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KEEPING RETRO COMPUTING ALIVE

THE STORY OF REACTIVEMICRO

By Jarrod Kailef

In a rapidly advancing technological world, it's easy to forget the origins of today's digital marvels. However, that's not the case for fans of old school retro computing. It's a unique space where nostalgia meets innovation. For many, the allure of retro computing is less about the machines themselves, and more about the memories they evoke and the recognition of the groundbreaking milestones they represent in the digital revolution. Within this niche, yet passionately followed realm, ReActiveMicro stands out not just as a business, but as a bridge that connects enthusiasts of yesteryears' tech to the innovations of today.

Founded in 2005, ReActiveMicro has emerged as a reliable provider of hardware tailored for the Apple

II, a microcomputer series launched in the late 1970s. While it might seem curious to some why there's still a market for products relating to a computer over four decades old, the answer lies in the dedicated community of hobbyists, collectors, educators, and enthusiasts that still love this platform. For them, retro computing isn't a mere pastime; it's a passion, a hobby, and sometimes, a profession. They rely on companies like ReActiveMicro to provide them with the vital tools, hardware, software, and support services that keep their vintage machines running in the 21st century. The Apple II isn't just a machine to these people; it was an introduction to the vast potential of personal computing for many, a legacy that individuals like Henry Courbis, the man behind ReActiveMicro, deeply respect and aim to preserve.

Truth be told, there are not a lot of retro computing companies that have stood the test of time. Frequently, hobbyist developers appear, design and sell a product for a year or two, and then fall off the map, making it nigh impossible (and ridiculously expensive) to get whatever product that they were selling. However, that's not the case with ReActiveMicro, which has firmly established itself as a bastion of innovation and reliability in the community. From memory cards, hard drives, video adapters, sound cards, accelerators, and power supplies, to a huge library of reference material

and software, ReActiveMicro's range is vast and varied, catering to a diverse clientele.

Henry Courbis graciously took time out of his day to do an interview with Old School Gamer, where I spoke with him about a variety of subjects, ranging from the founding of ReActiveMicro, the reasons the company exists, plans for the future, Henry's favorite old school video games, and more:

Jarrod Kailef (JK): How long has ReActiveMicro been in existence?

Henry Courbis (HC): ReActiveMicro has been around since roughly 2005. To be honest, after exiting my previous business, I was uncertain about my next steps. Almost unexpectedly, I found myself with a new opportunity that just kind of fell in my lap: people wanted the electronics I was dabbling with, even though initially, I honestly couldn't understand the appeal. Nevertheless, the consistent positive feedback kept me going. My primary motivation at the time was a personal ambition to understand electronics better, given that I had some free time. Fast-forward, and I find myself wondering how I unintentionally established a business. It was definitely not my plan! It's not at all how I envisioned my life going. In fact, even today I joke about my being "self-unemployed." Yet, somehow I now have staff, an office, and I'm immersed in the business world again. It's somewhat unexpected, but the silver lining is the opportunity to assist others. In that sense, I'm accomplishing multiple goals from my personal checklist.



JK: So when you say that it kind of fell in your lap, what do you mean? How did that come about?

HC: Well, I was trying to figure out electronics. I went back and thought, "Well, I could go to school and spend a lot of money, but that seems silly. Do I need other people to teach me how things work? I can probably figure it out if I read a bit. Isn't that what professors do? Read from books? I can read. Not sure about my reading comprehension, but I'll get there." In 2005, YouTube wasn't really a thing, it had just launched. But there were forums. I lurked, knew some folks, and knew how to find stuff online. It wasn't much, but there's always something, some group where you can get the information you need. So I hunted. I thought, "How do I study this? Maybe look at a working system. It's easy to work backward, harder to move forward without a clue. But retracing steps? That's doable." So I looked at some old computers. Then remembered I had one as a kid. Maybe I could get a TV to use as a monitor, write basic programs, and figure out RAM, CPUs, and the like. So I did that. Suddenly, I got a TV, and other gear just came my way. It's weird, like when you learn a new word and then suddenly you hear it all the time. It was like that with computers. Out of nowhere, stuff just appeared. I thought, "This is serendipity. Worst case, I junk it. Best case, I learn." I joined forums, met folks, and they said, "I need a power supply. Can you fix this?" I realized I didn't know about power supplies, but I could learn. I'd sold them in my IT business. So I learned. I tried making a few. Sold them fast. It was odd. Every time I made more, they sold out. Even made a sound card, my first Mockingboard clone. Few were interested initially, but then demand spiked. I remember making a bunch by hand. I love soldering, but it's tedious in bulk. I love business, systems, even accounting. But I have to love it to do it, you know what I mean? That's

how my IT business started. That's how this started. I put in the work because I love it. Even with the tedious parts, it's rewarding. I never expected to get so many orders, to the point where I need help. It's surreal, being perhaps the biggest retro computer vendor out there. It's really weird to me, but here I am, a schmuck in a basement, getting over two hundred sales per month. *laughs*

JK: So you're approaching twenty years in business, right?

