

Nerds on Earth

Convention Safety - Best Practices

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Convention Safety Best Practices

Disclaimer: we're not safety experts (though we consulted with one on this). These common-sense safety practices were put together both from personal experience and by talking to other members of the gaming community.

I played a TTRPG for the first time two years ago. It started after I binged all of the amazing Glass Cannon Network's *Giantslayer* AP episodes, and I decided I wanted to see what actually playing Pathfinder was all about. I quickly found a local game, signed up, and have been hooked ever since. I began playing as often as I could, first with Pathfinder, and then gleefully hopping on the Starfinder bandwagon when it was released in August of 2017. After seeing how amazing the local gaming community is here in Boston, I couldn't wait to go out and experience the larger community at conventions across the country.

While we're certainly there to have fun, and the overwhelming majority of the people we play with are amazing people, the unfortunate reality is that you can never be really sure about your safety. My day job has me travelling to trade shows and networking events, and using the best practices I use there, along with input from the gaming community, I've developed this list of safety best practices for conventions. To be honest, I don't do all of them all the time. I should - sometimes you're so caught up in the moment, in the fun, it's easy to rationalize or forget. That's why I call this "Best Practices" instead of "Tips" - this is the high bar to aim for, and it's OK to miss.

While this list may seem solely for the benefit of vulnerable populations, it's not just that. Let this be a guide as well for how you can conduct yourself in a way that creates an environment where *others* feel safe.

We have this list included as a downloadable PDF at the end of the post, along with some additional links to help you out!

1. Don't tell strangers what hotel you are staying in or allude to how far away it is from the convention center.

This can be harder at conventions that take place in specific hotels or where GMs who run a certain number of slots get comped rooms. I consider my hotel location to be part of my “physical security,” and as much as I can, I keep it on a “need to know” basis. If someone I don’t know, or don’t trust, asks me where I am staying, I just say “nearby,” or even try to laugh it off, *“Oh! In all the confusion of checking in I forgot the name. Somewhere over there (gesture vaguely)? Let’s get back to the game!”*

2. As a GM, keep your tone friendly but professional: don’t give personal identifiable information about your life to strangers (such as where you work, what school you go to, any social media groups you are in, etc.). You’re there to have fun, but you don’t need to be anything more than polite to someone at your table if you don’t want to.

It can be hard to keep personally identifiable information to yourself when most convention badges have your name printed on them! Even more so in this day and age of rampant social media, everyone seems to be one click away. Having a more common name is helpful in this situation - unfortunately for me, my unique last name means there is only one of me on networking sites. If you’re trying to remain anonymous, disclosing what Facebook groups you’re in, what company you work for, etc. are all ways people can find you just by knowing your first name. If pressed, you can say *“I don’t talk about my personal life at conventions, sorry. Now, why again did you think goblins as a playable race were a good idea in PF2e?”*

3. Save the surrounding area maps offline in your preferred map application (or print them!), so you can access them even if you don’t have service. Save the location of the nearest 24 Hour Urgent Care / Emergency Room in your offline maps and memorize the address. See the “Links” section below for instructions on how to do this in both Google Maps and Apple Maps.

Wi-Fi and cellular reception can be spotty sometimes at conventions. Download the local area maps ahead of time. Taking ten minutes to learn the layout and names of the surrounding streets to the convention is also a good idea.

4. If you do meet someone new (be it as a friend or something more), ask trusted friends or acquaintances if they know them, and what they think of them.

While you should never solely rely on the judgement of your friends and acquaintances, it’s an excellent puzzle piece you can use to make an assessment of someone. You can directly ask someone, *“Has Person X ever done anything that made you or someone else uncomfortable? Have you seen them do something that didn’t sit right with you?”*

5. Either bring a trusted friend with you when meeting with new people, or let your friend know where you are going to be and how to check in.

This is a relatively standard method of utilizing the buddy system. If you really trust your friend, consider using a Trusted Contacts application on your mobile device. Apps like these enable you to constantly share your location with a specific person or allow them to “ping” you and request your location if you miss your appointed check-in time. If you don’t respond to the request in a timely manner, the application automatically shares your location with your trusted contact.

6. Drinking at conventions happens - some conventions are lovingly referred to as “A Drinking Convention with a Gaming Problem.” Always watch your drink: if you don’t pour it yourself, or watch someone open/pour it, don’t drink it. Bring your drink with you to the bathroom.

