

# Project Ultra-Violence

LCC 6312 Design, Technology & Representation

Final Project

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**Abstract** Project Ultra-Violence is an exploration of the use of video in a virtual 3D interactive space. The user finds herself in a burlesque theatre, where she can take control of a set of mannequins and guide them around the theatre. When the curtain goes up, the mannequins are transported to the stage, where the user views clips from A Clockwork Orange projected onto their bodies.

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## Introduction

During some of our initial brainstorming for this project, we became interested in exploring the idea of taboos and the way that society reacts to the portrayal of controversial subjects. We considered the idea of creating a virtual peepshow where taboo movie clips were projected onto human bodies. Eventually this idea coalesced into the presentation of a stage theatre where mannequins become the projection screens for clips from the movie *A Clockwork Orange*.



Just another day at the Milk Bar

We selected the movie with awareness of its controversial use of violence and portrayal of sexuality. Though many scenes in the film are often quite disturbing, it is a deliberate move by the director to make a point. Kubrick himself read the novel by Anthony Burgess in 1969 and was immediately struck by the resemblance of Alex to Richard III of England. Kubrick observed that “Alex, like Richard, is a character whom you should dislike and fear, and yet you find yourself drawn very quickly into his world and find yourself seeing things through his eyes.” It may be hard to argue that the movie presents Alex as a sympathetic character, but if we regard him simply as a model of evil, we are overlooking the intention of the film.

Dealing with themes of ultra-violence, sexuality, misogyny, conformity and institutional repression, *A Clockwork Orange* was a controversial film from the start. It was released in December of 1971. After a wave of copycat rapes and brutality in the news in England, the film was pulled from release there and the distribution restriction wasn't lifted until 2000. The film is understandably very difficult to watch, with its depictions of gang violence and the brutal and callous treatment of women. Among the more memorable stage props in the film are the furniture pieces in the Milk Bar which are shaped like female mannequins in suggestive and uncomfortable-looking poses, being used as tables and footstools. There is also some irony in the use of something as wholesome in connotation as milk being used as a drug delivery substance. It is because of these kinds of juxtapositions of innocuous, mundane items with scenes of exceptional violence that the film's position of criticism becomes clear. This is quite evident in the chilling scene where Alex and his cohorts sing and dance gleefully while brutalizing an older couple in their home.



This pose became known as “the Kubrick stare”

Later in the film, the tables are turned as Alex enters the reconditioning program and is forced to listen to Beethoven while being deliberately sickened with drugs and forced to watch violent movies with his eyes pried open. Suddenly Alex is unable to enjoy firsthand the acts of violence which gratify him in his

everyday life, but now must appreciate it vicariously as a kind of punishment. We understand that Alex, as a vicarious consumer of violence, is really a proxy for the audience. Kubrick has described this film as: "...a social satire dealing with the question of whether behavioral psychology and psychological conditioning are dangerous new weapons for a totalitarian government to use to impose vast controls on its citizens and turn them into little more than robots." Though this may be something of an overstatement, Kubrick is craftily foregrounding the audience's complicity in the consumption of portrayed violence by making Alex an example, first as an active participant in brutality, then as a passive (and increasingly unwilling) consumer of it during his rehabilitation.

"Alex's adventures are a kind of psychological myth," Kubrick said during the year the movie was first released. "Our subconscious finds release in Alex, just as it finds release in dreams. It resents Alex being stifled and repressed by authority, however much our conscious mind recognizes the necessity of doing this." This is the reason why we cannot completely condemn the character. His actions are loathsome and unacceptable in society, but at the same time he represents a kind of primal wildness, an ancient "Lord of the Flies" mentality that we as civilized participants in society must obviously repress, but may secretly wonder about. Alex is able to act out these unconscionable impulses, so that the rest of us don't have to. We can watch, and feel repulsed (and yet possibly enjoy the spectacle vicariously) and then feel better about the world when Alex is punished.

