

Curiology with Various Emoji Experts

Ologies Podcast

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Oh hey, it's your building manager texting you, "So sorry to hear about the death of your praying mantis," with a cry-laughing emoji, Alie Ward, with another episode of *Ologies*. This week, what is it? What is it? What is it? It's emojis. Or is it emoji? Shit.

Jennifer: *Anyone who tries to police how you pluralize a word... you know, there's no right answer, there just isn't.*

That is Jennifer Daniel, one of not one, not two, but three ologists we have on this very, very giant and dear-to-my-heart episode about curiology. Jennifer is currently an emoji designer at Google who is responsible for designing a bunch of emojis, some that you're going to love like a serious fan favorite, the melting face emoji. And Jennifer is also a member of the Unicode Emoji Subcommittee, which may have you sitting at home wondering, "What the heck is a Unicode?" And I promise you we're going to get into that oh-so soon. I didn't know either and it's fascinating.

So, who else are we going to be hearing from? Well, there's Keith Broni...

Keith: *From a very technical perspective, it's emoji, but if you look at how people are actually using the term, it's emojis. And this is a classic example of language changing. If you want to be really, really technical, it's a Japanese term, and emoji, picture character, is both the singular and the plural.*

Keith is the current editor-in-chief of Emojipedia who, after writing his dissertation on the use of emojis at University College London, became the world's first professional emoji translator and shares what I would perhaps describe as an academic perspective throughout what will be this big two-parter on this daily part of our lives, emoji. And finally, Jeremy Burge, who founded Emojipedia...

Jeremy: *That was me.*

... in 2013.

Jeremy: *I did.*

And until very recently, represented Emojipedia in the Unicode Technical Committee. We're going to get in the trenches of emojis, the real, gritty, behind-the-scenes, backstage world of these beloved and mercurial little language cartoons.

But first, we like to do a little thanks up top. Thank you to patrons who support us and let us make donations every week of the ologist's choosing. For as little as a buck a month you can join [Patreon.com/Ologies](https://patreon.com/Ologies) and you make that possible. You also get to submit questions for our ologists and I may be saying your name on the show. But we also like to read a review every week because, as you know, I read them all and then I pick one. This week's comes from Andrea Ocarina, or Awndrea, [ph.] or Andréa Ocarina, who wrote:

Hey bestie! I feel like Mulder "talking to anyone who will listen" except I talk about your podcast and not aliens. I hope you read this.

Hey, guess what? I did. And maybe I read your name wrong, but I read it a couple times so hopefully I got it right. Thank you to everyone who leaves reviews, I read them and sometimes I weep in the best way.

Okay, curiology, let's get into it, I've been waiting years for it. So, curiology comes from curiologic which means 'representing things by their pictures instead of by symbols', and it comes from a Greek word *kyriologia*, meaning 'obvious language.' We're going to kick this off with a bit of debate about this term with our three ologists. Let's get into it with curiologists Jennifer Daniel, Keith Broni, and who you'll hear from first, Jeremy Burge.

Alie: Now okay, there is a little bit of controversy about the ology for this topic.

Jeremy: Is there?

Alie: Yes.

Jeremy: Okay, I love controversy. *[laughs]*

Alie: Okay, good. So, this topic has been the inception of all of *Ologies*, which has changed my whole life. This is a big one for me which is why I needed to call in the big guns.

Jeremy: Okay. Wow, I feel the pressure now.

Alie: No. *[laughs]* Okay, so *Ologies* started because 20 years ago, 21 years ago, I was on the internet and there was a baby, baby website, like a GeoCities type of website.

Jeremy: Okay, or Angelfire or, you know, a classic, classic.

Alie: *[laughs]* Yeah, something like that. And it listed all the ologies and I landed on that page because I was trying to come up with a name for an art company that I was starting, and I wanted to know if curiology was a real word. And I found out, via this little website, that it means writing with pictures. So, I was an illustrator at the time so writing with pictures, I responded well to that. So, I called my company Curiology forever, but in the back of my head, I always had this list of ologies that I wanted to do something with, make a book, or do... It sat.

So, when it came time to do an emojis episode... I am of the belief that it is somewhat writing with pictures but you're shaking your head a little, what do you think?

Jeremy: No, no, no, I agree. *[Alie laughs]* You know the first thing that often happens in any kind of discussion of emojis, some people feel like it's a language and a way of communicating and it's not, but I think you're right; I'm not shaking my head. In fact, I think I meant to nod *[both laugh]* because that's the etymology of emoji, that's what the word emoji means is "picture character" in Japanese. So, I think you couldn't be more accurate almost to the actual meaning.

Alie: So, you are a curiologist then?

Jeremy: I love that. That makes me sound much more impressive. *[laughs]* I'll take that.

Alie: You now have an ology title.

Aside: And how about our active Unicode board member and emoji designer, Jennifer Daniel, does she approve?

Jennifer: The Free Dictionary is telling me, "the representation of things or sounds by means of their pictures instead of symbols or words."

Alie: So, would that be... I feel like emojis, that that applies and if it doesn't count you can tell me why.

Jennifer: Curiology is great, curiology is great. When I think about emoji, I think historically, they are firmly grounded in a visual space but as we started to communicate outside of SMS text messaging, which is kind of a legacy of the past, it's not purely a visual form anymore, it really is supplemental to

gesture and intonation and body language and all these things, but there is no doubt that emoji have a visual representation in which case it would be perfectly suitable for curiology.

Aside: Okay, so far, two for two on curiology, which delights me. But how about the current Editor in Chief of Emojipedia, professional emoji translator, Keith Broni, who literally wrote his dissertation on the use of emojis, what's his take?

Keith: In terms of being a curiologist, I mean, the emoji keyboard is not just a set of literal pictographic depictions of objects. There are a lot of ideograms in there as well; there are the classic heart ideograms, where that's not a literal depiction of a human heart but people associate that particular design with affection. There is also, of course, all the various smiley faces that have those ideograms kind of, within them as well; the face with two big heart eyes, the face surrounded by hearts, there's the face blowing a kiss that has a little heart there representing it.

So, the emoji keyboard is a mix of genuine representations of objects, but there are also so many metaphorical, symbolic representations of concept as well, so it's kind of a mix of both. In the category of the smiley emojis, there are so many expressions there that obviously we with our faces cannot literally do. We cannot turn our eyes into hearts, we cannot turn our eyes into stars. The various ways in which sweat drops or teardrops are utilized across the smiley faces are very cartoonish in nature. A lot of the design conventions used across the emoji keyboard are drawn from comic book conventions, or conventions in anime and manga.

Aside: I had no idea about the influence of comic book art on emoji design, but it also came up talking to Jennifer who mentioned the work of Neil Cohn, who is a cognitive scientist and a comics theorist. Neil was nominated for a 2021 Eisner Award, which is like the Oscars for comics, for Best Academic Scholarly Work and he wrote a book, *Who Understands Comics: Questioning the Universality of Visual Language Comprehension*, and that presents this theory that he has that drawings and sequential images are structured the same as language. So, I don't know, maybe we can get him on the show some time to discuss comics. I don't know what that would be, maybe graphic narratology? Actually, scratch that. I just looked this up and people do use comicology to talk about this art. We're going to workshop it, maybe at a later date we'll have that episode. Anyway, take it away Jennifer.

Jennifer: He's amazing. For example, he collected a large number of manga and comic books and then all the faces that were in each one of these, created a taxonomy of the different facial expressions, and identified 69 unique expressions that all had very distinct meanings. So, I took those 69 expressions and then said, "This one is represented in emoji, this one is represented in emoji, this one isn't."

Alie: Oh! Wow.

Jennifer: "This one is, this one's similar enough." Then there was one that was paperification, because it's paper, magazine where the character kind of wants to disappear, they kind of turn into paper and float away. And so, between that and this other convention, which was changing the opacity of a character to make them look transparent, we got dotted line face, so you're disappearing, and we got the melty face. So, you're able to take these conventions and... That's the thing, you can never really make something new. I think that's a common misconception, that you have to make something new. But it's really something that's existed for a really, really long time.

