

Launch of Virtual Reality Class

by Abby Crowell

The Communication Department offered a special topics virtual reality class during spring 2020 for the first time. This unique and experimental course titled ‘VR: Perception, Production, Possibilities’ was developed by Michael Grabowski and Laura Meoli Ferrigon, two of Manhattan College’s most technologically savvy personnel. Grabowski is the current Chair of the Communication Department, and Ferrigon is the college’s Assistant Director of Digital Media in the Marketing & Communication Department.

The course’s creators utilized a hybrid online format for the students to interact with the VR community. Participants of the VR world operate, work and collaborate online, and the class is no exception. It relies on online communication and encourages a contemporary use of technology in this digital age, providing a captivating and modern approach for education.



According to Grabowski, the class “combines learning about human perception with understanding how perception changes in the new medium of virtual reality (VR).” Students enrolled in this course are expected to build projects using the Unreal Engine, which is a professional software that develops popular games such as Fortnite. Students are also able to use and experiment with the Oculus Quest VR headset.

Projects for the students in this class consisted of studying the evolution of senses in order to build a virtual environment. This included learning about the five senses as well as lesser known senses such as proprioception and the vestibular senses. Students were expected to manipulate perception by making users feel bigger or smaller, or



generating a meditative state in their virtual environment.

Grabowski acknowledged the academic setback due to the current COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on the VR course. “Luckily for us, we had designed this course as a hybrid classroom/online course, so much of the course content was already on Moodle. We made arrangements for students who did not have laptops that could run the software to borrow laptops from the school before they left campus, and each of the students were able to bring home an Oculus headset to continue working in VR.” Grabowski also mentioned that the most difficult aspect to adjust in the midst of online schooling is the inability to collaborate in person regarding issues with the online software.

This virtual reality class offers an incredible opportunity to use technologically advanced materials and resources that offer insight into the future of technology. In the near future, the Communication Department plans to offer a slew of newly developed courses that speak to the changing technological landscape like 3D design, motion effects, and game design, in addition to expanding other special topics courses in virtual reality.