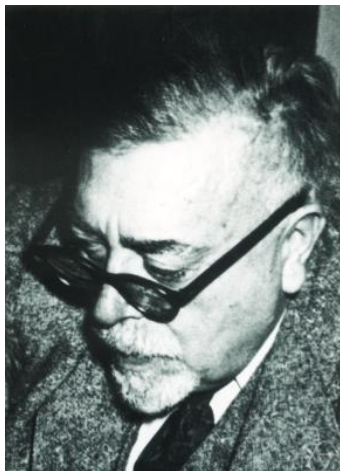# Nov. 26th

Norbert Wiener
Born: Nov. 26, 1894;

Columbia, Missouri
Died: March 18, 1964

Wiener is credited with inventing the study of communication and control mechanisms in machines and human beings, highlighting the importance of feedback for those systems. He called the topic "cybernetics," from the Greek word Kubernos meaning pilot or helmsman. Today's use of "cyber" to prefix computer-related words, including "cyberspace" [Sept 3] (and cyberman [Nov 23]) can be placed at Wiener's feet.

Norbert Wiener. Photo by Konrad Jacobs. CC BY-SA 2.0 de.

His book "Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine" (1948) was a massive hit, with the first edition going through at least five printings. This was quite surprising since the text contained a lot of mathematics, and wasn't intended for a popular audience.

"Cybernetics" was arguably the first book on digital computers, although they were only really discussed in one chapter. The book's main topic was the theoretical foundations of self-regulating mechanisms, which had a major influence on later research into AI.

Incidentally, two books much more focused on digital computing came out the following year:

- "Giant Brains" by Edmund Berkeley [June 30]
- "Calculating Instruments and Machines" by Douglas Hartree [March 27]

There are many tales of Wiener's absent-mindedness.

It was said that he returned home once to find the house empty. He spoke to a neighborhood girl, who told him that the family had moved that day. He thanked her and she replied, "That's why I stayed behind, Daddy!"

Once he drove 150 miles to a math conference at Yale; but when the event was over, he forgot he had come by car, so he returned home by bus. The next morning, he went outside to get his car, discovered it was missing, and reported to the police that someone had stolen it.

Micro-soft Official
Nov. 26, 1976

Prev: [April 4] Next: [June 25]

Bill Gates [Oct 28] and Paul Allen [Jan 21] registered the name Micro-soft in New Mexico, the state where MITS, manufacturer of the Altair 8800 [Dec 19] and their first client, was located.

In late 1976, Micro-soft landed its two biggest customers so far: National Cash Register and General Electric, and revenues for its first full year of operation came to over $100,000. During this time, Micro-soft moved to Two Park Central Tower, its home for the next two and a half years.

Allen stopped working for MITS at the end of this month, and in Jan. 1977, Gates dropped out of Harvard (although, he was granted an honorary degree in 2007).

A crucial event on [Nov 18] 1977 was the ruling that Micro-soft was within its rights to market its BASIC to companies other than MITS.

On Jan. 1, 1979, the company left Albuquerque, relocating to sunny Bellevue in Washington. Apparently, it had been difficult to persuade top programmers to move to Albuquerque, and Gates and Allen also wanted to be nearer their families. Shortly before the move, eleven of the then-thirteen employees posed for a staff photo [Dec 7].

Microsoft was incorporated on [June 25] 1981, just prior to the release of the IBM PC [Aug 12].

WordPerfect
Nov. 26, 1982

In 1979, Bruce Bastian and Alan Ashton completed a word processor for the DEC PDP-11/34 [Jan 5] owned by the local government in Orem City, Utah, and the pair decided to found Satellite Software to market the program to other PDP-11 installations

On this day, Satellite changed its name to WordPerfect Corp. to coincide with the release of WordPerfect (WP) for the IBM PC [Aug 12]. Although it was the first release, it was labeled version 2.20, continuing the numbering from the PDP-11 days.

