March 15th

E.A.T. Pepsi

March 15 – Sept. 13, 1970

"Experiments in Art and Technology" (E.A.T.) was a non-profit organization established by the engineers Billy Klüver and Fred Waldhauer (both at Bell Labs) and the artists Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Whitman to develop collaborations between artists and engineers.

It was officially launched in 1967 but the group had previously worked together in 1966 when they organized "9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering" [Oct 13]. By the end of the 1960's, 28 regional E.A.T. chapters had been created across the US.

The Pepsi-Cola Pavilion. Photo by Shunk-Kender. (c) Roy Lichtenstein Foundation, courtesy E.A.T.

E.A.T.'s activities took two main forms: a Technical Services program and E.A.T. projects. The former provided artists with access to new technologies for their work by matching them with suitable engineers or scientist. Of the latter, the best known E.A.T. project is probably the Pepsi-Cola pavilion at Expo '70 in Osaka: a Buckminster Fuller-style geodesic dome surrounded by a water vapor cloud sculptured by Fujiko Nakaya. The architect John Pearce fitted a spherical Mylar mirror inside the dome which reflected and inverted everything in the space. On the terrace outside were seven of Robert Breer's "Floats", six-foot high kinetic sculptures that slowly moved while emitting sounds. When one of them hit an obstacle or was pushed it would gently reverse direction.

Creeper

March 15, 1971

Daniel Murphy, Daniel Bobrow [Nov 29], and others at BBN [Oct 15] were developing a new OS called TENEX (short for TEN-EXtended) for the company's PDP-10 [Nov 00].

One of the team, Bob Thomas, created "Creeper" inspired by John von Neumann's [Dec 28] automata in the book "Theory of Self-Reproducing Automata" written by von Neumann and Arthur Burks [Oct 13].

Creeper would print a message, then look for another accessible TENEX system across the ARPANET [Oct 29], open a connection, and transfer itself to that machine, where it would start again. The message it printed was:

"I'M THE CREEPER : CATCH ME IF YOU CAN."

Ray Tomlinson [April 23], a colleague of Roberts, came up with an interesting Creeper variant called "Reaper", which also copied itself around the network; its job was to delete copies of Creeper.

In other words, if Creeper was the first virus (or worm), then Reaper was the first anti-virus software.

Some malware histories place "Rabbits" before Creeper/Reaper. Rabbits was a fork bomb, not a virus, that was discovered on a Burroughs 5500 [Feb 18] at the University of Washington in 1969. A fork bomb creates two running copies of itself, and keeps on multiplying.

The next virus after Creeper was probably ANIMAL (along with PERVADE) [Jan 00].

Much later, the conflict between Creeper and Reaper served as inspiration for the programming game "Core War" [Aug 5].

Homebrew Newsletter

March 15, 1975

Issue #1 of the Homebrew Computer Club's [March 5] newsletter was released. Only 21 issues were published up to Dec. 1977, but it still had an important influence on the early PC industry.

Bill Gates' "Open Letter to Hobbyists" [Jan 31] appeared in the Vol. 2, No. 1 issue. Later numbers contain some interesting responses, which can be found online at http://www.digibarn.com/

.com

March 15, 1985

Symbolics.com became the first ".com" company registered through the DNS (Domain Name System [Nov 18]).

".com" was one of seven generic top level domain names (gTLDs [June 20]) created by RFC 920 [April 7]. The idea was to provide distinct Internet spaces for corporations, universities, government, and the military.

Symbolics, a computer manufacturer, was founded by Russel Noftsker in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It designed and manufactured Lisp machines [Dec 25].

The first round of registrations wasn't exactly a mad dash: by 1992 there were fewer than 15,000 ".com" addresses, but things speeded up after the rise of the Web: in fall 2019 there were around 360 million names, with approximately 144 million using the ".com" ending. VeriSign reports that between

25 million and 30 million new domains are registered each year. By the way, don't confuse domain names with Web sites, which numbered around 1.83 billion in Jan. 2021.

Symbolics went into decline in the late 1980's due to the AI Winter [Oct 28], and rapid improvements in mass-market chip design which made dedicated hardware running Lisp much less attractive.

