost like reclaiming stories. It's certainly the case that there's Indigenous researchers in universities, and academics such as yourself, Angie, who are writing insightful papers and research about the process of storytelling. But at the same time, it sounds like there's an opportunity to reclaim culture, to take back stories from academia ... It's outside of most people's accessibility, and then bringing them back into a way you are telling them, according to your decisions and approach to doing it which is also quite exciting.

**AA:** It sounds like a process of repatriation.

**JD:** Definitely. It's a very exciting

concept to go to a university and find stories that aren't held by my family anymore, and going to my family and community and saying, "Hey, how would you like to see these stories presented in this completely new format." That's something that's just mind-blowing.

**JH:** The language teaching process of it -has your approach to teaching language come from research or an 'on-the-ground' sort of way for communicating language.

**JD:** Absolutely not. Yeah, I've been teaching language for a year and a half now. My prior education experience was teaching culture and heritage at the Botanic Gardens, mostly tours, talks, and things of that like. I've just been running so fast, trying to maintain my career, trying to get projects like *Project Birronggai* off the ground, and trying to revitalize the language in each of the ways that I've outlined before, being research, teaching, doing, and finding ways to do, that I haven't found a spare minute to learn how to teach.

**JH:** So is that something that you're going to put work into? And can you give us the context of why teaching with Duolingo [a language app] for example is not appropriate, or there's a better way of going about it?

**JD:** Yeah, absolutely. So of course, how to teach it effectively in this medium, is something that I'm going to put a lot of work into, because we don't want any of the mechanics that we might develop to detract from

the experience, we don't want any of the attempt to educate people on language, or culture, or stories, to detract from the experience either. I think that's just as important as letting bad mechanics through, not letting bad techniques for educating through is just as important. The Duolingo question is a really big one. I would say, to keep it concise, the two biggest reasons why our language doesn't lend itself well to that format of teaching is, (a), because those platforms tend to outsource the benefit of that education to the platform holders.

That is to say, if I begin to revitalize the language, and I go back and I teach my family, and I give them a complete package for how to teach the language so that they can contribute to revitalizing language. They can go and have opportunities to engage with the community, and learn, and have more experience, and potentially mature. Also, a very large part of it, is getting paid for doing that. Whereas if we plop that on a resource like Duolingo, we suddenly lose governance over how it's taught. None of those benefits are translated back to our communities. They're instead paying the Duolingo platform holders through advertisements.

The second attribute that doesn't lend our languages to being taught in a platform like Duolingo, I think is that platforms like Duolingo are an effective way of teaching people how to use the language if they have the motivation. That motivation, more often than not, comes from having a

very solid use case for the language. But right now, the vast majority of people who would be learning the language would be people who don't traditionally hold the language. There's only so much Gadigal mob out there, that even if 100% of us went on Duolingo and learned Gadigal language, we'd still only make up a very small portion of the user base. And the rest of the people who would try to learn the language wouldn't have as much motivation as us because they're not gonna say, "I'm gonna learn Gadigal language so I can go visit Sydney," because they can go visit Sydney and speak English.

Whereas if you go to Paris, you almost have to speak French and etc., etc. for every other use case that a lot of the languages that are on platforms like Duolingo have.

**JH:** Yeah, my feeling about a lot of those language learning platforms is they don't teach culture at all. Which might mean that they've got a bank of different languages where they're just putting in basically this completely ... If it's for teaching a businessman how to speak another language, it's basically a 1950's model about how to pick up a date when you're on a business trip in the restaurant of your hotel without any cultural context whatsoever. Here's what you say without engaging in any way about the cultural use of that language. And it's super, super bizarre. You feel like all you need to do is substitute one word in one language for another word in another language to have the same effect in the experience in a

different place.

**JD:** I 100% agree.

**JH:** What do you feel are your responsibilities as storytellers?

**JW:** That's a question that I think we've asked ourselves a few times. Maybe not exactly like that, but as a collective, we've talked about it a fair bit. JD, do you have anything, to begin with or should I talk from the creative perspective first, or would you like to...

**JD:** Just to say that we feel a lot of responsibility.

**JW:** Yeah. Definitely that. I suppose from the idea of actually visually displaying these stories in a VR medium. Obviously, it goes without saying that that's not how they were originally intended. And there's gonna have to be liberties, or creative liberties, taken with those stories in order to display them visually. For example, the model that I created for Biame is based off the traditional cave paintings found in the Biame cave, as well as some other illustrations that I've collected, and from what I've just been told based on the description. The way he's come out is as traditionally accurate as I could keep it. But it's obviously not to the T, so that's definitely something that I'm worried about in terms of conveying these stories visually. I don't want to put my own idea, or spin, or the team has their own idea and creative elements into it. I don't want to, for a lack of a better word, butcher it. So

that comes with a lot of responsibility that Joel, and Keenan, and I will all help each other with based on community engagement and the primary sources that we get those stories from.

**AA:** Are there any cultural protocols that are built into the design of the experience?

**JW:** I suppose touching off the creative again, all the body paintings that you see on Biame, they don't feature in the initial conception of him, at least from my sources. So they were additions on my behalf that I put in. If you look at them, they are all taught to me to have meaning. So for example, the main, he has a mark on his forehead, which is a mark of a bird, essentially. A general interpretation of it would be a bird track. This obviously holds meaning with what he is and what he represents as a Sky God, along with the markings running on his chest going down his arm. The pathways, without going into full detail, one might be circles, would represent a place of meeting, place of home,



gathering. The pathways represent just that, pathways, rivers, and so forth. There's symbols for people gathering, as well. The C shaped or the U shaped symbols. So yeah, I suppose to answer the question, there are pretty heavy cultural protocols into the design of the experience that is in no way hindering me. They are only benefiting me because the beauty of Indigenous design is that all these symbols have multiple meanings, and multiple feelings to them, which you can compile together in such a way to tell a multitude of stories, which I find remarkable and beautiful. So I find that that is definitely going to feature heavily in the game because we're lucky enough to be able to work with content such as that.

