

Sidedoor S7 Ep. 5 Love in the Time of Emoji Final Transcription

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Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

Lizzie Peabody: One night, Jennifer 8. Lee was texting her friend. She was hungry.

Jennifer 8. Lee: And we were texting about dumplings because we are Chinese-ish women, and that is what we do. We text about food.

Lizzie Peabody: So, Jenny ups the ante. She sends her friend a picture of some tasty looking dumplings.

Jennifer 8. Lee: And then he like texts back, "Yum, yum, yum, yum, yum." Knife and fork, knife and fork, knife and fork. And then there's this pause. And she goes, "Oh, apple doesn't have a dumping emoji." And I was like, "Oh, that's kind of strange."

Lizzie Peabody: This was 2015. Jenny didn't really use emoji, but still she was baffled.

Jennifer 8. Lee: I was like, "How is there no dumping emoji?" Because dumplings are universal. These things called emoji were universal. And if there wasn't a dumping emoji, then whatever system in place has failed.

Lizzie Peabody: So, fueled by dumpling induced indignation, Jenny set out to correct this travesty. After doing a little research, she discovered there was a cryptic council of tech elders called the Unicode Consortium. It's like a city council that meets to vote on new emoji and other important digital things. "Pile of poop with googly eyes, yea. Trained falcon delivering Chipotle? Nay."

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: But Jenny and her friend discovered they could pay to join the meetings. So, they asked friends to kick in some cash.

Jennifer 8. Lee: And we raised some money to join Unicode as this organization called Emojination whose motto is emoji by the people for the people.

Lizzie Peabody: And when Jenny got to Unicode, she stood before the panel of imposing tech giants, and she said, "Hey, just spitballing here. But hear me out. How about an emoji along the lines of, oh, I don't know a dumpling?" A silence took hold of the room. Everyone exchanged confused glances. And then in unison they rose to their feet, stuck their thumbs high in the air and yelled, "Yay."

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Okay, that's actually little more dramatized than the actual version, which involved copious amounts of paperwork, bureaucratic hurdles, and a lot of waiting around for emails. But the point is that Jenny got her dumping emoji, and it's the one in your phone right now. And she didn't stop there.

Jennifer 8. Lee: No, we just spent all this time figuring out the Unicode process and we decided we wanted to use our learned skillset for the good of the world.

Lizzie Peabody: So, Jenny and her organization, Emojination, spread the word. "If you've got an idea for an emoji, we'll help you make it official." And just in the past few years, she's helped more than 100 emoji get approved. That includes designing an emoji that was so groundbreaking it's joining the collection at the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum. So, this time on Sidedoor, we'll look at how these little pictures on our keyboards became a vital part of how we talk to each other in an increasingly virtual world. And what an emoji in the Smithsonian says about the digital future of museum collections. That's coming up, after the break.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: And I should probably text my husband a woman emoji, door emoji, knocking hand emoji, and then like a circle with a cross through it, yes. And a microphone.

Andrea Lipps: Fantastic. Love it. Love it.

Lizzie Peabody: This person humoring me as I said into my bedroom closet recording studio is Andrea Lipps, a curator at the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum. She's the one who looked into emojis back in 2019 and said, "We need to get our hands on one of these."

Lizzie Peabody: Did anybody give you a weird look when you were like, "I think we should get an emoji, guys."

Andrea Lipps: I don't think they were weird looks. I think people were confused as to how we would do that.

Lizzie Peabody: And they were right to be confused. I mean, how do you even acquire an emoji? And how do you display it once you have it? It's not like collecting and displaying a rare chair designed by Charles Eames. And yet not to acquire it just because it seemed hard, that wasn't an option either, especially as a museum devoted to demonstrating the impact of design. And right here in front of us are these intuitively designed little pictures that have become the garnish of digital conversations across the globe.

Andrea Lipps: My five-year-old and my 76-year-old father both understand emoji. I mean, it spans generations and demographics. They're just unbelievably-

Lizzie Peabody: And languages.

