



Dr. Luis Von Ahn

(1979 –)

GUATEMALA

INVENTOR OF CAPTCHA



You may have used a CAPTCHA today. You know, a “Completely Automated Public Turing Test to Tell Computers and Humans Apart?”

Still confused? A CAPTCHA is the test used in computing to determine whether or not the user is a human or robot. It is typically a series of obscured or twisted letters and numerals that appear on the screen which the user must retype to prove his or her humanity.



Photos courtesy of Dr. Luis Von Ahn

This means of protecting our sensitive information and halting rampant robot spamming is due to Dr. Luis Von Ahn, a Guatemalan mathematician, teacher and entrepreneur who first created the CAPTCHA concept in 2003 at age 24.

Dr. Von Ahn was born in Guatemala City, Guatemala in 1979. After graduating from the American School of Guatemala, he came to the United States where he attended Duke University and earned a Ph.D from Carnegie Mellon University in 2005.

Dr. Von Ahn is a pioneer in Digital Steganography, the art and science of writing hidden messages that dates back to 1499. The term comes from the Greek phrase “hidden words.” In the computer age, this practice has taken on new importance. While a different team of steganographers first proposed a CAPTCHA technique as far back as 1997, Dr. Von Ahn was the first to see its practical application.

CAPTCHAS can prevent “bots” from collecting certain data, taking part in online surveys or registering for free email accounts that are then used to send spam. CAPTCHA is now used widely by businesses that want to avoid computer-generated responses.

The invention of CAPTCHA has given Dr. Von Ahn prestige not only in Guatemala but throughout the world. He received the MacArthur Award (“genius grant”) in 2010. Popular Science named him one of the ten most brilliant scientists of the decade. After selling the CAPTCHA system to Google in 2009, Dr. Von Ahn became interested in online education and created Duolingo, a free online language learning system that now has 10 million users. He is currently Professor of Computer Science at Carnegie Mellon University.

