

theguardian  **6x9:**

An immersive experience of solitary confinement



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Overview: what is 6x9?

6x9 is an innovative virtual reality experience created by The Guardian about solitary confinement. “6x9” places viewers in a virtual cell, telling a story of the psychological damage extreme isolation.

Right now, more than 80,000 people are in solitary confinement in the US. They spend 22-24 hours a day in their cells, with little to no human contact for days or even decades.

The photo-realistic cell is made in CGI referencing real solitary cells. Inside, as you turn your head, are the contents of a typical cell: the poured concrete bed you are sitting on, a poured concrete desk opposite, a combination sink/toilet. Five books are on the desk, a letter, a roll of toilet paper.

All the voices you hear are real. We interviewed seven people who were in solitary in California and New York. Please see appendix for their stories.

The sound design in the piece is from a Secure Housing Unit (SHU) in Maine. It was recorded for a Frontline documentary called Solitary Nation.

MENTAL HARM

A key argument against solitary confinement (and one that was used as evidence in the recently settled case in Pelican Bay California) is that it causes psychological damage.

Studies show high rates of anxiety, nervousness, obsessive ruminations, anger, violent fantasies, hallucinations, delirium, stupor, confused thinking, perceptual disturbances (the ability to recognise the sameness of things from different angles), disordered thinking, panic attacks, depression, nightmares, trouble sleeping, dizziness, perspiring hands, and heart palpitations in inmates.

They suggest two causes for this: ‘physiological stress’, induced by a lack of stimuli and ‘psychological stress’ induced by a lack of human interactions.

The former is a form of anxiety caused by the monotony of the environment. Whilst the brain is very good at constantly making sense of an incredible amount of sensory inputs, the absence of stimulation forces the part of the brain responsible for channelling sensory inputs to fire off erratic information, which is interpreted by higher nervous components as partial information that needs to be completed or adjusted.

After a prolonged isolation this mechanism leads to auditory and visual hallucinations. Interestingly, although starting with flashing lights and lines, and abstract shapes, it often leads to fantasized rationalised reality, like seeing shadows, hearing sounds of footsteps and shape shifting objects

In the absence of human interactions, it is difficult or even impossible for a person to gauge the appropriateness of their emotions. In fact, human interactions are necessary to create an emotional image of oneself. The lack of interactions often leads to a distorted sense of self and may provoke obsessive thoughts and behaviours. Since the human being is a social creature, it needs others to reaffirm their own existence. The isolation then leads to anxiety and paranoia and, in more severe cases, it may engender violent behaviour against prison guards as a way of asserting one's existence.

More general responses to isolation may also include speaking out loud, which starts as a way of creating an auditory stimulation of some sort and eventually leads the person to confuse their own voice with the voice of someone else. It seems that what may start as a former 'natural' way of coping with isolation and deprivation in their quest to keep their sanity ineluctably spirals out of control towards insanity through anxiety, stress, obsession, etc.

This research has formed much of the visuals for the latter part of the VR piece and you hear two psychologists we interviewed Terry Kupers and Craig Haney (see appendix)

INTERACTIVITY

6x9 is built in unity. There are many interactive parts to the project. The room scene towards the beginning of the piece in one such scene. Where you look triggers a story. Towards the end the apparition in your peripheral vision disappears when you try and look at her.

THE CHARACTERS

Five Muallim-ak spent a total of five years and eight months in solitary confinement. Already diagnosed with a bipolar condition prior to entering confinement, his medication was restricted and he deteriorated “mentally and physically”. He started to hallucinate, and hear voices. He would do anything to get emotional contact, befriending a fly in his cell for company or self-harming to get validation and medical attention. Even clinical human contact is better than none.

Johnny Perez was in solitary for a combined three years. A number of his sentences to solitary were punishments for testing positive for marijuana, including one sentence of 13 months in isolation.

