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Making the Computer Personal:
Reconstructing Domesticity for the Information Age

   Until the mid-1970s computer technology was arcane, expensive and impersonal. Most people had never seen a computer, let alone used one. Yet by 1985 many millions of personal computers had entered the homes of ordinary Americans. An entirely new technology was born: the home computer. Firms such as Atari, Commodore and Sinclair created entirely new product lines aimed exclusively at domestic consumers.

   In this paper, I examine the cultural work done to reconstruct the computer as a domestic technology as it entered this new physical and cultural space. Domestication of this technology was far more than a technical challenge. Home computer manufacturers had to explain what a computer was, why you might need one, and how to use it. The proliferation of home computers was driven in large part by the idea of a computer revolution, creating an information society in which only those with computer skills could hope to flourish. Yet when computer enthusiasts tried to describe the computerized home of the future, they were unable to move beyond highly gendered and traditional concepts of the nuclear family headed by a single, male breadwinner. Women would use computers to keep recipe databases, balance the housekeeping budget, and do on-line shopping. Children would learn, while men played games, made investments and checked sports scores. The computer would bring the whole family together.

   The vision of a futuristic yet deeply traditional family appeared in hundreds of books, magazine articles and commercials devoted to computer technology. Yet in practice, the main domestic applications for early personal computers were video games and hobbyist programming. Both of these, I argue, reflected longer established traditions of masculine technological enthusiasm previously documented by historians studying technologies such as ham radio and automobiles. New communities of grew up around the machines, producing hardware, writing software, publishing magazines and hosting user group meetings. Together with the manuals and promotional materials produced by computer companies, these groups provide a rich array of provocative and accessible sources. By the mid-1980s, home computing had retreated into a niche of tinkering enthusiasts, and by the end of the decade the home computer largely vanished as a distinct technology. The computers which, during the 1990s, finally became useful fixtures of the American middle class home were instead based on the IBM PC or Macintosh designs created for business use.