



# **On the Edge: The Spectacular Rise and Fall of Commodore**

*Brian Bagnall*

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## **On the Edge: The Spectacular Rise and Fall of Commodore** Brian Bagnall

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 maker to market its machines to the public, selling an estimated 22 million Commodore 64s. These 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 experiences of the groundbreaking moments, soaring business highs, and stunning employee turnover that came along with being on top of the PC world in the early days.

## **On the Edge: The Spectacular Rise and Fall of Commodore Details**

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# From Reader Review On the Edge: The Spectacular Rise and Fall of Commodore for online ebook

## Michael says

I liked this book quite a bit, but I have always had a soft spot for tech-story books, even the fantasy of the Apple story. The C64 was my first computer at around 9 and I loved it with all my heart. I wrote my college entry essays on it when my peecee broke and was accepted to all of them (errr.... both). The interesting thing to note is that Commodore gets very little credit for revolutionizing the PC industry even though it can be said that they did more for it than Apple and IBM combined. But I believe that the reasons for their relative obscurity in the revolutionizing department are two-fold:

1) No one likes the leader. They sold something like 20 million C64s and dominated the market for 5 years or so (which in computer years is something like 27 bajillion years). Everyone hates the winner.

2) The guys creating the computers were dicks. From Tramiel to Peddle the engineers and managers involved were not cool and had over inflated views of themselves. On more than one occasion someone describes themselves as a samurai and on other occasions they talk about how superior their brain cases were. At least Apple had Woz and while IBM was Borg, they at least were nameless and faceless automata.

So that's it. It's still a nice read, and highly recommended for those in love with computer folklore. Just don't expect to find many heroes.

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## Phil says

This book is great. Seriously. 5 stars.

My first computer was a Commodore 64 and we also had an Amiga, so I'm probably biased. There is a lot of revising of history that eliminates Commodore from the personal computer landscape and makes everything be about PC vs. Apple. In the early and mid 80s, Commodore had a lot going for it. The Commodore 64 was the first personal computer to sell 1 million units. The Amiga was light years ahead of everything else when it came out in 1985.

If their technology was so awesome then what happened? READ THE BOOK.

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## Themistocles says

One of the best computer history books out there. Bagnall does a fantastic job in producing a book that is not only great in terms of retro computing, but also manages to be a great business book. Hats off!

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## Michael says

The introduction to the book sets the tone, when the author laments how most of the other computer histories in books and movies get it wrong, giving too much credit to other companies like Apple for the success of the personal computing revolution. That's a valid point. But As I've started to read the first hundred pages or so, a pattern emerged. The following occurs so many times, we can call the book formulaic:

"Book xxx says that the following thing happened. But it's wrong, and here's a quote from Chuck Peddle as proof."

"Here's a quote by an industry insider xxx, who says that the following thing happened. But it's wrong, and here's a quote from Chuck Peddle as proof."

The book reads more as an autobiography of Chuck than anything else. I can't get past the first 150 pages without having read a few hundred quotes from him, with only about a dozen quotes from other sources mixed in.

Also, the book takes the opportunity to bad-mouth Apple at every opportunity. The author really has some anger issues to work out.

Well, that, and the poor grammar and lack of editing. The wrong usage of the word "you're/your" and incorrect use of an apostrophe ("the two Steve's" used in a non-possessive context) within the first 60 pages detract from what might be valid points.

I wanted to like this book, to read something that offered a look at a company that wasn't Microsoft or Apple during those years. But the angry tone and bias of this book weaken what could have been an effective rewrite of history.

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## Levent Pekcan says

Çok ama çok fazla bilgi içeren, muhteşem bir araştırma ürünü.

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## Maurizio says

Storie, aneddoti e retroscena raccontati da chi lavorò in Commodore tra fine anni 70' fino a metà anni 90'.. i progetti sognati, realizzati o vaporware, le strategie aziendali e di politica interna.

Un libro ben fatto che rende eterna ciò che era già leggenda: la storia della Commodore dalla polvere all'altare .. dall'uno all'altro mar.

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## **Christopher says**

"BUSINESS IS WARRRRRRRRRR!!! WE MUST BECOME THE JAPANEEEEEEZZZE!!!" -- Jack Tramiel, CEO Commodore

If I was an engineer back then, I'd happily sacrifice my life as a Commodore Warrior for "Jack-Attack" Tramiel.

Don't believe the revisionist history! Apple is, and always has been, the original evil-empire. They led a revolution? THEY LED NOTHING!!!

Read about how Commodore engineer Chuck Peddle used to school "The Woz" and "Fake Steve" in how real computers were made. Read about a company that lived life on the edge, broke all the rules, and brought more affordable & advanced computers to more people than any other company of it's day.

This story comes complete, including the evil Wall Street banker, to kill the once-mighty company in the end.

Seriously, what self-respecting engineer could'a worked for a man who wears black turtlenecks with skinny arms... or a full-grown man who rides a scooter everywhere and wants to be called "The Woz"?

A great and entertaining book about mutually abrasive personalities locked in a single room. Think Jerry Springer with PhD's.

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## **Daniel says**

This is the story of not just Commodore, but the founding of MOS Technology which created the 6502 microprocessor.

This is a better business book than most I've read, because the author is unafraid to make clear judgement calls. When Jack Tramiel did something smart, the author says so. When someone does something dumb, he says so to. For instance, their marketing guy Tomczyk spent a long time negotiating a deal with Nintendo to have Commodore be the American company to port Nintendo's games to the C64 and release them. He brought the deal to Tramiel and Tramiel inexplicably said no. Result: Nintendo turned to Atari, who became their launch partner, and the games still came out for the C64 but now Commodore wasn't making any money.

