Spring 5-7-2018

Traditional Art Therapy Techniques versus Digital Art Therapy Techniques: A Comparison using Sand Play

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Honors Thesis

TRADITIONAL VERSUS DIGITAL

Abstract

Art Therapy is a growing field that has its basis in tactile experiences, whether those experiences involve paint, clay, sand, paper, or anything else you can imagine. These techniques all focus on the tactile nature of the process to facilitate therapeutic practices. However, many who would benefit greatly from art therapy are unable to utilize the tactile methods due to sensory limitations. Thus, the problem of how to facilitate art therapy with these clients arises. One solution to the problem would be to look to the digital realm. Unfortunately, not many digital applications exist to facilitate these art therapy practices. This gap is precisely what my project aims to fill.

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Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my thesis mentor Dr. Teri Nowak for her assistance and continuing support throughout my project. I would also like to thank Professor David Afsah-Mohallatee for aiding me in the design elements of the project.

Additionally, the administrators and consultants at the Noel Studio for Academic Creativity were an integral part in completing this project.

Traditional Art Therapy Techniques Versus Digital Art Therapy Techniques: A Comparison Using Sand Play

Art therapy is at the intersection between creativity and psychology and thus has many aspects involved when trying to describe what it entails, the basics involving the use of creative processes, and the communication of thoughts and emotions. Historically, art therapy has been a common approach to use, whether the practitioner used the term or not. The use of art as a therapeutic technique can be dated back to the Greeks, the Egyptians, and during the Renaissance, just to name a few notable instances.

Play therapy, a different but related therapeutic technique, also utilizes creativity but does so in a way that emphasizes play and creation within the client. The interpretation process thus occurs while the client plays, rather than during review of a creative product. Sand Play therapy is yet another therapeutic technique but this one lies at the intersection of art and play therapy. A new world is created through play and both the world and the play are interpreted.

In recent years, with the rise of technology usage, it has become an issue within art therapy practice as to whether or not digital art should be considered among traditional art therapy techniques. There are many arguments both for and against digital art therapy. Those for the implementation of technology often cite the rise of technology in society as a reason for adapting technology to traditional practices, arguing that practices should change with society in order to reflect contemporary social practices. However, critics often cite the importance of the tactile element of art media, arguing that digital techniques take that away from the client, hindering healing rather than facilitating it. Thus, while many argue for the contrary, digital art is as much a creative process that can facilitate healing as any traditional method.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

To begin to understand this debate, one must first understand the basis of what the practice of art therapy, play therapy, and sand play therapy involve.

Traditionally, art therapy involves utilizing hands-on art making techniques to facilitate communication. The focus lies in the process rather than the finished product and the subsequent interpretation of the process to the client. Also referred to as expressive arts therapy, art therapy includes music therapy and any therapeutic activities using theater, film, visual arts, creative writing, and sand (Hoffman, 2016). Hoffman asserts that "artworks allow you to reach thoughts, dreams, desires, joys, and sorrows of the author" (p. 198). This expression of inner thoughts and emotions can be therapeutic through the act of the communication and through subsequent interpretation of the expressed thoughts and emotions.

Play therapy sometimes falls under the flag of expressive arts therapy as well as it too allows for the expression and communication of thoughts and emotions, simply in a different way.

While a relatively new therapy, expressive arts therapy has been found to be beneficial, building off of historical examples of art used for mental healing (Hoffman, 2016). Research by Maujean, Pepping, and Kendall (2014) support the emotional benefits of art therapy practices, citing reduced negative emotions following treatments. These benefits are especially numerous when working with children and adolescents. In one study by Perryman, Moss, and Cochran (2015), not only did struggling teens naturally turn to arts-based practices, but these practices helped the teens to "communicate their difficult thoughts and feelings through various artistic modes," rather than having to verbally articulate them (p. 206). This ability to communicate non-verbally is especially important with those who cannot or will not communicate verbally, such as

those on the autism spectrum or who have selective mutism. Communication is such an important human privilege to which all should have access. Further research by Chandraiah, Anand, and Avent (2012) cite instances of using art-therapy to treat everything from low self-esteem to trauma, abuse, depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. Its versatility makes the practice invaluable. Ultimately, the benefits of art therapy lie in the process, not in the product (Kapitan, 2012).

Growing with the times, the practice has recently begun to implement digital technology into its methods and techniques, with usage rates in art therapy growing 36% from 2007 to 2011 (Orr, 2012). Since younger generations are aware of and comfortable with using technology in various disciplines, including art therapy, there are an increasing number of practitioners who include this in their practice, either using the technology as the media itself or as an interpretation system (Hsin & Garner, 2013).

Therapeutic benefits of digital techniques include comfort, mastery and creativity, and adaptivity as outlined by Penelope Orr (2012). Comfort in this case refers to the willingness of the client to participate. If a client is uncomfortable, it is unlikely they will participate. Technology can increase comfort because as a society we are more comfortable using technology than using a method we are unfamiliar with such as new art mediums. Mastery and creativity refers to growing the self-awareness of the client through the creation of something meaningful to them. Technology can contribute to mastery and creativity by providing a familiar vehicle for which to focus their energies on creating. Adaptivity is all about access, whether that be access to the material or access to the thoughts, it simply refers to the degree to which the therapy is successful and effective. Technology helps with access, and thus with adaptivity, in

that it opens up doors for those who previously could not use certain art materials but who can use technology.

