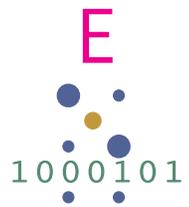
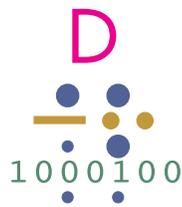
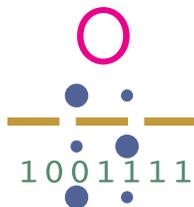
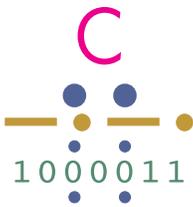


# The Hidden Language of Computer Hardware and Software



Charles Petzold

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# Contents

	<i>Preface</i>	<i>iv</i>
Chapter One	Best Friends	3
Chapter Two	Codes and Combinations	9
Chapter Three	Braille and Binary Codes	15
Chapter Four	Anatomy of a Flashlight	22
Chapter Five	Seeing Around Corners	32
Chapter Six	Telegraphs and Relays	40
Chapter Seven	Our Ten Digits	47
Chapter Eight	Alternatives to Ten	54
Chapter Nine	Bit by Bit by Bit	69
Chapter Ten	Logic and Switches	86
Chapter Eleven	Gates (Not Bill)	102
Chapter Twelve	A Binary Adding Machine	131
Chapter Thirteen	But What About Subtraction?	143
Chapter Fourteen	Feedback and Flip-Flops	155
Chapter Fifteen	Bytes and Hex	180
Chapter Sixteen	An Assemblage of Memory	190
Chapter Seventeen	Automation	206
Chapter Eighteen	From Abaci to Chips	238
Chapter Nineteen	Two Classic Microprocessors	260
Chapter Twenty	ASCII and a Cast of Characters	286
Chapter Twenty-One	Get on the Bus	301
Chapter Twenty-Two	The Operating System	320
Chapter Twenty-Three	Fixed Point, Floating Point	335
Chapter Twenty-Four	Languages High and Low	349
Chapter Twenty-Five	The Graphical Revolution	364
	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	383
	<i>Index</i>	385

# Preface to the 🌀 Paperback Edition 🌀

**C**ode rattled around in my head for about a decade before I started writing it. As I was contemplating *Code* and then writing it, and even after the book was published, people would ask me, “What’s the book about?”

I was always reluctant to answer this question. I’d mumble something about “a unique journey through the evolution of the digital technologies that define the modern age” and hope that would be sufficient.

But finally I had to admit it: “*Code* is a book about how computers work.”

As I feared, the reactions weren’t favorable. “Oh, I have a book like that,” some people would say, to which my immediate response was, “No, no, no, you don’t have a book like this one.” I still think that’s true. *Code* is not like other how-computers-work books. It doesn’t have big color illustrations of disk drives with arrows showing how the data sweeps into the computer. *Code* has no drawings of trains carrying a cargo of zeros and ones. Metaphors and similes are wonderful literary devices but they do nothing but obscure the beauty of technology.

The other comment I heard was, “People don’t want to know how computers work.” And this I’m sure is true. I personally happen to enjoy learning how things work. But I also like to choose which things I learn about and which I do not. I’d be hard pressed to explain how my refrigerator works, for example.

Yet I often hear people ask questions that reveal a need to know something about the inner workings of personal computers. One such common question is, “What’s the difference between storage and memory?”

That’s certainly a critical question. The marketing of personal computers is based on such concepts. Even novice users are expected to know how many *megs* of the one thing and *gigas* of the other thing will be necessary for their particular applications. Novice users are also expected to master the concept of the computer “file” and to visualize how files are loaded from storage into memory and saved from memory back to storage.

The storage-and-memory question is usually answered with an analogy: “Memory is like the surface of your desk and storage is like the filing cabinet.” That’s not a bad answer as far as it goes. But I find it quite unsatisfactory. It makes it sound as if computer architecture were patterned after an office. The truth is that the distinction between memory and storage

is an artificial one and exists solely because we don't have a single storage medium that is both fast and vast as well as nonvolatile. What we know today as "von Neumann architecture"—the dominant computer architecture for over 50 years—is a direct result of this technical deficiency.

Here's another question that someone once asked me: "Why can't you run Macintosh programs under Windows?" My mouth opened to begin an answer when I realized that it involved many more technical issues than I'm sure my questioner was prepared to deal with in one sitting.

I want *Code* to be a book that makes you understand these things, not in some abstract way, but with a depth that just might even rival that of electrical engineers and programmers. I also hope that you might recognize the computer to be one of the crowning achievements of twentieth century technology and appreciate it as a beautiful thing in itself without metaphors and similes getting in the way.

