Feb. 14th

Bell vs. Gray

Feb. 14, 1876

Prev: [June 2] Next: [March 7]

Separate patents for the telephone were filed on this day by Alexander Graham Bell and Elisha Gray [Aug 2], setting the stage for the controversy over who actually invented the device. Indeed, it's probably the single most litigated fact in US history, with Bell's patents having been defended in over 600 cases.

It's true that Bell's lawyer had his paperwork filed first – the application was the fifth received by the patent office that day, while Gray's was the 39th. But those numbers are misleading, since Bell's papers was handed in directly while Gray left his application in an in-basket. Nevertheless, it was enough, and Bell was awarded US patent 174465, on [March 7], 1876.

Another unsettling aspect of the story was that Gray had kept his invention a secret until the preceding Friday, Feb. 11. Rumor has it that it was only when Bell heard of Gray's work on that day, that he hurriedly prepared his patent application. The rushed nature of the paperwork is sometimes 'proved' by the way that Bell scribbled an addition in the margin.

Some ten years later (1886), a patent examiner, Zenas Wilber, signed a sworn affidavit that Bell had paid him a bribe in March 1876 to look at the details of Gray's application. This supposedly gave Bell the necessary hints to convert his vague ideas into a working system. However, Wilber's claims were dismissed at the time.

Adding to the confusion is that Italian inventor Antonio Meucci began developing a "telegrafo parlante" (a talking telegraph), in 1849, and Bell later conducted experiments in the same lab as Meucci.

On June 11, 2002, the US Congress naming Meucci as the inventor of the telephone, but many engineers disagree. One remarked, "Meucci's telephone was more like two tin cans and a thread."

The Birth of IBM

Feb. 14, 1924

Thomas J. Watson [Feb 17] decided to rename the Computing-Tabulating-Recording Company (C-T-R [June 16]), and submitted an application to list "International Business Machines" on the New York Stock Exchange using the initials IBM. He'd never liked the clumsy hyphenated C-T-R.

Watson had joined the company as General Manager on May 1 1914, after leaving National Cash Register (NCR); he was promoted to president just 11 months later.

The IBM name came about because Watson was looking for a way to 'improve' on NCR: "International" was better than "National", and "Business Machines" was way more sophisticated than "Cash Register".

Watson's business acumen led to rapid improvements at IBM. He implemented generous sales incentives, an insistence on well-groomed, dark-suited salesmen [Feb 4], and an almost evangelical fervor for company pride and loyalty [May 4], [May 29].

Of course, he popularized the "THINK" slogan, that he'd actually coined while at NCR. A biographical article in 1940 noted that "This word is on the most conspicuous wall of every room in every IBM building. Each employee carries a THINK notebook in which to record inspirations. The company stationery, matches, scratch pads all bear the inscription, THINK. A monthly magazine called *Think* is distributed to the employees."

IBM became a highly-effective organization, based largely around punched card tabulating machines [July 20]. For instance, Watson's technique of leasing machines and supplying services was a much more profitable approach than selling the hardware outright.

By 1952, IBM owned and leased more than 90 percent of all tabulating machines in the US. Unfortunately this success triggered an antitrust suit by the Department of Justice on [Jan 21].

A Path to Thinking at IBM Poughkeepsie. Photo by Agiorgio. CC BY-SA 4.0

Watson's devotion to punched cards meant that it wasn't until his son, Thomas Watson, Jr. [Jan 14], became IBM president in 1952, that the company really poured its energies into the computer field. For example, Watson Sr. had turned down a chance to buy Eckert-Mauchly Computer Corporation [Oct 25] in 1949. Admittedly, this decision may have been influenced by his bad experience working with Howard Aiken [March 8] on the Automatic Sequence Controlled Calculator (ASCC) [Aug 7] in 1944.

On the bright side, this falling out with Aiken meant that IBM decided to focus its funding on Columbia, and Wallace Eckert's [June 19] lab was transformed into the Watson Scientific Computing Lab [Feb 6]. Several historic computers were designed and/or built there while Watson Sr. was in charge,

including the SSEC ([Jan 27] 1948), and the IBM 604 ([June 00] 1948).

Reverend Apple

Feb. 14, 1981

"Reverend Apple", an Apple II program, performed its first marriage today, on Valentine's Day.

