

# Issue 064: Retrocomputing

Adrian Kosmaczewski

January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024



Welcome to the sixty-fourth issue of *De Programmatica Ipsum*, about *Retrocomputing*.

In this edition:

- We look at the reasons behind<sup>1</sup> the resurgence in popularity of retrocomputing.
- In the Library section<sup>2</sup>, we review “Home Computers” by Alex Wiltshire and John Short<sup>3</sup>.
- In our Vidéothèque section<sup>4</sup>, we watch some episodes of the TV show “Computer Chronicles”<sup>5</sup>.

We would like to thank our patrons who generously contribute every month (or have contributed in the past) to our work and help us run this magazine. Thank you so much! In alphabetical order: Adam Guest, Adrian Tineo Cabello, Benjamin Sheldon, Christopher Nascone, Franz Lucien Moersdorf, Guillermo Ramos Álvarez, Jean-Paul de Vooght, Patryk Matuszewski, Paul Hudson, Quico Moya, Roger Turner, and Szymon Licau.

Enjoy this issue! Please subscribe to our free newsletter<sup>6</sup> to stay updated about new releases, share the articles on social media, or contribute<sup>7</sup> if you would like to support our work with a donation via Liberapay<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>1</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/return-to-innocence/>

<sup>2</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/category/library/>

<sup>3</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/alex-wiltshire-john-short/>

<sup>4</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/category/videotheque/>

<sup>5</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/stewart-cheifet/>

<sup>6</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/newsletter/>

<sup>7</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/contribute/>

<sup>8</sup><https://liberapay.com/>

Cover photo by Lorenzo Herrera<sup>9</sup> on Unsplash<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup>[https://unsplash.com/@lorenzherrera?utm\\_content=creditCopyText&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_source=unsplash](https://unsplash.com/@lorenzherrera?utm_content=creditCopyText&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=unsplash)

<sup>10</sup>[https://unsplash.com/photos/vintage-gray-game-console-and-joystick-p0j-mE6mGo4?utm\\_content=creditCopyText&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_source=unsplash](https://unsplash.com/photos/vintage-gray-game-console-and-joystick-p0j-mE6mGo4?utm_content=creditCopyText&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=unsplash)

# Return to Innocence

Adrian Kosmaczewski

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The pages of this magazine have often orbited around the subject of retrocomputing. Take, for example, the editions about sustainability<sup>1</sup>, computer museums<sup>2</sup>, hardware<sup>3</sup>, hobbies<sup>4</sup>, gaming<sup>5</sup>, operating systems<sup>6</sup>, or the one about BASIC<sup>7</sup> published last summer. If you pay attention, you most probably have realized how much retrocomputing has grown in popularity in the past few decades, with more and more people learning on YouTube or TikTok how to replace the batteries or leaking capacitors from the motherboards of all kinds of computers of yesteryear.

It is the firm opinion of this author, that there are at least two long-term trends hidden beneath the appeal of retrocomputing in hobbyists and computer clubs.

First trend: Moore's Law, or rather, its lack thereof. Despite all the efforts of Apple<sup>8</sup> to hide its flattening curve with ARM-based chips, it is *vox populi* that a computer from 2014 is just about as powerful as the one you bought as a Christmas gift in 2023, bar the amount of RAM or the speed and capacity of the SSDs therein. On the other hand, consumer PCs of 2014 were, by all standards, widely superior to those of 2004, and immensely more than those of 1994 and, needless to say, 1984.

