



Getting Serious About Casual Play

A Retailer's Guide to Hosting, Nurturing,
and Leveraging Casual Gaming

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Getting Serious about Casual Play: A Retailer's Guide to Hosting, Nurturing, and Leveraging Casual Gaming

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What do we mean when we say “casual play?”

We mean two things: the **structure of the event** (round structure, prize structure) and the **atmosphere of the event** (good humor, good sportsmanship).

This guide can help you leverage both of those things. You’ll learn what casual play looks like, why it’s important, and how other stores are finding success with it.

Ready to get started?



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Running Casual Events: Day-to-Day



Retain New Customers by Up to 75%

Find out how to attract new players and increase the likelihood of them returning by up to 75% in this short video.



How Casual Grew Games Academy

When Fabio Zuccarini started his store [Games Academy](#) almost eight years ago, he didn't like the idea of promoting competitive events.

Instead he focused on casual formats for in-store play, offering a wide and diversified game experience, varying from Commander and Pauper to Intro Packs and Duel Decks.



Fabio's main idea was simple: offer formats that are affordable to customers, but at the same time build profits by promoting sales of new *Magic: The Gathering* products.

Intro Pack League

A clear example is Games Academy's Intro Pack/League.

Every time a new expansion is published, Fabio starts a league where players can only play with Intro Packs of the new set and can only add cards from new boosters if they do not win games.

Fabio keeps track of all the boosters that players open for the league, ensuring the integrity of the events and educating his customers to play in a casual environment.

MONDAY	Commander / League
TUESDAY	Intro Pack / League
WEDNESDAY	Standard
THURSDAY	Commander / Casual
FRIDAY	Commander / FNM + Standard / FNM
SATURDAY	Booster Draft



Casual Day-by-Day

The store's weekly calendar is a great example of casual day-by-day events.

On Monday, the store offers a Commander League, Tuesday: Intro Pack League, Wednesday: Standard; Thursday: Commander Casual; Friday: Commander FNM and Standard FNM; Saturday: Booster Draft.

At every event, he offers a flattened prize structure to entice new players. Everyone at the event walks away with at least a booster pack.

"Veteran" formats like Modern, Legacy, or Vintage are limited to big competitive events like Grand Prix Trials or Preliminary Pro Tour Qualifiers.

Results Beyond Expectations

In 2014, Fabio sold almost two hundred Intro Packs and eighty Commander decks, and his store was one of the first to reach the Advanced Plus level in Italy.

Every time a new league starts, an average of 25 to 30 people join and Fabio signs up at least eight new players each month.

Changes in Friday Night Magic's structure, allowing playing casual formats in Friday Night Magic events, helped to boost his casual business even more.

Games Academy has gained more than 10% growth in *Magic* products over the last five years, which Fabio credits to his focus on running casual events.

By Marco Soranno



3 Offbeat Event Ideas that Can Draw New Players

What events do you run to draw new players? Bring-a-friend nights? Learn-to-play events? Those are good, time-tested ideas, but a lot of WPN stores are getting inventive and finding new players off the beaten path.

Here are three:

1. “Mom-And-Me *Magic*”

Sometimes parents are curious about the game their child loves, but timid about getting involved. Sometimes they’re *Magic* veterans, eager to share their passion.

Both needs are met at [The Gameboard’s](#) “Mom-and-Me *Magic*” event, in which mothers and their children play Two-Headed Giant against other mother/child teams.

But there’s a catch: **if the more experienced player wants to advise the other, they have to sacrifice a permanent.**

Owner Lynn Potyen recalls a particularly absorbing match, in which one team was desperately behind when the son identified a way to survive. He chose to sacrifice a permanent—putting himself at risk—in order to keep his mother in the game.

“But it worked out and they won!” says Lynn.



2. *Magic* Birthday Parties

Last March, the parent of a deeply enthusiastic young *Magic* player asked Keegan Conrad of [Comics to Astonish](#) for *Magic* birthday party ideas.

Ray Nee, the store manager, quickly chimed in: “We could run them their own private party in the store!”

