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THURSDAY, MAY 7, 2009

A Brief, Incomplete, and Mostly Wrong History of Programming Languages

1801 - Joseph Marie Jacquard uses punch cards to instruct a loom to weave "hello, world" into a tapestry. Redditors of the time are not impressed due to the lack of tail call recursion, concurrency, or proper capitalization.

1842 - Ada Lovelace writes the first program. She is hampered in her efforts by the minor inconvenience that she doesn't have any actual computers to run her code. Enterprise architects will later relearn her techniques in order to program in UML.

1936 - Alan Turing invents every programming language that will ever be but is shanghaied by British Intelligence to be 007 before he can patent them.

1936 - Alonzo Church also invents every language that will ever be but does it better. His lambda calculus is ignored because it is insufficiently C-like. This criticism occurs in spite of the fact that C has not yet been invented.

1940s - Various "computers" are "programmed" using direct wiring and switches. Engineers do this in order to avoid the tabs vs spaces debate.

1957 - John Backus and IBM create FORTRAN. There's nothing funny about IBM or FORTRAN. It is a syntax error to write FORTRAN while not wearing a blue tie.

1958 - John McCarthy and Paul Graham invent LISP. Due to high costs caused by a post-war depletion of the strategic parentheses reserve LISP never becomes popular[1]. In spite of its lack of popularity, LISP (now "Lisp" or sometimes "Arc") remains an influential language in "key algorithmic techniques such as recursion and condescension"[2].

1959 - After losing a bet with L. Ron Hubbard, Grace Hopper and several other sadists invent the Capitalization Of Boilerplate Oriented Language (COBOL). Years later, in a misguided and sexist retaliation against Adm. Hopper's COBOL work, Ruby conferences frequently feature misogynistic material.



ABOUT ME

 [JAMES IRY](#)

[SAN FRANCISCO, CA, UNITED STATES](#)

If cars were built like software then...well, I don't know squat about building cars so who knows. It might be kinda cool. But probably not.

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the Ultimate Kitchen Utensil." This paper becomes the basis for a long running, but ultimately unsuccessful run of late night infomercials. Lambdas are relegated to relative obscurity until Java makes them popular by not having them.

1970 - Niklaus Wirth creates Pascal, a procedural language. Critics immediately denounce Pascal because it uses "x := x + y" syntax instead of the more familiar C-like "x = x + y". This criticism happens in spite of the fact that C has not yet been invented.

1972 - Dennis Ritchie invents a powerful gun that shoots both forward and backward simultaneously. Not satisfied with the number of deaths and permanent maimings from that invention he invents C and Unix.

1972 - Alain Colmerauer designs the logic language Prolog. His goal is to create a language with the intelligence of a two year old. He proves he has reached his goal by showing a Prolog session that says "No." to every query.

1973 - Robin Milner creates ML, a language based on the M&M type theory. ML begets SML which has a formally specified semantics. When asked for a formal semantics of the formal semantics Milner's head explodes. Other well known languages in the ML family include OCaml, F#, and Visual Basic.

1980 - Alan Kay creates Smalltalk and invents the term "object oriented." When asked what that means he replies, "Smalltalk programs are just objects." When asked what objects are made of he replies, "objects." When asked again he says "look, it's all objects all the way down. Until you reach turtles."

1983 - In honor of Ada Lovelace's ability to create programs that never ran, Jean Ichbiah and the US Department of Defense create the Ada programming language. In spite of the lack of evidence that any significant Ada program is ever completed historians believe Ada to be a successful public works project that keeps several thousand roving defense contractors out of gangs.

1983 - Bjarne Stroustrup bolts everything he's ever heard of onto C to create C++. The resulting language is so complex that programs must be sent to the future to be compiled by the Skynet artificial intelligence. Build times suffer. Skynet's motives for performing the service remain unclear but spokespeople from the future say "there is nothing to be concerned about, baby," in an Austrian accented monotone. There is

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LABELS

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1987 - Larry Wall falls asleep and hits Larry Wall's forehead on the keyboard. Upon waking Larry Wall decides that the string of characters on Larry Wall's monitor isn't random but an example program in a programming language that God wants His prophet, Larry Wall, to design. Perl is born.

