Mask - Major Studio 2: Narrative Project Paper
Student: Tao-chia Karen Chin
Instructor: Stuart R. Cudlitz
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Abstract

Based on observations on social interaction, depending on the surrounding environment, it is common to disguise one self in order to achieve certain goals. Universally people are accustomed to being polite when introduced to a stranger or superior, they filter what to say and how they act. The issue I want to touch upon is the idea of being fake, how people put on different masks for different situations. By sharing a perspective through media consisting 2D narrative animation, this project is intended for the audience to reflect upon their lives and relate by provoking them to see if they do the same things as the character portrayed. This paper further describes the motivation, process, and future development of the project.

Keywords

Animation, narrative, mask, identity, disguise, facial expressions, lying, deception, psychology, emotions, surrounding environment, social context, perspective, observation.

I. Introduction:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be otherwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see thus, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!

-"We Wear the Mask", by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1896) [1]

"Hi, how are you?" This is a question that pops up everyday, at a grocery store, at work, at school, or even stepping outside and running into your neighbor. It is a question to ask out of politeness with most cases not expecting an honest answer. The way people cringe and squeezes out a weak smile to hear a response of how their neighbor got praised at by his boss, when what they really care about is how loud their neighbor plays music. Yet the next encounter that they have still starts off with, " Hi, how are you?" Even though they do not want the answer. Or how people's tone of voice changes when yelling at their dog in contrast to his or her childhood crush. They disguise their real self.

As a person who has a certain amount of fondness towards observing the details in surrounding environments, I find this sort of social interaction very intriguing. Through animation perceived in a dark humorous fashion, I would like to introduce the audience to a perspective provoking them to realize everybody has their own mask and armor. Some of the issues I would like to touch upon are the honest-fake interaction between strangers. Is this who they really are? Do they become this person they want to show?

II. **Contextualizing your design concept**:

The domain and field of my final project is displayed in the diagram below.

Based on observation and experience with qualitative and quantitative research, I am aiming to produce an observational and exploratory story that covers on identity, disguise, and social encounters.

The methodology used to execute is a linear narrative story drawn in 2D animation produced with Adobe Flash and Adobe After Effects.
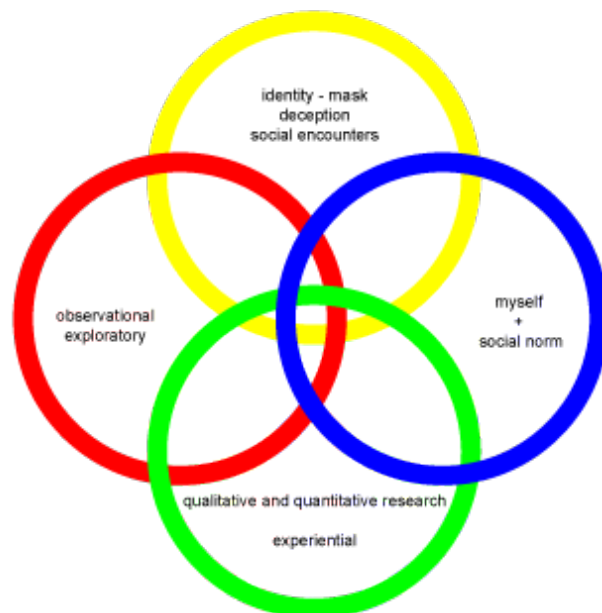
III. **Research and Design Questions:**

The research that I gathered or was referred to covered a range of topics including deception and lying, facial expressions, and masks.

Lies

What is a lie? According to *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*[2] noun definition of lie:

lie[2] (lī) noun

1. A false statement deliberately presented as being true; a falsehood.
2. Something meant to deceive or give a wrong impression.

