

Digital Heroes stands tall in downtown Walla Walla

Nearly 30-year-old comic book shop thrives in new location

By **EMRY DINMAN**
Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

WALLA WALLA — Where many comic shops and game stores have come and gone over the years, Walla Walla's Digital Heroes has withstood the test of time, the ebbs and flows of a changing industry and a global pandemic.

And in November, the 29-year-old business made a big move, leaving its Eastgate locale near the intersection of Wilbur Avenue and Alder Street and opening the door to its new downtown storefront.

"I love downtown," said owner and founder Jeff Watson. "A lot of people that come and walk downtown love to check out the shops. Our foot traffic has been amazing, especially over the holidays."

The new, larger store at 120 E. Alder St., also has allowed Digital Heroes to expand its in-house competitions and gaming sessions, which have proven to be particularly popular social outlets amid the pandemic.

Some days, as when a new Magic: The Gathering set launches, the five gaming tables at the back of the store can become quite crowded with people keen on trying out new cards.

This was a particularly important feature for the new store, Watson said, especially after Western Paladin Games closed its Walla Walla brick-and-mortar shop on Second Avenue and Chestnut Street in late 2020.

The two businesses had long run gaming competitions in tandem, but Digital Heroes' prior locations didn't have the space to accommodate many people and only had two small tables for gaming.

When the beloved gaming store Western Paladin closed its doors in the face of pandemic-related shortfalls, Watson knew the new Digital Heroes location had to fill that unmet need.

"Now that we have five, much-larger tables and a lot more space, we're definitely the premier place for (in-person gaming)," Watson said.

As in-person gaming has reemerged from a pandemic-induced hibernation and brought more people into the store, Digital Heroes has started looking at additional ways to improve the player experience and attract more business.

They recently set up an account with Coke and Frito-Lay to start bringing snacks into the store.



Marcus Kisling, tournament organizer, looks on as players get their new Magic: The Gathering cards before a tournament Feb. 11, 2022, at Digital Heroes in downtown Walla Walla.

Greg Lehman/Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

But while Digital Heroes has proven resilient in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has certainly faced its fair share of challenges these last couple of years.

"We rode the waves of what we could ride on," Watson said.

A new threat arises

The shop was closed for a month when the pandemic first hit Washington in March 2020, forcing Watson to turn his attention back to the online store that had once been the bulk of Digital Heroes' business.

They hobbled along as best they could during those uncertain early days of COVID-19, with Watson's high school-aged son running deliveries of comics and cards to customers' homes.

For nearly a year, the in-person gaming that helps stores such as Digital Heroes and Western Paladin form tight-knit communities were shut down outright.

Gaming publishers, including of Wizards of the Coast, Magic: The Gathering and Dungeons & Dragons fame, wanted nothing to do with in-store competitions, afraid of seeing headlines about super spreader events at a gaming tournament.

There were major shakeups in the comics and gaming industries, as well, with some of the biggest players in the business losing some ground to competitors. Diamond

Comic Distributors has long held a near-monopoly on comic distribution in the country, but that began to change after the company halted operations in the wake of the pandemic.

"It was a nightmare," Watson said. "Diamond completely shut down, and it completely killed the comics industry because there was only one distributor."

Since then, publishing behemoths Marvel and DC have partnered with other distributors, Watson said. This created a lot more paperwork for small businesses such as Digital Heroes, and consequently there was a slight increase in overhead, but the transition to more diversified distributors has largely been a smooth one, he said.

Other impacts from the pandemic have begun to dissipate.

Once in-person gaming was allowed again, it didn't take long for interest to pick back up. At first, it was mostly Watson's employees playing D&D or card games on their off-time, and a couple customers at a time would spot them playing and join the game.

Now, more "planeswalkers" and "dungeon masters" gather in the back of Digital Heroes than ever before.

Up, up, and away

The pandemic may have added a lot of complications in the last

couple of years, but it has only been the latest storm that Digital Heroes has weathered in its ever-changing industry.

Watson first began selling comics in the early '90s out of his cubicle at Safeco Insurance, where he worked as a programmer analyst, and at booths at comic conventions, which were not the large-scale productions that they can be today.

In those days, comics were still well outside of the mainstream.

"When I first started collecting, it was pretty niche," he said. "I was the nerdy kid with the geeky stuff. Who's into Star Wars comics and trading cards?"

"But if there was no Star Wars, there would have been no Digital Heroes."

Digital Heroes began as just a name. He needed a business license to continue to sell comics at conventions, but if comics didn't work out, the name would work just as well for a computer-consulting business.

But comics (and games, which go hand in hand in many stores) did work out, but not without a lot of luck in those early years.

When Watson opened his first store in 1993 in the Flatiron Building where Boyer Avenue and Main Street meet, the comic business had a slow start.

But Digital Heroes benefited from being in the right place at the

right time: 1993 was the year that Richard Garfield, a visiting mathematics professor at neighboring Whitman College, launched Magic: The Gathering, the first modern trading card game.

