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THE EXPRESSION OF EMOTION IN HUMANS AND TECHNOLOGY

Play Story Press

THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF MEANING GAME

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Introduction

The fundamental question is – are emoji an effective way to communicate? Moreover do they help or hurt the conveyance of narrative. Can telling a story through emoji improve its universal understanding or deteriorate the clarity of such work? Drawing from other projects that aimed to convert classic literature into emoji, *The Unbearable Lightness of Meaning* flirts with such translations by making a playable experience offered as a kind of choose your own adventure. The narrative is based on Kundera's novel, The Unbearable Lightness of Being (1984). The playable experience aims to translate the work both in general plot and theme.

The history of digital games has often included an effort to create more meaningful play. This perspective is in part inspired by the fundamental understanding of play's value. That play serves as both practice and as a means of exploration (Grace, 2019). Digital play in this frame is no different. Some perceive play mediated through the digital as an opportunity to amplify such value.

The Unbearable Lightness of Meaning game is designed around a set of core observations about the current state of storytelling in the digital space. It draws from a few patterns in modern communication culture that at their intersection reveal an opportunity for critical reflection. These are pictographic communication, emphasis on brevity, and the propensities of digital communication.

The continued growth of pictographic communication in the digital domain could be attributed to a variety of sources and can be used to distinct benefit. Bresnaha outlines a World War 2 linked pictographic history who's rise was related to a desire for a universal language across cultures (2015). Others see opportunity in pictographs for multiculturalism in the future, as augmented reality requires more universal communication (Nawar and Gabr, 2013). Others might emphasize the ubiquity of image capture technology, with more people having direct access to smartphone cameras than toilets in the world (Wang, 2013). The evident truth is that much of the story, whether the fictions social media promotes through Instagram or the streaming content of services like Netflix, are communicated through image.

Image provides some really unique opportunities in an increasing global world. While the overused adage, a picture is worth a thousand words may read as trite, the reality is that when communicating across languages, a picture is an extraordinarily effective means of articulating a story.

The efficiency of image for communicating is in part supported by the ubiquity of the Internet. An Internet that is increasingly becoming an image rich environment, from its more humble text origins. While the lingua franca of the web is HTML, an English derived markup language, the universally understood image standards of JPG or GIF are binary (but not so for the scalable vector graphics). One could argue that if someone wants something to be better understood across a variety of language speakers, images are a safer bet than text.

But this dichotomy is one of convenience, not necessarily truth. The shortcomings of image are evident. Images, whether moving or still, require fluency in both visual communication by the image maker and the perceiver. This is why, as humanity evolves to interpret images, it develops new visual language. The famed examples of audiences becoming discomforted by a locomotive rushing toward the camera in early movie houses hints at how society adapts to the evolving language of image. It also reminds us how much of the way the image producer communicates is subject to interpretation. The entire world of visual illusion is about the effects produced in human perception around the elements of an image. Such tricks eventually find their way into the everyday visual language of even the newest of visual communicators, as they use perspective to frame the Eiffel Tower between their fingers or drop a finger on the Louvre. These are all part of the ever-evolving language of image.

Image also meets a contemporary need to communicate quickly. As the Internet has created a media rich environment with far more content than viewers have time, the interest in brevity becomes even more important. If email truncated the written letter and removed it's formality, Twitter further reduced it to a communiqué with more in common with a telegraph than the prose that word processors had made so much easier to create (in comparison to a typewriter). In all these examples there is a clear link to the technology. The tele-

graph shortened messages and offered a specific protocol (i.e. telegram style or cabalese). Later the telephone required new changes to human communication, turning the dynamic of human conversation to a single duplex interaction until full duplex phones allowed two or more people to speak at once. Email's structure abstracted much of the envelope's content of written letters, reducing them to what seemed a mere to and from (although send mail transfer protocols, or SMTP, include far more information). Early Twitter users were limited to 144 characters, but unlike a telegraph, the world could be their audience. The format, tone, and kinds of stories told changed as a product of the technology's affordances and limitations. The result is framing of the way we communicate that is affected by the technology.

