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Case Study of the
Child of Empire:

From Student Project to
a World-Touring Virtual
Reality Documentary

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Introduction

This white paper was commissioned by the Innovate UK Immersive Tech Network, the UK government's leading network for immersive technology innovators, and Arts Council England. It examines the experience of the independent XR creators of 'Child of Empire', who were able to successfully navigate turning their idea into a fully realized internationally touring piece of immersive work.

The UK is home to some of the best producers of immersive content in the world. Despite significant growth in the sector and wider adoption of the technology in recent years, the barriers to entry to

immersive production remain quite high, especially for those outside of established production companies.

This white paper looks at challenges the project faced with the creative process, building the right team, accessing funding, and touring the work to a wide range of international venues. We hope the deep dive into this project's production journey, and the key lessons learned from the team can offer insight to creatives who are just getting started in immersive production.

Asha Easton

Innovate UK Immersive Tech Network Lead

CHILD OF EMPIRE



PROJECT
DASTAAN

A PROJECT DASTAAN AND ANZU FILMS PRODUCTION



ANZU

CAST: ISHAR PLAYED BY: ADIL HUSSAIN AND IOBAL PLAYED BY: SALMAN SHAHID CREATED BY: SPARSH AHILJA AND ERHAN SAADATI ART DIRECTOR: STEPHEN STEPHENSON WRITTEN BY: OMI ZOLA GUPTA
PRODUCERS: SPARSH AHILJA, ERHAN SAADATI, SAM DALRYMPLE, SAADIA GARDEZI EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: LISA MARIE RUSSO, ERICA GARBER, ELODIE MAILLET-STORM, LIZ ROSENTHAL MUSIC COMPOSITION: VASUNDHARA GUPTA AND AMRA GILL

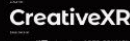


Figure 1: Child of Empire Still

Child of Empire is an animated virtual reality (VR) experience which tells the story of the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan. But the experience itself also has a story worth telling. This white paper outlines the journey of the *Child of Empire* team as they navigate

the world of immersive media production and world-touring as University students reclaiming their families' stories of Partition. At the same time, this case study identifies key learning points of the team to guide immersive industry newbies of the future.

Project background

Child of Empire is one of the outputs of a peace-making initiative *Project Dastaan*, which aims to encourage conversations about the Partition by collecting and sharing people's personal stories. *Project Dastaan* was founded by Sparsh Ahuja (*Project Dastaan* Founder & CEO), Sam Dalrymple (*Project Dastaan* Co-Founder & Operations Lead) and Saadia Gardezi (*Project Dastaan* Co-Founder & Pakistan Lead), and inspired by their families' connections to the Partition. In addition to the *Child of Empire*, which is the core focus of this report, the initiative also produced a three-part animated series, *Lost Migrations*, and runs a *Social Impact Program* which focuses on reconnecting people with their childhood memories of the Partition.

Child of Empire is an animated virtual reality documentary through which the viewer experiences a story of Partition through a first-person perspective. The experience was showcased in 2022, a year which commemorated 75 years since the historical event, as part of an international tour in the United Kingdom, India, and Pakistan. Venues hosting part of the tour were Victoria and Albert Museum in London; British Film Institute in London; Birmingham Museums and Art Galleries; SOAS, University of London; Bradford Cathedral; Derby Museums; National History Museum in Pakistan; Partition Museum Amritsar and Delhi in India; Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol; and Warwick Arts Centre in Coventry.

About the Partition

"The 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan is the largest migration in human history. Over 14 million migrated and over one million perished. Partition continues to be a lived experience for many across the subcontinent. The political relations between India and Pakistan are hostile, plagued by the legacy of Partition and the four wars that followed it. Even today, most refugees have not been able to return home." ¹

¹ Turning closed borders into open virtual frontiers, Project Dastaan, accessed July 5, 2023, <https://projectdastaan.org/about/>

About this White Paper

This white paper presents a case study of the *Child of Empire* experience from its conception to distribution. The report is split into chapters representing the planning stage, development stage, and touring stage of the project. Each chapter identifies significant actions and events that took place at each stage, with challenges and learnings being emphasised due to this report's aim to inform future creatives at a similar career stage. Lastly, since securing financial support proved to be the team's biggest challenge, the final chapter delves into insights about navigating funding for virtual reality experience production.

The information for this report was obtained by interviewing people involved at each individual stage, namely the members of the founding team – Sparsh Ahuja (*Project Dastaan* Founder & CEO), Sam Dalrymple (*Project Dastaan* Co-Founder & Operations Lead), Saadia Gardezi (*Project Dastaan* Co-Founder & Pakistan Lead); representatives from organisations that provided funding for the development of the experience – Liz Rosenthal from *CreativeXR* (Executive Producer), Adriana García from *CatchLight* (Director of Operations), and an anonymous representative from *Doc Society*; leading members of the production team – Erfan Saadati (*Child of Empire* Director), Omi Zola Gupta (*Child of Empire* Writer), Stephen Stephenson (*Child of Empire* Lead Artist); and representatives from venues hosting the experience as part of the 2022 tour – *SOAS, University of London; Victoria & Albert Museum* in London; *British Film Institute; Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery; Derby Museums; Bradford Cathedral; Bristol Arnolfini; The Citizens Archive of Pakistan; and Partition Museum Delhi and Amritsar* in India set up by The Arts and Cultural Heritage Trust.

