August 15th

Leslie John Comrie

Born: Aug. 15, 1893;

Pukekohe, New Zealand
Died: Dec. 11, 1950

Comrie was a pioneer in using mechanical computation for scientific purposes. In 1928, he utilized punched card equipment to predict the course of the Moon (for the years 1935 to 2000), and also to produce nautical tables. He hailed these devices (the National-Ellis 3000 and the Burroughs Class 16) as "modern Babbage machines" [Dec 26]. In 1937, he founded Scientific Computing Service Ltd, which produced ballistic, bombing, and surveying tables for the Allies during WWII.

A crater (23.3N 112.7W) on the far side of the moon, and an asteroid, 3521 Comrie, bear his name.

Paul Rand (Peretz Rosenbaum)

Born: Aug. 15, 1914;

Brooklyn, New York
Died: Nov. 26, 1996

Rand was a graphics designer known for his corporate logos, including for IBM [Aug 2], UPS, Enron, Westinghouse, ABC, and NeXT [Oct 12].

His work for IBM came about because Tom Watson Jr. [June 14] wanted IBM's "look" to be more like Olivetti's, the stylish Italian typewriter company. He hired Elliot Noyes, curator of the NYC Museum of Modern Art, who hired Paul Rand, and several other famous designers including Eero Saarinen [April 22], Isamu Noguchi, and Charles and Ray Eames [April 22][Feb 17]).

Aside from his IBM logo work, Rand also designed the witty rebus poster "Eye-Bee-M" in 1981 for the THINK campaign.

Rand was 72 when he designed the logo for NeXT. He billed Steve Jobs [Feb 24] $100,000, and produced a single design, with an elaborate book explaining its rationale, including why the logo was tilted from the vertical by 28 degrees. Jobs was delighted with the work.

Bletchley Park

Aug. 15, 1939

The first personnel from the UK's Government Code and Cypher School (GC&CS) moved into Bletchley Park, a stately home in Buckinghamshire with 50 acres of grounds. One nickname for GC&CS at the time was the "Golf, Cheese and Chess Society".

Bletchley was known as Station X during WWII, and remained a secret until 1967. Its successes included breaking the Enigma [Feb 23] and Lorenz ciphers [June 1], which shortened the war by many years

The idea for founding Bletchley came mainly from Alastair

Bletchley Park's main building (2017). Photo by DeFacto. CC BY-SA 4.0.

Denniston the head of GC&CS from 1919 to 1942, and a former Scottish Olympic hockey team member. He realized that mathematicians and engineers would be needed to break German's cipher machines, and his recruits included: Alan Turing [June 23], Gordon Welchman [March 18], Jack Good [Dec 9], Max Newman [Feb 7], and Thomas Flowers [Dec 22].

Several wooden huts were constructed at the end of 1939.

Huts 3, 6 and 8 became the homes for the Enigma work [March 18], and Hut 11 for the bombes [Feb 18]. Several brick-built "blocks" were added later: Block C carried out extra Enigma duties, Block F was nicknamed the Newmanry [June 1], and the Collossi [Jan 18] were in Block H.

Joan Clarke (1917 – 1996) was one of the few women employed at Bletchley as a cryptanalyst. She had gained a double first in mathematics at Cambridge, but had been denied a full degree, as only men were awarded those until 1948.

Churchill characterized the Bletchley Park team as "the geese who laid the golden eggs but never cackled".

EMISARI

Aug. 15, 1971

EMISARI – the Emergency Management Information System and Reference Index – was set up by the US Office of Emergency Preparedness. It was linked to ten regional centers around the country via a "Party Line," thereby probably making it the first multi-machine chat system.

It was first employed during the 90-day freeze on wages and prices announced by President Nixon on this day. It continued to be utilized during various emergenciess until 1986.

The team behind EMISARI was led by Murray Turoff, and the system was implemented on a UNIVAC 1108A [March 10], the first multiprocessor machine in that series. It was coded in around 2500 lines of XBASIC [May 1], running on the EXEC8 OS.

The second online chat system was probably the Talkomatic, a part of PLATO IV, which debuted in [July 00] 1976.

The Wow! Signal

Aug. 15, 1977

The Big Ear radio telescope, operated by the SETI project at Ohio State, received a strong 72 second signal originating from among a group of stars in the Sagittarius constellation. The signal's strength was 30 standard deviations above the mean background noise, indicating that the supposed transmitter must be utilizing a large amount on energy.

Astronomer Jerry R. Ehman discovered the anomaly a few days later, circling the reading on the printout, and writing the comment "Wow!".

There have been a range of non-alien explanations put forward for the signal over the years. For instance, in June 2017, Antonio Paris suggested that a pair of passing comets might have triggered the anomaly. Comets generate clouds of hydrogen which emit noise at the detected radio frequency.