Andrea Lipps: And languages exactly.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: More and more of our lives are taking place online. A third of Americans say they're online constantly. And data shows that we spend roughly three and a half hours a day on our phones, a number that is only getting bigger.

Andrea Lipps: One of the things we often talk about is somehow the separation between digital or virtual life and real life. But what we need to remember is that our life is real life. It's just separated by this screen and by the materiality of code.

Lizzie Peabody: Andrea says museums need to reflect this shift to a more digitized culture, and collect things that live online just like they do with physical objects in the analog world. That's why Andrea acquired the images and design specifications embedded in the code for an emoji. Basically, like it's blueprint, and this wasn't just any emoji. It's the emoji that depicts an interracial couple holding hands.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Marrying someone from a different race has only been legal in the United States for about 50 years and mixed-race couples say they still face challenges in many parts of the country today. Andrea says it would be a failure not to preserve and celebrate this object, an object that was designed to allow interracial couples to be seen in one of the world's most widely used forms of communication.

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Lizzie Peabody: While mixed race couples broke cultural barriers, the interracial couple emoji broke new design barriers. It solved a problem on the emoji keyboard that had never been cracked before, a crowning achievement in design evolution 20 years in the making, going way back to the colon parenthesis smiley face.

Keith Broni: It's really the mid 1990s that we see the first thing that we can fully call an emoji.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Keith Broni, Deputy Emoji Officer for Emojipedia. That's an online emoji reference guide that explains the meaning and popular usage of every single emoji, all 3,633 of them. And Keith likes to describe his job at Emojipedia as-

Keith Broni: Thinking face, magnifying glass, and arrow pointing in at phone, probably then with the various symbols emoji.

Lizzie Peabody: Before emoji, there were emoticons. That's like when you use a less than sign and the number three to represent a heart or a colon and parenthesis to make a smiley face. And in the early years of digital communication, that's about as fancy as you could get. Until the mid 1990s.

Keith Broni: In the mid 1990s, in Japan, pagers were all the rage. And one particular pager allowed users to send a small little digitized heart graphic, as opposed to simply sending numbers across on the pager screens. This was an incredibly popular feature.

Lizzie Peabody: Emojis began with love. Sweet, right? And these hearts were so popular that when that pager company suddenly discontinued the heart graphic, their customers left in

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droves. And their competitors were more than happy to say. "Yeah, sure. We'll give you a little heart symbol."

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Lizzie Peabody: The term emoji means picture character in Japanese. One of the earliest and most influential sets of these picture characters was created by Japanese designer Shigetaka Kurita in 1999. He designed 176 pictures, or pictgrams as they were known, for the Japanese phone maker DoCoMo.

Keith Broni: And in trying to encapsulate, say, emotions, he took inspiration from various visual art forms popular in Japan, such as anime and manga. So the Japanese form of animation and the Japanese comic book industry,...

Lizzie Peabody: These first emoji were mostly about travel, things like trains and landmarks. And they were incredibly small and rudimentary, 12 by 12 pixels, and only a few colors. But in the early 2000s emoji gained popularity and spread to online chats like MSN Messenger. And the pictures started to get more complex, and the definition got a lot better, but you know what they say, more pixels, more problems.

Keith Broni: Because if you're trying to encapsulate the concept of a dancer and you're using a stick figure striking a particular pose, that person can be just said to be anybody across the world. There's no concept of gender or race in that stick figure. But as the design gets more and more elaborate, the canvas gets larger, it begs for a more elaborate design, and therefore the designers have to start making decision says how to represent this.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh. And these Japanese designers were nearly all pale-skinned men. So they made emoji people look like, well, pale-skinned men. The police officer emoji was a man. The doctor was a man. This didn't raise many eyebrows at the time because emoji were still up and coming and mostly being used in Japan. And designers were focused on an entirely different problem. Something called-

Keith Broni: Mojibake.

Lizzie Peabody: Emojibake?

Keith Broni: Mojibake.

Lizzie Peabody: Mojibake essentially means garbled characters.

Keith Broni: Think of this. If you send the letter A, and your recipient gets the letter B, incomprehensible.

Lizzie Peabody: Right.

