Ma Famille − narrative approaches in play

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ABSTRACT

Ma famille is a hat design project for role play. It is a group of characters, they create a small family. There are 5 hats in total, and they were designed as creatures who has different personalities. Ma famille was designed for a more open and abstract way of expressing character and moods. There is no fixed meaning and stories for any of them. You might not recognize anything familiar from them at first, you have to search, touch and wear them to find out what they are for you.
There were lots of inspiration came from children. There are several workshops carried out through the process, and had big influence on the design decision later. Ma famille was designed for the interaction between children and adults, for play and also for balancing power between adult and kids. The main focus of this project is about identity construction and non-linear story telling. The material, colour and tactility was chosen and designed as a whole experience.

Key words: Role play, story telling, identity construction, costume design

CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

Background

Communication and Interaction

I was always looking for interesting interaction in daily life, people interact with objects, gestures, movements, colours, lights, etc. For me, that is the fun part of play activities, and everything could be play.
I got highly inspired by the body language and lighting signals in airport traffic control, while I was going to take off. For me, those airplanes are like calm huge monsters, quietly following little human's waving hands. There are little robots with two light blinking one after the other along the runway, I always feel empathy towards them, since I feel like the whole life of them is just one single thing, blinking eyes. At the same time, vehicles are medium size creatures moving around the big airplane. When you look at them carefully, they all looks different and funny. It is a highly abstract, hidden fantasy world for me, seem there is a parallel way of life happening, but no one noticed.
I start to think, how can I make objects which trigger kids and adults interact in an interesting way?

Identity construction and gestalt

"According to G. H. Mead(1969) the Self is born when the individual takes the role or attitude of the Other to the individual himself. " Through our childhood, we are looking for what is self and the identity of ourselves by playing role play games and giving meaning to objects and ourselves. 1 So role play actually play an important role in helping children looking for their identity and building up their personalities. " The child makes it self and object for itself as a subject (with the help of Other). Now play, and especially role play is a way of very concrete symbolization of this process. In play the child can combine many important things. Some of them are: 1) Looking at the Self by projecting it into the toy. 2) Giving to this projected Self attributes that are wished for. 3) Exerting the power longed for. So playing with toys is a way of trying to realize history and projections of the future in the moment that is present now. And it is done by "translating" life with real people into the material language of toys."(195, lars-Erik Berg)

Inspiration from other field

I got lots of inspiration from the play therapy's methodology on story telling with kids. The material that therapist uses to trigger kids' interaction and telling stories gave me a first glance of what kind of thing I could create for role play. Since they start with the interaction they want from kids then they look for existing toys as a tool. It is the opposite of what I normally read from sociologists' research. Since instead, Sociologist starts with the toys in the market and see how kids react to them(Anders Nelson, 1999). The book from Gunilla Lindqvist (The Aesthetic of Play) talked about role play from a didactic perspective, I see a lot of existing examples of kids interact with imaginative characters.

Idles

Most of the figure or character designs in the market now are either illustrating heroes or perfect idles from different era in adult world. Mostly because they are highly recognizable since they are always connect to certain stories from mass media and movie industry. But when you hold them and feel it, they are almost the same all the time, same size, same material, even same faces just with different costumes.
In reality, people are so diverse, somebody is fat and soft but tall, somebody is very strong and has tough, muscles all around the body, somebody is small but has very flexible body. Most of the design now are not materialize this variety, and thus not good enough for children who are having difficulties to express themselves.

A group of objects

From the starting points, I decided that I would like to design a group of objects. You can call them family or friends. I called my project Ma famille, since for me friends are also part of the family. The concept of family is a small society, people often have different ages, looking, personalities and sizes, etc. We sometimes want to experience to be someone else, or like to hang out with the person who has the opposite personalities we have. So I want to design a group of objects which let children and adults try to imagine, to be someone else. It is a safe way to experience another type of life and create meanings for ourselves.
"The Moomin Valley is a "fantastic reflection of our own, a literary world to step into and get to know through its own rules." Tove Jansson purposely lets the different books reflect different outlooks on life. Her characters and her approach is an interpretation of our experience of life. "(105, Lindqvist)
A family of Objects could materialize those personalities and features which came from real life into a free narrative platform.