Aside: One time Jarrett had this viral tweet about how most domestic partnerships are just urgently demanding that your partner look at your pet, like, "Look at them, look at them," even though they're exactly the same as they always are. This tweet has continued to make the rounds for years and I always think that some of the most resonant or successful bits of art or comedy, or

whatever, aren't something that no one has ever seen before but actually identifying something everyone is familiar with, but no one has really named or pointed out, at least not recently. That also seems to be what makes a successful new emoji as well. So, the little, tiny picture that you didn't know how much you needed.

Anyway, back to talking to Keith about the question of curiology. I asked him if he thought it would be closer to the study of symbolic communication via semiotics.

Keith: Emojis sit in this fascinating place because they are a part of our keyboard, so it is fair enough to say that there's a huge element of curiological work in dealing with emojis, there's a lot of semiotics as well, there's a lot of linguistics, there's a lot of design thinking.

Aside: Okay, I'm calling that three for three. I think that's a slam dunk. Now some could argue that curiology is a more literal use of images as language, like with hieroglyphics, but until we start an - ics podcast, I'm standing by curiology. All right, let's get into the history of emojis with Jeremy.

Alie: When did emojis start?

Jeremy: You know what? So, one of the confusing bits about the early emoji history is just the fact that I guess a lot of us had— and I say “us,” I'm 38 for reference. So, when I grew up a popular messaging app was MSN Messenger in Australia; I know over here, AOL Instant Messenger was popular. And they had smileys as well and people are often like, “Aren't they emojis too?” They looked very similar but the reason that emoji became universal on every platform is that they existed in Japan, and the idea was you could insert them into regular text. You could have some normal text and put it alongside, it didn't matter which SMS you were using, which platform, and that's sort of their origin story. And then the world expanded, and we needed to be compatible with each other so the rest of the world needed emoji support, otherwise we couldn't talk to our Japanese friends, and our Japanese friends would not be interested in mobile platforms from Apple and Google, which was their priority at the time.

Alie: And when it comes to how they're displayed on different phones and different computers, is there a code that says, “This is going to be someone weeping and melting,” and then every different platform has to have a certain thing that represents that code?

Jeremy: Yes, the origin of every emoji having a name is that in the early days, an emoji had a name, and each platform could do what they wanted with that. You'd have an emoji that says, “Smiling face,” and you go, “Easy, got that. Big tick.” [*Alie laughs*] But then you get ones like, “Face with hand over mouth,” and this one was complicated because some platforms made the eyes look like they were laughing, and some made the eyes look like they were serious. So, if you imagine a face with a hand over the mouth, that can either be, sort of, shocked or “I'm sorry,” or it can be, “Ha-ha, that's very funny.”

And there's definitely been plenty of people online who have run into trouble with this, influencers and minor celebrities, who might react to a news story, thinking they're being sincere or shocked and other people see it on their phone as laughing, which is not what you want to do.

Alie: That's happened to celebrities?

Jeremy: That has definitely happened to celebrities.

Aside: Oh, this definitely happens all the time. Some quick googling will take you to plenty of articles sharing emoji fails, which mostly seem to be related to individuals who are just surely trying to express grief or sympathy through a text, usually related to an injury, the death of a pet or a loved one, and they use the crying emoji but accidentally hit the cry-laughing emoji, which is just so sinister and cruel.

But I did find one little fun celeb emoji mix-up pretty recently. In September 2022, when Queen Elizabeth II, beloved pop diva, Cher, included in her text of mourning, “I’m so proud she was a...” and then added the emoji for a bull, which very much looked like Cher was calling the late Queen a cow. Now, initially, some thought perhaps she meant to use the goat emoji, calling her the Greatest Of All Time? However, astute fans did their own beep-boop-beep-boop processing and decoded that Cher was actually saying, “I’m so proud she was a Taurus,” because Cher and Queen Elizabeth II apparently shared the same Earth sign in the Sun position of their zodiac charts. And the end of that tweet was that Cher was happy the Queen had a great sense of humor. So, I’m sure everyone in all astral planes got a kick out of it. Cher, when I die, you can call me a cow, it would be an honor; anything but the thumbs up, and we’re going to get to that later.

Jeremy: There’s another instance where the drooling emoji for a while there on some platforms looked like, you could barely tell the drool was there so you might think it’s just a nice smiley face, and on others, it’s sort of this ridiculous cartoon eyes, giant eyes with giant pools of water coming out the corner of the lip [*laughs*] and if you’re posting that going, “Oh, this looks nice!” You might not even have even noticed there’s a little drool out of the corner on one phone.

So, there was an era where that was happening a lot, and then the last few years, the companies have kind of got together and there’s a lot more consistency now. You can be a lot more confident in the last three or so years that your emoji might not have the same style, might be glossy, or might be flat-shaded but it’s going to look pretty close, whereas 5-10 years ago, it was the wild west out there with some of them.

Alie: When it comes to how they’re coded, does that mean that different devices have to say, “Okay, well when I get this code in, that means this is going to pop up for it”? So, we have to make sure that it’s not too different so that the cry-laugh doesn’t look too weepy on one and have a completely different meaning depending on the user.

Jennifer: Yes, and I think that was probably something that was less appreciated in the earlier days of emoji. It really felt like, “Okay, here are a bunch of code points, go off and design them.” Everyone went off and were like, “I just made the most beautiful cucumber.” Everyone went off and designed their own emoji and what happened was the opposite of what Unicode wanted to happen. You wanted to be able to send, in any language, what you intended to someone else. But if I was sending you a cucumber emoji from my Android device and on your Apple device, it’s a cucumber but it’s been cut up, depending on the context of why I’m sending the cucumber, it means completely different things and no one wants to be misunderstood.

So, I think in recent years, there’s been a real concerted effort to reconcile meaningful variances of interpretation and the ones that were most egregious were probably the faces because 1) they’re emotional and so those are a lot harder, our infinite prismatic emotions are hard to capture in one image. And we’re also evolved to read micro-expressions, so even an eyebrow that’s slightly less concave than another can be interpreted differently.

Aside: Speaking of misunderstood emojis, I think it’s safe to say that one of the most famously ambiguous emojis, we’ve all been there, it’s the one with the two hands pressed together. Are they praying hands or is it a high-five? Who’s lying? And I’m praying for closure, I’m going to high-five anyone who can give it to me. In this case, Keith, give us a hand.

Keith: Actually, the folded hands emoji was never intended to be a high-five emoji. Now, that is not to say that it has never been used as a high-five emoji. But if you look at this emoji’s earliest designs on some platforms, take for example the Microsoft emoji set, it actually depicts what the original name of that emoji was, which was “Person with folded hands.” And listeners can go to Emojipedia,

they can go to the “Folded hands” emoji page, they can go down to Microsoft and they can see all of the historic emoji designs and what we will see, from several years ago, is a person with both of their hands folded, their face a bit solemn, a gesture associated, of course, with prayer or maybe *namaste*, or in certain countries like Japan, expressing thanks.

Now, if you go to certain platforms and you enter “high-five” into an emoji search bar, it will suggest the folded hands emoji which is one of the spaces where this possible interpretation has come from but if you actually look at how people use this emoji, and it actually is one of the most popular across the world, high-five is an incredibly niche-use case.

I will say this, there is really no right and wrong way to use an emoji. It all comes down to whether or not the person at the other end of the message you’re sending will be able to interpret the emoji correctly.

Aside: So, there you have it, once and for all, here on *Ologies*, is the emoji praying hands or is it a high-five? And the definitive answer is yes. So, okay. But let’s get back to the early days, the growth and the spread of emoji.

Alie: When did it make the jump from Japan? Because I remember I didn’t get an iPhone until 2009 or something, and then I remember when my friend Micah sent me the first emoji I had ever seen, I think it was an arm flexing and I was like, “How did you put the tiny picture in there?”

Jeremy: Good emoji, yeah.

Alie: It’s a great emoji. But when did it start to spread culturally?