The computer displayed the text of the wedding vows, and vocalized the usual questions. However, instead of answering "I do" , the bride and groom had to type in "Y". If either of them entered "N" then the machine beeped, told them to try again, and repeated the question (hopefully not thereby entering an infinite loop).

The software was written by M.E. Cavanaugh at the request of the Rev. Ron Jaenisch, who stood in attendance with "Reverend Apple" while the ceremony was being performed/executed.

Officially, the computer was only Jaenisch's assistant, but Jaenisch's main role was to start a wedding service by pushing a 'RUN WED' button. Rev. Jaenisch was known as the "Archbishop in Charge of Keyboarding".

During its first eight months, "Reverend Apple" disappointingly only performed six marriages. Jaenisch explained, "It's not easy to convince people to get married by a computer. They don't think it's romantic."

Don't Trash the ENIAC

Feb. 14, 1981

For ENIAC's 35th birthday [Feb 15], the wily old-timer was pitted against a state-of-the-art RadioShack TRS-80 Model 1 [Aug 3] in a colossal battle to square all the integers from 1 to 10,000. The graybearded ENIAC managed it in six seconds, but the TRS-80 (aka the "Trash-80") accomplished it in a sprightly third of a second.

In more recent times, various iconic computers have been compared using the Dhrystone 2.1 benchmark, developed by Reinhold P. Weicker, to calculate their MIPS (millions of instructions executed per second) score:

- The ENIAC: 0.0029 (obtained using a simulator;
- MITS Altair [Dec 19]: 0.01;
- Apple II [April 15] 0.02;
- Commodore 64 [Jan 7]: 0.02;
- Atari 800XL [Nov 00]: 0.165;
- Raspberry Pi 2 [Feb 29]: 9700.

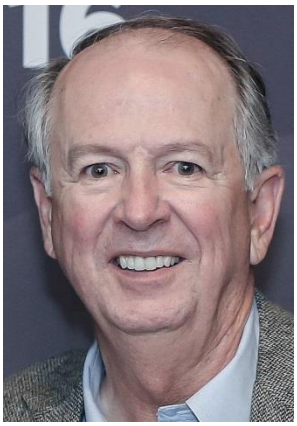
Most of the surviving ENIAC hardware is on display at the Smithsonian in Washington DC. Several panels are also on show at the Heinz Nixdorf Museum in Paderborn, Germany, and at the Moore School [Aug 7].

ENIAC's 50th anniversary [six entries on] was also incorrectly celebrated on this day.

Compaq

Feb. 14, 1982

Compaq (a portmanteau word based on Compatibility And Quality) was founded in 1982 by Rod Canion, Jim Harris and Bill Murto— all former Texas Instruments managers [Oct 1].



Rod Canion (2016). Photo by Frank Schramm. CC BY 2.0.

The company became the largest supplier of PCs during the 1990's [Jan 28], even though the founders had initially considered starting a chain of Mexican restaurants instead.

The first Compaq PC was sketched out on a placemat/napkin by Canion while dining with the other founders at the "House of Pies" in Houston. Their idea was to reverse-engineer the IBM PC [Aug 12] to produce a 100% compatible machine that was considerably cheaper.

To get around IBM's ownership of the machine's BIOS [July 10], they hired engineers with no knowledge of that code, put them in a "clean room", and had them come up with a BIOS of their own. This was expensive (costing an estimated $1 million), but legal. The resulting Compaq Portable [Nov 4] was a massive hit.

In 1987, Murto resigned to join a religious education program at the University of St. Thomas

First Online Wedding

Feb. 14, 1983

George Mike Stickel, aged 29, and Debbie Fuhrman, 23, exchanged wedding vows in Grand Praire, Texas via CompuServe's CB Simulator chat program [Feb 21].

Sixty-six wedding guests from across the country attended the event online, including the bride's parents at home in Phoenix, Arizona, while her sister was present via hardware lent out by a RadioShack [Feb 2] store in Sacramento, California. They were frequenting a private CB channel accessible with the password "Lovein."

Reverend Kim Payton, a Universalist minister, stood at one terminal, while Debbie and Mike stood across from him at their own input device, tastefully decorated for the occasion with two white ceramic swans.

