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# The Innovators: How A Group Of Hackers, Geniuses, And Geeks Created The Digital Revolution



## Synopsis

Following his blockbuster biography of Steve Jobs, *The Innovators* is Walter Isaacson's revealing story of the people who created the computer and the Internet. It is destined to be the standard history of the digital revolution and an indispensable guide to how innovation really happens. What were the talents that allowed certain inventors and entrepreneurs to turn their visionary ideas into disruptive realities? What led to their creative leaps? Why did some succeed and others fail? In his masterly saga, Isaacson begins with Ada Lovelace, Lord Byron's daughter, who pioneered computer programming in the 1840s. He explores the fascinating personalities that created our current digital revolution, such as Vannevar Bush, Alan Turing, John von Neumann, J.C.R. Licklider, Doug Engelbart, Robert Noyce, Bill Gates, Steve Wozniak, Steve Jobs, Tim Berners-Lee, and Larry Page. This is the story of how their minds worked and what made them so inventive. It's also a narrative of how their ability to collaborate and master the art of teamwork made them even more creative. For an era that seeks to foster innovation, creativity, and teamwork, *The Innovators* shows how they happen.

## Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 17 hours and 28 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Simon & Schuster Audio

Audible.com Release Date: October 7, 2014

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00M9KICAY

Best Sellers Rank: #1 in Books > Engineering & Transportation > Engineering > Electrical & Electronics > Digital Design #2 in Books > Computers & Technology > Internet & Social Media > Hacking #2 in Books > Computers & Technology > History & Culture > History

## Customer Reviews

The good news: an epic sweep through computing history connecting the dots as Isaacson's sees them. Even if you're not a technical history fan than this book will serve as the definitive history of computing through the first decade of the 21st century. The bad news: this book will serve as the definitive history of computing through the first decade of the 21st century. It is at best technically

wrong, misses some of the key threads in computing history and starts with a premise (that innovation comes from collaboration) and attempts to write history to fit. The difference between a reporter and a historian is that one does a superficial run-through of a rolodex of contacts and the other tries to find the truth. Unfortunately Isaacson's background as reporter for Time and CNN makes this "history" feel like he was comfortable going through his Rolodex of "Silicon Valley" sources connecting interviews, and calling it history. I'm sure Isaacson would claim, "more details get in the way of a good story," however that is exactly the difference between a throwaway story on CNN and a well written history. The same epic sweep could have embraced and acknowledged the other threads that Isaacson discarded. The gold standard for a technical history is Richard Rhodes "The Making of the Atomic Bomb." (Other reviewers have pointed out pointed several critical missing parts of computing history. I'll add one more. While perpetuating the "Intel invented the microprocessor" story makes great business press copy it's simply wrong. Intel commercialized something they knew someone else had already done. Lee Boysel at Four Phase invented the first microprocessor. If Isaacson had done his homework he would have found out that Bob Noyce was on the Four Phase board, knew about the chip and encouraged Intel to commercialize the concept.) Finally, one of the "facts" in this book that differentiate reporting from history is the garbled bio of Donald Davies, one of the key inventors of Packet Switching. Davies is described as "during the war he worked at Birmingham University creating alloys for nuclear weapons tubes..." I started laughing when I read that sentence. It's clear Isaacson had no idea what Davies did in WWII. He obviously found a description of Davies' war work, didn't understand it and re-edited it into something accidentally amusing - and revealing. What Davies had actually done during the war is worked on the British nuclear weapons program - codenamed "TubeAlloys". Understanding the distinction is the difference between a reporter and a historian.

One of the greatest strengths of Walter Isaacson's latest book is the author's personal interviews with some of the post-Altair key players. A curious weakness noted by a few reviewers is that some of the earliest digital computers are absent from the text. A paragraph or two on the fascinating history of the ancient abacus would have been nice. While Isaacson is generally correct in observing that advances in computer technology have benefitted from or were made possible by collaborations, those advances often occurred as step functions and not gradual ramps. A full review of this latest Isaacson book would require a book of its own. So I'll zero in only on the Altair 8800 story. While the Altair's Intel 8800 microprocessor was developed in Silicon Valley, Isaacson begins his account of the Altair by noting that the first commercially

successful hobby computer was developed far away in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The Altair was designed by Ed Roberts, who headed MITS, Inc. Isaacson captures only a hint of Ed's personality during those heady days, and he emphasizes Ed's hobbyist side more than his degree in electrical engineering. Ed was a first class designer of both analog and digital circuits, an ability most notably shared by Steve Wozniak. Elsewhere in this tome Isaacson adds flavor and spice to the origins of the PC era with some captivating interviews with some of the key players. Unfortunately, Ed passed away in 2010 (Bill Gates visited him in the hospital), and was not around to be interviewed. Dave Bunnell and other MITS veterans could have added some great Ed stories and corrected a few flaws. For example, the Altair was not developed in The Enchanted Sandwich Shop, which I rented for \$100 per month so we could move MITS from Ed's garage to prepare the Opticom kits we sold through Popular Electronics. That was in 1970, long before the Altair. The Altair was named by Popular Electronics staffers Alexander Burawa and John McVeigh, not by Les Solomon's daughter. These errors are trivial (one of Ed's favorite words) in light of this book's vast reach and they don't take away from the significance of this book, which could be the primary text for a university course on the history of modern computing. But since Ed's Altair set the stage for much of the industry that followed, it would be good to have a flawless and somewhat more detailed account of the Altair's origin. A number of other histories of the PC have similar errors. While a revised and corrected second edition would be best, perhaps the paperback version of Isaacson's book can include an epilogue with at least some mention of the missing computers noted here by other reviewers and more about Ed, MITS and the Altair story. An ideal platform for an epilogue is the Startup Gallery of the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science in Albuquerque. Startup, which was conceived and largely financed by Paul Allen, presents the history of modern computing with many rare artifacts from Allen's personal collection. The centerpiece is devoted to the development of the Altair, complete with video interviews with Ed Roberts and the other key players. A nearby multimedia presentation is must watching. 2015 will be the Altair's 40th anniversary. If Isaacson can visit Startup and provide advance notice of his arrival, perhaps some of us MITS veterans can meet him there and give him a tour.

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