

FULONGAMER'S Guide to GenCon Mastery

Everybody knows the 3-2-1 rule, so I will not reiterate it here except to remind everyone to follow it.

More importantly this is a summary of tactics techniques, and practices that one can use to make the most out of a Gen Con expedition, no matter the skill set or budget.

PREPARATION

Alloted Time – If you have the vacation time available, try to center the GenCon weekend in the middle of it to allow for to-from travel and recovery. Ideally arrive on Wednesday and depart on Monday. This means that you should allocate at least a whole week to the expedition, preferrably two. I try to take at least three, but I am a roadtrip fanatic, and do several things at once with my GenCon.

Event Registration – The event schedule is released in a format that can be handled with an EXCEL spreadsheet or ACCESS database. This is sortable and cuttable to help refine your selections. Take several passes thru to find your chosen areas of influence. Plan for your specific intent. NOTE: If you are a tournament player (D&D Open, etc) be aware that your events will be tiered, and you have to earn advancement into successive rounds, with no guarantee as to which timeslots you will advance to. Have backup events planned and be prepared for both continued advancement and tournament drop. You may be able to refund pre-paid event tickets prior to the event if you know early enough, so watch the tourney standing boards closely!

Generic Tickets – You will want some of these. There are things going on all the time and you probably won't be able to plan for every eventuality. There will be blocks of time when you weren't able to get the events you wanted, where you can't afford the temptation of the Dealer's hall, and where you just don't know what you wanted to do with yourself. Generic tickets can be purchased in bulk both during pre-reg and onsite. They will allow you to enter in virtually any open game that has player space available. The only thing is that Specific Event tickets have priority over Generics when it comes to filling the table, but it is a great way to fill the time when you are feeling either lost, or adventurous. I racked in several sessions of the Gamer Olympics at my last Gen Con and they were a staple for entering the Makoto Arena (Dragonsport) in Gen Cons past. Note that excess tickets are nearly impossible to get refunds for, so meter your Generic ticket useage and try to spend them all by the last day. There is a cutoff beyond which no refunds will be given (if they are giving any at all). Otherwise, enjoy your Souvenirs!

BUDGET

It is entirely up to you how much to allocate for your Gen Con experience. You really can get by with nothing more than Travel (there and back), Lodging (sleep, shower, food), and a 4-day event pass. There are sufficient Free events and constant pick-up games going on to carry you through with nothing else. That said there are amenities and opportunities that you will kick yourself for passing on if you are not financially prepared.

TRAVEL

If it is at all possible, you should drive to GenCon. I've done it in both my own vehicle, and in a rental. Both are adventures and a Great American Road Trip is not to be passed on. Add to that the ease you will have in transporting all your gaming necessities to and most especially your SWAG from the event and you will thank yourself for avoiding the horrors of air travel.



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If you must fly and expect to have any money at all for “buying stuff” you will be well advised to pack an extra “empty” bag and budget for the extra baggage for your return flight. Barring that, be prepared to take advantage of the onsite shipping facilities to secure everything you could expect to give the TSA conniption fits with for direct mailing to your home address.

LODGING

Spend some time before the Lodging window opens for the “lottery” of rooms spaceblocked for the Con by becoming familiar with the local hotel accomodations. Break out your Googles and Mapquests and Travelocities just to examine the relative locations of each facility to the convention center, because in all things it is location, location, location (ok, and price). Better familiarity with the physical locations will allow you to more accurately budget and commit your multiple site selections and alternates within your abilities and intent. Physical connection to the convention center (via the ubiquitous skywalks) is possible from a variety of locales and you can expect to pay for the convenience.

The next tier is a reasonable walking distance from the site and you can enter the habitrail warren within a block or two. Getting beyond 10 blocks from the site definitely puts you in the position to have to weigh your daily events carefully, pack for each foray and expect not to see the safe haven of your room until the end of whatever your individual endurance can sustain. Lodging farther afield will put you in the unenviable position to depend on the (possible) existence of a courtesy shuttle, have to drive yourself and spring for parking, or shell out for a taxi. This will indeed also cramp your shopping proclivities, your ability to partake in the wild festivities, and other things that such daily transportation woes are sure to impart.

Another less talked of possibility is the extremely budget conscious option of “live in the car”. Don't laugh, 4 of us did this in an '82 Grand Prix. If you look at 24-hr parking fees as the extent of the hotel bill, it becomes quite reasonable, and allows for a much closer proximity than one's finances might otherwise allow for. The 3-2-1 rule might suffer some in these circumstances, but there are ways to work around that, depending on your social skills and the willingness of friends to share of their more traditional accommodations. Barring that, local gyms?