01 Highlights

- The idea for *Project Dastaan* was sparked by Sparsh Ahuja who wanted to utilise a virtual reality 360 environment to take his grandfather back to his childhood village which he has not visited since the Partition event in 1947.
- The founding team members, Sparsh Ahuja, Sam Dalrymple, and Saadia Gardezi, all had family histories connected to the Partition, which influenced their motivation for the project.
- *Social Impact Project* was born as the team received overwhelming interest from others whose family members have been impacted by the Partition and hoped to be taken back to their childhood memories.
- The founding team initially worked on the project voluntarily during their studies but received some funding for fieldwork from their Oxford colleges.
- They faced multiple grant rejections before obtaining a fellowship from *CatchLight*, which marked a crucial turning point for the project. After graduating, the team dedicated to the project full-time.
- Initially, they planned on producing a live-action 360 documentary (*Child of Empire*), focusing on one person's journey of homecoming with the help of the team and VR technology.
- The team faced challenges with grant writing due to a lack of experience in the immersive world, leading to imposter syndrome. A grant from *CreativeXR* provided training and support in those areas. Over time, they learned the art of pitching and developed important social connections.
- The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the project, leading to a shift from a live-action 360 documentary film to an animated virtual reality experience (as *Child of Empire* exists today).
- The team faced challenges in narrative development and cultural sensitivities. They had to find a balance between cohesive storytelling and representing diverse perspectives. They overcame this by producing an additional three-part animated series, *Lost Migrations*, which featured stories they were unable to include in the VR experience, especially of women.
- The project received grants from *CatchLight*, *CreativeXR*, *BFI Doc Society*, and *Arts Council England*, enabling them to develop and tour the VR experience across the United Kingdom, India, and Pakistan.
- The team encountered difficulties during the touring stage, including logistics, managing audiences, and international shipping regulations for VR headsets. They learned about the importance of insuring equipment, budgeting for support staff, providing comprehensive training for staff and managing viewers' emotional reactions.
- The project is now a permanent cultural exhibition in venues in India and Pakistan, showcasing the experiences of Partition survivors.

02 Planning Stage



Figure 2: Moments before taking Sparsh's grandfather back to his ancestral village with the use of a virtual reality headset

This section outlines the early stages of Project Dastaan and how it inspired the development of the animated virtual reality experience Child of Empire.

Early 2018: The project is inspired by Sparsh's grandfather's wish to revisit his ancestral village

Sparsh, whose grandfather migrated from Bela in Pakistan to New Delhi in India in 1947, and who has not seen his childhood village ever since, had an idea to take his grandfather back to his ancestral village using virtual reality technology by 360 filming the village and showing it to his grandfather in a virtual reality headset. Sparsh mentions his grandfather always talked a lot about the village in which he grew up before the Partition and his pain of not being able to see it again because of the politics of tourist visa arrangements between India and Pakistan.

Sparsh shared this idea with his University friends Sam and Saadia, who also have personal or familial connections to the historical event of Partition and were interested in helping Sparsh with the project. Eventually, it became apparent that many people of Sparsh's grandfather's generation had similar stories, which people started sharing with the team as the word about their project got around.

“We just started off trying to take people back home - virtually. I think it was a wonderful idea to give people that kind of closure.” Saadia.

“Initially, the idea was that it'd be a very sweet gesture by a bunch of students for their parents and a generation that we felt like we owed a lot to.” Sparsh.

Mid 2018: Social Impact Project is born as a voluntary student project

This encouraged the Social Impact Project, which aimed to reconnect people with their childhood memories before the Partition. The initial goal was to record 75 stories by 2022 to mark the 75th anniversary of the Partition.

As a Punjabi speaker, Saadia conducted interviews and collected people's personal stories of Partition, while Sparsh and Sam visited and recorded people's ancestral villages using 360 filming technology, which they then edited and showed to people in virtual reality headsets. This stage of their work was very emotional and rewarding, the founding team recall a moment when they connected two old friends who were separated during the Partition.

"We had a few of these very emotional moments. And sometimes survivors would say, 'Oh, you brought me back to my childhood, I wanted to see this one more time before I passed away'" Sparsh.

At this stage of the project, all of them were students and conducted this work voluntarily during their studies. They funded initial fieldwork with funding received from Oxford University colleges and through crowdfunding.

As interest in the project grew, the team started applying for external grant funding opportunities to produce a film about the Social Impact Project.

Early 2019: Transition from student project to something greater marked by CatchLight funding and graduations

After a few unsuccessful grant applications, Sparsh obtained a global fellowship from CatchLight, which allowed the team to fund fieldwork travel and equipment.

"[Obtaining CatchLight funding] was very much the moment that [the project] went from being a small student project [when] the ground was very much, 'Let's just see what happens'. Whereas after that it suddenly turned into something more, I think it was a big turning point." Sam.

They all graduated in the summer of 2019, at which point Sparsh and Sam dedicated themselves to the project full-time, while Saadia was applying for PhDs.

CatchLight is a non-profit organisation that aims to transform, connect, and inform communities through visual storytelling. The application for the global fellowship included an application form and submission of previous work (prototype or portfolio), which was then reviewed by a jury of journalism editors and art curators.

