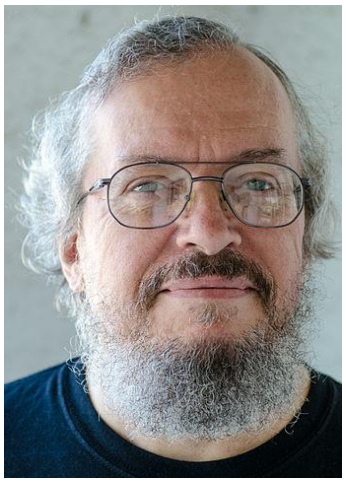
Unknown

Henry Spencer

Born: ??, 1955;

Saskatchewan, Canada

Spencer wrote a non-proprietary replacement for UNIX's regular expression library [Feb 04], which has found its way into many programming languages and tools. He and Geoff Collyer were also responsible for C News, a server that managed the distribution and storage of USENET [Jan 29] groups.



Henry Spencer (2014). Photo by Oz. CC BY-SA 3.0.

Spencer set up the first USENET site outside the US in 1981, based in the Zoology department at the University of Toronto. He decided that a permanent record of the technical material would be worth keeping, and so the magnetic tapes began to fill up [Nov 21]. In the early 1990's, the growth of the USENET outpaced the department's budget and the archiving had to stop; there were 141 tapes.

Before the tapes deteriorated, Bruce Jones and David Wiseman set up a rescue programme that copied more than 2 million posts onto a hard drive. This data was eventually acquired by Google to provide an invaluable archive of USENET from the 1980's.

Spencer is a space enthusiast, and a founding member of the Canadian Space Society, a Fellow of the British Interplanetary Society, and an occasional consultant to the Canadian Space Agency. An "I Corrected Henry Spencer" virtual T-shirt award is given to anyone who can catch him in an error of fact about this topic.

Back on Earth, he found time to develop a four-point font used by entomologists to label pinned insect specimens.

Some quotes: "Those who do not understand UNIX are condemned to reinvent it, poorly."

"Programming graphics in X [June 19] is like finding the square root of π [March 14] using Roman numerals."

(Winifred) Mitchell Baker

(She doesn't use Winifred)

Born: ??, 1959;

Berkeley, California

For many years, Baker was the chair of the Mozilla Foundation [Jan 23], with the unofficial title "Chief Lizard Wrangler". She was instrumental in the creation of the foundation in 2003, after AOL shut down its Netscape browser division [March 17].

She originally trained as a lawyer (with a side degree in Chinese studies), and first worked for Sun Microsystems [Feb 24] as a General Counsel. In Nov. 1994, Baker joined the newly formed legal department at Netscape [March 25]. She recalled later:

"My first few weeks as a Netscape employee were so tumultuous that I thought I was likely to be thrown out. Fortunately Jim Barksdale's arrival as CEO calmed the setting."

In her spare time, Baker is an amateur trapeze artiste.

Playskool Computer

??, 1972

The Milton Bradley "Playskool Look 'N Learn Computer" was a mechanical toy designed to look like the control panel of a mainframe, albeit it a very small one – 13.5 x 10 x 4 inches in size.

The 'sysadmin' slotted a card in the front, and then rotated the 'tape drive' disk on the left until its window showed a picture. A push button on the right was used to rotate another "tape drive" disk until its window showed a matching picture.

Milton Bradley's first real computer game was the Microvision, a handheld cartridge based console, designed by Jay Smith, and released in Nov. 1979. Although it wasn't the first handheld (see [next entry]), it was the first to support interchangeable cartridges. The first batch included a Breakout game clone [May 13], and a version of Connect Four.

The Microvision didn't contain its own CPU; each cartridge had its own, typically an Intel 8021 or a Texas Instruments TMS1100.

For discerning children, interested in learning how computers worked, the Bell Labs CARDIAC [July 00] from 1969 was more worthwhile, or perhaps the Digi-Comp I [Sept 30] or Digi-Comp II [April 30], or the range of wonderfully named kits from Berkeley Enterprises [Feb 22].

Mattel Auto Race

??, 1976

"Mattel Auto Race" was probably the first handheld LED game that was entirely digital, with no mechanical components except for its controls.

