

EXPO-SÉ

How two guys with a web comic are changing the face of an entire industry



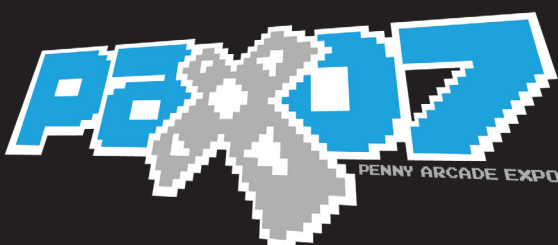
THERE ARE A FEW STAPLES OF EVERY SUMMER ROAD TRIP: CAR, FRIENDS, CAMERA, MONEY, NINTENDO DS. OKAY, SO THAT LAST ONE MIGHT NOT BE ON THE TOP OF EVERYONE'S LIST, BUT FOR A LATE-AUGUST JAUNT TO SEATTLE FOR THE PENNY ARCADE EXPO—PAX, FOR SHORT—IT'S A MUST.

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 love at least one of them, you're set—especially if you want to find some like-minded *Mario Kart*ers 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 almost 40 000 attendees, volunteers, and exhibitors in one place, the Penny Arcade Expo showed me just how diverse unity can be.

**Story and photos
by Ramin Ostad
with photos from Mike Smith**



A Little History

Penny Arcade began in 1998 as an Internet-based comic strip published three times a week by artist Mike Krahulik and writer Jerry Holkins. Giving themselves the alter-egos Gabe 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 much more, surpassing its comic-strip roots and becoming not only an Internet-culture phenomenon, but a force that has affected musicians, writers, sick children, large corporations, ping pong players, and convention goers alike. Now, they even have their own game in production.

"It doesn't seem like a chaotic explosion; especially in the case of *Penny Arcade*, it's been a very carefully plotted growth," says Damien Hess, better known as MC Frontalot, 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 Khoo, and Jerry and Mike, pour all this blood and sweat into it. If it was just the boys, I don't think they'd have 30 000 people in this giant 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, Holkins often points out that a strip has been spawned from an actual conversation or argument between the pair.

During a Q&A period at PAX, Holkins 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," Holkins 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 mean 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 use 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 video-game industry, it was intended to be a place where enthusiasts, journalists, and industry professionals alike could get their grubby hands and blood-shot eyes on all of the newest games and gadgets being shown by a large number of exhibitors.

But some ideas don't always pan out the way they were intended. Over the years, E3 became larger than life; its grandiose scale was equaled only by the extravagant and ultimately obtrusive spectacle it strived to become. While the flashy lights and trade mentality did have some benefits—it was the one time of year that video games were given mainstream media attention—it soon turned into a "Caligula's Interactive Funhouse Emporium" of sorts.

Soon, however, many gaming fans began to find ways to sneak into this "industry-only" only event. For example, since retailers were admitted to the event, every low-level cashier who worked at EB Games strove to become a manager and gain entry. Even campus media members were given passes. As more attendees 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.

"What I like about PAX? It's slightly less crazy," says Jay Watamaniuk, the community manager for BioWare, a leading Edmonton-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 clothing, and you just get this very Vegas style of crazy where it's very difficult to get your voice heard. I mean, we make role-playing games; we don't make big-explosion games. You can't go, 'Oh, look at the subtleties of this dialogue we're showing,' when you've got all this attraction and craziness."

As a result, E3 became a victim of its own growth and splendor, and was massively downsized to save money for everyone involved. Now, the guys behind *Penny Arcade* are starting to fill its shoes—albeit somewhat inadvertently. While PAX has its own style of spectacle, the focus on community and game culture make it a very different beast than E3. Watamaniuk says 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.