There's History and Money in Obsolete Computers

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In the first purchase of his collection, Sellam Ismail loaded the trunk of his car with old computers he stumbled upon at a flea market for $5 apiece. Soon he had filled his three-car garage with what others would consider obsolete junk.

Years later, his collection of early computers, printers, and related parts is piled high across shelves and in chaotic heaps in a 4,500-square-foot warehouse near Silicon Valley. And it is worth real money.

Even as the power and speed of today's computers make their forerunners look ever punier, a growing band of collectors are gathering retro computers, considering them important relics and even good investments.

"There has been a real steep upward trend in prices in the last year, year and a half," said Ismail, 38. "It seems it's become like the new collectible to moneyed people. Before it was just nerds and hobbyists."

He states his own affiliation clearly: he wears a black T shirt with the word "nerd" on the front. He recently brought a quarter-century old Xerox Star computer back to life to be used as evidence in a patent lawsuit.

The pride of his collection is an Apple Lisa, one of the first computers (introduced in 1983) with a now standard graphical interface. Such items sell for more than $10,000.

Pigs

In an old barn in Northern California that also houses pigs, Bruce Damer, 45, keeps a collection that includes a Cray 1 supercomputer, a Xerox Alto (an early microcomputer introduced in 1973) and early Apple prototypes.

"For me the fascination with these artifacts are that they are living histories) - especially if they can be kept running) - and that they are the key innovations that affect all of our lives more than anything else here in the 21st Century," Damer said.

"These artifacts also represent the 'roads not taken' when you see designs and user interfaces that in some ways are better than we have now, but simply didn't make it."

Damer's "Digibarn" is open to the public by appointment.

"I think my wife can be a bit put off by the project if we get visitors who want to come on the weekends but she is remarkably tolerant of this hobby of mine," said Damer, who is the owner of a company that produces 3D simulations for the U.S. space agency, NASA.

New Jersey-based Evan Koblentz says acquiring old computers is much like some other hobbies.

"Antique car collecting is a great analogy," he said. "No one is saying that a '34 Ford is better than a 2004 Ford in terms of reliable technology, but it's funner."

"Vintage computers have character. Once the whole Wintel thing came along, all computers pretty much look alike," he said of newer computers that run Windows software on Intel Corp. processors.

"In vintage computers, just because you bought one and plugged it in didn't mean it would work, didn't mean the software was available."

"Feel" the history

As in other hobbies, tech enthusiasts scour Internet sites and eBay for offerings, attend swap meets (where the old machines are sometimes demonstrated) and rely on word of mouth to obtain rare finds. Some items cost just a few dollars; jewels go for thousands of dollars.

Private demand is also making it more difficult for museums to obtain certain models. "It's tough; now they are becoming much more valuable," said John Toole, executive director of the Computer History Museum in Mountain View, Calif.

Some celebrate their collections on detailed Internet sites, such as Silicon Valley software engineer Erik Klein, 41, at www.vintage-computer.com.

"I've tried collecting stamps and coins and never quite got into it mainly because, for me, you can't really 'feel' the history in the items," he said.

The pride of his collection is a 1971 Kenbak-1 computing machine that he bought for $2,500 a few years ago. He says it has since appreciated five fold.

In Livermore, Ismail says his vast holdings of more than 2,000 computers, thousands of books, monitors and countless electronic odds and ends is worth more than $500,000. But he emphasizes that the real value is historical not financial, and hopes to one day convert his disorganized warehouse into a museum.

"Historically there is a lot of stuff that is significant in here," Ismail said.

"People are going to understand why I did this."

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