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Editor-in-Chief



Last week we lost John Conway, one of the mathematical community's most original thinkers, to COVID-19. He left a lifetime of sometimes strange and often wonderful mathematics behind him, and he will be sorely missed. He got the ultimate nerd accolade of a memorial XKCD cartoon, and I hope he would have been pleased by that (though at times he seemed to feel about the "Game Of Life" the way Ron Hynes, in later years, said he felt about "Sonny's Dream.")

When somebody dies, it suddenly makes makes it clear why we're all acting out E.M.Forster's classic SF story "The Machine Stops." We're not isolating ourselves as a stunt – this virus kills people, and this is how we prevent it from killing more of us, until we've got a vaccine or an antiviral drug to act more directly against it. But life has certainly become strange as a result.

Thousands of people who, a month ago, had never taken part in an online video conference are becoming seasoned veterans. No, it's not the same as a face-to-face meeting over coffee, but my department has had various meetings and an entire hiring process, with some success. (If anybody was wearing pajama pants or none at all, it didn't show.) And in the last month I got plenty of research done by email: that, at least, works as well as ever. Getting together in front of a blackboard for serious brainstorming? That will, alas, have to wait.



A single Gosper's Glider Gun creating "gliders" in Conway's Game of Life

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With amazing foresight (for which read luck), I had done an overload in the fall term and had no teaching in the winter. My colleagues who had classes to finish off did an impressive job of it; and we're standing by now for our first term of classes taught entirely online. It was not so long ago that the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission deemed our proposal to put one ten-course certificate program online such a major change that we had to go through the entire program approval process all over again. In the last month, our whole program changed over – at a week's notice.

Was it successful? It may depend what you mean by success. Various instructors noted drily that the (unproctored) online exams were so successful that hardly anybody failed. I doubt whether future employers and graduate schools would welcome this as the new normal! We've had promises of AI software that can watch students' eyes and tell if they are cheating: some people in online chat rooms seem quite sure they have already learned how to game that system. I don't think we've heard the end of this story.

Once more, everybody – stay isolated, stay well. You're all irreplaceable.



Prominent mathematician and game of life theoretician, John Conway, passed away on 11 April 2020 at 82 from COVID-19. He will be missed by the mathematical community.

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