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Media consultancy company finds home at WKU

MICHAEL J. COLLINS michael.collins@bgdailynews.com

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Suspenders of Disbelief Founders Sangita Shresthova (left), Henry Jenkins and Sam Ford

Submitted

Memes and fandom culture may seem like simple fun, but for a new local company, they're the focus of decades of research and experience.

The Bowling Green Area Chamber of Commerce announced this week the formation of a new “storytelling and engagement consultancy,” Suspenders of Disbelief, at Western Kentucky University’s Innovation Campus.

Co-founders Sam Ford, Henry Jenkins and Sangita Shresthova will offer expertise on “participatory culture, media convergence, transmedia storytelling, digital

innovation, civic imagination, and so much more,” Jenkins stated in a release.

“Suspenders of Disbelief’s work originated from the research and development the three of us have carried out together in various forms over the past 20 years,” Ford stated. “Of late, we have begun working on multiple projects exploring how these models can apply outside the academic world: in the business realm, in economic development, in educational systems, in civic infrastructure, and beyond.”

Ford, the company’s managing partner, is an author, research affiliate with MIT Comparative Media Studies/Writing and a Culture & Innovation Fellow with the Innovation Campus, among other roles.

Ford said the trio has provided expertise to clients for years, but the company now provides a vehicle to continue applying their research outside academia.

“Ultimately, Suspenders of Disbelief is working on applied projects with clients,” Ford said. “We hope there are opportunities to bring folks in to work on those projects, whether those be students or recent graduates.”

Jenkins met Ford as his graduate school mentor at MIT in 2005, studying media and the impact of the internet just as Facebook was formed in the area, Ford said. Jenkins went on to work with Shresthova at the University of Southern California in 2008 and the trio continued to collaborate on projects through the years.

Jenkins has authored or edited 20 books and pioneered the study of fandom culture and “transmedia storytelling,” wherein entertainment is presented across different mediums to create a shared, complementary experience.

Lessons from his 2006 book, “Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide,” are still taught in university settings such as at WKU. It opened notably with the case of “Bert is Evil,” wherein a meme created by an American high schooler showing Sesame Street’s Bert posing with Osama Bin Laden ended up on protest signs across the Middle East after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Shresthova is director of Research and Programs and co-principal investigator of the Civic Paths Group at the University of Southern California. She is also a faculty member at the Salzburg Academy on Media and Social Change in Austria and her artistic work has been featured worldwide.

Shresthova stated that Bowling Green and the campus were chosen as headquarters for the “rich cultural diversity and the area’s focus on growing its emerging technology and storytelling sector.”

Warren County Judge-Executive Doug Gorman stated the county previously worked with the founders in 2023 on a workshop aimed at planning for future growth and continues to work with Suspenders of Disbelief elsewhere.

“I’m excited to see this new company make its home here, and I look forward to having these world-scale thinkers and their networks engaged with the amazing opportunities we have before us here,” Gorman said.

Bowling Green Area Chamber of Commerce President Ron Bunch said he is “excited to have world-scale experts in storytelling, participatory culture, and emerging technologies like the Suspenders in Disbelief team” in the city.

“Dr. Jenkins has been one of the leading thinkers of the last three decades on understanding digital culture, and we know that this team’s engagement here in our region will continue to elevate our work on building an immersive experiences focus north of Nashville,” Bunch stated.

WKU Innovation Campus CEO Henry “Buddy” Steen stated that Jenkins and Shresthova “have inspired many aspects of what we are building here.”

“The formation of Suspenders of Disbelief and its establishment of a headquarters in our Collaborative SmartSpace exemplifies our desire to create an environment for co-creation that attracts creative, artistic professionals and technologists from throughout our north Nashville region and around the world,” Steen stated.

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Michael Collins

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