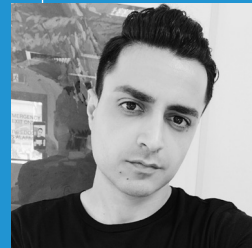# Gaming with Emojis: A Look at Different Strategies of Emoji Inclusion in the Design of Digital Games

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ABSTRACT:

This theoretical study explores the strategies of emoji implementation in digital games, influenced by emojis' cute aesthetics. The effects of the Cute have been discussed from two perspectives. While some consider it as a sweet coating around the bitter pills of everyday life under capitalism, others regard it as a true mental refuge, capable of teasing, harshness and seriousness. By categorising emojis' functions in digital games into five groups (personification, aesthetic substitution, doubling the fun, instrumentalization, and self-enhancement), it will be posited that sometimes emojis' function is primarily rooted in their solacing power, and that at other times their role is more directly tied to reinforcing the rationale behind the capitalist market. Their role in personification (*Emoji Quest*), aesthetic substitution (*Disney Emoji Blitz*) and doubling the fun (*Emoji Kitchen – DIY Emoji Mix*) aligns with the comforting power of the Cute. Meanwhile, their role in instrumentalization (*Emoji Clickers*) and self-enhancement (*Mirror Fun Emoji Face Stickers*) can bolster ideological components of the capitalist market, namely greed and self-obsession.

Introduction

Emojis consist of a collection of small digital symbols that depict various ideas, concepts, facial expressions, body language, and other elements. They were first designed in 1999 by a Japanese artist and designer, Shegitaka Kurita. The primary purpose of their curation was for a Japanese mobile company NTT DoCoMo. After being widely embraced in Japan, emojis were standardised by the Unicode Consortium in 2010 and have since expanded globally in use and appeal. The popularity of emojis has made them an integral part of many forms of communication and content production in our digital era. Their implementation in cinema, e.g. in *The Emoji Movie* (Leondis, 2017), advertising (Danesi, 2017), political propaganda (Robertson, 2019), educational surveys (Massey, 2022) and many other different contexts can well manifest the current prominence of the set. The world of digital games is not excluded from this trend. The cute aesthetics of emojis provide a wide range of possibilities for game designers to include these familiar icons in their gaming narratives, enhance engagement, and elicit positive sentiments from their audience. By investing in emojis' indisputable place in popular culture (Ebel & Dutra, 2022; Kiaer, 2023), game designers can capitalise on the set's conspicuous position to increase engagement and entertainment.

The use of emojis in gaming is an aspect of a game's narrative design which is "the art of using gameplay and the sum of visual and acoustic methods to create an entertaining and engaging experience for players" (Heussner et al., 2023, p. 1). According to Heussner et al. (2023) since the space of mobile games is limited to small screens, strong visual or audio clues must be implemented to communicate bits of story effectively in a finite space. Looking at the subject from this angle, the review of emoji inclusion in gaming

environments can unfold the popular manners in which these visual objects are regarded and utilised. Despite the insufficiency of the data to discuss the popularity 'rate' of each strategy, it is safe to say that all the roles emojis play in the narrative design of the games under discussion here are rooted in a degree of popularity of emojis' function in that manner. Otherwise, it would be unwise, and unsuccessful in terms of game development to allocate the finite space of a mobile game to an unwelcome role or facet of emojis.

Consequently, different gaming strategies and ways of including emojis in the environment of games (personification, aesthetic substitution, doubling the fun, instrumentalization and self-enhancement) could mirror the broader politics of emoji usage in everyday life – or at least the 'imaginable' and 'desirable' directions of emoji usage. The politics of emoji usage, in turn, is tied to their aesthetics. The intentional design of emojis charges the series with specific aesthetic traits, creating a set of pictographs that can communicate emotions and sentiments in an engaging manner. At the same time, those aesthetic attributes have the capacity to transform emojis beyond just whimsical pictographs into vehicles of cultural, social and even political significance in digital culture. While the aesthetics of emojis can be discussed from a number of different perspectives, one prominent approach is the consideration of them as a set of Cute images (Gn, 2018; May, 2019; McMahon & Kirley, 2019; Herring & Dainas, 2020).

