Proposal for a more holistic model of gender representation in emoji
To: Unicode Consortium
From: Paul D. Hunt
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Introduction

There have been several recent attempts to addressing gender representation in regards to emoji. There was a push to minimize gender discrepancy by adding gendered pairs in Unicode 9.0. More recently, Google has proposed for 'Expanding Emoji Professions' with the aim of reducing gender inequality between men & women. Unfortunately, none of the attempts at addressing the issue at hand have approached the issue of gender from in a completely holistic manner. Of course it is impossible to avoid any references to gender in emoji at all, nor do I believe that it would be helpful to divorce all gendered representations in emoji. But it is my view that currently emoji has gone too far in presenting gender as a binary construct.

The general premise for this proposal is that emoji can be more representative if all gender associations are abstracted away from emoji presentation by default inasmuch as is possible. This means that the most basic forms of emoji should be presented in a way that avoids attaching any gendered features. This is what is currently done for the the smiley face series of emoji and B&W stick figures that are shown in the Unicode charts and this logic should be applied across the board to all emoji insofar as is possible.

In order to allow for a more balanced approach to gender representation in emoji, it is the author's opinion that there should be at least 4 options to provide coverage the most *expansive* model of gender. These 4 gender representations should be:

- Agender: no specific gender appearance, abstract facial and body forms
- Feminine: can feature appearance 'typical' of women as interpreted by emoji artist
- Masuline: can feature appearance 'typical' of men as interpreted by emoji artist
- Androgynous: should present humaniform facial & body features that are open to interpretation as to whether they are masculine or feminine.

For the most part, various aspects of this proposal are already implemented in the Unicode standard or are currently being implemented by vendors, albeit in a non-comprehensive manner. The original guidance from Unicode in Technical Report 51 has been that besides a handful of characters, 'All [emoji] should be depicted in a gender-neutral way'. The author of this document proposes that the guidance could be updated to ask vendors to provide default representation that is abstract and not gendered as smilies and stick figures. This will allow for emoji users to opt out of any intentional expression of gender as they may desire.

As it is reasonable to expect that users will want to use emoji that are more humanized in form than stick figures, the author proposes that three gendered representations be made available for emoji users to choose from: one feminine (woman), one masculine (man), and one androgynous. Work is already underway on developing representation for masculine & feminine emoji; the author of this document proposes that this should be expanded to include androgynous representation for emoji

users to opt for more humainform emoji representation, but without having to opt in to the binary gender model (man/woman only). The proposal to encode 3 ambiguously gendered person emoji characters will be embodied in a separate document.

- Gender Spectrum: Understanding Gender
  https://www.genderspectrum.org/quick-links/understanding-gender/
- Unicode Technical Report #51: Unicode Emoji: Gender
  http://unicode.org/reports/tr51/#Gender
- Proposal to encode 3 non-gendered person emoji characters
  https://docs.google.com/document/d/1dTEQqVQweftpiXpBL6hKxGWo7oKWmJkw1yGULFekV-c

Rationale

In approaching the topic of gender, or any aspect of identity for that matter, it is my sincere belief that every possible precaution must be taken to prevent the disenfranchisement or harm of the most vulnerable parties in these concerns. In terms of gender, the most vulnerable include young, impressionable children who may not have yet come to any hard and fast conclusions to the question of their own gender identity. Other vulnerable groups may include any groups or persons who may be harmed by even the simple act of having to identify with any specific gender stereotype. In these cases, I believe these vulnerable parties would be best served if there were adequate options to 1) opt out of any gendered emoji representations or 2) opt out of binary gender representation by using emoji with androgynous appearance. My belief is that having non-gendered emoji as default would allow for the best fallback situation for platforms where gendered, humaniform alternatives are not adequately represented.

~~In order to understand this concept, I would refer to a recent study that shows that the work of women coders is more likely to be accepted on GitHub when project runners have no information about the code submitter's gender:~~

~~If women made [those] requests to an outsider and their user profiles did not identify them as women, the requests were accepted 71.8 percent of the time. But if they made the requests using a profile that identified them as women, the acceptance rate dropped to 62.5 percent.~~

~~Interestingly, there was also a drop for men when gender was disclosed, but to a smaller extent.~~

~~http://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/data-mine/2016/02/18/study-shows-women-are-better-coders-but-only-when-gender-is-hidden~~

There may be many reasons for any number of emoji users to choose to employ emoji without any specific gender assignment.

