

# **How to Run a Games Club**

Written by Keith Levy

What do you need to start a Games Club? The basic ingredients are a Host, a place to play, and games.

First you need at least one person willing to be in charge; or, as I like to call it, a “Host”.

You can have several people take turns hosting, but you need at least one person in charge to make a club work. Second, you need at least one place to play. Several rotating locations may work, but this will require good communication, planning in advance and a larger number of available gamers to participate to be successful. And finally, you need games. A few different game titles can work to get started, and then asking others to bring their favorites will help increase the available inventory.

## **The Host**

The Host(s) or person(s) in charge needs to coordinate where the gaming will take place, when the gaming will take place, what games might be played, and also communicate with potentially interested persons.

You will also need to decide what type of gaming group they want. Some people prefer to have a private, smaller and close knit group of selected individuals, while others may prefer to have larger groups where virtually anyone can attend.

You will need to devote a certain amount of time on a regular basis to run a successful Games Club. In addition to time, hard work and personal sacrifice is required. The amount of time and hard work you invest should correlate with the success of your club. Some traits of a good Host are: initiative, patience, regular and open communications, flexibility, a positive mental attitude (PMA), open mindedness, the ability to get along and communicate with a diverse group of people, and to promote good sportsmanship and fair play.

Patience, as a key virtue, comes in handy with respect to building your Games Club. Do not expect to have ten people show up regularly from day one. It could take several months to form a small group and years before you develop a consistently large enough following to form a large Games Club.

I have seen examples of club attendance growing very slowly and very quickly. I started my own group with only three regular attendees on a weekly basis. It took about five years before we had ten to twelve consistent attendees. After about a year or so of consistently high attendance, I decided to form an official club. I’ve seen a club location start with over fifteen attendees on the first meeting and never let up from that level of consistent attendance in over several years.

## **A Place to Play**

You will need to determine where you want to play games. Depending on the size of your group some choices are better than others. The location will require at least one or two tables for game play and enough chairs for everyone. Having some games already at the location makes things a bit easier to facilitate logistics by not having to transport as many games. That pretty much covers the basic requirements, and you could even bring along all three of these items (i.e., using folding tables and chairs if you have to.)

The location will also need a restroom. To make the location more successful, I highly recommend that you have gaming supplies readily available.

Recommended Basic Supplies:

- Paper
- Pens, Pencils
- Dice
- Sandwich baggies (to hold game pieces)
- Scissors or clippers (to cut game pieces from their holders)
- Highlighter pen (to highlight the rules in the rulebook that are always questioned during play)

Other essential items are beverages and light snacks of some type.

Suggested basic drinks and food items:

- Water
- Soft drinks
- Juice
- Fruit (grapes or apples)
- Chips
- Pretzels
- Nachos
- Candy
- Cookies

Suggested Serving items:

- Ice
- Cups
- Plates
- Napkins
- Paper towels

You can go as far as they want to serve food, depending on the time and cost that they are willing to incur. This would include anything from dips to baking deserts to going as far as serving a meal. I've seen meal service work quite well in attracting extra attendees to a Games Club. I've also seen Game Clubs co-ordinate a potluck for food, snacks and beverages, which works very well in spreading out the work and costs involved. I personally provide water, ice, soft drinks, pretzels, and appropriate paper goods.

### **Finding a Suitable Location**

A good place to consider first is someone's home. As I've stated previously, you will need some space to play and tables, chairs and games. The advantage of having gaming at someone's home is that it makes logistics easier and offers lower cost. A person's home is free as there will be no charge to use the space. A Host(s) home may already have tables, chairs and games and can also provide an easy place to store these items in between club sessions. A home is also an easy place to store gaming supplies, beverages, snacks and food. Some of these items are usually more readily available at someone's home anyway.

But what if you don't have the space or are wary of inviting strangers into your home? There are numerous public places that can make an excellent Games Club location. Although many public places may charge a fee for use of their space, some charge a minimal fee or may not charge at all. Many times if you know someone connected with the facility, they can negotiate a fair price.