The Rainbow Series

Aug. 15, 1983

The "Rainbow Series" of security standards and guidelines for computers was published by the US government during the 1980s and 1990s. The series' nickname comes from the different colors used for each book's cover. For example, "Trusted Computer System Evaluation Criteria" is almost always simply called "The Orange Book"; it was published on this day.

No lesser a security expert than Bruce Schneier [Jan 15] has stated that some of the books have "hideously colored covers." He picked out "Trusted Database Management System Interpretation of the TCSEC" as a good example. Wikipedia modestly describes it as having a purple cover.

The Rainbow Series. Photo by Dmeranda. CC0.

Metroid

Aug. 15, 1986

Nintendo released Metroid, a 2D platform game for the NES [Oct 18], which would go on to become one of Nintendo's most-popular franchises. It chronicles the missions of space-faring bounty hunter Samus Aran, who protects the galaxy from Space Pirates. As of Sept. 2012, the series had sold well over 17 million copies.

Metroid cleverly combined the platforming of "Super Mario Bros" [Sept 13], adventure in the style of "The Legend of Zelda" [Feb 21], with a touch of horror. The game's lead developer, Yoshio Sakamoto, said that Ridley Scott's [Jan 22] 1979 sci-fi film "Alien" was a huge influence. Indeed, one of the characters in the game is called Ridley.

Softlanding

Aug. 15 1992

Softlanding Linux System (SLS), released by Peter MacDonald, was arguably the first complete Linux distribution – it combined the Linux kernel, GNU utilities, the X Window System, and an installer. Its catchy slogan was "Gentle Touchdowns for DOS Bailouts", and was distributed on 15 floppy disks.

Although SLS was very popular for a while, it was eventually superseded by Slackware [June 17] which billed itself as a cleaned-up version of SLS. In a similar vein, Ian Murdock's dissatisfaction with SLS led him to create Debian [Sept 15].

For more Linux distributions, see [July 17], [Aug 11], [Dec 22], [Oct 20], [April 15], and [Feb 19].

Biff Dies

Aug. 15, 1993

One of the key elements of early UNIX [Oct 15] was a program called "biff" which would notify a user when new e-mail arrived.

The software's name came from Heidi Stettner's pet dog, Biff, when she and Bill Joy [Nov 8] were graduate students at Berkeley, and Joy was developing BSD version 4 [March 9]. Biff was known for barking at mailmen, and so his name seemed ideal for the command. Another version has it that Biff was a friendly dog who loved to chase and retrieve Frisbees.

Sadly, Biff (the dog) died on this day.

biff (the program) could cause trouble by inadvertently overwriting text on the screen, and so has fallen from favor in modern times. But the useful concept keeps reappearing; for instance, AOL's "You've got mail" voice [Dec 18] was a kind of Biff.

Browser Anyone?

Aug. 15, 1994

Benjamin Slivka had been assigned the task of researching possible features for MS Windows 95's successor [Aug 24]. On this day, he sent an email to his co-workers suggesting that they add in a Web browser.

In October he became the lead of the new Internet Explorer (IE) project, leading a team of just six people, and starting out far behind the competition. For instance, IBM launched OS/2 Warp Version 3 with a built-in Web browser and dial-up Internet connectivity during that

month [Oct 11], and Netscape [March 25] Navigator was released on Dec. 15. The first version of IE was released a year (and a day) later, on [Aug 16] 1995.

Who Owns Linux?

Aug. 15, 1994

On this day, William R. Della Croce, Jr. of Boston filed for ownership of the Linux [March 14] trademark, which he was somehow granted in Sept. 1995, and thereafter started demanding 10% royalties from various Linux distributors. After several court battles, Linus Torvalds [Dec 28] wrestled the trademark rights back on Aug. 20 1997.

These shenanigans mean that while the Linux kernel is free, the term "Linux" is a trademark owned by Torvalds. His assignee, the Linux Mark Institute (LMI), is empowered to collect licensing fees from companies and individuals who want to use the word commercially. LMI use to charge between $200 and $5,000, but later began offering a free worldwide sublicense.

Nokia 9000 Released

Aug. 15, 1996

The Nokia [May 12] 9000 Communicator became the first best-selling smartphone by integrating a cellular device with a personal organizer for the first time. Other features included email, a graphical web browser, support for faxes, word processing, and spreadsheets. However, the 9000 wasn't the first smartphone; that title goes to the IBM Simon [Aug 16].

The phone ran Nokia's GEOS 3.0 (a predecessor of the Symbian OS [June 24]) on an Intel 386 [Oct 17] with 8 MB of memory. The handset flipped open to reveal a 640 x 200 pixel screen and a keyboard.

The Nokia 9000. Photo by Tecno567. CC BY-SA 4.0.

Drawbacks included its bulk (over 1.5 inches thick), weight (a hefty 14oz), and the low-contrast LCD screen. It was also expensive.