

THALU

DREAMTIME IS NOW



THALU TYSON MOWARIN (VIRTUAL REALITY)

The world of *Thalu* is brought to life through Virtual Reality (VR), in otherworldly surroundings guided by the concept art of cult favourite and graphic artist, Stuart Campbell. The VR experience is a dazzling series of linked worlds filled with fantastical, high contrast, neon-lit Australian landscapes and wildlife.

'Thalu' in the Ngarluma language means, 'totem'. However, the English word cannot fully describe the layers of meaning that "thalu" conveys to the Ngarluma people. The 'thalu' in Mowarin's virtual reality experience is a spiritual doorway that connects two realms and transports the participant into the Spirit World, where they will meet Jirri Jirri, their guide. Jirri Jirri will show audiences the spirits of the elements, land, flora, and fauna, and teach them about how these spirits and environments are connected to humankind.

Launching on the HTC Vive, *Thalu: The Buried VR* is a uniquely Indigenous Australian experience that showcases the powerful storytelling of the Ngarluma people of Western Australia.



TYSON MOWARIN
Creator / Cross-media storyteller

A Ngarluma man, **Tyson Mowarin**, is an experienced filmmaker, writer, producer, director, photographer and cinematographer; and owner of Weerianna Street Media. Mowarin's other projects include the *Welcome to Country* iPhone app, an extensively researched information portal and archive of Welcome to Country videos and messages.

INTERVIEW



Josh Harle: Can you tell us about Thalu?

Tyson Mowarin: ‘Thalu’ is a term we Ngarluma use for certain sites on the Country. It could also be a friend, a little messenger, like a little messenger bird or something. A little spirit that hangs around with an individual. Or It could be a friend. If I’ve got a best friend that follows me everywhere, people might call him a Thalu. But for the VR project, Thalu refers to certain ‘increase sites’ on the Country. To compare it to something, it’s like when a farmer goes to church and prays for rain. Supposedly God hears his prayers and sends rain to him. A Thalu site on Country is very much the same. We’ve got rain sites as well. Rainmaking sites where people go out and perform a certain ceremony and a certain site. They can work that site and they can ask for rain as well, and the spirit of the land will send rain to them. There’s all sorts of Thalu sites. There’s good ones and there’s bad ones and there’s flora ones and there’s fauna ones.

JH: We’ve been through *Thalu* and seen the different sites. There are icons which indicate which ones there are, and I think there’s one for fish, one with a kangaroo symbol. Another one with the whirlwind and the rain coming through. The rain one?

TM: That’s the elements one. You can go out on Country and you can summon the elements. Rain and fire, lightning, all that sort of stuff.

JH: Can you describe what the player experiences when they go into it?

TM: For the fish Thalu site, obviously we’re not allowed to put the traditional use or the traditional ceremony in the game, what you do there is the player goes down into the water and his little Thalu, which is the Jilly-Jilly bird, turns into human form. Then he hands you the boomerang and there’s a certain way that you hold those boomerang near the water and then that summons the fish up the waterfall. The fish spirits are going up the waterfall, up into the waterholes on the country. Same for the flora and the fauna one. Once you’re doing the actions with the boomerangs, which you take with you, you will see their spirits arising from them and going up into the real world.

For the experience, we start by talking about the creation. Then the world comes out of the ocean. Then you’re taken down into the Burrup, or the Pilbara - it’s all the same sort of landscape - surrounded by all the ancient rock that holds on the petroglyphs, the rock art. Each of the virtual spaces is typical Pilbara landscapes. The spinifex. The specific or the iconic Pilbara rocks landscapes, some of these rocks are unlike anywhere in the world, or anywhere in Australia at least. Each of those worlds is what I call the cultural or the spiritual warehouse, where the spirits of all those elements, flora and fauna, live. That’s where they come from because even when the farmer goes to church and asks for rain, the rain has to come from somewhere. In my eyes,



and my theory, according to me it has to come from somewhere.

As you know, Aboriginal culture is very spiritual. I'm saying that those worlds that you're experiencing, they are spirit worlds. That's why the flora and fauna and the elements look spiritual, are all there just waiting for their spirits to come to the real world.

Angie Abdilla: Can you explain what the player is doing within these worlds?

TM: Right at the start, the fish, where the waterfall is, is learning about how to use the fish Thalu, the fish site. He's got a person that's got to learn that they have to use the boomerang to summon the spirit of the fish to go up to the real world. Same in the elements world. You're gathering the power of the elements. Then you're shooting them into the Willy Willy, which takes it to the real world and unleashes it up there. Same with the flora and fauna. Once you're working the boomerangs in different ways, you're summoning the spirits of that

flora and fauna. You'll see the spirits rise up often. They'll leave and up into the real world.

