

Response to Feedback on My Latest Proposal

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I received the ESC's feedback on my latest submission 'Revised Proposal to Fill the Gaps in the Emoji 5.0 Repertoire' and would like to respond to it in detail. I apologize in advance for the harsh words, but it is not easy to stay professional after months upon months of dealing with corporate non-answers and the kind of opaque, unfocussed meddling that seems to be going on within the ESC. I am understandably quite angry.

The following passages are not attacking you as persons, but primarily you as members of a standardization committee for digital communication.

»Emoji will never be able to satisfy the desire to have complete representation of all important aspects of self-presentation across all of the relevant emoji characters.«

That is not what I am asking for. I am asking for Unicode to actually satisfy the desires that they themselves have explicitly put forth. I wouldn't be writing all of these proposals if Unicode hadn't declared that they allegedly wanted gender variants. You voluntarily started the process to achieve good representation last year, and now I want you to finish your damn job and not make up flimsy excuses.

»While it is important to have emoji represent a range of gender presentations [...]«

Can't be that important if some characters that were added seven years ago still do not have gender options. Your words don't match your actions.

»[...] and we have been moving to support that [...]«

Yes, you have been moving. You have been moving so slowly that it almost looks like you're just standing in place. You deliberately move slowly following no apparent pattern and for reasons that are never explained. You even move backwards by excluding random variants while pretending that you are trying to help the cause. That's how you have been moving.

»[...] many people consider it also important to have explicit representations of additional hair colors and styles, for example«

Just like with gender those "many people" now also include members of Unicode so I am not sure what this point is trying to allude to. It is irrelevant what some people may or may not consider important because you already made it clear that gender is important for your standard. Demand for other kinds of glyph modification does not interfere with the demands discussed here.

Despite all my attempts to get the missing gender variants added, I am still strongly opposed to the presence of gender in emoji because putting them into discrete categories makes emoji *less* representative and inclusive. Emoji were at their best pre-4.0 when all we had were the neutral, generic ones. Even with three variations for all characters eventually fully supported emoji would still be less inclusive than before that whole ZWJ nonsense. I genuinely do not want the emoji I

proposed to exist, but now that we are stuck with needlessly gendered pictographs till the end of time I need to make sure that Unicode at the very least gets the implementation right. Offering three distinct gender appearances for all adult human emoji is the best (or rather the least bad) option possible without getting rid of gender markers entirely.

»Based on feedback from implementers, the Emoji Subcommittee tries to limit the number of new emoji (including those represented by ZWJ sequences) that are added each year [...]«

Last year, Emoji 3.0 and 4.0 collectively added 807 new emoji. Emoji 4.0 in particular added 623 new gender-specific sequences that – to put it bluntly – nobody asked for.

I can live without PERSON WITH CHRISTMAS HAT for now; I can live without the family sequences for now. That leaves 48 emoji I am asking you to add, or roughly 6% the amount introduced in 2016. Add to that the missing variants documented in L2/17-071 and you still wouldn't even come close to last year's numbers.

»[...] while preserving some balance among various categories (faces, animals, food, etc.) [...]«

Emoji 4.0 was 99.2% gender, plus three emoji that only serve gendered sequences, and two arguably useful additions. Four of the new characters in Unicode 9 (amounting to 24 new emoji) were also exclusively for forming gender pairs with existing characters.

»Thus we may add gender sequences in smaller batches, in order to allow additions in other categories as well.«

See the above two points. This is simply ridiculous and not grounded in reality.

»Emoji include a number of idiosyncratic characters, some inherited from the original Japanese carrier sets, and some from Webdings/Wingdings. It is probably relatively less important to ensure a full range of possible presentations for these.«

Tell that to POLICE OFFICER, SLEUTH OR SPY, GUARDSMAN, CONSTRUCTION WORKER, MAN WITH TURBAN, PERSON WITH BLOND HAIR, WOMAN WITH BUNNY EARS, and so on and so forth, all of which somehow reached that mystical threshold of relevance. Apparently 'men with bunny ears partying' was amusing enough for you to include straight away without discussion, but transgender people still have to beg on their knees for fair representation months later?

