

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Gerald "Jerry" Anderson Lawson (December 1, 1940 – April 9, 2011) "Father of the Videogame Cartridge"

Gerald "Jerry" Anderson Lawson was born on December 1, 1940, in Brooklyn, in New York City. His father was a longshoreman and voracious reader of science books. His mother worked for the city of New York and was PTA president at Jerry's elementary school.

As a boy, Jerry admired the works of inventor George Washington Carver, and was interested in science and chemistry. At the age of 13, he repaired ham radios and televisions. He later obtained an amateur ham radio license and built his own station at home, with his own money. During the 1960s Jerry attended both Queens College and the City College of New York, but never finished. In the late 1960s, he moved to California.

In 1970, Jerry began working for Fairchild Semiconductor International, Inc., as an applications engineering sales consultant. He also joined the Silicon Valley's Homebrew Computer Club, where he was one of only two black members. In 1975, Jerry invented a coin-operated arcade game prototype, Demolition Derby, in his garage. When Fairchild's executives heard of Jerry's creation, they were upset at first, but later asked if he would develop the technology for the company. Using Fairchild's new F8 microprocessors, Demolition Derby was one of the first microprocessor-driven arcade video games.

Jerry was immediately promoted to Chief Hardware Engineer and Director of Engineering and Marketing for Fairchild's video game division. In that role, he led the development team of the Fairchild Channel F console, released in 1976. The console was specifically designed to use swappable game cartridges based on technology licensed from Alpex. Most game systems at that time had their games built into the hardware and were not interchangeable. Jerry and his team refined and improved the technology developed at Alpex that allowed games to be stored as software on removable ROM cartridges. These cartridges could be inserted and removed repeatedly from the console and provided a new means of revenue for game manufacturing companies. The Channel F console featured a variety of controls, including an 8-way joystick designed by Jerry and a "pause" button, which was a first for home video game consoles. The first Channel F cartridge based console, released in 1976, cost \$149.99 and was sold in various department stores. Game cartridges sold for \$19.99 each. Fairchild Inc., sold about 350,000 units before selling its gaming technology to the Zircon corporation in 1979.

In 1980, Jerry left Fairchild to start his own video game development company, Videosoft. Videosoft produced games for manufacturers that made software for the Atari 2600 video game system. Zircon canceled the Channel F system a few years later. The Atari 2600 went on to sell more than 30 million units in its lifetime. Jerry's business closed after five years. After that, Jerry began consulting for other gaming and tech companies, as well as mentoring engineering students at nearby Stanford University. He collected notes to begin writing his autobiography to inspire more black engineering students. The book was never completed.

In 2003, Jerry's health began to suffer due to complications of diabetes. His sight began to fail and he lost the use of one leg. His illness left him bound to a wheelchair, but his desire to invent, never waned. In March 2011, the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) honored Jerry as an industry pioneer for his work. As the processing power of video game consoles continued to evolve, Jerry expressed disappointment at the graphic violence that began to replace the innocent, unpretentious games of his era.

On April 9, 2011, Gerald "Jerry" Lawson died of complications from diabetes at the age of 70. He left behind his wife and two grown children.

In 2012, the Los Angeles Unified School District honored Jerry's contribution to science and innovation by naming Elementary School #11, the Gerald A. Lawson Academy of the Arts, Mathematics and Science.