Into this melee of widely available messages comes the low cost of delivering images. This is an environment where brevity is the responsibility of a technology communicator vying for the attention of an audience among clamoring ads, social media, and more. In this context, text may be great, but the image is better, at least initially. First impressions of images are quick and easily perceived across language barriers. A joke in an image is far more easily translated than text language, despite the ubiquity of automated translation. Whether good or bad, the reality is that often to be heard in such an environment, a story is aided by an image. The proof of this is in professional newsfeeds that include stock imagery simply to attract readers to their text content. It's in the dominance of image driven web products like Instagram, SnapChat, and TikTok.

It is no surprise then that Internet culture and smartphone users adopt a pictographic language as part of their communication. Communicating with emoji, shorthand representations of emotions, objects or people, is commonplace. Originally a product of Japanese culture, there is a wide array of emoji users that run a wide demographic. A pinnacle achievement in the world of emoji translation is *Emoji Dick* (Hollander, 2015) , a crowdsourced translation of *Moby Dick* told solely through emoji.

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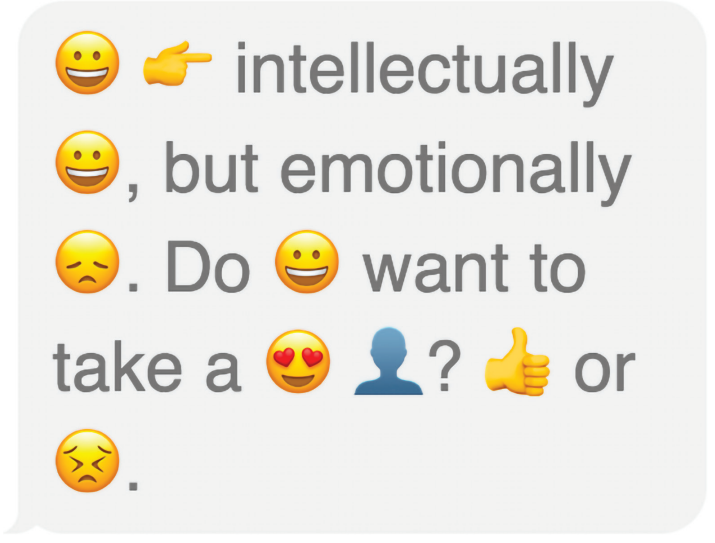
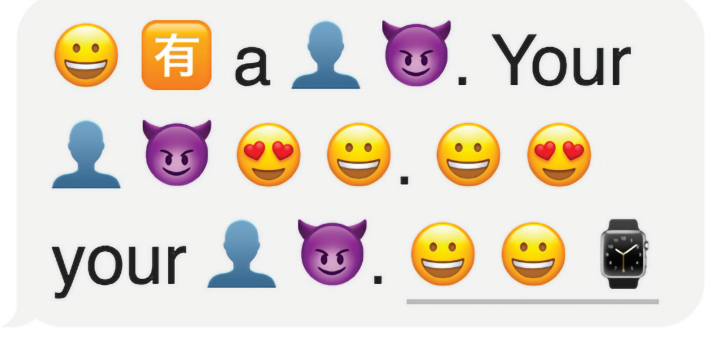
Ludoliteracy

One of the core themes among designs of meaningful play is the notion of ludoliteracy. Visual literacy is linked to fundamental human needs, like knowing how to tell a threat in the real world from a non-threat (e.g. is that a lion or a hamster) or





