
Showing Our Emoticons:

The 25th Anniversary of the Original Smiley



There is a lit candle in an elevator mounted on a bracket attached to the middle of one wall (say, 2" from the wall). A drop of mercury is on the floor. The cable snaps and the elevator falls. What happens to the candle and the mercury?

This quirky post on the Computer Science Department (CSD) electronic bulletin board (bboard), and the flame war that followed, inspired one of today's most widely used conventions in plain text communications.

WARNING!

Because of a recent physics experiment, the leftmost elevator has been contaminated with mercury. There is also some slight fire damage. Decontamination should be complete by 08:00 Friday.

Re: WARNING!!

The previous bboard message about mercury is related to the comment about Physics experiments. It is not an actual problem ... My apology for spoiling the joke but people were upset and yelling fire in a crowded theatre is bad news.... so are jokes on day old comments.

=] :-o :) =) :^) :- (:(=(D: :-/ :-\ =/ 8-) :-| :| ;-) ;)

It was 1982 and not the first time a joke had gone awry inside Carnegie Mellon's very young electronic community. Messages were often sent with the familiar air of a phone call or a chance meeting outside the computer room, but obviously lacking the customary visual or vocal cues of interpersonal communication. To eliminate future misunderstandings, several users proposed official "joke" markers: an asterisk, the ampersand, maybe the hash mark. The Gandalf VAX group offered its horizontal smile glyph. In a hastily written post on September 19, artificial intelligence researcher Scott Fahlman casually added another idea to the mix:

I propose that [sic] the following character sequence for joke markers:

:-)

Read it sideways. Actually, it is probably more economical to mark things that are NOT jokes, given current trends. For this, use

:- (

The convention caught on quickly within CSD. Soon the open-mouthed surprise smiley, the smiley with glasses and many other variations began showing up throughout Carnegie Mellon's nascent computer network. Led by emails like the one Visiting Professor Jim Morris (S'63) sent to his friend at PARC detailing this "communication breakthrough," the lighthearted glyph migrated out of Pittsburgh over the ARPAnet and into the realm of Internet legend.

Fahlman, now a research professor, AAAI fellow and head of the Scone knowledge-base engine research group at Carnegie Mellon, is amused by the smiley's success, "It's kind of weird being better known for a silly thing that I tossed off one day in five minutes than for the research I've done in the past 35 years or so. But it's also kind of fun." The smiley was such a spur-of-the-moment idea that no one, not even Fahlman, thought to keep a record of the bboard post. "By the time I realized that this smiley-face phenomenon was going to be long-lasting and that it would spread around the world as the Internet grew, it was too late to easily retrieve the post and the original message was lost for many years."

Today, the :-) smiley glyph and its hundreds of cousins are recognized worldwide. Known as emoticons, these symbols help us express emotions from love to rage to political satire to just plain silliness in the limited and often cryptic environment of text-based messaging. The Wikipedia entry for "emoticon" defines nearly 40 of the most common turn-your-head-to-the-side character strings,

followed by numerous examples of the horizontal variety (the ones meant to be read without turning your head), the East Asian style and the Japanese Shift JIS glyphs. Many software programs now intercept the most widely used emoticons and change them into little pictures. If you happen upon one you don't quite understand, there are several emoticon dictionaries available online to help you decipher it.

(^_^)

East Asian

When Mike Jones (S'82, '88, CS'92), director of connected systems customer strategy and evangelism at Microsoft, sees the sideways smiley in his messages, he often remembers reading Fahlman's original post. "I like history, including computing social history," he says, "and I knew that I was one of the few people in the world in possession of the knowledge that might be able to help us find the original post." As a graduate student at Carnegie Mellon, Jones had maintained the Bags software for the CSD bboards and he still knew where to locate the source code. So, in February of 2002, Jones wrote to Howard Wachtler, then-SCS facilities director, and the search was on.

⌋ ('~') ⌋

Japanese Shift

Fahlman narrowed down the time frame they were looking for, Jones determined the file name it would most likely be found under and Wachtler and his staff located the back up tapes. Next, they had to locate a 9-track tape drive—a *working* 9-track tape drive—and a machine to use it on. Finally, using a compatibility mode in the restore program of a FreeBSD machine, and later a NetBSD machine, SCS research systems programmer Jeff Baird (S'80) painstakingly transferred and read through the monthly 4.1BSD dump format tapes.

On September 10, 2002, nearly twenty years to the day that Fahlman sent his message to the bboard, Baird hit pay dirt. "It was surprisingly more difficult to track down than you'd expect," he says. News of the discovery appeared in various newspapers and magazines—from the Seattle Times to Forbes magazine to Britain's Globe and Mail—and, of course, online at sites ranging from CNetNews and Slashdot to The Hindu, India's online national newspaper. On the actual anniversary, National Public Radio featured Fahlman and Baird in a telephone interview during "All Things Considered."

While finding the post is proof of the idea's inception at Carnegie Mellon, it's not proof that this was the very first use of the :-) character string to signify a smiling face. Given the limited character set in early teletype operations and the simplicity of the idea, it's likely as not that it was used in some fashion before 1982. However, Fahlman's elegant solution to indicate a humorous electronic message is generally seen as the birth of the modern emoticon. We at SCS are glad to now have this important piece of history close at hand. Δ

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