First-person interactive experience of a Concentration Camp: The case of Block 15.

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Figure 1. Screenshots from the VR production demo.

Abstract

This paper focuses on the infamous Block 15 of the Haidari Concentration Camp in Western Athens, the largest and most notorious German concentration camp in wartime Greece, as a showcase of a largely neglected site of difficult heritage and will attempt to make the building, currently an endangered one, accessible to audiences and communities of diverse backgrounds through the use of immersive technologies. Through an original scenario based on primary and

multimedia archival sources that are largely based on digital storytelling, this interactive, immersive Virtual Reality experience does not only bring back to life the actual monument that is Block 15, but also functions as a reminder of the horrors and torture inflicted by the Nazis on prisoners, in an attempt to educate and to reintroduce a historically and politically contested site to heterogeneous audiences, both in situ as well as in sites outside the concentration camp.

Introduction

The German occupation of Greece from April 1941 to October 1944 claimed more victims in relation to the total population than in any other non-Slavic country. Although its effects can still be felt today in the Greek culture of remembrance, and despite the considerable amount of research concerning the Second World War and the German occupation in Greece, international researchers such as the German historian Dieter Pohl observe that very little is still known about Greece (Pohl 2015: 125). The Balkans and especially Greece is literally absent from the European map of occupation terror and are completely unknown to a broader European public.

With regard to the Second World War, the Greek historical culture is an absolutely special case. The way of coming to terms with the past in Greece differs greatly from that in other formerly occupied countries due to the civil war. During the three and a half years of the brutal occupation, the resistance of the Greeks was active and extensive. The National Liberation Front (EAM), which was mainly influenced by the communist party, was by far the largest resistance organisation. But the end of the war brought the afflicted people no peace as a positive point of reference - especially since internal disputes from the occupation continued to smolder. In a bloody civil war lasting more than three years (1946-1949), a center-right coalition which was dominated by an extremely national-conservative or monarchist wing, was victorious in 1949 with massive British and American help. The outcome of the civil war also revised the official memory of the Occupation: for both phases the communists were declared the main enemy and traitors, dangerous elements for the nation and social order. The resistance of the EAM was reduced to its negative aspects, which made it easier to justify the ex-collaborators and to reintegrate them into the victorious "national" camp. Three and a half years of occupation seemed obliterated (Fleischer 2010: 222). According to the historian Constantin Goschler, there was no common "anti-fascist culture of remembrance" in Greece, such as in Eastern Europe, or a "patriotic culture of remembrance", such as in France or Italy, which included the left resistance (Goschler 2015:

164). As a result, there was no shared memory of the 1940s in post-war Greece, but only a divided memory, which can be traced back to the conflict between the right and left political camps. Only in 1974 with the collapse of the military dictatorship and the legalization of the Communist Party did cracks appear in this narrative. In 1982 the first socialist government officially recognized the EAM and its affiliated organizations as structures of national resistance. When the Holocaust finally became a topic in the rest of Western Europe, in Greece the historiographical analysis of the resistance just began.

Despite growing interest of both scholars and the public in highlighting sites of memory, there has been no effort to understand the spatiality of the wartime period in Greece, due, in large part, to difficulties of access, or absence of knowledge, around sites at all scales, from killing sites to concentration camps. There is no comprehensive study of the German concentration camps in Greece, even statistical data or relevant archival material hardly exist. Almost only memoir literature as well as oral and public history are available for research. Of the presumably 36 (and not further specified) concentration camps set up by the Germans - with over 100,000 prisoners and 48,000 executed - Haidari in Attika and Pavlos Melas in Thessaloniki are among the worst.

Concentration camps are the fundamental instrument of control and punishment for the occupation policy across Europe. The enormous social and cultural impact of the camp experience has meant that smaller places of internment, such as forced labour camps, transit camps, prisons and jail houses, which played no smaller role in the vast system of repression within which they were integrated, have, nevertheless, been largely overlooked. A burgeoning historical interest in the "concentration camp" is reflected, increasingly, in the appearance of works that move beyond structural and functional analyses to capture socio-spatial categories such as "place," "space," and "void" (Wachsmann 2015). This perspective prioritises the connection between place (and space) and those various aspects of genocide, collaboration, and complicity (Aleksiun and Kubátová 2021, Cole 2020, Meng 2011). It enables consideration of myriad processes of transformation and the creation of an archaeology of space which captures the diachronic perspective: the "before" and "after" of a site. Commemoration and musealization, negligence and abandonment, preservation or adaptation of space continuation or discontinuation of the original use, are all affirmations of a troubled past, that those in the post-war era tried so desperately to make sense of.