Keith Broni: If you send a love heart and someone gets a penguin, what's going on here?

Lizzie Peabody: I mean, I love penguins, but the lack of a standardized emoji alphabet, if you will, created real problems for phone makers who wanted to make sure their phone could communicate with all other devices. It was especially a problem for a quaint little start up known as Google. You may have heard of them. This little podunk company wanted to take its new email service, Gmail, global. And it wanted to make sure that if someone in London sent a smiley face to someone in Kuala Lumpur, it wouldn't show up as a poop emoji. That's just very bad PR. So, Google looked to the Unicode Consortium. Remember those guys?

Keith Broni: Unicode and emoji were almost on like an inevitable collision course.

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Lizzie Peabody: Now, the Unicode Consortium existed well before emoji. It was formed by Silicon Valley tech companies in 1991. They saw the internet becoming a big deal and said, "Hey, I think it's in all of our best interests if we create some universal standards here. That way we can be sure all of our systems can communicate with each other." So, they agreed to hold regular meetings where representatives from all the major tech companies get together and vote on the standards they'll all use. And by the late 2000s, the people at Unicode had been watching the development of emoji for years, like dark clouds forming on the horizon, waiting for the storm to arrive. And in 2008, emoji rained down on Unicode like yellow faces and red hearts pounding against the window, prompting the group to release its first ever coding standard to include these picture characters. Apple, Google, Samsung, now that they knew a smiley face sent from their device would be a smiley face when it arrived on any other device, they went emoji wild.

Keith Broni: And really, in 2014, 2015, we see just emoji explode in popularity across the West and the wider world.

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Lizzie Peabody: By 2015, emojis had become so mainstream that the Oxford English Dictionary named the emoji that is laughing so hard it's crying, word of the year. But if you're rolling your eyes at a picture being named word of the year, Keith says you need to understand the power of emoji. We're communicating less face-to-face and more through text, email, and instant message systems like Slack, or AOL messenger if you're cool. And emoji are like these little tools that help us insert humanity and nuance into cold lifeless text.

Keith Broni: Because if you think about how we communicate with each other, with text, across our various messaging platforms, we're not trying to write in a manner that's comparable to prose. We are trying to encapsulate speech-

Lizzie Peabody: Right.

Keith Broni: -via text.

Lizzie Peabody: Right.

Keith Broni: And the problem with that is speech is never in isolation. It comes with vocal inflection-

Lizzie Peabody: From your mouth. From your face

Keith Broni: From our mouths, and also our tone of voice, our gestures, our body posture, all of these provide significant contextual clues for how a certain statement should be read.

Lizzie Peabody: So, if you text someone, "I'm waiting outside." the person who receives that has no idea what your tone is They might think you're upset, like, "Ugh, I'm waiting outside." Or more ominous, like, "I'm waiting outside." But if you add a smiley face at the end.

Keith Broni: Just to basically clarify, "I'm not obsessed. I'm not trying to imply a sense of additional pressure. I'm content."

Lizzie Peabody: So, emoji help us avoid miscommunications and have the closest thing to face-to-face conversation we can through text. And even though they've really only been on our phones for about 10 years, they're already changing the way we interact with each other.

Jennifer 8. Lee: A generation of kids who are growing up, they can quote, read, and write emoji before they can read and write their native language.

Lizzie Peabody: Jennifer 8. Lee says that's why it matters if there's a pizza emoji, but not a dumping emoji, a male doctor, but no female doctor, two people holding hands, but they have to be from the same race, because the next generation is looking at this tiny digital screen in their hands all day, every day, and what they see, or don't see, matters.

Jennifer 8. Lee: We spend so much time, especially in the United States, talking about representation on the big screen. There's like Oscars so white. I actually like to think that representation on the small screen is as important, if not more important, because in reality, we spend much more of our time on the small screen.

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Lizzie Peabody: Still to come, Jenny works to expand representation on the small screen with the interracial couple emoji, and teams up with an unlikely ally to do it. We'll have more on that after the break.

