

佛说人生苦

THE (A)TYPICAL

CHINESE UNCLE MEDLEY



The (a)typical Chinese uncle, and a medley of his sufferings.

Uncle Wu is an average middle-aged man who, according to his own words, "didn't achieve much in life". You don't need to learn much about him. Sitting in front of his computer, he just needs to do two things: get his kid a UK visa, and keep his dad alive.

Despite being an art teacher for his whole life, my dad stopped recognizing himself as an artist in his early 20s. Under an education system where art is almost a disgrace for many, his unsupportive parents decided that he should not want more than a stable job. So, when I was 18, my dad sent me to the UK with all his life savings, hoping that I could have more choices in a liberal education system, a country with less censorship. But now, in my early 20s, I find myself facing a similar identity crisis that my dad went through 30 years ago, just in a different context: as a migrant artist, I'm struggling to continue my practice under the current socio-political climate in the UK.

The desire to be an artist is almost like a curse that won't disappear from my family throughout generations, as if we're stuck in a Samsāra. Coming from a humble background, my grandpa struggled his whole life to get more recognition as an artist - he spent all of his savings on it but never achieved more than mediocre fame. But the story (and the curse) is not just about my family. Within the first year of my career in Exeter, I saw three local arts organizations lose their venues to real estate companies, and the only higher education Fine Art course was axed with the government's funding cut. The livelihood of grassroots artists, in 'small' places across the UK has been deprived by the current government and major corporations. Every day, I witness local artists going through this Sisyphean experience where they keep on fighting for art but keep on losing.

I wonder why they continue, I wonder why I continue.

On the day that my grandpa passed away, I asked my dad how his siblings were doing. He told me they were mostly prepared for this, except for my aunt. He explained: 'Your aunt can't accept that he (grandpa) passed away despite all our efforts, but that's just part of life. **Like one of the Eight Sufferings in Buddhism, the suffering of not getting what one wants.**' He accidentally perfectly summarised what I've been struggling with, about being an artist and a bit more.

My grandpa. My dad. All the lovely artists in Exeter. Me. Through this exhibition, I'd like to talk about the unjust system for art & artists, but a bit more - it's about the fate that we can't change, the boulder that will roll down again, the Samsāra that we're stuck in...

And yet, we keep on going.

The exhibition presents an almost escape room experience, with divisions created using fabric-covered steel truss/scaffolding poles. Going through 4 stages, the audience will operate different versions of Windows systems in different settings. By interacting with the content on the PCs (files, chatboxes, and minigames), a story will be revealed. Only one person gets to be on the PC each time - others will gather in front of it like a family. With real stories from me, my family, and artists in Exeter, the exhibition provides a physical interactive experience, through a journey full of suffering - around life, death, and being an artist. While reflecting on a socio-political system that leaves no space for art, the exhibition poses wider philosophical inquiries for both artists and non-artists: Why, and how do we keep on going despite all the suffering in an increasingly hostile system? What is the role of desire in surviving through times of suffering?

Computers have always been the centrepiece of my family home. I grew up standing by my dad and watching him play video games - sometimes my dad watches while I play. Sometimes my mom also joins in. In my head, there's always an image of me/my dad/three of us on the PC in our home. But sometimes I see us and the computers appear in weird places, like in the hospital beside my grandpa on the sick bed, in the funeral hall with the video wall. It's almost out of place, but also makes perfect sense visually at all the places with screens. It also makes sense as this is literally how we live, on the computer through all the (in)significant moments of our lives.

The journey in this exhibition largely mirrors my journey in January, when I went back home for the first time in three years. I was at my own home, at the hospital visiting Grandpa, at Grandpa's funeral with my family - yet I felt like a ghost, out of place and could not do anything, like feeling when you push a button but nothing happens. While the experience on the PCs is from the dad's POV, the audience doesn't particularly play the role of my dad, me, or themselves. They are given no context on their identities, and will be 'pushed' into situations without much explanation. There's no sense of agency or achievement in this story. The completion of tasks only leads to a bigger crisis. The suffering of not getting what one wants - all the attempts to make sense of the story or make things better will be in vain.