There are several categories and methods of lying. To give an example, here a list of common use of methods compiled by contributors to Wikipedia[3]: big lie, bluff, barefaced lie, contextual lie, economical with the truth, emergency lie, exaggeration, fabrication, jocose lie, lie-to-children, lying by obsolete signage, lying by omission, lying in trade, lying through your teeth, misleading or dissembling, careful speaking, noble lie, perjury, puffery, compliments and false reassurances, and white lie. Yet why and how do we lie? Avoiding discussing detailed analysis of cognitive science, to quote well-known psychologist Paul Ekman well known for deceiving expressions," Most of the time we lie out of laziness or timidity.[4] " In order to recognize a lie, one's body gestures and facial expressions are examined to show signs of "leakage" or a "tell." In 1972, Ekman comprised a list[5] of basic universal expressions which includes: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise. Here are some images[6] which helped me in character design:

Neutral	Anger	Disgust	Fear

Joy	Sadness	Surprise
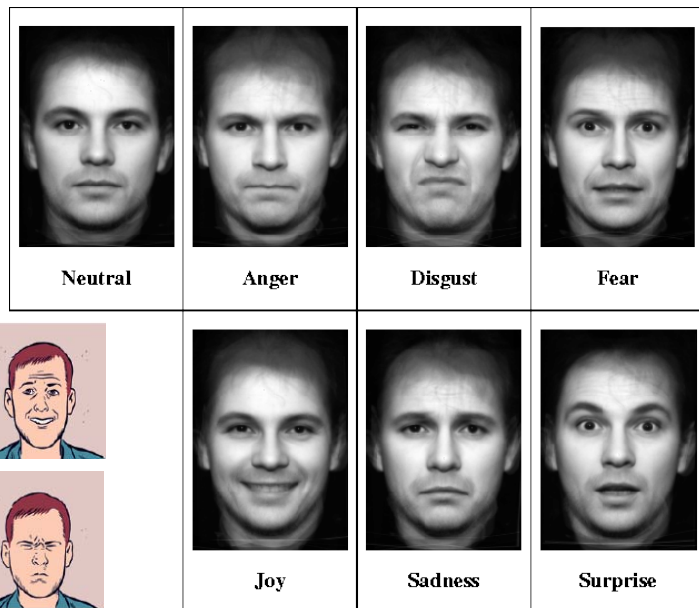
From these facial expressions led to the research into masks[7].

mask (mask, mäsk) - noun

1. a covering for the face or part of the face, to conceal the identity

2. anything that conceals or disguises

Masks are used in several different places and various context, whether for performing amusement, protection, or fashion; they all fall under the category of concealment and disguise. In relationship to the basic facial expressions mentioned by Ekman, most masks are designed to meet and resemble along these emotions regardless of culture or purpose. Just to paste a few of the assortment and range of masks:

Although these masks and facial expressions were looked into and incorporated into my initial designs, some of the feedback from peers were that the designs were misguiding into different subjects like cultural differences and stereotypes or cosplay and superhero trends. This lead me to seek designs that are more similar yet at the same time vastly different. The Noh mask is the ideal example. Noh(能) [8] is the classic Japanese dance and drama theater performance. What is unique about the Noh mask is that depending on the angle of the mask the viewer reads the expression differently. In the Noh performances, with a tilt of the head the actor can shift from a joyful face to a crying expression with the help of lighting and the angle shown to the viewers.

Here is an example of the Noh Mask. The camera is fixed while the mask tilted on the left and on the right.
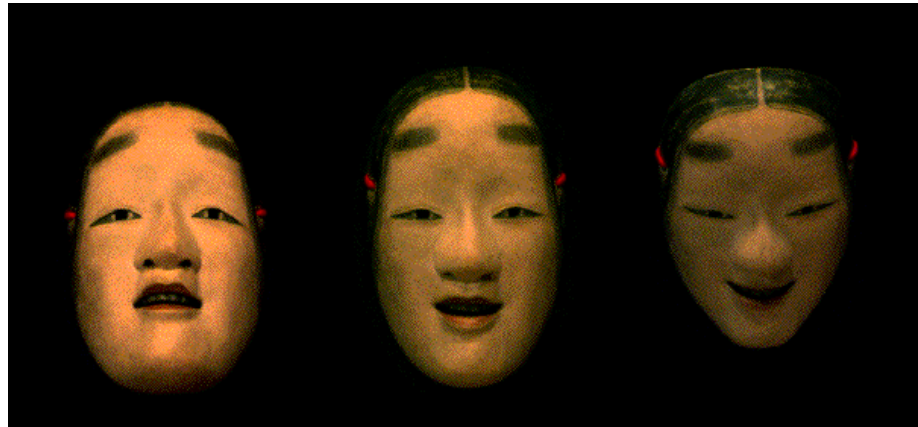

