

Harrow area business keeps pinball passion alive



Engineers Robert Whent and Matt Daviau operate Viper Pinball, a Harrow area business dedicated to pinball repair and restoration.

by Adam Gault

To enter the garage of Robert Whent is to step back to a simpler time many of us are constantly seeking to recapture.

The lights, bells, synthesized voices and sounds, and unmistakable clacking of pinball flippers, brings one back to the simpler days of youth. When mortgages, car payments, and grocery bills were “grown-up” problems, and our biggest concern was whether you’d have enough quarters to get you through the evening at the local arcade or bowling alley on your favourite machine.

For Whent, that’s where it all started. At the long defunct Fast Eddy’s Arcade on Riverside Drive in Windsor, a new pinball machine in 1980 captured his imagination and sparked a lifelong affair with a pastime and industry that’s gone through more than enough ups and downs over the last 40 years.

“It was a kid’s haven, and you could certainly use up all of your quarters and gravitate to the newest machines. It was all about the newest machines. Black Knight was one I remember the most, from Williams (manufacturer). It was one of the first games to really make use of speech. It also has a double layer pinball surface, which was a first in the industry. It also had magnets that would hold your ball so you wouldn’t lose it. There was so much about this machine that as a kid was just magic for me,” said Whent.

Whent would go on to become an electrical engineer, but his passion for pinball never left him. Acquiring his first pinball machine in 2009, Whent’s engineering background took over, and he began to tinker with them in his garage, learning the ins and outs of their mechanics and electric switches from all eras of pinball.

“It’s the tactile feel of

it. Maybe a little bit of the danger, you have that ball under the glass. It’s a 3D immersive environment that you don’t get any other way. You don’t get it from video games, you don’t get it from Candy Crush on your phone. You’re actually making this steel ball move under your will and guidance. Including bumping the machine, tilting the machine to achieve certain things. It’s dopamine,” said Whent.

In 2019, Whent started Viper Pinball out of his garage on Concession Rd. 6. Here, along with fellow engineer Matt Daviau, and other enthusiasts, they run a part-time business fixing, restoring, and selling pinball machines from across North America.

“It gets you back to the roots of getting your hands dirty and getting involved in everything from painting, woodworking. Every game is different enough that they’re all challenges that will actually keep you up thinking why something doesn’t work,” said Whent.

Even doing house calls for home repairs, Whent and his partners want to do what they can to help preserve and promote the hobby, which up until recently, seemed to be on its last legs following a golden era from

the 1980’s through the turn of the 21st century.

“I think in 2015 is really where I’m starting to see it take off again. That’s when more manufacturers saw there must be a market again. It really comes down to the theme. In the last six months there’s been Foo Fighters, Scooby Doo, The Godfather 50th anniversary, Tank Battle, Queen. Music pins are big right now. If you love the theme, you’re gonna love the machine,” said Whent.

A healthy rotation of machines is usually making their way through the restoration process at Viper Pinball, with Whent explaining that one of the most rewarding parts of his passion business is helping people connect with the machines that bring them back to that simpler, quarter counting, pop drinking time.

“I love restoring them for somebody that’s connected to them, that has a reason they want it done. They don’t want to just fix it and sell it. We stand behind our work and offer a warranty on our repairs, which is unheard of,” said Whent.

Additional information on services and machines for sale can be found online at viperpinball.com.



Machines from 50 years ago through today are restored and sold from this Harrow garage.



Black Knight, a machine from 1980, sparked Whent’s lifelong passion for pinball, with its (at the time) cutting edge sound, lights, and design.



A South Park pinball machine from 1999 (with glass top removed), is currently undergoing an extensive restoration at Viper Pinball.

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