Styling, semiotics, narrative approaches

The interaction between adults and Kids during the narrative play is very crucial, Adult should understand that telling a story about themselves and the community is not something only for the kids, it is also a way to understand the kids and enhance the relationship between children and adults.
The good way is to design objects attract both adult and kids, So the play signal should be clear towards both of them, in order to make adult enjoy or be amused rather than just cater for the play wish from the child.

*Designed object should be able to be interpreted into different meanings or could attract people from different backgrounds. The semiotic information by **tactility, colour, shapes, sizes** should balance between being touched and very abstract.*

personal purpose

I am personally interested in designing objects with abstract shape and investigate on people's reaction on shape, sizes, colour and tactility. I have never done playful thing for story telling before, so I was really excited to do so this time. I am very intrigued by my previous project(tactility memory game), so I would like to do this type of research deeper. I add this new elements story telling this time into the project, and It was always inspiring to combine the knowledge I gained from the previous project to the current one.
I always try to let my design more open in the sense of how people perceive it. By adding story telling this new elements, the project for me became more exciting than the pervious ones.

Problem Formulations

Become someone and with someone
The design result will give children the chance to imagine they are with someone or become someone, who they wants to be or be with.

Non Idle and non perfection
The design may be translated into someone looks like you, or something you are lack of and looking for. But there is no perfection or idle. Designed feature will be interpreted variously by different people from different ages, backgrounds.

Hat as creature
Hats are simple and strong signal of identifying a person's interests, personality, moods, taste, etc. Besides, hats is such a common artifact almost everybody knows how to react to it, as long as it looks fun, the play signal is there.
Those hats physically looks like hats or cap but are designed as creatures living on the head. So the main focus will not be the normal function of hats, but the mood and personality it creates.

Delimitations

It was the first time for me to make hats, so I have to learn from basic. But I felt that it also creates possibilities for me, since I am not a hat maker, I will not think about hats in a hat maker' logic I assume.
But this fact also limit my time schedule, I have to try to learn skills through the process and at the same time design.

Questions

Do my designs have faces? (actually faces normally make more sense towards adult than children during my observation) If so, how abstract it could be?

How deep I go into the tactility, material choices, will it largely influence the producibility?

How to keep the design looks like a family at the same time each of them has so much individual feature?

*How to balance the power between adult and children in the play? (hat, mask)*

Linear or non linear story telling?

IMPLEMENTATION

Gathered information/Data collection

I got numerous inspiration from African art, Hats fashion, pedagogue's research, classic characters. I was looking for emotions and gestalt examples in our daily life which is simple and strong.
I like african art since sometimes I really don't have any idea of what it is about, but it is so strong, that I couldn't stop watching it, and I couldn't forget it for long. When I was looking at it, I was thinking a lot of association, but at the same time I also feel like I couldn't come up with any conclusion. I wanted to achieve this kind of quality in my work, it is so strange but touching.

Long
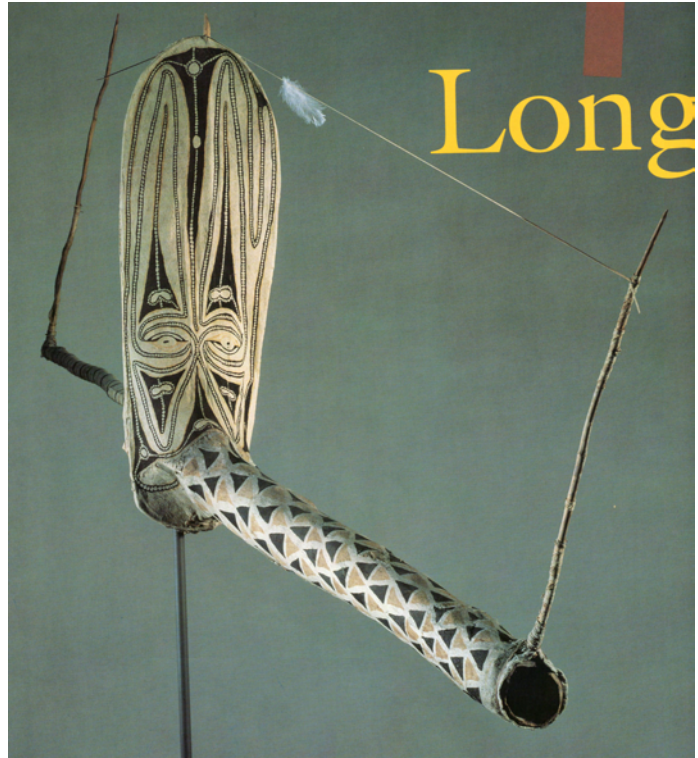
I went to paris during the preparation time for inspiration, then saw an exhibition of dance in pompidou. It was really inspiring and gave me a new perspective to think about, the movement. I see a dancer's video, her whole performance was overwhelmed by her tremendously big dress, the shape you see from her movement is the dance itself.

