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## High score

Gamers delight in arcade offerings — retrograde to revolutionary

By Valerie Singleton  
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Meredith Matthews pushed Dale Katechis against a “Frogger” video game machine in St. Louis and kissed him more than 20 years ago.

Katechis doesn’t know what became of Matthews.

“Frogger,” on the other hand, should be within his reach in about a month’s time, when Katechis — owner of Lyons’ Oskar Blues — and neighboring business owner Kevin Carroll of pinball wizardry fame open an old-school video game arcade in the brew pub’s basement.

Katechis envisions “Lyons Classic Video Games at Oskar Blues” as a retrograde destination — “Asteroids,” “Defender,” “Centipede,” “Tempest,” “Missile Command,” “Galaga,” “Frogger,” “Ms. Pac Man” and “Joust,” to name a few — in one room, for the pleasure of anyone who appreciates the beauty of pre-Clinton Era game technology.

The 600-square-foot basement housed the Oskar Blues brewery until recently, when Katechis moved the operation to a nearby building to better accommodate beer production.

The move sparked Carroll’s interest. He owns about 150 pinball machines but currently has room to board only 32, plus several classic video games, inside his business, Lyons Classic Pinball.

He seized the opportunity.

“The juices are starting to flow,” Katechis says. “Kevin’s got these great ideas. He comes over and taps me on the shoulder daily. The heat’s on me to make the space available and get out of here.”

In the meantime, gamers who prefer modern graphics to green screens and cheesy sound effects satisfy their video urges with “Dance Dance Revolution” and contemporary video and pinball games.

But they won’t find an ally in Katechis. In fact, when it comes to the new generation of video games, he says he’s out of touch.



Kevin Ryan of Boulder plays “Getaway” during a tournament at Lyons Classic Pinball. An old-school video game arcade is set to open in about a month in the basement of neighboring Oskar Blues.

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“I’ve been too busy flipping burgers and serving beer,” he says.

A new era of gaming: ‘Dance Dance Revolution Extreme’

Aaron King has legs like Fred Astaire and the brain of a 19-year-old video game guru.

He’s on fire, his eyes fixated on a monitor rapidly scrolling dance directions to the tempo of electronica music. King leans back, supports himself on a metal bar and wildly taps his feet on four floor-pad arrows each time the corresponding direction glows on the “Dance Dance Revolution Extreme” screen.

The machine’s computerized voice responds: “You’re not an ordinary fella!”

This guy never took tap-dancing lessons. He never will. King, aka “Spork,” is simply a 19-year-old game shop employee who stumbled upon the dance-game craze in a Colorado Springs mall three years ago and discovered his gift.

“It’s mesmerizing. When this guy does it, it’s amazing,” King’s friend and fellow dance-game enthusiast Chance Ragland says to a group of regulars here at Net-Topia, a cyber café inside Twin Peaks Mall.

“Dance Dance Revolution Extreme” is King’s home court. These people are his awestruck fans. When someone steps alongside him on the opposing game pad, he or she should prepare for battle. While King hates to intimidate rookies, he takes pleasure in humiliating pretentious gamers.

“Everyone in my life always discouraged me, said I wouldn’t be worth (anything),” King says, standing with his girlfriend, Kelly Hackett, after his game.

King says he has won the last six dance-game tournaments in which he competed. He’ll host the next competition, “Rumble in the Rockies,” at 10 a.m. April 15, at Net-Topia. He networks at the gatherings. Three months ago, he met Hackett at a competition.

“I was super jealous,” Hackett recalls of first seeing King compete. “I was like, ‘I want to be that good.’”

Today, King owns 15 dance-game machines, a strange fact considering he mocked the game the first time he watched it being played inside a mall. When King’s friends bet him he couldn’t pull off the game’s moves, he agreed to the challenge.

“I was addicted,” he says. “I just know if I didn’t play for two or three days, I’d feel weird.”

Hackett says men dominate the craze, though women, such as 16-year-old Deborah Strantz, have become regulars. Strantz, by request, demonstrates the difference between “Dance Dance Revolution Extreme’s” heavy and light dance modes by playing at Level 1 speed. She is intensely bored.

Jesse Hart, 19, who spends \$20 to \$30 every few days to play dance games here, also prefers a more rigorous level of play.

The key is patience, King says.

“If you’re gonna play it once and give up,” he says, “chances are you’re gonna hate the game.”

A passion for pinball

Kevin Carroll has technology to thank for the verbal slap his pinball machine is about to deliver.

This Addams Family pinball machine is his wife's favorite. From the looks of things, Carroll must have played it hundreds of times; he is adept at the art of nudging the machine and maneuvering the ball toward the nearest target.

Carroll presses a button on the side of the machine, activating the game's flippers, and flings the ball into a pit on the board. The digital screen alights, and the voice of Addams Family matriarch Morticia taunts him.

"You should know better," she says.

"I know," Carroll responds almost before the machine has issued the familiar reprimand.

The secret to falling in love with pinball is having one good game, Carroll says. And that takes practice.

"It just takes you out of your everyday troubles," he says. "When you get to play a pinball machine, you're in that little world for that 30, 45 minutes.

"Our problem is getting people to know about it."

Pinball strategy pays off big time, though the game's amateurs rarely take the time to uncover its secrets.

Beginners generally fail to attempt a game's skill shot, a special, opening game shot that, if achieved, wins the player big points and game rewards. Pinball wizards perform lane changes, diverting the ball down different chutes to earn bonus points.

Some folks even walk away as a pinball machine issues a loud, discernable smack, unaware that the sound signifies a game win.

But almost everyone can tackle the nudge, perhaps pinball's easiest strategic move, which gives players the power to redirect a ball.

"And I do say nudge — not throw it across the room," Carroll says.

"Pinball is physical. It's a ball on wood, and if you don't interact with it physically, it is gonna go straight down."

Carroll owns all of these machines. He knows the story behind each. His wife bought him his first pinball machine, a 1978 KISS game. The Addams Family followed. Soon, pinball machines — from South Park to Elvira, Monster Bash to Evel Knievel — flooded the Carrolls' basement. He resolved the overcrowding by opening Lyons Classic Pinball.

These games offer greater variety than was available during Carroll's childhood on the Jersey shore. His oldest pinball machines date back to the 1930s. Solenoid magnets and switches control much of the operations in the arcade's oldest pinball machine, Kismet, circa 1961.

The KISS machine utilizes better, "solid state" technology, with greater memory capabilities and musical interludes, while 1988's Banzai Run shows alpha-numeric advances with an upgraded point screen and an upright pinball course. Contemporary, dot-matrix machines, such as Indiana Jones and South Park, combine pinball with digitized screens and modern video game technology.

While new pinball machines generally contain more resources for handling the ball, Carroll says there's something to be said for the classic games.

"The thing is, the older games are harder," he says. "If you lose the ball, you've lost the ball. (Pinball

players) end up getting a little affection for them.”

Valerie Singleton can be reached at 303-684-5319 or by e-mail at [vsingleton@times-call.com](mailto:vsingleton@times-call.com).