Computers are constructed in a hierarchy, from transistors down at the bottom to the information displayed on our computer screens at the top. Moving up each level in the hierarchy—which is how *Code* is structured—is probably not as hard as most people might think. There is certainly a lot going on inside the modern computer, but it is a lot of very common and simple operations.

Although computers today are more complex than the computers of 25 years or 50 years ago, they are still fundamentally the same. That's what's so great about studying the history of technology: The further back in time you go, the simpler the technologies become. Thus it's possible to reach a point where it all makes relatively easy sense.

In *Code*, I went as far back as I could go. Astonishingly, I found that I could go back into the nineteenth century and use early telegraph equipment to show how computers are built. In theory at least, everything in the first 17 chapters of *Code* can be built entirely using simple electrical devices that have been around for over a century.

This use of antique technology gives *Code* a fairly nostalgic feel, I think. *Code* is a book that could never be titled *The Faster New Faster Thing* or *Business @ the Speed of a Digital Nervous System*. The "bit" isn't defined until page 68; "byte" isn't defined until page 180. I don't mention transistors until page 142, and that's only in passing.

So, while *Code* goes fairly deep into the workings of the computer (few other books show how computer processors actually work, for example), the pace is fairly relaxed. Despite the depth, I tried to make the trip as comfortable as possible.

But without little drawings of trains carrying a cargo of zeros and ones.

*Charles Petzold*  
*August 16, 2000*

**code** (kōd) ...

- 3.a. A system of signals used to represent letters or numbers in transmitting messages.
- b. A system of symbols, letters, or words given certain arbitrary meanings, used for transmitting messages requiring secrecy or brevity.
4. A system of symbols and rules used to represent instructions to a computer...

— *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*

Chapter Three

# Braille and Binary Codes

Samuel Morse wasn't the first person to successfully translate the letters of written language to an interpretable code. Nor was he the first person to be remembered more as the name of his code than as himself. That honor must go to a blind French teenager born some 18 years after Samuel Morse but who made his mark much more precociously. Little is known of his life, but what is known makes a compelling story.

Louis Braille was born in 1809 in Coupvray, France, just 25 miles east of Paris. His father was a harness maker. At the age of three—an age when young boys shouldn't be playing in their fathers' workshops—he accidentally stuck a pointed tool in his eye. The wound became infected, and the infection spread to his other eye, leaving him totally blind. Normally he would have been doomed to a life of ignorance and poverty (as most blind people were in those days), but young Louis's intelligence and desire to learn were soon recognized. Through the intervention of the village priest and a schoolteacher, he first attended school in the village with the other children and at the age of 10 was sent to the Royal Institution for Blind Youth in Paris.



One major obstacle in the education of the blind is, of course, their inability to read printed books. Valentin Haüy (1745–1822), the founder of the Paris school, had invented a system of raised letters on paper that could be read by touch. But this system was very difficult to use, and only a few books had been produced using this method.

The sighted Haüy was stuck in a paradigm. To him, an A was an A was an A, and the letter A must look (or feel) like an A. (If given a flashlight to communicate, he might have tried drawing letters in the air as we did before we discovered it didn't work very well.) Haüy probably didn't realize that a type of code quite different from the printed alphabet might be more appropriate for sightless people.

The origins of an alternative type of code came from an unexpected source. Charles Barbier, a captain of the French army, had by 1819 devised a system of writing he called *écriture nocturne*, or “night writing.” This system used a pattern of raised dots and dashes on heavy paper and was intended for use by soldiers in passing notes to each other in the dark when quiet was necessary. The soldiers were able to poke these dots and dashes into the back of the paper using an awl-like stylus. The raised dots could then be read with the fingers.

The problem with Barbier's system is that it was quite complex. Rather than using patterns of dots and dashes that corresponded to letters of the alphabet, Barbier devised patterns that corresponded to sounds, often requiring many codes for a single word. The system worked fine for short messages in the field but was distinctly inadequate for longer texts, let alone entire books.

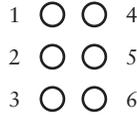
Louis Braille became familiar with Barbier's system at the age of 12. He liked the use of raised dots, not only because it proved easy to read with the fingers but also because it was easy to *write*. A student in the classroom equipped with paper and a stylus could actually take notes and read them back. Louis Braille diligently tried to improve the system and within three years (at the age of 15) had come up with his own, the basics of which are still used today. For many years, the system was known only within the school, but it gradually made its way to the rest of the world. In 1835, Louis Braille contracted tuberculosis, which would eventually kill him shortly after his 43rd birthday in 1852.

