LWG3780: The Paper
format's width estimation is too approximate and not forward compatible

Abstract

LWG3780 describes an issue with width in std::format estimation. This paper offers more information.

Revisions

Revision 1

- Illustrates that no reserved codepoint that the standard considered wide is treated as such
- Add a link to a file used to produce the results
- Add links to existing terminal implementations
- Remove the screenshots which SG16 found unhelpful.

Motivation

For the purpose of width estimation, format considers ranges of codepoints initially derived from an implementation of wcwidth with modifications (see P1868R1).

This however present a number of challenges:

- From a reading of the spec, it is not clear how these ranges were selected.
- Poor forward compatibility with future Unicode versions. The list will become less and less meaningful overtime or require active maintenance at each Unicode release (which we have not done for Unicode 14 already).
- Some of these codepoints are unassigned or otherwise reserved, which is another forward compatibility concern.
Instead, we propose to

- Rely on **UAX-11** for most of the codepoints)
- Grand-father specific and fully assigned, blocks of codepoints to support additional pictograms per the original intent of the paper and existing practices. We add the name of these blocks in the wording for clarity.

Note that per UAX-11

- Most emojis are considered East_Asian_Width="W"
- By design, East_Asian_Width="W" includes specific unassigned ranges, which should always be treated as Wide.

This change:

- Considers 8477 extra codepoints as having a width 2 (as of Unicode 15)  
  (mostly Tangut Ideographs)
- Change the width of 85 unassigned code points from 2 to 1
- Change the width of 8 codepoints (in the range U+3248 CIRCLED NUMBER TEN ON BLACK SQUARE ... U+324F CIRCLED NUMBER EIGHTY ON BLACK SQUARE) from 2 to 1, because it seems questionable to make an exception for those without input from Unicode

**Additional Observations following Mailing List discussions**

This paper is not trying to change, in any way, the definition of double width characters for the purpose of padding in fmt, but only to make it forward compatible with future unicode versions.

Unicode considers width only for the purpose of east asian character and does not necessarily encourage using it to estimate width. Indeed that is highly dependent on fonts.

**Note:** The East_Asian_Width property is not intended for use by modern terminal emulators without appropriate tailoring on a case-by-case basis. Such terminal emulators need a way to resolve the halfwidth/fullwidth dichotomy that is necessary for such environments, but the East_Asian_Width property does not provide an off-the-shelf solution for all situations. The growing repertoire of the Unicode Standard has long exceeded the bounds of East Asian legacy character encodings, and terminal emulations often need to be customized to support edge cases and for changes in typographical behavior over time.

[https://www.unicode.org/reports/tr11/#Scope](https://www.unicode.org/reports/tr11/#Scope)

However we adopted P1868R1 in C++20, to do just that. It was always a partial solution, which is better than nothing. No perfect solution exists.
P1868 was based on the grandfather of all unicode wcwidth implementations, and so it is interesting to look at its comments (emphasis mine)

In fixed-width output devices, Latin characters all occupy a single "cell" position of equal width, whereas ideographic CJK characters occupy two such cells. Interoperability between terminal-line applications and (teletype-style) character terminals using the UTF-8 encoding requires agreement on which character should advance the cursor by how many cell positions. **No established formal standards exist at present on which Unicode character shall occupy how many cell positions on character terminals. These routines are a first attempt of defining such behavior based on simple rules applied to data provided by the Unicode Consortium.**

For some graphical characters, the Unicode standard explicitly defines a character-cell width via the definition of the East Asian FullWidth (F), Wide (W), Half-width (H), and Narrow (Na) classes. In all these cases, there is no ambiguity about which width a terminal shall use. For characters in the East Asian Ambiguous (A) class, the width choice depends purely on a preference of backward compatibility with either historic CJK or Western practice. Choosing single-width for these characters is easy to justify as the appropriate long-term solution, as the CJK practice of displaying these characters as double-width comes from historic implementation simplicity (8-bit encoded characters were displayed single-width and 16-bit ones double-width, even for Greek, Cyrillic, etc.) and not any typographic considerations.