“Child of Empire was an exciting project for CatchLight to be a part of because there are very tangible ways in which VR can tell a story visually, particularly stories that would otherwise be impossible to tell. But the excitement is also in being at the forefront of solving the challenges that come with new tech – cultural and logistical challenges like appropriate cultural representation and equipment accessibility.”

Adriana García, Director of Operations at CatchLight.

Late 2019: Erfan joins the team as the Child of Empire film director

At this point, the team was planning on producing a live-action 360 documentary (Child of Empire) about the Social Impact Project, focusing on one person’s story and the team’s journey of creating a 360 VR film to ‘bring them home’.

Sparsh recruited Erfan who was experienced in making 360 documentaries to join the team as a Child of Empire film director. They connected via a ‘VR professionals UK’ Facebook group.

By this time, the team experienced four grant rejections for the Child of Empire film with the feedback that 360 films are unlikely to receive funding and the team was close to giving up on the project.

“So at that point, it was like, ‘Is this film ever going to get made?’” Sparsh.

January 2020: CreativeXR as first successful external funding application

In January 2020, the team received great news – they were selected to take part in Venice Gap-Financing Market, a support programme in project financing for European and international producers, as well as received a grant from CreativeXR to make a 3-minute prototype of the film.

As the CreativeXR grant covered around 60% of their production budget (excluding team wages), the team used the grant money for making a 3-minute prototype as well as the full film. Their prototype was not selected for further funding for the next stage of the CreativeXR programme.

CreativeXR was an incubation acceleration programme for the arts and culture industries developed by Digital Catapult and Arts Council England, specifically aiming at helping UK talent with the development of extended reality projects. In addition to financial support for the development of a prototype, the programme provided guidance on financing and pitching creative projects by running workshops providing a mentorship scheme. The programme also emphasised social networks and the importance of introducing teams to potential funders and distributors.

“There are many R&D [Research and Development] programmes, but they don't focus on the business development side of creative project development, and it means that the projects always stay as R&D and there are few case studies in terms of return on investment or impact. This was an important focus at CreativeXR.”

Liz Rosenthal, Executive Producer at CreativeXR.

February 2020: COVID-19 changes everything and Child of Empire becomes an animated virtual reality documentary

In February 2020, just before the COVID-19 lockdown announcement, the team began the next stage of fieldwork in India. The lockdown completely changed the project plan as it was no longer possible to conduct fieldwork.

An idea for Child of Empire as an animated film came about and Erfan brought on his former colleague Stephen, an experienced VR creative, to join the team as an animator and lead artist.

Key Learnings

- **Voluntary Efforts:** During the planning stage, the whole team worked on the project voluntarily. This experience taught them the importance of leveraging their skills and resources to advance the project, even without significant financial support.
- **Funding Challenges:** Navigating the world of grant funding, the team encountered several rejections, and many felt challenged by imposter syndrome. Through experience and perseverance, they became more familiar with the digital storytelling funding landscape and interest, learnt grant-writing skills, and became aware of the importance of social networks.
- **Collaboration:** The founding team learnt the importance of collaboration and outsourcing skills as the project and production demands grew. They reached out to Erfan Saadati who was experienced in VR film production and acted as a guide for the team through the immersive industry landscape.
- **Networks and Connections:** The team learnt about the importance of social networks and identified various individuals who have had an important impact on the success of the project. Specifically named individuals were academics from Oxford University for their help at the early stages of the project, especially Dr Faisal Devji (Professor of Indian History, St Antony's College, Oxford) and Dr Yasmin Khan (Celebrated Historian of British India and Associate Professor of History, Kellogg College, Oxford). Moreover,

Indian writer and art historian, Aanchal Malhotra provided them with guidance and training on oral history collection. Liz Rosenthal, Executive Producer at CreativeXR (Funder), was also mentioned as an impactful individual, especially for introducing the team to the world of immersive as an industry.

Project Dastaan Advisory Board

The team has formed an advisory board throughout various stages of the project. The website names the following board members: Malala Yousafzai, Noble Peace Laureate; Suroosh Alvi, Co-Founder, VICE Media; William Dalrymple, Celebrated Historian and Author; Gabo Arora, Founder/Director of LightShed, Former Creative Director of the United Nations; Dr Shahidul Alam, Bangladeshi photojournalist, teacher and social activist; Dr Faisal Devji, Professor of Indian History, St Antony's College, Oxford; Dr Kate Sullivan De Estrada, Associate Professor in the International Relations of South Asia,

CSASP Oxford; Dr Ayesha Jalal, Mary Richardson Professor of History at Tufts University, MacArthur Fellow; Dr Sundas Ali, Lecturer in Political Sociology and Politics of Southeast Asia, Oxford; Anita Rani, British Radio and TV Presenter; Asad J. Malik, Filmmaker and CEO 1rIC; Aanchal Malhotra, Author and Oral Historian; Gayatri Parameswaran, Filmmaker and Immersive Journalist; Anam Zakaria, Author and Oral Historian; and Dr Yasmin Khan, Celebrated Historian of British India and Associate Professor of History, Kellogg College, Oxford.

“It’s important to get advice from experienced producers from the media and entertainment world. Because immersive formats are very new there are few experienced producers in the field who have knowledge of IP development, financing and licensing. This experience really helps shape the value and the future of a project.”