    I was greatly influenced and inspired by this concept and started drawing images that shared and derived from this idea. In addition, I explored for precedents that also cover these topics. Listed below are several currently existing animations in which I have found appealing and could benefit from by modifying and incorporating the technique or idea to my project.

Pinocchio (1940) - Walt Disney[9]

    A classic and popular animation created by the Disney studio, the protagonist Pinocchio is a wooden puppet who dreams of becoming a real boy. This is one of the classic examples of integrating the "lying" with the "tell," when he tells a lie his nose grows longer.


El Empleo (The Employment) - Santiago Bou Grasso [10]
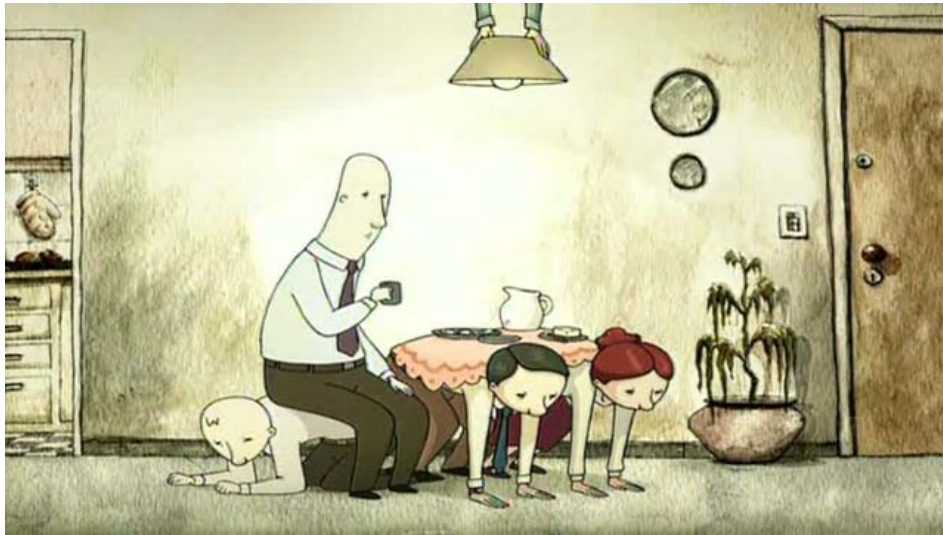
   Santiago Bou Grasso' s 2D animation "El Empleo" (2008) creates a world that depict people as objects. The audience follows a man's routine life and is led into this environment trying to put together the meaning behind. "El Empleo" had significant impact for this project, I am deeply inspired by the story beats of how the narrative is told. Also I admire the aesthetics and texture the drawings bring out. For my project, with this reference I wanted to carry out this idea of introducing a queer world as well as creating a dark atmosphere with the use of textures and layers.

"Everything Will Be OK" - Don Hertzfeldt [11]

   What interested me in the animation "Everything Will Be OK" by Don Hertzfeldt may not be the main point but in the initial stages of my brainstorming I was deeply attracted by the social interactions within the film. For example quoting an excerpt from the narrator," A checkout girl said, ' How are you doing today?' Bill said,' Fine, thanks, how are you?' She didn't answer. Bill felt used."
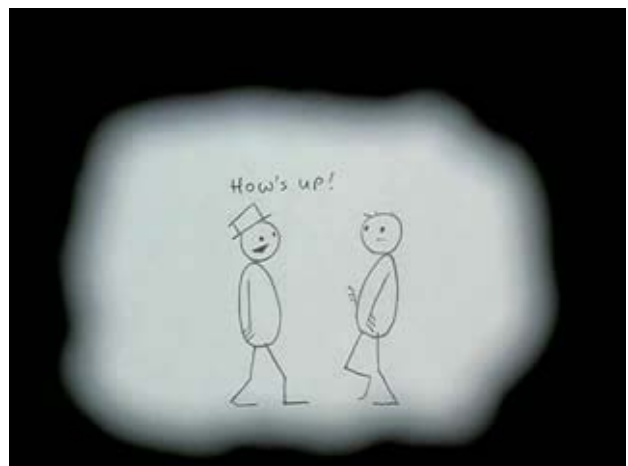
Also the simple style of drawing accompanied by narration was a great inspiration, even though as I progressed I did not follow that path.

