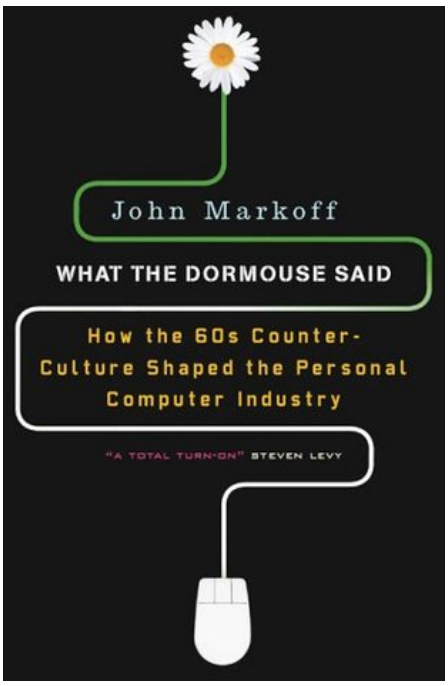

What the Dormouse Said: How the Sixties Counterculture Shaped the Personal Computer Industry

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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.

What the Dormouse Said: How the Sixties Counterculture Shaped the Personal Computer Industry Details

Date	:	Published February 28th 2006 by Penguin Books (first published 2005)
ISBN	:	9780143036760
Author	:	John Markoff
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From Reader Review What the Dormouse Said: How the Sixties Counterculture Shaped the Personal Computer Industry for online ebook

Eric B. Kennedy says

A really wonderful, personal account of the emergence of the personal computer... and the multitude of social and community dynamics in play behind it all. It's a tour through LSD and hacking, in the differences between east and west coasts, and through wildly successful product demos and deeply frustrating personal moments. It does a great job of highlighting the personal dimensions of innovation, and how the stories we tell ourselves - of 'great men' leading the way - are actually far better told as webs, communities, and fortunate intersections. Great technological history.

Brian Vaughan says

The San Francisco Bay Area has a long history as a center for the political left and the counterculture. It is also an important center for the development of computers and the Internet. The heyday of the counterculture, the late sixties and early seventies, was a critical moment in the development of computer technology. How did the wave of popular social transformation influence the development of computing, itself a source of further significant social and political transformation?

Unfortunately, Markoff doesn't answer this question. He doesn't even ask it clearly.

In the first few pages of "What the Dormouse Said," he makes it clear that, as early as the late 1940s, some few researchers imagined the "personal computer," in contrast to the tightly controlled bureaucratic tools known at the time, and those few researchers went on to spend decades developing that concept. This is interesting.

However, the next 250 pages of the book consist of hundreds of irrelevant and tedious biographical snapshots, explaining how yet another computer scientist was a gifted child, happened to choose to go to grad school at Stanford, and met the last computer scientist described a few pages earlier. Somewhere in this, the person described has some involvement with the counterculture or the New Left, usually a very superficial involvement. How that influenced the person's views of computing is never discussed. Causation is not correlation. Simply telling us that many computing pioneers took LSD and protested the Vietnam War doesn't tell us much, if anything, about how their views of the possibilities of computing were transformed.

He does make it clear that there were two critical loci: the Augment lab at Stanford, where Doug Engelbart's vision of personal computing laid the groundwork that was developed later, and more famously, at Xerox's PARC, where the Alto computer established the conventions familiar today in graphical user interfaces; and the People's Computer Company, in which enthusiasts made a conscious effort to unite the ideals of the counterculture and the New Left with the developments in computer technology. Sadly, Markoff spends only a few pages on the PCC, which deserved much more in-depth consideration.

In general, Markoff's treatment of the ideas of the counterculture, the New Left, and of computing, are superficial.

I gave this book three stars, as despite all these shortcomings, I believe the book is worth reading, as the information is there, despite Markoff's failure to connect the dots and construct a coherent historical narrative.

Lars K Jensen says

This is a great book, especially if you're into the early computer/PC history.

As other reviewers have pointed out before me, I'm not sure how much interconnectedness there really was between the counter-culture and the beginning of the PC era. Naturally, there was some - but it seems to me that the counter-culture was almost *everywhere*.

The reason I bought this book in the first place is because how this time in technology and computer history is described in Thomas Rid's 'Rise of the Machines' (on the history of the word "cyber") which I thoroughly enjoyed reading. The link seemed clearer to me in Rid's book that it does in Markoff's.

None the less, the counter-culture and some of the people associated with it (and of course the ideals it represented) affected the early PC history quite a lot. That makes it even more ironic when you look at the billion dollar business it has since become.