Comics to Astonish provided product and an organizer, the parent provided cake and ice cream, and the result was three hours of *Magic* in a private, VIP-style setting—a great experience, especially for young players.



Many kids experienced *Magic* for the very first time, and Keegan says they’re still turning out for FNM.

“Once we did it, I was like, we probably should have thought of this years ago.”

3. Renaissance Fair *Magic*

Four years running, Jason Webster of Dreamer's Vault has connected with the Minnesota Renaissance Festival and hosted a Booster Draft on the festival grounds.

Entry to the draft includes admission to the festival and costs about the same as a general admission ticket. The festival provides the product, Jason provides the prizes, plus saleable peripherals like sleeves and deckboxes.

Jason says the Ren Fair has brought new faces of all types into the store.

"It's probably the most diverse age group of any event that I've ever run. It's a very good way of getting our name out there."

Jason's tips for working with Ren Fairs:

- Reach out to the marketing department
- Choose a backup location in advance of inclement weather
- Stay on flavor (no computer, no printer)
- Issue coupons that can be redeemed in the store
- Keep the rules enforcement at the "kitchen table" level

What unusual events are you running to draw new players? Tell us at WPNStories@Wizards.com!



Running Casual Events: Friday Night Magic



Why Your FNM Could Be 15 Times Bigger

Every Friday, countless players come together for the indispensable experience of communal, face-to-face *Magic* that has been lifeblood of the game for years and years.

And then there's Friday Night Magic.



94% of Magic is played at home.

Of all those gamers, just six percent have that face-to-face experience in stores.

That's exactly why FNM is open to any format—to give you flexibility to draw players who want that priceless in-person experience, but who want it in a relaxed environment.





75% of new players stick with Magic when their first experience is with casual play.

Start players off on the right foot with open play, learn-to-play events, or multi-player formats. It's all fair game at FNM.

But that doesn't mean your engaged players lose out.



FNM can be any format.



Take Pandemonium Books and Games, where FNM offers something for everyone, from Modern to Pauper to casual open play.

Standard	6PM
Pauper	7PM
Modern	8PM
Commander	UNTIL 10PM
Casual Magic	ALL NIGHT

Pandemonium Books and Games

A diverse FNM like Pandemonium's satisfies engaged players while providing an inlet for new ones.

So add some casual play to your FNM!



Build a Better FNM

On January 9th, 2015, 71 players turned out for Friday Night Magic at [Pandemonium](#). Twenty-five were playing Standard, twenty-nine were playing Modern.

The other seventeen were blazing a trail toward a better FNM.

Right on Schedule



After FNM changed in early 2015—**all formats, more promos, no minimum player requirement**—Brandon Petitpren quickly diversified his offerings, adding programs for more casual players.

Like those seventeen—24% of an already formidably sized night of *Magic*.

A typical night looks like this:

6pm: Standard

New options for casual players doesn't mean fewer options for everyone else—Standard still fires promptly at six.

Brandon says adding casual play has even boosted his traditional tournaments—new players get a closer glimpse into that world, which sometimes proves irresistible.

7pm: Pauper

In Pauper, players build decks entirely out of commons. At Pandemonium, it's a free-to-join, low-pressure entry to constructed *Magic*.

How Pandemonium's Pauper league works:

Players each build three decks, no two of which can share a color. Players switch decks over six weeks, playing three matches per week on up to three weekly league meetup nights.

On certain nights, decks are put into deckboxes, shuffled, and issued at random. The deck you get is the deck you play.