Tao-chia Karen Chin
Mask - Major Studio 2: Narrative Project Paper

7

"Mask" by Ji Hyun Ha[12]

"Mask" (2008) is a stop motion animation created by Design and Technology alumni Ji Hyun Ha.

Ji's description:

> The story of Mask is concerned with society's treatment of those who are different and powerless, exploring our conflicts and struggles in human interaction and relationship to social expectation and constructs. By focusing on the complex operation of social inclusion and exclusion, Mask addresses issues of morality, power, judgment and arrogance in human interaction, and the collective violence, abuse, oppression and tension that results from difference and inequality. [13]

In my opinion the medium used and details in this piece certainly increased the tension and the mood drastically adding to the story. Although having similarity on the topic mask, the issue I want to address differs focusing more on the truthfulness and perception on social encounters.

IV. **Prototyping Process:**

Iterations of my prototyping process derived from numerous sketches, character sheets, process of storyboarding, animatics, and lastly iterations of animation.

Story outline:

> Set in a urban city, Mask is a third person central linear narrative based on the main character's average day in a gloomy and tainted world where people literally wear masks. The main character, portrayed without the mask and in white, resembles the idea of how people say they are honest and pure. Being the only person in this world that is true to everybody the audience watches with him seeing how people disguise themselves rather than showing their "ugly side." At the end, by accident it is revealed that he like everyone else is wearing his own mask.

Draft of script:

> [Apartment, morning] Main character wakes up (does not show face), leaves apartment goes to take the subway.
> By-passers are all wearing masks.

[On the subway] Woman in front is drawing on her face "applying makeup."
A child without a mask laughs(clear voice) and runs around, trips and falls, calmly gets up,
puts on a mask approaches his mother then cries(muffled).

[Office] Female manager is yelling(muffled) at co-workers.
Boss comes, manager's tone changes and sucks up.

[Grocery store, at cash register] Main character has his back to the camera.
He sneezes and his face falls off.
Cashier scanning grocery notices his face, looks up and is shocked.
Main character unaware, looks left to the second person in line and scares her too, he
notices his face and puts it back on.
He says," Have a nice day," then leaves.