For me, the most important element of the experiences is teaching people about the spirit world, having people see it as a living, breathing thing. It's current. Even it's similar to the Dreamtime, where people talk about the Dreamtime as something passed. Like today is a dream time for me. Today is my Dreamtime. It's the same in the spirit world exists today, not only in the past.

JH: We noticed that being introduced in the intro as well, where you talk about the contemporary landscape, with mining coming into the Pilbara and into the Burrup, and in some of the narrative, where the voice is talking about the setup and the environment you're talking about how this sort of thing has been forgotten or there's not an understanding of it and these sites are being destroyed, but they're still deeply important. With that in mind, who is the intended audience for this experience?

TM: I always say, everybody. Then it'd probably be younger kids, maybe teenagers, mainly because it's best to teach people when they're young. When you get to my age, you've got a little bit of an understanding about the surroundings they live in.

JH: Talking specifically about damage from the mining industry that's going on in the Pilbara, would you say that there's a focus on making people, for example, in Western Australia where there are all these mining operations going on, a little bit more aware of some of the consequences of this, like the potential damage to these sites and things like that?

TM: Yeah. It's all relevant to all the work I do, and things I say, and in my films as well. My 'Connection to Country' film that I made recently is a documentary that talks about WA's Heritage Act and how the government is trying to amend it. They wanted to do massive approvals for mining and resource companies to destroy sites. Now with the change of government, they're actually reviewing the whole Heritage Act from the community, across the state. A bonus that the new Indigenous Affairs Minister is a blackfella himself. Yeah. *Thalu* is about teaching people about conservation of their heritage as well, because, in my film, my Connection to Country film, we talk about Thalu sites for the plain kangaroo, that they stay on the country here. That one is potentially being destroyed. It might be not a coincidence that you go out to that certain part of the country and you don't see many plain kangaroos.

In our way of thinking, the Elders' way of thinking, the Thalu there is being destroyed so we've lost an opportunity to increase the kangaroo population in that area.

Then, on the other hand, there's another site there for the bush gum, and he's still intact. Right across our Country, in late September, early October, actually the government that's in the Thalus and in our flora, that gum is on those little trees. Where that Thalu site is, they start earlier. They come earlier to Country. It starts in that area and then it spreads out. Every year is exactly the same. If that site is destroyed like it's partially destroyed now, it will probably mess the seasons up. If it's destroyed forever, who knows what will happen to those plants. Then they're gone.

JH: Can you talk more about changes to the Heritage Act? I remember they changed definitions to a very Western idea of the sacred site, based on churches.

TM: You know what they actually did was they deregistered nearly 4,000 sites right across WA without consultation with Aboriginal people because they brought in a classification to say that a sacred site has to have a regular religious activity attached to it. If you compare that, like always compare the Aboriginal Heritage Act to the Build Act in Australia, even manmade churches don't have regular religious activities. Still, they are listed in heritage listings, and they are protected, and you can buy and get the money to restore

them and maintain them. Whereas, an Aboriginal Heritage site you can't. For Indigenous sites, they deregistered them all and they didn't tell anybody. It was only found out by accident.

AA: It strikes me as a potentially precarious position to be in because of course there are cultural protocols with how much information is shared with, in particular within a virtual environment, as opposed to on Country.

TM: Teaching young people about heritage sites when they're young - the audience is broad. Hopefully. When I build these things up I don't really think of the audience until it's built. Heritage should be protected by everybody. That's something non-Aboriginal people have to stop and think about as well, even in coming down, even when things happen like NAIDOC [National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee] Week. People think NAIDOC Week is just for blackfellas. NAIDOC Week is a celebration for everybody, to celebrate Aboriginal culture and heritage. I think something like *Thalu* can be for everyone, black, white, or it doesn't matter who you are or where you from. It's teaching a story that everybody needs to know. Even though the Aboriginal Heritage Act within the government ranks, Aboriginal Heritage supposedly belongs to everybody in the state. Not just Aboriginal people. It's funny the government sees it that way but they don't treat it that way.

AA: How do you expect Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences to experience the work differently? For example, do you think that then it might be difficult for somebody that may have no cultural knowledge to be able to access the cultural complexity and richness of the work? Or are you making the work with the expectation that people will be able to understand how to navigate the different worlds and how to summon the spirits relating to them?