Today, enhanced versions of the Braille system compete with tape-recorded books for providing the blind with access to the written word, but Braille still remains an invaluable system and the only way to read for people who are both blind and deaf. In recent years, Braille has become more familiar in the public arena as elevators and automatic teller machines are made more accessible to the blind.

What we're going to do in this chapter is dissect Braille code and see how it works. We don't have to actually *learn* Braille or memorize anything. We just want some insight into the nature of codes.

In Braille, every symbol used in normal written language—specifically, letters, numbers, and punctuation marks—is encoded as one or more raised

dots within a two-by-three cell. The dots of the cell are commonly numbered 1 through 6:



In modern-day use, special typewriters or embossers punch the Braille dots into the paper.

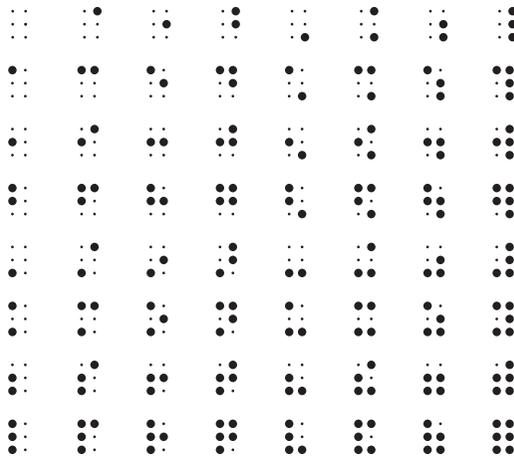
Because embossing just a couple pages of this book in Braille would be prohibitively expensive, I've used a notation common for showing Braille on the printed page. In this notation, all six dots in the cell are shown. Large dots indicate the parts of the cell where the paper is raised. Small dots indicate the parts of the cell that are flat. For example, in the Braille character



dots 1, 3, and 5 are raised and dots 2, 4, and 6 are not.

What should be interesting to us at this point is that the dots are *binary*. A particular dot is either flat or raised. That means we can apply what we've learned about Morse code and combinatorial analysis to Braille. We know that there are 6 dots and that each dot can be either flat or raised, so the total number of combinations of 6 flat and raised dots is  $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ , or  $2^6$ , or 64.

Thus, the system of Braille is capable of representing 64 unique codes. Here they are—all 64 possible Braille codes:



If we find fewer than 64 codes used in Braille, we should question why some of the 64 possible codes aren't being used. If we find *more* than 64 codes used in Braille, we should question either our sanity or fundamental truths of mathematics, such as 2 plus 2 equaling 4.

To begin dissecting the code of Braille, let's look at the basic lowercase alphabet:

⠁	⠃	⠉	⠇	⠑	⠋	⠎	⠕	⠗	⠊
a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j
⠌	⠍	⠎	⠏	⠥	⠖	⠞	⠟	⠡	⠢
k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t
⠥	⠦	⠧	⠨	⠩					
u	v	x	y	z					

For example, the phrase “you and me” in Braille looks like this:

⠠⠽⠠⠁⠠⠎⠠⠇⠠⠑

Notice that the cells for each letter within a word are separated by a little bit of space; a larger space (essentially a cell with no raised dots) is used between words.

This is the basis of Braille as Louis Braille devised it, or at least as it applies to the letters of the Latin alphabet. Louis Braille also devised codes for letters with accent marks, common in French. Notice that there's no code for *w*, which isn't used in classical French. (Don't worry. The letter will show up eventually.) At this point, only 25 of the 64 possible codes have been accounted for.

Upon close examination, you'll discover that the three rows of Braille illustrated above show a pattern. The first row (letters *a* through *j*) uses only the top four spots in the cell—dots 1, 2, 4, and 5. The second row duplicates the first row except that dot 3 is also raised. The third row is the same except that dots 3 and 6 are raised.

Since the days of Louis Braille, the Braille code has been expanded in various ways. Currently the system used most often in published material in English is called Grade 2 Braille. Grade 2 Braille uses many contractions in order to save trees and to speed reading. For example, if letter codes appear by themselves, they stand for common words. The following three rows (including a “completed” third row) show these word codes:

(none)	but	can	do	every	from	go	have	(none)	just
knowledge	like	more	not	(none)	people	quite	rather	so	that
us	very	it	you	as	and	for	of	the	with

Thus, the phrase “you and me” can be written in Grade 2 Braille as this:

So far, I’ve described 31 codes—the no-raised-dots space between words and the 3 rows of 10 codes for letters and words. We’re still not close to the 64 codes that are theoretically available. In Grade 2 Braille, as we shall see, nothing is wasted.