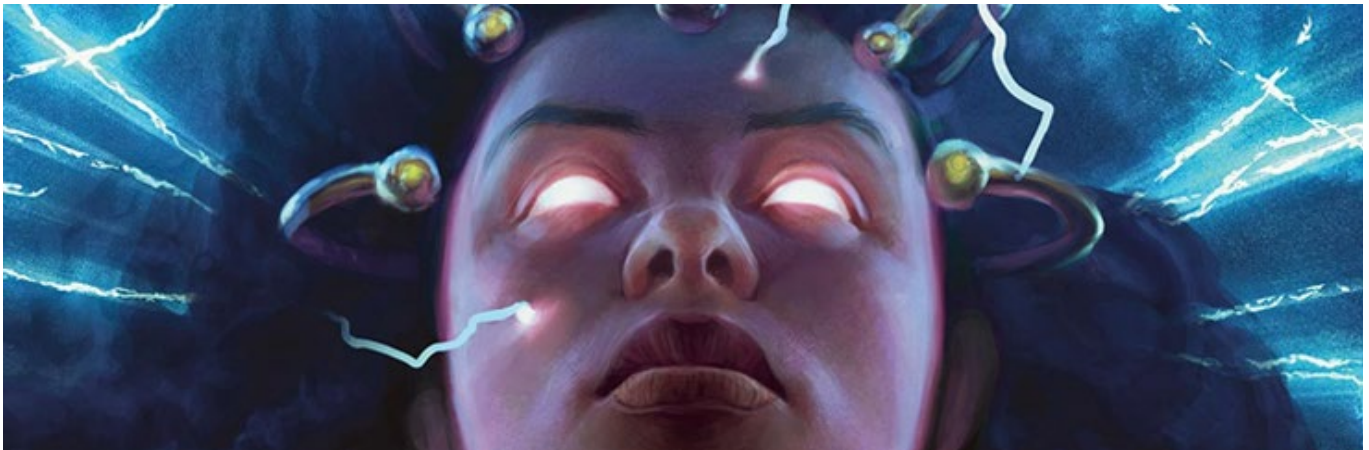


8pm: Modern

Pandemonium has built a terrific crowd around high-level play. That crowd is as strong as ever under the new paradigm.

“We still get mid 30s to mid 40s for Standard and Modern.”

All Night: Commander League



Three FNM promos are earmarked for Commander league players.

How Pandemonium's Commander league works:

Rather than earn points over a season, players start with 40 and lose them for in-game offenses like taking more than two turns in a row or doing too much damage in a single combat phase.

Fire-on-Demand: Cube

A “cube” is a draft format custom-built out of cards from *Magic's* history.

Pandemonium has three, and they're available to any player who can find three friends to join in.

Brandon says it gives newer players a thrill to see classic, powerful cards in action, which is sometimes a starting point into new formats.

But even if it isn't, drawing a new player types is an end in itself.

“The crowd has definitely grown and diversified,” says Brandon.



How 1 Store Grew Their FNM

Focusing efforts on providing a fun, casual atmosphere at your Friday Night Magic goes a long way towards attracting new players to come, play, and stay.

Take it from Lee Wiegand of [Know Dice Games](#)!

He Found a Community Partner

When a representative from the [Boys and Girls Club of America](#) reached out to Know Dice Games, he and his staff headed down for a visit, bringing plenty of *Magic* sample decks to hand out and use to teach the game.



Getting involved in their community, inspiring and educating children, and spreading joy were rewards in themselves. But Lee quickly realized that it was also an opportunity.



He Created a Learn-to-Play Event at FNM

After his experience at the Boys and Girls Club, Lee decided to launch a second Friday Night Magic event and focus it on educating new players.

This new FNM event is free to play, uses sample decks only with no structured tournament, and is marketed towards new and less-experienced players.

Those who participate in this event get a discount on the second FNM event that starts a couple hours later. This includes veteran players as well!

In fact, Lee has a veteran player who regularly attends to help teach new players the game.

He Says a More Casual Event Pays Off

About twenty players attended the first few learn-to-play FNMs—a lot more than what he expected!

Not only did the event draw in new players, including some of the Boys and Girls Club members, it created a more relaxed, welcoming atmosphere overall.

Before they added the casual event to FNM, Lee explained, “We had players who would leave before [FNM] even started once they learned that our top player was playing in that night’s event.”

Now casual fun is the priority and everyone has an equal chance of getting an FNM promo.

You can follow in Lee’s footsteps! Contact a local community organization like Boys and Girls Club of America and YMCA and see how you can get involved. Then create your casual event for Friday Night Magic and invite the community to come and play at your store!



