Sept. 16th

Dame Vera Stephanie Shirley

(née Buchthal / Brook)

Born: Sept. 16, 1933;

Dortmund, Germany . She came to Britain as an child refugee in 1939.

Shirley founded the company "Freelance Programmers" in 1962 with the aim of creating job opportunities for women, and consequently employed mostly women until the UK Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 made that illegal. At the time, she signed her company paperwork 'Steve' in order to get better responses from the male-dominated business world.

Dame Stephanie Shirley, 2013. Photo by Lynn Hart. CC BY 4.0.

After university, she worked as a programmer at the Post Office Research Station. She loved the job, but hated the sexism: "You learnt to stand with your back to the wall so that someone couldn't pinch your bottom."

When she retired in 1993, she gave away most of her stake in the firm to her employees, making around 70 of them millionaires.

Xerox 914

Sept. 16, 1959

The first commercially successful photocopier, the Xerox 914, was introduced at the Sherry-Netherland hotel in NYC. One of the photocopiers used at the event caught fire, but fortunately not one involved in the live TV demo.

The 914 was 'blazingly' fast (capable of up to 7 copies/minute), economical, and became a significant component of Xerox's revenue in the mid-1960s. In fact, its success prompted the company, then known as Haloid Xerox [Oct 6], to change its name to Xerox in 1961.

The machine was called the 914 because it could copy paper sizes of up to 9 inches by 14 inches.

Software and Art

Sept. 16 – Nov. 8, 1970

"Software, Information Technology: its New Meaning for Art," curated by artist and critic Jack Burnham for the Jewish Museum in Brooklyn, was one of the seminal computer-art exhibitions at the end of the 1960s. It followed on from "The Machine at the End of the Mechanical Age" ([Nov 27] 1968) show at the Museum of Modern Art.

One work, by Nicholas Negroponte [Dec 1] from the Architecture Machines Group at MIT , was formely entitled "Seek", but better known as "The Gerbil Smasher". A robot arm piled 500 metal cubes in an artistic pattern across a forty-square-foot platform. Forty gerbils were let loose and, as they scrambled among the cubes, the robot arm would keep repositioning the blocks. Also, if a block was accidentally moved by a gerbil, the arm would place the block back in its designated spot. If the gerbils substantially disordered the blocks, the computer would lay them out in a new configuration.

Negroponte later commented: "Rarely have two disciplines joined forces to seemingly bring out the worst in each other."

The RESISTORS [Nov 00] developed some of the software used at the exhibition, and Ted Nelson [June 17] was a technical consultant.

6502s in Jars

Sept. 16, 1975

The MOS 6501 and 6502 were cheap 8-bit microprocessors designed by Chuck Peddle's [Nov 25] team at MOS Technology. Peddle, Bill Mensch [Feb 9] and several others had recently left Motorola because of the company's lack of interest in their designs. But after the 6501 was announced, Motorola became sufficiently interested to file a lawsuit against the company. It dragged on for years before MOS agreed to pay $200,000 in fines.

In the meantime, MOS sold each 6502 for a mere $25. By comparison, Intel's 8080 [April 18] and Motorola's 6800 [March 7] both cost nearly $200. The price reduction was made possible by the chip's support of a minimal instruction set, combined with a fabrication process that yielded ten times as many good chips as the competitors.

Peddle introduced the 6502 at the Wescon trade show in San Francisco, but because Wescon wouldn't allow exhibitors to sell anything on the show floor, MOS rented the MacArthur Suite at the nearby St. Francis Hotel. The processors were put on display in large jars to imply that they were in steady production and readily available. What the customers didn't know was that the bottom half of each jar contained dud chips.

The 6502 almost singlehandedly forced the price of processors to drop, and helped launch the PC revolution. The 6502 was used in the Apple II [June 5], the Commodore PET [April 15], and the BBC Micro [Dec 1], and game systems put out by Nintendo [Sept 23] and Atari [June 27].

MOS also developed the KIM-1 single board computer [April

00], originally as a demonstration device for the 6502. It was one reason why Commodore [Oct 10] bought MOS in 1976.

Jobs Quits Apple
Sept. 16, 1985

Prev: [May 31] Next: [Sept 17]

The Apple board had removed Steve Jobs [Feb 24] as head of the Macintosh division back in May. On this day he announced his resignation, saying "I've been thinking a lot, and it's time for me to get on with my life. It's obvious that I've got to do something. I'm 30 years old."

Jobs registered the company name NeXT the same day, which would eventually lead to his triumphant return in 1996 after Apple acquired the company [Dec 20]. He became CEO again exactly 12 years later in 1997 [two entries on].

ESRB Founded
Sept. 16, 1994

Violent video games, such as "Mortal Kombat" [Oct 8], "Night Trap", and Doom [Dec 10], led to a set of congressional hearings in 1992. At the time, a few companies, such as Sega and 3DO, had introduced their own ratings systems, but there was no industry-wide system in place. Therefore, to pre-empt the possibility of the creation of a governmental rating board, several of the largest game providers founded the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB).

Ratings naturally led to some controversy, including the appropriateness of the categories. For example, when Minecraft [May 17] was ported to consoles, the ESRB decided that the game was only appropriate for children aged 10 and up (i.e. it was rated E-10+ [March 2]), because of "violent acts such as lighting animals on fire and harming animals with weapons."

The same congressional hearings also prompted the formation of the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) [June 24].

Jobs Rejoins Apple
Sept. 16, 1997

Twelve years to the day after resigning from Apple [two entries back], Steve Jobs [Feb 24] was named Apple's Interim CEO. The move came after Gil Amelio [Feb 2] resigned from the position on July 9 following one of the worst quarterly losses for a company in Silicon Valley history. Jobs' first official task was to announce a $161 million loss and a reduction in revenues of 28%. In fact, although Jobs was now CEO, he'd been serving as an adviser to Amelio since Apple's acquisition of NeXT on [Dec 20], 1996.

Much of the technology acquired with the NeXT purchase later found its way into Mac OS X [March 24].

Wearable PC
Sept. 16, 1998

IBM unveiled an ultra-portable prototype PC at IBM Fair'98 in Tokyo. It had been developed at its Japanese Yamato Lab.

IBM Wearable PC Prototype. (c) IBM.

The Pentium-class [March 22] computer had been stuffed into two Walkman-sized cases that clipped onto the user's belt, and included a three-inch head-mounted 320x640 pixel display. The PC could understand verbal commands using ViaVoice voice recognition software. This feature led to the creation of a memorable TV commercial featuring a young man sitting in a park screaming stock orders into his PC's headset.

For the earliest commercial *wrist* wearable computer, see [Jan 00].