THE EXPERIENCE

Stage 2: Windows 7, Hospital



Stage 1.5: Hallway



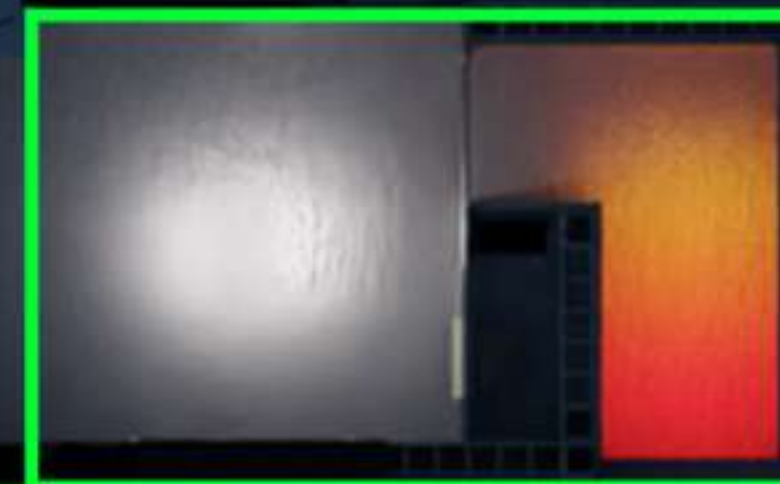
Stage 3: Windows 10, Funeral



Stage 1: Windows XP, Home



Stage 4: Windows 3.2, Crematorium



Start | End:
Uncle Wu is Live(ing)

Entry/Exit

~ On the shelf ~

- Horse ornament
- Global Talent Visa Application guideline printed on paper.



1: WINDOWS XP, HOME

Interactivity on the PC:

- 'User' kept on receiving new emails from the hospital, which suggests that 'Grandpa' is in the ICU, with payment links and forms attached. (Optional - do the paying & signing)
- 'Wife' is upset. 'User' promised to visit 'Wife', but has to cancel as 'Grandpa' is in ICU. Choose the correct dialogue in the chatbox so that she's less upset.
- The 'Kid' is coming home to visit soon, but only for a week as the 'kid' is anxious about their career with another local arts venue shutting down. The kid mentions about: Global Talent Visa, and how people are using unfair means to get it. 'Grandpa' has done something 'not fair' to the 'Dad'. Choose the correct dialogue in the chatbox so that the 'kid' might stay for longer.
- Minigame - teaching simulator. Relaxing and easy to win.
- Desktop loaded with Grandpa's art pieces and publications, where Granpa & Horse Ornament's story will be revealed.