Cute aesthetics refer to a visually pleasing and charming style characterised by adorable and endearing elements, often featuring soft colours, playful motifs, and sweet, innocent designs (Brown, 2023). As the aestheticisation of minorness, powerlessness, and vulnerability (Ngai, 2022), Cute reinforces a malleable look that facilitates a favourable perception and extracts a warm-hearted response. The cute object consistently symbolises an abstract form of a deeply affectionate bond with another (Gn, 2016), and plays a crucial role in 'affective capitalism' which converts the everyday bodily experiences of the population into quantitative metrics that can be observed, measured, and processed subconsciously, transforming individuals into 'dividuals' ready to respond to specific information at any given moment (Lee, 2023). This way, Cute can be considered as a "cruel relief" with the power of normalising neoliberal capital and work (Page, 2016, p. 79), or a "'sweet coating' that makes it easier to swallow bitter pills" (Brzozowska-Brywczyńska, 2007, p. 213).

However, the Cute can also be interpreted as a way of taking refuge from the harshness of reality. Highlighting the advantages of cute aesthetics, Bîrlea (2021) argues that Cute "brings benefits to social and civic life, as a means of involving citizens in various activities and maintain group cohesion and harmony" (p. 95). In a more expansive discussion on Cute, May (2019) explores the concept and its unique allure, emphasising its inherent "teasing indeterminacy" (p. 27). This kind of indeterminacy is not characterised by hesitation but by an open and multifaceted nature, often expressed in a playful or self-deprecating manner. According to May (2019), this blend of characteristics neutralises the threat of danger while infusing a sense of edginess into safety. Debating the tradition of thinkers such as Nietzsche and Foucault for whom the power paradigm defines all aspects of life, May (2019) asks, "does it [power] enable us to explain and evaluate as much about those relations as we tend to think it does?" (p. 125), and concludes,

> what if Cute is a miniature Trojan horse in the citadel of power: in the intellectual citadel that for over three centuries has increasingly interpreted even the most altruistic, compassionate, freedom-giving human relations in terms of power and the will to power? What if its real "master trope" is not personification strategies understood as projections of power, whether for good or ill, but rather playful unpindownability: the carefree evocation of uncertainty as a fundamental characteristic of life and world? (May, 2019, pp. 126-127)

The debate pertains to a more fundamental question that the limited space of the current study cannot address comprehensively. Although it is hard to dismiss the fact that power dynamics are at play in every corner of societal interactions and details of human relationships, the consideration itself could at times lead to a paralysing determinism instead of progressive activism – if everything is already under the influence of power relations and if everything we do reinforces another series of power relations, then what does it mean to think or act freely or seek liberation or solace in everyday life? Nevertheless, what is important to the present discussion is the fact that the modes of emoji implementation in gaming designs manifest both sides of the spectrum of scholarly reflections on Cute. On the one hand, sometimes emojis' Cute function enhances the light-heartedness of the space in a game. On the other hand, their cuteness sometimes appears overtly associated with the rationale behind the capitalist market economy.

