

Roderick Coover in conversation with Pat Badani on "Hearts and Minds: The Interrogations Project" screened at the Electronic Visualization Laboratory, University of Illinois at Chicago

Introduction

"Hearts and Minds: The Interrogations Project" is a 3D narrative experience made for the affective sensory environment of the EVL's CAVE2 that gives voice to stories of this violence and the post-traumatic stress experienced by ordinary American soldiers who became torturers in the course of serving their country. During the American-led counterinsurgency and counterterrorism campaigns in Iraq in the years after September 11, 2001, the torture and abuse of detainees was a commonplace tactic. "Hearts and Minds: the Interrogations Project" is based on interviews of American soldiers conducted by Dr. John Tsukayama. Viewers travel through the domestic spaces and surreal interior landscapes of soldiers who have come home transformed by these experiences, triggering their testimonies by interacting with objects laden with loss. The production team includes filmmaker Dr. Roderick Coover, writer Dr. Scott Rettberg, artist and visualization research scientist Dr. Daria Tsoupikova, computer scientist Arthur Nishimoto, sound designer Mark Partridge, production assistant Mark Baratta, and senior research programmer Lance Long. Dr. Jeffrey Stevenson Murer of St. Andrews University, Scotland also contributed as a consultant on the project. Made with support from the Electronic Visualization Lab (EVL) at the University of Illinois Chicago, the UIC Department of Art and Design, Temple University, and the Norwegian Research Council.

Pat Badani: "Hearts and Minds: The Interrogations Project" is a narrative piece designed for the 3D immersive CAVE2 TM [1] display system at the University of Illinois Chicago. The work's script creatively integrates data from a Detainee Interaction Study that examined the lived experiences of American military and intelligence veterans. Can you describe how you came to the material, and how you structured research made in the social sciences into an immersive art-piece?

Roderick Coover: The project is based on the research of a political scientist, John Tsukayama. John had had a full career as a private investigator, well trained as an interrogator. He wanted to try to understand the post-traumatic stress that soldiers live with, as well as the horrors that were inflicted during interrogations of detainees during the American-led counterinsurgency and counterterrorism campaigns in Iraq in the years after September 11, 2001. What he found were gross patterns of violence – horrible violence: killings, mass graves and so forth, essentially war crimes. I believe that he wanted to find a way of talking about how such patterns of violence come about without blaming individual soldiers. His work draws attention to the failings of a system that asked these soldiers to do things that they should never have been asked to do with the training they had (if at all). Generally the soldiers were untrained to perform acts of interrogation and unprepared for what such acts might do to others or themselves. Not knowing what to do, they invented many of these acts out of things they has seen in movies, heard on television, and so on. For example, when one group of soldiers heard about waterboarding, a sergeant decided, "Oh, we'd better learn how to do this," and they agreed to try it out on the first person they saw, just to practice. It is unimaginable how we asked soldiers to perform acts with little or no training, and to throw them in these situations. So, John undertook interview-based research; it is the basis of a doctoral thesis project that was completed in June 2014, [2] and I am sure it will come out in book form soon. It is an important and challenging work.

John shared this material with others and myself in our production team. We tried to find a way to engage the interviews and treat them in a non-sensationalist way. It was very clear in our initial Skype conversations that he did not want to have the work dramatized using the storytelling conventions of much contemporary documentary or narrative film. He wanted something that would open up the text and allow people the space to connect to these stories, and to see that the situations are complex. It is too easy to lay blame in just one place; the conditions are distributed.

We therefore developed a multimedia approach, one that would be highly immersive; on the one hand to try and draw users into the emotional experiences of the soldiers and on the other hand to offer a flexibility of space, a listening space. We wanted to create spaces where the user would not be pushed forward by the story as one is in a movie, but rather spaces that would offer users the time to digest the stories and move on when they were ready. That was a challenge – but the CAVE2 environment is particularly good for the latter because it is immersive. The user experiences the stories at her own pace by moving between these worlds. The spaces are suggestive both of those that the soldiers came from and those that they went into. This allows for the comparison of cultures and of psychological states – psychogeography essentially – the psychogeography of inhabiting a suburban home placed against being in the desert, where the soldiers were facing threats and violence, witnessing the death of friends and being asked to get intelligence through any means possible. While the project necessarily uses actors to conceal the identities of soldiers who were willing to speak out, the work closely follows their words. Most didn't imagine, in signing up to serve in the military, that they would be expected to become torturers and they show great courage in speaking about what happened.

