

SCIENCE NEWS®

The Weekly Newsmagazine of Science

A Science Service Publication
Volume 125, No. 5, February 4, 1984

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Subscription Department
231 West Center Street, Marion, Ohio 43302

Subscription rate: 1 yr., \$27.50; 2 yrs., \$47.50;
3 yrs., \$67.00. (Foreign postage \$5.00 additional per
year.) Change of address: Four to six weeks' notice is
required. Please state exactly how magazine is to be
addressed. Include zip code. For new subscriptions
only call (1) 800-247-2160. Printed in U.S.A. Second
class postage paid at Washington, D.C. Title
registered as trademark U.S. and Canadian Patent
Offices. Published every Saturday by SCIENCE
SERVICE, Inc. 1719 N St., N.W., Washington, D.C.
20036. (202-785-2255)
ISSN 0036-8423

Letters

BASIC problems

We are amused to read of True BASIC and the desires of John G. Kemeny to "see the language get around as widely as possible" ("A BASIC standard for digital dialects," SN: 12/24 & 31/83, p. 404). The reason the (old) BASIC is extended in so many ways is because as a programming language, it doesn't possess adequate control and data structures to write easily correct programs and programs longer than 15 or 20 lines. Significant programs written in BASIC are unreadable and thus hard to maintain, and most importantly are impossible to verify as correct, so that they are prone to containing errors throughout their lifetimes. Edsger Dijkstra, one of the world's renowned computer scientists, wrote that: "It is practically impossible to teach good programming to students that have had a prior exposure to BASIC: as potential programmers they are mentally mutilated beyond hope of regeneration."

So why bother reworking old dogs? The new BASIC standards perpetuate a notation and a language that cannot transcend its inherent, fundamental flaws. Outside Dartmouth most

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Cover: Though Karen Silkwood died in 1974 while attempting to blow the whistle on alleged safety problems at a nuclear-fuel plant in which she worked, she leaves a powerful legal legacy behind: Responding to a lawsuit brought by her heirs, last month the Supreme Court effectively opened a way for states and juries to set *de facto* nuclear-regulatory policy. (Photo: Wide World)
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people use Pascal (SN: 12/1/79 p. 377; 9/24/73, p. 202), a simple language with sufficient control and data structures, to aid in teaching programming as a systematic discipline. Even the College Board Advanced Placement course in Computer Science has selected Pascal, helping spur its use in secondary schools.

Andy Mickel
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Cloud capsules

In reference to the article on Magellanic Clouds (SN: 12/17/83, p. 390), you may want to note the following:

- 1) It is the SMC Remnant and the Mini-Magellanic Clouds (not the SMC and the MMC Remnant);
- 2) the paper by Mathewson and Ford from the Tubingen symposium, a copy of which was sent me by Dr. Mathewson, refers only to 21-cm line observations of interstellar gas, while your article discusses mainly stars (though you do mention the use of two opti-

cal telescopes); and
3) the question of how the Magellanic Clouds were named seems more complicated than it is reported in your article or in my texts; the New York Times for 2/24/83 reported that "The 15th-century Portuguese navigators, as they neared the Cape of Good Hope, saw two 'shynynge white clouds . . .'. They called them Cape Clouds. A few decades later a historian, Antonio Pigafetta, named them for Fernando Magellan, who was then circumnavigating the world."

Jay M. Pasachoff
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The report we used came through the Australian government and did deal with stellar velocities.
—Ed.

Correction: In "Dioxin strategy announced by EPA" (SN: 12/24 & 31/83, p. 406), dioxin should have been described as an unwanted by-product of the manufacturing process for certain herbicides; 2,3,7,8-TCDD is not, as stated, a polymer of dioxin.



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