The origin story of the Microsoft ninjacat

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Today's entry comes from guest blogger <u>KC Lemson</u>, who answers a question everybody has been wondering but been afraid to ask: Where did the ninjacat come from?

If you haven't heard about the Microsoft ninjacat before… then this blog probably isn't very interesting to you. But if you want to take a romp through history on this topic to get up to speed, this article from *The Verge* in March 2015 is probably the best place to start:

http://www.theverge.com/2015/3/2/8134603/microsoft-is-cool-again

Ever since that article, as people have found out I was behind the ninjacat at Microsoft, they've asked me to write up this story. And then recently in a random email thread with Raymond, he offered to host this on the Old New Thing (which I've been reading for 12+ years) which felt like the perfect place for this peculiar topic as part of Microsoft lore, so here it is.

In mid 2014, a couple of us in that team were working on a presentation about what would later become known as Windows 10, and as a joke we made a slide that started with this image (that made the rounds of social media in 2013) and then animated it into a slide full of "kittens and puppies and rainbows and unicorns" with a design that was inspired by the amazing *Welcome to the Internet* image by Jason Heuser.

After the presentation was over I started to get email from people on the team asking how they could get that powerpoint slide on a T-shirt. Now of course folks in our industry do love our geeky shirts… but even then, let's just say that asking for a slide to be made into a shirt is not a common occurrence, so this was a really nice signal that there was something 'there there', and that we had ended up with a visual that spoke to a sort of zeitgeist about how people felt about the product and where we were headed.

I did a small run of some shirts as well as stickers, since they are far less expensive than shirts. Over the next six or so months, I handed out stickers to coworkers, who then asked for more stickers to give to other coworkers, and so on. As the months went by, Microsoft employees were putting the stickers on their laptops and it just kind of spread slowly from there.

Then, in January 2015, we unveiled more of win10. Interest in the stickers with other Microsoft employees increased after that event, so I made some another print run, which continued for a couple of months until the folks at The Verge ended up seeing a sticker on an employee's laptop and wrote the above article.

Customers and fans then started to share this image representing not just Windows 10 but also Microsoft overall. It was "super cool" (in the Microsoft vernacular – we have a tendency to put "super" in front of adjectives) to see people enjoy this thing we did just for fun within our team. In particular what I loved seeing is how fans made it their own, creating their own mashups and designs, as the spirit of the ninjacat isn't really specific to any particular image, it's more about the general concept of holding the Microsoft flag and being proud of what we're doing… and well, because it's the internet, cats and memes are involved.

As we got closer to the launch of Windows 10 last summer, we made some new designs and blogged about it, posting a "DIY kit" along with some wallpapers.[1] Around this timeframe the Skype team also approached me and asked if they could do an emoticon animation of one of the designs, which we had fun with.

As the months went on and we got requests, we made more stickers and T-shirts to give out at various events, but we also started to joke about how it had gone far beyond the expected 15 minutes of fame and clearly the ninjacat was jumping the shark. So for fun, we made a new steed for her:

One of the people on the Xbox avatars team was a ninjacat fan, so I worked with him to make some avatar animations/props too (T-rex and Shark). And then this past week, to celebrate the Windows 10 Anniversary Update we just released (which, by the way, has some ninjacat emojis which were even mentioned in *Teen Vogue* a couple of months ago), we also posted some new wallpapers and an animated GIF:

So there you have it, that's how we got to where we are today. And I know that this post is *already* ridiculously long on a seemingly simple thing, but I wanted to talk about why this simple thing even matters, why it's worth even writing this post: Windows is a product that's used by over a billion people worldwide, and that scale is both awe-inspiring… and very very humbling. And one risk/downside that can happen with products or companies operating at that scale is that it can sometimes be hard to really see the

people behind the product – the passion, the energy, the designs, the code, and the fun that all goes into it. In the hallways there is so much energy and passion for our products and our customers, but due to the immense scale at which our products operate, it's easy sometimes to come across as "Corporate with a capital 'C'".

