Democratising AR, bringing content to life with Zappar

By Cari Coetzee   20 Nov 2017

A leader in augmented reality (AR), Zappar, have ventured into mixed reality (MR) and recently paid Cape Town a visit to end off AfricaCom with the launch of the ZapBox - an MR kit presenting individuals and businesses with the opportunity to create their own MR experiences - at the Two Oceans Aquarium, V&A Waterfront.

ZapBox Launch - Two Oceans Aquarium, Cape Town, South Africa from Zappar on Vimeo.

We lured CEO and co-founder Caspar Thykier into the Bizcommunity office for a bit of show and tell and delved into the rich and living world of VR, AR and MR.

▦ *So, we all know that the millennial generation is increasingly becoming a powerful force of consumers and what we know about millennials, among other things, is that they value experiences and they insist on using technology to go about their daily lives – do you think that Zappar is symptom of these times? In short, what led to the creation of Zappar?*

As a business we've been going shy of seven years now. Times have definitely changed since we started. What we're seeing is, from a business perspective, more corporations actively thinking about how they can implement AR as a digital transformation agent, and not simply ticking the innovation box – which is kind of where it started.

From a millennial point of view, there's definitely a sense that people want more experiences, but they are also demanding to know more about products and the brands that they are interacting with. We do live in an age – because of politics around the world and corporate undoing – in which there isn't that necessary degree of trust with brands, institutions and government. So, being able to use AR to find more information about things is another area we're seeing a lot of growth in.

There is clearly a generation that hasn't experienced anything other than living with technology. Smartphones are often described as being an evolutionary appendage – it's genuinely a device we can't live without. A study that has just come out in the US shows that, on average, US consumers spend over seven hours a day on their mobile devices – which is sort of incomprehensible, it's over half the time that they're awake!

There is this extraordinary trend that this is a device now through which we see the world and it has become a remote control for it – and AR has an interesting role to play in that, because it is a way to use the camera and the lens like a discovery channel, to unlock content from things.

Caspar Thykier, CEO and co-founder, Zappar

We've done campaigns for children e.g. for toy brands as well as healthcare products for people in their later years. So, I don't think there are any barriers to the technology in terms of who it really sits with. Ultimately, as with all good tech, it should just work.

You said it's like a discovery channel, but what we also see with AR is that people are using it to not just discover, but actively create and augment their own realities. Can you offer us your insights into that part of AR?

We really celebrate that! Part of our mission in business has always been to democratise AR and truly make it a mass-market proposition.

For that mission of democratising AR, it was important for us to put the tools in the hands of the people. We don't want to be the only people making these experiences - because who knows what could be created? So we built this platform called ZappWorks – a content authoring and publishing platform – and that allows anyone to make their own experiences and publish them. They can do that through the Zappar app. Indeed, for personal usage, it was important that anyone could go on and use the tools for free.

We created a range of tools catering to different levels of ability – from a drag and drop kind of interface for non-tech-savvy people like me and all the way up for people who are more talented like coders, designers, etc.

When we first started, we had to do a lot of education about what AR is. Now it's about how the jigsaw puzzle of this new lexicon of AR pieces together. The reason we made Zappar very modular and a full ecosystem, is to put all those elements together for people because it gets quite complicated.

▦ *How do you bring something to life? Tell us about the process.*

It's all proprietary. All the tools, the platform, everything is built from the ground up. That's also a benefit for us because we can start from the beginning and think mobile first.

There are different aspects to the tech. The first thing is to make sure that we can have really good algorithms that are fast at scanning and detection. You want something to work the first time.

Then there's the element of thinking about how you're going to tell your story and describe what you're going to do in AR. We've seen over the seven years, that there are **three Cs to making a good AR experience**: Understanding the **context**, having a **clear call to action**, and then thinking about the **content** with the first two in mind.

The context is really as simple as thinking about the moment, putting yourself in the other person's shoes. Where are they, have they got a hand free, what is the thing they are looking at? Within that environment: what's the light doing, what's the audio, how long are they likely to have to look at that image, and how are they enticed to look at it in the first place?

The call to actions is critical as well. You have to state clearly that they will have to download something and point at a certain place to get some form of reward.

The content, then, is about how you deliver something that couldn't be done more easily if I just pointed someone to a website. What makes it meaningful for it to be AR? If you can't answer that questions, it's probably not worth doing it in the first place. There's another really important consideration as well and that's thinking about the size of that content package and where it's being served.

