abstract

Halt and Catch Fire up to its conclusion in season 1 + personal computers, "hackers" in 1983.
If we recall correctly the TRS portable - for the same reasons related to its small size - also became popular among hacker circles; in other words the exact opposite public than the one targeted and advertised to by Tandy... i.e. three-piece suit execs in jets or upper management on business trips....


ARTICLES

Contains the word hacker on the cover (contributing to its introduction to average American households).
A series of elements about Cameron’s background was previously revealed: their father was in the Air Force, "helicopter crew chief" killed in Vietnam (a war that in the early 1980s was still present in people’s minds, not least if they had lost a relative). In a later discussion with Bosworth they also explain how they came to "fall in love" with computers: a school club was where they ended up being by accident after hiding because they were not popular with the other kids, and learned BASIC.

As for BASIC, this is also not just a detail: it was unique among languages and its position is worth defining: neither commerce oriented like COBOL (the language of banks and businessmen), academic like ALGOL (the language of algorithms), or indeed "close to the metal" (Assembly) or favored by operating systems writers (C), all of them expert users more or less; but was a language meant for the people. Ergo it may have contributed to inform their vision of 'democratic' computers (we hesitate to use the term because this is all to serve capitalism in the end).

Hunt, Donna’s superior (at Texas Instruments), inquires about home which inevitably brings them back to business as soon as discussion reaches her husband and, by extension, Cardiff:

- Did you help them with that?
- Maybe.
- What was the solve?
- Chips on both sides of the board.
- So simple.
- I guess you’re everyone’s secret weapon, huh?
- Super secret.

The relationships that exist between the two poles of the technology world - business and money on one side, technology and knowledge on the other - come one more time to an expression in ep. 6’s dispute between Gordon and MacMillan:

J - I’m gonna do whatever I want to do and you’re gonna do whatever I tell you to do because that’s the way this relationship works.

But, groups with diverging priorities also exist inside the knowledge technicians, separated (this being the 1980s, and the PC area) roughly between software and hardware: represented respectively by Gordon, leader of the hardware team, and Cameron, now "manager" of software (replacing Steve). He wants the programmers to work on drivers so they can be tested, Cameron on the OS "expansion" (presumably matching their vision).
BIOS finished, software development has moved to the operating system; this coincides with a change in the language used, following the same direction, from (x86) Assembly to - higher level - C.

(Our hypothesis is this is a function that Cameron has built to e.g. get the name of the user of the personal computer or command and then interact with them - congruent with their views on OS interaction. cf. demonstration at the end of the episode when they are still struggling with spaces.)

In some way this is mirrored by changes in Cameron’s lifestyle, housing: from office closet, then basement to hotel room to, now,-sharing with Yo-Yo and his musician (rock?) mate. Some progression seems to be occurring, anyway (if not perfectly vertically). As in the realm of software she is moving away from “close to the metal”.

Further, two paradoxes in visions for computers are formulated by two people. First, MacMillan’s wish is to create a product this is great but also successful (implied commercially). Then, Cameron expresses the other divergence that separate those who create computers for expert users, while others have the exact opposite outlook, they want to reach as many people as possible.

Gordon wants to build a computer that’ll impress all the other people who build computers. I want to build something for people who never thought they’d want a computer, who don’t know anything about them.
Ep. 7 (six weeks before COMDEX, a designer for the case is missing):

The non-commercial side of computer technology is approached when Cameron reads a story from *Newsweek*, 'Computer capers', about hackers:

"A bunch of teenagers broke into Los Alamos National Lab’s computers. Also into some cancer center and a big bank. Most were DECs running VMS OS." God, cover story and everything. Pretty cool.

Another side of computing, not exhausted by either hardware/Gordon-Donna or Software/Cameron or Business/MacMillan is the design of things. Simon Church, "one of the top industrial designers in the world", has reconsidered designing the case for the personal computer.

In turn this area has priorities of its own: Gardon wants to know - looking at the designs - what happened to "the specs", but this is no concern for the artist who likes to think "beyond the specs"... Gordon, turning red, starts denouncing the "form over function" approach. Gordon has a new enemy, after commerce and software: Designers, who also don’t respect his discipline.

Bosworth has received a petition for divorce (a cause or consequence of late office nights), Donna has gone on a business trip with Hunt where during a meeting with executives she intervenes to recommend abandoning TI’s 99/4A personal computer (a possible conflict of interest).

Cameron respects the importance of good design, as they understand the personal computer is an object that will soon be in the hands of everyone:

"a utility that every single human being will be interfacing with inside of five years."

Gordon has another of his 'Kitchen ideas', a term not actually used but that we propose, here to describe Donna’s constant input (heat management, now).

Bosworth has undergone a great transition for he is now talking the language of "innovation". He believes in the project so much he will use his own money.
LGBT themes are included as Church is a former partner of MacMillan who, now sick, "came to say goodbye".

Ep. 8 : last preparations before the big convention.

