

Why's that an emoji? The ethos and birthing process behind the icons we use to communicate

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If you have a smartphone, or use the internet at all in 2019, you probably know emoji—those small pictures that seem to punctuate nearly every written exchange today. (Some of you are probably even thinking your responses in emoji right now.)

There's the heart, the thumbs up, the now-ubiquitous smiling swirl of poop, the "Face With Tears of Joy," which Oxford Dictionaries named the 2015 word of the year, and a few thousand more. Every year, it seems to take longer to swipe the perfect one you're looking for, as more and more [emoji](#) options proliferate.

Ever wonder where emoji come from or where they go to die—if they die?

The answer to those questions is largely true of all emoji: Each one is birthed through a proposal process run by the Unicode Consortium, the nonprofit organization that has curated emoji since 2010.

Anyone can propose an emoji—yes, you could, too. That said, each proposal needs to meet a strict set of standards. For instance, any new emoji must be distinctive, it must be something people will use, and it must add something to the set.

"We look for which one is clearly missing," Welch said. "Aces, hearts, clubs, but no diamonds?"

Too many emoji?

Over time, this [thought process](#) has helped lead to the 3,178 emoji in existence today, according to emoji reference website Emojipedia. Many emoji are simply part of a set. With flags, for instance, Welch said that if you have one, you have to have them all, or at least all of the ones of countries recognized by the United Nations. Others include different skin tones and gender variations of emoji depicting people.

And there will always be more emoji because the idea of "too many emoji" exists only in theory at Unicode.

"Theoretically, there could be too many emoji," said Greg Welch, a member of Unicode's board of directors. "If there is an emoji for every single object in the universe, then yes, that is too many."

In fact, for Welch, the potential issue of having too many emoji is more of an issue with user interface. While most platforms save users' most-used emoji near the front of your emoji keyboard, they may want to scroll through to find something they've never used before, and that can take a lot of sifting. Welch believes this can be alleviated through future systems that use facial and voice recognition to gather emoji.

Could my favorites get deleted?

Whether one thinks there are too many or not, Unicode is not going to delete an emoji anytime soon. According to Welch, deleting an emoji would be like deleting an obscure function in Microsoft Excel, because while the rate of use for some emoji may be small, it is never absolute zero. And like the Excel function, removing any one emoji could retroactively ruin someone's work. It would be as if a web browser suddenly lost support for the letter L.

"Once (an emoji) is part of the set it stays in the set," Welch said.

Unicode was originally created to provide consistency in how computers encode and display language on different computer systems. Because of Unicode, English, Cyrillic, Mandarin, and hundreds of other writing systems can be viewed on any computer.

And basically, the emoji you send from your iPhone to your friend's Android phone shows up because both systems understand the Unicode number that represents each emoji. They just appear differently on, say, Facebook, your iPhone, or Twitter because of each of these company's stylistic choices.

Who decides what emoji mean?

According to Jennifer Daniel, the creative director of emoji at Google and a voting member of the Unicode Consortium, the emoji in the context of communication is one of the primary factors in deciding how an emoji will look.

For instance, an ice cube emoji could have myriad meanings that must be considered in the design process, and can even determine where the emoji appears on the emoji keyboard. Is ice a solid or a liquid? Should it be melting? Is it food? Does the ice cube mean that the sender is cold, or that the recipient has been burned?

Often, Daniel will talk with experts to inform Google's emoji design, especially if the given emoji deals with someone's experience, or identifies with the emoji. This is especially true of emoji that depict disability. Ultimately, for Daniel, aid in communication is key when considering emoji

design and introduction.

"Will this result in people not understanding each other?" Daniel said. "What do people need help saying?"

That answer comes from many different places, from individuals to large organizations. For instance, the Gates Foundation, along with Johns Hopkins Center for Communication, lobbied in 2017 for the mosquito emoji, which was released in 2018.

Other times, these ideas come from people who want to express their cultural experience with emoji.

When there is no emoji for what you want to say

During the Chinese New Year of 2017, Natalia Lin, the project manager at the Facemoji Keyboard app, noticed that she couldn't express herself to her family and friends the way she wanted to with emoji. There was none that truly reflected her experience as a Chinese person.

So Lin, who describes herself as "a little emoji addicted," thought of proposing three emoji that all share great significance in Chinese culture: a firecracker, a moon cake, and a red envelope.

According to Lin, all of these symbols are distinctly Chinese. The moon cake, for instance, is a common treat and an iconic symbol of the Mid-Autumn Festival. The firecracker and red envelope, on the other hand, are synonymous with Chinese New Year. During that holiday, celebrants set off firecrackers, and elderly family members give money to younger relatives inside red envelopes.

"These symbols are central to Chinese identity," Lin said. "For Chinese people anywhere in the world, these things are imbued with tons of meaning."

Lin proposed her emoji in 2017, which, after three rounds of approval, were later introduced in June 2018. To help get these emoji approved, she pointed to statistics over 1 billion digital red envelopes had been sent the previous Chinese New Year, pointing to their ubiquity. Overall, Lin said she is satisfied with how the emoji approval

process allows for the inclusion of different voices and cultures.

"Emoji is just a better way to express yourself," Lin said.

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