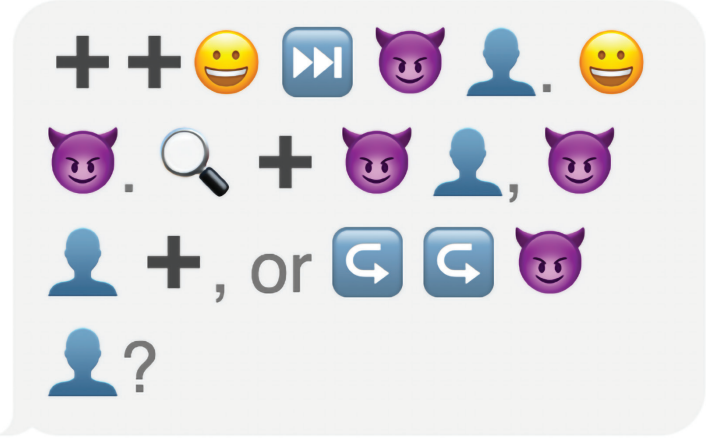
simply being able to navigate the real world (e.g. wayfinding). Ludoliteracy has similarly been linked to some elements of human psychological development, with those who do not play possessing substantial mental deficits that may result in antisocial behavior (Brown, 2009). The case for ludo-literacy is based on the notion that people understand the fundamentals of play because play itself is fundamental to human and animal behavior. Children learn through play and in designing meaningful play, there's an opportunity to exploit that experience toward further learning. This obviously is aimed not only at children but also adults who practice play in the digital space.

The early projects in meaningful play aimed at telling stories that would inspire their players. They offered rough translations of 'The Hobbit in Zork (Anderson and Galley, 1985), or took HP Lovecraft as motivation in *Alone in the Dark* (Infogrames, 1992). These efforts were kinds of translations of existing texts. Likewise others, more commonly, wrote their own narratives, succeeding in meaningful play with games like *Oregon Trail* (Minnesota Educational Computing Consortium, 1971). Such narratives were not without their own problems which Elizabeth LaPensee and others have highlighted in the past. The result is new stories supported by play like *When the Rivers were Trails* (LaPensee & Emmens, 2019). Such examples aimed to tell distinct stories.

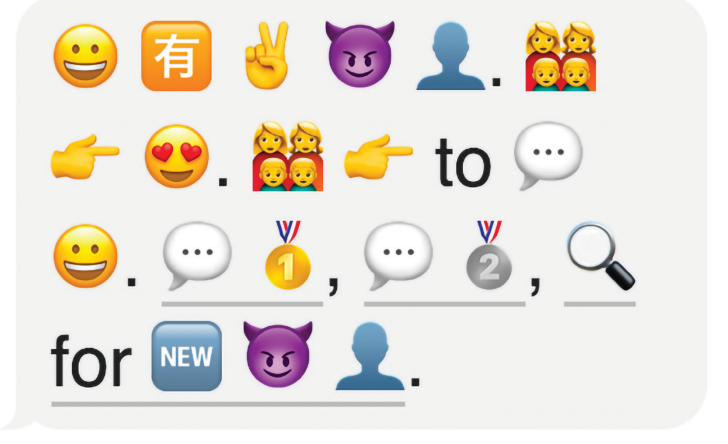
The aim of this small project was to explore how ludoliteracy in the contemporary can be combined with the visual literacy of emoji to tell a story. But the work also aims to do more than that. It also aims to show how quickly meaning is made ambiguous in all of these translations. While image

is often translated as an unambiguous means of communication, masters of illusion and masters of the writing craft recognize the strength of text and image (both imagined and rendered). More importantly, the project aims to explore how a relatively impoverished pictographic language like emoji can be adapted toward meaning.

Other work in this space has endeavored to show some of the biases of meaningful play. My prior work, *A Very Meaningful Game* (2014), for example, provides a tongue in cheek view of how much of meaningful play is all about you – the player. In the game, the player must complete a set of phrases from a poem that is about the player. The player character is a cartoon style set of legs with the word You. You, the player character, must be controlled in a series of fill in the blank styled platform puzzles. In each level the player is tasked with finding the right place to put you, and later nudging I as a secondary subject into its own place. The result is a clunky storytelling experience that sits somewhere between the tradition of educational game design (determining sentence structure) and a poetic creative experience.



