

## Card Index Emoji; Or, Who is John Appleseed?

NARRATION: If you have an Apple device and open the emoji keyboard, you'll see your recently used emojis and then the smileys and people. Keep scrolling and you'll see animals—the dog, panda, frog. Keep on scrolling, past the trees and flowers, past the food and sports equipment emojis, past the army of automobiles and rows of buildings. Keep on going and eventually you'll get to a section with a hodgepodge of objects. There are mailboxes and calendars and file folders—generally emojis we don't use much. But among all these is the card index emoji, you know, Rolodexes—those rotating things people used to use as a means of organizing their contacts. This is an emoji I've been *obsessed* about.

For such a small image, the emoji packs a lot of placeholder info for the fictional person John Appleseed. It lists his e-mail ([appleseed@me.com](mailto:appleseed@me.com)), his address (125 Main St.), and phone numbers, like (408) 123-4567. But the wildest thing about this emoji is that it includes something real—a real photo, of a real person. This means there's a photo of this so-called John Appleseed hiding in the phones of millions of people around the world. He appears to be a young white man with dark hair. In the picture, he's wearing an orange shirt. His name probably isn't actually John Appleseed, but if there's a photo of him, he must exist, right?

This emoji mystery has preoccupied my mind for months. Who is the real John Appleseed? Why is he on the emoji? Does he even know he's on the emoji? Has anyone else noticed this random guy hiding in the emojis on their phone?

Disappointingly, searches on the Web didn't yield the answer. It seemed like most people online didn't care for the emoji at all. Most emoji-related articles made no mention of the card index, and articles that did were things like one titled “Top 10 least-loved emojis” and another titled “23 New Ways To Use These Boring Old Emojis.” Obviously these people didn't feel the emoji on the same level that I do. And so while the Internet may be a useful tool in helping me find the answer, it wasn't just going to give it to me. I was going to have to pursue other methods

The first person I decided to ask was my friend Nick, a lover of emojis.

NICHOLAS TOMLIN: Hi, I'm Nicholas Tomlin, and I'm an emoji enthusiast.

NARRATION: As an emoji fan, Nick really opened my eyes to the importance of emoji.

NICHOLAS TOMLIN: Well, I think emoji are just like a fun, creative way to change some of our online messages, and I think they also provide a lens into some of the sociocultural issues we're facing today. Like for example Apple specifically decided to change their pistol emoji to a water gun in light of some of the recent conversations about gun violence.

JUSTIN BAI: So it seems like you know a lot about emojis. I was wondering what you know about the card index emoji?

NICHOLAS TOMLIN: Well, I know you're really obsessed with that emoji.

NARRATION: One thing about my obsession, though, is that at first, I didn't reflect much on it. That is, until Nick asked me

NICHOLAS TOMLIN: But why are you so obsessed with this emoji?

NARRATION: I wasn't sure then, but I believe that this fascination I have is one others could harbor. To me, there is something both nostalgic and ironic about it that I love. It harks back to those times when people actually kept track of their contacts using physical little slips of paper rather than smart

phones, yet there now is an emoji for the card index on the very device that helped make it obsolete. And if emojis represent the Information Age, the card index represents finding things out the old-fashioned way. Appropriately, the mystery of the card index emoji couldn't be found through a simple web search. I was going to have to make use of the old-fashioned methods of getting answers—by snooping around, asking a lot of questions, and hoping for lucky breaks. Luckily for me, Nick had some good answers.

JUSTIN BAI: So do you have any theories on who could be on the emoji?

NICHOLAS TOMLIN: Well, it could just be a stock image, or maybe it's like the guy who designed the emojis or someone else.

JUSTIN BAI: Do you know how designed Apple emojis?

NICHOLAS TOMLIN: Yeah, his name is Willem Van Lancker.