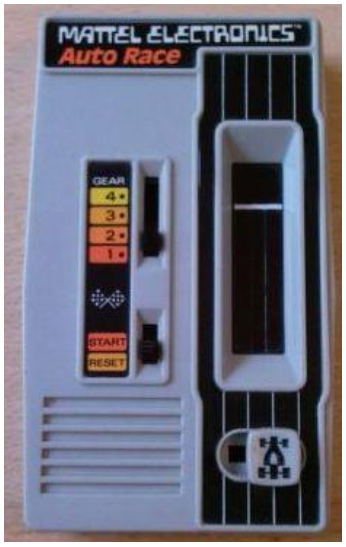
The player pressed buttons to have his car (represented by a bright dot) move left or right to avoid obstacles (represented by

less bright dots) dropping in three columns from the top of the screen.

The game was designed by George Klose and Richard Cheng at Mattel, and implemented by Mark Lesser at Rockwell International. The CPU was a Rockwell B6100-15 (a calculator chip) and ran assembly code that was just 511 bytes long, which was fortunate since the ROM's size was 512 bytes.

Even a game as simple as this one required the chip to be modified – it needed to utilize a multiplexing scheme to draw to different parts of the screen at the same time. Another issue was producing sounds (various beeps) on a CPU with no dedicated sound support. The trick was to turn the speaker on and off using timing loops.

The following year, the same team produced "Mattel Football 1", which sold over 1 million units, and ushered in a short golden age of LED handheld games.



Mattel Auto Race. Photo by JMinter.

Lesser did the programming for several of Mattel's earliest handhelds: Auto Race, Football, Baseball, Brain Baffler, Horoscope Computer, and Missile Attack. During this time he also relocated to a cabin deep in the woods of Maine.

"Mattel Auto Race" may have influenced another gaming milestone – "Donkey" [Aug 12], written by Bill Gates and Neil Konzen.

The division at Mattel that released these handheld systems was headed by Tom Kalinske, who would later became CEO of Sega America (1990 - 1996). He was in charge during the glory days of the Sega Genesis [Oct 29].

FAQ Coined

??, 1982

Frequently asked questions (FAQs) are a standard feature of mailing lists, newsgroups [Jan 29], and online forums. The idea is that a mumbling neophyte should read the FAQ before bothering the venerated greybeards who live atop Mount Olympus, wearing togas, and eating ambrosia

The first FAQ appeared in the sci.space newsgroup and the Space Digest mailing list, mostly through the efforts of Eugene Miya of the Computer Systems Division at NASA Ames. He had been discussing the need for a Q&A compilation with Henry Spencer [four entries back], Dale Amon, and others for some time. He dubbed the result "Frequently **Answered** Questions" (FAQ), but this name mutated as the format was picked up by other mailing lists and newsgroups.

Although Miya is usually credited with being the author of the first FAQ, he's suggested that Mark Horton [Nov 21] began it all with his "18 question" post that he periodically sent to the news.announce newsgroups. It answered burning questions such as "What does 'foobar' mean?" [March 10] and "What does UNIX stand for?" [Oct 15].

Internet Coke

??, 1982

The first Internet Coke machine was constructed by CMU students Mike Kazar (server software), David Nichols (UI), John Zsarnay (hardware), and Ivor Durham (finger interface). It was located on the third floor of Wean Hall, close to the computer science department.

They installed micro-switches in a standard Coke machine to sense how many bottles were present, and hooked them to CMUA, the department's main PDP-10 [Nov 00]. Software monitored the machine's state, including how long each bottle had been cooling. CMUA's finger server [Dec 17] was also extended to let people discover if the machine was full and if the sodas were cold (via `finger coke@cmua`). In fact, since finger was an ARPANET (Internet) protocol, interested parties could query the machine's status from anywhere on the network by appending CMUA's IP address, 128.2.209.43.

An old Xerox Alto [March 1] was allocated the important task of displaying the Coke machine's status, and was positioned in the terminal room so it was visible to passersby through a window. When a departmental guest was shown the computing facilities, the first thing they saw was the Alto's Coke display.

At some point, another hardworking graduate student set up a similar system to monitor the nearby M&M machine.

The Coke machine code was lovingly maintained for over a decade, including being ported over to a VAX [Oct 25] when the PDP was retired. However, one of the original developers, Mike Kazar, later admitted, "I never used it, except to see if it was working. I never liked Coke."

Although CMU can claim the first Internet-accessible vending machine, it wasn't the first computer-controlled one. That honor belongs to the "Prancing Pony" at Stanford [July 11], and David Nichols recalled being inspired by it when working on CMU's Coke system.

For more Internet connectivity firsts, see [Aug 00], [Sept 1], [Nov 22], [Dec 3].