RISD Participates in Microsoft Virtual Reality Study Aimed at Developing an Immersive Classroom Environment That Meets the Needs of Artists and Designers

Two cross-disciplinary studios at RISD are taking part in a new partnership focused on novel uses of technology for immersive learning.

PROVIDENCE, RI (November 18, 2020) – Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) announces their participation in a Microsoft virtual reality study aimed at developing an immersive classroom environment that meets the needs of artists and designers. The study’s goal is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of an immersive classroom environment when compared to classes that rely on video calls and to develop novel research methodology for remote classroom observation in VR. Although other colleges are also taking part in the study, RISD is the only participant focused on bringing fine artists into the research space.
RISD’s 2020 mid-semester Digital Materiality crit, led by Textiles faculty member **Joy Ko**, is a cross-disciplinary studio that invites students to design immersive 3D spaces using virtual reality (VR) technology and traverse the fabrics they’re creating as part of the landscape. Ko’s class is one of two fall Textiles studios taking part in a new partnership with **Microsoft** focused on novel uses of technology for immersive learning. The other studio, **Apparel Fabrics**, taught by Associate Professor **Anna Gitelson-Kahn MFA 09 TX**, allows first-semester seniors to deepen their research skills and experiment with a wide range of tools, including digital technology, to inform their work. Students in both classes are participating in the study to further understand the role of VR in remote education, using the Mozilla Hubs platform.

“VR is more than a surrogate for in-person crits,” said **Joy Ko**. “It has become a way for students to think expansively about their work and to communicate their ideas in ways that go beyond touch and feel. Who knows what might result if students experience fabric as a terrain with mass, channels, cavities and other hidden conduits?”

Students, such as second-year Furniture Design grad student **Kai Ji MFA 22 FD**, also expressed the positive differences of the VR studio crit compared to video conferencing, which has become the norm for online learning throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. “It's
pretty different from a normal crit,” he said, “and way more interesting than a Zoom call. Looking at work together in the same space—even if it’s virtual—creates a feeling of community.”

Former RISD Faculty member and alum Evelyn Eastmond MFA 12 DM, and her colleague M Eifler (who is co-leading the study) have been instrumental in facilitating the partnership. Currently, Eastmond and Eifler are senior design researchers at Microsoft, focused on potential new users and directions for VR technology. Eastmond believes that the fine artists taking part in the user study are more likely to start with the needs of a particular project, rather than what the tech allows them to do, which makes for more out-of-the-box tech development. She hopes that this user study will lead to future Microsoft research at RISD, perhaps involving additional Fine Arts faculty members and students.

“RISD is essentially acting as a thought partner,” Associate Director of Strategic Partnerships Rebecca Nolan explains. “We’re reporting back to Microsoft about the experience through a survey process headed up by former faculty member and RISD alum Evelyn Eastmond MFA 12 DM, who has been pivotal in making this partnership happen.”

About Rhode Island School of Design

RISD’s mission, through its college and museum, is to educate students and the public in the creation and appreciation of works of art and design, to discover and transmit knowledge and to make lasting contributions to a global society through critical thinking, scholarship and innovation. The college’s strategic plan NEXT: RISD 2020-2027 sets an ambitious vision for educating students for the future and bringing creative practices to bear on the creation of just societies, a sustainable planet and new ways of making and knowing. RISD’s immersive model of art and design education, which emphasizes critical making through studio-based learning and robust study in the liberal arts, prepares students to intervene in the critical challenges of our time. Working with exceptional faculty and in extraordinary specialized facilities, 2,500 students from 69 countries engage in 42 full-time bachelor's and master's degree programs. RISD's 30,000 alumni worldwide testify to the impact of this model of education, exemplifying the vital role artists and designers play in today’s society. Founded in 1877, RISD (pronounced “RIZ-dee”) and the RISD Museum help make Providence, RI among the most culturally active and creative cities in the region. Find more information at risd.edu.

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