

# Death and Catharsis: Re-defining Pleasure by Design

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## **Abstract**

In designing for positive emotional experience, there is no common definition of pleasure as used within the design professions. In addition to the idiosyncratic nature of human-product interactions, the tendency toward emotive design based on surface-level details for short-lived positive reactions must be broadened to address more sustained, reflective responses to products, as interpreted in context of use. A relatively unexplored area of design and emotion is constituted around ritual artifacts. For example, design research concerning the processes and products associated with death may seem at first to have little connection to a discussion of pleasure in design. Yet, the artifacts and rituals surrounding our last rite of passage can be argued as relevant to pleasure both in terms of their ability to facilitate positive memories and the need to mourn, and in reducing the effects of psychological pain through therapeutic or cathartic experience. The insights promoted through this research discussion suggest the need for broader interpretations of pleasure, and the benefits of re-defining pleasure in applications of design and emotion.

**Keywords:** Pleasure, product, design, death, catharsis

## **Challenging Pleasure**

Designing products for a pleasurable emotional response is a more challenging task than might seem evident upon initial reflection. While it is easy to identify products that engage us enjoyably through intriguing interfaces, pleasing colors, sensuous textures, and whimsical details, the human response to artifacts can be much more complex. In one respect, we must question why some objects are responded to favorably by some people while rejected with distaste by others, suggesting a range of idiosyncratic interpretations of the product world. Human reactions to products are rooted in the combined considerations of design intent, and interpretation in the context of personal and cultural experience.

A commercial approach to emotive design might bring to mind such products as Alessi corkscrews, animated floss holders and toothpick dispensers, BMW scooters, or Sony Aibo® robotic dogs. While these pleasurable products may serve the purpose of eliciting an immediate positive reaction, it is important to recognize the range and depth of human emotional responses to product interactions. Emotive design based on surface-level details for short-lived positive reactions must be broadened to address more sustained, reflective

responses to products, as interpreted in context of use. It is these sustained and reflective responses, or “mood”, that constitute emotional experiences, contrasted to short-lived and reflexive emotions or transitory positive reactions (DiSalvo, Forlizzi, and Hanington, 2002).

There is lack of consensus in the challenge to adequately define pleasure, even among experts. Definitions alternately offer vague references to any “positive experience”, and to the “opposite of pain” (Tiger, 2000: 17). The opposing force to pain may in some measure convolute the understanding of the concept of pleasure, as there are various things in individual experience that will reduce or eliminate “pain”, or discomfort associated with physical or psychological stress. It is critical to realize in defining pleasure that the things people do may be sought out both to *seek* pleasure for purely positive effects, and to *reduce* the effects of boredom, depression, or other negative psychological or physical conditions.

People engage in a number of seemingly self-destructive behaviors which they may define as pleasurable and rewarding. Certainly the effects of cigarette smoking, drug and alcohol consumption provide pleasing effects for some, yet the dangers are well documented. Similarly, “sensation-seekers” may find a rush of adrenaline inspired by jumping out of planes, dangling from rocky cliffs, or bouncing from bridge decks on strands of rubber cord. Pleasure is a subjective experience, sought out in various ways by different people. The tendency to equate pleasure with strictly positive and explicitly constructive activity, is subject to challenge.

A further illustration of the complex notions of pleasure can be seen in ritual practices and artifacts. Rites of initiation, particularly those foreign to our own cultural experience, may seem shocking or even horrific to us. Yet those engaged in ritual practices that define significant transitions in life would no doubt argue that they are emotionally critical events, bringing satisfaction and joy to one’s life, and are therefore pleasurable. For example, adult circumcision among the Masai reads as a painful exercise by our standards, yet is celebrated with ceremonial fervor, dancing, and feasting, as young boys are welcomed into manhood (van Gennep, 1960).

While we can maintain a healthy curiosity about obscure rituals from other cultures, we can look more immediately to examples in a Western context to illustrate the range of

considerations necessary for defining “pleasure” in products and experience. For example, the practices surrounding death may at first glance be considered negative and far removed from the purview of pleasure, yet upon closer examination both the rituals and artifacts associated with the last rite of passage can be seen to serve a positive, even pleasurable, purpose.