Windows XP



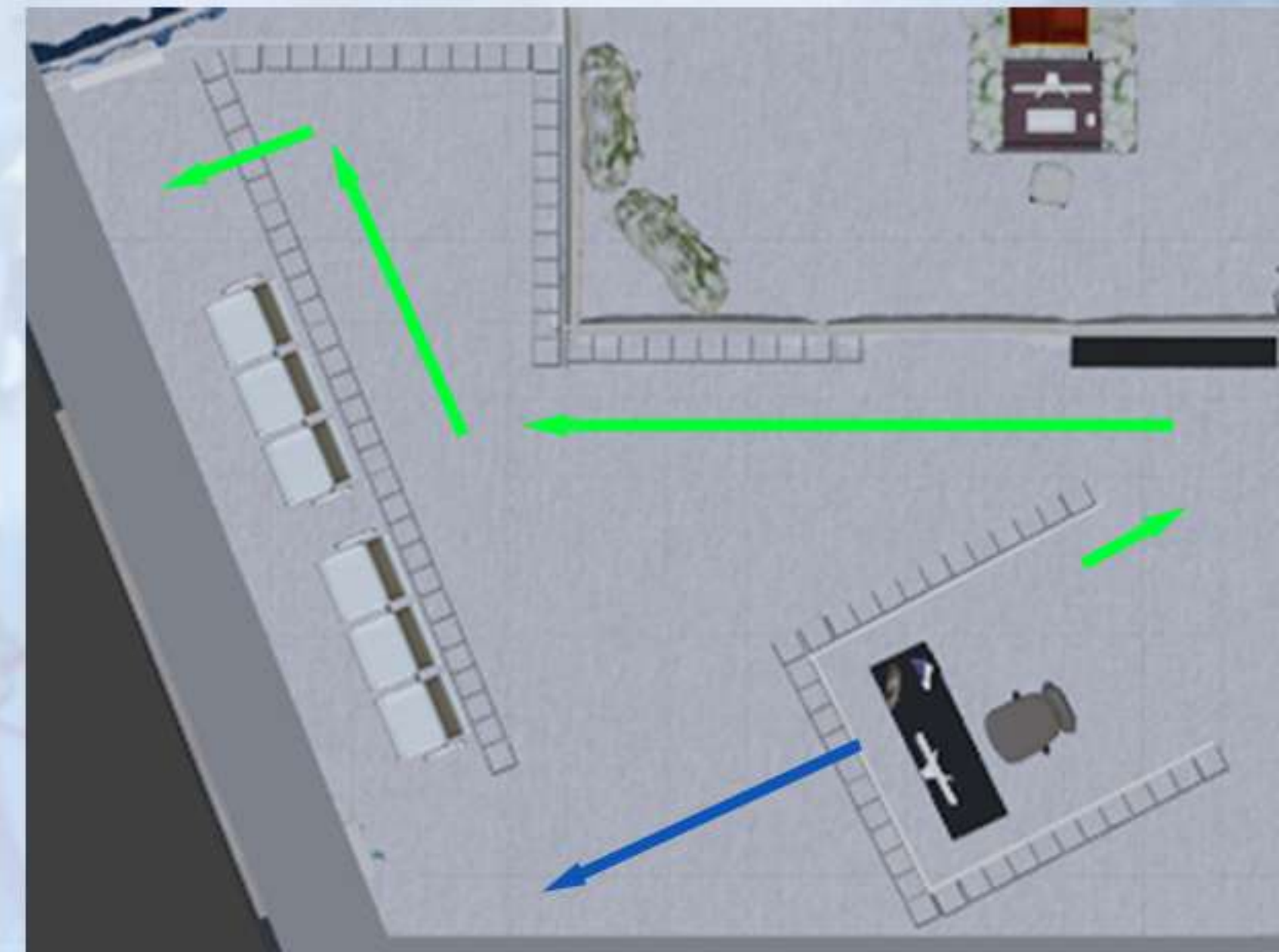
Curtain exit under desk



~To Exit the Stage~

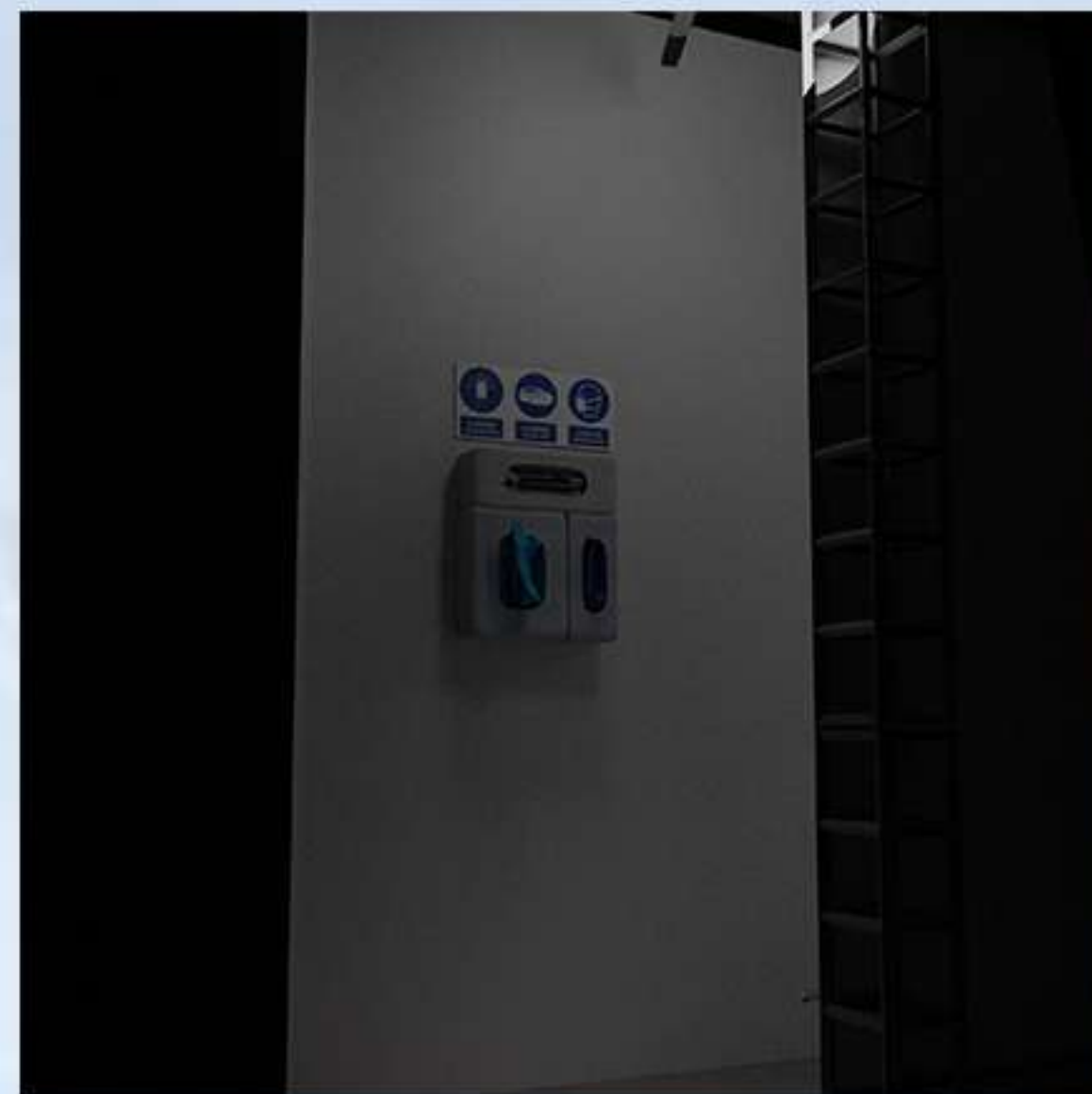
Blue route: The audience will crawl under the table to get to the exit behind the PC.

Green Route: A hidden (unlit path), wheelchair-accessible route is available on the side if needed.





