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Delete: A Design History of Computer Vapourware

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***Delete: A Design History of Computer Vapourware*, by Paul Atkinson**

London: Bloomsbury, 2013. 240 pp., 150 color illustrations, references, index. PB. \$42.95.

Reviewed by Rachel Simone Weil

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Computer histories are often presented as serialized achievements, triumphs brought about by ever-advancing electronic technologies, consumer needs, and design approaches. But focusing on success and progress in computing makes it easy to overlook the many mis-steps, unrealized dreams, works in progress, and paths not taken. Paul Atkinson's *Delete: A Design History of Computer Vapourware* provides a much-needed corrective by cataloging the design history of computers that could have been, but were not.

Vaporware, Atkinson writes, consists of "computer products that are announced by a company but which ultimately fail to appear." While this definition encompasses both hardware and software, *Delete* focuses exclusively on hardware such as microcomputers, laptops, and mobile phones.

Atkinson provides compelling reasons to consider the design history of vaporware. He notes that the unrealized plans, prototypes, and promises found in magazine ads and on the convention-room floor nevertheless inspired generations of consumers and designers. And, indeed, some of the devices illustrated in *Delete* did go on to inspire later product designs.

Additionally, the study of vaporware permits us a glimpse of collected wishes and anxieties, what designers in the past had hoped their future might become. It allows us to consider alternative histories of computing, imagining what might have been, while acknowledging how many technological successes rely on chance and confluence.

Atkinson's Introduction and first chapter situate vaporware within broader fields such as science fiction and speculative design. The author draws apt comparisons between vaporware and the "imagined machines" of designers such as Leonardo da Vinci and Norman Bel Geddes.

The next four chapters are dedicated to imagery and descriptions of twenty-eight device designs, ranging from Charles Babbage's massive Difference Engine to the diminutive Palm Foleo. These four chapters group the devices by type: "Mainframes and Minicomputers," "Personal and Portable Computers," "Pen Computers," and "Mobile Computers."

Because many of the devices fall into more than one of these categories, I found the organization of these chapters imperfect; even

Atkinson notes some small misgivings about it in his Introduction. I would have preferred to see the devices ordered chronologically in order to allow the observation of certain technological trends over time.

However, Atkinson's arrangement of the material does not detract greatly from the volume as a whole. The backstories on each product's development are fascinating, providing perspectives from designers, programmers, and executives, a good number of whom Atkinson interviewed personally.

One of the book's most readily apparent strengths is the selection of beautiful photographs, advertisements, and illustrations of computer hardware, some of which were previously unpublished. Given the rarity and fragility of the objects depicted, not to mention the hesitation that some companies or designers might feel about displaying products that did not reach the marketplace, having a photographic record of these items is incredibly valuable.

Though not explicitly framed as such, *Delete* is ultimately a history of European and American vaporware. Should a companion volume to *Delete* be published, I would enjoy seeing a focus on vaporware that extends beyond Europe and the US and into Japan, Russia, Brazil, and Hong Kong, for example.

Atkinson's final chapter, "The Agency of Ideas," revisits themes and questions posed at the beginning of the book, but this time refers to specific hardware examples pulled from the central chapters. It seeks to address some of the lasting impacts of these examples and speculate on what might have been. These conclusions never veer too far from the sphere of hardware design, and rightly so given the scope of *Delete*, but it certainly left me wondering how Atkinson might see applications of vaporware and alternative computer histories in other disciplines. How might vaporware inform contemporary, niche art genres such as vaporwave, cyberpunk, and glitch, for which the role of abandoned or obsolete technology figures greatly? Or how does a study of corporate failure or of recuperated histories fit into a larger critical framework?

Many books promise to straddle the line between trade and academic publication, but few deliver. *Delete* is a refreshing exception, written with great clarity, depth, and expertise, that will appeal to academic and enthusiast audiences alike. The color photographs and scans alone serve as an excellent visual resource for hardware designers, collectors, and historians. But in combination with their development backstories, they produce one of the more engaging computer history texts in print.