

Nov. 11th

Roberto Mario (Bob) Fano

Born: Nov. 11, 1917;
Turin, Italy
Died: July 13, 2016

Fano's work on information theory included the Shannon-Fano data compression method with Claude Shannon [April 30], but he also contributed to network theory. In 1961, Fano and Fernando Corbató [July 1] developed the Compatible Time-Sharing System (CTSS [May 3]), one of the earliest time-sharing systems.

The success of the CTSS convinced MIT to launch Project MAC [July 1], with Fano as the founding director. It grew into MIT's largest interdepartmental research lab, and eventually became the renowned Computer Science and AI Lab (CSAIL).

Fano was one of the first open-source advocates, before that phrase had been invented. He liked to call computing a public utility that should be accessible to everyone.

Donald Michie

Born: Nov. 11, 1923;
Rangoon, Burma
Died: July 7, 2007

Michie was one of the founders of AI research in the UK, focusing on natural language systems and theories of intelligence. In the 1950's, he also worked with his wife on in vitro fertilization.

In 1960, he developed the Machine Educable Noughts And Crosses Engine (MENACE), one of the first programs capable of learning to play an unbeatable game of tic-tac-toe [May 21]. Since computers weren't readily available at this time, Michie implemented the software with the help of 300 matchboxes and colored beads.



Donald Michie (1986). Photo by Petermowforth. CC BY-SA 3.0.

In Edinburgh, during the 1960's and early 1970's, his team developed Freddy, the first lab robot capable of assembling complex objects from parts. However, overly ambitious predictions about Freddy's future abilities prompted a backlash of skepticism from rivals [Aug 30].

Michie had worked at Bletchley Park [Aug 15] during WWII, contributing to the efforts to break the Lorenz cipher [June 1]. In April 1944 he invented a technique that employed a Colossus [Jan 18] to decode the secondary wheel of the Lorenz machine, which meant that texts that had taken days to decipher could now be broken in hours.

He also found time to have frequent lunchtime discussions with Alan Turing [June 23] about 'intelligent' machine while playing chess.

Peter Karow

Born: Nov. 11, 1940;
Stargard, Pomerania

In the mid-1970's, Karow released the Ikarus system, which digitally generated fonts at any resolution by employing a spline model for each character's outline. The name referred to the frequency of system crashes during the early days of its development (i.e. just as Icarus fell from the sky).

Karow's company, URW, became a major supplier of digitized fonts for companies such as IBM, Microsoft, Apple, and Adobe.

Abacus Beats Calculator

Nov. 11, 1946

A contest was held in Tokyo that pitted the soroban (the Japanese abacus) against an electric calculator to judge their relative speeds and accuracy on problems involving the four basic arithmetic operations.

The soroban was utilized by Kiyoshi Matsuzaki, a champion operator, who worked for the Savings Bureau of the Japanese postal administration. The calculator was placed in the hands of US Army Private Thomas Nathan Wood of the 240th Finance Distributing Section at General MacArthur's headquarters. Wood was considered the most experienced calculator operator in Japan at the time.

The competition, held at the Ernie Pyle theater in Tokyo (now the Takarazuka theater), resulted in a decisive win for the soroban, 4 to 1, with the electric calculator prevailing only in multiplication. *The Nippon Times* reported that "Civilization, on the threshold of the atomic age, tottered Monday afternoon as the 2,000-year-old abacus beat the electric calculating machine."

A similar, but more awesome, tale appears in the "Lucky Numbers" chapter of "Surely, You're Joking, Mr. Feynman!" [May 2]. The abacus proved to be faster than Feynman's prodigious mental abilities for multiplication and division (he only had pen and paper), but Feynman won out when calculating the cube root of 1729.03.

Unisys Formed Nov. 11, 1986

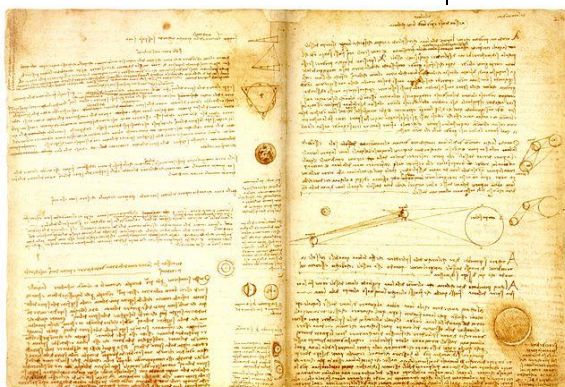
The Burroughs Corporation [Jan 26] and Sperry Rand [Jan 25] merged to become Unisys, the world's second largest computer manufacturer.

The Unisys name was chosen from over 31,000 submissions. Chuck Ayoub's winning entry was composed from parts of the words "united", "information", and "systems".

Unisys continued working for various government agencies in the same way as its parents. However, as mainframes declined in importance, it shifted into IT services. Unisys products included the Micro A in 1989, the first desktop mainframe.

Gates Buys da Vinci Nov. 11, 1994

Bill Gates [Oct 28] purchased Leonardo da Vinci's "Codex Leicester," also known as the "Codex Hammer", for \$30.8 million at auction. This made it the most expensive book at the time, but it's since dropped to 8th place in absolute terms (before adjusting for inflation).