In practical terms, we can safely say that we are in a weird, intermediate, transitional age,

<sup>1</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/the-twenty-year-computer/>

<sup>2</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/the-digital-dark-ages/>

<sup>3</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/the-untimely-demise-of-workstations/>

<sup>4</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/zx2020/>

<sup>5</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/insert-coin/>

<sup>6</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/ken-ross-paul-laughton/>

<sup>7</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/programming-the-liberal-arts/>

<sup>8</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/eternally-finally/>

where you are as a matter of fact retrocomputing as you read this article. Spoiler alert: unless there happens to be some breakthrough in physics that will drive more gigahertz to our CPUs, more crypto to those GPUs, more watts to our batteries, and more money to cloud providers, or unless there is some development in the realm of affordable, “home” quantum computing (will that ever be a thing?) we most probably will not see any difference between the computer you are using today and the one you will receive as a gift in Christmas 2033. Get used to this fact.

Retrocomputing, then, emerges not only as a fun, recreational activity, but also as one with widely applicable skills, particularly for those working in sustainable computing, and those spreading its use in regions of the world where it has not yet reached peak maturity, and where refurbishing old hardware is an effective way to raise standards of living through computer technology. In this age of rising temperatures and rising oceans, reusing old computers is a very valuable skill.

The second trend: the rise of AI. The impending dehumanization fears naturally brought by ChatGPT and other copilots shifted the spotlight back to retrocomputing. Paraphrasing Obi-Wan Kenobi<sup>9</sup>, computers of yore were “elegant weapons for a more civilized age.” And just like Jedi finish their training by building their own lightsabers, many computer enthusiasts scavenge old computer stores for the Kyber crystals<sup>10</sup>—sorry, for the vintage CPUs and capacitors required to build or repair their own retrocomputer systems.

We marvel at the fact that the Apollo 11 computer<sup>11</sup> is vastly overpowered by the cheapest Apple Watch, yet it helped Armstrong and Aldrin to land on the Moon. Those of us old enough to have witnessed a Commodore 64 in action, chuckle as we run a VICE emulator<sup>12</sup> and load a copy of Impossible Mission<sup>13</sup>. We remind ourselves of times when Turbo Pascal was the most advanced IDE, and how we used it to code 2D games with our friends, tirelessly copying code from a magazine. We shake our heads in dismay watching young kids trying to use Windows 95, struggling just like Scotty did in Star Trek IV<sup>14</sup> as he interacted (“how quaint!?”) with a first-generation Mac... using the mouse as a microphone.

No, Scotty; neither Siri nor Alexa nor ChatGPT were available on the first Mac. And thankfully so. In our world, there is no better mechanism to get away from the Generative AI craze than by using a computer that cannot run any of that. Preferably, not even a web browser. How is that for a Luddite? As much as we can find ChatGPT or DALL-E dazzling inceptions, we marvel at a time when computers were so simple that you could understand each circuit on it just by reading the pile of manuals provided by the constructor in the box—yet another sign that these were more elegant weapons for a more civilized age.

Yes: even if you are not aware of it, each one of you are looking for ways to get away from the modern world. We all are. All the time. There are two kinds of people in our modern western world: exhausted people and liars.

That is why people repair and drive old cars, you know, the ones without computers<sup>15</sup> on board. That is why people enjoy Classical music, go to museums<sup>16</sup>, or read history books<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Obi-Wan\\_Kenobi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Obi-Wan_Kenobi)

<sup>10</sup>[https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Kyber\\_crystal](https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Kyber_crystal)

<sup>11</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/margaret-hamilton/>

<sup>12</sup><https://vice-emu.sourceforge.io/>

<sup>13</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impossible\\_Mission](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impossible_Mission)

<sup>14</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QpWhugUmV5U>

<sup>15</sup>[https://www.reddit.com/r/Wellthatsucks/comments/18r1r3s/the\\_future\\_is\\_here\\_and\\_it\\_is\\_stupid/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Wellthatsucks/comments/18r1r3s/the_future_is_here_and_it_is_stupid/)

<sup>16</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/computer-museums-in-switzerland/>

<sup>17</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/william-aspray/>

This is why we browse old photos in an album left behind by our grandparents. People have done this for ages, but the difference nowadays is that, for the first time in the history of mankind, a fifty-year-old person can have vivid memories of a childhood before the iPhone existed. The outstanding level of change (or, as historians like to put it, the “pace of progress”) of our current times is draining our capacity for attention and patience.