1990 - A committee formed by Simon Peyton-Jones, Paul Hudak, Philip Wadler, Ashton Kutcher, and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals creates Haskell, a pure, non-strict, functional language. Haskell gets some resistance due to the complexity of using monads to control side effects. Wadler tries to appease critics by explaining that "a monad is a monoid in the category of endofunctors, what's the problem?"

1991 - Dutch programmer Guido van Rossum travels to Argentina for a mysterious operation. He returns with a large cranial scar, invents Python, is declared Dictator for Life by legions of followers, and announces to the world that "There Is Only One Way to Do It." Poland becomes nervous.

1995 - At a neighborhood Italian restaurant Rasmus Lerdorf realizes that his plate of spaghetti is an excellent model for understanding the World Wide Web and that web applications should mimic their medium. On the back of his napkin he designs Programmable Hyperlinked Pasta (PHP). PHP documentation remains on that napkin to this day.

1995 - Yukihiro "Mad Matz" Matsumoto creates Ruby to avert some vaguely unspecified apocalypse that will leave Australia a desert run by mohawked warriors and Tina Turner. The language is later renamed Ruby on Rails by its real inventor, David Heinemeier Hansson. [The bit about Matsumoto inventing a language called Ruby never happened and better be removed in the next revision of this article - DHH].

1995 - Brendan Eich reads up on every mistake ever made in designing a programming language, invents a few more, and creates LiveScript. Later, in an effort to cash in on the popularity of Java the language is renamed JavaScript. Later still, in an effort to cash in on the popularity of skin diseases the language is renamed ECMAScript.

1996 - James Gosling invents Java. Java is a relatively verbose, garbage collected, class based, statically typed, single dispatch, object oriented language with single implementation inheritance and multiple interface inheritance. Sun loudly heralds Java's novelty.

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chocolate and has an idea. He creates Scala, a language that unifies constructs from both object oriented and functional languages. This pisses off both groups and each promptly declares jihad.

Footnotes

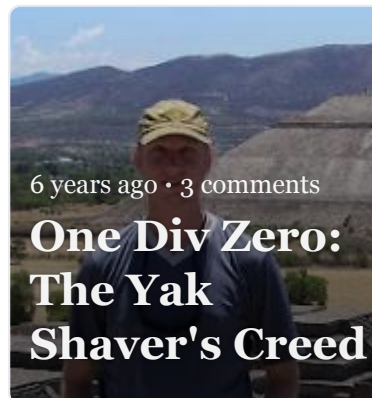
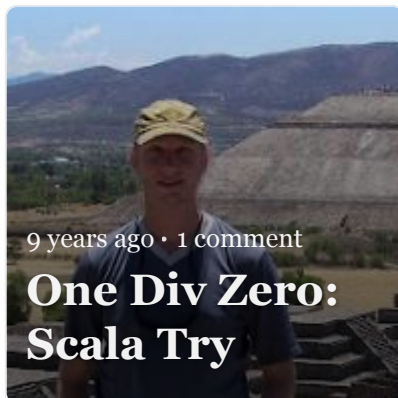
1. Fortunately for computer science the supply of curly braces and angle brackets remains high.
2. [Catch as catch can](#) - Verity Stob

Edits

- 5/8/09 added BASIC, 1964
- 5/8/09 Moved curly brace and angle bracket comment to footnotes
- 5/8/09 corrected several punctuation and typographical errors
- 5/8/09 removed bit about Odersky in hiding
- 5/8/09 added Objective-C, 1986
- 5/8/09 added Church and Turing
- 4/9/10 added Ada (1983) and PHP(1995)

POSTED BY [JAMES IRY](#) AT [7:28 PM](#) [1260 COMMENTS](#)
LABELS: [HUMOR](#), [PROGRAMMING LANGUAGES](#)

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OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS [?](#)



Jack Cough • 12 years ago

Thanks. I'm cracking up.

53 [^](#) | [v](#) • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) >



Archimedes deSilva [→](#) Jack Cough

• 8 years ago

Bad cough.

[^](#) | [v](#) • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) >



Andi7 [→](#) Jack Cough • 5 years ago

LOL..

[Travel Malang Juanda? Pilih Nahwa Travel, Bukan yang Lain](#)

[^](#) | [v](#) 2 • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) >



Anonymous • 12 years ago

Jacquard's loom wasn't concurrent? It was pretty thoroughly multithreaded, I'd have thought!

