

## **South by Southwest (SXSW) Austin, Texas, 7–11 March 2014**

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### **Summary**

Mary-Ellen Mullane (Documentary) and Justin Halliday (Interactive and Multi-Platform Drama) attended SXSW in Austin, Texas. The goals of the trip were to:

- improve the attendees' skills and knowledge of the games, interactive, and film sectors
- represent Screen Australia at the world premiere of three feature films
- engage and support other interactive and film teams at the festival,
- meet with relevant representatives of screen agencies and publishing and distribution companies.

The outcomes of the trip exceeded the goals, with attendance at the festival giving Justin and Mary-Ellen the opportunity to meet a number of new and established teams, and to attend presentations from some of the world's best technology evangelists.

The main Screen Australia moments at the festival were the premieres of *The Infinite Man* (funded by Screen Australia through the SA Film Lab initiative), *Predestination* and *The Mule*. The screenings of all three of these films were well attended, with *Predestination* screening at the larger Paramount Theatre and *The Infinite Man* and *The Mule* screening in the slightly smaller State Theatre. The audience reception for all three films was positive, with *Predestination* subsequently receiving one strong review from Twitch Film, "Poignant and haunting time travel," and one middling review from Variety; "Graced by an extraordinary breakout performance from Aussie newcomer Sarah Snook, *Predestination* is likely fated for a minor arthouse reception at best, but there will be plenty of cultists willing to indulge its heady and rarefied approach." *The Mule* gathered two reviews of the screening, both positive, with Ain't It Cool News calling it "...super fun, really intense, shot well, performed well..." *The Infinite Man* was very well received, with four excellent reviews and a callout from Moviefone naming it the second best film to screen at the entire festival (behind hometown hero Richard Linklater's *Boyhood*), with this quote: "*The Infinite Man* is a galvanic experience, all around jaw-dropping, from the deeply committed performances to the movie's uncanny editing." *The Infinite Man* was also in *Time* magazine's Top 10 from the festival, and received a Best Screenplay recognition from Indiewire. While SXSW is not a market for film sales, the various awards and notices that *The Infinite Man* received have positioned it well for its domestic screenings and for international sales. Furthermore, the *Ringbalin: River Stories* interactive

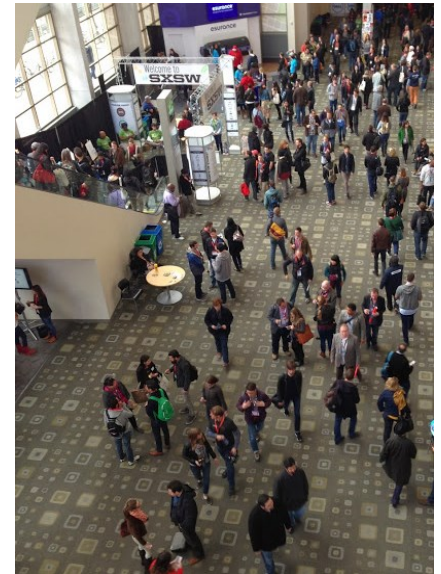
project was nominated for a Best Art award at the SXSW Interactive Awards, but lost out to *Pulse of the City*.

The major takeaway from this year's SXSW festival was the continued disruption of traditional media and entertainment companies, and their struggles to transition from legacy print and broadcast platforms to an online environment. The 'old' media companies are in the middle of this transitional period, and many are experimenting to try to find the right way to connect with their customers and reinvent their business modes. This subject is explored in depth in the Platforms vs Publishers section.

## SXSW Interactive Festival

The 21st annual SXSW Interactive Festival took place in Austin, Texas from Friday, 7 March to Tuesday, 11 March 2014. SXSW is an incubator of cutting-edge technologies and digital creativity. The 2014 event featured five days of presentations and panels on emerging technology, networking events hosted by industry leaders, and special programs showcasing the new websites, video games and start-up ideas. From hands-on training to big-picture analysis of the future, there was a session for everyone. A total of 730 Australians attended, half of them for the Interactive stream: 45% Music and 5% film.

With an attendance of 32,800, SXSW is the largest event of its kind in the world. There was discussion from long-term participants that it has become too big and even a session called 'Has SXSW Jumped the Shark?' However, as a first timer, the amount of choice and the scale of the event was impressive and it in no way felt like SXSW had reached its use-by date.



