August 23rd

Paul Marie Ghislain Otlet

Born: Aug. 23, 1868;

Brussels, Belgium
Died: Dec. 10, 1944

Otlet probably has the best claim to being called the "father of information science"; other contenders include Emanuel Goldberg [Aug 31] and Vannevar Bush [March 11]

In 1895, Otlet and Henri La Fontaine began building a collection of fact-filled index cards, that came to be known as the “Repertoire Bibliographique Universel”. In 1896, Otlet set up a fee-based service to answer questions by mail, which sent out copies of the relevant index cards for each query. By 1912, this service was dealing with over 1,500 queries a year.

Part of the Mundaneum (1920).

The collection grew to include letters, reports, newspaper articles, and images. It eventually held some 100,000 files and millions of images.

Perhaps in response to storage issues, Otlet and Robert B. Goldschmidt, another Belgian inventor, proposed a standardized format for microfiche in 1906, and a portable microform library in 1925.

In 1910, Otlet and La Fontaine announced the “Palais Mondial” (“World Palace”), to serve as a central repository for all the world’s information. Otlet renamed it the Mundaneum in 1924.

The Mundaneum grew to hold 13 million index cards by 1927, and over 15 million in 1934. At this juncture, the Belgian government cut off funding, and the project offices were closed.

Worse followed: during WWII, the Mundaneum’s quarters were requisitioned to hold a collection of Third Reich art, and substantial amounts of the collection was destroyed to make room for the artwork.

Nevertheless, Otlet's vision of a great network of knowledge never completely disappeared. For example, H.G. Wells promoted the idea [Nov 20] in his book, "World Brain" (1938), and in July 1945, Vannevar Bush took up the idea when he published “As We May Think” in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

A Mundaneum museum opened in Mons, Belgium, in 1998.

Georgi(i) Pavlovich Lopato

Born: Aug. 23, 1924;

Ozershchina, Gomel,
Byelorussian SSR
Died: Feb. 13, 2003

Lopato was the chief designer of the Minsk computer series, produced in the Byelorussian SSR from 1959 to 1975. The Minsk was one of the first Soviet small computers, and intended for engineering and scientific problems.

The Minsk-1 (Aug. 1960) used 800 valves, executed 2500 instructions per second, and used 1 KB of ferrite and magnetic tape memory. The most advanced model was the Minsk-32, developed in 1968 by V. V. Przhiyalkovsky. It supported COBOL, FORTRAN and ALGAMS (a version of ALGOL [Jan 11]). Nearly 2900 were produced until 1975, making it the most widely used general-purpose computer in the USSR at the time.

Other Soviet computing pioneers include Sergey Lebedev [Nov 2], Bashir Rameyev [May 1], and Boris Babayan [Dec 20].

DEC

Aug. 23, 1957

Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC or Digital) was founded by Ken and Stan Olsen [Feb 20], and Harlan Anderson on this day in Maynard, Mass. The company started with three employees and was based in a converted mill. One visitor said of the site: “it was a nice old 19th-century mill that was used to make wool blankets during the civil war, so the wooden floors were soaked with lanolin and had to be swabbed occasionally. It was a huge building, and a little spooky to work in at night when no one else was around.”

DEC initially sold computer modules for use in labs, that could be purchased separately and wired together to produce different digital systems.

In “Phase II”, it focused on the development of a new class of smaller computer, the minicomputer. The resulting PDP series [Oct 30] became popular in the 1960s, especially the PDP-8 [March 22]. However, the machine that really cemented its position was the PDP-11 [Jan 5], released in 1970, with over 600,000 units eventually sold.

This was followed by the VAX-11 series [Oct 25], the first widely used 32-bit minicomputer, sometimes referred to as a “supermini”. These machines were able to replace mainframes, such as the IBM System/370, in many domains.

But the rapid rise of the business microcomputer in the late 1980s, and the introduction of 32-bit systems in the 1990s, eroded the value of DEC’s systems. DEC made an attempt to move into personal computing with its Rainbow 100 [May 00], but the company's business model wasn't geared up for low-cost, high-volume

sales. Its last major product was the DEC Alpha [Feb 25].