Fans find retrocomputing to be a proverbial breath of fresh air. Free from the distractions of our wondrous, 30-year-old World Wide Web<sup>18</sup>, some activities bring memories of a time when techno-optimism and its associated utopias were still a wish, and not a dystopian reality.

Retrocomputing can be as simple as playing a game of SimCity<sup>19</sup>, compiling code on THINK C<sup>20</sup>, making a website<sup>21</sup> with HoTMetaL Pro and Paint Shop Pro and testing it on NCSA Mosaic<sup>22</sup>, or writing your next bestseller on a rock-solid (and licensed-for-life, an underrated feature of legacy software) copy of Word 5.1a for Mac<sup>23</sup>, allegedly the best version of Microsoft Word ever released. After all, does not George R.R. Martin write his novels with WordStar 4.0 for DOS<sup>24</sup>? (In case you would like to follow his footsteps, you can download it<sup>25</sup> for free, read the manual<sup>26</sup>, and run it on FreeDOS<sup>27</sup>. You are welcome.)

Speaking of old software, retrocomputing can consist of downloading and running some from the Internet Archive<sup>28</sup>, VETUSWARE<sup>29</sup>, WinWorld<sup>30</sup>, or Bitsavers<sup>31</sup>, recreating Chandler Bing’s laptop<sup>32</sup>, installing the oldest possible Linux distro<sup>33</sup>, playing old Mac games<sup>34</sup>, watching Twitch channels dedicated to the Amiga<sup>35</sup> or Objective-C<sup>36</sup>, or going even further back in time and trying to run Multics<sup>37</sup> on an old PDP.

You can enjoy retrocomputing simply by exploring the MacPaint and QuickDraw source code<sup>38</sup>, enjoying the original music or Super Mario Bros<sup>39</sup> or Pac-Man<sup>40</sup>, following @mos\_8502<sup>41</sup> on a retrocomputing Mastodon client<sup>42</sup>, buying<sup>43</sup> an old Kaypro<sup>44</sup> 2 computer, loading software on an Apple II through sound<sup>45</sup>, emulating an MITS Altair 8800<sup>46</sup>,

<sup>18</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/from-hypertext-to-spas-to-hypertext/>

<sup>19</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SimCity\\_\(1989\\_video\\_game\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SimCity_(1989_video_game))

<sup>20</sup><https://beyondloom.com/blog/thinkc.html>

<sup>21</sup><https://www.fastcompany.com/3053173/what-it-was-like-to-build-a-website-in-1995>

<sup>22</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mosaic\\_\(web\\_browser\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mosaic_(web_browser))

<sup>23</sup><https://winworldpc.com/product/microsoft-word/5x-mac>

<sup>24</sup><https://www.theverge.com/2014/5/14/5716232/george-r-r-martin-uses-dos-wordstar-to-write>

<sup>25</sup><https://winworldpc.com/product/wordstar/40>

<sup>26</sup>[https://archive.org/details/Wordstar\\_Rel\\_4\\_for\\_CPM\\_1979\\_Micropro\\_International/](https://archive.org/details/Wordstar_Rel_4_for_CPM_1979_Micropro_International/)

<sup>27</sup><https://freedos.org/>

<sup>28</sup><https://archive.org/details/softwarelibrary>

<sup>29</sup><https://vetusware.com/>

<sup>30</sup><https://winworldpc.com/home>

<sup>31</sup><http://www.bitsavers.org/>

<sup>32</sup>[https://friends.fandom.com/wiki/Chandler%27s\\_laptop](https://friends.fandom.com/wiki/Chandler%27s_laptop)