All versions up to 5.0 were programmed in x86 assembly, which gave the software a significant performance advantage over its main competitor, WordStar, [Sept 00], which relied on MS-DOS functions to access hardware. By release 5.1 in 1989, WP had become a standard in the MS-DOS market.
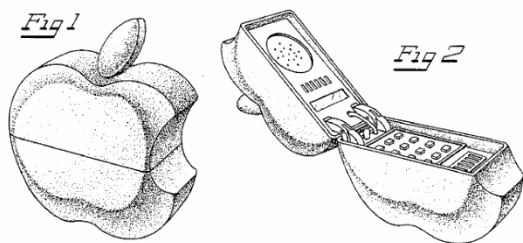
However its dominant position began to erode after a disappointing release for MS Windows, followed by a long delay before a better version appeared. Meanwhile MS Word [Sept 29] took over, helped by aggressive bundling deals that ultimately led to Office in [Aug 1] 1989.

Pete Peterson, executive vice president for WP, once remarked: "Microsoft is the fox that takes you across the river and then eats you."

WP was sold to Novell in June 1994, and then to Corel in Jan. 1996.

First Apple Phone
Nov. 26, 1982

Long before the iPhone ([June 29] 2007), the first apple phone patent was filed on this day by Marvin Glass & Associates (MGA), and approved as USD 281686 in Dec 1985.

Figures 1 and 2 from the MGA apple phone patent (USD281686).

MGA was a toy designer and engineering firm, and the patent was for an apple-shaped toy phone not a prototype smartphone. The designers were Denni F. Rivette and Harry Disko who incidentally included a 'bite' cut out from the side, as in the Apple logo. This could have caused problems since this famous Rob Janoff design for the Apple II dated from 1977 [April 16].

Apple's first phone appeared the next year, but only as a product concept by Hartmut Esslinger of Frog Design. It included a touch screen and a stylus.

For another Apple designer, see [Feb 27]. For another iPhone before the iPhone, see [Jan 6]

Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home
Nov. 26, 1986

The fourth feature film based on the TV series "Star Trek" [Sept 8] saw the crew time travel back to 1986 San Francisco in search of whales. It's generally considered the most humorous of the movies, as typified by Scotty's attempts to use a Mac Plus [Jan 24] by talking at its mouse. The script originally specified an Amiga [July 23] for the scene, but Commodore required the producers to purchase a computer while Apple was willing to lend them one. The Mac's internals were completely removed and its screen was replaced with one from an IBM PC to make it easier to synchronize its video refresh rate with the film camera's frame rate. The "transparent aluminum" animation that Scotty hacks up via the 'quaint' keyboard was also created on an IBM PC.

At one point Spock takes a test where he must answer "What were the principal historical events on the planet Earth in the year 1987?". The answer is not heard but you can briefly see the two written answers: "Computers cloned from carrots", and "New York Times is last magazine to close doors." The computer answers "Correct".

For more "Star Trek", see [Sept 8], [June 4], [Oct 28].

The PayPal Mafia
Nov. 26, 2007

The "PayPal Mafia" was the humorous name given to former PayPal [Feb 15] founders and employees who went on to create other technology companies, such as Tesla Motors, LinkedIn [May 5], SpaceX, and YouTube [Feb 14].

The term gained wider exposure when today's article in *Fortune* magazine used the phrase in its headline and featured a photo of 13 former (all-male) PayPal employees in gangster attire.

Peter Thiel was referred to as the "don", and Max Levchin as the "consigliere" (the don's advisor). The culture at the company before the eBay take-over [Sept 3] was described as "an intellectual pissing contest". But John Malloy, a former board member, later remarked: "Calling us a mafia is to insult mafias. A mafia is far better organized than we were."

The PayPal Mafia has been (optimistically) compared to the breakaway Shockley Semiconductor [Feb 13] engineers of the late 1950's, who were sometimes (unfairly) known as the "Traitorous Eight" [Sept 18].

A similar group photo from the 1990's is *Forbes* magazine's "Masters of the New Universe" from [July 27] 1998, which also features only men.