

EXPERT OPINION: BOWEN TAN



BOWEN TAN is a PhD Research Student in Creative and Critical Practices at the University of Sussex, based in the School of Media, Arts and Humanities. He is an independent animator, VR creator and Program Director of Tell Me Lemon, an immersive media studio working with cultural organisations, museums and independent businesses in Brighton and beyond.

Bowen's animation Mechamorphosis has won Best Animation awards at Manchester Film Festival (MANIFF), the USA Film Festival, and the Vortex Sci-Fi, Fantasy & Horror Film Festival. His VR animated music video Dark Tide has been officially selected by TOPU International Animation Week and Feinaki Beijing Animation Week. His doctoral research focuses on 360-degree storytelling and how spatial and social perspectives in immersive media shape audience emotion.

AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' VIEW OF LIFE IN BRIGHTON, AND HOW DEVOLUTION COULD IMPROVE IT

I should start with something very simple.

Before I came to the UK, I had never heard of Brighton & Hove. And I don't say that to be provocative; it's just true. For many people in China, when you talk about studying in the UK, you talk about Oxford, Cambridge, London, maybe Edinburgh or Manchester. Brighton isn't usually part of that picture.

The reason I came here was straightforward. I was accepted onto a PhD at the University of Sussex, which was attractive because it was only an hour from London. That was the anchor. Everything else followed from that decision rather than the other way around.

Once I arrived, though, I started to understand what Brighton, and wider Sussex, actually is. It has a very vivid creative community, and a sense that experimentation is normal. People collaborate easily.

There's a strong games development culture here, which matters a lot when you're working in XR (shorthand for 'extended reality') and immersive media, because so much of the technology is built on game engines and game design thinking. The presence of global gaming technology company, Unity, in the city sends a signal that this is a place where this kind of work belongs.

My doctoral research sits within the School of Media, Arts and Humanities at Sussex, and it focuses on extended reality archives for local independent businesses. Most XR work is designed for large companies with large budgets. Small businesses don't work like that. They have to think very carefully about what they invest in, how it can be reused, and whether it has long-term value.

My research explores how immersive 3D environments (virtual representations of real shops and spaces) can be repurposed. A customer might use them to explore a space remotely, but a business might also use them for promotion, planning future layouts, or even preserving a record of a space that may change or disappear. The same XR asset can have many lives, if it's designed properly. That research quickly became practical.

A friend in Brighton said something quite blunt to me: if you want people to take this seriously, you need a company.

As a student, it's hard to make contracts or be trusted at the same level. A company gives people confidence that you'll still be there tomorrow.

That conversation led to Tell Me Lemon, a tech start-up which I co-founded with collaborators based in Brighton, Plymouth and China. The name was chosen deliberately; we wanted something creative, memorable, and focused on storytelling rather than technology for its own sake. Through Tell Me Lemon, we've worked on XR animations for local businesses, the Sussex Business Show, and organisations including the Science Museum and TEDx Brighton.

Alongside this, I co-organise XR Initiative, a community programme that brings together XR developers, artists, educators and businesses in Brighton. Those events matter, because they make the ecosystem visible. People realise they're not working alone, and that there is real momentum here.

I genuinely believe Brighton has the potential to be recognised internationally as a serious centre for XR and immersive technology. There are emerging studios, award-winning projects, and a strong crossover between games, art, wellbeing and storytelling. When XR was 'overheated' globally, expectations became unrealistic. Now that high-pressure attention has largely shifted to AI, it actually means there's space to do XR work more thoughtfully and meaningfully.

But potential only goes so far. From the perspective of an international founder and researcher, there are some very practical issues that need attention if Brighton and Sussex want to attract and retain more international talent like me. Some of these are things a new mayor should focus on early, because they shape how the region is perceived from the outside.

From my perspective, people like me don't come to Brighton because of incentives alone. We come because we believe we can grow here, collaborate here, and build something meaningful. Brighton and Sussex already has many of the ingredients: strong communities, creative confidence, and technical skill.

The challenge now is making sure the foundations (infrastructure, education, and long-term stability) are strong enough to support what comes next.

FIVE THINGS A NEW MAYOR SHOULD FOCUS ON

1

Basic infrastructure and quality of life

Roads, public spaces and everyday facilities matter more than people admit. If local business owners are constantly complaining about infrastructure, that undermines any story about innovation. I was surprised at how neglected a lot of this felt when I arrived.

2

Stability in higher education

Universities are one of Brighton's greatest assets, but job losses and uncertainty make it harder for international students to commit. People don't just choose a city; they choose supervisors, expertise and intellectual communities.

3

A more confident international story

Promotion exists, but the marketing of Brighton and Sussex as a place to work and invest often feels amateur compared to the quality of work actually happening here. That gap needs to close.

4

Backing creative and tech communities, not just sectors

XR, games and immersive media grow through networks, events and collaboration, not just funding pots.

5

Using sport and culture as global signals

Brighton & Hove Albion's Premier League presence really matters internationally. Cultural and creative excellence can work the same way, if it's framed properly, and shouted about in other countries.

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