

Finding Aid to the Gerald A. ("Jerry") Lawson Papers, 1967-1994

Summary Information

Title: Gerald A. ("Jerry") Lawson papers

Creator: Jerry Lawson (primary)

ID: 113.5713

Date: 1967-1994 (inclusive); 1976-1985 (bulk)

Extent: 1 linear foot

Language: The materials in this collection are in English.

Abstract: The Gerald A. ("Jerry") Lawson papers are a compilation of design documents, correspondence, business records, court records, and other papers relating to Lawson's career in the video game industry. The bulk of the materials are dated between 1976 and 1985.

Repository:

Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong

One Manhattan Square

Rochester, New York 14607

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Administrative Information

Conditions Governing Use: This collection is open for research use by staff of The Strong and by users of its library and archives. Though the donor has not transferred intellectual property rights (including, but not limited to any copyright, trademark, and associated rights therein) to The Strong, he has given permission for The Strong to make copies in all media for museum, educational, and research purposes.

Custodial History: The Gerald A. ("Jerry") Lawson papers were donated to The Strong in October 2013 as a gift from Marc Anderson Lawson, son of Jerry Lawson. The documents were accessioned by The Strong under Object ID 113.5713.

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Controlled Access Terms

Personal Names

- Lawson, Gerald A., 1940-2011
- McElroy, Daniel F.

Corporate Names

- Fairchild (Firm)
- Fairchild Camera and Instrument Corporation
- Fairchild Semiconductor Corporation
- Video Soft, Inc.

Subjects

- African-American engineers
- Channel F (Video game console)
- Channel F System II (Video game console)
- Color Bar Generator (Cartridge)
- Electronic games industry
- Electronic games--History.
- TV POWWW (Television program)
- Video game industry
- Video games--History.

Biographical Note

Gerald A. ("Jerry") Lawson was an African-American engineer and video game pioneer, best known for developing the first video game console system featuring interchangeable cartridges: the Fairchild Channel F.

Lawson was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1940. He grew up in Queens, pursuing a variety of scientific interests. As a teenager during the 1950s, Lawson repaired televisions and radios while maintaining an amateur radio station out of his home. He attended Queens College and the City College of New York before starting his career at ITT's Federal Electric division. Lawson's interest in computers intensified as he accepted positions at Grumman Aircraft, PRD Electronics, and Kaiser. In 1970, Lawson started working for Fairchild, which produced semi-conductors, microprocessors, and other transistor and circuitry equipment. The management at Fairchild asked Lawson to create a video game console prototype for the company after discovering that he constructed his own coin-operated game called *Demolition Derby*.

He utilized the Fairchild F8 processor in the base console and developed a mechanism which allowed for the insertion of separate memory devices (or game cartridges) without destroying the console's semiconductors. Lawson built what eventually came to the retail market in 1976 as the Fairchild Channel F (originally called the Fairchild Video Entertainment System), the first home video game system to use separate programmable cartridges for each game.

Lawson founded Video Soft, Inc. in 1980, with Stephen Yueng and Daniel McElroy. They worked as consultants and created game cartridges for the Atari 2600 and other game systems. He later acted as a mentor to students at Stanford University. In March 2011, the International Game Developers Association honored Lawson for his innovative work in engineering and video gaming. He passed away in April 2011, in Mountain View, California.

Collection Scope and Content Note

The Gerald A. ("Jerry") Lawson papers contain materials from 1967 through 1994, with the bulk of the papers dated between 1976 and 1985. Items in this collection include correspondence, business records, design documents, court records, published game console/cartridge instructions, creative writing, news articles, a copy of a patent for a hand-held game controller, and an oversized schematic drawing. Additional scope and content information can be found under the "Contents List" section of this finding aid.

The Gerald A. ("Jerry") Lawson papers are arranged into three series. The collection is housed in two archival document boxes and one oversized flat folder.

System of Arrangement

Series I: Personal papers, 1967-1994

Series II: Fairchild, 1972-1993

Series III: Video Soft, Inc. and consulting, 1982-1987

Contents List

Series I: Personal papers, 1967-1994

Scope and Content Note: This series holds personal correspondence and creative writing by Lawson, as well as news articles about his career. An audio cassette recording of Lawson reciting original screenplay ideas is included with the notes in Folder 3.

