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Columbia gamers flock to alumni-owned shop

Chicagoland Games opens despite shaky economy

In late October, Columbia alumni Mel Mastro and Jon Paul Neri were hurriedly painting.

The couple's newly-leased shop was still empty, except for a couple of ladders, some odd brushes and a few board games in the window next to their hand made sign. Mastro said it was between applying coats of bright yellow paint on the shop wall that she noticed a man stop in front of the store window, glance from the games to the poster board sign and let out a hearty cheer.



"We couldn't hear him, but you could just see him saying, 'Yes!'" said Mastro, who along with her husband and his two partners, just launched the hyper-niche Chicagoland Games board game shop at 1207 W. Bryn Mawr Ave. in Edgewater. "It seems that in the community, people are starting to get really excited about the store."

Chicagoland Games was created to fill the vacancy left by a now-defunct retail chain, Gamer's Paradise, which used to employ each of the new company's partners. Not only does the store offer a growing collection of some of the most unique board games and role-playing games from around the world, but it also serves as a hub for like-minded gamers-many current Columbia students-to connect, compete and commiserate.

Jon Paul Neri, 28, who was a film and video major at Columbia from 2003-



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2005, said this sense of community was

what he and his partners were seeking from day one-which, he adds, wasn't so long ago.

"College students move to the city every year, and a lot of them don't know anybody," Neri said. "They're looking for a new group of players, and this is definitely one of the best ways to do that. We're big in the 16-24 age group."

Neri said the shop resulted from a combination of opportunity and timing. When Gamer's Paradise closed its doors all over the city, both the store's employees and its patrons were left without a place to play. That's when Neri and his partners decided to live up to both their fellow gamers' hopes and a dream Neri had been mulling over quietly for years-starting his own business.

"We were [encouraged] to hold off because the economy sucks, but we realized that it will probably keep sucking," Neri said. "Someone else could have entered the market at any time. We just had to go for it."

Neri said because so few small businesses are opening citywide, he was able to find deep discounts on supplies to open his business. He was also able to do it quickly; Chicagoland Games went from concept to reality in less than 30 days before its Oct. 31 opening.

"If we tried to open in a good economy, we wouldn't have made it," Neri said.

Wading through the legal red tape has been the biggest challenge for the business, Neri said.

They're still waiting for their front sign to be installed because they need government approval.

Now that the doors are open, Mastro said the community is already using Chicagoland Games as a gathering place. Its "Find a Gamer" forum on ChicagolandGames.com (built by Mastro, a web designer) is already buzzing with activity.

"We would see 10 people signed up, then the next day 50 people," said Mastro, who is a 2003 web design alumna. "We thought, 'This is actually starting to catch on.'"

Joe Locastro, a video game design major, who found the new store by accident soon after it opened, is now a regular. He also used to frequent Gamer's Paradise, and said Chicagoland Games feels exactly like what it is-a small, community-based business-and that the customers ultimately benefit.

He said its owners take the company motto, "We don't close until the game is over," very seriously.

"[The owners] are here until 3 a.m. some days, just letting people play," Locastro said. "That wouldn't happen at Gamer's Paradise, but it's happening here."

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