Examples of the first approach include games such as *Emoji Quest* (Cappy1 Games, 2016), *Disney Emoji Blitz* (Jam City & Disney Interactive, 2016), and *Emoji Kitchen – DIY Emoji Mix* (Braly, 2024), hereinafter referred to as *Emoji Kitchen*. In this cohort, one can see emojis that personify different characters and objects in a storyline where the player is an adventurous persona (*Emoji Quest*), observe that emojis are used as an aesthetic substitute for Disney characters in a gaming environment (*Disney Emoji Blitz*) similar to *Candy Crush Saga* (King.com, 2012), and finally witness emojis as an opportunity for players to practice digital creativity by combining different images from the series and doubling the fun inherent in the emoji world (*Emoji Kitchen*). The second approach includes games such *Emoji Clickers* (Gimica, 2022) and *Mirror Fun Emoji Face Stickers* (Mirror AI, 2017), hereinafter referred to as *Mirror Fun*. In this cohort, emojis' cuteness is instrumentalised in an idle environment designed for coin collection (*Emoji Clickers*). Moreover, emojis and their brand name have been appropriated for the purpose of digital self-enhancement and transforming the self into a cute picture within the bigger frame of mainstream beauty standards (*Mirror Fun*).

Personification – *Emoji Quest*

Released on January 9, 2016, *Emoji Quest* is a digital game designed by a German game developer, Cappy1 Games. This game immerses the player in a vibrant world made entirely of emojis, complete with hidden secrets waiting to be discovered. As the player explores, they will solve quests to unlock new emojis, battle against emoji foes to gain experience and strength and find unique items that they can use strategically. The adventure is all about uncovering mysteries, growing stronger, and cleverly using the unique items one comes across. The player begins with a simple smiley emoji. This emoji is transformable throughout the game in different transformation bases designed in the game. By swapping different directions on the screen, the player leads the emoji on different paths. The total map of the game includes six places: Springwater Town, Emoji National Park, Greenview City, Mojified City, Monkey Mountain, and Space Centre. The diverse places provide a space for different emoji characters to spring into action and play a role in the adventure plot of the game.

Characters play both negative and positive roles. For instance, the Bear emoji (🐻) throws Chestnut emojis (🌰) and the cat face emoji (😼) tosses fish emojis (🐟) at the main character to reduce the level of red in the red heart emoji (❤️) that symbolises its life.

Notwithstanding, the negative characters remain cute throughout the game by show-casing a positive smile, which is one of the main attributes of emoji images in general (Picture 1). The preservation of cuteness in the game, in spite of the adverse role assigned to the emoji characters, exhibits the power of cute in fostering an environment marked by an obsession with child-like attributes (Cross, 2004).

Emoji Quest is an example of the 'personification' role that emojis play in digital games. Here, personification highlights giving human characteristics to non-human ele-ments by drawing them in ways that recall human agents or placing them in situations reminiscent of the human environment. This technique adds humour, relatability, and emotional appeal through anthropomorphism. In *Emoji Quest,* each emoji has a distinct character in the game's environment, interacting with other characters and the general atmosphere of the game. They are personified in that they do human things. They walk through the city, buy bus tickets, ride the bus, cross the street, can be hit by cars, and can enter buildings. By imbuing these expressive symbols with distinct personalities, emo-tions, and characteristics, the game transforms them from mere digital icons into relat-able and engaging characters. Each emoji becomes a potential ally, adversary, or guide, contributing to the narrative and gameplay.

