July 24th

Max Palevsky

Born: July 24, 1924;

Chicago, Illinois
Died: May 5, 2010

After working on the logic design for the Bendix Corporation's first computer, the G-15 [March 00], Palevsky joined the Packard Bell Computer Corporation in 1957, where he helped develop the Packard Bell PB250, the first silicon computer.

In 1961, he and 11 colleagues left Packard Bell to found Scientific Data Systems (SDS) to build small and medium-size computers, aimed at the scientific and educational markets, a niche being ignored by large companies like IBM. The formula worked, marked by the success of the SDS-940 [Aug 8]; [Nov 30], the SDS Sigma 7 [Oct 29]; [Dec 5], and others.

In May 1969 Xerox bought the company for $918 million, with Palevsky taking home a tidy 10% share. Little did Xerox know, but SDS had peaked [July 21]. Meanwhile, Palevsky became a founder investor of Intel [July 18].

In later life, he complained of "the hypnotic quality of computer games, the substitution of a Google search for genuine inquiry, the instant messaging that has replaced social discourse." "I don't own a computer," he told The Los Angeles Times in 2008. "I don't own a cellphone, I don't own any electronics. I do own a radio."

Gran Trak 10 Released

July 24 (or Aug 21),1974

Atari's [June 27] "Gran Trak 10" was the first arcade game where the player drove a car around a race track, as viewed from above, avoiding the track edges and trying to pass as many checkpoints as possible in 90 seconds.

The game's controls included a four-position gear shift, a steering wheel, and two foot pedals, all firsts for arcade games. At one point during the design process, there was also a small printer to print scores, but that was removed at some stage. It was also the first arcade game to use a solid state ROM to store sprites, a feature designed by Larry Emmons.

The two-player version was called "Gran Trak 20", and a smaller variant was named "Trak 10" (it should have been "Gran Track 5" surely?).

Poor management at Atari meant that the game was sold to distributors at a net loss of $100 per cabinet. This contributed to a total loss of $500,000 for the company that year, placing Atari in severe financial difficulties. Nolan Bushnell [Feb 5] was forced to reduce the workforce by almost half. In other words, Gran Trak's most enduring legacy was as the game that nearly put Atari out of business.

IBM at the Olympics

July 24, 1996

Newspaper articles started appearing describing the many problems with the IBM systems at the Summer Olympics in Atlanta.

In particular, the software that provided competition results to 12 news organizations was producing incorrect results, and its data transmission was erratic. At one stage, several news companies resorted to getting results in the old-fashioned way – using runners who delivered the scores written on pieces of paper.

Part of the problem was that until the 1994 winter games, IBM's involvement with the Olympics had been primarily as a hardware provider. The real-time scores software being used in Atlanta was quite new. To make matters some how worse, IBM had paid $80 million to the Olympic organizers in order to be promoted as the "lead technology integrator".

Chromecast

July 24, 2013

Google [Sept 7] released the Chromecast, a 72mm long USB stick that streamed video from the Internet (and other sources) to a high-definition TV or monitor.

It possessed the model number H2G2-42, most likely a reference to Douglas Adam's "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" (or "H2G2" for short), along with 42 as the "Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything" [March 8].

A first-generation Chromecast plugged into the HDMI port of a TV. Photo by TAKA@P.P.R.S. CC BY-SA 2.0.

The numbering fun didn't end there – the Chromecast's power adapter bore the code MST3K-US, which was probably a reference to the TV series "Mystery Science Theater 3000".

Spy Pixels

July 24-27, 2018

At PETS 2018, the 18th Privacy Enhancing Technologies Symposium in Barcelona, Steven Englehardt, Jeffrey Han, and Arvind Narayanan of Princeton presented their paper "I never signed up for this! Privacy implications of email tracking".

They revealed that about 30% of the emails they analyzed leaked recipients' email addresses to third parties via methods like embedded pixels (aka spy pixels), the majority of them intentionally.

Spy pixels are commonly embedded in the HTML of an email as small, imperceptible, transparent graphic files. When the recipient opens the message, the mail client requests the image. The Web server where the file is stored logs the request, and the information is later used for directing a deluge of marketing at the user.

Things have only got worse. In Feb. 2021. the "Hey" email service estimated that it blocked spy pixels in about 600,000 out of 1,000,000 messages per day.

Facebook Fine

July 24, 2019

The US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) ended a year-long investigation into Facebook [Feb 4] over its alleged misuse of user data and various privacy scandals (e.g. the Cambridge Analytica debacle [March 17]) by imposing a $5 billion fine.

To mere mortals this may seem like a lot, but it should be remembered that Facebook earned revenue of over $16 billion in 2019. Indeed, when the news reached the business markets, Facebook's stock price went up.

The settlement also included blanket immunity for Facebook executives (e.g. CEO Mark Zuckerberg [May 14]) and no real restraints on Facebook's business model.
