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Extra Life: Coming Of Age In Cyberspace

EXTRA LIFE

>> COMING OF AGE IN CYBERSPACE

DAVID S BENNAHUM
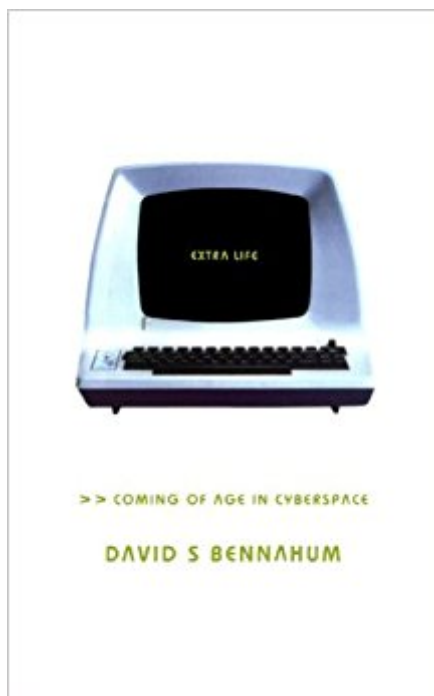
Synopsis

Today's digital culture traces its roots to the 1980s, when the first computer generation came of age. These original techno-kids grew up with home-brew programs, secret computer access codes, and arcades where dedicated video gamers fought to extend their play by earning "extra life." In that era of gleeful discovery, driven by a sense of adventure and a surge of power, kids found a world they could master, one few grownups could understand.In this fast-paced, real-life tale set in the bedrooms, computer rooms, and video arcades of the '80s, popular media chronicler David S. Bennahum takes readers back to his initiation into this electronic universe, to his discovery of PONG at age five. We follow him from video game addiction—his Bar Mitzvah gift was an Atari 800 with 48K of RAM—to his ascent to master programmer with the coveted title of "Super User" in his high school's computer room. Bennahum reflects on how computers empowered him and his friends to create a world of their own.We see how their geekiness, grounded in roleplaying, iterative thinking, and systems analysis led to a productive, social existence—the "extra life" they found on the other side of the screen. Hilarious, poignant, and packed with little-known computer lore, Extra Life is a grand digital adventure set against the background of the emerging information age.

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Customer Reviews

Bennahum writes a rich account of what it was like to be among the first to grow up with computers

as an important part of daily life, where the critical parts of the most coveted toys are electronic rather than mechanical. What lends Extra Life such poignancy is that it ranges far beyond mere push-buttons and keyboards to incorporate the new electronic world into the larger life of a boy growing up in New York. Bennahum delves into his own psyche to show how the computer revolution dovetailed with other revolutions surrounding his coming of age, such as coping with his parents' divorce, emerging from being an outsider, and youthful (sometimes illegal) strivings for adulthood. However enthusiastic he gets about his electronic extra life, he doesn't overlook the dark side of experience. When he violates a system-access rule, for example, he discovers a serious system flaw and must now wrestle with the ethical issue of whether to report it and protect the system when doing so would reveal his violation. If Bennahum sometimes seems overly self-congratulatory for being part of his generation, that's easily forgiven as he shares his childlike wonder in the electronic new world that grew up alongside him. --Elizabeth Lewis --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In this peculiar memoir of growing up at the same time as the computer, Bennahum, a contributing editor to Wired and other magazines, charts his lifelong obsession with the machine, from before he could type a four-line BASIC program to his days of amateur hacking to the time he took a trip to Microsoft's Seattle offices for a job interview. Implicitly challenging the distinction between geekiness and coolness, Bennahum tells of his early fascination with drugs, the solace he found in computers and the seductiveness of invading others' cyberprivacy. He writes as compellingly about the glee of his first hacking job as other memoirists have written about their first acid trip or incestuous relationship. Bennahum captures with poignancy the yearning he had to be a "Super User," the computer lab's star du jour, as well as the thrill of discovery when working with computers. But his memoir is marred by too many unexplained digressions, such as the all-too-casual suggestion that his sister became a "bad girl" because she didn't look for computers to rescue her. The book's largest bug lies in the fact that Bennahum spends too much time documenting when he should be enlightening. Must we really know that "Paul Haahr taught me how to play Ping-Pong with the switches," when we'd rather read his insights into such a moment? Those who grew up during the same pivotal cyber-time as the author will recognize at least some of his sentiments but find little new in them; those who didn't might assume that they didn't miss much. Author tour. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

It's an easy read, but I mostly found it interesting because there were many similarities to my own youth and computer education. The problem with this book is that there really isn't a message or a point. It's entertaining as narrative, but it's all empty calories.

