Dec. 13th

Ernst Werner von Siemens (von from 1888)

Born: Dec. 13, 1816;

Lenthe, Germany
Died: Dec. 6, 1892

Siemens and Johann Georg Halske founded "Telegraphen-Bauanstalt von Siemens & Halske" on Oct. 1, 1847. The company was built around Siemen's pointer telegraph which used a needle to point to the right letter, rather than requiring the user to know Morse code [Oct 19]. By the 1960's the company was known simply as Siemens, and had become the largest industrial manufacturer in Europe.

Siemens & Halske's early telecommunication successes included building the first long-distance telegraph line in Europe, stretching 500 km from Berlin to Frankfurt. In 1867, the company completed the first Indo-European telegraph line (from Calcutta to London, via Berlin, Odessa, and Teheran). Also, they employed their cable-laying ship, the Faraday, to lay several transatlantic telephone cables in the later 1870's after earlier attempts had failed [Aug 16].

Other Siemens inventions included the world's first electric elevator (1880), the world's first electric street lighting, installed in Godalming, England (1881), and the first electric-powered trolleybus (1882).

Siemens' name was adopted as the SI unit of electrical conductance in 1971.

Jack (Idek, Jacek)
Tramiel (Trzmiel, Tramielski)

Born: Dec. 13, 1928;

Łódź, Poland
Died: April 8, 2012

His Anglicized last name is pronounced truh-MELL.

Tramiel founded Commodore [Oct 10], the company behind the PET [April 15], VIC-20 [May 00], Commodore 64 [Jan 7], Amiga 1000 [July 23], and several other home computers. Inexpensive and immensely popular, they helped kickstart the PC industry.

Tramiel's abrasive, autocratic style was renowned, as were his yelling fits, dubbed "Jack Attacks". Steve Arnold of LucasArts [Sept 12] once said that Tramiel reminded him of "Jabba the Hut", although within Atari, the preferred "Star Wars" comparison was with "Darth Vader".

Tramiel once said "Business is war, I don't believe in compromising, I believe in winning." For example, in 1983, when Commodore was at its height, he ran a full-page newspaper advertisement that announced: "Commodore ate the Apple."

Jack Tramiel (1982). Photo by Michael Tomczyk, Commodore's "VIC Czar". CC BY-SA 4.0.

On [Jan 16] 1984, Tramiel resigned from Commodore, and soon after formed Atari Corporation [July 1], raised from the ashes of the original, now-defunct Atari.

As a child, after the German invasion of Poland in WWII, he and his family was sent to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, where he was examined by the notorious SS officer Dr. Josef Mengele.

Tramiel was rescued from the Ahlem labor camp in April 1945 by the 84th Infantry Division, and after emigrating to the US, he joined the army. In later life, Tramiel gave regular talks about the Holocaust, and was a co-founder of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. It includes a plaque which reads, "To Vernon W. Tott, My Liberator and Hero." Tott had been in the 84th Division.

Relay I
Dec. 13, 1962

NASA's Relay 1, the first active repeater communications satellite, was launched on this day, and began transmitting test patterns on Jan 3, 1963, once its solar cells had been fully charged.

On Nov. 22, 1963, it became the first satellite to broadcast TV signals from the US to Japan, which happened to be the announcement of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The following summer, it was used to broadcast the Summer Olympics from Japan, relaying the signal via another satellite, Syncom 3. This was the first time two satellites had been used together for transmitting a TV broadcast.

Amateur Computer Club
Dec. 13, 1973

The UK's Amateur Computer Club (ACC) sprung into existence as a byproduct of Mike Lord publishing the first issue of the *ACC Newsletter* in March 1973. Each issue contained lots of good stuff, including data sheets

of surplus hardware, book recommendations, how to get free time on university machines, and the latest prices for chips. Two notable early articles gave a description of the instruction set for a simple 10-bit computer designed by Ian Spencer, and John Florentin supplied details on how to build a homemade PDP-8 [March 22].

The first actual ACC meeting was held on this day at the South Bank Polytechnic in London, but according to a write-up in the next newsletter, "only 10 people managed to overcome the transport problems (no trains, hardly any petrol)." This refers to the 1973 oil crisis. Nevertheless, the club grew to over 600 members by 1976.

Other notable user groups, in chronological order of their foundation, include SHARE [Aug 22], DECUS [March 00], USENIX [May 15], the Amateur Computer Society (ACS [May 5]), the Homebrew Computer Club [March 5], ACGNJ [June 13], A.P.P.L.E. [Feb 21], and the Chaos Computer Club (CCC) [Sept 12].

Gates Arrested
Dec. 13, 1977

Bill Gates [Oct 28] was arrested for reckless driving in Albuquerque, probably for running a stop sign and driving without a license. The police mugshot taken at the time keeps popping up on the Internet, and here it is again.

