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Recharging After COVID

Creating a Virtual Reality Space to Grow Outreach and Foot Traffic at an HBCU Consortium Library

When the Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library (hereafter referred to as the AUC Woodruff Library) reopened in August 2021 following the CO-VID-19 closure, the following issues persisted: less foot traffic, fewer instruction session requests, and diminished campus activity. Fast forward several years and the effects of the pandemic on higher education have been dramatic,[1] likely in some ways we won't know for years. While students and faculty are back on campus, in many cases, AUC campuses have elected to offer hybrid options for course delivery.

While distance learning and hybrid classes have been around for years in some capacity, as compared to classes before the pandemic, they are now much more common. The past few entering classes (those students graduating in the years 2024–2027) experienced the pandemic in high school or their first year of college. It became clear that library outreach needed to change in its approach to this audience. In response, library staff brainstormed new ways to conduct outreach with a cohort of students who are happy remaining virtual. Many workflows within the library became flexible to reflect that environment, such as offering online research consultations, online or hybrid library instruction, and hosting e-learning workshops. Despite these efforts, student and faculty engagement efforts have not reached the same levels as pre-pandemic.

At the same time, AUC campuses added new programs focusing on virtual reality and engagement. Spelman College created a minor in Game Design and Development, while both Morehouse College and Spelman College launched e-sports student organizations. The creation of the Game Design and Development minor at Spelman College is supported by the Spelman Innovation Lab, a hub for students to learn and use makerspaces and game-building programs like Unity. In another example of the ingenuity of AUC faculty and students, Clark Atlanta University offered business classes focused on esports, such as Writing for Games. The founding of the student organizations Maroon Tiger Gaming and Spelman Esports also increased awareness about e-sports internships and career opportunities in the AUC community. One of the events hosted by the AUC Woodruff Library during the ALA Games and Gaming Round Table's International Games Month is International Games Day,[2] where AUC members and visitors come together to discuss, learn, and play games of all kinds.

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Morehouse in the Metaverse,[3] led by Muhsinah Morris, director of Morehouse Metaverse Programs and senior assistant professor, is a program supporting faculty development for teaching with virtual reality. Metaversity is a portmanteau of the words Metaverse and University. It refers to the metaverse, virtual reality (VR), extended reality (XR), augmented reality (AR), and higher education combining to create experiential or transformative learning. Morehouse College was the first higher education institution in the United States to work with Victory XR, an augmented and virtual reality company,

The AUC Woodruff Library VR Lounge. Photograph by Patrice Williams.

resulting in the construction of a replica of the Morehouse College campus in the metaverse. Since the start of Morehouse in the Metaverse in 2021, the program has birthed numerous creative and innovative teaching techniques. The four original affiliated faculty members are Muhsinah Morris (Chemistry), Ethell Vereen (Biology), Tanya Clark (English), and Ovell Hamilton (History). Within Morehouse in the Metaverse, students can visit a historical slave ship, conduct chemistry labs, or move around a human vein with blood cells. The program has grown to include other courses and faculty members. Student engagement has skyrocketed, and the program received several educational awards and recognition. Currently, 113 listed colleges and universities work with VictoryXR to participate in "Metaversity" programs.[4]

Expanding Spaces through a Grant Opportunity

Students in the AUC Woodruff Library VR Lounge. Photograph by Patrice Williams.

When informed of ALA's Building Library Capacity Grant by the then-Director of Engagement and Scholarship at the AUC Woodruff Library in early 2023, we saw it as a chance to recharge the relationship between the AUC community and the library, especially in light of the increased emphasis on VR programs at the AUC institutions. In June 2023, the AUC Woodruff Library was awarded a $10,000 Building Library Capacity Grant to create a space for virtual reality and wellness engagement inside the library. Collaborative spaces within the library are heavily used, so adding a space for VR and wellness was viewed as a potential avenue to increase library foot traffic as well as create another collaborative space to support campus initiatives and provide students with a space to unwind.

We evaluated the room allotted for the project to determine how many stations we could fit, and of what type. Initially, we envisioned two VR stations and one station equipped with a gaming laptop, and we began to outfit the room accordingly. The AUC Woodruff Library already owned ten Meta Quest 2 VR headsets donated by Muhsinah Morris through

Morehouse in the Metaverse. Both VR stations are equipped with a gaming desk and gaming chair. Meta Quest headsets are available to students as a reserve item. Having ten headsets and two dedicated VR stations allowed the library to have at least two headsets charged and their accompanying controllers ready with working batteries. We purchased travel cases to protect the headsets as they are transported by patrons to the VR room.

