THE DESIGN ELEMENT OF SURPRISE

by Caroline Delbert

One of the earliest "body swap" stories is in an obscure novel called *Turnabout*. A husband and wife viciously argue that the other has the easier life, then are shocked when their bodies are swapped by a trickster god: "Tim was treated to the unnerving experience of seeing his own body wringing its hands." Literary scholar Peter Jordan wrote of *Turnabout*, "[T]he supernatural machinery, because it forces the protagonist beyond convention, releases him to satisfy his and our desire to throw a pie in the face of convention."

The element of surprise, and specifically to see one object but find it means something else, is one of the foundational motifs in entertainment. Athena baffles Sophocles's Ajax with vision-changing magic that causes him to slaughter everyone in sight, then she smirks: "I can darken even the most acute vision." Aladdin's genie is costumed as a lamp, then Aladdin himself is outfitted as a prince.

Centuries later, Dungeons & Dragons introduced the mimic, a character usually represented as a treasure chest that turns into a monster when you approach. Beginning with *Castlevania*, videogames introduced save points that trigger battles instead. In the first *Paper Mario*, our hero has to pick his true minions out of crowds of imposters and in *Thousand Year Door*, he's thrown out of his own body by a shapeshifter named Dupliss.

In stories with body swaps, illusions and mimics, there are reasons we find them pleasurable and satisfying. When there's dramatic irony – when we know Sally is the one going to Tim's job at the ad agency and submarining his career, when we're rooting for Aladdin to persuade everyone he's really a prince – being in on the secret is what propels the story. In a game, we learn to identify the "real thing" and avoid the ersatz.

The accumulation of these stories over thousands of years has given us a shared collection of tools to identify what's happening. A religious scholar coined the term "unexpected possible" to describe a liminal space between everyday and spiritual. Some of our love of mimicry seems like the unexpected possible in a literal sense, where a conman or a Dupliss can replace and present himself as a beloved character we used to know.

In the November issue of *Current Biology*, a study of chord changes in music identified our pleasure at these surprises as "positive reward prediction errors," meaning we're confronted with a surprise that we find more pleasurable than our baseline expectation. We know we're going to like it, then we like it even more than that. Studies have shown that a gap between our expected and actual reward triggers the release of dopamine across all our experiences, not just in music or in stories or games. A pleasant surprise is a measurable phenomenon.

When Gary Gygax introduced the now-classic mimic, it served as a "gotcha!" within the reward system of his dungeon-crawling tabletop game. Disguised traps and pitfalls are a defining trait of the dungeon crawler or traditional roguelike game, but they're just the latest expression of a tale as old as the art forms themselves.