Other considerations for a suitable location are amenities and accessibility. Being close to a method of mass transportation, such as a subway line is quite helpful. Adequate, free and well-lit parking can be very advantageous for attracting a larger group. Is the facility and restroom Handicap accessible? Good overhead lighting is important for game playing as it is to reading.

It is hard to have too many lights. Air conditioning is helpful as well, as rooms can get especially hot with large groups of people quickly.

Some public places to consider are:

- Library
- Community Halls or Centers
- Society Halls (that may belong to other organizations)
- Recreation Centers
- Churches, Synagogues or other religious institutions
- Schools (including public, private and colleges)
- Military Installations or Camps
- Game Stores

I have found that using your home if you have the space, can work quite well. I've always used my home, as I've been fortunate enough to have a large basement where there is plenty of room to play. Game stores that have some playing space have made an ideal location. Game store owners seem to be very willing to have a regular game group come there to play, as it brings in extra potential customers to make purchases.

## **Games**

Although having a large selection of games is helpful, you should minimally own a few game titles. Also having a little variety in the types of games is important as well. You don't need every type of game out there, but having a small variety of game types to choose from will aid in the success of your Games Club. Having a single type of game may work well for small gaming groups and/or if you prefer to form a group that plays a specific type of game. Games usually fall into one of the following general categories:

- Board Games
- Card Games
- Collectable Card Games (CCG's)
- Miniatures (Historic and Fantasy)
- Role playing games (RPG'S)
- Live Action Role Playing Games (LARP'S)
- Tabletop Games

Game types fall into vast and numerous sub-categories under these general ones. Board games for example, may include, but would not be limited to: European or Euros, family, historical simulations, kids, manual dexterity, parlor, racing, sports, strategy, tactics, and war games.

Asking others to bring games is a good way to increase variety, while reducing the potential cost per person. This will increase the choices of game titles and to insure that people attending will have games that they like to play. You may also co-ordinate in advance the type of games or the exact titles themselves that will be played.

When I initially started a games club, I personally owned very few game titles, beyond a household's normal collection of parlor games. Over the years my passion for gaming and the desire to build a good selection of games for Club use has built my personal gaming library to well over a hundred game titles.

### **Advertising**

If you want a smaller club, you will most likely do some selective advertising or communicate with a limited number of people. Smaller clubs are often not referred to as clubs, but simply as a gaming group. You can advertise in the community newspaper or at your local game store to appeal to a smaller audience. Word of mouth also works well for small groups or clubs, when you inform potential gamers that you are looking for only a few people to join. Once you find some gamers, they will often know other gamers and how to contact them. It's up to you to decide how many to invite and how large you want your club to be.

You can also do advertising on the internet through gaming discussion groups. You can select a limit to the number of gamers in your group or club. You decide who to give specific information and therefore determine who can actually show up and play games. The key with keeping a smaller gaming group is to have an open communication, so you can determine if you have enough in common with the potential group members to create that special environment you are looking for.

If you are interested in sharing the gaming hobby with almost anyone, than you are probably interested in forming a larger Game Club. Believe it or not, many of the same methods used for attracting a smaller gaming group, work well for forming a large club. You just have to use some of the same resources a bit differently. Word of mouth works just as well for large clubs as small ones.

Many city newspapers will provide free space to groups that are holding public events. Many newspapers have a community event page or a calendar of events page that can be either very inexpensive or even free to advertise your event there. Many community, city and special event websites can provide the same services on line. Online gaming discussion groups, such as *rec.games.board*, *spiefrieks*, and *nigglybits*, are good ways to spread the word about your gaming group. There are many gaming related websites such as: About.com, North American Game Club Listing and numerous game club sites, such as Games Club of Maryland, that will provide free space on their website for your Games Club information.

Most of these gaming sites will provide your contact information, even if you don't have your own club website. If you have the resources or know-how then a Game Club website is extremely helpful in spreading the word for large gaming groups. The Game Club Host(s) will want to advertise the date, time, place and a short list of some of the games they might want to play.

