LEVEL A2

The Coffee Pot That Became the First Webcam

Why the Whole Internet Watched a Pot of Coffee

In 1991, computer scientists at Cambridge University put a camera next to their coffee pot. Austin tells Olivia how the pot became famous on the internet.

Key words

- climb
- stairs
- corridor
- empty
- tiny
- screen
- broken
- leak
- plug
- switch
- auction
- repair

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How to use it

1

Listen to the episode on YouTube.

2

Read the transcript and learn the key words.

3

Do the activities, then check the answer key.

Includes the full transcript, key words, activities and answers

Listen to the episode on the Aprendos YouTube channel

Key words

These words appear in the episode.

Key words	Meaning	Example
climb *verb*	To go up something, like stairs, a hill or a tree.	*We climbed the hill behind the hotel to watch the sunset.*
stairs *noun*	Steps that take you from one floor of a building to another.	*The lift was broken, so we carried the sofa up the stairs.*
corridor *noun*	A long, narrow hall with doors to different rooms.	*The toilets are at the end of the corridor, on the left.*
empty *adjective*	With nothing inside.	*I opened the fridge, but it was empty, so we ordered a pizza.*
tiny *adjective*	Very, very small.	*My first flat had a tiny kitchen with space for only one person.*
screen *noun*	The flat part of a computer, phone or TV that shows pictures and words.	*My phone screen broke when I dropped it on the bus.*
broken *adjective*	Damaged, so it doesn't work anymore.	*The washing machine is broken, so I'm going to the launderette.*
leak *verb*	When water or another liquid comes out of a small hole by mistake.	*My old water bottle leaks, so my bag is always wet.*
plug *noun*	The thing at the end of a cable that you put in the wall to get electricity.	*The lamp doesn't work because the dog chewed the plug.*
switch *noun*	A small button that turns a light or a machine on or off. To switch something off means to turn it off.	*The light switch is next to the door.*
auction *noun*	A sale where people offer money and the biggest offer wins.	*My aunt bought an old piano at an auction for fifty pounds.*
repair *verb*	To fix something that is broken.	*A man in the market repairs bicycles for a few euros.*

Full transcript

The Coffee Pot That Became the First Webcam: Why the Whole Internet Watched a Pot of Coffee

AUSTIN Picture this. You **climb** three floors for a cup of coffee.

OLIVIA Three floors. Okay, I'm tired, but I'm climbing.

AUSTIN You walk to the coffee pot, you pick it up, and it's **empty**.

OLIVIA Again?

AUSTIN Again, every single day. And that empty pot starts the story of the first webcam.

OLIVIA Wait. The first webcam was about coffee?

AUSTIN About coffee. Ten years later, somebody paid a lot of money for that pot. A **broken** pot.

OLIVIA Who pays money for a broken coffee pot?

AUSTIN This is Aprendos English, level A2. I'm Austin.

OLIVIA And I'm Olivia. Seriously, Austin, who?

AUSTIN Patience. First, England. Cambridge University, in 1991.

OLIVIA Cambridge. So, very smart people.

AUSTIN Very smart, and very tired. They work in the computer lab, and one room there has a funny name. The Trojan Room.

OLIVIA Like the Trojan horse? The big wooden horse with soldiers inside?

AUSTIN That's the one, but no soldiers. Only about fifteen computer scientists.

OLIVIA And one coffee machine, I guess.

AUSTIN One machine for all of them, in the **corridor** outside the room.

OLIVIA The corridor, so the long hall between the rooms.

AUSTIN Right, the hall. And some people work on other floors of the building.

OLIVIA So they climb the **stairs**...

AUSTIN ...they climb the stairs, they walk down the hall, and the pot is empty.

OLIVIA Who drinks it all?

AUSTIN One of the scientists, Quentin, has an answer. He says the all-night hackers in the Trojan Room get there first.

OLIVIA Hackers, so computer people who work all night...

AUSTIN ...and drink all the coffee, yes.

OLIVIA Poor people. Three floors for nothing.

AUSTIN I know this pain. At my first job in San Diego, the machine was next to my boss. I only got coffee when he was in a meeting.

OLIVIA So you planned your coffee like a spy.

AUSTIN Like a spy. Today I just drink cold brew from a can.

OLIVIA From a can? Austin, I'm worried about you.

AUSTIN It's fast! Okay, listeners, if you like true stories about very small things, subscribe. We have lots more like this one. So, what do the scientists do about the empty pot?

OLIVIA Easy. They buy a second pot.

AUSTIN That's the normal answer. They do something much more fun.

OLIVIA A rule, then. The last person makes new coffee.

AUSTIN Nope. They point a camera at the pot.

OLIVIA A camera. In 1991.

AUSTIN In 1991. Two men build it, Quentin Stafford-Fraser and Paul Jardetzky.

OLIVIA Those are big names for a coffee story.

AUSTIN They put a small camera on a metal stand next to the machine...

OLIVIA ...and it looks at the pot all day?

AUSTIN All day. Then they run the wires under the floor to a computer.

OLIVIA And then?