This year the major theme was concerned with privacy, security and data permanence, and included Edward Snowden's first public appearance via multiple proxies from Russia, as well as Julian Assange and journalist Glenn Greenwald.

## Australian Projects in Competition

Two Australian interactive properties were nominated at the SXSW Interactive Awards:

### ***Ringbalin: River Stories***

*Ringbalin: River Stories* is an immersive geo-located multiplatform documentary telling the stories of Australia's greatest river system through the hearts and minds of the world's oldest living indigenous culture. *Ringbalin* peels back the 'known' world, guiding the viewer through a landscape of Aboriginal stories and experiences as we journey together down the Murray-Darling River.

<http://www.ringbalin-riverstories.com/>

*Ringbalin: Rivers Stories* received funding from Screen Australia's Multiplatform program.



### ***ACO (Australian Chamber Orchestra) Virtual***

The ACO virtual installation allows performers and visitors to step 'inside' the performance, immersed in a 360-degree cinema experience, surrounded by the musicians. The installation has toured Australian galleries and museums. Inside the installation 15 ACO musicians appear as projections on walls or screens, while each musician's sound is heard from the direction of their image.

<http://modprods.com/production/acovirtual/>



## Australian Projects Screening

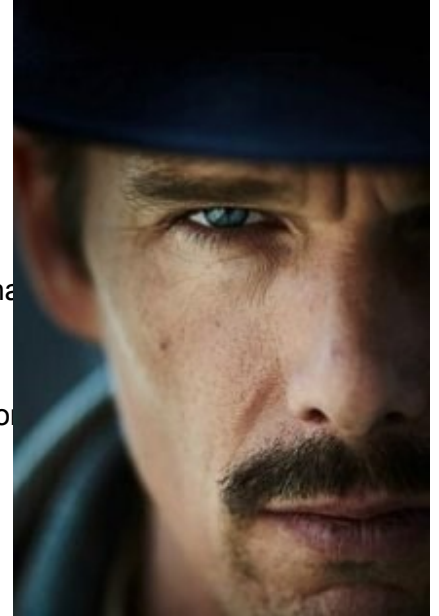
Four Australian feature films and one short animation were selected for the film festival:

### **PREDESTINATION**

Genre: Sci-fi Mystery

*Predestination* chronicles the life of a Temporal Agent sent on an intricate series of time-travel journeys designed to ensure the continuation of his law-enforcement career for all eternity. Now, on his final assignment, the Agent must pursue the one criminal that has eluded him throughout time.

Producers: Paddy McDonald, Tim McGahan  
 Writers: Michael Spierig, Peter Spierig (based on a short story by Robert A Heinlein)  
 Directors: Michael Spierig, Peter Spierig  
 International Sales: Arclight Films International  
 Australian Distributor: Pinnacle Films  
 Cast: Ethan Hawke, Sarah Snook, Noah Taylor



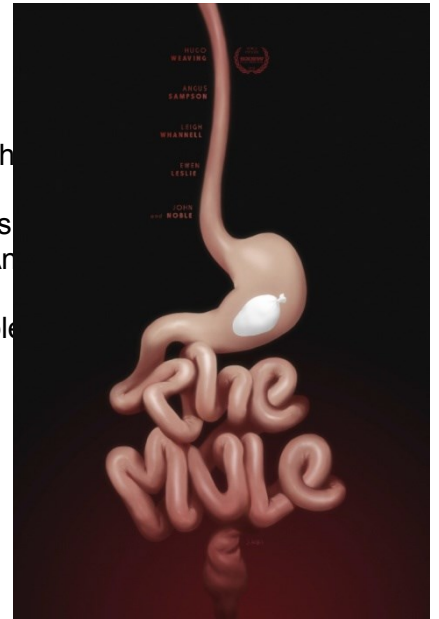
*Predestination* received funding from Screen Australia's Feature Films program.

### **THE MULE**

Genre: Crime/Black Comedy

A naive man with lethal narcotics hidden in his stomach is detained by Australian Federal Police. Alone and afraid, 'the mule' makes a desperate choice: to defy his bodily functions and withhold the evidence...literally. As he does so becomes a 'human time-bomb' dragging cops, criminals and concerned family into his impossible escapade

Producers: Angus Sampson, Jane Liscombe  
 Exec Producers: Michele Bennett, Leigh Whannell, David Griffiths, Angus Coupland, Troy Lum, Bryce Menzies  
 Writers: Leigh Whannell, Angus Sampson, Jamie Browne  
 Directors: Angus Sampson, Tony Mahony  
 International Sales: eOne Films International  
 Australian Distributor: Hopscotch/eOne  
 Cast: Hugo Weaving, Angus Sampson, John Noble, Leigh Whannell



*The Mule* received funding from Screen Australia's Feature Films program.