Johnny became detached from reality and felt like he was losing his mind. Withdrawn from all sense of time, his days and nights in isolation were spent speaking to an imaginary friend or wrestling with anxiety. He feared he was being forgotten that time would never end and that he would die in solitary forgotten and alone.

Tyrrell Muhammad a “survivor of the New York State incarceration system” spent 25 years in prison for robbery and second degree murder. He was in solitary confinement for 7 years, initially for missing a prison count though his stay was extended numerous times. Moving between various prisons Tyrrell was subject to different solitary confinement regimes and conditions across institutions during the 1980s. He endured harrowing experiences in many of these places, which led to bouts of depression. Tyrrell’s inability to read and follow his trial prior to being sent to prison resulted in him embracing education - both in solitary (when the rules allowed) and in general population. He graduated from Syracuse University whilst serving his sentence and encouraged other prisoners to learn. Tyrrell now campaigns for CAKE – the coalition against isolation and confinement.

Dolores Canales was in solitary confinement for 9 months. Strong and articulate, she would organise other female prisoners in nearby cells through the air vents, encouraging them to use their bed sheets to ‘dress’ for dinner and lead them through renditions of “Respect” the other inmates on backing vocals as she to the lead. But she would also sing quiet songs to herself, thinking about her aunt who raised her and the two sons she left behind when she entered prison aged 18. At night she watched mice on her cell’s brick work, the sensation of spiders and ants crawling over her skin. She thought her head was going to pop open.

Steven Czifra was first sent to solitary as a child, after receiving a ten year prison sentence for a crime he committed aged 13. Steven was eventually paroled at 30, serving eight of his 17 years in jail in solitary. He experienced confinement in three separate institutions. His pastime became drawing and reading but when that stopped satisfying him Steven became violent. He would invite the guards in; by attacking them he found release. He would deliberately refuse to comply with rules so as to undergo cell extractions and a chance to briefly feel human contact. Steven paroled from prison over 11 years ago but still suffers from paranoia and intimacy issues from his experiences. Being in solitary as a child, years of vital teenage development were spent away from human contact. He initially used drugs to overcome his fears but after ten years of

recovery with his partner he has been able to teach himself, for the first time, how to be with others.

Marcel Neil served just under 39 months in solitary confinement, with four confinements in two prisons. Marcel missed the birth of his daughter whilst in solitary and he spent much of his time staring at the ceiling, trying to think positive thoughts and fantasizing “I just couldn’t understand whether it was fake or was it real.” And then started the hallucinations, “The officers would knock and I would be in a corner seeing things from my past”. They didn’t want to open the cell door because they were scared of what I might have done. Marcel combatted negative thoughts by writing. When that didn’t work he would fight his rising aggression by kicking his cell door and yelling, shouting for hours straight, trying to exhaust himself. At night he fought voices, paranoia and fears that the guards were about to attack. Today Marcel struggles anxiety, aggression and paranoia that limits his ability to interact with more than one person at a time and he attributes to this to his experiences in solitary.

Victor Pate had a number of spells in solitary for various offences, including the charge of having too many bed sheets in his prison cell. In all he spend nearly two years in solitary confinement in prisons across New York. Victor feared for his life when he was first taken into solitary confinement and went on to be both psychologically and physically affected by his experience. He had hallucinations and heard voices, as he was ‘visited’ by childhood friends in his cell. “The collateral damages never, ever go away”.

THE PSYCHOLOGISTS

Terry Kupers is professor of Psychiatry at the Wright Institute, the University of Berkeley has spent 40 years interviewing thousands of solitary confinement prisoners. We will interview him for the piece.

Craig Haney is a social psychologist at the University of Santa Cruz and was an expert witness at the Pelican Bay case. He too has been interviewing inmates of solitary confinement for decades, often the same prisoners and has been able to chat their deterioration. Both will talk of the short and long term mental effects.

