

GenCon for the Aspiring Professional:

*A four-part article series on using GenCon (or other conventions)
to your advantage as an aspiring member of the gaming community.*

Every year, tens of thousands of gamers descend upon Indianapolis, Indiana for what is arguably the biggest and most important gaming convention of the year. GenCon Indy offers 4 full days of gaming, almost 7,000 events, vendors, demonstrations, debuts and panels. But it also offers something else...

Opportunity.

Conventions such as GenCon may be the biggest chance that aspiring writers and artists get for one-on-one face-to-face connections with potential employers and networking contacts. While there are definitely ways to get more in-depth quality time with various people of import in the industry, GenCon is a quantity-heavy situation, a target-rich environment, if you will.

However, such opportunities are a double-edged sword. Face-to-face contact can be a great career tool—if you're prepared for it. It also offers the chance for the unprepared to totally flummox their chances of working in gaming as well. Since I'm frequently asked about how to get your proverbial foot in the door in the gaming industry, I've put together some advice on how to make the most of your convention attendance, if you're interested in working as a professional in the gaming field.

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OTHER CONVENTIONS

Origins

Columbus, OH—July
originsgamefair.com

Dragon*Con

Atlanta, GA—September
dragoncon.org

Gama Trade Show (GTS)

Las Vegas, NV—April
gama.org/gts

NorwesCon

Seattle, WA—April
norwescon.org

BayCon

San Francisco,
CA—May
baycon.org/2010

Penny Arcade Expo (PAX)

Seattle, WA—September
paxsite.com

Part One: The Basics

The Ultimate Basic

This is so basic that it shouldn't even need to be said, but it does.

No one wants to hire, work with, game with or even stand next to someone who smells foul. Yes, cons often involve long hours and little in the way of amenities. Folks may be dealing with shared hotel space, long carpools or couch-surfing. That is **no** excuse to smell bad. Take a shower and put on clean clothes before you come to the con. Not just mostly clean—really clean.

If you're day tripping, and it involves driving for any real length of time, or eating in the car, plan to make a quick stop when you get to the con and use the restroom to change into clean clothes if necessary. A small package of baby wipes can be a lifesaver for a fast anti-sweat wipe-down (preferably in the privacy of your own stall).

If you're staying at a hotel, consider stopping to grab a quick shower and a change of clothing before you start schmoozing. Bring clean clothes for each day, and a spare outfit for that messy chili-dog accident you didn't plan on happening. If you're sharing a hotel room or staying nearby, use the shower at least every morning, even if it means getting up a little early.

And last, but in no way least—**use** deodorant/antiperspirant. Put it on when getting dressed, and if the day wears on, there's nothing wrong with a mid-day reapplication. Trust me. It really, really does matter.

CONWEAR

Even when using the con as a career opportunity, no one expects you to show up in a three-piece suit or formal business dress (unless you're cosplaying, but that's addressed later...) However, if you're wearing very extreme, overly sexualized, blatantly offensive, or just plain ratty clothing, you're not doing yourself any favors. Even standard con-fare (jeans and a t-shirt) can be an asset or a detractor to the impression you make—choose wisely!

By dressing inappropriately you are distracting from your own agenda. When working a con as an aspiring professional, you're selling yourself (but not in *that* kind of way.) You want potential contacts to remember your art, or your clever insight about their game mechanics or setting, not your cleavage or six-pack abs. While it's become common in the convention circuit to see extremely revealing clothing, heavily fetishized outfits, or shirts with logos that range from subtly sexual to graphically blatant, you don't really want that publisher or game company rep to remember you as “the one with the “F*CK YOU” shirt” or “Oh, yeah, the gal with the huge... tracts of land... falling out of her corset” when you're trying to impress them with your employability.

Likewise, while your favorite T-shirt or jeans may give you a lot of confidence, if they're falling apart or are covered in stains, they're not going to make a very

SUPPLY CHECK LIST

These are personal items which you should have either with you or have access to even for a day trip to a convention you hope to “work”.

Handy-Wipes
(For quick clean ups)

Deodorant
(For re-application)

Toothbrush & Paste
(Use after meals)

Hairbrush or Comb

Make Up (if used)
(For touch-ups)

Change of Clothes
(In case of spills)

Mint/Gum
(For breath)

good impression on those around you. You want people to remember you, not the holes in your shirt.