History

The first emoji set from DoCoMo has only one pictogram that could be construed as having explicit gender: the symbol for toilet (which represents man & woman gender together). As SoftBank & KDDI

incorporated emoji into their own platforms, they generally tried to approach representations of people in as abstract a manner as possible. For example, the pictograms for the 18 following human forms were all designed to be abstract enough as to not imply a specific gender: baby, baby angel, police officer, construction worker, guardsman, bride with veil, face massage, person frowning, person pouting, information desk person, person raising hand, person bowing deeply, pedestrian, runner, person raising both hands, bath, skier, surfer. The following 21 pictographs can be construed as being either masculine or feminine: boy, girl, man, woman, older man, older woman, blonde person, man with gua pi mao, man with turban, princess, Father Christmas, haircut (primarily SoftBank's rendition), no good gesture, ok gesture, dancer, bunny dancer(s), hetero couple holding hands, hetero couple kissing, couple with heart, family, person with folded hands (KDDI).

As these were added to Unicode, the gender representation was extracted in some cases in the naming while being reinforced by the representative glyphs. Two examples are those for KISS (u+1F48F) & COUPLE WITH HEART (u+1F491): while the naming implies no gender representation, the representative glyphs clearly indicate gender roles in these instances. Once emoji was encoded in Unicode, Apple then created the first mass-market emoji font for distribution with their iOS operating system. In attempting to create high-resolution artwork for the existing characters, the Apple depictions of some human-formed characters sought to make them more realistic by adding a level of more explicit, visible gender. Two examples here are HAPPY PERSON RAISING ONE HAND (u+1F64B) & RUNNER (u+1F3C3). There are many more incidences of this trend that I will not cite, but this general trend is visible in comparing Apple's color emoji to the original artwork created by the Japanese carriers. As other vendors began to develop their own emoji sets/fonts, they generally tended to follow Apple's lead in terms of gender application. This is not strictly true and confusion has arisen from the gender disparity between various emoji sets making interoperability tricky and tending for gender representations which are not inherent to the Unicode standard becoming increasingly entrenched. The trends described above are visible in Emojipedia's recent article on the Emoji Creation Story.

This is a problem as I see it. The man/woman binary gender construct is not inclusive enough to accurately and fairly allow for representation of persons who either identify themselves by some other gender, or who would like refrain from choosing any gender representation, or forcing emoji users to resort to choosing a gendered emoji that is not reflective of the user's personal gender identity. In contrast to this situation, Facebook allows users to choose from 56 language-based gender expressions. Fortunately, I believe that it will be much easier to accomplish gender parity in emoji, which are strictly visual, than by including so many explicit variations (which I believe to be a function of language and impossible to do in pictograms anyway). I believe that defaulting to genderless emoji is a humane approach, one that will do less harm to marginalized persons who either struggle with gender dysphoria, or who do not identify particularly strongly with either of the binary gender representations typically available.

- Unicode: Full Emoji Data
  http://unicode.org/emoji/charts/full-emoji-list.html

Proposal
Part 1: Genderless emoji by default

From the author's perspective, the first step towards a more fair, balanced, and inclusive approach is to reevaluate how default gender is currently handled and applied in the Unicode standard. My suggestion would be to reinterpret *any* mentions of gender in respect to emoji to having a neutral effect on gender appearance by default insofar as is possible. This means that the following characters should all be genderless by default, reinterpreting MAN or WOMAN to be PERSON instead, and not in correlation with what the actual assigned name of the character is:

- BABY
- BABY ANGEL
- POLICE OFFICER
- CONSTRUCTION WORKER
- GUARDSMAN
- BRIDE WITH VEIL
- FACE MASSAGE
- PERSON FROWNING
- PERSON WITH POUTING FACE
- INFORMATION DESK PERSON
- HAPPY PERSON RAISING ONE HAND
- PERSON BOWING DEEPLY
- PEDESTRIAN
- RUNNER
- PERSON RAISING BOTH HANDS
- BATH
- SKIER
- SURFER
- BLONDE PERSON
- MAN WITH GUA PI MAO
- MAN WITH TURBAN
- HAIRCUT
- FACE WITH NO GOOD GESTURE
- FACE WITH OK GESTURE
- DANCER
- BUNNY DANCER(S)
- COUPLE HOLDING HANDS
- KISS
- COUPLE WITH HEART
- FAMILY
- PERSON WITH FOLDED HANDS
- FACEPALM
- PREGNANT WOMAN
- MAN IN BUSINESS SUIT LEVITATING
- SPEAKING HEAD IN SILHOUETTE
- BUST IN SILHOUETTE

- BUSTS IN SILHOUETTE
- SLEUTH
- MAN IN TUXEDO
- SHRUG
- OTHERS THAT MAY HAVE BEEN MISSED

Every attempt should be made to represent these emoji in an non-gendered manner as default representations. This means that these characters will likely have to be more abstract and use round smiley faces instead of more humanized forms.

This would leave only the following explicitly gendered emoji:

- BOY
- GIRL
- MAN
- WOMAN
- OLDER MAN
- OLDER WOMAN
- PRINCESS
- PRINCE
- FATHER CHRISTMAS
- MOTHER CHRISTMAS
- MAN AND WOMAN HOLDING HANDS
- TWO MEN HOLDING HANDS
- TWO WOMEN HOLDING HANDS
- ZWJ SEQUENCES WITH EXPLICIT GENDER CHARACTERS IN SEQUENCE

It may be desirable to deprecate some recently added gendered emoji or perhaps even some of those in the list immediately above:

- MALE DANCER
- OTHERS?

In order to be able to represent addition non-gendered persons, it is proposed that one of the smileys be added to the list of bases so as to allow for agender representations of new professions such as artist, firefighter, pilot, astronaut, &c. It is proposed that this base should be either WHITE SMILING FACE (U+263A) or SLIGHTLY SMILING FACE (U+1F642). This can then be combined in a similar manner as MAN/WOMAN are with emoji objects to represent occupations not atomically encoded in the Unicode standard.
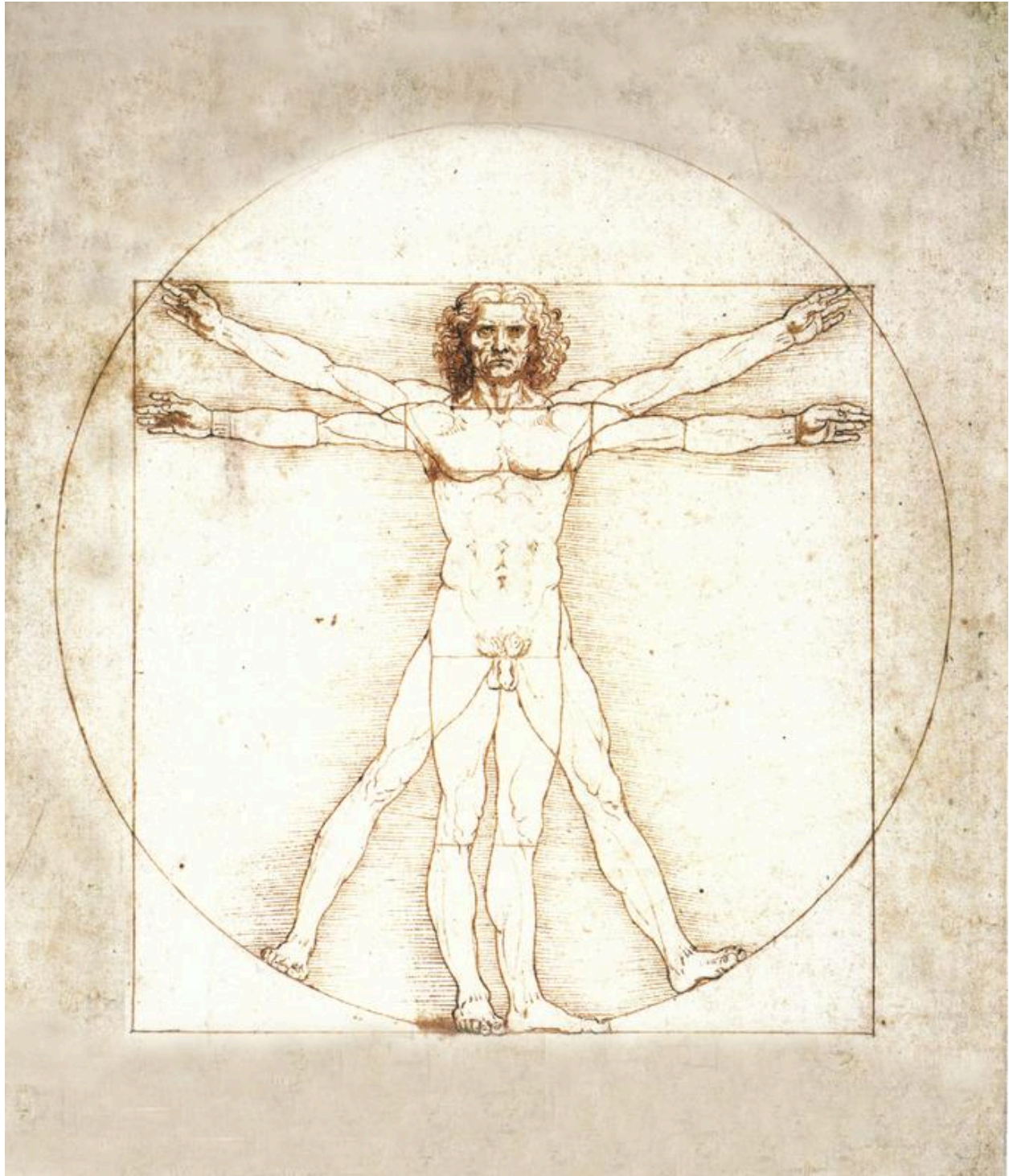
Part 2: Gendered emoji via modifier sequences