3 Ways to Grow Your FNM

Remember the old Friday Night Magic structure? Just a handful of formats? No casual play? Fewer promo cards, and firmer guidelines on how to issue them?

Think back. What did you wish you could do? What creative ideas did you want to try out?

Chances are, most of those ideas are fair game now. FNM is open to all formats, engagement levels, and all ages.

Here are three ways you can take advantage:

1. All Formats

Try out any formats your players like. Even formats that don't exist yet!

Challenge your players to dream up new, inventive ways to play. Clever communities have been doing this from the beginning, and now they can do it at FNM.

A few examples, courtesy of [reddit](#):



MoggFanatic 3 points 11 months ago

The working title is "Field Marshal". 60-card singleton deck, but you can have four of any one creature.

"Field Marshal. 60-card singleton deck, but you can have four of any one creature."





[~] **kemikiao** 21 points 4 months ago

We're doing one for Halloween. Modern legal, must play halloween-y creatures only like Goblins, Spirits, Vampiers, Zombies, etc.

[permalink](#) [save](#) [report](#) [give gold](#) [reply](#)

"We're doing one for Halloween. Modern legal, must play Halloweeny creatures only like goblins, spirits, vampires, zombies, etc."



[~] **Rootkit9208** 6 points 11 months ago

Couch magic.

Play Magic across the couch with a friend.

Any permanents or spells that fall off the couch are exiled.

[permalink](#) [save](#) [report](#) [give gold](#) [reply](#)

"Couch Magic. Play Magic across the couch with a friend. Any permanents or spells that fall off the couch are exiled."

2. All Levels of Engagement

[Pandemonium Books and Games](#) embraces this philosophy with offerings for every imaginable player, new or experienced, casual or committed. Modern, Pauper, Commander League—you name it.



Pandemonium

Friday Night Magic kicks off with doors open at 4pm today! We've got an event for everyone this and every Friday!

Standard @ 6pm, \$5 entry. Store credit to top 8 & a participation pack of Fate Reforged for everyone else!

Pauper @ 7pm, \$5 entry. Store credit to the top 4 or 8!

Modern @ 8pm, \$5 entry. Store credit to the top 4 or 8!

Commander League open play goes all night long, and we give away 3 FNM promos to any League players at 10pm.

Even if you're not playing, it's a great time to hang out and talk Magic. See you tonight!

[Like](#) · [Comment](#) · [Share](#) · 1 hr

"Even if you're not playing, it's a great time to hang out and talk Magic. See you tonight!"



3. All Ages

Waves of WPN stores are building robust communities around family-focused efforts.

Like the “Kids Corner” at [Gamerz Pair-a-Dice](#), with activities for budding gamers. Golem Head Games even has a station for kids to charge their tablets.

Now they can take their efforts to the next level at FNM. Father/daughter Two-Headed Giant. A family Trios league. The possibilities are endless.

Now’s the time to start exploring those possibilities!



Creating a Casual Atmosphere: Using Your Prizes



How to Perfect Your Prize Pool

Help improve new customer retention with this technique!



Inside the World's Most Successful FNM

Four rounds of Swiss, one pack per match win.

Friday night at Madness Games looks pretty much like any other game store.

Except **250 people show up for it each week.**



Their prize pool isn't overwhelming, their prices don't undercut the competition. What accounts for their success?

"I can't really explain why our numbers are the way they are," said owner Chris Mettler.



He then explained, with perfect clarity, exactly why their numbers are the way they are.

Relaxed Atmosphere

“*[We] created an atmosphere where people could play kitchen-table Magic in a store.*

”

The world’s biggest FNM wasn’t always that. In 2010, Madness returned from a long event hiatus with *Rise of the Eldrazi* Prerelease, which drew 30 players.

At that time, the North Texas *Magic* scene was focused on tournament-style play, with rewards focused at the top of the standings. But despite some resistance from players, Chris made an effort to appeal to players looking for a less formal environment—including a more flat prize pool.

It was a smart move: only 6% of *Magic* is played in organized tournaments. Chris simply created an option that would appeal to the other 94%.





