May 28th

Ian Lancaster Fleming

Born: May 28, 1908;

Mayfair, London
Died: Aug. 12, 1964

Fleming is best known as the author of the James Bond [Jan 3; May 22] spy novels, but he was also a journalist and naval intelligence officer, which helped supply some of the unique details in his books.

He was recruited by Rear Admiral John Godfrey, Director of Naval Intelligence, to become his personal assistant in May 1939. In particular, Fleming was utilized as a liaison with other sections of the wartime government, including Bletchley Park [Aug 15]. Their need to crack Enigma codes [Feb 23] led to Fleming proposing "Operation Ruthless" in a memo dated Sept. 12, 1940.

The idea was to man a German bomber with a British team dressed in Luftwaffe uniforms, and ditch it in the English Channel. The crew would attack their German rescuers, and bring their boat's Enigma machine [May 9] and code books back to England.

Sadly the mission was never carried out, as recorded by Frank Birch, the head of the Naval Section at Bletchley, in a letter dated Oct. 20, 1940. He wrote: 'Turing and [Peter] Twinn came to me like undertakers cheated of a nice corpse two days ago, all in a stew about the cancellation of Operation Ruthless.'

The problem seemed to be that the Heinkel bomber chosen for the plan was likely to sink too quickly for its crew to be rescued.

There's no evidence that Alan Turing [June 23] and Fleming ever met, but it seems likely since Fleming visited Bletchley as often as twice a month during 1940 to liaise with Birch.

The most obvious reference to the Enigma machine in the Bond books is in "From Russia with Love" (1957), where Bond is tempted into a trap in order to acquire a Spektor cipher device used by Soviet Intelligence. It's also been pointed out that a key sequence from Thunderball (1961) bears some resemblance to elements of Operation Ruthless. However, only "Casino Royale" and "Live and Let Die" were published before Turing's death in June 1954.

The Fleming/Bletchley connection is explored in Mavis Batey's "From Bletchley with Love", a 40-page booklet written to accompany an exhibit of the same name held in Bletchley in 2008.

On with the Show!

May 28, 1929

"On with the Show!" is generally considered to be the first all-talking, all-color, feature length movie – a musical with some mystery and comedy thrown in. There had been earlier films that had been colored by hand, but this one was promoted by Warner Bros. as being in "natural color" using the Technicolor process. Unfortunately, only a few fragments of the original color print have been preserved, the longest lasting about 20 seconds.

The other studios starting shooting films using the same process, and "On with the Show!" was quickly eclipsed by the second Technicolor film, "Gold Diggers of Broadway" released on August 29.

As always, there are several contenders for first in this category, in this case depending on how you define "movie", "color", and "talking". For instance, the 1912 feature "With our King and Queen Through India" is a "full length" film using the Kinemacolor process, but it's a silent movie.

Volkswagen Bugs

28 May 1937

The car-maker Volkswagen (the "people's car") was founded on this day. The company is perhaps best known for the Volkswagen Beetle (officially the Volkswagen Type 1, and unofficially "The Bug"), a two-door, rear-engine design, manufactured from 1938 until 2003. The Bug's popularity peaked in 1968 with sales of just over 423,000 (incidentally, the "The Love Bug" movie came out that year).

Volkswagen also introduced the first 'computer' controlled electronic fuel injection (EFI) system in 1968, although only in its high-end Volkswagen 1600TL/E, not the Bug. Naturally the adverts described the system as "Volkswagen's electronic brain".

The D-Jetronic system (D for "druck", the German word for "pressure") was developed by Bosch to utilize the engine speed and intake manifold air density to calculate the "air mass" flow rate and thus the fuel requirements.

The D-Jetronic didn't employ a microprocessor; all the processing was carried out by 25 transistors. The first car to use a chip was the 1977 Oldsmobile Toronado, in its MISAR Ignition System [Aug 9].

In Sept. 2015, Volkswagen hit the headlines again for its embedded systems. This time for knowingly selling millions of vehicles with deceptive emissions software.

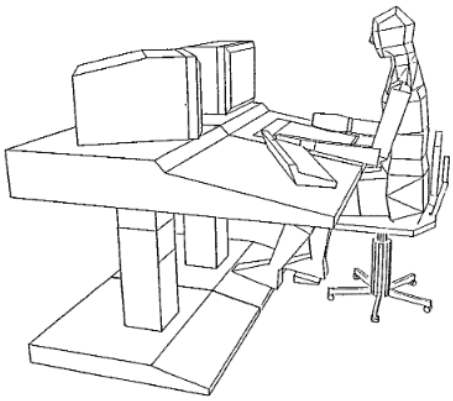
The code detected when the car was being subject to emissions testing, and engaged the emission controls. However, during normal driving conditions, the controls were shut off in order to maximize fuel economy and power. The downside was that this configuration produced 40 times more pollution than allowed by law.

SAMMIE Drives Away

May 28, 1970

SAMMIE (System for Aiding Man-Machine Interaction Evaluation) was developed by Maurice C. Bonney and his team at the University of Nottingham, starting in 1967.

The project developed a 3D computer model of a human figure in stages. It began as a single arm, then two arms joined to a rigid link representing the spine. A lower body was added as the 1970's dawned.



SAMMIE at work, from a 1986 paper by Keith Case, J. Mark Porter, and Maurice C. Bonney

Although not as visually realistic as William Fetter's [March 14] "Boeing man" from 1964, SAMMIE was much more flexible because all his joints worked.

SAMMIE (and an unnamed friend) appeared on the cover of *New Scientist* magazine on this day, sitting nonchalantly in a car, as part of a story about computer ergonomics.

In 1971, a short film showed SAMMIE happily carrying out a variety of assembly tasks., and the system was explained in detail in "Computerized work study using the SAMMIE/AUTOMAT system" by Bonney and A.A. Schofield. Among other features, AUTOMAT could automatically generate a 3D workplace layout that satisfied SAMMIE's needs for a task.

By 1977 the software, now FORTRAN based, was being used regularly in industrial design studies.

Super Mario Bros. Movie

May 28, 1993

Hollywood Pictures released "Super Mario Bros.", starring Bob Hoskins, John Leguizamo, Dennis Hopper, and Samantha Mathis, making it the first major motion picture to be based on a video game [Sept 13].

Two Brooklyn plumbers, Mario and Luigi, must travel to another dimension to rescue Princess Daisy from the evil King Koopa and stop him from taking over the world.

The film was neither a critical nor a commercial success, although its visual effects were praised, and was the first to use Autodesk Flame, now an industry standard for VFX. Since then Nintendo [Sept 23] hasn't produced another live-action feature based on their game franchises.

Dennis Hopper remarked, "My six-year-old son at the time - he's now 18 - he said, 'Dad, I think you're probably a pretty good actor, but why did you play that terrible guy King Koopa in Super Mario Bros.?' and I said, 'Well Henry, I did that so you could have shoes,' and he said, 'Dad, I don't need shoes that badly.'"

Yahoo! and GeoCities

May 28, 1999

Prev: [April 25] Next: [Jan 30]

On Jan. 28, 1999, nearing the peak of the dot-com bubble [March 10], Yahoo! [March 2] purchased GeoCities [June 7] for $3.57 billion. Yahoo! took control of the company on this day.

Soon after, users began to leave en masse in protest at the new terms of service which stated that GeoCities owned all user content, including media such as pictures. Yahoo! quickly reversed the decision, but GeoCities' long growth had come to an end.

On Oct. 26, 2009, Yahoo! closed GeoCities, and its websites disappeared the next day. Happily, the Internet Archive has them backed up at https://archive.org/web/geocities.php

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