April 21st

Wayne Douglas Pickette

Born: April 21, 1950;

California

The development history for the Intel 4004 [Nov 15] places the majority of the credit with four engineers – Federico Faggin [Dec 1], Ted Hoff [Oct 28], Stan Mazor [Oct 22], and Masatoshi Shima [Aug 22], but Pickette, who worked with Faggin and Shima, has argued that the 4004 also owes something to his design for a miniaturized PDP-8/S [March 22].

Pickette had bought a PDP-8/S in 1967, at the age of 17, and became interested in making a computer small enough to use in a real-world robot after reading Isaac Asimov's [Jan 2] "I, Robot". The result was his design for a PDP-8/S shrunk down to just 19 integrated circuits, with a Fairchild 74181 arithmetic and logic chip at its core.

Pickette presented his design to Fairchild Semiconductor [Oct 1] in Feb. 1968, but the company rejected his concept as "crazy." Some time later he persuaded Robert Noyce [Dec 12] to look over his chip block schematics, which led to his joining Intel on April 13, 1970.

He helped develop the 4004's instruction set [Nov 15], worked on the demonstration model for the chip, and assembled its first programs. He also presented the 4004 at the 1971 Fall Joint Computer Conference.

The Programma 101 Launched

April 21, 1964

The Olivetti Programma 101, also known as Perottina or P101, was the first commercial programmable "desktop computer", although it was arguably closer to being a programmable calculator. However, aside from the usual arithmetic functions, it supported conditional jump instructions, and internal memory (about 240 bytes) for data storage.

The device was created by Pier Giorgio Perotto (hence the machine's nickname), and its stylish case was designed by Mario Bellini.

It weighed around 65 pounds and was about the size of a typewriter. Olivetti, an Italian business, had been manufacturing typewriters since 1908 and adding machines since 1940.

The P101 didn't have a monitor, so output was sent to a small paper tape printer. Programs were input via plastic cards, approximately 3-inch wide and one foot long that had a magnetic coating on one side.

The P101 was launched at the 1964 New York World's Fair, and volume production started in 1965. About 44,000 units were sold, primarily in the US, with ten used at NASA during preparations for the Apollo 11 moon landing.

When Olivetti's computer division was sold to GE in 1965, the P101 inexplicably stayed with Olivetti. Apparently this was due to a re-categorization of the product from "computer" to "calculator", which meant it was excluded from the sale.

Game Boy Released

April 21, 1989

The Game Boy was an 8-bit handheld game console created by Gunpei Yokoi [Sept 10] and Satoru Okada at Nintendo. Its 2.9-inch screen could draw in four shades of gray, with games loaded from ROM-based cartridges.

The Game Boy's entire initial shipment of one million units was sold within a few weeks, which was something of a surprise at Nintendo since internal reviews had predicted poor sales. This was reflected in the console's nickname at the company: the "DameGame", dame being Japanese for "hopeless" or "lame"; its official codename was "Dot Matrix Game" or "DMG-01".

In retrospect, the Game Boy's success seems obvious – it offered a winning combination of low cost, portability, simplicity of use, and (eventually) a huge games library. Nintendo also made sure

The Nintendo Game Boy. Photo by Evan-Amos.

that later Game Boy systems remained backward compatible, so they still could run the many beloved older games. The most popular of these was probably Tetris [June 6], which came packaged with the device.

Another feature of the console that proved popular was a port that allowed it to be connected to another Game Boy via a cable. This let users compete in two-player games.

Multiple versions of the Game Boy followed, included one with a color screen in 1998. However, the next significant upgrade (or advance) was the Game Boy Advance [March 23].

Denver Bags

April 21, 1994

Denver International Airport's open day was intended to show off its state-of-the-art automated Airport Baggage System. It employed 100 computers, 5.5 miles of conveyor belts

operating at speeds of 20 mph, and 4,000 baggage carts; it was predicted that the system could deliver 60,000 bags per hour. The reality turned out to be less impressive.

Reporters were treated to scenes of clothing and other personal effects being scattered beneath the belts, with the actuators that moved luggage from belt to belt often tossing it exuberantly threw the air instead. The luggage carts were unable to cope with sharp corners in their routes, and the system's sensors couldn't reliably determine where bags were. The mayor quickly cancelled the planned May 15 airport opening.

The baggage system that was eventually unveiled was a shadow of what had been envisaged. It supported outbound flights on a single concourse only, while the rest of the airport's luggage was handled by a manual tug and trolley system. The project went over budget by almost 30%, costing a total of around $250 million, and was completely scrapped in Aug. 2005.

Winamp Released

April 21, 1997

Winamp was the most popular media player during the "MP3 revolution" of the early 2000's. It was created by Justin Frankel and Dmitry Boldyrev, with its name derived from its use of the AMP MP3 library.

Version 0.92, released in May, was the first to use Winamp's distinctive dark grey and glowing green color scheme. Later it gained a graphical equalizer, a playlist editor, and music visualization. After version 2 it was sold using the freemium model, and added support for plug-ins and skins.

Contrary to popular belief, Winamp wasn't the first Windows-based mp3 player – that honor goes to Winplay3, released in 1995.

Winamp may have been responsible for the first Internet meme [Nov 15], by way of its startup soundclip: "Winamp, it really whips the llama's ass!". This catchy slogan was taken from a Wesley Willis track called, unsurprisingly, "Whip The Llama's Ass," and became so popular that the company adopted "Mike the Llama" as its mascot.

Winamp 0.92. Screenshot by Mariusz S. Cybulski.

For more Internet memes, see [Jan 5], [May 31], [July 27], [Aug 00].

World Digital Library

April 21, 2009

The World Digital Library (https://www.wdl.org/en/) was launched at UNESCO headquarters in Paris, becoming the world's third major digital library, after Google Book Search [Oct 28] and the European Union's Europeana. As of 2021, it lists more than 19,000 items from nearly 200 countries, dating back to 8,000 BC.

The library holds many publications of historical significance, including "The Tale of Genji", an eleventh century Japanese manuscript considered to be the first novel ever written, the Arabic text of Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khuwarizmi which established algebra, the Waldseemüller map which was the first to include America, and a 13th-century "Devil's Bible" from the National Library of Sweden.

Other digital libraries of note include the Library of Congress's American Memory [Oct 13], the Internet Archive [May 12], Project Gutenberg [July 4], Google Books [Oct 6], and WikiSource [June 20].

Mobilegeddon

April 21, 2015

Google announced a change to how it rated websites, boosting the scores for sites that were mobile-friendly if the search was made from a mobile device. Chuck Price, in a post to "Search Engine Watch", termed this day "Mobilegeddon".

However, when content marketing company BrightEdge tracked over 20,000 URLs after the update, it only reported a 21% decrease in non-mobile-friendly URLs on the first three pages of Google's search results.