In order to apply explicit gender, modifiers must be applied to genderless bases as described in previous proposals. That is to say by combining a genderless base with a woman (♀), man (♂), or androgyny (☿) symbol with ZWJ serving as glue.

Some humaniform, genderless characters will need to be added that correspond to emoji characters with explicit gender. These would necessarily be:

- PERSON (or HUMAN?)
- CHILD (or HUMAN CHILD?)
- OLDER PERSON (or OLDER HUMAN?)
- ROYAL (or HEIR? Or NOBLE?)
- COUPLE HOLDING HANDS (of indistinct gender)

In aiming for androgynous emoji depictions, the artist could include such devices as long-ish or pixie-cut hair; generic forms for eyes, mouth, and other facial features; also the absence of facial hair. It is the author's opinion that the aim of providing androgynous emoji should be simply to cast doubt on the explicit gender of a particular emoji so that it can be interpreted as either masculine or feminine.

Part 3
Going forward every effort should be made to avoid explicit gender becoming attached to base emoji characters either in appearance or in name. This will allow for adding fewer new emoji characters to Unicode as additional human representations are wanted. If gendered representation is wanted, these emoji should be handled by ZWJ sequences with gender modifiers.

Conclusion

There is already a vast number of genderless human forms that exist in the Unicode standard. The most obvious example of these is the smiley faces (& hands, & other body parts). The typically smiley is simply a personified circle: an abstract rendition of a human face with a particular expression. A more holistic approach toward gender would treat as many emoji as possible as genderless by default. This approach, combined with using 3 modifiers for gender appearance, should produce an expansive enough model for emoji users who want to either opt out of any gender representations in emoji, or want to use gender representations in emoji as part of any existing model of gender. It is the author's belief that this should be the aim of Unicode in terms of gender representation within its standard and steps should be taken toward providing good emoji gender options for all users.

~~It is beyond the scope of this proposal, but perhaps it should be considered that these gender neutral forms could also serve as bases for explicitly gendered forms. Perhaps all animal forms could be considered as gendered bases. This would allow for distinctions between LION (male with mane) & LIONESS (LION+explicit gender tag, resulting in a lion face with no mane). Perhaps other body parts should be considered as bases for gender so that it might be possible to have more feminine hand forms. These are some topics to be considered as we try to develop a more inclusive, consistent, expressive depiction of gender within emoji.~~