

Blueprint for Starting a Gaming Circle

Gaming circles are a places for non-gamers to experiment with and learn about creative, artful, and fulfilling video game experiences. They are meant to help you think about leisure, technology, and community in your lives. Like book clubs, membership, meetups, and interactions might vary from group to group. Gaming circles should be a kind of patchwork of games and practices, wherein each of you can add your own style and flavor to your group.

Putting Together your Circle

Who do you want to play with? The group should consist of game curious folks that are like-minded in their desire to think differently about what games are out there and have a support network to experiment with. Start by reaching out to a few people you think might be interested in the idea, and ask them to branch outward, inviting friends, or friends of friends. Much like a book club, I have found that having a list of 10-20 interested people garners about 6-10 people per meetup. Your group might be small at first; give it time to grow.

Decide, from the start, a good method of communication for group members depending on what they regularly use. Facebook, although popular, is not without problems. In my experience, a Facebook “secret group” or “private group” is an easy way to poll people about games and times/days, and make sure a large number of people get the message. However, as many people continue to migrate off of this platform, it is necessary to be flexible. Others might want to consider using a Slack, email, or group text. If you are already part of a book club, see if they are interested in transitioning to occasional games.

Several people might respond by telling you that they “don’t play video games.” I find it is helpful to ask those who are resistant to the idea why they don’t play games. Is it about time? Is it about their own perceptions of digital games? Take this opportunity to have a conversation with your friends about how they think about leisure, and what they would like to see improve. Even if they don’t join, these are important conversations.

Selecting Games

Here are some starter games you might want to consider. These selections are available on both android and iOS. Adventurous folks might also consider computer or consoles (such as the Nintendo Switch)

- ***Florence***. This very short story game is about finding first love. The entire game takes most about an hour to play, so the buy-in time is not tremendous. It’s use of “chapters” makes it easy to transition from a traditional book club to a game club.
- ***Monument Valley***. *Monument Valley* is a puzzle game, where the play travels through Escher-esque castles, trying to position and reposition them to find their way. The game is low on story, but the art and puzzles are breathtaking. For fans there is also a sequel (*Monument Valley 2*).
- ***Donut County***. This hilarious game has you play as a hole in the ground, growing larger and larger with the more things you suck inward. It involves a weird, quirky story about a small town getting sucked into the holes, mean-spirited racoons, pickles, quad-copters, and (ultimately) redemption.

- ***Gorogoa***. This artful game-puzzle is constructed entirely of hand-drawn images that you can fall in-and-out of. Some of the puzzles are tricky, but the wordless story eventually comes to life on the screen in sublime ways.
- ***Oxenfree***. *Oxenfree* is an atmospheric, narrative-centric, game that sits just on the edge of being horror. A teenage girl and her friends travel to an abandoned island which (it turns out) is inhabited by ghosts. The game responds to the choices the player makes as well as the way the player treats other characters.
- ***Stardew Valley***. *Stardew Valley* is a world building game, with several twists. The game involves things like farming, mining, and fishing – which sounds mundane but magical realism gets added quite consistently, and players can have relationships with non-player characters.

Try to alternate between more narrative heavy and puzzle games, as different members are going to like different things. If, after a time, the group determines specific kinds of tastes (puzzle games, narrative games, e.g.), follow that rabbit hole. Try to pick inexpensive games for a smaller buy-in. Most of the games listed above cost under \$5 USD.

Look for online lists and recommendations, but also continue to check <http://playlikeafeminist.com> for updates on new games that could be successful for gaming circles. I would recommend not choosing games that are too long without discussing them in advance with the circle. For example, while *Broken Age* and *Life is Strange* are both artful and would create good discussion, they also require some intensive time commitments that the group may not be ready for.

Try to meet up at least once a month, building play time in between games.

Rules of the Game

Here are some basic rules I try to institute in Athena's Gaming Circle:

1. **You don't need to finish the game if you don't want to.** Just like with a book club, people might have various phases of play. People don't need to finish the game to meet up.
2. **If you need help, ASK.** There should be no judgment on ability in a gaming circle, and no stupid questions. If you are stuck, always reach out.
3. **Use a walkthrough if you need to.** Using a walkthrough for parts of the game (or even all of the game) is absolutely acceptable. The experience of play is personal, and many players have satisfying experiences with walkthroughs. They exist for a reason. Searching the name of the game and "walkthrough" will likely render good knowledgebases to become unstuck.
4. **Not everyone will like every game.** It is acceptable to have differences of opinion, or for some (or all) members to not like a game. In order to know what you like you need to know what you don't like.
5. **Remember why you are doing this.** Everyone is doing this for different reasons, of course. But remember that your leisure, happiness, and sense of community is paramount to this exercise. Playing games should be fun; only continue so long as it remains so.

Tips on Meetups

1. **Find good locations.** Depending on the size of your group, you may want to meet at coffeeshops, board game cafes, libraries, or rotate between your homes. Find a location that makes the group the most comfortable, to start, and grow from there.
2. **Come with questions.** Don't just wing it; come to the group with specific questions for discussion. The companion web site – <http://playlikeafeminist.com> – lists several games and possible discussion questions. Try to ask questions that will spur debate about the story, the play elements, or the design of the game.
3. **Nurture disagreements.** Everyone will not like every game. If participants disagree, try to figure out what core distinctions between you might draw you to different kinds of games.
4. **Find language for what you like.** The companion web site gives some language, to help you figure out how to talk better about what you like in terms of genres, mechanics, and styles. Try to use this industry language, particularly when reporting back to game companies and talking on social media about your experiences. Using industry-specific language can only help games get better.
5. **Build community.** Keep reaching out. Keep asking yourselves about how you pull leisure into your life, and how you want to see it in the future. Consider doing other community building activities with your group, such as board game nights and “escape the room” type experiences. This group can go beyond just digital games and be a way to think about leisure differently with your friends and loved ones. Use the hashtags #GamingCircle and #PlayLikeAFeminist and let game companies know you are playing their games.