With any innovation, however, also comes criticism. The following quote by Hsin and Garner (2013) sums up the basis of the criticism: "With its focus on the sensory nature of art materials and the artistic/creative process, technology has [been] met with some resistance" (p. 35). This claim is supported by research from multiple sources, including one from Brian Austin (2010), founder of the Animation Project which aims to increase digital methods of art therapy. He pointed out the lack of resistance to the media less the vital physical qualities of art that prove to be beneficial, but goes on to argue that the benefits far outweigh the negatives of digital media.

There is not, however, a method in practice that does not have critics. Art therapy is still proven, digital or not, to be an effective and beneficial therapeutic technique.

ORIGINALITY OF RESEARCH

Most of the research in this particular area focuses on effectiveness of technique. This project, however, focuses on adapting a specific traditional technique--in this case it is sand play therapy--to a digital platform through the creation of an app. While not typically thought of as an art media, sand play is a vital part of art therapy and play therapy practices. Because sand play is such a tactile technique, adapting it into a digital technique is vital to proving the potential effectiveness of digital art therapy.

To give some background, Sand Play as a practice was finally given a name in the 1950s and developed into a universal technique by Dora Kalff. Ultimately, it consists of miniature toys/figurines and sandtrays along with the client's creativity (Gallerani & Dybicz, 2011). Also known as worldplay, sand play involves playing with toys, usually miniature, in sand and even in

water. The therapeutic aspect comes from the client being able to express their world in a safe environment and in the therapist's ability to interpret the meanings of the play.

It would then follow that digital sand play therapy involves the same aspects. Digital Sand Play therapy *does* involve the same fundamentals of the traditional technique. However, because of its technological basis, it does not have the physical sand, water, or toys. For some this could prove detrimental, as the physical and tactile aspects are so important, but for others this could prove extremely beneficial, especially for those with sensory limitations.

Speaking of populations, the research into adapting traditional techniques to digital platforms is not just beneficial to clients and therapists. While those two populations hold perhaps the most important implications, this research will also benefit the general public as it will expose the public to sand play and art therapy.

SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH

This research is significant because it provides not only a comparison of the techniques being used but in addition, it provides an innovative variance of a technique in the way of an original digital application. Currently apps for art therapy are few and far between, with apps specifically for Sand Play being even harder to find with only one existing on the Android platform. By creating this app, not only will the hole in art therapy apps be filled, but so will the hole for sand play apps.

This app, some might argue, is redundant when one can just get a tray of actual sand and fill it with actual toys for the client to utilize.There are many clients of art therapy, however, who have sensory limitations that could prevent them from benefitting from the traditional sand play. This app would eliminate the tactile element of sand that many clients often find irritating or

even intolerable, since texture often is commonly listed as a frustrating aspect of interacting with the environment.

Additionally, the app would serve to eliminate the high cost of creating an adequate Sand Play therapy facility. It would also eliminate the high space usage of an adequate facility. Technology is the future, that much is certain. By adapting these traditional techniques to digital platforms now rather than later, the opportunity for even more growth in the practice presents itself.

PRODUCT

My research culminates in a digital application for Sand Play therapy, as mentioned in the prior section. This application is designed to make effective therapeutic techniques more accessible to those who would not ordinarily be able to utilize these methods. For this app specifically, the goal was to mimic as many realities of a physical Sand Play session as possible. I wanted to design each and every aspect that went into the physical sessions to make this realism possible. Because of this, I ended up designing over twenty slides of features for the app to effectively articulate the realities the app would mimic.

Once the application is functional, it is intended to be used by trained professionals who can provide the important interpretation components of Sand Play therapy. The app will be marketed for therapists who work with children, but can be used with a variety of populations. The goal of the app is accessibility to *all*.

PROCESS

To design the app, graphic design was the vehicle of which to do so--for the screen captures at least. Because of my lack of programming knowledge, I chose to design screen captures of the application before I take the steps to make the app fully functional, which I will

do so by working directly with an app programmer. These screen captures will illustrate the design and the features of the app. The screen captures will include: a home page, a login screen, a start page, a create new page, a saved library, the workflow, the toolbar, the expansion options for all seven toolbar features, and the miniature library made up of all twelve categories. This totals 26 different screen captures. The quantity of screen captures will effectively communicate the future functionality of the app.

I began the process with sketches first, wanting low-tech prototypes before designing them digitally. Once the drawings were all finished, I sat down with my mentor and edited them for content and aesthetic. I specifically added a few screen capture designs to fully articulate the process, such as the login screen and a few more miniature categories.

After the editing process, I began the actual design process on the computer with Adobe Illustrator software. With my limited formal training in graphic design software, I utilized both fellow students and my professors as resources and references. I began with the more simple designs, such as the saved library, create new page, and the toolbar options. Once the first batch of designs were finished, my mentor and I went through another editing process. One of the first issues we found were the lack of ADA compliant screens. I am designing this app specifically for accessibility and thus should not have forgotten about ADA compliance for visual designs; it was an easy fix, however, as the issues were only with the font choice and colors. The process thus began anew with more designing and editing, redesigning and more rounds of editing.

FEEDBACK

The next step in the process as a whole was to send the "app" off to professionals that the app would be geared towards in order to get their feedback. These professionals include sand play therapists in the central Kentucky area as well as to a foundation in Atlanta, Georgia called

Artreach, who works with children in local, national, and international locations, using art to facilitate healing in vulnerable populations.

Rather than simply just sending the designed slides to these professionals, I asked specific feedback questions along with the slides. These questions included:

1. As a knowledgeable/practicing therapist, what would some recommendations for improving the miniature libraries be?

2. What would be some aesthetic improvement that the app designs could stand to benefit from?

3. Would you use this app should it be made available to you for little to no charge? Why or why not?

4. Do you think this app would be successful in the therapeutic community? Why or why not?

These questions were carefully articulated and phrased to glean the most constructive criticism as possible from professionals in the field. I wanted the questions to address both the content and the visual appearance of the app designs as well as address the perceived functionality of the app.

