

Begin forwarded message:

LC woman's company creates emojis for everyone

By LAURA ELDER | Posted: Friday, July 11, 2014 10:30 pm



Apple of her idea

Katrina Parrott was inspired by her daughter, Katy, to develop an app with diverse emojis that represent a wide range of different faces, images and expressions. The app, iDiversicons, is available at Apple's App Store and at Google Play.

LEAGUE CITY — Katrina Parrott isn't a programmer or even a techie. But Parrott developed a mobile app that could change the way the world expresses itself through emojis, those little cartoon pictures used to convey emotions in texts and emails.

It all started in June last year, a month after Parrott was laid off from NASA, where she had managed logistics contracts. Parrott's daughter Katy, a pre-med student at the University of Texas at Austin, was home in League City sending text messages on her smartphone. Katy wondered aloud why emojis lacked racial and cultural diversity. Emojis were either yellow variations of the smiley face or cartoon images of Caucasians.

"Wouldn't it be nice to send an image that looked like me to my friends?" Katy asked her mother.

Katrina Parrott immediately set out to help her daughter make that happen.

iDiversicons is born

Through Cub Club Investment, a real estate company she already had formed, Parrott and her daughter created emojis under the product name iDiversicons. The idea was to create emojis representing an entire world of faces — African-American, Asian, Latino and Hispanic, Indian, Caucasian and biracial, Parrott said.

"We wanted to be inclusive and give everybody a sense of belonging," Parrott said.

The Parrotts brainstormed and came up with hundreds of cartoon characters and images. They hired an illustrator and senior programmer. Then, Parrott applied to Apple and Cub Club Investment was accepted as a developer.

In October, iDiversicons, which are compatible with iPhone, iPad and iPod touch, became available in Apple's App store. Just last month, the Android app became available in the Google Play Store.

The timing couldn't have been better. About 8 trillion text messages are sent around the world each year with emojis and emoticons frequently replacing old-school expressions like words. Increasingly, people were asking why emojis weren't more racially representative.

Digital roots

Emojis and emoticons differ. Emoticons used standard keyboard characters to create representations of things like smiley faces. Emojis are cartoonlike images of things such as human faces, hearts, animals and common objects that can be conjured at the press of a single key.

Professor Scott Fahlman, a computer scientist at Carnegie Mellon University, is said to have been the first to post an emoticon, back in 1982 on an online bulletin board. "I propose the following character sequence for joke markers: :-)," Fahlman wrote. "Read it sideways."

The first emojis were created in the late 1990s by Shigetaka Kurita.

Eventually, Microsoft and AOL began intercepting emoticon character strings and translating them into emojis.

Falling behind

But of the more than 800 emojis released by the Unicode Consortium and found on keyboards, the only two resembling people of color are a man who looks vaguely Asian and another in a turban.

Emojis haven't kept up with a youth culture that, for the most part, embraces cultural and racial integration. Celebrities have taken up the issue. Actress and singer/songwriter Miley Cyrus and

actor Tahj Mowry have called for more diverse emojis. And earlier this year, MTV blogger Joey Parker took issue about the lack of nonwhite emojis in most text-message apps used by Apple, Google and Microsoft, according to reports. Katie Cotton, Apple's vice president of corporate communication, responded: "We agree with you. Our emoji characters are based on the Unicode standard, which is necessary for them to be displayed properly across many platforms. There needs to be more diversity in the emoji character set, and we have been working closely with the Unicode Consortium in an effort to update the standard."

Right place, right time

Parrott found herself positioned to take part in changing the Unicode Standard by becoming a member of the technical committee of the Unicode Consortium, a nonprofit organization of technology companies that sets standards for software and cellular products. The consortium, which is charged with the gate-keeping of emojis used in Internet and in texting, aims to create a single worldwide character encoding standard for all languages. There are almost 100,000 characters in the latest definition of Unicode. In May, Parrott traveled to San Jose, Calif., for the Unicode Technical Committee's quarterly meeting, at which she gave her pitch on emoji diversity and iDiversicons.

Apple's committee representative got the director of Apple's headquarters to meet with Parrott while she was at the San Jose meeting. In August, Parrott will attend the committee's meeting in Redmond, Wash. Microsoft is the host.

Cub Club wants to add its diverse emojis to the next updated Unicode Standard and wants to work with the Unicode Consortium to update the standards with iDiversicons' images. Cub Club already has hundreds of diverse emojis that fit the size, design and style, Parrott said.

Approval by the Unicode Consortium is vital to the iDiversicons app and would make it easier to use, Parrott said. Cub Club would like Apple to license iDiversicons' emojis, but there's been no such agreement to date.

'Sky's the limit'

With just a little grass roots marketing, Cub Club has sold more than 500 iDiversicons apps for \$1.99 each.

A licensing agreement with Apple would be a game-changer. Parrott used credit cards and a successful Kickstarter Campaign — raising \$2,000 — to finance iDiversicons.

Cub Club continues to add to iDiversicons' product line, to date offering 900 images. The company's images also include mascots from local schools, fist bumps, sports images, flags, occupations and more.

The company recently added images of redheads and a hot dog based on consumer demand.

"We are very responsive," Parrott said. "The sky is the limit."

App Store for iPhone, iPad & iPod Touch

<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/idiversicons-first-diverse/id720172165?mt=8>

Google Play Store for Android devices

<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.wwc.cci>