Digital storytelling from below: Revolutionary Athens through a kaleidoscope

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Introduction

Creating a digital application for a historical event is not necessarily intertwined with historical documentation and re-negotiation of historiographically shaped reality. Typically, app and game developers borrow the widely accepted versions of the past and invest in digital presentation of battles and landscapes.

In the case of the REVAthens program "Reviving life in revolutionary Athens", the project team chose to look for evidence concerning the daily life of the population in Athens before and during the 1821 War of Independence. Although this was not a historiographical project, the members of the project team agreed that an understanding of the pre-revolutionary social environment was an important precondition for the implementation scenario.

Historians have long debated about the actual social group that sought to overthrow the Ottoman imperial power and organized the popular uprising (Papanikolaou, 1991· Kremmydas, 2016). Official narratives and standard school history refer to persecuted Greeks who chose to free themselves from the oppression of their Ottoman compatriots.

International historiography has already discussed and identified how multicultural everyday life on the borders of empires included tolerance and consensus. So, in order for the REV_ATHENS scenario to correspond to a documented version of reality, information was sought on the ways in which populations with distinct cultural, linguistic and religious characteristics managed to coexist before nation building.

"A duty to revolt"? Everyday life in pre-revolutionary Athens

A widespread assumption is that the Greek-speaking subjects of the Ottoman empire sought to overthrow the sultanate and recalled the freedom they enjoyed during the years of the Greek-speaking Byzantine Empire. Historian David Brewer studied the period 1204-1453 and concluded that the Western troops (Franks, Venetians, Catalans), who were looting the mainland Greek-speaking area at the time, had made the native populations suffer so much that the Ottoman conquest of the 15th c. seemed like redemption to their eyes. The Ottoman invasion was presented as an alternative to the feudal model imposed by Western rulers. In fact, the Greek-speaking populations were familiar with the multicultural life of the empires as soldiers, cavalry, and archers from Germany, Hungary, Serbia, Bulgaria and the Black Sea circulated in the area since the Byzantine era (Brewer 2018).

After the Fall of Constantinople in 1453 and until the 16th c. the Greek-speaking populations exercised their religious duties freely, while their daily lives were not substantially disrupted. Princes and dukes ceased to alternate, and along with administrative stability, changes in tax systems were reduced. The decision of the Ottoman administration to ban the sale or division of real estate prevented the accumulation of farms in the hands of a few rich people and the impoverishment of the poor. Property stability created the necessary conditions for the mitigation of class

antagonisms (Brewer, 2018). Moreover, the Ottoman Empire invested in the coexistence of diverse religious communities. Muslims and Sephardic Jews settled in the old Byzantine cities, while Catholic Christian populations continued to live in coastal cities (Methoni, Koroni, Nafplio). The multicultural structure of the Ottoman society is testified also by Tournefort (2003).

Ottoman Athens was inhabited at least until the 17th c. mainly by Greek-speaking residents along with Turkish-speaking families and Albanian-speaking Muslims. In contrast to Thessaloniki, which became a commercial hub thanks to the wool trade, Athens became famous due to the Acropolis and the material remains of classical antiquity. From the end of the 16th c. to the end of the 18th c. European diplomats, intellectuals and travelers visited the small settlement of modern times that surrounded the rock. The main reasons for these trips were scientific with an emphasis on botany and the acquaintance with classical antiquity. According to these travelers, the locals -especially the villagers- were illiterate and religious (Brewer, 2018). Christians and Muslims lived a common daily life, the boundaries of which were not always distinct. Intercultural relations were not always the same, however, and tensions developed between different ethnicities over time (Chandler, 1776). For the needs of the digital project, we took into account testimonies such as this of Chateaubriand who visited the Peloponnese and Central Greece fifteen years before the outbreak of the War of Independence. Chateaubriand describes a lazy daily life, in which Christians and Muslims coexisted without much tension. However, he observed violent practices in the imposition of order and control by the Ottoman authorities. He also commented on the increased presence of Franks and Italians and doctors arriving to work from Venice and the Ionian Islands (Satovriandos, 2019).

