

<https://german-association.org.sg/Veteran-Expat-Cornel-Hillmann>

(Translated from the German original)

## *Interview with Cornel Hillmann, CG Artist and XR Designer from Germany in Singapore*



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*Cornel lives and works as a CG artist and XR designer in the north of Singapore. In fact, Cornel even moved to Singapore twice. Here you can find out about his job (or should we say, his mission?) and what the Bremen-born and previous Hamburg resident has to report from his almost 16 years of experience in Asia.*

**GA: Cornel, you are a CG artist and XR designer. What is that?**

Cornel: “CG” stands for “Computer Graphics” and first of all, means digital art. CG is mostly associated with 3D animation. But games and “visual effects” also fall under CG. I mainly deal with VR (Virtual Reality) and AR (Augmented Reality), both of which fall under the area of XR Design. With VR, we create completely virtual worlds; with AR, an additional, interactive information layer is placed over the real world.

I am also a specialist book author in this area. On one hand, it's a lot of fun because I can dig deeper into some topics and meet interesting people for articles and interviews.

On the other hand, book writing is also a very intense job, and I am happy when the finished, printed work is finalized.

***GA: One more question, because not everyone may be familiar with your job: How should I imagine your job in practice, who are the clients of your CG art?***

CH: The applications and thus the customers are becoming more and more diverse. A simple example for AR: You scan your apartment and a furniture manufacturer places virtual objects in this real environment so that you can see what a designer sofa would actually look like in your living room.

Games are, of course, an important area and the driving force behind this development. The transitions between games and EduTech and MedTech are very fluid, because more and more playful elements are being used in education and training. Gamification is the keyword here. Or, just think of the medical field. I recently had a meeting with the HoloLens team at Siemens Healthineers for my new book. The Siemens HoloLens app processes CT and MRI scanner data into photorealistic, stereoscopic 3D holograms in real time. For example, the inside of a patient's brain can be studied as an interactive 3D object in space. This not only assists doctors in evaluating where to operate best, but also helps with patient communication.



***GA: Let's move over to Singapore. You have been on site since 2006. What brought you here?***

CH: My first time in Asia, including Singapore, was actually in the mid-1990s, for a year and a half. I took on technical support and media consulting for the contract partners of the American company Scitex, major Asian publishers such as the Thai Thairath Group. My first personal impressions of Singapore stems from that time, and I was particularly impressed by the multicultural and diverse food culture here.

The positive impression probably helped me, when I decided to move my gaming startup from Hamburg to Singapore in 2006. Originally, I didn't want to leave Hamburg because I felt very much at home there and things were going very well. The company's investors, however, pressured me to move the company to Singapore. I committed after a consideration period and under certain conditions. After these conditions had been sealed with a Hanseatic handshake, I saw it as an opportunity for an exciting adventure. For me, that meant at first: Grind, grind, grind. I really worked a lot and, especially in the early stages of the development, I didn't really see much of Singapore. Whenever I needed a break, I took a weekend trip to Bali, every now and then. Unfortunately, I had to close down the company two years later, when the financial crisis hit in 2008. The gaming sector had been hit hard by the crisis in the financial sector and the investors'

concept of a profitable exit was no longer feasible. The entire process took almost two years; it was exhausting, but in the end it was satisfactory for everyone involved.

After all that stress, I needed a change of scenery and took a job in Cambodia to teach computer graphics and VR at the university. The country had just emerged from the aftermath of the civil war and its rough and violent period. Before that, guns were still openly carried, child prostitution and brutal gangs, almost commonplace. Then things changed, Cambodians began to clean up, rebuild their civil society and began to discover the world. It was a great time! People opened up, were curious and hungry for life. From a vivid music scene, great parties, to innovative non-profit campaigns targeting poverty and nature conservation, a lot of positive changes happened.

Speaking of which: In addition to teaching at the university there, I also created 2D animation videos for NGOs, for diversity inclusion and wildlife preservation projects. If you are interested, in the [link here](#), you will find a 3-minute video of how such a 2D animation is created. Another [video here](#), that I made for a fair-fashion label at the time, reflects the optimism of that period quite well.

***GA: Ok, I understand, your first arrival in Singapore was much further back than in 2006. What made you give up the exciting life in Cambodia?***

CH: Once the virtual reality industry really got going, a while after the financial crisis, I needed an appropriate business environment. Singapore was considered a strategic point for the technological rise of the tiger states, a large variety of international companies, corresponding expertise, financing and infrastructure, were available right here at that time.

