



He's a pinball wizard

By Brent Stewart, The Southern

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There was once a time where video games were a public activity.

You went to the arcade with your friends, plopped quarters in the slot and played for hours and hours. You gathered around your buddy as he sought to break the high score on the popular game of the moment.

With the advancement of home-game consoles, a lot of that camaraderie is lost. Maybe a couple friends come over to play "Wii Fit," but for the most part, it's just one person sitting in front of a screen in his or her bedroom, or a kid huddled in a corner with their Sony PSP, ignoring everyone else around.

In spite of having an arcade in the basement of his Marion home, Rob Craig appreciates and misses that part of gaming history. This is how the **Heartland Pinball Arcade and Supershow** was born.

"You can have all these toys, if you don't share them, then what's the purpose," Craig said.

The walls of Craig's personal arcade are lined with pinball machines, an old bottle Coke dispenser and, in the corner, an arcade modulator that will let you play over 500 classic video games. In essence, he's re-created the arcades of yesteryear.

After graduating from college, Craig bought an old pinball machine to work on as a hobby. Having a background in electronics, he found himself working more with computers and wanted his skills to stay sharp. He bought the game "Black Hole," spent time figuring out how it worked and fixed it up. With this knowledge, he began buying, restoring and selling pinball games.

"I couldn't believe how much money I was getting out of these games," Craig said.

It wasn't something he was doing for profit; it was an investment and the beginning of something that evolved from a hobby into a passion. Craig now owns 50 pinball machines, some in varying degrees of working order, which occupy a basement playroom and a workshop in the garage behind his home.

"The cool thing about this, compared to fixing a radio, is you get to play it," Craig said. "Whenever you sit down at one of these things and you power it up and the lights are done their thing and everything's popping, then you get to connect with it."

Craig's skill in reparation led to his making a series of DVD documentaries called "Life After Death," about restoring and buying pinball machines. He also began writing articles for gaming magazines, along with attending game conventions all over the country.

One evening, on the drive home from the pinball expo in Chicago, Craig commented to his friend, Steve Rothschild, that they could do a similar kind of thing in Southern Illinois. The two threw some ideas around and thought of all the collectors they knew in the area who might join in.



Rob Craig of Marion has taken his love of games to a new level. Craig, here in his basement 'arcade' in Marion, restores pinball machines to their former glory. 'The cool thing about this ... is you get to play it,' Craig says. (BRENT STEWART / THE SOUTHERN)

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It wasn't just talk, it became a reality.

For the last four years, Craig has used a special dolly to haul each of his games out of his house and to the Supershow location.

"It's crazy, isn't it," he said.

The first year the show was at the Williamson County Pavilion. But the second and every year since the Supershow has been at the Herrin Civic Center. For the price of admission, you get access to more than 80 pinball machines and video games, tournaments and seminars.

Attendance each year has increased, and it's becoming more and more of an exciting event, not just for gamers, but for families and those just wanting to come out and relive a little of their youth.

"If they came, they had a good time," Craig said.

Aaron Cross met Craig through an electronics club at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. Cross now helps restore the machines, which is kind of like a dream come true for someone who loved video games as a kid.

"It's just been awesome," Cross said.

For Craig and those involved in the Supershow, it's all fun and games. Proceeds are given to Big Brothers/ Big Sisters and the Shawnee Crisis Pregnancy Center. They prefer not to advertise; instead they rely on word of mouth to get people to the show.

"It's all about giving," Craig said. "If our hearts are right in this, people will come."

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THE SHOW

What: The Heartland Pinball and Arcade Supershow

When: 3 to 11 p.m. Friday, Sept. 19, and 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 20

Where: Herrin Civic Center

Tickets: \$10 per day or \$17 for both days for those over age 5

What else: There is a pay-to-enter pinball tournament with a \$250 prize and children under five can participate in a free tournament on Saturday.

Good causes: Proceeds from the show are given to Big Brothers/Big Sisters and the Shawnee Crisis Pregnancy Center.

For more information: Contact show director Rob Craig at 751-8458 or by email at popbumper@gmail.com.

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