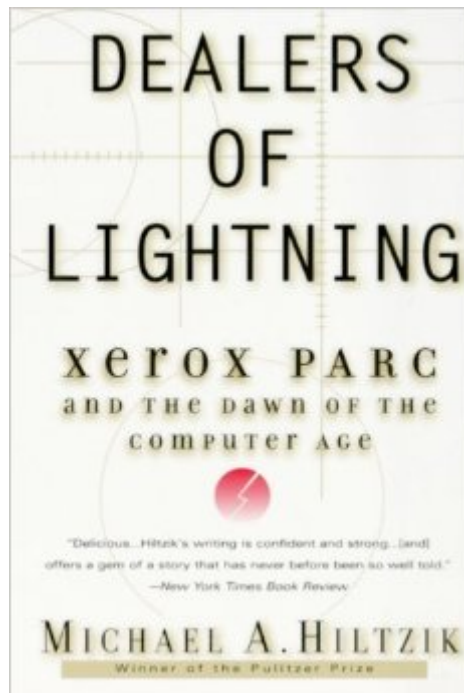


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Dealers Of Lightning: Xerox PARC And The Dawn Of The Computer Age



Synopsis

In the bestselling tradition of *The Soul of a New Machine*, *Dealers of Lightning* is a fascinating journey of intellectual creation. In the 1970s and '80s, Xerox Corporation brought together a brain-trust of engineering geniuses, a group of computer eccentrics dubbed PARC. This brilliant group created several monumental innovations that triggered a technological revolution, including the first personal computer, the laser printer, and the graphical interface (one of the main precursors of the Internet), only to see these breakthroughs rejected by the corporation. Yet, instead of giving up, these determined inventors turned their ideas into empires that radically altered contemporary life and changed the world. Based on extensive interviews with the scientists, engineers, administrators, and executives who lived the story, this riveting chronicle details PARC's humble beginnings through its triumph as a hothouse for ideas, and shows why Xerox was never able to grasp, and ultimately exploit, the cutting-edge innovations PARC delivered. *Dealers of Lightning* offers an unprecedented look at the ideas, the inventions, and the individuals that propelled Xerox PARC to the frontier of technohistory--and the corporate machinations that almost prevented it from achieving greatness.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

If you read only one book about research management, researchers, or computing research this year, this is the one to read. *Dealers of Lightning* is the story of the seminal first 13 years of Xerox's famed Palo Alto Research Center, a period in which PARC developed laser printers, the ethernet, internets, networked personal computers, the client-server model, bitmap displays, icons and

graphical user interfaces, the desktop metaphor and overlapping windows, and various other foundations of the computing world as we know it today. But this is not primarily a book about technology -- it is about the people who generated it: How they were brought together, how they interacted, and finally, how they dispersed. Michael Hiltzik is a reporter for the Los Angeles Times, and he has clearly done his homework. He seems to have talked to all the major (and many of the minor) figures involved, read everything that has been written on the subject, and understood most of it. There are ample footnotes, source citations, glossary, and acknowledgements. Some of his accounts are as close to definitive as we are ever likely to see. For example, his story of the famous demos for Steve Jobs that had such an influence on the Lisa and the Macintosh (while recognizing that participants' recollections conflict) has more information about them than I was able to gather while at PARC. As an "unindicted co-conspirator," neither interviewed by Hiltzik, nor mentioned by name (although I was close to the epicenter for the last half of the book's time span), I have both inside information and personal biases. I spotted a few small factual errors, and in some cases my interpretation of events is different than Hiltzik's.

I read this book because it was mentioned in *The New New Thing* - a book about Jim Clark. What I found was a very well written story of PARC (Xerox's research centre in Palo Alto). The story is really set in the 1970s and 1980s when Xerox set up PARC really to support a newly acquired computer company SDS. What happened instead was that PARC itself outshone the acquired company and for a corporation that built up its name in the photocopier business, it caused many problems. Hiltzik is a master at capturing the mood and feel. He brings a multitude of characters to life in bite sized chapters. (The book has almost 450 pages but the chapters are about 8-12 pages long making it easy to pick up and immerse yourself in a piece of history.) What I found astounding was the level of technology reached in PARC. This is well documented in this book. You have Douglas Englebart who used research and ideas raised in the 1940s as a blueprint for interactive hardware and software aimed at manipulating text and video images (he was the "inventor" of the mouse). You have explanations of the floating point function (which caused Intel so many problems with its Pentium chip). You have descriptions of culture shaping events such as Bob Taylor's "Beat the Dealer" where his people would spend an hour or so explaining their research and then were let loose to the erudite audience "like a rank steak to a pack of hungry wolves." You even have the origins of Ethernet and TCP/IP documented here. This is a very detailed book but unlike say "competing on Internet Time" it is much more like a story with real characters and real-life issues. It reads as well as a Southwick book but with much more to say.

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