I have found that the more methods of advertising, the more likely the word will spread about your group. The methods of advertising I used to start a Games Club, prior to the advent of e-mail and the internet, were word of mouth, posting on a bulletin board

in a local game store, and free advertisements for opponents in a gaming magazine. I also made an effort to post of Club flyers in game stores and at game conventions. A few years later when the technology and resources were available, we created a club website. The club website in concert with word of month advertising has accounted for a majority of our club growth.

### **Scheduling**

Setting a regular schedule in advance is one of the basic ingredients for a successful Games Club. Scheduling will include what days and times that you will want your Group or Club to meet.

The first thing to consider is what day and time is most convenient to you. The next thing to consider is what you think the best time for more potential gamers to show up. Generally, scheduled gaming sessions on Friday nights, Saturdays or Sundays will attract the most gamers. But I've seen regularly scheduled gaming sessions work extremely well during the week.

The keys are consistency and patience. You can always change your schedule later if it's not working out. Scheduled gaming sessions can be as frequent as several times a week or as sparse as once per month. I don't recommend anything less than once per month. A once per month session, should always be the same day of each month; the second Saturday, or the fourth Thursday of every month; for example. More frequent gaming sessions should be scheduled the same day of the week; like every Wednesday or every other Friday. You could also rotate days, every other week, by having one week on Tuesday and the following week on Thursday and so on. There are numerous possibilities.

The next item to consider is the starting time. The gaming location may limit the times you are allowed to use their facility. You will need at least three hours of playing time minimally, unless you are meeting several times a week. I recommend having at least four hours of play time for a Games Club to work well.

The longer your gaming sessions are, the more people will be willing to attend, and the more willing they will be to travel further distances to attend.

The time must always be the same and should be determined in advance. Normally on week days evening time is best, since most people work during the day. Usually somewhere around or between 6:30PM to 7:30 PM is best. On weekends there is more flexibility for starting times. You can start as early as you wish, but I've found that most gamers are not willing to start earlier than 10AM or 11AM on a regular basis. The finishing time can be less structured, unless you are in a public building that kicks you out at a certain time. You may also wish to list an end time if having a game session in their home. This makes it easier for you to ask gamers to leave, when the time comes. A stated ending time also makes it easier to plan what games to play. You do not want to start a three hour game at 10PM, if you want people to leave by 12 midnight. Usually during the week, anywhere between 11PM to 1AM is a good time to finish playing.

It mostly depends on what time that you have to wake up the next morning. Typically on Friday and Saturday nights, you may choose to play later if you wish. I've seen gaming sessions go through to 4 or 5AM in the morning and sometimes gamers will even pull all-niters.

Most of all, be patient with your scheduling. It could take several months to form a regular small group, and even years before you develop a consistently large enough following to form a large Games Club. So don't be so anxious to change the schedule just because you don't have large attendance after a month or two. Of course, if you find that a number of potential attending gamers are asking you change the scheduled dates, than by all means change the schedule. But I caution you to be wary of following one person's advice if it does not flow with the will of the majority. It is better to lose one attendee than to lose three or four. Good communication is important between scheduled gaming sessions as well; since it's important for attendees to have a way to know if a scheduled session has been changed or cancelled due to inclement weather, or any other reason.

### **Record Keeping**

You can keep records of several items at your Games Club in an effort to create value, share the details with others, and to help grow the gaming hobby. You can keep track of attendance, games that are played, who plays what and the winner of each game. As a matter of fact, there is even an organization called AREA, Avalon Hill Reliability, Experience, and Ability Scoring System (on line at <http://wolff.to/area/>) that keeps track of game scores and gives players ratings based on their win and lose records. You can keep a written inventory of all the games at the club and post them for attendee use.

### **Costs**

The costs of running a Games Club will generally be incurred purchasing all of the items I've mentioned above including: games, supplies, chairs, tables, drink, food, paper goods, advertising, and website. The overall costs can be low compared to many other hobbies, but can also reach higher levels quickly if one person is funding all the expenses of a large club. A good way to help collect funds and defer some costs is to put out a collection tin. I've seen this work quite well and have observed some very generous gamers.