As for cosplay and other costuming—you may want to wait until you’re done to start your hand-shaking and networking efforts. While your angel wings or blood-soaked lab coat may get you stopped in the hall for photo opportunities, it’s not necessarily the impression you want to leave on a potential business contact. You probably don’t want to have to start your follow-up email with “You may remember me as the drow with the super-sized broadsword...”

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

You never know where or when you’re going to bump into a potential contact or employer, especially at an event like GenCon. They’re everywhere, and you may encounter them even when you’re not “on your best behavior”.

This means the guy in the elevator who you just told that Game X totally sucks might just turn out to be the publisher of said game, and someone you’d hoped to get an interview with. The “booth babe” you just leered at and made rude comments to your friend could very well be the HR director for her company (who just happens to look great in their promotional t-shirt). Likewise, the crowd at the bar you just spilled beer on because you were “totally wasted” has a decent chance of containing at least one member of the development team for your favorite game.

I’m not advocating being fake—no one likes a phony. But being aware of your surroundings and the impression you’re making can make a huge difference in how you come across to others. Express opinions politely, rather than using terms like “worst”, “sucks” or “hate”. Socialize without losing control. Treating others with respect and politeness won’t necessarily get you a job in the industry—but poor behavior can definitely shut doors.

And a final note about first impressions—You really never know who you’re talking to—or who they’re connected to. The gaming industry is a very small circle of people, and there’s a lot of overlap. The person you’re badmouthing at one booth might well be a friend, co-worker or associate of the person you’re talking to. The game you’re dissing might well be something the person you’re talking to worked on, helped design or even invented. Or you might have just called her best friends’ masterpiece an utter piece of crap. Keep it positive, and if you don’t have anything good to say—don’t say anything at all. An attempt to connect with one industry pro by insulting another one (or to praise one game by insulting another) may very well have the opposite effect.

PROFESSIONAL SUPPLIES.....

These are items you should carry on your person at all times when attempting to “work” a convention.

Business Cards

Include at least your name, email address and some hint about who you are or what you do. Phone numbers are great as well, especially if you’ve got your cell phone at the con.

Pens

Several—for making notes, dashing down phone numbers, or loaning to someone who doesn’t have one.

Cell Phone

While not strictly necessary, it really helps to be able to communicate for things like impromptu meetings, cancellations or follow ups.

Portfolio/Ash Can

A sample of your work that you can leave with an editor/art director) is invaluable. Make sure your contact information is clearly available on it (and on every page if it includes unattached documents.)

Part Two: Preparation

TAKE CARE OF YOU

Taking care of yourself is key to being able to make the most of GenCon (or any convention.)

You're going to need to drink (preferably water) enough to keep you from getting dehydrated. And, you're going to need to eat enough to keep your metabolism at a solid level. Since food and refreshments can be expensive, I advocate granola bars, jerky/pepperoni/cheese sticks, fruit, and a refillable water bottle. But be sure to bring a toothbrush or at least mints/gum—you don't want to exhale jerky-breath on a potential contact!

Even if you're doing the con on a shoestring, if it's possible on your budget, stick aside an "emergency" \$20. You may find yourself in a situation where someone you've been discussing professional stuff with invites you to tag along while they hit Steak and Shake or the sports bar, and it would suck to not have enough to cover your meal (and be able to continue being a part of the networking.)

Do **not**, however, invite yourself along to meals with industry folks you're trying to schmooze. A casual hint/opening ("I've been wondering where to eat around here. Where are y'all heading?") is one thing. However, unless you are specifically invited to come along, don't. Meals are often a rare and precious commodity when industry folk are working a convention like GenCon, and inserting yourself into their circle during this time unwelcomed is not likely to endear you to them. (This, like any of the rest of the rules, is not hard and fast. There are certainly folks who have parlayed a self-invite into business connections. However, the ratio of success to failure with this endeavor is **very** high, and do you really want to risk that you're the one person in 100 who manages to pull it off?)

Sleep is just as important as nourishment. While there's a strong temptation to do without sleep entirely at conventions (especially if you're working the booth circuit to make job contacts during the day and getting all your recreational activities in throughout the night!) two things will happen if you skimp on sleep. Either you'll sleep in unintentionally, and thus lose out on valuable schmoozing time while the exhibition hall is open, or you'll be dragging yourself around from booth to booth, and it's difficult to make your best impression if you can't keep your eyes open or follow a conversational thread.

