The Big Switch: Rewiring the World, from Edison to Google, Nicholas Carr. In the midst of an unprecedented technological transition, the author asserts that the digital revolution has a strong historical corollary: electrification. Carr argues that computing is going the way of a power utility: where manufacturers once provided wind and water power, they now plug into the grid. We’re in the midst of a similar transition in computing, the author believes, moving from private hard drives to the computer as access portal.

Soon, corporations and individuals will outsource their systems to companies with large hard drives residing in remote locations. The author’s analysis of recent developments shows insights into common computing tools embedded in the Internet instead of stored on a hard drive. The social and economic consequences of this transition fall somewhere between uncertain and grim. Wealth will be gathered into ever fewer hands, and specific industries—particularly publishing—will perish at the hands of crowdsourcing and content unbundling. The author rejects an entirely dystopian future, though, hypothesizing without prognosticating.


Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System, Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost. The Atari Video Computer System dominated the home videogame market so completely that “Atari” became the generic term for a videogame console. The affordable Atari VCS offered the flexibility of changeable cartridges. Nearly a thousand of these were created, the most significant of which established new techniques, mechanics, and entire genres. This book offers a detailed and accessible study of this influential videogame console from both computational and cultural perspectives.

Studies of digital media have rarely investigated platforms—the systems underlying computing. This book (the first in a series of Platform Studies) does so, developing a critical approach that examines the relationship between platforms and creative expression. The authors discuss the Atari VCS itself and examine in detail six game cartridges: Combat, Adventure, Pac-Man, Yars’ Revenge, Pitfall!, and Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back. They describe the technical constraints and affordances of the system and track developments in programming, gameplay, interface, and aesthetics. Adventure, for example, was the first game to represent a virtual space larger than the screen (anticipating the boundless virtual spaces of such later games as World of Warcraft and Grand Theft Auto), by allowing the player to walk off one side into another space; and Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back was an early instance of interaction between media properties and videogames.

The authors show that the Atari VCS—often considered merely a retro fetish object—is an essential part of the history of videogames.


Nonobject, Branko Lukic and Barry M. Katz. The “objective” world is one of facts, data, and actuality. The world of the nonobject addresses perception, experience, and possibility. In this highly original book, the authors imagine what would happen if design started not from the object but from the space between people and the objects they use. The “nonobject,” they explain, is the designers’ personal experiment to explore our relation to the observable world.

The authors show us an umbrella that puts us in harmonious relationship with nature by sending falling rain rushing through the handle from an upturned top that resembles a flower; a spoon with myriad tiny bowls that let us savor our soup; and a “superpractical” cell phone with keypad, speaker, and microphone on every surface. They imagine the ideal material, Thinium, as incredibly thin and strong while also environmentally and aesthetically beneficial. They show us clocks and watches that free us from time told by artificial demarcation, then consider the possibility of a digital camera that captures the part of the scene we didn’t see.

In Nonobject, product design meets philosophy, poetry, and the theater of the imagination, filling us with surprise and delight.


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