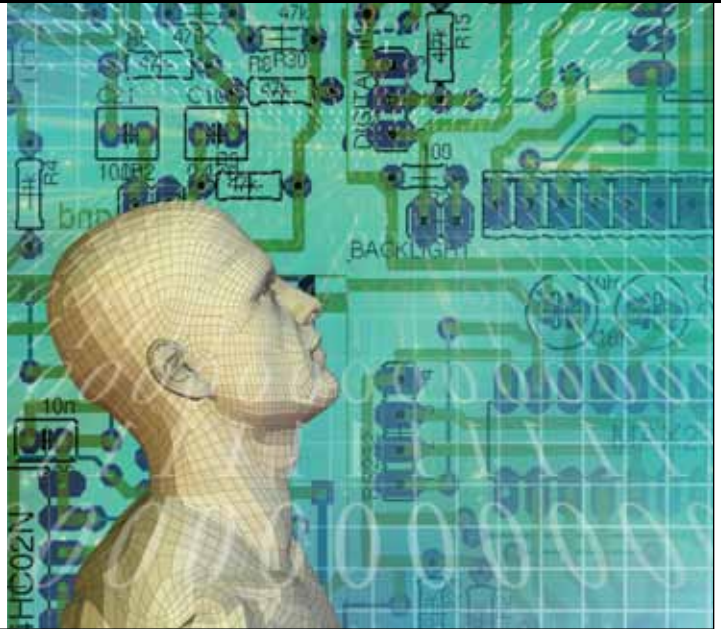


Monash Museum of Computing History

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Smaller, localized computing museums like the one hosted at Australia's Monash University offer an important complement to larger sites.

I love going to graduation ceremonies and am always quick to volunteer when the university needs faculty representatives to fill one role or another. I love the energy of the graduates and their families celebrating these successful educational efforts. I also like meeting a random cross-section of the faculty from all over campus while we wait in the back room, eat snacks, and get dressed in our robes and funny hats.

At one of these pregraduation receptions, I sat next to someone from the history department and figured that to get the conversation started, I would tell him about my own fascination with the history of computing. I explained that computing and technology create “ancient” history at an unprecedented pace. After 20 years in the field, even the most modern technology looks like a quaint, disposable antique from a bygone era. I asked him if anyone in his field recognized that we’re losing these artifacts and was interested in studying this very recent ancient history. He thought

my idea of 30-year-old artifacts being ancient history was a pretty silly notion and turned to talk to someone more interesting.

PRESERVING COMPUTING HISTORY

If historians are not interested in history until artifacts are hundreds or thousands of years old, then we in computer science must work together to be our own historians. We must explicitly keep track of important artifacts and record the stories and lessons that surround them. This doesn’t mean that we should all fill our garages with outmoded devices until they become historically significant. If each of us kept our own computer museums, we would all soon be in trouble with our friends and families.

It’s therefore indeed fortunate when a computing department invests space, money, and time into retaining and cataloging these artifacts. Not only are computer scientists often in possession of them as they pass into obsolescence, they have a good sense

of where each artifact fits into its historical context.

AN AUSTRALIAN EXAMPLE

The Monash Museum of Computing History (MMoCH) was founded in 2000 on the Caulfield campus of Monash University near Melbourne, Australia. The museum received a small grant to build public displays and supporting materials. The facility consists of several public displays on the first floor of the computing building (Building B) as well as storage space for artifacts not on display and limited support for artifact curation and cataloging.

Judy Sheard, director of the museum and a university faculty member, describes the community’s involvement with the museum:

When school children come to the museum, we have an hour tour. We take them through the museum, starting with the calculating machines. We talk about what people did before we had computers and explain, “What is a computer?” and “How did we come

up with the word *computer*?" We have a picture of women using slide rules in 1948 doing their calculations and [explain] the idea that the first computers were people. Often they were women, and so that is an interesting bit of social history.

One of the advantages of hosting a computing museum at a university is the ability to integrate university artifacts into teaching. According to Chris Avram, another faculty member at Monash University,

Even before we had the museum, we had the CSIRAC, the fourth stored program digital computer in the world. In 1972, it arrived on campus for storage purposes, and they put it in a display case. When I arrived in 1988, I would always take my introduction to architecture students past [the CSIRAC]. It had so much to tell students about the origin of operating systems and the pri-

mary function of operating systems, [which is] to allocate resources and the efficient use of resources.

The museum is a combination of the overall history of computing, placed in the context of the history of computing in Australia broadly as well as the particular contributions of the faculty and students at Monash University.

It's clearly a labor of love. Like any museum, it faces a persistent lack of funds and low staffing levels, but those involved remain committed to maintaining the collection. According to Judy Sheard,

History is so quickly forgotten, and there is a danger that we forget about these things. If we don't have them around for people to see, they forget about the history of the technology they are using. And I think that is a real danger.

I hope that other schools will follow the Monash Museum of Computing History's lead and integrate historical displays into their public spaces, hallways, and curriculum. Having a sense of history close at hand makes for more well-rounded students, and when enough time passes to capture their interest, the "real" historians will be able to excavate at the sites of long-buried computer science buildings to find the artifacts that we left behind. Or perhaps, 2,000 years from now, all of YouTube's archives will be on the average wristwatch, and everyone can just watch the video interview associated with this article at [//URL//](#). 

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