Then I start to spend energy of looking for examples of using physical experience to express a meaning. I believe the difference senses experience of wearing my design should be considered as a whole.

Then I was wondering what kind of emotion is the easiest and strongest in our life? I got an answer from the book, The Aesthetics of Play, (Lindqvist 1995), it talked about the emotions that is important when a writer and illustrator making a children book, Fear. Fear exist from our early life and come along with us through our whole life. "Fear is something which cannot be avoided. Tove Jansson herself has said: " I think there is an element of fear in every honest book for children." "(96, Lindqvist) Fear, become one of my key point to think about when I was designing the hats group. It is such a strong emotion, which can trigger tons of other moods, it is one the most complicated emotion in human society. Sometimes we scared, sometimes we are looking for horrors, sometimes we are shy, sometimes we are brave.

When I was looking at those successful example of stories and characters, they are mostly very open and dynamic, that's also why the writers could create so many episodes and people don't get tired at all.

"These characters are not people, and they are not animals, and absolutely not traditional mythological characters--- maybe they are simple a camouflage for normal, human behavioural patterns, who at the same time have a more extensive margin for action" (105, Lindqvist)

And this openess is really the quality I am going to look for while my design process.

Conceptual work and sketches

earliest sketches
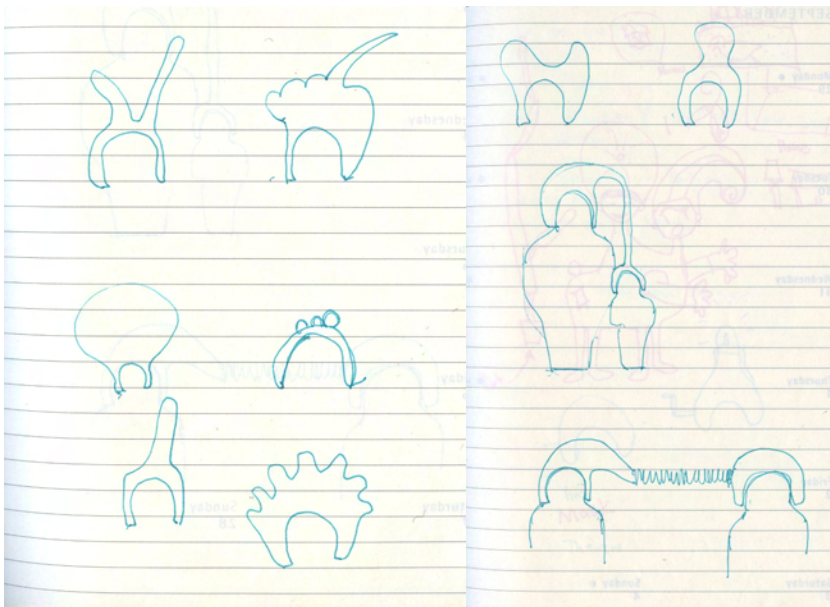
At the very beginning, I was searching for different possibilities for people to interact with the hats I am going to design. I didn't make hats or costumes before, and I am gonna make hats for story telling. But there is one thing I know, I don't want to make the character of the hats static, I want my design could be interpreted in different ways. But how abstract I can go? Do I need structures to help me seek for shapes? So I did a lot of research on old masks and statues from african art, theatre costume(especially dancing costumes), since I also like the movement of costume, I think it is also an inportant part of the design.