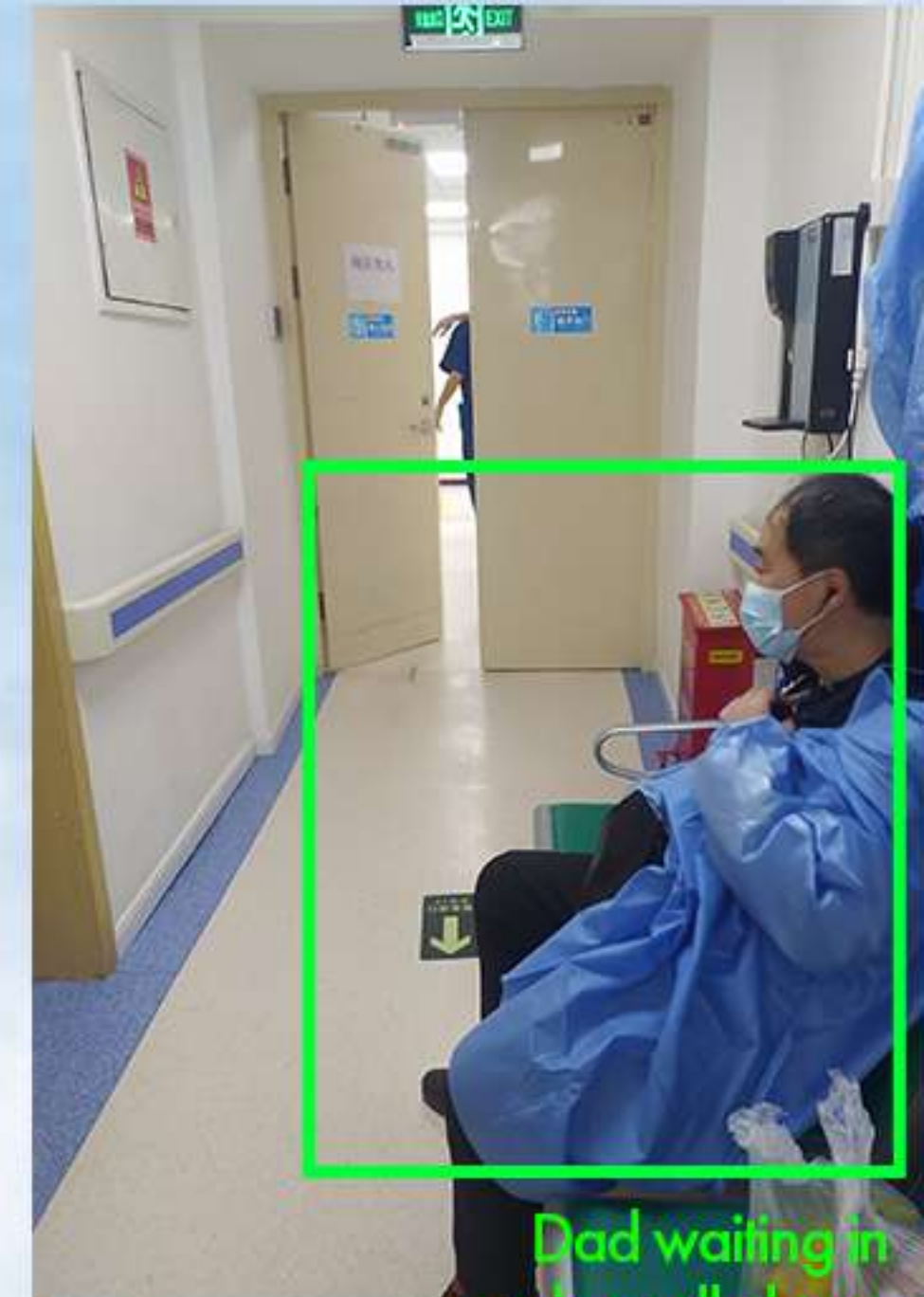
Cheap-looking hospital posters



View perspective right after exiting last stage. The sign on the wall requests putting on the surgical apron and mask provided.



A lightbox sign and the voice of a 'nurse' indicate when the visitor can enter the patient ward.



Dad waiting in awkwardly huge medical apron



Reference - from life

1.5: HOSPITAL HALLWAY

The experience of awkwardly waiting in the hospital's hallway, before entering the patient ward (2nd stage). Due to its narrow space, people on the chairs might have to lift their legs if others are passing through.

The audience will have to wait in the corridor for a minute and/or until the last group leaves the patient ward. The signals are automated by having a webcam that detects the optical flow in the patient ward. The aprons will be recycled at a 'medical waste bin' at the exit of the 2nd stage.



