

ACADEMIC INNOVATION PROJECT - REPORT 2021-22

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Digital Innovation through Risky Play with Virtual Reality Technologies



What did you set out to do?

We set out to design, lead and evaluate a pilot project which brought together staff from the IOCT (CEM) and Performing Arts (ADH) to trial an virtual reality (VR) performance project. The project embraced and tested a 'Risky Play' methodology with students through the 3rd year undergraduate Performing Arts module Creative Media in Performance. Professor Sophy Smith has been exploring using specific approaches to risky play with PGR students and we were keen to investigate how this could work with UG L6 students.

'embedding play into the postgraduate curriculum can enable the development of supportive creative environments where learners are able to experiment and innovate, how curriculum and assessments can be designed to encourage play and experimentation, how permission to play can enhance the creative practice of learners' (Smith, 2019).



Image from Easter VR workshop

We aimed to encourage digital innovation by working with cutting edge VR and Volumetric Capture technologies and performance. We brought together staff with expertise from the fields of performance and creative media both in-house and from industry, to develop an innovative new approach to the module content and test the new approaches in practice with the students.

How have you achieved it?

This module currently asks students to bring existing skills from performance to work with a range of new technologies, including Video Mapping, Artificial Intelligence, Interactive Sound Design and VR. It asks them to work with rapid prototyping and experimental design-led approaches. Initially, Sophy and I introduced the risky play methodology, discussing the characteristics of play and different perspectives on the use of play in learning. We led some guided tasks on how students could implement the approach during the module. We asked them to reflect upon past creative projects to identify how and if play was part of their process.

Throughout the module, students were supported to use risky play, alongside other methods such as rapid prototyping, agile and scrum methods to drive forward experimentation and innovation. Students were encouraged to consider how play can be used within their own creative processes and to identify how this model can support them to take more creative risks within their own learning process. Helping them to cultivate a critically reflective awareness of what supports and hinders their own creative process. They were asked to reflect on this in their assessment portfolios.

Student comments taken from feedback forms and portfolio assessments

'I'm so grateful to have learned this theory now because it will be an important tool for my personal and professional practice'.

'Risky play is collaboration, freedom, creativity, imagination and unpredictability'.

'Risky play helped me to learn from my mistakes'.

"In order to find where we could potentially go with the software, we looked at using risky play and remaining in that 'paratelic' state".

What next?

The new VR kit can be used annually on this and other UG/PG modules. I'd like to explore other potentials, such as social and educational spaces for learning and to experiment with creating live theatre in virtual spaces. In the future, we can trial VR headsets being lent to at-home learners who can then engage remotely through VR platforms, moving beyond the use of Teams for remote engagement.

Our frontrunner Emily Holliday has created a short video about this project.

Scan the QR code using your phone camera to watch the video.



Benefits for the University

We worked with established professional companies via this project including Creative Technologist Ben Neal and the Tom Dale Dance Company, strengthening external connections with industry and knowledge exchange.

We now have VR kit available in AV loans for students and staff to access.

Benefits for Subject Community

This pilot provided us with the time to explore VR and volumetric capture technologies with leading experts and purchase equipment not currently available from AV loans. It facilitated cross-faculty collaboration and will hopefully lead to further future curriculum partnerships. It can act as a case study for using innovative approaches to teaching technology-driven performance practices.

Benefits for Students

Students got to explore an innovative approach to the module content which centralises the learning process and supports them to more fully meet the assessment criteria.

They were able to experiment with cutting edge VR technologies and methods and acted as co-creators to the use of the method in practice. They can now hire this equipment from AV Loans to use within their own projects.

Students worked with industry and in-house experts via the taught sessions and extra Easter workshops, to develop performance projects using the latest VR technologies.

In light of the current pivot to the digital the pandemic has initiated, skills in digital creativity, digital performance, design thinking and reflective approaches are critically important to our current students and future graduates. Students developed transferable digital and creative skills highly sought on graduation.

Benefits for Staff

This approach could be trialled within other undergraduate modules on wider courses. This project can be used as a case study for future cross faculty curriculum collaborations. With training, staff can access the VR kit now housed at AV Loans. Please contact kerryn.wise@dmu.ac.uk for further information.

5 characteristics of play—self-chosen and self-directed; intrinsically motivated; guided by mental rules; imaginative; and conducted in an active, alert, but relatively non-stressed frame of mind (Gray, 2013)



Image from L6 taught session

References

- Gray, P. (2013) *Free to Learn*, Basic Books, New York.
Smith, S. (2019) 'Exploration: Play in Practice—Innovation Through Play in the Postgraduate Curriculum', in A. James and C. Nerantzi (eds) *The Power of Play in Higher Education: Creativity in Tertiary Learning*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG.



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