David Bennahum's "Extra Life" is one of the most touching, gripping, and interesting books I've read in a long time. The book is a personal account of the authors youth, his early descent into the world of drugs and alcohol, and how discovering the fascinating world of computers brought him out and changed his life forever. It was a powerful moment when the meaning of the book's title hit me.. like in video games, David was granted an "Extra Life", a chance to pull himself up by the bootstraps. Computers were the answer.Perhaps I enjoyed this book so much because many of David's experiences hit very close to home -- while I was never did drugs or drank alcohol, and I am a bit younger than him (Pac Man instead of Pong), I found myself relating closely to Bennahum's memoirs. The similarities between us are scary, from our first computers (Atari 800), to our interviews with Microsoft later in life. "Extra Life" is the first book I've read that has hit the spirit of the computer programmer straight on the head. Finally, someone who shared the same passion for programming that I have! Bennahum expresses this passion eloquently."Extra Life" is a fascinating story, most likely the first of many personal experiences about growing up in the computer age we'll see in the future. After reading David's story, I had the strange urge to share my similar experiences. Personally, I can't wait to give this book to my parents to read, and I urge those parents who are curious -- and maybe a bit concerned -- about the hypnotic attachment their kids have with the computer to pick up a copy of "Extra Life" and read what that attachment is all about.Cheers to David S. Bennahum on his first book. I can't wait for his next.

I didn't know what to expect when I started this book; especially with the opening chapters about France, I almost didn't become fully immersed. But I stuck in, and was tremendously rewarded for my patience. Even though I am ten years younger than the author, most of the same experiences reminded me of why I was a computer nerd through middle and high school and why the computing world used to be a much more interesting space, at least for the geeks rather than the consumers.This is the story of David's computing life up until the mid to late 90's. From discovering electronic gizmos in his father's office (what would have been $1000 then would sell in a dollar store now) to interviewing with Microsoft just before they reclaimed their dominance in their industry a few years later.You can see how one generation is connected to the next. Page 67, as the author lays out the "commandants" followed subconsciously by his fellow peers, echo loudly those

inÃ Â Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution - 25th Anniversary Edition, followed by the PDP hackers of the 60's.If the book has any flaws, it is that a lot of side stories didn't feel wrapped up to me; the author would mention things going on with his sister, for example, from time to time in the book, and then would leave the subject alone for a half-dozen chapters. Some of the information written about the secondary players in the Epilogue, and how their time was spent between high school and the book writing, might have been better placed within the chapters.It is a shame, however, that this book wasn't written ten years later, as it would be very likely that the author would have been able to find and reconnect with all the players in the story, thanks to social networking. I imagine he has tried to find Misha since writing the book?

This is the best book about growing up with computers that I have ever read. David mixes wonderful self-storyline with historical home computer accuracy and creates a book that reads more like an entertaining novel than a traditional book about himself. While I am year younger than David (I am 30 now-12/98), I can relate to almost everything he talks about in the book. How early home computers captured my interest where nothing else could. I can honesyly say this is the first book I have read, cover to cover, in many years. Most books about computers, be it reference or history, usually tire by page 100. This is not that book. I ordered the book from less than a week ago and read it in less than 3 days. I could not put it down. David has done an excellent job putting this diary and story down on paper. Do yourself a favor and read this book! It may shed more light than you think on Generation-X, the Atari generation.

Well, this book was like looking into a partial mirror of some of my friends lives, including mine. Growing up part computer geek - Timex Sinclair 1000 and C-64 were the basics - in a community of yuppie families with similar situations to Bennehum's put this book within a close striking distance to autobiographical for most of my adolescent friends and the entire genre of people that find themselves labelled Gen-Xers for that matter. Computers were a part of all of our lives from early on and Bennehum does a good job of using the digital metaphors to relay his societal message.If you grew up with an Atari 2600, Intellivision, whatever, and find yourself now working with computers on a daily basis, then you should read this book. God forbid you did all that and now find yourself immersed in cyberspace as a profession...but if you did this will read like an autobyteography.

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