Aim for at least 6 hours of rest per day for "working" cons. If you can't swing that, look for a time in the mid-day when things are at their slowest to grab a quick cat nap and refresh your senses before heading out again.

As well, if you have any important medications—remember to bring and take them. In the middle of an impromptu interview with a game company exec is not the time to remember you forgot to take your anxiety meds!

PORTABLE

REFRESHMENTS.....

(That are actually semi-healthy)
All of these should be fine without refrigeration if eaten during the weekend.

Water

- Iced Tea
- Lemonade
- Granola Bars
- Fruit Snacks
- Fresh Fruit
- Fruit Cups
- Dry Cereal (in bags)
- Baby Carrots
- Cheese
- Crackers
- Pretzels
- Bagels
- PB&J
- Jerky
- Pepperoni Sticks
- Trail Mix
- Nuts
- Raisins

LEAVE AN IMPRESSION (AND A CARD)

I am a **huge** advocate of business cards, even if you don't have an official business. They're a quick, concise, neat and professional-looking way to leave your contact information with someone, and they give the impression that you have your act together. Depending on your field, a simple white card with your name, email, phone number and a single context line (Game Designer, Freelance Writer, Editor for Hire, the name of your podcast, etc.) can work wonderfully. Artists might want to invest a little more and use an example of their art on their card. Many internet sites, such as Overnight Prints (where I get mine) can get you cards in a hurry, and for a very small investment.

If you don't have time or resources to get business cards professionally made yourself, consider making a batch up using print-and-tear blanks. These are available at most office supply stores for a reasonable amount, and most word processing programs have some sort of template for putting together a basic business card. Just print them on your home computer, and voila! Nearly instant, inexpensive business cards! While the perforated edges may not look quite as slick as professionally printed ones, they're vastly better than just scrawling your name on a piece of paper, or worse yet—not leaving any contact information at all with potential employers.

Potential employers are inundated with aspiring writers. One of the idiosyncrasies of the industry is that almost everyone who plays games believes they have the skills to work in the industry professionally. And, while many do, if you want to make the cut you need to be able to show that you're truly talented. Unless they have specified a time for interviews or portfolio reviews, most industry professionals are not going to have the time (or the interest, to be honest) to look through your full portfolio or reading your writing samples while at GenCon. This is a time for them to promote their own businesses and interact with fans. However, that doesn't mean you shouldn't be prepared for any eventuality. Bring your portfolio, but leave it in your car or hotel room. That way you're not tempted to throw it down on the table at inappropriate moments, but you've got access to it with just a few minutes walking if you find out that a company you're interested in does open up some portfolio viewing sessions unexpectedly.

As well, if you are an artist, have a few CDs with examples of your work, or ashcans (mini-portfolio for giving away) with you. Print quality is very important on this type of product, as a poor print job can make a great artist look incompetent! Take a little time to be sure that what you're giving to potential employers really makes you look as good as you are.

Writers can do the same thing, with a CD or chapbook that showcases some of their pertinent work. As with artwork, be sure you've edited what you are giving to potential employers—typos and grammatical errors in your sample work don't leave producers with the best impression possible of your ability.

If you'd prefer not to print give-aways, create a virtual portfolio on a website and include a URL link to it on your business card.

OTHER PRINTERS

123Print
123print.com

Moo.com
moo.com

PSPrint.com
psprint.com

UPrinting
uprinting.com

VistaPrint
vistaprint.com

Zazzle
zazzle.com

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

GenCon attracts more than 25 thousand attendees each year. That’s a decent sized town descending upon the Indiana Convention Center and its nearby hotel facilities. For four days, the area becomes a veritable sea of geekery. In the Exhibition Hall, crowds are often two or three people deep in every aisle, and navigating the walkways and booths can be a challenge of its own.

This is not the time to just walk around and hope to make business contacts. With vendors ranging from corset companies to movie moguls, there’s just too much diversity (and too much territory) to just wander and hope for the best. Additionally, many companies use booth-workers to man their sales and demo tables during the convention (so they can be more flexible in schedule and location.) This means that even if you do find a promising company’s booth, the person standing at the table might be the warehouse person for the company, or the owner’s niece who knows nothing about the industry.

(And to make things even more complicated, many of the smaller companies share booth space with other vendors, making it even more difficult to know who to talk to in any given area.)

I recommend doing some research before the convention begins. A little prep work will help you feel more confident (and sound more experienced) than going into the situation cold.