Also, there are *a lot* of persons buzzing around in his history and unless you take notes, you are going to lose track of who is who. I certainly did, and Markoff could easily have done a better job at helping us out. Maybe a list of persons at the beginning or end of the book.

And probably the most noteworthy counter-culture(-inspired) person to have ever walked the IT/technology business, Steve Jobs, is barely mentioned in the book. No doubt that this is because the book is from 2005 and Jobs only really (like, really-really) rose to fame at the launch of the iPhone in 2007 which changed the business.

But then again, in his first iPhone presentation, Jobs quoted Alan Kay who is mentioned in described in Markoff's book.

All in all: I suggest you read the book but maybe structure your reading so you have a break now and then, because you are going to meet at lot of (interesting) people throughout your reading sessions :)

Jonathan Barry says

The author wrote this in the same way in which I often write my essays: I start with a preconceived conclusion and generally try to shoehorn the rest of my essay into it, despite reality differing a little from what I though.

The rise of computers was undoubtedly parallel with the rise of the drug culture and the New Left, and many of the first computer scientists were active participants in these movements; however, it seems that by the

author's sporadic intermingling of these separate events, neither overly influenced the other.

At points, I thought I was reading two different stories: one of the rise of computers, one of '60s counterculture, which were both incredibly interesting. The vision of researchers in the '50s and '60s is mindblowing, especially after having watched and read some of the primary media mentioned by Markoff. The anti-war student movement, too, is a fascinating subject, one that I would like to see in more depth.

In summary, it's a solid book, especially for those with little knowledge of pre-Apple II computer history, but the author's overly ambitious approach of intertwining two separate events confused the narrative and took away from what could have been two excellent, separate histories of the goings-on in '60s California.

Lucas says

Decent general early computing history, but the 'sixties counterculture' is only occasionally connected-sometimes in important ways but frequently not.

There is some entertainment value in the occasional story of the movement conflicting with reality:

> The commune idea hadn't worked out. He ran out of money within six months, it being more expensive to live on a commune in southern Oregon than he had thought it would be. Worst of all, it turned out there were no programming jobs anywhere close to his commune.

The environmentally destructive effects of large numbers of people getting close to nature are more apparent now, and perhaps others have realized it as a left-wing rationalization for urban flight.

The impact of the Vietnam War seems greater than the occasional acid trip (or hot tub use, also documented here). Men would go to work for defense contractors in order to avoid being drafted, but the weapons work was repulsive to those opposed to the war. Defense funded university computing labs sometimes became targets for protests.

> But Duvall was extremely opposed to the war in Vietnam, which he came to see as a generational aberration. An entire American generation had been shaped by World War II; they got to be heroes, they got to be in command, and they won. It had been the high point of their lives. Vietnam, he thought, was the legacy of a group of Americans that was reaching its midlife crisis, and to grapple with it they were waging another war. There was no other reasonable explanation.

Nick Sweeting says

Great book, it lays out the history and impact of the silicon revolution by following the tales of several radical radical academics. These researchers piloted the future of computing into uncharted territory, accelerating research by experimenting with using LSD as a problem-solving aid. A good read if you enjoy an anecdotal story-telling style, on a very interesting topic.

Natali says

First the good: A very inspirational read for anyone who loves computers and history. Markoff tells the the underground tale of how personal computers evolved out of a (sometimes illicit) counterculture in the 1960s in the San Francisco Bay Area. The story made me homesick for the independent, creative, and brilliant spirit that permeates the Bay Area. I am proud to be from there.

Now a few drawbacks: The book is a little hard to follow because there were so many players. I really wanted to know the personal background of every major contributor to the personal computing movement but I had a hard time keeping them all straight. Perhaps a little different organization might have been helpful. Also, the book omits the contributions of women and minorities. I know that these groups' contribution were limited but some of the wives of the major contributors hardly had their due. One woman in particular was only ever referred to as so-and-so's wife. It is no wonder that the computer is such a masculine tool. It was designed by white men who could afford the time to play with their toys. Anyone who calls the computer androgynous is seriously mistaken.

