

Comments on Emoji 13.1 and 14.0 Candidates

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1. WHITE RIGHTWARDS BACKHAND and WHITE LEFTWARDS HAND

No new hand-shape characters have included the qualifier “white” in their name since Unicode 7.0 in 2014. These characters should simply be called RIGHTWARDS BACKHAND and LEFTWARDS HAND respectively. They do not derive from a dingbat font, but were invented from whole cloth for emoji use, so the chances of ever needing black versions are pretty slim. The word “white” in emoji names where the actual colour white is not meant always leads to slight confusion among users.

2. FACE WITH HAND OVER MOUTH

To make the intended contrast with U+1F92D SMILING FACE WITH SMILING EYES AND HAND COVERING MOUTH more explicit, a qualifier like “with open eyes” could be added to the character name, as confusion over the shape of the eyes was the main reason this new character was proposed.

3. THUMB AND INDEX FINGER CROSSED

For consistency with U+1F91E HAND WITH INDEX AND MIDDLE FINGERS CROSSED, this character should be given the formal name HAND WITH THUMB AND INDEX FINGER CROSSED.

4. *Face in Clouds*

The choice of U+1F636 FACE WITHOUT MOUTH as base character for this ZWJ sequence is odd and seems to be largely motivated by the fact that the mouth happens to be obscured in the sample art provided by the original proposal document. There is however no requirement that the mouth of this emoji not be visible and using U+1F636 could needlessly restrict vendors when crafting their own interpretations of the design.

The proposed keywords for *Face in Clouds* are “confused”, “delirious”, and “forgetful”, while FACE WITHOUT MOUTH is annotated with “quiet” and “silent”. Emojipedia further cites “humility”, “disappointment”, “frustration”, and “sadness” as possible interpretations of the latter. These two sets of emotions are clearly not compatible; the currently proposed ZWJ sequence could therefore lead to confusion and miscommunication when the receiving end does not have support for the sequence and only sees or hears its individual components in unligated form. ZWJ sequences should always be defined with scenarios like this in mind.

In my opinion, U+1F615 CONFUSED FACE is much better suited for the range of emotions this sequence is trying to represent. Alternatives like U+1F610 NEUTRAL FACE, U+1F641 SLIGHTLY FROWNING FACE or U+1F626 FROWNING FACE WITH OPEN MOUTH, which are commonly shown with similar expressions, would also be possible.

5. *Face Exhaling*

U+1F4A8 DASH SYMBOL is not a puff of breath, but a cloud of dust produced by a cartoon character running away really fast. It is annotated as such in the emoji data and its CLDR short name fittingly

is *Dashing Away*. The combination of U+1F62E FACE WITH OPEN MOUTH and U+1F4A8 DASH SYMBOL does therefore not represent a face calmly exhaling, but a face escaping from the scene at high speed. Coupled with the fact that U+1F62E can also be used to indicate sudden shock or surprise, this ZWJ sequence is just begging to be wildly misinterpreted.

As there is no emoji in Unicode that represents breath (with the exception of U+1F32C WIND BLOWING FACE, which is unsuitable), there is no sensible way to encode this emoji as a ZWJ sequence. It should be postponed until Unicode 14.0 and added as an atomic character instead.

6. Face with Spiral Eyes

I believe the UTC is making a mistake redefining U+1F635 DIZZY FACE to be a face with X-shaped eyes to accommodate this new ZWJ sequence.

There is nothing spiral-like about U+1F4AB DIZZY SYMBOL, neither in terms of its semantics, nor in any of the vendor illustrations that have been created so far. There is no reason why this character should be a modifier to make a face's eyes spiral-shaped. In fact, this raises an interesting point: If the combination of two “dizzy” emoji – DIZZY FACE and DIZZY SYMBOL – is meant to be displayed as a face with spiral eyes, does that not imply that spiral eyes are the best possible representation of dizziness and that therefore DIZZY FACE – unambiguously the semantically correct emoji for dizziness – should be shown with spiral eyes by default?

I have image-searched for various terms connected to dizziness and tallied up how often each design paradigm was used among the first 50 emoticons, smileys, cartoon faces or similar types of images that came up for each one. Results that depict an existing emoji glyph from a major vendor have been excluded from the count.