Upon receiving the question, “Do you, Debbie, take Mike to be your lawful husband?”, Debbie typed in “I will” and the screen flashed “(((((((KISS)))))))”and a shower of periods, commas and asterisks rained down to represent rice; overcome by emotion, the bride’s mother typed in “Sniff.” A complete transcript of the happy event was printed in *InfoWorld* magazine on March 14.

“We met through a computer,” said Stickel later, “and we dated through a computer, so it was just the next step to be married by a computer. What could be more logical?”

The first “Virtual Reality” wedding occurred some ten years later, on [Aug 20] 1994

Lotus Symphony Introduced

Feb. 14 1984

Lotus Symphony was an integrated MS-DOS package [Aug 12] for creating and editing text, spreadsheets, charts, databases, and sending e-mail. It was released as a follow-up to Lotus' ubiquitous spreadsheet program, Lotus 1-2-3 [Jan 26].

Lotus 1-2-3 had originally also been billed as an integrated product with spreadsheet, database, and graphing (hence the name “1-2-3”). But other “integrated” products, such as Ashton-Tate’s Framework [Aug 00], included more stuff, such as word processing; Symphony was Lotus’ response.

Lotus Jazz [Nov 12] was a sibling product for the Mac which proved less of a success. Clearly more people like symphonic music than jazz.

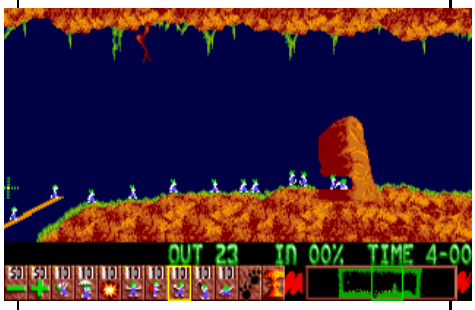
In 1992, Symphony was replaced by Lotus SmartSuite, but in 2007, after Lotus had been bought by IBM [July 6], the Symphony name was resurrected, attached to integrated software for MS Windows.

Lemmings

Feb. 14, 1991

Lemmings is a puzzle game developed by Russell Kay, Mike Dailly, and David Jones at DMA Design in Dundee, Scotland for the Amiga [July 23]. The game was inspired by a 8x8 pixel animation that Dailly created while experimenting with Deluxe Paint, the de facto art package for the Amiga.

The objective is to guide a group of human-like lemmings through a number of obstacles on each game level so that enough of them reach the exit. This is done by assigning skills to specific lemmings – the Climber, the Floater, the Bomber, the Blocker, the Builder, the Basher, the Miner, and the Digger. These allow a lemming to modify the landscape (e.g. build a bridge, dig a hole), or change the behavior of other lemmings.



Lemmings crossing a bridge and tunnelling through a boulder. Screenshot of the Amiga version of the game.

The levels were grouped into four categories on most platforms: Fun, Tricky, Taxing, and Mayhem, while a two-player option took advantage of the Amiga's ability to support two mice simultaneously.

Sales topped 55,000 copies when the game was released on this day, and an estimated 15 million copies of all the ports were sold between 1991 and 2006.

In the box cover art, the lemmings are carrying a sign that says the game is not responsible for players' loss of sanity, hair, nor sleep. The "droopy-nosed" lemmings design was inspired by the UK children's book "The Wombles", by Elizabeth Beresford.

On the 20th anniversary in 2011 a plaque was unveiled at the bottom of Perth Road in Dundee, commemorating DMA’s first office, where the game was born.

Project Star Trek Begins

Feb. 14, 1992

“Star Trek” [Sept 8] was the name of a top-secret project by Apple and Novell [June 19] to port the Mac OS to Intel x86 PCs by running the OS as a shell on top of Novell’s DOS. This wasn't quite as crazy as it sounded since MS Windows 3.1 [April 6] employed MS-DOS in a similar way. Indeed, the development reached a point where System 7.1 [May 13] could boot on an Intel 486 PC, but only with very specific hardware.

The project's tagline (almost inevitably given its name) was “to boldly go where no Mac has gone before.” However, *ComputerWorld* magazine mocked it as “the OS that boldly goes where everyone else has been”.

