May 3rd

Leonid Genrikhovich Khachiyan

Born: May 3, 1952;

St. Petersburg, Russia
Died: April 29, 2005

Khachiyan developed the ellipsoid algorithm for linear programming, the first to have a polynomial running time. This meant that problems previously thought to be intractable could now be solved efficiently.

At the time, *The New York Times* called him, "the mystery author of a new mathematical theorem that has rocked the world of computer analysis."

Jaron Zepel Lanier

Born: May 3, 1960;

NYC

A pioneer in the field of virtual reality (VR Dec 22]), who departed Atari in 1985 with Thomas G. Zimmerman [Aug 29] to found VPL Research, the first company to sell VR gear. Their products included the Data Glove, the EyePhone, and the DataSuit – a full-body outfit with sensors for measuring movement.

The EyePhone was featured in the 1992 sci-fi movie "The Lawnmower Man." The scientist-hero, played by Pierce Brosnan, was supposedly based on Lanier.

Lanier was one of the first people to employ VR in the performance arts, with his band Chromatophoria, where he played various virtual instruments.

His book "You Are Not a Gadget" (2010) offers a critique of various digital technologies, including Wikipedia [Jan 15] (a triumph of "intellectual mob rule"), Facebook [May 18] and Twitter [March 21] ("dehumanizing and shallow"). His 2013 exposé, "Who Owns the Future?", argues that people are becoming increasingly disenfranchised from online economies.

A VPL Research DataSuit. Photo by Dave Pape.

CTSS Presented

May 3, 1962

The Compatible Time-Sharing System (CTSS) was probably the first time-sharing OS. Development began in MIT's Computation Center in spring 1961, led by Fernando. J. Corbató [July 1], Bob Daley, and Marjorie Daggett. However, another contender for first is PLATO II [Aug 22], created by Donald Bitzer in early 1961.

CTSS ran on a modified IBM 7094 [Nov 30] with two 32K banks of core memory instead of the usual one. One bank was reserved for the time-sharing supervisory program, the other for user programs.

On this day, Corbató, Daggett, and Daley presented a paper about CTSS at the 1962 Spring Joint Computer Conference. However, an earlier version of CTSS (then called the "Experimental Time-Sharing System") had been demoed in Nov.1961, running on an IBM 709, and attached to four Friden Flexowriter terminals.

Notable CTSS tools included:

- One of the first email implementations, with a mail box for each user. It had been proposed by Louis Pouzin [April 20], Glenda Schroeder, and Pat Crisman in Jan. 1965, and was implemented by Noel Morris and Tom Van Vleck as MAIL [Dec 00] during the following summer;
- Real-time text messaging for up to thirty users; also implemented by Morris and Van Vleck;
- Pouzin's RUNCOM which could execute a list of commands contained in a file. This later gave him the idea to develop the Multics [Nov 30] shell, which went on to inspire UNIX shell scripts;
- The text editor QED [March 26], the predecessor of ed and vim, with regular expressions later added by Ken Thompson [Feb 4];
- RUNOFF [Nov 6] by Jerry Saltzer [Oct 9], one of the first text formatting utilities. It was the ancestor of UNIX's roff, nroff, and similar tools for many other systems.

The "Compatible" in the name referred to the OS's backward compatibility with the FORTRAN Monitor System (FMS), the IBM 7094's batch processing OS.

CTSS supported two names for each file, with the second telling it how to process the file. This had the function of a filename extension, but was not written with a dot separator.

Examples included "MAD" for source code for the Michigan Algorithm Decoder [Aug 26], "FAP" for the FORTRAN assembly program, "SYMTB" for symbol tables and "BSS" for the .bss segment.

The MS-DOS [Aug 12] style of filename and extension descends from DEC OSes [Aug 23], which took inspiration from CTSS,

By 1965, CTSS supported up to thirty simultaneous users every day, and was running on the so-called 'blue machine' in the MIT Computation Center and the 'red machine' at Project MAC [July 1].

Earliest Spam

May 3, 1978; 12:33 EDT

Gary Thuerk, a dedicated DEC marketer [Aug 23], sent an email to a large fraction of everyone on the ARPANET to promote the DECSYSTEM-20. He sincerely believed that they would be delighted to receive the exciting news about how DEC had integrated ARPANET support into their TOPS-20 OS [Nov 29].

In those days, there was a printed directory listing all the ARPANET addresses. Thuerk extracted those located on the west coast, and added a few others, including people at ARPA HQ. The list eventually grew to 397 of the 2600 people on the ARPANET at the time; some 15% of the network.

Thuerk called in a willing DEC engineer, Carl Gartley, to work on the content of the message, polishing its prose to precision. When they were happy with the result, Gartley used Thuerk's email account to send it off.

Unfortunately, the mail software would only accept a maximum of 320 addresses at once. Undeterred due to the message's importance, Gartley re-sent it to those unlucky enough to miss the first post.

Thuerk maintains to this day that he was performing a public service since the DEC-20 changes were relevant news for the community – "I think of myself as the father of e-marketing." He also likes to point out that the approach worked: "we sold $13 million or $14 million worth" of DEC gear because of the email.

