April 2nd

2001: A Space Odyssey

April 2, 1968

"2001: A Space Odyssey", directed by Stanley Kubrick, premiered at the Uptown Theatre in Washington, D.C. The film is noted for its scientific accuracy [Aug 9], [Nov 13], [Dec 9], pioneering special effects [April 8], and otherworldly narrative.

Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke [Dec 16] had first met in NYC in 1964 to discuss the possibility of working together on a film. As the idea developed, it was decided that it would be loosely based on Clarke's short story "The Sentinel", written in 1948 for a BBC competition.

The movie is mostly concerned with a voyage to Jupiter on a space craft controlled by the AI computer, HAL 9000 [Jan 12]. The mission was triggered by the discovery of a mysterious black monolith on the Moon which transmitted a signal towards Jupiter when touched.

HAL's advanced technologies includes being a superior player of chess, but at one point HAL claims to have a checkmate in two moves against astronaut Frank Poole. This should raise a red flag concerning HAL's truthfulness, since experts would recognize the game as being a copy of a famous real-world Roesch vs. Schlage match, played in Hamburg in 1910.

Such an esoteric reference would be entirely typical of Kubrick who was a passionate chess player. Quite probably it's intended as foreshadowing of HAL's subsequent bad behavior [Sept 00].

LEXIS Begins

April 2, 1973

Mead Data Central (MDC), a subsidiary of the Mead Corporation, launched the LEXIS ("legal information") database, offering computerized full-text search of all Ohio and New York legal cases.

LEXIS was the continuation of an experiment organized by James F. Preston Jr. and William G. Harrington of the Ohio State Bar Association (OSBA) in 1967 with Data Corporation, headed by Richard Gering.

In 1979, LEXIS introduced the little red UBIQ terminal, which led to the Lexis service becoming ubiquitous in law libraries and attorney's offices.

In 1980, an archive of all US federal and state cases was added to LEXIS. In the same year, the NEXIS ("news information") service went live, a searchable database of news articles that proved extremely popular with journalists.

In Dec. 1994, Mead sold the LexisNexis system to Reed Elsevier for $1.5 billion.

As of 2006, LexisNexis had the world's largest electronic database of legal and public-records, hosting over 30 TBs of content on multiple mainframes and servers. As a clear sign of the times, in Feb. 2020 the company moved its services to the AWS cloud [March 19].

Z80 SoftCard

April 2, 1980

Microsoft released its first hardware product, the Z80 SoftCard board for the Apple II [June 5]. It allowed programs that relied on CP/M [June 22] to run on the Apple II with only minor modifications. The board was primarily aimed at people wanting to use the enormously popular WordStar [Sept 00] word processor.

CP/M required an Intel 8080-compatible CPU, which the Z80 SoftCard provided in the form of a Zilog Z80 [March 9] chip. It wasn't possible to run CP/M directly on an Apple II since it used a MOS 6502 [Sept 16].

The SoftCard was Paul Allen's [Jan 21] idea, originally as a way to make it easier to port Microsoft's BASIC [Jan 2] to the Apple II. However, the card was developed by Tim Paterson [June 1] at Seattle Computer Products (SCP) [May 19].

A Z80 SoftCard. Photo by OlivierBerger. CC BY-SA 4.0.

The SoftCard became Microsoft's biggest revenue source in 1980, selling 5,000 units in three months at $349 a pop. The high sales continued for several years, and helped make the Apple II even more popular.

One drawback of the original SoftCard was that most Apple II users also had to buy the Apple 80-Column Text Card. It allowed the Apple II to display 80 columns of text instead of its usual 40 since WordStar required at least 64 columns on-screen.

PS/2 Introduced

April 2, 1987

The IBM Personal System/2 (PS/2) line was IBM's response to losing control of the PC market to IBM PC "clone" makers [Nov 4].

In particular, most PS/2s used the new Micro Channel Architecture (MCA), a bus format quite incompatible with IBM's AT bus [March 2] employed by the clones. MCA

could transfer data at 160 million bytes per second, eight times faster than the best bus speeds of the time.

Many credit the PS/2 as making the 3.5-inch floppy disk drive [Nov 00] and VGA (Video Graphics Array) standard for PCs. VGA offered 256 colors at a resolution of 320x200, and 16 colors at 640x480.

The series also featured faster serial communications (useful when using a modem), and faster RAM chips.

An IBM PS/2 Model 25. Photo by Raymangold22. CC0.

The company shipped more than a million units by the end of its first year, but ultimately failed to recapture the market.

One problem was that IBM's new OS, OS/2, wasn't ready for the PS/2's launch. When it finally did appear on [Dec 4], it was big, slow, and buggy, and the GUI version only arrived in late 1988. Some industry observers also pointed out that perhaps IBM shouldn't have asked Microsoft to develop OS/2 when it competed so directly against Microsoft products, such as MS-DOS and Windows 2.0 (which came out on [Dec 9] 1987).

Despite the fact that MCA was a huge technical improvement, the PC clone market didn't want to pay royalties to IBM. Instead the "Gang of Nine", led by Compaq [Feb 14], introduced its own standard, EISA, which extended the AT/ISA bus to 32 bits.

In fact, few desktop PCs ended up using EISA either, and the popular standard remained 16-bit ISA until Intel's introduction of PCI [June 22] in the early 1990's.

During the 1980's, IBM's adverts frequently used the likeness of Charlie Chaplin. For the PS/2, they added a soon-to-be notorious jingle: "How ya' gonna' do it? PS/2 It! It's as easy as I.B.M."

That ad's lack of success, combined with other dismal adverts deploying characters from the MAS*H TV show, persuaded IBM to change its global advertising agency. It was the largest account review ever, worth over $500 million a year.

Crazy Charts

April 2, 2006

"Crazy" by Gnarls Barkley became the first song to top the British singles chart based solely on online sales.

Following its release as a digital download, the song debuted at the number one spot on the UK download chart on March 22, 2006. At the time, chart rules allowed a song to appear in the UK Singles chart based on its online sales if a physical equivalent was released during the following week. As the CD single was released on April 3, "Crazy" became the number one single on this day.

It remained on top of the chart for nine weeks, a clear indication of the growing importance of the Internet.

Robot Scientist

April 2, 2009

Scientists from Aberystwyth University and the University of Cambridge, led by Ross King, published an article in *Science* announcing the "Robot Scientist" called Adam.

Adam was able to carry out the entire scientific process on its own: formulate hypotheses, design and run experiments, analyze data, and decide which experiments to run next.

The article discussed the robot's first discovery, simple but new knowledge regarding the genomics of the yeast species Saccharomyces cerevisiae. The human researchers also wisely checked Adam's discovery with their own experiments, which confirmed his findings.

Despite his name, Adam wasn't a humanoid robot; it was actually around 16 feet long, and 10 feet high and wide. However, he was eventually joined by an "Eve". King's group built "her" to autonomously design and screen drugs for treating malaria and schistosomiasis, an infection caused by a type of tropical parasitic worm.