PB: Which takes me to the next question. In "Hearts and Minds" you created layered meanings via juxtapositions and connections that point to a variety of architectures and landscapes. Can you talk about how you help the performer construct a sense of 'locality.'

RC: The version that we showed during special screenings in June and July 2014 in the CAVE2 at the University of Illinois Chicago is a dedicated performance event. We asked a performance artist, Mark Jeffrey, take on the role of the user in order to carry the audience through the project, because the CAVE is essentially a one-person experience: one person drives the movement, wandering through these environments and engaging with objects. The CAVE2 at UIC – which is absolutely fabulous – is much larger than the first generation CAVE, with room for about 30 people.

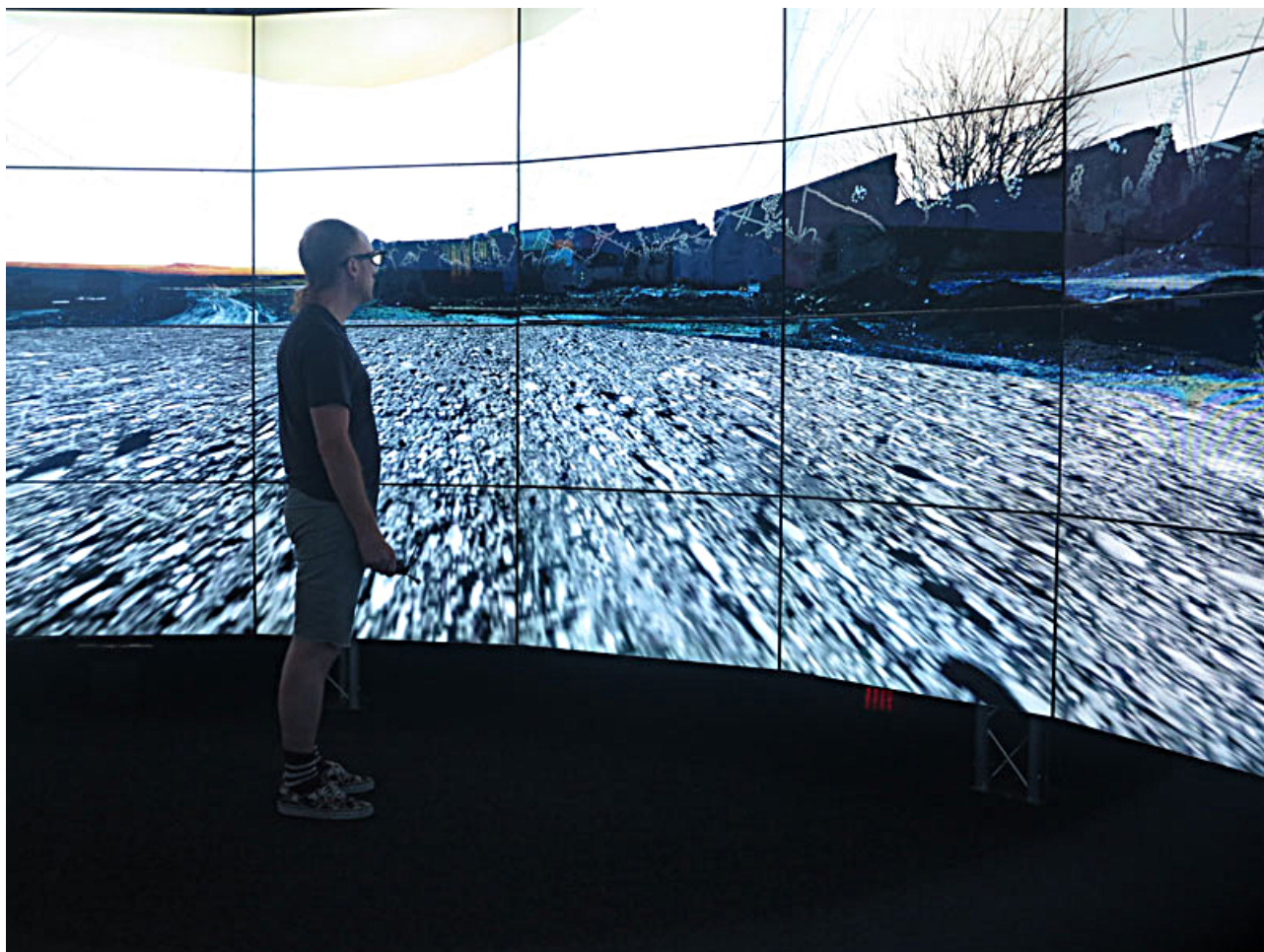


Hearts and Minds: The Interrogations Project, 2014, Roderick Coover, Scott Rettberg, Daria Tsoupikova, and Arthur Nishimoto, CAVE2 multimedia installation, ©Roderick Coover. (Used with Permission.)

Under such conditions, it was very helpful that one person lead the audience on the journey. Having Mark perform the role of user also allowed for some minor elaboration. For example, he carried with him a folding chair. Not only was the chair tied to navigation in the work, enabling automatic links, it also served as a powerful physical reminder of a resonant object – such chairs were used in the field during interrogations in various and violent