

Interview with Ken Thompson

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The Japan Prize, one of the highest honors awarded for outstanding contribution to science and technology, was awarded jointly this year to Ken Thompson and Dennis Ritchie for the creation of UNIX. The prize is normally given to the recipients at a lavish banquet in Tokyo attended by the emperor. However, due to the April earthquake and tsunami, the prizes this year were distributed at the honorees' place of work. I was able to attend the ceremony for Ken Thompson, held at Google headquarters, where he currently works. After the ceremony, he consented to this exclusive interview.

DDJ: You've received a lot of awards over the years for UNIX. At what point in UNIX's development did it become clear it was going to be something much bigger than you'd anticipated?

KT: The actual magnitude, that no one could have guessed. I gather it's still growing now. I thought it would be useful to essentially anybody like me because it was not built for someone else or some third party. That was a perjorative term then. It was written for Dennis and me and our group to do its work. And I think it would have been useful to anybody who did the kind of work that we did. And therefore, I always thought it was something really good that was going to take off.

Especially the language [C]. The language grew up with one of the rewritings of the system and, as such, it became perfect for writing systems. We would change it daily as we ran into trouble building UNIX out of the language and we'd modify it for our needs.

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