In her discussion of Auschwitz- Birkenau and the challenges of heritage management during the Cold War, Katie Young notes that "it is a critical time for the camps as the memory of the Cold War fades and can no longer be used as an excuse for the deteriorating state of the camps today. The camp buildings and artefacts stand desperately in need of protection as their

deterioration is further compounded by an endless stream of visitors and inadequate funds for upkeep. Despite these limitations the camps' significance remains unquestionable" (Young 2009:50). A number of studies have taken the transformations of these sites of memory as a *topos* and particularly so within the fields of memory studies and commemoration (Skribeleit 2005, Young 1993). Camps provide a very tangible frame of reference for reflection on the experience of suffering; they can coherently frame trauma, and can be visited in ways that evoke understanding and raise awareness of past injustice now embedded within contemporary discourse (Hubbel 2020: 3). Memorials exist, alternatively, to provide a physical focus for an often remote, or unlocated, traumatic event.

Greece is a country obsessed with the preservation of the past. This obsession, however, is focused, almost without exception, on Ancient Greece and Classical antiquity. As recognised by Stratos Dordanas, very little research has been undertaken on the concentration camps of Occupation Era Greece, and few structures built that serve to memorialise the loss and trauma implicitly associated with them.[1] Indeed, the history and transformation of concentration camps and prisons during the Occupation Era, both Italian and German, remains an intriguing but rarely researched subject. The former concentration camps of Haidari in Athens, Pavlos Melas in Thessaloniki and the Italian and German concentration camp in Larissa exemplify the problematic materiality of memory in heritage. In all three cases, site deterioration is due to neglect. These camps have not been declared 'heritage sites' as other similar sites have been elsewhere in Europe. There has been no "memory boom" in Greece of the type that has characterised renewed interest in the materiality of the Second World War in Europe. According to Mark Mazower, "The Second World War remains invisible for the visitors who flow into Greece during the summer, relaxing on the sunny beaches or becoming accustomed with the ancient temples in ruins and theaters. But for those who know where to seek, behind the fences of the old abandoned Jewish villas in Thessaloniki, or at Chaidari, where the new block of flats hides the view to the so called 'Bastille of Greece', the scars from the wounds of the Nazi Occupation era still exist" (Mazower 1994: 407).

Indeed, the Second World War remains inaccessible to those attempting to connect with the period through surviving ruins, while memorial sites of the 1941-44 period exist, largely, in a state of decay; crowning the silence which characterizes the memory culture of the 1940s in Greece more widely. The study of sites of "Difficult Heritage" in Greece is inevitably a study on

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[1] Interview for the Arolsen Archives International Center on Nazi Persecution Website: https://arolsen-archives.org/news/keiner-hat-bislang-damit-gearbeitet/.

the same collective oblivion; a mild form of "damnatio memoriae" which, according to Aleida Assmann, constitutes a fundamental characteristic of all nations (Assmann 2006: 104).

The concentration camp of Haidari is 9 kilometers west of the capital Athens. The Haidari camp in the sparsely populated suburb of Haidari (1940 with 5,868 inhabitants) was built in 1937 during the Metaxas dictatorship and served as a training center for the Greek army. However, the construction was not completed. The site is located at the foothills of Pikilio Hill north of the Athens-Corinth road. In the beginning, the camp functioned as a branch of Averof Prison on Alexandras Street. After the outbreak of the Greco-Italian War, it was "inaugurated" on September 3, 1943 as a concentration camp with the transport of 590 prisoners from the Italian Larissa camp, which was to be closed. Among the 590 prisoners counted by the camp doctor Antonis Flountzis there were 243 communists from Akronafplia prison, 20 prisoners from the island Anafi as well as another 327 prisoners of the Italians. Among these first prisoners was Flountzis himself, which means that his information can be assessed as relatively credible. The Haidari camp was primarily a transit camp for the prisoners on their transport to the concentration camps in Germany or Poland, and the same conditions and rules prevailed as are known from all other types of horror during the Nazi regime (Flountzis 1976: 21).