Liz Rosenthal, Executive Producer at CreativeXR.

03 Production Stage

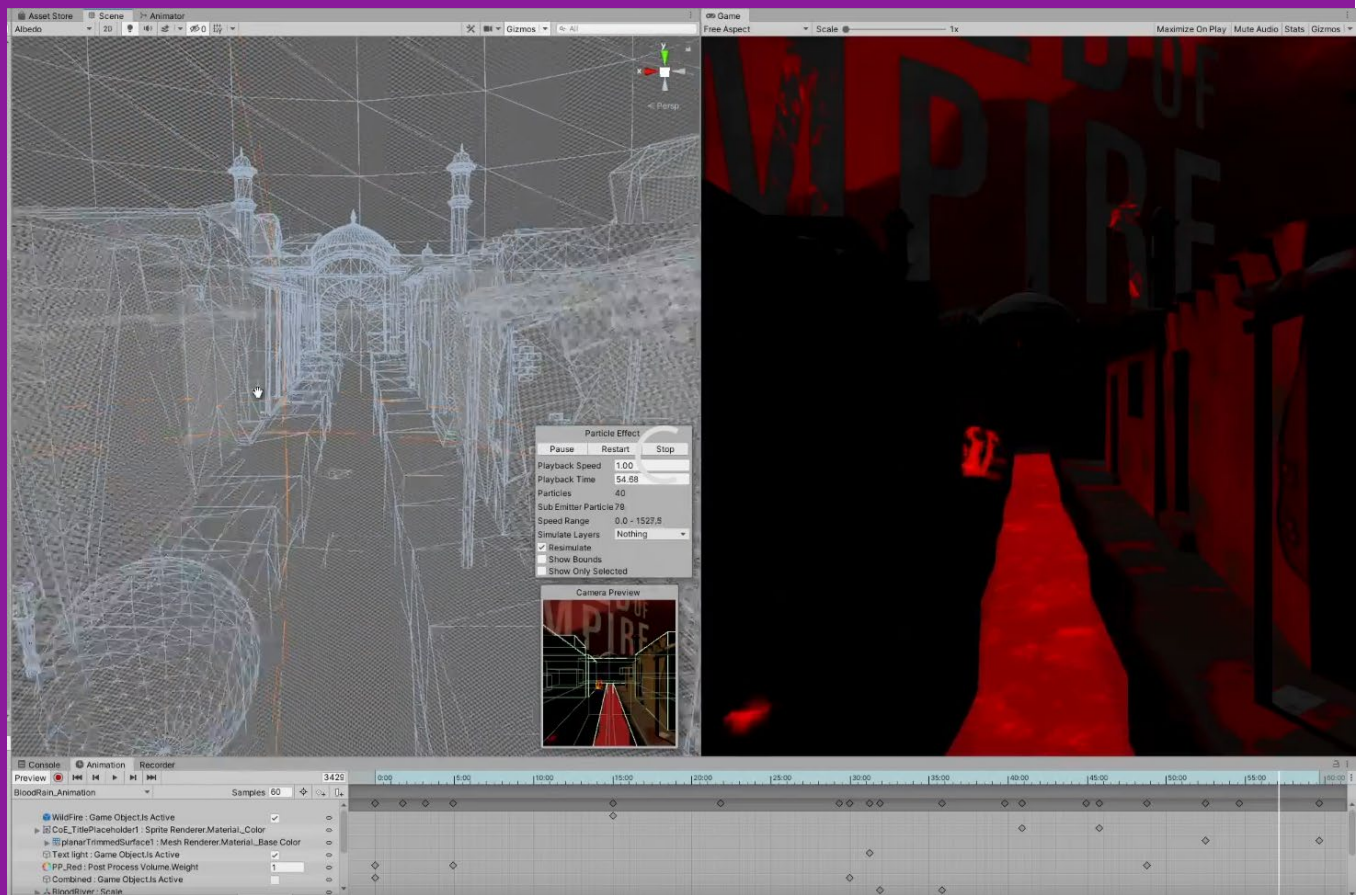


Figure 3: Child of Empire as work in progress

This section outlines the production and creative development process of the Child of Empire as an animated virtual reality experience.

Most of 2020: The production team works on assets and locations but encounters clashes over the script

Production of the Child of Empire experience as we know it today began with a decision for its format as an animated virtual reality docu-drama experience, rather than a live-action 360 documentary film as initially intended.

The production team described the production process as exceptionally creative and explorative. This was new for both Erfan and Stephen, who previously worked for a virtual production company, identifying the uniqueness of this project's complete creative freedom due to no editorial interference. This meant that they were truly able to experiment, which all production team members identified as the greatest part of working on the Child of Empire.

“Although we had a lot of different funders, no one interfered editorially. Which was very interesting and fun. [...] So it's really an open canvas which sometimes is very good but sometimes it means that you are constantly questioning yourself, like, ‘Are we taking this in the right direction?’ And we did do that because we wrote the script probably three or four times and changed the story structure a few times. But that's also the good thing about [it], that we could afford to do that because we were under no one's timeline but our own. So, in the end, we've made something that we were actually quite proud of. It was our story.” Erfan.