ways that are described in the anecdotes. So, for the specific screenings at UIC we guided visitors via the performer, otherwise people can guide themselves through the immersive environment by using the gear provided, and forthcoming there will be a more portable version that can be viewed on smaller 3D devices.



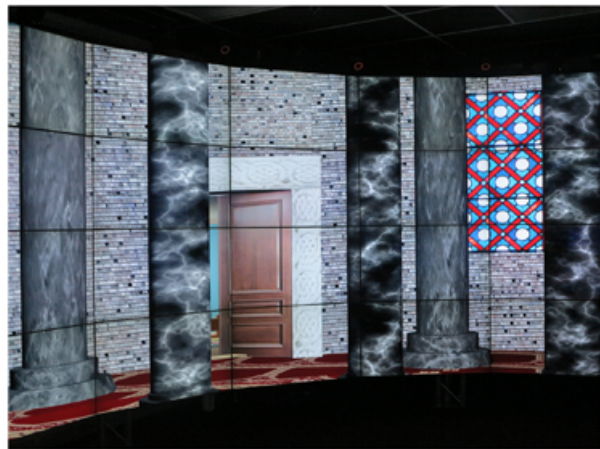
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PB: You used a number of visual and aural inscriptions in the work's constructed landscapes in order to create a sense of place. I am really interested in your use of metaphors and symbols that help the user interpret the material and emotionally connect to it.

RC: The way the project is set up is that the user enters a large hall like a mosque, and in this hall, one hears the voices, almost in whisper form, of soldiers speaking about why they signed up to go to Iraq – many voice patriotic and admirable reasons for having signed up. There are four doors each leading to luminous, ordinary American domestic spaces. These are modeled 3D spaces and include a children's room, a living room, a kitchen and a back yard. Users may engage with objects in these rooms, such as posters of Cubs Scouts, or toy models, or video games. Engaging with the objects triggers the walls to disappear and stories to begin. The suburban home dissolves into some strange desert landscape – a constructed and somewhat surreal landscape, and soon one hears the voice of one of the soldiers beginning to recall a story or experience.



