Creating a Culture of Research, Development and Innovation

Following the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the widespread use of disruptive technologies and a wider economic downturn, creative markets have been shrinking, and many businesses now view R&D investment as an unattainable luxury. This is despite an association between a decline in "innovation-active" firms and stagnated productivity in the UK.

Creative companies that are not actively researching new technologies and integrating them into their work, will inevitably lose business to their more innovative competitors. For the West of England, this means a loss of inward investment to other key players nationally and globally. To maintain and grow the West of England's Creative sector, which has a GVA of £1,286 million, an intervention to build a strong culture of Research, Development and Innovation is essential.

The MyWorld programme has successfully embedded this culture throughout its creative technology ecosystem, using three primary mechanisms of work.

Funding

Having provided over £4.5M of ringfenced R&D funding, MyWorld has allowed critical R&D to be conducted with little or no financial risk to creative businesses. Through funding calls, experimental productions and research fellowships, MyWorld has supported 404 businesses in conducting R&D.

Network

The MyWorld programme has 13 industry and academic partners, and many touchpoints within the West of England's creative technology industries, having reached over 130,000 members of the public, trained 3,258 learners, and supported 404 businesses. By making connections within this network, shared challenges, complementary skillsets, and opportunities for knowledge sharing have been uncovered. So far, MyWorld has enabled 133 business to business and business to university collaborations, where mutually beneficial R&D can be conducted, costs lowered, and risks shared.

Facilities

MyWorld has invested in the development of creative technology R&D facilities in the West of England, co-designed and with co-investment from industry and academic partners. This has enabled local access to state-of-the-art spaces and technologies for conducting R&D, which truly meet the needs of the creative industries. The facilities' purpose-built design lowers barriers to engaging in R&D; often with everything provided under one roof, and at a lower rate than commercially operating production spaces. MyWorld has worked with 43 organisations across 12,000 hours of supported R&D since beginning to offer R&D space in December 2024, alongside expertise and equipment hire from summer 2022.

Through these mechanisms, MyWorld has successfully created a culture of research, development and innovation in three key organisations.

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Aardman Animations

Aardman Animations has created iconic, globally beloved characters for over 50 years. Despite this success, Aardman are facing the same problem as many creative organisations: the costs of production are going up, while the pay from commissioners stays the same. These rising costs per minute are particularly detrimental in stop-motion animation, which is inherently time-consuming.

To create financial sustainability, new technologies must be utilised within the business. This poses an obvious challenge. How can you embed innovative new technologies in an organisation that is world-renowned for its hand-made ethos? Can Aardman combine the physical and the digital, while keeping material practice at the core of what they do?

In their work with MyWorld, Aardman investigated exactly that, receiving funding, a research fellow, and access to facilities and networks over the course of 13 months. The dedicated R&D team interviewed over 40 stakeholders to identify what digital tools could be most helpful in the pre-production process, before conducting experiments into how virtual production technologies can be implemented on a 'model scale'.

"At the very beginning there was hesitation, especially around VR headsets and being in a digital world, that is so alien to someone who is used to using their hands and being very physical."

Georgia Hope, Aardman Animations

Crucially, these stakeholders were kept engaged throughout the process. The R&D unit was located on the studio floor, amongst ongoing productions, so crew members could look behind the curtain and engage with the practicality of what was being created. Regular demonstrations and feedback sessions were held to allow continued iteration of tools that were intuitive and fit into the stop-motion crew's traditional practices.

This transparent structure of R&D was key to showing the creatives at Aardman how technologies can be used to enhance creativity rather than overshadow it. The approach of demystifying technology has reassured stakeholders, built confidence, and enabled teams to increase production density while maintaining the artistry of their craft.

Importantly, this project has successfully shown how R&D can be a powerful tool to respond to changing market conditions, helping Aardman stay agile and future-focused. As a result, Aardman has continued conducting R&D beyond their project with MyWorld, embedding a lasting culture of innovation across the organisation.

"Without MyWorld, we wouldn't have approached a traditional and structured form of R&D. MyWorld being a catalyst and the desire for change happening internally, allowed us to set up a new R&D unit."

Dan Efergan, Aardman Animations

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Lux Aeterna

Creative practitioners have always adapted to new tools, but the rapid development of generative AI is challenging many industries in ways that feel both groundbreaking and unsettling. Lux Aeterna, an award-winning, Bristol-based VFX company, are amongst many whose business will be affected by such emerging technologies.