~ On the bed~

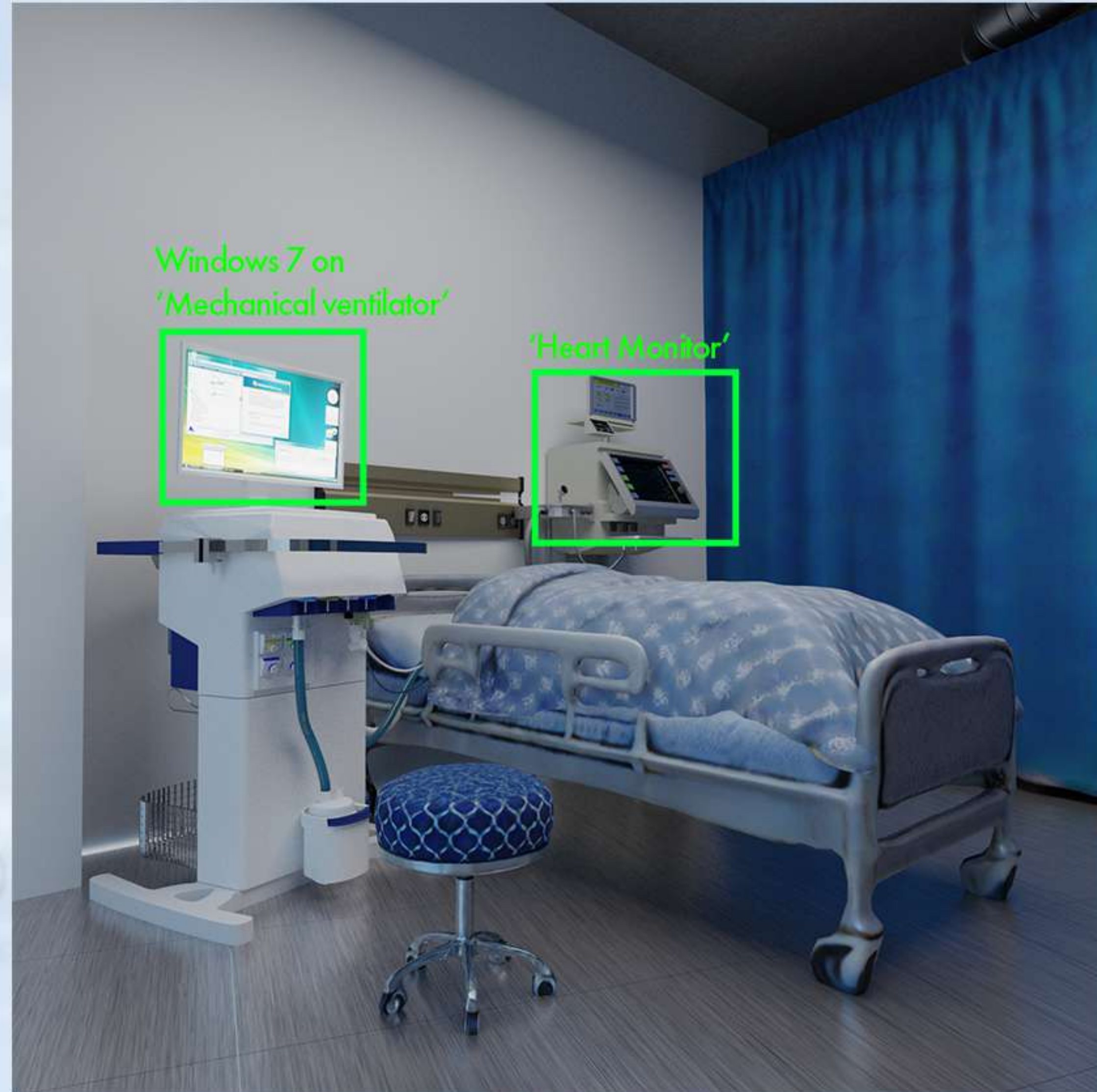
'Grandpa' - clothes shop mannequin with a tube inserted at throat. Badly AI-generated faces, mapped projection on mannequin with shape-shifting effect to make Grandpa's deformed face.



Reference - from life

- Upon login, a short 8-bit film of the 'Dad' picking up the 'Kid' from the airport. 'Kid' and 'Dad' chatting on the metro back home, about people desiring things and not getting things.
- 'User' only receives one email from the hospital, informing that 'Grandpa' has got better and is in 'Step Down Unit', where visiting is allowed.
- 'Wife' is upset, as 'User' has essentially given up his career to take care of 'Grandpa' & 'Grandma'. 'Wife' mentioned that the siblings of the 'User' are making more money than him, and 'Grandpa' has always preferred his siblings over him. Choose the correct dialogue so that she might be less upset.
- Teaching simulator game is now more difficult with a shorter 'energy' bar.
- A frustrating minigame of writing the most 'polite' message possible by adding more and more tangents, where the 'User' is asking an old friend to help with the 'Kid's' visa.
- 'User' keeps on receiving messages from the 'Kid', who struggles to locate household items. Reply to the kid while doing everything else.