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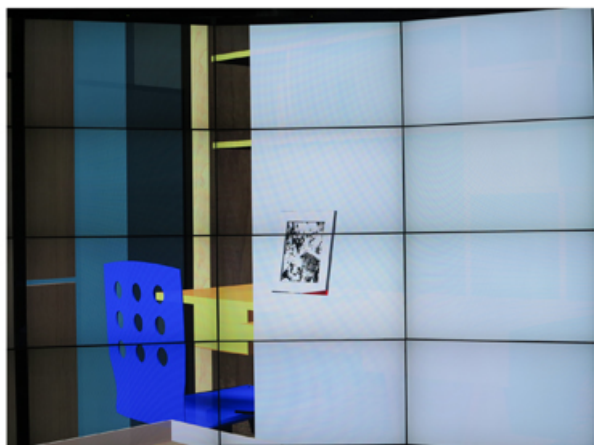
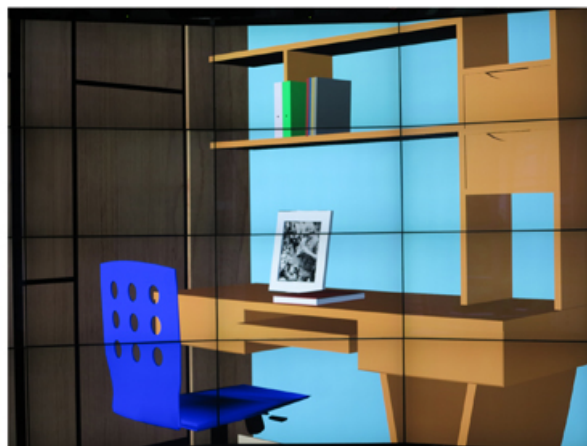
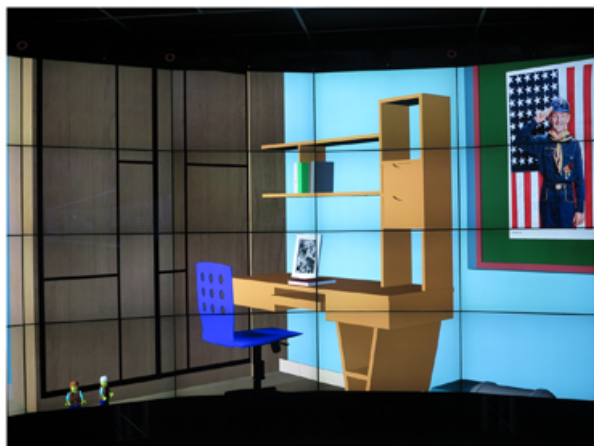
In this way, the piece juxtaposes the landscape of "home" that is left and later come back to, with this gap in the middle that in some sense transforms or discolors the original sense of place. These intermediary spaces are suggestive of interior, psychological states rather than identifiable locations. The source materials was rather pointedly selected however. I shot some of the imagery in deserts of the American southwest near where soldiers trained for the Iraq campaigns and some of the others I recorded around prisons and work camps built by Pinochet during his rule in Chile. The tremendous horror and violence I felt built into those structures in Chile resonated with the stories I was reading from these soldiers' testimonies.

PB: The use of the notion of 'home' and the objects that touch on remembrances associated with comfort are powerful...

RC: We know that one has a strong relationship to the notion of home through personal objects, so we took this idea for the project. We identified objects that would trigger relationships between spaces at home and in the field. Those triggers usually have some resonance with what was happening. For example, there is one particular character that was inspired to become a soldier because his father had been a soldier in Vietnam, and as a kid he had played with his father's clothes and rummaged through his father's diaries, so we include a diary and military garb. The son had built up a mystique around his Dad. So, when the son was thrown into an interrogation situation, he drew upon horrific methods he'd read about in his father's diary – methods the father has used in Vietnam: electrocuting people with lamp wires, and things like that...and then back home, one discovers that these are things that his father had deeply blocked and when his soldier son began talking about what he was doing in Iraq it caused all these traumas in the father, and the father almost committed suicide. Home is filled with these catalysts. Objects are used to provoke memories and imagine how memories reconfigure or distort lives in the present. The people involved had to face some traumas that are not always reachable directly, they become manifest in objects; they become repressed, distorted.

