Brother Nico's Return to Convention Guide

or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Con



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AUG 24, 2025

This past weekend, I did something I haven't done in over five years.

I attended a convention.

Flame Con 2025, to be specific. And I have some thoughts about the possibility of returning to the convention circuit, and what that will require from me.

Not going to bury the lead. Here are four bullet points I'm going to follow moving forward, even if my attendance turns out to be sporadic. Perhaps they'll help you out too.

1. Go Local, Buy Local
2. Know Why You're There
3. Wear a Mask
4. Shower

Read on if you want the full scoop on these.

M.I.A., or just sleeping on it?

Admittedly, I've been pretty adverse to the idea of returning to these giant events. The biggest reason was that a pandemic broke out, and there's still a lot of personal tension and anxiety about existing indoors

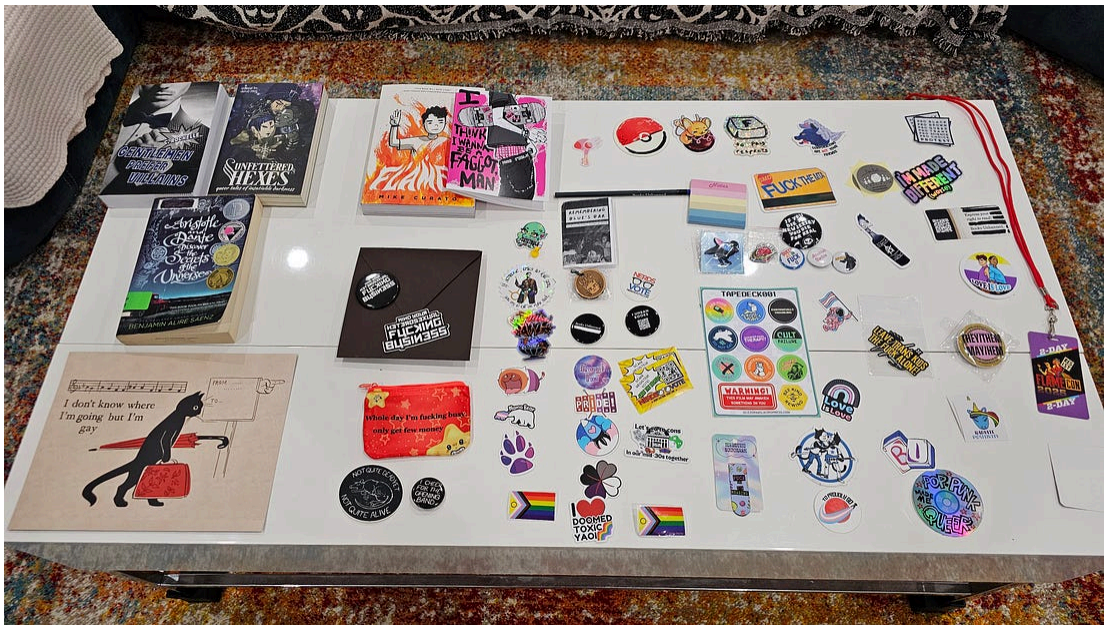
with lots of people around me. Another big reason: New York Comic Con was one of my local cons, but had lost 100% of its charm for me. Overly commodified, and an underwhelming expenditure of time, given my own interests. And the final big reason: I was attending a lot of conventions back when I really didn't have the money to do so. With the benefit of hindsight, it was a tightrope act: did money go into savings, or did money go into conventions?

I blinked, and five years had passed since MAGFest 2020. Then the pandemic hit, I fell out of both game design and the con circuit, and now it's 2025.

For a couple of years now, my sister has been encouraging me to go to Flame Con, a queer fan convention local to us in New York City. But for the above reasons, I kind of waved it off.

Until this year.

It was manic. It was fun. It was exhausting and a bit delirious. I took myself shopping on a paycheck I did not have five years ago, and somehow spent less than $200—an all-time low. (But to be fair, I'm really only buying small things now, like stickers and pins. I bought a LOT though!)



I cannot be stopped.

On Day 2, I was getting ready for the trip back into Manhattan when I had the idea for this post. It's a new approach for me. A promise of responsible practices and self-care. More than ever, I can afford these weekends, but more than ever, I have limited time to get everything else done. One way or another, I'm putting this out there as advice to me, myself, and maybe you, too.

So here we go.

1. Go Local, Buy Local

I used to make annual pilgrimages from New York. In the summer, Indianapolis. In the winter, Milwaukee. All by car, as the solo driver.

