

Research Detours

by Bailey Kelley

Several of our readings this week have talked about how technological and social development is nonlinear rather than a direct march toward “progress.” Today I was reminded that academic research similarly includes left turns, feedback loops, and hiccups. But what could be (and usually is) frustrating almost always turns out to be productive, as long as we approach research with an open mind and an expectation of detours.

If I had come to this project outside of the context of this seminar, I would have limited my objects to the paratexts, or ephemera of early personal computers: user manuals, packaging, marketing materials, and journalistic sources. I could make an argument about how those kinds of texts speak directly to the discourses surrounding the use of technology in domestic spaces and the kinds of audiences that producers imagine, but in all honesty it would have been because I had no confidence that I would be able to obtain, let alone set up and use, original hardware and software. These past few days have underscored the fact that if I want to take media materiality seriously, I have to physically engage with media. When I pulled out the Commodore VIC-20, I didn't expect to be told to hook it up and see what happened, but I did. And what happened was: not much.

I successfully got it out of the box and surprisingly hooked it up correctly, but to no avail. Yet my orientation toward the VIC-20 as an artifact from an archive paralyzed my troubleshooting instincts. I was terrified of breaking something, and I wasn't comfortable rifling through the various adaptors and implements scattered around the TV cart. Looking back on my anxiety, it seems completely unwarranted. All week we have been asked to take leaps and make guesses, to

critique the idea of the archive as a static catalog to be handled with kid gloves, and our hosts have been nothing less than encouraging and supportive. I realized that my insecurities and lack of confidence stemmed from leaving my safe and comfortable research nook and venturing into new territory. But that is where we do our best work. Nervousness produces adrenaline, and our senses are heightened when we are in unfamiliar spaces, doing unfamiliar things. Research is boring not only when we discover what we were expecting to find; it is also less than illuminating when we rely on the same old methods that we have worn smooth through overuse.

The fits and starts of this afternoon were productive for me for two reasons. First, it reinforced my commitment to pushing myself beyond my intellectual comfort zones – that's where the magic happens. But, as you might expect, it also led to a firmer grasp of what I want this project to be. While software that facilitates recipe curation would be specifically relevant to a paper that I'm editing for journal submission, it would be a very narrow, and probably not terribly fruitful, way to spend the next two days. After noticing programs for household management (such as budgeting, address books, and inventory), I decided to expand my scope to consider the ways that these early in-home computers promised to assist with a host of domestic tasks. A suite of games included in the ADAM, for example, is titled "Home Babysitter," clearly addressing the childcare provider who could use this new technology to carve out time for other tasks rather than to the children whose time it promised to occupy. In reviewing the research questions that I initially drafted, the majority of them already spoke to a much broader consideration of domesticity than my original object of recipes could have addressed. My project was already bigger than the kitchen, and the time I spent getting my hands dirty helped me move beyond the narrow agenda I had assigned myself on Monday.