PB: Can you describe the objects themselves? I gather that the performer navigates by selecting these objects. Can you name these objects?

RC: The performer navigates through a space that is a constructed model of a mosque-like room, which in turn dissolves into constructed 3D models of domestic spaces: a living room, a kitchen, a children's room and a shed. In these rooms one can find modeled 3D objects, so in the children's room, for example, there is a Boy Scout poster, a family photo, an alarm clock, and a tonker truck, as well as other objects like badges, toy soldiers and model airplanes. In the kitchen, for example, there is a knife, a bottle of wine, a towel and a fridge. Outdoors in the yard, there are tools such as wire cutters, a dartboard, a tricycle and a watering can. These are the kinds of objects that are found in the spaces that then trigger movement into these panoramic, photographic spaces, so there is this angle of the artificial and the natural being shown. There is documentary representation of spaces and 3D modeled spaces; spaces that are constructed digitally.



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PB: What motivated you to combine documentary material with constructed, 3D modeled material – what were your aesthetic and your conceptual criteria for doing this?

RC: So, these spaces and their objects are a little strange because they are artificially recreated, and this establishes a distance – you, as audience member, know that you are in an art space that is not meant to be hyper realistic in all elements – yet you are engaging with texts that are powerful, clear and truthful. I feel that this affords a useful amount of distance to talk about violence or terror, about personal disruptions. There is an interesting passage at the beginning Michael Taussig's book, *The Nervous System*. [3] Taussig is trying to find the right distance by which to talk about terror and violence. How to present horrors at home with enough distance to gain some understanding but not so far as to be alienated to the unfathomable stress surrounding conditions of violence – how not to turn the emotional experience, the psychogeography of terror, into an academic exercise through

discourse. And I think that this is how the CAVE environment is helpful, because it pulls the viewer into this psychological space.

The combination of documentary materials with modeled spaces and objects imparts a strangeness that I hope will allow people to enter into the soldier's stories. The aim has been to create conditions that will help users receive the stories, to hear them. It tries to offer another way to understand the implications of US military practices, given the intransigent ideas about what's going on that people develop from the loud political discourse in American culture. The project aims to break away from this discourse by creating a space to hear the words of those who were in Iraq – to engage with the veterans' experiences about what they were and were not being told to do; their journey and learning experience. By giving voice to those who were there, and focusing on patterns rather than blaming individuals for where things went wrong, the goal of the art project – and I believe this might also be part of John's thesis work – has been to help transform a culture from within rather than remain stuck in what has become a dumb political discourse in the media.

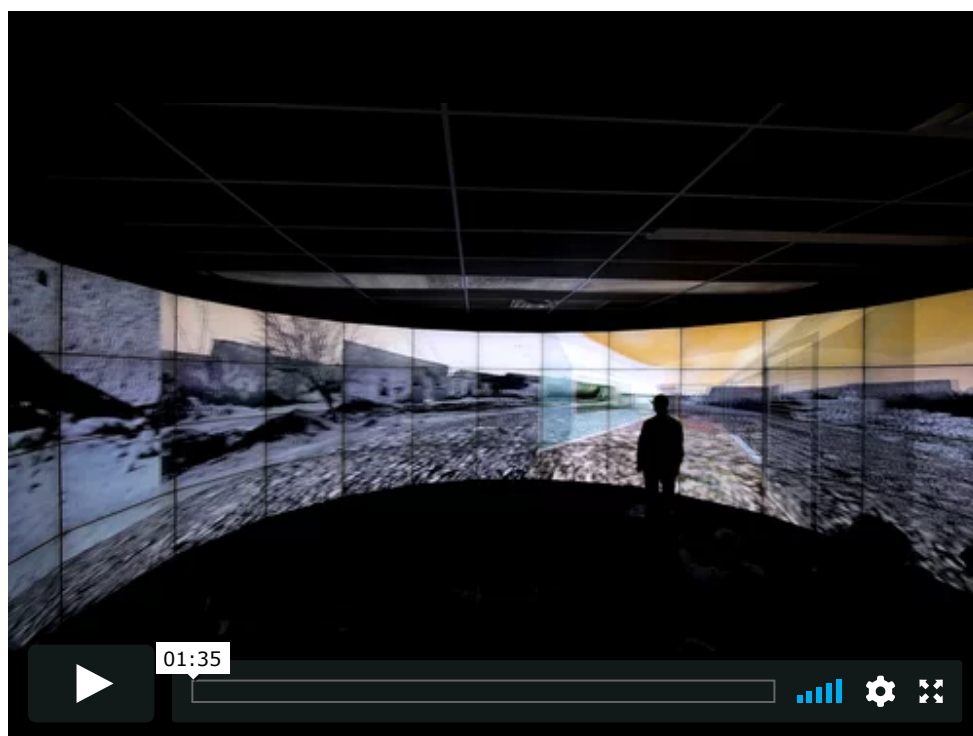
PB: I also felt that the soldiers' monologues in the piece are powerful testimonies that reflect lived experience. Can you describe the four soldiers in the piece? And then, how and why did you compress and combine the original interviews into four characters.

