Book Review

Delete: A Design History of Computer Vapourware

Paul Atkinson, *Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 256 pp., 150 col. illus, paper, $42.95. ISBN: 9780857853479*

Paul Atkinson's book *Delete: A Design History of Computer Vapourware*, a glossy, illustrated compendium of computing projects (all hardware) that never came to fruition, is best read during times of leisure, one case study at a time, rather than straight through from start to finish. The book consists of short chapters on twenty-eight computing devices, most of them, at some point or another, conceptualized inside an organization (IBM, Xerox PARC, etc.). Each chapter has details on how the device was designed and supposed to work, and the story of its development, and in many cases, eventual abandonment. Chapters are mostly descriptive rather than analytical, and some of the stories tend to get repetitive, but they are often gorgeously illustrated (perhaps too gorgeously, because the photographs, which often seem to be marketing materials, sometimes obscure the nitty-gritty of technical work, though this is easily explained by the fact that they are sourced from the portfolios of industrial designers, who were Atkinson's primary informants). Readers will find it exciting to linger for a while in a different time and place, when computing meant something very different from what it does today.

The book is divided into four sections, on 'Mainframes and Minicomputers', 'Personal and Portable Computers', 'Pen Computers' (devices that used a stylus for input), and 'Mobile Computers', and is book-ended by an Introduction and a Conclusion that provide an analytic synthesis of the case studies. Each section consists of seven individual chapters on a particular piece of vapourware. No particular reasons are given for why one device or project is included in the book; one assumes that this has to do with what Atkinson was given access to. For example, the section on 'Personal and Portable Computers' includes four IBM products, all of them designed by Tom Hardy: SCAMP, Yellow Bird, Aquarius and the 'Atari' PC. This selection seems rather arbitrary. But it does illustrate the point that IBM (or rather, the executives who decided on its strategy)—dedicated to a vision of computers as large machines meant for business processing—took longer to understand the possibilities of personal computing.

In the Introduction, Atkinson argues that the term 'vapourware' needs to be freed of its negative connotations, as a con perpetrated for publicity by a company on the general public. Instead, he suggests that the term might equally well be applied to any product that did not make it to the market, whether these are 'computer dreams, feasible concepts, prototypes or failed products' (p. ix). Of the projects referred to in the book, only two are what might be plausibly called 'vapourware' in the traditional sense: the Honeywell Kitchen Computer (an advertisement that benefited both Honeywell and Neiman Marcus), and, in the chapter on the GO PenPoint computer, a fake competing demo by Microsoft (one of the many reasons PenPoint never took off). All other chapters are about prototypes that failed to reach the market because of a combination of financial problems, technical issues and politics. As Atkinson shows, all three were tightly intertwined; technical issues often caused

financial over-runs, and convincing others in an organization of the importance of a device was often the key to getting it into the market.

Why write a history of vapourware, then? Atkinson argues that this 'provides an entertaining view of an alternate world, of products that could well have been available, of designs that nearly and clearly could have been realized were it not for the vicissitudes of fortune' (p. ix). He suggests that the fact that these products did not make it to the market does not mean that they did not have an impact. Instead, vapourware becomes an illustration of what Atkinson calls 'the primacy of ideas', that 'ideas for products rather than products themselves can have influence far beyond that expected' (p. ix).

As a student of Science and Technology Studies (STS), I have no quarrel with the notion that exploring the paths not taken is a profoundly important way to think about the relationship between technology and society.

However, I do quibble with Atkinson's partiality towards the world of 'ideas'. I would argue that what his examples show is that the people involved in particular vapourware projects often lived to fight another day, and that they used existing institutional channels to make a case for their vision, even as it became harder to realize it in practice (e.g. Alan Kay's extensive writing and evangelizing for his Dynabook). Many works in STS and the history of technology have shown that technology is not an autonomous force that drives history, but then, neither are 'ideas' in the abstract; both are deeply embedded in institutional forms. What Atkinson's case studies illustrate, I think, is not agency of pure ideas but the enduring power of (shifting) institutional mechanisms and their centrality to understanding the relationship between technology and society.

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