Make a list of companies you’d like to make contact with. Start with companies that make games you play and enjoy, or who produce games in the same genres that you like playing. From there, add in some that you have heard good things about—checking out industry awards like the Origin Awards, ENnies or Independent RPG awards for the last few years may give you a starting place. Recommendations from friends or from your Friendly Local Game Store staff can help round out your list.

Once you’ve got a list, do a bit of research on each company. Make a note of some of the major games they produce, and, if possible, give them a try. If you can’t actually play them, then at least spend a little time on review sites or forums learning about them, so you have something intelligent to say if the topic comes up.

Along with the major games, see if you can come up with a name or two associated with the company. For small companies, this can be simple. Sometimes the owner, editor, writer, artist, layout team, janitor and chief bottle-washer are all the same person. For larger companies, look for titles like “editor”, “designer”, “producer” or “developer”. If you’re an artist, look for Art Developer or similar titles. As well, making a note of any reoccurring writers or artists in the company’s credits—You may run into them at GenCon as well, and while they probably can’t offer you work, they may be able to offer valuable insight and advice.

Now that you’ve got your list all compiled out and cross referenced, use it. If there is a particular company you’re interested in, search the internet for an email address and drop them a polite inquiry, asking if you could stop by and ask them a few questions at the convention.

RPG COMPANIES

12 to Midnight

12tomidnight.com

Catalyst Game Labs

catalystgamelabs.com

Eden Studios

edenstudios.net

Fantasy Flight Games

fantasyflightgames.com

Goodman Games

goodman-games.com

Green Ronin

greenronin.com

Malhavoc Press

montecook.com

Mindstorm Labs

mindstormlabs.com

Pagan Publishing

tccorp.com

Paizo

paizo.com

Palladium

palladiumbooks.com

And finally, take the list with you to the convention. (I am notorious for leaving behind vital pieces of paperwork, so I email myself a copy as well, so I can print it out at the hotel if I forget!) When you get on site, check the programming schedule and exhibit hall map, and make note of where and when you may be able to arrange to meet up with people from your list. If you’ve managed to score a pre-arranged meet up, prioritize that. If not, don’t be shy about stopping in and introducing yourself, or asking if it’s possible to meet whoever you’ve researched as your desired contact point for the company. (More about this in Part 3—“**At the Convention**”.)

Sounds like a lot of prep work for a “fun” event, doesn’t it? But really, when you’re attempting to break into a career field, you’ve got to look at preparation as a necessary step. Go into the situation well prepared, and you drastically increase your chance of being able to make those vital connections and take advantage of any opportunities that arise!

RPG COMPANIES
(CONT.).....

Pelgrane Press
dyingearth.com

Signal Fire Studios
signalfirestudios.com

Steve Jackson Games
sjgames.com

White Wolf
white-wolf.com

Wicked Dead Brewing Co.
wicked-dead.com

Wildfire, LLC.
cthulhutech.com

Wildside Press
wildsidegame.net

Wizards of the Coast
wizards.com

Part Three: At The Con

Any major convention can be a bit overwhelming, but with a plan of action, you can avoid wasting your precious convention-connection time.

WHERE TO GO AND WHAT TO DO

Panels and Programming—When you arrive at the convention, take a few moments to look over the programming schedule.

Conventions attended by industry professionals often feature panels, roundtables, workshops and Question and Answer sessions hosted or moderated by those professionals. Obvious choices to attend would be panels like “How to work for X Company” or “Getting Started with Y Company”, especially if those are companies you’ve already noted as potential employers on your researched list ([seeSee “Do Your Homework” on page 6](#)).

But other panels related to new products, sales/marketing or other professional topics, or subjects directly related to a company’s proprietary line are often opportunities to speak with company employees in a small-group setting (which can often be parlayed into a brief one-on-one conversation before or after the panel). Many panel descriptions will list the moderators—be on the look out for company big-wigs or those who do hiring (editors/developers) and earmark those panels as potential meet-up opportunities, regardless of the topic.

