

The objective of my project is to deconstruct the practices of the amateur programming of 8-bit home computers in the 1980s as a cultural form. I envision it as a concrete manifestation of a culture in a specific historical setting. I investigate how such 'everyday programming' was imagined, considered and experienced. To do so, I explore how amateur programming was embedded in the specific cultural, economic, and social currents in the highly developed countries of Western Europe and the US, during that decade. This research provides evidence that analysis of amateur software creation, a form of immaterial labor, can significantly contribute to a better understanding of the interconnections between the emergence of cognitive capitalism and the use of computing tools.

This historical project aims to contribute to the debates on the role of software and coding skills in societies. I will pursue this by investigating how coding skills offered a perceived sense of empowerment in a decade of individualism and competitiveness. My agenda is to highlight how a historical study can make a timely and socially relevant contribution to the ongoing debates on the issue of the critical role of the technical competences of digital technology users. With my project, I investigate the experience of being an amateur programmer in the era when a significant number of computer users were writing their programs, and I highlight continuities and discontinuities with the contemporary world, where we routinely use software, but only a small number of computer users have any coding skills.

Research for this project includes an analysis of software artifacts, preserved in online databases as a digital object, or as a listing circulated in a magazine, or bulletin. I intentionally focus on mundane programs that were not released commercially, but only as freeware or shareware, such as utilities that helped to organize recreational or professional activities, or as a form of self-expression with programmed audio-visual content. I also analyze relevant artifacts of knowledge such as books on programming, computer magazines, and bulletins released officially or within the framework of hacker cultures. These sources are supplemented by a series of 40 online interviews with authors of programs, who could be found and contacted through online platforms.