Retro Computing Lab is More Than Nostalgia

Tucked away on the fourth floor of UWM’s Holton Hall exists a collection of fully functional retro computers.

Created and managed by UWM History Professor Thomas Haigh, the Retro Computing Lab is a growing collection consisting of more than twenty computers from the 1980’s to the early 2000’s.

The project started with Professor Haigh’s personal collection that he worked to refurbish in his attic throughout 2021. In the Spring ’22 semester, the collection moved to campus and has been expanded by the generous donations of UWM Staff and Faculty and community members.

The Retro Lab is not a museum full of artifacts on a shelf meant to be observed at a distance, but a working lab with a collection of ordinary machines representing the history of computing and the evolution of personal computing.

The lab allows Professor Haigh to teach students about the evolution of the computer and to give them the opportunity to experience it for themselves.

Professor Haigh teaches an Honors College class about the History of Computing following his book A History of Modern Computing and making heavy use of the lab.

The class, which will be taught again during the Fall ’23 semester, includes a hands-on assignment which students can do in the lab on one of the retro computers, using period appropriate software.

“One of my previous students during the Honors College course used an early version of CorelDraw on one of the computers to write an article,” shares Professor Haigh, “which they then printed using one of the printers in the collection.”

The oldest computer in the lab is a TRS-80 Model 1, originally released in 1977 alongside the Apple II.

“This was the year that standard, mass-produced, personal computers were available for purchase,” Professor Haigh shares. “Prior to these machines personal computers were kit-based and required a user with specialized knowledge.”

The collection includes a wide range of vintage machines with the most recent model being a 2003 iMac G4.

Professor Haigh maintains the technology in the lab and hosts regular open hours throughout the year for anyone to learn about the history of computing, for primary research on working machines, or just to relive a past experience with these amazing, vintage computers.

The lab also maintains a collection of software, and Professor Haigh is happy to help visitors find and install retro software on a machine from its era for an original computing experience.

In addition to the large collection of computers, the retro lab also maintains a collection of early computer accessories, including printers, drives, and original manuals and catalogs.

“These items are useful primary sources to show the experience of buying and owning one of these computers in their time,” says Professor Haigh. “They show pricing, the way they were marketed, and some of the stuff they may have been used for.”

The Retro Computing Lab is a gem on our campus and we suggest making a special visit next time it is open to visitors.