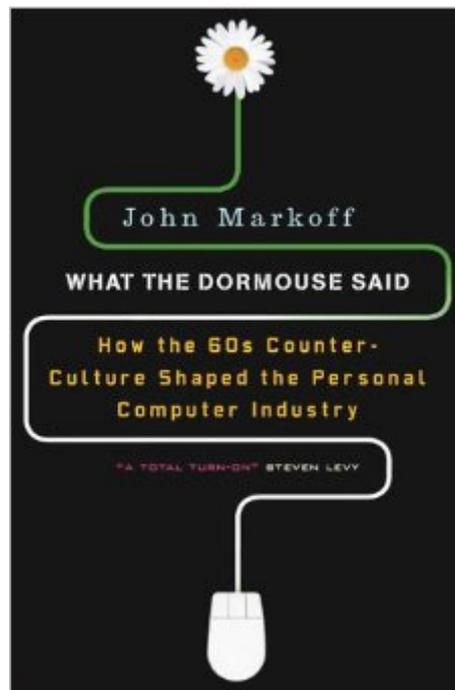


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What The Dormouse Said: How The Sixties Counterculture Shaped The Personal Computer Industry



Synopsis

Most histories of the personal computer industry focus on technology or business. John Markoff's landmark book is about the culture and consciousness behind the first PCs "the culture being counter" and the consciousness expanded, sometimes chemically. It's a brilliant evocation of Stanford, California, in the 1960s and '70s, where a group of visionaries set out to turn computers into a means for freeing minds and information. In these pages one encounters Ken Kesey and the phone hacker Cap'n Crunch, est and LSD, The Whole Earth Catalog and the Homebrew Computer Lab. *What the Dormouse Said* is a poignant, funny, and inspiring book by one of the smartest technology writers around.

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Customer Reviews

Most histories of the personal computer begin with Steve Jobs, Steve Wozniak, and Apple in 1976, but while hanging out at SAIL in the mid 1970s, and at the First West Coast Computer Faire in 1977 I heard highly attenuated versions of the folklore that Markoff has only now, after nearly 30 years, run to ground. Conventional histories of the PC make passing reference to the MITS Altair (1974) before going on the talk about the Apple, the IBM PC (1981) and what followed. The more sophisticated would conspiratorially tell the story of how Steve Jobs "stole the idea" for the Macintosh from Xerox's fabled Palo Alto Research Center (PARC) as they were "fumbling the future", and nearly everyone knew that Bill Gates then stole the ideas from Apple. But the truth of those half-heard folktales from my youth is that nearly every concept in the personal computer

predates all of this, in a delightfully picaresque tale that starts in the late 1950s and weaves together computers, LSD, the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, the Vietnam War and dozens of characters. John Markoff, veteran technology reporter for the New York Times, is the first to comprehensively tell this story in his new book *What The Dormouse Said: How the 60s Counterculture Shaped the Personal Computer Industry*. Markoff, best known for *Cyberpunk and Takedown: The Pursuit and Capture of Kevin Mitnick*, explodes the conventional notion that the PC replaced the mini-computer in the same way that the mini-computer replaced the mainframe -- by a sort of evolutionary selection within the computer business, by persistently investigating the roots of the PC its unsung pioneers, its user interface, and the culture of open-source software in the San Francisco drug and anti-war culture of the late 1950s and 1960s.

"What the Dormouse Said" is an excellent book about two research groups based around Stanford. The two groups developed many of the key components of modern computing, and were closely linked to the counter-culture of the 1960s that flourished near Stanford. I was quite excited to read this book. I learned a great deal of things, from the relatively minor (e.g., the origin of the word "mouse") to the extremely important (e.g., how the personal computer was a radical departure from the concept of shared computing). The book is full of keen observations about the odd individuals and groups that were responsible for making the jump from mainframes to the personal computer. However, the book suffers from a huge problem, which others have pointed out. The book doesn't have consistent themes that pull all the anecdotes and fascinating history together. Good non-fiction books usually have three levels of organization: big ideas that motivate the entire tome; themes that link material between and within chapters; and clear sentence level writing. The book has the big idea and it is clearly written on the level of sentences and paragraphs, but you get lost reading through chapters. There are so many people that just appear and disappear that it's hard to keep track of them. I felt like the author was lazy and just dumped a lot of oral history on the page, without going through the process of finding strong organizing principles for the material. I found the book really frustrating to read. It's a shame. A good editor could have really whipped this book into an outstanding work of non-fiction. One or two more rounds of writing and rewriting, and the book would really be outstanding. It's has all the right stuff... it's so close ...

As all major movements and innovations seem to come out of periods of cultural upheaval so true is it of the computer revolution that brought about the information age. Here we see that Steve Wozniak's Apple one was just an immediate cause the soon to come home computing explosion. It

wasn't until brew-club mate Steve Jobs saw that the market was ripe to start selling computers that the market took off. But underlying this well known story of garage-built computing is a much deeper and much more interesting story of how the field of computer science developed in sequence with the intellectual community and how it wasn't until these fields clashed (or symbiotically nurtured) with 1960's psychedelic counterculture as only California could have produced it that the computer science really took off. "What the Dormouse Said" explores how the computer industry needed freedom from the heavy top down institutions of the East Coast and found it in Silicon Valley. Of course it all started with transistors that TI built into integrated circuits in 1958. This was the essential technology that made the revolution possible and though the IC wasn't perfect it was only a few years before the idea of a home PC was possible. As possible as it was, Digital's CEO Ken Olson said that there was no reason anyone would want a computer in their home. This backward view, like Bill Gates in 1981 when he said there is no reason a PC would require more than 640K of RAM, seems laughable in hindsight yet it was these philosophies, among forward thinking men no less, that probably slowed down the process. It only follows that if these were the innovators closed-mindedness must have been the prevailing stance within the computer science community.

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