Jeremy: So, around 2009 to 2012. It wasn’t deliberate but it almost had all the cues of a viral soft launch because they were hidden at first, you had to download special apps. And so, the first time nearly any of us saw it was when we had our cool friend send us an emoji and you’d be like, “Wow, I’ve got to get that.” And that wasn’t intentional at all; they just hadn’t finished making iOS compatible with Japan, so some people knew how to get to it, some people didn’t. But really it was around 2012 when they became standardized and you could use them on, theoretically, every phone. I don’t think the idea of them being an exciting item of pop culture that we could all rally around and go, “I love this emoji, I like that emoji...” That would be around 2014, I would say.

Alie: Do you remember when you updated your phone and had it on your keyboard for the first time?

Jennifer: Oh, for sure, I remember driving from Arizona to California for some road trip, and a new iPhone I suppose came out and it wasn’t default installed, so you had to download this other keyboard to get it to render. So, that predates Unicode’s involvement in it. But then there’s this big gap. I remember that moment and I remember using them, but then I didn’t really know what an emoji really was for a long time actually, in retrospect. I don’t know, you see them in Gmail, there was that little lobster guy that...

Alie: Yes! *[laughs]*

Jennifer: That kind of animation where it chopped its claws. I just used it because he was sassy. That’s not really an emoji but it is emoji-adjacent. But that’s true of everything, you just want to be like, “What is this new thing?”

Alie: What is the difference between an emoji and an emoticon?

Jeremy: It does depend on who you talk to, but these days we tend to accept that an emoticon is a text-based character, so the colon and the smile or the equal sign and the bracket to make a smile, that sort of thing. We did kind of incorporate also these custom ones on MSN. You type them the same way, a lot of your listeners might remember you would type the smiley and then it would replace it

with an image. Emoji tends to be this very standardized set that a committee agreed to and they're on every keyboard in the world. Whereas an emoticon could be just anything in any app.

Alie: One reason I've wanted to interview you forever is that you launched a site called Emojipedia.

Jeremy: I did.

Alie: Which is a big deal. It is where people go to figure out, "What is this emoji? How are people using this? What does it mean if I get this? What does it mean if I accidentally give this?" So, what led you to want to create an information hub for that?

Jeremy: I did like emoticons and emojis and we all had the thing where we're playing with them, and I've always quite liked technology and getting the latest update and seeing what's in there. It was exciting one year when... No one really discussed this but Apple, you updated your iPhone and there were new emojis there. And like most nerds do, you go to google it, you go to have a look, this is around 2012, and there's just, I don't know, no one was talking about it. *[laughs]* And I just figured that didn't make any sense. They weren't a phenomenon yet, but they were pretty popular. I was like, "Why are there no articles listing what the new emojis are? That makes no sense to me." So, it was as simple as that. It started off wanting to know what the new ones were and so I'd go through the list, you'd compare notes with friends or find somebody with an old phone and it evolved over time. That was the origin of Emojipedia and then I thought, "Well, I also want to know what they mean or what they're called," and that started a very long journey.

Alie: What was the moment when you decided for it to go from an idea into something real?

Jeremy: I'd been playing around for around 6 months. I was working for universities at the time, setting up their websites and things, and trying to convince them to put emojis on their websites. But there were some technical issues, and they weren't very interested. So, it was about 6 months of playing with them, and then one day I was like, "Anyone can set up a website, it's not hard." It's like your ologies Angelfire list. The first Emojipedia was just one page with a list of names, and it evolved from there. So, I would say 6 months of playing around and then one night of putting something quick together.

Alie: That's how it works. It just simmers and then ta-da!

Jeremy: It was the name as well. I remember coming home, it was my birthday, I'd been thinking about the idea, we'd been out for dinner and drinks. And Emojipedia is such an obvious name, it doesn't take a genius to come up with it. *[Alie laughs]* But I'd been playing with the idea of having a site that listed every emoji and what they meant, and I was just like, "I've got to go." As soon as I came in the door, I had had a few drinks but I could still navigate the computer, the internet, and I'm just like, "Surely this is going to be taken as a username and domain name," and it wasn't, so I was like, "That's it. You've got the name; you have to start. You'll be so mad if 6 months from now or a year from now someone else does this and you think, *[hushed tone]* I was going to do that."

Alie: Uh-huh. How did you start to fill out what meant what? Because things can mean different things to different people.

Jeremy: They can. So, I learned so much. I was an absolute novice; I had no idea when I very first started making this list that they even had an official name each. I was like, "All right, let me put each one down." And then I went, "What am I going to call them?" I thought, "Well okay, let me just check what Apple calls them," and I found you could do a text-to-speech thing and I went, "Okay, so Apple calls them this but where are they getting that list from?" And this is when I realized they'd been incorporated in the Unicode standard, which is an international standard for every text character

in the world. So, Unicode is inscrutable, very hard to figure out their documentation, but they had a list on their site just saying, “Here’s every emoji.” And I went, “Oh, I’ll use that. Thanks very much.”

Alie: Who is deciding, at Unicode – because I didn’t know about Unicode until very recently – who is on the board deciding what emojis exist, what they mean, what they look like? Is there one giant conference table?

Jeremy: There is a conference table. So, the origins of Unicode are very boring, very noble. 20, 30 years ago, there was no way to have a document that had different languages in it. You had to say, “This document is in Japanese. This document is in English.” So, you had nerds that are into text and internationalization, very smart people, came up with this standard. And then when emoji first got incorporated into this standard, you had this esoteric list of little pictures from Japan that a few random guys made up, it wasn’t standardized over there, it’s just whoever made it up. And then when it became an international standard, the same people who know about fonts and technology, they just, sort of, by default, were the people who were administering the new emoji lists. So, they weren’t necessarily qualified, as in, they didn’t have any special qualification for emoji, they were just text standardization people.

Keith: So, the Unicode Consortium, usually just called Unicode is an international organization that’s made up of a variety of different member companies, primarily tech companies like Apple, Google, and Microsoft. They basically create this standardization document that talks about how text should be encoded across all digital devices. It actually originates from the late ‘80s, early ‘90s in Silicon Valley; there were discussions between Apple engineers and Microsoft engineers who realized “Look, if various different computational devices are being constructed all across the globe, we want to make sure that each of those different devices, regardless of their manufacturer, are going to be able to communicate correctly with one another.”

Jennifer: Around 30 years ago, the Unicode Consortium was created and every year the Unicode Technical Committee publishes and specifies the rules, and the algorithms, and all the properties necessary to achieve interoperability between different platforms and languages. And when I say interoperability, I really just mean, you can type the letter A and the person on the other end can see the letter A, or Aleph, or whatever letter or language you want, because it’s not just letters, there’s also scripts.

But anyway, now, it’s more reasonable that when you send the letter A from your device, the other person will see the same thing. That’s what Unicode does. They basically say, “Here’s a single character set that covers the languages of the world,” and emoji are the same way. Letter A has a code point.

Alie: And what is a code point exactly?

Jennifer: A code point is a sequence of letters and numbers that... It’s like the code that renders any number of things, it’s the code that renders the letter. So, the code for the letter A is U+0041.

Alie: Oh!

Jennifer: And that’s just for the capital A, there’s a different code point for lowercase A, which is 0061. That’s why there’s a difference between a capital A and a lowercase A. Now, the way that A presents itself is different depending on the font you’re using. Are you using Comic Sans? Are you using Helvetica? What are you using? And emoji are the same way; each one is assigned a code point, so the code point for skull is 1F480.

Alie: Wow. Okay.

Jennifer: Every emoji has a code point assigned to it.

Alie: Yeah, so each one isn't a picture, it's a really detailed and colorful letter, which I feel like, there aren't necessarily colors in letters and numbers. But a letter in a font having all of these details, how are you even telling a computer how to render that?

Jennifer: Well, this is where it's interesting. When we think of what a font is, what do you think of?

Alie: I think of a... I feel like, serifs, sans serifs, italics. I feel like it has the bare bones of the structure but then it modifies it. But I might be completely wrong.