HC: Technically, yes. But I don't really like to think of it in terms of decades, it makes me feel old! It's surprising, to be honest. If someone had told me around 2000, when I "retired" and sold my old IT business, that I'd be back in business 25 years later, I would've said they're crazy. I thought I was done with that chapter in my life. I couldn't imagine finding another passion like that one. Maybe something like taking care of animals, homesteading, or even home remodeling. But making and selling electronic parts for antique computers? That's the last thing I'd expect. Even now, it feels odd. Yet, here I am, 20 years in.

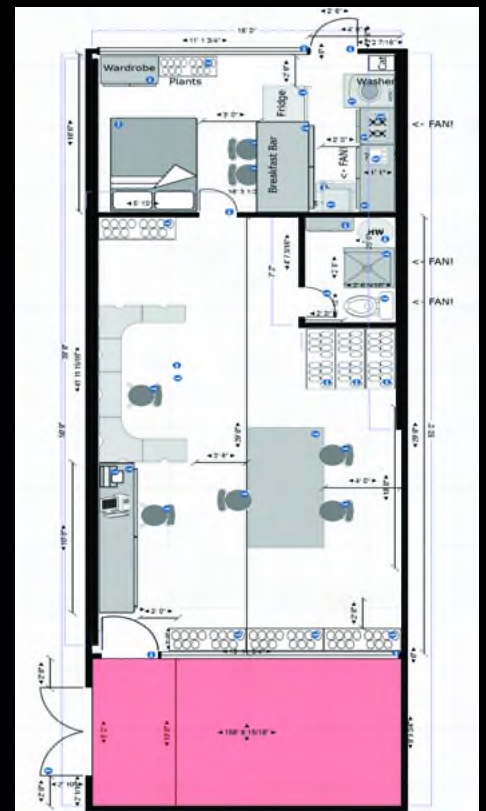
JK: ReActiveMicro seems to be primarily focused on the Apple II line. But if memory serves, you have a few products for other Apple systems as well, right?

HC: That's right. We have some products for the Apple III, and also for the Apple I. But most of our offerings revolve around the Apple IIe and IIGs because that's what I'm familiar with and can test effectively.

JK: Makes sense, given that the majority of the vintage Apple community revolves around the Apple II. There aren't many active Apple I and III systems compared to the Apple II systems out there.

HC: Absolutely. And I am keen on expanding into other areas in the future. One challenge has been finding the right office location

and the right people to assist. But things seem to be falling into place



now. If I can get the right team and location, coupled with my desire to go back to a more self-sufficient lifestyle like homesteading, it'll free up my time and energy. This will allow me to collaborate more with others and maybe even set up a machine shop again. I genuinely miss building things.

JK: So, are you considering branching out beyond the Apple II realm? For instance, there's a sizable market for Commodore 64 devices, which is another very popular retro computing platform.

HC: Possibly. That market's pretty saturated, though. But I might jump into helping those folks with the logistics and reselling, where they wouldn't have to handle daily business operations. I excel in that domain: handling logistics, hiring, managing operations. They could focus on what they're best at, maybe drop-shipping or an Amazon-like service. If they want me to warehouse and produce their items, I can do that, but I need to be able to test everything.



The thing is, there are many talented designers in the Apple II community. They excel at design and research but get bogged down in production, shipping, customer service, and other business aspects. Often, products get backlogged, or they run out of stock, or there are parts they can't source. As a result, they either stop production or product prices skyrocket. I can assist there. I'm not looking to dominate or monopolize any markets. My goal is to expand them and support designers in creating more products. If they want to sell them, that's great. But a lot of these designers, and you might agree, are better at designing than they are at filling orders, producing, and the financial aspects of the business. If you're trying to stock a lot of boards, the costs add up quickly, and then you hope you'll recoup your investment. Many designers underestimate this aspect. They might produce a batch, sell it, and then start over. And yes, soldering becomes really tedious when done repetitively. So, I see a real opportunity to help these folks.

JK: What would you say is the most popular product you sell?

HC: That's a hard question. It's not as straightforward as you might think. I mean, the popularity of products varies depending on the timeframe we're talking about. Over my entire career, or just recently? Because it definitely does change. The RIFA capacitors are pretty consistent sellers, often moving

in batches of fives and tens. Then there's the enhancement kits that include the ROM and CPUs. It's funny because if someone had told me two decades ago that I'd still be moving 15 to 20 of those enhancement kits every month, I'd have laughed. It just seems unreal. But there are so many Apple IIs out there! Other strong contenders include the MicroDrives and sound cards. But if I had to pick one from the past few months or so, I'd say the Apple II enhancement kit is probably leading. Last year, however, it might have been the CFFA 3000 drives or the MicroDrives. The economic situation also plays a role. With everything that's been happening in the world, like the war in Ukraine and concerns about the dollar, I've noticed people becoming more cautious with their spending over the past six months. High-ticket items seem to be taking a back seat, and people are becoming a bit more frugal.

JK: I would've thought power supplies were the most popular, considering all Apple IIs, whether enhanced or not, are three or four decades old. Surely, the power supplies are the first to go, right?