When organizing your panel schedule, take a few minutes before the actual time-slot to jot down a brief-but-pertinent question or two for each panel. While you don’t want to dominate a discussion, coming prepared can be a godsend for those holding the panel if the rest of the audience doesn’t offer any topics of discussion. As well, asking questions can give you the opportunity to (very quickly) paint yourself as an aspiring professional, which breaks the ice for later conversations in non-panel settings. Examples might include:

- **In a panel about X game topic**—“I’m an aspiring freelance artist, and I’ve been studying the new X line—The mood feels much darker/lighter/more gothic/more historic than Y books were. Was that an intentional choice?”
- **In a panel about publishing**—“I’m an aspiring freelance writer, and I’ve been following forum discussions about X issue. The feeling I’ve gotten is that Y is becoming a trend—Do you think Z will be the end result?”
- **In a panel about getting started in the industry, freelance work or industry trends**—“I’ve done some pro-bono work for local publishers, and I’m hoping to break into write-for-hire work. Do you have any advice for new authors/editors/writers who are hoping to do X in the industry in the next few years?”
- Be sure the questions you’re asking are pertinent to the panel and the people running it. Asking questions about a company’s video game line at a panel on CCGs or grilling an art director about the company’s editing policy is unlikely to gain you much in the way of useful information, and you risk coming across as if you don’t really understand what’s going on.

PANEL TYPES

Terms to look for in panel descriptions:

- Industry
- Insider
- Professional
- Editor
- Developer
- Creator
- Advice
- Meet & Greet
- Freelancer
- Portfolio Review

Games—Many game companies may be running sessions or demos of their games at GenCon as well. While the chances that you’re playing with someone who might have hiring-type power is fairly small with bigger companies, with small ones it’s a very real possibility. Do go to game sessions and play the games. Have a great time! Be a great player. Don’t try to pitch yourself during the session; that’s not what it’s for, and if you come across as someone who ruins other people’s fun for your own self-interest, you’re unlikely to make a positive impression.

Do take the time, however, after the game, to speak with the person running the session. Let them know what you liked about the game, and, if the situation seems appropriate, tell them about your aspirations for entering the industry. Keep it short—they may be on their way to another demo. A simple “I’m interested in writing/art for X game. Do you know who, in the company, I should approach about that?” is usually sufficient. Make a good impression, and you never know, you might garner yourself an introduction or recommendation from the person whose game you played in. Or, you might find out that they’re the contact person themselves. If nothing else, you’ve learned more about the game and that’s always a good thing.

After Hours—A lot of industry schmoozing happens outside of exhibit hall time or game sessions. Be aware of your surroundings and keep an eye out for opportunities to strike up a (brief and respectful) conversation with the person you met at a company’s booth later in the weekend. Understand that you may be catching them on the way to something (a meeting, a game, their one meal of the day or the restroom) so don’t monopolize their time. A quick “Hi, X, I’m J... We met at your booth yesterday, and I had a quick question about freelancing for your company. Would you mind if I came back tomorrow/later to ask about it?” will remind them of who you are, without demanding their time at that moment. If they’re not doing anything important, they may stop and offer to discuss the question with you now (so be sure you have one ready!) But, if they’re on their way to something (or just don’t like to talk with folks outside of booth time) you’ve opened the opportunity to meet up with them at a later time.

Don’t expect that, if you’ve stopped in to speak with someone at a panel or at their booth, that they will necessarily remember you. They’ve interacted with hundreds, if not thousands, of folks and by the end of the first day, it’s all a big blur. Offer a quick reminder of who you are, when you meet them again—“Nice to see you again, John. I enjoyed our conversation about Orc armor after your panel yesterday.” It will not only serve as a reminder of your previous conversation, but it takes them off the hook of trying to remember who you were, which is a social nicety they may well be grateful for.

A brief note on overindulgence—Some industry professionals have a very “work hard/play hard” attitude. A lot of industry business is handled over drinks, networking at social events, etc. Liquor and other inhibition lowering substances often abound. Remember, however, that the combination of nervous pro-wanna-be and mind/mood altering substances is a recipe for disaster. If you’re meeting folks at a bar or party, either stick with non-alcoholic beverages or imbibe in *extreme* moderation. You want to be quick-witted and alert to take advantage of any situation that comes up, not spending your schmooze time worshiping the porcelain god in a con restroom stall.

TIME TO SAY GOODBYE...

Some signs that the other half of your conversation has stopped listening:

Looking past or around you.

Fidgeting with their hands.

Starting another task.

Not participating.