“Star Trek” never quite reached warp speed before John Sculley’s [April 6] reign at Apple came to an end. The new CEO, Michael Spindler, had little interest in porting the Mac OS to the x86, preferring to prepare System 7 for the PowerPC [March 14]. The project was canceled in 1993, although various bits-and-pieces popped up in other projects, notably in Novell DOS 7.

Delphi Released

Feb. 14, 1995

Delphi evolved from Borland’s Turbo Pascal [Nov 20], which was hardly surprising since the chief architect of both was Anders Hejlsberg [Dec 2]. Delphi is essentially Pascal [Feb 15] with object oriented extensions.

Delphi's excellent programming environment included a code editor, a visual designer, an integrated debugger, a source code control component, and support for third-party plugins. A Delphi project of a million lines could easily compile in a few seconds, and the generated binary code was small.

Delphi was originally one of many codenames used in the project, and probably a reference to the classical Greek oracle at Delphi. Delphi supported database connectivity including links to Oracle databases, so Danny Thorpe suggested: "if you want to talk to the Oracle, go to Delphi".

UNIX Wars

Feb. 14, 1996

"The UNIX Wars" was the exciting name for the attempts by several UNIX vendors to develop a standard for the OS.

In the late 1980's and early 1990's, there were numerous UNIX implementations floating about, typically based on System V [Oct 15], BSD [March 9], or some combination of the two, and several efforts had been made to develop open specifications and standards based on them. These included the European group of companies called X/Open (1984), and the IEEE POSIX group ([?? 1988]). POSIX was designed to be readily implemented on both BSD and System V platforms.

In 1987, AT&T entered into an alliance with Sun Microsystems, resulting in SVR4 (System V Release 4.0) in 1988. The response was for several other vendors to form a competing group called the Open System Foundation (OSF) to develop their own UNIX.

On [June 14] 1993, a lot of the fight went out of the combatants when AT&T left the computer business, and sold System V to Novell. Novell later handed over the UNIX trademark and System V's source code to X/Open.

On this day in 1996, OSF and X/Open merged to become "The Open Group, which still promotes" open system standards to this day.

By the late 1990's, UNIX-related interest had begun to shift and coalesce around "GNU/Linux." It was an appealing mix since GNU [Sept 27] had been written from scratch to avoid copyright issues, and Linux [March 14] was open source and broadly compatibility with POSIX.

In the PC domain at least, GNU/Linux seems to have won, although there are many, many "distributions" to choose from, such as [May 00], [July 17], [Sept 15], [Aug 11], [Dec 22], [Oct 20], [April 15], and [Feb 19].

ENIAC is 50

Feb. 14, 1996

The ENIAC that was unveiled (almost) 50 years ago [Feb 15], was turned off [Oct 2] in 1955, and stored at the Smithsonian. It was switched back on today by Vice President Al Gore [Dec 9] in a ceremony at the University of Pennsylvania's Moore School of Engineering. Not only did various panels light up, but the machine was able to do some calculations – two rows of lights indicated that it was able to count up to 46, and this feat was later surpassed by having it count to 96.

Herman Goldstine [Sept 13], one of the last surviving members of the original team, remarked "ENIAC bears about as much resemblance to a modern computer as dinosaurs do to humans. It's absolutely incredible. Nothing is believable when you look inside a computer today. It's like I was in a different world."

Other events scheduled to celebrate ENIAC's birthday included the release of a commemorative "Computer Technology" stamp [Oct 8] and the first Garry Kasparov vs. Deep Blue chess tournament [Feb 10].

The University of Pennsylvania also sponsored a project led by J. Van der Spiegel called, "ENIAC-on-a-Chip", which built a chip with the same functionality as the entire ENIAC.

2021 was, of course, ENIAC's 75th anniversary, and videos from "ENIAC Day" can be found online at `https://www.youtube.com/hashtag/eniacday`

YouTube Launched

Feb. 14, 2005; 9:13pm

YouTube was founded by Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim, all early employees of PayPal [Feb 15]. Their first headquarters were above a pizzeria (Amigi's) and Japanese restaurant (Hi-Mo) in San Mateo, California.

Karim has said that the inspiration for the company came from two incidents: Janet Jackson's dress malfunction during her 2004 Super Bowl performance, and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Karim couldn't easily find video clips of either online, which led to the idea of a video sharing site. Hurley and Chen have said that the original idea was for a video-based dating service, similar to "Am I Hot or Not?" [Oct 9]

The first YouTube video, "Me at the zoo", was about Karim's visit to the San Diego Zoo. It was uploaded on [April 23], 2005.