**JH:** Do you have any advice to people who are starting out, and any other projects that you can recommend having a look at, or which were inspiring or informed your project? ...We're also interested in how everyone experienced VR the first time.

**JD:** We actually more or less all tried

VR, or at least dived into VR in the exact same way. My friend had a headset, and I borrowed it off him, took it into work and we all tried it.

**KP:** My initial experience was actually at this place called Coderfactory which is where I went through a short course on the web film stuff I do. But that's where we held the first Indigitek meetings that I went to. One of the people from there, had a Vive [VR Headset] set up in the office, and they just let people hang out and play. That was my first time with a Vive or any sort of non-mobile phone VR headset. I think most of it was just going through the Steam VR lab and maybe a bit of VR Accounting. So part of that, Joel actually brought his ... I can't remember exactly which mobile one it was.

**KP:** I think it might be the Samsung Gear.

**JD:** Yeah, Gear S6.

**KP:** We actually played a couple of things on that, one of which was a horror game. I think just going into



that and just feeling, even though the graphics were low quality because it was new in its mobile VR, just the atmosphere and the scale of having to look up at something and just how different that sort of a motion makes a game was a big part of what really inspired me to push more towards learning VR as opposed to other game development.

**JD:** As for how we decided to do this project, we worked together at NGNY. And I guess these two missed me enough after I left. No, it's just something that I think has been a dream of all of ours and we've had the requisite experience to do it between the three of us. So it was just natural.

**JW:** Definitely.

**JH:** So for developing this experience, did you feel it was necessary to get up to this point where you're all skilled up and you've got the experience before engaging in this project rather than jumping on it and learning from scratch.

**JD:** I think it's empowered us to be more audacious about the specifics of the experience, and really at an artistic level, this is the messaging that we wanna put across. Without having to worry about are we capable to do so - we're instead asking, "All right, what is the best way to do so?"

**AA:** Yeah, and there's another layer to the process when you need to explain the nuances of cultural protocols when working with non-Indigenous developers.

**JD:** Yeah, exactly. 100%.

**JH:** And also, they might not be very good. If you want to do something special, you know what your capabilities are, you have an idea that you can spend a few late nights figuring out how to do it. Whereas if you're working with an external thing, they just do what they want to do., what they're comfortable with.

**JD:** I actually heard that complaint. In my current role, I sit in between the business and consultants who are developers, and I heard the exact complaint today. It seems more like they're developing what they want to develop rather than what we need them to develop. It would be a shame to have a project like this fall prey to that kind of practice.

**JW:** Definitely.

**AA:** What are your thoughts on the current state of Indigenous digital media? Are there any other projects by practitioners that you'd like to mention, or advice about starting out in the medium?

**JD:** Yeah, I think I speak for all of us when I say that a large part of what drives us on this project is that this is, not to discount what anyone else out there is doing, but Indigenous digital media is not at the point where we want it. I hope that after we do this, and after we keep doing projects similar to this, potentially, that there are still people ten years from now who will say the same and keep pushing it forward. Yeah,

I really don't wanna discount what anyone else is doing out there, but we want to see Indigenous digital media thrive because we feel like it's worth it. We feel like there's so much that is out there to be told and so many interesting and talented people to tell all of these interesting things that are there to be told, and so many interesting mediums for all of these interesting people to tell all of these interesting stories! And interesting lessons to share. It's just a shame that it's not as vibrant and thriving as we would like it to be. So we would like to contribute to that. I think it would irresponsible for us to share comments about getting started in the video gaming development.

**JW:** "Follow your dreams."

**KP:** I think as far as other projects, there's actually this guy Rhett Loban from UNSW who's making a game to very heavily influenced by astrology based VR experience as well. I think that's definitely another one to check out.

**JH:** All of our different interviews reference each other. That seems like a good sign!

**JW:** As it should be. Everything should be interconnected. We've all gotta help each other out.



## COLLISIONS IMAGE CREDITS

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In order of appearance:

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2. *Behind-the-scenes of the Collisions production.* Photo Credit: Piers Mussared
3. *Nyarri tries virtual reality for the first time.* Photo Credit: Pete Brundle
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5. *“Spirit Cloud”* Artwork by Jossie Malis, spirit cloud imagery Lynette Wallworth.
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## PROJECT BIRRONGAI IMAGE CREDITS

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1. *Render of the Biame.* Image Credit: Jeremy Worrall / Frenetic Studios
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3. *The Alter at which Wugan draws in the pathways through the Dreamtime allowing you to travel between realms (level selector).* Image Credit: Jeremy Worrall / Frenetic Studios
4. *Wugan accessing the Rites stone (level select).* Image Credit: Jeremy Worrall / Frenetic Studios
5. *Turntable shot of Wugan; An extension of Biame Wugan follows you through the Dreamtime guiding you on your journey and bridging the gap between realms.* Image Credit: Jeremy Worrall / Frenetic Studios
6. *Render of the playzone in its infancy, features Biame and the home tree.* Image Credit: Jeremy Worrall / Frenetic Studios
7. *Another perspective shot.* Image Credit: Jeremy Worrall / Frenetic Studios
8. *Original Concept for the play zone, a chunk of earth lifted into the heavens by Biame the ancient all father and sky god. This is the centre piece for the players adventure.* Image Credit: Jeremy Worrall / Frenetic Studios