Jennifer: No, but that's the thing, we all come to it with a preconceived notion of how a font should operate: you can change the color, you can change the size, you can change how it appears, you can change the formatting, all the things that you just described. Now, font technology has gotten to a place where you can do more than that. You can have color fonts. So, color fonts, while not how we commonly think of fonts, is a reason why people don't know that emoji are fonts because it defies how you think of them. You're like, "No, a font is... Arial."

I wouldn't say there's a large market for color fonts yet. Because they are more complex, so I think emoji are probably the most popular use case of a color font. But even with that color, you can't do things to emoji like you can a font; you can't make it italic, you can't bold it. They look like pictures, so you presume it's a picture, and I think that's a fair assumption to make. But the word is Japanese, emoji doesn't mean emotion, it's a picture character, e-moji. And so, if you think about code points, it's the same thing; there's the picture and the character of the code that's defined. So, it is inherently a technical artifact. And all Unicode really does is they have a lengthy spreadsheet, "Here are characters on a list; this is what they mean, and this is what their names are, and this is how they map between different character sets."

Alie: So, does that mean... Let's say the skull one. 0F114, which, by the way, I feel like is a great longhand for when you want to say you're dead laughing now. *[laughs]*

Jennifer: Yes. I really do think this is how funny shortcodes work too. The time it takes to find the right emoji, you just don't so you just write ":dead:". You get it, you understand. Or just "shock.gif." You don't even get a GIF anymore you just like, evoke the idea of a shocked GIF.

Alie: *[laughs]* That's so funny.

Jennifer: Love that.

Aside: Okay, so Unicode does all this cataloging of emojis internally for tech but how about cataloging them for the public at large who are using them and misusing them? How did all the internal work of Unicode get out there for folks just, kind of, casually tippy-tapping on pocket computers, us woozy little cows like you and me? Let's bop back to Jeremy and talk about the growth of Emojipedia.

Alie: Did people take notice of Emojipedia and you? Did people start saying, "Hey, what are you working on? Let's show you what we've got coming up?" When did you start to become an authority in the field?

Jeremy: Emojipedia kind of blew up overnight in a small way that, because we started publishing lists of upcoming emojis, which I thought was interesting, one day, news had, not quite leaked, but someone had said, "Oh, there's some new emojis coming out," and when you looked it up, Emojipedia would come up. And I, by that stage, had gone from treating it like a side project to taking it pretty seriously, we'd gone from 5 visits a day to 1,000 visits a day, and then 10,000 visits a day. So, this is only about a year in and then I went, "All right, I've got to clean this site up a bit." *[Alie laughs]* I'd done it, but it was a lot of late nights and asking my friends, "What do you think this face... I've got the official name here, but for the meaning of, what does it mean?" There was a

lot of me looking at it and going, “Hmm, this one looks the same as that one but it’s a bit happier.” So, that would be the description for the first year.

Aside: So, while describing each of the emojis was challenging just in its most basic definitions, with the constant evolution of emoji and culture, how does Emojipedia keep up with the ever-evolving definitions? Just thinking about it, it makes my stomach hurt, it causes me a sense of overwhelmed vertigo. How does an expert cope with this? I asked Keith.

Keith: There is a lot of social listening involved, there’s a lot of data that we’re pulling from various sources that were able to do so. But also, there’s a lot of crowdsourcing that is involved as well. We have to be tipped off to a certain thing may be happening on one platform versus another and we’re so lucky that we have such a global user base that’s very invested in the reporting that Emojipedia does and maybe tips us off that, “Hang on, have you seen this happening with this emoji?” And we’ll jump in on the beginning of an emerging viral trend.

That was the case with, for example, the triangular flag emoji becoming the go-to symbol for conveying the sense of someone having a red flag. You know that term where someone’s got a red flag, there’s a behavior that’s incredibly counterproductive or very, very negative, that gives people, to use dating parlance, “the ick.” That emoji existed on the keyboard for an incredibly long time. By and large, it had always been conveyed as a red flag, a little triangular red flag, but it never really was used to convey that term up until one post goes viral, we get the tip-off, we monitor the situation, we look into our social listening tools, and are able to see a spike in popularity and the change in terminology that’s being used alongside the emoji. People by and large use emojis as punctuation with text, so when you see social posts, emojis are going to sit in the same place by and large that you would expect to see a full stop, or an exclamation mark, or even a question mark. And then you’re able to really see, “Okay, this is what the topic of conversation is in relation to this emoji,” and we monitor how it progresses.

You see this all the time as well, the saluting face emoji is another one that jumped hugely in popularity recently, actually during the acquisition of Twitter by Elon Musk. As people were being made redundant left, right, and center, they were signing off with a salute emoji. What we found was that emoji quickly quintupled in popularity. And though it dropped off quite dramatically after the initial fervor, its popularity is still more than double what it was before. People almost were made aware of this emoji’s existence on their keyboard after its virality and now it has become part of their more broad emoji lexicon.

Aside: Okay, so quick aside. Just because this made me think about an emoji which, once I became aware of it, I started using all the time. It’s this little 8-bit goblin dancing thing and it looks kind of like a purple space invader and Emojipedia told me that it’s actually known as “Alien monster.” I started using it years ago with my friend Micah, basically as a way of just rating how much I do or very often do not have my shit together. I’ll say, “I’m at like, 3 out of 5 goblins today, I’m hanging on, I’m not doing that bad.” And I know we all have secret meaning ones, but the alien monster, it’s one of my favorites; it’s just pixelated chaos. But what about Jeremy, as the founder of Emojipedia, what’s his little favorite, what’s his little darling?

Alie: Which emoji do you use the most?

Jeremy: I get bored of the same emoji. I like a new one. The melting face has been excellent in recent years, one of the best new additions, I think.

Alie: *[laughs]* What do you like about it?

Jeremy: The melting face, I just like any that are conflicting which defeats the purpose in some ways. *[Alie laughs]* Every confusing one are my favorite ones that add some ambiguity in there and the melting

face is smiling but it's melting away. I like that. I think it adds some realism, it's like talking in the real world. A plain smiley is just, nahh, boring.

Alie: What about the skull for dying laughing? Do you enjoy that juxtaposition of meaning and image?

Jeremy: I like that it exists. These things happened when I was running Emojipedia. I think that we saw this skull come out of nowhere, that Apple released a list of... they were trying to show off some privacy feature and they showed off their top 10 emojis used in iMessage and this is a good year or two before I'd seen mainstream use of the skull. It must have been happening, it was in the top 10 and I had to go, "What is going on? Why are people using this?" And clearly, it was happening in younger communities and now it's very widespread. I can't use it myself; I feel like it belongs to the next generation, I don't think I can sincerely put the skull. What about you? Can you put the skull emoji for laugh?

Alie: I can do a skull emoji for laugh but only when it's also very flat-faced, like, "I'm dying laughing, also I do want to die from this." So, it has to have a double meaning and I would only use it in very, very intimate contexts, probably. I wouldn't just text a colleague or, you know what I mean?

Jeremy: *[laughs]* Yeah, colleagues get the top five generic ones: the laugh-cry, the smile, the thumbs up... I think that's about it.

Alie: Right, that's it. I feel like I use the anguished face a little too much.

Jeremy: I like the anguished face. It has a lot of emotion on one face.

Alie: So much and I feel like if you had to mine my personal data to see how my mental health is going at certain points, you'd be like, "She's using the anguished face a lot. She must be on deadline."

Jennifer: We all use the same ones, the same two. Tears of joy and heart by a large margin. One in five emojis shared is the tears of joy.

Alie: *Really?*

Jennifer: Oh yeah. And then the red heart for obvious reasons, and then there's a looonnng drop-off.

Keith: We saw a huge jump in usage over the last number of years in the loudly crying face, the emoji with the two waterfall-esque tears running down its face. It was initially created to convey genuine sadness, absolute despondency, abject melancholy, but because of how incredibly over-the-top its design is, younger generations, in particular, began to co-opt it as, "Oh my god, I'm so overwhelmed," which can also be used, say, "I'm so overwhelmed because of how hilarious this is or how cringe-inducing it is." It's actually quite diverse.