Trying to walk away

Yawning

Spacing out

Texting

Stretching

Rubbing their eyes, ears or face

Picking at their clothing

HOW TO TALK SHOP

Opening the Conversation—If you want to use GenCon (or other conventions) as an opportunity to get your foot in the proverbial gaming industry door, at some point you’re going to have to bring up your aspirations to enter the industry on a professional basis. However, finding the right words to paint yourself as an aspiring professional (rather than an enthusiastic fan) can be challenging. Here are some examples of ways to open that particular conversational thread:

- “I am interested in learning more about (writing/doing art/editing/doing game development) for your company. Who would be the best person for me to ask for more information?”
- “Do you use freelance (artists/writers/editors)? Is there an application process for those roles?”
- “I’m very interested in X game line... Do you know if they are looking for entry-level talent on similar projects?”

The key, in my opinion, is to be straightforward and confident, without coming across as entitled or egotistical. Realize that while your local gaming group, art critics or college English professor may think you’re the neatest thing since sliced bread, you’ve got to prove yourself to any potential employer, and that means checking your ego at the door and showing them that you’ve got what it takes to contribute to their product in a positive way.

The Hard Sell—For the most part, however, the convention itself is not the place for a new person to enter into negotiations, discuss pay rates, or firm up deals. If you’re just starting out, it’s an opportunity to make a good impression, express some interest, and make a request for a follow up conversation after the con. Most industry folks are going to be swamped during the event itself, and they’re going to be approached by dozens, if not hundreds, of folks on the same mission you are. Don’t ask for details or press for commitment. Instead, use your brief conversation as an opportunity to engage in further dialogue after the convention. Ask “I’d love to talk more with you about this. Can I contact you after the convention?” And then, do it. (More information on following up on con contacts will be covered in Part Four, “Follow Ups and Follow Through”.

Accepting Critique—No one likes to hear that their work isn’t as awesome and amazing as they think it is. But part of working as a creative professional in any industry is that your work (both before and after publication) is open to critique. Whether at a convention or submitting work afterwards, be prepared for appraisal and criticism. Listen with an open mind and a calm spirit to what is being said and, even if you don’t agree with it, attempt to absorb it in a positive and professional manner. Don’t take it as a personal insult. For the most part, industry professionals are not telling you the areas you’re weak in to make you feel bad or exert their authority over you (although it may feel like it at the time.) They want publishable work (be it art or words) that they can use. They want your efforts to be up to snuff, so they can use you. And while you may not agree with their assessment of the quality of your work, if you’re trying to sell them on you and your creations, their opinion matters.

It should go without saying, but whatever you're told—don't argue with the authority. If you're insulted, outraged, mortified or mad, be a professional—politely gather your work, thank them for taking the time to look at it and walk away. If your views and theirs are so diametrically opposed that you can't find any value in their assessment of your creation, perhaps they are not the right person or company for you to work for or with. Arguing will not change that. Nor will it change their professional opinion of your work. All it will do is make you look like a whiny prima donna who can't take criticism—and that's not a selling point. Give yourself some distance, go do something else for a while, and then think over what was said. See if you can find any value or truth in their assessment. If so, learn from it and follow up with them at a later date. If not, go on to the next prospect on your list of researched potential employers—there are a lot of fish in the sea, and not every individual will be a good match for every company. But don't burn your bridges by being less than 100% professional—you never know when your path will cross with theirs again.

WHAT TO SAY (AND WHAT NOT TO SAY)

Complaints—As we addressed in [Part One](#) of this series, insulting people or products is rarely an effective technique when interacting with gaming professionals. Industry pros are bombarded and besieged with insults and abuse about their game on a semi-constant basis, and the last thing that is going to endear you to them is layering another helping of negativity on, whether it's their own work or another company's that you're targeting.

On the other hand, personal opinion, when couched in polite terms, can show an industry professional that you have not only played the game but also have an in-depth understanding of the setting and mechanics. A pet peeve, when expressed diplomatically, can open the opportunity for conversation, rather than shutting it down.

- “I was wondering about X mechanic in Y game. I didn't feel it was an improvement over Z mechanic because of A reason. Can you tell me why they went that direction?”
- “The rule about X has never worked very well for my players. We've house-ruled Y, because it does Z. What are your thoughts on that?”
- “My group wasn't fond of the X setting, so I took it and put a Y twist on it. They're now involved in Z conflict with a group that is kind of akin to X's monster, but with a different feel. Have you tried doing something like that with it?”

Compliments—On the other hand, effusive complements and hyperbole are more the domain of rabid fanboys/girls than aspiring professionals. Save “It's the bestest game ever, and I love it more than life itself, can I have your babies?” for private situations, or when you've made more than casual acquaintance with your conversation partner. For first interactions, simple, succinct complements (when true) are much more meaningful than fluffy layers of fawning.