Years later, reporters wanting more juicy details were disappointed when a spokesperson for the Albuquerque Police department stated that no record could be found. This probably meant that the charges were dropped and Gates' record expunged. (It's untrue that the department's copy of MS Access deleted the data autonomously.)

Another spokesperson, this time from Microsoft, commented that Bill Gates remembered being taken into custody, and added,

"It is well-known that when Bill was young he didn't have a very good driving record."

Bill Gates (1977). A glamor shot by the Albuquerque, New Mexico police department.

Paul Allen [Jan 21] wrote that in the early days of Microsoft, Gates amassed so many speeding tickets that he was forced to hire the best traffic attorney in Washington State to get him out of trouble.

In 2007, Gates told Gizmodo that he remembered getting three speeding tickets in 1978, two from the same police officer, while driving his Porsche 911 home to Seattle.

In 2016, Gates told another interviewer that back then he'd sometimes go out at night and "drive around at high speeds" through the New Mexico desert, just to clear his head and think.

In 2010, the ArsTechnica website remarked that the outline of Gates in the mugshot looks very much like the default silhouette used in the "People Pane" of MS Outlook 2010.

Atari 1200XL
Dec. 13, 1982

The Atari [June 27] 1200XL ("extended look") was announced at a press conference in NYC as part of Atari's "Sweet-Sixteen" strategy, although it only started shipped in March 1983. It had a striking, high-tech appearance designed by Regan Cheng, and internally replaced the seven separate boards that

made up the Atari 800 [Nov 00] with a single motherboard with 64 KB of memory. However, it soon gained a reputation for being a crippled machine that was too expensive. There were only two joystick ports instead of the four on the Atari 400 and 800, its Serial Input/Output (SIO) port was incompatible with some devices, and its color enhancement feature couldn't be utilized because, inexplicably, the designers had forgotten to connect it to the monitor port. In general, the machine's "closed box" design made it difficult to change the hardware.

The underlying problem seemed to be that the machine had been brought to market too quickly, with the aim of competing against the unstoppable Commodore 64 [Jan 7]. Given enough time, the subsequent Atari 600XL and 800XL proved to be better machines.

There is an oft-repeated story, that sales of the old Atari 800 shot up after the release of the 1200XL, as people tried to snap up the "better" machine before it was withdrawn.

Tecmo Super Bowl Released
Dec. 13, 1991

"Tecmo Super Bowl" is an American football game for the NES [Oct 18] which was the first to acquire licensing agreements with the National Football League (NFL) and the NFL Players Association. This meant the game could use the names and attributes of real teams and players, and this approach later became standard for sports games.

"Tecmo Super Bowl" has maintained an extensive cult following, partly due to how easy it is to modify the game to support college football rosters or present-day professionals.

There's a number of tournaments based around the game, including an annual world championship held in Madison,

Wisconsin.

Free Ryzom
Dec. 13, 2006

The Free Software Foundation (FSF) pledged $60,000 dollars to the Free Ryzom Campaign, which hoped to purchase the Ryzom MMORPG so it could be released as free software. Its original developer, Nevrax, had gone into receivership in Nov.

The game featured a unique character abilities system that allowed players to construct custom actions like spells or attacks. It also had a scenario editor that let players design their own game areas. The underlying game engine, NeL (for Nevrax Library), had been open sourced in 2002.

Unfortunately, the 2006 campaign only raised €172,988, just short of the necessary €200,000, and on Dec. 21 Ryzom was sold to GameForge France. However, less than a year later, GameForge itself filed for bankruptcy before it had finished paying for the game, so it was returned to Nevrax.

On May 6, 2010, Nevrax announced the release of Ryzom's source code in partnership with the FSF, and it can still be downloaded from https://ryzom.com/

SUNBURST Reported
Dec. 13, 2020

The Washington Post reported that multiple government agencies were breached via updates to SolarWinds's Orion software (a popular network management system).

The hackers had acquired superuser access to token-signing certificates at SolarWinds which gave them trusted access to its networks.

The cybersecurity firm FireEye (one of the companies affected) reported that the hackers had inserted "malicious code into legitimate software updates for Orion that allow an attacker remote access to the victim's environment". FireEye also named the malware SUNBURST

SolarWinds later stated in an SEC filing that 18,000 of its customers had been affected by Orion versions released between March and June 2020. Victims included the US Treasury Department, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, and Homeland Security. International customers impacted may include NATO, the European Parliament, GCHQ in the UK [June 5], the UK Ministry of Defence, and the UK Home Office.

It's now believed that APT29, aka Cozy Bear, working for the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, was behind the attack.

In Nov. 2019, a security researcher notified SolarWinds that their FTP server had a weak password; namely "solarwinds123". Also *The New York Times* reported that SolarWinds didn't employ a chief information security officer at the time, and that employee passwords had been posted on GitHub [Feb 8] in 2019.

For a few more choice pieces of malware, see [March 4; May 7; July 15; Sept 5; Nov 21; Nov 24].