In Nov. 2006, Google bought the company for $1.65 billion in stock, making it Google's second-largest acquisition at the time. As of May 2019, more than 500 hours of content were uploaded to YouTube each minute.

YouTube has featured an April Fools prank every year since 2008. That year, all the video links on the main page redirected to Rick Astley's music video "Never Gonna Give You Up", a prank known as "Rickrolling" [July 27].

In 2014, the music video for Psy's Gangnam Style [Dec 7] became the first video to surpass two billion views, forcing

YouTube to upgrade from a signed 32-bit integer count [Jan 19] to 64-bit.

WhatsApp Incorporated
Feb. 14, 2009

WhatsApp is a freeware, cross-platform, centralized instant messaging (IM [Feb 24]) and voice-over-IP (VoIP [July 30]) service. All data is end-to-end encrypted

It was founded by Brian Acton and Jan Koum, former employees of Yahoo! [March 2] soon after Koum had purchased an iPhone [June 29], and the pair had decided to create an app for the App Store [July 10].

Koum almost immediately chose the name WhatsApp because it sounded like "what's up", and he incorporated the company on his birthday.

Both of them had previously failed to get jobs at Facebook [May 18], but in 2014, Facebook bought the company for $19.3 billion. Acton took $50 million and invested it in a WhatsApp competitor called Signal. On March 20, 2018, he sent out a tweet [March 21] urging everyone to delete Facebook.

By Feb. 2016, WhatsApp had a user base of over one billion, making it the most popular messaging application at the time.

Computer Engineer Barbie
Feb. 14-17, 2010

Mattel unveiled the 126th career in its "Barbie I Can Be" series – "Computer Engineer Barbie" – at the 2010 American International Toy Fair in NYC.

Mattel had left the decision to the public, by running an online poll, and asking for suggestions on Facebook and Twitter. Half a million votes were cast, and "Computer Engineer" became the first career selected by popular vote.

In order to make Barbie look authentic, Mattel worked with the Society of Women Engineers and the National Academy of Engineers to design her wardrobe. She ended up dressed in a binary code patterned t-shirt (it spelt out "Barbie"), with accessories including a smartphone, Bluetooth headset, and a laptop travel bag. She had a dual monitor set-up for her pink laptop that ran Linux (although she later switched to Barbie OS).

Computer Engineer Barbie. Photo (c) Mattel.

Various female engineers suggested that for authenticity she needed "a Coke can and a bag of Doritos" on her desk, but she only received a coffee cup.

Mattel rather spoiled matters a few years later when the company had to apologize for the book, "I Can Be a Computer Engineer" (2013). There were complaints that it represented Barbie as incompetent, since she required the help of two men (Steven and Brian) to program the game she had designed. The duo also found time to fix her computer virus problem. The book was later withdrawn.

We should also forget 1992, when the blond bombshell was made to say, "Math class is tough."

Humans in Jeopardy
Feb. 14, 2011

IBM Watson was specifically built to answer questions on the quiz show Jeopardy! It was developed in IBM's DeepQA project by a team led by David Ferrucci, and named after Thomas J. Watson Sr. [Feb 17].

The system ran on Linux using the Apache Hadoop [July 13] framework to support distributed computing, which handled the access to 200 million pages of content, including the full text of Wikipedia [Jan 15]. However, Watson wasn't connected to the Internet during the game.

IBM stated that, "more than 100 different techniques are used to analyze natural language, identify sources, find and generate hypotheses, find and score evidence, and merge and rank hypotheses." However, Watson still had trouble in a few question categories, notably those having short clues containing only a few words.

Originally Watson signaled electronically to give an answer, but Jeopardy! show staff requested that it press a button physically, just as the human contestants did. Even with a robotic "finger", Watson was faster than the puny human players, despite that its programming prevented it from using the popular tactic of buzzing before it was sure of an answer.

On this day, Watson competed against two former Jeopardy! champions, Brad Rutter and Ken Jennings, and won the first place prize of $1 million.

The company now markets Watson's DeepQA software to large corporations in fields such as telecommunications and financial services.