**THE INFINITE MAN**

Genre: Comedy/Sci-fi

A man's attempts to construct the ultimate romantic weekend backfire when his quest for perfection traps his lover in an infinite loop.

Producers: Kate Croser, Sandy Cameron  
Exec Producer: Jonathan Page, Cameron Rogers  
Writer/Director: Hugh Sullivan  
International Sales: Shoreline Entertainment  
Australian Distributor: Infinite Releasing  
Cast: Josh McConville, Hannah Marshall, Alex Dimitriades

*The Infinite Man* received funding from Screen Australia through the SAFC Filmlab initiative.



**UKRAINE IS NOT A BROTHEL**

Genre: Feature Documentary

Ukraine's topless feminist sensation, Femen, has created a media frenzy across Europe, but before they take the world by storm these bold and beautiful women must confront the dark and perverse forces that power their organisation.

Producers: Kitty Green, Jonathan auf der Heide, Michael Latham  
Director: Kitty Green  
International Sales: Cinephil



**THE VIDEO DATING TAPE OF DESMONDO RAY, AGED 33 & 3/4**

Genre: Short Animation

Desmondo Ray is the story of a lonely man looking for love.

Producers: Steve Baker, Laura Mustchin  
Writer/Director: Steve Baker



## Topic highlights

Given the sheer scale and scope of the event, there was something for everyone, from DIY tech to yoga. Many panel topics overlapped, and advice did too. This year's major strands included: sport, games, TV in the digital age, marketing/brands, creativity, science, innovation, social change and start-ups. Here are some takeaways:

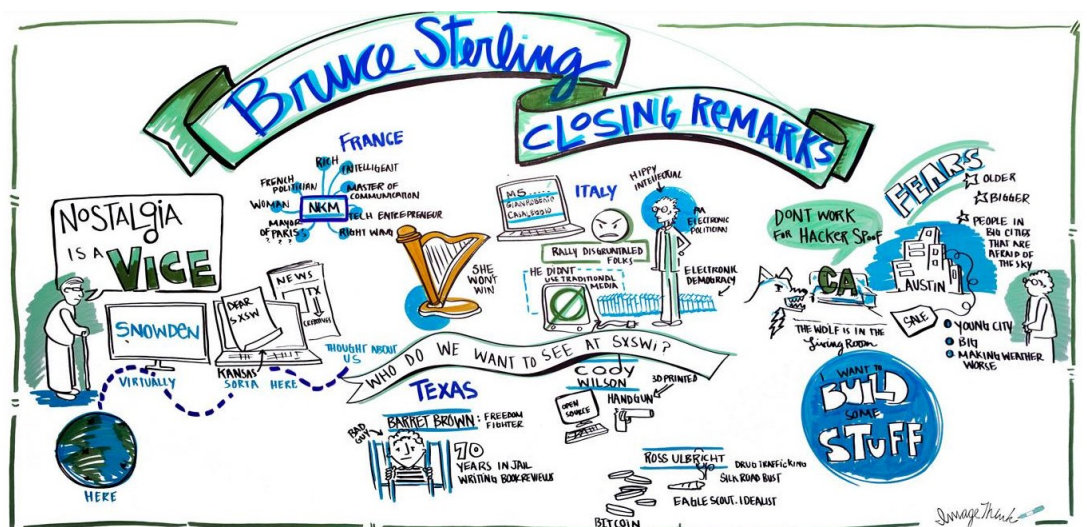
### 1. Security/Privacy

Appearing on screen, against the backdrop of the US Constitution, via multiple proxies from Russia, NSA leaker Edward Snowden spent an hour offering practical advice and calls to action specific to the large audience at SXSW.

Filmmakers have to care about net neutrality, surveillance and privacy because it affects their work directly. Net neutrality, or making sure ISPs don't get to pick and choose whose data moves most smoothly across their networks, can protect filmmakers from industry behemoths (Hello, Netflix and Comcast!) limiting their distribution options, for example. Both corporate and governmental surveillance pose threats to filmmakers and their subjects. Former NSA contractor Edward Snowden was smart and sobering on surveillance and privacy.