DEC was acquired by Compaq [Feb 14] in June 1998, in what at that time was the largest merger in the computer industry. Compaq subsequently merged with Hewlett-Packard (HP) in May 2002 [Sept 3].

LACES

Aug. 23, 1971

The London Airport Cargo Electronic Data Processing Scheme (LACES) came online at Heathrow Airport. The cargo terminal was linked with two ICL System 4-72's [July 9] that were able to handle requests from some 220 terminals, and process up to 500 enquiries/minute. A standard request was completed within 2 seconds.

Before LACES, the old-style paperwork took so long that cargo usually sat at the airport for four to five days – one of the worst records in Europe. After LACES, most cargo was delivered the day after its arrival.

LACES was probably the first example of Electronic data interchange (EDI) by computer. However, the first ever EDI messages were sent in 1965 when the Holland-American steamship line began transmitting trans-Atlantic shipping manifests as telexes. When these messages were received, they were written to tape and loaded onto a computer.

Vector Graphic

Aug. 23, 1976

Vector Graphic was an early microcomputer company, founded by Lore and Robert Harp and Carole Ely. The business was mainly located on two desks in a spare bedroom at the Harp residence. However, they tested computers at a separate facility (the dining room table) and kept packing materials in a shower cubicle.

Their first product was a memory card for the MITS Altair 8800's [Dec 19] 100-pin expansion bus, which the industry later dubbed the S-100 [Aug 28]. The card proved wildly successful.

A full microcomputer, the Vector 1, using the Z80 chip [March 9], was introduced in 1977. It shipped in two case colors, green or orange (although the latter was arguably closer to "rust"). A clever attempt to utilize orange circuit boards to match the case went awry when the first batch of fifty came back pink.

Apple and Commodore could boast larger unit sales if figures for both the business and home markets were combined, but when it came to more expensive machines for medium-sized businesses, Vector was the dominant player. By 1980, it was achieving $25 million (about $95 million today) in annual sales.

Sales peaked in 1982, but faltered soon afterwards. The introduction of the IBM PC in [Aug 15] 1981 radically changed the market and many smaller players, including Vector Graphic, lost out.

Drilling Platform Sinks

Aug. 23, 1991

The Sleipner A offshore drilling rig was being built for deployment in the North Sea. On this day, its concrete base was being lowered into the water at the docks just as its buoyancy tanks sprung a leak, causing the base to sink. The accient caused a seismic event registering 3.0 on the Richter Scale, and a $500 million drilling platform was lost.

The base had been designed using a well-respected, sophisticated, finite element package. However, an investigation using a different finite elements package, showed that the software had made a poor approximation in a critical area of the base, resulting in an underestimate of stresses on the buoyancy tanks by about 50%.

Rather than use the unreliable software again, the operator switched to an old design made using "pre-computer slide rule era techniques" [July 11]. Admittedly the new base was less sophisticated, more costly to build, but had the advantage of working correctly.

Doonesbury's Newton

Aug. 23, 1993

Garry B. Trudeau, the creator of the popular *Doonesbury* comic strip, published a week-long series of gags satirizing the shortcomings of Apple's Newton MessagePad [Aug 3]. Some Newton fans later blamed this strip for contributing to the product's failure.

"The series was really supposed to be about boys and their toys," Trudeau later said. "I seized on the personal digital assistant idea because it struck me as a very expensive replacement for a $5 datebook."

Perhaps the best known joke in the series appeared on Aug. 27: Mike tries out his PDA's handwriting recognition by writing "Catching on?"; the pharse is corrected to "Egg Freckles?".

The Newton engineers tacked the strips on the lab wall as inspiration, and included a version of the "Egg Freckles?" panel in the Newton OS 2.0 as an Easter Egg.

For more computing cartoons, see [March 12], [April 16], [July 5], [Sept 9], [Sept 24], [Oct 17].