Pages from the Codex Leicester. Leonardo da Vinci.

The "Leicester" name comes from Thomas Coke, Earl of Leicester, who acquired the book in 1719 (and it stayed in his family for 250 years after that). The "Hammer" appellation

refers to the oil magnate, Armand Hammer, who owned it before Gates.

Written between 1506 and 1510, the 72-page notebook records da Vinci's thoughts on tides, dams, fossils, and the relationship between the Moon, the Earth, and the Sun. It's written using da Vinci's mirror-image handwriting style.

Gates later included scans of some of the pages as screen saver images and wallpaper files in Microsoft Plus! for Windows 95 [Aug 16].

The book is currently located in Xanadu [Dec 00].

IAHC Nov. 11, 1996

The Internet International Ad Hoc Committee (IAHC) was formed by Jon Postel [Aug 6] to produce a "Memorandum of Understanding" which recommended the creation of seven new Internet domains: .arts, .firm, .info, .nom, .rec, .store, and .web. The precise difference between .firm, .store, and the existing .com, was left unclear.

Having completed its job, the organization was dissolved on May 1, 1997, and The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN [Sept 18], (also formed by Postel) took over. It approved seven new domains in 2000: .info, .museum, .name, .aero, .biz, .coop, and .pro. The precise difference between .biz and .firm, .store, and .com, was left unclear.

Tencent Nov. 11, 1998

Chinese company Tencent Holdings Limited was founded by Ma ("Pony Ma") Huateng, Zhang Zhidong, Xu Chenye, Chen Yidan, and Zeng Liqing. It has

since become the world's biggest investment corporation, and the largest gaming and social media company. Analysts estimate that Tencent's digital services are used by more than two-thirds of the Chinese population.

Tencent also owns the most profitable game in the world, "Honor of Kings", which makes about \$1bn each quarter and has 200 million monthly players. However, after the Chinese government called the game "poison" and a "drug", Tencent introduced one-hour game-playing time limits for under-12's, extending to two hours for 12- to 18-year-olds.

Just in time for the 19th National Party Congress in 2017, Tencent released a mobile game called "Clap for Xi Jinping: An Awesome Speech", in which players had 19 seconds to clap as many times as possible for President Xi by tapping their smartphone screens rapidly.

Tencent is often grouped with two other Chinese Internet giants, Baidu [Jan 18] and Alibaba [April 4], and collectively known as BAT.

Dream Robots Nov. 11, 2000

At the Robodex 2000 conference in Yokohama, Sony introduced its humanoid Sony Dream Robot, the SDR-3X, although it was quickly renamed the QRIO (short for "Quest for cuRIOsity". This release followed the launch of their AIBO robotic dog the previous year [May 11].

The QRIO was only 50 cm tall and weighed just 50 kg, but was capable of dancing, kicking a ball, getting up from a prone position, and walking quickly (covering around fifteen meters per minute). This was good enough for The Guinness World Records (the 2005 edition) to deem it the first bipedal robot capable of running.

The QRIO was equipped with image and speech recognition software running on the Aperios real-time OS, with two CCD

cameras and seven microphones embedded in its head.

On Jan. 26, 2006, the AIBO and QRIO were discontinued, but a new generation of AIBO's appeared in 2017.

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

Heroes of Video Games Stamps

Nov. 11, 2005

The French postal service released a collection of stamps on the theme of "Heros des Jeux-Video" featuring Adibou, "Donkey Kong" [July 9], "Lara Croft", Link from Zelda [Feb 21], Mario [Sept 13], "Pac-Man" [May 22], "Prince of Persia", Rayman, "The Sims" [Feb 4], and Spyro.

In Oct. 2014, Ireland's postal service joined in, issuing four stamps celebrating "Pac-Man", "Space Invaders" [June 5], Mario, and "Sonic the Hedgehog" [June 23].

For more stamps action, see [April 7], [June 30], [Oct 8], [Dec 11].

PlayStation 3

Nov. 11, 2006

Sony unveiled the PlayStation 3 (PS3) in Japan, featuring a 3.2 GHz Cell microprocessor, a 500 MHz GPU, 256 MB of RAM, 256 MB of VRAM, and a 60 GB hard drive. It was the first gaming system to use Blue-ray discs [July 18], which helped Blue-ray gain wider acceptance.

Sony started selling the PS3 in North America a week later, and sorely underestimated its popularity by only having 400,000 units on hand. Retailers' inability to meet the crazy levels of demand led to a few problems – two men were shot during a scuffle over ownership, and several armed robberies were committed to obtain the device.

The PS3 faced strong competition from Microsoft's Xbox 360 [Nov 22] and Nintendo's Wii [Nov 19], which meant that it performed less well than earlier PlayStations ([Dec 3], [March 4]). Indeed, Sony's games division posted an operating loss of \$1.97 billion in 2007, and soon after, Ken Kutaragi [Aug 2], President of Sony Computer Entertainment, announced plans to retire.

Several supercomputer configurations have been built with PS3s, including the Condor Cluster [Dec 1], a 200-node device used to crack SSL authentication [Dec 23], and the smaller CrackStation [Nov 28],

The PlayStation 4 was released on [Nov 15] 2013.