However, the Defense Communications Agency (DCA), which ran the ARPAnet, called Thuerk's boss to register a strong complaint. The large negative reaction to the post also dissuaded others from trying the same thing, at least for a few years.

Although Thuerk is usually awarded the title of First Spammer, a possible earlier example dates from 1971 on MIT's CTSS MAIL [Dec 00].

The term "spam" was coined later [March 31], and the earliest commercial spam was also a few years away [April 12].

Dell Founded

May 3, 1984

University of Texas at Austin undergraduate Michael Dell founded "PC Limited" (later renamed Dell) in his off-campus dormitory room (no. 2713) at the Dobie Center. The startup specialized in selling IBM PC-compatibles built from stock components.

During the last month of summer break, Dell sold $180,000 worth of gear, prompting him to drop out of college, and set up a full-time business in Austin; he achieved sales of $6 million in the first year.

PC Limited was probably the first company to apply the direct selling model to computers, initially through phone sales, then later via the Internet.

Dell was one of the most successful companies of the 1990's, creating a wave of "Dellionaires" – employees who capitalized on the burgeoning value of their stock to become entrepreneurs, investors, and philanthropists. This helped Austin become one of the main tech startup centers outside of Silicon Valley.

Carlo Acutis

Born: May 3, 1991;

London, UK
Died: Oct. 12, 2006

Acutis began documenting Eucharistic miracles around the world on his website `miracolieucaristici.org` in 2005, having started compiling the catalogue at the age of eleven.

He was educated in Milan at the Jesuit Instituto Leone XIII. Outside school, he did voluntary work with the homeless and destitute. Unfortunately, his promising career as a programmer was cut short by his death from leukemia.

In 2013 he was named a Servant of God, the first stage on the path towards sainthood.

After a detailed investigation of a miracle in Brazil attributed to Acutis's intercession, Pope Francis [June 6] announced his beatification in a decree on Feb. 21, 2020.

For more religious-themed computing, see [April 4].

First Geocache

May 3, 2000

Dave Ulmer kicked off the "Great American GPS [Feb 22] Stash Hunt" by posting the coordinates of his geocache stash to the USENET [Jan 29] newsgroup sci.geo.satellite-nav: 45°17.460'N 122°24.800'W (near Viola in Oregon).

The First Geocache. Photo by groundspeak. CC BY-SA 4.0.

The five-gallon bucket contained a Delorme Topo USA topographic map, two CDs, a cassette recorder, a "George of the Jungle" VHS tape, a Ross Perot book, four $1 bills, a slingshot, and a can of beans.

There was also a logbook and pencil for leaving comments.

Sadly, the bucket was severely damaged by an Oregon road crew a few years later, but concerned geocachers, recognizing its historical importance, placed an "Original Stash" plaque at the site.

The date of this first geocache wasn't chosen at random. GPS's "Selective Availability" feature had just been turned off on May 2, making it possible to use GPS to locate small objects for the first time.

Back then geocaching was more commonly called "gpsstashing." However, Matt Stum noted in the gpsstash group on eGroups (which would later become Yahoo! Groups [Jan 30]), that the term "stash" had rather negative connotations, and suggested "geocaching" instead.

Microsoft Drops Yahoo! Offer

May 3, 2008

Prev: [Sept 7] Next: [July 29]

On Feb. 1, 2008, Microsoft offered $44.6 billion ($31 / share) to purchase Yahoo!, as part of its master plan to compete against Google [Aug 19].

After several months of negotiations, Yahoo! rejected the bid, and publicly stated that the offer "substantially undervalues" the company. This was after Microsoft had added an extra $5 billion in loose change to the tender.

The deal fell apart mainly due to Jerry Yang's [Nov 6] opposition, even though some other board members and several large shareholders had wanted to accept it. On this day, Microsoft officially abandoned its proposal.

Less than ten years later, Yahoo! sold its core business to Verizon for $4.8 billion on [July 13] 2017.

Non-fungible Tokens

May 3, 2014

A non-fungible token (NFT) is blockchain [Aug 19] data that certifies that a digital asset is unique, although copies of the asset are available to anyone. NFTs have been used to represent photos, videos, audio, and much more.

The first NFT was created on this day by Kevin McCoy and Anil Dash during the Seven on Seven conference held at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in NYC. The blockchain marker was linked to a video clip that McCoy's wife had previously made. The pair called their creation: monetized graphics.

The first NFT site, Etheria, was launched in Oct. 2015. Most of its items went unsold until March 13, 2021, when interest in NFTs sparked a buying frenzy. Within 24 hours, everything had been sold for a total of $1.4 million.

On June 30, 2021, Tim Berners-Lee [June 8] sold an NFT for his original Web source code [Dec 25] for $5.4 million to an unidentified buyer at Sotheby's auction house. The highest bid had stood at $3.5 million for a while, but there were a flurry of bids in the closing 15 minutes.

Four items were included as part of the NFT:

- time-stamped files of the code;
- an animated video of the code being written;
- a letter from Sir Tim;
- a digital poster of the code.

However, the sale fell short of the record - $69m, for digital artwork by Beeple, sold at Christie's[Feb 23] auction house, in March.