

## Pinball wizardry: Restoring old games turns into 'hobby gone mad' for Halton Hills man

What started as a way to finance his own collection has become a successful business



What started as a hobby for Nick Angel has grown into a successful business restoring pinball machines. Herb Garbutt / HaltonHillsToday

Nick Angel flicks a switch and a whirring sound grows into a hum, lights of all colours flash throughout the room, and bells, chimes, squeaks and whistles emanate from every corner. It's as if you're standing inside an alien spacecraft that has suddenly powered up.

Take a look around and you'll find some spaceships, either fending off alien invaders or blowing up asteroids. You'll also find sharks, monsters and maybe your favourite rock band.

Angel's basement looks like the arcade you spent way too much time feeding quarters into a machine as a kid. Video game classics like Pac-Man, Donkey Kong and Asteroids line the outside walls while two rows of pinball games run down the middle of the room.

“It started with the arcade games,” Angel says. “I was obsessed with them as a kid. It was like you were controlling what was happening on TV.”

That obsession had not diminished as an adult, so when he bought his first house, he purchased a Star Wars arcade machine. And then he kept adding.

“There weren’t many collectors at the time, so you could contact operators and see what they had to sell,” Angel said. “I bought as many as I could.”

Which proved to be an expensive hobby. So Angel began doing research on the Internet, and started fixing and restoring games, using the money he made to build his collection.

He eventually bought an old pinball machine and was fascinated by its inner workings. He also enjoyed playing them more.

“If you’re playing something like Asteroids, you play a lot, you eventually figure it out,” he said. “Pinball is different every time, you don’t get bored of it.”



Nick Angel has turned his love of pinball and video games into a business restoring machines.  
Herb Garbutt / HaltonHillsToday

And each machine has its own unique elements. The Wizard of Oz machine has a house that rises and spins, on Jaws you try to shoot the ball into the shark's mouth, the ramps on the Guns N' Roses machine are a guitar fretboard and headstock.

The repairs were not only more interesting, but more challenging.

"If you can fix one video game, you can fix 50 of them," Angel said. "(Pinball) is all mechanical, so you have to work your way through it. You have to think like machines do. It's always very satisfying when you fix them."

And he has yet to be stumped.

Angel works on everything from early '70s machines, where the score is kept on flipping metal plates that click as the tally changes, to modern-day machines with video boards, music and electronic displays. He keeps his own inventory of hundreds of different parts on the shelves of his workshop.

One of Angel's favourite things to do, and one of the most in-demand services he provides, is 'hot-rodding' - updating older machines to include all the modern bells and whistles.

Despite having close to 60 machines in the basement of his home north of Georgetown, Angel said he doesn't play nearly as much as you might think. He does host pinball leagues, where players compete not only for the league title, but for world ranking points.

Angel said pinball saw a resurgence during COVID when people were stuck at home and bought machines for their basements. Parents saw it as alternative to games on phones or tablets and for others, nostalgia was a major factor.

"You get a lot of people looking for their first game," he said. "They remember being good at it, whether they were or not."

But he now spends more time fixing machines than playing them.

He's also started working on slot machines and jukeboxes, which he said "are similar in logic to pinball machines, but mechanically are more complex."

But pinball machines remain the bulk of his work and word has spread. He's currently working on a 1961 shooting gallery game for a client in Calgary.

"It's not quite a full-time job," he said. "It's more of a hobby gone mad."



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