FUTURE DIRECTION

My hopes for the app are high but the first next step is to get the app design trademarked. After that, the application will be coded and produced. Next, my hopes are for the implementation of the app in therapeutic settings. Following critique and revision, my hopes are then for the app to be available to educators and other trained interpreters.

Ideally, the application would be available free of charge to qualified professionals. The app is meant to make therapy techniques more accessible, not out of reach because of cost. A

small fee may be associated with the app to get it off the ground, however, the end goal is to distribute the app for free of charge to trained therapists.

Additionally, I eventually hope to create a whole line of apps for art and play therapy. These apps would cover techniques such as drawing, graphic design, animation, 3-D modeling, and other similar art medias. These apps would also be geared toward a younger audience and would ideally be free of charge to therapists.

CONCLUSION

In sum, Sand Play therapy exists at the intersection of art therapy and play therapy, making it an effective and important technique for clients . However, sometimes sand is not a medium that is accessible. Thus, the app in question is designed with a focus on accessibility to all and on being as realistic as possible with recreating the experience of using an actual sand tray for Sand Play therapy. The implications for this app's creation and publication would be allowing vulnerable populations to get the help that they need much easier and much cheaper than if they were to be utilizing traditional methods and practices.

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TRADITIONAL VERSUS DIGITAL

Appendix

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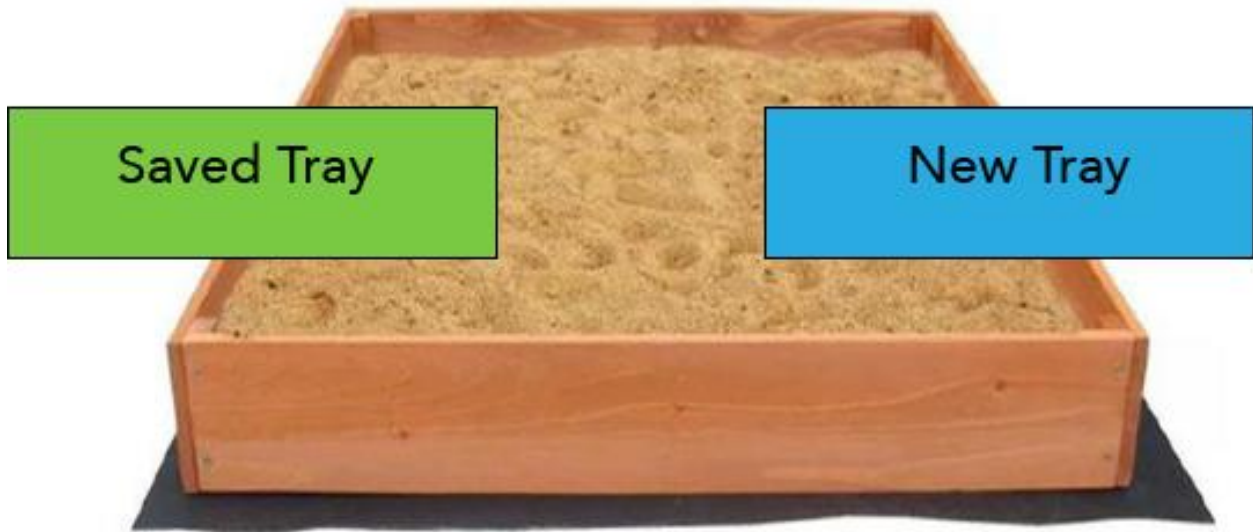
Login

username:

password:

Saved *Library*

< page 1 of 1 >

Tray 18 2/6/18	Tray 17 2/5/18	Tray 16 2/4/18	Tray 15 2/3/18	Tray 14 2/2/18	Tray 13 2/1/18
Tray 12 1/9/18	Tray 11 1/8/18	Tray 10 1/7/18	Tray 9 1/6/18	Tray 8 1/5/18	Tray 7 1/4/18
Tray 6 1/3/18	Tray 5 1/2/18	Tray 4 1/1/18	Tray 3 12/9/17	Tray 2 12/8/17	Tray 1 12/7/17

