The History of Home Computers by Sam Stevenson

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The home computer boom began in the 1970s, when the Apple II computer was made available to the mass market at a price point that many could afford. While it was an immediate hit with wealthier consumers, it was a bit too expensive for most households. Cheaper home computers from the likes of Commodore, Atari, and Kay Pro, which made use of things that people already had such as tape decks and televisions instead of dedicated disk drives and dedicated displays, and this meant that home computers could finally be afforded by the average consumer. Prices came tumbling down further with the introduction of the Sinclair ZX range of computers, which were smaller and cheaper than any of the other machines on the market. While these were less powerful than most of their competitors at the time, such as the Commodore 64 and the Amstrad CPC, their small size and low cost gave them a distinct advantage in the home market.Â

Each of these home computers had their own distinct operating system. However, in the business world, large, expensive IBM PCs had become the de facto standard. In fact, the Windows PCs of today are directly descended from these machines. At the time, though, they were not affordable enough to be a serious choice as a home computer, which opened a market for dedicated word processors, which were essentially home computers tailored to business applications such as word processing and databases. Towards the end of the 1980s, IBM clones by the likes of Amstrad and Compaq, which could run MS DOS, the operating system used by IBM PCs, and were compatible with most of the software applications for that platform, started to appear, which was when the PC began to be regarded as a home computer as well as a business computer.Â

The new PC clones did not have an easy time of it in the home market at the time, however. New generation 16 bit home computers from Commodore and Atari offered superior graphical capabilities, sound, a much larger selection of games and more processing power than the still more expensive PC clones. As the 90s progressed, PC clones gradually caught up with and eclipsed the Amiga and ST in terms of processing power and software, and even IBM were making inroads into the home market. Also, the Apple Mac, which was even more expensive than a PC, was beginning to come down in price, and the aesthetically novel iMac cemented Apples place in the home computing market. These days, the majority of home computers are PCs running the Microsoft Windows operating system, although Apple still enjoys a healthy share of the high end market.

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