Much less clear is the choice of width for the Not East Asian (Neutral) class. **Existing practice does not dictate a width for any of these characters.** It would nevertheless make sense typographically to allocate two character cells to characters such as for instance EM SPACE or VOLUME INTEGRAL, which cannot be represented adequately with a single-width glyph. **The following routines at present merely assign a single-cell width to all**
neutral characters, in the interest of simplicity. This is not entirely satisfactory and should be reconsidered before establishing a formal standard in this area. At the moment, the decision which Not East Asian (Neutral) characters should be represented by double-width glyphs cannot yet be answered by applying a simple rule from the Unicode database content. Setting up a proper standard for the behavior of UTF-8 character terminals will require a careful analysis not only of each Unicode character, but also of each presentation form, something the author of these routines has avoided to do so far.

http://www.unicode.org/unicode/reports/tr11/

Markus Kuhn -- 2007-05-26 (Unicode 5.0)

So, this script was written against Unicode 5.0. And admits it is doing its best in the absence of a standard.

* - The null character (U+0000) has a column width of 0.
* - Other C0/C1 control characters and DEL will lead to a return value of -1.
* - Non-spacing and enclosing combining characters (general category code Mn or Me in the Unicode database) have a column width of 0.
* - SOFT HYPHEN (U+00AD) has a column width of 1.
* - Other format characters (general category code Cf in the Unicode database) and ZERO WIDTH SPACE (U+200B) have a column width of 0.
* - Hangul Jamo medial vowels and final consonants (U+1160-U+11FF) have a column width of 0.
* - Spacing characters in the East Asian Wide (W) or East Asian Full-width (F) category as defined in Unicode Technical Report #11 have a column width of 2.
* - All remaining characters (including all printable ISO 8859-1 and WGL4 characters, Unicode control characters, etc.) have a column width of 1.
It considered East Asian Wide (W) or East Asian Full-width (F) codepoints to be 2, and the rest 1 or 0.

We decided not to consider control characters in P1868R1, and because we only consider the leading codepoints in graphemes, we do not need to care about combining marks (ditto for Jamo medial and final). Note that lone combining marks usually have a width of 1, so the standard is more correct to consider leading grapheme than trying to pretend combining marks have no width.

Either way, this script does not pretend to be a standard, nor was it ever updated in the last 13 years.

It has, however, been forked. Notably, the ruby port is compatible with Unicode 15 https://github.com/janlelis/unicode-display_width

(Other projects fo Python and go seem to have fallen behind in their unicode support)

I think the comments above are illustrative of the state of the art and existing practices:

East Asian Wide (W) or East Asian Full-width (F) codepoints have a width of 2, a half width, or, for anything else,...we really don't know. This is covered extensively in https://www.unicode.org/reports/tr11/

So there is no perfect solution.

Yet, the standard's definition leaves a lot to be desired:

- It does not consider all W and F codepoints as being of width 2. This lead to the following nonsense:

```
3
4 int main() {
5 auto width_pregnant_woman = std::format("{:^2}", "").size();
6 auto width_pregnant_person = std::format("{:^2}", "").size();
7 assert(width_pregnant_woman == width_pregnant_person);
8 }
```

Another example: https://godbolt.org/z/McoG64n1y
• It specifies ranges of wide characters in terms of non fully allocated ranges. This goes against TR11 which specifies that only

Unassigned code points in ranges intended for CJK ideographs are classified as Wide. Those ranges are:

- the CJK Unified Ideographs block, 4E00..9FFF
- the CJK Unified Ideographs Extension A block, 3400..4DBF
- the CJK Compatibility Ideographs block, F900..FAFF
- the Supplementary Ideographic Plane, 20000..2FFFF
- the Tertiary Ideographic Plane, 30000..3FFFF

All other unassigned code points are by default classified as Neutral.

The standard should generally be *very* careful not to specify arbitrary range of codepoints containing unassigned code points or ranges of blocks that are not fully allocated as this introduces forward compatibility issues when new codepoints are assigned. It's the exact issues which created forward compatibility and portability issues with identifiers in C++11.