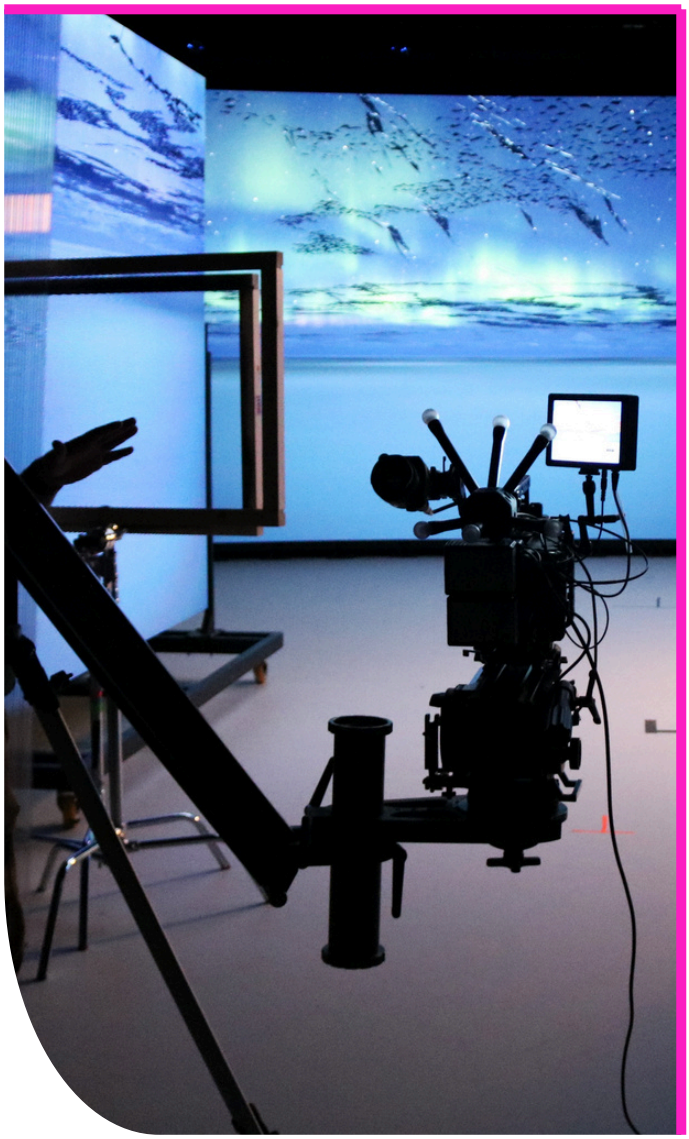
Working with MyWorld, Lux Aeterna created a short film, RENO. In making this film, they experimented with how these emerging technologies can be used practically, efficiently, legally, and ethically within their workflow. MyWorld provided funding and high-end production technologies and facilities which were instrumental in RENO's production.

Most impactfully, MyWorld enabled a partnership between Lux Aeterna and Dr Cobus Jooste, Intellectual Property Law expert at the University of the West of England, to explore the legal and ethical implications of using these tools. The team will publish a report to share knowledge gained with creative industry practitioners, academics, and policy makers alike.

"These tools have sprung onto the creative industries in a very rapid way. Even four or five years ago they didn't really exist, and so every creative organisation is trying to figure out what it means for them, how they should be using them, if they should be using them. This tries to get to the bottom of a lot of those questions."

James Pollock, Lux Aeterna

Such knowledge sharing is crucial to creating a culture of R&D with industry-wide benefits in this period of technological uncertainty. Since the start of the project, the RENO team have spoken at many influential events, including AI panels at Westminster Forum, The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, and the British Film Institute. Across these events, the team has shared their early findings with over 1500 industry practitioners, policy makers and invited audience members, continuing these essential conversations and embedding an open research culture.



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Bristol Old Vic

The rise of streaming services and at-home entertainment has had a devastating effect on live performance venues. World renowned theatre and production company, Bristol Old Vic, has been exploring live streamed performances as a new distribution method and revenue stream. This presents a huge opportunity to reach audiences that are switching to at-home entertainment, as well as new, diverse audiences who may not have previously attended the theatre.

"Before MyWorld, we had never carried out R&D for any of our digital work. It needs many multidisciplinary partners and facilities to come together."

Giles Chiplin, Bristol Old Vic

In partnership with MyWorld's Audience Insights research team, Bristol Old Vic were provided with funding to investigate how scientific data could be used to inform creative decision making, to maximise audience engagement when watching a theatre show via live stream. Using MyWorld's technology, biometric data was gathered from those watching a performance of Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead, both in the theatre, and over a live stream.

By identifying where the two groups differed, the film team could spot the moments in the live stream where the audience's attention was fading. This measurement continued for 3 successive livestreams, with the creative team making data-driven changes to the live stream each night, which ultimately resulted in a more engaged audience.

Enabling these kinds of partnerships between industry and academia can remove the guesswork which so often happens when conducting creative R&D. By allowing data to be part of the production process and inform decision making, creative businesses can confidently and effectively establish new products and revenue streams.

"The way that we designed it, the access to the kit, to the facilities, and to the other stakeholders, they've come about because we're partners on the MyWorld project, and they have enabled these productions to take place"

Giles Chiplin, Bristol Old Vic

These are just three of the 404 trailblazing companies which MyWorld has supported in conducting R&D. Through providing funding, network, and facilities, MyWorld has removed barriers to conducting valuable R&D, and grown a bold and productive community of practice in the West of England region. This has resulted in over £38M of additional investment to the region, indicative of lasting economic growth.