AUSTIN Paul writes a program for that computer. It takes pictures of the pot every few seconds.

OLIVIA And Quentin?

AUSTIN Quentin writes a second program for everybody's computer. A **tiny** picture of the pot sits in the corner of your **screen**.

OLIVIA Clever. So before the stairs, you check your screen...

AUSTIN ...and you decide. Full pot, you go. Empty pot, you stay at your desk.

OLIVIA How good is the picture?

AUSTIN Terrible. It's black and white, and very small.

OLIVIA How small?

AUSTIN One hundred and twenty-eight dots across, and the same number down.

OLIVIA Dots, so pixels. My phone has millions of them.

AUSTIN And the picture changes only about three times a minute.

OLIVIA Three times a minute? That's so slow.

AUSTIN But coffee is slow too. A pot takes a few minutes to fill.

OLIVIA Okay, fair.

AUSTIN Quentin made a joke about that. He wrote that the grey picture was fine, because the coffee was grey too.

OLIVIA Grey coffee. So that's British coffee in 1991.

AUSTIN Careful. Britain is listening.

OLIVIA Sorry, Britain. Your tea is great.

AUSTIN Now guess how long they need to build all this.

OLIVIA A month?

AUSTIN About a day.

OLIVIA One day? I need a week for a new printer.

AUSTIN But there's a problem. In 1991, the camera only works inside the lab.

OLIVIA Of course, because almost nobody had the internet at home then.

AUSTIN Right. So for two years, the pot is only for the lab.

OLIVIA Ooh, and then 1993 comes. I know this part...

AUSTIN ...you know this part? Okay, go on.

OLIVIA In 1993, a new web browser comes out. Its name is Mosaic.

AUSTIN A browser, so a program for web pages.

OLIVIA Yes. And Mosaic can show pictures inside a web page. Before that, most web pages were just words.

AUSTIN Okay, now you're stealing my story.

OLIVIA Sorry, sorry. Take it back.

AUSTIN So in November 1993, two other men in the lab do something new. Daniel Gordon and Martyn Johnson put the coffee pot on the web.

OLIVIA So now anybody in the world can look at this pot.

AUSTIN Anybody, anywhere, any time of day...

OLIVIA ...all looking at a coffee pot in England. But why?

AUSTIN That's the funny part. They can't drink the coffee!

OLIVIA I know why. It's live, and it's very far away.

AUSTIN People love it. A TV channel from Japan even comes to film it.

OLIVIA A TV crew for a coffee pot.

AUSTIN And by about 1996, the picture has more than one million visits.

OLIVIA One million? For grey coffee?

AUSTIN For grey coffee. A journalist even said this. The pot had more visitors than King's College Chapel.

OLIVIA The chapel, so that big old church in Cambridge?

AUSTIN Yes, and tourists come from all over the world to see it.

OLIVIA And they lose to a coffee pot. Okay, listeners, quick question for you. What thing in your home needs a webcam? Tell us in the comments.

AUSTIN My answer is easy. The washing machines in my building.

OLIVIA Why those?

AUSTIN Two machines in the basement. I carry my clothes down four floors, and both are busy.

OLIVIA So that's your empty coffee pot.

AUSTIN Exactly. But back to our pot, because it isn't always the same pot.

OLIVIA What do you mean?

AUSTIN Coffee machines break. So over the years, the lab gets new ones.

OLIVIA How many?

AUSTIN Nobody agrees. Quentin once wrote three or four. Other people say four or five.

OLIVIA The most famous coffee pot in the world, and nobody counted them.

AUSTIN Nobody counted. Then in 2001, the computer lab moves to a new building.

OLIVIA Does the camera move too?

AUSTIN Guess.

OLIVIA Yes, of course. Everybody loves it.

AUSTIN No. The team decides to stop.

OLIVIA No! Why?

AUSTIN I think ten years is enough for them. And they have other work now.

OLIVIA It's still sad.

AUSTIN But the news is big. The story is on the front page of The Times in London...

OLIVIA ...the front page, so the first page, with the biggest news?

AUSTIN The very first page. And it's on the front page of The Washington Post too.

OLIVIA For a coffee pot!

AUSTIN On the twenty-second of August 2001, they **switch** the camera off. And guess the last picture.

OLIVIA An empty pot?

AUSTIN A hand. Three fingers, ready to press the switch.

OLIVIA Oh, that's a little sad, and a little funny.

AUSTIN And now, the broken pot.

OLIVIA Wait, can I tell this part? I read about it last year.

AUSTIN Of course you did. Go for it.

OLIVIA The people in the lab have a coffee club. The club owns the pot. They decide to sell the last pot on eBay, in an **auction**.

AUSTIN An auction, so people offer money, and the biggest offer wins.

OLIVIA Exactly. And this pot is a Krups, and it's in a bad state. It **leaks** water.

AUSTIN Oh no.

OLIVIA And somebody cut off the **plug**! The eBay page even says it's broken. Maybe nobody can fix it.

AUSTIN Wow. Great sales page.

OLIVIA The best. So the club hopes for a few hundred pounds. Enough for a new coffee machine.

