

„Do it!“

Indigital Founder Mikaela Jade on Her Vision For The World

- ***Let us start without much ado: Give us a brief introduction of what “Indigital” stands for.***

I am a park guard here in Australia. I am an indigenous person and I started “Indigital” to stop the digital divide for over 400 million indigenous people around the world using virtual, augmented, and mixed reality story telling. We are an education technology company, and we are teaching teachers how to teach using augmented and virtual reality through a cultural lens.

- ***That means you target at teachers, coaches, trainers, at anybody who is educating indigenous people?***

That is correct. Sometimes we are also working directly with students. But we feel we are getting the most impact by working with the educator community around the world because they are reaching hundreds of thousands if not millions of students.

- ***Your focus is not only on Australia where you started, I understand.***

We started in Australia, we worked here as EduTech company for over a year, and we work mostly with indigenous communities in Australia, but we recently started working also in Canada and New Zealand.

- ***What gave you the idea? Were there particular experiences especially for going for virtual- and augmented reality?***

I have been a park ranger for 21 years. I was responsible for writing these explanation signs you see at national parks. I found these signs pretty steroid, not really telling the story behind. It certainly was not sharing cultural background with people coming to visit these places. I envisioned you holding up your phone when being at such a place and a holographic explanation popping up in the right language at the right time with the right features creating additional economic opportunity for our community.

- ***Originally you targeted at a different group of people, at the park visitors. That is something completely different from educating your people.***

Yes! We ended up becoming an EduTech company because I was asked by more and more groups to tell their stories. I realized it was not possible for me to tell everybody’s cultural

stories. It proved to be a much better way to train our people how to talk about their own culture and traditions.

- ***Please, give me some examples on how you work and how you use virtual- and augmented reality. You cannot give everybody one of these fancy VR glasses, especially out in the parks where we know internet connectivity is not always the best.***

We work a lot with different indigenous communities and talk to them about their obligations and rights in the digital space that they become confident in sharing their stories and language in the digital environment. Then we work on the story they would like to share. As a part of that we are creating characters and do audio recordings working in Minecraft Education Edition to create the landscapes. In the end we are putting everything together and upload it to the platform we created using artificial intelligence. It normally costs about 165,000 Dollar to build a virtual- or augmented application. That is totally out of reach of our people. What I want to archive is to provide a platform that only costs a tiny fraction of that.

- ***You make it sound as if the story of Indigital went very smoothly. We all know that usually this is not the case. What were your challenges and how did you overcome them?***

I had to pick up a business loan and pay it off personally to have my first viable product built, and I needed to find developers willing to work with me because I was a park ranger, not a technologist. So, I was pressing companies around the world trying to convince them till I found somebody willing to teach me how to do virtual- and augmented reality. We did it over Skype since he is living in the UK and I am in Australia, working in a national park in a very remote area. I was working during the day and at 11:00 at night I got on Skype to get my lessons with Dyson.

- ***Cheers to Dyson!***

Absolutely! He is one of my heroes! Finally, we got the first product ready, and everybody wanted to do it! It cost me 90,000 Dollar for every 90 seconds because we had to outsource the content production. This was too cost prohibitive. At the same time, I tried to develop the business line and continued working as a park ranger. I almost quit in 2018! I was at my last speech engagement when I literally wanted to shut down my company. I was talking at a conference about me as an indigenous woman and about what I did so far and that I stopped doing it. That was when somebody in the audience, he was from Microsoft, stepped up and

asked if he can help, and I just cried out yes! I wanted to learn about Hollow Lens to learn this mixed reality technology. And suddenly I was able to work with one of their leading experts to make it more accessible and cheaper. Because there is no way for our people to use this technology because it is too expensive and because of the bad connectivity. We developed a solution to overcome these issues.

- ***So, you succeeded in the end! What happened next?***

Well, I decided I could not do everything by myself, and I started hiring people. We are now having a team of eight people, all aborigines and indigenous people working from our countries. Usually, we have to go into the cities to work and leave our countries behind. I wanted to change this and prove that we can work from our countries in jobs we love and doing things that are important to us culturally. I am very happy we accomplished that. Since we tried to avoid being restrictive on people, we created a framework and a platform. That means everybody around the world can access it and use their own cultural background, their own cultural language, and their own cultural law.

- ***I think we now need to move a bit closer to the results of your work. Can you give us a showcase of how these features look in the end?***

Yes! What it looks like when we start creating a project, we are having cultural figures we work with. This can be people, cultural objects. We create a QR code and when you scan it the content pops up like the Pokémon ghost using your language and your cultural expression in AR. And it impacts your digital skills. We recently worked with a grammar school in Queensland. The kids started to connect with the local aborigines' communities. For aborigines groups came together with six groups from that region, inspired to infuse the school curriculum with cultural knowledge as well, not just looking at technical skills but also looking at how to bring cultural knowledge into every part of the school curriculum.

- ***You already mentioned the impact you have with your work. Can you stress this point a little bit more?***

It is very hard for schoolteachers to interface with third party communities. It takes some effort to connect with these people. We teach them how to do it and how to include them in a project, so they can also influence it. We then invite the communities. They now have the opportunity to influence the way schoolteachers code their knowledge and how to bring other things like science and technology through this people's lenses. In Australia, we have a living culture of over 80,000 years and we have incredible wisdom about ecosystems and climate

change adaption. All this becomes part of the school's entire curriculum. I think this is really exiting if you are doing a small investment showing kids the possibility space and they are working together in this community to be grounded in the culture where they live and work. Another example is our work with "At risk" with people with another regional town in Southern Australia. These kids are in out-of-home care, they have some substance issue. They really had some tough times in their young lives. We taught them how to create their own content, and many of these students have already reached out to me saying that they found their purpose in live. They want to finish school and continue their path as storytellers in this new media they did not know at all before.

- ***Let us be a bit visionary now. What can be the impact of all this activity for your people?***

What I am really conscious of is the pathway of our people economically. A lot of our cultures are in the agricultural and the extract industries like mining where job opportunities are becoming narrower and narrower because of automation. What they can do is to work in forced industrial revolution industries like the space industry or the renewable energy sector and much more. There is a whole new world if our communities are given the opportunities. We need to show them where these jobs are, how to participate in these futures and we can help to shape them.

- ***Now let us look what you envision for Indigital and yourself in the future. Where do you see both, company and yourself? Where do you want to be in five or ten years?***

We would like to employ more people and become more active in more countries. I think we will work more in holographic technologies. We do a lot of research and development within the company. We are looking at what these technologies will look like in the next five to ten years and how they can interact with cultural knowledge systems. I completed a master in ???? and I am very interested in the intersection between artificial intelligence and cultural knowledge systems.

- ***That means besides running your company you are also taking academic courses to expand your horizon? That is a lot of extra engagement!***

I feel it is very important to keep yourself updated about the future. I am very lucky that I can do it. I feel I have a responsibility to share this knowledge with other people across the world.

- ***To summarize all we talked about I would state there is an exciting future for a great company and a great team. However, with all you are doing, is there still time left for a private Mik?***

My interests are to learn more about my culture and to be in my country and do our cultural practices. I also hike with the family. We only finished a long hike in New Zealand just before Covid started. I also love camping, anything that gives us the opportunity to disconnect from technology.

- ***This is your last chance in this interview to add something I missed to ask you.***

You have not missed anything. I just like to encourage everybody, not only our people, to get involved in New Technology and not to be afraid to bring cultural knowledge and digital together. The more we share our cultural knowledge the better the systems will be for everybody. What I want to say to everyone: If you want to get involved – DO IT!