If someone did not already know about COMDEX they would receive the following hints:

1. At COMDEX, lavish equals shrimp. [Gordon]
2. Why would I want to go to COMDEX? It’s just for salesmen, right? [Cameron]
3. There’s gonna be over a thousand booths this year. All the heavy hitters show up. [Gordon]

Gordon goes on about "Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Mitch Kapor" being there, and IBM taking up two hotel floors, etc. Before recalling his experiences: "Donna and I were there in ’81”

Kapor is not a household name like the others, the company he founded, Lotus was acquired by IBM, but was already referenced indirectly in a previous episode when Bosworth - who had not caught the "innovation" bug yet - indeed was arguing against it: He claimed he would only be satisfied when "Lotus 1-2-3" was running on the machine, against the innovation side represented by MacMillan at the time (ep. 4, beginning).

At 10 min. a fairly spectacular and bizarre development has occurred: Bosworth, so far down the rabbit hole of tech, has recruited Cameron for a hacking heist on a bank! The same Cameron who just a few weeks or months ago was so nervous about copying code. The FBI storms Cardiff and instructs everyone to "step back from [their] keyboards".

Gordon, whose argument before his father in law, was that he had an experienced leader and the backing of a company, now finds himself in a much worse position than the disaster that was the Symphonic presentation at COMDEX 81. But, he has figured a thing or two out in the process, when it comes to technology leadership:

"Every time something terrible happens, you seem to benefit."

Cameron comes to similar conclusions, but put otherwise:
G - I put my life into that box.
J - Like I didn’t?
G - You gave it a name and a handle. You didn’t build a damn thing.
Cameron - He’s right. You only destroy things. You’ve never created anything.

Another setback is that IBM is rumored to be working on a portable, release “early next
year”.

Gordon – already a criminal for breaking into Cardiff to retrieve the demonstration model,
and at this dangerous rhythm soon-to-be Marxist... – realizes he has common interests with
Cameron (“we’re the talent”) and proposes the two of them should sell the personal computer
on their own at COMDEX, independently from Cardiff, MacMillan, et al.

He now admits his wrongs when it comes to Cameron: he understands the general idea of
her ‘expanded’ OS as a “better than MS-DOS” operating system and will try to defend its ideas
as best as he can if she does not come; he mentions extra features of user friendliness such as it
“corrects you if you make a command wrong” [a characteristic implemented since in some shells].

Around pizza they exchange stories of their “firsts”, by which computers are meant: Apple
II for Cameron. Altair kit for Gordon.
Cameron — ... the Apple II.
G — Oh, God. I feel so old.
(...)
G — I saw the Altair on the cover of 'Popular Electronics' and I just had to get the kit.

[He means the January 1970 issue, promoting the Altair 8800 as "the world's first minicomputer kit to rival commercial models"].

Followed by an anecdote of Gordon and Donna in college, exchanging encrypted love messages for which they developed their own cipher.

Tech’s bad boy MacMillan, at the first serious sign of trouble crawled back to his father and New York and IBM, where - like the true scion and son of modern aristocracy he is - he asks, or rather orders to be put in charge of the Portable project there. A self made man, whose brilliant ideas and inscrutable genius alone propelled to the top ...

If just fiction, such trajectories would be thrilling to watch or read about once in a while in novels or movies; and would not need to be pointed out as part of some analysis.

From this conversation, the additional information is gotten that MacMillan had been in Dallas since April. I.e. he lasted barely a half year away from daddy.

Ep. 9 : Vegas, COMDEX :

Gordon calls the convention capitalism as its finest, due to presumably the competition that characterizes it, according to his rendition.

A first problem surfaces when the suite they had booked is refused to them (the credit company has frozen the account due to the pending investigation); except that - again per Gordon’s wisdom and battlefield experience - suites are the key to doing business at COMDEX.

G — The booth isn’t the point. That’s just a way to identify the real buyers and then get them up to our suite.
D — For the opening night party.
G — Yeah, suite’s where the action is. It’s where we nail down all the real deals.
An interlocutor of Cameron at the party, a XEROX employee mentions PARC as “the guys who created Ethernet”, and offers a description of it as “Pure research and experimentation”; going on to mention “top secret projects” like “meta-classing, hypertext or object oriented programming” (it’s not clear if he’s flirting with them, attempting to recruit them or both).

He sums up “nothing against Dallas …, but California’s where it’s at.” Cameron asks him if he has considered the downside of earthquakes, ad that the Grateful Dead are there...

Going by the booths Cameron goes “Hey, Windows looks cool.” to which Donna replies “Yeah, but it was crawling with bugs.”

Follies of computer technology under capitalism are in full sight when : a copy of the copy of the IBM PC is presented, faster and cheaper. To remain “competitive”, what made the machine original is removed (Cameron’s experimental OS), and replaced with MS-DOS.

During the final presentation the machine without a soul is unveiled : It’s not special, and does not need to be. “Unique” is overrated, what matters is performance.