TM: Yeah. It could be the other way around, where instead of *Thalu* being the one to experience, if you've already looked at knowledge and that experience of Country, maybe it's the other way around where *Thalu* is the one that opens your eyes and you will go and seek that experience afterwards.

JH: It's interesting to see how you developed your storytelling and what was possible with it in VR. How did you get interested in working with VR? And what about VR you found interesting?



TM: Myself and Justin [McArdle, Frame VR], met up for the first time at a storytellers workshop conference down in Perth, where ScreenWest brought together Indigenous storytellers, filmmakers, writers together with people in the digital world: iPad comic makers augmented reality developers and virtual reality stuff. I met Justin and he invited me down. He invited everyone down to his workshop in Perth. I was the only one that took his invitation. I went down there, had a couple of experiences in the virtual reality headset, with what they use, and used Tilt Brush for the first time. When you get into that virtual reality thing for the first time it always blows you away. I was blown away. He said, "Listen, make a story."

It took about a year to get talking and writing until we actually made something. I like doing my own thing. I love being creative. I thought virtual reality is a pretty new, creative way, potentially telling an important story.

AA: Did you have in mind the story or the experience before choosing VR as the platform? As you also work in film, I'm curious to know what was the reason was for choosing VR over film as your approach to tell this particular story?

TM: I sort of thought about it more as an experience, because I figured out that you could be sitting anywhere in the world with a virtual reality headset on. People all around the world could be transported to my Country. I thought that was special. I suppose it just shows the interest that

I have in new technologies and telling stories in different ways because I've made iPhone apps, traditional card games, web films and I've recorded music. I just like being creative in all types of different ways. Virtual reality - it's pretty cool.



JH: You mentioned younger audiences coming in and learning about VR. When you were doing playtesting and development, was there anything where you were thinking about VR as a good medium for engaging a younger audience as much as an older audience?

TM: Yeah. We've had a setup in the community there, and we've had a number of kids, people of all ages actually, experiencing it. I think they really enjoyed the experience.

AA: Were there any obstacles that you found working in the medium, different to film? There are different design challenges compared to film within VR.

TM: I was writing the story, getting the story was pretty much the same as film. I suppose not having the technical skill or not skill, but the know-how to work with the developers, where I think I'd develop it as we'd go along because a couple of their first go's some of the scenes looked like very alien landscapes. They didn't look anything like in Pilbara. It was a little bit frustrating because I'd send some stuff up. Like I'm saying, it didn't look like much. Only because they were having to build my Country, the landscape from scratch. There's no plug-ins that they can just plug in and create the Pilbara. Whereas film, obviously if you want some of the Pilbara you go and shoot it and you've got it straight away. A big challenge was time, I suppose. Taking a long time to create something that in my eyes, as a filmmaker, it's quite short, but as a developer, it's probably very hard.

JH: I noticed one thing that was quite interesting; when you first descend into the spiritual world, the way the player's attention was drawn to the bird through the trail that it left. Then it gives you a lot of time to know what you're supposed to be paying attention to, and the focus of the person who's in a VR environment. Were there any other things like that where the player can pretty much do whatever they want, but you need them to go through certain stages to progress the story?

TM: Yeah. With interaction, certain things like the rocks with the portals on it, they would pop up after a long

time. We got them to pop up a bit more faster.

AA: In film, directing your audience's experience happens three different times over in the concept developing phase when you're writing a script, then when in production shooting, and then again, in the edit - each time you are directing the audience's attention to affect in different ways, plotted through the linear experience of clocked time. How did you manage this process - working with your developers to direct the user/player's experience?

TM: I'd probably start with the first thing, one of the hardest things about this project was being made down in Perth and I'm up here. I couldn't see it every day. In saying that, when they would send a buildup to us, me and Stu [Stuart Campbell - Interactive Storyteller], we'd sit down and go through it a couple of times and write a whole list of notes about things we can improve on for the user experience, as you say. Yeah, we were conscious of not having people just stand around in each scene for too long for no reason. Even the directions from Jilly Jilly and the portals popping up a bit faster, and all those sorts of things. Comparing that to film, it was different.

JH: For me, having the human figure, with that amazing shade of their skin being this translucent sort of thing, standing in front of them felt pretty awesome. Having the suspense of standing in front of another human figure that you're interacting with

works really well, because it's not just standing in front of someone, it's this bodily experience of being in the presence of that figure as well. Was Stu Campbell part of the development process, producing images that could then go to the developers to try and recreate that sort of work?