This book does provide a fascinating juxtaposition for the state of personal computing versus the intention of personal computing. Our digital founding fathers intended information and software to be freely exchanged. They figured they would make their money on hardware, not software. It is amazing how, after the 90s era of big money Microsoft, we come full circle to a computer culture that values free-flowing information. But this is still tricky. Here is a great quote from the book illustrating this: *"Stewart Brand expressed the fundamental tension most clearly: 'Information wants to be free,' he said, 'and information also wants to be very expensive.'"*

Angela says

Psychedelics and computer history, two of my favorite topics. This book would have been improved if I'd had the patience to chart a timeline while I was writing it, I think, because as other reviewers have stated, it's very difficult to keep track of the main characters. The structure isn't organized strictly by time (it jumps back and forth between years, particularly towards the end) or by subject (making it difficult to remember who a particular player is, when their only previous appearance was 60 pages prior), but it's full of richly interesting stories and quotable moments. Recommended if you're into the topic, but I can't imagine it would appeal to a casual reader very much.

Tariq Mahmood says

The best way to predict the future is to invent it....

The story of the genesis of the computer age seemed very similar to the rise of any religious movement, with its ideological future predicting, LSD smoking prophets, who believed in a future built on the power of their algorithms. They were true revolutionaries who went against the business models of their own corporations in order to bring about iconic changes which have turned us all into firm believers in the new religion of technology.

Long live the revolution.....

Miros?aw Aleksander says

Certainly and interesting and informative book, it often loses focus, ant the influence of 60s counterculture on the PC industry, although convincing, seems to take the back seat. The amount of people discussed is impressive, however, its easy to get lost in who did what and when. Nonetheless, it is an interesting account of the development of personal computing.

Sten Tamkivi says

There are countless books on the history of Silicon Valley that follow on the story of particular founders, investors or a startup company.

This one goes a layer deeper towards the roots: investigating the impact on nascent Silicon Valley by hippies, counterculture movement, bands like Grateful Dead, the anti-war protests at Berkeley, local book stores, LSD & mushrooms and so forth. How the nascent institutions like Stanford Research Institute, Stanford AI Lab and first attempts at personal computing commercialization such as Xerox PARC were built around the quirky individuals, all influenced by their curiosity across disciplines outside of engineering and tech.

Fantastic research and a gripping read. Should be used more often in the arguments if we should have more hard sciences alone in education, or find more ways to induce interdisciplinary creativity.

(Thanks for the recommendation, THI)

Sathya Narayanan says

A fascinating history of the development of computing in America, with special focus on the Silicon Valley. This is not a book on the PC revolution, but of an era which paved way to the PC era. The book connects the sixties counterculture and the beginnings of technology.

The book is a chronological approach to the development of computing with specific focus on Doug

Engelbart and his team at SRI, John McCarthy’s SAIL and Stewart Brand, author of the Whole Earth Catalog. Finally, there was programmer extraordinaire, Alan Kay.

The book takes the reader to the time when people were experimenting with LSD and the development of the anti-establishment movement, which had a huge impact on the creation of the Homebrew computer club. Steven Jobs, who was a member of the club, would later visit PARC and got and would be inspired to start Apple and become the first major PC vendor.

If you are interested in the history of the PC and how it relates to the 60s culture, this is a good book.

David says

The people who created the personal computer didn't do it because they loved technology (though they did) or because they were brilliant entrepreneurs (though some were). They did it because they saw the promise of expanding human cognition. They wanted to free people's minds, to give them power to build a better world, and to connect with others. That all sounds very cliche nowadays when every trite startup is on a mission to "change the world and connect people and ideas", but in the 60s they really tried to do just that.

Reading this book helped me understand where the computer came from and how we have still fallen so far short of what it could be. And I loved to hear all the personal stories of the pioneers.

As an industry, computing always cannibalizes those that came before and never looks back. This book takes the opposite approach by purposely looking backwards to tell the forgotten stories and uncover the motives behind those that actually did change the world.

Highly recommended for anyone working in tech. If we don't know where we came from, how will we know where we're going?

Kevin O'Brien says

This was just a fun break from serious reading, but I quite enjoyed it. Before Steve Jobs, before Bill Gates, there were the real pioneers who gave us personal computers, people like Doug Engelbart, who probably did more than either of the above. This is the story of those unsung folks. And of course all of this took place in the Bay area around San Francisco just as the anti-war and hippie movements were active. It was not an accident that these things happened in the same place at the same time.

Brett Provance says

This is a fun book. I have read it a few times, and have now incorporated it into my California History course, as it complements material on the Bay Area's cultural history, and it especially offers a solid knowledge base concerning the establishment and development of the industries of Silicon Valley. Indeed, one of the more groundbreaking insights that I gained when reading this work is the undeniable and significant involvement of government-financed projects in developing the foundational concepts and technological breakthroughs that we enjoy today in the world of personal computers and electronic social

networking.