

Awane Jones

Founder and CEO, Phenomena

Awane Jones is a VR/AR entrepreneur and thought leader. He was General Manager of VR/AR for the Montreal-based production company Zone3 and founded two companies that pioneered the AR/VR sector in Canada.

Discovering new realities

Awane Jones started his entrepreneur journey as a label owner and record producer. In 2008, the industry was waking up and sensing the threat posed by Napster and other online platforms. Awane was facing a challenge with the release of his album: how to make people buy a physical CD when they could actually steal the content online? By pure coincidence, a friend, back from a trip to Japan, introduced him to Augmented Reality. At that time, the technology was used by applications activating simplistic augmented reality content from webcams. The foundation of a great technology was there, but the use-case not compelling enough to spark interest with music fans. It was at the same time that Apple released a new model of their iPhone, capable of handling complex computed images in 3D. Awane took this opportunity to create the first AR app for an artist by enhancing the CD cover with an interactive experience. Using their smartphone and their physical copy, the audience could interact with the artist, take pictures and share them online ([example of AR app](#)). Of course, that was a trick that the music industry could pull a couple of times only.

For Awane Jones, the future was in digital realities more than in the recording industry. Awane started the first AR company in Canada. With a client portfolio including Desjardin, JP Morgan, Manulife, Montreal Canadiens, Universeal Pictures or Twitter, the company developed award-winning immersive experiences and 360 videos.

Phenomena

Building on the success of his first venture, Awane created Phenomena, a technology and entertainment company with a mission to bring location-based experiences to families. In 2018, after several months of research and development, Awane and his partners, Charles Miran and Bassil Silim-Jones released their first immersive experience: *Enter the Duat*. This project is based on the *Book of the Dead*, an iconic text from Ancient Egypt. Combining wearable haptics, hand gesture capture technology and moving treadmill, *Enter the Duat* takes the player into a unique journey to save the world from the scheme of Apep, god of chaos.

The objectives were to develop a user-friendly, high-quality and fascinating experience. After an initial market research, it was determined that families wanted to explore Ancient Egypt. The team investigated Egyptian mythology and identified the *Book of the Dead* as one of the most interesting stories to tell in Virtual Reality. The use of proprietary haptics (VPX Haptics) allowed Phenomena to perfectly calibrate this experience and to make it as accessible for beginners as for players well versed on virtual reality. The deep understanding of the story

material and of immersive mechanics enabled Awane and his team to bring *Enter the Duat* to life as they envisioned it: players are completely part of this journey, immersed in time and space like never before.

Since November 2018, *Enter the Duat* is being showcased at the Cominar Galeries Rive Nord shopping centre in Québec. The immersive experience will be presented at the Grand Egyptian Museum in Cairo later this year. By March 2019, Phenomena will open its kit to other developers. Developers interested to produce their own experiences can buy Phenomena's VPX haptics – soon to be shipped – and will be able to plug it into Unity. This is the path Awane wants to follow: Phenomena will build their own immersive experiences and open up their tools to the world.

The natural pattern of disruption

Although an increasing number of high-quality experiences emerge, Awane cannot help but express his frustration when it comes to the pathway digital realities have taken so far. According to him, headset manufacturers sold a dream that was far from being a reality. If you look at every major disruptive media technology (radio, TV, video games, etc.), you will see that they all followed the same pattern. First, they were expensive technologies and did not offer a lot of content. People congregated at places to listen to the radio, watch TV or play video games. Then they became so popular that people started getting their own radio, their own TV set, their own video game system. For some reason, VR did not respect this pattern and went directly to the consumer.

Things are finally starting to take shape, to become more realistic. Awane believes that location-based entertainment is the first step of a natural evolution that has been ignored for too long. For \$5 to \$15 dollars, people can enjoy immersive experience in VR/AR spaces. They will love it so much that they will want to have it home, but that is going to take 3-4 years according to Awane.

Determination and patience

Montréal is the best city in the world to develop this kind of immersive interactive experiences. In addition to its low cost of living, Montréal offers fertile ground for skilled engineers and artists. Montreal is not only at the intersection between the arts and technology but also a diverse hub under many influences. Its proximity to other creative cities (e.g., New-York, Toronto) is also a competitive advantage.

However, a great location does not ensure success. Awane acknowledges that VR is a difficult industry and young entrepreneurs must be willing to suffer, to go all-in. The same goes for investors: of course, funding is based on trust but when it comes to digital realities, VCs must be bolder. In Awane Jones' words: if you are not patient, do not invest in this industry, but the ones who will invest will be big winners. His advice to new comers is to focus on producing great projects. If they are not producing remarkable content or technology, they will probably loose: high-quality content and seamless technology should be your main focus!

To learn more about *Enter the Duat* and Phenomena: <https://entertheduat.com/>

<https://thephenomena.co/>