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‘Pac-Man’ plus affordable housing in St. Paul?

Classic arcade anchors remodeled housing at Rice and University.



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Riemenschneider talks with Jonesy the resident cat at his Two-Bit Game Room on Rice Street. (John Autey / Pioneer Press)



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Some guys spent the early days of the pandemic staining their porch deck or learning guitar. Health care communications consultant Peter Riemenschneider bought and refurbished seven units of affordable housing at Rice and University avenues in St. Paul, anchored by “Donkey Kong Jr.” and “Mortal Kombat,” among the dozens of other classic arcade games in his appointment-only retro gaming lounge.

The Two Bit Game Room — an exhibit hall of sorts for his aptly-titled “Rent My Arcade” rental business — features about half his collection, or some 50 games mostly from the 1970s, ’80s and ’90s, as well as obscure board games and collectibles. It’s a safe space for Generation X to revisit eight-bit video treasures — some call them antiques — like “Pac-Man,” “Space Invaders” or “Rampage,” away from the judging eyes of kids and grandkids raised by 64-bit PlayStations or the Nintendo Switch.

Another 50 classic arcade games are in various states of repair or rented out, generally for a month at a time, in people’s living rooms and garages across the Twin Cities.

The Two Bit Game Room — a \$10 reservation gets you unlimited play for three hours — opened in February as an under-the-radar addition to the neighborhood, just across from a recently-refurbished White Castle and down the street from the new St. Paul City School building. Two of Riemenschneider's remodeled housing units are situated just upstairs from the gaming lounge, and all seven are enrolled in the city's 4D tax incentive program, which offers tax breaks to landlords who agree to keep rents stable.

Riemenschneider doesn't lease out his games, painstakingly collected over 20 years or more, to saloons or fling open his doors to the general public for 25 cents per play. Most of the folks he deals with harbor a love of the original "Double Dragon" and "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" that goes back to, say, 1989.

A week-long rental might cost \$150. A month-long rental? Just \$75. What rental gets cheaper as time goes on?

"It's fewer trips," explained Riemenschneider, who drives the big blue delivery truck himself. "I do it because it's mostly fun. It's for private use — not bars and restaurants, because it's still my collection. I spent my pandemic building an arcade."



Riemenschneider stands among several game machines that he is in the process of repairing or restoring. (John Autey / Pioneer Press)

Riemenschneider, a lifelong East Sider, lives with his wife, Jen, and two high school-age children just off — where else? — Arcade Street.

The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: I've driven and even walked by the Two Bit Game Room space any number of times, not realizing there was an arcade inside. What was there before?

A: It was several things. Originally a paint store, then Salvation Army, then Milos Furniture and most recently a thrift store. The commercial/retail space was vacant for three years before we took it over in November 2020. It took about 14 months to renovate the space before we opened to the public in February.

Q: How does a health care guy come to own a classic arcade?

A: I've been collecting video arcade games for about 20 years, since before my daughter was born. We got our first game, I poked around inside, figured out how it worked, did some light restoration. I put it in my basement. I got a few more and put it in my garage. My wife said, you've got a collection. Why don't you try renting some of these out?

About two years ago, we started talking. Folks were asking about having a place to come preview them, and see what they want. We've had dads showing their kids how the games work, which is a nice switch.

We wanted more than just games. I've been collecting — well, not collecting, but keeping my '80s stuff for years. Board games, and Nintendo Magazine, Atari games, the Nintendo Entertainment System including the zapper and Rob the Robot, if you remember that. Nothing too modern. I was a Nintendo guy, so that's primarily what I collected. It's "Mario Kart" on the big screen.

Q: Do your kids get into the classics?

A: Not so much. My son plays PlayStation 5 and Nintendo Switch. My daughter plays Nintendo Switch. My daughter had her basketball banquet here. I think they appreciate it more when they see the reaction of their friends.

Q: What are your favorite games in your collection?

A: I'm a huge "Star Wars" fan, and we've got the 2010 big dome screened immersive "Star Wars" game. You're recreating a few scenes from the "Star Wars" movie. You'll do the original Death Star run, the battle of Hoth from "Empire Strikes Back," and the speeder skates through the forests of Endor on 'Return of the Jedi.'

The one I'm most surprised by and like to talk about is "Space Invaders." This one is mounted at the bottom of the cabinet facing up toward a one-way mirror, which creates a hologram effect, backlit with a moonscape with black light. It's a black-and-white monitor, so they put colored gels against the monitor to add color at a time when it wasn't available. That came out in '78 or '79.

It looks like the aliens are actually floating in space above this moon. As you go down through the game, there's this anxiety — the experience of actually descending, whether it's the lighting or the sound — that makes it special.

Q: Where do you find your games?

A: Part of the fun is the chase, the hunt. I've gotten games from Little Rock, Ark., about 13 hours one-way. I've found games in barns in northern Minnesota. Basically, there's these old operators who rented games to bars and restaurants. They would run routes — "OK, we'll put 'Pac-Man' in these five restaurants." And then "Mortal Kombat" would come out and they'd put "Pac-Man" in storage. And they're just sitting there in storage waiting for guys to come find them again.



Riemenschneider describes how to play the very rare Act Interactive Comedy game. (John Autey / Pioneer Press)

We've got a really strong arcade gaming restoration community in Minnesota, where guys can repair circuit boards and monitors. They can recreate the hardware when original parts are no longer available. For example, if a game uses a particular kind of chip, and that chip isn't available, they can create a work around.

Q: What kinds of groups have rented time at the Two Bit Game Room?

A: We've had a baby shower — a very fun and geek-oriented baby shower, some guys-night-out, some high-school-age birthday parties. We've had two retirement parties so far. People who are in their late 50s, these are their games too. ... We also had one mom who had chemo, and she had her husband and her son come in and they rented out the whole

space so there wasn't a risk of her getting sick. They've been by a few times.

Q: Has modern gaming improved upon these classics, or has it lost something vital? What's the difference between the games your kids play and the games you play?

A: My son was playing the Nintendo DS, which is a handheld dual-screen game, and he was playing a "Super Mario" monitor game. I think his character died three times. A P-Wing, I think it's called, picked up his character and carried him across the screen so he could bypass the level. He would literally fly across the level. I think that's bogus. (In the '80s), you had to beat that level. You had to beat the high score. You got three lives, and that was it.

Now they don't want the kids to get too frustrated and play something else. They want to lock in that player. Compare that to "E.T." on the Atari. That game was so impossibly hard they ended up burying them en masse in a landfill, because it was so awful. Now there's a casino-style reward system with modern gaming, like "Candy Crush" on your mobile phones, where there's flashy bells and whistles, and the screen fills up with candy waterfalls that gives you that visual stimulation. It's all gamification. We've got representative games across the '70s, '80s and '90s, and you can definitely see a progression.

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