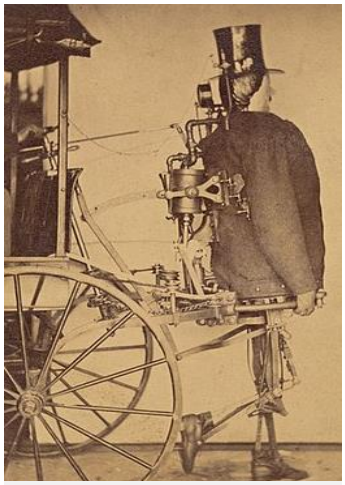
March 24th

Steam Man

March 24, 1868

Zadoc P. Dederick and Isaac Grass were granted a patent for their steam-powered man-shaped engine for pulling a cart (US 75874). The seven feet and nine inches high humanoid utilized legs rather than wheels, which moved in a close resemblance of walking via a complex system of levers and cranks driven by pistons and a boiler in its trunk.

The steam man's smiling face was molded from white enamel, with dark hair and a mustache attached later. He was debonairly dressed in a jacket and top hat (but no trousers), and sometimes smoked a pipe.



The Steam Man (1868). Photo archived at New York Public Library.

The first report of the prototype appeared in the *Newark Advertiser* on Jan. 8, 1868, but plans to commercialize the machine never materialized.

The device probably inspired the first American sci-fi dime novel, "The Steam Man of the Prairies" by Edward S. Ellis (http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/7506), published in August 1868. At the time, Ellis was a superintendent of schools in New Jersey.

The Steam Man of Ellis' story may perhaps be the first robot in modern 'literature', although "Tik-Tok" is better known [July 30], and readers of a classical bent might instead nominate Talos [June 19].

For more robot men, see [Feb 00], [Feb 24], [March 23], [April 16], [April 30], [July 17], [July 30], [Sept 15], [Nov 11], [Nov 30], [Dec 22].

Michael Peter Barnett

Born: March 24, 1929; London, UK

Died: March 13, 2012

Although Barnett's area was theoretical chemistry, he found time to carry out groundbreaking work in computer typography [March 30].

In 1960, while he was the director of the Cooperative Computer Lab at MIT, Barnett realized how difficult it was to typeset the mathematical formula used in quantum chemistry. As a result, he wrote TYPRINT which could drive a Photon 560 phototypesetting machine. TYPRINT's input were commands such as:

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(X$RU$2)$LV$*LBA*$RV$*RBA*
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The output was: X^2

TYPRINT was written in FORTRAN [Feb 26] on an IBM 709 [Nov 30], with a few routines coded in FAP (FORTRAN Assembler).

In 1961, he used TYPRINT to reproduced the "Tail" passage from chapter 3 of "Alice in Wonderland", making it the first document phototypeset using a computer.

During 1962, Barnett developed the PC6 system, which was used to produce a variety of MIT reports, pamphlets and publications.

In 1964, Barnett joined RCA's Graphic Systems Division [Nov 20], where he designed the algorithmic markup language PAGE-1 for full page composition. In 1977, while on the staff at CUNY, he added support for pictures to PAGE-1.

Steven Anthony Ballmer

Born: March 24, 1956; Detroit, Michigan

Ballmer was the Microsoft CEO from Jan. 2000 until Feb 4, 2014, when he was succeeded by Satya Nadella [Jan 6].

Microsoft under Ballmer's control was considered to have "dropped the ball" on several market trends, including Web search, tablets, music players, and smartphones. However, his tenure did include the Xbox [Nov 15], and the Azure cloud service [Feb 1], and Microsoft profits boomed.

As a student at Harvard, Ballmer lived down the hall from Bill Gates [Oct 28]. Later, he dropped out of Stanford's Graduate School of Business to join Microsoft, becoming its 30th employee, and its first business manager. One of his tasks was to restructure the company into an incorporated business [June 25], and Microsoft's subsequent IPO [March 13] made him one of the company's three billionaires (along with Gates and Paul Allen [Jan 21]).

In the early 1980's, Microsoft moved its headquarters to Northup Way in Bellevue. It soon became apparent that the mail volume was barely a trickle and, in particular, checks weren't arriving. The reason was that nobody had filed a Change of Address form with the Post Office. A visit to the old offices revealed a huge mound of mail.

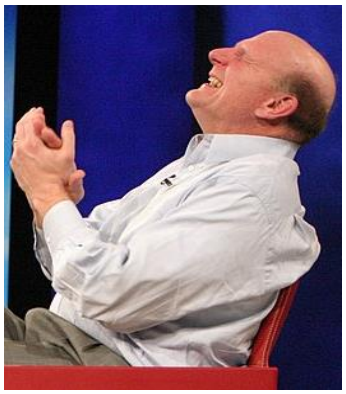
A Change of Address was quickly submitted, but in the meantime, Ballmer became Microsoft Mailman. Every day, he would drive to the old offices, pick up the mail that had accumulated, then deliver it to the Northup offices.

Ballmer is known for his energetic and exuberant personality, which comes across in his most famous quote from a 2000 developer's conference: “Developers, developers, developers, developers, …” This occurred a few days after his equally unforgettable "Monkey Boy" dance during Microsoft’s 25th anniversary celebrations. A possibly related notion is the *Ballmer Peak*, which was defined by Randall Munroe [Oct 17] in xkcd as the Microsoft discovery that programmers gain superior coding abilities if they have a blood-alcohol concentration of between 0.129% and 0.138%.

Other quotes: “There’s no chance that the iPhone [Jan 9] is going to get any significant market share. No chance.”

“Google’s not a real company. It’s a house of cards.”

“I don’t know what a monopoly is until somebody tells me.”



