HERE ARE A FEW STAPLES OF EVERY SUMMER ROAD TRIP: CAR FRIENDS, CAMERA, MONEY, NINTENDO DS. OKAY, SO THAT LAST ONE MIGHT NOT BE ON THE TOP OF EVERYONE’S LIST, BUT FOR A LATE-AUGUST JAUNT TO SEATTLE FOR THE PENNY ARCADE EXPO—PAX, FOR SHORT—IT’S A MUST.

Created by the guys behind the popular web comic Penny Arcade, PAX is an annual convention. Now in its fourth year, it’s designed with a single purpose: to bring together in one place as many like-minded nerd-brains and geek-wads as possible to celebrate their love of all things game. Board games, card games, table-top games, video games—it doesn’t matter. As long as you live at least one of them, you’re set—especially if you want to find some like-minded Mario Karters for a local network race on 150cc.

This was the first time I’d been to an event like this, and I had all kinds of preconceived notions of what to expect going in. I knew the type of people that would be there: overweight guys with long hair and acne-scarred faces looking at high-definition screens or coloured boards through thick-framed glasses, yelling at each other about Mana and dice rolls. And I knew that it would be glorious.

However, I soon realized that an event like PAX is about far more than just nerds loving nerd things. I learned that nerd culture is not so insular; that it has a ripple effect on many different aspects of life, from music to religion to politics to healthy competition. By bringing together 40,000 attendees, volunteers, and exhibitors in one place, the Penny Arcade Expo showed me just how diverse unity can be.

A Little History

Penny Arcade began in 1998 as an Internet-based comic strip published three times a week by cartoonists Mike Holkim and Jerry Holkim. Giving themselves the alter-ego Game and Tycho, they initially used the comic and supplementary news posts to provide commentary and satire on current events in the gaming industry. Over the past nine years, Penny Arcade has grown into something much more, surpassing its comic-strip roots and becoming not only an Internet phenomenon, but a force that has affected musicians, writers, kid children, large corporations, pug pug players, and convention goers alike. Now, they even have their own game in production.

“It doesn’t seem like a classic exploration, especially in the case of Penny Arcade. It’s been a very carefully plotted game,” says Damon Hoss, better known as MC Fantastic, a rapper who got his biggest break with support from Penny Arcade and who has performed multiple times at PAX.

“But that’s because guys like [Penny Arcade director of business development] Robert Koo, and Jerry and Mike, pour all this blood and sweat into it. It was just the boys, I don’t think they have 80,000 people in this game convention center. You need a group of smart people for that, and that’s what they have.”

For readers of their strip, the creators’ strong bond seems to come up regularly in the accompanying blog posts. Holkim often points out that a strip has been spawned from an actual conversation or argument between the pair.

During a QA period at PAX, Holkim and Krahulik discussed the strides they have made in their time together, and how it has affected their relationship.

“I think it was after the Wired article, after the guy had left, and I felt really good,” Holkim reminisced.

“And I said [to Mike], ‘This is crazy man; we’ve been doing this for ten years. We really are like, more than friends.’ And I was expecting him to say, ‘Yeah, we’re like brothers.’ But he turns to me and says, ‘We’re just colleagues, let’s not make it more than it is.’ ”

“It’s relatively complex,” Krahulik replied. “I don’t think that two friends would be able to do this for as long as we’ve done it. Because at some point, if you didn’t expect the other person to be means to you, and hate you, it would be a real surprise, and you would leave. But going into it, if you know you’re there to see the other person as just a drawing machine, then you put up with whatever you have to put up with.”

The new Mecca

PAX may now be the largest convention of its kind in the United States, but it hasn’t always been that way. Up until a year ago, before it underwent a major overhaul, that honour belonged to an event called the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), an event that used to be considered the Comicon or Cannes of video games. Originally designed as a trade show for the computer- and videogame industry, it was intended to be a place where enthusiasts, journalists, and industry professionals alike could ge their gizmo hands and blood-shot eyes on all of the newest games and gadgets being shown by a large number of exhibitors.

But some idea doesn’t always pan out the way they were intended. Over the years, E3 became bigger than life: its grandiose scale was equalled only by the extravagant and ultimately obtuse spectacle it required to be maintained. While the flashy lights and trade mentality did have some benefits—it was the now-scarce time that video games were given mainstream media attention—it soon turned into a “Caligula’s Interactive Funhouse Emporium” of sorts.

So, however, many gaming fans began to find ways to sour into this “industry-only” even. For example, since retailers were admitted to the event, every low-level cashier who worked at BestBuy stores to become a manager and gain entry. Even campus media members were given passes. As more amateurs began arriving annually, seemingly out of thin air, major businesses like Sony and Microsoft spent more and more money to make sure their showings were the loudest, flashiest, and most entertaining.

“With a life like PAX? It’s slightly less crazy,” says Jay Watanakorn, the community managers for RedWing, a leading Boston-based video game developer. “You go to E3 in the past, and there was pounding noise and weird stages and women walking around with not a lot of cloth- ing, and you just get this very Vegas style of crazy where it’s tough to get your voice heard. I mean, we make role-playing games, we don’t make big-explosive games. You can’t go, ‘Oh, look at the titles at the exhibition we’re showing’ when you’ve got all this attraction and cavities.”

As a result, E3 became a victim of its own growth and splendour, and was massively downsized to save money for everyone involved. Now, the guys behind Penny Arcade are starting to fill its shoes—albeit somewhat mundanely. While the concept of spectacle, the focus on community and game culture make it a very different event. It’s also, because of that, while PAX doesn’t have the same mainstream penetration that E3 of old achieved, it’s a nice change from a developer’s standpoint.