

Doctoral School Research Award: Virtual Reality in America

The Doctoral School Research Award funded travel to America to explore virtual reality experiences and participate in several academic conferences in America during March - April 2022. The trip to America included visiting a cluster of events surrounding virtual reality to gain invaluable insights related to my doctoral research. This included participating in several virtual reality experiences, presenting research at a symposium at University of North Texas in Denton, TX, and participating in the *North American Conference of Video Game Music* at Louisiana Tech University in Ruston, LA.

Over the last few years, virtual reality technology has made huge leaps and bounds forward. The trip provided opportunities to engage with the latest commercial virtual reality experiences such as *THE INFINITE* – a NASA-supported project which allowed participants to walk around and explore the International Space Station in virtual reality. Of particular interest to me was how sound was handled within these environments; unlike small-scale virtual reality environments, *THE INFINITE* placed nearly a hundred users within the virtual environment simultaneously, each of whom was able to explore independently. Being able to take part in an experience like this provided me with invaluable insights into how virtual reality experiences are developing and changing in response to the developing technology. I also visited cutting-edge warehouse-scale experiences which used virtual reality technologies to create virtual escape rooms and virtual reality gaming experiences suitable for video-gaming fans, corporate teambuilding exercises, and other similar audiences. It was fascinating to talk to the technical managers and floor crew at these sites to discuss the pragmatic difficulties they are facing as they try to bring virtual reality to a wider audience, and to experience the latest generation of commercial hardware myself.

I was also an excellent opportunity to meet with scholars who are at the cutting edge of the field. COVID-19 has made networking difficult, and many of the scholars present at University of North Texas and Louisiana Tech University had not had the opportunity to discuss their research for much of the last few years. This made attending particularly fruitful: many researchers had embarked on deep dives into related areas over the last few years and had many new and exciting discoveries to share. Many of the discussions we had have shaped my thoughts as I began to finalise the conclusions of my doctoral research from May 2022 onward.

The Doctoral School Research Award funded the majority of my flights, hotels, and activities in America. With the aid of this financial assistance, I was able to ensure that my research was situated at the forefront of knowledge and practice in the field of virtual reality and virtual experience. This opportunity is one that I will always be grateful for having received.

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