Exploring “home” in early home computing

by Bailey Kelley

In various ways, I’ve been interested in domesticity as a constellation of expectations, practices, technologies, and affects that can provide access to all kinds of questions about labor, gender/race/class, and materiality. This week I’ve been asking: What does it mean to have a computer in the home, and if women have traditionally been the creators and managers of homes, what is their relationship to this technology?

Keeping in mind Gittelman’s definition of media as both technology and context, this project has two pieces. The actual hardware and software of early home computing intended to assist with various housekeeping tasks and the physical experience of using them; and their various paratexts, including advertisements, packaging, user manuals, and popular discourse. First I’ll tell you some of the more interesting things I’ve found in the past few days regarding each of these areas and how they might be theoretically framed, and then talk about ways this project could move forward from today.

I’ll start with the paratexts surrounding the technology. In the brief review of advertising and packaging that I’ve done,

women are usually represented as watching someone else in the family use the computer, either husband or children. In the rare instances that they are featured at the console, they are using housekeeping software, like the Commodore 64's "Micro Cookbook" or some kind of "self-improvement" program, whatever that means (figure 2). A lot of these texts, however, do directly address women as the household's ultimate authority, the person who makes decisions about what comes into the home. A program in the VIC-20 is called the "Home Babysitter" and ads often emphasize the importance of providing exceptional educational tools for their children. Women continue to be constituted by their traditional gender roles of wife and mother; this is simply another technology framed as making the housewife more efficient, but probably just creates different kinds of labor, such as learning how to program and monitoring children's use of it. Alternatively, we can think of the computer, especially in a domestic setting, as a container technology, a concept developed by Zoë Sofia that facilitates and nurtures, rather than a more masculine technology that manipulates and calculates.

I didn't get my hands on any software that was explicitly housekeeping-related like the Coleco ADAM's "Recipe Filer" or

the Commodore VIC-20's home inventory program, but I did set up Mattell's Aquarius and played around with their FileForm software, a simple word-processing program that is described as being useful for keeping "all kinds of home records," including recipes. In a previous project I recreated some dishes from recipe archives, so I approached this with the same attention to my own physical and psychological sensations as well as the materiality of the technology itself. I had the same issue with "fidelity" that we've been talking about all week: I was in TAG, not in a home, using a large, flat-screen tv, and I have more familiarity with computers than an average housewife would have, although that wasn't really as much help as I thought it would be. After a lot of trial and error – literally pressing CTRL+Q, CTRL+W, CTRL+E until I found the help page at CTRL+P – and struggling to find a comfortable way of using the very awkward and slow keyboard with its raised rubber keys and unfamiliarly placed space key, I managed to create a file for my marinara recipe (figures 3 and 4). I felt an incredible sense of accomplishment and was pretty stoked that I had figured this out. Quickly after that rush of pride, though, I thought about how useful this would actually be for a home cook. There was no tagging or categorization system that I could see, so I would have to remember the file names of all the recipes that I created and open them up as needed. It wasn't apparent how this technology would be more functional than a recipe box, especially since the computer probably wouldn't be located in the kitchen so the recipe would have to be printed out when I wanted to use it. Nevertheless, I could understand how simply mastering this technology, regardless of its utility, would be an exciting and even empowering experience for a housewife in the early '80s. This gets us to thinking about how these technologies might serve very different purposes for the women who use them than their developers intended, just like the women who abuse the telephone by gossiping, as Marvin discusses.

Moving forward, I'd like to think more deeply about what it means to recast the computer as a feminine or maternal technology, as well as do more research on how the first home computers were actually used by women. This would require some difficult historical research, but I think it's important to take seriously the groups that are explicitly excluded from authoritative textual communities and how their use of new technologies might influence their ultimate social meaning in addition to the discourses produced by experts.

Works Cited:

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Sofia, Zoë. "Container Technologies." *Hypatia* 15.5 (2000): 181-201.