

# Collaborating on success

BY DEBBIE SWANSON

There's a lot to find at Worlds Apart Games: a wide spectrum of games, trading cards, books and accessories, as well as a steady stream of loyal customers. But one thing you won't find is a paid employee. Since opening its doors in 2008, the downtown Amherst, Mass., game shop has been volunteer-run.

Operated much like a food co-op, the establishment is owned by The Pioneer Valley Gamer Collective, a group of game-savvy owner/members. Membership to PVGC is open to the public and gained by either working shifts at the store or purchasing a monthly membership. Members enjoy voting rights and are eligible to run for either the store's governing council or an officer position. A charter and bylaws help steer store decisions.

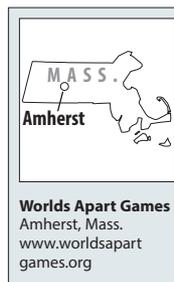
But the motivating factor for most is to be a part of the store's culture, a workforce "looking to help further the local gamer community we've built," says Desmond Duval, the store's membership coordinator. Employee volunteers are as much customers as they are workers, he says, and as a result, management decisions tend to favor the needs of the community.

"We can focus much more on building a fun atmosphere, as we don't need to wrap every decision in fiduciary responsibilities," Duval says.

A large portion of the store's clientele is comprised of enthusiasts of the popular trading card game *Magic: The Gathering*. Customers are drawn to frequent events on the calendar and the abundance of *Magic* cards for sale or resale. The store was the birthplace of a community of *Magic* judges—individuals who have completed a certification program making them eligible to oversee *Magic* tournaments. They, in turn, have boosted the store's wider appeal.

"We have a judge on hand to adjudicate every event we run, and that's brought in tons of new players, excited by our commitment to running fair events," Duval explains. "[The group is], to the best of my knowledge, one of the largest groups of local *Magic* judges on the East Coast."

Another hot seller is board games, but not those you'll find on the shelves at the



**Worlds Apart Games is a volunteer-run store in Amherst, Mass.**

neighborhood mall. Worlds Apart Games carries a large array of euro-style games, which tend to emphasize strategy rather than conflict and reward economic gains

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instead of military conquests. They're also called German-style board games, and key elements of play are centered around thought and planning.

"We like stocking the classic Eurogames that board-game enthusiasts will search for. Bestsellers include *Forbidden Island*, *Betrayal at House on the Hill*, *Pandemic*, *Dixit* and, more recently, *Exploding Kittens*," says Duval. "We also like working with popular Kickstarter projects to carry their finished products to market. It's a bit of a balancing act."

A shelf of demo games invites customers to try before they buy, but Duval says those who partake are typically already game enthusiasts; non-gamers take a bit more convincing and tend to prefer trying out their games at home.

"Enthusiasm and availability is what gets non-gamers to try games," he states.

Located close to both the University of Massachusetts and Amherst College, the basement-level store is within easy reach of the approximately 30,000 students that comprise Amherst's five-college consortium. Some students volunteer as part of a work-study program, receiving credit for their hours. But most are just drawn to the environment, happy to have an alternative to the typical bar-and-party scene.

The store continues to evolve. "We're trying to expand our current strategies to find some new members through the e-sports communities, both players and spectators."

But they plan to hold true to their collaborative model. Members are currently working on documenting policies to ensure the success of future management teams and to professionalize the store's internal culture, without losing the "soul" that makes the store unique.

"I am regularly amazed by how far we've come with such an odd idea for a game store," says Duval. "It is truly a testament to the enthusiasm of our team of volunteers—their willingness to sacrifice their time and energy to help build an incredible community around the games we love. [That's] the absolute key to our success."

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