»For changes about which many people feel strongly, such as increasing the range of gender presentation, it is probably best to move gradually, learning as we go.«

This is not what happened with Emoji 4.0. This is also not what happened back in Unicode 8 with Fitzpatrick modifiers which were rushed into the standard without properly consulting the potential user base first judging from the information I could gather, and before ISO had any chance to take a look at these characters and veto their encoding. Besides, **I was the person who made you learn about this months ago**. You had the opportunity to educate yourself for way over half a year. This issue didn't spontaneously come into existence last week.

»That is, rather than declare a full range of presentations for every character that could possibly accommodate them, [...]«

Again, not what happened in Emoji 4.0. Gender variants were defined even for characters that represent abstract emotions or gestures, solely based on the fact that they resembled MAN or WOMAN in the then current version of Apple Color Emoji (or as some like to call it: “in common practice”).

»[...] it may be better to try some of the most important cases first, [...]«

Playboy bunnies in leotards are not more important than transgender and non-binary people.

»[...] get some feedback from actual implementations, and then take that into account as we expand the range of presentations for additional emoji.«

Once again, this apparently wasn't the case when Emoji 4.0 was forced on implementations all in one go. Or did the emoji vendors not represented on the UTC agree that creating a female version of, say, MAN WITH TURBAN but not MAN WITH GUA PI MAO was a sensible, rational course of action?

»Thus with the addition of CHILD, ADULT, and OLDER ADULT there is a basis for trying out implementations with gender-neutral presentations. It may be important to have feedback from those implementations before attempting to significantly expand the extent to which gender-neutral presentations are available for more human-form emoji, including the family groupings.«

May I remind you that Unicode character additions are eternal? If vendors wanted to “try out” their implementations of a third gender option they could have done so long before these characters became a permanent part of an international industry standard. That's what private-use characters and internal testing are meant for. It is too late to back out now. It is too late for ‘but’ and ‘maybe’. Vendors have already made their decision, whether they fully realise it or not.

What even is the plan here? *‘Well, we agreed to adding these explicitly gender-neutral emoji and we can no longer reverse that decision at this point, but now it turns out that gender-neutral design actually takes some effort so we're just not going to bother anymore and let these characters rot away quietly.’* Is this how we're designing standards now? Make decisions first and ask questions later? Is this the same thing that happened last year with MODERN PENTATHLON and RIFLE where Apple and Microsoft didn't realise that a rifle is a weapon until it was too late to remove them from the ballot?

Excuse me for having absolutely no sympathy with implementations here, but the additions I proposed will not be a burden on them. They already made designs for all the professions and concepts and activities in Emoji 4.0 and prior. And – seeing how Emoji 5.0 is now set in stone even though the beta review period hasn't ended yet – they will also be obligated to come up with a design for ADULT, CHILD and OLDER ADULT regardless of what happens. Where exactly does putting an existing image of a straw hat on an existing image of a human face require any noteworthy effort? And if all those extra images are too much of a strain on their fonts, maybe they should have vetoed skin tone and gender modifiers while they still had the chance. Heaven forbid we actually commit to our own decisions.

»As you know, the official Unicode name is not necessarily definitive on the gender presentation that may be associated with an emoji. There is always the potential to add ZWJ sequences to make available the full range of gender presentations for any human-form

emoji, regardless of its name or the gender appearance with which it may have initially been shown.«

Yes, that is the whole freaking point. U+1F931, U+1F9D4 and U+1F9D5 don't include the words 'man' and 'woman' in their formal identifiers **because they were meant as genderless bases for ZWJ sequences. They do not have a gender by default. That is literally the only reason those names were chosen.** But now they can't be genderless because Unicode does not recommend them having variants, thus vendors will implement the defaults as gendered "for realism" like they always do. U+1F9D5 in particular can't be genderless **because the Unicode emoji data explicitly says that it represents a woman despite its formal name.** What the hell are you even trying to achieve, Emoji Subcommittee? Seriously.

Vendors are not going to change their defaults if at some distant point in the far future somebody in command realises that it is physically possible for men to wear a piece of cloth on their head. Because vendors never change their defaults unless it is for copying the latest revision of Apple Color Emoji. Keyboards are still using the unmarked default character as either the male or female (depending on the character) counterpart to an explicitly gendered variant sequence.

