8.1 Case study: emphasis for beginners

Objective
This case study shows how the emphasizing strategy is commonly applied in the design of products for the youngest users: kids! Infants, toddlers, and even older kids see the world in a very different way to adults. We could superficially argue that their world is a simplified version of the grownups' version, but, in reality, it is very complex because it is much more imaginative. How do kids explore complexity without making their life as complicated as we do? Where does this complex instinct come from?

Background
One of the most popular toys ever invented is the teddy bear. The teddy bear owes its name to US President Theodore Roosevelt (National Park Service, 2019). Roosevelt was a passionate hunter, as well as a pioneer in environmental conservation. During one hunt, he refused to shoot at a bear that had been cornered and tied with a rope because the President deemed this too unfair to the animal. The story was captured by articles in several newspapers. Morris Mitchtom, a toymaker based in Brooklyn, whose company made stuffed animals, had the idea of creating a new bear and naming it 'Teddy' with Roosevelt's permission (fig. 8.1a).

Figure 8.1a - A teddy bear formerly owned by Kermit Roosevelt, thought to be made by Michtom, in the early 1900s.

This story precedes the use of animals as fantasy characters by Walt Disney, creator of Mickey Mouse and a crowd of other animal-based personages, not always easy to trace back to real animals (what kind of animal is Goofy?). Teddy bear and Mickey Mouse are not realistic representations of animals, but nobody would hesitate to recognize a bear or a mouse in them. Animal-based characters have nothing of the wild and sometimes ferocious real-life counterparts. Quite the contrary; their features emphasize tenderness and playfulness, such as the warm fur and soft consistency of the teddy bear or the big eyes and ears of Mickey Mouse. Threatening or otherwise irrelevant features such as claws, fangs, or sexual attributes are carefully suppressed.

Despite these high, unrealistic renderings of animals, kids have no particular problem recognizing a real bear and seeing the teddy bear as a particular case of a bear cub. The emphasizing design strategy is evident in these representations. Some traits are emphasized, others are suppressed or remodeled to serve the purpose, which is to create a mild version of a tender play companion exhibiting both human and animal traits.

The combination of human and animal traits has a profound root in the history of humanity. Totemic figures combining the human and the natural worlds are universal and diffused and sometimes deified in most human cultures. Animals are often attributed psychological traits that are typically human such as stubbornness (donkeys), curiosity and cattiness (monkeys), loyalty (dogs), physical and moral strengths (lions, eagles), or elegance (felines), as in Esopus or Phedro's tales.

Figure 8.1b - An artistic depiction of a group of rhinoceros, was completed in the Chauvet Cave 30,000 to 32,000 years ago.

Figure 8.1c - Rock paintings from the Cave of Beasts (Gilf Kebir, Libyan Desert) Estimated 7000 BP depicting a hunting scene.
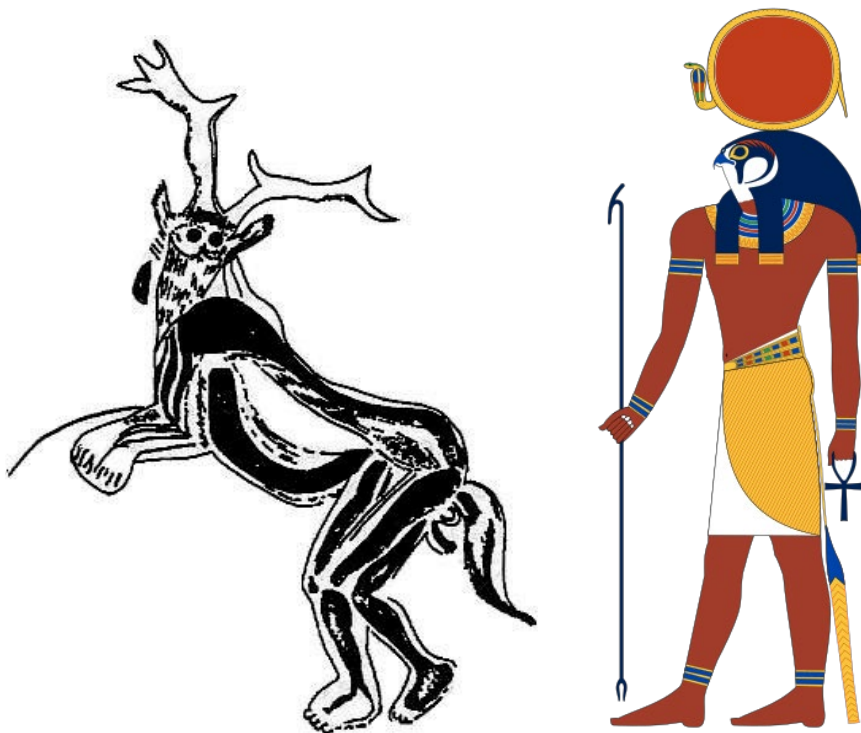
Figure 8.1d - On the left side, the Wizard or Cuckold God of the Trois-Frères Sanctuary as depicted in Henri Breuil's sketch, on the right the representation of the ancient Egyptian god Ra.

It is perhaps not the case that prehistoric artists also used graphic emphasis in portraying animals and shamanic figures with totemic features. Animal figures depicted in prehistoric graffiti are not very realistic but clearly emphasize those key traits that a hunter would quickly notice when spotting a prey or a predator (fig. 8.1b). After all, in nature, animals move quickly, hide and use camouflage, and we seldom have the luxury to contemplate all the details. Interestingly, one theory on the function of primitive art was that animal representations were also used to educate kids about nature. This interpretation is substantiated by the very detailed depiction of hunting phases, especially when capturing the prey would require a high level of coordination and sophistication (fig. 8.1c). Keeping up with our speculation, what if the lack of scary details was the way not to frighten young hunters and help them get close to the depicted animals? In this sense, certain cave art would work as modern simulators, and this would explain why ferocious and ugly animals come into cute stuffed puppets that everybody loves.

Totemic figures would instead be the product of imagination in the attempt to communicate with the spiritual nature of the world, to understand it from the inside, at the visceral and emotional level, or for religious purposes (fig. 8.1d).

Questions
1. Visit an online or offline toy store and select a toy for toddlers that captures your attention.
2. Identify which features are emphasized and how.
3. Make assumptions about why the emphasis is there and what it intends to communicate.
4. Find inspiration to design a toy yourself, sketch the design, and argument how and why you are using the emphasis.

References
National Park Service (2019), **The Story of the Teddy Bear,**
https://www.nps.gov/thrb/learn/historyculture/storyofteddybear.htm