

Engaging Humanities & Humanistic Social Sciences Faculty, Staff, and Students Through XR

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Abstract. As a Karp Library Fellow for the University of Rochester's hub for extended reality technology, Studio X, I conducted research on the applications and potential that XR (extended reality) technology offers to the humanities and humanistic social sciences during the spring 2021 semester. My research involved three phases: finding pre-existing use cases, holding a focus group with Learning Initiatives Librarians, and conducting a student survey. From these three phases of research, I curated a range of XR use cases across humanities and humanistic social science fields and developed targeted engagement strategies for these users, which I implemented in the fall of 2021. From this, I began to plan an Intro to XR workshop that could be tailored for any group who wanted to learn about these amazing technologies.

Keywords: Extended Reality, Humanities and Humanistic Social Sciences, Education, Higher Education.

1 Introduction

As the hub for extended reality at the University of Rochester, Studio X [1] fosters a community of cross-disciplinary collaboration, exploration, and peer-to-peer learning that lowers barriers to entry, inspires experimentation, and drives innovative research and teaching in immersive technologies. My position as a Karp Library Fellow for Studio X has allowed me to participate in research that better my university's library community. Established in the summer of 2020, the Karp Library Fellows Program at the University of Rochester River Campus Libraries aims to prepare students for their future careers through their work in and contributions to specialized library spaces. While collaborating with library staff, Karp Library Fellows share their expertise, provide training to their peers, and enhance the libraries.

2 Research

My research from the spring 2021 semester [2] encompassed the many fields of the humanities and humanistic social sciences to showcase to those disciplines the endless potential that XR technologies offer. From conducting research, student surveys, and meetings with learning initiatives librarians, I collected information to fuel my project and showcase how easy it is for any discipline to get involved with XR technologies.

2.1 Pre-Existing Use Cases

As a humanities research fellow, I identified preexisting use cases in which the humanities and humanistic social sciences are already leveraging XR technologies. The goal with this task was to better understand what XR looks like in these disciplines and to curate examples and use cases for faculty, staff, and students in these disciplines. These examples demonstrate the possibilities for XR and the humanities and help humanities folks better relate to these technologies, so they may consider XR for classes, studying, and research opportunities. [3]

2.2 Learning Initiatives Librarian Focus Group

In order to get a better idea of ways that Studio X could benefit humanities faculty and students, I organized a focus group with some of the Learning Initiatives Librarians here at the University of Rochester River Campus Libraries. They are liaisons to the humanities and humanistic social sciences departments. I asked them a series of questions about their experiences working with faculty and how we might better engage their faculty with these technologies. I then established how Studio X could help with their goals and explained how we could help them overcome any challenges they may face.

2.3 Humanities Student Survey

In order to gauge humanities and humanistic social sciences students' exposure to XR technologies, I ran a short survey for about a week. The survey was open to both graduate and undergraduate students. I asked a range of questions about prior exposure to XR, how they could imagine using XR, and what might motivate them to do so. From the results, I was able to begin creating programming to get students engaged with Studio X.

3 Conclusions

Although many humanists have embraced technologies in their research, immersive technologies are largely new territory for humanities and humanistic social sciences

faculty and students at the University of Rochester. The technology is expensive, has a steep learning curve, and often comes off as a novelty rather than a viable research tool. However, as we progress into the future, it is important to recognize the benefits that immersive technologies could offer these disciplines. It is clear to me that with enough guidance and support from Studio X, people will be much more likely to expand their research potential by working with XR technologies.

3.1 Moving Forward

Using the results from the focus group and the student survey, I was able to produce a plan to help Studio X move forward with the Humanities and Humanistic Social Sciences in mind. I created an Intro to XR workshop, which I have run several times with different variations depending on the group attending. In addition to this, I ran a Beat Saber Competition, a VR game that involves music and rhythm, as games were one of the most commonly used applications of XR technology mentioned in the survey results. I also wrote several informative blog posts to help people get a quick and easy introduction to XR. [4]-[6].

3.2 Final Thoughts

My personal experience with XR has been quite interesting, as I have been learning and immersing myself through the process of doing research for this project. I got my first VR headset, an Oculus Quest 2, just several months before starting this project. The sudden explosion from no exposure to so much through my own experimentation and research has been quite illuminating. As Creative Writing Major, I see the great potential that VR has for the Humanities and Humanistic Social Sciences disciplines. This project only fueled my passion for XR technology, which has led me down a path of pursuing more detailed research into VR and the future potentials it holds for us.

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