And of course, one thing that we'd certainly seen occur in the emoji keyboard as things have evolved over the years is, kind of, a much wider embrace of the ironic use of emojis. Millennials and older generations by and large tend to use them in a more earnest fashion or stick more closely to their intended meanings. So, if they want to convey a sense of awkwardness, they would opt for the emojis that have been created to encapsulate that sensation; so the classic upside-down face, or more recently the melting face emoji.

But more and more we're seeing reports of younger generations getting a lot more playful when it comes to the emojis they're opting for to convey a sense of awkwardness. There's a lot more sardonic emoji use. We've seen reports of people using the cowboy hat emoji for example, to convey a sense of awkwardness because it's just so absurdly happy and it could convey in a certain context just an awkward, "Okay, I've got to go along with this even though I don't feel it's appropriate for how I'm feeling at this moment in time, because I'm sitting here with a big goofy

smile on my face, cowboy hat on,” again, metaphorically speaking. Just having to, kind of, go along with this bizarre situation I’m finding myself in.

Aside: Okay, so we’re going to get back into how these new uses of emoji began and how Emojipedia keeps track of them all. But first, every week we donate to a charity of the ologists’ choosing and this week it’s going to none other than Unicode. So, the Unicode Consortium, it kind of sounds like an evil corporate empire but surprise! It’s cool as hell and it’s a nonprofit. So, Unicode is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, it was founded in 1988 and it involves hundreds of professionals, so many volunteers, and language experts who are helping create and manage standards for software that’s deployed on more than 20 billion devices around the globe. And it’s uniting us in language and giving greater access to expression for so many people. So thank you, Unicode, for allowing us to text a drooling face emoji to an ex at 1:54 AM and at least be understood if not well received. And also thank you to patrons and sponsors of *Ologies* who make those donations possible.

[Ad Break]

Let us celebrate emojis for the next few weeks. It’s World Emoji Day on July 17th. How can you celebrate? You can toss a couple bucks at Unicode, I’m sure they’d use it. You don’t have to because we did, but you always can. Okay, next week we’re going to have Part 2 with all your questions but for this Part 1, let’s keep our butts at the edge of our seats, learning the history and the basics of emojis and their constantly evolving meaning and how does Emojipedia track them?

Alie: When it comes to who is making the trends, did you find at some point that things would start on TikTok and then they would go to Twitter? Is there a waterfall effect? Where does it start?

Jeremy: As far as we could tell, and say, a couple of years in, we needed to hire data analysts to figure out what’s going on. Twitter was easier to mine for data which helped us see trends in big ways; we could analyze 50 million tweets or 100 million tweets. But it was clear from some of these reports from companies like Apple where they’d selectively show stuff that was happening in private messaging, as far as I can see it’s happening in private messaging first. In small communities, small groups have a shared language or something that you use between your friends, and a little fun idea for an emoji and it spreads from one to the next. It probably moves privately to Snapchat and then you get these blurry, mixed private-public platforms, Snapchat, Instagram. TikTok is obviously a massive cultural hit now, TikTok is setting the internet culture now. No doubt that is where it’s happening now but at least while I was running it, Twitter was an easier place to see the trends as they hit the mainstream.

Keith: And of course, a lot of social media platforms today have very different generational demographics. I don’t think it’s surprising for most people when I say that Facebook tends toward older millennials to older generations in terms of its active user base. TikTok is primarily Gen Z, and you just have platforms like Twitter that exist across different generations, although it does, again, skew Millennial and older.

You can actually see completely different trends between these platforms when it comes to certain emoji usage. So, across the likes of Facebook, say, the face with tears of joy still absolutely rules the roost in terms of the go-to emoji to convey laughter. When you go to TikTok, for example, the face with tears of joy still crops up, absolutely, it’s still the number one emoji in the world across all social platforms and messaging apps, but it is deemed a little cheugy or cringe, very “Okay, Boomer,” perhaps.

Aside: What about emojis whose meaning between different groups might be very different? Say, the water droplet emoji, which some very sweet and tender souls may use only to use something

straightforward, perhaps like your Meemaw, reminding you not to forget an umbrella because it might sweat droplet outside. Does Unicode worry about regulating that at all?

Jennifer: You know, I sometimes joke that every emoji is a sex emoji. [*Alie laughs*] Here's the thing, when you're working in a vacuum, yes, those anecdotes are really funny, and I love them, and I use them all the time. But the reality is, is that 80% of the time emoji are used, it's alongside words. So, if I'm writing, "I'm so horny for you," and I use that emoji, there's no question about what I mean. [*Alie laughs*] Right? There's no ambiguity there at all. And if you're trying to be coy and not be so overt, then maybe but if you're having a heated conversation, not going to happen right?

So, one of the things I do love about emoji is that it is a parallel to how we already communicate. So, think about body language or eye contact, what might be considered too close, physically, to someone is considered culturally appropriate in some parts of the world and not appropriate in other parts of the world. Or even hand gestures, certain hand gestures are more lewd in some parts of the world than other parts of the world, and so you have to respect that culture when you visit those places of origin. Part of it is being aware, part of it is learning through experience. And I do think what is great about emoji is that they don't need to be globally, universally understood.

There's maté emoji, which is a drink from a couple different places, but it basically is this brown, it almost looks like a coconut with a straw in it. So, if you're from Uruguay, you'd be like, "I know what that is, maté. I love maté. Thank you for the maté emoji." If you talk to someone from, like, Montana, who is not familiar at all with maté they'd be like, "Oh, that's a coconut drink! I've seen that before!" And they might use it, "I'm going on a tropical vacation." [*Alie laughs*] That doesn't mean they've used it wrong. They used it and it was effective to communicate what they needed to say to the person they were talking to.

This is just like the Tower of Babel all over again. Platforms like Twitter, where you have a global audience, it's really important to understand who your audience is versus, like, shit-talking [*Alie laughs*] with your girlfriend; it can mean anything. I used paw prints instead of a heart to indicate my love. Just like pet names that we have for our loved ones, people use emoji in very personal ways.

Alie: Well, I wonder if there's anyone that goes by just an emoji, kind of like a mononym, you know, like Sting, or Beyoncé, or Zendaya. Is there anyone that's just represented... like Prince, Prince was the initial, "Just call me by this symbol from now on," and I wonder if there's anyone doing that with just an emoji, legally.

Keith: Well, certainly we're seeing a lot of folks try to use emojis as a unique sign-off, or fandoms representing their kind of topic of interest with specific emojis. You mentioned Beyoncé, the bee emoji is very synonymous with Beyoncé because of the BeyHive. And the purple heart emoji, for example, is used hugely by fans of the K-pop band BTS. So, there are certain emojis that are associated with certain performers, and celebrities. Now, that's not to say that emoji is definitively theirs of course. The emoji keyboard is there to be used by all of us in whatever way we fancy, and it ultimately comes down to whether or not the receiver of a message we've crafted with a particular emoji will have interpreted it as the way we've intended it to be interpreted or not. That also comes down to whether that person is within the same "in group" as me. Are we both members of the BTS fandom and will that other person know when I use a particular emoji that I'm referring to this member or that member? And that all comes down to insider knowledge based on the community we're a part of but that also scales up to a variety of different cultural instances.

If you explore the emoji keyboard, there is a huge host of emojis that are there that represent certain attributes and aspects of Japanese culture, coming from their Japanese origins, that many

people in the Western world would look at and have *no* idea what this kind of concept is there to represent. That means that they may just not get used. It also may mean that they'll be picked up and imbued with a new meaning and context because the meaning for that group of people at the moment is not particularly explicit. And then you'd see these kinds of divergences across different cultural demographics or geographical demographics in terms of how certain emojis are being used to convey different concepts.

