

The Battle for Hearts and Minds: Interrogation and Torture in the Age of War

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Figure 1: Viewers at a performance of *Hearts and Minds* in the CAVE2™ VR environment at the Electronic Visualization Lab at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Abstract

We describe the first virtual reality art performance *Hearts and Minds: The Interrogations Project* developed using a novel method for direct output of the Unity-based virtual reality projects into CAVE2™ [Febretti et al. 2013] environment. This work incorporates original research, technological innovation and creative arts in an adaptation of veterans' testimonies detailing US military interrogations and abuses of prisoners in Iraq during the American counter-insurgency campaign in the early 2000s. It presents a debate focusing on interrogation methods, torture and its consequences, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder experienced by soldiers who have participated in such acts. This work was developed at the Electronic Visualization Lab in Chicago through a unique international collaboration between artists, scientists, and researchers from five different Universities. The methods developed for this project allow hands-on education of virtual reality by letting students create their own virtual environments and exhibit them in the CAVE2 quickly.

Keywords: virtual reality, CAVE2™, interactive installation, art, storytelling, digital humanities

1 Project Description and Development

During the American-led counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism campaigns in Iraq in the years following September 11, 2001, the torture and abuse of detainees became a commonplace tactic of interrogation. As they were returning from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, soldiers who had participated in or witnessed interrogation practices and acts of abusive violence of detainees were left with haunting memories. While the soldiers had joined the military for many reasons, few had signed up to be torturers. This project gives voice to those veterans willing to speak-up about their experiences. Our project is based on interviews of

American soldiers conducted by political science researcher, Dr. John Tsukayama. In *Hearts and Minds*, we navigate in 3D through ordinary domestic environments, such as a boy's bedroom, a kitchen, a living room or a suburban yard. In each of rooms certain objects are "triggers"; when they are activated the room falls away and the scene moves to surreal desert landscapes, where soldiers recount acts of torture and its consequences. Each of five rooms represented a difference aspect or stage of the complex narratives of torture and its aftermath that soldiers revealed. This work explores the aesthetic possibilities of new visualization technology, confronts some alarming truths about prominent and banal practice of sanctioned torture and provides a platform for discussion about military interrogation methods and their effects on detainees, soldiers, and society.

The project was developed using Unity (Unity Technologies Inc., CA) and the getReal3D plugin (Mechdyne Corporation), which were linked together to produce a system that achieves a novel direct output of the interactive 3D environments in the CAVE2 environment. Current applications for CAVE2 environment typically use Omegalib: a specialized application framework for hybrid reality display environments. To synchronize Unity across the CAVE2 cluster we used the getReal3D plugin. We developed a plugin to streamline the integration of any Unity 3D application in the CAVE2 system, which was not possible before. We now allow non-programmers like artists, designers and undergraduate science students with minimal programming experience, to develop projects without the requirement for high-level programming frameworks such as Omegalib. In order to enhance the project's accessibility for public audiences and to make this work available on other platforms our team developed a portable computer installation of the project and is currently releasing the mobile version on the iPad and a web player version.

References

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