But truthfully, I'm spoiled for choice in the New York/New Jersey area. Given that privilege, as much as possible, I should attend local conventions over events that are farther away. Even if there's not a lot of choice for you, you should do the same. Support your local events and event organizers. And where possible, you should buy local.

Some of the reasoning for this is that right before the pandemic, conventions felt like they were about to burst. And they've come roaring back since. But you're only going to hear about the big names: SDCC, NYCC, Gencon, etc.

These are fantastic places to journey with a crew, and there's a nice little bonus of reconnecting with friends from all over.

But consider getting your crew first. Otherwise, it’s a little boring by yourself.

If you're in college, you might have an extraordinary opportunity to attend something hyper-local, put on by a university's clubs, for example. But even if it's a drive (looking at you, Ohio), get to what's closer to you. Bonus points if you can go back and forth between your home and don't need a hotel. Seriously, as much as you might get FOMO about missing out on something that could've happened after the show floor closes? You also need to rest. (More on that below.)

While I've been estranged from this scene for half a decade, I can think of six conventions off the top of my head that are local to me and wouldn't demand the extra cost of a hotel room, or the friend politics of paying for either bed or floor space.

Again, I'm spoiled for choice, but if you have a convention local to you, prioritize that one.

While you're there: buy local.

It's okay to ask where folks are coming from for the con, and that goes double for vendors. I don't expect that to be a dealbreaker for purchasing decisions. You're going to fall in love with some stuff no matter what.

But your most local vendors will be at your local conventions, because it's harder to break even on their business when they also have hotel rooms, meals, etc.

Added bonus: you'll also probably pick up on who's local by their merchandise. A bespoke "Fuck the MTA" Metrocard sticker is only going to be made by a New York vendor.



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All this to say, I absolutely adore the stickers and pins that scream, "I'm from New York but I'm going to die in New Jersey."

I probably won’t find those in Atlanta.

2. Know Why You’re There

People go to conventions for all sorts of reasons.

There are two broad categories: the people who are there for business, and the people who are there for fun.

I want to emphasize, though, that the reason why I'm suggesting you need to know why you're there, is because your time is pretty valuable.

After Flame Con, I casually asked myself if my intent for the convention matched with my experiences, and if my time was well-spent. Honestly, I accidentally approached it like business, but two hours in, I realized I was having a lot of fun and thinking fresh, and I didn't have to weigh myself down with imaginary professional expectations. That pivot made it even more worth it, and I'm looking forward to next year.

I'd encourage you to think this way for every convention. For example, maybe you go to Gencon for fun, but learn that there are tons of folks in the analog game industry there. If you want to pursue that career, then your next trip could easily be for business.

It also goes in the other direction: I went to Flame Con thinking I'd approach it as business like I did before COVID-19. But I didn't last a day before realizing I was there for fun. No sweat, we stomp sucken cost fallacies in the face.

There will definitely be conventions you go to, and you realize that you don't want to be there for one reason or another. Midwinter comes to mind; it's a great convention, but for me, not worth the drive in January

just to see some people I reconnected with at Metatopia two months ago. Intercon also comes to mind; I just wasn't into the theater larp scene the way I thought I would be. Another one: NYCC. It's too big for me, and ironically, too boring for me? It's for the fans, and I'm the worst kind of fan of anything, in that I have no sense of hero or celebrity worship, *and* I bottle up my fandom obsessions like it's a sport.

But that's just me. I'm not reviewing these cons, so don't hate on me for citing them. I just don't have a good enough reason to go.

Knowing why you're there will also keep you focused on the themes of a convention. This past week's con, Flame Con, is a queer fan convention, and I went to reflect on my own queerness, be joyful with a lot of other queer people, patronize local queer creators, and step into the dialogue again.

(Thankfully, everybody's saying what I've been thinking lately. Shoutout to the panelists on the Gay For Play(er) panel!)

(Also, does nobody sell Helluva Boss merch, or are we hyperfocused on Hazbin Hotel because it's on Amazon instead of Youtube? *Ugh!*)

In the near future, I'm keeping myself open to the possibility of attending more conventions as a queer writer, first and foremost. I'm not sure if I'll step back into the world of game design; that's a thought for another time. But knowing why I'm going will make this make more sense as I move forward in the post-pandemic convention world.