Europeans in groups or lonesome searched for monuments and other material remains of ancient Athens. Muslims and Christians had become acquainted with the quest for ancient heritage and they gladly led the visitors to these relics. Interestingly, the Europeans had the impression that the inhabitants coexisted with the ancient remains as if they were part of city life. Ignorance of the historical past and mainly of a coherent historical consciousness allowed them to integrate these remains smoothly into their daily lives. Life in the city until the first decade of the 19th c. seemed idyllic and corresponded to a period of peaceful coexistence. The American Samuel Howe informs us that at the beginning of the Revolution and during the first siege of the Acropolis, there were no clashes and violent actions by one ethnicity towards the other (Howe, 1997). Uprisings did not necessarily lead to major revolutions.

We form a similar picture from Finkel's descriptions of the Orloff period. This is a generalized climate of local uprisings in areas of the Balkan Peninsula (Montenegro, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Albania, Greece). It expressed the dissatisfaction of the inhabitants of multiple areas. According to Finkel, the Ottomans of Athens believed that they had greater interests in defending the hegemony of Moldavia. The local uprising was deemed insignificant (Finkel, 2007) We should try to understand the greater developments through different prisms (transnational relations, local movements, ideological framework, religious relations).

Local uprisings need to be integrated into the wider context, as the Russian fleet was circulating the eastern Mediterranean and Russian foreign policy allowed local commanders to hope for a reorganization of the Balkans based on religious orientation (Gallant, 2017). Ottoman foreign policy was aware of the military weaknesses of the empire, its economic difficulties and therefore followed a peaceful stance, even after

the annexation of Crimea in 1783 by the Russians. These war conflicts between the Ottomans and the Russians fueled subsequent conflicts between the religious communities of the Balkans.

In terms of participation, it is now known that the 1821 uprising attracted fighters and warriors of Greek or Albanian origin. Some were professional mercenaries who had been trained and paid by Ali Pasha. The first conflicts in the Peloponnese were followed by a resurgence in the wider geographical area. As a result, the attitude of the Ottomans towards the Christians changed during the second year of the revolution. Howe (1997) notes that when Omer Pasha settled in Athens to help his fellow believers, he resorted to violence. This refers to the hunt for Christians, a 'game' they established then. The Ottoman soldiers captured some villagers, then let them escape, until the cavalry overtook them and killed them with their rifles. Howe criticises the torture of elderly Christians by Ottoman soldiers. The narratives of those who observed the conflict as external viewers are of particular interest, as they confirm that the "duty to revolt" was not the result of a process of nostalgia and ideological quest for a pure Greek state or empire. On the contrary, the descriptions show that violence was purely linked to the war process itself and operated in a vengeful manner.

The war and the claim of Independence were the actual factors that reshaped relations and sparked violent incidents across the Empire. The human body was at the center of these conflicts, as the 'duty to revolt' was understood as an obligation to 'dishonor ' the enemy's body regardless of gender, age and whether it belonged to a warrior or a villager.

The project's rationale and methodology

Our project focused on the life of individuals, mainly Christians, during the 1826-1827 siege of the Acropolis by the Ottoman General Cioutachis. The characters of the app were developed according to the methodology of museum theatre, an interpretive technique that can contextualize information in a stimulating and engaging way and convey multiple layers of human experience in a direct manner. Theatre as a method to communicate the past in museums appeared in the 19th century. As it draws from the long theatre tradition it involves a wide spectrum of tools and methods that can significantly enrich the ways we interpret and communicate the past today. It is especially useful in incorporating the notion of "process" in the interpretation of the past as the visitors meet the characters in particular circumstances, being themselves in a process that involves past memories, beliefs, assumptions, hopes and fears. Museum theatre also allows for a direct approach of cultural practices, as a field of convergence of competing discourses which influence the production and spread of ideology. Thus, the characters' performance becomes a place of flow of cultural signs that generate cultural messages. These dynamics were incorporated in a non traditionally theatrical setting, which formed a space of experimentation for the research team.

