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VR Project Created By Students To Be Shown At Moogfest

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Tech and music festival Moogfest is back for its second year in Durham – and this year, you can enjoy a concert in a new way because of a student-led installation to be housed at the Bullpen, the home of the Duke Innovation & Entrepreneurship Initiative downtown.

'Perspective,' created by a board of 10 Duke students, promises to be "an immersive VR experience" during which the user can experience a Nona Hendryx concert from four different perspectives.

The user will wear a VR headset and, with a remote control, will be able to toggle between the four perspectives. The students are building custom software that will allow the new perspective to pick up at the same time in the time code so that the concert is uninterrupted.

The installation caters to two audiences, said John Sipp, a junior classical studies major who will help film the concert. Users who didn't get to attend the Nona Hendryx show because of scheduling conflicts with other Moogfest events will get to experience it, while viewers who attended the show will get to see it from new angles.

"The overarching theme of the project is that there's a transience of perspectives," said Anthony Alvernaz, a senior public policy and computer science major and visual arts minor. "The idea was born from not only 'What are you missing by not being there?' but also 'What are you missing by being there?'"

The students plan to film from an audience member's perspective, from Hendryx' perspective, from backstage and from an aerial view using a spider monkey. The footage will then be combined to create the VR installation that can be experienced through a headset.

This is the inaugural year of the student board, which was put together by Kip Frey, who directs both Duke I&E and the Program in Law & Entrepreneurship.

"I saw Moogfest as an incredible opportunity for students here at Duke to get involved from a programmatic standpoint and really become participants in this technology and music and futurism festival that we have happening at Duke every year," Frey said.

Frey collected an eclectic group of students with interests ranging from technology to show production.

The students had no guidelines other than to pitch an innovative idea for Moogfest. They went with VR, said senior Anthony Alvernaz, because they were interested in the surge of VR as a new way to experience things.

Alvernaz, a computer science and public policy major with a minor in visual arts, said that because VR is becoming commercialized, the group was able to leverage off-the-shelf technology and, after trying several different kinds of cameras, decided to use 360 cameras from Samsung for their project.

“What it really speaks to is the power of an innovative idea, of perspectives,” he said. “That transcends technology; it’s not a matter of ‘Do we need \$15,000 cameras?’ but it’s a matter of how to make that footage into something that’s really unique.”

Technical and hardware decisions may have been the crux of the project, but there were many decisions to make. Jason Calixto, a junior visual and media studies major, said Nona Hendryx was the ideal choice to film because of her punk background and the tech/futuristic environment she represents. She already experiments with wearable technology during her performances, so VR fits in well.

Maria Carrasco, a junior English major receiving a certificate in the Arts of the Moving Image program, has been working on an introduction video, which visitors will watch before viewing the installation to help orient themselves in the world of VR.

Alex Grau, the managing director of RTP VR, will speak in the video about the history of VR and its recent rise to popularity.

Jessica Womack, a junior public policy major, said it’s been interesting to work on a project that partners with the Durham community. It’s also been exciting to work with VR, she said, because although cost can be a barrier to access, she thinks the technology will be easily accessible and disruptive in the future.

Frey said it’s been interesting to watch the board transform from a group of students who didn’t know each other to an organized, cohesive team.

“Over the course of not too many weeks, it all started to happen – roles started to emerge, interesting interactions started to happen, and really we watched and learned together how to form a group,” he said.

He’s also proud of the students’ project.

“They are looking at the very bleeding edge of virtual reality experience and how that experience affects both artists who are performing and how people are going to be able to consume art in a virtual reality context in the future,” he said. “What they’re bringing in terms of programming, in terms of the use of specific technologies, I don’t have any hope of understanding. But they do, and it’s been great to watch them. I learn a lot from the experience of watching them.”

‘Perspective’ will be shown in the Bullpen, located on the third floor at 215 Morris St., during the Saturday and Sunday of Moogfest from 2 to 6 p.m. Festival attendees have to register in advance to view the installation, and slots are filling quickly.

Frey is looking for the next cohort of students who will replace the seniors currently on the board. He asks those interested in serving on next year’s Moogfest student board to contact him directly.

By Katie Jansen | Photos by Pilar Timpane

This story was originally published on Duke Today (<https://today.duke.edu/2017/05/vr-project-created-duke-students-be-shown-moogfest/>).

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