

# Robert McLaughlin

## Executive Producer, National Film Board of Canada

The National Film Board of Canada (NFB) is an 80-year old agency of the federal Government within the portfolio of the Canadian Heritage Department. As Canada's public producer and distributor, the NFB works in collaboration with emerging and established filmmakers and artists to explore what it means to be Canadian in an increasingly complex world. The NFB has produced award-winning documentaries, film, auteur animation and digital media projects. Since its early days, the NFB has delved into new technologies to achieve its mandate: 3D, IMAX and these days digital realities.

Robert McLaughlin leads the NFB Digital Studio producing interactive and immersive works with a national mandate from his office in Vancouver.. Other studios inside the NFB have also produced VR content, like the Animation Studio and the French-language studio in Montreal.. Virtual Reality is a perfect fit for the Digital Studio and over the years it has produced experimental physical installations, virtual immersive projects (Stan Douglas' *Circa 1948*), 360 videos, browser-based VR applications and mobile apps.

### Virtual perspectives

Artists from different backgrounds come with ideas for VR projects. There is a certain excitement around digital realities as they open new horizons and new creative paths to explore. Artists like to work with experiential storytelling VR, whether it is the ability to put the audience in a different place, or the interactivity and the control the audience can have on the environment. Some creators are also interested in the notion of relationship to character, the unique proximity offered by VR that allows someone to connect with characters.

From a producer's perspective, Robert says that it is enlightening to see all these artists discover innovative tools like VR. Even artists from more traditional fields, with a long history of practice in other disciplines come with the desire to learn more about Virtual Reality and develop creative ways to exploit the specificities of the medium.

Robert McLaughlin observes that Virtual Reality has an incredible potential when it comes to storytelling. Back in the early days of the Internet, we wondered how computing would affect the stories that we consume. Notions of computation and algorithms have affected how we discover and consume stories. Technology does affect the practice of narration, including VR, AR and XR, and they are only nascent technologies! The NFB is particularly interested in new technologies and how it can help them achieve their creative and social mandate.

## Biidaaban

*Toronto's Nathan Phillips Square is flooded. Its infrastructure has merged with the local fauna: mature trees grow through cracks in the sidewalks and vines cover south-facing walls. People commute via canoe and grow vegetables on skyscraper roofs. Urban life is thriving. Rooted in the realm of Indigenous futurism, *Biidaaban: First Light* is an interactive VR time-jump into a highly realistic—and radically different—Toronto of tomorrow.*

*Biidaaban* came from the mind of Lisa Jackson, one of Canada's most celebrated contemporary artists working in film and VR and a prominent voice among Indigenous artists. Lisa has a long relationship with the NFB. She came with an idea for an installation and the production team began discussing the world of VR with her. Together, they identified some opportunities that they could explore outside and inside the installation that would help achieve some of the artistic and creative goals that Lisa had defined. With the help of 3D artist Matthew Borrett and design agency Jam 3, they created realistic to-scale architectural models of Toronto scenes (subway station, Nathan Philips Square). *Biidaaban* also celebrates Indigenous perspectives and a future of reconciliation as the audience hear and read texts of the first people of this land, the Wendat, Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) and Anishinaabe (Ojibway).

As a producer, Robert was really interested in Indigenous perspectives. One of the many strengths of *Biidaaban* was to offer an experience focused on the future, not just the past. It is also part of the NFB's mandate to share all perspectives that contributes to the diversity of the Canadian identity.

Throughout the production process, Robert learned that it takes a team to develop an ambitious VR project like *Biidaaban*. A VR project is collaborative by essence: it requires many perspectives, capabilities, and skills. Without Lisa's patience, this would not have happened the same way. Robert reminds us that VR is an extremely exciting technology that comes with its challenges. As of today, it is still cumbersome, imperfect and frustrating but at the same time, it is eye opening. VR is not ready to be a mass media experience; however, it demonstrates great potential for artistic expression.

## The challenge of exhibition

*Biidaaban* was presented and awarded at many festivals, including the Tribeca Film Festival, LA Film Festival and imagineNATIVE. However, the experience took a powerful dimension when it was presented at Nathan Philips Square, breaking down the barrier between physical and virtual realities. It made most sense to exhibit *Biidaaban* for an audience most likely to be affected by seeing their own city in a different light, understanding that it contains Indigenous past, present and future. This in situ exhibition worked perfectly, and the responses were beyond expectation.

The NFB is responsible for the distribution of the works it produces, and therefore need to make sure that they are consumed, that they ultimately engage with the Canadian audiences. Would the impact of *Biidaaban* have been the same in downtown Vancouver? Probably not. This example illustrates the challenge of exhibiting Virtual Reality works. Robert and the NFB's teams constantly challenge

themselves to come up with successful plans for how people can experience digital media productions. To that extent, the NFB's learning-by-doing approach goes way beyond the production process. Simply offering their productions on a store or an online platform will not necessarily help them achieve their goals. A creative act must connect with an audience.

How does that a project connect to the Canadian public? This is the question the NFB's teams constantly asks themselves, from the moment they review applications. Artists and creators who are willing to work with the NFB must understand how people are going to experience their work: it is first and foremost about engagement.