94% of Magic is played at home.

Things escalated gradually over the next five years.

"It just kept inching up. Sixty, then eighty, then ninety," he says. "[Now] it's 220 to 260."

Consistent, Positive Experiences

“ *Our [FNM] is consistent. You know what to expect.* ”

Keeping it relaxed helped build Madness's unequalled success. How do they maintain it?

"It doesn't make sense to us," says Chris.

But what eludes Chris makes perfect sense according to the [Corporate Executive Board](#): 94% of customers return to businesses that keep things easy, reliable, and “[effortless](#).”

“It’s clean and simple,” says Chris.

What “Effortless” FNM Looks Like at Madness:

Start on time: “That’s the simplest, first thing.”

Make routine announcements: “Do an actual player meeting.”

Minimize time between rounds: “When the end of the round comes, you should already have 99% of the results processed.”

Enforce your conduct policy: “I’ve got million-dollar-a-year CEOs driving Lamborghinis and I’ve got guys that ride their bikes two miles to get here. They all want the same thing. They want to be treated with respect.”

Can your market support a community the size of Chris’s? Most can’t.

Does your store have the capacity for 250? Most don’t.

But even if the scale is unique, the tactics are universal: relaxed play and consistency are powerful tools.

Put them to work in your store!



“It Raised Our Prerelease to a Whole New Level”

[The Dragon](#) went into *Khans of Tarkir* Prerelease with a clear, achievable goal: hit fifty players and make Advanced Plus. Per their custom, they based the number of rounds on the number of players that turned out. And, per their custom, they focused prizes on the top 40% of finishers.

At 64 players, the event was rewarding. But at seven hours, it was fatiguing.

Six months later, *Dragons of Tarkir* delivered similar success with none of the downside. Owner Jennifer Haines took advice from a local L2 and trimmed the event to four rounds and gave prizes out based on match wins.

It was an incredibly simple change. But it made all the difference.

“It just fixed so many inefficiencies,” says Jennifer.



Including:

1. “Nobody dropped from the tournament”



Because players were guaranteed prizes so long as they dug out two match wins, any player with at least one match win going into round four had incentive to stick around. Hence, they stuck around.

“Which is incredible. There are *always* drops.”

2. “We could prize out as the event was going on”



Because standings were irrelevant, Jennifer started delivering prizes while people were still playing, which meant a lot less work at the end of the event.

“We actually started our second Prerelease of the day *on time*.”

3. It sent a message: “This is an event to come have fun”

The low-pressure rewards system made it clear from the get-go that there was no reason to get worked up over losses.

“Flattening the prizing and setting the limits of rounds really sends that message.”



4. “There was a lot more positive energy in the room”



With the pressure off, the atmosphere was light-hearted and fun.

“Losing two matches didn’t mean the end of the world,” says Jennifer. “You still had a good chance of going home with prizes.”

5. “It set expectations”



Players didn't have to keep track of where they'd place; they knew where they stood, without knowing the standings. "Everyone knew right off the bat how many packs they were getting," Jennifer says.

"Everyone loved it. They had a great time. We got so many compliments about it."

This could be what players are saying about your Prerelease too!

3 Ideas to Spice Up Your Prizes

Players want rewards for playing well. A certain number of boosters, a certain amount of store credit—that's what they expect, and it's important to meet that expectation.

But that shouldn't stop you from having some fun with it. WPN locations around the world earn [invaluable loyalty](#) with unique rewards that help establish meaningful, long-lasting connections with players.

Here are just three:

1. Custom Trophy



Game Day winners at [Common Ground Games](#) get the customary package of promo cards and a playmat, but owner Jamison Sacks adds a personal twist: custom trophies topped with [Funko POP! figures](#) and [WizKids miniatures](#).

“We put the statues up the week before the tournament and we got tons of questions and attention for them!” says Jamison.

How You Can Do This:

- Jamison orders the trophy from Crown Awards
- Removes the generic trophy topper
- And attaches the figure with super glue.