Emoji Quest leverages the personification of emojis to create a unique and immer-sive experience. To contextualise the personification of emojis, the game has designed a setting similar to an urban space, where buildings such as a post office, bank, and conveni-ence store can be found. The offices and buildings have certain officers and clerks working there who provide pieces of information to the player. The main character is not permitted to enter certain areas of office buildings. Emojis are modelled on the patterns of human behaviour in an urban environment. When the main character approaches similar emojis, a dialogue box forms between them. Through the dialogue box, the other character pro-vides some information for the lead persona. Occasionally, the information exchanged be-tween the characters has a pedagogical aspect that seems to be directed at the younger generations (Picture 1).
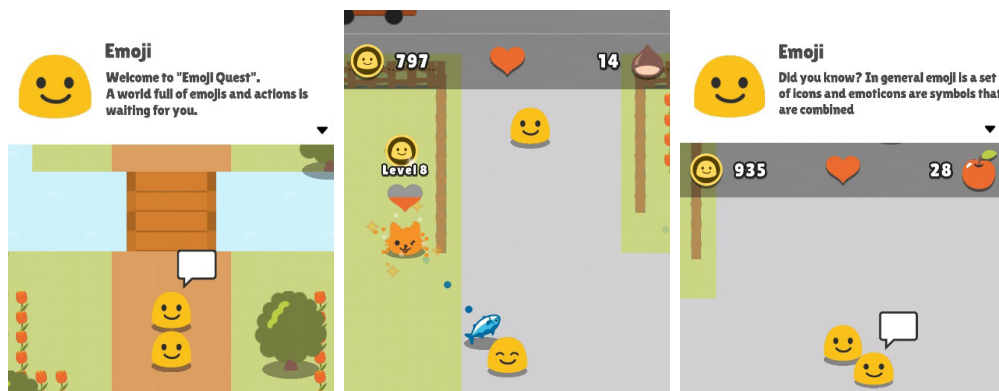
Picture 1: Emoji Quest gameplay screenshots
Source: the author's screenshots from the game Emoji Quest (Cappy1 Games, 2016)

Aesthetic Substitution –
Disney Emoji Blitz

On July 13, 2016, Jam City and Disney Interactive introduced the mobile game *Disney Emoji Blitz*, which quickly became popular. *Disney Emoji Blitz* combines classic match-3 puzzle gameplay with the charm of Disney characters and emojis. Players match three or more emojis of the same type to clear them from the board and earn points. Each emoji has special powers or abilities that can be triggered during gameplay, adding a strategic element to the matching process. The game features various Disney and Pixar characters, each represented in emoji form. Events and challenges offer players the chance to unlock exclusive emojis and rewards. Players can collect and level up their favourite Disney characters in emoji form. The game often ties in with Disney movie releases or other significant events, introducing special emojis and themes. *Disney Emoji Blitz* demonstrates an aesthetic intermingling. It converges the aesthetics of emojis with that of Disney productions. Disney characters are represented in the form of emojis – as icons depicting facial expressions. Moreover, Disney characters are sometimes merged with specific emojis in their representation, e.g. Mickey Mouse with the smiling face with heart-eyes emoji (😍) (Picture 2). As with most gaming environments, *Disney Emoji Blitz* also features in-app purchases for using new characters in the game.

Picture 2: Disney Emoji Blitz gameplay screenshots
Source: the author's screenshots from the game Disney Emoji (Jam City & Disney Interactive, 2016)

In addition to the combination of Disney aesthetics with emoji aesthetics, *Disney Emoji Blitz* demonstrates the substitution of the aesthetics of a preceding game, *Candy Crush Saga,* with the magnet of emojis. The similarities between the two games are evident. They share commonalities in their core gameplay mechanics as both are match-3 puzzle games. In both games, players must match three or more similar items (emojis in *Disney Emoji Blitz*, candies in *Candy Crush Saga*) to clear them from the board and earn points. Additionally, both games feature power-ups and special abilities tied to the matched items, providing players with strategic options to tackle challenging levels. The progression system involves completing levels to unlock new characters or advance through the game, and both titles often incorporate events or challenges to keep the gameplay experience dynamic and engaging. Replacing the aesthetics of *Candy Crush Saga* with emoji forms can be looked at as an investment in the values that emojis maintain. Integrating the term 'emoji' into the game title and portraying characters as emojis can bind the game with the prevailing popularity of emojis, their "origins in teen and commercial culture" (Lebduska, 2015, p. 4) and their "cultural appeal across the world" (Seargeant, 2019, p. 183).

Doubling the Fun – *Emoji Kitchen*

Emojis are generally associated with an atmosphere of fun and unseriousness (Maa & Taguchi, 2022; Wirza et al., 2020; Leslie, 2019; Li & Yang, 2018). As linguist Jieun Kiaer (2023) suggests, the utilisation of emojis for emotional expression can be a lifesaver by fostering an atmosphere where individuals can communicate without concerns about the reactions of others. One common reason for using emojis is the safe space they create where *kawaii*[1] elements take centre stage. This environment allows parties to unwind without the necessity of maintaining a serious demeanour, promoting a more unserious atmosphere. A game such as *Emoji Kitchen* builds its philosophy upon this dimension of emojis and encourages players to double the fun by facilitating different combinations between the icons.