HC: It's unpredictable. For instance, last month, we only sold about 20 power supplies, but in the months before that, it was around 60. Sometimes people bulk buy, like six or eight at a time, and then there's a lull because they're set for a while. Interestingly, I recently restocked

the power supplies, but we haven't even opened the first box. In the past few weeks, the enhancement kits have been flying off the shelves, and I can't really pin down why. Maybe it's the price point? A power supply can range from 70 to 200 dollars, depending on features and add-ons. That's starting to feel like a significant amount for many people nowadays.

JK: Given that you have such a history with Apple II computers, and considering that we are a retro gaming magazine first and foremost, I've just got to ask: What are your favorite Apple II games?

HC: Hah! I ended up with the alias "Leechmaster" during my BBS days because I amassed a huge collection of games; I had hundreds of disks that I downloaded, and all with my 2400 baud modem, which as you can imagine took thousands of hours. This, however, made me the go-to guy for warez. Some of my all-time favorites include *Crisis Mountain* and *Lemonade Stand*. *Wings of Fury* was challenging and could get a bit slow, but I loved it as well. *Choplifter* holds a special place in my heart since it was among the first games my dad got for our Apple II. *Wizardry* was good, but tough. Interestingly, I played *Championship Lode Runner* but not the original one; beating that game remains a goal. In school, I never had a copy of *Lode Runner*, but I did play other space shooters like *Syzygy* and, what was it, *Quarks* I think? Some of the most fun games were simple and innovative, like *Leisure Suit Larry*, which was a hit amongst us youngsters due to its risqué humor. *Archon* was so good that I actually bought it, which was unusual for me. *Hard Hat Mack*? A fantastic game I also purchased. Oh, and let's not forget *Ultima*! Today's games literally cannot compare. Look at these huge sprawling 3D games that literally take up a hundred thousand times the space of a game like *Ultima*, and *Ultima* was considered massive at the time! I think *Ultima V* was on four double-sided floppies or



something.

JK: Yes, that's right, four double sided floppies, only about one megabyte in total size. By the way, I'm surprised that you didn't mention *Robot Odyssey* as a favorite of yours, I figured with your electronics background you would have loved it.

HC: Oh, yeah! I can't believe I didn't mention *Robot Odyssey* already. While games like *Choplifter* offered arcade-style fun, there were other games that I played as a child that truly left an impact on me intellectually. *Robot Odyssey*, which I received as a Christmas gift from my Dad, was very much one of those. To those who haven't played it, it's one of the best games ever created. Although, in a sense, it isn't a game, even though it's a lot of fun. You learn real fundamentals of electronics in this game, right down to designing and creating microchips. It challenged my mind in different ways and set me on a path that shaped who I am today. I'm really grateful for experiences like that.

JK: Do you think ReActiveMicro would be here today if you didn't play *Robot Odyssey*?

HC: That's a good question! Honestly, probably not. Very good question. I always wanted to

learn how that little magic box did what it did, like how the Atari 2600 did what it did. I wanted to understand that. Looking at my wiki page about ReActiveMicro, that's how the word "Reactive" came about, due to chemistry, physics, and the fundamental forces – the willingness to act or do something or have an interaction. So, when I started doing business again, I felt like I'm being reactive. That was the play on words there. People have asked, "Why not proactive?" They often misunderstand the term; if they knew physics, they'd get it. In physics, we don't have terms like "proactive." It doesn't work like that. So yeah, that's where that came from. I genuinely don't think I'd be where I am today if it wasn't for the Apple IIe, my Dad, and Robot Odyssey.

JK: I could surely talk to you for hours, but there's limited space in the magazine so I had better wrap this up. Do you have any closing remarks that you'd like to make as we wind down this interview?

HC: Certainly, there's a train of thought I'd like to push to users. It's about not supporting bad behavior from vendors. There are individuals in the market driven solely by profit. And while I understand the entrepreneurial spirit, I dislike when designers are very guarded with their work, reluctant to collaborate or share. It's disappointing to see products go up on eBay for exorbitant prices because they're no longer

in production. I've reached out to some to offer help in reviving those projects, but often I am faced with reluctance. So, I urge users not to support such behavior. Unless there's a commitment to support the longevity of a product, there's potential for exploitation.

Also, there are designers who don't want to handle sales and support; they should collaborate with those who do. It benefits the community. The goal shouldn't be to turn this hobby into an elite, expensive pursuit. Imagine if every piece of vintage tech was priced like classic cars! That'd strip the fun out of it.

On the business side, I operate modestly. Sales help fund the next project, not luxury purchases. I'm in this to support the community. So, if there's one thing to take away, it's that designers should think of the larger community. If you're done with a project, collaborate with others. Make sure it remains accessible and affordable. It doesn't have to be me, just someone reputable in the community. This isn't about hoarding gold. These are passion projects, and there's a way to get a fair return without resorting to exploitation.

JK: Henry, I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to me today! If you ever have any interesting news or updates that you'd like to get out to the old school gaming community in general, please don't hesitate to let us know.

HC: I will, and thank you. 📷