New *Tray*

Tray Shape

Tray Color

Sand Type

Course
Fine
Extra Fine
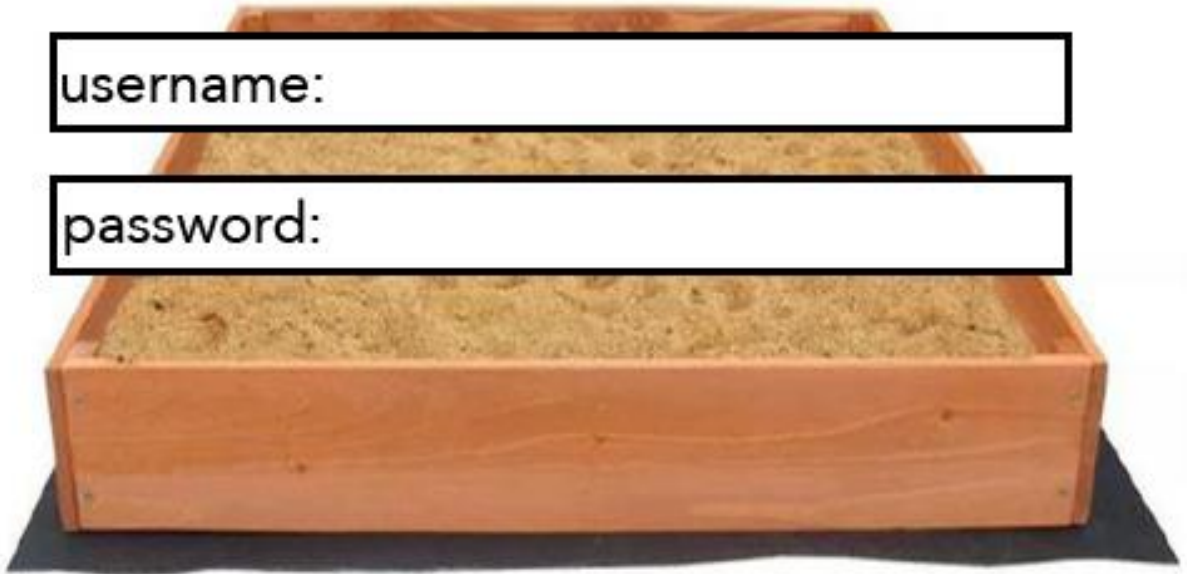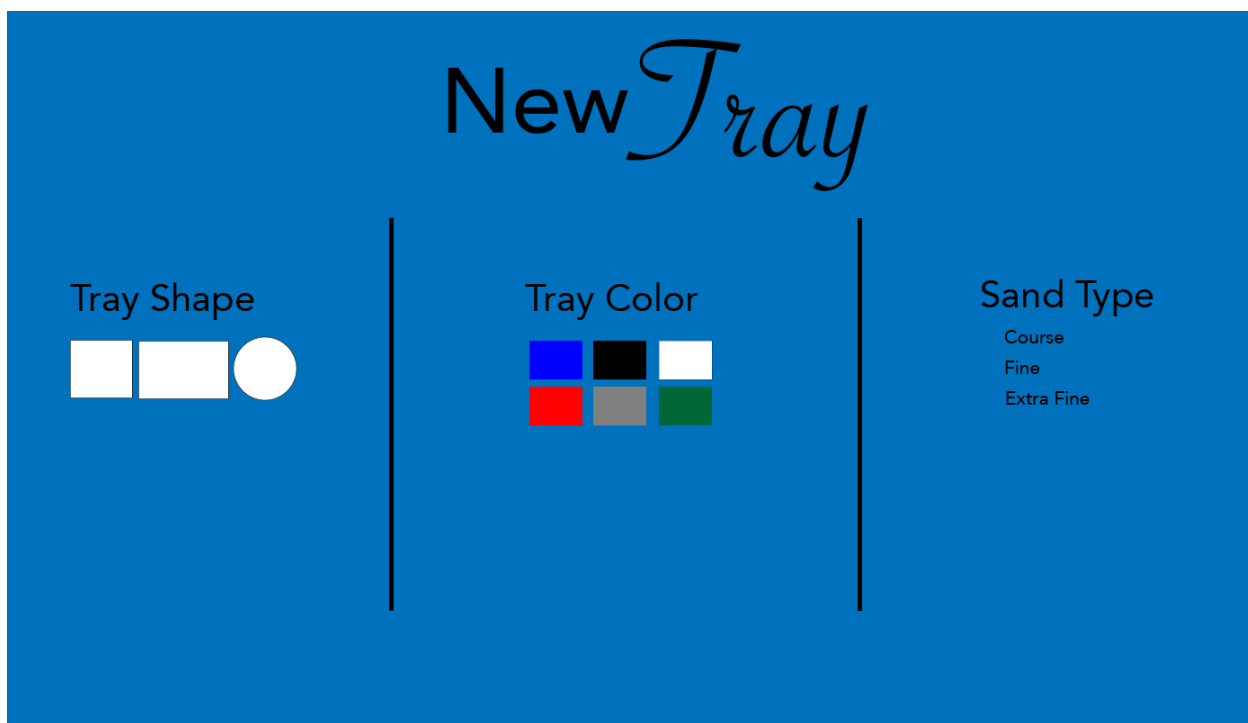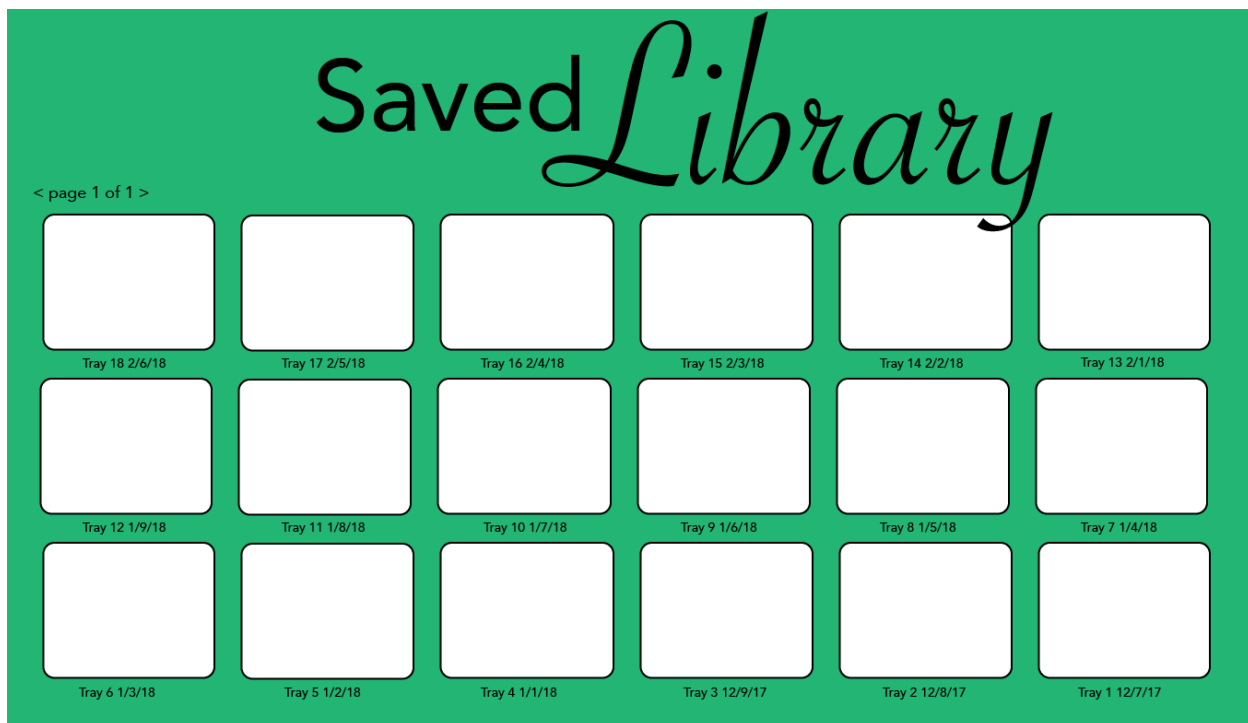