In line with our basic rationale, we decided to focus on ordinary people and on human practices with a timeless character (like love, death, child rearing, friendship,) as expressed in times of war and extreme hardship. In this way we aimed at a bottom up approach of historical narratives and a connection to today's visitors. Research results have proved that bringing to life ordinary people from the past who speak about

universal characteristics, in their own historical context, encourages visitors to relate to their experience (Venieri 2022). The political and military events are filtered through the characters' daily experience as we wanted to shed light on how these events were experienced by different subjects, in terms of gender, position and ethnic origin.

Selecting a few single deep stories or many shallow stories was another matter of concern. Neither is better than the other; but mixing multiple approaches can significantly increase the complexity of the experience. We thus opted for more shallow stories that can bridge general issues to concrete experience, in other words, "translate" theoretical issues into their everyday impact.

Characters were first selected based on criteria of heterogeneity. The first question was whether we would use historic or imaginary characters. We opted for the latter, and only used one historic character. Imaginary characters did not exist, but could have existed, and are shaped by the method of "substantiated hypotheses" (also called "educated assumptions") based on historical sources. A key criterion is the ability of these characters to illuminate different aspects of historical processes in a way that will be comprehensible to different contemporary audiences.

Following this rationale, our virtual characters/avatars represent different gender, social and ethnic groups, like a Greek fighter, an Athenian woman of Albanian origin, a Muslim resident of Athens that fought on the Ottoman side, an Albanian messenger, an educated Greek woman, etc. However, a complete representation of the heterogeneity of the population of the time exceeded the scope, time frame and funding of the project that initially aimed to produce a model that can be further enriched.

The design of the avatars is as close as possible to the depiction of the faces, bodies and clothes of the time that we have traced in our sources.
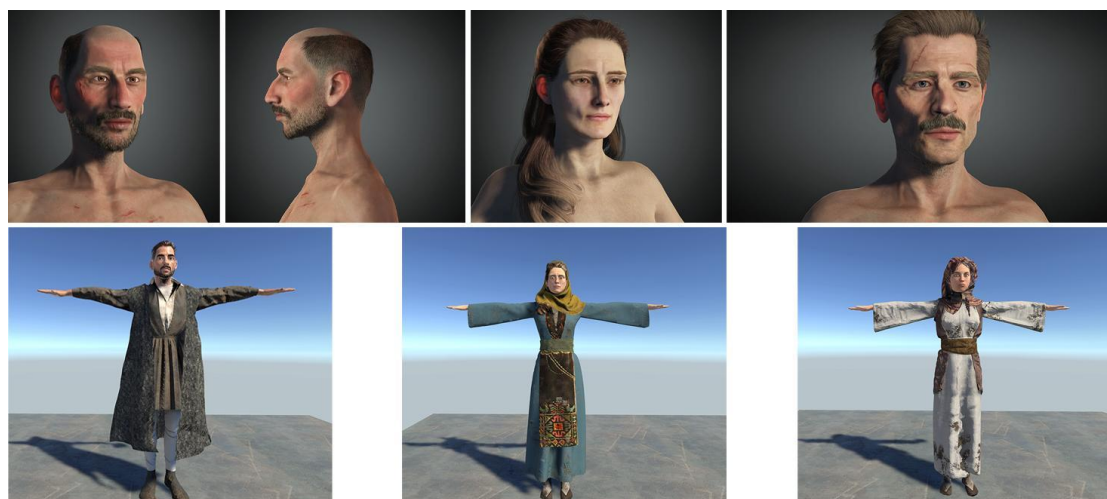

Various avatars

The dialogues and monologues of the avatars express the feelings and anxieties of the besieged, evoke memories from their life in the city before the uprising, inform about significant events occurring during the siege. So historical events 'hang' on the

characters' life tree. In this way, the issue of subjectivity in the interpretation of the past comes to the fore, and visitors encounter multiple approaches to the characters' current reality, that involve their past, present and future and shape complex constructs similar to the ones that we create in our everyday life. Following the bachtinian notion of heteroglossia, we aimed to combine distinct points of view without an hierachical structure. Through heteroglossia visitors are encouraged to adopt a critical stance, as there is not a clear narrative that controls the meaning-making process. The language spoken by the avatars is understandable today, but retains a sense of the historical period made evident either by the vocabulary and the syntax in Greek or by the inclusion of some Turkish and Albanian words.

