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Old-school techies embrace change at Gen Con

Gen Con gamers can use iPhone app to find their favorite events

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For more than 20 years, Mark Mastej has done the same thing after arriving at the Gen Con hobby gamers convention: He grabs a thick program book, takes a deep breath for patience and resigns himself to squinting at the tiny type inside to find pick-up games of Dungeons & Dragons.

"It's still hard to find," he said.

Well, this year, there's an app for that.

Gen Con attendees who own Apple iPhones or iPod Touch devices will be able to download a digital guide to the convention when it opens today in Downtown Indianapolis. The free application -- or app -- is a high-tech twist to a convention of nearly 30,000 gamers known for its low-tech ways.

Gen Con Mobile allows users to search for games by type, date, time and location.

The app has links to real-time information about the convention via Twitter and Facebook. And it comes with a map of the city and tips about local restaurants and hotels.

All of this information should come in handy for the gamers who descend on Indianapolis every year to play board, video and role-playing games and dress up as their favorite characters, from "Star Wars" stormtroopers to fairies.

Gen Con attendees already spend nearly \$27 million at local hotels, restaurants and shops over the convention's four days, so the city might benefit even more if the attendees find more things to do.

For Gen Con organizers, commissioning an app was a way of bringing the 42-year-old convention into the 21st century.

Techies are everywhere at Gen Con, but these are techies who love dice and figurines more than joysticks and video-game consoles. So, it's not usual to see people pulling paper program books out of backpacks loaded with game boards but sending text messages on an iPhone.

"We definitely had our fans asking for more real-time ways to find out information," said Scott Elliott, senior director of sales for Seattle-based Gen Con LLC.

The free paper program books, which have grown in terms of pages but shrunk in terms of font size over the years, are printed days before Gen Con starts, and often changes occur before they make it into attendees' hands.

Flat-panel TVs in the Indiana Convention Center list those changes. The Gen Con Mobile app, however, will be updated constantly.

That made Chris Kornfeld's life much easier Wednesday.

The gamer from Niantic, Ill., was using the app to see whether any miniatures games were open while he stood in line at the convention center. Normally, he would've been flipping through the program guide.

"If I want to search for something really quick, it's good," he said.

Elliott expects about 20 percent of the nearly 30,000 Gen Con attendees will come with an iPhone or iPod Touch.

Executives at Carmel-based LaViaz Mobile, which designed the app under a two-year deal with Gen Con LLC, had smaller expectations but high hopes.

"We're hoping for 2,000 to 3,000 downloads. We just don't know," said LaViaz CEO Ron Blaisdell. "Even if it's only 1,200 or 1,500, in our mind, it will be successful because others are going to see it, and next year, the numbers will be up significantly."

So far, the numbers have been good. The app landed in Apple's App Store over the weekend and quickly racked up about 100 downloads.

Users have given the app good reviews, too.

"Almost every comment was: 'The app is awesome! I just wish it would do this one little thing,' " said Chris Patterson, director of application development for LaViaz. "That's the nature of Gen Con people to tweak stuff."

One thing that won't be tweaked, though, is the Gen Con program book. Just as many were printed this year as last year, and Elliott is hoping they won't run out.

Technology -- at least for the Gen Con folks -- will never replace the feel of a glossy printed program book. They're collectors' items, Mastej and his three friends said without hesitation.

Elliott concurred.

"We're really committed to the program book," he said. "I don't see a time in the next five years where we don't print the book."

Additional Facts

Convention details

» **What:** Gen Con is an annual convention for fans of board, live-action, role-playing, fantasy and video games. It is Indianapolis' only 24-hour convention, with attendees of all ages playing games at all hours of the day and night.

» **Where:** Indiana Convention Center and several nearby hotels, including the Crowne Plaza, Marriott, Hyatt and Omni Severin.

» **Attendance:** 28,000 to 30,000 visitors.

» **Economic impact:** \$27 million.

» **When:** Today through Sunday.

» **Cost:** Attendees must purchase badges to gain entrance to the show. A four-day badge is \$78, and a one-day badge is \$48. Children 8 and younger are free with an adult.

» **Exhibit hall hours:** Exhibit hall is open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Thursday through Saturday and from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday.

» **Sponsors:** Gen Con LLC, Wizards of the Coast and Upper Deck.

Gen Con Indy 2009 events

» World of Warcraft TCG North American Continental Championship sponsored by Upper Deck to be held Friday and Saturday, starting at 9 a.m. both days, with finals on Sunday.

» Upper Deck also will offer free demonstrations of new trading card games, including World of Warcraft, Marvel Superstars and Dinosaur King.

» Life-size Virtual Battletech Pods will be stationed outside the entrance to Exhibit Hall A for 24-hour virtual game play.

» Gen Con Costume Contest on Saturday in the Westin Hotel Grand Ballroom IV at 4 p.m. Categories include anime, fantasy/historical and superheroes.

» 9th Annual ENnie Awards on Friday at 7 p.m. in the Westin Grand Ballroom IV. Fan-based awards for excellence in tabletop role-playing gaming.

Sources: Gen Con and Indianapolis Convention & Visitors Association
