



Commodore: A Company on the Edge

Brian Bagnall

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Filled with first-hand accounts of ambition, greed, and inspired engineering, this history of the personal computer revolution takes readers inside the cutthroat world of Commodore. Before Apple, IBM, or Dell, Commodore was the first computer manufacturer to market its machines to the public, selling an estimated 22 million Commodore 64s. Those halcyon days were tumultuous, however, owing to the expectations and unsparing tactics of founder Jack Tramiel. Engineers and managers with the company between 1976 and 1994 share their memories of the groundbreaking moments, soaring business highs, and stunning employee turnover that came with being on top in the early days of the microcomputer industry. This updated second edition includes additional interviews and first-hand material from major Commodore figures like marketing guru Kit Spencer, chip designer Bill Mensch, and Commodore co-founder Manfred Kapp.

Commodore: A Company on the Edge Details

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From Reader Review Commodore: A Company on the Edge for online ebook

Pete says

Commodore: A Company on the Edge (2010) by Brian Bagnall is an enthralling account of the tumultuous times of the company that created the PET, VIC-20 and C64. It's a rollicking account of how Commodore went into microcomputers, the people who made the machines and their creations. For anyone who remembers the 1980s the book provides insight into the company that produced what was, for millions of people, the first computer they had contact with.

Commodore started as a Portable Typewriter company by the Auschwitz survivor Jack Tramiel. Commodore moved into electronics and calculators. Commodore ran into trouble as Japanese firms undercut them and moved from typewriters to adding machines to calculators. They ran into trouble and were bailed out by Irving Gould, a Canadian businessman. After deciding they needed to have a chip manufacturer they bought MOS technologies and there Chuck Peddle designed the 6502 which was used by the Commodore PET, the VIC-20, the BBC Micro, the Apple II, the Atari 2600 and the Nintendo Computer family.

After Tramiel was offered to buy Apple by Steve Jobs he got Peddle to create a competitor which they did by creating the PET in 1977 in about 6 months. The PET went on to sell very well. The VIC-20 was then created in 1980 and then the C64 was released in 1982. Each machine undercut and outsold competitors including those from Apple. History tends to write more about survivors and Apple's early inferior sales compared to Commodore is rarely described. The fact that Commodore built the chip that the Apple II was built on is not well known.

The book provides a remarkable insight into what happened in the early years at Commodore. Jack Tramiel and his 'Jack Attacks' where he yelled at others are quite incredible as is Tramiel's tendency to sue, cheat and refuse to work with other companies. Peddle and others remarkable engineering talent in producing the 6502, PET, VIC-20 and C64 is well described. Tramiel's firing or turning on his employees is also staggering. Even Peddle was pushed out by Tramiel.

The book is full of descriptions of the remarkable people who created so much at Commodore. It gives a real sense of the excitement and hard work there that produced incredible machines. The book has a bit of the feel of 'Soul of a New Machine'.

The book stops as Tramiel is removed from the company and before the release of the remarkable Amiga computer.

The book crams a great deal into its pages. It is probably a bit too long for anyone who isn't really interested in the creation of Commodore products. It does, however, provide a great in depth view of Commodore and shows the bias of the Accidental Empires, a book written by a former Apple employee. The book is well written and fun to read though. As well as a view of the remarkable people who created a revolutionary computer it provides a feel of the excitement that the machines created.

Michael Biondi says

If you had a Commodore computer you will love it

Great insight into who made the Commodore computers and how they were built. Slightly long winded at times but still very interesting.

E. Kahn says

Fascinating book about the rise of Commodore as one of the major (arguably the dominant) company in the early era of personal computing. The book takes a pretty negative view of company management on the one hand, while underlining how close they were to achieving total domination on the other, which I thought was a bit contradictory. In my view, the most interesting part to the general public will be insight into the decidedly weird and wild CEO Jack Tramiel, the man who shepherded the company into the PC market when the market did not even exist. Under his decidedly ruthless, autocratic leadership, the company prospered even as it made enemies of its natural allies, from suppliers to employees.

Very much looking forward to the sequel, Commodore: The Amiga Years, which covers the company's history after Tramiel was replaced by his board of directors.

Philip Hollenback says

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. A caveat: I am old and grew up on the PET and Commodore 64. Thus this book provided a historical context around technology I was personally involved in, which probably made it more interesting.

The author did a great job of providing relevant technical detail while focusing on the personal details of the people involved. I think anyone with a passing interest in early home computer technology would get a lot out of this book.

I was particularly surprised at how negative this book was toward Apple. The history in this book lays out a pretty convincing argument that Apple was not at all one of the inventors of the home computer industry as they have claimed. Then again, the victors write the history books so it's not surprising that we would now think that Apple invented everything.

One minor gripe: the editing of the Kindle version of this book was pretty terrible. One page of the book was just the same two sentences accidentally repeated over and over again.

Themistocles says

I had read the original edition and had found it to be one of the best computer history AND business books I've read.

Though I'm no Commodore fan (CPC rulez!) the book is really great with an exciting pace and many insights. Really well put together with characters coming alive and several not known or obscure details about the development of the company and its machines.

Can't wait for the Amiga Years!

Evan Clark says

Incredibly enjoyable read for anyone who grew up with the C64 as their first computer

Lance Taylor says

Having first started learning to program on an Altair 8080 in Grade 7 I was then introduced to the Apple II. By the time I reached High School my electronics teacher in Grade 9 was busy building Heathkit's and hacking on Kim-1 Boards. When the Commodore PET came out, my world changed and I just knew I was going to be in "The Computer Business".

Taking all those typing courses on Commodore Typewriters years before paid off in spades too. I took a course in Grade 10 (taught by Mrs. Crawford) and as I was so quick in typing I got my work done sooner just so I could have time in class to code on those CBM 8032s.

I knew I wanted my own computer and when the movie War Games came out that cinched the deal. I bought a Vic-20 but returned it to the store just two days later because it didn't have enough memory for my code. So, I bought a Commodore 64. I had a paper route back then and saved my money up for a 1541 disk drive. I got one of the crappy ones, and after reading this book I know why it never quite worked.

So I got a part time job with a Commodore Dealer called Computer Works. Thankfully, I was able to get a replacement there. :)

After a few years at that store, and nearing the end of High School I went to work for another Commodore Dealer called Compute Or Play and worked my way up to a Manager of a store when we took over the ComputerLand locations.

I bought an Amiga 1000 when it came out and I look forward to reading the next book.

Tim says

Detailed outlook on commodore

A bit more detail about all of the people involved in the rise of commodore than I needed, but still a good read for a history lesson on personal computing

Noel Llopis says

Way too much detail. Way too many people. Also the author has a tendency to first explain something, and then quote some dialog saying the exact same thing. I'd only recommend it for people who already know quite a bit about Commodore and want to know all the details.

Ghislain says

Une plongée dans les premières heures de l'informatique grand public mais aussi une assez terrifiante plongée dans le management de Jack Tramiel. Je crois que je n'aurais guère apprécié de travailler sous ses ordres.