C++ should rely on Unicode properties which have default values.

It is also very hard to make sense of the current specification as the ranges are not motivated, and were derived from an unmaintained script.

Proposed solution

• Specify display width in terms of Unicode properties such that the behavior remain over time
• Keep certain ranges for compatibility with C++20, and because some pictograms that have emoji presentation have an East Asian Width of 1. These blocks are fully allocated.

But what about my terminal/font?
The annex shows the rendering of the impacted characters in different environments (Thanks #include C++ and Twitter). Even when the fonts are not present (not surprising given a lot of impacted codepoints are from Unicode 14 and 15), 2 columns are used in most environments. And if terminals behaved poorly, I really don't think the C++ standard is the place to look at that problem.

Consulting the implementation of different terminal reveals that they follow the unicode specification
- **iTerm2**
  [https://github.com/gnachman/iTerm2/blob/master/sources/NSCharacterSet+iTerm.m#L464](https://github.com/gnachman/iTerm2/blob/master/sources/NSCharacterSet+iTerm.m#L464)
- **Windows Terminal**
  [https://github.com/microsoft/terminal/blob/main/src/types/CodepointWidthDetector.cpp](https://github.com/microsoft/terminal/blob/main/src/types/CodepointWidthDetector.cpp)
- **KDE**
  [https://github.com/KDE/konsole/blob/b8325d2f1842e8f5b4999e7e4510093895818dee/tools/uni2characterwidth/uni2characterwidth.cpp#L892](https://github.com/KDE/konsole/blob/b8325d2f1842e8f5b4999e7e4510093895818dee/tools/uni2characterwidth/uni2characterwidth.cpp#L892) Interestingly, KDE treats regional flag indicators as wide, which neither Unicode, the C++ standard or other implementation seem to do


### Rendering of unassigned code points

The following screenshot illustrates that reserved codepoints currently of size 2 in the standard are not in fact rendered as double width by iTerm2 (contrary to what was claimed in a meeting). Instead, the tofu glyph is rendered weirdly, overlapping the next codepoint.

This has been reproduced with several fonts.

![Screenshot of rendering issue](image)

We probably do not want to standardize weird rendering bugs :(
I've confirmed that both Konsole and Windows terminal treat these things as narrow.

**SG-16 polls on R1**

Forward D2675R1 "format's width estimation is too approximate and not forward compatible", with improved presentation, to LEWG as the recommended resolution of LWG3780 and NB comment FR-007-012.

SF F N A SA
3 3 0 0 0

Unanimous

Recommend that D2675R1 be applied to the C++23 working paper.

SF F N A SA
2 4 0 0 0

Unanimous

**CIRCLED NUMBERS**

There as previously a question of whether we want to consider wide U+3248 CIRCLED NUMBER TEN ON BLACK SQUARE .. U+324F CIRCLED NUMBER EIGHTY ON BLACK SQUARE which are not East_Asian_Width="W" but are currently considered wide in C++. However, we realized there is no special handling for them in any terminal.

These these things are East_Asian_Width="A", for which terminal have special handling (usually an option that let the terminal treating them as either wide or narrow)
SG-16 subsequently decided not to make any special provisions for these.

They may appear wide in some terminals because of rendering bugs (Thanks Victor for the screenshot)

Reproducing the results
The following script was used to generate the data.

https://gist.github.com/cor3ntin/deecab6d8d43713edd49e305b8140802

The following file can be rendered (with cat or similar) in a terminal to verify them

https://gist.githubusercontent.com/cor3ntin/b7f4f52893b0b54890e970f7bbec6118/raw/720a910585d78c9ceb4e0458dcef87af2a436121/width.md
Future Works

We could

- Reconsidering the width of control characters
- Convince the Unicode consortium to offer a better solution to this problem

However these are outside of the intent of the original feature which focused on east asian width.

Wording:

This wording is relative to [N4917](#).