Box 1

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| Folder 1 | Jerry Lawson personal correspondence, 1967-1988 |
| Folder 2 | Jerry Lawson publicity/news clippings, 1978-1984 |
| Folder 3 | Jerry Lawson screenplay ideas and notes, n.d. [c. 1979] with audio recording, n.d. |
| Folder 4 | Stanford Aero/Astronautics Department Honor, 1994 |

Series II: Fairchild, 1972-1993

Scope and Content Note: This series contains materials related to the Fairchild Channel F game console (designed by Lawson), and its follow-up, the Channel F System II. Items of note are an oversized schematic drawing of the Channel F console casing, function specifications for Videocart cartridge games, and a copy of the patent issued for the Channel F game controllers. In addition to business-related materials, this series includes copies of court records documenting Lawson's testimony in a 1993 lawsuit between Fairchild Semiconductor and Nintendo.

Folder 10 houses a 1979 proposal from MCL Electronics describing the POW system, ultimately used for the interactive television game show *TV POWWW*. (Contestants watching a video game on their television screen at home would call

in and control the game play, indicating when the weapon on-screen should fire by saying "Pow!") Stations airing the program, which began in 1978, were originally supplied with a Channel F console.

The International Center for the History of Electronic Games (ICHEG) at The Strong also holds three generations of Fairchild Channel F prototype printed circuit boards, along with Channel F and Channel F System II game consoles owned by Lawson. ICHEG also has numerous Channel F Videocart game cartridges and prototype cartridges.

Box 1

- Folder 5 Gerald A. Lawson employee identification badge, Fairchild Camera and Instrument Corporation, n.d. [c. 1972]
- Folder 6 Fairchild function specifications for *Flying Saucer*, *Torpedo Alley*, and *Math Quiz*, April 27, 1976
- Folder 7 Fairchild function specifications for *Slalom Race* and *Race to the Moon*, April 30, 1976
- Folder 8 Fairchild business correspondence, 1976 and n.d.
- Folder 9 U.S. Patent #4,085,301, "Hand-Held Controller Device," Ronald A. Smith and Fairchild Camera and Instrument Corporation, April 18, 1978
- Folder 10 MCL Electronics and Marvin A. Kempner, "POW System Proposal," February 3, 1979
- Folder 11 Fairchild Video Entertainment System user's manual, 1976 [Channel F console]
- Folder 12 Fairchild Video Entertainment System/Videocart Cartridge limited warranty cards, n.d. [c. 1976] [Channel F console]
- Folder 13 Channel F game console instructions, *Superchess*, n.d.
- Folder 14 Channel F System II instructions, "Playing Tennis" and "Playing Hockey," n.d.
- Folder 15 Channel F System II Videocart Cartridges brochure, n.d.
- Folder 16 Channel F System II - Videocart 24 *Pro Football* instructions, n.d.
- Folder 17 *Alpex Computer Corp. v. Parker Brothers*, Affidavit of Gerald Lawson with attached exhibits, March 30, 1988
- Folder 18 Fairchild Semiconductor, Jerry Lawson contact card, n.d.
- Folder 19 *Fairchild Semiconductor Corp. v. Nintendo Co.*, Deposition of Gerald A. Lawson, June 17, 1993
- Folder 20 *Fairchild Semiconductor Corp. v. Nintendo Co.*, Deposition of Gerald A. Lawson, November 18, 1993

Box 2

- Folder 1 *Fairchild Semiconductor Corp. v. Nintendo Co.*, Deposition of Gerald A. Lawson, December 9, 1993

Oversized

- Folder 1 Oversized schematic drawing, Channel F console case, n.d.

Series III: Video Soft, Inc. and consulting, 1982-1987

Scope and Content Note: This series houses business records and product specification documents from Lawson's company, Video Soft, founded in 1980. (Video Soft created video game cartridges for the Atari 2600 and other game systems.) Papers include business plans, design documents, and company stationery.

ICHEG holds Video Soft prototype cartridges from Lawson in its electronic game collections.

Box 2

- Folder 2 Atari Video Computer System Programming Manual, Revision C, July 1, 1982
- Folder 3 Video Soft, Inc. consultant agreement template, January 1983
- Folder 4 *Who Wears the Crown* game description and letter, April 1983
- Folder 5 Video Soft, Inc. "List of Manufacturers, Competitors, and/or Potential Clients," June 22, 1983
- Folder 6 Video Soft, Inc. design specification documents and instructions, Jerry Lawson and Dan McElroy, 1983-1984
- Folder 7 "Wonder Clock" project, 1983-1984
- Folder 8 *Color Bar Generator* cartridge materials, 1984
- Folder 9 Video Soft, Inc. Confidential Business Plan, March 9, 1984
- Folder 10 Video Soft, Inc. Confidential Business Plan, February 3, 1985
- Folder 11 "FCC Procedure for Measuring RF Emissions from Computing Devices," July 1987
- Folder 12 Video Soft, Inc. brochure and stationery, n.d.
- Folder 13 Video Soft, Inc. company folders, n.d.