- “I really enjoy X aspect of Y game.”
- “I've played lots of X-themed games, but I found that Y was my favorite because of Z aspect.”
- “X game introduced me to the Y genre, and I have never looked back.”

Character Stories—As a note? If you’re going to tell an industry professional about your character (and I’m neither recommending nor forbidding you from doing so) for the love of all that is holy, please keep it short. Unless they specifically ask for a blow-by-blow of your 14-year campaign setting and meta-plot, keep it to a few short sentences about what you like to play and why. A *very* brief anecdote (especially if it’s well-practiced, funny and less than a minute long) can also be appropriate, if it works well in the conversation.

However, always be aware of your audience. If the person you’re speaking with is looking past or around you, fidgeting with something in their hands, breaks your conversation to speak with someone else, or in some other way appears to be non-enthralled with your story—**stop talking**. A brief “Ooops, I’m sorry, I was rambling” followed by a question thrown their direction to change the topic can often rescue such a faux pas.

HOW (AND WHEN) TO END

It’s tempting, once you’ve actually made a contact at a convention, to keep talking with them for as long as possible. The initial contact can be frightening, so it’s a natural instinct to want to continue the “good part” of chatting with them for as long as possible.

Fight this instinct, especially if you’re monopolizing their time. Group conversations can go on a bit longer, because you’re not keeping them from interacting with everyone else, but for one-on-one conversations, keep your discussion down to a few minutes, at least on first contact.

After that, a polite “It’s been great talking with you, but I don’t want to monopolize your time. Thanks for taking the time to chat with me.” is a wonderful way to break out of the conversation. It gives the other person the opportunity to end the conversation or not, depending on their interest and situation. If they say anything other than some variety of “No, please stay,” consider that your cue to move on to your next conversational partner.

If, on the other hand, you are invited to stay, please don’t take that as an invitation to put on a one-person show. Conversation, especially with folks you would like to work with or for, should be a back and forth dialogue. You’re there to learn and to make connections, not to perform for an audience.

THE WRAP UP

As you’re leaving, don’t be shy about asking potential contacts if they have a business card. Most do, and it’s my opinion that asking for one gives the impression that you are attempting to interact with them as professional-to-professional, rather than fan-to-pro. It’s also a great opportunity to offer your own card in exchange ([See “Leave an Impression \(and a Card\)” on page 5](#) of this series).

I always recommend taking a moment immediately after walking away from a contact conversation to jot a few things on the back of the card. These include the person’s name (if it’s a business card rather than a personal one), the time/date you

talked to them (Friday morning for example, or “at Indie Publishing Panel”), and any particular topics you discussed (“talked about .pdf products” or “she collects Japanese parasols”). Chances are you may well return home with a fist full of these cards, and a little information will help you remember why you got them in the first place, as well as serving as a reminder on which individuals you want to do follow up emails with. (More information on this is given in Part Four, “Follow Ups and Follow Through”.)

As you can see, many of the things that I’m recommending you do to take advantage of GenCon as a networking opportunity are the same things you’re likely going to be doing at a gaming convention any way: go to panels and games and chat with folks at booths. You’re just parlaying them into opportunities to make networking connections. “Working” a convention can be as much fun as going purely for pleasure—if you go into it with a positive attitude and the right skill set.

Part Four: Follow Ups and Follow Through

FOLLOW UPS

Hopefully, by the time you return home from the convention, you'll have collected a nice stack of business cards. These will be the basis of your post-con follow ups.

On the back, you've carefully jotted a few notes about your conversation with each person, as discussed in "The Wrap Up" of Part Three in this series. Use these as a "to do" list when you get home. Create a brief email letter and customize it for each of the individuals you spoke with at any length during the convention. A sample might read:

"Dear X,
Thank you for our conversation on Y during GenCon last week. I really enjoyed hearing your thoughts about Z.
As we'd discussed, I am very interested in opportunities to freelance as a (writer/artist/editor) in the industry, and I was wondering if you could point me in the right direction to explore that avenue with your company.
Thanks again for taking the time to chat with me.
Sincerely
I. Wanna Job
555-555-5555
jobless@myhouse.com"

I recommend doing this for all the contacts you make at the convention who are already involved in the industry. Just because someone doesn't have hiring authority doesn't mean they don't have experience and insight that you can learn from. Plus, you have the opportunity to make more friends—always a bonus on both a personal and professional level.