First, we can use the codes for letters *a* through *j* combined with a raised dot 6. These are used mostly for contractions of letters within words and also include *w* and another word abbreviation:

ch	gh	sh	th	wh	ed	er	ou	ow	w
									(or “will”)

For example, the word “about” can be written in Grade 2 Braille this way:

Second, we can take the codes for letters *a* through *j* and “lower” them to use only dots 2, 3, 5, and 6. These codes are used for some punctuation marks and contractions, depending on context:

ea	bb	cc	dis	en	to	gg	his	in	was
,	;	:	.		!	()	“	”	”

The first four of these codes are the comma, semicolon, colon, and period. Notice that the same code is used for both left and right parentheses but that two different codes are used for open and closed quotation marks.

We're up to 51 codes so far. The following 6 codes use various unused combinations of dots 3, 4, 5, and 6 to represent contractions and some additional punctuation:

st	ing	ble	ar	'	com
/		#			-

The code for “ble” is very important because when it's not part of a word, it means that the codes that follow should be interpreted as numbers. These number codes are the same as those for letters *a* through *j*:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0

Thus, this sequence of codes

means the number 256.

If you've been keeping track, we need 7 more codes to reach the maximum of 64. Here they are:

The first (a raised dot 4) is used as an accent indicator. The others are used as prefixes for some contractions and also for some other purposes: When dots 4 and 6 are raised (the fifth code in this row), the code is a decimal point in numbers or an emphasis indicator, depending on context. When dots 5 and 6 are raised, the code is a letter indicator that counterbalances a number indicator.

And finally (if you've been wondering how Braille encodes capital letters) we have dot 6—the capital indicator. This signals that the letter that follows is uppercase. For example, we can write the name of the original creator of this system as

This is a capital indicator, the letter *l*, the contraction *ou*, the letters *i* and *s*, a space, another capital indicator, and the letters *b*, *r*, *a*, *i*, *l*, *l*, and *e*. (In actual use, the name might be abbreviated even more by eliminating the last two letters, which aren't pronounced.)

In summary, we've seen how six binary elements (the dots) yield 64 possible codes and no more. It just so happens that many of these 64 codes perform double duty depending on their context. Of particular interest is the number indicator and the letter indicator that undoes the number indicator. These codes alter the meaning of the codes that follow them—from letters to numbers and from numbers back to letters. Codes such as these are often called *precedence*, or *shift*, codes. They alter the meaning of all subsequent codes until the shift is undone.

The capital indicator means that the following letter (and only the following letter) should be uppercase rather than lowercase. A code such as this is known as an *escape* code. Escape codes let you “escape” from the humdrum, routine interpretation of a sequence of codes and move to a new interpretation. As we'll see in later chapters, shift codes and escape codes are common when written languages are represented by binary codes.



# Index

*Note: Page numbers in italics refer to illustrations.*

## Numbers

- 6800 microprocessor, 260–61, 281–83, 284
- 8080 microprocessor, 260–83, 284

## A

- abacus, 238
- accumulator, 208, 211–13, 215, 232, 264, 268, 270–72, 282–83, 321
- adding machines, 131–42, 148–49, 194, 207–8
- Aiken, Howard, 243, 354
- ALGOL programming language, 354–60, 362, 363
- algorithms, 50, 236, 354–63
- al-Khwarizmi, Muhammed ibn-Musa, 50
- Allen, Paul, 362
- Altair, 283–84, 302, 304, 362
- ALU (Arithmetic Logic Unit), 232, 269
- Ampère, André Marie, 28
- analog computers, 231
- Analytical Engine, 101, 240, 241, 362
- API (application programming interface), 330–32, 371, 373, 381
- Apple Computer
  - Apple II, 284, 366, 372
  - Apple Computer, *continued*
    - Apple Lisa, 370
    - Macintosh, 285, 334, 370, 372–73, 375, 378, 381
  - argument, 233
  - Aristotle, 86, 87, 91
  - Arithmetic Logic Unit (ALU). *See* ALU (Arithmetic Logic Unit)
  - Art of Computer Programming* series (Knuth), 360
  - ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange), 286–300, 311–13, 315
    - high-level programming language and, 351, 356–57, 365–67, 373, 378–79, 381
    - operating systems and, 320–21, 323–24, 327–31
  - assembly language, 236
  - associative law, 88–89, 92, 103
  - “As We May Think” (Bush), 364–65, 369
  - AT&T (American Telephone and Telegraph), 246, 248, 333. *See also* Bell Telephone Laboratories
  - Atanasoff, John V., 244
  - automation, 206–37