But there are also emojis in there, food, the animals that, yes, are associated with very definitive things in the world but emotionally speaking can be co-opted to mean a different thing amongst a different group of people and this can be between a couple, there's an excellent academic paper called "Why Pizza Emoji Means I Love You," from several years ago. It talks about how couples will repurpose certain emojis between each other to convey new information. It can scale up to friend groups with their group chats where they all have shared experiences, their friends are hanging out and a certain thing happens to one member of the friend group and there's a perfect emoji there on the keyboard to be used to represent that silly or amusing situation, and that emoji becomes a shorthand to reference that situation. Or it can scale up again to other different demographic groups where you're seeing emoji be used to represent this concept for this demographic group.

You can see so many different colorful emotions be used in combination with one another to represent sexual identity or represent sports teams, things of this kind, and say, "I'm going to use the blue and white heart emoji beside each other to represent my local sports team," or the light blue heart emoji and the pink heart emoji to represent transgender identity. These are things that people can look to the emoji keyboard to communicate, they can get very, very playful with them in there. But ultimately, the beauty of an emoji and the utility of the emoji is in the eye of the beholder.

Aside: And just because experts and designers are more than happy with emoji definitions being so fluid and alive, it doesn't mean that people aren't out there trying to define them exactly as possible and assign one, singular, definitive forever meaning for their own self-serving purposes. And those people are lawyers.

Jeremy: The number of defense attorneys that came to me over the years. [*laughs*]

Alie: [*gasps*] Are you serious?!

Jeremy: Their argument, it was so funny how it was always the same. I never actually got called into court because they never liked what I had to say. Because what they'd ostensibly want me to say is that whichever emoji their defendant put at the end of their message meant that they were kidding. [*Alie gasps*] They'd normally say something horrific or some implication of any kind and they'd go, "Oh, but there was a wink at the end, Your Honor."

Alie: Nooo!

Jeremy: "So, clearly the wink means I mean the opposite of this horrific message. I didn't really mean I wanted to do whatever I said I was going to do." And obviously, I can't say in good faith that's what they meant. I mean, clearly, I'd have to say they probably didn't mean that but at the very least I'd say, well there's no one right or wrong answer. But they would pull up a line from Emojipedia and go, "Well, this emoji you've said here says, 'May imply joking or laughter.'" And I go, "Yeah, it might, it might not. In this context, it doesn't. But it might."

There have been other court cases where Emojipedia gets brought up. There was one with Geoffrey Rush, a defamation case a few years ago, where Emojipedia were brought up to the judge and they were debating whether it's reputable or not to say, "Here's a reputable website Your

Honor [Alie laughs] and here's the emoji that my client used, and this is reputable." And then the other side saying, "No, is it reputable?" And yeah, that's the thing, people want a finite answer, what does this emoji mean? And it just isn't, it's like human expression, it can mean lots of things.

Alie: Have you had to go up on the witness stand?

Jeremy: No. It was always the defense that wanted me, and they always did this little thing which, I've never been in a position to want this, but they do a little pre-interview, they talk to you, they pay you for your time, for an hour, and they basically find different ways to ask you, "This means they were kidding, right?" And then obviously an hour later of me going, "No, I'd have to say that it's context-dependent? Do you want me to comment on this message?" "No, no, no, just this emoji in general, what does it mean?" And I go, "It means three different things. It could mean happy, it could mean joking, it could mean curious." So, funnily enough, I never got the call back from any of these people.

Alie: Yeah, they're like, "We won't be needing your services after all."

Jeremy: That's almost word for word what they would say. [Alie laughs] Or you'd just hear nothing, "Thank you for your time, please send us an invoice for your hours."

Alie: Would they just send you an upside-down smiley face?

Jeremy: Yeah. [laughs]

Alie: What does that mean to you by the way?

Jeremy: Upside-down is one of the clearest as sarcasm, it's found its place on the internet as one of the few that most people mean sarcasm, or at the very least, "I'm not feeling it, I'm feeling a little bit up in my head today," or some kind of, "Things aren't right." It's upset in some way, but sarcasm is the closest word to describe it, and thankfully that one is mostly used in that way. I don't think there's as much confusion on that as say the wink or the smile.

Alie: What about ones that are so passé, that are so, how do they say, cheugy?

Jeremy: Cheugy. [laughs]

Alie: Cheugy. What's the most just, what's the most embarrassing emoji?

Jeremy: It's got to be the laughing-crying, right? Both because when people say it's overused, it is, because it's the most popular emoji so you're going to have that.

Alie: Is it the most popular?

Jeremy: It's still the most popular emoji.

Alie: [gasps] What about the tears streaming down the face?

Jeremy: That's definitely coming in, the two of those are neck-and-neck depending on which platform you're on. They're both very emotive so they're both useful, but I think it got overdone by grandparents, by meme pages, by corporateness. And I get it, it's very clear, "I'm laughing at this," it's a ha-ha emoji. But it's just, you see it so much, it's hard to use now.

Alie: Do you think things start in personal chats, maybe they go to Snapchat, and then they go to Slack to die?

Jeremy: Yeah, corporate... Anything that makes you feel like you're at work has to die in your personal life. [laughs]

Alie: [laughs] That's so sad.

Aside: But what about the emoji that have gone so far past popular usage that not even corporate uses them anymore? Or worse, maybe no one ever started using them. What about the least popular emoji? And who invited it to the party?

Keith: Back several years ago, it was revealed that on Twitter, the aerial tramway emoji was the least used emoji of the entire emoji keyboard on the platform and, that actually drove users to use the aerial tramway emoji to try and up its usage across the board and remove it from being relegated as the last place emoji in the world. I'm going to quote the current head of the Unicode emoji Subcommittee, Jennifer Daniel, they've said that there are so many emojis in the emoji keyboard that don't get a lot of love, maybe because they shouldn't have been turned into emojis in the first place, the emoji keyboard is a bit of a "junk drawer."

But when you see one of those emojis, like for example, the chair emoji crop up, it's just a case of, "Wow, someone's really exploring the options there." And in fact, the chair emoji was not too long ago the subject of a bit of a viral trend on TikTok where one influencer declared that they were going to use the chair emoji as a symbol for laughter and it caught on for maybe 24-48 hours. So, you'd see a lot of chair emojis in the TikTok comments. And of course that was incredibly confusing, and it was just a case of, this influencer's following decided this would be a funny way to repurpose an emoji in a really, kind of, humorous and confusing manner. Now, that didn't sustain itself because, of course, it was based on a joke as opposed to actual utility, but even those kinds of emojis like the chair, you could even go, the sewing needle. There are so many different emojis that are out there not getting a lot of love but when they crop up, I never really groan, I'm just like, "Oh cool! Someone's really diving in deep there."

Aside: Let's talk thumbs up. Why is it so passive-aggressive? Why does the thumbs up get a thumbs down?

Jennifer: My feeling is the reason people think it's passive-aggressive is because the person using it is passive-aggressive. Who is using thumbs up? It's a lot of Boomers and their conventions are more formalized and maybe they're being more passive-aggressive than your friends, so it's associated with that. But you can use thumbs up, you can be a cool dude, you can use the sunglasses face and have the thumbs up be the thumbs, that's a super cool way of using it. It's like anything else, you use things with intention, feeling, and authenticity and if it's not authentic, people can tell. They're just like, "Good job on that report. Thumbs up." You're like, "Oh... you too." [*Alie laughs*] So, that is probably indicative of larger communication breakdowns than the thumbs up.

Alie: That's a great answer. What do you think is the most underused emoji? What's the one that you're like, "This one even exists?"

Jeremy: Hmm, I mean, there are some rubbish symbols at the end of the list, obviously.

Alie: [*laughs*] Like what?

Jeremy: Even in recent years, I've found some of them that I was on the committee that approved a bit boring, I know. I'm sorry, you've probably got quite a science-y group that listens to this but the lab coat emoji and the test tube. I mean, they're fine.

Alie: I love them! I love them!

Jeremy: They're fine! But they get so little use compared to the faces and the flowers and the nature. They're like, very job-specific, let's say.

Alie: What's one that you wish existed?

Jeremy: The emoji that needs to exist, but I don't think will happen, but it does need to exist, it's one that did exist on MSN Messenger, it was an open hug from one direction, and then there was a reverse one pointing the other direction.

Alie: Awww!