FOLLOW UPS—PART TWO

Immediately after a big convention, many industry folk are swamped, exhausted and inundated with new contacts. I recommend setting up some sort of follow up list for yourself and sending a very polite second letter about a month after the first one. Avoid any sort of guilt-inducing statements—remember the person you're writing to doesn't owe you a response. But a simple follow up saying something like "I know it's busy after big cons, so I thought I'd drop you a note to follow up on my email from last month" is a diplomatic way not only to keep contact, but also to show that you're the kind of person who has follow through and persistence. Another note can follow, a month after that, if necessary.

LISTEN AND LEARN

The responses you receive back may vary from "check our website" to extensive offerings of advice. Regardless of how small or large, it's always nice to send a follow up letter thanking the person for taking the time to write you. Especially if they've taken the time to actually give you in-depth advice, remember that this is a valuable gift, and treat it as such.

FOLLOW UP

TIMELINE.....

At Convention—

Jot a note on the back of each business card about your interaction.

Immediately After The Con—

Initial Follow Up—
Remember to give a memory trigger to help remind them of who you are!

1 Month Post Con—

First Check In—Be sure to double check spelling of email address, etc.

Monthly Thereafter—

If you don't get any response after 4-6 mailings, perhaps it's best to assume they aren't interested. Do not get mad, just let it go.

However, as you learn more about the industry, you will also find that you’re sometimes given contradictory advice. One professional says you “must” do something one way to make it in the industry, while another says that such an act would make it “impossible” to succeed. When you receive industry advice that is mutually exclusive, you’re going to have to make some decisions on your own. Weigh the pertinence of each person’s advice for your particular situation. Consider which works the best with your own personal philosophies and professional ethics. And then set your own course of action, based on what resonates correctly for you. Be sure to thank both individuals, however—they’ve both taken the time to share with you the truth as they see it.

FOLLOW THROUGH

At some point, there’s a good chance that, if you handle yourself well and have skill and persistence, you may be offered a job in the industry. While each individual situation is unique, there are some basic things to keep in mind about the gaming industry.

While you are working in the entertainment field, you’re still doing a job. Be responsible about deadlines, prompt and responsive with communication, and realistic about what you can and can’t perform. If you take on a job and discover that you don’t think you’re going to be able to complete it in a timely and professional manner, contact your supervisor and let them know that. Don’t just drop off the face of the planet and stop returning emails. Most industry professionals understand that sometimes things just come up, and may be willing to work with you, either by offering an extension, or by finding someone else to take on a portion of the project.

As well, be respectful of the Non-Disclosure Agreements you sign—violating one of them not only will almost certainly assure you don’t work in the industry again, it can cost you a great deal of money. NDAs are legal documents, and violating one could find you on the receiving end of an expensive lawsuit.

And finally, if and when you do break into the industry, remember to treat those who are still aspiring with the same respect and courtesy that you wanted while you were there. It’s easy to lose one’s humility on the “professional” side of the gaming table, but when it all comes down to it, we’re all just gamers.

GenCon, and other gaming conventions, can be intimidating to the aspiring professional. But they can also be a unique opportunity. I hope that I have provided some advice and aid for those of you who are seeking to enter the industry. Questions, comments or insight can be sent to me at jess@jesshartley.com.

NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT.....

A legally binding contract between two parties wherein the contracted party agrees not to disclose or talk about any confidential professional information which he becomes privy to after signing the contract. NDAs refer to non-public professional information, such as upcoming projects, financial statistics, or new products. In general, most companies will ask you to sign an NDA before they discuss projects with you, and you are bound not to share the information you learn while under NDA until it becomes official public knowledge, such as through a press release, the unveiling of specific information by official parties within the company, or the product is made available to the public.

Also referred to as:

- Confidentiality Agreement
- Confidential Disclosure Agreement (CDA)
- Proprietary Information Agreement (PIA)
- Secrecy Agreement

Jess Hartley

Jess Hartley is a freelance novelist, writer, editor and game developer.

She has written extensively for the gaming industry, including novel-length fiction, role-playing game development, writing and design, and short fiction anthologies.

Jess lives in Arizona, with her family and a menagerie of other interesting creatures, where she participates in a plethora of strange and curious pastimes which often make her neighbors and acquaintances scratch their heads in confusion.

More information about Jess can be found at her website: www.jesshartley.com, where you will find an archived electronic copy of these articles.

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