### **Creating a Large Games Club**

After you have a well established group of people getting together on a regular basis, you can take steps to create a larger Games Club. Record keeping is an integral part of creating a larger Games Club.

The first step would be to give your Club an official name. The next step would be to create membership for your group and then to add more members. To create membership you need to require something from your members.

Money is not one of the things you need to require. You will need to require information from your members so you can keep track of who they are and stay in contact with them.

I recommend at least two points of contact for each member, in case one method of contact falls through. E-mail contact is easiest and quickest. You can create an e-mail group of all your members and send out regular e-mails to establish official communications.

You can create value of Club Membership by offering something to your members. Several benefits that Large Clubs can offer are:

- Open Gaming Space
- Games
- Gaming Equipment
- Opponents
- Communication Services
- Club News and Information
- Special Events
- Game Reviews
- Convention Information
- A Club Bulletin Board
- Club
- Flyers
- Discussion Groups
- Group Buying Discounts
- Convention discounts
- Services to the Gaming Hobby
- Club Products

Services to the hobby could include: group services to conventions, club products could include anything from gaming equipment to clothing to household goods.

Once you have an established membership, you can look for others to join your Club. Unless you are centrally located in a large city with public transportation access, having several Games Club locations is very helpful. You will need Hosts and locations willing to be part of your club and meet the Club's membership requirements.

Having an effective communication network is essential to forming a large Games Club. Setting up e-mail groups of all your contacts is one the basics to starting a communication network. You can send out regular e-mails to all your contacts so they are aware of club happenings. You can also set up group discussions online at places like *Yahoo* or *Consimworld*. Having a website is also a basic ingredient to form a successful Games Club. Creating a website is a great way to get the word out about your Game Club. You can post everything potentially interested people would want or need to know about your group. It's helpful to get on as many search engines and to get as many links from other gaming websites as possible. Another good communication tool is a Club newsletter.

The more people that you can get involved in running the club will increase the likelihood of success. Formalized organizational structures such as a charters and bylaws can be helpful with the growth of your Game Club. Charters and by-laws help define what your club is about and how it runs, and can assist with getting others to join your group.

### **In Conclusion**

To start and run a successful Games Club, you need to make a serious commitment of your time and resources. You will need to work hard and be patient, flexible, open minded, and a good communicator. You need to be willing to consistently

play Host to your club events on a regular basis. You will need a place to play, some tables, chairs and games to get started. Providing some gaming supplies, food and drinks regularly, will help your Games Club be successful. Using various forms of advertising can help you start your Games Club and continue to run it with a large group of interested gamers. A regular schedule and record keeping are also key ingredients to running a successful games Club. I wish you success and good fortune in your efforts to help spread the wonderful hobby of gaming. Above all, have fun, learn, share, grow, and play.

**About the author of this article:**

Keith Levy is the Founder and President of Games Club of Maryland (GCOM). Keith Founded GCOM in 1996. He formed a board of directors in 2002 and was voted in as the first GCOM President in November of that year. The roots of Games Club of Maryland started back in the late 1980's, prior to the advent of the internet and e-mail access. Keith started with nothing more than a group of about 2-3 close friends that liked to get together every once in a while to play games. As of October 2004, GCOM has seventeen locations throughout the state of Maryland and over 200 members spread throughout the Mid-Atlantic region. GCOM provides regular hobby communications and services to hundreds of gaming enthusiasts in the Mid-Atlantic region. Go to <http://www.gamesclubofmd.org/> if you are interested in reading more about GCOM history or if you would like to part of the Games Club family and open a location in your state. Our goal is to help spread the hobby throughout the United States by having a Games Club of America. If you have further questions or need assistance of any kind, please feel free to contact the author of this article at [gcom@gamesclubofmd.org](mailto:gcom@gamesclubofmd.org) . And finally, I would like to thank Robert Waters for his editing of this article.

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