With the funding and support from CreativeXR, Stephen explored the use of various animation styles and softwares. For example, at first, Stephen explored the use of Oculus Quill, painting and animation software for virtual reality, which was aesthetically appealing but introduced a range of technical limitations with animation and interaction. Therefore, they decided to use Unity instead, which impacted the artistic style of the animation (i.e., a more traditional animation aesthetics).

Another important decision was the level of interactivity of the experience. Initially, their plan was for an interactive and explorative experience, however, the team became aware of spatial limitations when testing the experience in their small bedrooms during lockdown. This encouraged them to reflect on spaces in which they hoped to showcase the experience, such as museums or at home. In addition to acknowledgement of the fact that their target audience might not be particularly experienced in the use of virtual reality, they decided for the experience to require less interaction and be more passive in nature.

The sensitive and personal nature of the topic (i.e. founding team members were personally connected with the Partition while the production team members were not) led to creative differences regarding the script. Everyone agreed for the experience to include stories the founding team collected as part of the Social Impact Project, however, they struggled to agree on the exact stories to be featured. As a result, the team rewrote the script multiple times, which delayed the overall progress of the experience production.

Early 2021: Scriptwriter Omi is recruited and the team agree on the narrative

In the hope of overcoming challenges with the script, Sparsh brought on board a script writer Omi, whom he knew through a mutual friend. Omi was a fresh pair of eyes and of a South Asian background, which was important to the founding team in the way of understanding the significance and sensitivity of the Partition.

Despite not having worked on a virtual reality project before (or ever trying a headset), Omi was able to apply his experience of writing for animated films when writing the script. The team also lent Omi a VR headset and suggested a range of good and bad experiences to familiarise himself with.

As the team already developed most assets and locations by the time of Omi's involvement, he had to work around those. However, Omi was given complete creative freedom regarding the story and the characters featured in the experience. He incorporated two stories based on the Social Impact Project interviews, of an Indian Hindu man, Ishar Das Arora (Sparsh's grandfather) who migrated from Pakistan to India, and of a Pakistani Muslim, Iqbal-ud-din Ahmed, who migrated from India to Pakistan. This story combination represented a balance of both religious perspectives which fed into the peace-making goal of the project. However, the team recognised the drawback of both stories being from a male perspective and in relation to the Punjab area. Originally, there was a third story of a woman from a Bengal region, however, they

decided to exclude it due to the complexity of the narrative and the visuals (i.e., visuals representing Punjab and Bengal regions would differ aesthetically). This was a difficult decision for the team as they wanted the VR experience to be a holistic re-telling of the history, but they recognised their limitations and inability to tell the story of Partition from all points of view. To address this, they produced an additional three-part animated series called Lost Migrations, which particularly focused on the 'unheard stories', especially of women.

"I think then we just resigned ourselves to the fact that we can't tell a comprehensive total story of Partition. But what we can do is be authentic to at least two voices that we have in this story and tell them as authentically and honestly as we can without ever expecting some kind of total history through this experience, which is too tall an order for a tragedy as large as it is." Omi.

Another important aspect of story development highlighted by the team was identifying the target audience. Their original goal was to develop a peace-making experience for both Indian and Pakistani audiences. However, throughout the development, they became aware of the lack of knowledge about the Partition in British audiences and recognised the potential of the Child of Empire as an educational tool. However, Omi reflects this was sometimes challenging to navigate from a storytelling perspective in terms of the level of detail.

Mid 2021: Project development leaps and experience is finalised

The team reflects on the final six months of experience development as a dynamic collaborative creative process between Omi and Stephen.

Using the traditional screenwriting software Final Draft, Omi approached the scriptwriting from a dialogue and emotional perspective, without dictating visual direction. Omi reflects on his Punjabi heritage and his family's experiences informing the writing, particularly the emotional tone of the script. Nonetheless, for certain scenes, such as the theatrical opening sequence, Omi and Sparsh worked together on an art direction document for Stephen.

"If I was directing the project, then maybe I would have written the script with more direction, but it wasn't my project to direct, so I was just writing more of the emotional journey and thinking about how we could go from a place of suspicion... a sense of familiarity between these two men because they are both Punjabi and the only thing that divides them is this very arbitrary border, in the face of a post-colonial country. But ultimately, they're both Punjabi, they speak the same language, they probably eat the same foods, but they met each other with some kind of sense of suspicion and maybe that's just communicated through banter but I see it with my grandparents. Because my maternal grandparents are Punjabi and they have experienced Partition, and they still speak with suspicion about Muslims and Pakistan, but they were seven years old when they crossed the border." Omi.

Simultaneously, Erfan and Stephen worked on a floor map for the experience, which they both recognised as important based on the previous VR experiences they have worked on. Nonetheless, they recognised the floor map was not critical for this project due to good working relationships and trust between the team members.

Stephen encountered a few technical challenges due to technical limitations of working with Oculus Quest headsets, especially in relation to file sizes (i.e., Oculus store independent file limitation size being 2G), which involved multiple long conversations with Unity.