On September 10, 1943, after the Italian surrender, the Sicherheitsdienst (security service) took over the former barracks to "concentrate" suspects who had been arrested in connection with resistance actions or raids. Haidari also became a transit station for thousands of Jews who were deported to Auschwitz. The facilities of Haidari extended over approximately 50 hectares. In the whole camp there were about twenty block buildings or barracks, as well as larger and smaller barracks, each of which served different purposes. The block buildings were divided into two parts, each with its own entrance. There were two prisoners categories: the first category was placed in the so-called "free camp", the next in "light solitary confinement" in the cellars of Block 4, while the last category in Block 15 was subjected to complete isolation. The Germans had set up sewing and wood workshops as well as a shoe and equipment production facility in the camp, in which prisoners with the appropriate skills were employed. There they repaired furnishings that had been confiscated in Greek private houses and made shoes and civilian clothes from materials that had been stolen from various cloth and leather warehouses in Athens. The articles produced were intended for the various SS services or were sent directly to Germany. The inmates of the Haidari concentration camp were also sent to other "work" outside the camp, such as following the bombing of Piraeus. There were also accommodations for guards, administration barracks, a kitchen and storage sheds. There were hardly any washing facilities, so the hygienic conditions in the camp were unsustainable. It is known from testimony that many

of the prisoners went blind due to the poor living conditions and the lack of vitamins. For example, the sewage pits were deliberately rarely emptied, which meant that the prisoners had to relieve themselves in the corridors and stairs of the block. The toilets in Block 15 were full of feces and the sick collapsed in the midst of the excrement. In one case, a prison guard was reported to have been forced to pick up excrement and bring it to a nearby pit with his hands (Chatzipateras and Fafaliou-Dragona 2003: 154).

An estimated 20-25,000 people were imprisoned: men and women, prisoners of war, partisans, members and officials of the Communist Party of Greece, Jews, hostages arrested in purges, political leaders such as the leader of the Liberal Party and later Prime Minister Themistoklis Sofoulis, or the ministers and former premiers Stylianos Gonatas and Georgios Kafantaris (Flountzis 1976: 749). Some well-known personalities from the intellectual and cultural life of Greece were also imprisoned in Block 15, including the actress Rena Dor, the Professor Emmanuel Kriaras and his wife, the composer Nikos Skalkotas and, for three months, the actor Giorgos Oikonomidis. Professor Emmanuel Kriaras, then director of the Medieval Archives of the Academy of Athens, was detained in Block 15 for three days. His brief testimony describes life in prison and isolation (Chatzipateras and Fafaliou-Dragona 2003: 153-154).

Since the beginning of 1944 Chaidari was an internment place for various groups of people, so for members of the EAM and the conservative partisan organization EDES, for members of espionage networks and British services, for trade unionists, students, workers, high officials, in individual cases even for members of the collaborating Greek Security battalions and members of German services who had been charged with contacts with the Allies or criminal offenses. In November 1944, the New York Times reported that Chaidari was one of the largest Nazi camps in occupied Europe, which shows that the camp had achieved dubious fame well beyond the Greek border.[2]

The fate of the prisoners was extremely tragic. A life-threatening workload, constant malnutrition, a lack of medical care, fatal living conditions, lack of water, constant harassment and arbitrary murders characterized their everyday lives. Unfortunately there are no death registers left, which makes a general balance of the victims of the Haidari concentration camp impossible.

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[2] „Haidari Prison Outside Athens ranks high among Nazi horrors", *New York Times*, 2.11.1944.

The immersive experience on Block 15

"Block 15" (2020-2023) is an R&D project hosted by the Department of Informatics, Athens Univesity of Economics and Business, focusing on the infamous Block 15 of the Haidari Concentration Camp in Western Athens, the largest and most notorious German concentration camp in wartime Greece. The project, so far the first and only of its kind in Greece and SE Europe, makes the building, currently an endangered one, accessible to audiences and communities of diverse backgrounds through the use of immersive technologies. "Block 15" is co-funded by the German Federal Foreign Office through funds of the Greek-German Future Fund and the Hellenic Ministry of Culture.
The project aims to create impact on different levels:
– enhancing understanding of and engagement in the functions of the building and the historical context
– renewing cultural identity of the region of Athens
– fostering civic participation of diverse socio-cultural groups

Through an original interactive scenario based on primary and multimedia archival sources and with the employment of digital storytelling, the immersive Virtual Reality experience under development does not only bring back to life the actual monument that is Block 15, but also functions as a reminder of the horrors and torture inflicted by the Nazis on prisoners, in an attempt to reintroduce a historically and politically contested site to heterogeneous audiences.
"Block 15" is supported by the Municipality of Haidari, the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece (KIS) and the Jewish Community of Athens.