Do you really not see how retroactively changing the meaning of a character will cause massive problems? Why do you think that DANCER for instance is now canonically female-only even though it never was at any point in time? Because Apple made it female and (almost) everyone copied Apple, and they couldn't remove the gender afterwards (especially after MAN DANCING was approved) because billions of messages had already been using this character to represent a female dancer and not any other dancer. PERSON WITH HEADSCARF is never going to be gender-neutral even after sequences with ♀ and ♂ are eventually introduced because major vendors will already have decided on a default presentation by the time these changes are made. The same is true for PREGNANT WOMAN, BREAST-FEEDING and BEARDED PERSON.

If there existed a full range of gender options vendors would have no choice but to design every default emoji in an androgynous way because otherwise users would rightfully be wondering why some emoji are available in three distinct flavours but others only in two. However, as it stands now we only have a total of three neutral emoji (not accounting for Fitzpatrick variants), and because those three are the only ones available most users probably wouldn't even recognize them as the neutral counterparts to the male and female ones since there is just no appropriate context that surrounds them.

If those gender-neutral professions that have been stuck in the pipeline for ages had made it into Emoji 5.0 then vendors would now also need to redesign the police officer, the runner, the swimmer, and the bicyclist without any gender characteristics for the sake of consistency. Vendors need to be **forced** to make these changes because we all know damn well that they are not going to do it voluntarily if they can avoid it. The longer you hesitate to amend the emoji data the more vendors are going to implement the mistakes that you recommended to them.

That is the reason why the changes I proposed last time must be made as soon as possible. That is the reason why all of these changes should have been made months ago, back when all of you already were well aware of the ramifications. Because in every other case this is already a lost cause. You will have already destroyed the possibility of there ever being truly gender-neutral emoji except for three measly token characters. Congratulations. Call it Emoji 5.1 or 6.0 or anything you want, but please make it happen before any major damage can be done.

I hope you enjoy reading these comments because I am not going to stop sending them until Unicode allows people to use emoji that are (roughly) the same gender as them. You know, the thing you said you wanted to do ten months ago and failed to accomplish ever since. Stop making plans that you don't want to fulfil is all I'm saying. None of this would have been necessary if you had just rejected the original gender proposal by Been et al. last year.

There is a word for treating some people worse than others solely based on some benign attribute of theirs. It is called discrimination. I want to believe that you are not bigots. I want to believe that you're sincerely behind the cause and aren't just making half-arsed attempts at appeasing people like me who have been nagging you for improvements in increasingly angry letters. I want to believe that you are merely clueless rather than malicious, but this belief is getting weaker and weaker.

I understand your job isn't easy. I understand that standardization takes time, but it has literally been eight months since I first brought the problems with the gender binary and gender stereotypes to your attention, possibly even longer if some of you read my comments before they were officially discussed at UTC #148. The Unicode Technical Committee reviewed my first two comments on gender at the same time as the original proposal they were in reply to, I cannot stress this enough. Emoji 4.0 wasn't even conceptualised back then; not a single new emoji for Unicode 10 had been formally approved at that point. Now we are already making plans for Emoji 6.0/Unicode 11 and *nothing has happened so far*. Seriously, what is going on?

Stop releasing statements that directly contradict your actions. You told me – probably with a straight face – that Unicode is still trying to improve gender representation only two weeks after the president of Unicode had published a document urging the Consortium not to add some of the missing gender variants until some arbitrary, undefined level of demand can be demonstrated, a criterion that either had been thoroughly ignored for many past gender-specific additions or was newly created recently just in time to avoid having to deal with gender any more.

Three new characters that nobody seems to be sure what to do with next and one single acknowledging document by Mark Davis containing such delightfully insulting sentences as '*Don't bother with these yet, unless a major vendor pushes for them, or someone can demonstrate that they would be more than edge cases in terms of usage.*' are not enough. The encoding of ADULT and company almost feels like the emoji equivalent of "I can't be racist because one of my friends is black", the absolute minimum amount of effort to defend against unfortunate accusations. I am not pretending to know your original motivation for the approval of Paul Hunt's proposal, and it probably didn't even occur to you that it could be taken in such a way, but frankly this is one of the few interpretations that actually make sense given the circumstances. At times it is genuinely sickening having to deal with your shenanigans.

Either enable the full gender spectrum for all human characters without exceptions as soon as possible or formally deprecate all the gendered ZWJ sequences you have created in the past, remove them from the data files and recommend against their usage. There simply is no middle ground. You cannot have full inclusion and select exclusion at the same time.