Jan. 25th

Transcontinental Phone Call

Jan. 25, 1915

Prev: [Oct 9]

The first call was made on the transcontinental telephone line between New York City and San Francisco.The line had been completed on July 27, 1914, but the commercial service didn't start until today. The six month delay was because AT&T's wanted to promote the service at San Francisco's 1915 World Fair.

Alexander Graham Bell [March 7] made the call from the AT&T head office at 15 Dey Street in NYC, and his former assistant Thomas A. Watson received it at 333 Grant Avenue in San Francisco. It involved five intermediary telephone operators manually patching in the route, which took some 23 minutes.

Of course, Bell and Watson were asked to re-enact their very first conversation on a telephone [March 10]. Bell obligingly asked "Mr. Watson, come here, I want you." This time Watson replied, "It would take me a week now."

President Woodrow Wilson and the mayors of both cities were also involved in the call.

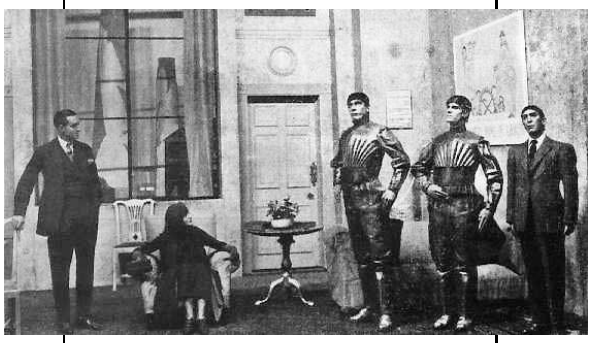
R.U.R.

Jan. 25, 1921

R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots) by Karel Čapek premiered at the National Theater in Prague, although the script had been published in 1920.

It marked the first appearance of the term "roboti," coined from the Czech word "robota," the work that serfs were required to perform on their masters' land. Čapek wasn't the word's originator – that was his brother, painter and writer Josef Čapek. Karel was thinking of calling the creatures laboři (from the Latin, labor), but decided to seek his brother's advice instead.

Čapek's robots are biological machines that are assembled, as opposed to being grown or born, so are probably more technically androids.



A scene from R.U.R; three robots on the right. Photo from http://www.umich.edu/~engb415/literature/pontee/RUR/RURsmry.html. PD-OLD-70.

As a modern reader might expect, the machines eventually go on a rampage, killing all but one of the humans. The robots named in the play are Marius, Sulla, Radius, Primus, Helena, and Damon.

An English language version of the play opened at the Garrick Theatre in NYC on Oct. 9, 1922, where it ran for 184 performances. Naturally, it marked the first appearance of "robot" in English, and the script was published in 1923. Spencer Tracy and Pat O'Brien played robots in their Broadway debuts.

On Feb. 11, 1938, BBC TV produced the first ever sci-fi programme, by adapting a section of the play.

Eric, a British robot constructed for public appearances, bore the letters "R.U.R." across its chest [Sept 15]. There are no reports of it going on a rampage, but it was unrelated to the R.U.R. devices.

Remington Rand

Jan. 25, 1927

On this day, James Henry Rand, Jr. merged Rand-Kardex with Remington Typewriters, and several other office supply companies, to form Remington Rand.

Rand purchased Eckert-Mauchly Computer Corporation [Dec 8] in 1950, the builder of the UNIVAC I [March 31], and Engineering Research Associates (ERA), developer of the ERA 1101 [Dec 00] in 1952. That machine was rebadged as the UNIVAC 1101 to cash in on the public's recognition of the name; a UNIVAC had predicted the outcome of the 1952 Presidential election [Nov 4].

By mid-1952, Remington Rand was one of the biggest computer companies in the world, but its lumbering management structure eventually caused many engineers to leave, to found more spritely firms (e.g. Control Data Corporation [July 8]).

Before 1954, Remington Rand could boast of having sold 30 large computers compared to IBM's paltry four. However, 1954 marked a turning point as IBM started taking orders for its IBM 700 series [May 7]. By 1956, IBM had installed about 75 computers to Rand's 50 or so. Gradually, Rand faded from view.

Meanwhile, Rand was acquired by Sperry in 1955 to form Sperry Rand (later shortened back to Sperry). It was Sperry Rand that decided to enforce the ENIAC patent [June 26], which led to litigation over who invented the computer [Oct 19].

Sperry merged with Burroughs on [Nov 11] 1986 to form Unisys.

The novelist-philosopher Ayn Rand said that she chose her Americanized name based on her Remington Rand typewriter.

Her birth name was Alisa Zinovyevna Rosenbaum.