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Lizzie Peabody: Okay. So, I'm scrolling through a bunch of little emoji on my phone, past the guys in the fur hats, the artiste, the genie, the Dracula, the dancing bunny ladies. Evan Bonnstetter is with me. He's trying to help me find the interracial couple emoji.

Lizzie Peabody: All right. I see the people together.

Evan Bonnstetter: Yes.

Lizzie Peabody: Okay. So, I'm holding down.

Evan Bonnstetter: Going to hold down.

Lizzie Peabody: Yes.

Evan Bonnstetter: And you're going to see a lot of potential combinations of people.

Lizzie Peabody: Okay. Important question.

Evan Bonnstetter: Yeah?

Lizzie Peabody: Why do all these men have mustaches? It looks like I'm dating Mario, is basically what it looks like. Evan is a product director for the dating app Tinder. You know, swipe left for nuh-uh, swipe right for, oh yeah. Eventually you find a match. Love ensues. Well, Tinder is also the reason we have the interracial couple emoji. And it all started way back in 2017. Cornell University had just published research saying that the rise in dating apps had led to a huge spike in the number of interracial couples.

[MUSIC]

Evan Bonnstetter: Once this Cornell study came out that kind of validated, oh my goodness, there is this massive rise in interracial marriages, we wanted to do some of our own research as well. And so, we conducted a global Tinder survey on interracial relationships and it produced some really, really intriguing results.

Lizzie Peabody: Tinder found that their users were dating people outside their social circles. And this opened up a whole new world of potential partners.

Evan Bonnstetter: If you look at the way that people have traditionally coupled up or gotten together, a lot of the times that's through a shared social context. And when we look at our, whether it's our friend groups or the social clubs that we're in, oftentimes a lot of those people can look the same. And what Tinder and other apps have done is they've kind of removed that barrier.

Lizzie Peabody: Okay. So great news dating. Dating apps were giving people the opportunity to broaden their horizons. Barriers were being broken. But the bad news was that one of our most popular forms of online language hadn't caught up. The couple emoji on most phones was just two people standing side-by-side holding hands. You could have two women holding hands, two men, or a man and a woman, but they had to be the same race. So, in 2018 Tinder decided it wanted to create an interracial couple emoji. It started a campaign using the hashtag represent love. Mixed race couples could then tweet photos of themselves using the hashtag to show their support.

Evan Bonnstetter: When you want to engage with an audience on social, it could either hit or miss a lot of times, and we were really surprised to see that the amount of people who were submitting their photos was, it felt a bit nonstop, which is a wonderful feeling to have, but I think we were even a bit surprised by how engaged folks were.

Lizzie Peabody: Tinder was overwhelmed by the demand for this emoji. So, Evan and the rest of the team said, "Great. People are excited. Now how the heck do we build this thing?"

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Lizzie Peabody: So, Tinder did what anyone in their position probably would've done. They reached out to an expert.

Jennifer 8. Lee: Among the most complicated emoji that we have pushed through is the interracial couple emoji because it actually changed what I would call the grammar of how emoji work.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Jennifer 8. Lee again, founder of Emojination. By this time, she'd facilitated the creation of more than 100 new emoji, and she knew her way around the Unicode application process. But this emoji would be different. There had never been an emoji that allowed users to select both different skin tones and genders in a single image. This was 2018. The option to choose between five skin tones on a single emoji person had just become available a couple years earlier.

Jennifer 8. Lee: Which is actually really funny on the vampire, because it's very light gray, less light gray, gray, dark gray, darker gray.

Lizzie Peabody: I don't think I've sent enough vampire emojis to know that.

Jennifer 8. Lee: Yeah, no, but you can see there was a whole debate. Like can we do skin tones on vampire?

Lizzie Peabody: Wow.

Jennifer 8. Lee: And the first answer was no. And I'm like, "Are you guys kidding? Have you not seen Buffy the Vampire Slayer?" Clearly vampires come in different skin tones.

Lizzie Peabody: Good point.

Lizzie Peabody: So, giving people the option of six skin tones, if you count the generic yellow one, plus three variations of couples would be a groundbreaking undertaking. That's the difference between an emoji with six options and one that would have more than 70. So Jenny was like, "Okay, maybe we can do a long press where you hold your finger on the character and different options pop up. Or maybe it's a grid."