Launched on January 8, 2024, *Emoji Kitchen* was designed by the Vietnamese studio Braly as a cool game where the user's mission is to craft new emojis through the combination of diverse emoji characters. Players can employ swiping, and matching techniques with emojis of the same kind to merge them together and unlock a plethora of new blends. The results will be stored in a game section labelled 'collection' (Picture 3), allowing users to save or share each outcome across various applications. By featuring emoji mixtures, *Emoji Kitchen* can amplify the fun for users by introducing a dynamic and creative element to gameplay. The process of combining and matching different emoji characters not only adds a layer of creative thinking, but also sparks the joy of discovery as players unveil new combinations. The 'collection' section further enhances the enjoyment by providing a sense of achievement and allowing users to share their creativity with others. The player is

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1   Remark by the author: *Kawaii* is a Japanese aesthetic and cultural phenomenon that celebrates cuteness, often characterised by the use of charming and endearing elements such as soft colours, round shapes, and adorable characters. It extends beyond appearance to encompass a sense of innocence, purity, and childlike charm, influencing various aspects of Japanese pop culture, fashion, and design. *Kawaii* is not just a visual style; it represents an appreciation for the sweet and lovable aspects of life, encouraging a playful and positive outlook on the world. *Kawaii's* influence on emojis is evident through an emphasis on expressing emotions and ideas in cute, simple, and universally relatable symbols, aligning with the core concept of conveying feelings succinctly and visually, which is at the heart of emojis' design and purpose.

drawn into a rich and expressive mosaic where each amalgamation becomes a miniature artistic creation. The appeal lies not just in the visual novelty, but also in the endless possibilities for self-expression and communication that arise from the creative interplay of diverse emojis.
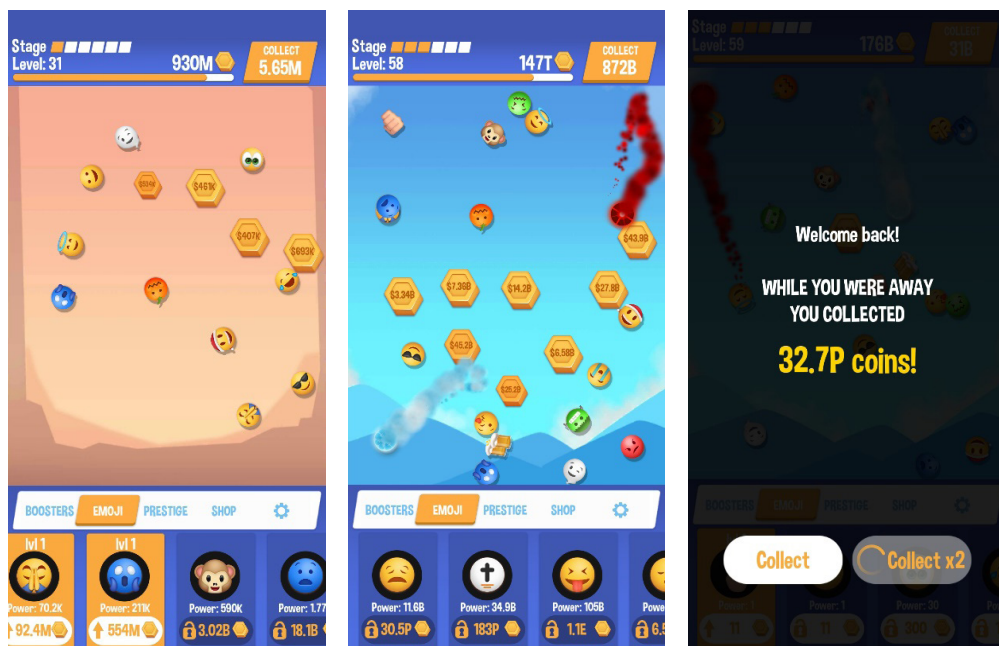