2. Edibles

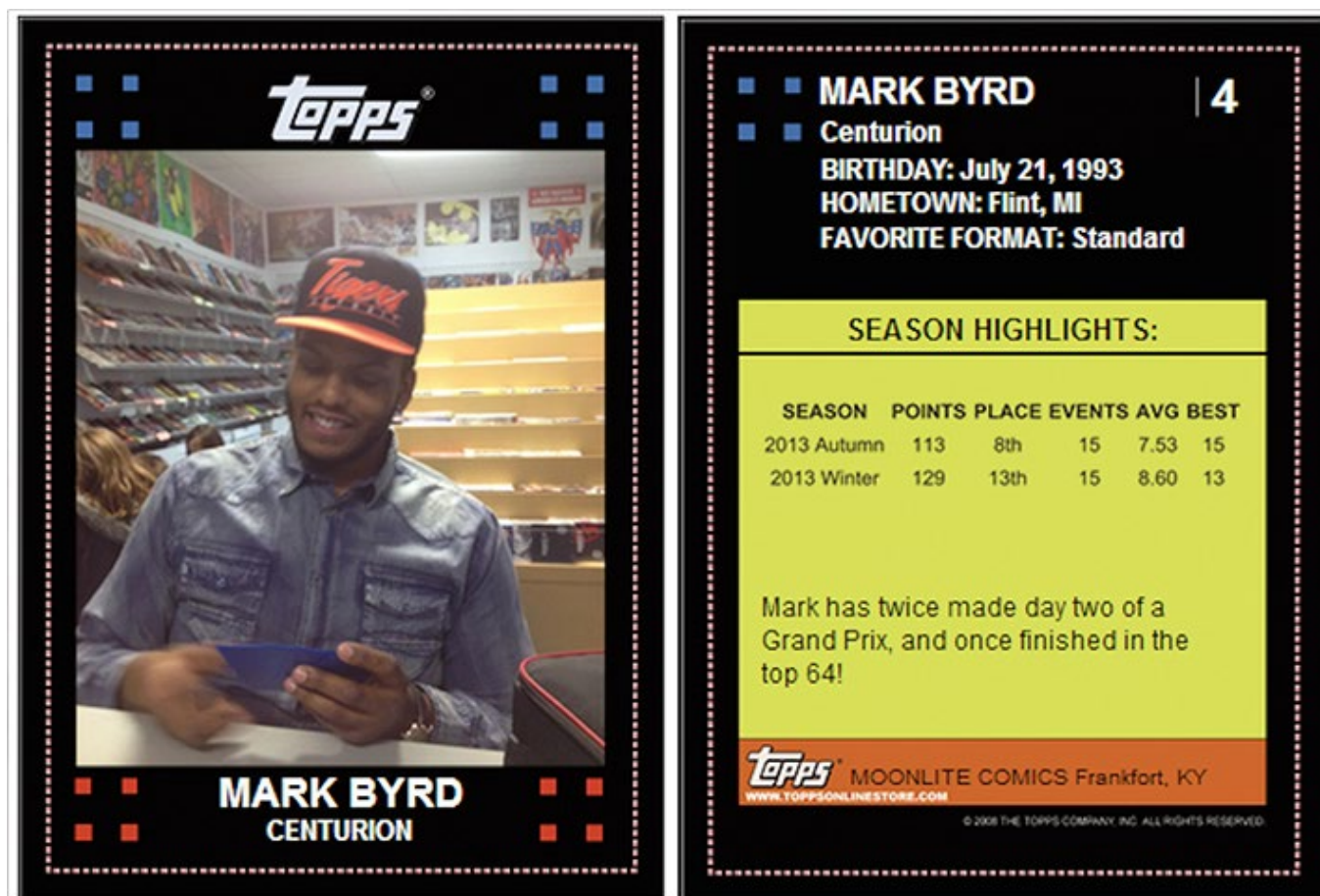
[Mana Infinito](#) boosts their prize pool with a **consolation donut** for the last place finisher, while lucky players at [Face to Face Games Toronto](#) guzzle *Magic*-themed beverages!