Also, depending on how much service you are willing to give to the Con, and how soon you join their ranks, there is also reserved lodging for Staff Volunteers. More on this later, but be aware that it can provide a solution to the lodging question.

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DAILIES

WED – This should be your target date for arrival at the Convention site. Earlier is better than later. Dragging in at 8 at night means all you get out of this day is sleep and food (and hopefully a pickup game). Also be prepared to trudge around with nothing but a parking space should you arrive earlier than the all important Check-In hour. There are things to occupy your time, but you may be pinging around for a while, which is fine. Get set up in your lodging and scout out the entries to the convention. Find the food courts and restaurants you will be frequenting. If you are totally winging this trip, or didn't have your Badge and event tickets sent to you in the mail with pre-reg, this is the day to drone thru the Great Evil Line and pick up your Con packet when it won't interfere with your first events. (There will be separate lines for Pre-Reg pickup and Onsite Registration). In the past there have also been "Pre-game" events like the RPGA meeting and charity auction. Got myself seats gaming with both Timothy Zahn and Ed Greenwood that way. Note that this can severely impact your Con Budget discretionary spending.

THUR – The Great Zerg Rush, aka the opening of the Dealer's Hall. Pay for the VIG (and/or associate) pass and you get a 1 hr jump on the rush. Some vendors do indeed have "early-bird Specials and uniques, so there is an appeal for this sort of thing. Buuuuuuuut! The Games start before the Hall opens! Depending on your plan and schedule, you may be kicking off with a Slot 1 or 2 game. Either as a GM or as a Player, do a good map-recon of where you are supposed to be and be there when you are supposed to be there. Other significant THU events are the opening rounds of the Tournaments, more onsite registration (Badges or Event tickets (again separate lines)) and the mad scramble to figure out the last-minute event changes, reschedules, cancellations, and additions to the roster.

FRI – More Round 1 and perhaps the start of the Round 2 Tournament slots for the bigger tourneys. Be flexible and remember your Plan B. The Dealer's hall is in it's groove and the overall events are over the chaos of the opening hump. Ride the wave and revel in it. Watch out for the later-day events that may conflict with such things as The Ennie Award Ceremonies! (or whatever)

SAT – The Killer Breakfast (hey, mine had food for us too) if you are taking part, this will be an early slot, be ready for it. (it is at least worth the food). The Last of the Round 1, Most Round 2, and perhaps Round 3 tourney slots. This can lead to much gamer chaos, especially if you are trying to run in several tourneys. Don't overreach!

SUN – NOTE: The Con goes longer than Hotel Checkout if you don't heed my advice and plan to leave Monday. You will need to clear your room and live out of the car or your suitcases/lobby if you are still gaming Sunday and have an afternoon/Evening flight, or roadtrip scheduled. If the finals for your Tourney weren't SAT, they will be SUN. Award ceremonies to follow nearly immediately upon completion and computation. More and more dealers are carefully controlling their travel stock, but it is a truism that there are deals to be had on the last day of the con in the Dealer's hall. Later means more desperate dealers, but also means more sparse the pickings. A careful balance in the circle of life here. Push this all the way to the last tick of the clock to get the best deals. Games do still go on in scheduled events, but beware of glaze-eyed zombies who forget they were supposed to be running something, or are suffering burnout. Pickup games with friends and compatriots will serve to round out the day and evening after the halls close. Spend this time sorting your Phat Loot, sharing tales of derring-do and decompress. Catch a movie. Get some sleep and a good meal.

MON – This is when you should be loading the car and checking out of the room after a good night's sleep (or at least 3 hrs after the Pick-up game disperses). Get that good Brunch in ya and start the return leg of the Great American Roadtrip.

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PLAN-B

Scenario 1- "I / We bombed the Tournament event." Tournament play is a big draw of attending GenCon. There is great SWAG for the winners, the adulation of the masses, and fantastic adventures to pit yourself against along with squaring off against the rest of the GamerNation at large. Two things can go wrong when planning for tournaments. The obvious is that you can lose, freeing up several slots later that day and on the successive days. Be prepared to seek out free events, pickup-games, tour the Exhibit Hall, or buy in to paid events by standing in the Great Evil Line. The not-so-obvious is that you can win advancement (as a team or individually) but the large tourneys are massive multi-elimination events and you will have no sure way to predict what your advancement rounds might be. This may cause conflict with paid events you are already holding tickets for. This will force you to choose, advance in your slot, or bail on your team/tourney for that other once-in-a-howeverlong opportunity you were dead set on partaking in. The good news is that if there is sufficient time, you MIGHT (not a guarantee by any means) be able to return your paid event tickets to the Con organizers for a refund. If the suspense is too short, you may either have to eat the cost, or scalp the event tickets yourself.