405 [^](#) | [v](#) • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) >



Anonymous [→](#) Anonymous • 10 years ago

badom-tsch

28 [^](#) | [v](#) • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) >



Devin [→](#) Anonymous • 10 years ago

Eeeeeeyyyoooooooooooooooooo!

8 [^](#) | [v](#) • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) >



Ralph Siegler [→](#) Anonymous • 8 years ago

ahead of its time, when threaded with silk, it could even make productive use of bugs.

67 [^](#) | [v](#) • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) >

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Philip Machanick →

Jenny_Axe • 7 years ago

Stop, you're getting me in stitches.

11 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Jenny_Axe → Philip

Machanick • 7 years ago

I'm sorry; I know I have a warped sense of humour...

13 ^ | v 1 • Reply • Share >



jmrm01 → Jenny_Axe

• 7 years ago

Given the subject, maybe you have a warped and woofed sense of humor.

2 ^ | v 1 • Reply • Share >



Jenny_Axe → jmrm01

• 7 years ago

Maybe we should stop shuttling jokes back and forth...

10 ^ | v 1 • Reply • Share >



Mr BigDreams → Ralph Siegler

• 4 years ago

This comment is so underrated!

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Gabriel C. • 12 years ago

As the story goes, when Odersky got the idea for Scala, he was high on pizza and listening to "Stairway to heaven"

31 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Philip Machanick → Gabriel C.

• 7 years ago

If he understood pizza, it would have been stairway to leaven

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share >

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Eric • 12 years ago

Languages wars are usually sad but languages history is definitely funny! Thanks.

16 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Jack Cough • 12 years ago

Thanks. I'm cracking up.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



gmlk • 12 years ago

:D Thx.

You did however forget some important/interesting languages e.g. Objective C (all things Apple?)

9 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Avatar This comment was deleted.



Jim ↗ Guest • 8 years ago

The prior comment was made about 6 months after the first iphone was released. Dude

5 ^ | v 1 • Reply • Share >



justanotherhacker12345

↗ Jim • 8 years ago

And? Obj-C wasn't created for the iPhone. Obj-C first appeared in 1983.

11 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Alessandro Ogheri ↗

justanotherhacker12345

• 7 years ago

1983 first appeared in 1996

13 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



AZ_FJ ↗ Alessandro

Ogheri • 7 years ago • edited

but well after 1983

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goto.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Bob Jarvis → Alessandro
Ogheri • 4 years ago

1984 first appeared in 1949.

7 ^ | v 1 • Reply • Share >



Mr. Stone • 12 years ago

I can't stop laughing... thanks man! :)

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Anonymous • 12 years ago

Objective C is nice but it's not considered an influential language. It's only used on the Apple platform and nothing else. It didn't have anything that could inspire a new language designer, because in the end its object model is just a light smalltalk layer over C.

I'd say, it didn't make "History".

5 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Francis Devereux → Anonymous
• 10 years ago

Java was heavily influenced by Objective C

5 ^ | v 1 • Reply • Share >



Jimmt → Francis Devereux
• 10 years ago

More heavily by C++.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



e70838 → Jimmt
• 10 years ago

Objective-C was a reaction against C++ and was very much influenced by smalltalk. Java was influenced by smalltalk, by the lessons learned from Objective-C and

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45 [^](#) | [v](#) · [Reply](#) · [Share](#) >



Mason Wheeler [→](#)

greyfade · 8 years ago

No templates. I'd say that's fixing a major C++ defect! (I take no position here on the quality of Java's generics system; that's a totally different question.)

[^](#) | [v](#) 1 · [Reply](#) · [Share](#) >



greyfade [→](#) Mason

Wheeler · 8 years ago

Templates are not a C++ defect. They're a happy accident, and a powerful metaprogramming language, albeit with a few warts and an ugly syntax. Generics are a joke.

1 [^](#) | [v](#) · [Reply](#) · [Share](#) >



Bob Jarvis [→](#) greyfade

· 3 years ago

Why fix existing defects when you can invent your own?