<sup>33</sup><https://itsfoss.com/earliest-linux-distros/>

<sup>34</sup><https://classicmacdemos.com/>

<sup>35</sup><https://www.twitch.tv/dosamigans>

<sup>36</sup><https://www.twitch.tv/objcretain>

<sup>37</sup><https://www.multicians.org/>

<sup>38</sup><https://computerhistory.org/blog/macpaint-and-quickdraw-source-code/>

<sup>39</sup><https://chiptune.app/browse/Nintendo/Super%20Mario%20Bros>

<sup>40</sup><https://chiptune.app/browse/Nintendo/Pac-Man>

<sup>41</sup>[https://studio8502.ca/@mos\\_8502](https://studio8502.ca/@mos_8502)

<sup>42</sup><https://mstdn.social/@feditips/110963086323723848>

<sup>43</sup>[https://oldbytes.space/@mos\\_8502/110675360987261510](https://oldbytes.space/@mos_8502/110675360987261510)

<sup>44</sup><https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaypro>

<sup>45</sup><https://chaos.social/@swetland/110683090511224544>

<sup>46</sup><https://www.s2js.com/altair/>

emulating<sup>47</sup> a Nintendo Game Boy<sup>48</sup>, compiling and running programs (kids: we did not yet call them “apps” back then) written in “arcane” or “ancient” programming languages...

And so much more.<sup>49</sup>

Retrocomputing is good for our geek mind, exposed as it is to a plethora of unused and unusable functionality spread across gigabytes of disk space, and requiring permanent network connections for seemingly no reason at all (well, mostly corporate surveillance.) It is an escape mechanism from a world that has grown increasingly complex, *even* for computer geeks.

Here is a different angle, compatible with both the MCU<sup>50</sup>, the DCEU<sup>51</sup>, and another recent movie<sup>52</sup>, brought forward by Paolo Amoroso<sup>53</sup>:

Retrocomputing is a multiverse.

It’s a multitude of parallel universes in which every classic computer and software achieved success, and gained the ecosystem and love it always deserved.

Why not. Paraphrasing Anton Ego, retrocomputing could be seen as an example of fresh, clear, well seasoned perspective<sup>54</sup>. We, computer programmers and users, crave a return to innocence<sup>55</sup>, to a time when we were not afraid to use weak typing<sup>56</sup>, where we could drop our hubris<sup>57</sup>, where we could look into our kernels<sup>58</sup> and return to ourselves. Alas<sup>59</sup>,

It has been 50 years since the Magnavox Odyssey<sup>60</sup>, and all innocence is lost.

Cover photo by Vincent Botta<sup>61</sup> on Unsplash<sup>62</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup><https://visualboyadvance.org/>

<sup>48</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Game\\_Boy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Game_Boy)

<sup>49</sup><https://8bitnews.io/archive/2023-12-29/annual-review-2023>

<sup>50</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marvel\\_Cinematic\\_Universe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marvel_Cinematic_Universe)

<sup>51</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DC\\_Extended\\_Universe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DC_Extended_Universe)

<sup>52</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Everything\\_Everywhere\\_All\\_at\\_Once](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Everything_Everywhere_All_at_Once)

<sup>53</sup><https://fosstodon.org/@amoroso/111324137998494923>

<sup>54</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/by-all-means/>

<sup>55</sup>[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rk\\_sAHh9s08](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rk_sAHh9s08)

<sup>56</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/the-truce-of-type-inference/>

<sup>57</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/you-are-doing-it-wrong/>

<sup>58</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/aftermath-of-the-kernel-wars/>

<sup>59</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/insert-coin/>

<sup>60</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magnavox\\_Odyssey](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magnavox_Odyssey)

<sup>61</sup>[https://unsplash.com/@0asa?utm\\_content=creditCopyText&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_source=unsplash](https://unsplash.com/@0asa?utm_content=creditCopyText&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=unsplash)

<sup>62</sup>[https://unsplash.com/photos/black-floppy-diskette-bv\\_rJXpNU9I?utm\\_content=creditCopyText&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_source=unsplash](https://unsplash.com/photos/black-floppy-diskette-bv_rJXpNU9I?utm_content=creditCopyText&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=unsplash)