Jeremy: So, if someone sends you something sad, or good news, anything, you can send them the open hug and they can send you the reverse of it to hug you back.

Alie: Oh, that's so reciprocal I love it.

Jeremy: That needs to exist. Instead, there's a boring hug of two silhouetted people hugging and that is very corporate and doesn't make anyone feel warm and fuzzy. Some platforms make it look better than others. Google's one is a bit clearer than Apple's but that was one of these issues of the gender and the skin tones, if you had every man, woman, and nonbinary person with five different skin tones you'd suddenly have hundreds of hug emojis that are tiny still!

Aside: Just a quick aside, a heads up that we're going to cover this topic of diversity in emojis, and representation, and the purposes of emojis say, versus avatars, and a lot more in Part 2 when we return with y'all's questions. It's so good, it's so nuanced and interesting so come back next week for that and a whole bunch more. Okay, sorry to interrupt, we're back in.

Jeremy: Whereas back in the day, one benefit all these other platforms had, they were so small, you couldn't really tell. The hug emoji on MSN Messenger, you couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman, they're just little pixels, you had no idea. So, you could make yourself that person.

Alie: How lucky were we that there was a germ emoji that actually was a coronavirus?

Jeremy: That was exceptionally lucky. Apple's design was the more popular of all of them. I think a few of them looked a bit different early on. But yeah, what incredible timing that became. That was briefly the top emoji being used. You want to talk about this new thing that takes over the world and you've literally just approved an emoji for it.

Keith: There was also a huge jump in the use of the, of course, face with medical mask emoji which had actually existed on the emoji keyboard since the very beginning. It was actually one of the emojis that was there from some of the early sets created in Japan in the late 1990s, early 2000s.

Aside: Another popular COVID emoji? The syringe and vaccinations. Do you remember though, when the syringe used to have drops of red coming out the top? Who got to decide when the syringe stopped being a tiny blood fountain?

Alie: Were you on the board when they decided to make the syringe not having blood gushing out of it?

Jeremy: Because the committee doesn't decide what they look like, there's this weird dance that all the companies are at the meetings, Apple is there, Google is there, Twitter is there, they all have their own designs, but the committee doesn't really say, "Here's what it should look like." It goes back to probably when Apple changed the gun from looking like a real weapon into a water pistol and they did that without consulting anybody. And fine, I don't have any... I have no pro-gun stance, it didn't bother me being the gun on the keyboard. I think Apple thought they were doing a good thing. I think they thought, "Great, we will be a responsible company. There's a gun problem in America, we will remove the gun, redesign it, and make it look like a water pistol." And it was complicated because it meant that other phones did not do the same thing, so I could send a toy gun to you, and you could see it on your phone and see a weapon.

Alie: Oof!

Jeremy: So, there's a practical issue. And then there's also just the other companies probably feeling a bit cheesed off, like, "Why is Apple over here making it tough on us? We didn't do anything, we stuck with the status quo and now they've given us an issue. Now we have to change ours or not change ours. We're meeting together, why don't we agree on these things?" The syringe, the same sort of thing. I don't think the committee ever officially decided, but maybe there might have been a bit more collaboration behind the scenes, maybe a little bit more, just, "Hey, we're thinking maybe we might bump the blood out of this," and someone else goes, "Yeah, we might too." So, I think it's a bit more like that, a bit more wink-nudge; see what the big players do and if you're a small tech company, you don't have much choice.

Alie: Were there any of those meetings where people were just fighting?

Jeremy: Sometimes me. *[laughs]*

Alie: Realllly?

Jeremy: No, I mean, they're very cordial. Everyone are tech professionals. In more recent years it's been a more diverse group of people, linguists, lexicographers, people that bring non-tech backgrounds which is very helpful. No, it never got emotive in the sense *[Alie laughs]* but sometimes you're saying no to an emoji and sometimes I would think some of the boring ones... I don't think I necessarily made a stand against the lab coat or the test tube, but nonetheless, for some of the boring ones, I'd be more likely to say, "I think it's fine, but is this the priority?" And sometimes you go... you do it in meetings, you go around in circles, and you bring it back and it gets re-tabled next month or next week. There's no fisticuffs at the board.

Aside: Speaking of discussions about what emojis look like, and also what emojis we get to have, is it all just nerds at the big conference table having polite arguments? Is there any way that, say, you or I could petition to have an emoji added? What if I, and a lot of people, maybe, need a, "I'm showing up to your barbecue in the leggings I slept in, hope that's cool," emoji? Or something that connotes, "Hey, I hope you had a good time hanging out last night. I'm texting you after the hang to make sure that you also thought it was a good hang." How can we get one of those emojis?

Jennifer: There are two ways to answer this question. One is, google "Emoji proposal" and you'll find a website, Unicode.org where you follow the instructions. It's sort of like writing a dissertation though, but it's open to the general public, anyone could write a proposal. But it's not like Change.org, it's not like, "Write a petition, get your signatures, and once you hit a certain number it becomes an emoji," that's not how this works. It's more in the space of academia.

Alie: When it comes to making new ones, who is designing them and what is the process of actually designing them? Because I imagine, we use them so teeny, but they must be designed on these big monitors, right? They're like shrinky dinks, I just realized, they're like digital shrinky dinks.
[laughs]

Jennifer: Okay, how do we answer this question succinctly without getting too wonky about designing fonts?

Alie: Oh, we love that.

Jennifer: It is true. If any podcast is going to get wonky about designing fonts...

Alie: Yeah, get into it.

Jennifer: So, anyone can design an emoji, right, just like anyone can design a font. In terms of the process of designing an emoji, they're all so different, everything from the seemingly inconsequential, like, what side eye the tear should be on, versus how melted should the melty face be? Or what

direction should the teapot face? Or what color should that bucket emoji be? There are so many different considerations.

And so, phoenix, there's a new phoenix emoji coming out. The phoenix is obviously not a new concept, it's been around for a long, long, long, long, long, long time and its conventions are fairly similar because it exists in lots of different cultures. The phoenix appears in Greek mythology, it has representation in Asian culture, and it means all different kinds of things. Obviously, it can mean rebirth, but it also can mean love, it can mean nobility, it can mean a number of different things depending on its roots. It has roots in Egyptian culture and Slavic culture and Turkic culture. So, the phoenix had global representation because it could be found in a number of different cultures around the world and throughout history.

So, how does that influence the design? As you can imagine, the way it looks in Chinese culture isn't exactly the same as it is in Persian culture or Egyptian or Turkish. So, how do you design a phoenix that can represent all of those different cultures? Generally, what I do is rather than saying, "Oh, let's pick Slavic because they have less representation in the keyboard," which you *could* do, instead what I do is I don't pick any culture over another one and I just pick a little bit of each one so no one's happy. [*both laugh*] Everyone is all Frankensteined in there.

But the phoenix, in terms of a symbol, is iconic. There are certain things that we understand it to be, its gesture with its wings open, its color. Also, generally because of the mythology around the phoenix, it's grounded in peacocks, so the face kind of looks peacock-ish with little feathers here and the shape of the beak, and the S-shaped neck, and the rising from the ashes. So, when we were designing it, we were thinking about how it can be representative of many cultures, and how you can design it so it looks glorious when it's big, but also, to your point, legible when it's at 12-point size in your Google Doc. You have to design it in a way where, just like any letter form, like the letter A, you want to make sure that the hole in the letter A is thick enough to be legible. So, you do that with the shape, the shape of the neck has enough space between the wings so that you can separate different anatomical parts of the bird.

So, you're constantly looking at it big and small, you're looking at it in dark environments and light environments, because now we've got dark mode and light mode, we've got all kinds of different modes. So, because you can't anticipate where emoji will appear, [*whispers*] because they appear everywhere. They're kind of like smart refrigerators now. I saw one on an ATM at Target. They're everywhere. All you can really do is just say, "Onto itself, it's the best it possibly can be and where it's most frequently appearing."