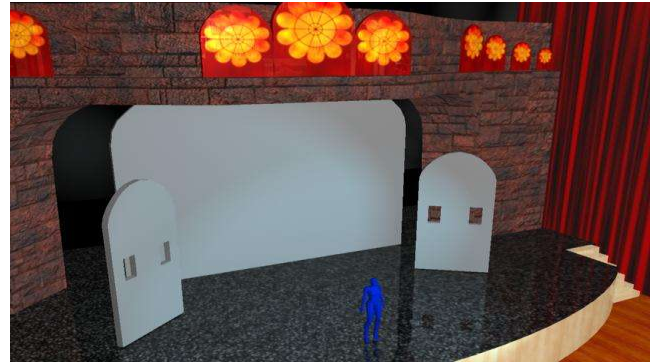
Our group's scene takes place in a kind of burlesque theatre, with a stage, tables with seating, cage dancers and a bar. The atmosphere is dark and foreboding, with a strange mixture of red velvet opulence and 1970s style tawdriness. There are some faint echoes of visual elements from the film, with white writing on black walls near the bar area, milk glasses on the bar, and female mannequins. The ceiling is quite high, allowing for many balconies where the onlookers may hide in relative obscurity. High up along the walls are cages complete with brass poles, where mannequins are poised to dance suggestively. Certain areas of the large room are partitioned with red velvet curtains, hiding the theatre's secrets.

## Project Goals

One of the goals of our project is to examine the social implications of the portrayal of violence in the name of art. As in Kubrick's film, we as viewers are put in the position of witnessing a spectacle that may make us uncomfortable. Like Alex, we are trapped here and we cannot look away. By watching violence, or viewing art that suggests violence, we are also somehow guilty of complicity. We benefit from the enactment. By creating a theatre space, our group intends to foreground the idea of the spectator's relationship to the scenes that are being presented.

Viewers of *A Clockwork Orange* often feel a sense of ugliness and gut reactions of disgust when watching the film. One might argue that the film uses violence for its own sake just to manipulate the viewer. Unlike a typical horror or action film, however, Kubrick is doing much more here. His use of violence can be seen as a means of engaging discussion, a way of offering a criticism of society's casual acceptance of violence in entertainment media. With this in mind, we have chosen to explore the movie's controversial portrayal of the female figure as

an inanimate object by prominently featuring female mannequins, whose bodies become the projection screens for our movie clips.



The stage area, showing a prototype mannequin

We are using the idea of the burlesque theatre to contextualize the scenes taken from the movie. The physical structure of the space has a number of different design sources and goals. The most direct design source was naturally the torture theater in which Alex is conditioned against violence. Though there are few physical similarities between the two spaces, we wanted to tease out ideas of the public projection of violent images. We also designed in such a way as to allow the user to assume a number of viewer orientations. Backstage access and the ability to change model positions indicates a kind of special access normally reserved for those involved in the production. Additionally, a significant amount of time has been taken to create an environment in which the user would feel comfortable taking the role of the spectator and watching the proceedings from a perspective congruent with normal audience positioning.

Along with the regular theater, we also created a space reminiscent of the Korova Milk Bar that Alex and his "droogs" frequent in the film and used the sparse otherworldly design for the rotating models. This is to simply set the tone of the space and try to bring into the theater space some more iconic representations of the film.

Outside the film there were a number of spaces that contributed to the spatial design of the theater. The most direct correspondence is an image we discovered during research for the design of the theater (see figure below). The general design and setup of the theater in question fit our needs in terms of stage space and yet was disconnected enough from the film itself as to give the space a unique "placeness".



Inspiration for the set design came from this image.