## B

- Babbage, Charles, 101, 240, 240, 241, 362
- bandwidth, 310
- Barbier, Charles, 16, 101, 240–42
- Bardeen, John, 247
- base two logarithm, 76
- BASIC, 361–62
- Baudot code, 288–90, 295
- Baudot, Emile, 288
- BCD (binary-coded decimal), 271, 292, 296–97, 338
- Bell, Alexander Graham, 248, 377
- Bell Systems Technical Journal*, 246
- Bell Telephone Laboratories, 243, 246–47, 249, 333, 362, 373, 377, 380. *See also* AT&T (American Telephone and Telegraph)
- big-endian method, 283
- binary-coded decimal (BCD). *See* BCD (binary-coded decimal)
- binary (base two) number system, 61–85, 182
  - adding machines and, 131–43
  - automation and, 208
  - bytes and, 181
  - conversion to/from, 184–85
  - flip-flops and, 177
  - signed/unsigned numbers in, 154
  - switches and, 95–96
- bits (binary digits). *See also* bytes
  - carry, 136
  - least-significant (rightmost), 141, 142
  - logic gates and, 104
  - most-significant (leftmost), 141
  - origin of the term, 67–68
  - overview of, 69–85
  - photographic film and, 76–79, 88
  - sign, 153
  - sum, 136
  - use of the term, by Shannon, 103, 246
- Boole, George, 87, 87, 95, 101, 129–30, 359. *See also* Boolean algebra
- Boolean algebra, 87–103, 130, 246, 269–70, 359–60, 363. *See also* Boole, George
- Braille, 5, 31, 242, 287. *See also* Braille, Louis
  - basic description of, 14–21
  - binary digits and, comparison of, 70
  - simplicity of, in comparison to Morse code, 85
- Braille, Louis, 15, 15, 16, 18. *See also* Braille
- Brattain, Walter, 247
- Bricklin, Dan, 366
- British Broadcasting Corporation, 7
- buffers, 128–29
- bugs, 236, 274, 275
- Burks, Arthur W., 245
- bus, 301–19
- Bush, Vannevar, 364, 369, 380
- Busicom, 258
- Byron, Augusta Ada, 240, 362
- bytes, 180–89. *See also* bits (binary digits)
  - definition of, 180
  - high-order (leftmost), 216–17
  - low-order (rightmost), 216, 217, 222

## C

- C programming language, 362–63
- calculators, 188, 231, 239
- Carroll, Lewis (Charles Dodgson), 86
- cathode-ray tubes (CRTs). *See* CRTs (cathode-ray tubes)
- CD-ROM (CD Read-Only Memory), 378, 380
- CDs (compact discs). *See* compact discs (CDs)
- Census data, 241–42
- character sets, 286–300. *See also* ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange)

chip, 250–59  
 clocks, 209, 222, 263. *See also*  
   oscillators  
   flip-flops and, 158, 166–68, 170–78  
   memory and, 191–92  
   speed of, 258, 259, 261  
 closed architecture, 303  
 CMOS (complementary metal-oxide  
   semiconductor), 251, 256  
 COBOL, 361  
 coincidence (equivalence) gate, 136  
 Colossus computer, 244  
 comments, 235–36  
 common connections, 34, 36  
 commutative rule, 88, 89  
 compact discs (CDs), 43, 376–78, 380  
 complementary metal-oxide  
   semiconductor. *See* CMOS  
   (complementary metal-oxide  
   semiconductor)  
 compression, 375–76, 379–80  
 computability, concept of, 244, 258  
 conditional jumps, 228  
 conductors, 28, 35, 38, 39  
 Constitution of the United States,  
   40, 241  
 contacts, electrical, 34–35  
 control signals, 214–15  
 counters, 177–78, 232  
 CPUs (central processing units). *See*  
   microprocessors  
 CRTs (cathode-ray tubes), 309–15,  
   320, 365, 368–70  
 current, 28–29  
 cybernetics, 246  
 cyberspace, 246

## D

Daguerre, Louis, 40  
 daguerreotypes, 40  
 data paths, 180  
 De Morgan, Augustus, 129–30

De Morgan's Laws, 129–30  
 decimal (base ten) number system,  
   47–53, 336–37  
   adding machines and, 132  
   alternatives to, 54–68  
   bits and, 69–70  
   bytes and, 181  
   conversion to/from, 184–89  
   flip-flops and, 177  
   floating-point numbers and, 341  
   hexadecimal number system and,  
     184–89  
   subtraction and, 147  
 decoders, 121–22, 129, 197–200  
 Dickson, William, 314  
 Difference Engine, 101, 240  
 digital data, 231  
 Digital Equipment Corporation, 354  
 Dodgson, Charles (Lewis Carroll), 86  
 DRAM (dynamic random access  
   memory), 308–9  
 Dummer, Geoffrey, 250  
 dynamic random access memory  
   (DRAM). *See* DRAM (dynamic  
   random access memory)