Picture 3: Emoji Kitchen gameplay screenshots
Source: the author's screenshots from the game Emoji Kitchen – DIY Emoji Mix (Braly, 2024)

Instrumentalization – *Emoji Clickers*

Released on June 28, 2022, *Emoji Clickers* is, as its German developer Gimica suggests, "an endless idle clicker game that combines the fun of idle build-up with all the fun of Emojis" ("Emoji Clickers", n.d.). In a game like *Emoji Clickers*, emojis serve as instrumental tools, transforming from mere symbols into strategic resources that drive the core mechanics. The game leverages the universal recognition and emotional resonance of emojis to engage players in a bouncing frenzy. The utilisation of emojis goes beyond mere aesthetics, as they play a functional role in the gameplay dynamics, creating a visually stimulating and emotionally resonant experience. The incorporation of emojis in *Emoji Clickers* serves as a means of merging simplicity with effectiveness, turning these familiar symbols into interactive elements that drive engagement and progression within the game (Picture 4).

Emoji Clickers primarily functions as an automatic game, minimising user interaction. The game's unique feature lies in the limited choices available to players, focusing on unlocking and incorporating new emojis into the animated array. In *Emoji Clickers*, each emoji holds a distinct power in the coin-collecting process. When the player proceeds in

the game, they can unlock new emojis with new powers. In the early stages, there are emojis such as the face screaming emoji (😱) which accumulates 211k with every impact, or the monkey face emoji (🐵) which collects 590k with each knock. Later, the player can activate emojis such as the enraged face (😡), oncoming fist (👊), clicking beer mugs (🍻) with higher powers to gather more coins. This diverse range of emojis not only adds an element of variety to the gameplay but also introduces a cute aspect to the task of money collection. As a user puts it on the game page on Google Play, "seeing those emojis that we all love bounce around with they're classic faces is priceless!! and make some change! 👍😁😂" (Alvers, 2023). Another player points out the integration of cuteness and market rationale in the game: "This emoji game is just like becoming an adult, an adult that's cool and exciting. With it's fun fast pace money making and collecting emojis while using our thinking skills" (Moore, 2024).[2]

Picture 4: Emoji Clickers gameplay screenshots
Source: the author's screenshots from the game Emoji Clickers (Gimica, 2022)

In symbolic terms, *Emoji Clickers* can manifest how emojis and their associated concepts, objects, and emotions can be instrumentalised in the direction of greed. Here, instrumentalization refers to the act of using or treating something as a means to achieve a specific goal or purpose, often toward financial gain, without regard for other possible aspects. Instrumentalization involves employing an entity, concept, or resource as a tool or instrument to serve a particular function or objective. The implementation of emojis as a means to reach the goal of money collection in the game, even in the absence of any meaningful activity from the player, can also demonstrate the feeling of mastery over cute entities. As Harris (1992) and Ngai (2005) suggest, cuteness can often correspond to a desire for sadistic dominance through an overemphasis on the thingness of things. This sense is stressed in this game by instrumentalising the cuteness of emojis in collecting coins.

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2   Remark by the author: The grammatical and typo errors in both comments are retained from the original.

Applied linguist Philip Seargeant (2019) points out that emojis are a writing system "birthed into a culture of hypercapitalism and privatised regulation" (p. 168). It is arguable that *Emoji Clickers* is built on this notion. It overemphasises the 'thingness' of emojis while giving the player a mastery position. By situating emojis' cuteness in a blatantly capitalist context, the game communicates the message that these diverse emotive depictions must operate as animated tools within the context of the digital environment to gather financial benefits. The reduction of emotional expressions to mere bouncing instruments underscores the primary focus on monetary gain, emphasising a pragmatic and transactional aspect within the larger framework of the depicted scenario. One can argue that the implementation of emojis in the narrative design of *Emoji Clickers* renders a 'cute' picture of greed – the aestheticization of greed in a cute wrapping that emojis provide.

