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# How Mesa Convention Center has become a model for scaling unconventional events

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If there is a home to the geek convention explosion, it comes from perhaps the most conservative city in the country.

The Mesa Convention Center has embraced the geek culture and has been home to Taiyou Con, Game On Expo, and YuGiOh tournaments.

Starla Ybarra, sales manager for the convention center, said about 10 percent of the location's 727 events are gaming and comic expos.

Phoenix Comicon, which moved to the Phoenix Convention Center downtown, was held at the Mesa Convention Center from 2006 to 2009. The event quickly outgrew the smaller space, but through hosting at the Mesa Convention Center built its reputation as a starting place for geeky conventions.

The venue itself is scalable, with standard reservation rates available by room or by building. Spaces range from a single 273-square-foot room to a 15,000-square-foot hall. Building rental rates can run from \$175 per day for a small room to \$2,500 per day for an entire building.

"There's such a network of people," said Dyan Seaburg, the venue's manager. "I think conventions feel that they can grow here and feel at home."

It helps Mesa that the circle of people who put on the conventions is small, according to Taiyou Con director Michael Spadafore.



ASJR PHOTOS

Cosplayers at the Game On Expo that took place at the Mesa Convention Center.

Prior to running his own anime convention, Spadafore said he volunteered with Phoenix Comicon and Saboten Con, where he was able to get to know the convention community.

For the gaming community, Game On Expo has become a community event that allows families and gaming enthusiasts to gather to play and buy games of all kinds. The convention is only in its second year, but has found a home at the Mesa Convention Center, growing into the space.

“We really liked the location because it’s near the light rail,” said [John Lester](#), co-owner of Game On Expo.

The venue’s free parking and familiarity with gaming events also helped his company choose Mesa, Lester said.

Additionally, Lester cited his appreciation for Phoenix Comicon and their growth in the location as an inspiration.

The Marriott hotel next to the convention center also serves as a base of operations for convention-goers who use the hotel as a staycation when the convention is in full swing.

Seaburg said the area has been impacted by the influx of geeky events.

“We have one restaurant in the area who calls us sometimes and asks when the conventions are happening so he can hire more staff and have promotions,” Seaburg said.

Ybarra said she enjoys geeky conventions because they bring out families and people in costumes.

“It’s just really fun,” Ybarra said.

The location was built in the 1970s, but Seaburg said the venue has undergone many renovations. Most recently, she said new carpeting was installed in a few buildings and as well as updated bathrooms.

Beyond the geeky events, the Mesa Convention Center also holds corporate trade events, industry training sessions, gun shows, concerts and crafting workshops.

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