## E

EBCDIC character code, 295–97, 356  
 Ebert, Roger, 73–74, 96  
 Eccles, William Henry, 161  
 Eckert, J. Presper, 244, 246  
 Eckert-Mauchly Computer  
   Corporation, 246  
 Edison, Thomas, 30, 314, 375  
 EDVAC (Electronic Discrete Variable  
   Automatic Computer), 245  
 electromagnets, 41, 44–46, 156–57,  
   317  
   logic gates and, 106, 108–10  
   memory and, 205  
 electrons, 23, 27–29, 33–34, 37  
 Engelbart, Douglas, 369, 370

ENIAC (Electronic Numerical  
Integrator and Computer),  
244, 245  
error checking, 81, 82–83  
escape code, 21  
even parity, 81  
expansion slots, 302

## F

Fairchild Semiconductor Corporation,  
250  
feedback, 155–79  
Feynman, Richard, 360  
file systems, 325, 333  
film critics, 73–75, 85, 96  
fixed-point numbers, 335–48  
Fleming, John Ambrose, 243  
flip-flops, 155–79, 249–50  
    automation and, 207, 226  
    chips and, 254–55  
    edge-triggered, 170–73, 178–79,  
    226–27  
    level-triggered, 166, 170, 173, 191  
    memory and, 191  
floating-point numbers, 335–38  
floppy disks, 318  
foreign languages, 47, 181, 298, 300  
Forest, Lee de, 243  
*Formal Logic* (De Morgan), 129  
FORTRAN, 354, 360, 361  
French Telegraph Service, 288  
frequency dividers, 175–76  
function tables, 162, 169

## G

Gates, Bill, 102, 362  
Gibson, William, 246  
gigabyte, 202  
GNU project, 334  
Goldstine, Herman H., 245

Goto instruction, 226  
graphical user interface (GUI). *See* GUI  
(graphical user interface)  
ground, use of the term, 34–35  
guard patterns, 80–81  
GUI (graphical user interface), 370, 371  
Gunter, Edmund, 239

## H

hard disks, 318–19  
hardware, use of the term, 232  
Harvard Mark I/II computers, 243  
Haüy, Valentin, 16, 42  
Hertz, Heinrich Rudolph, 159, 175, 310  
hexadecimal (base 16) number system,  
183–89, 234, 288–97, 321, 349  
high-level programming language,  
349–63  
Hindu-Arabic (Indo-Arabic) number  
system, 50–53  
Hoff, Ted, 258  
Hollerith, Herman, 241, 241  
Hollerith cards, 241–42  
Hopper, Grace Murray, 243, 354

## I

IBM (International Business Machines),  
180–81, 242, 246, 261, 284–85,  
332–33  
    ASCII and, 295  
    floating-point hardware and, 247  
    high-level programming language  
    and, 361–62, 366–67, 371–72  
    peripheral devices and, 303–4, 314,  
    317–18  
    punch cards, 295–97, 295, 317, 361  
    video displays and, 366–67  
IC (integrated circuit), 250–59, 301.  
*See also* chip

information  
 as a choice among two or more possibilities, 72–73  
 retention of, through flip-flop circuits, 161  
 theory, 246

initialization code, 323

input devices, 105, 231, 261–62

integrated circuit (IC). *See* chip; IC (integrated circuit)

Intel, 258–61, 284, 303, 309, 320, 327, 332, 348

International Telecommunication Union (ITU), 288

interrupts, 280–81, 332

inverters, 119, 129, 149–50, 157  
 automation and, 215–16  
 memory and, 195

ITU (International Telecommunication Union). *See* International Telecommunication Union (ITU)

## J

Jacquard, Joseph Marie, 239

Jacquard loom, 239–41

Java, 381–82

Jobs, Steven, 284, 370

Jordan, F. W., 161

## K

Kemeny, John, 361

Keuffel & Esser Company, 239

keyboard, 315–17, 322–24, 349, 369

Kilby, Jack, 250

Kildall, Gary, 326

kilobytes, 201–3

kinetograph devices, 314

Knuth, Donald, 360

Kurtz, Thomas, 361

## L

labels, 234–35

language  
 foreign, 47, 181, 298, 300  
 high-level programming, 349–63  
 machine (machine code), 232, 236, 321, 349–63  
 speech and, 5  
 use of the term, 232

last-in-first-out (LIFO) storage. *See* LIFO (last-in-first-out) storage

Law of Contradiction, 91

*Laws of Thought, The* (Boole), 101

Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm von, 87, 239

LIFO (last-in-first-out) storage, 273

Linux, 334

little-endian method, 283

logarithms, 76, 231, 236, 238–40, 340, 346–47

logic, 85, 86–101, 285. *See also* logic gates  
 character sets and, 295  
 tables, 194–95, 197

logic gates, 102–30, 214, 307–8  
 binary addition and, 134–38  
 chips and, 252–55  
 flip-flops and, 159–64, 167, 169  
 memory and, 191, 195, 197, 205  
 semiconductors and, 249  
 subtraction and, 148, 150, 151  
 vacuum tubes and, 243–44, 249

Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth, 70–72

Lowell, Amy, 312

## M

machine code (machine language), 232, 236, 321, 349–63

magnetic storage, 317–18

Maltin, Leonard, 74–75

Marquez, Gabriel Garcia, 5

*Mathematical Analysis of Logic, The* (Boole), 129

- “Mathematical Theory of Communication, A” (Shannon), 246
- Mauchly, John, 244
- McCarthy, John, 363
- Memex, 364, 380
- memory, 190–205, 243, 355–56. *See also* RAM (random access memory)
- 1-bit, 167
  - basic description of, 231
  - high-level programming language and, 349
  - magnetic core, 245
  - mercury delay line, 245
  - microprocessors and, 261–85
  - operating systems and, 320, 321
  - peripheral devices and, 319
  - storage and, difference between, 319
- memory-mapped I/O, 280
- microprocessors, 231–32, 246–48. *See also* 6800 microprocessor; 8080 microprocessor
- high-level programming language and, 349–50, 352
  - invention of, 250–59
  - memory and, 261–85
  - operating systems and, 320
  - peripheral devices and, 302, 303, 305, 317
  - single-chip, 261
  - two classic, 260–85
- Microsoft Corporation, 102, 362
- MS-DOS operating system, 332, 333, 354–55, 365, 371, 372
  - Windows operating system, 334, 372–73, 378
- MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), 103, 333, 364, 367
- mnemonics, 232–33, 264, 267, 349
- Moore, Gordon E., 251, 258. *See also* Moore’s Law
- Moore’s Law, 251, 285, 309
- Morse, Samuel, 9, 15, 40, 40, 42, 44, 101, 240. *See also* Morse code
- Morse code, 1–14, 31–32, 40–46, 382. *See also* Morse, Samuel
- binary digits and, comparison of, 70
  - character sets and, 287, 289
  - invention of, 9–10
  - telegraph system and, 33–39
  - UPC codes and, 80, 83–85
- MOS Technology, 284
- motherboard, 302
- Motorola, 259–60, 281, 283, 285, 348, 370
- MS-DOS (Microsoft Disk Operating System), 332, 333, 354–55, 365, 371, 372
- Multics, 333
- multitasking, 334
- Murray code, 288
- Murray, Donald, 288
- ## N
- nanoseconds, 253
- Napier, John, 238, 239
- Napier’s Bones, 239
- National Semiconductor, 260
- negation, 146
- negative transition, 173
- networks, 103, 104
- Neumann, John von, 245, 245, 246, 363, 367, 372
- neutrons, 23–24
- Newton, Isaac, 87
- nibble, definition of, 181
- nines’ complement, 144–45
- Nobel Prize, 247
- noise, 72
- Noyce, Robert, 250, 253, 258
- NPN transistors, 248
- number systems, 47–70, 335–48. *See also specific number systems*
- Nyquist, Harry, 377

## O

OCR (optical character recognition),  
80, 376

octal (base eight) number system,  
55–60, 63, 181–82

odd parity, 81

Ohm, Georg Simon, 29

Ohm's Law, 39

*One Hundred Years of Solitude*  
(Marquez), 5

ones' complement, 146, 150–51, 154

opcodes, 213, 215, 217–19, 263–64,  
270–72, 276–77, 279–82, 285

open architecture, 303

operands, 87, 92–94

operating systems, 319, 320–34,  
370–71

optical character recognition (OCR).  
*See* OCR (optical character  
recognition)

*Organon* (Aristotle), 86

Orlando, Tony, 69, 71

oscillators, 157–59, 173–76, 178, 209,  
222, 262

oscilloscope, 367

Oughtred, William, 239

output devices, 105, 231, 261–62

## P

parity, 81

Pascal, Blaise, 239

Pascal programming language, 362

Paterson, Tim, 332

Pentium microprocessors, 284–85, 348.  
*See also* microprocessors

petabyte, 202

Pfleumer, Fritz, 317

phonograph, 376

photographic film, 76–79, 85

pixels, 311–13, 367–68, 370

Polonius, 144

pop, 273

positional number systems, 50

Poulsen, Valdemar, 317

“Preliminary Discussion of the Logical  
Design of an Electronic  
Computing Instrument” (Burks,  
Goldstine, and Neumann), 245