Each drink is inspired by a card with the Split Second ability.

3. Personalized Baseball Card

At [Moonlite Comics](#), League players earn orthodox rewards like Fat Packs and discounts, but owner Jay Kirkman has been known to throw a curve ball: players with over 100 points received custom baseball cards!



How You Can Do This:

- Visit topps.mytradingcards.com
- Choose a design
- Upload a photo and customize the back of the card
- Place the order (you'll be asked to create an account)

Each of these ideas is a unique, low-cost way to invest in your players and show them they're valued.

Try one of these ideas or come up with your own!



Creating a Casual Atmosphere: Using Your Space



1 Way to Beat the Online Competition

The modern era of coffee began at 1st Avenue and Pine Street in Seattle, Washington.

In the late 1980s, while competitors designed their spaces to shuffle customers in and out quickly, [Starbucks](#) took the exact opposite approach.

Inspired by Milanese coffee culture, Howard Schultz positioned Starbucks as a place to slow down, meet friends, converse, hold a meeting, and conduct an interview.

The original location turned out to be the first of 22,000, and today's game stores can learn a lot from their success.

Why?

Because the Starbucks approach drives sales organically, and **there is no digital equivalent.**

What Brick-and-Mortar Does (that Digital Doesn't)

“*The Third Place is the important place, because that's the one they want to be at. —Steve Nemeckay, Amazing Heroes*

”



The ascent of Starbucks is the most famous example of applying “**Third Place Theory**” to business.



The theory goes like this: “third places” are the nerve centers of a community, the social venues outside of home (first) and work (second).

It’s where people go to decompress: full of conviviality and laughter, free of judgement and pretension. It’s open to all, yet all feel privileged to join. Everyone’s presence is important, yet no one feels obligated to be present.

That’s something traditional retail seldom offers, something ecommerce is incapable of, and something companies from Panera Bread to Life Time Fitness to Uniqlo have found unprecedented success with.

And it finds a natural ally in gaming.



What Live Gaming Does (that Digital Doesn't)

“*There is no comparison, in my mind, between the joys of getting together, of the face-to-face enjoyment and banter.—[Ray Oldenburg](#), pioneer of Third Place Theory*”

Successful game stores provide an irreplaceable face-to-face experience by applying Oldenburg's principles of the third place.

Some features of a “third place” retail store are relatively obvious and relatively easy to implement: the hours are accommodating, the décor is unpretentious, food and drink is available.



But some of the crucial properties of a third place are largely intangible, and require strong “soft skills” to provide. Such as:

The regulars are a bigger draw than the host

Build a friendly staff and a friendly community, using the same tactics: recognizing good behavior, encouraging creativity, leading by example, and investing in those players that help draw in new ones.

Players feel a sense of investment in the space

Involve your players in the execution of events and success of the store. This can be as simple as regularly soliciting feedback or as elaborate as the mentor program at Golem Head Games.

Barriers to Entry Are Low

Make sure your store feels welcoming to all not only through how you structure events but how you handle the community. Offer multiple formats and events, including casual formats and a new player-friendly event, at your Friday Night Magic. Reward participation and sportsmanship, rather than just top finishers, at your events. Act as a liaison between regulars and newcomers: introduce them around, hook new players up with veterans for guidance.

Plenty of stores are finding success with these principles. [Face to Face Games](#). [Game Wizard/Blue Sky Hobbies](#).

Keep an eye on WPN.Wizards.com/Articles for more examples from around the WPN!