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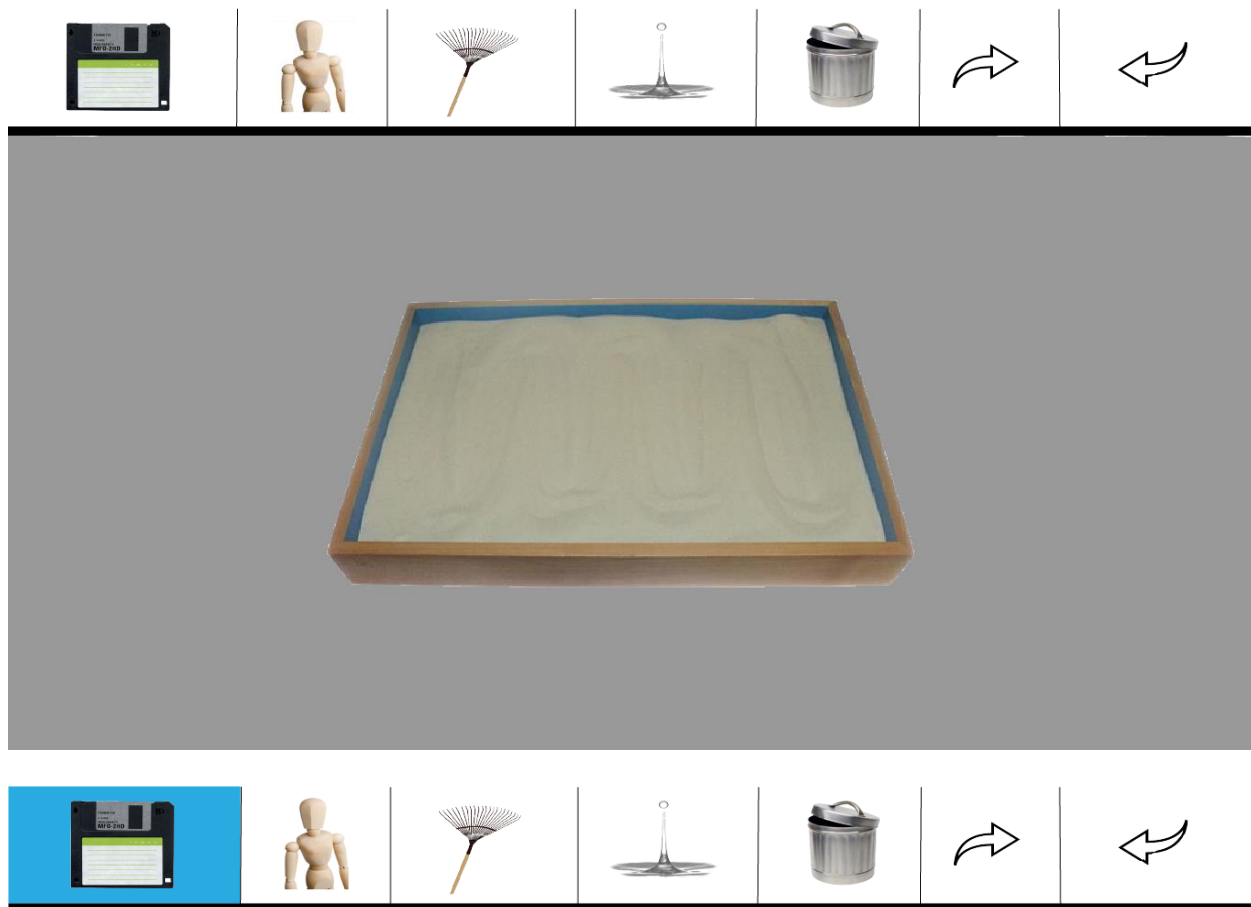
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name of project here