TM: Yeah, exactly like that, because Stu lives up here and we had talks about it. He drew these panels of each different world, what we wanted them to look like, similar to what they basically look like. He did more of a collage of illustration and Photoshop type images. That's basically what they use as guides to build these different scenes. They don't look exactly the same but they're pretty similar and have a similar, magical feel about them.

AA: What was your approach to using sound in the development and production?

TM: I got a hold of my follow-up here named Patrick, anything traditional and they use different kinds of stuff. I wanted it to be more natural and magical sound. There's nothing musical, just atmospheric.

AA: I noticed the importance of sound, particularly in VR to draw people's attention, because you don't have the control of film-making. The film is a collective example of the importance of sound. It's half what you see and half what you hear. That includes the story, the narrative, the sound design of music, all the folly, all the various different layers

of sound in film is quite significant in directing your experience, and through a particular timeframe. With VR, you can enter into this world and stay there forever. You've got more importance and reliance on sound to actually move you, direct your audience through space, and reveal those different worlds and so forth. I notice that the sound in *Thalu* it is quite subtle with the use of birds and the natural sounds of Country were really beautiful. Was there a particular directorial approach that you took to using sound in this particular piece?

TM: I think I could have probably put more thought into it, even though you say it's beautiful sounding. I probably could have done a better job and enhanced the sound a bit more.

AA: Are there plans for further work, for further development?

TM: There should be. I personally don't think it's a final product at the moment. I don't think the sound is finished.

JH: As an Elder, you have certain knowledge and permission to tell these stories to a different audience. What did you decide could be shown and not? How do you work with telling certain things and being aware of what is inappropriate to show a general audience?

TM: I sort of just know. I don't always think about what the wider community or what the Elders would say, I just learn as I go what I can use. Even working in film, I do the same.

I would not hesitate, but I sent the stories automatically to only allow things that I know old people, Elders would be happy with me showing. I still looked at them for cultural guidance and approval.

JH: Did you consult with Elders on this project?

TM: Yeah, a couple of my older cousins, talking with them about it. We're actually still working to show a few more. We're going to show it to a few elders before it's done, yeah.

AA: Do you feel an Indigenous approach to sharing knowledge came into how you told the story itself? The handing over and custodianship of knowledge and how that happens traditionally is quite different than Western ways. As there's a lot of cultural knowledge in this experience, did you consider that when designing the experience for players in *Thalu*?

TM: Yeah, I suppose in a way I don't really think too deeply about these things. I just write the story. Yeah, I don't write it with the beginning, middle, and end, like a film. What I have written fits the idea of the virtual reality thing. I did feel when I was trying to write, it was hard to write because I was thinking more about a film. When you write this sort of thing it's more of an experience. It is a learning experience for myself as well because like I say, it was not hard but it was different trying to write for this, writing for a world, if you know what I mean. It turned out and acts differently to a short film. It was more

a part of my process. The funding agency, they didn't really have any say on the creative start of it then. They came a little bit later. They didn't guide me and they didn't give me any rules that I had to follow. Who knows, if they probably did then it may have turned out differently, because they probably would have wanted to see and hear things that they wanted to, just like a film. I think the funding agency funding this sort of VR experience, especially in WA, is brand new to them. I remember them saying "They've got this digital funding. What the hell do we do with it?" That's probably why I think it's where that initial storyteller and digital developer workshop came from. They had the money. They didn't know what to do with its funding for VR.



Screen Australia, they did the same. I remember I was part of a similar thing. I flew over to the east for a week-long workshop, where they had a cross-media lab. They had all these storytellers and filmmakers put together in a room with these fellows

who taught you how to put a digital project together and pitch it. We spent a week together and then we pitched to ABC and NITV at the end of the week. I don't think any of us got any commissions out of that, but the one thing that did happen for me was at that workshop was I developed my 'Welcome to Country' app into a pitch. I had that in the back of my mind and I eventually built that, separate from any of the state or federal funding. I did it myself.

JH: How do you advise people starting out in VR?

TM: The Screen West workshop was my first VR experience. I was seeing AR, augmented reality, before that or even at that workshop. For Virtual Reality, it was my first time.

AA: Have you got any desire to work with Augmented Reality?