How 1 Store Beats Digital Competitors



How Armada Games Give Thanks

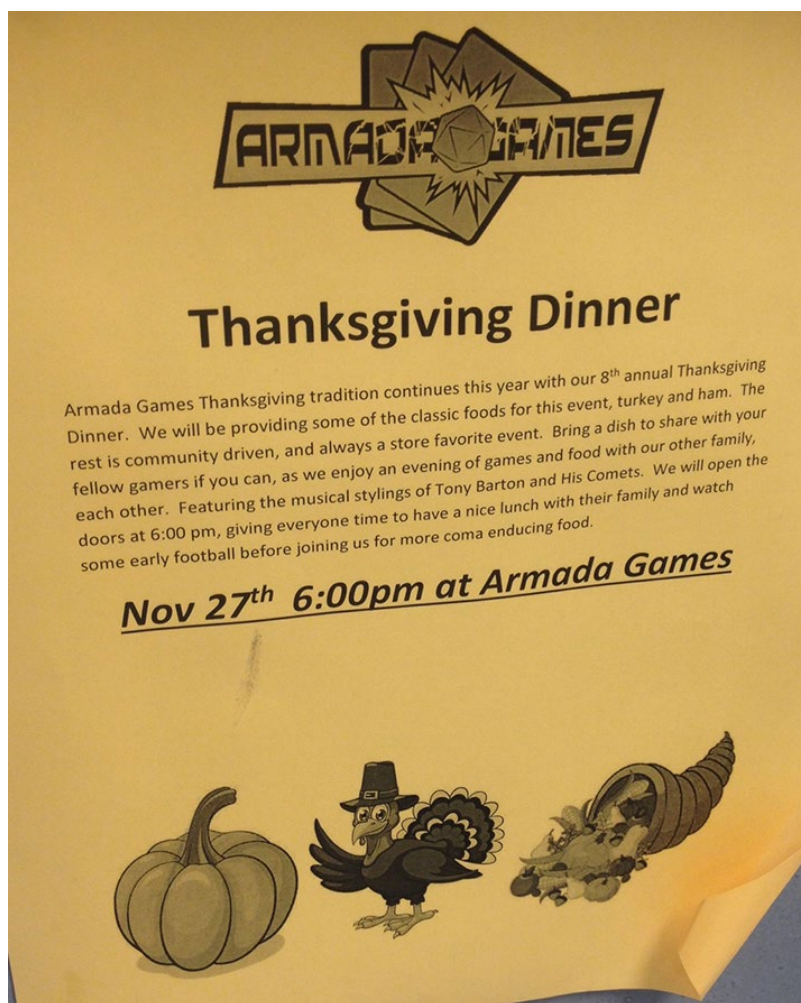
The holidays aren't the best time for event attendance.

Students head home for break. Spare income goes toward travel. Suddenly your events aren't just competing with other entertainment options, but family obligations, work parties, and gift shopping as well.

Still, Armada Games manages to give their community a reason to celebrate in the store.

Nine years running, they've hosted a feast in honor of Thanksgiving.

Management provides the turkey and players earn their entry by bringing a dish to share.



It's lavish. A generous spread of sides with mashed potatoes in half a dozen varieties. European players bring traditional dishes from their home countries. One player brings a much-coveted buffalo chicken dip. "It's absurdly good," says owner Michael Fortino.



Why do holiday celebrations make such effective community building efforts?

Because of what anthropologists call "[communitas](#)," that feeling of joy and belonging we get from shared experiences. A soccer game, a concert, a Grand Prix—"communitas" magnifies what unites us and trivializes what divides us.

It's powerful stuff. [Research says](#) customers remember the intense emotions they feel in your store (whether good or bad) and quickly forget everything else. By focusing on high-emotion moments, many businesses are [taking advantage](#).

Michael's Tips for a Flawless Feast:

- Check in with the appropriate officials. (You may need an event permit).
- Allocate a lot of time for cleanup. ("What should stores be prepared for?" MICHAEL: "A mess.")
- Look out for food allergies. (Label foods that include nuts.)
- Prepare vegetarian/vegan options. (Find some recipe ideas [here](#).)
- Give employees the night off. (Owners only on the clock.)

Armada takes advantage of holidays at every opportunity.

Like American Independence Day (aka Fourth of July), when they host a cook-out with U.S.-themed activities like red-white-and-blue model-painting and Commander (all players enter with a deck that shares colors with the US flag).

Independence Day and Thanksgiving are American, but "communitas" is universal. Every region has its opportunity to take advantage—including yours!



For more information and inspiration on welcoming new players and keeping those players coming back to your store, visit WPN.Wizards.com