1. Modify 22.14.2.2 `[format.string.std]` as indicated:

   -12- For a string in a Unicode encoding, implementations should estimate the width of a string as the sum of estimated widths of the first code points in its extended grapheme clusters. The extended grapheme clusters of a string are defined by UAX #29. The estimated width of the following code points is 2:
   
   (12.1) — U+1100 – U+115F
   (12.2) — U+2329 – U+232A
   (12.3) — U+2E80 – U+303E
   (12.4) — U+3040 – U+A4CF
   (12.5) — U+AC00 – U+D7A3
   (12.6) — U+F900 – U+FAFF
   (12.7) — U+FE10 – U+FE19
   (12.8) — U+FE30 – U+FE6F
   (12.9) — U+FF00 – U+FF60
   (12.10) — U+FFE0 – U+FFE6
   (12.11) — U+1F300 – U+1F64F
   (12.12) — U+1F900 – U+1F9FF
   (12.13) — U+20000 – U+2FFFD
   (12.14) — U+30000 – U+3FFFD

   (?1) — Any code point with the East_Asian_Width="W" or East_Asian_Width="F" Derived Extracted Property as described by UAX #44

   (?2) — U+4DC0 – U+4DFF (Yijing Hexagram Symbols)

   (?3) — U+1F300 – U+1F5FF (Miscellaneous Symbols and Pictographs)

   (?4) — U+1F900 – U+1F9FF (Supplemental Symbols and Pictographs)

2. The estimated width of other code points is 1.

References

[Unicode® Standard Annex #11 EAST ASIAN WIDTH](#)

P1868R1 width: clarifying units of width and precision in std::format
Acknowledgments

Thanks to the many people who contributed screenshots!

Annex: Exhaustive list of changes

For the following code points, the estimated width used to be 1, and is 2 after the suggested change:

- U+231A WATCH .. U+231B HOURGLASS
- U+23E9 BLACK RIGHT-POINTING DOUBLE TRIANGLE .. U+23EC BLACK DOWN-POINTING DOUBLE TRIANGLE
- U+23F0 ALARM CLOCK
- U+23F3 HOURGLASS WITH FLOWING SAND
- U+25FD WHITE MEDIUM SMALL SQUARE .. U+25FE BLACK MEDIUM SMALL SQUARE
- U+267F WHEELCHAIR SYMBOL
- U+2693 ANCHOR
- U+26A1 HIGH VOLTAGE SIGN
- U+26AA MEDIUM WHITE CIRCLE .. U+26AB MEDIUM BLACK CIRCLE
- U+26BD SOCCER BALL .. U+26BE BASEBALL
- U+26C4 SNOWMAN WITHOUT SNOW .. U+26C5 SUN BEHIND CLOUD
- U+26CE OPHIUCHUS
- U+270A RAISED FIST .. U+270B RAISED HAND
- U+2728 SPARKLES
- U+274E NEGATIVE SQUARED CROSS MARK
- U+1FA70 BALLET SHOES .. U+1FA7C CRUTCH
- U+1FA80 YO-YO .. U+1FA88 FLUTE
- U+1FA90 RINGED PLANET .. U+1FABD WING
- U+1FABF GOOSE .. U+1FAC5 PERSON WITH CROWN
- U+1FACE MOOSE .. U+1FADB PEA POD
- U+1FAE0 MELTING FACE .. U+1FAE8 SHAKING FACE
- U+1FAF0 HAND WITH INDEX FINGER AND THUMB CROSSED .. U+1FAF8 RIGHTWARDS PUSHING HAND

For the following code points, the estimated width used to be 2, and is 1 after the suggested change:

- U+2E9A
- U+2EF4 .. U+2EFF
- U+2FD6 .. U+2FEF
- U+2FFC .. U+2FFF
- U+3040
- U+3097 .. U+3098
- U+3100 .. U+3104
- U+3130
- U+318F
- U+31E4 .. U+31EF
- U+321F
- U+A48D .. U+A48F
- U+A4C7 .. U+A4CF
- U+FE53
- U+FE67
- U+FE6C .. U+FE6F
- U+FF00
- U+3248 CIRCLED NUMBER TEN ON BLACK SQUARE .. U+324F CIRCLED NUMBER EIGHTY ON BLACK SQUARE