

Spinners, Matches and Karaoke Inventions That Made Nothing for Their Inventors

The craze for the fidget or finger spinner has hit the world in a huge way. Like Loom Bands, Pokémon cards and Beanie Babies before them, their rise to popularity and eventual restocking to the '75% off' bin is inevitable. But, have you ever looked at one of these toys, or any simple device, and wondered how rich the inventor must be now? Ever said to a friend, "It's so simple. Why didn't I think of that?" Beware – the life of an inventor is, more often than not, paved with more debt than gold.



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The Lowly Fidget Spinner

We'll start with the case study of the fidget spinner, since they're on everyone's mind and fingers at the moment. The device, a plastic covered, three-pronged implement with a ball bearing centre that allows for free-spinning action, was originally invented by Catherine Hettinger from Florida. You might be surprised to find out that she invented the device in the early 1990s as a toy for her daughter and patented the idea in 1997. "Where has it been since then?" you might ask.

Well, Hettinger had her original prototype produced professionally and began to sell the devices at arts and crafts sales around Florida. She broke even on the production of the device, but never really sold the spinner in huge quantities. Hasbro, the American toy giant, became interested in the spinner but, on market testing it, decided not to proceed with production. Hettinger thought her toy would never sell and, when the US patent expired in 2005, she decided not to submit the \$400 (£310) fee to renew. She has said that she simply couldn't afford to do it at the time.

This meant the idea entered into free use and now Hettinger receives no royalties whatsoever from the sales of tens of thousands of the devices around the US and Europe.

Hettinger now takes on engineering contracts to support herself and her occasional inventions and has had to move to a smaller house. She remains positive about the experience, saying that she is just happy that people are able to use her device. She estimates that only about 3% of inventions actually make money for their inventor. If only she'd been able to find that \$400 for the patent renewal!

The Even Lowlier Match and the Ballpoint Pen

If our first case study doesn't make would-be inventors heed the warnings about patent, our next two examples should. In 1829, John Walker, an English chemist, serendipitously created the match when experimenting with ways to make fire easily. A splint of wood, soaked in a lighting mixture he was testing, caught fire through friction when it dropped near the fireplace. The friction match had been invented.



While Walker sold his matches, called 'Congreves', in boxes of 50 for one shilling, he never patented his invention and only sold 168 units. Two years later, Isaac Holden independently invented a similar thing, but again refused to patent the idea. A version of Holden's match was eventually patented by Samuel Jones under the name 'Lucifers'. While the 'Lucifers' were superseded in time, it is sad that the original inventors saw little profit from a business that now sells a billion matches a year in the US alone!

The ballpoint pen is another case along similar lines. Ever wonder why we sometimes call a ballpoint pen a 'biro'? Laszlo Biro invented the device after becoming irritated by leaking fountain pens. In 1938, he took out a patent for the device, but sold it to Marcel Bich in 1945.

Bich then created a little company he chose to call 'Bic' and the rest is history. Over 100 billion of the pens have been sold since.

Sound Waves and Karaoke

Many inventions are either accidents in the lab or created out of necessity. One such case of necessity is the phenomenon of karaoke. In 1971, Daisuke Inoue, a drummer for a band that let the audience do the vocals for its songs, couldn't attend a concert. He pre-recorded the backing tracks on tape for the audience to sing to and karaoke was born. Failing to submit a patent for the idea, Inoue and his band see none of the profit from a multi-billion-dollar industry. Karaoke, by the way, is Japanese for 'empty orchestra'. We don't know how Inoue and his band feel about their 'empty pockets'.



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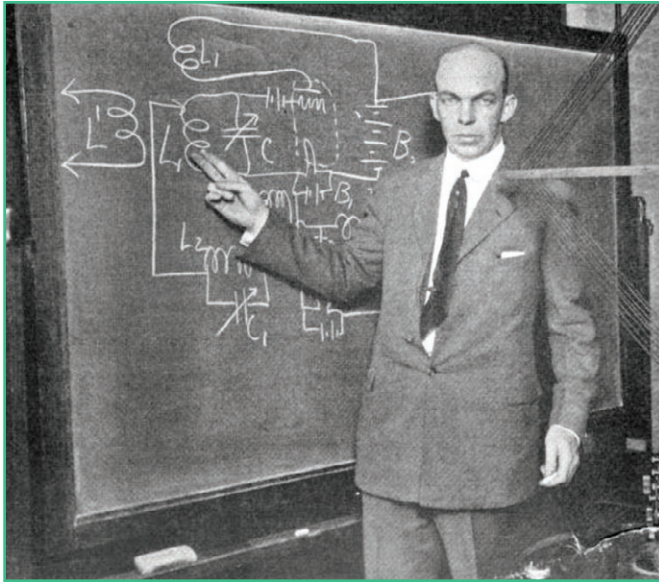


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The Hero of the Internet

Sometimes, inventors are simply magnanimous. They want the world to benefit from their invention without the benefit of a commercial profit. One such case is that of Tim Berners-Lee, the British inventor of the internet. Working at CERN in 1991, Berners-Lee and friends created the very first webpage, but chose not to patent their world-changing invention. The group believed that the internet could be an amazing tool for communication and, as such, should belong to everyone. Thank you very much Mr. Berners-Lee!

While losing out on a small share of a multi-billion-dollar industry would be enough to make anyone feel a little bilious, some inventors really suffer for their creations.



In the 1930s, Edwin H. Armstrong, charged with fixing the poor sound quality of the AM radio frequencies being used by broadcasters, developed FM (frequency modulated) radio. He eventually organised a small network of FM radio stations to promote his invention after its rejection by RCA. The giants of radio at that time, Radio Corporation of America (RCA) and AT&T, lobbied against his technology, worried about its impact on their own stations. In the end, the legal wrangling couldn't stop the growth of the FM stations, but it took its toll on Armstrong himself. The creator of the first FM radio network killed himself in 1954, after years of battling with the big boys.

What Is a Patent?

A patent is the granting of a set of exclusive rights over an invention for a set period of time by a sovereign state. In other words: you invent something, you apply for a patent and, in the process, show your invention to everyone. In return for this, each country you apply for patent in allows you sole rights over the invention for a set period of time. Other people and companies are excluded from making, using or selling their own versions of your invention. When that period expires, the invention is freely available for all people to use, adapt and sell on in their own way.

The word patent come from the Latin 'patere', or 'to lay open', meaning to put up for public inspection.

Ending on a Smiley Note

While some inventions cost their inventors everything, others start out as just a little fun. When Harvey Ball designed the iconic 'smiley' face for an advertising company in 1963, he had no idea of the eventual reach of his design. Within a decade, 50 million pins had been produced with the image on it. Harvey Ball made \$45!



So, take heed future inventors: a picture may be worth a thousand words, but a patent may be worth a billion dollars!