

Class Reflection

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I began the process of writing this class reflection by reviewing what others had written before me, and I was struck by number of references to the grand events of the 1980s, most of them drawn from politics and global affairs.

Important events to be sure, but for most of us the memories of those events will be just that: memories without much direct connection to our own lives. So today I'd like us to reflect on a more personal event during Freshman Orientation in 1985.

Without knowing it at the time, this event connected us to a global transformation that affects us every day.

On Monday, September 2, 1985, hundreds of us lined up to receive our brand new Apple Macintosh computers. We were the first class at F&M to use personal computers on a mass scale. Those computers had a now-laughable 128 K of RAM (that's right, 128 KILOBYTES, not megabytes). But these little boxes were a harbinger of things to come. Along with CD players (which first arrived in dorm rooms in large quantities in the mid-'80s), the VAX mainframe computer system (which the College purchased in 1983 and which included an early e-mail feature), and the migration of the library catalog to CD (which started in 1988), the computers that students installed in their dorm rooms in September 1985 were an

indication of the wholesale transformation in daily life brought about by a variety of new technologies.

And yet, if I want us to think about the significance of that moment in September 1985, we should do so with caution. After all, commonplace access to networked computing was over a decade away (be honest: how many of you actually knew about the VAX system or sent e-mail on it?). The CDs that seemed like the wave of the future in 1985 now seem downright quaint. And despite all the cultural space that Apple claims for itself, don't misinterpret those Macintosh computers. Sure, Apple remains a powerful technology company, but by the time we graduated it was clear that Microsoft, not Apple, was shaping the way most Americans encountered the personal computer.

But I think that's part of the point of a Class Reflection. Remembering events decades ago can be dangerous: it makes the past seem obvious and the future seem predictable. Reflecting on that simple moment of distributing computers in September 1985 serves as a reminder of the unpredictability of change.