The final stage of experience development involved recruiting voice actors and musicians. Adil Hussain and Salman Shahid were the voices of Ishar Das Arora and Iqbal-ud-din Ahmed whom Sparsh and Omi recruited via multiple streams of personal connections in India. The recordings were done remotely as both actors were based in India, while the production team was in London. Additionally, Omi brought on board a musician who was a school friend, Amira Gill, who co-composed a piece with a colleague Vasundhara Gupta, adopting Faiz Ahmad Faiz's (Pakistani poet and author) only poem on Partition. Their adaptation is one of the few musical adaptations of the poem, and they were proud to have managed to connect with Faiz's relatives who advised on the adaptation.

October 2021: Additional funding from BFI Doc Society Short Film Fund

The final piece of budget for experience production came from the BFI Doc Society fund Made of Truth, which marked the Child of Empire as the first virtual reality experience to win this grant. This fund specifically supported animation and enabled the team to work with an animation studio in Romania which provide further support with asset development.

February 2022: The experience premieres at Sundance online

The Child of Empire virtual reality experience premiered at the Sundance film festival. However, because of COVID-19, the festival took place online, which was slightly unfortunate for the team as this limited their ability to network and promote their work in person.

“Actually, I think it was very unfortunate for them. New Frontiers at the Sundance Film Festival is an important showcase for immersive impact projects, especially in the North American market where they would have had exposure to leading journalists, influencers and important industry figures which could have led to wider distribution for the project. Because of COVID-19, the festival was held online and few people got to see it as home ownership of VR headset was imperative and is still niche. Launching at important festivals like Sundance, SXSW and Venice can be essential for getting attention and distribution for Creative Immersive Projects that have little chance of being published on the online storefronts which mostly focus on VR games.”

Liz Rosenthal, Executive Producer at CreativeXR.

Key Learnings

- **Adaptability and Shifting Direction:** The team was adaptable and open to shifting their project direction based on constraints and unforeseen circumstances. This was crucial, particularly in relation to the shift from live-action to animated film due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Determination:** The team demonstrated great persistence despite multiple challenges and a lack of significant financial support. This demonstrates determination and character which stems from their belief in the project and personal ties with the story.
- **Seeking Expertise:** The team recognised the value of seeking expertise outside their immediate circle and recruited specialised professionals who played crucial roles in the project's development, especially Stephen Stephenson and Omi Zola Gupta.
- **Industry Awareness:** The production team highlighted the importance of familiarity with existing VR content, and they encouraged Omi who was new to writing for immersive experiences to watch as many VR experiences as possible (good and bad) before writing the script.
- **Audience Definition:** The team learned about the importance of clearly defining their target audience in advance of production as it significantly impacted the process. Specifically, they considered their target audience's familiarity with technology and understanding of the Partition, which directly informed the script as well as the level of interactivity of the experience. This was crucial as they were navigating two different demographics (UK and South Asian), who varied in knowledge and emotional connection in relation to the Partition.

04 Touring Stage



Figure 4: *Child of Empire* on tour

This section outlines the distribution of the *Child of Empire* virtual reality experience, particularly the teams' international tour in the United Kingdom, India, and Pakistan.

Early 2022: The team builds relationships with potential showcase venues

The team was on track with their original plan to showcase Project Dastaan outputs in August 2022, which commemorated the 75th anniversary of the Partition and the legal existence of Pakistan and India (14th - 15th August 1947).

In early 2022, the team started planning the tour and building relationships with venues in the United Kingdom, India, and Pakistan. The team connected with a range of venues that were interested in immersive exhibitions, religious studies, and/or history. Representatives from venues featuring the experience emphasised the appeal of the Child of Empire was the fact that it is a virtual reality experience, often the first showcased at their venue, and its exploration of under-represented history.

“Our directors were approached directly and some discussions had already taken place with the South Asian Heritage Month Festival. When we found out more about it, the experience was clearly a great opportunity for our audiences and city demographic, and also tied in with new organisation approaches to be experimental, to share real stories and experiences that were meaningful to people, and to provide something that we could learn from in developing and operating our future live programming and engagement work.”

Anonymous tour venue representative (Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery).

“Our venues, the Partition Museums Delhi and Amritsar in India preserve memories of Partition survivors by documenting their

oral histories, therefore, showcasing the Child of Empire VR at the Partition Museums Delhi and Amritsar was a natural progression.”

Anonymous tour venue representative (Partition Museum Delhi Venue).

Mid 2022: The team obtains Arts Council England funding to support the UK tour

The team submitted a funding application to the Arts Council England for the UK tour in early 2022. The team remember thinking their application was rejected as they had not heard from the Arts Council England for a while after applying. They develop a backup plan which only involves showcasing the experience at SOAS, University of London and Bradford Cathedral. However, they received the good news of acceptance in July 2022 (two days before the planned touring date). This grant enabled them to showcase the experience in numerous UK-based venues in addition to touring the project internationally in Pakistan and India.

Funding for the international tour in India was provided by Professor Navtej Purewal from SOAS, University of London, as part of The Border Crossings research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.² Australia Council for the Arts International Engagement Fund provided financial support for the tour in Pakistan. The team also obtained further support from CatchLight (as part of their continued fellowship support), who donated 20 headsets for the tour.