As another example, the artist also worked with a group of students to produce a game adaption of another significant literary work. In the *Tell Tale Heart Game* (Grace, 2014), the narrative events of Edgar Allan Poe's short story *Tell Tale Heart* are adapted from read elements to played elements. The player employs one of 6 of the game's verbs through accelerometer and touch based actions on a mobile device. The culmination of these actions of an erratic and awkward shaking and tapping embodied by the player and intended to leave the player in the same fitted and tormented state as the protagonist in Poe's story. In short, the game



aimed to tell the story through action instead of words and to embody the first-person narrative in the player. All of this work is based on prior game design theory proposed as the poetics of game design (Grace, 2012). The identification of poetic potentials for computers, well before natural language processing had become so mainstream, was on artist's minds in the 80's (Pinsky, 1985), but has yet to have enough substantial work completed to demonstrate it's propensities as a design frame, practice, and implementation.

By producing *The Unbearable Lightness of Meaning* the goal was simply to give experiential evidence to the ephemeral qualities of telling a story through requiring both visual literacy and ludoliteracy. The story is told through emoji, but the player must translate those emoji to understand the content of the game.

The Game

The Unbearable Lightness of Meaning is a playful adaptation of Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984). The game plays with the ambiguity of emoji as a unit of meaning and operation, touching on the conference themes of understanding the impacts of online interaction and interpreting the basis for conveying emotional understanding. The player traverses one of two narratives, one about war and the other about love. Each is designed as an adaptation of Kundera's own themes.

The ambiguity of meaning resulting from abstracting the depth of Kundera's work to simple, 140 character (or less messages) in emoji is designed to remind players of the impoverished ways that we can communicate via technology. The death of a lover is minimized to a knife, coffin, and skull. The poetry of the novel, which is embedded in the game as quotes through emoji, is diminished into vagaries that have a certain lightness to them. Once the player accepts this lightness, lack of ultimate meaning as a thematic element in the novel, the Lightness of Meaning emoji becomes a more natural experience. It is when we try to determine exactly what they mean, that the tensions in efficacy and action become strongest.

In concert with a theme in the book, there are several paths to be traversed, but they function less as a rehearsal and more as an expense. There are, as the first lines of the book allude, moments eternal return which like an infinite loop repeat ad infinitum. There are moments, as well, when such returns seem like infinite loops, when in reality they are recursive, revealing that the seemingly infinite pattern is the only way to move forward.

As the player is successful at moving the path forward, the emoji retreat to the clearer meaning of the language itself (at least for English speakers). But, rewarding players for the lightness of being, the emoji are the only way to take action in this small, narrative game. In the end the game is an effort in thematic reference to a deeply philosophical novel, designed as a text-messaging game who's adventures orbit finding a way to philosophize in times of war, balancing the needs of lovers, and managing the unbearable lightness of being.

Conclusion

Ultimately the goal was to highlight how the innovations in technology sometimes limit the qualities

of the stories we tell. Just as a film adaptation of a book often loses nuance, the translation of a relatively complex work into the simplicity of emoji reduces some of its most defining qualities.

By analogy, the game serves as an example of an ASCII art render of the Mona Lisa. It falls far short of the aesthetic qualities, adapts its very limited propensities to the medium, and demonstrates how much more needs to be done. At the same time it hints at some potential for creating a ludoliterate narrative informed by automated translation. The transcription of text to emoji through natural language processing is in concept, practicality. In reality, themes are far harder to translate than narrative plot. In the least, what this small creative research demonstrates is the long road ahead in achieving translation of literature to ludo-literature.

In so doing, it references the theme of exhibition. As an example of the expression of emotion in humans and technology, it demonstrates both the opportunity and the shortfallings. It is a playable experience requiring domain-spanning literacies through the pictographs of emoji, ludoliteracy and the translation of emotion from literary work to played experience. This is not meant to be an easy translation, and much of the experience is problematized by the medium's real and interpreted ambiguity.

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