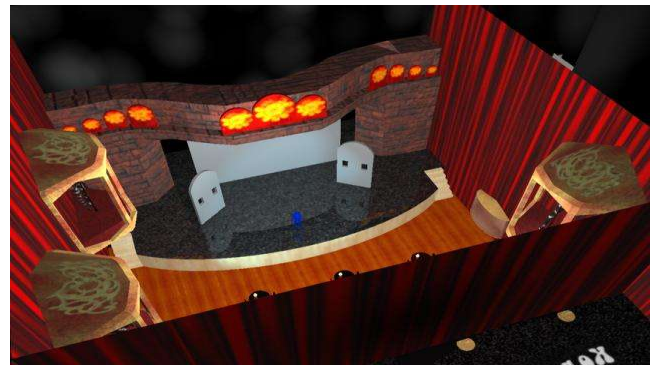
When choosing the scenes to be projected, we thought it was important that the clips be visually stimulating, representative of the movie as a whole, and that they work well in the context in which they are presented. Most importantly, we didn't want users to feel like our environment was just a glorified QuickTime player, where they could go to view clips of the movie. This forced us to think of the clips more as textures than as narratives, although we still wanted these "textures" to be meaningful. With these considerations in mind, we ended up favoring those clips that provided largely self-contained action, rather than ones that were not very interesting at a glance, or required in-depth knowledge of the story to appreciate.

The first clip is Alex and his "droogs" driving down some country road to the house of their first victim. This scene, like most of our choices, is a somewhat quintessential Clockwork Orange scene, and is telling about the characters' state of mind. The second clip, in which Alex and his gang battles Billy Boy and his gang of army-surplus hoodlums, is also an important scene in terms of character development. The third clip we chose was the opening scene, which introduces Alex and his droogs, drinking their milk at Korova. And finally, there is the clip of Alex, strapped into his seat at the hospital, undergoing his "treatment". All of these clips, in addition to being pivotal points of the movie, are easily recognized, and easily appreciated.

A general description of the interaction that is planned for our theatre follows: The user wanders around the theatre. The curtain is down, the lights are up, and some Beethoven is playing. Seated at a few of the tables are the mannequins. When the user touches a mannequin, one of the montages fills the users field of vision, immobilizing her temporarily, and the user is (somehow) transported to the mannequin's point of view. The user can then move the mannequin anywhere in the theatre. After a while, the house lights flicker and then go dark. The user is left in the audience, and after a few moments, the curtains rise to find the mannequins in the Chorus Line position, and depending on where the mannequins were left when the lights went down, different clips will play on/in each mannequin. There are two places clips will occur: While switching mannequins, and during the closing scenes.

### Structure

Exploring the space of the theatre - how movement is constrained. The viewer is able to move through the space as a kind of free-moving camera that collides with objects. When the viewer collides with one of the mannequins, a clip from the movie is played. When the clip is finished, the user then regains control of the camera and is able to continue navigating the space.



Overhead view of the stage

Why did we choose this particular architecture? We decided to make the theatre using a kind of dinner-theatre structure. Instead of a big auditorium-style space, we opted for something more unusual that included caged dancers and a bar that complement the action taking place on stage. Another source of inspiration came from the Moulin Rouge theater. The fact that it was forbidden on British stages because people considered it to be too audacious for the public ties in with some of our ideas about the controversial nature of the movie we had chosen.



View from above the stage, looking back toward the bar area

How is time portrayed? There is some indication of the passage of time in our space through the movement of the cage dancer mannequins who move around the stripper poles.



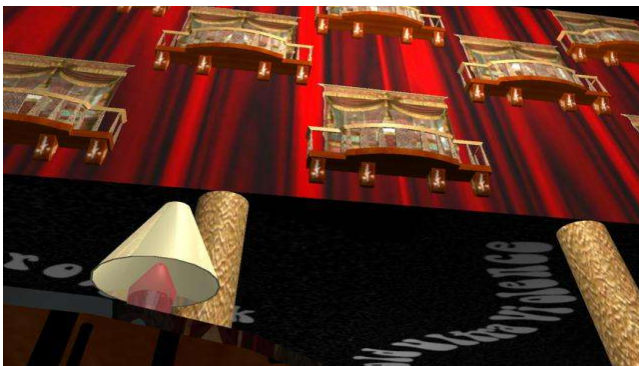
A mannequin performing

So we are presenting not a 'frozen in time' scene but an ongoing exploration.