### **Death and Design**

In current Western ceremonial traditions dealing with death, the necessary act of disposing of the body is typically accompanied by a funeral or memorial service, and the establishment of some form of memorial artifact. In addition to these more public affairs, the bereaved are commonly engaged in an ill-defined period of mourning, as they come to accept the passing of someone in their life, and the eventual acceptance of continuing on without them.

Historically, a rich array of artifacts and traditions served the purposes of bereavement very well. Codes of mourning attire, beginning with non-reflective black and gradually moving toward increased color and reflectance, defined suitable periods of bereavement. This attire was often accompanied by mourning jewelry with references to the deceased, including hair from the dead incorporated within rings and pendants, or woven to construct the strands of necklaces or bracelets. In addition to honoring the deceased, coded artifacts were critical elements of the mourning ritual. “In order to ease the psychological burden of bereavement mourning allowed, then as now, the individual time in which to spread the potentially damaging effects of the loss, the sudden, awful absence.” (Llewellyn, 1991: 85).

The psychological factors of bereavement are certainly individual in nature. What some may define as bizarre others may find necessary in their response to death. Artifacts which may be regarded as ghoulish today were commonplace in recent history, including so-called *memento mori*, objects with deathly references designed as perpetual reminders of one’s own mortality (Figure 1). The history of printed ephemera also contained explicit death images such as corpses and skeletons (Figure 2). In fact, to photograph the deceased or capture their repose on the deathbed in a painting was also common. Babies taken tragically premature through death were often photographed swaddled in the arms of their parents. One can only assume some cathartic benefit associated with these acts, defined by tradition.



**Figure 1, *Memento Mori*:** Mourning spoon, 1670, and copper snuff box, 1792 (Llewellyn, 1991)



**Figure 2, Funeral invitation, woodcut, 1705** (Llewellyn, 1991)

Western death practices today offer little in the way of artifact or ritual to mitigate the ongoing process of mourning. The funeral or memorial ceremony is intended to offer some solace, and a memorial artifact may contribute to a sense of tangible “place” for paying tribute to the deceased. However, the rich symbolic traditions of past have been minimized in favor of an expedited mourning process that demands a quick return to the activities of daily life. In fact, critics of the funeral industry have targeted the promotion of expensive goods and services as merely unethical examples of profit-seeking that take advantage of unwitting consumers during a time of intense emotional vulnerability (Mitford, 1998). While the accusations of these excesses may be true, there is also a well-defended side of the argument

that indicates the cathartic or therapeutic benefit associated with ceremonial artifacts and practices used in our rituals of death.

For example, the coffin or casket may be seen by some as merely a practical vessel for transporting human remains to a grave or crematorium. Yet it serves other purposes. For those believing in the sanctity of the body and possible resurrection, the coffin may offer assurance of eternal preservation. It may also provide an opportunity to pay tribute to the deceased, through choice of relevant materials and motifs in coffin form and decoration. For example, the selection of a wheat sheaf motif on casket hardware may provide a fitting recognition for the life of a farmer (Figure 3). Taking personalization to an extreme are caskets made in the form of objects relevant to the deceased, such as those constructed in Ghana (Figure 4). Granted, the choice of an elaborate casket may also relieve guilt, felt by many at the passing of a loved one. Yet fundamentally, the coffin is a critical component of the ritual of death, and may therefore be instrumental in providing some relief from pain in the final farewell that we bid to those who have died (Hanington, 1997).



**Figure 3,** Wheat sheaf casket (author photo)



**Figure 4,** Outboard motor coffin, Ghana fantasy coffins (Palmer, 1993)

In fact, the funeral industry speaks of creating a “beautiful memory picture”, generally referring to the satisfactory cosmetic presentation of the corpse for viewing, but reasonably assumed to include the construction of an appropriate funeral or memorial service. “The undertaker becomes a stage manager to create an appropriate atmosphere and to move the funeral party through a drama in which social relationships are stressed and an emotional catharsis or release is provided through ceremony.” (Mitford, 1998: 16-17). The “design” of the ceremony is critical in defining the memory associated with the final ritual, and therefore of the deceased. This is why we see such great attention and expense paid to the details of the ceremony, including the selection of artifacts such as flowers, pictures, music, and coffin or urn.