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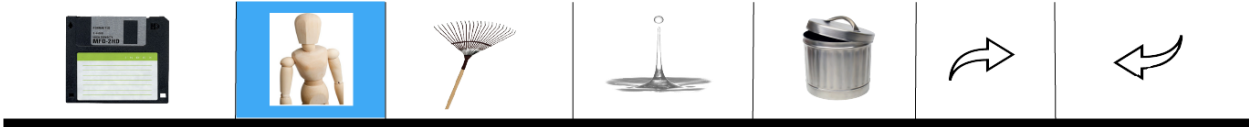
Miniatures Library

People	Natural Items
Animals	Fantasy
Buildings	Spiritual/Mystical
Transportation	Landscaping &
Vegetation	Accessories
Fences/Gates/	Household
Signs	Miscellaneous

Finger	———	Light Pressure
		Hard Pressure
Brush	———	Small
		Medium
		Large
Rake	———	Thin
		Thick

Droplet

Puddle

Pond
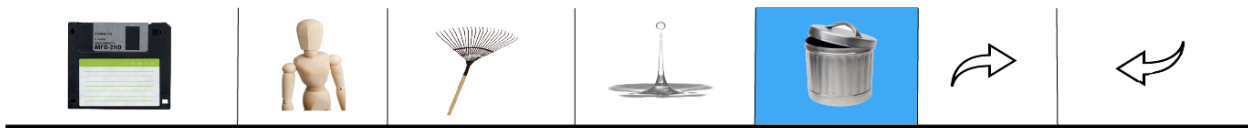
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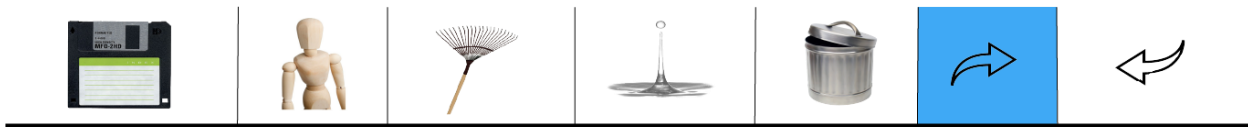
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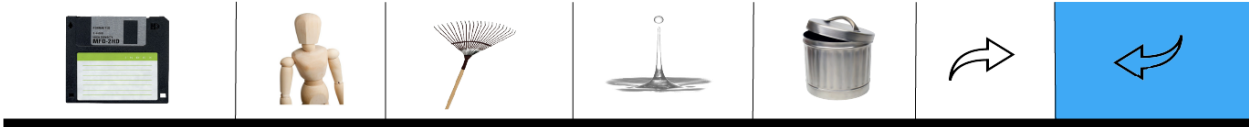
Step Backwards?