In brief, the information given in the dialogues serve to elicit questions about established and widespread representations of the national history. All dialogues were scripted based on meticulous research and with the assistance of a professional actor.

Τούτο το σφίξιμο στη καρδιά.. μου τρώγει τα σωθικά.. ολονών.. που δεν ηξεύρεις από πού θα σου 'ρθει.
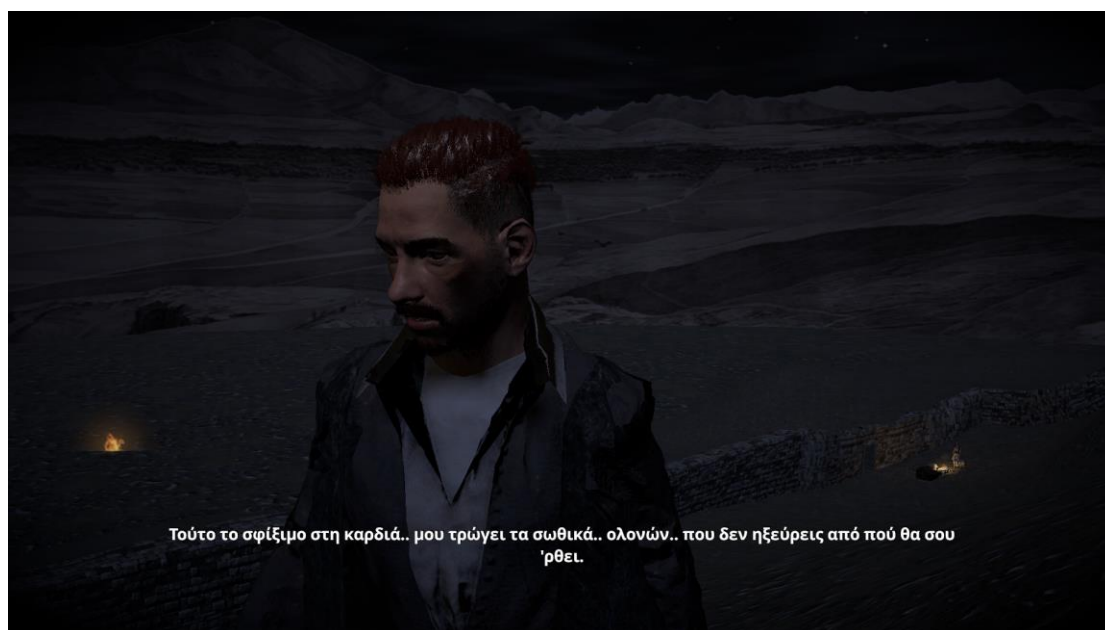
Manolios' monologue

Digital tools and narration

The basic idea for the creation of the app was to combine the physical presence of the user within specific places around the rock of the Acropolis (The well-spring of Klepsydra, The Herodion / Serpentzes), where, through geo-location, s/he can watch and interact with a digital narrative that they have previously downloaded and saved on their mobile or tablet. The physical presence of the users within the *arena* of the third siege was deemed necessary, in order for them to be able to compare the current form of the Acropolis with that of the "castle", which at the time of the Revolution, constituted the morphology of the rock, as determined by the natural conditions of the time and the effects of the Revolution in and around the area of Athens.

The structure of the digital narrative can be considered at a first glance as a form of gamification of public history. While the term "gamification" finds narrow use in contemporary discourse to describe participatory approaches in consumer marketing

practices (for example, collecting frequent flier reward points, liking and unliking in social media), we adopt a more general understanding of gamification, informed by the work of the French sociologist Roger Caillois (1958) who proposed play (in the context of games) as activity that is: free, separate (within defined limits of space and time), uncertain, unproductive (creating neither goods or wealth), governed by rules, and make-believe (invoking the imagination). Caillois' work draws from the earlier ideas of Johan Huizinga (1949) who used diverse examples such as lawsuits, dancing, and the military battlefield to show how civilization arises and unfolds in and as play (Gazi et al., 2021).

At this point, it is worth noting that the various forms of mobile gaming that are most popular nowadays, should not be seen solely as a consequent contemporary "invention" of the digital revolution. Parikka and Suominen approach mobile gaming and, in general, digital narrations with gameplay elements such as the REVATHENS application, as a natural extension of cultural practices and products dating as far back as the 19th century.

