Being a white, suburban, middle-class, teenage boy in the late 70’s/early 80’s could be tough. It was hard for those who did not fit in with the classic stereotypes in high school, such as the jocks, popular kids, burn- outs, or the brains. With advances in technology and the availability of computers, a completely new wave of products would sweep the nation thus creating an entirely new identity for these teenage boys who didn’t seem to quite fit in. A new breed of “nerd” was in the making, and one of the key helpers in this revolution was the Sinclair ZX81. The Sinclair ZX81 was manufactured by Timex Corporation in 1981 in Scotland. They were extremely popular all over Europe and did not come to the U.S until 1982, where it would be renamed the Timex Sinclair 1000. It was an unusual device because it was not made in the U.S, and also because of its popularity despite how unreliable it was. This computer was by no means a luxury device, it was however a step up form its processor, the ZX80. It could be used as a calculator and for programming (functions, coding, looping..ect). It was also extremely unreliable, it could not save any data unless you could transfer it over to cassettes (which was an exciting innovation for the ZX81), the device was known to get very hot, and if the device were to wobble slightly or be jerked you would lose all of your code that you had typed up and the hours and hours you spent programming would have been wasted, these were called glitches. What set the ZX81 apart from the rest of the home computers at the time was the availability, this would set the stage for everything we know about modern computers forever. The ZX81 was cheap, and kits were sold for £49.95 ($76.00) or assembled for £69.95 ($106.00), this was extremely exciting for those who could not spend the $1000 for a PC (the average cost for one at the time). I’m not sure if Timex knew just how popular their computer would be, considering that the idea of being middle-class and having a “sophisticated” device such as this was unheard of. I imagine that the inventors thought that they might even lose money because the idea was so far fetched, but it was extremely successful in both Europe and the United States. It was a simple home computer, at a good price, and the right time, these were the ingredients to a extremely successful and well-liked product. The ZX81 was what brought the computers to homes and would inspire these suburban teens to become future programmers and shape the computer industry to what we are familiar with today.

Judging by the advertisements with slogans such as “Never before has the power of a computer been within reach of so many people”, or “Finally you can afford to satisfy your lust for power”, it seems like the intended audience would be the every day person. Specifically those who did not have the money to get a PC and who were looking for a way to feel like they were a part of something bigger than themselves because they did not fit in with the predetermined societal roles. These were people who were looking for
something else and were intelligent and highly curious “It started off a proud tradition of teenage boys persuading their parents to buy them kit with the excuse that it was going to be educational” (http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-12703674). The ads also made computing look accessible to the every day person, the device looked small, sleek (compared to what was on the market), and relatively simple so that inexperienced people would also be interested in this computer. These teenage boys were unknowingly getting the best practice for the cheapest price and would be left with the skills to create a career, when all they wanted to do was play games and make their own programs. I also assume the intended consumer was already well-versed in the computer society and knew how big of a deal it was to have a computer in your home, when the only contact with a computer they could get was from their school/universities. The popularity of these devices came to somewhat of a surprise, the idea of having a computer in your home without spending all your money was absurd, it was the device that nobody thought they wanted until it came out. These consumers would need to be somewhat comfortable with programming and maybe even somewhat skilled, due to the small amount of memory, this forced the programmer to be creative and efficient. If you were not creative and efficient, this device is exactly the kind of device one would need to hone their abilities. The ads are also very focused on the drive of the user, they expect the consumer to be highly curious and eager, almost as if they were waiting for this device to come out, these ads probably spoke volumes to those who had even a slight interest in computing and sparked an interest thus making them go out and buy one. The set-backs on this computer were actually preparing these future programmers and enhancing their abilities, “the very limitations of the ZX81 are what built a generation of British software makers. Offering the ultimate in user-frostiness, it forced kids to get to grips with its workings” (http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-12703674). The elements that made the ZX81 so problematic actually would benefit the consumer at the end of the day, they would be getting the necessary practice in order to be an extremely proficient programmer in the future. Some people argue that nowadays, which technology having so much memory, people can now just copy and paste code, destroying the purpose of the countless hours of practice these boys put in and making the future generations of computing lazy. However, this is just a part of moving forward with the technology, it is getting more advanced and so are we.

From the sources that I have looked at, it seems as though the Sinclair ZX81 was a very beloved device and to this day is still talked about and sought after. Each ZX81 came with a BASIC manual on how to use it and it also taught users how to do different programs, someone took the time to publish this manual digitally online. I did a search on ebay and found multiple deals on used ZX81s, the cheapest they would go for is $69, which is odd because it was called the ZX81 in Europe but that changed to Timex Sinclair 1000 in 1982, this could mean that was better known as its original name. Timex eventually discontinued these home computers, but that has not stopped people from wanting them. Maybe today people are going to go back to the basics and become extremely proficient in coding just like the nerdy teenage boys before them and they will start another technological revolution. Because the ZX81 was sold in Europe and did very well and then moved to the U.S, where is would also be in high demand, this would mean that the revenue from this device was very large.
The market for the personal computer in general had become very large. So large that in 1982, Time magazine did not have a man of the year, in honor of the sudden boom of the home computer, they released a special issue with the title, “Machine of the Year”. The home computer was making its way into the hearts of millions and this would set the tone for how computer companies would compete with each other. By Time magazine releasing this issue, this would shed light on the growing world of computing. Another home computer would also be released in America in 1982, it was released by Commodore and called the Commodore 64, this is a device that looks more similar to what we know today because it has a screen, something the simple ZX81 was lacking. The Commodore 64 had a lot of features that the ZX81 did not have, for instance it had much more memory, which could make programming a lot easier. This computer sold for just under $600, which was still pricey compared to the $76 you would pay for the ZX81, but you are ultimately getting a completely different machine that would be able to do more and be much more reliable. The Commodore 64 would be extremely popular and even be named the greatest selling computer of all time in the 2006 Guinness book of world records. Just one year after this Apple would release the “Lisa” computer, named after the estranged daughter of Steve Jobs. However, Lisa would not do well on the market, but this did not keep Jobs out of the world computers, in fact I am writing this essay from a Mac book pro.

These sources were extremely interesting to look through, I feel like I experienced the excitement these young boys got when the home computer became available. I did however have to do some outside research on where exactly the ZX81 originated, it was unusual because this is the only major computer that I know that was not manufactured in the United States. We were at the foreground of computer innovation and culture, and we had to wait a year before this ground breaking device would be available in the United States, while the suburban teens in the U.K got to have it right when it came out. The ZX81 was discontinued because it would become completely obsolete by its American competitors, but that does not mean that it did not play an extremely crucial part in the computer wave. I would also like to know more about Timex and Sinclair, the companies that produced the ZX81, they collaborated in hopes to break into the rapid world of computing and succeeded. The only time I see a Timex logo is on watches, but never any computers. All of these machines I mentioned and the people behind them would shape generations to come, to this day, these machines are still talked about. The home computer is still a somewhat new major technology, which is what makes it exciting to be alive right now because I get to experience it and say that I was there for this time in history. Who knows what the computer will look like once I have kids of my own, they will look at pictures of this Mac book that I’m using right now and think it looks like it belongs in a museum and there might even be forums of people looking to buy this now “vintage” computer on ebay one day.
Work Cited