[Apartment]
Main character enters dark room, throws his face aside, and the door closes.
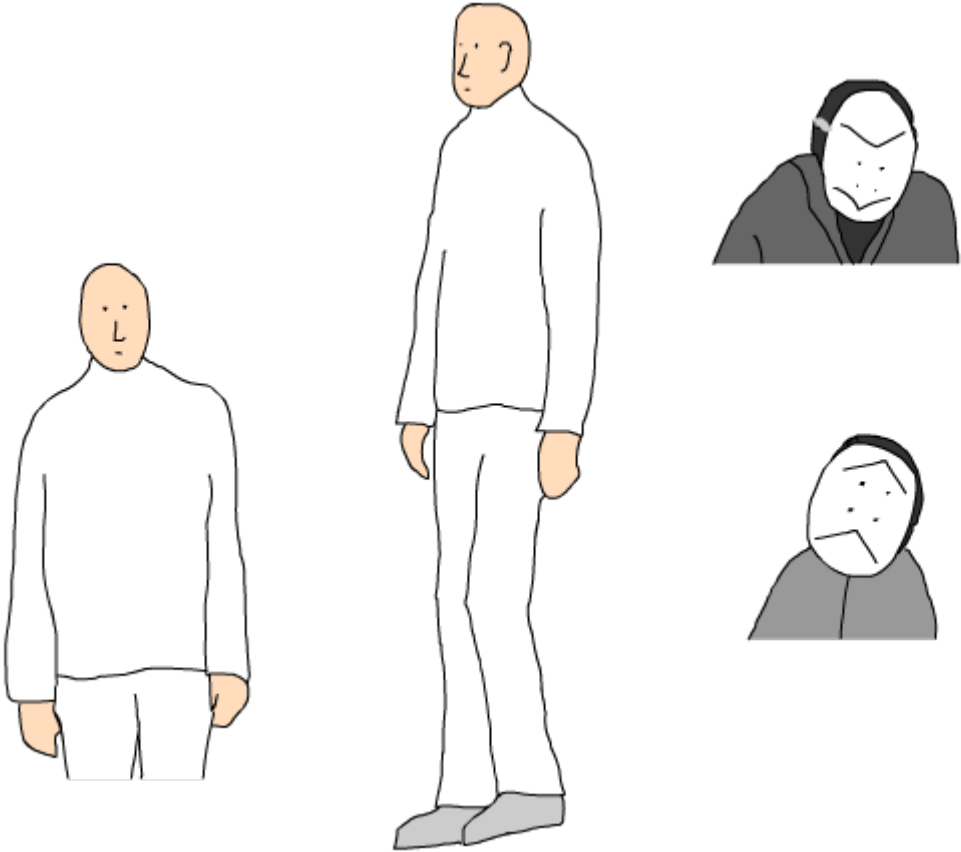
End.

Sketches and Character Design:

    Here are some excerpts of drawings, incorporating inspiration from the Noh mask the
characters all wear the same mask. When the mask turns upside down, the expression changes
from a joyful face to a sad face and vice versa.

Character design for the protagonist and the design for the peoples mask.

Storyboard:

The animatic, more drawings, and links to references can be viewed at the following link http://parsons.karen-chin.com/10spring/studio/final.html. The last iteration which is presented as my final project can also be viewed online.

V. **Conclusion:**

For future work on this project, I would like to polish the details within the story and animation. It was obvious from feedback during critiques that the animation was not clear enough to express what I wanted to tell. In presenting my work, after refining the weaknesses I plan to submit my work for the next NYC Metropolitan Area College Computer Animation Festival and the ASIFA-East Animation Festival.

Moving ahead for thesis and future work, there is a possibility in incorporating my previous animations and animations to come, combining them as a series of stories within stories since they all live under an urban environment. Broadening and blurring the edges of limitations to a single piece of media, it also allows the option of becoming an interactive narrative where the social aspects of the projects could be further expanded on and applied.

End Notes

[1] Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar.* 1944.
[2] Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th edition. 2010.
[3] Lie, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/lie.
[4] Radiolab, "Deception". 2008.
[5] Paul Ekman, "Basic Emotion" *Handbook of Cognition and Emotion.* 1999.
[6] Malcolm Gladwell, "The Naked Face" *The New Yorker Archive.* 2002.
 Methods of Psychological Research, http://www.dgps.de/fachgruppen/methoden/mpr-online/issue4/art3/node9.html
[7] Webster's New World College Dictionary. 2010.
[8] Noh Mask, http://www.kasrl.org/noh_mask.html.
[9] Pinocchio, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0032910.
[10] http://www.arte.tv/fr/Videos-sur-ARTE-TV/2151166,CmC=2697838.html.
[11] Don Hertzfeldt, "Everything Will Be OK." http://www.bitterfilms.com/ok.html.
[12] Ji Hyun Ha, "Mask." http://scenergystudio.com/mask_web.html.
[13] Ji Hyun Ha, "Mask." http://www.beckyheritage.com/files/MFADTThesis2008.pdf.

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Ha, Ji Hyun. "Mask". http://a.parsons.edu/~haj64/thesis.html. (Accessed on May 12, 2010)

Ji Hyun Ha, e-mail message to author, April 20,2010.