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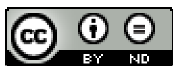

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The Intimate Life of Computers: Digitizing Domesticity in the 1980s

by Reem Hilu

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS, 2024, 240 PP.
PAPERBACK, $27.00
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REVIEWED BY TANYA K. OSBORNE
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An invigorating exploration of the early adoption of microprocessors in domestic life, *The Intimate Life of Computers: Digitizing Domesticity in the 1980s*, by Reem Hilu, is a welcome call to reexamine the cultural impact of technology in the 1980s. At the core of this book is the development of the concept of "companionate computing." Hilu invites us to consider a diverse range of technologies as companionate computing, including self-assembly computer kits, spreadsheet software, alarm clocks, and coffee makers, to name a few. The book examines both the precursors to the now-booming "internet of things" and "maker culture" and the software designed to comment on and complement intimacy in heterosexual relationships.

Far from the usual exploration of the rugged male individualist as a pioneer of early computer culture, this book offers us an alternative lens through which we can examine the impact of other types of masculinity and femininity in the early digital age. Set against the background of substantial changes to households and working life in the 1980s, with more families than ever having two working parents, the book explores how microprocessors and programmable devices entered domestic life. This wave of new household technology is positioned against the contemporaneous media discussion of "computer widows," or women who feared their relationships would erode because of their husbands' obsessions with the home computer.

Hilu starts by introducing us to the core concept of this book, companionate computing. The companionate computer is one that enters social relationships in the home and that encourages the development of social relationships both with and through computers. Importantly, the notion of companionate computing is intended to extend analysis beyond home computers and allow the author to explore other kinds of interactive and programmable microprocessor-powered devices.

The book is organized into four chapters, each exploring a different facet of companionate computing. Every chapter in this volume is bursting with ripe examples of 1980s home technologies, and earlier versions of chapters 1 and 3 are available as standalone peer-reviewed journal articles.

In "A Ménage à Trois with Your Computer," Hilu explores three distinct text-based quiz software programs, each aimed at different parts of the heterosexual relationship. Focused on sexual preferences and compatibility, these programs were mainly advertised toward women and were legitimized by female experts in psychology. Designed to be played as a couple and at times reimagining the use of the keyboard, these games

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used self-help narratives to massify sex and relationship advice. Hilu argues that these software programs typically reinforced the dominant heteronormative relationship discourses of the time, despite operating under the guises of high-tech sex and correcting the perceived fissures in relationships caused by tech-obsessed men.

In “Not an Appliance, but a Friend,” Hilu explores how the burgeoning field of household robotics turned to embrace the changing ideals of fatherhood, aligning itself with the new paradigm of participant fathers. A family teaching activity that Dad could lead, home robotic kits encouraged parents to bond with kids while developing programming and electronics skills. Following the stories of early domestic robots, such as the bulky, rover-like Hero Jr. and the cute, humanoid Topo, Hilu argues that home robotics kits are a bridge that brings typically male interests into the realm of family life.

In “A Doll That Understands You,” we are invited to follow the stories of three microprocessor-enabled dolls aimed at young girls: BabyTalk, Julie, and Jill. These dolls were programmed with sensors, sound activation technology, and even cassette tapes that encouraged young girls to learn and play. Hilu argues that these toys were framed as replacements for female role models and were an important way that girls were helped to learn and engage with technology through play. Acting as a gateway to STEM learning, these toys foregrounded the importance of building social relationships with technology.

“Sex and the Singles Game” introduces two computer games exploring sexual themes. *Romantic Encounters at the Dome* is an offbeat indie text-based game that can be played with a male or female protagonist and includes an array of social encounters that may lead to sexual situations. The game also contains some elements of psychological testing, in common with the games from the “Ménage à Trois” chapter. The other game examined, *Leisure Suit Larry*, is a well-known adult point-and-click adventure game. Accompanied by a discussion about the role of the nerd stereotype in gatekeeping technology, as well as the sudden increased access to pornography in the 1980s, Hilu discusses how these games negotiate the boundaries of masculinities using cringe humor.

To conclude the book, Hilu reflects on some of the modern legacies of the technologies he explores. From humble beginnings, with dolls that could only recognize a set number of words and say a set number of phrases, we now have voice-enabled personal assistants such as Siri. Robots have entered family lives and found themselves useful and productive contributors to domestic labor—though often in a limited sense, in the form of such products as robotic vacuum cleaners.

What emerges very clearly when reading this book is just how urgently we need to reexamine how we tell histories about early digitization, particularly the need to place a greater focus on everyday technologies. When thinking about how women and femininity have impacted computing, we might also consider the overlooked collaborations of female psychologists with often male technology developers.

If there is a core flaw in this book, it is the disconnect between the examples of interactive technologies intended for family life and software intended for adult entertainment. While I do believe there is a strong case to be made for the notion of companionate computing, it seems out of place in discussions about single player sexualized comedy games because it is tenuous to locate the social relationships involved during solo play. This feels unfortunate, given that the introduction of the book presents a long and convincing list of underappreciated technologies that entered family life in the 1980s. I walk away with a sense that there is much remaining to explore.

There is also more to unpack in the deployment of hegemonic masculinity as an analytic lens. There are many fantastic examples throughout the book of other ways we could see technomasculinity outside of the dominant forms of geek masculinities that are typically analyzed as hegemonic in these settings. This discussion tends to take a backseat to the development of companionate computing as a concept. Nonetheless, scholars working with geeky and technophilic masculinities will find this book an invaluable resource for forming alternative narratives.