VR headsets and gaming accessories are cataloged as reserve items and secured behind the Information Services Center Desk from which students can check them out while using the VR Lounge. Once we set up the room, we realized we had space and budget to purchase a second gaming laptop and furniture for what would be a fourth overall station. The laptop stations have gaming chairs and adjustable height desks, so patrons

Student using equipment in the AUC Woodruff Library VR Lounge. Photograph by Patrice Williams.

can play either standing or sitting. We did not purchase adjustable height desks for the VR stations as students are required to be seated while using VR to reduce the risk of users running into furniture or each other. Behind each laptop station desk, large screen monitors were installed that connect to the laptops via an HDMI cable.

While monitors remain in the VR Lounge, all other items were cataloged as reserve items and are borrowed from the circulation desk when users come to check in for their reservation. Reserve items for gaming laptops include an Alienware laptop, a wireless computer mouse, a wireless Alienware keyboard, an HDMI adapter, and headphones. Reserve items for VR headsets include a travel case with the Meta Quest 2 VR headset and two wrist controllers. Pod chairs are also available, with a range of reserve items including noise-cancelling headphones, a meditation headband, and a white noise machine.

We discussed the logistics of storing and circulating equipment of this nature with staff members at other Atlanta-area libraries who have VR or gaming spaces.[5] One conversation centered around whether the AUC Woodruff Library should purchase games that students could check out while in the library. Another library with a similar program shared issues around licensing rights when a library owns one copy of a game that multiple students are able to play. Based on this, we determined that we would allow students to log into their own accounts through cloud-based gaming platforms like STEAM or Game Pass to play free games or ones they already own. After conversations with AUC Woodruff Library IT staff, we decided that rather than having students check out and transport laptops from the desk to the room, it would be preferable to leave the laptops in the room, so laptop locking cables were purchased to facilitate this. However, the model of Alienware laptops we purchased are incompatible with most laptop locking cables and therefore policies and procedures were adjusted. Patrons can check out the laptops as reserve items in a travel case along with the charging cable. Patrons also check out the Alienware mouse, HDMI adapter, and keyboard separately.

In addition to being a space for gaming and VR, the room was conceived as a place for wellness and relaxation. To that end, the room is equipped with a globe, or pod, chair. Both

the chair and the VR stations can be reserved by an individual for up to 90 minutes per day, and the gaming stations can be reserved by an individual for up to three hours per day with the ability to bring one guest.

We collaborated with the library's Planning, Assessment, Communications and Events Department for the selection and installation of the visual display in the VR Lounge and Wellness Room. These included a comic book-themed large wall decal, as well as both contemporary and retro video game posters, complemented by a framed collection of reproduced comic book covers from the library's Archives Research Center—The Dawud Anyabwile Collection. A sign was designed and placed on the exterior.

Reception

The room launched August 29, 2024, after some adjusted logistics of procedures and facility changes. As of fall 2024 at the time of writing this article, around 30 students have booked the stations within the VR Lounge and Wellness Room. However, the number of confirmed bookings does not reflect the allowed guest count of the room. We received feedback that students wanted more than one pod chair. On the other hand, there have been only a few checkouts of the VR and laptop equipment. This could be a result of students not being aware of the equipment or students bringing their own equipment. Patrons are allowed to bring their own equipment, and many have opted to do that.

Conclusion

The reopening of the AUC Robert W. Woodruff Library post-pandemic has shown that adapting to new technologies and evolving student needs is critical for continued engagement. Despite efforts to offer flexible, virtual outreach and the addition of innovative programs like the VR Lounge and Wellness Room, student engagement is trending toward pre-pandemic levels. The library has embraced new trends in education and campus activities, aligning with the broader AUC community's focus on e-sports, game development and design, and wellness. Although student engagement with VR and gaming equipment is still growing, the addition of the collaborative and wellness-focused space has garnered interest, particularly the pod chairs, reflecting students' need for both academic and personal relaxation resources. As the library continues to fine-tune its offerings, this initiative represents a proactive approach to aligning with modern educational trends and campus needs, setting the stage for increased future interaction and utilization.

Acknowledgment

Notes

1. Iryna Sharaievska, Olivia McAnirlin, Matthew H. E. M. Browning, Lincoln R. Larson, Lauren Mullenbach, Alessandro Rigolon, Ashley D'Antonio, Scott Cloutier, Jennifer Thomsen, Elizabeth Covelli Metcalf, and Nathan Reigner, "'Messy Transitions': Students' Perspectives on the Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Higher Education," *Higher Education* (2022), https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00843-7.

2. To learn more about International Games Day, please visit the LibGuide (https://research.auctr.edu/international-games-day) or visit the Metaverse United website (https://www.unitethemetaverse.com/).

3. To learn more about Morehouse in the Metaverse, visit the LibGuide (https://research.auctr.edu/game/metaversity).

4. VictoryXR, "Our Partners & Use-Cases," https://www.victoryxr.com/our-partners/.

5. Staff members include Justin Ellis, Allison Valk, Krista Graham, Phally Phorn, Andrew Johnson, and Shandra Jones.