RC: The characters include three male soldiers and one female soldier, each with distinct motivations for having joined the army and diverse backgrounds. In the piece, they talk about why they signed-up, their experiences in the military, their family relationships and their sense of home – of where they come from, and the home they come back to – and this is very important because each of these individuals comes back to a home that is in a sense transformed. We convey the sense that 'home' has been ripped apart, that it is never quite the same after what they have gone through.

Because we needed to protect the soldiers' identities we needed to have actors play the role of the soldiers. John went to great lengths to conceal their identities because he wants to tackle systemic problems not blame individuals and to do so he must project them – they talk about issues that are difficult, at times very violent, and perhaps even at times, war crimes. He needed to steer away from legal issues for himself and his subjects. We wanted to highlight these patterns; patterns that in some ways follow those that occurred in Vietnam and other wars that the USA has been involved with. For the same reason, we did not show actors on screen, but rather we had actors read these roles and set the sound segments against distorted landscapes.

Scott Rettberg is the scriptwriter for the piece as well as an artistic participant in developing its latter stages. Scott's writing for the project began in February when we met for a week-long residency at Brown University's Digital Scholarship Lab. The first goal was to condense this large research project into something that would carry over into an art experience – to make at least a small portion of the material accessible. His first solution to this was to find common threads, maybe two or three characters that would be condensed into a single figure, while staying true to the original language. The benefits were clear, a single actor reading three or four anecdotes of a common type together would add coherence, illuminate broader differences, and better protect identities.

One character believes that torture works although he carries an inner torment – a constant desire for violence that he must hide from his children for fear they would reject him. Another character goes to Iraq with great belief in the system that is telling him to do these things, and is transformed as he sees it unravel. A third learns to intervene. A fourth is devastated by the experience. So this is how we worked toward creating a coherent art experience for the viewer with limited time – something very different from the time expectations given to the reader of a scholarly work containing hundreds of pages of text. So, one of our creative challenges – a common challenge for artists – was to expand upon just a small part of the evidence in a way that might make the material accessible, meaningful and resonant to viewers. And of course, hopefully, some would be inspired to go to that longer text or other research on this issue after engaging with this project.



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PB: This brings me to my next question, which is about audience. You habitually create experimental pieces that require special screening conditions and that limits your audience to these very specialized locations, and the CAVE is one of them because there are such very few of them in the world. So in terms of the audience and in relation to this incredible content that you're trying to convey to as many people as possible, how do you envision reaching to your audience when access to these screening environments is limited?

RC: That's a tricky subject, and we talked about that with "Hearts and Minds" when working with the CAVE2 at the University of Illinois at Chicago. I believe that there are only two other CAVE2 environments in the world running on this system, and the other ones are very far away. Australia is one of these places for example, and hopefully we'll be able to work there sometime soon. We are now in the beginning stages of the project. As you know, there is a stage where you rely on a work that has very specific conditions, or construction and presentation requirements that might be a maximal version of the work, and then you find a way to adapt it and show it to different audiences. The CAVE2 does have the advantage of its size, seating 20 or more audience members at a time, and this allows us to invite differing groups to see it, and we've talked to various people about this.