The subjects of privacy, security and surveillance closed the conference with a presentation by Bruce Sterling, who listed all of the people who should be at the conference, but were unable to attend. His list included Edward Snowden who fled the US after disclosing the NSA's eavesdropping program on everyone, Julian Assange (the creator of Wikileaks) who remains holed up in the Embassy of Ecuador in the UK after he was accused of sexual offenses in Sweden, and Aaron Swartz who suicided after being charged by the US Federal Attorney General for downloading academic journals. Sterling finished with a sobering view: "The future is about old people in big cities afraid of the sky".



## 2. Story is Not a Dirty Word (in games)

SXSW featured a new stream of games presentations as well as a games expo attached to the festival. One Australian team – Framed by Loveshack – was on display at the games expo. The rest of the expo was notable for the presence of a number of ‘story-driven’ indie games, including *God Will Be Watching*, *The Novelist* and *That Dragon Cancer*.



In addition to the games on the expo floor, one of the games stream sessions focused on Telltale Games (*The Walking Dead*), looking at the growing popularity of their interactive-story games, including their upcoming *Game Of Thrones* title.

The games industry’s early adoption of digital-distribution platforms has allowed indie developers to successfully commercialise story-driven games themselves, bypassing traditional publishers who haven’t been interested in these genres for more than a decade.

## 3. Convergence

This year, the standard ‘convergence’ panels featured issues of overlapping interest, particularly around changing television business models. The big growth area of interest was the ‘digital domain’, or interactive documentary strand, where, for the second year, crowds demonstrated that SXSW has to relocate the strand from the tiny room it’s given. New this year was a Participant Media owned-and-operated day on social-good audio-visual storytelling.

Build community with media, not media with community. You’re trying to build connections, with conversation through storytelling. Immersion in longform storytelling can get you there, but get there. And the more user-participation possibilities you have in the experience, the more opportunities there are to

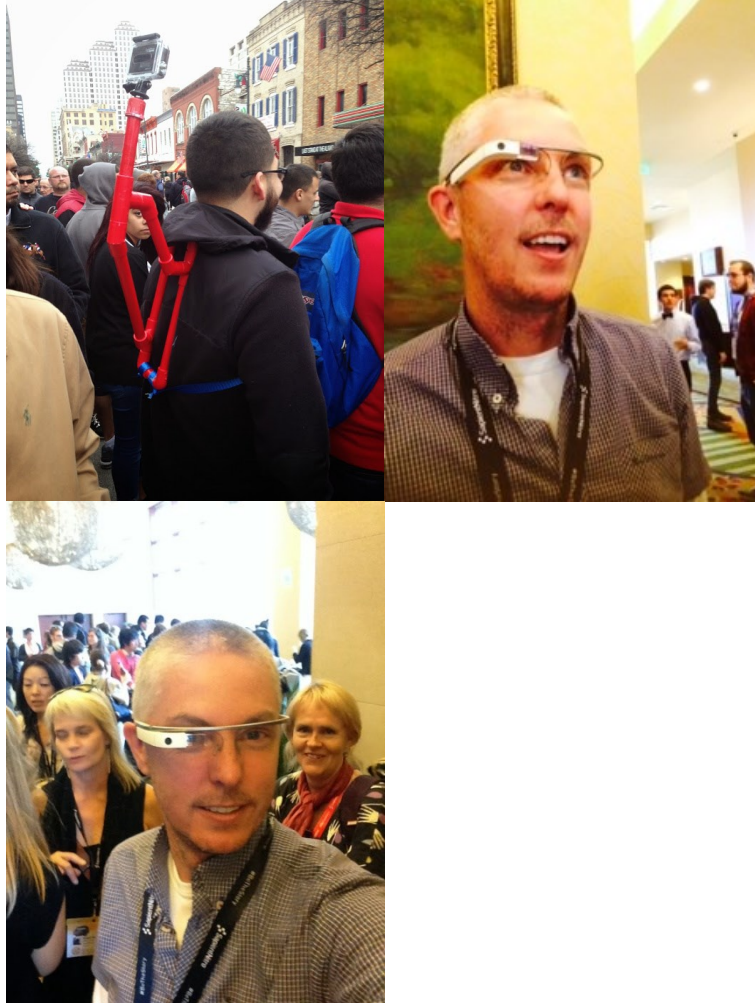


connect. Powerful stories build powerful communities. Tell stories well with technology that's easy for people to use, and let them tell stories too.