When designing the emoji, we obviously read the proposal, or if you're writing the proposal, is making sure it's grounded in the right literature and you confer with experts on the subject as a designer, which is my favorite part of the job. When the anatomical heart was added, I talked to a cardiovascular surgeon. When we were redesigning some of our marine animals, we talked to the Monterey Bay Aquarium. You know, so I get these excuses to talk to these folks that really know the space really well and figuring out that fine line between... You don't need to design something that would go in an anatomy textbook for a surgeon to reference [*Alie laughs*] you want something that is legible, and useful, and approachable and not terribly gory. That's where the third step, I didn't really mention the first and second, but you know, it's like reading a proposal, is really anticipating its purpose in a communication context. So, sometimes that means not embracing reality, it means actually how will it visually be represented?

And then one part that I don't think the average designer who is proposing emoji, but I do think folks designing emoji fonts do consider, is how it works with other emoji in the inventory. There's a new lime emoji coming. How do you make sure it's distinctive, visually distinctive from the lemon

emoji? So, you really want to evaluate and consider its purpose in a communication context and evaluate how it works with other emojis in the inventory.

And then, of course, another aspect of designing emoji is anticipating how other folks will design it. Because it's a font, it's not a picture, when I send it to you, I want to make sure that you're going to see something meaningfully similar as to what I meant. And so, there isn't much room for creative freedom, honestly. You really have to be faithful to the original intent and its purpose and the proposal, and yeah.

Alie: And what about the actual nuts and bolts of drawing it? I always picture the old animation studios from the '20s where they've got sketches of characters that we're now really familiar with. Where does it start in terms of the shape of it?

Jennifer: I mean, it can start from anywhere. One of our artists, Fiona, she was drawing the jellyfish emoji.

Alie: Ahh! By the way, the medusologists are *thrilled* about that. So thrilled.

Jennifer: We were working with a number of different students studying marine biology, and they looked at all the different types of jellyfish, and which one, because you've got to pick one, which one is going to represent all of them? Is it a box jellyfish? Is it... I forget the other ones.

Alie: A comb jellyfish. There are so... yeah.

Jennifer: What do you got here? So, you really go into cartoon land, and you pick something that is this idea of a jellyfish rather than a literal jellyfish. Anyway, she did a number of sketches around different types, different colors, different ways it could swim, and at the end of the day you go with something that feels it is emblematic, iconic. The software is not the most interesting; Procreate and Illustrator, but that's just the first part. You have to make a font out of it and there's all kinds of font software as well.

Alie: Do you remember the controversy with the squid?

Jeremy: [*exhales*] No. [*laughs*] Oh, vaguely! But refresh me, is there anything...?

Alie: It had a butt on its face and the person who pointed that out was a friend of mine, who I met because I interviewed her for the Teuthology episode, and she was one of the ones that was like, "Excuse me, I'm a squid expert and that squid has a butt on its face." [*laughs*]

Jeremy: Yes, I do recall this now. This sort of thing happens and often it was then me going to companies like Apple or Google and saying, "Hey, someone's brought this up."

Alie: [*laughs*] Someone named Sarah McAnulty.

Jeremy: "What are you going to do about it?" Often you wouldn't hear back, necessarily, but you may get a heads up when it gets updated to go, "By the way, you might want to check..." Or not. In the end, we just got to the point where we checked every update religiously, so it didn't matter. At Emojipedia, a new Apple update would come out, or Google, or anything, and we would download it and check side-by-side because maybe they released one and they didn't want to tell you about it. Maybe it was a little bit on the down-low. The bagel people didn't like the dry bagel with no cream cheese that Apple tried to release.

Alie: I get that.

Jeremy: They briefly tried to make the peach less luscious.

Alie: How dare?!

Jeremy: And people got mad.

Alie: Yeah, how dare! How dare.

Jeremy: Yeah, those are fun discussions.

Alie: When you're working with Unicode, where there's a discussion about what's coming up next, are there any emoji that are on the chopping block? Like, "No one uses the fire hydrant. Get it out of here!" Anything like that that you have had to stand up for an emoji or say, "Nah-ah. No, not that one."?

Jennifer: I mean, I try to host conversations about it, so to give people space to explore and ask questions, some of it rhetorical, some of it grounded in actual evidence. And I try not to step in unless... There needs to be something that is fact-based, or clarifying, or a follow-up question of some sort, and to hold ourselves accountable to our own guidelines, right? If we're starting to have a discussion about something that seems to undermine a previous one or contradict something, then try to bring that up and make sure that's surfaced and appropriately addressed. Because once you add an emoji, you can never remove it. They're permanent. They're permanent!

Alie: What?!

Jennifer: So, there's no room for experimentation. It is in the Unicode standard; it is a code point, and they never remove the code point once it's added.

Alie: Woow! Can I ask you some questions from listeners?

Jeremy: Of course. Yes, love a listener question. Power to the people.

Alie: We have so many good ones, it is boggling.

So, ask smart people colorful questions, get ready to celebrate World Emoji Day on July 17th, get pumped about it. We'll have another episode with all of your questions next week. Feel free to share this to anyone who has so many boggling emoji questions. It's part of our everyday life. I want to thank the guests who came on, we've linked all of their socials in the show notes, thank you Keith, Jeremy, Jennifer, we'll hear more from them next week.

We are @Ologies on Twitter and Instagram, I'm @AlieWard on both, also on TikTok @Alie_Ologies, thank you to everyone talking about us on Reddit. Thanks to everyone who shares the show with friends, thanks also to people at Patreon.com/Ologies who contribute to the show. You can also contribute your questions and hear what episodes we have coming up soon. *Ologies* merch can be found at OlogiesMerch.com. Thank you, Susan Hale for managing that and so, so much more. Thank you, Erin Talbert for adminning the *Ologies* Podcast Facebook group. Emily White of The Wordary makes our professional transcripts. You can find that and bleeped episodes up at AlieWard.com/Ologies-Extras.

Also, we have *Smologies* available at AlieWard.com/Smologies, they're linked in the show notes, those are shorter, kid-friendly episodes you can listen to in a classroom or with your Meemaw. *Smologies* is worked on by Zeke Rodrigues Thomas and Mercedes Maitland as well as Jarrett Sleeper of Mindjam Media. Kelly R. Dwyer works on AlieWard.com. Noel Dilworth does our scheduling. Additional editing was done by Mark David Christenson. Mercedes Maitland and Jarrett Sleeper took the lead as lead editors on this and did an *amazing* job, especially since I've been traveling the last few weeks. Love you all to bits! Also, Laurel McCall did additional research for this. So, big thanks to them for so much heavy lifting on such a big episode. We'll be back next week with Part 2. Nick Thorburn wrote and performed the theme music.

And if you stick around until the end of the episode, I'll tell you a secret. And this week's secret was that I was just going to open my phone to tell you what my most used emoji is, and I realized that my phone is dead. It's only 2:00 in the afternoon, why is my phone dead already? So, I'm at like, four goblins, but that's fine, you're just going to have to wait until next week to find out. Also, when I was on Catalina Island last week teaching those climate scientists about sci-comm, who are lovely, I missed a spot on my face on my upper forehead to hairline, where I did not use enough sunscreen snorkeling and now it is peeling. So, let this be a note to cut bangs, text your crush, we're all going to die. And also, bangs do offer sun protection so let's not forget that. But you do whatever you like, that's the whole point, do whatever you like. Okay, text your crush if you want, ask them what their favorite emoji is. Okay, berbye.

Transcribed by Aveline Malek at TheWordary.com

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 [Emojipedia](#)

 [#WorldEmojiDay 7/17/23](#)

 [Emoji Kitchen](#)

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[That melting face emoji](#)

[New Emojis for 2022-23](#)

[Shigetaka Kurita, NTT DOCOMO. Emoji \(original set of 176\). 1998-99 via MoMA](#)

[Evolution of Color Terminology by Melissa Bollbach](#)

[Blue-green distinction in language](#)

[Color categories: evidence for the cultural relativity hypothesis](#)

[People Who Use Emojis Have More Sex](#)

[Worth a thousand interpersonal words: Emoji as affective signals for relationship-oriented digital communication](#)

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