I would like to design the hats from colour, shape, physical experience and tactility, But it turned out to be little bit difficult to start, since there are too many thing to think about.

When I looked at the african art, I feel like the visual thing is too strong that you might forget about what material it is made of. And I think to attract people from the first moment, I need very strong visual message, then it is the tactility and other perspectives.

I was bit stuck in coming up one mood to start with form giving, then I try to read lot of pictures from high fashion. Since they are expressing strong signals with a high simplicity and modernity.

*I read an article about fashion in cold war, I saw the picture of the cover of the book named, **fear and fashion in the cold war**, it was a women wearing a hat, but the hat looks mostly like a mask. I feel that message is so strong so I decided working on this form first, the form for fears.*

I start to work on different ways or how much you expose your face, to seek for forms of different level of "fear". I also add other elements on the hat to see what kind emotion or possibilitie they could create.

RESULTS

The results of the project

Ma famille are five hats for role play. They are abstract in shapes and dynamic in meanings.
The most important part is the various interaction from adult and kids, It was always different.

5 hats
size for age group: 6 year-old and above
material: wool, cotton, silk

Usage
Ma famille has two kind of function
1. They work as a tool for art teacher or parents or play therapist to open up kids's mind, and let
children tell stories about the world around them. 2. It is a toy for adult and kids.

Personalities choice:

I start with 4 setup personality, shy, curiosity, queen, double personality.

Then I did 3 workshop with kids, it opened up my design, so I decided to develop the hat by the way you expose your face, based on my previous scenario but at the same time keep it open-ended.

Material choice*:*

I deliberatly chose more "adult material" in term of pattern, colour, material quality for 2 reasons. First, from previous project I noticed that kids got interested in "unusual material", which was not largely used in toy or children goods design. They react to the material, but in a different way than adult.

Second, I want to balance the power between adult and kids. So the design is not only for kids to wear, it also have to attract adult's attention. When a grown-up person wear the hats, it immediately change the power of the person towards kids.

Colour and Shape choice

Colour and shapes largely interact with each other in this project. Sometimes I tried with the same shape with different colour, or the same colour into different shapes, then see what kind of change they make in terms of association.

I made the black hat first and tried with kids at the very beginning. Then I noticed that colour has very big influence on the imagination of kids. Black is also a special colour, it has such strong impact on the association. So I decided to make this hat shape into two colour and see what will happen. So there are the red hat and black hat. I try to choose more "soft colour" later in order to have even stronger contrast with the black colour. But at the same time, I was looking for cold and calm colour, warm and vibrant colour for different hat shapes.

Process

The process of this project is two parts, internal and external. Since there is my own formgiving process and selfstudy process on hatmaking. External process is about talking with kids, parents and workshops. Of course, these two parts influence each other very much.

At the begining of the project it was more internal learning process, later workshops with kids start to give me lot of new ideas.
I start from the hatmaking course to see what is a hat, and how to shape it like what I wanted to.

I actually got a lot of inspiration in the course, since hatmaking itself is a resource of art, they are very extravagant and expressive. So many hatmaker's work intrigued me a lot.
I tried with getting to know the material and try to choose some material that express what I want.
At the same time, I tried to learn how to shape a expression into a hat.

later I started to do workshop to test my mockups. It turned out to be very productive process, children's interaction with those model made me feel more clear what do I should do. I made my

design more open and more dynamic. I was really into hat shape at the beginning, after talking with parents and designers and kids, I feel like I should break the traditional hat shape, instead, I should design them like creatures. They have life, they have stories by themselves.

3 Workshops with kids and reflections

age 3-10

Main reflection: trying with kids make my design become more open and deep into the shape, material and colour. Colour has great impact on kids' reaction in this project, but the shape also help a lot on their association. The most interesting thing is when I ask them to make a story out of it during one of the workshop, they didn't use any association.

Workshop No.1
date: 16th March 2012
ISGR international elementary school, art course
Age: grade 3
Usage: as a story telling tool

Content:

First round : We wore the black hats in front of the class and ask them what do you think we are?

Their reaction: pumpkin! chicken! a snowman with a carat on the top! robber! night! art!