# Stewart Cheifet

Adrian Kosmaczewski

January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024



The same way kids are addicted to TikTok nowadays, I was addicted to TV as a kid. In the place and time of my teenage years, that is Argentina during the 1980s, it was the times of hyperinflation and eternal crisis (which begs the question: has anything changed in forty years?) Such a tense situation also meant that there was not much content on the telly about a subject that I was definitely interested in since a young age: computers. I mean, you could barely afford food, so, understandably enough, computing was scarce. Maslow's pyramid, yadda yadda.

There were the occasional programs about video games, like the one I described in the Gaming<sup>1</sup> issue of this magazine, but nothing about other aspects of computing.

And late at night, Raúl Portal<sup>2</sup> would make us wish we had a ColecoVision<sup>3</sup> or a Talent MSX<sup>4</sup> (one of the few 100% Argentine computers of the 1980s) during "La Hora de los Juegos"<sup>5</sup> ("The Hour of Gaming") on Channel 11<sup>6</sup>. He would jokingly refer to characters in classic games such as Venture,<sup>7</sup> Bosconian,<sup>8</sup> Space

<sup>1</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/insert-coin/>

<sup>2</sup>[https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ra%C3%BA1\\_Portal](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ra%C3%BA1_Portal)

<sup>3</sup><https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ColecoVision>

<sup>4</sup>[https://www.msx.org/wiki/Talent\\_TPC-310](https://www.msx.org/wiki/Talent_TPC-310)

<sup>5</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3nGoELArIY>

<sup>6</sup>[https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telefe\\_\(Buenos\\_Aires\)](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telefe_(Buenos_Aires))

<sup>7</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venture\\_\(video\\_game\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venture_(video_game))

<sup>8</sup><https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bosconian>

Panic,<sup>9</sup> and Time Pilot,<sup>10</sup> with colorful names such as “corbachos,” “popómbalos,” “skrutenhaisens,” “crotófalos,” or “gróceres,” words that, of course, could only make Argentine kids laugh.

Americans were much luckier in that respect. During 19 years, from 1983 to 2002, a unique TV program on PBS provided a live documentary of the growing PC industry. “The Computer Chronicles”<sup>11</sup> was a half-hour weekly program hosted by Stewart Cheifet<sup>12</sup>, a journalist graduated from Harvard who also worked for ABC.

The 19 seasons of “The Computer Chronicles”, today available on both YouTube<sup>13</sup> and the Internet Archive<sup>14</sup>, are a treasure chest of historical data. To put it in perspective, “Friends” only had 10 seasons<sup>15</sup>, and “The Simpsons” has just started its 35th<sup>16</sup>. It constitutes a living testimony of an era long gone, with episodes showcasing every imaginable subject: the rise of the IBM PC, Windows, and the World Wide Web; obscure and not so obscure programming languages; spreadsheets and office suites, operating systems, printers, mainframes, microchips, databases, software piracy, networks, fax machines, ...and tax preparation software. The list of episodes<sup>17</sup> looks more like a 1980s Computer Science curriculum than a TV show.

The show ended early enough, before Linux, Open Source<sup>18</sup>, Cloud computing<sup>19</sup>, or even Python<sup>20</sup> became mainstream. That should give you an idea of the timeframe we are talking about here. Oh, but there were some episodes about Java<sup>21</sup> and Artificial Intelligence<sup>22</sup>, if you are into that kind of thing.

Each episode of “The Computer Chronicles” followed a very similar structure: a 30-minute-long magazine program dealing with one main subject, split into various sections and interviews, and followed by a newsreel sequence at the end with some industry information. Couple that with the corny jingle music for the introduction, and the voice intonation of the host (I can only hope Mr. Cheifet did not talk like that at home to his family), and you can enjoy a nice trip back in time.