#### 4. Hardware Everywhere

While last year's conference shouted 'get into hardware', this year saw that shout answered. In the year since the last conference we've seen multiple wearable devices in the mainstream, such as Google Glass, various smart-watches (from everyone but Apple), and the ubiquitous FitBit personal fitness monitors.

A noticeable number of conference attendees were wearing Google Glass, vanguards of a new wave of interactive wearable technology.



While wearables are the hot accessories, the hardware arena has seen several lukewarm launches. The Ouya Android console, which was Kickstarted for \$8.6m, launched to pretty lacklustre results. And the LeapMotion 3D input device grabbed lots of attention but not a lot of practical purpose.



The big winners of the recent hardware renaissance have been the Oculus Rift virtual reality headset (Kickstarted for \$2.4m, bought by Facebook for \$2b) and the expansion of 3D printing. The so-called 'maker' movement has embraced 3D printing, and prices and quality are set to tumble with technological development and expiring patents on key technologies. These technologies have proven themselves in their niches but it remains to be seen whether they can break out of their dedicated enthusiast communities.



Figure 1: At the Maker expo tent

## 5. Platforms vs Publishers

Another major takeaway from this year's SXSW festival was the continued breakdown of traditional 'gatekeeper' media and entertainment companies (such as terrestrial broadcasters, print publishers, game publishers, etc) and the rebuilding of these companies on the internet with much more engagement with their users (such as the Huffington Post Live and MSNBC website).

Underlying this is the tension between platforms and publishers, where open platforms like YouTube are growing hugely, and traditional publishers are struggling for attention. Print stalwarts like *The Guardian* exemplify this in their transition from a company whose business is putting words on paper to one that is (in their words) a 'convener of conversations, discussions, and ideas'. These tectonic shifts in the media and entertainment landscape inform where our sectors will head over the next decades and give Screen Australia, as representatives of the sector, a valuable insight into the coming changes so that we can keep our sectors ahead of the trends.



## 5. You're not just telling stories anymore, you're making storyworlds...

...or environments people identify and bond with, participate in, share with their friends. Those storyworlds employ content not for consumption but communication. Social media are essential tools to build these storyworlds as seen in Pemberley Digital's case study *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. Recipient-driven content production is now better understood.

There was much discussion as to how storyworlds may help build a more sustainable filmmaking ecosystem. Don't mimic what the analogue world has done before. Think storyworld, with multiple wormholes and extensions, different discovery points and participation levels.

We have not found the words or vernacular to describe the experiences yet; without them desire cannot be fully fuelled. Go where the people are already gathered; don't struggle to bring them to you. It's a world of abundance and only community + conversation move things to the top of all queues. Provide points of access for both collaboration and interaction. Plan to correct course midstream.

Build community over time; don't expect it to suddenly blossom. Use multiple narrative engines; don't rely on just story-based drivers, but utilise experience-based ones too. Maintain a bias to action; bring the future into the present. Build for and embrace 'play'. The current model of mass market and non-participatory was the disruption; this is the return to form. Don't wait, iterate! Let go of the need to be the auteur; allow for collaboration. Interaction is an ingredient, not a genre. Bundle the levels of engagement and let the community choose their way. Don't rely on a storyworld strategy just to refresh something that was not of community or market interest/investment to begin with.

## 6. Distribution

Distribution continues in the same decentralised direction, with more intermediaries. Theatrical is still the classiest way to establish a film's marketplace identity, and still doesn't make any real money. There's a lot more opportunity, but figuring out what's in the toolkit to leverage it is not easy.

Use data to improve strategies and performance. Use social media to test strategies and recalibrate when they don't work. Learn how data are being used to control your own choices; some called this 'algorithmic literacy'. The most oft-repeated message was that your audience is your collaborator. Embrace them, study them, welcome their feedback, build with and on their creativity. As remix, fanfic, vids, and memes show, creativity is wildly social and people want to participate in the creative process. Research your users, and never stop. Find out as much as you can upfront about potential participants in your media work (which won't be as hard as you might think, because the internet's business model is all about spying on users). Then keep learning about them as they begin to use your work, and adapt, serve, network. Tools like harv.is (still in development) are going to help. Tools don't build relationships, people do. Tools can facilitate building relationships, but they can't do that work themselves.