> *"… the pattern of mobile entertainment usage as the creation of a private sphere was already part of the railway culture of the nineteenth century - even if people consumed such media contents as newspapers and books instead of digital entertainment. In addition, such artifact-like mobile gaming systems as card decks and portable chess sets were part of the mediascape of nineteenth century modernization and the new patterns of increasing movement of the Victorian upper class. Also the small mobile flipbooks, originating from the 1860s by the name of kineographs, which animate picture series can be added to the history of mobile entertainment. One could also view such objects as mobile cameras, wristwatches, women's fans and hand-screens from the perspective of archaeology mobile media, as Erkki Huhtamo (2005b) suggests."* (Parikka, 2006· Huhtamo, 2005).

From this point of view, the idea of creating a digital narrative app that is constructed as a game-space which frames as an experience both the simulation of a part of the Acropolis rock as it appeared during 1826-27 and a requirement that the user is physically present within the area in order to experience a (an expanded) narration of public history, is not a surprising phenomenon, but rather the continuation of a tradition born after the 2nd industrial revolution and the beginning of distanced travel, mostly via trains but not exclusively.

Nowadays, we may observe the appearance of new forms of networks, which are hybrid analogue/digital networks. These networks are composed on the one hand by traveler's bodies moving in frenzy speed toward cultural destinations, facilitated through the logistics of air transports and hosting platforms such as airbnb. On the other hand, the individual management of these moves and visits, made possible through the use of mobile devices, which at the same time dislocate the users from the physical environment in order to provide them guidance on how, where and what to perceive in the environment. Following this thought, an observation that Parikka and Suominen make in their aforementioned paper, adds one more insight to the use of public historical narrations.

> "Following Foucault's ideas, the German media historian Friedrich Kittler (1990) has in his own work concentrated on mapping the discourse networks which act as the historical a priori of media experiences and subjective positions. Media act

as discourse networks in the sense that they are the processes which produce reality and concepts of that which can be sensed, thought, memorized, etc." (Parrika and Suominen 2006)

In other words, as the traveler's guides, which are embedded in mobile phones as apps, suggest visitors where and what to eat, drink and sleep, so in the same way, but in a different non-trivialized, uncommodified way, a digitally encoded historical narration can be part of the visitor's media network experience. So, what can be "sensed, thought and memorized" may provide hints to the visitor/user on the reality of the present and the past of the space that s/he walks by or stands in.

Present-day Athens and the digital simulation of the Acropolis siege

Contemporary Athens and its suburban environs is a dense, sprawling, concrete metropolis of commercial buildings, apartment blocks, industrial warehouses, workshops, stores and houses extending in all directions, south towards the sea and north, east and west to the rises of four mountains that surround the city on all sides. With a population of around eleven and a half million it is home to some of the most densely inhabited city neighborhoods in the world and for or a traveler visiting central Athens, the experience is one of narrow streets, heavy traffic, bustling commercial districts, shops, restaurants and bars, while never far from sight is the Acropolis, a flat limestone rocky outcrop with an area of around 3 hectares that rises some 80 meters or so from the surrounding city streets. Capped with the restored archaeological remains of an ancient citadel dominated by the iconic classical temple of the Parthenon, it is a popular tourist attraction for travelers passing through Athens to visit the site on their journey to their holiday destination of Greek islands, mountains, resorts and beaches.