TM: Yeah, augmented reality, I was trying to work with augmented reality a long time ago when it first came out. I was always interested with that but I wanted to do more film projects with augmented reality, especially at Murujuga [on the burrup Peninsula], so maybe use AR to put up an augmented reality fence. You stand up and you can look around, or you can go, even pointing up, if you're on a rock art tool and importing out certain rock art that you can look at. There's all sorts of things. Even 360, when it first came out, actually in those crossover labs that we did over east we came up with a pitch. It's been sitting there ever since. I've got

a folder on my desktop full of digital ideas. One of them was using AR to identify all the traditional plants on the Morajoba or the Pilbara area here. These things take time and money. Just recently, even last year, you find out someone has made those apps already. You can identify any plant right around the world, and you can download them. You can get all the scientific names but you can't get the main uses and the cultural information. That's still a desire to do that.

JH: Do you have any advice to other storytellers who are starting out in AR, VR, digital media?

TM: Yeah. I'm always keeping an eye out on filmmaking initiatives and digital initiatives that Screen West and Screen Australia are always announcing. Then I've always got some sort of idea for a film or like I said, I've got a folder full of digital ideas as well. I suppose coming up with the ideas, like the way I write them out, I've learned that from attending those digital workshops over east, it's almost like writing a pitch. What does it do? What does it look like? Answering all those questions. This *Thalu* project, it got off the ground because I got sponsorship from a Rock Art foundation for it. Then Framed VR went and got the other half, based on I already had some money put towards it. If you want to do something, go and do it. Pitch yourself, I suppose. People know me as a filmmaker. A lot of other people know me as a musician. Some people know me as they follow who made the

iPhone app, the 'Welcome to Country' one. I suppose don't restrict yourself. Don't restrict yourself but don't try and take too much as well.

JH: Would you say if you're starting out and you don't have any footholds? Don't wait until you get the opportunity before developing the ideas, just develop the idea into something that stands on its own, maybe find collaborators - then if any funding or any opportunities come along, you'll have something ready to show them?

TM: That's almost exactly the way I go, yeah. I've never met Justin or framed VR before, but I got invited to that workshop because I was a filmmaker, a storyteller.

AA: What do you have planned for after this project?

TM: Actually, I'm having more of a conversation with Stu. He's doing a documentary project, using a little bit of VR with some of the local kids here. He's got a bit of a crossover and an interesting project. Stu's doing all right with his augmented reality projects. He's got funding and he's opening up the augmented reality world to a lot of different artists. That's pretty interesting. He's getting more into virtual reality. *Thalu* was actually his first go with virtual reality. Now he's developing, he's probably one of the most sought-after virtual reality artists in Australia. He's been commissioned by everybody, from Disney to Google and YouTube and all that sort of stuff. I mention I've got a

desire to continue using 360 video and virtual reality. Last year I went down to Perth and got my drone pilot's license. I want to do a lot more heritage work using the drones, creating all these 3D images that you can make. I want to document Country using the drones, then make into cultural maps before certain parts of my Country are destroyed by mining and all that. Using 360 cameras and drones on the ground.

I do these things with a respect. We've always got these anthropologists and archaeologists coming into our communities, documenting our history and culture, and then taking off with it all somewhere down in a city a long way from us. By doing these different projects, like the *Thalu* VR project, this is documenting my language today and using it today. I'm not just documenting it, then creating an archive that my great-great grandkids might see one day. It's more about documenting it, saving it, using it today as well.

AA: Our culture is not static, it evolves.

TM: I think that's a tag on *Thalu*; *Dreamtime is now*. Today is my Dreamtime. People see Dreamtime as a thing of the ancient past but it's not. Today is my Dreamtime.



BARANGAROO NGANGAMAY IMAGE CREDITS

In order of appearance:

1. *Barangaroo Ngangamay Augmented Reality activated postcards*, Photo Credit: Bonnie Elliott
2. *Sharon Mason throwing a fishing line*. Image Credit: Bonnie Elliott
3. *Barangaroo Ngangamay App Point of Interest marker*. Image Credit: Bonnie Elliott/ A-Positive
4. *Using the app onsite at Barangaroo Reserve*. Photo Credit: A-Positive
5. *Barrugin - echidna rock engraving at Barangaroo Reserve..* Photo Credit: Bonnie Elliott

THALU IMAGE CREDITS

In order of appearance:

1. *Thalu project poster*. Image Credit: FrameVR / Tyson Mowarin
2. *The fauna Thalu* (screenshot). Image Credit: FrameVR / Tyson Mowarin
3. *Moving between Thalu sites* (screenshot). Image Credit: FrameVR / Tyson Mowarin
4. *Gathering at the fish Thalu* (screenshot). Image Credit: FrameVR / Tyson Mowarin
5. *The entrance to the fish Thalu, Pilbara* (screenshot). Image Credit: FrameVR / Tyson Mowarin