
Subject: Old magazines, a window into the past

Posted by [Robby "The C= gu](#) on Fri, 26 Jul 2013 12:40:50 GMT

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Reading an old magazine is a bit like looking through a window in time that propels you back to days long gone. Whether it's magazines about gaming (like Zzap!64, Commodore Format, ...) or the ones focused on the more serious use of computers (like 64'er, Byte, ...), they all share that same quality: they recount a moment in history and preserve it for future generations. One such magazine I acquired recently conveys such a very important moment in computing and Commodore's history; Byte Magazine of October '77.

For instance, the magazine holds some of the first ads for what's to become the "trinity" of home computers: The Commodore PET, the Apple II and the TRS-80.

The most striking piece of history that is immortalized in the magazine however, is the account of the Dallas National Computer Conference (NCC), held on June 13th 1977. Normally the event showcased the big computer companies like IBM, GE, National Semiconductor, ... but in 1977 the organizers decided to try out something new and created an extra exhibition hall for the microcomputer companies, which they called the Personal Computing Fair.

Manufacturers of personal computers and related products turned out in force to display their wares. Hopeful hobbyists and experimenters exhibited their home computer projects and vied to win prizes.

As for Commodore, it would be the moment of truth to see if their entry into the home computer market would work. Commodore was in some hard times financially, taking a blow from the calculator wars. Jack Tramiel had instructed Chuck Peddle to attend the NCC and showcase the PETs as best as possible and try out a "preorder" plan. Basically, you would buy and pay for your Commodore PET then and there and it would be shipped within the next 90 days. The idea being of course that it would give some financial breathing space to Commodore with hopefully enough checks coming in.

Although the PETs on display were only prototypes (as can be seen in the Byte magazine), consisting of the "wooden" PET (with the working cassette tape reader) and 2 metal ones that could have their lid opened up (but without a working recorder, so programs had to be typed in beforehand), the fact that you could own a full-blown computer for just \$595 with 4K of memory (or \$795 for 8K) compared to the \$1298 for the Apple II was enough to persuade everyone.

As the people were queuing up to hand in their checks, Chuck Peddle recalls in Brian Bagnall's book "Commodore, a company on the edge", that that moment in time, marked the true start of the home computer industry and the end of the "big" computers. He states it as follows: "The crowd is so big (at the Commodore booth) and it's talking so long to collect the money that I got a half-hour break. So I take this opportunity to walk upstairs on the last day of the show, to the floor where the exhibits for the big computer companies were. The entire floor was empty of customers. All the big computer guys are sitting there talking to one another. If you had taken a snapshot at that show, you knew what was going to happen to the computer industry. I was walking among the dinosaurs while they were dying. They had lost the momentum. The momentum was building under their feet and they didn't have a clue".

That snapshot, that precise history defining moment, was captured in Byte magazine, Volume 2, number 10, October 1977.

How I love old magazines!