Two hundred years ago at the time of the Revolution the scene was entirely different. The town of Athens was a small enclave with a mixed population of around 9,000, comprising Christians and Muslims of different ethnicities, Greeks, Turks, Arvanites, Egyptians and a small number of Ethiopians all living together in relatively peaceful harmony. The town comprised around 1.600 buildings: small houses, stores, bazaars, markets, gardens, churches, mosques, hammams, a madrassa, etc. Everywhere could be found ruins of the ancient past, scattered marbles, broken elements of classical structures, some of them incorporated into the contemporary buildings of the time in a kind of assemblage that didn't overtly distinguish the artifacts of the past with the constructions of the present. The town itself occupied the area close to the North and East of the Acropolis and was surrounded with a rough and hastily constructed walled rampart built in 1778 from marbles and stones pilfered from the walls and remains of classical structures under the direction of Hadij Ali Haseki, the Ottoman governor of Athens. The vista extending in all directions away from the town towards the surrounding mountains was a bucolic landscape of open space, rocky hills, knolls and outcrops, the waters and tributaries of two major rivers, the Illisos and Kifissos, along with the smaller river Eridanos. Dotted here and there the vista was punctuated with isolated houses, walls, stony paths, clumps of trees, the occasional olive grove and at the sea, the small settlement ports of Piraeus and Faliro. The fortified