printing telegraph, 288

protocols, 381

push, 273

## Q

quaternary number system, 60–61, 63

## R

Radio Shack, 38, 39, 110, 244, 284

RAM (random access memory). *See*  
*also* memory; RAM arrays

automation and, 208–15, 219,  
220–32, 236–37

basic description of, 198–99

microprocessors and, 258, 261, 263,  
272–73, 284

operating systems and, 320,  
325, 328

peripheral devices and, 301–2,  
304–8, 312–13, 314, 317, 319

quantities of, 201–3

as volatile memory, 205

RAM arrays, 199–205, 249, 250, 256.  
*See also* RAM (random access  
memory)

automation and, 208–15, 220–27,  
231–32, 236–37

microprocessors and, 263, 284

peripheral devices and, 304–5, 308

random access memory (RAM). *See*  
RAM (random access memory)

read-only memory (ROM). *See* ROM  
(read-only memory)

registers, 264–67, 275–79, 282

Remington Rand, 246, 317, 354  
 resistance, 28–30, 37–39  
 resolution, 311, 314  
 Revere, Paul, 70–72  
 Ritchie, Dennis M., 333, 362  
 ROM (read-only memory), 312–13,  
 324–25, 332

**S**

scanning devices, 79–81, 83  
 Scheutz, Edvard, 241  
 Scheutz, George, 241  
 semiconductors, 247–49, 260  
 Shannon, Claude, 103, 105, 130, 246  
 Shockley, William, 247, 249  
 Shockley Semiconductor Laboratories,  
 249  
 short circuits, 30  
 Sieve of Eratosthenes, 359, 360  
 signed binary numbers, 154  
 Siskel, Gene, 73–74  
 Socrates, 86, 91–92  
 software  
   engineers, 232  
   use of the term, 232  
 solid-state electronics, 248  
 speaker wire, 38–39  
 SRAM (static random access memory),  
 308–9  
 stable states, 161  
 stacks, 273–76, 282  
 static random access memory (SRAM).  
   *See* SRAM (static random access  
   memory)  
 Stibitz, George, 243, 246, 380  
 Stroustrup, Bjarne, 373  
 Sun Microsystems, 381  
 syllogism, 86, 91  
 “Symbolic Analysis of Replay and  
 Switching Circuits” (Shannon),  
 103, 105, 130  
 synchronicity, 158

**T**

Tabulating Machine Company, 242  
 tabulation machines, 241–42  
 TANSTAAFL principle, 222  
 tape systems, 317–18  
*Technical Reference* manual (IBM), 303  
 telegraph systems, 33–46, 101, 105–6,  
 242. *See also* Morse code  
 telephone systems, 72, 75–76, 242, 317  
 teletypewriters, 288–90  
 television screens, 310–11, 314  
 tens’ complement, 152, 153–54  
 terabyte, 202  
 Texas Instruments, 250, 251, 257  
 Thompson, Ken, 333  
 Torvalds, Linus, 334  
 transistors, 142, 247–50, 260–61, 285,  
 305. *See also* TTL (transistor-  
 transistor logic)  
 trigonometry, 231, 236, 239  
 true/false values, 85–86, 93  
 TTL (transistor-transistor logic),  
 251–56, 305, 308. *See also*  
 transistors  
*TTL Data Book for Design Engineers*,  
 251–56  
 Tukey, John Wilder, 68  
 Turing, Alan M., 244, 258–59  
 Turing Test, 244

**U**

Unicode, 300  
 UNIVAC (Universal Automatic  
 Computer), 246, 354  
 Universal Product Code (UPC). *See*  
 UPC (Universal Product Code)  
 UNIX, 246, 333–34, 362  
 UPC (Universal Product Code), 79–85

## V

- vacuum tubes, 37–38, 142, 243,  
247, 249
- variables, 355–56
- video displays, 311–15, 321, 324, 332,  
334, 349, 366–70, 372
- virtual memory, 334
- VisiCalc, 366–67
- voltage, 27–30, 37–39, 43
  - flip-flops and, 157, 159
  - logic gates and, 107–9, 113–14, 120
- Volto, Count Alessandro, 28
- von Neumann architecture, 245
- von Neumann bottleneck, 245

## W

- Warnock, John, 374
- Watson, Thomas J., 242
- Watt, James, 31
- white space, 234
- Wiener, Norbert, 246
- Wilson, Flip, 371
- Windows (Microsoft). *See* Microsoft Corporation, Windows operating system
- Wirth, Niklaus, 362
- Wozniak, Stephen, 284
- WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get), 371

## X

- Xerox PARC, 369, 370, 372

## Z

- Zenith, 251
- Zuse, Conrad, 243