1 [^](#) | [v](#) · [Reply](#) · [Share](#) >



InvaderACE [→](#) e70838

· 8 years ago

ObjectiveC and C++ is about the same age (79-80 timeframe) and ObjectiveC is not a reaction to c++

6 [^](#) | [v](#) · [Reply](#) · [Share](#) >



Ralph Johnson [→](#)

e70838 · 7 years ago

Objective-C and C++ were invented about the same time. Both were attempts to make C

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probably win out in the long run. So much for my ability to predict the future.

11 [^](#) | [v](#) · [Reply](#) · [Share](#) >



Bob Jarvis [→](#) e70838

· 4 years ago

Nice to see they invented their own defects. :-)

[^](#) | [v](#) · [Reply](#) · [Share](#) >



Anders [→](#) Jimmt

· 10 years ago

No, it wasn't. Unless you count "don't do like C++" to mean heavily influenced. :)

2 [^](#) | [v](#) · [Reply](#) · [Share](#) >



Philip Machanick [→](#)

Jimmt · 7 years ago

Nothing is heavier than C++.

[^](#) | [v](#) · [Reply](#) · [Share](#) >



Bob Jarvis [→](#) Philip Machanick · 4 years ago

What? Just learn "virtual" and you're there. :-)

[^](#) | [v](#) · [Reply](#) · [Share](#) >



Philip Machanick [→](#) Bob Jarvis · 4 years ago

Strange, I am getting notifications about stuff a year old. I know virtual. I teach a class in introductory computer architecture and one of my code examples is how to implement virtual functions.

Free book here

<http://homes.cs.ru.ac.za/ph...>

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Hopper. As part of it she related this story:

"Back in the nineteen-fifties I had a program to run but it was too big to fit into memory - so I wrote a little routine to write parts of the program out to tape and read them in when they were needed. I called it 'using auxiliary storage'. Five or six years later Burroughs did the same thing and called it 'using auxiliary storage'. About ten years after *that* RCA reinvented it, but they called it 'virtual storage'. But it didn't become respectable until IBM discovered the idea - another six or seven years later".

^ | v · [Reply](#) · [Share](#) ›



Philip Machanick → Bob Jarvis · 3 years ago

That's a different virtual. I used a Burroughs B5700 in the 1970s. A great machine, one of the first also to be fault tolerant – if an IO channel broke, it could switch to another and in its final days with various parts breaking because it was off maintenance, it just kept on going. Replaced by a Univac 1100 that was on paper far faster but it wasn't – in part because it didn't have VM. It had programmer support for swapping large memory to

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Sasmito Adibowo [→](#) Anonymous

• 10 years ago • edited

Objective-C is about as influential as C# is.
Not to mention that it's about two decades
older and still going strong(er).

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Daniel Butler [→](#) Sasmito Adibowo

• 10 years ago

yes but C# was not put in here
because it was influential or used a
lot. It's put in here solely because it's
almost a direct knock off of Java.

15 ^ | v 1 • Reply • Share ›



Mason Wheeler [→](#) Daniel

Butler • 8 years ago

It's actually a direct knockoff
of Delphi, rewritten to look
like Java. (It's not so obvious
in more modern versions, but
if you look at .NET 1.0, it's
pretty clear what it is you're
looking at, even if you didn't
know what Anders Hejlsberg
was doing before he went to
work for Microsoft.)

It's what Microsoft always
does: realize their product is
no good, look around, see
who's producing something
that actually works really well,
and blatantly rip it off to
produce their own version.

11 ^ | v 1 • Reply • Share ›



Bob Jarvis [→](#) Mason

Wheeler • 5 years ago

Oh, PLEASE! Microsoft didn't
"rip off" .Net from Borland -
they bought Hjelsberg and

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Microsoft saw Java and liked it, and thought to themselves, "I wonder how we can start transitioning our COM monoliths to use a programming platform that doesn't require 10 years of experience to be remotely productive with." They created J++, which is basically Java with a COM interop layer, and started experimenting with writing COM components to be parts of Office apps using it. Sun turned around and said, "You can't do that! Java is meant to be Write Once, Run

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4  |  · [Reply](#) · [Share](#) >



David Howell  Jonathan Gilbert · 3 years ago

A real shame they didn't open source it 10 years earlier, it would have been taught in schools and be a lot more prominent in OSS projects instead of the defacto Java. Scala was also originally created to run on both .Net and the JVM, another real shame the .Net version was abandoned too.

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Article Stone

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