Jennifer 8. Lee: You choose one thing going up one direction and the other person going up the other direction.

Lizzie Peabody: While she's weighing these options, she's keeping in mind how much memory and processing power each option takes up on your phone. This is just one emoji out of thousands and you still need room on your phone for the really essential stuff like your selfies and that app that tells you if it's dark outside or not.

Jennifer 8. Lee: You're not only doing it for the iPhone in the US. You're also doing for the \$50 Android phone in Uganda. So, you have to make sure that whatever demand you're putting on the operating system is reasonable on all levels up and down the spectrum.

Lizzie Peabody: And so, Jenny ended up designing a few options that included the grid and the long press. Then she, Tinder, and the Emojination team sent the proposal off to the Unicode Consortium and waited to hear back. They knew there was a demand for the emoji, but they worried that one of the reps from Apple or Google might think the design was just too complex or clunky or not intuitive enough. It could easily get rejected. Dozens do every year. Then in 2019, they got their answer.

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Evan Bonnstetter: I won't forget that feeling.

Lizzie Peabody: The emoji was approved. Evan Bonnstetter remembers the exact moment when it appeared on his phone.

Evan Bonnstetter: It was a bit of a moment where we all, collectively at the office, took out our phones and started playing with it and started to see how it came to life and how it was real.

Lizzie Peabody: I have this image of a bunch of young Tinder professionals, in a conference room, everyone on their phone, just playing with the emoji, like cheering, a cake, maybe some balloons. Was it like that?

Evan Bonnstetter: I will say, I don't know that there was a massive balloon drop or anything like that, but it was kind of this aha moment once we saw that it was possible. It was like amazement that this is real and this is in our hands.

[MUSIC]

Jennifer 8. Lee: One of my friends who is American black but now's in the UK with her husband who is from India and they have a interracial marriage. And when she saw the interracial couple emoji that could represent her and her husband, she cried, because as she said, "She felt seen."

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: 2019 was a breakthrough year for inclusive emojis. Besides the interracial couple emoji, Unicode approved a guide dog, a person in a wheelchair, and a prosthetic arm. There were also gender-neutral characters and more options for professionals. Gone were the days of only being able to send a white male doctor emoji. And Andrea Lipps says this is a huge achievement.

Andrea Lipps: I mean, the more you see something, the more normalized it becomes. That idea of being able to scroll across an emoji keyboard and to see something that represents you and your identity is so incredibly important. I mean, 100% really do believe that the importance of having representation on that keyboard does reverberate out.

Lizzie Peabody: And this is the way cultural change is happening today. It's still taking place on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, but it's also happening on our phones, through TikTok videos, websites, and, yes, emoji. In the past museums may have collected the physical paper an important speech was typed on. In the future, museums might collect a series of Tweets that

sparked a social movement. And I know some of us are struggling to get our heads around this idea of museums being full of YouTube videos and Snapchats. But Andrea says a significant part of our culture has been lost because curators in the past struggle to understand the importance of technology in their time.

Andrea Lipps: When you speak with other curators, we often talk about the digital dark ages, that when we look back 100 years from now there really is going to be this big missing chunk of history from the '90s up through the 00's and the early teens.

Lizzie Peabody: Wait. So, does this mean that like the future won't know about the Oregon Trail? Cause that's a problem.

Andrea Lipps: I know. I know. It really is, right?

Lizzie Peabody: Absolutely.

Andrea Lipps: And all the floppy disc. You'd have to like put floppy disc in after floppy disc, and oh my gosh.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: And while floppy discs have gone extinct, Keith Broni thinks emoji could stand the test of time. He says as long as we're communicating through text there will always be a place for emoji. Until they gain consciousness and take over the world.

Keith Broni: In the meantime, happy face, all around.

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Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

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Lizzie Peabody: If you want to learn more about our show, we share supplemental content in our newsletter at si.edu/sidedoor. You can subscribe to Sidedoor wherever you get your podcasts.

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Lizzie Peabody: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.