Y   N

Animals

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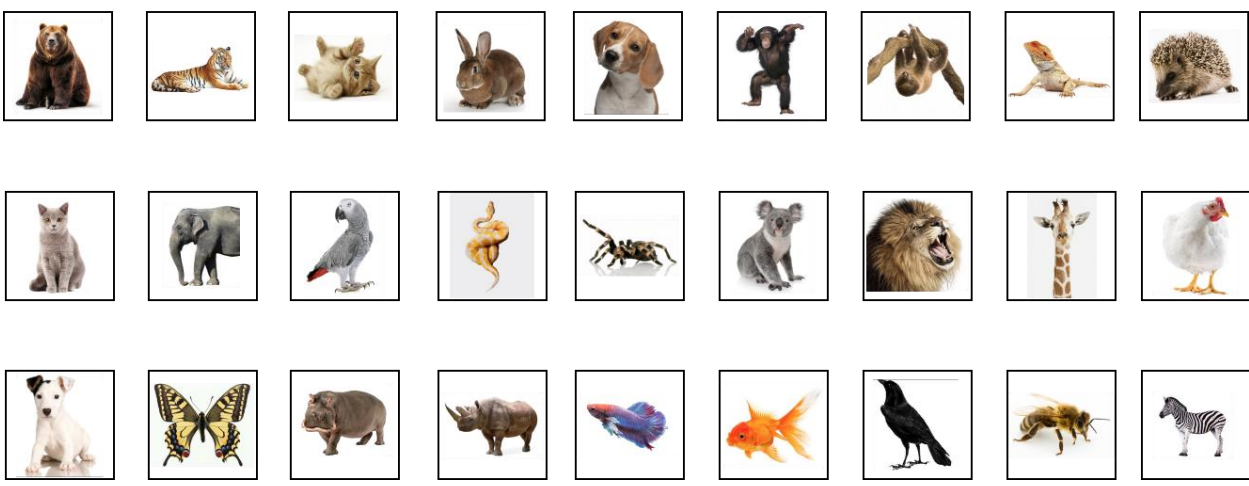
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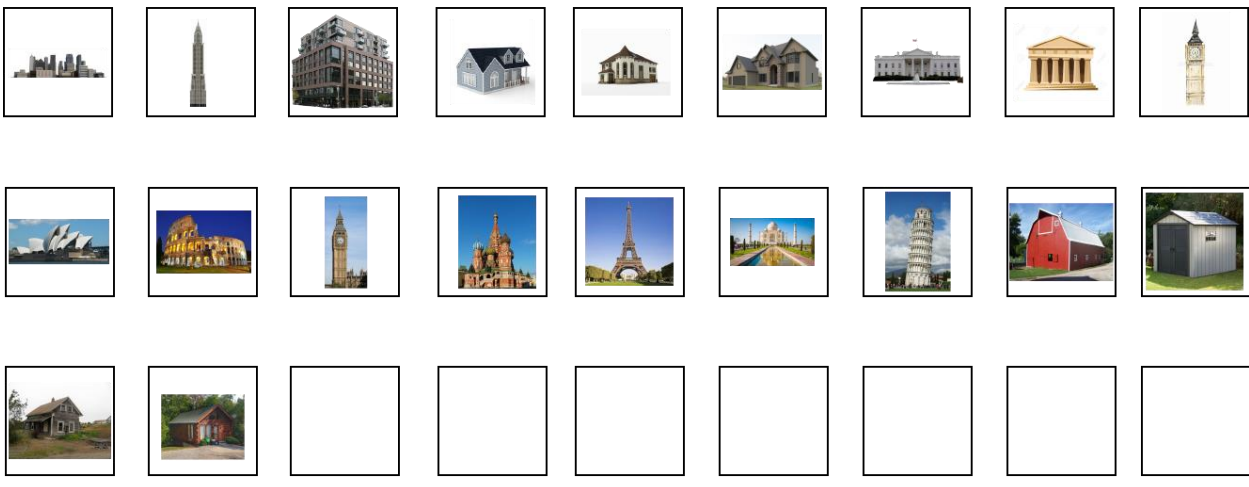
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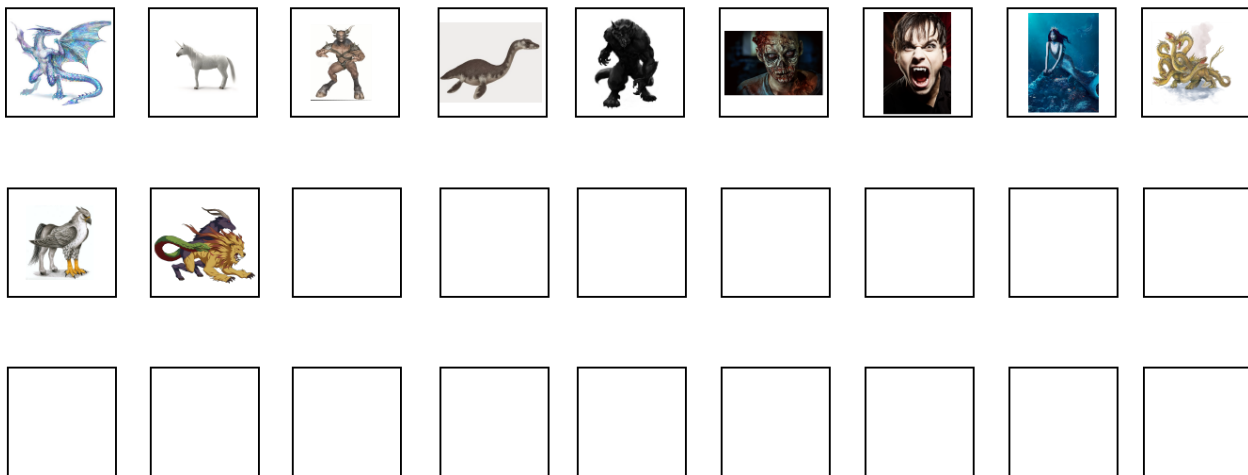
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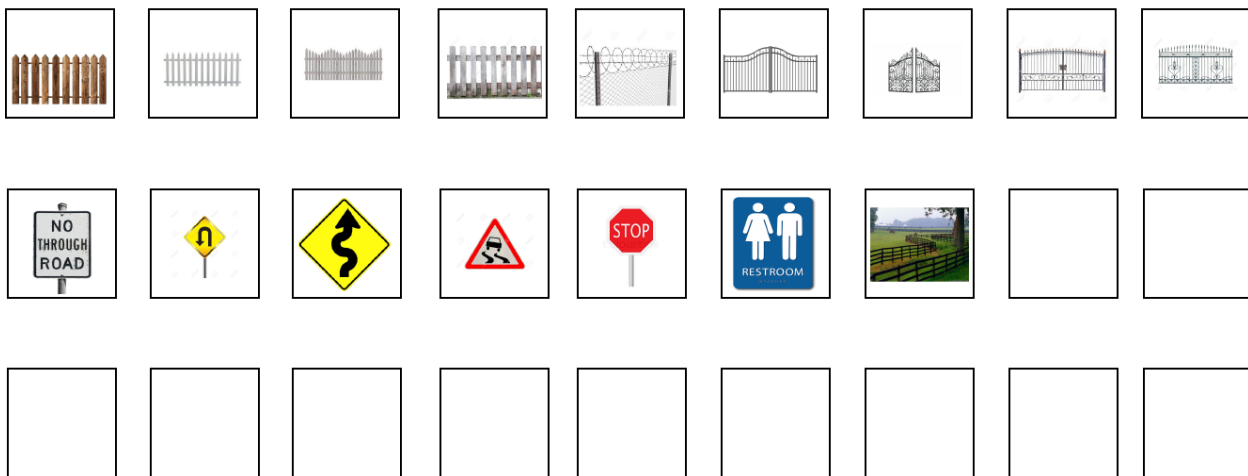
Household