Second round: please imagine that one of us become one of your family member, what will happen? Please make a story by drawing or clay sculpture.

Stories from kids:

One day one of the family member came back home, and all the other people at home was shocked to see him. Nobody talked to him anymore. He started to feel sad. Then the family started to realize that they were too mean to him, so they start to talk to him again, and they are happy together ever.

One day Dad came home with a mask on his head. The mum and kids got scared, they ran away. after a while, the kids talked to their mum, " Wait mum, he is still our dad!" "Yes, he is still the same dad." Then they ran back home and happily come back to father.

Reflections:

1. *All of the kids chose male family member as the character, most of them chose father, and 2 of the kids chose grandfather! It make me think, probably for kids, the colour and the shape together indicate a male image.*
2. *they didn't use any association inside of the story, ex they didnt't say father become a pumpkin as they said before. A lot of the pupils focus on the shocked reaction. They think it is unbelievable. Some of the story came little bit sad at the beginning, but most of them had a happy ending. It made me think about people's general reaction of dramatical change in daily life.*

Workshop No.2
20th March 2012
the international preschool
age range 3-6
usage: toy

It was interesting to do workshop in this preschool, since I was there several times, so I almost remember the personality of those kids there. It made me easier to notice changes, and undstand the situation deeper
We have 6 kids as a group. Then we call one of them to come and try, while the others were playing LEGO nearby.

They were scared by the black colour, especially after they looked at themselves through the mirror. They opened their mouth and immdiately took it off and ran away. This effect interested me a lot. Kids were influenced each other very quickly, so it became very hard to convince more kids to wear the hats anymore. we tried with 3 kids totally, some of them said they are not scared. But all of them kept silent while their fellow was wearing the hats, which is quite strange, seems there is a social tension suddenly among them. (which I didn't see in the older group)
Me and two other teachers were wearing the same hats together and ask opinion from the 6 kids. One of the more talkative boy said, he think the material looks dusty and old. (which i never think about it before. it was also interesting) they associated the hat with pumpkin in halloween.

Reflection:

1. *try with soft colour and smooth surface material to do the same shape, and see what will happen.*
2. *the function of the product i design could be A for art course or course for learning social skills. the hat become a tool to trigger kids imagine and create. B. play situation, the product become the center objects to play with, such as role play. C. private usage*
3. *Maybe the scary feature of the black hat is good*
4. *The way of kids and adult appreciating material is so different. Wool as a relatively more expensive and high end material, for kids probably just looks dusy and old.*
5. *Colour influnce younger kids (3-5) more than older kids.*

After those workshops, I produced a new series of model, based on the knowledge I gained in the first part of the project. I also changed material, to make it more clean and strong in colour.

I send them an email to order 502. 600. 300. 400
each half/kilo

compu...

Soon I realized that I need to use the real material to do even mock-up, since the actual colour, softness, texture will change the looking and tactility so much.
For example the real material I used in the end is much softer than the mock-up material. But the softness give people a relaxing feeling, I quite like it, especially after I tried them with kids later.

Workshop NO.3
11th April
4 hats done, green, orange, black and red
usage: toy, future theatre costume
(one day before I showed them to adult and discussed with them about the green and orange one.
the green one trigger one male say that people need courage to wear. when asked about the reason,
he said, i am afraid i will be recognized by iclandic people as dwarfs living underneath of the
ground.

lots of people see the orange hat looks like a elephant with only one ear.)

1st and 2nd grade international school

This time I didn't explain too much about the hat itself, i just tell them there are some hats, try it
out!

The whole process i was also just a observer, i didn't interact with the kids so much, they were running to the mirror and try to wear different ones. They talked to the teachers and play with me as well.

First the teacher who was in charge call two girls from grade 1 try them out. they tried one by one, but didn't say anything and run away. we thought they are not interested, then 2 minutes later, they bring the whole group of pupils from another room. Most of them are girls and from grade 1, some of them are from grade 2.
they start to try one by one, and start to laugh, ran to the mirror.
Then some of them left and bring more boys to come. Boys were more shy to do the try out, girls start to push them to do it, then boys start to feel bit frustrated and went away, but there are one chinese boys left here and start to try each one of the hats. He is also very shy, but seems that he enjoyed it.