My Computer Family

March 15 ??, 1996

Chinese TV began airing the "educational" situation comedy "My Computer Family". Microsoft and Compaq [Feb 14] spent $475,000 making the first 26 episodes, which were produced in Beijing, and featured the director and actors from "I Love My Family," an established hit.

The show was about the Zhaos, a typical family until Dad visits America and spends the family savings on a Compaq computer running MS Windows. Rather than abject penury, the main problem is the family must now deal with computer basics, revolving around Microsoft products, while never forgetting the key importance of intellectual property rights. Alongside this riveting narrative, Microsoft and Compaq included three 30-second commercials per episode.

The intellectual property angle was in response to the massive growth in PC sales in China. The demand was partially met by smugglers bringing computers into the country from the US without paying duties or a 17% value-added tax.

According to Microsoft PR statements, "My Computer Family" was one of Chinese TV's most popular situation comedies for that season.

GameWorks

March 15, 1997

The 30,000-square-foot GameWorks center opened in Seattle, a joint venture between DreamWorks (the movie studio founded by Steven Spielberg [May 00], Jeffrey Katzenberg, and David Geffen in 1994), Sega [Nov 27], and Universal Studios.

The idea for GameWorks grew out of a dinner conversation between Spielberg and Skip Paul (a former executive with Atari [Feb 29], who later became GameWorks' first CEO). Spielberg was an avid gamer [June 27], and he noted that while players had got older, the arcades hadn't kept pace with more adult entertainment.

GameWorks' big attraction was "Vertical Reality", a game, designed by Spielberg himself. Four players were tightly strapped into chairs with game consoles, which were connected to a central tower lift. The amount, and direction, of movement of each chair depended on how well a player did in the game. Eliminating bad guys moved a chair up, but death in the game made the player's chair droop.

There were also tamer virtual-reality games that let you "experience" skiing, or driving a racing car, and a microbrewery, pizzeria, and a Starbucks.

It was a risky business since arcades were in decline as people chose to play games on their home PCs instead. A few years later, DreamWorks sold its portion of the venture (around 9%) to Sega and Universal, ending Spielberg's involvement. It probably hadn't helped that Spielberg had been name-checked in 2000 for marketing violent entertainment to kids through GameWorks.

The chain filed it's first bankruptcy in 2004, and it's second six years later.

RSS Released

March 15, 1999

RSS is a type of Web feed that allows users to access updates to online content in a computer-readable format. One common use-case is for syndicating the changing contents of news websites.

Unfortunately the idea that RSS is a "standardized" format is something of a myth. In 2004, one developer, Mark Pilgrim, counted no less than seven incompatible versions.

The underlying problem was that after RSS' release its supporters almost immediately split into two camps – one where "R" meant RDF (a data model), and one where it didn't.

"RDF Site Summary", the first RSS, was created by Dan Libby and Ramanathan V. Guha for use by My.Netscape.com. Guha had previously worked for Apple, where he came up with something similar called the Meta Content Framework.

In July, Libby released RSS 0.91, which removed RDF elements and added ideas from Dave Winer's [May 2] news syndication format. RSS now stood for "Rich Site Summary".

A competing organization, the RSS-DEV Working Group, which included Guha, produced RSS 1.0 in Dec. 2000. This RSS reclaimed the name "RDF Site Summary", kept RDF, and added XML namespaces.

In the same month, Winer released RSS 0.92 (the "Rich Site Summary" version), adding an enclosure element. This permitted audio files to be carried inside feeds, and helped spark the rise of podcasting [Aug 13]. Winer also helpfully described what the RSS-DEV Working Group had done as "theft".

This to-and-fro continued for several more years. One result was the creation of a *third* syndication format, called Atom, in June 2003. Atom was later adopted as IETF Proposed Standard RFC 4287. Atom did

away with RDF but kept XML namespaces.

Amazingly, this proliferation of RSS specifications didn't stop it from becoming popular during the 2000's. It was helped by the release of Google Reader, an RSS aggregator, in 2005.

What probably spelt the end for RSS was the rise of social networks, which provided a much easier way to view news (and ads). Also, Google Reader was shut down in July 2013.