Self-enhancement – *Mirror Fun*

Emojis can play a prominent role in shaping an individual's sense of self by serving as digital expressions of emotions, sentiments, and personal identity (Ge, 2019; Li et al., 2020; Robertson et al., 2021; Ge-Stadnyk, 2021). The selection and use of emojis contribute to the creation of a unique online persona, allowing individuals to convey aspects of their personality, mood, and communication style in the digital realm. The ability to choose from a vast array of emojis enables users to curate a visual language that resonates with their emotional state and personal preferences, fostering a sense of self-expression and authenticity. Emojis, in this context, become tools for self-representation, aiding in the nuanced communication of feelings and contributing to the construction of a digital identity that aligns with one's self-perception and how one wishes to be perceived by others.

Released on June 19, 2017, by Mirror AI, *Mirror Fun* serves as a personalised and expressive extension of one's digital identity, offering users a cartoony version of the self in the virtual space. Users can create customised avatars that resemble their physical appearance, allowing for a more personalised form of self-representation. This not only propels a sense of individuality but also enhances the connection between the user and their online presence. The ability to integrate these personalised avatars into various digital communications, from messaging to social media, adds a layer of fun and creativity to interactions. By enabling users to inject their virtual presence with a distinct and customisable visual identity, *Mirror Fun* can play a pivotal role in shaping the way individuals express themselves and engage with others in the digital realm (Picture 5).

The app appropriates the emoji brand to offer an opportunity for cartooning the self and imbuing it with cuteness in digital representations. This way, *Mirror Fun* can have a profound impact on how individuals represent their online identities. The use of cute and cartoonish elements can serve as a form of self-expression, allowing individuals to highlight specific aspects of their physicality in a visually engaging manner. The use of adorable avatars or emojis can contribute to an idealised self-image by emphasising endearing qualities and downplaying any perceived flaws. By exaggerating visual features that they aspire to maintain, players can focus on their likeable attributes, render a fictitious image of the 'self,' and share it with other users online. While the playful and creative nature of cartooning the self can enhance a sense of individuality and agency in shaping one's online identity, it can also lead to false representations with possible negative effects on an individual's body image. In a sense, *Mirror Fun* and other similar applications can enact

a cute version of online beauty filters with their adverse effects on the perception and acceptance of body image (Mihăilă & Braniște, 2021; Fioravanti et al., 2022; Cug et al., 2022; Mancin et al., 2023). By playing within such environments, players practice representing a cute version of the 'self' while adhering to mainstream beauty standards.
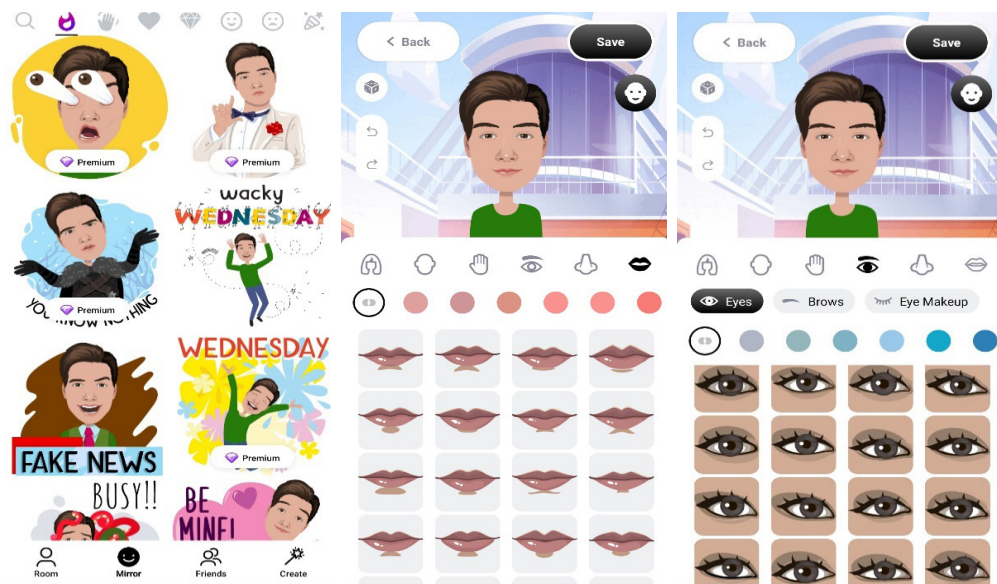
Picture 5: Mirror Fun gameplay screenshot

