

Happy Birthday BASIC

On one of our MapBasic Essentials Training Courses recently, a delegate asked me how old the MapBasic programming language was. I don't know the exact answer – it was probably around 1986 – but it did prompt me to remember that it is 50 years ago this year that the BASIC programming language was born.

BASIC - Beginner's All-purpose Symbolic Instruction Code – was invented in 1964 by Thomas Kurtz and John Kemeny at Dartmouth College in the U.S.A. At that time there was no such thing as a Personal Computer. Instead we all had to queue up for a time-slot on a mainframe computer. Usually the mainframe sat in regal splendour in an air-conditioned dust-proof room with its every need attended to by a group of devoted technicians. On the rare occasion that a mere mortal such as myself was allowed to approach the machine it was akin to entering the Holy of Holies! Nevertheless BASIC did allow us to write a piece of code and run it. We learnt the frustration of submitting a programme and - after waiting a couple of days - finding that there was yet another error in the code. Occasionally we also experienced the exhilaration of our program actually working!

Soon someone came up with the idea of a teletype – an electronic typewriter connected to the mainframe by a cable – and it became common to see a room with 20 or 30 people each huddled over a teletype. There was no screen involved. Everything you sent to the computer appeared in front of you typed on a roll of paper and you then waited for the response to appear on the same roll of paper. In 1970 we thought this was cutting edge!

In the mid-70s along came the Personal Computer that we all know and (?) love. Despite the much lower memory available in a PC, BASIC proved resilient enough to be adapted for use on PCs, thereby enabling even more people to experiment with writing their own programs. So Happy 50th Birthday BASIC – and thanks for giving so many of us a leg-up on the computing bandwagon.

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