

# Coming Attractions: Virtual Film

David Marlett is the director of *MansLaughter*, a virtual reality (VR) film scheduled to be released this September and billed as the first VR feature film. Here, he talks about some of the challenges of storytelling in the VR medium – and why it opens up new vistas for directors and movie-goers alike.

By Winter Wright



The premise for *MansLaughter*, five acquaintances plotting to murder each other over the possession of a winning lottery ticket, may sound like classic Hollywood, but the experience will be far from it. It will be presented in virtual reality, will have a little over 60 minutes of content produced for it (long enough to qualify as a feature film), though the actual running time will be only 15 minutes, as the viewer will be surrounded by four different scenes happening all at once, each of which can be tuned into and out of at

will (this is meant to encourage multiple viewings, or perhaps “stories” might be a better word in this instance). Its director is David Marlett of CINEMERSIA studios, and he recently spared some time for *WinWin* to talk about the new form of moviemaking he’s pioneering.

## A first time for everything

**WinWin: Can you tell us a little bit about your studio, CINEMERSIA?**

**David Marlett:** CINEMERSIA is the leading producer of live-action feature films for virtual reality media.

CINEMERSIA seeks to work with any company to help them develop and improve such technology. Our VR productions are the largest and most complex being offered. Thus any VR tech company seeking to enter (if not beat) the market, should set their sites on being able to manage/handle CINEMERSIA productions. For example, if you can bring *MansLaughter* to the masses at high resolution and download speed on an untethered HMD, then that technology would instantly be the best in the world. Without *MansLaughter*, the technology companies can only talk about how great their tech is, without the means



## About David Marlett

David has 25 years of experience in film and theater, with emphasis on screenwriting, directing, production, VR R&D, and strategic consultation. He is in post-production on the world's first live-action feature VR film, *MansLaughter*, scheduled for a September 4, 2015 release, which he wrote & directed. He is currently leading the development of two large live-action VR productions, *Innerdrone* and *Arapaho*. He is also in preproduction on his VR film and stage play, *Blue Highway*, which he is producing under the CINEMERSIA banner with Emmy-award winning Richard Middleton (*The Artist, Hitchcock*).



to demonstrate it. CINEMERSIA gives you the cool content to be able to show people the depth of your tech.

**WinWin: How can people see *MansLaughter*?**

**Marlett:** It's just meant for virtual reality, and works only in that environment. No need to go to a cinema: just watch the movie anywhere, using a head-mounted display (HMD).

## A new perspective

**WinWin: How does the immersive quality of VR change the viewer's**

**experience of watching a movie?**

**Marlett:** It changes the viewer's experience drastically. Feeling as though you are in a scene, surrounded by the action, perhaps even a part of the scene, is entirely different from observing the scene inside the framed, rectangular space of a monitor or cinema screen. In short, it is a revolutionary shift to a new medium, like the shift from radio to television.

**WinWin: Will VR require a new visual language? Will certain techniques be replaced with something else?**

**Marlett:** Yes, VR will require new

techniques. It imposes many limitations, as there are no close-ups, quick cuts, or tracking shots – at least not so far. As the new medium matures, and audiences become more familiar with it (and the headgear required to experience it), the methods of camera movement and editing will be expanded.

VR also changes the art of acting. The actor is working more like a theater actor, only not projecting or playing to a fixed audience in a single direction. Many actors will find this liberating, as what is required of them is to simply inhabit the character and be there in that scene, with significantly less awareness of camera position, eye-lines, etc. Further,



## More on virtual video content

*MansLaughter* may be the first VR feature film, but VR content in general is already starting to takeoff across the media ecosystem, thanks to the availability of devices like GoPro's 360 camera system. According to Jez Jowett, Global Director of Creative Technologies at Havas Media, "We've seen the likes of YouTube announce the launch of the first-ever 360-degree version of their platform (known as Jump). I can now go to YouTube and use one of my devices and start to actually view content through that VR device. I can also now go through to Firefox or Safari and start to view VR content through their browsers. All the big content producers and independent content communities are starting to make their own content. If I want to make my own, many of these platforms and publishers will actually provide me with a kit, free of charge, for me to go and make my own content. There is a rush on for people to make content, because the platforms are there. The only thing that isn't there yet is the actual physical devices."

the long takes give VR the feel of long stage scenes. And yet many film actors may find it more difficult, especially those who like the comfort of multiple takes, short takes, and coverage shots.

### **WinWin: What creative limitations are currently imposed on filmmakers by existing VR technology?**

**Marlett:** On the production side, the limitations are the quality of the cameras themselves; the quality and features of the workflow software for post-production, including stitching (a technique that combines multiple images to produce a panoramic view); and the quality and efficiency of the compression software for creating the final product that can be read correctly in all HMD brands. On the audience experience side, the limitations are, first, in the means of transmission of the VR films to millions of HMDs, and in the HMD technology itself as we need faster and higher resolution devices which are more ergonomic, convenient, and less expensive. I believe that all of these limitations will be addressed and conquered within the next three years.

## Inhabiting the scene

**WinWin: VR director Saschka Unseld is quoted as saying, "Cinema is a sequential medium. It's like a dictatorship of the director. Look at this, look at this face, look at this detail." VR, on the other hand, puts control back in the hands of the viewer. As someone who has directed a VR film, how do you feel about having your "dictatorship" taken away?**

**Marlett:** Having directed stage and traditional film, I can tell you that yes, it is a greater challenge for the director in some ways; but it also opens up tremendous new opportunities. VR will probably be better suited to a stage director, at least at first. And that makes sense, relative to another point. VR filmmaking requires very careful

and well-crafted writing. Writing that otherwise might have been undone by the director is now essential to making the 360-degree scene work. Finally, with the audience able to look anywhere in the 360-degree realm, VR gives both the writer and the director an opportunity to "lead" the audience in natural ways, both toward a point of plot interest, or in fact away from a plot point, thus adding a level of intrigue to spur multiple viewings. We experimented with that a great deal in *MansLaughter*.

**WinWin: The pace of film has accelerated, with quicker pacing and more cuts. If VR is about making viewers feel like they're inhabiting a scene, will the pace start to slow down? VR director Felix Lajeunesse is quoted as saying that, if you deliberately try to produce exciting or fast-paced content, the viewer will feel this artifice, and "the immersion will fail." He says that with VR, the desire to move on to the next thing is reduced, and the viewer inhabits the moment. Do you agree?**

**Marlett:** I agree with Felix on a lot of things, but I might differ on this point. Yes, at first audiences will need to grow into VR experiences. But life happens fast all around us, and the invigorating moments often come quickly. To the extent that reality is sought, then that speed could be, and perhaps should be, replicated. But yes, immersion is key, and that often includes inhabiting a moment. We had to consider that even in the production design for *MansLaughter*, where the audience can take 15 minutes and just linger in a scene and study the set, the authenticity of the props, etcetera – another new consideration that traditional film doesn't have. But, overall, I agree that the evolution of audience tolerances and expectations must be considered, though I expect it will not take the 80 years that traditional film took; more like eight years, max. **WIN**