Scenario 2 – "Where the hell is the GM!!" It never fails, at some point you will appear at a table, stand around awkwardly with a growing crowd of fellow disgruntled gamers and come to the realization that everything is there but the GameMaster. Your first recourse is to notify the event hall Coordinator. They may be able to direct you to an alternate event, insure a backup GM is made available to your game, or facilitate your complaint and even a slight chance at a refund from the Ticket desk. One caveat for this is to be sure to constantly seek updates on upcoming events to insure they are in fact still on the schedule and haven't been "officially" cancelled. No-Show GMs happen for a variety of reasons, not the least of which may involve Scenario 1, but most often can be found in the earliest slot-blocks of each day as some folks just oversleep. This hazard increases as the Con extends into the weekend. Again be prepared to seek out free events, pickup-games, tour the Exhibit Hall, or buy in to paid events by standing in the Great Evil Line. You might be able to cross/crash into a similarly priced game that is suffering the inverse problem "Where the hell is my Gamer". The Hall Coordinator and the local GM are the arbiters of that option. You can also combine generic tickets with your Nullified event ticket in some cases to match the event costs if there is a disparity.

Scenario 3 – "Who are these kids and why are they calling me Dad?" Gen Con is a family friendly environment, there are limited child care facilities onsite but they have strict rules for ages, time onsite, and costs. This locale is intended for brief respites to allow participation in a slotted event and then to get your house-apes and rug-crawlers back. DBAD and expect to get full-time babysitters. I foisted mine off on the Grandparents for many Gen Cons of his earlier years and let them spoil him for a week or so, but he is a true aspiring Gamer himself and is sure to be joining the Gamer Ranks sooner or later. Be aware of the unsupervised age limits for the Con at large and you own child's maturity and responsibility levels. Gaming as a clan and as individuals each has its merits, you find your own mileage for each.

Scenario 4 – "Honey, I'll be over here...." If you are blessed with a significant other who is supportive enough to let you go to Gen Con, but also has to come along with you, there are a vast array of other things for them to do if they are unwilling to be your Con-Arm Candy/Beefcake. (These can also be your mental pressure relief valves if you need a break from the press of the crowds) Plan for times and places to meet and share (Meals are great for this) as well as some kind of common interest enjoyment events to partake in together. Seminars, Crafts, Shopping in the Dealer's hall, Experimenting with other games, Computer games, Movies, (on or off site, there are Theaters in the attached mall). Cell Phones, Walkie-talkies, Tweets, Facebooks, Hotspots, Bulliten Boards (real ones with tape/tacks) and ore are options to communicate when you can't see each other and are needed to alleviate panic and stress. Use whatever works for you.

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VOLUNTEERS

It takes a lot to pull off a Convention. It is more than the Guests of Honor and the Dealers. There are many ways to become one of the faceless minions that have the honor of making Gen Con the success it is each year, and varying levels of compensation you can get for your time and effort. The downside is that it will cost you time you would otherwise be spending playing, the upside is that it can alleviate a significant amount of the financial drain attending such a magnificent event can cause. I recommend that everyone who plans to be a GenCon regular take the time at least once to don the red-shirt and see what it is like on the other side of the rope lines. By no means are my recommendations and recollections guaranteed accurate as things are always changing, but look on the Gen Con Website for the Volunteer links and explore them thoroughly if this is how you think you may want to partake in a Gen Con this time around (or each time around)!

STAFF Volunteers serve in the trenches at the ticket sales, badging offices, event coordinations, Licensed SWAG booths, Child Care monitors, Event Hall Coordinators (and their scuttling runners/minions). Hardcore and full-time volunteers from this group are the ones that get free/reduced Con Entry fees, and the volunteer lodging block.

GAMEMASTER Volunteers serve as Judges for organized events such as the RPGA, the D&D open, and others (True Dungeon maybe?) the more you GM for the organizations, the more credit you accrue that can be applied at the end of the con to defray Entry badge costs. This option has the benefit of letting you work and play at the same time, but has less of a compensation package.

GameMaster Your Own Event. This is not a volunteer per-se, but it is one of the backbones of the Convention. Submit your event to the convention organizers if you are planning to run something at the con. Get yourself listed in the event guide and have players from around the world come to you. Play that old-school game, showcase your house rules, wow the crowd with your maps and terrain, resurrect the classics, experiment with the new. Get out there and run for the GamerNation. This entails far earlier planning and coordination, details for event submission can be found on the GenCon website. Show your chops and bring your game to the world stage. NOTE: DBAD! Show up for your event if you promise to run one!

These are some of the observations of FULONGAMER and several GenCons past. These notes applied to both Milwaukee and Indy equally well, I assume they will work in general for SoCal or Euro as well!

Enjoy GamerNation! See you at the Con!