NARRATION: When I did a Google search of his name, Google listed an autocomplete suggestion of *willem van lancker emoji*. If this wasn't a good sign, I don't know what else could be. I then found an interview with Van Lancker on the *New York Magazine* website. In it, he talks about emoji, stating that he had *quote-unquote* "made all of them." According to the background text that went along with the interview, Van Lancker made the emojis when he was just an intern at Apple. The text gives the more precise numbers of him creating "400 of the original 500 characters." Not only that, I found his website and LinkedIn profile which make reference to his attendance at the Rhode Island School of Design, one of the best design schools in America. Both webpages make mention of his creating hundreds of emojis, and both webpages are sprinkled with emojis throughout. *If there's someone who knows the most about emoji design, including the card index*, I thought, *it must be him*. All I had to do was contact Willem Van Lancker. And so I did—I emailed him and tweeted him, but after a week or so of no response, I knew I needed to follow other leads.

In a moment of desperation, I decided to try contacting John Appleseed using the contact info on the emoji. I sent an email to the email address listed but didn't get a response. Then, I called John Appleseed's work phone number.

AUTOMATED MESSAGE: Call cannot be completed as dialed, please check the number and

...

NARRATION: And then I called his home phone number.

AUTOMATED MESSAGE: Call cannot be completed as dialed...

NARRATION: It was a long shot, but the contact info listed on the emoji didn't get me anywhere. So I had to go back to searching for leads. And the Internet may not outright have the answer, but it does have clues.

One of them was from an Instagram post from months ago by Emojipedia, one of the most (if not *the most*) thorough reference sites on emojis. The Instagram post had the card index emoji and next to it was a blown up image of John Appleseed's face. It was like one of those photos of a UFO sighting where there's a speck in the sky and next to it, a blown up version so you can better see the sighting. The blown-up version of John Appleseed's face was still blurry, though. Captioning the post was the phrase "Person shown in photo: unknown." I scrolled through the comments in hopes that one could be a user stating something like, "Hey! I know that guy! He's an old friend from college!" but there was nothing like this to be found. As the best lead I had, though, I called Jeremy Burge.

JEREMY BURGE: I'm Jeremy Burge, and I'm the founder of Emojipedia.

NARRATION: Being an emoji lover, I decided to indulge a bit in my obsessions.

JUSTIN BAI: How did Emojipedia start?

JEREMY BURGE: It was—it was years ago now—maybe three years ago. And it's kind of surprising when you expect everything to be on the Internet, you know when you Google something, and you just assume that the answer will be there—you take it for granted that it will be, and that wasn't the case for emoji when I started Emojipedia. It was just an idle curiosity. There were different emojis. I was trying to look up when they came out, or you know, is this one new? Is the donut—is that new? And there was nothing there, and so I stepped up to the mantle to fix that.

JUSTIN BAI: So in all your years researching emoji, have you come across any emoji secrets?

JEREMY BURGE: Emoji secrets—you know what, it's always the Japanese ones that get me. I've been to Japan once or twice, I think, and—but still, I don't have a deep, deep background in Japan, so there's always strange Japanese emojis that—new meanings come up to me. There's one—the bank emoji in Japan—it has just the letters B and K on it—that's the same on the iPhone, actually, and BK in Japan, it sounds like a word that means to sort of slack off or to get rid of your responsibilities, so people use that one not as a bank at all. They just use it as this sort of “you're slacking off” emoji, so it's always weird things like. It's always the Japanese stuff that I don't expect to come across.

JUSTIN BAI: Well, I have something, I guess it's not exactly a secret per se, but I guess it's sort of this not widely known piece of information about emojis, specifically, the Apple ones. There's this emoji known as the card index emoji. Are you familiar with that one?

JEREMY BURGE: Yep, yep, I do know that one. What about the card index emoji is your secret?

JUSTIN BAI: Well, there's a picture of a guy's face on it, and so far it seems unknown as to who this person is who's on the emoji.

JEREMY BURGE: Good, yeah, that's a great one. I mean, I know the contact details on there. It says, John Appleseed, which is a fake name that Apple uses on all kinds of things whenever they need a name for anything—the book emoji, say, they're by John Appleseed. Or the credit card emoji says, from John Appleseed. But the photo on the card index emoji—no, that is a mystery to me. Are you gonna tell me you know who this man is?

JUSTIN BAI: No, that's this obsession that I've been having for several months, and I was wondering if you have any theories as to who it could be?

