

# Frankly, A Virtual Senior Show Exhibition and Collaboration

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**ABSTRACT** In the spring semester of 2020, the University of Arkansas graphic design senior class prepared to showcase their capstone projects with a research poster exhibition, made complete with bespoke branding, holistically designed spaces, and opening night celebrations. But when a global pandemic forced all classes and events to pivot to a virtual format, the seniors embraced the moment and moved their entire show online. Through a collaboration between the University of Arkansas School of Art, the Tesseract Center for Immersive Environments and Game Design, and Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, their senior show came to life as a real-time, immersive 3D experience. Working with developers at the Tesseract Center, students collaborated to recreate their senior show in a virtual space called Gallery 5, a software application developed in partnership Crystal Bridges Museum that mimics one of the museum's galleries. Students embraced the challenges of designing virtual experiences that are engaging and enjoyable, as well as the challenges of facilitating collaboration between 24 students through strictly remote interactions. This short paper presents the outcomes and discusses the affordances of Gallery 5 as an online gallery space. We examine the use of accessible platforms and collaborative tools to explore the possibilities of virtual reality and immersive design, particularly in the context of remote learning. When planning their show, students arrived at a theme of "finding courage to confront problems and address them with design," which is exactly what they accomplished through their virtual exhibition. Despite a truly unprecedented and uncertain semester, students came together to meet a unique challenge, incorporating a multidisciplinary approach and building community partnerships to realize an innovative senior exhibition in the time of virtual learning. The show can be viewed at [frankly.uark.edu](http://frankly.uark.edu).

**Keywords:** *immersive design, 3d, virtual reality, exhibition design, collaboration, remote learning, community partnerships*

## Introduction; Background and Context

As students in design programs prepare to graduate this spring, it is a commonplace that they organize and execute an exhibition showcasing a body of work. This experience, both celebratory and distinctly final, can often feel like a rite of passage for students. In the spring semester of 2020, along with students in design programs across the country, the University of Arkansas graphic design senior class prepared to showcase their capstone projects with an exhibition of research posters and designed artifacts. The planned exhibition included bespoke branding, holistically designed spaces in our design studios, and an opening night reception. But a global pandemic forced all classrooms to pivot virtually, and left the format of senior shows everywhere unknown.

Seniors in the Graphic Design BFA program at the University of Arkansas enroll in a capstone course called Degree Project. They spend their final semester in the program conducting design research relating to a specific context that often is of personal interest. In the class of 2020, topics ranged from managing mental health, supporting caregivers of Alzheimer's patients, building community among people on the autism spectrum, facilitating conversations about sex education, and engaging citizens in local politics. Their projects culminate in a proposed speculative intervention informed by their research and findings. Students prototype, test, and present their solutions using a variety of design research methods. Simultaneously as they conduct their research, students also collaboratively (as a class of about 30 students) design and organize an exhibition-style showcase of the work and plan an opening reception event. The Degree Project course focus is evenly split, emphasizing both individual investigations and the collaborative showcase of work.

Halfway through the spring 2020 semester, in the middle of their research projects and event planning, the world ground to a halt. Campus closed. Classes moved online. Calendars were cleared. The future became unclear. The COVID19 outbreak derailed the plans of both educators and students in one fell swoop, forcing all of us to immediately rotate our thinking and expectations for our class's outcomes. We couldn't bear to see our students' hard work go to waste without the celebration and fanfare of a senior show, so we began looking for virtual solutions by reaching out to campus and community partners for ideas.

## Remote Collaboration

The University of Arkansas is also home to the Tesseract Center for Immersive Environments and Game Design, an interdisciplinary studio situated in the Computer Science department. Tesseract seeks to develop innovative curricula that incorporate interactive experiences in both 2D and 3D space with a range of 3D technologies. One of our students in the Degree Project course, Stevie Petet, worked as an intern at the Tesseract Center and immediately saw an opportunity for a cross-campus collaboration. Thanks to her hard work and foresight, a pivotal collaboration was initiated.

To facilitate remote collaboration, we began to shift the classroom hierarchies, making space for students to communicate their needs and expectations during an uncertain semester. Mentally, students had to work to pivot their anticipated outcomes. They once envisioned a physical space and proximate celebration. They had to renegotiate those plans and demonstrate agility and resilience in reframing the outcomes.

