



Pioneers of the Computer Age: from Charles Babbage to Steve Jobs

Abdul Montaqim

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This book is intended to provide an introduction to, and an overview of, the computer industry - or the "Computer Age" - as well as the key people who created the computerised world we live in... without too many technical details. The idea is to offer a snapshot of the industry at this point in time and find out how it got where it is today, highlighting its most notable inventions and innovations and the pioneering people who are responsible for them. It is not really meant to be an exhaustive record of anything, although it does feature some lists.

Extract from book:

* The original human computers used tools to help them calculate. The most well known calculating tool from antiquity is the abacus, which was usually made from wood and featured a frame containing sticks along which beads could be moved. It is believed that the abacus was invented some time between 2700-2300 BC, in Sumeria, and its forerunner was probably a system whereby stones or beads were moved along grooves in the sand or ground, or tablets of wood, stone or metal.

The abacus is still widely used throughout the world today, although mainly in Asia. In China, for instance, it is still used to teach mental arithmetic to gifted child mathematicians in school. So the abacus was a tool that computers - the human beings that who did the computing - used to make their calculations.

Over time, human computers used other tools to help them calculate, such as the slide rule, which was more widely used in the West. But it was not enough. And, very often, human computers would turn to books containing pre-calculated answers to common calculations such as multiplication tables and other, more advanced mathematical tables, which were calculated by other human computers, intended as an aid in their work.

However, these books were riddled with errors - human errors; and understandably so. There were many, many stages in which there was potential for human computers to make even the most elementary mistakes when producing the tables; and that indeed is what happened - lots of mistakes were made. The mistakes happened all too frequently for the liking of the man now credited with having created what is considered to be the first ancestor of the modern computer, the Difference Engine.

The Difference Engine was invented by Charles Babbage, an English mathematician and mechanical engineer who lived during the industrial revolution, having been born in 1791. Around that time, Britain and Europe were building machines that could perform many tasks that previously only humans were able to undertake. So it occurred to Babbage - who was becoming increasingly frustrated with the mistakes he found in the books containing mathematical tables - that perhaps a machine could be built that would perform complex calculations, flawlessly.

His ideas led him to conceive of something he called the "Difference Engine", a mechanical device about the size of a 1920s-style family car. The Difference Engine could compute complex calculations and is now thought to be the mechanical ancestor of modern computers, the machine equivalent of the "missing link" for

humans, the point at which the human computer started becoming a machine computer. *

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