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Game Keepers

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Photo by: FRED FOX

If you need a pinball machine, above, Andy Kline, left, can help. He sells, leases, rents, repairs and takes trades at his store, The Game Gallery.

TAMPA - Ms. Pac-Man. Space Invaders. Centipede. Asteroids. Pinball machines. Air hockey. Video driving games.

With their flashing lights, repetitive ditties and memorable characters, arcade games are making a come back. But not at your local convenience store or entertainment center.

"Coin-operated" machine amusement is moving into the home, a door opened by the explosion of video games played on consoles such as Nintendo's GameCube, Sony's PlayStation and Microsoft's Xbox, said Michael R. Rudowicz, president of the American Amusement Machine Association, an arcade game trade association.

The so-called Big Box stores, Wal-Mart and Target, have spotted the trend and are sapping business once exclusive to small specialty shops. But those shops see a profitable glimmer. As more games move into homes, buyers are seeking out the smaller stores to repair and maintain their machines.

Young gamers seemingly born with game controllers in their hands are helping drive the market. But the base of the growing market comes from people who played Space Invaders and Ms. Pac-Man as teens and twentysomethings in the early to middle 1980s, the heyday of arcade games, said Tim Ferrante, publisher of GameRoom magazine, which caters to the coin-operated home gaming enthusiast.

Those who in their youth scarfed down piles of cheese fries and spent countless afternoons manipulating the flippers on High-Speed, the 1986 pinball game from Williams Electronic Games Inc., grew up, graduated from high school or college and got good-paying jobs.

"So now, you have the wherewithal to go buy one of those games," Ferrante said.

Overall, the arcade game industry is on the decline, shrinking by more than 70 percent since the early 1980s, Rudowicz said. Then, arcades -- outlets dedicated to pure, coin-operated machine bliss -- numbered about 10,000, he said. Now, there are less than 3,000, and the majority of those are "entertainment centers," such as Chuck E. Cheese and Celebration Station.

Good reasons for why many in their late 30s and 40s and 50s are feeling a little nostalgic and seeking out an old childhood pal that helped them escape the drudgery of homework and listening to their parents, the experts say.

One of those is Richard Eckmeder, 37, who stopped by The Game Gallery at 7941 N. Armenia Ave. in Tampa on Tuesday. A pinballer when he was younger, Eckmeder of Tampa said he found the store while surfing the Web.

Like many chucking their dining room furniture to build game rooms, Eckmeder wasn't shopping for any particular game. "Just one that works well," he said.

The Game Gallery, owned by Andy Kline, caters to customers who want pinball machines, arcade video games, jukeboxes, popcorn makers and other coin-operated amusement machines in their homes.

The store, which Kline says is one of just a handful in Florida and around the nation, sells, leases, rents, repairs and takes trades. He focuses on the home game room, but also supplies arcades, corporate events, conventions and trade shows.

Kline attributed the rise of the people buying arcade games for home to the mood of the country after the Sept. 11 attacks. He said business jumped nearly 80 percent, before sliding back because of other market forces.

"When there's a tragedy, people don't want to travel," Kline said. "There was a return to family values. People were playing at home with their kids."

Most of Kline's clientele are big-spending athletes, entertainers and celebrities, whose incomes can afford \$1,500 to \$2,000 arcade games. He said he once delivered 25 pinball machines to the Bay area home of David Wells, a star pitcher for the Boston Red Sox, and he receives calls from Warren Sapp for games.

But anyone who wants to play the nostalgic games and aren't concerned about duplicating their childhood experiences can get in on the trend, said Ferrante, the magazine publisher.

Manufacturers are searching for and beating down the doors of people who own the rights to many classic arcade games. Versions of such classics as Donkey Kong, Frogger and Missile Command can be found online for free. Some manufacturers are creating arcade style video cabinets that play 75 different games or more. Still, others are remaking the old arcade-style games for PlayStations, Xboxes and GameCubes.

"The companies are now looking at the home buyer," Ferrante said.

In fact, the new paradigm for marketing movies and television shows across every available medium at

once is moving into the realm of arcade gaming. New cable programming from Nicktoons already has raced on the coin-operated amusement machine with Nicktoons Racing, Ferrante said.

With everyone getting into the game of gaming, Kline said his business dropped about 40 percent before people began educating themselves about the games. The Big Box stores such as Sam's Club, Wal-Mart and Target, which can afford to buy high-ticket items in bulk, now sell new versions of the classic arcade games, he said. And online auctions, like eBay, also are carrying pinball machines and arcade video games.

But while his sales initially took a hit, Kline's repair business has skyrocketed, rising about 200 percent, he said. Trucks from The Game Gallery used to roll twice a week to pick up machines that needed servicing. Now, Kline's repair trucks are on the road four days a week, he said.

"An educated person knows they are buying something they're going to have to get fixed," he said. "It's not a toy.

"This stuff shouldn't be sold at Sears. It's not an appliance. It's not a mower."

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