Collaborating with the Tesseract Center posed an immediate challenge both for faculty and students. This challenge was rooted in the shift from physical to virtual, observed within the class's expectations and the mode of teaching and communication. Students had to not only reframe their expectations, they also had to quickly adapt to new ways of learning and collaborating. Alongside them, we worked together to examine what would translate virtually and what would not.

## Gallery 5

Students spent a great deal of time with the new technology introduced by the Tesseract Center. The developers at the center use a software called *Gallery 5*, an application developed in partnership with Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art (located nearby in Bentonville, Arkansas). Used in browser, *Gallery 5* mimics a blank Crystal Bridges museum gallery in interactive, real-time, 3D space. This virtual exhibition space can be curated, lit, and designed by a user and subsequently visited online by other participants. The potential of *Gallery 5*, in conjunction with working with Tesseract, and the student intern's immense help, made it possible to adapt this software for our students' Senior Show.

For students to use *Gallery 5*, it did not require expert skill or technique. But there was still a large learning curve, especially during an overwhelming time for students. The student in our class that interned at Tesseract became an invaluable resource and crucial part of the undertaking. They took on massive amount of responsibility and were excited to do so. Because of this, we reframed this particular student's outcomes for the class, allowing them to devote more time to the *Gallery 5* exhibition and teaching and collaborating with fellow students.

## Pivoting Expectations, Outcomes and Perspective

Once students settled into the shift to virtual, they restructured their committees and roles amongst themselves. The web team took on additional responsibilities, the branding team focused on a new set of artifacts, and the Tesseract intern joined the leadership team. As a class of 24, they began to redesign their Senior Show for a virtual experience. Before the pandemic, they had already settled on a show name: "Frankly,"—a single word (including the comma) that they defined as "prefacing a harsh reality laid bare at a time when the stakes demanded it." The naming and sentiment became even more prevalent as the class progressed. The students branded the *Gallery 5* space with large-scale environmental graphics, which may not have been possible in person. They created guidelines for virtual "poster" designs hung on the walls in the digital gallery. They installed video and motion graphic pieces, capitalizing on a digital format's affordances where they could.

The move to *Gallery 5* did not come without its challenges. Students had to work to rotate their thinking of the anticipated outcome constantly. As educators, we encouraged students to think about a virtual space's affordances and how their projects would be received in this new environment. We rewrote learning objectives and final deliverables, particularly encouraging students to design their research reports as digital books rather than printed artifacts, yet still offering to cover the cost of printing if students still wanted a physical copy. It goes without saying that at the onset of a global pandemic, the greatest hurdle the students overcame in this endeavor was the threat to their physical and mental health during a time of extreme uncertainty. Their passion for the outcome drove them to keep going, despite the myriad challenges.

## Student Outcomes and Reflection

The outcome was a successful cross-campus and community partnership that generated an innovative and first-of-its-kind senior show for our students in the program. The show received attention from local media and won a Silver Award from the University College Designers Association Student Design Competition in the category of Digital Published Work. The students celebrated their show with an opening reception on Zoom, where we were joined by dozens of campus partners, community members and family members from all over the country.



**FRANKLY,**

**OUR SENIOR SHOW IS GOING VIRTUAL.**

Throughout the past four years, the University of Arkansas BFA Graphic Design Class of 2020 has grown in unimaginable ways. Together, we have survived a year of studio foundations, memorized hundreds of titles and dates in multiple art history courses, and learned to appreciate the minute details of typographic anatomy that, realistically, no one else notices. Regardless of where our paths lead us in the future, our time together at the University of Arkansas has shaped us into dynamic, forward-thinking designers eager to tackle any design problem thrown our way.

Click here for more details:

**Gallery5**

Class of 2020 Senior Show Opening Reception (Recording)

**Reception**

Each of the 24 graduating seniors has dedicated their final semester to researching and designing a speculative solution for a systemic problem of their choice. With topics ranging from developing self-confidence and managing mental health to interventions in sex education and local politics, these projects showcase the versatility of our talented class. Read on to learn more about the research process and final design outcomes created by each student.

Despite the unfortunate circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, we are still

frankly.uark

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Frankly, University of Arkansas SoArt BFA Graphic Design Senior Show 2020 frankly.uark.edu/ Followed by uarkart, doodle25 and 57 others

Following Message

gallery5 identity bts photoshoot degree



Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

Frankly, the virtual art show from the University of Arkansas graphic design seniors is awesome. In this season of precaution, the University of Arkansas School of Art Class of 2020 design students decided to take their senior art show to the digital space — and Crystal Bridges was happy to help!

