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What the Dormouse Said

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Description

Review of *What the Dormouse Said* / Markoff, John. What the Dormouse Said. How the 60s Counterculture Shaped the Personal Computer Industry. New York: Penguin Group USA, 2005

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What the Dormouse Said

Posted on **October 1, 2005** by **Editor**

Review by Jeffrey Barlow <barlowj@pacificu.edu>

Markoff, John. *What the Dormouse Said*. How the 60s Counterculture Shaped the Personal Computer Industry. New York: Penguin Group USA, 2005

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"

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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!