

Laine Nooney, **The Apple II Age: How the Computer Became Personal**, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2023, 352 pp., \$28.00 (paperback).

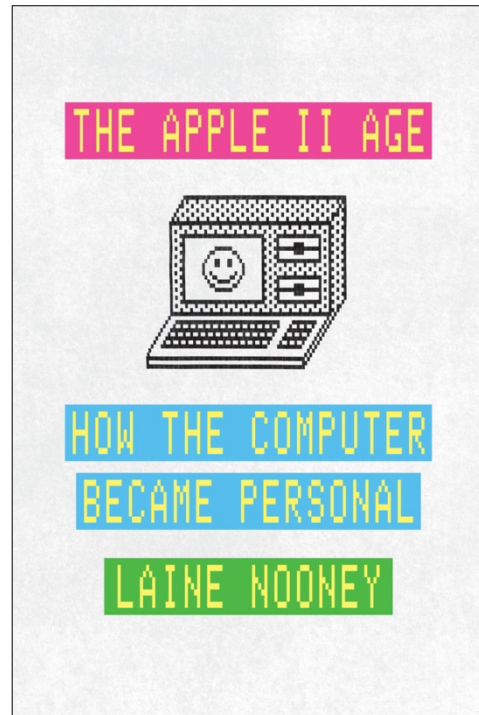
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The personal computer is historically contingent. The point was raised by Laine Nooney when they were in a personalized but contingent lockdown because of COVID-19 (p. 276). Through meticulous examination, Nooney uncovers how distinct historical events and conditions transformed the traits of computers. Against widespread romanticized narratives, they sharply argue that the history of the Apple II reveals that microcomputing was not initially conceived for home use or personal consumption. The central question thus is: What makes it personal?

Genius is not the answer. Rather than attributing the shift solely to individual genius, Nooney highlights the broader technological, societal, and economic conditions that are historical but often ignored. In the introduction, they challenge the dominant narrative glorifying the success of Apple solely due to the talents of Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs. While their talents were undeniably unique, other factors played a significant role in steering computing from a technical tool to a personal product. This book aims to navigate through this transformative period, particularly the mid-1970s to mid-1980s. It was a period where capitalists “were already there” (p. 44).

In the 1970s, as detailed in chapter 1, the “vast majority” (p. 19) of potential Apple II consumers exhibited limited interest in computing, starkly contrasting with the industrial prevalence of computing machines. Computers had already been introduced into the military and government but rarely in personal areas. Before the advent of microcomputers, industries predominantly relied on large, costly mainframe computers, making accessibility a challenge for the average individual. However, with advancements in time-sharing, microcomputers, and processors, computers became increasingly user-friendly, narrowing the cultural gap between machines and their users. This shift gave rise to microcomputing as a hobby. While initially confined to hobbyists due to costs and programming complexities, this newfound interest laid the foundation for a culture of “sharing ethos” (p. 44) and set the stage for Microsoft’s early profitability models. This chapter underscores how accessibility, hobby-driven interest, and commercial potential intertwined to shape the early days of microcomputing.

Chapter 2 explores Apple’s foundation and growth as a commercial organization. Contrary to the romanticized narrative of innovations birthed in both garages and talents, Apple’s journey began with the entrepreneurial desire of Jobs, capitalizing on Wozniak’s technical prowess. As a result, this synergy



captivated stakeholders. Established in 1977, Apple Computer Company witnessed various capital investments and a proactive approach to market needs. After early attempts, it was Markkula's investment that dramatically increased Apple's capacity for market growth. In this sense, the Apple II was not just a technological advancement or a hobbyist's tool; it was strategically positioned as a commercial product. This product was not only crafted with the allure of a technological hobby but also with a voracious intent to commercialize, echoing Job's rapacious dedication (p. 2) to business.

The next part of the story connects the foundation of commerce to the longevity of Apple. Chapters 3–7 delve into the development of deeper layers of how the computer became personal. In the nascent stages of business software, products like VisualCal addressed business challenges, making the future of computing more user centric. In the process, Apple II not only provided an ideal development environment and created a new business model but also catered to the aspirations of a specific group of users: the pursuit of digital control and economic forecasting, where computers were transferred into a tool fueling personal anxieties and ambitions. Such endeavors, driven by "technical and economic desires" (p. 87), benefitted both Apple II and VisualCal and successfully transformed individual consumers into personal users. After that, games like Mystery House marked a new culture of producing and consuming. The Mystery success was a result of home production, an open platform for game development, and a new realm of home consumption. Apple II not only opened a new genre of exploration and cultivated a culture around expectancy but also extended computers from personal labor to personal leisure.

However, "everything was business as usual" (p. 143), and the journey was not without hurdles. In the utility sector of software, issues such as "unauthorized" (p. 158) duplication led to conflicts and tension between consumers and producers. Threats from entities like Locksmith underscored the economic foundation of the software industry. The tension reveals that the importance of such a debate is not about hobbies but about profits. Subsequently, Apple enlarged the circle with home creativity and imaginative dimensions. Products like Print Shop finally cultivated the joy of daily microcomputing tasks. Computers were no longer surrounded by hobbies but by consumption. In the following stage, described in chapter 7, the market character of Apple II had been prominently increased in educational sectors. These transitions from a hobbyist's tool to versatile applications, and ultimately to being a household essential, show the constant efforts and vision of industry stakeholders, without which the computer would not have become personal. Though those attempts are in diverse software sectors, Nooney tries to argue a point on the building of imagination that "the emergence of specific software categories is actually itself a history of what people imagined computers were for, how people used their computers, and how they imagined (or were asked to imagine) themselves as users" (p. 15).

In Nooney's inconclusive remarks, they emphasize that business remains, fundamentally, about business. In this sense, the theatrical presentations by corporate figures during iPhone keynotes are described as mere "financial mating rituals" (p. 259) where commercial interests reign supreme. Nooney's insights into the subtle forces perpetually molding technology offer a lens through which we can understand the historical construction of our current reality. This computationally integrated world had been shaped by, but not solely, the evolution of microcomputers, battles in the software domain, economic aspirations, and a sense of "national rejuvenation" (p. 262) through technological progress. All of these facts counter the oversimplified narrative attributing everything to individual genius:

We can clearly see the intractable role financial speculation and the construction of markets played in people's desire to even imagine what shape innovation might take. The technological itch and the creative instinct do not preexist the economic conditions in which they arrive. In the hands of the early adopters profiled here, microcomputers were simultaneously a vector for their creative exploration and wealth accumulation. (pp. 261–262)

The book illuminates unexplored possibilities in the realm of consumer technology through a hybrid of methods. In the absence of specific circumstances, computers might remain merely functional instead of personal. To point out the financial ambitions and affective imagination of the process, Nooney has opened a special but solid research approach that is different from business analytics or semiotic analysis. In this analysis, romantic commercial success is a result of three key elements: financial aspirations in a specific context, the shift from the industrial imagination of computers to personal imaginations, and efforts from actors to build such imaginations up. These conditions of personalized computers are entangled together commercially, culturally, and historically. Nooney, therefore, successfully transplants *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* by du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, and Negus (1997) to *The Age of Apple II* and incorporates a more vivid perspective of actors and historical contexts. To readers, it provides convincing histories and creates an intriguing path for us to explore and imagine unexplored trajectories through Apple II's story.

References

du Gay, P., Hall, S., Janes, L., Mackay, H., & Negus, K. (Eds.). (1997). *Doing cultural studies: The story of the Sony Walkman*. London, UK: SAGE Publications.