

Shave

Playing with Conventions in Society and Game Design

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SHAVE (Böckler 2018) is an art game which explores the social conventions surrounding shaving and hair within a game system. The main mechanic of the game comprises the task of completely removing the hair from a variety of hairy objects. The player can interact with the objects directly via touch input on a mobile device. During the game the combinations of hair and object become more and more bizarre, and players begin to question the sense of their actions. Diverse sensations and associations emerge, which point beyond the actual game.

THE BACKGROUND

SHAVE was developed in the context of a master's project at Zurich University of the Arts. Based on the premise that we have many implicit expectations and fixed concepts relating to the games medium, art games were examined as a tool for expanding the limits of conventional game design. These are mostly short games, produced in small teams and with little focus on commercial success, and therefore offer game designers the necessary creative freedom in order to develop strong and extraordinary experiences.

THE THEME – A GAME ABOUT SHAVING?

In the field of Triple-A computer games, certain topics are repeatedly dealt with, including war, territorial power struggles or rebellion. Their narratives are

formed from archetypes, cultural-historical clichés and stereotypical themes that can be easily read and understood by the player. Content in which we can predict what kind of experience will await us is appealing, and many Triple-A computer games operate according to this lowest common denominator. For comparison, imagine a visit to a fast food restaurant which promises us a predictable and consistent experience. By contrast, an experimental food choice, such as molecular cuisine, offers new flavors and taste combinations – with the high risk that it may not be for everyone. And you probably won't order the same food twice. The motivation for visiting an experimental kitchen is not pure pleasure, but entertainment, which also contains an element of surprise and curiosity for the new and unexpected.

Figure 1: Shaving a tea cup in the game as homage to Meret Oppenheim (1936).



Source: Sonja Böckler

THE AMBIVALENCE OF HAIR AND PLAYING WITH UNPLEASANTNESS

There is no conventional story in *SHAVE* to guide the player through the game. Instead, the game engages the player by means of a topic from everyday life that almost everybody can relate to: body hair and our weird conventions around it. In our society this topic contains a great ambivalence of meaning, and it illustrates how our interpretation of one and the same thing vastly depends on the context. Full thick hair on the head is considered beautiful, representing health

and youthfulness. But as soon as the hair is no longer anchored to the head and eventually ends up in the drain or in the soup, we feel disgusted. Hair on women's legs or under the armpits is unattractive, but a hairy male chest can stand for masculinity.

These ambivalent views about hair are the essence of the intended gaming experience. The player is confronted with abstract fur-covered objects and the simple task of shaving them. In this basic set-up, different meanings, stories and interpretations arise. It is useful that people tend to recognize meaning and context in everything they encounter, but, to keep the disgust in the player's imagination, the style of the game is very clean. Soft-looking objects float in a clean white room, reminiscent of a clinical facility or futuristic laboratory. The simplicity and reduction to the essentials also supports this imaginary space. Only the strong contrast between hair and skin invites the player to intervene.

Some players are already disgusted as soon as they touch the virtual hairy objects. They get goose bumps from the noise or cannot watch how the hair falls down while shaving. Others feel great joy when they remove the inappropriate hairs from this otherwise clean world. A field of tension opens up between sensual pleasure and disgust. The experience can even take on a symbolic or metaphorical character, and so a rather untypical gaming experience is created.

At some point the player is introduced to a popsicle which is completely devoid of hair. When the popsicle is touched, hair starts growing on it. The shaving mechanic is reversed and the goal in this level is to cover the whole popsicle with hair. Players often reacted with disgust, because they could not avoid associating the sensual delight of licking a popsicle with their feelings of disgust at having a hair in the mouth at the same time.

Figure 2: Popsicle with hair growth.



Source: Sonja Böckler

ACTIONS CREATE MEANING

Big game titles often rely on tried and tested mechanics, for instance, a first-person shooter or a strategy-building game. Just like the similarities in the themes chosen, games are based on the same game design ingredients that have worked so many times before. Therefore, the mechanics are often not perfectly tuned to the narrative and the interactions the player performs. In *SHAVE*, the mechanic and the setting both contribute to a certain curated experience. Based on the idea “Do It, Don’t View It” (Mechner 2008), the experience is created through the player’s interaction with the game, with a special emphasis on the sensations encountered. To challenge our common sense of purpose and target-orientation, every level in *SHAVE* ends with a pleasant sound and burst of hairy confetti raining over the screen, highlighting the absurdity of the goal that the player is aiming for.

SURREALISTIC REFERENCES

In this game, various motifs from surrealism are employed and thus further scope for interpretation is invited into the game experience. The shapes, animations or colors of the objects deviate slightly from reality: through a nuanced shifting in the representation they appear subtly different and slightly disturbing.