"The orange one makes me look like a fish. I like fish!" one of the girl from grade 2 said to me, later the orange one became her favourite. (That was very big surprise for me, since when I talked with the tutor, we thought it was less strong design in the group, she invented a new way to wear it as well)She tried to wear it several times, and she never left our corner we were sitting, it looked like that she really want it. she tried with the big yellow one and stand still in front of her teacher, and say, "i am a mushroom, i like to be a mushroom."
Then she wear the black hat, while I was wearing the blue one. she pretended to be a thief and take my hat away.

Other girls from the first grade, they say the blue one is something from the water. the girl from grade 2 said it is an octopus.

Reflection:
1. I will try with same shape in different colour, the red and black one.
2. Change details to make them even more like a group.
3. Use "unusual" material combination.

Reflections

Now I look at my project and the whole processs, a lot of questions has been answered now, and at the same time there are more questions triggered by the result and during the process.

Reflections on the presentation

1.

My Opponent linda holmer suggest me to talk with psychiatrists who have experience on play theraphy and get some feed back from a another perspective than designer. Besides, she suggested me to chanlenge myself more. Since the workshop I did till now, it is mostly traditional way that adult organise it and children follow. She want me to do workshop in a more democratic way, between children and adult, of role play or storytelling, in order to see more possibilities. Furthemore, I should also try to do workshop with less kids each time. Since the result of the workshop I did for this project, are still bit too similar to each other, so probably I should do workshop with just one or two kids each time with adults in the future.

I agree with that, since it is always good to hear from different perspectives, it might not be the main concern in terms of design or other future directions, but it is interesting to get reference knowledge from different field. So I think I will contact psychiatrists in the future and discuss with them.
And indeed, I should do workshop among kid and adults together. And try to use other ways to organize the workshop.

2.

My examer Johnny Friberg ask me about the ranking of different influence I mentioned in summary and presentation to my project. And is family still important for my project any more?

After the discussion, I feel like it is more clear of how to explain my project in a academic way. My design is surrounded by a key actitiy, role play, say, identity construction. So the main focus is the interaction of kid and adult towards my design. Through my whole design process, investigation on association that people made from my design play a big role, I was invetigating on reactions from kids and adults on the same shape or colours, and try to see some pattern out of it. I got inspiration from play therapy and didactic researchers, they gave me lots of methodological support.
I rethink what is family to me after the presentation, I did explaination now in the background part in this report. I think family is a group of people who are similar at the same time opposite to each other. and they don't need to be biologically related, or even the same species, they could be just friends. But when you call a group a family, It indicate some convention or hierarchy inside of this small society, and it will not be broken easily. I want to have a group like this, which has an open structure and people may changing roles inside but still hae a certain setting being a tight group. Since I need this group for people to compare and imagine, it become more interesting when you see a group of weird things and try to imagine their stories. Sometimes I think i probably should call it friends instead of family, like my friends. But i still like "ma famille" since sometimes you also call your friend is one of your family member. Family means the closest group of people from your network in this society, the most primary but probably not the most simple one. I design with this concern when I was working with gestalt.

linear story or non linear story.

I think until to the middle of my process I was still wondering whether I will give a concrete story to the design. Once I discussed with my tutor Helena Hansson, both of us think there shouldn't be any concrete story there, and leave as open as possible.
I personally doesn't like to really tell a linear story of my design, but on the other hands, because i have never done that, I was bit curious if I do what will happen?
But after I tried with kids, I think they have lots of ideas and imaginations towards my design, and it makes me feel like i shouldn't close this imagination.
Then there comes a new problem, what should I call them. The name of each creatures should be abstract and open but also interesting.

If I do it again...

If I continue or do this project again, I could go deeper into the form giving, since there was a process for me to learn how to make hat in the first half of the project. Besides, on the base of the result I have, I could look for some new things, like same shape with a series of colour choices. If I could have more time to observe kids and talk with parents, teacher, psychiatrists, I might get more inspiration and drive my project into something new.
The material I am using is big of thick, and all wool-based material. I would like to try more material on this project.

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