What makes Haidari and Block 15 difficult to process for digital narrative and 3D visualization?

As part of an operational military facility, Block 15 and the surrounding spaces associated with the production narrative are not open to the public. As such, special permits apply to visit the site and most digital content captured cannot be directly published or be part of a digital production. Both facts significantly hindered our work and limited the digitized visual resources we could introduce to the production.

Perhaps our biggest challenge was that, for the production of a predominately visual experience, most resources were either recorded testimonies of captives or scattered and heterogeneous non-visual data (e.g. rough sketches, Red Cross register entries). Coupled with the extensive renovation of the military camp and the Block 15 building due to the change of function of the spaces, this left us with little hard evidence to work with for the visualization of the site at the reference period. Although basic structural information remains mostly intact (particularly for the Block 15 building), interior details such as electric cabling, as well as the function of particular rooms and the appearance of other utility buildings now demolished, can only be extrapolated from similar military camps of this era.

Since the intended audience of the production includes youngsters but also people with varying tolerance levels to violent content, we had to avoid blunt brutality and offending visuals, without however suppressing facts and diminishing the grim atmosphere, inhuman procedures and desperate psyche of the prisoners. Violence had to be "felt" rather than "seen".

Methodology

Scenario

In terms of narrative, script and interaction scenario, there were two major limiting factors: the (user) point of view, i.e. *who* is the user, and the exact time frame of the scenario. The fist was actually very problematic, since the identity of the user's avatar directly affects the clearance to access parts of the camp, one's ability to freely explore the site and the available interactions. The time frame had to be carefully chosen according to the historical information, so that to maximize the convergence of events impacting or referenced by the scenario without artificially stretching the virtual reality experience time or altering factual information for the sake of narrative.

In the scenario we developed, the user takes the role of a cook's male assistant. This is no person of any significance or historical reference, whose identity can be easily attached to any user, regardless of age. Second, although not free to roam the camp site, the prisoners tasked to provide food for the other captives followed an itinerary that allowed them escorted access to several buildings. We could therefore develop a story, which takes the user through many typical everyday scenes in the camp and Block 15's isolation ward and allows one to partake in or glimpse events unfolding either as part of the story or in the background.

The scenario of the virtual reality production has been developed as a dramaturgical narrative, which, however, is based on thorough historical research and is truthful to historical sources and events, in accordance with their actual timeline. The narrative revolves around the experience of a prisoner in Block 15 of the Haidari concentration camp during a 24-hour period: from the morning of the 9th to the morning of the 10th of August 1944.

The user of the virtual experience is the protagonist of the narrative (in the "role" of the prisoner), who has just been transferred to the Haidari concentration camp from the *mploko* (blockade) of Vyronas and is appointed to the kitchens. Thus, the eyes of the user and the newly arrived prisoner coincide – initially "virginal" and unsuspecting, then gradually becoming aware of the grim reality of the camp. Soon enough, the user/prisoner takes on a "mission": to deliver a note from the women's block to another prisoner in solitary confinement within Block 15. The user is assigned a partner who will help with the game mechanics, but who also guides or queries the user with regards to historical events taking place during their stay in the Concentration Camp.

With the action unfolding in ten scenes, taking place in different parts of the Haidari concentration camp and Block 15 (men's detention block, courtyard, kitchens, camp gate, women's block, cells and chamber 18 of Block 15), the user interacts with other prisoners as well as with German officers and soldiers, and becomes witness of events significant to camp life. Among them, the morning roll call; the selection of the 50 prisoners to be executed in Mandra, Attica, on the 9th of August 1944; the strenuous efforts of the prisoners' mothers to see them from afar; the forced labor and tortures of prisoners carrying heavy stones in the courtyard under the whip of German soldiers; the distribution of food and other essentials by the International Committee of the Red Cross; the tortuous arrival of the Jews of Rhodes; the ration distribution in the chambers and everyday life of prisoners; the arrival of hundreds of prisoners from the *mploko* of Dourgouti and Katsipodi escorted by the Security Battalions; the isolation and the horrors afflicted on prisoners in Block 15.

Featured in the script as characters are also actual persons, such as the prisoners Eleni Georganta and Antonis Flountzis –the camp doctor–, but also German military personnel, such as the camp commander Fischer, the interpreter Wassenhoven and the guards Kovac and Suneric. The user can choose to interact with people (testimony) and objects (object interaction), and thus obtain additional information on certain aspects of camp lifε.