JEREMY BURGE: Well, I mean, the origin story for emoji at Apple is—it's quite—I don't think it's been told completely. A lot of Apple—the things they do internally, you know, they like to keep it internal. They don't like to necessarily talk about individually who did what, necessarily, but what I do know is the original emoji set at Apple was designed by multiple people. There were different people involved and different people may or may not have sort of taken credit for different things publicly—on to who designed this—my best guess is that either a friend of someone who designed this original set at Apple—maybe, what're we talking now, we're talking maybe five years ago, maybe more? Or, one of these stock photos that are on the web; it's possible it could be a stock photo.

NARRATION: With not even Jeremy Burge knowing the identity of the so-called John Appleseed, I returned to checking my e-mail and Twitter, in hopes that Willem Van Lancker would reply, and still I

received no response. Curious, I checked Twitter to see others who had tweeted at him to see if they got a response. I saw other journalists trying to get in touch with him about emoji, and users making emoji requests to Van Lancker, like one tweet that asked him to make a raccoon emoji. Regardless of their reason for tweeting at him, they received no reply. Prospects seemed grim for me when Van Lancker seemed to be the go-to guy for emoji questions, and I just wasn't getting a reply.

But it turns out that I didn't even need a response from Van Lancker to learn more about emoji design, because—plot twist!—Van Lancker didn't design the card index. And while Jeremy Burge says that the origin story for emoji at Apple hasn't been told completely, I was going to try my best to make it more complete, if only by a little bit.

OLLIE WAGNER: My name is Ollie Wagner, and I'm an interface designer and programmer.

NARRATION: Ollie Wagner worked at Apple and designed emojis. The thing about Ollie, though, is that you won't find his name popping up in articles about Apple emojis. When you Google his name, it doesn't try to autocomplete to *ollie wagner emoji*. Just a side note—because the interview was through Skype, the quality is a bit scratchy.

JUSTIN BAI: So I just have sort of a concern. When I've been trying to research emojis and who designed them, a name that kept popping up was Willem Van Lancker. Are you familiar with that name?

OLLIE WAGNER: Yeah, he was an intern after I was there.

JUSTIN BAI: So he claims to have created several hundreds of Apple's emojis. Do you know how true that statement is?

OLLIE WAGNER: Kinda funny you mention this. Just recently I had posted something on Twitter, just clearing that up. I think he actually designed maybe closer to maybe fifteen or twenty. I think maybe he had done some tweaks maybe on fifty more than that, but yeah, the vast majority of them were designed before his time.

JUSTIN BAI: How many of them did you personally design?

OLLIE WAGNER: I designed over three hundred of them.

NARRATION: This was a shocking claim for me, especially since basically every article I came across that mentioned the designer of Apple emojis had listed Willem Van Lancker, not Ollie Wagner or someone else. Could all of these articles have been wrong? Could a lie have been spread so boldly and publicly?

OLLIE WAGNER: One time I was looking to see if people had any of those questions like, you know, "Who drew the emoji?" and you know, there it was right on his portfolio page. I think he's had multiple interviews where he also claimed as much.

NARRATION: And perhaps one of the saddest things about Van Lancker's claims is what Ollie told me about his favorite emoji.

OLLIE WAGNER: I think my favorite emoji is the pizza.

JUSTIN BAI: Did you design that one?

OLLIE WAGNER: I did. That was actually one that he claimed to have designed.

NARRATION: If what Ollie Wagner was telling me was true, it meant that he couldn't even have his favorite emoji to his name because of Van Lancker. And I found that to be heartbreaking, especially because I remember what Ollie was referring to. I remember visiting Van Lancker's website, which had a page dedicated to emojis. On that page was a section with a few of his *quote-unquote* "personal favorites" and at the end of the list was the pizza emoji.