***GA: What was your first impression, when you moved from Germany to Singapore?***

CH: Funny, that you're asking (*smiles*). A friend of my father's, Henning Melchers, who was, just as my father, Schaffer, at the traditional "Bremer Schaffermahlzeit", ran an old family business that, as is often the case with old Bremen merchant families, had a long tradition with far east trade in Asia. Based on his stories, I had created an image of Singapore in my mind that was much more Indian, even though I also knew from him that it was influenced by Chinese culture. Basically, both are part of the culture here, as we know, of course. I had also heard exciting nautical stories about Singapore from the circle around my grandfather, who was a Senator in Bremen. When I arrived here, I was under immense work pressure, as I mentioned. What I didn't expect was, how different the family and work culture in Singapore is, in the sense of, family comes before job. I had worked around the globe previously, including 7 years in Los Angeles before my

time in Hamburg and my school years had also been very culturally diverse due to the boarding schools abroad. At first, I was surprised at how extremely family-oriented young Singaporeans are, in particular. Who often live with their parents until well over their 30s or even over 40s, and enjoy doing so. And even if they have their own apartment, they still spend a lot of time with their parents. I wasn't familiar with that, not from my previous experience in the US, or the Asian communities there, nor from Germany. Generally speaking, that should be considered a good thing.

***GA: Many expats have only been in Singapore for a year or two. What was completely different in 2006?***

CH: A lot! The whole skyline was different, the entire Marina Bay area didn't exist yet. I lived near Holland Village in the beginning and always enjoyed being near the Dempsey Hill area, which was a little less developed and wilder at the time. I have always been impressed by the amazing tropical vegetation there. After that I lived in a Landed House on the East Coast, on Kuo Chuan Avenue, actually pre-war barracks that the Singaporeans were not interested in. With a little garden in front and behind the house. I loved it! Today it is total luxury, but at the time not yet discovered.

By the way, nature is what I still like most about Singapore today. The parks are great, for example, Woodlands Park on the coast, which is where I enjoy to go for inline skating. And the water reservoirs in Singapore are great places for me to rest and recharge.

***GA: You are now firmly established here and you are even married to a Singaporean. How did you integrate when you first came here?***

CH: I'm a gamer at heart and was immediately involved in the game development scene. It's very international, totally friendly and open. In almost every country, there is a so-called Game Developer Association (igda.org) and, for some years now, a VR-AR Association. There you get to know new people and there is always something to talk about right away. There are also a lot of locals involved, so I rooted myself deeper here bit by bit. Initially, at the beginning, I thought that I would only be staying in Singapore for a short time, only one or two years (*laughs*).

***GA: We are curious. What is a normal day in your life here in Singapore like?***

CH: Well, after breakfast, I first play a VR game on my Oculus Quest. Preferably "Dead & Buried". By the way, I always meet the same players around that time, almost like in real life. Then I focus on my new book project and try to stick to my workload. Obviously, I spend most of the time in front of the computer, I work with the Unreal

Game Engine on various projects, as I described at the beginning, but in between I also sketch concepts. And in the evening it is time for another little game of “Dead & Buried” to finish off, or at the moment “Half-Life: Alyx”, where I enjoy the rich details of the virtual environments.

***GA: Here in the café, where we are sitting together, there is Durian Mousse Cake, Durian Puff and Durian Ice Cream Roll. Do you like this interesting smelling fruit?***

CH: I like durian very much, and even liked it from the beginning! My wife, Audrey, also likes the fruit, of course, and because of her I know a bit more about it now, as well. There are various, sometimes highly priced types of special and old plants, some are often identified with numbers, such as D24, D88, but also have names such as Mao Shan Wang or Black Gold. There are also different flavors, it's kind of similar to wine.

***GA: You are definitely one of the few German durian lovers! On another topic: it's Covid time. What do you wish for the next few months?***

CH: That I can travel again! I live in the north of Singapore and finally want to get on the train again to go over to Malaysia. I also have my dentist there, by the way. He is very good and also much cheaper compared to Singapore. I also typically visit Germany for at least two weeks a year. Me and my wife Audrey often combine that with a city trip, for example, to Prague, Vienna, Lisbon or Krakow. But we also miss short trips within the region, to Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia.

But, you can also travel virtually of course. Due to Corona, there is now an increased interest in VR, for example, for the home office or for video conferences with avatars. This is often more productive and much more relaxed for participants in certain areas, instead of having to constantly stare at a video call screen. This development is, of course, good for my business.

***GA: Last short question: What is your favorite character in the virtual world, maybe you even designed it yourself?***

Yes, I do, as a matter of fact. One of my favorite VR projects was the Titan Dolphin for the TV series “The Future is Wild”, about the animal world in 200 million years. I designed it together with the author Dougal Dixon, animated it in 3D and then brought it to life in VR. The Titan Dolphin was originally a peaceful dolphin, but through evolution it was pushed out of the sea onto the land, where it grew legs and developed into a predator to assert itself in the new environment!

*Information about Cornel's company can be found [here](#) .*