You can learn about mistakes to avoid from this book. Other business history books I've read often somehow manage to muddle the story so that it's never clear; I have one about Carly Fiorina's time at HP (widely regarded as disastrous) that doesn't clearly explain what major decisions she made and why, and how they turned out wrong.

Note 1: There seem to be two editions of this book, and the first edition supposedly goes to 1994 (covering the Amiga story and leading up to the time Commodore went bankrupt), but the edition I have (the 2nd ed.) doesn't seem to go that far. It might be worth getting the first edition as well.

Note 2: I didn't realize it, but the 6502 was a ground-breaking invention because it was the first microprocessor that was fantastically cheap enough to be included in mass market consumer devices. Motorola and Intel had somewhat more-capable chips which sold for about six times as much. The tech lead for the Motorola 6800 team suggested to Motorola that they make a low-cost device, and Motorola said no. So the team quit, and moved to a new company MOS Technology, and made the 6502. MOS was able to get their defect rate low enough that the chip could be sold cheaply; they introduced it at an early West Coast Computer Faire, and there was a groundswell of demand. People were buying 6502s for like \$20, out of a big jar; and the jar was a visual demonstration that MOS could manufacture the chip in volume, in order to make people feel comfortable about building it into their products. (In fact, only the chips on the top of the jar were good; the ones in the middle and bottom were ones that had failed testing.) The 6502 is, in some sense, the Model T Ford of microprocessors.

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### **Kevin Wortman says**

This is a thorough account of Commodore through all its computer-producing years. As a former C64 programmer and enthusiast, the accounts of the key personalities and behind-the-scenes corporate drama are fascinating.

Unfortunately, many long passages, especially in the earlier chapters, are verbatim quotes from Chuck Peddle presented without commentary or any countervailing perspective. The text has numerous typos, repeats phrases, and drags in places. The book would have benefited from more forceful editing.

It's an enjoyable read for Commodore groupies, but would probably be a slow slog for anyone else.

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### **Stephany Wilkes says**

About to re-read this and realized I'd never rated it. Will edit this later but, as a very fortunate child whose DoD-employed grandfather introduced her to the Commodore 64 (hence setting me on the track to a tech career I love, and have always, loved), I highly recommend this. Warning: This recommendation may contain a touch of nostalgia.

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### **Don says**

aaaahhh...geeky nostalgia goodness! i went the route of Apple II back in the day, only hands-on exposure the competition (commodore, atari) was at K-Mart. dunno why. Apple II led to the Mac, which was extremely hard to program for (aak, Hypercard)! and was still niche. wonder what life would be like if i grew up hacking away at a commodore or atari machine. would have led to PCs rather than Macs.

anywho, good times those late 70s early to mid 80s. the technology we take for granted today.

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## Eion Williamson says

As a child of the 80's nothing was more popular in this time than the Commodore64, iconic product of its time. Fantastic read, as like other corporations in history (i.e. Nokia, Atari) interesting to read how they got it so wrong.

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## Fredrik says

Veldig usikker på om jeg skal gi denne en 3 eller 4. Den er nok mye mer relevant for de som er litt eldre enn meg, siden jeg aldri har tatt på en Commodore-maskin.

Men ganske morsomt å se hvordan datamaskinindustrien var i begynnelsen (og hvordan vellykkede firmaer ofte har svakt psykopatiske ledere)

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## Rob King says

Commodore built some of the landmark computers early in the history of the personal computer. They made the first fully integrated personal computer, the first computer to sell more than a million units, and the best-selling single model of computer ever (the Commodore 64). They were also responsible for the first multimedia computer, the Amiga, and were a mainstay of the digital arts world for over a decade.

So how did they manage to screw it all up? They could have owned the world. The story of Commodore is told in "On the Edge", and it's a great story.

In fact, the story is, honestly, the only reason I keep reading. I love the old Commodore machines (especially the Amiga), and I love hearing the story from the perspective of those in the trenches. The book certainly does not disappoint in that regard: there are interviews with dozens of people who worked for Commodore throughout its turbulent history. The interviews are informative and to the point.

Unfortunately, the non-quote writing leaves quite a bit to be desired. The author does not follow standard English professional writing style. For example, he italicizes things that should not be in italics (for example, the *University of Minnesota*). He also seems to have been writing with a thesaurus next to him. Whenever he quotes someone, he finishes the sentence with a new synonym for "said": people in turn "exclaim", "recall", "muse", and a variety of other actions. It's not bad to use these words when the subtle shades of meaning actually fit what is being said, but someone does not, for example, exclaim "I started working at this company in 1979. It was a bit of a rainy day."

The biggest flaw, however, is that the author seems to occasionally forget to introduce important people. Someone will say something about another person in an interview, and that person magically becomes part of the narrative. It is up to the reader to determine, via context, what relationship that person had with Commodore. The author also forgets critical background information, leaving it as a stumbling block when it is referenced in quotes later in the text (for example, Jack Tramiel, a major player in Commodore's history, was a survivor of the Nazi death camps. This is not mentioned in the narrative, but someone does say "Jack worked in the camps." It's up to the reader to determine which camps).

So, I would say that, while I do recommend this book, it's not because of the writing. The story of Commodore is so good and so integral to the modern personal computer that anyone with an interest in computer history should read it. If you ignore the mediocre writing and the lamentable lapses in journalistic ability, it's a great story.

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### **Jeff Goldenberg says**

A really fascinating and seemingly authentic look at not only the rise and fall of the biggest computer company of all-time, but also of the entire industry upto the mid nineties. Highly recommended reading for those of you who think Apple and the Jobs Messiah are the most important thing to happen to computers.

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