A different mannequin in "pole position"

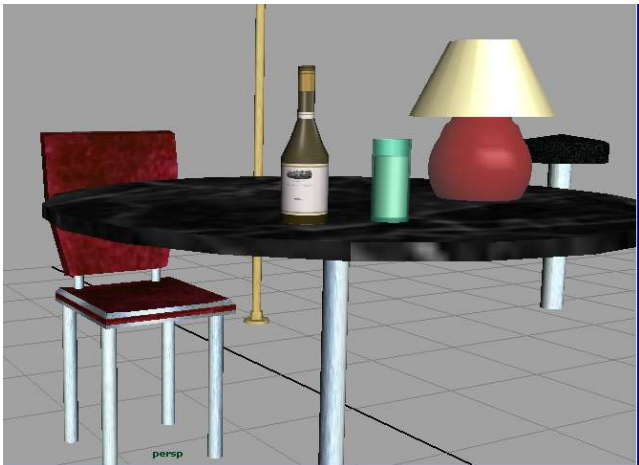
Movement is taking place with the caged mannequins that are rotating around their respective poles. This is the main ongoing action that proceeds unconnected to the movement of the player.



View from the dining area, looking up at balcony

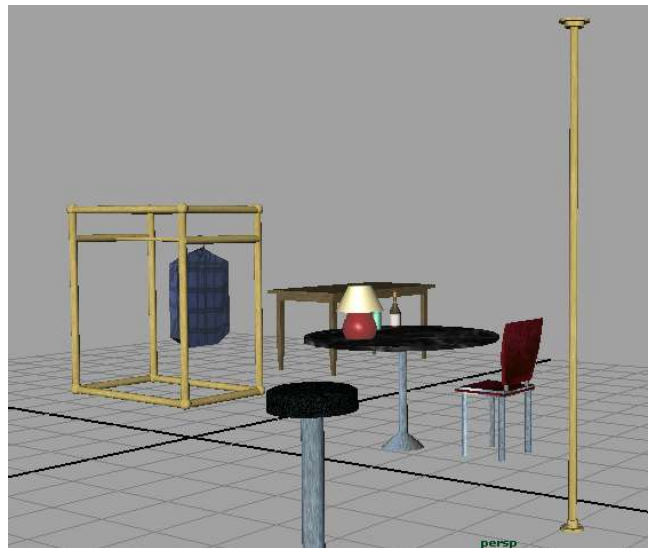
### Technical Issues

Working with Maya. The items in the bar as well as the structure of the theatre space were modeled in Maya, using various textures.



Some objects to be included in the bar scene

Affordances of the medium. Maya allows for detailed modeling and previewing what will appear in the finished piece.



A collection of items for on and off-stage areas

Working with Virtools always poses technical challenges of its own. Rigging the movement of the mannequins took a bit longer to adjust than we had hoped, but the results were eventually acceptable. We opted not to animate the mannequins in a realistic way, but to let them hover and remain in pre-determined poses. They can be moved like pawns to different areas of the theater.

One of the most important issues dealt with in the creation of the 3D character is the question of how we would display the video on the bodies. It is difficult to find video from a feature film that loops well and even more difficult to place that video as a texture since there is no good way to tile it without revealing the seams in the video texture. Our final decision was to position the camera directly in front of the standing character and use the camera to project a set of UV coordinates onto the character. The UVs were then scaled and moved to provide the best projection surface for viewing the film on a 3D character.

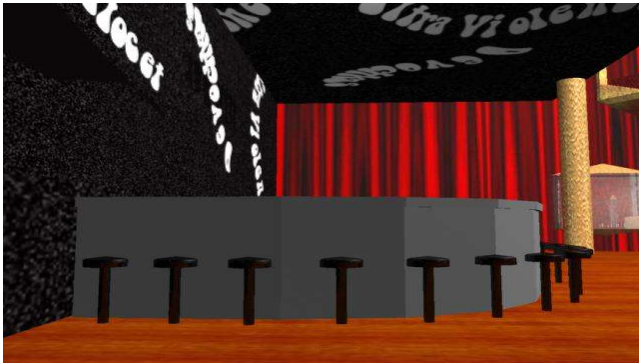
### Description of the Finished Piece

The viewer starts out in the center of the dining room area. To move through the space, the player can press the arrow keys on the keyboard and use the mouse to orient the camera direction right and left.