PC glitches in the end - chatbox with 'Wife' jumps out, with a message from 'User': 'The doctors are transferring him into the ICU again', The heart monitor starts beeping, the tube spits out brown mucus. 'Maybe you should leave' repeated in the voice of the 'nurse', also projected all over the room.



Windows 7 on
'Mechanical ventilator'

'Heart Monitor'

2: WINDOWS 7, HOSPITAL

3: WINDOWS 10 @ FUNERAL



Reference - from life

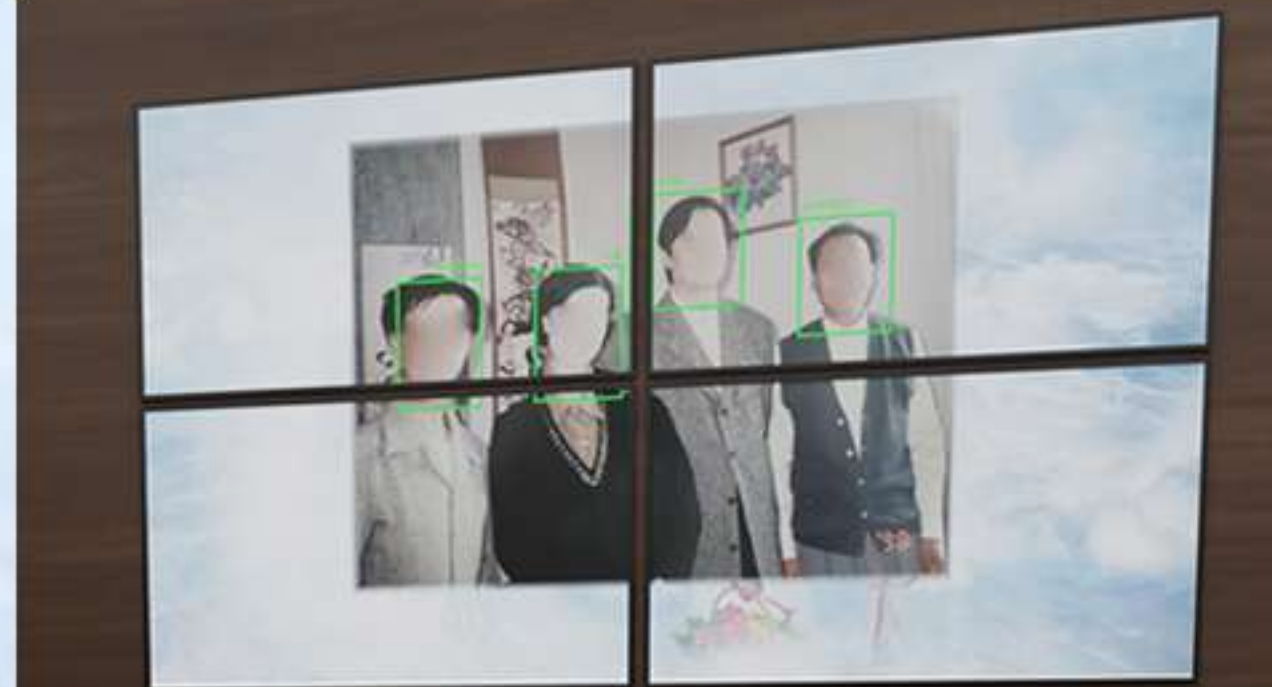
- 'User' kept on receiving new emails from the funeral service, with payment links and forms attached. (Optional - do the paying & signing)
- Dialogue in the SMS app has been updated with communications around the attendance of the funeral.
- 'Kid' asking the 'Dad' to stop asking for his friend's help, sending a (real) screenshot of communications with Arts Council England, where they said they won't endorse social practice artists for visa as it's just 'workshops and activities'.
- Drag & upload pictures for the funeral. All uploaded pictures immediately show up on the big screen, except the ones that only feature 'User' / his family with 'Grandpa'.
- Teaching simulator crashes if attempted to run.

~In the Coffin~

Similar to the last stage - mannequin with mapped projection AI-generated faces, but 'happy' yet uncanny looking with heavy makeup.