Further, "Hearts and Minds" has been developed using UNITY. [4] This means that the piece can be transported to other environments that support UNITY. The next step is to prepare it for exhibition on a single 3D monitor or projection. I don't know yet which venues the political scientists would like to take the project to, or where the computer scientists would want to take it. I know that it will be shown across the arts and sciences and we know that we might want to schedule viewings with veterans' groups, and include the human rights discourse around it too.

PB: The work is the result of an interdisciplinary collaboration between institutions and artists/researchers. Can you describe the process of collaboration? What methodologies did you use as a team?

RC: What we had was basically the merger of two collaborative methodologies plus the outstanding research from another. I had been working a lot with the writer Scott Rettberg who is based in Norway; we have done quite a few films together – often working through electronic exchange, Skype, and then intensive production sessions. Typically the process is something akin to passing a ball back and forth. My images provoke his text, which in turn

provokes more images, etc. However, managing this flow across oceans with limited time or funds to put work together is not always the speediest of methods. Scott's sabbatical in Chicago where he had an office at UIC, thanks in good measure also to Dr. Joe Tabbi, allowed for this opportunity to build our dialog with Daria Tsoupikova and other members of the EVL team. We also had very limited time, essentially just a semester, to bring together all our diverse, disciplinary approaches.

Luckily, we shared some common threads. While we each had very different primary skill sets and duties, we also all have interdisciplinary backgrounds and were able to more or less grasp each other's ideas and concerns. After initial conversations with John and Jeffrey, I brought Scott into the conversation to begin developing the scripts, and I set about auditioning actors, preparing for the audio recordings and developing initial imagery. We developed a proposal that we discussed with Daria and following an intensive week together in March, Daria and Arthur began modeling the 3D space and developing the architecture, and it all went on from there.

Scott came to the east coast to work with me for a week and then was in Chicago meeting with Daria and a doctoral candidate in the lab, Arthur Nashimoto. I was Skyping, flying to Chicago, and so forth. It was a very fluid way of working. Sometimes I would be making images in my studio, shooting data across Dropbox and then Skyping to see how the elements were coming together for a particular scene. This process allowed for the private, quiet time to develop work individually without distractions in the studio, and also allowed exchanges, and feedback – as if sharing the same studio in contiguous space, so to speak. There was a lot of Skyping where we would demo projects – sometimes with the 3D glasses right on the camera to give me an idea of the 3D render. We looked at the models as they were being created – and it has to be said that Skype, and other forms of televisual conferencing have transformed collaborations particularly in this case allowing us to look at and discuss images being used in live action – images sent from small portable devices such as a tablet that can be carried about a space like the CAVE2.

PB: You all had very defined roles, and those roles were determined by people's skills: a writer, 3D modelers working in the CAVE...

RC: But we talked a lot about how to bridge our differing skills and approaches, and while doing this we were learning from each other's fields. For example, choosing objects for the scenes. What kinds of objects to use? How many to use? I suggested the idea to have the same object appear in different scenes so as to have a memory resonance between scenes. We discussed this – how we could adapt this idea to the different formats? What does it mean to have a memory resonance? So, the folding chair is a good example of an object that we discussed and adapted for various scenes.

PB: Is there a director in the piece making final decisions? Are decisions made collaboratively? How did you work?

RC: Unlike other pieces I've made, in this piece ... I don't think you can say there is a director, rather a constant exchange – passing work back and forth. I think that it is a very equal collaboration that is driven by John's research. Scott and I initially worked together to build the proposal, create the script and images in the pre-production, the initial design phase – but then, to really see it through and imagine it in this kind of 3D space, it was very, very much a three-way collaboration between Daria, Scott and myself, and then as Arthur became increasingly involved in the CAVE design and coding in UNITY it became a four-way collaboration, with still other excellent people coming in to help out in very specific areas.