Second Live Streaming

Aug. 23, 1994

The Santa Cruz Operation (SCO) [Jan 00] streamed a live "Deth Specula" concert over the Internet from the Cowell courtyard at UCSC. This was the second netcast ever; the first being by the group "Severe Tire Damage" on [June 24] 1993.

There's some argument over whether this event counts as a webcast [July 17] because the concert was streamed using the Internet Multicast Backbone (MBone) [July 30].

"Deth Specula" was a parody group composed of SCO employees. The first song streamed was called, "We Are An Internet Band", based on "Grand Funk Railroad"'s "We're An American Band". The revised lyrics began: "We're comin' to your town to bring your network down. We are an Internet band."

The bassist, Jon Luini (aka "yam"), was one of the three founders of the Internet Underground Music Archive (IUMA) in 1993 [May 29].

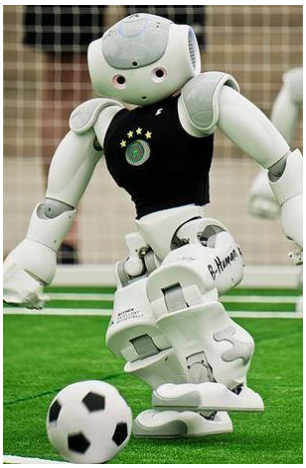
The previous day [Aug 22], SCO and Pizza Hut had made history by announcing PizzaNet, also at the UCSC campus.

RoboCup Kicks Off

Aug. 23 - 29 1997

The 1997 RoboCup 2D Soccer Simulation League was the first RoboCup competition. The ambitious aim was to field a fully autonomous humanoid robot soccer team that would be able to beat the human squad that had won the most recent World Cup. The main organizers were Hiroaki Kitano, Manuela M. Veloso, and Minoru Asada.

The event was held during IJCAI-96 in Nagoya, Japan, although there had been a practice "warm-up" event the year before at IROS-96 in Osaka.



A SPL team B-Human robot, RoboCup 2016. Photo by Peter Schulz. CC BY-SA 4.0.

Since this first competition, RoboCup has blossomed to include rescue robots, robots in the home, at work, and self-organizing mechanical men [March 24].

RoboCup 2019 was held in Sydney, home of the UNSW team, who have been crowned world champions more times than any other team. Around 600 groups competed.

Blogger

Aug. 23, 1999

Pyra Labs launched Blogger, one of the first blog publishing services. Its popularity would later be credited with turning the word "blog" into both a noun and verb. Much of the original code was written by Paul Bausch and Matthew Haughey.

The very first blogging platform was probably Open Diary, which was released on [Oct 20] 1998. However, the first blog predates that software by a few years – Justin Hall's web-based diary started on [Jan 23] 1994.

The term "weblog" was coined by Jorn Barger on [Dec 17] 1997. The short form, "blog," was invented by Peter Merholz, who jokingly broke the word weblog into the phrase "we blog" in the sidebar of his Peterme.com blog in April or May 1999.

On Feb. 24, 2015, Blogger announced that it would no longer allow its users to post sexually explicit content, unless the nudity offered "substantial public benefit."

Happy Mac

Aug. 23, 2002

At 10:20 pm, Apple launched Mac OS X 10.2, codenamed "Jaguar" [March 24]. It included numerous new features, including the iChat instant-messaging client and Inkwell handwriting recognition. But something was missing. For the first time since the Mac's launch on [Jan 24] 1984, the "Happy Mac" icon was no longer part of the system's start-up sequence. It had been replaced by a silver-gray Apple icon.

The "Happy Mac" had been designed by Susan Kare [Feb 5] in Nov. 1983. She responded to its disappearance in the *New York Times*: "He was carried off into the night. There isn't even a milk carton that reads, 'Have you seen this icon?'"

Also gone was the "Happy Mac's black-sheep brother, the "Sad Mac", who would have previously popped up if there was a hardware problem. The "Sad Mac" came with its own little tune, known cheerfully as "The Chimes Of Death".

But this story has a happy ending – the iPhone X [Jan 9] has reemployed the "Happy Mac" as part of its Face ID feature, although he's lost his body.