I’ve been in situations before where I walk into a bar or hotel room party where I am handed an open drink right away. At first, it was awkward - I worried about offending the host - but with practice it became easier to say *“Thanks for the offer - if you don’t mind, I have it as a general rule for myself to never drink something I didn’t open or pour myself, no exceptions.”* I usually close the statement or explanation with something positive about the person offering the drink to keep the tone light but firm - this isn’t personal to them, it’s personal to me.

7. Walk in pairs, especially late at night. If you feel like someone is following you, don’t walk back to your room - go to the front desk or police/security station.

“Safety in numbers” is a tried and true personal security best practice. If you feel you are being followed, walk towards a situation where there will be people who can help (security, police, hotel staff, etc.). Walking back to your room further isolates yourself. Don’t feel bad for skipping an elevator with someone who makes you feel uncomfortable or asking someone at the front desk to escort you to your room.

8. Even with friends you trust, don’t give out your hotel room number unless absolutely necessary.

This personally identifiable information should be kept need-to-know. If someone doesn’t need to know it, don’t tell them. Once someone other than you has that information, you cannot control who has it. Your friends could be talking about coming up to visit you and someone could overhear the room number. Better to play it safe.

9. If you’re hanging out with a group, do so in a public place. It’s tempting to retreat to the privacy of hotel rooms, but only do so with people you know and trust.

After a long day of gaming, it can be so tempting to retreat to a hotel room with your closest gaming friends - some may be friends you only see a few times a year. Most of my best memories from conventions come not from the actual gaming but from the midnight shenanigans with my friends that occur when the gaming is over. If you're hanging out with people you know and trust, and they want to invite another person, use Best Practice #4 - ask questions about the person you are allowing to access your trusted space.

10. If something about a situation is making you feel weird, feels off, you can just leave. You don't need to stay in a conversation with someone just to be polite. You do not owe anyone an explanation for your departure – but have a plausible excuse in your back pocket if you need one. Having an excuse handy can help you duck out of an uncomfortable situation.

Don't ignore your gut feelings about people or situations. Those instincts we have evolved over millions of years to keep us safe. Luckily, gaming conventions provide ample reasonable opportunities to excuse yourself - getting ready for your next game, organizing chronicle sheets, or even needing to get some sleep are all valid reasons for leaving a place and difficult to challenge. Use the past tense to subtly communicate that the conversation is over: *"It was nice to meet you/play with you/see you. If you'll excuse me, I need to prepare for my next session."*

11. Develop a subtle signal for use with your friends to signal that you want assistance. Be ready to verbally extract your friend from a predicament if they give you the signal.

Agree with trusted friends ahead of time on a physical signal and a secret code word. The code word indicates to your friends that you would like to leave the conversation. The physical sign can be made from across the room to tell your friends that you need aid. If you see your friend give you the signal, be ready to verbally extract them from their conversation. Having plausible reasons to extricate your friend are important: *"Hey, can I talk to you about something private for a moment?"* or *"Hey, I need your help with something important - can you come see this?"*

12. Identify one or two favored meetings spots to reunite with your friends, ideally in a public place. Cell phone signal and Wi-Fi can be unpredictable at a large convention, and it's good to have a place you can withdraw to find friendly faces.

Potential spots could be right near HQ for your preferred TTRPG (though don't loiter for the sake of loitering!), right outside the doors to the convention, or in a quiet seating place. Many of these meeting places develop organically, though it doesn't hurt to formally verbalize that these are trusted meeting areas in the event that you lose cell service or your battery dies.

13. If you cosplay or regularly volunteer for a gaming company, consider using a separate email address to coordinate convention appearances and work.

While not always necessary, having a dedicated “gaming” email can help partition your personal life from your gaming life - though for some (including me!), there can sometimes be a fuzzy line between the two. Having a way you can “officially” be contacted can allow more open communication with fans or other gamers you want to stay in touch with for professional reasons.

14. Regarding mental safety: be mindful and create a self-care plan for before, during, and after the convention. Share the plan with one or two close and trusted confidants at the convention in case you need a little extra support.

Conventions can be big, loud, and overwhelming. For some, conventions and crowds of any size can cause anxiety, both leading up to and while attending the convention. Check in with one or two trusted people ahead of time and ask them if they will be available to help you if needed.

Links

Here are directions for how to [store maps offline](#) with Google Maps (for Apple and Android).

Here are directions for how to add [“favorite locations”](#) to your Google Maps (for Apple and Android)

Here is how to [view maps offline](#) with Apple Maps (for Apple).

Here is how to [bookmark locations](#) with Apple Maps (for Apple).