The narrative is preceded and followed by a brief presentation of additional historical data about the Haidari concentration camp and Block 15, enriching the provided information and, at the same time, strengthening the user experience.

Block 15 aims at heterogeneous audiences with diverse ages, personality traits, cognitive, academic, and professional statuses. The educational value of the storytelling aside, it is essential to underline that the central character, who is the mainstay of the narrative is utterly transformed through and after the experience. In the way the interactive scenario is designed, each challenge carries implications and emotional gravitas. The central character becomes an agent who takes on an active role. In his work on the mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics (MDA) framework for enterprise gamification, Umar Ruhi introduces three types of narratives in immersive gamification: "integrated narratives", "emergent narratives" and "interpreted narratives"[3]. These narrative layers are related to various elements of each production. "Integrated" narratives are connected to the mechanics and are recommendations of the designers. "Emergent" narratives are associated with the actions and dynamics of the players-participants: "they are created by players during their interaction with the gamification application in a dynamic fashion as they perform different activities"[4]. "Interpreted" narratives are related to aesthetics, and perceived as "the desirable emotional responses evoked in the users when they interact with the gamified system"[5]. Ruhi ascertains that (2015), for an immersive experience to be successful it must show coherence between all three styles of narratives. In Block 15, we sought to combine all three types of narrative to trigger empathy and optimize user experience.

Technological and Aesthetic Approach

Early on in the pre-production phase we faced the dilemma whether a 360-degree stereoscopic video production or an interactive (3D-modelled) VR application would be more appropriate and effective. Both approaches have their merits and shortcomings and we carefully weighed all of them, after compiling a short tech demo for each one. The 360-degrees video is much more captivating when focusing on specific characters and their convincing and dramatic acting.

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[3] Umar Ruhi, Level Up Your Strategy: Towards a Descriptive Framework for Meaningful Enterprise Gamification. Technology Innovation Management Review, 5(8), 2005, p. 8
[4] Umar Ruhi, Level Up Your Strategy: Towards a Descriptive Framework for Meaningful Enterprise Gamification. Technology Innovation Management Review, 5(8), 2005, p. 8
[5] Umar Ruhi, Level Up Your Strategy: Towards a Descriptive Framework for Meaningful Enterprise Gamification. Technology Innovation Management Review, 5(8), 2005, p. 8

However, it is far more limited in terms of interactive opportunities and more importantly, its creation process is practically monolithic and inflexible. On the other hand, the full 3D production allows for more creative freedom, great reuse and adaptability of assets (3D models, animations, interaction scripts) as well as the ability to tweak and modify every aspect of the production for corrections and scenario modifications.

We have chosen the second approach for our VR production and therefore focused the scenario accordingly, distancing the user from face-to-face interactions and dialogues, capturing wider-field actions and focusing on the user's ability to move more freely and interact with the environment, instead. The VR production is based on the Unity game engine. Particular attention has been given to atmospheric lighting to establish the desired mood, a fast-paced yet grim scenario and optional interaction opportunities that reveal additional historical information and open up new dialogues. That said, the dramatic potential of a cinematographic 360 production was compelling enough to motivate us for a separate side project that would be more passive in terms of interactivity yet more emotionally intense.

Production

Conversing with and following the cook around the camp to enter Block 15, we see through the assistant's eyes various parts of the camp, including the kitchen rooms, part of the courtyard in front cell blocks, where the roll call used to take place, and, of course the Block 15 building and its interior. For the 3D modelling of the latter, the original building still stands, albeit renovated and modified. Since plans for the historical building do not exist and any sketches were scarce and unreliable, we had to take on-site measurements and photos from which we eventually reconstructed enough structural and functional information to reconstruct the spaces visited in the VR production (see Fig. 2). No digitally captured data could be used directly as they would a) clash with military regulations and b) not reflect the function and conditions of the building in the timeframe of interest. Instead, all models and textures were created by hand, respecting the measurements and photographic evidence, where available. For the interior, although most elements are preserved (ground floor general structure, some doors, window grills, etc.), we had to use cross references from other similar-era Nazi concentration camps and military facilities for certain details that would not have survived the repeated renovation (e.g. electrical systems, wall and floor colors and markings).

Although for several notable characters, both prisoners and German officers, we have evidence of their presence at the camp in the specific period of the production, we did not focus the narrative on them, since the medium would not allow for detailed close-up facial reconstruction or convincing virtual acting. Instead, we modelled several neutral characters to bear the principal roles associated with close interaction. Figure 3 shows examples of such generic 3D character models and their details, as used in our production.

