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What the Dormouse Said

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Review by Jeffrey Barlow <barlowj@pacificu.edu>


Some works are very difficult to review, and this is one such. It can be described as a history of the personal computer (PC), at least as seen through its antecedents in the San Francisco Bay Area, particularly at Palo Alto. But it could also be described as a cultural history of technology, focused upon the turbulent Sixties. Important figures like Doug Englebart, Bill Gates, and Alan Kay who made critical contributions to the development of the PC are presented as confusingly but inextricably intertwined with names like Ken Kesey, the Grateful Dead and Stewart Brand. They share not only their presence in the maelstrom of the Sixties in California, but are part of the feed-back between counter-culture and technology labs such as SAIL (Stanford Artificial Intelligence Laboratory) and the later Xerox PARC (Palo Alto Research Center).

Neither, John Markoff argues, is this conjunction mere coincidence. Markoff states at the last that the two competing views of technology, as perhaps best expressed by Steward Brand. “Information wants to be free….and information also wants to be very expensive.” (p. 286) can be seen in the origins of the PC. The contrast is not only between attitudes toward information, but best reflected here in the uneasy conjoining of university and corporate research labs, often funded in large part by defense contracts during the Vietnam war, staffed by draft-dodging young men and women experimenting simultaneously with technology and with drugs, sex, ideas, and social policy.

While the book is probably most interesting for the unexpected ways in which the countercultural revolution both intruded in and contributed to the technological revolution, the book can stand by itself as a sort of local history of the creation of the personal computer in the Bay Area.

Markoff, a splendid writer, well equipped to produce this often wry analysis, also has the journalistic objectivity to see all sides of the issue. Some of his subjects lead or participated in student attacks—both physical and intellectual—on the very labs where they themselves
worked, had worked, or would work. But Markoff’s approach lets the reader sympathize with all parties. But the author does make the extremes of the national security processes of the era come to seem not only senseless, but also downright dangerous.

The unanswered question that this history begs to ask, may well be whether or not the free-wheeling personal approach to computing exemplified here by the many contributions of misfits, dreamers, and scruffy refugees from reality can coexist with an increasingly centralized process of federally funded research and development? Might this centralization not fatally impede the creativity that brought so many critical elements of the personal computer itself into existence?

The audience for this book is proving to be a very broad one, it has been quite successful and seemingly uniformly well-reviewed. However, a certain minimal knowledge of the history of the computing industry would be very helpful, and a good understanding of computers themselves will certainly improve one’s enjoyment of the work.

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15 THOUGHTS ON "WHAT THE DORMOUSE SAID"

video baby monitor reviews
on February 1, 2014 at 11:23 AM said:

Quality posts is the secret to attract the visitors to pay a quick visit the website, that’s what this site is providing.

table saw reviews
on February 3, 2014 at 6:58 PM said:

I think this is among the most significant info for me. And i am glad reading your article. But wanna remark on some general things, The web site style is wonderful, the articles is really nice : D. Good job, cheers

rifle scope reviews
on February 3, 2014 at 10:34 PM said:
What i don’t understood is in fact how you’re now not actually much more smartly-liked than you may be now. You’re very intelligent. You know thus significantly with regards to this subject, made me individually consider it from a lot of numerous angles. Its like men and women are not involved except it’s one thing to accomplish with Girl gaga!

Your individual stuffs excellent. All the time handle it up!

band saw reviews  
on February 3, 2014 at 11:02 PM said:

You’ve made some really good points there. I looked on the net for additional information about the issue and found most individuals will go along with your views on this site.

best induction cooktop  
on February 3, 2014 at 11:12 PM said:

Heya i’m for the primary time here. I came across this board and I to find It truly useful & it helped me out much. I’m hoping to give something back and aid others like you aided me.

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on February 4, 2014 at 12:32 AM said:

Hey there! I’m at work browsing your blog from my new iphone 4! Just wanted to say I love reading your blog and look forward to all your posts! Keep up the outstanding work!
Wow, amazing weblog layout! How long have you been running a blog for? you make running a blog look easy. The total look of your web site is great, as neatly as the content!

It’s going to be finish of mine day, but before finish I am reading this great piece of writing to increase my experience.

Hello everyone, it’s my first visit at this web site, and article is in fact fruitful designed for me, keep up posting these types of articles.

for that finest cost around the market super genuine all

I am a student and i found your information over a web site really fascinating for my study, Please preserve it up.
nigeria entertainment news
on February 4, 2014 at 10:38 AM said:

I have mastered some significant items via your internet site post. A single other subject I wish to talk about is that there are many games available on a industry formulated specially for toddler age children. They include pattern acceptance, colors, family pets, and shapes. These typically focus on familiarization as an alternative to memorization. This keeps smaller little ones engaged without sensing like they’re studying. Thanks

recumbent bike reviews
on February 4, 2014 at 6:48 PM said:

Thanks for sharing your thoughts. I truly appreciate your efforts and I will be waiting for your further post. Thanks once again.

scroll saw reviews
on February 4, 2014 at 7:48 PM said:

Hello mates, pleasant post and pleasant urging commented here, I am truly enjoying by these.

jig saw reviews
on February 4, 2014 at 8:20 PM said:

You really make it seem so easy with your presentation but I find this matter to be actually something that I think I would never understand. It seems too complicated and very broad for me. I am looking forward for your next post, I will try to get the hang of it!