



SUMMARY: THE LURE OF THE MACHINE

The Personal Computer Interest in Finland from the 1970s to the mid-1990s

The dissertation focuses on the history of the Finnish personal computer hobby. The investigation centres on the phase of development that came after the early stages of the spread of information technology yet preceded the full-scale breakthrough of personal computers in the 1990s. The essential question asked in the study is: How was the Finnish personal computer hobby born and how did it develop as a social and cultural phenomenon? The approach adopted in this study is interdisciplinary. In addition to the tradition within history of information technology, media studies, the study of popular culture, consumption, youth culture as well as computer gaming studies feed into the investigation. The sources used consist of home computer magazines, interviews, statistics, brochures, advertisements and audiovisual materials. Material from archives and from private collections has also been used.

The definition of the computer enthusiast varies historically. Personal interest, pleasure and entertainment are the most significant factors defining computing as a hobby. Despite this, the hobby may also lead to acquiring useful knowledge, skills or experience of information technology. Most often the activity takes place outside working hours but can still have links to the development of professional expertise or the pursuit of studies. In many cases it takes place in the home environment. On the other hand, it is characteristically social, and the importance of friends, clubs and other communities is greatly emphasized.

Computing as a pastime had a central role in making information technology part of our everyday lives. The influences shaping and moulding the interaction between hobbyists and information technology were varied and closely linked to simultaneous social and cultural changes and processes. In Finland this was apparent



in the increased wellbeing brought on by economic growth, as well as in increasing urbanization and the strengthening of the role of youth and youth culture.

Personal computers first appeared on the consumer market at the end of the 1970s alongside increasing public debate on Finland as an information society. This marks the point at which the personal computer came to be seen as a tool in the education of children and youth, making it possible for them to acquire the basics of “computer literacy” that were to be so valued in the future. The gradual spread of personal computers also greatly increased the expectations and hopes directed at computer studies. The period was also characterized by a strengthening of the symbolic meanings associated with personal computers. The personal computer first became a fashionable appliance at that time. The full-fledged breakthrough of personal computers started in the first half of the 1980s when they began to be sold as consumer electronics.

The uses of information technology were varied, bringing about specialization on the basis of expertise. The personal computer hobby meant growing cooperation among users, leading to the establishment of various computer-clubs, associations and subcultures in addition to more informal groups among friends. Communities of home computing had typical rules, norms and procedures defined by the use made of computers, which strongly shaped social identities. One central feature was the identification of users with particular home computer brands. Due to the limited selection of home computers available as well as the incompatibility between these, users formed loose groupings according to the kind of machine they operated.

The establishment of relations between users is also tied to the nature of the personal computing interest as a clearly masculine phenomenon. Information technology has commonly been seen as a very masculine field and existing studies clearly confirm this view. Seen as quite technologically centred, home computing as a hobby was established by men and boys as a field of activity that was not open to women or girls. My re-



search supports the view that home computers were not nearly as exclusively used by men and boys as has previously been understood. In many families siblings very often experimented and played with computers together. Undoubtedly the availability of personal computers in domestic settings, schools and workplaces increased the opportunities of women and girls for using information technology from the 1970s to the 1990s, leading to a strengthening of their computing identities. Women's participation was less visible, however, and thus little attention has been paid to it. Especially the strongly male-dominated hobby culture surrounding computers remained largely foreign to women whereas it significantly affected the computing identities of men. The percentage of male hobbyists was highest in organized and social computing activities.

The research shows that, from the start, many users had a very intense, experimental as well as personal relationship with their computers. The spread of the home computer hobby in Finland also gave birth to stereotypical images of young computer enthusiasts, "computer geniuses" and "whiz kids". The concept of the computer hacker with its associated, strongly black-and-white, image and interpretations also became common. This term, originally referring to the internal rules and principles of the community of computer hobbyists, entered general awareness as information technology became more commonplace. The role and significance of the hobby was recognized but computers and their users were still often thought of with misgivings. The enticements and opportunities available were perceived as leading users to crime and vandalism.

The widespread presence of the quite contradictory term "hacker" in the media is evidence of an attempt to understand the significance of computer hobby for society at large. The stereotypical portrayals of computer hackers brought the hobby to the awareness of the general public on a more substantial level. Occasionally the fears and prejudices associated with the computer hobby appeared as threats inherent in information technology in general. At the end of the 1980s these fears and prejudices were manifested in the form



of computer viruses that challenged the view of a safe and secure information society so carefully constructed in the media.

The study closely follows the lives of hobbyists in the overlapping spheres of practical applicability and entertainment. In the case of entertainment use, the central focus is on computer gaming and its history. Recreation and games were centrally present in the users' relation to computers from the very start. The motives for this resided largely in curiosity and the desire to experiment. According to this study, computer gaming was the most important single factor affecting the spread of the home computer hobby. Gaming could have a crucial impact on users' later approach to information technology. The significance of gaming was also apparent in related association activity and hobby groups, where games were traded, created and modified. Beliefs according to which youth could be attracted to more serious computer activities through computer gaming were widespread. The programming of computer games provided home computer magazines with an interesting way of expanding computer activities to cover areas other than gaming. The popularity of programming in Finland was also increased by the international success achieved by game-programmers very early on.

Parents believed computer gaming would cause unhealthy dependence in their children. In Finland, these and other fears and prejudices concerning computer games in the 1980s were in part a counter-reaction to the changes brought by new technology. In addition, parents and more experienced computer enthusiasts took computer gaming to be a pastime largely reserved for children and youth. The computer gaming hobby sometimes also involved activities that were seen as problematic, the most common of these being the distribution of copies of commercial software. The research shows that it was not until the early 1990s that computer gaming gradually began to establish itself as a significant and more widely accepted form of youth culture.

Many forms of computer activity strengthened at the beginning of the 1990s, partly as a result of the spread of the com-



puter hobby to ever younger generations. The most important factor in this development was a clear weakening in the sales prospects for the old-style home computers that had established themselves in the 1980s. The coincident arrival of PC-machines and the advent of a worldwide information network like the Internet also paved the way for the popularization of the computer hobby. The groundwork for our contemporary “web-generation” was laid in the 1980s, however. In the early stages of the commercialization of the Internet, Finnish modem hobbyists had already acquainted themselves with the use of information networks for almost a decade.

This study has emphasized that the central aspect in the history of information technology is not in the equipment and the machines but in the human activity surrounding these. Changes in machine base and other technological advances did not go hand-in-hand with changes in user culture. Rather, the various facets of the hobby are characterized by continuity and simultaneity. While computers certainly offered many enthusiasts opportunities for employment and study, this was certainly not the case for all. In this sense, tinkering with home computers was in no way distinguishable from other recreational activities. The computer hobby always had its up and down cycles, where intense interest might be followed by a period of quick boredom and resignation. After the early years of the home computer hobby the distinctive features of contemporary computer culture were already clearly apparent, however. The group of information technology users that we take for granted today was born. For those who had busied themselves with home computers for so long, operating computers remained an equally natural and commonplace activity in adult life.

Translated by Kalle Pihlainen



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