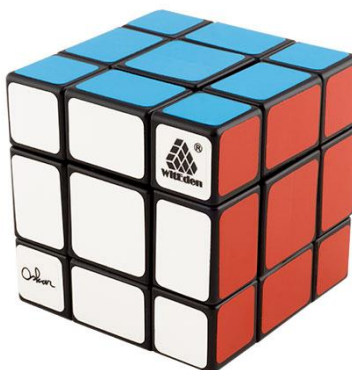


Design Etude #1

Means and Ends

1. The Mixup Cube



Upon first glance, this looks like a regular 3x3x3 Rubik's cube. However, the secret is that this puzzle can turn when sides are rotated just 45 degrees rather than the usual 90:



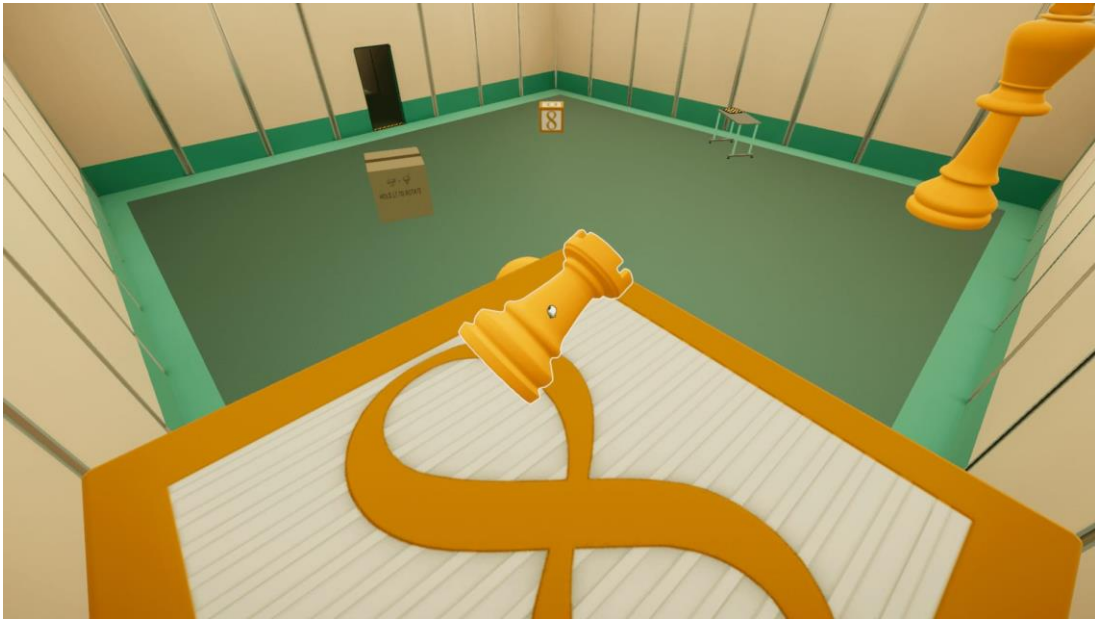
As a kid, I used to always dream of lining up the “wrong” slices of a Rubik’s cube and turning them on the 45-degree angle. When this puzzle was created, I was elated and incredibly satisfied to see that my desire was brought to life. Twisty puzzle designers have deep aesthetic choices to make since many twisty puzzles are isomorphic in some way. Indeed, there is no reason for the mixup cube to look like a cube at all. However, the callback to the form of a typical Rubik’s cube elicits surprise and delight in the user. It is a pragmatically challenging puzzle because of its many axes of freedom, but aesthetically it is not unlike a fully-zipper-pencil-pouch: it takes a parameter (rotation of a slice) and pushes it beyond what one would expect (half turns???) in a tasteful way. The means-to-an-end of being a recreational challenge is complemented by the end-in-itself of its familiar, cube-like shape and the distortion thereof.

2. *Superliminal*



Continuing on the theme of play and unexpected parameter-pushing, the next thing I find beautiful is the puzzle game *Superliminal*. (This one will be spoiler-free, don’t worry.)

Superliminal is a game entirely based on the principle of depth perception: when you're close to an object, it looks bigger, and when you're far away, it looks smaller. The game asks the question: what if you could pick up an object very far away and it remained the size at which you perceived it? What if you put your face right next to a block of cheese, then picked it up and had it remain as massive as you perceived it in your proximity?



The game is very simple functionally: find an object, change its size, then use it to progress through the levels in some way. However, the form appeals to an almost universal human sense: scale. *Superliminal* speaks to the natural fear of large objects and the frustration of small object manipulation. The puzzles are not difficult in a pragmatic sense and the solutions are undisguised, but the answer often lies in examining the assumptions we have about depth perception and the interpretation of objects placed in rooms. The playful nature of sizing everyday objects willy-nilly (an end in itself) combined with the charmingly wonky physics engine (a means to an end), when mixed with the slightly creepy plot of the game, makes for an experience that understands how we view the world and subverts that spectacularly.

3. Clippy

Look at that smug face. Those patronizing eyes. That quirky little tail.

Clippy is certainly a polarizing figure, but the design choices are fascinating and are inseparable from its polarizing nature. For one thing, it does seem like paperclips are ubiquitous (how do they manage to end up where you least expect them?) and are one of the most universal symbols of the office. Having a helper for a word processing software is certainly a pragmatic decision, but making it into a cute (potentially over-personified) piece of metal was a large aesthetic leap. With it, Microsoft decided that the user would want an interactive assistant with something akin to its own emotion and personality, but (either due to technological constraints or to avoid Skynet complaints) elected not to give it human form. The seemingly innocent means-to-an-end of having a personal assistant for software became a symbol for an overbearing, almost managerial figure in its form and aesthetic. The emotional consequence of interacting with Clippy ended up being frustration for many rather than relief or gratitude. At the end of the day, Clippy just doesn't understand us. (Sorry, I know we were supposed to discuss something we found beautiful. This was just too tempting as a topic!)



Guerilla Design

After the censure above, the pressure is on for me to design something reasonable.

I have an embarrassingly large Rubik's cube collection, and I have this one shelf of oddball puzzles that is hard to display in a palatable manner. Here's how it looked before:



Complete disarray, essentially. This shelf has a lot of pyramid-shaped puzzles that seemed to belong together. Furthermore, there are puzzles that are duplicates and bags of spare parts that belonged in the back. In addition, some of these are not meant to be played with since they are packaged collector's items. I tried to move these to the back and make the shelf more inviting. The goal is to present the puzzles in a fashion that asks a passerby to play with them.



This is how it ended up. I put the unsolved puzzles nearer to the front since people who walk by are more likely to feel comfortable messing with a puzzle that isn't solved (so as not to disturb the piece). I put the triangular puzzles on the left, the accessory materials in the back, and the uninteresting and collector puzzles in a harder to reach spot. The (rather adorable) elephant is next to its sibling in color and size (the house) and the layout is such that every puzzle is visible from the usual viewing angle (slightly above the shelf). The aim is to present the shelf as fun, accessible, and enticing; we'll see how people like it!