

# COMPULSIVE PROGRAMMERS

## — an alternative view

Just finished fifteen hours in front of the computer? Eyes feel like roadmaps? Well, get yourself a glass of something strong, curl up somewhere quiet, and consider this . . .

DESPITE THE MUCH-LAUDED benefits flowing from computers and information technology there are fears that all is not well for the computer user.

There is growing concern amongst some educationalists and academics that excessive use of computers can create social and psychological problems, especially in the young. It is thought that social development may be inhibited, relationships damaged, and that academic achievement may be adversely affected.

Has society created and encouraged this new compulsion? From every side, via every medium, we are being indoctrinated with the idea that we will have to be able to program computers if we are to survive and cope in our brave new world. Those who are unable will be seen as technological illiterates.

In order to program effectively one must spend vast amounts of time at the keyboard. The concepts involved in writing the simplest program are quite considerable for the naive user. Many never go beyond this stage and confine themselves to using commercial software prepared by those more skilled. Some may never return at all and remain suspicious of this awe-inspiring equipment.

However, others do continue and can become highly involved and skilled; they can also get hooked by the activity and become compulsive programmers. They are more interested in the *process* of programming than in the result of their work.

### Who's hooked?

Research currently taking place at Loughborough University, in England by

Margaret Shotton aims to investigate the incidence of this modern phenomenon and determine its causes and effects. After extensive media requests people contacted Margaret about their 'compulsive programming'. The phenomenon was obviously very real for some people.

The initial survey showed that the vast majority (over 97%) of those hooked were male. Many were spending up to 40 hours per week of their spare time at the computer. One could see that there would be little time for other activities in their lives, assuming the human body still needed time for sleep.

Why is this pastime predominantly confined to men? There are many theories that need investigation.

1. Men are generally more obsessive about their hobbies in general; golf and fishing widows are not uncommon.

2. Men are able to devote hours and hours of their spare time to one particular hobby, whereas women have more demands made upon them by their families etc. This argument loses force when one considers that this sex difference in computer 'addicts' occurs in the young and the single.

3. Computer advertising is geared to the business world. But once again there are probably far more women in business and clerical tasks who would benefit from the new technology and should welcome it.

4. Arcade and computer games, often the initial means of contact with new technology, are geared to the male as aggressor and hold little interest for females. There has to be something in this as the computer indus-

try is pouring money into designing games especially for girls, but with very little success.

5. Women are not mechanically-minded and are suspicious of machines (a well-worn adage). Take a look in any woman's kitchen to see this is not so. She probably deals effectively with far more machines each day than most men. True, she may not repair them, but she positively encourages their purchase to ease her day.

6. Women are illogical and disorganized thinkers and cannot cope with the demands of computing. Discussions with the computer industry have revealed that many prefer to employ female programmers, if they can find them, because they tend to be more methodical, practical and efficient.

7. Fewer girls take computer studies courses and are therefore less likely to get into the area. Discussions with teachers have revealed that not only are the majority of computer teachers male and courses geared to male interests, but also that curriculum organization often places computer studies in competition with History, French or even Home Economics, which are all traditionally very popular choices for girls. It is hardly surprising that the computer option is rarely taken up.

In primary schools these sex differences do not seem to occur. Here computers are used mainly as carriers of educational software and usually no bias is observed between the boys' and girls' enthusiasm for computers. In secondary schools, however, computing tends to be taught as a subject in its own right, rather than used as a tool. This is probably a most relevant aspect.

## Margaret A. Shotton

8. Women see very little need for a home computer. This statement is supported by the opinions of many women. They cannot see how it will aid their work in the home, and often resent the financial outlay which they feel could be put to better use. The excuse that it can be used for keeping household accounts, when previously the back of an envelope has sufficed, carries little weight with many women.

### The damage done

One may wonder how anything so intrinsically fascinating can do any harm. Problems start when an interest becomes an obsession.

A typically obsessed schoolboy will spend every break time in the computer room with little thought for making friends, let alone lunch. At home all his spare time will be spent in his bedroom on the micro. Small boys, not normally renowned for early rising, report waking up at six o'clock in the morning to play games.

Most parents positively encourage their children to use computers initially, as it keeps them occupied and can only be of benefit to their futures. However, when children start refusing to participate in family outings or to come to the meal table, problems can occur. Interactions with their peers may become very limited because of the lack of common interests, and isolation tends to follow. This may drive the child to depend more heavily upon the computer where rewards are fast and fun, and mistakes private, impartial and non-judgmental.

Experience has shown that young hackers

often make poor students, and some university computer departments are now trying to recognize and eliminate them at the interview stage. Others become hooked while at university. Lectures are skipped, course work goes to the wall and many fail their degrees, despite their high levels of intelligence.

Another group which appears to have a great affinity for the computer is married men. Pressures from work or the threat of unemployment convince them that computer literacy is the only way to succeed. There are reports from America that divorces are occurring because of the compulsive behaviour of some husbands: husbands who have changed from lovable, sociable beings into recluses.

Research so far carried out at Loughborough has revealed that there seems to be two different types of men who get hooked by computing. One group may be termed the workaholics. They may either be bringing their office work home with them or they may be writing software in order to sell it. Money, promotion or prestige are their aims and they rarely program for the sake of it. Despite the vast number of hours that they spend, there is always an end product in mind.

The second group appears to be those who in the past have always been obsessive about a hobby to some degree. Computer

programming has become the ultimate pastime.

Do the majority of men, who have at some time had some degree of obsession about a hobby, have great difficulty with human relationships? These men usually report that from an early age, they have had great difficulties with human relationships. The computer is refuge.

At last they can interact with something which totally accepts them, offers them continual intellectual challenge and an escape from reality. They report that they prefer this interaction to that with humans.

Still, the computer is not something to fear. Very, very few people get hooked in the way described. To some, with little desire for social interaction, the computer is a boon. It may even increase one's status in the eyes of one's peers, who may see the junky as the computing guru and the fount of all knowledge. Also networking, like CB radio, gives the shy an opportunity to communicate with others without the trauma of face-to-face encounters.

There is much still to be investigated. Margaret would be pleased to hear your opinions and experiences on this subject. (All information will be treated confidentially.)

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