3. Wear A Mask

There are a *bunch* of conventions where mask-wearing is still optional. As much as I want to move on from COVID-19, it's not the full reality of today's affairs, and there are a lot of nuances I care about, even if I'm so, so tired.

So let me just say that if you're required to wear a mask, do it for the selfish reason of not coming down with con crud.

If you're *not* required to wear one, *maybe do it anyway.* For the same reason.

Unlike Disney World, you're going to be indoors in spaces with hundreds or even thousands of people. If you start getting sick before the end of the convention, you'll either try to push yourself to make it to the end (in which case, you'll just get sicker). Or, you'll stay in your home or your hotel room, and that's the end of your convention.

Don't push yourself to worse places. If you get sick afterwards, well, yeah, you get to miss work (although this isn't in your favor if you just used your PTO on the convention, in which case, I am so sorry, you deserve better agency over your time). But your con drop—the sad feeling of leaving these wonderful events behind—will be that much worse while you're trying to get better.

Wear a mask. Your ears will hurt, but you'll avoid a worse outcome.

4. Shower

Listen, listen, *listen.* This isn't about body odor. That's a different blog post. (Still can't believe this is still a subject.)

It's about self-care. Giving yourself permission to rest, and rest well.

There's still a lot about conventions that make people uncomfortable, and people brave that because they love the community, the fandoms, the events, etc. But you've got to go back to your home, or your hotel room, or your friend's place, or your Airbnb, and get comfortable again.

Invest in taking a shower every day as a palate cleanser.

Be firm about it. This is the last resort and spa.

Shower. Take your meds on time. Take a B-12 when the hangover hits. Take a Sudafed if the local pollens are trying to unalive you. (I am extremely allergic to Bermuda grass. Knowing that is the difference between "am I sick?" and "is the South trying to kill me?")

I hope this advice is a neat refresher for your conventions, and/or encouragement that it's okay to come back.

We're all pretty happy out here. 😊

To Do

I've got myself writing regularly again. The crash lists feature 500 words a day, and you can catch them on my Instagram stories, and in the highlights.

The past week, my writing got split between *Whiskey Down* (the sequel!) and this blog post. It kind of helped, because I'm not so much 30,000 words into this book, as I am 10,000 words into three different parts of the book and still trying to weave it back together. But it's going to be worth it. I've written one of my darkest scenes yet, and it gives me shivers just thinking about the readers who will enter that moment some day.

Shepherding Butterflies - no change, still in consideratio for release.

Niagara Falls - no change, still in consideration for both a cover refresh and release. Revisiting in autumn.

Human Hawke - no change, but Flame Con put the spark of hope back into this one. It never fell out of consideration for release, but I need to think long-term about it too.

Currently Reading

Flame Con had a Queer Little Library, and I snagged a few new books for my TBR pile. (Some folks may have also gotten to take home an autographed copy of *Whiskey Dogs!)* But I also made a few purchases, and can I just say: I *adore* queer graphic novels. I'll be reading more of those in the future.



First up, a quick little zine by Giles Crawford: *I Think I Wanna Be A Faggot, Man* is somewhere between graffiti, punk art, poetry, and prose.

It's a quick but intense read of a trans man's journey coming into himself while growing up and entering adulthood in the punk scene. It's personal, it's beautiful. I really liked it.

I also picked up a tiny free zine called *Remembering Blue's Bar,* which tells the history of Blue's Bar in a rallying format to help its recent fundraiser.

Then I read *Eat Your Heart Out* by Terry Blas after attending his workshop. His ideas on story led me to follow him back to his table and purchase a copy. It's *Living Single* meets *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in the glamorous vision of New York City that all queer people dream of. It's fun, it's full of vivid characters. I *cannot* wait for Volume 2 to come out!

Finally, I read *Flamer* by Mike Curato. This was honestly kind of a sign; I visited Giovanni's Room in Philadelphia at the beginning of July, spotted it for sale on the shelves, but passed on it cause I was in thrifting mode and had accidentally wandered into the full sale price section of the store. But I came to regret it.

Then I found Mike's table at Flame Con, and now I have a signed copy! Let me tell you: this book is *really good*. It's a heavy read at times; set at a Boy Scout sleepaway camp in 1996, it covers a lot about the fear of being yourself, and of coming out or being outed. There are a couple of pages where I burst into tears, but thankfully, it's a soothing read. Not one that fixes the world, but reminds you that the world is a work in progress and still worth fixing. Highly recommend checking it out if you can!

Stay weird and queer. Keep the fire burning.

- Nico