

Catherine Allen,

Tuesday, 26 July 2022, awarded Honorary Doctor of Letters (Hon DLitt) with oration given by Professor Jonathan Heron

PROVOST

Our honorary graduand this afternoon is the internationally renowned expert on Virtual Reality: CATHERINE ALLEN. I am delighted to introduce her to this Congregation.

Catherine is one of the UK's leading authorities on immersive technology and its relationship to the public, engaging with policy-makers, audiences and students alike. Her approach is inclusive and her method is interdisciplinary, bringing together the arts and sciences through the public understanding of embodied technologies. She graduated from Warwick in 2010 with a first-class degree in Theatre Studies. During her time as an undergraduate, she worked with the CAPITAL Centre (now IATL) and Academic Technology to develop the use of learning technologies in the Arts Faculty, as well as starting her first successful business as a film maker.

Later, she worked for Touch Press, the educational app developer, with whom she won a BAFTA award as part of the team that developed the Disney Animated app, before moving into VR. In 2017, she founded Limina Immersive – a research organisation and consultancy dedicated to bringing immersive technology to a broader audience in a responsible way. Two years later, she launched Limina VR Theatre in Bristol, the UK’s first Virtual Reality theatre. Here, she provided a relaxing space in which people could enjoy a cultural experience in small groups, and engage in discussion afterwards: Catherine understands that for many VR can be an isolating – even daunting – experience which can be transformed by allowing people to enjoy it in a comfortable social setting. Over 15,000 people have now experienced the Limina approach, which was recognised by a Best of British Award in 2020.

Catherine’s creativity was shaped from a young age by her grandparents Joan and John Levett. Her grandmother was a co-founder of the New Vic Theatre in Staffordshire, and the young Catherine would often find herself in that venue’s theatre-in-the-

round environment. At the same time, her grandfather had decided to teach her computer coding, and so Catherine, before she knew about VR, was already learning how to build immersive environments through creating and coding. Before she arrived here as a theatre student, she had already been working with hardware at her local computer shop in Melton Mowbray and had routinely experienced moving between technical processes and artistic practices.

Catherine has also been active in shaping the VR industry itself. Her work has played a significant role in informing policy – with a current focus on helping shape the metaverse’s inclusion in the UK’s Online Safety Bill. She is co-author of *Shaping the Metaverse: a guide to existing and future harms in virtual reality* which ensures that immersive technology is understood at government level to support safeguarding and develop immersive literacy.

Catherine has a passionate belief in the inclusive uses of technology, having led the first VR Diversity Initiative – a free workshop for people from under-represented groups and was a key

contributor to the Vision for Women in VR manifesto, looking to a future where the immersive sector would challenge the gender imbalance in related industries. She has encouraged and mentored young innovators in the creative and digital sectors and has supported innovation strategy events here at Warwick, such as the launch of our Creative and Digital Communities Initiative. She has also supported us as we explore how to integrate VR in education, contributing to our interdisciplinary module, 'Introduction to Design Thinking'.

In summary, Catherine is a successful innovator and entrepreneur, a pioneer of Virtual Reality as a social-cultural activity with a focus upon wellbeing and inclusion, and has already made an enormous contribution to an increasingly important industry. It is a pleasure to welcome her back to Warwick this afternoon.

Provost: in the name of the Senate, I present to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*, CATHERINE ALLEN.