UA-Little Rock dives into the virtual world at the Emerging Analytics Center

by Nick Popham
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You don't see very many classrooms that look like this.

"We keep doing new breakthroughs, we keep doing things nobody else dares to do," Dr. Carolina Cruz-Neira, the executive director of the Emerging Analytics Center, or EAC at UA-Little Rock, said.
What is just a box with black screens surrounding all but one side, becomes a portal into a different world, into a virtual world.

"This is Google Earth, and what you're seeing right now, this is live feed...if I wanted to right now, I could go to Paris and you would be able to see the Eiffel Tower," Juan Sebastian-Munoz, a student pursuing at doctorate at UA-Little Rock, said.

This is just one of the many technological marvels you'll find at the EAC at UA-Little Rock.

This place, is one of the largest centers to work with virtual reality in the country.

Whether immersed in the CAVE, or deciding how many elements make an atom, the students who work here are trying to stay on the cutting edge of this technology, and it's all thanks to this woman.

"We are probably one of the top centers in the nations that is doing that kind of research," Dr. Cruz-Neira said.

Dr. Cruz-Neira has been in the VR space since the early 90's, a field, she didn't originally set
out to be a part of.

"Since I was little I was making my focus dance career," she said.

While living in her home country, Spain, her parents told her that wasn't a viable career to pursue.

Because of that and a broken knee, she decided to switch gears and got a scholarship to come to the U.S. to get her graduate degree at the University of Illinois.

It was there she discovered herself through a group who worked in a galaxy far, far away.

"That group did the first, or, one of the first animated segments for a film which was the first Star Wars movie," Dr. Cruz-Neira said.

The plans on that screen, that show where the rebels are planning their attack on the Death Star, is what helped inspire this VR mastermind to pursue this career.

"To me, it's like a new world opened up," Dr. Cruz-Neira said.

Which is, in part, why I’m able to stand in this box.

During her pursuit of a doctorate, Dr. Cruz-Neira was a part of the team to create the cave, the first virtual reality program that can immerse groups in the virtual world.

"Multiple people come into the space together and they share the experience together," Dr. Cruz-Neira said. "And in some extent, choreograph the activity in the virtual world together."
Juan Sebastian-Munoz is pursuing a doctorate at UA-Little Rock, and says this experience further enhances a group's perspective in a virtual space.

He says dr. Cruz and the EAC have given him the tools to further develop his virtual reality program.

"I've learned a lot of things from them and they're always really generous with their knowledge," Sebastian-Munoz said.

Right now, Sebastian-Cruz is one of many students working at the EAC.

Each pupil plugging away on cutting edge technology in the virtual space.

"We try to push the boundaries of what people expect from VR," Kyle Hooks, a student at the EAC, said.

Hooks is working on a 3D chemistry learning experience, which provides studying tools through combining and working with atoms to form different elements.

"It helps the student what they've done right and what they've done wrong."

He says the EAC is monumental in his career development.

"I've become a better public speaker," he said, "I have better programming habits, I have a better foresight into the work that I can do."
The EAC is a place that harbors creativity, to create things never imagined before, and that's all because of this woman.

“It just got me by surprise, you know, I was just this girl from Spain that came to this country barely speaking English, and it was nice, you know it was a nice feeling.”

As if being VR guru weren't enough, Dr. Cruz has also helped create virtual cadavers that are used to help train doctors in the medical field.

This past February, Dr. Cruz-Neira was selected for a high honor in her field after being elected to the national academy of engineering.

PREVIOUS STORY: It’s not often you find a classroom that is being taught in a different world. Inside the Emerging Analytics Center (EAC) at UA-Little Rock, that's exactly what you’d experience.

The EAC is one of the largest virtual reality centers in the United States, and it’s right here in the capital city. Currently, dozens of students are working on using the virtual world to improve life and business in the physical world.

Channel 7’s Nick Popham will be taking you to that world and introducing you to the woman who runs it.

That’s coming up this Thursday, October 25th, on KATV News at 10.