2 “BORDER CROSSINGS: Exploring history and community through virtual reality at the 75th anniversary of the Partition”, UK Research and Innovation, accessed 5 July, 2023, <https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=AH%2FX000184%2F1>

Location	Dates
Victoria and Albert Museum, London Friday lates	29 th July 2022
British Film Institute, London One Week VR exhibit & Premiere of Lost Migrations animations	August 2022
Birmingham Museums and Art Galleries One-week installation and screenings	August 2022
SOAS, University of London Exhibit and social engagement events	Sept/Oct 2022
Bradford Cathedral, VR exhibit for one week as part of inter-faith events	November 2022
Derby Museums VR exhibit for one week	November 2022
National History Museum, Pakistan Ongoing exhibition and setup of permanent VR exhibit	Since November 2022
ArtChowk Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan Pop-up exhibit	December 2022
Partition Museum Amritsar and Delhi, India Ongoing exhibition and setup of permanent VR exhibit	Since January 2023
Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol VR exhibit for three days and film screenings	January 2023
Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry Partition exhibition and screenings	March 2023

Most of 2022: Team tour the experience in the UK, India, and Pakistan

In addition to the exhibition of the Child of Empire film, the team displayed Lost Migration films and organised a range of talks and panel discussions on the topic of Partition as part of their tour.

Logistically, the tour was a big learning process for the team. Over the course of the tour, they learnt about the physical and emotional requirements for setting up and running a virtual reality exhibition and thrived in unpredictability as each location was unique in venue size and local interest.

They learnt about the unpredictability of an exhibition of such nature at their first in-person exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, where the four team members were taken aback by an incredibly long queue which required Victoria and Albert Museum staff members to stop people from joining the queue. This was an important lesson in budgeting for stuff as well as audience management, which they took on board for future touring venues.

In the UK, they transported equipment using moving companies, which were sometimes unreliable, with some drivers refusing to transport VR equipment, making this mode of transport rather risky.

Touring a virtual reality experience in India and Pakistan resulted in further challenges. There were no virtual reality headset rental companies in India or Pakistan, so the team shipped headsets internationally. This was especially challenging as the headsets contain Lithium batteries, which are considered dangerous cargo. Additionally, virtual reality headsets are taxed as luxury item. These two factors significantly delayed the tour and introduced unexpected additional costs, resulting in a shorter tour duration than initially planned at certain venues.

The team donated headsets to venues in India and Pakistan, making the Child of Empire a permanent exhibition in Pakistan and India.

“It’s so rare to collaborate across the border, I think everyone was quite excited about it.”

Noor Ahmed, The Citizens Archive of Pakistan.

Tour Audience Experience Snapshots

The experience was extremely well-received by the tour venues as well as the audiences. Accounts from tour venue representatives suggest that the Child of Empire showcase sparked important conversations about the Partition and migration.

Below, we provide a collection of quotes from tour venue representatives and showcase visitors (as provided by the tour venue representatives) demonstrating the effect the tour had on its audiences. Further, Project Dastaan worked with academics from SOAS, University of London, who conducted an in-depth evaluation of the audience impact of the Child of Empire, as part of The Border Crossings research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.³

“The project has great value in contributing to those discussions [on migration and its impact on individuals and communities]. VR and the other media experiences give a very personal insight in this tragic chapter and allow for many conversations between audience members. I am deeply impressed by the impact this project with its many layers has had on our audience and internationally!” Anonymous tour venue representative (British Film Institute).

“Although we were not very experienced in working with VR, Child of Empire really showed us how something of a

very personal and serious nature can be amplified by VR technology, and how it can resonate with so many people to provide a real point for reflection and discussion. [...] The emotive nature of the film and experience definitely made people reflect on the human angle of forced migration for individuals and communities, perhaps thinking differently about a situation or people they know because, even in a small way, they had experienced something of it. It definitely sparked a lot of conversation and was the catalyst for participants to share their own stories with us, their families, and with the project team, which I don't think would have happened in our space without providing this sort of experience.” Anonymous tour venue representative (Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery).

“This has introduced me to something I was not aware of and has made me think differently about how Empire played a part in changing the world, and its impact.” Feedback from an anonymous tour visitor as provided by the venue (Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery).

3 “Exploring Partition History through VR”, Partition in India and Britain, accessed 5 July, 2023, <https://research.soas.ac.uk/pib/2022/11/01/partitionvr/>



Visiting Bradford this week - I wanted to recommend all listeners of [@EmpirePodUK](#) visit Bradford Cathedral to experience 'Child of Empire' ~ a deeply evocative, immersive VR experience that explores Partition memories

Thank you all!



1:35 PM · Nov 17, 2022

Figure 5: A tweet from an anonymous exhibit visitor

“The storytelling narrative was so realistic and artistic that it communicated effectively on every level. Child of Empire will always be [the] most powerful docu-drama as it is directly inspired by real-life accounts of three partition witnesses from both sides of the border. It is significant how memories of children of partition in particular are shaped by the forced changes in their life. [...] The film inspires debate and dialogue on divisive communalism that unfortunately plagues the subcontinent today. The important stories of migration are not those of the politics that dictate it but of the people that it uproots and what they go through in order to restart their lives again. This film was also a great lesson in history told with this animated format which enhanced the storytelling experience to a much greater degree.”

Anonymous tour venue representative,
India Partition Museum.