Most importantly, the one and only Gary Kildall<sup>23</sup>, of all people, was a co-host together with Mr. Cheifet during the first 7 years of the show. Sadly, Mr. Kildall passed away in 1994, and the show aired a special episode<sup>24</sup> in his memory. Kids: Gary Kildall is (in)famous because, among other things, he could have been Bill Gates. Ask your dad if you do not know who Bill Gates is. (Sadly, history only remembers stupid details like these. Let us be clear here: Gary single-handedly kick-started the home PC revolution in the mid-1970s, but because he did not become an eccentric billionaire, just a few history boffins like the author of these lines

<sup>9</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Space\\_Panic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Space_Panic)

<sup>10</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Time\\_Pilot](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Time_Pilot)

<sup>11</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Computer\\_Chronicles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Computer_Chronicles)

<sup>12</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stewart\\_Cheifet](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stewart_Cheifet)

<sup>13</sup><https://www.youtube.com/@ComputerChroniclesYT>

<sup>14</sup>[https://archive.org/details/Computer\\_Chronicles](https://archive.org/details/Computer_Chronicles)

<sup>15</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Friends\\_episodes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Friends_episodes)

<sup>16</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_The\\_Simpsons\\_episodes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_The_Simpsons_episodes)

<sup>17</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Computer\\_Chronicles\\_episodes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Computer_Chronicles_episodes)

<sup>18</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/issue-21-open-source/>

<sup>19</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/issue-22-the-cloud/>

<sup>20</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/issue-35-python/>

<sup>21</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/issue-24-java/>

<sup>22</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/issue-11-artificial-intelligence/>

<sup>23</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gary\\_Kildall](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gary_Kildall)

<sup>24</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tdj8gh9GPc4>



remember him. Gary is a towering<sup>25</sup> figure in our craft, and one of the main reasons you have a personal computer in front of you at this precise moment.)

The “Software Publishers Association”, today known as the Software and Information Industry Association<sup>26</sup>, and still heavily engaged against software piracy, would sponsor many episodes of the show with the catchy “Don’t Copy That Floppy”<sup>27</sup> slogan at the beginning. Talk about a lost cause. At the end of the show, during the early nineties, you could ask questions to the hosts using CompuServe, using the GO CHRONICLES command. If you do not know how to use CompuServe, call 1-800-522-4477 to learn how to log on. Insert 28kpbs modem sound here.

These days, you can follow Stewart Cheifet on Twitter<sup>28</sup>, if you are into that kind of thing.

In this era of binge-watching TV shows, make yourself comfortable and enjoy the 19 seasons of “The Computer Chronicles” on YouTube<sup>29</sup> or the Internet Archive<sup>30</sup> with a good bowl of popcorn, or some nachos con guacamole. But if this is still not enough, and you would like to watch even more videos about retrocomputing, here is a quick list of YouTube channels that this author can heartily recommend: This Does Not Compute<sup>31</sup> (a personal favorite with superb content), Action Retro<sup>32</sup>, Computer History Museum<sup>33</sup>, Computer History Archives Project (“CHAP”)<sup>34</sup>, Gaming Historian<sup>35</sup>, Michael MJD<sup>36</sup>, RetroSpector78<sup>37</sup>, Mac84<sup>38</sup>, LGR<sup>39</sup>, Sayaka’s Digital Attic<sup>40</sup>, and the excellent 8-Bit Guy<sup>41</sup>. Oh, and throw danooct1<sup>42</sup> in the mix, particularly if you are interested in watching old Windows and DOS viruses and trojans in action without any risks.

Have fun, but remember to get off your sofa and stretch every so often.

Cover snapshot taken from episode 24 of season 10<sup>43</sup> of the show (Copyright 1993 Stewart Cheifet Productions).