Corresponding remarks can be made about memorial artifacts such as headstones, in some ways more critical owing to their enduring tangible form and ongoing visibility to survivors of the deceased. As with funeral artifacts, the choice of material, scale, text and motifs of grave markers may offer to the bereaved a chance to pay appropriate tribute to the deceased, and enhance the memory they have of a loved one, in addition to providing a record of their life.

### **Creativity and Catharsis**

The argument for addressing this realm of artifacts and behaviors in a discussion of pleasure is twofold. First, the active sense of facilitating a “positive” experience, in so far as this is possible, through the creation of memories and the paying of appropriate tribute to the deceased, may be defined as pleasurable. Second, in the sense that these activities may reduce the burden of pain felt by the bereaved through cathartic experience, the rituals constructed around death are components of pleasure. In other words, both the active creation of positive emotions, and the release of negative emotions, may be deemed pleasurable.

Positive experience is facilitated through active participation in the creation of a meaningful ceremony. This meaning may be inherent in the ritual itself, but also through the sense of control through action, exerted by the bereaved, in a situation where most feel otherwise powerless. Playing a more active role in the creation of ceremonies and the design or

selection of artifacts facilitates a personal connection to the deceased, and can also prove to be a therapeutic act for the bereaved. An increasing number of people are no longer content to relegate the design of ceremonies to professionals, who may never have had a personal relationship with the deceased (Hanington, 1997). In seeking details relevant to the deceased in the planning and execution of funerals and memorials, rituals will more closely resemble the *celebration of life* that many intend.

The role of artifact is to provide tangible stimulation through appropriate visual, auditory, and other sense references, and to define key moments in the ritual process. At a minimum, this may include relevant casket forms and motifs, as previously discussed. A more innovative example of personalized ritual participation facilitated by artifact is the “whiteboard casket” that invites final messages of tribute to be scribed on the outer surface by funeral participants. This sense of *action* is critical to the notion of human-product experience, and adds a social dimension to the operational identity defined by merely functional product attributes (Margolin, 1997).

The release from pain felt through the loss of a loved one can be enacted both at the time of ceremony through appropriate expressions of tribute and grief, facilitated by ritual artifact, and throughout the process of mourning. While the traditions of mourning have been lessened in recent history, simple gestures such as maintaining memorials, the placing of flowers at the grave, or acknowledging significant anniversaries are still performed with assumed therapeutic benefit. Opportunities for enhanced personalization of memorials may further benefit the bereaved in paying tribute and facilitating activities of mourning (Figure 5). A theory of “two bodies” suggests that the memorial is in fact an attempt to preserve the “social” body, as a means of commemorating the individual to loved ones and in the collective memory, thereby maintaining the social fabric of life despite the loss of the deceased’s physical being (Llewellyn, 1991).



**Figure 5,** Trucker’s memorial headstone (author photo)

### **Design and Pleasure**

Implications for positive emotive design specific to the realm of death include the need for providing flexible opportunities that enable the creation of personalized ritual ceremonies, and facilitation of the process of mourning, including artifacts that support meaningful experience relevant to the bereaved, and to the memory of the deceased.

We can extract meaning from this discussion beyond the illustrative example of artifacts from the rituals of death, to wider application in the definitions of emotive design. By challenging the definition of pleasurable responses beyond those garnered from fleeting reactions to surface object qualities, we can examine the depth of emotional responses to objects connected to personal meaning and context of use. Furthermore, it is the *quality* of these activities, and of the artifacts that support them, that offer insight into emotive product design.

Emotive design criteria are thus suggested as variables that take into account personal circumstances and context, and engage people in meaningful process. Objects and experiences that allow for action, personalization through enhanced choice, and flexible use or customization, will further serve to foster pleasurable responses. The example of ritual artifacts in the last rite of passage suggests that emotive product design may be considered for opportunities to facilitate deeper emotional meaning through sustained and reflective human responses, through both the creation of positive experience, and the release from negative states.



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