area on top of the Acropolis rock formed a tightly knit space of houses and ammunition stores, rainwater tanks and cisterns to support the soldiers tasked with defending the citadel and built into the open interior of the Parthenon, bombed and partially destroyed in

1687 by Venetians targeting gunpowder munitions stored there, was a small active mosque.

REVAthens is divided into two primary scenes, each situated with sub scenes at two main locations around the Acropolis rock. A primary scene defines the real-time experience by the user of the game scenario and is located either at the North part of the Acropolis or the South part. The historical content of the narrative embedded in a primary scene will have taken place within these specific locations during the period of the third siege of the Acropolis in 1826-1827. The first of these primary scenes, "Klepsydra", is centered around a fortified spring well located at the north east part of the Acropolis, near to the Propylaea. The second scene, "Serpetzes", takes place in and around the ruins of the Roman Herodes Atticus Theatre to the southeast of the rock. Today, a visitor to the "Herodion" encounters an active cultural venue and performance space for classical and modern, theatre, music and dance, within a structure fully excavated in the latter part of the nineteenth century and extensively restored in the 1950s with marbles quarried from Mount Penteli.


Herodion, Theodore du Moncel, 1843
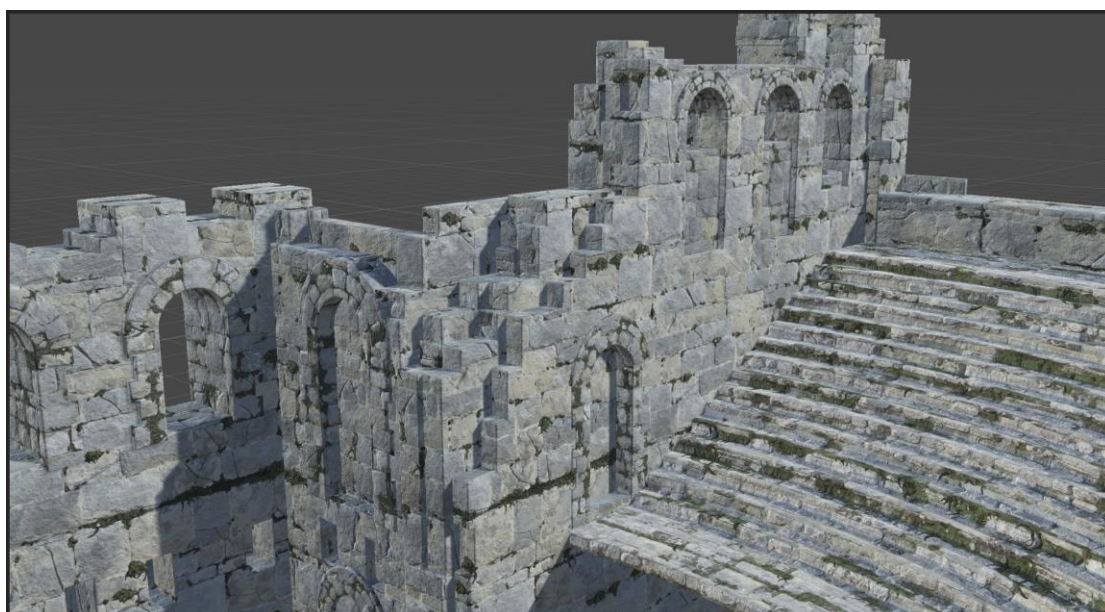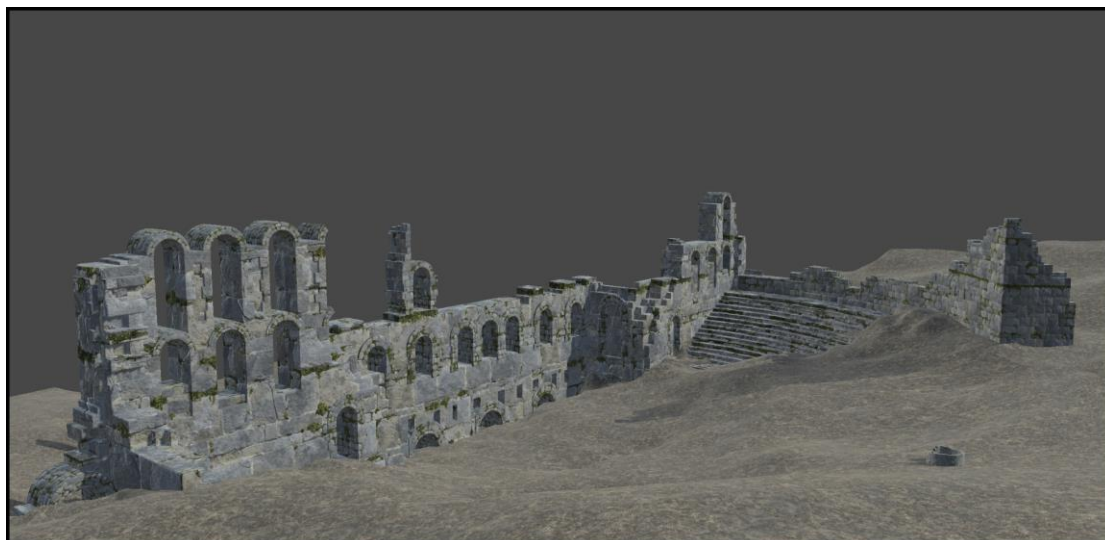
Herodion/Serpetzes simulated environment