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<sup>25</sup><https://computerhistory.org/blog/in-his-own-words-gary-kildall/>

<sup>26</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Software\\_and\\_Information\\_Industry\\_Association](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Software_and_Information_Industry_Association)

<sup>27</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don%27t\\_Copy\\_That\\_Floppy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don%27t_Copy_That_Floppy)

<sup>28</sup><https://twitter.com/cheifet>

<sup>29</sup><https://www.youtube.com/@ComputerChroniclesYT>

<sup>30</sup>[https://archive.org/details/Computer\\_Chronicles](https://archive.org/details/Computer_Chronicles)

<sup>31</sup><https://www.youtube.com/@ThisDoesNotCompute>

<sup>32</sup><https://www.youtube.com/@ActionRetro>

<sup>33</sup><https://www.youtube.com/@ComputerHistory>

<sup>34</sup><https://www.youtube.com/@ComputerHistoryArchivesProject>

<sup>35</sup><https://www.youtube.com/@GamingHistorian>

<sup>36</sup><https://www.youtube.com/@MichaelMJD>

<sup>37</sup><https://www.youtube.com/@RetroSpector78>

<sup>38</sup><https://www.youtube.com/@Mac84>

<sup>39</sup><https://www.youtube.com/@LGR>

<sup>40</sup>[https://www.youtube.com/@Sayakas\\_Digital\\_Attic](https://www.youtube.com/@Sayakas_Digital_Attic)

<sup>41</sup><https://www.youtube.com/@The8BitGuy>

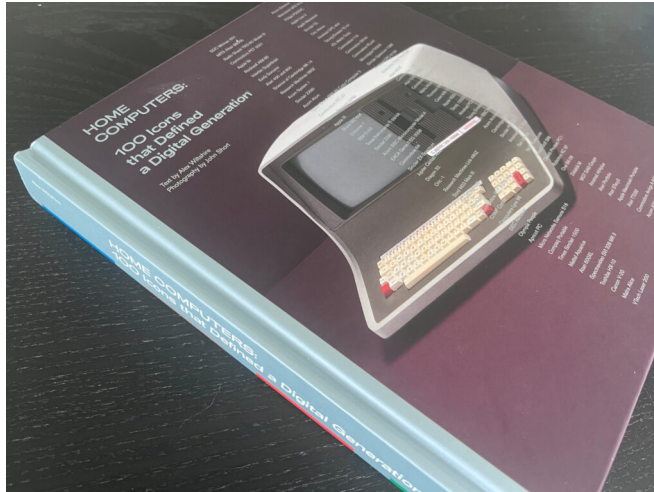
<sup>42</sup><https://www.youtube.com/@danooct1>

<sup>43</sup>[https://archive.org/details/os2\\_2](https://archive.org/details/os2_2)

# Alex Wiltshire & John Short

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Last September, we reviewed our first “coffee table book”: a precious and unwieldy volume by Taschen called “The Computer”<sup>1</sup>, written by Jens Müller and Julius Wiedemann. At the end of that article, we mentioned another coffee table book, and it is about time we talk about it in detail. This month’s Library entry is, then, “Home Computers: 100 Icons that Defined a Digital Generation”<sup>2</sup> by Alex Wiltshire, featuring photographs by John Short, published by MIT Press in 2020.

“Home Computers” features some of the computers in the collection of The Centre for Computing History<sup>3</sup> at Cambridge, United Kingdom. We find the usual suspects that one might expect: the Altair 8800b, the IBM 5150<sup>4</sup>, the BBC Micro, the Apple Macintosh, the NeXT Computer, the Compaq portable, the Commodore 64, the Commodore Amiga A-500 Plus, and the Sinclair ZX Spectrum<sup>5</sup>.

Fair enough. But there are many other names that do not ring any bell at all in 2024: SDC, Intertec, Thomson, Oric, or Robotron. Bonus points if you used one of those computers when you were a kid. Some names, however, have evolved, and are still there, albeit as part of another acronym. This is the case of Acorn, whose initial letter features at the beginning of the “ARM” architecture, at the base of various power-efficient CPUs today. Some other manufacturer names are simply not (primarily, at least) associated with computers at all nowadays, such as Sharp, Casio, Canon... or even Mattel!

