May 21st

Börje Langefors

Born: May 21, 1915;

Ystad, Sweden
Died: Dec. 13, 2009

Langefors developed the 'infological equation' in 1980, which describes the difference between information and data in terms of additional semantic background and a communication time interval.

Langefors joined SAAB, the Swedish aerospace and defense company, in 1949 where he utilized analog devices for calculating wing stresses. The need for more powerful tools became evident, and the only Swedish computer of the time, the BESK [April 1], was insufficient for the task. So Langefors persuaded SAAB to build a new version of BESK that employed magnetic tape. The project began in the fall of 1955 and was operational by 1956 as SARA (Saab's Calculating Machine).

As SAAB's involvement in computers grew, its computing work was moved to a new company called DataSaab. One result was the SANK (Saab's Automatic Navigational Calculator), renamed the DataSaab D2 in 1960. It was a small desktop calculator weighing only 150 kg, and was probably mainland Europe's first transistorized computer [Oct 7]. Another DataSaab product was Algol-Genius, an amalgamation of Algol [Jan 11] and COBOL [April 8].

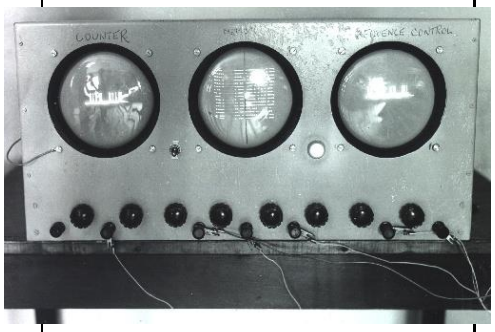
Alexander Shafto "Sandy" Douglas

Born: May 21, 1921;

London, UK
Died: April 29, 2010

Douglas built the first graphical computer game, OXO, in 1952. Running on the EDSAC [May 6] at the University of Cambridge, it played tic-tac-toe (known as Noughts and Crosses in the UK).

At the time, the EDSAC used three small cathode ray tube screens to display the state of its memory. Each one could draw a grid of 35 x 16 dots. Douglas re-purposed one of them for his game, and obtained input (i.e. where to place a nought or cross) via EDSAC's rotary controller.



EDSAC CRT Tubes. Computer Lab, Univ. of Cambridge. CC BY 2.0.

Douglas wrote the program, which he called "noughts and crosses", as part of his thesis on human-computer interaction. The game acquired the OXO name much later when computer historian Martin Campbell-Kelly released an EDSAC simulator (https://www.dcs.warwick.ac.uk /~edsac/).

Another contender for first visual computer game is "Bertie the Brain" [Aug 25], also a tic-tac-toe player. However, it ran on dedicated hardware rather than a general-purpose computer.

The first non-graphical computer game was probably the Nimatron [Sept 24], on show at the New York's World's Fair in April 1940.

Douglas also established one of the earliest programming courses in the UK, at the University of Leeds in 1957. The first machine for students was a Ferranti [Feb 27] Pegasus, installed in the disused Eldon Chapel on Woodhouse Lane. The machine was known as Lucifer, short for Leeds University Computing Installation (FERranti).

IBM 726 Announced

May 21, 1952

The IBM 726 was the company's first magnetic tape unit, intended for use with the recently announced IBM 701 [April 7], the company's first electronic computer.

The 726 utilized half-inch tapes with seven tracks. Six were for the data and the seventh was employed as a parity track. Some tapes were 1,200 feet long, could store 2.3 MB of data, and IBM claimed that just one could replace 12,500 punch cards.

The drive could write 100 characters per inch on a tape and read 75 inches per second. To withstand the system's fast starts and stops, it utilized a "vacuum column" that created a buffer of loose tape so it wouldn't snap when moved so rapidly.

Buyers of a 701 needed to purchase two 726s, but IBM generously provided two 1200-foot and two 200-foot tape reels for free. The 726 quickly became the standard tape unit for IBM machines.

The 726 wasn't the first tape drive for a commercial computer – that was the UNISERVO for the UNIVAC 1 [March 31].

Atari 7800

May 21, 1984

Atari [June 27] announced the Atari 7800 ProSystem game console, its first system designed by an outside company, General Computer Corporation (GCC). GCC had a background in arcade games, so the 7800 system used an architecture similar to arcade machines of the time.

It offered superior graphics (up to 256 colors) and game play involving a large number of moving objects (75 to 100) which far exceeded previous consoles even though it only

employed a slightly customized 6502 chip [Sept 16], called the Atari SALLY. The console's weak spot was sound, since it utilizedthe same old sound chip as in the Atari 2600 [Oct 14].

Other strong selling points were that the 7800 was almost fully backward-compatible with the 2600, and could be upgraded to become a full-fledged home computer. In this latter category, there were plans to release a full-featured $100 keyboard, and a modem cartridge, but they never appeared.

Although the 7800 was announced today, it was only released in May 1986, delayed by the sale of Atari to Tramiel Technology on [July 1], and a dispute over which of the two firms should pay GCC for their work.

Even after the machine hit the shops, it only managed a disappointing range of games compared to its rivals, such as Nintendo's NES [Oct 18].

Schnell's Bill

May 21, 1998

The US Postal Service refuted an email spreading across the Internet claiming that a Congressman Tony Schnell (R) has introduced "Bill 602P," which would allow the government to impose a five-cent surcharge on email. This would supposedly help defray the financial losses that the postal service had suffered since the advent of the Internet.

There was no Congressman Schnell, and no Bill 602P. This should have been obvious since we all know that congressional bill names begin with either H., R., or S., depending upon whether they originate from the House or Senate).

The real Tony Schnell, a Canadian MP, had originated the hoax in Canada, which is also suprising since Bill 602P was incorrectly numbered in that country as well, where parliamentary bills must begin with either a C. or S., depending upon whether they originate in the House of Commons or the Senate).

In March 2001, an Australian version began circulating, with the email 'Schnell' now an Australian member of Parliament.