PB: Let's talk about funding, because I am trying to figure out how this would happen outside a research environment facilitating the technology and without substantial funding.

RC: We have all certainly learnt a lot from previous projects about doing work with very limited funding – and the thing is that everyone really believed in this project and in the value of developing these types of collaborations in the arts and in scientific environment of

EVL. There was basically no direct funding at all. The tiny funding we got did nothing more than pay for a couple of flights to Illinois so that we might all work together face to face. I also managed to get funds to bring a sound designer, Mark Partridge, to come to work with us at Temple University for a short period So we worked with very limited resources. We all gave time to make this happen. And, great thanks goes to Daria and the support of the EVL members; the project could not have happened in this way, had not the individuals at EVL been willing to invite us in and spend the time to work with us. It demonstrates a commitment to be open to alternative ways of using these powerful tools, inviting others to help imagine how to use such an exciting space through creative practice and collaboration.



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Footnotes

1. CAVE2 is a trademark of the University of Illinois Board of Trustees. Arthur Nishimoto a computer scientist, who worked on the project, explains that the earlier CAVE1 system was developed in the early 90's at UIC's EVL. The earlier version was a projector-based cube. One of the biggest differences between CAVE 1 and CAVE2 is the shift from projectors to LCD-based technology. CAVE2 uses the latest in that technology and obtains brighter colors and better contrast than projections. CAVE1 and CAVE2 have the same physical footprint (30' x 30'), but since LCDs take up less space than projectors, there is three times more usable space within the CAVE2. This means that there is more space to physically walk around the virtual scene and a larger group experience. CAVE1 allowed entry to four to six people, whereas CAVE2 allows for twenty to twenty-five people.
2. Tsukayama, John K., "By any means necessary: an interpretive phenomenological analysis study of post 9/11 American abusive violence in Iraq." Doctoral Dissertation. University of St Andrews, 2014, <http://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/handle/10023/4510>
3. Michael Taussig, "The Nervous System." Taylor & Francis, 1992.
4. During a conversation about UNITY with Arthur Nishimoto, he explained: "The UNITY engine has been around for several years now and it was originally used to do desktop computer games. It has also been used for other multiple developments, so you pretty much can design a game for a particular platform whether you're working on a Windows computer or a Mac, and then you are able to export your project onto vari-

ous devices: Androids, iPads, and with special licenses you can even run these on PS3, or Xbox, or a Nintendo system as well. There is even a web-based player, so you could actually also run your project on a website. UNITY is a pretty powerful tool because it allows you to design something that you're able to distribute on a variety of different platforms. Being able to export to the CAVE2 is very much an ongoing research experiment here at EVL where we're working with a company, Mechdyne, that licenses and builds CAVEs and they have developed the getReal3D plugin that enables us to take UNITY and run it on a computer cluster, to run it on 37 machines connected to our tiled display systems. I've also been developing our own UNIIY tools to make it easier to develop UNITY applications specifically for CAVE2. The virtual wand laser pointer used 'Hearts and Minds' is an example of one of these interaction tools."

Bio

Roderick Coover is Director of the M.F.A. Program in Film and Media Arts at Temple University and the founding Director the Graduate Certificate Program in Documentary Arts and Ethnographic Practice. Coover makes films, interactive cinema, installations and webworks. Some of his latest projects include the interactive series Unknown Territories (unknownterritories.org) about exploration in the American West and the edited book, "Switching Codes: Thinking Through Digital Technology In The Humanities And Arts" (Chicago 2011). A pioneer in interactive documentary arts and poetics, his works are distributed through Video Data Bank, DER, Eastgate Systems and elsewhere. His creative work has been exhibited online and at art venues including SIGGRAPH, Documenta Madrid, The American Philosophical Society Museum, Chemical Heritage Foundation Museum, and elsewhere. More information about his work can be found at:

www.roderickcoover.com