In South Africa, you have to deal with slightly different network issues and high data costs. So, we've also built the system to create these **bite-sized experiences – small, snackable, zaps**. And then it really is, as with any good story, thinking of the beginning, middle, and end.

The other thing we've discovered is that **the things that are simple, small and beautiful are the things that can be most compelling**.

> *The ability to think differently about how you can drive valuable experiences for people, in a branded context, and to surprise and delight is good for driving active engagement.*

[ZapWorks User Showcase- Studio - BMW G32 - Amalfi](#) from [Zappar](#) on [Vimeo](#).

⊞ *What is the value of AR and what Zappar does to South African marketers? What should they know about it and why should they buy into it?*

There are different aspects to our business, with some B2B work. We have clients across a number of sectors – entertainment, education, healthcare, packaging, retail, etc. In that case, the clients come to us and they want that full-service offering for a specific brief or challenge that they are trying to meet.

Within ZapWorks and the ZapWorks community, something we fundamentally committed to growing is doing all our work for clients using the ZapWorks tool – exactly the same tool as everyone else – but we allow more agencies and individuals to use it because we don't want to become a bottleneck in creativity. We see a huge variety of people using it, it's a vast and disparate group which is really exciting.

> *I think what's happening with the whole area of immersive computing – be it AR, VR and now MR – is such an amazing opportunity for agencies. There is this absolute need for strong creative and compelling content.*

The fact that the technology is there, is great – and there are quite a few companies on the AR beat and the tech side of it,

not just us. The problem is that there isn't enough good content. And the rules of how you create these micro-moments and experiences are still being written.

The people who are really good at telling stories are the creative agencies. I really hope they wake up to this now. They've had a tough time, their lunch is being eaten by almost everyone… because of what's happened with digital, with consultants coming in, brands taking on a lot of that creativity in-house.

Now, who can make these things? I think it should be the agencies. We hope ZapWorks is a tool they can embrace.

Here in South Africa, we work with a company called IMDM and to have a really innovative company who understands and can see the opportunity for the technology and translate it into local market context is valuable. There are very few markets around the world that have, for instance, the split of mobile penetration between IOS and Android the way South Africa has. It's a very different context in terms of socio-economics here – who's got the phones, what kind of phones, what's the network coverage?

We know where it has worked in other markets, but for them to take that local context and really understand where the opportunity is and take heart of that journey here, is invaluable. The opportunity is local and having experts like IMDM is really import.

Where I see the real opportunity for the next 12-24 months for AR is connected packaging – a massive opportunity.

> " *What AR does best is turning passive print into an always-on media channel that you can control.* "

In the trinity of paid media, earned media and owned media, what AR does is explode owned media. All those billions of dollars being put into products and packaging can now turn into this direct connection with end-users, either at the point of purchase or point of consumption.

And that's amazing, to have a new channel where you can the product contextually relevant to the user dependent on where they are and get rich data analytics from that.**It's like turning on an entirely new channel that didn't exist before.**

[Angry Birds Action - Peperami](#) from [Zappar](#) on [Vimeo](#).

In this creative revolution for agencies, we will see, with the technology now available, the level of creativity and thinking really moving on from these one-off pieces to something a bit richer.

If these things happen in unison, this notion of AR becoming more mass market will begin to catch.

▦ *A bit more on the philosophical side, do you think that the technological advancement of mobile devices is being driven further and faster by companies like Zappar or do the technological advancements of phones drive the development of companies like Zappar? If that makes sense…*

I think there's a virtual circle of hardware and software going on. If you look at the technological advancements of mobile phones, it has begun to decrease a bit. The new phones are only incrementally better while before there were quite giant leaps. The interest from a lot of the hardware guys is in the unlocking of the power of the camera on phones – I think they see it as a big opportunity in giving people another reason to trade up. I think we're going to see a lot of second cameras, depth cameras coming in to lend themselves to computer vision inputs and to make more of that. That's driving the hardware side.

The software side is just going: "Wow, now that there is this technology in the hardware, here's all this other cool stuff that we can do."

I think we're part of the conversation, but we're not driving it. But it will be fascinating to see where things go in this next period...

ABOUT CARI COETZEE

Cari Coetzee is a contributor to Bizcommunity Tourism, Agriculture and Lifestyle.
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