Key Learnings

- **Tour Staffing:** The team initially underestimated the physical and psychological demands of showcasing a virtual reality experience, especially due to the length and emotional nature of the experience. Over time, the team increased staff numbers by involving venue staff and volunteers.
- **Staff Training:** Venue managers emphasised the importance of thorough staff training in onboarding (introducing visitors to the headsets) and offboarding (audience care after they experienced the content), which is not only crucial for visitor enjoyment but also staff confidence in working with people and handling technology.
- **Insuring Equipment:** The team learnt about the importance of insuring expensive equipment (e.g. VR headsets) in case of breakage, especially when working with external staff and volunteers.
- **Shipping Equipment and International Regulations:** The team displayed excellent troubleshooting skills when encountering multiple challenges with transporting equipment, especially internationally. While this was not possible in India or Pakistan, the team recognise the benefits of renting virtual reality equipment instead of shipping it. The team also learnt it is important to account for such issues in tour planning.
- **Audience Safeguarding:** When showcasing virtual reality experiences with emotional histories, it is important to consider viewers' safety and comfort. The team mitigated this by explaining the content and trigger warnings to people before onboarding into VR as well as delegating staff and physical spaces for people after experiencing the content. Additionally, as the tour took place soon after the COVID-19 pandemic, the team sanitised headsets between use in order to ensure the safety of staff and visitors.

“It helped they [the audience] were briefed [before the experience]. It’s very, very important to tell them beforehand all the effects of what’s going to happen and what they’ll see”.

**Anonymous tour venue representative,
Partition Museum Delhi India.**

05 Funding Takeaways

Navigating the funding landscape was highlighted as the greatest challenge for the team. This section elaborates on their journey and learnings.

What Made Child of Empire a Successful Funding Application

While funders were unable to disclose the process of grant allocation, they reflected on specific aspects that could have contributed to the success of their applications.

Overall, Child of Empire was of interest to both CatchLight and CreativeXR because it applied new technology as a peace-making mission as well as the diversity and inclusion of voices of those directly impacted by the event.

More generally, funders highlighted the importance of a clearly defined production plan (ideally with a prototype) and impact, as well as demonstrating they plan to and have the means of evaluating the impact of the project in tangible ways (quantitatively as well as qualitatively) once the funding has been obtained.

“We were very attracted to the fact that it was a peace-making project [...], thinking about how to heal old wounds, how to tell the story of... especially colonisation and things that have been told very much through a coloniser lens, [to tell the story] through a non-coloniser lens was very attractive to CatchLight. ... Another specific element that really made the project stand

out was leveraging VR, which at the time... people were doing it, but not with this degree of storytelling [...]. It also was crossing boundaries and borders that it was kind of impossible to do without the technology.” Adriana García.

When Can XR Creatives Start Paying Themselves

The team initially worked on the project voluntarily, without paying themselves, and as students, they used their skills and resources to advance the project. They were driven by their personal connections to the Partition event and a desire to reclaim their family histories.

However, as the team graduated and decided to dedicate themselves to the project full-time, they faced the challenge of expanding the project and obtaining financial support. Due to limited resources available, the team used funding obtained from CatchLight and CreativeXR programme to fund fieldwork and equipment costs but continued working on the project on a voluntary basis, without paying themselves.

The mental shift from understanding Project Dastaan and Child of Empire as a student volunteering project to seeing it as a career project that they should have been paying themselves for was slow for the team. This was partially due to limited funding but especially because of their imposter syndrome and the belief that they would not obtain funding if they had budgeted for their salaries.

“I think it wasn’t just building compensation into the grant applications. One was not knowing how these things worked, but in most of that I think there was a bit of an imposter syndrome, kind of, ‘Why would anyone fund us if we were to pay ourselves?’”
Sparsh.

Eventually, the team started paying themselves and highlight this as a crucial aspect of cultivating their commitment to the project.



Figure 6: Project Dastaan founding team members at the beginning of the project during their student years

“The incentivisation, I think, to speak for myself, even though I was a co-founder from way before... it was really when I wrote those scripts for Lost Migrations and got paid for them, [for the first time, in 2021, three years after Project Dastaan started] that in my mind it switched that this is my project as well. Even though I loved the work that we were doing and it was extremely emotionally rewarding, I think that the payment... increased the level of contribution that I was making. [...] It was this psychological thing that this is mine now, this is my ownership and I have not only worked on it but I am getting paid for it so this could be my career as well. I think that we all learned that this is not just a part-time job.”

Saadia, Project Dastaan Co-Founder & Pakistan Lead.

Innovate UK Immersive Tech Network

Innovate UK's Immersive Tech Network is the UK's leading membership organisation for immersive technologies.

The network brings together industry, research and academic organisations, public sector and innovators to help fast track innovation, R&D, scalability and company growth. Its aim is to support UK businesses in the immersive tech sector to be the most successful and innovative they can be. It does this by connecting people to explore future collaborations; pointing to the latest funding and finance opportunities from across all industries in the UK economy; addressing the pressing issues that slow down R&D and barriers to innovation; and identifying the opportunities for growth in this exciting, emerging marketplace, both in the UK and internationally.

Arts Council

Arts Council England is the national development agency for creativity and culture. It set out in its strategic vision, Let's Create, that by 2030 it wants England to be a country in which the creativity of each of us is valued and given the chance to flourish and where everyone of us has access to a remarkable range of high-quality cultural experiences. It invests public money from Government and the National Lottery to help support the sector and to deliver this vision.



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