Windows 10 (Laggy)



Inspired by Babaoshan Funeral Home, Beijing

Video wall showing old photos of Grandpa (and with the family), 'Buddhist Frutiger Aero' backdrop. In replication of their slightly cyber-dystopian service, there's a QR code on Grandpa's portrait that people can scan to read the eulogy, leave a like ('leave a flower'), or comment ('send a condolence').

Windows 3.2 is one of the first operating systems that my dad used (when he was in his 20s), and also a special one as it was only available in simplified Chinese. In the previous 3 stages, the user was all about solving problems for the kid and the grandpa - his own presence is almost invisible on those PCs, despite he's the one using them. However, the PC with Windows 3.2 was the only PC that truly belonged to him, one that presented a clear image of the protagonist who's been hiding this whole time.

Toilet door - also painted in the style of furnace gate.



Exit - furnace gate
(Path towards the Start | End point)

'Operation panel' - Windows 3.2



No mouse or keyboard to input. Button panel to navigate & read through files: 'User's' drawings, notes from singing practice, diaries about his dreams as an artist and musician, and how he gave up on his dreams.

Press 'Start' button on the panel to wipe and turn off the PC, activate the burning fire light effect in the furnace.

Walk into the furnace.

~Note~

Despite an unhappy story, none of the things on the PC will be in a very heavy tone - my dad takes himself super unseriously, and he constantly makes jokes about everything.

When he was in the hearse, he took a picture of the coffin and sent it to the family group chat, with the caption: 'Not feeling the motion sickness this time right?' (My grandpa has motion sickness.) I hope to include a lot of things like that.

Reference - from web



4: WINDOWS 3.2 @ CREMATORIUM

Right in front of the door, where people enter/exit, they'll see a video wall that (fake) livestreams what my dad is doing in the front room, from the perspective of a security camera.

When people enter, I hope they will laugh at the footage of a random dude doing very random things (also constantly on his phone), be tempted to go on his PC, and then laugh even more at his weird humour. When people leave, I hope it gives some sort of happy closure to a story that is mostly sad and has no end. I hope it sends a message that the story is neither finished nor unfinished, in a sense of just existing and living with it, despite all that we desire and not getting.



Repeat the Samsāra?

START|END-UNCLE WU IS LIVE(ING)

Reference - from life



OUTREACH & EVENT

Who gets to be an artist and have the space for art? How do we survive with the desire for art under the current socio-political climate?

While I highly appreciate Arebyte's strong commitment to supporting emerging artists, I believe in the importance of also actively recognising its relatively privileged position as an art gallery/organisation. In the spirit of this exhibition, the outreach & event ideas aim to recognize and celebrate the grassroots and their ways of living, with their love for art despite all the sufferings, within and beyond the space of Arebyte Gallery.

~Outreach Project~

Rewilding the Arts - Invite to Seed Bomb Lost Arts Spaces (Collaboration with Exeter Seed Bank)

An invitation to rewild, and host mini funerals in memorial of the lost Arts Spaces that have been left empty across the country. Protesting unethical urban planning, and calling for more space for art, without risking arrest.

At the funeral stage, the audience can find packets of wildflower seeds hiding amongst the fake flowers, with invitations to seed bomb a lost, empty Arts & Culture Venue (gallery, community art space, indie book shop...). They are encouraged to share this process, and about the lost venue on Instagram tagging Arebyte, where they'll be reposted on the IG Stories.

~Possible Events~

Talk/Panel Discussion (Collaboration with Migrants in Culture)

In focus of the suffering and survival of Grassroots Im/migrant Artists.

Immigrant Uncles Medley

Fancy Dress Concert of Immigrant Uncles who almost became musicians.

Journey to Global Talent Visa

DnD Style Game Night, in the challenge of getting a Global Talent Visa.

~Appendix Links~

3DModel (.blend, images, and video tour):

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1QLNvs9E911-7IH_tigl_y9eA6W-vOkK-u?usp=sharing

(Modified) Video reference of 'Buddhist Frutiger Aero' backdrop from Babaoshan Funeral Home:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1mlRoU1olyjH-QvcHgMif3Jcag5r7lrFF/view?usp=sharing>