THE TEAM

Francesca Panetta is a multi-award winning sound artist and journalist. She works for the Guardian as a Special Projects Editor leading on projects which innovate in storytelling. Her work is experiential and immersive, fusing her art practices with strong journalism to have visceral impact. Outside the Guardian Francesca works as a sound artist specialising in binaural sound design and non-linear storytelling, usually in physical landscapes. Francesca talks around the world about digital storytelling and innovation in audio.

Lindsay Poulton is a multi-award winning documentary filmmaker and journalist who is passionate about innovation in digital storytelling and new platforms. She has produced a wide range of documentaries and multimedia interactives on subjects ranging from climate change to literature, features on the First World War and military operations in Afghanistan and investigations into the global garment industry. Lindsay talks at festivals and conferences around the world about documentary and innovation in digital storytelling.

Andrew Mason is a creative developer at the Guardian specialising in multimedia interactives. With a background in interactive design and technology he is able to bring storytelling to modern platforms in new and innovative ways. He is passionate about experimenting with new mediums including creating the Guardian's first real-time 3D animated visualizations.

Xaquín GV is the editor of Guardian Visuals, a 50-person, cross-disciplinary desk at The Guardian, responsible for the paper's interactive storytelling and data visualizations.

Aron Pilhofer is Executive Editor of Digital at the Guardian as well as acting Chief Digital Officer, working across the Guardian's editorial teams to develop and execute new and innovative digital journalism initiatives and tools to help grow global audiences and deepen reader engagement.

Carl Addy is a Creative Director for Mill+ in London. He drives the vision for Mill+ that includes a team of Mill directors and designers, which focus on conceptualizing and delivering original content. Reinforced by the artistry and scale of The Mill. Carl has over 18 years experience in the industry, directed projects such as Google Chrome 'Jamal Edwards', We Are Shining 'Wheel' and the 2015 D&AD Title Sequence and In Show Package. He has won a range of advertising, design and direction awards, as well as serving as an inspirational speaker and mentor at a number of events including OFFF, FITC and Semi-Permanent.

Ed Thomas is an all aspects creative at the Mill with a complete, leading edge and innate knowledge of every discipline of visual content creation and artist team management. 20 years working in computer graphics have given him the opportunity to experience all facets of this industry from video games development to architectural visualisation, script development, broadcast animation and live action direction. He has extensive experience directing Motion Capture shoots and he has overseen live action shoots as credited Creative and Animation Director for many broadcast TV commercials.

Kevin Young is a creative technologist at the Mill with over 10 years experience in the industry. He has built immersive experiences and games for a range of clients across the tech and entertainment industries including HBO, Disney, Warner Bros, Fox, Oasis, Bosch and Google.

Jarrad Vladich is a producer at the Mill and has worked in both our London and New York studios. His most recent creative highlights include DFT 'Transparent' Optum 'The Pursuit of Healthier' and the epic Call of Duty: Ghosts in-game graphics. Jarrad has been working in VFX for 9 years, having spent four of these years as a 3D Artist before moving into production. This makes Jarrad perfectly placed to seamlessly manage our 3D projects.

THE MILL

We partnered with the Mill on this project. They have done all the technical and CGI work.

ABOUT THE GUARDIAN NEWS & MEDIA

Guardian News & Media (GNM) publishes theguardian.com, one of the largest English-speaking quality newspaper websites in the world. Since launching its US and Australia digital editions in 2011 and 2013 respectively, traffic from outside of the UK now represents over two-thirds of the Guardian's total digital audience.

In the UK, GNM publishes the Guardian newspaper six days a week, first published in 1821, and the world's oldest Sunday newspaper, The Observer.

The Guardian is most recently renowned for its Pulitzer Prize and Emmy-winning revelations based on the disclosures made by whistleblower Edward Snowden. In 2014, the Guardian was named newspaper and website of the year at the Society of Editors UK Press Awards and is the most trusted newsbrand in the UK (Ofcom News consumption in the UK report, 2015).

The Guardian is also known for its globally acclaimed investigation into phone hacking, the launch of its groundbreaking digital-first strategy in 2011 and its trailblazing partnership with WikiLeaks in 2010.