Source: the author's screenshot from the game Mirror Fun Emoji Face Stickers (Mirror AI, 2017)

Conclusion

This theoretical study looked at the integration of emoji images with digital games. The incorporation of emojis in various gaming narratives showcases their versatile appeal, transcending mere symbols to become integral components of storytelling, engagement, and expression. The utilization of emojis in the design of digital games demonstrates how game designers capitalise on a popular phenomenon of the digital age to enrich engagement and entertainment. It was discussed that the politics of emojis' role in the environment of digital games is an outcome of their aesthetics, namely their Cuteness. Cute itself can be read on the two sides of a spectrum. One may see Cute as a quality as opposed to the seriousness of reality, or else, it can be conceived as a sweet layer around the bitterness of the components of capitalist ideology. Both considerations of the Cute are traceable in the ways emojis are used in digital games.

The manners of emoji incorporation in digital games were classified into five strategies: personification, aesthetic substitution, doubling the fun, instrumentalization and self-enhancement. While the first three strategies (personification, aesthetic substitution, doubling the fun) may demonstrate the solacing power of the Cute in fostering a sweet and creative environment, the two other strategies (instrumentalization and self-enhancement) can be associated more explicitly with the ideological elements of the capitalist market. An example of each strategy was given for each strategy. *Emoji Quest* brings emojis to life through personification, turning these digital icons into relatable characters in an emoji world. *Disney Emoji Blitz* substitutes the aesthetics of a former digital game,

Candy Crush Saga with a mixture of iconic Disney characters in the form of emojis. The act of combining emojis together, as explored in *Emoji Kitchen*, appeals to viewers by unlocking new dimensions of creativity and storytelling, thereby doubling the fun of the emoji world. *Emoji Clickers*, on the other hand, instrumentalises emojis as strategic tools in the task of collecting coins in the game's environment. Finally, *Mirror Fun* enables users to enhance their virtual self-image with numerous customising options.

The diverse applications of emojis across various gaming settings highlight the profound impact of the Cute, which embodies the essence of emojis as a brand and their set of icons. In certain instances, like *Emoji Kitchen*, this influence leans towards a light-hearted and entertaining nature, contributing to a playful gaming experience. On the contrary, in games like *Emoji Clickers*, the utilisation of emojis takes on a different tone, aligning with a broader capitalist rationale that prioritises the pursuit of profit at any cost. Likewise, while titles like *Emoji Quest* and *Disney Emoji Blitz* may offer a delightful hour of immersive engagement within the charming universe of emojis, providing players with a light-hearted experience, games like *Mirror* may introduce a context potentially yielding adverse effects on players' self-perception and body image. Such contrasts underscore the versatile nature of emojis and their Cute aesthetics, illustrating how their use can range from whimsical and entertaining to embodying more significant socio-economic themes within the gaming landscape. Future research can shed light on how these contradictions within the realm of emojis are perceived by the audience, which is likely comprised mostly of younger generations.

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