

Iowa town seeks status as video gamers' mecca

May 17 2009, By LUKE MEREDITH , Associated Press Writer



Ryan Miller, of Ottumwa, Iowa, plays a pinball game at a local video arcade, Wednesday, May 13, 2009, in Ottumwa, Iowa. Ottumwa city officials announced in April plans to develop what they're calling the International Video Game Hall of Fame. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)

(AP) -- For a brief shining moment in the 1980s, Ottumwa was the unlikely hot spot of the fledgling video game industry as gamers around the globe flocked to this sleepy Iowa city and its video game arcade for a series of landmark tournaments.

Gamers set world records, the TV show "That's Incredible" broadcast a tournament to a national audience, and then-mayor Jerry Parker dubbed Ottumwa "The [Video Game](#) Capital of the World."

The glory days didn't last long. The Twin Galaxies arcade closed within a

couple years, and memories of Pac-Man and Donkey Kong dimmed for everyone - except arcade owner Walter Day, who dreamed of making Ottumwa into a permanent game destination.

"You know how your average person fantasizes, when they daydream about having a new car or having a beautiful wife or inheriting from their uncle \$2 million or something like that? I'm a little bit different," he said. "I fantasize about owning downtown Ottumwa and turning it into the first video game-themed amusement attraction."

It's a calling that's been heard by town officials. In April, they announced plans for an International Video Game Hall of Fame.

"Every town needs a place to be recognized for," said Terry McNitt, head of Ottumwa's Chamber of Commerce.

Day said he envisioned making Ottumwa a "cultural home base" for the lucrative worldwide gaming industry. The Entertainment Software Association, a [game publishers](#) trade group, said computer and video game industry sales climbed to \$22 billion in 2008.

Ottumwa's bid to reclaim its past also was inspired by a pair of 2007 video-game documentaries, "King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters" and "Chasing Ghosts," both of which featured the Twin Galaxies' heyday when Day was known as the king of video game stats.

Although his arcade closed, Day's scorekeeper status remains. Twin Galaxies Inc., his Fairfield-based company, tracks rankings, high scores and championship tournaments for video games around the world.

City officials are passionate about Day's plans, but the idea is mostly a vision backed by a Facebook group with about 800 members. Officials said they hoped to buy a building near the original Twin Galaxies site

and want to secure naming rights and a designation as a nonprofit and build up a Web site.

Day said he's also reached out to his contacts in the gaming industry for donations. The hall of fame would likely include donated classic games, exhibits about the industry and an area with modern games for visitors to play.

Dale Uehling, the city's mayor, noted there was "a lot of interest, a lot of enthusiasm" for the project.

"The thing is, it's real and it has potential, and I think that's what excites everybody," McNitt said. "Why Ottumwa, Iowa? We're a population of 26,000. Well, we're a great little town."

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