Perhaps I should have been skeptical of Van Lancker's claims earlier on. There've been some inconsistencies in the estimate of the number of emojis he's designed. In the 2012 *New York Magazine* interview I briefly mentioned earlier, Van Lancker states that he had made all of them. In that same interview, however, the background text says he made only 400 out of the original 500. On his website as of August 2016, he gives a vaguer estimate, stating, *quote* "While at Apple, I created a few hundred characters" *unquote*. But an archived version of this same webpage from February 4, 2014, states he created *quote-unquote* "several hundred characters."

Wanting to give a fair voice to Van Lancker, I reached out to him by e-mail to request for comment, telling him I have a source who claims he created much fewer emojis than he claims on his site. I wasn't sure I'd get a response considering he never replied to my e-mail before, but surprisingly, he replied in less than an hour. He wrote to me, *quote* "Authorship is complex especially for a project of this scope, size, and duration. I did an interview years ago that tried to make that too simple, crediting me as "the designer." The emoji had several designers involved (both before and after I worked on them)... To be clear, while I was an intern at Apple in 2009 I worked on several projects, one of which was working on illustrating and redrawing characters for the Apple color emoji font. During that time I did work on illustrations and files of a few hundred characters (both new and existing)" *unquote*. I really wanted to believe in Van Lancker, and I do believe some of what he says, like the part where he acknowledges that several designers were involved. It seemed like he was admitting that he simplified reality too much, giving too much credit to himself. But what still left me scratching my head was that he continued to hold on to this claim of working on a few hundred characters. After contacting Van Lancker, I visited his site again, but this time, I noticed that the list of *quote-unquote* "personal favorites" was no longer there, even though I know it was there just a couple days prior to me contacting him for comment.

I reached out to Ollie again, this time by e-mail, telling him of what Van Lancker told me. Did Ollie just somehow get this numbers wrong? But Ollie got back to me and wrote, *quote* "It's interesting that he'd say that. Willem's work folder contained 74 emoji, around 15-20 of which were original. Otherwise he made extremely minor tweaks to align with feedback from the carriers and unicode" *unquote*.

When I presented Van Lancker with the 74 emoji claim, he replied, *quote* "I do not have access to the design files so I can't speak to the exact figure but I know that it was hundreds of characters. I am honestly not sure where the 74 number would have come from.... Software is always an evolving design project and exists far beyond how a single pixel was drawn."

But Ollie Wagner was just not buying it. As a final note, he wrote to me, *quote* "I'm sure Willem is persistent in his claims as he has been making such claims for quite some time now. His actual work folder from when he was an intern at Apple contains 74 files. That's where that number comes from: Reality."

NARRATION: If you're still wondering about the card index emoji, here's what I've got for you. Ollie Wagner did design the original card index emoji while he was interning at Apple. In his version, it actually did not have John Applesseed on it.

OLLIE WAGNER: It's kind of funny, the original one that I had made actually had Steve Jobs's contact info on it, but I think when they redesigned it to make it larger, that didn't fly, so they had to put on good ol' Johnny Appleseed.

NARRATION: I asked Ollie if he was familiar with the person on the current card index emoji, and he told me that it's likely just a stock image. I was able to find, though, the person who redesigned the emoji—a man named Laurent. He told me that it's probably just a random Apple employee. I was also able to find the same John Appleseed photo in a demo image of iChat on Mac OS X Tiger, which dates the image to around at least as far back as 2005. But that's all I was able to find.

Really, though, perhaps the real lesson of the card index emoji is not about the identity of John Appleseed. It's about the effort that goes into every Apple emoji, whether it's the card index or something else. And in spite of all the controversy surrounding emoji authorship, one thing I think most can agree on is that emojis involve the work of many people and behind every emoji is a design process that we often don't even consider when we send a text. The real lesson that these emojis teach us is to take a moment before we send that text, to stop, and to smell the rose emoji.

CREDITS: In this story, you heard interviewed, in order, Nicholas Tomlin, Jeremy Burge (whose website can be found at [emojipedia.org](http://emojipedia.org)), and Ollie Wagner (whose website is [yapstudios.com](http://yapstudios.com); you can also follow him on Twitter @olliewagner). Music for this story was by Lee Rosevere. I would also like to thank all the people who helped me make this story—shout outs go to Samuel Adler, Amal Eldick, and Vonnie Wei.