The scenario and the scene implemented in the demo VR application place the user in various outdoor and indoor parts of the camp, where scenes of violence take place as the story unfolds. Brutality, torture and demeaning treatment were everyday occurrences and although a realistic and uncensored production must not hold back such evidence, exposure of all audiences to potentially shocking content would not be a good practice. Instead of avoiding the presentation of sensitive content to certain user groups, we opted for a different approach, often followed in cinematography: Violence is hidden in plain sight, by preventing direct exposure to it but rather either implying it or choosing less offensive channels to communicate it. For example, In the scene of Figure 4, the soldier opens the holding cell and aggressively beats the prisoner. The user only glimpses the incident by watching the partly obscured figure of the soldier, but not the begging and bleeding inmate. On the other hand, the proximity of the event and the vulgarity and desperation conveyed by the accompanying audio, more than compensate for the lack of visual presentation of the brutal encounter.
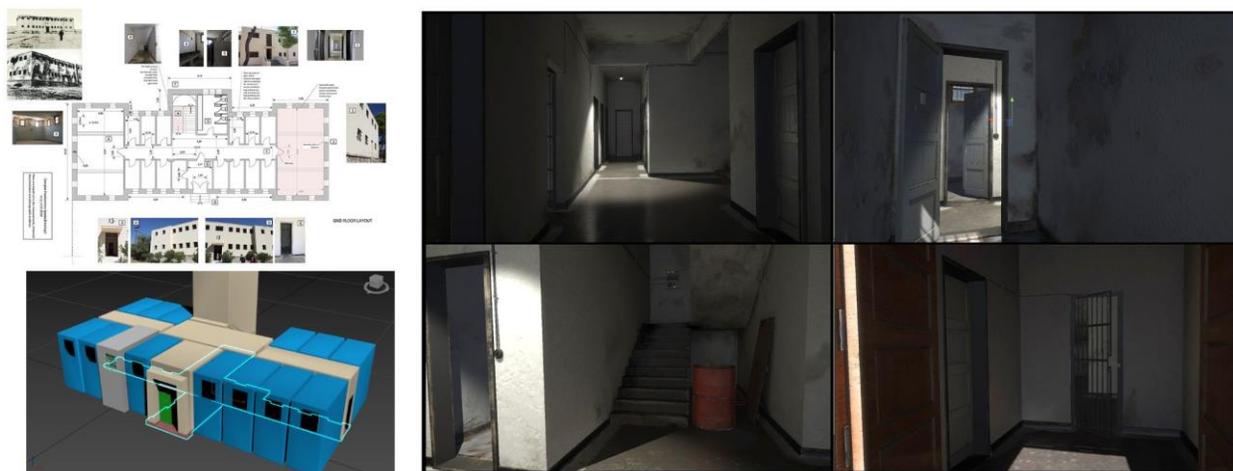

Figure 2. Reconstruction of the Block 15 ground floor from measurements, photographic evidence and prisoner descriptions and sketches.

Figure 3. Character examples and details from the VR production demo.

Figure 4. Brutality is either implied or hidden from camera to avoid the presentation of excess violence.

Preliminary results - Conclusion

The virtual reality production on Block 15 is due to be refined and completed by the end of 2023, however iterations in design have enabled us to carry out several user assessment sessions. The

sessions, predominantly focused on Athens University of Economics and Business students, included observation of user experience, short interviews and a brief questionnaire.[6]

Participants' familiarity with immersive experiences varied from experiences gamers to absolute beginners. Overall, their impressions about the Block 15 production was very positive. Despite some initial concerns about the scope of the production and some reservations expressed on the actual subject of the project, all participants were intrigued on a perceptual and emotional level.

The scene inside Block 15, a narrow and quite claustrophobic building, caused uneasiness, which was expected and in part deliberate, albeit unavoidable. On the contrary the scene in the kitchen, a larger room in itself, was perceived by some as impressive, while others found it somewhat dull. Most participants were in awe at the outside view of Block 15, which is revealed in all its grimness when the user exits the kitchen and looks slightly to the right.

Violence was not perceived as glorified not as traumatic, while observation revealed that some participants tended to react to the scenes with sounds or gestures. It remains to be confirmed whether younger demographics will respond similarly.

Although not all triggers were identified as such and therefore not activated, measurements of the questionnaire administered illustrated that the educational aspect of the production was successful: most participants answered questions on historical details alluded to in the production correctly.

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