A view of the theatre from above

When the player collides with one of the mannequins, she can play the movie clip by pressing the shift key. At that point, the movie clip plays as a transparent plane on the entire screen.



An early version of the bar area, complete with bar stools

By making the movie clip play in this way, there is a definite shift in focalization from the previous view from the perspective of a third person observer, to the illusion of seeing the movie from the point of view of the mannequin, as though one were seeing the clip through the model's eyes.

Once the clip has finished, the mannequin is "attached" to the camera so that when the player moves around the space of the theatre, the mannequin acts as a kind of avatar, giving the impression of "driving" the mannequin. It is now possible to collide one mannequin against another and to play more movie clips. More of the mannequins can be combined in this way.

At some point later in the scene, the mannequins on stage will project or be projected upon. Some final scene from the movie will play somewhere and bring all of our efforts to a satisfying conclusion.

One of our main goals in planning the environment and interactions for this project was to avoid trying to "recreate the movie", as is done in some popular video games such as *The Lord of the Rings*, or *Terminator*. Not only is this very rarely effective at creating an enjoyable experience, it is also questionable whether it is even a goal that is worth pursuing. This is because film is a linear form. Even those filmmakers who intentionally play with non-linear ideas, such as Peter Greenaway and Dziga Vertov, end up with a linear product. Most of the time, movie scripts are written with linearity in mind, and they are deeply dependant on a progression of events to achieve their intended purpose.

Real-time 3D environments, by contrast, are interactive. The user can take any path that they want, and they control their own experience. This is, in many ways, the opposite of the experience of watching a movie. This isn't to say that one cannot create a filmic interactive experience, or that it is impossible to convey a message with an interactive environment, but simply that trying to convey the message of a movie using the linear script for inspiration is like trying to play baseball using a Normal Rockwell painting as inspiration. Therefore, our approach was to try to create an environment that somehow used the concepts of the movie as an inspiration, but avoided recreating any spaces from the movie. We wanted the clips that we chose to be meaningful in the context of the space, but not because they show the space itself.

One approach to this would be to develop environment in which the clips have had some sort of impact on the environment. Another approach, and the one we chose, was to make the clips affect the user in a way that was meaningful

in the context of the space.

In terms of sound, the theatre is divided into two sections - the bar and the audience. Moving from one section to another, the user will notice a change in the nature of the ambient crowd sounds. At the bar, the user can hear the clinking of glasses and slightly more lively conversation. In the theatre section, the user will hear chairs moving on a wooden floor, and more hushed conversation. Unlike these sounds, the music is not spatialized, but is played as background sound - albeit modified from its original form to sound as if it is playing in a large theatre.

In our experience, adding sound was a comparatively "cheap" way to dramatically enhance the experience of navigating the space. Without sound, the space seems empty and lifeless, but when the user gets feedback from her actions both visually and with sound, the experience seems complete. Playing music from the *Clockwork Orange* Soundtrack was also extremely effective in tying in the movie, while not recreating it. Since it is played in a theatre, it does not seem out of place or forced, and yet since it plays such an important role in the movie, it evokes many of the feelings that are important in the film.

## Conclusions

What would we have done differently? What have we learned?

One of the main challenges we faced in this project was deciding how we wanted to tackle the task of bringing a linear form to a non-linear medium. Far from a trivial matter, this issue was a guiding force in the project all the way to the end. As always, the technology provided plenty of headaches, but one issue in

particular was a great influence on our project; the difficulty of modeling humans. Being limited to environments that contained only a small number of people confined us to a particular type of scene. Although, in the end, it seems that we decided to ignore the issue altogether (as made evident by the fact that the soundtrack suggests that there are people in the theatre, while there are only the stationary mannequins), in the initial

brainstorming session, this was an important issue.

## References

<http://pages.prodigy.com/kubrick/kubaco.htm>

This web page offered some useful background on the Kubrick film