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Landscaping

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Miscellaneous

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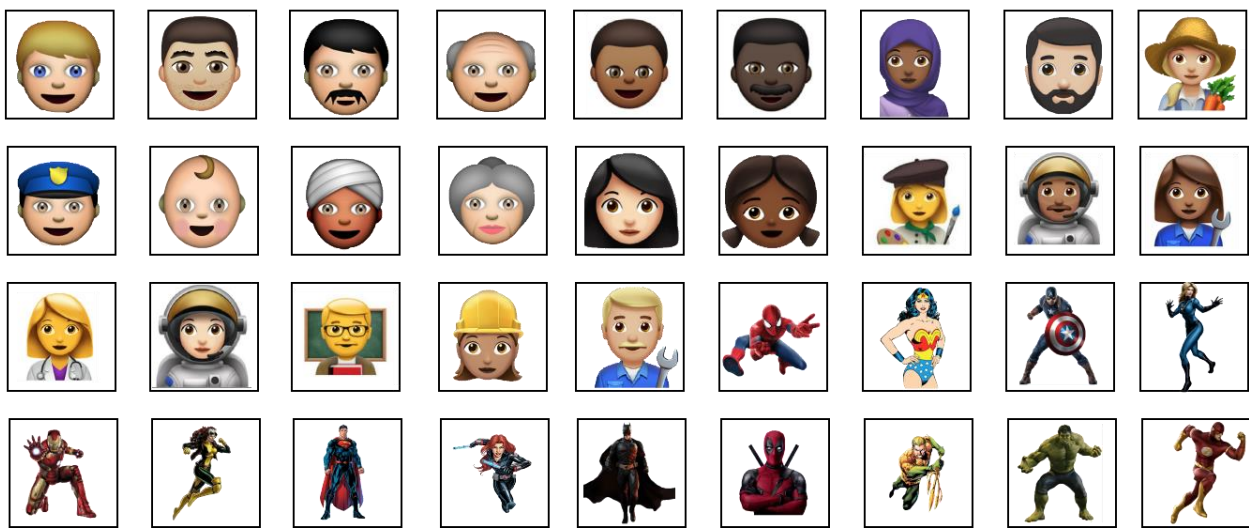
Natural Items

All natural items can be added as many times as desired and scaled up or down in size.

People

All characters are customizable via hair color, skin color, and eye color. When the character is clicked on, a pop up menu will appear to change these features. Characters can be added as many times as desired and scaled up or down in size.
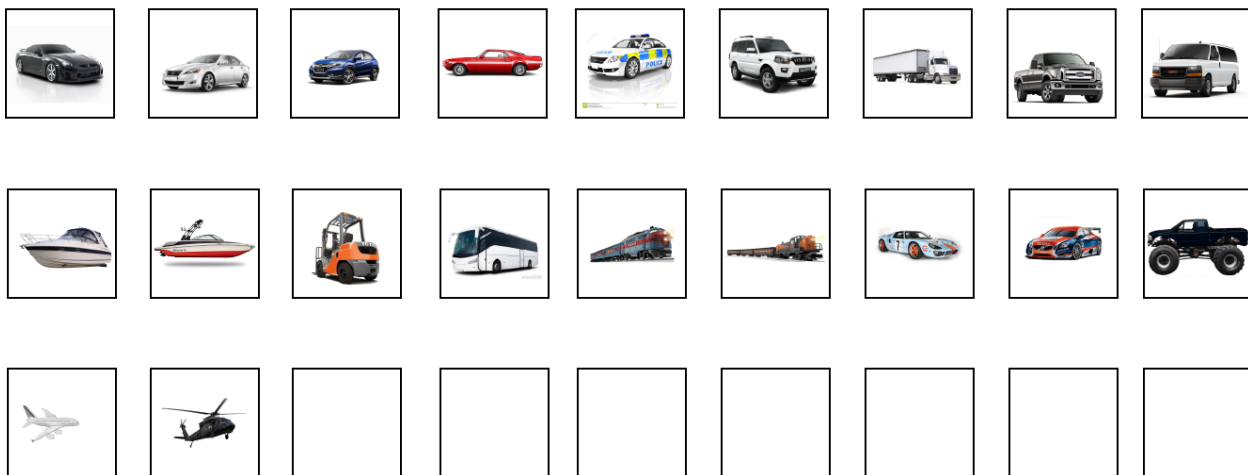
Spiritual/Mytical

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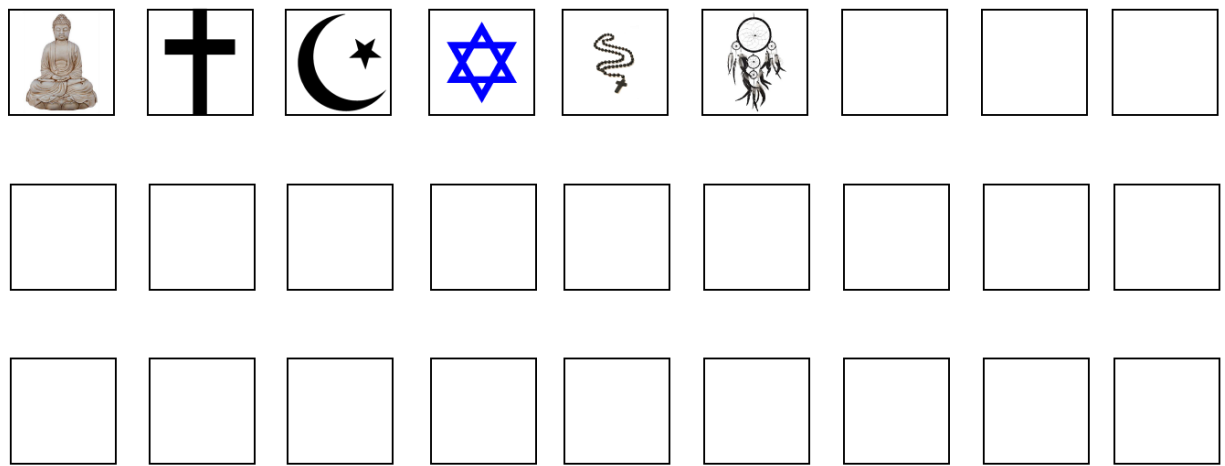
Transportation

All transportation can be added as many times as desired and scaled up or down in size.

Vegetation

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