

The Project That Couldn't Be Released

Handout C — Student reading

Simulating Silence — Secondary Teacher Resources

KEY TERMS

Virtual reality (VR): Technology that creates a computer-generated world you can look around and interact with, usually by wearing a headset over your eyes.

Soft gatekeeping: When an institution blocks something — not by saying “no” directly, but by creating so many delays, conditions, and requirements that the project becomes impossible. Each individual obstacle seems reasonable. It is the pattern that reveals the obstruction.

Archive of obstruction: A record of all the delays, conditions, and refusals that blocked a project. When collected together, these documents become evidence of how institutions prevent certain stories from being told — even without formal censorship.

What was the HashimaXR project?

Between 2020 and 2025, a team of researchers and game designers at SOAS University of London built a virtual reality experience about Hashima Island. The project was called HashimaXR. Using VR technology, it recreated the island as it looked in the early 1970s — just before everyone left.

But HashimaXR was not just a virtual tour of a ruined island. It tried to do something that no other Hashima project had done: it told the story of everyday life on the island while also making space for the history of forced labour that official accounts leave out. The project was designed to let users explore buildings, hear from different people who lived there, and encounter the parts of the island's history that heritage managers have tried to avoid.

So what went wrong?

HashimaXR worked. The technology was built. The historical research was done. Prototypes were demonstrated at events in Tokyo and Nagasaki. But the project was never released to the public.

Nobody banned it. Nobody took it to court. Nobody said “you are not allowed to publish this.” Instead, something more subtle happened. When stakeholders realised the project would include the history of forced labour — not just the story of industrial achievement and community life — support began to disappear. Access to the island for reference photography was refused. Review processes that should have taken weeks stretched into months. A potential partner proposed a legal clause that would have prevented the project from saying anything critical about the site's heritage management.

One by one, the conditions needed to publish the project were removed — not by a dramatic act of censorship, but by a pattern of delays and withdrawals. Researchers call this **soft gatekeeping**.

Why didn't they just publish it anyway?

The project team had a choice. They could have published a version of HashimaXR that left out the forced labour content — a version that showed the island's buildings and community life but stayed silent about the workers who were brought there against their will. That version would have been approved.

But publishing it would have meant doing exactly what the official heritage sites already do: celebrating the industry while erasing the workers. The team decided that staying silent was more honest than pretending. If the only way to release the project was to remove the history it was designed to tell, then not releasing it was the right decision. The project's failure to launch became its most important finding.

What does this tell us?

The HashimaXR story shows something important about how powerful institutions can control historical narratives without ever openly censoring anyone. Nobody said “this history is not true.” Nobody said “you may not talk about forced labour.” Instead, the project was blocked by a series of procedures — each one looking reasonable on its own, but adding up to a wall that could not be climbed.

The researchers kept a record of everything that happened: the emails, the refusals, the delays, the conditions. That record is what they call an **archive of obstruction** — evidence of how heritage governance actually works, hidden in the paperwork.

NOTE FOR TEACHERS

This handout covers the most conceptually challenging material in the unit. The concepts of soft gatekeeping and institutional obstruction should be discussed in class before students read independently. Consider using the Teacher Guidance document for preparation.