Raymond's been blogging for years putting a human face on some of the behaviors and decisions made in Windows which I love, and that's why I've been reading it for so long. With the ninjacat, what I find the most rewarding is how fans and other employees have reacted and understand the *spirit* in which it started – people on the team excited about what we were working on for customers, and just goofing around and having dorky fun with each other. So really the best part of this is not about what we did with the ninjacat, but what *others* have done. Some of my favorites of those creations are (hopefully I got all the attributions right, apologies in advance if not):

One, two, three and four by @greg_carpentier

https://twitter.com/Nick_Gothard/status /625861459235459072 and http://imgur.com/a/9Z5Xx by @Nick_Gothard

https://twitter.com/DrMattSm/status/624601443014586369

https://twitter.com/simonjen1/status/625243121639624705

https://twitter.com/arcadio_g_s/status/623598808883179521

https://twitter.com/Paulsimon90/status/623616262254501890

https://twitter.com/PerfectReign/status/623654488105037824

https://twitter.com/r3pwn/status/623690774354354176
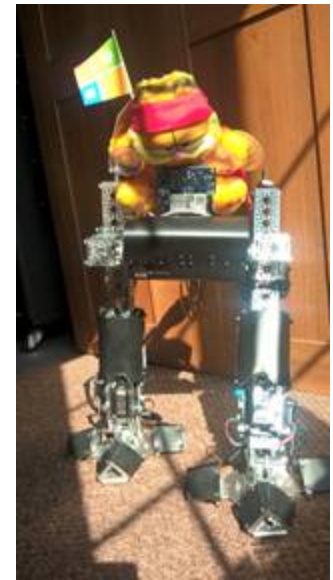
https://twitter.com/tomi_memo/status/623810059139547136

https://twitter.com/aisetan/status/651078695436709889 (plus an awesome animated GIF of a ninjacat chasing a bug)

Windows Central and Softpedia did posts with some of their favorite images last year, and you can find more recent ones by looking for #ninjacat on twitter, alongside various tweets about people's actual cats who are apparently actual ninjas or at least are able to blend into their surroundings.

A few months ago my team even got me a plush stuffed ninjacat as a surprise present, which was awesome:

At any rate, if you read this whole thing, I'm impressed. I hope you enjoyed this romp through history on this super strategic topic.
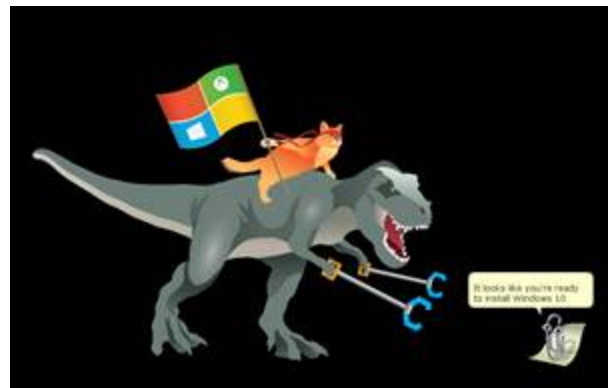
– KC

[1] One of the changes that happened organically around this timeframe was to the icons on the flag. My original ninjacat sticker had two icons on the flag (Xbox and Windows) since that's what I was working on myself – but someone doing a mashup later added the Office and Bing icons to the flag. I loved this change and was kicking myself for not thinking of it originally, as of course Office and Bing are both huge parts of the experience on Windows. After that happened and designs based on the four icons spread, I started to get questions about why I *removed* two icons from the flag, so from then on I made sure to not use the two-icon version again.

Hi, it's Raymond again. Here are some explanations for those who didn't catch the cultural references:

- KC discovered that there was "something there there". This is a callback to the phrase "There is no there there," which in its original usage meant "The place I was looking for doesn't exist," but nowadays means something more like "There is nothing of any substance there."
- The blue and white shark over which the ninjacat is jumping? That's Left Shark, who famously failed to execute a choreographed routine at the 2015 Super Bowl.
- The narwhal with bacon on its tusk is a nod to the nonsense phrase The narwhal bacons at midnight which was invented by Reddit members as a way to identify each other.
- That thing in the T-rex's hands is a pick-up and reaching tool, which the T-rex clearly needs because his arms are so short.

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