There are also stories about the computers that could have been but never were. This is the case of the DEC Rainbow<sup>6</sup>, a computer that, despite coming from the second-biggest

<sup>1</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/jens-muller-and-julius-wiedemann/>

<sup>2</sup><https://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262044011/home-computers/>

<sup>3</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Centre\\_for\\_Computing\\_History](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Centre_for_Computing_History)

<sup>4</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/peter-norton/>

<sup>5</sup><https://worldofspectrum.org/>

<sup>6</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rainbow\\_100](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rainbow_100)

manufacturer in the world at the time, could not resist the market forces that raised the IBM 5150 to become “the” PC by antonomasia<sup>7</sup>.

The nice thing about coffee table books is that they provide various angles of interest for different audiences. First, the historical one, which is obvious and which we will not delve into right now. Second, and much more interesting, the design<sup>8</sup> angle. Because, let us be honest; some of those personal computers back then were drop-dead gorgeous. Special mentions to the Intertec Superbrain shown on the cover of the book, the all-red Matra Alice 90<sup>9</sup>, the original Apple Macintosh, the Commodore PET 8032-SK, the NeXT Computer (of course!) and the Apple iMac G3, closing the book.

Granted, not all of them were as beautiful. In particular, some had seriously terrible keyboard designs. The Sharp MZ-80K, the Commodore PET 2001, and the Atari 400 stand out as sinners in this category. On the other hand, the keyboards of the Sinclair ZX80, ZX Spectrum, Didaktik M, Jupiter Cantab ACE, VTech Laser 200, and Timex Sinclair 1500 all beg the same question: where is the space bar?

The book also traces the evolution of portable computers, a category that went from downright laughable (sorry, “luggable”) to indispensable in less than 20 years. The sequence goes like this: the Osborne 1, the Compaq Portable, the Commodore SX-64 (first of its kind with a color monitor), the Cambridge Z88<sup>10</sup>, the Amstrad PPC 512, the Atari Portfolio, the Atari STacy, and the Apple Macintosh Portable.

As comprehensive as this book might be, there are some glaring omissions, at least apparent to the eye of this author. Suffice to mention Tandy’s TRS 80 Model 100<sup>11</sup>, featuring a portable form factor similar to the Cambridge Z88 that could probably still be a hit today; the Macintosh PowerBook 140<sup>12</sup>, arguably the first true modern laptop; any Kaypro<sup>13</sup> model; and the Talent MSX 2 Turbo<sup>14</sup>, one of the few computer models ever produced in Argentina during the 1980s. The latter featured the distinctive MSX<sup>15</sup> design, with those large colorful arrow keys on the right side of the keyboard, as seen on the Tatung Einstein 256 and the Casio MX-10 Type B featured in the book.

Another aspect that “Home Computers,” does not deal with is something that the author of these lines finds the most interesting: the software. Maybe a series of videos based on this book would be a welcome addition. But, you know, you can just download a few emulators here and there, a copy of CP/M or MS-DOS 2.x, a BASICA interpreter, and have fun.

Cover photo by the author.

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<sup>7</sup><https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/antonomasia/>

<sup>8</sup><https://mastodon.social/@kjhealy/111636769874391529>

<sup>9</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matra\\_Alice](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matra_Alice)

<sup>10</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambridge\\_Z88](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambridge_Z88)

<sup>11</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TRS-80\\_Model\\_100](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TRS-80_Model_100)

<sup>12</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PowerBook\\_140](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PowerBook_140)

<sup>13</sup><https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaypro>

<sup>14</sup>[https://www.msx.org/wiki/Talent\\_TPC-310](https://www.msx.org/wiki/Talent_TPC-310)

<sup>15</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i7Fdfv3Es>