The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America (Inside Technology)

By Paul N. Edwards

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The Closed World offers a radically new alternative to the canonical histories of computers and cognitive science. Arguing that we can make sense of computers as tools only when we simultaneously grasp their roles as metaphors and political icons, Paul Edwards shows how Cold War social and cultural contexts shaped emerging computer technology -- and were transformed, in turn, by information machines.

The Closed World explores three apparently disparate histories -- the history of American global power, the history of computing machines, and the history of subjectivity in science and culture -- through the lens of the American political imagination. In the process, it reveals intimate links between the military projects of the Cold War, the evolution of digital computers, and the origins of cybernetics, cognitive psychology, and artificial intelligence.

Edwards begins by describing the emergence of a "closed-world discourse" of global surveillance and control through high-technology military power. The Cold War political goal of "containment" led to the SAGE continental air defense system, Rand Corporation studies of nuclear strategy, and the advanced technologies of the Vietnam War. These and other centralized, computerized military command and control projects -- for containing world-scale conflicts -- helped closed-world discourse dominate Cold War political decisions. Their apotheosis was the Reagan-era plan for a " *Star Wars*" space-based ballistic missile defense.

Edwards then shows how these military projects helped computers become axial metaphors in psychological theory. Analyzing the Macy Conferences on cybernetics, the Harvard Psycho-Acoustic Laboratory, and the early history of artificial intelligence, he describes the formation of a "cyborg discourse." By constructing both human minds and artificial intelligences as information machines, cyborg discourse assisted in integrating people into the hyper-complex technological systems of the closed world.

Finally, Edwards explores the cyborg as political identity in science fiction -- from the disembodied, panoptic AI of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, to the mechanical robots of *Star Wars* and the engineered biological androids of *Blade Runner* -- where Information Age culture and subjectivity were both reflected and constructed.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review
Edwards traces how computers have emerged as the dominant technology as a direct result of Cold War politics and the defense research it engendered. From the first use of room-size mainframes to coordinate missile systems, Pentagon research aimed toward complete computer control, including the budget-busting and ultimately impractical Strategic Defensive Initiative. Edwards relates how the technolog--which is now so open as to be nearly anarchic--began in strictly enclosed secrecy. The military computer goal of perfect "command, control and communication" systems was understood to mean communication only within a very closed world. Edwards' thesis is that this approach influenced the very structure of our modern computers.

Review

What is the social role of the computer? Scholars have approached this question from a broad range of vantages -- the history and sociology of technology, cultural studies of the Cold War, critical theory. What many readers have awaited is the kind of creative synthesis that integrates these very different approaches and points us toward a more expansive realm of inquiry. Paul Edwards has started us on that path. He offers great originality, unshackles erudition from jargon, and releases the insights of a variety of academic disciplines from the compartments that so often limit their interplay. Readers from many quarters will be grateful for the clarity and sweep of this exciting book.

(Michael Smith, Professor of History, University of California, Davis)

The Closed World brilliantly re-envisions the role of computer in post-World War II American history and society by simultaneously situating them as metaphors, technological artifacts enabling the formation and pursuit of Cold War politics, and conceptual thinking machines. The many discourses *The Closed World* marshals and analyzes make it a richly provocative work that anyone interested in computers, cyborgs, or the Cold War must read.

(N. Katherine Hayles, Professor of English, University of California, Los Angeles)

In his brilliant interweaving of the history and culture of computing, Paul Edwards reveals a wealth of tantalizing links and interactions between computers as technology and computers as mythology. He shows how both the development and the understanding of a technology are deeply rooted in political and social concerns, and he offers a thought-provoking interpretation of our life with computers from a new perspective.

(Terry Winograd, Professor of Computer Science, Stanford University)

Paul Edwards, in this wide-ranging introduction to postmodern technology, boldly argues that computer metaphors, as well as computer tools, invasively shape our intellectual spaces: films like Bladerunner become, for him, extended computer metaphors; cognitive psychology depends on computer analogies; and the Gulf War takes on the characteristics of a virtual-reality video game.

(Thomas P. Hughes, Visiting Professor, MIT and Mellon Professor Emeritus, University of Pennsylvania)

A fascinating glimpse into the history of computing and a cogentreminder of the extent to which this history continues to inform ourvision of the future.

(Grant Kester *The Nation*)

The Closed World is astonishing. One of the most important books of the 20th century.

(Howard Rheingold *Whole Earth Review*)

From the Back Cover
The Closed World offers a radical alternative to the canonical histories of computers and cognitive science. Arguing that we can make sense of computers as tools only when we simultaneously grasp their roles as metaphors and political icons, Paul Edwards shows how Cold War social and cultural contexts shaped emerging computer technology - and were transformed, in turn, by information machines. The Closed World explores three apparently disparate histories - the history of American global power, the history of computing machines, and the history of subjectivity in science and culture - through the lens of the American political imagination. In the process, it reveals intimate links among the military projects of the Cold War, the evolution of digital computers, and the origins of cybernetics, cognitive psychology, and artificial intelligence.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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