Cutting-edge virtual-production studio at ASU now available to community

Students learn latest filmmaking technology at MIX Center, where 'Mesa can be Tokyo'

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
May 6, 2025

Virtual production has revolutionized filmmaking, allowing for mind-blowing effects while streamlining the process and making it cheaper.

Arizona State University students have been learning this technology at the Virtual Production Volume Studio in the Media and Immersive eXperience Center in downtown Mesa for almost two years. And now the Volume Studio is available for community members to rent.

“We're interested in establishing a strong, thriving and vibrant arts community here in Mesa — one that that brings in industry,” said Nicholas Pilarski, interim director of the MIX Center and an associate professor in the Sidney Poitier New American Film School.

“So we thought a lot about how to have people with all different types of projects be able to shoot here.”

The Volume, which became available for rental this spring, is ideal for creators who have a vision, said Pilarski, who also is a filmmaker.

"It could be a car company that wants to bring in their cars and shoot them in a specific way. It could be a small business owner who really wants to think about shooting a commercial, or it could be feature film productions looking for specialized shooting and bringing down the cost of production virtually,” he said, noting that using the Volume Studio in Mesa would be priced much less than renting one of the many virtual-production spaces in Los Angeles.

(Video: {https://youtu.be/lA6pgEPM2sY})

Interested in using the space?

Inquiries about renting the Volume should be sent to Susan Rubin, events coordinator for the facility, at susan.rubin@asu.edu.

Rental rates are based on the type of client and how much of the Volume Studio's technology is needed for a project. For example, nonprofits and city of Mesa units would pay $780 an hour for a premium package with all the technology — less than the $1,300-per-hour charge for commercial and for-profit renters.

Pricing is customized for a full-length film or other large-scale project. Potential renters must know how to use the software and have a proficient crew. Post-production services such as editing, special effects and color grading also are available.

The Volume Studio at the MIX Center is one of only two virtual-production facilities in the state, according to Calvin Stanley, the video systems technical director who runs the space. He graduated from ASU in 2024 with a master's degree in extended-reality technology.

The studio contains everything needed for any kind of production, from an immersive art installation to a full-length feature film, he said.

"This is something that we'd like to open up to whoever's interested in learning about virtual production, making sure that this kind of technology is not just siloed in the studios of Hollywood, but also present here in downtown Mesa," Stanley said.

Inquiries about renting the Volume should be sent to Stanley at mixman@asu.edu.

The Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts has not publicized the availability of the Volume before now, but filmmakers have heard about it through the grapevine, Pilarski said.

"So the largest issue now is to make sure we're serving our students and also returning our promise to the city of Mesa on starting a creative economy," he said.

ASU students — who don't have to pay to use the Volume — have priority, and classes in the Sidney Poitier New American Film School on how to use the technology fill up fast. Clients who want to rent the space are then fit in.

"The students who are working and learning here are the first generation to use what is the future of filmmaking," Pilarski said.

Industrial Light and Magic, the special-effects production company founded by George Lucas, invented virtual production for "The Mandalorian," which dropped its first season in 2019. The technology allows designers to create highly detailed digital worlds that are loaded onto giant screens, where the actors can interact with what the audience will see and changes can be made instantly.

Previously, actors would work in front of a blank green screen, and the digital effects would be added during post-production.

The MIX Center's Volume Studio uses an Unreal gaming engine to render the immersive environment and has a cutting-edge tracking system to integrate the background with the actors, Stanley said.

Unlike the older green screen technology, still used in TV news studios, actors can see what's going on around them in the Volume, where the background is projected onto the giant curved wall

and the floor.

“They know where they actually are in the shot versus the green screen, where you have to imagine your environment,” Stanley said.

Using a projected background allows filmmakers to avoid the time and expense of shooting on location or building elaborate sets.

“Mesa can be Tokyo,” Pilarski said.

With the Volume Studio in Mesa, Pilarski said he’s getting a vibe similar to what he saw in Austin, Texas, 20 years ago.

“You have a lot of emerging filmmakers really hungry to do things,” he said.

“So my hope is that this is the first of multiple steps.”

This story originally appeared on ASU News.

Main image



Video systems technical director Calvin Stanley stands in a virtual rendering of Glacier National Park that he created for the Virtual Production Volume Studio at the MIX Center. The Volume Studio is now available to rent for projects such as immersive art installations, music videos, commercials and films. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Gallery



Phil Klucsarits, a cinematographer and associate professor in the Sidney Poitier New American Film School, leads students in an advanced camera workshop on April 2 in the Virtual Production Volume Studio at the ASU MIX Center in downtown Mesa.



Fourth-year film and media production students Liam McDonald (left) and Liviya Kleinwachter learn how to use the control board from Calvin Stanley, the video systems technical director who manages the Volume Studio.



Students check the camera settings during the set preparation in an advanced camera workshop in the Volume Studio at the MIX Center. The virtual-production technology has been available to students for about two years and now will be accessible to the community.