The virtual exhibition called “Frankly” will be featured in Gallery 5, an interactive, real-time 3D rendering of our Modern Art Gallery, created by Tesseract Center for Immersive Environments & Game Design. Using a computer, visitors can virtually walk through the space and view the bios of each student artist and their work through a wide variety of forms including apps, community projects, printed artifacts, and games.

The virtual gallery opens at 5 pm today and will remain open for the foreseeable future. Tap here to tour the virtual show and learn more about the students and their work: <https://frankly.uark.edu/>

BFA GRAPHIC DESIGN PROGRAM THE UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS SCHOOL OF ART MAY 07, 2020

**FRANKLY,**

**WE'RE GRADUATING.**

HONESTY, BOLDNESS, & DILIGENCE

VIEW OUR SHOW & [www.frankly.uark.edu](http://www.frankly.uark.edu)



As relieved as we are to have 2020 in our rear-view, we must acknowledge that the uncomfortable shifts and pivots we all made during the Covid era are very much still a part of our present and will remain a part of our future as educators. So how do we prepare students for a world that not only allows for, but *necessitates* the bridging of physical and virtual spaces? How do we give them opportunities to practice agility and resilience, traits they will most certainly need in the post-Covid world? Pivoting, which started out as a response necessitated by crisis, could become a continuous mindset that calls for new tools and methods to sustain us and prevent burnout.

At the time of writing, we are currently overseeing the planning of the 2021 Senior Show in our program, and students are planning both an in-person and online experience. They are excited to present their work in a physical space, but they are also designing the event to be inclusive of viewers who cannot attend in person. In the post-Covid world, providing a virtual alternative of physical events will likely be an explicit expectation of event-goers, which forces designers to completely reimagine how we facilitate interactions, gatherings, meetings and events. Bridging physical and virtual experiences will be a central component of the initial planning stages, rather than a “pivot” that takes place in the middle. Virtual experiences will need to be designed intentionally as standalone experiences that capitalize on the affordances and limitations of technology, not as mere replications of physical experiences. As educators, we are taking into account how this affects the way we teach interactive and multiversal design.

Although the Class of 2021 was not thrown a curve ball like the Class of 2020, they have still been forced to demonstrate profound resilience and ingenuity as they navigated their senior year in a remote learning environment. As educators, we are centering their needs as students and humans to support them and facilitate horizontal collaboration—lessons we will continue to take forward in our teaching post-Covid. Although the future of design education remains yet uncertain amidst a global pandemic, we know that we will meet it with flexibility and resilience, and our students will too.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY AND RELEVANT LINKS**

View video of the Frankly gallery:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p62lnX9tbbo&feature=youtu.be>

View Frankly website: <https://frankly.uark.edu/>

Visit Frankly Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/frankly.uark/>

Tesseract Center for Immersive Environments and Game Design:

<http://tesseract.uark.edu/>

Tesseract Center Gallery 5 Platform:

<http://tesseract.uark.edu/gallery-5/>

## AUTHOR(S) BIOGRAPHY

**Alison Place** is a design educator, researcher and practitioner. Her research examines the intersection of feminism and design as a space for critical making, radical speculation and the redistribution of power through systems, artifacts and the built environment. She is an assistant professor of graphic design at the University of Arkansas School of Art, and has more than ten years of industry experience as a designer and creative director for nonprofit and higher education institutions. She holds an M.F.A. in experience design from Miami University of Ohio, a B.S. in graphic design from the University of Cincinnati College of Design, Architecture, Art and Planning (DAAP), and a certificate in journalism from the University of Cincinnati.



**Bree A. McMahon** is an Assistant Professor of Graphic Design at the University of Arkansas. Her research explores methods for disrupting traditional approaches to design pedagogy. Working with various collaborators, she develops and facilitates workshops for design students that examine complex topics through dialogical project prompts while incorporating opportunities for student conversations that encourage critical perspective and learning. Concerned with how design can be used to both solve and discover problems, Bree has presented, participated, and had work featured at conferences (nationally and abroad) and in various publications on design research. Bree attended Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin, where she received both a BA in Art History and a BA in Graphic Design. Curious about the intersection between design, history, and culture, she began her career in print journalism, which facilitated an interest in designing for community engagement. She earned her MGD from North Carolina State University's College of Design. There, she established a research agenda exploring designing conditions for collaborative conversations within professional and student studio settings.