Steve Ballmer 'laughing' (2008). Photo by D.Begley. CC BY 2.0.

For his famous "cancer" quote, see [June 1].

The Cluetrain Manifesto

March 24, 1999

“The Cluetrain Manifesto” claimed that conventional marketing techniques had been rendered obsolete by new kinds of online “conversations” between consumers which bypassed companies. Web sites, message boards, and chat rooms would soon tear down the old bureaucracies.

The manifesto was written by Rick Levine, Christopher Locke, Doc Searls, and David Weinberger, and posted in the form of ninety-five theses (statements) on this day. It was also published as a book in 2000, with several extra essays, and became a business bestseller.

The term "cluetrain" came from one of their sources who talked about how his company had missed the clear signs of change: "The clue train stopped there four times a day for ten years and they never took delivery."

The manifesto has been credited with setting out the guiding principles for social media years before Facebook [May 18] and Twitter [March 21] were formed. However, John C. Dvorak [April 1; Sept 27; Dec 26] dismissed the work as a product of “lunatic fringe dingbat thinking.”

SEA-ME-WE 3

March 24, 2000

SEA-ME-WE3 (South-East Asia - Middle East - Western Europe 3) is the world’s longest optical submarine telecommunications cable, at over 39,000 km in length. It became operational on this day to connect 39 landing points in 33 countries and four continents between Western Europe and Australia.

One of its more beautiful landing points (the CAT Charlie 4 Cable Landing Station) is in Satun, gateway to Thailand’s Andaman Sea. The town hosts several other cable links, including the 28,000 km long FLAG (Fiber-Optic Link Around the Globe).

The first transatlantic telegraph cable was completed on [Aug 5] 1858, but didn't function for long. The first trans-Pacific telegraph cable began working on [Dec 14] 1902.

Mac OS X Cats

March 24, 2001

Apple released the first version of Mac OS X (pronounced “ten” not “ex”). It succeeded the “classic” Mac OS [Jan 24], which had been introduced back in 1984, and had reached version 9 in 1999.

OS X was a break from the classic OS by being based on the UNIX-like NeXTSTEP [Oct 12], which had come to Apple with the purchase of NeXT on [Dec 20] 1996. Steve Jobs also returned and, under his management, NeXTSTEP became OPENSTEP, then Rhapsody [Jan 7], and finally OS X.

It’s UNIX core, known as “Darwin," offers two main advantages: pre-emptive multitasking and memory protection, which gives the system the ability to run multiple applications without them interrupting or corrupting each other. Darwin also forms the core of the OSes for the iPhone [June 29], iPad [April 3], and Apple watch [April 24].

Initial reviews of OS X were mixed, with praise for its sophisticated, glossy Aqua GUI but criticism of its sluggish performance. Several makers of classic Mac applications, such as FrameMaker and PageMaker [July 15], decided not to develop new versions for OS X.

Subsequent versions of the OS were all named after big cats (e.g. Cheetah, Jaguar [Aug 23], Lion) until 10.8. Since then Apple has preferred locations in California (e.g. Yosemite, High Sierra, Catalina), and "OS X" has been rebranded as "macOS".

One possible source for the cat names comes from the days of the Mac clones [Dec 16] when a British maker, Shaye, produced a line using Cheetah, Puma, Jaguar, Panther, Tiger, Leopard, Lion, and Lynx. Another possible inspiration are German tanks and armored vehicles of WWII.

"Snow Leopard" (Aug. 2009) was the first version to drop

support for PowerPC-based Macs [March 14] and focus on Intel processors [June 6].

Microsoft XNA

March 24, 2004

Microsoft XNA (standing for "XNA is Not an Acronym") was a freeware toolset for writing lightweight games for a variety of Microsoft platforms, including Windows, the Xbox 360 [Nov 22], and Windows Phone 7 [Oct 11]. It was based on the .NET Framework [Feb 13], and positioned as a .NET equivalent to Microsoft's better known game development system, DirectX [Sept 30].

Although XNA was announced on this day, the actual tools only started appearing in March 2006. For example, "XNA Game Studio Express" provided basic "starter kits" for specific genres, such as platform games, real-time strategy, and first-person shooters.

XNA became quite popular among indie and hobbyist developers, and was used for a number of games produced by Microsoft Studios. Nevertheless, it stopped being actively supported on Jan. 31, 2013.

Unity [June 8] CEO David Helgason tweeted at the time, "Farewell XNA, you were never quite the worthy opponent I expected, though you hit some high notes along the way."

Microsoft Guilty!

March 24, 2004

The European Commission found Microsoft guilty of abusing the "near-monopoly" of its Windows OS. It ordered the company to pay a €497 million fine, to release a European version of its OS without a media player, and to create API documentation for its server products. Microsoft appealed.

On July 12, 2006, the EU responded by fining Microsoft a further €280.5 million for noncompliance, and warned of worse to come if the company didn't behave.

On Feb. 27, 2008, the EU fined the company an additional €899 million for failure to comply with the March 2004 decision. On May 9, 2008, Microsoft lodged another appeal.

On June 27, 2012, the court upheld the previous fine, but reduced it to a more reasonable €860 million due to a "miscalculation" by the European Commission. A spokesperson for Microsoft said the company was "disappointed with the court's ruling."

All told, the case had cost Microsoft around €1.68 billion, which makes it the largest *total* fine associated with a European antitrust case. However, the largest *single* fine, of €1.09 billion, was levied in 2009 against Intel.

In a related investigation, the Commission fined Microsoft €561 million in March 2013 for failing to promote a range of Web browsers rather than just Internet Explorer [Aug 16]. Microsoft described the issue as a "technical error"

Today is also CEO Steve Ballmer's birthday [five entries back].