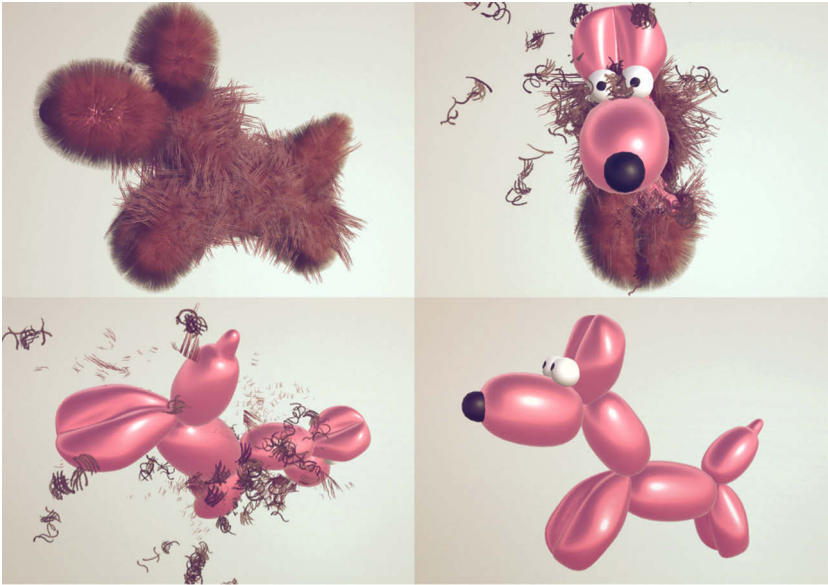
A fur-lined teacup, for example, is inspired by Meret Oppenheim's *Object* (1936). The delicate porcelain is hidden under the wild hair, and the players usually very much enjoy freeing the cup from the hair. As a further homage, reference is made to René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* (1929). The original painting features the famous text "C'est ne pas une pipe", which plays with our perception of reality and representation. In the 'hairy' context of the game, this pipe raises questions such as: Does it make a difference to my sensation whether I shave real or virtual hair? And is my emotional response as artificially generated (perhaps through social conditioning) as the pipe I am shaving?

PLAYING WITH EXPECTATIONS

Most objects and shapes in *SHAVE* seem to be easily readable, and players can tell which object is hidden under the hair by its silhouette. Others toy with the expectations of the player. For example, a hairy triangular object is presented. At this point the player has already learned that they can 'shave' the objects with one finger and turn them with two fingers. But now, when they start to rotate the object, it is no longer stiff, as they learned to expect from the tea cup, pipe or egg they shaved in the previous levels. Instead, this object wobbles vividly as if it were made of soft flesh. While turning and watching the movement of the object, the player still cannot see what is under the hair. Only after shaving is a disembodied fleshy nose revealed.

In another level the player is presented with a dog, on which only the bright eyes are not covered by thick brown fur. The form underneath is not clearly discernible due to its long hair. From the stiff pose, one might think of a stuffed animal. But as soon as the player starts to 'shave' the dog, a bright pink plastic skin appears under the hair. The sound of rubbing a balloon is heard and the part of it that is being shaved dents a little, as if the material is yielding. The whole interaction here is only slightly different from the previous levels, but the player now thinks of the sharp razor blade one generally uses to shave. Unlike before, they now fear that the balloon dog will burst if they touch it.

Figure 3: Will the hairy balloon dog burst if the player is not careful enough?



Source: Sonja Böckler

FINDINGS

SHAVE is not just a game that is enjoyable and entertaining, but it also invites the player to reflect on their own attitudes towards hair and how rarely we fundamentally question whether our conventions make sense at all. If we understand conventions as rules of our society, then the transfer of these rules into a game can make the essence of a convention visible. In this way, simply shaving objects is contributing to a larger discussion. Keeping it symbolic and not too concrete allows the player to find their own meaning in their actions within the game. Consequently, players did not feel instructed by the game, but rather invited to reflect on the justifications behind the real-life conventions concerning hair.

Deliberately limiting the entire game to one particular experience, with a strong focus on a specific interaction throughout its duration, has highlighted the need to adjust common game design approaches and develop custom solutions instead. Furthermore it can be very inspiring introducing a somewhat unusual

topic into the medium of computer games and shaping one's own expressive voice to suit the game.

Not relying on proven game and motivation design patterns made it difficult to predict the outcome of certain game design decisions. That in turn made the development probably more extensive than an out-of-the-box approach would have done. Sometimes I consciously broke with common game design patterns. Because many people have a certain expectation of how games work, there is a risk that gamers become so irritated that they stop playing, which also reveals our narrow expectations of games. However, games that invite new themes and new storytelling approaches in game design are an important element in the evolution of computer games.

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