Search Term	Spiral-Shaped Eyes	X-Shaped Eyes	Neither
“dizzy face”	24	17	9
“dizzy character”	17	6	27
“dizzy cartoon”	11	3	36
“dizzy cartoon character”	14	4	32
“dizzy eyes”	36	3	11

If we repeat the same procedure with the term “knocked out” instead of “dizzy”, we get the following results:

Search Term	Spiral-Shaped Eyes	X-Shaped Eyes	Neither
“knocked out face”*	0	9	11
“knocked out character”	6	8	36
“knocked out cartoon”	0	24	26
“knocked out cartoon character”*	4	8	32
“knocked out eyes”*	9	16	6

*This query did not provide enough relevant results.

While this is obviously not a scientifically rigorous study, it does show a general trend: Spirals are more often associated with feeling dizzy (i.e. unbalanced, light-headed, confused, disordered, overwhelmed or scatterbrained) and Xs are more often associated with being knocked out (i.e. exhausted, tired, defeated, incapacitated, unconscious or potentially even dead). There is certainly some conceptual overlap between these two states and both glyphs have been used to represent either one, but they are not equivalent.

If you showed the average person a picture of a cartoon character with Xs for eyes, their first association would most likely not be dizziness, but rather (comical) unconsciousness. So even though there are more vendors and fonts that show DIZZY FACE with X eyes than spiral eyes at the time of writing, that is – in my opinion – actually not a very appropriate glyph.

The underlying issue is that vendors cannot decide among themselves whether to display U+1F635 with spiral-shaped or X-shaped eyes, and that this cross-vendor inconsistency has allegedly led to some confusion and miscommunication. The fact of the matter is that U+1F635 was never a face with spiral eyes nor a face with X eyes – it is and always has been a dizzy face. The choice of representative glyph should therefore be solely based on what image best represents the concept of dizziness and not the idiosyncratic past decisions of individual vendors.

There is nothing to be gained from releasing this emoji prematurely if the consequences are a misleading ZWJ representation and the sudden redefinition of a character with a decade of history behind it. The world will continue to turn even if the resolution of the X eyes vs. spiral eyes debate must be delayed by another couple of months. Having sensible, consistent and reliable definitions is more important than padding the upcoming emoji release just so people will have slightly more stuff to play with while they wait for the next major update.

Yes, formal character identifiers are not the be-all and end-all of character semantics, but they are not chosen arbitrarily either. U+1F635 was given the name DIZZY FACE because that is what it was encoded for – to represent a face that looks dizzy. Retroactively changing the meaning of a commonly used character that has been part of Unicode for over a decade is irresponsible and potentially damaging to the standard. All it accomplishes is subtly obfuscating ten years worth of messages for no reason. DIZZY FACE wouldn't be the first emoji this has happened to, but that doesn't justify doing it again.

Completely redefining a well-established character should be an absolute last resort measure reserved for fixing serious architectural issues and not something that happens semi-regularly to patch up minor vendor mishaps. No other part of Unicode is this volatile and for a good reason.

If both X-shaped and spiral-shaped eyes were acceptable glyphic variants of DIZZY FACE, there would be no need to define a new emoji at all since users would always understand what the character means regardless of whether its eyes are Xs or spirals, but evidently that is not the case. One of these two glyph options does not fit the character; otherwise there would be no confusion in the first place.

If X eyes and spiral eyes must be differentiated at the character level – and I do agree that they probably should given the circumstances – then the spirals should be granted to the emoji whose meaning is best represented by spirals, and in my view DIZZY FACE is the only correct choice here. The *Face with Spiral Eyes* ZWJ sequence should be removed from the candidate list and instead a new FACE WITH X-SHAPED EYES or KNOCKED-OUT FACE character be considered for the next Unicode release as was originally planned.

If that is somehow not an acceptable option, then *two* new emoji should be encoded – one explicitly for X eyes and one explicitly for spiral eyes, with no mention of their deeper semantics – and DIZZY FACE should be given a new recommended design that is independent from both. There are other ways to depict dizziness that do not rely on the shape of the eyes alone as the tallies above have shown.

Regardless of which of these solutions is chosen, I also firmly believe that U+1F635 should retain its CLDR short name of *Dizzy Face* and not be renamed to *Face with Spiral Eyes*, even if no separate spiral eyes emoji is ultimately encoded. Changing this character from representing a certain emotion (which could have any number of glyphs associated with it) to representing only a very specific glyph is a bad idea in any case, even if said glyph happens to be an accurate visualisation of that emotion.