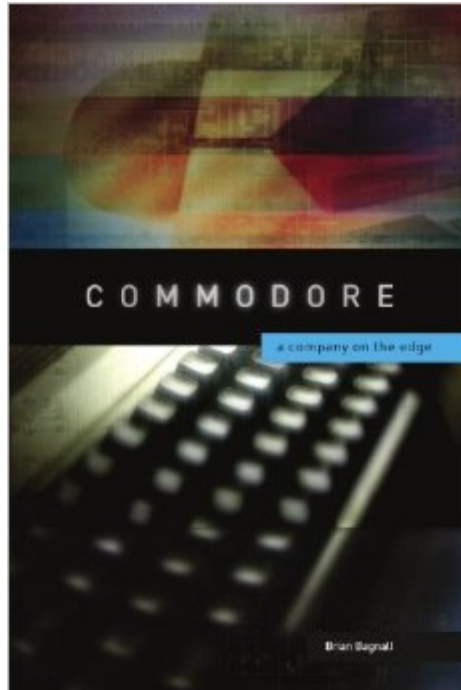


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Commodore: A Company On The Edge



Synopsis

Filled with first-hand accounts of ambition, greed, and inspired engineering, this history of the personal computer revolution takes readers inside the cutthroat world of Commodore. Before Apple, IBM, or Dell, Commodore was the first computer manufacturer to market its machines to the public, selling an estimated 22 million Commodore 64s. Those halcyon days were tumultuous, however, owing to the expectations and unsparing tactics of founder Jack Tramiel. Engineers and managers with the company between 1976 and 1994 share their memories of the groundbreaking moments, soaring business highs, and stunning employee turnover that came with being on top in the early days of the microcomputer industry. This updated second edition includes additional interviews and first-hand material from major Commodore figures like marketing guru Kit Spencer, chip designer Bill Mensch, and Commodore co-founder Manfred Kapp.

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Customer Reviews

Let me state plainly up front that I was a Commodore Kid: a happy owner of both a 64 and an Amiga. So there is a certain nostalgia kick I might have received while reading this book that other

people might not get to the same degree. But I actually don't think it's particularly important to have been familiar with Commodore's products to appreciate this book. The first half of it serves more as a highly illuminating journey into those crazily fast-moving times in the second half of the 1970s, when the industry went from being a few companies selling mail-order, solder-it-yourself boards with a CPU and eight LEDs to a brave new world of self-contained home computers no more than five years later. No industry has ever become so important so quickly, and Chuck Peddle, MOS and Commodore were at the very heart of it. Peddle is the figure who appears most frequently in the text, and the book at times takes on some of his irritation at the rewriting of history by Apple at the expense of Commodore. The chippiness is amusing at times, but, in truth, it's justified. I was there, even if as a kid, and I remember how hugely important Commodore were in those days. Apple were a relatively minor player with their expensive machines. The Macintosh was the first thing of any real significance they did, building on the Xerox PARC ideas and seeing (correctly) that GUIs were the way forward. But it was Commodore who brought home computing to the masses (along with Sinclair in the UK, a company whose significance I was happy to see this book acknowledge). This is really terrific stuff if you want to get a good idea of how we got from there to here.

In the interest of full disclosure I write this review as an insider at Commodore from just after the launch of the C64 through the purchase of Amiga, after which I rejoined Jack Tramiel ("Jack") and other Commodore veterans at Atari Corp. Needless to say I bought this book with great anticipation. It is a disappointment. The book should have been titled "A Biography of Chuck Peddle and Stuff" but I suspect that would not have sold well. Commodore was Jack. Further, for American audiences Commodore was the C64 and, to a lesser extent, the VIC20. Despite this fact, the vast majority of the book's focus is on Chuck Peddle and the PET. Even though the second edition of this book was published in 2010 and Jack did not die until 2012, the author appears to have never interviewed him. The core problem appears to have been that Bagnall actually interviewed only a handful or two of the players. Thus we get huge amounts of detail from the perspectives of relatively few players (some admittedly central to the Commodore story) but most no longer active at Commodore during the VIC20/C64 years, the years of greatest interest to the audience for a book on pre-Amiga Commodore. Examples of the scattershot approach of failing to interview more broadly are legion but I will give an illustrative example. Bagnall clearly interviewed the engineer, Bill Herd, extensively and dedicates pages to him. However, Bill joined Commodore in 1983, well after the VIC20 and C64. His work was on projects that barely saw the light of day (how many had a Plus/4?) and that were supplanted by the real Commodore successor to the C64, the Amiga. It was designed by the

engineers at Amiga.

This is an extensively researched work which is told in a very compelling fashion. The book is primarily made up of quotes from Commodore employees, articles of the time, and other sources, which are woven together in a lucid chronological format. It was very interesting to find out the details and reasoning behind aspects of popular computers such as the VIC-20 and, especially the C64. The technical details (chip manufacturing, software device drivers, etc) may be of more benefit to someone with a technical background, but anyone can enjoy all aspects of this book. As a software developer, I found much of the "behind the scenes" detail extremely rewarding. It was also surprising to see how much Commodore did accomplish in such a dysfunctional environment, which began with the volatile founder and CEO, Jack Tramiel, at the top. This book starts at the beginning of Commodore, which was created in 1958 in Toronto, Canada as a calculator company, and went public in 1962. It stops coverage in June 1984, shortly after the Plus/4 came out. There is an announcement in the back of the book, stating that a book titled "Commodore: The Amiga Years" will be arriving in 2012, which will likely pick up where this one left off. Think "Chuck Peddle" - not "Steve Wozniak"... I also found it very interesting to learn that Commodore was far more the innovator during the late 70s and early 80s than was Apple, or other personal computer companies of the day. Apple is a benefactor of receiving a lot of revisionist press from the likes of Robert X. Cringely (whose real name is Mark Stephens and was an employee of Apple) and others who like to perpetuate the myth of the two Steves being the most innovative during that era.

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