AUSTIN And now I take it back. Guess the final price.

OLIVIA Five hundred pounds?

AUSTIN Higher.

OLIVIA A thousand?

AUSTIN Three thousand three hundred and fifty...

OLIVIA ...dollars?

AUSTIN Pounds. Three thousand three hundred and fifty British pounds.

OLIVIA For a broken pot with no plug?

AUSTIN For a broken pot with no plug.

OLIVIA Who buys it? A museum?

AUSTIN Not yet. A German news website, Spiegel Online.

OLIVIA News people. Of course they need coffee.

AUSTIN And then the coffee company, Krups, **repairs** it for free.

OLIVIA For free? Smart move. That's very good advertising for Krups.

AUSTIN Smart and kind, maybe. So the pot goes back to work. It makes coffee for the journalists in Hamburg.

OLIVIA Good coffee, Austin. Fresh from a pot. No cans in Hamburg.

AUSTIN I knew you were going to say that.

OLIVIA So is it still in Hamburg today?

AUSTIN No. Since 2016, it's in a big computer museum in Paderborn, in Germany...

OLIVIA ...so it gets to a museum in the end!

AUSTIN In the end, yes. And guess what's next to it.

OLIVIA A webcam.

AUSTIN A webcam, of course.

OLIVIA So it's famous again, and it doesn't even make coffee.

AUSTIN Your turn, listeners. A camera on a coffee pot: great idea or silly idea? Tell us in the comments.

OLIVIA And the full text with the key words is in a free PDF. Find it in the description.

AUSTIN Subscribe for our next A2 story too. It's about a stolen football World Cup and a very clever dog.

OLIVIA A dog? Okay, a dog is better than a camera.

AUSTIN And a dog doesn't need a plug.

OLIVIA Right. And now I need coffee. I'm going down three floors.

AUSTIN And if the pot is empty?

OLIVIA Then I'm building a webcam.

AUSTIN Give it one day. Bye, everyone!

OLIVIA Bye, everybody!

Did you understand?

Choose the correct answer.

1. Why are some scientists in the lab unhappy in 1991?

- ◯ The coffee machine is too slow.
- ◯ They walk to the coffee pot and it is often empty.
- ◯ The coffee is too expensive.

2. How long do Quentin and Paul need to build the camera system?

- ◯ About a day.
- ◯ About a month.
- ◯ About a year.

3. What happens in November 1993?

- ◯ The lab buys a second coffee pot.
- ◯ A TV channel from Japan buys the camera.
- ◯ Two men in the lab put the coffee pot on the web.

4. What does the last picture from the camera show?

- ◯ An empty pot.
- ◯ A hand, ready to press the switch.
- ◯ The whole team, waving goodbye.

5. Where is the pot today?

- ◯ In a computer museum in Paderborn, in Germany.
- ◯ Back in the computer lab in Cambridge.
- ◯ In the office of a news website in Hamburg.

Exercise 1. Odd one out

Which word doesn't belong? Think about why.

1.

◯ climb ◯ auction ◯ stairs ◯ corridor

Why doesn't it fit?

2.

◯ tiny ◯ small ◯ empty ◯ little

Why doesn't it fit?

3.

○ plug ○ switch ○ screen ○ corridor

Why doesn't it fit?

4.

○ broken ○ repair ○ fix ○ mend

Why doesn't it fit?

Exercise 2. Code breaker

Write the word from the list for each clue. The pink letters spell the name of a company in the story.

1. The last pot does this: water comes out of it. ☐☐☐☐
2. It doesn't work anymore. ☐☐☐☐☐☐
3. On eBay, people offer money, and the biggest offer wins. ☐☐☐☐☐☐☐
4. Krups does this to the pot for free. ☐☐☐☐☐☐
5. You climb these to go to another floor. ☐☐☐☐☐☐

WHICH COMPANY IS IT? ☐☐☐☐☐

Exercise 3. Your turn

What thing in your home or office needs a webcam? Write three or four sentences. Use at least two words from the list.

Answer key

Check your answers after you finish the activities.

Did you understand?

1. They walk to the coffee pot and it is often empty.
2. About a day.
3. Two men in the lab put the coffee pot on the web.
4. A hand, ready to press the switch.
5. In a computer museum in Paderborn, in Germany.

Exercise 1. Odd one out

1. **auction** The others are about the long walk to the coffee pot. An auction is a sale, like the eBay sale of the last pot.
2. **empty** The others mean not big, like the picture of the pot. Empty means nothing inside.
3. **corridor** The others are parts of machines. A corridor is a long hall in a building.
4. **broken** Repair, fix and mend all mean make it work again. Broken means it doesn't work.

Exercise 2. Code breaker

1. leak
2. broken
3. auction
4. repair
5. stairs

KRUPS Krups made the last pot, and the company repaired it for free after the auction.

Exercise 3. Example answer

The fridge at my office needs a webcam. It's at the end of a long corridor, and I always climb the stairs to get there. Very often my milk is gone and the fridge is empty. With a tiny picture on my screen, I could stay at my desk.