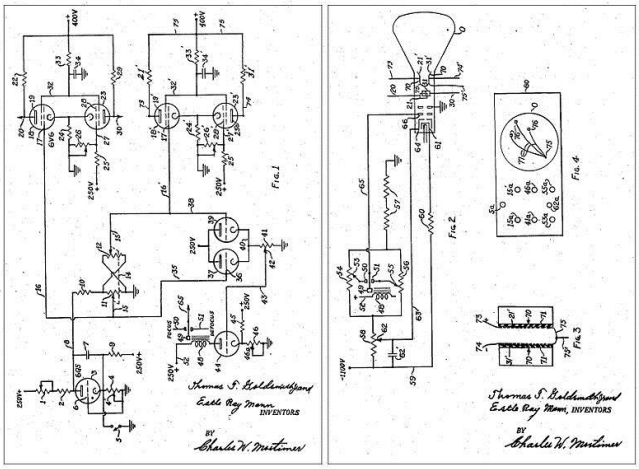
Remington Rand had no connection to the RAND Corporation [Oct 1].

First CRT Game

Jan. 25, 1947

Thomas Toliver Goldsmith Jr. and Estle Ray Mann filed a patent for a "Cathode Ray Tube amusement device", the world's first interactive electronic game. The pair worked at DuMont Labs developing cathode ray tubes (CRTs) for TVs. The patent (US 2455992) was granted on Dec. 14, 1948.

The CRT projected a spot onto an oscilloscope display, and traced out a parabolic arc representing the trajectory of an artillery shell. Transparent plastic shapes could be stuck onto the screen to represent targets such as airplanes.



Schematic for the Cathode Ray Tube Amusement Device. Thomas Tolivan Goldsmith Jr.

At the completion of an arc, the beam defocused to indicate that the shell had exploded. Of course, the intention was to have the shell explode under a target.

Before the beam drew its arc, the player could turn control knobs to set the departure angle and the delay time before the beam defocused.

The device used only analog hardware based around eight vacuum tubes. Since it didn't contain any digital components, most historians don't count it as a computing device.

The "Cathode Ray Tube amusement device" was never commercially manufactured, but several prototypes were built.

In any case, the first computer game was probably the Nimatron [Sept 24], which went on display at the New York's World's Fair in April 1940.

First Robot Death

Jan. 25, 1979

Robert Williams was the first person to be killed by a robot, in an accident at the Ford Motor Company's Flat Rock Casting Plant in Michigan.

Williams was one of three operators of a parts retrieval system, a five-story robot designed to retrieve castings from shelves.

Williams was unloading a part from the third level of a storage shelf, when he was struck from behind by one of the other one-ton transfer vehicles, killing him instantly.

His family sued the robot manufacturer, Litton Industries, alleging "that Litton was negligent in designing, manufacturing and supplying the storage system and in failing to warn [system operators] of foreseeable dangers in working within the storage area." The family won the case.

His death came on the 58th anniversary of the premiere of Karel Capek's play [three entries back].

In 2015, US government records showed that robots had caused at least 26 workplace deaths in the past 35 years.

The Next Killer Application

Jan. 25, 1994

Microsoft engineer, James Allard published a 16-page memo entitled "Windows: The Next Killer Application on the Internet." He argued that the company should make the inclusion of Internet software in Windows 95 [Aug 24] a priority. He succeeded in having TCP/IP [Sept 9] support included.

Reacting at something less than "The Speed of Thought" (2000), Bill Gates sent out his own memo on the subject, entitled "Internet Tidal Wave", on [May 26] 1995.

Allard was also responsible for registering microsoft.com on May 2 1991. According to legend the microsoft.com server was originally located under the desk of the site's first administrator, Mark Ingalls. However, it had to be moved because Ingalls kept turning off the machine by mistake as he was leaving work.

SQL Slammer

Jan. 25, 2003

The SQL [May 1] slammer worm became one of the fastest spreading viruses ever by exploiting vulnerabilities in Microsoft SQL 2000 servers. It had little impact on home or desktop PCs, but business machines (e.g. servers) were a different matter.

Just ten minutes after the worm was detected on this day, it had infected over 75,000 machines. Each one inundated the Internet with more copies of the virus, added to every network packet. This triggered a massive denial of service condition worldwide by overloading servers and routers.

South Korea lost Internet and cell phone coverage for 27

million people. In the US, almost all of Bank of America's 13,000 ATMs were knocked offline. Seattle had problems with its 911 service, and Continental Airlines had to cancel several flights due to electronic ticketing and check-in errors.

But don't blame Microsoft too quickly! They'd issued a patch for the exploit over six months before. The rapid spread of the virus showed how few systems were being kept up-to-date (including quite a few at Microsoft itself).