Garfield's revolutionary game, which still has a devout following nearly three decades later, would take the world by storm in the years to come. Digital Heroes began carrying the trading card game when it released, and Garfield himself would come in to teach the game to the shop's regulars.

"It got big pretty fast," Watson said. "That was huge for us for the first couple of years, because I didn't know what I was doing."

But as Digital Heroes was finally getting its feet under it, the rug was pulled out from under the entire industry. The comics market dried up in the mid-to-late '90s, Watson said, leading him to close the Flatiron storefront and go back to school to pursue a master's in computer science.

In the interim, Watson kept Digital Heroes alive with an early transition into an online business when the internet was still young and only just beginning to be actively commercialized. Mail-order and online shopping proved robust, so much so that Watson was eventually no longer able to grow the business inside his home.

In 2015, Watson decided to reopen a brick-and-mortar store, this time near the Bicycle Barn on Isaacs Avenue, around the same time that local, now-defunct game store Western Paladin Games launched its Portland Avenue shop.

Comics were hot again, hot enough to be able to sustain a physical building and employees.

"I was really surprised at the local audience," Watson said. "We grew exponentially from 2015 to 2020."

Digital Heroes quickly outgrew its storefront and moved into a building on East Alder Street. And, about a year ago, Watson started eyeing his next move, eventually looking toward a return to Walla Walla's downtown.

Luck struck again when he sat down with his current landlord, Andrew Reed, who expressed interest in the comic shop as a draw to bring more people downtown.

Watson had a number of things he wanted for his dream shop that required structural changes, including having a bathroom that would be accessible to people with disabilities, and this new location would allow him to do that.

In November, Digital Heroes' new location opened its doors to the public for the first time.

LOCAL BRIEFING

19-year-old in jail for slaying in Milton-Freewater

MILTON-FREEWATER — The Umatilla County Sheriff's Office has arrested a 19-year-old man for the shooting death of another teen that occurred Saturday, March 5, in Milton-Freewater.

Manuel Adam Perez Jr., of Walla Walla, now is in the Umatilla County Jail, Pendleton, on a probable cause charge of second-degree murder, as well as for second-degree disorderly conduct and second-degree criminal trespass.

The sheriff's office in a press release reported it received 911 calls on March 5 at approximately 12:10 a.m. about gunshots on the 84000 block of Yellow Jacket Road, Milton-Freewater.

Initial reports indicated two people had been shot. Umatilla County sheriff's deputies, together with Oregon State Police and Milton-Freewater police, responded to the scene.

According to the press release, the investiga-

tion showed people at the residence left before law enforcement arrived and took a gunshot victim to Providence St. Mary Medical Center, Walla Walla.

Jason Samuel Warner, 18, of Milton-Freewater, had been shot multiple times by another male, according to the sheriff's office, after an altercation during a party at the residence.

Walla Walla Police Department and Walla Walla County Sheriff's Office responded to the hospital as well. Warner died at the hospital.

According to the press release, law enforcement early in the investigation identified Perez as the lone suspect.

Sunday, March 6, at approximately 11 a.m., Perez walked into the Milton-Freewater Police Department, which notified the Umatilla County Sheriff's Office.

The sheriff's office working in cooperation with Umatilla County District Attorney's Office, Walla Walla County Sheriff's Office and the police departments of Milton-Freewater, Walla

Walla and Pasco were able to establish probable cause for Perez's arrest.

The investigation is ongoing.

Leonetti Cellar purchases historical M-F vineyard

MILTON-FREEWATER — Leonetti Cellar, the oldest Walla Walla Valley winery, founded in 1977, has announced its purchase of the 9-acre Waliser Vineyard in The Rocks District American Viticultural Area of Milton-Freewater.

Terms of the deal were not disclosed.

Waliser, planted in 1997, was one of the first vineyards in Milton-Freewater before more than 30 winegrowers would rush to the cobblestone soils.

Prior to grapes, the property had been an apple orchard.

"After 44 years of family tradition on the Waliser Vineyard property, the torch will be

passed to a new visionary owner," Tom Waliser said in the announcement.

"I experienced an exciting period as the property transitioned from a groundbreaking apple orchard to an elite vineyard planted on the rocky soils of Milton-Freewater."

The purchase enables Leonetti Cellar, owned by Figgins Family Wine Estates, to expand its wine-growing operations in The Rock District.

The 8-acre Holy Roller Vineyard, also property of the Figgins, sits next to Waliser.

"I'm honored to see the Figgins family become its new steward," Waliser said.

The acquisition excites Jason Magnaghi, Figgins Family Wine Estates viticulturist.

"I cut my viticultural teeth in Tom's vineyards and am delighted to be farming this heritage vineyard going forward," Magnaghi said. "It is a spectacular piece of land and fits perfectly with our Holy Roller Vineyard next door."

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