Two hundred years ago however, the scene of the "Herodion" was very different. Most of the lower part of the walls and seating of the theatre was buried under a thick accumulation of rocky sediment and dirt with only the upper parts of the Herodion wall extending above this piled up ground. Our intention with REVAthens has been to render the environment of our scenes with as much detail as we can that corresponds as accurately as the historical record can inform us. While the aim is to represent the space with an informed concern for visual historical accuracy consistent with the historical and cultural reality of that time, the intention is not to simulate with hyperreal verisimilitude, but instead to consider the virtual space as akin to a theater stage and to digitally paint the environment with the aesthetic of a theatrical look and feel. Multiple references have been used as source material for simulating the physical environment with an attention to the visual accuracy of the reprensentation. Many of these sources were the work of late 18th and early 19th century Northern European travelers, drawn to Athens with a curiosity borne from a romantic interest in the

Greece of classical antiquity, whose drawings, watercolors and etchings were rendered with a keen eye for observed accuracy and detail. In particular, we relied heavily on a set of architectural schematics of the "Herodion" carefully drawn with accurate measurements by James Stuart and Nicholas Revett, two British architects who visited Athens between 1751 and 1754, and who later published a large volume of copper plate etchings of plans, sections and details of classical Athenian monuments and structures. Their work was noted for its departure from the generic and often imaginary representations of ancient monuments that preceded them.
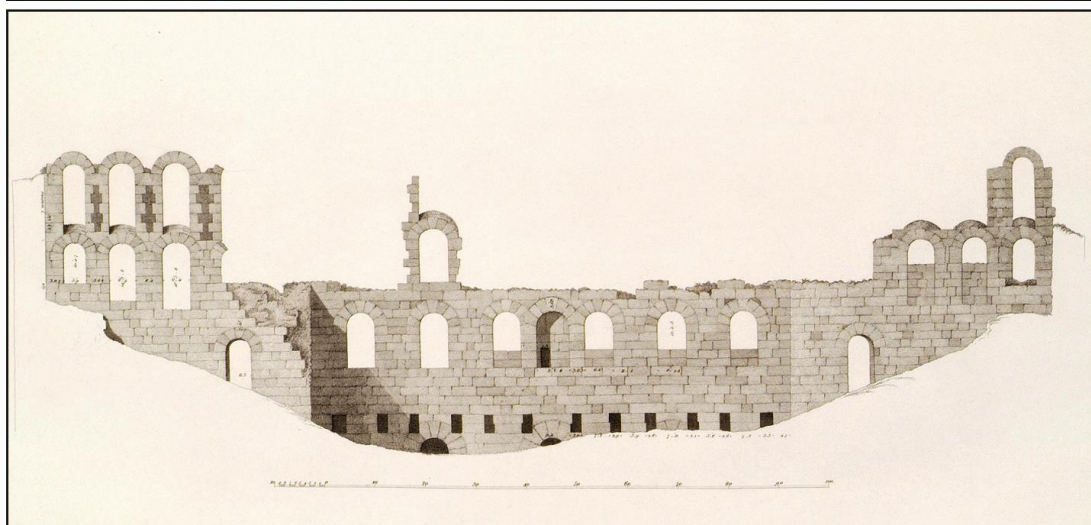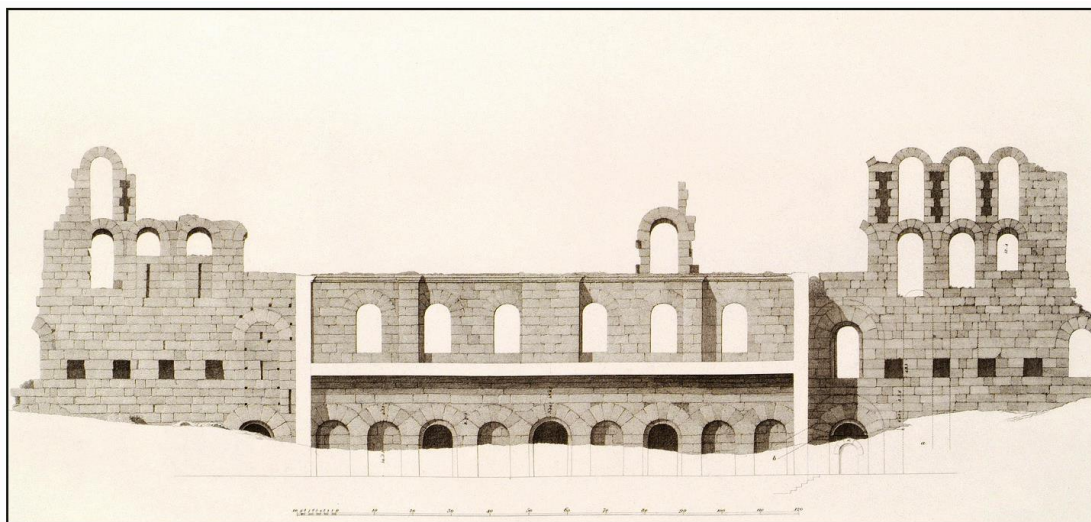
Stuart and Revett, 1824

A key opportunity for a user of the application is to see for themselves how different the space of historical events appears today from how the space appeared during the revolutionary period. Geolocation data and GPS compass tracking of the handheld device will permit a coordinated registration of the user's line of sight so that the virtual camera of the simulation frames the same point of view the user has of the real-world space they are situated within. In this way we aim to convey a sense of space and place that simultaneously engages the user in the landscape of the present layered through the portal of the virtual screen with the landscape of the historical past.

In conclusion

The project aims to fill a significant gap in the research and dissemination of evidence related to the Revolution of 1821. Its originality lies in the creation of a digital interpreting tool for mobile phones and tablets, which is accessible to different groups of audiences, and utilizes the methodology of museum theater to create subjective narratives of fictional characters in a playful, enjoyable and understandable way. The scattered information given in the dialogues and the scenes of the application compose the mosaic of the Ottoman society of the revolutionary times and serve to elicit questions about the established and widespread representations of the national historiography. Through this process, the understanding of different aspects of the past and the visitors' critical involvement with historical narratives are encouraged. From this perspective, the project is an innovative application in the field of public history and an interpretive tool that can be a model of communication of history to a wider audience.

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