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Creating Accessible and Equitable Tabletop Gaming Events

Matt Coward-Gibbs, York St John University

Disclaimer

This presentation contains very few answers.

Where this started

- Stories seen via social media
  - Concerns from people looking to attend events
  - Individuals stating their choice not to attend as their needs are not accommodated
  - Issues expressed by participants having attended events
- Some of this is mirrored in data captured as part of PhD fieldwork, though it didn’t make the final thesis in full

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Accessibility

- Independent access with the **same ease** as others
- Access is not just associated with events themselves
- Framing of access: ‘access seems to enter our lives not so much as a question but as a demand’ (Titchkosky, 2011, p. 7)
- How does accessibility and/or equal access become practice as standard?

Accessibility (2)

- Importance of recognising the impacts of both social and medical models of disability (Haegele and Hodge, 2016)
- Presence of broadly ‘social’ or ‘societal’ barriers:
  - In created environments
  - In societal attitudes
  - Through organisational procedures and practices
  - Within the game itself

Accessible games

- Calls for more accessibility within tabletop game design and development (Andrade et al, 2019; Heron et al, 2018a, 2018b)
- Growing volume of work about making games more accessible (Bolesnikov, 2022; Heron, 2024)
- Asmodee’s Access+ series

...the extent to which products, systems, services, environments and facilities are able to be used by a population with the widest range of characteristics and capabilities (e.g. physical, cognitive, financial, social, and cultural, etc.), to achieve a specified goal in a specified context

Persson, Ahman, Yngling and Gulliksen, 2014, p. 524

Equity

- Equity is read as being interlaced with Persson's (2014) conception of accessibility
- Potential to consider an intersectional approach to tabletop game events.
- Significant questions about power dynamics and relations within event spaces

Accessible games

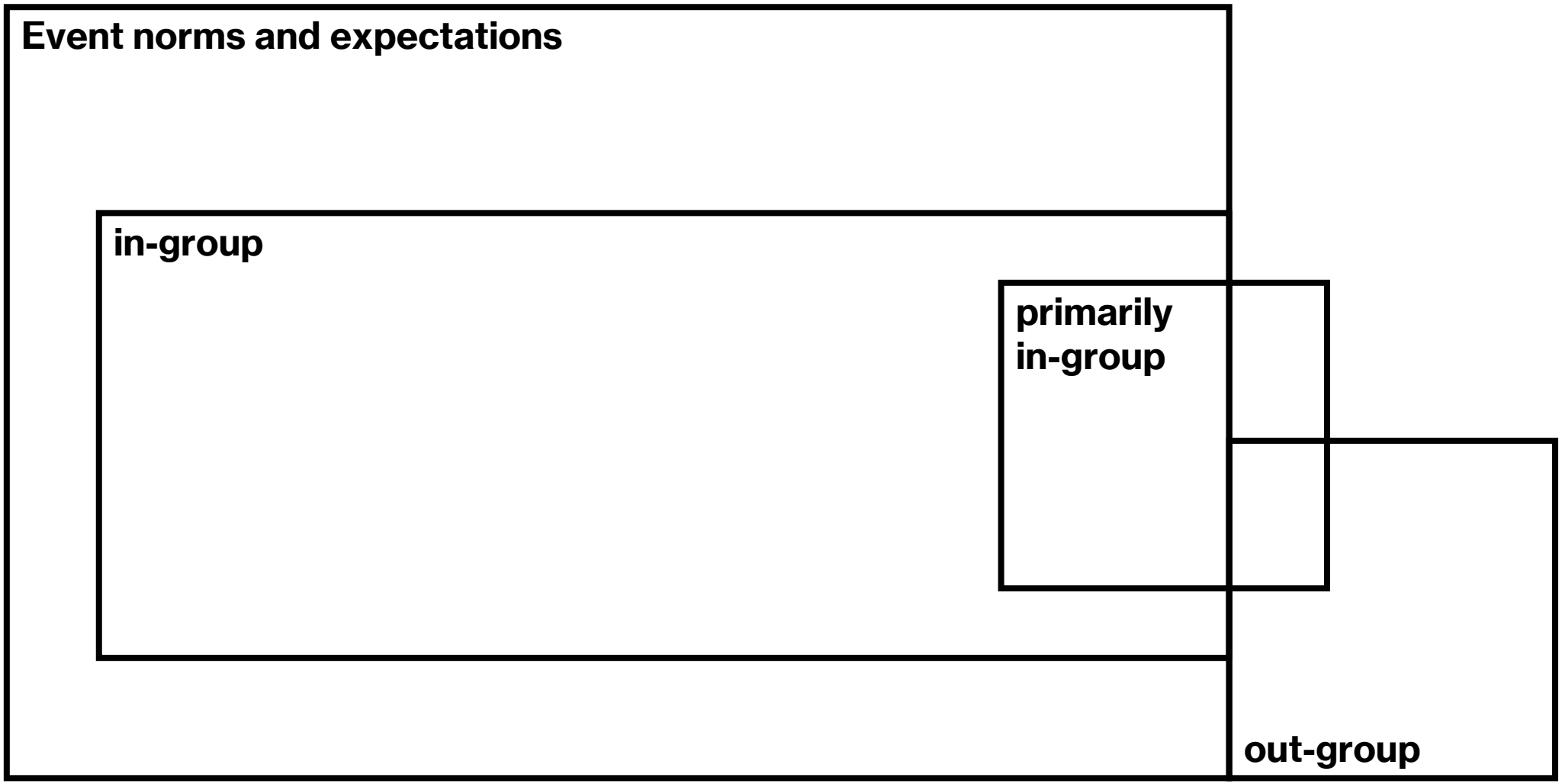
- Significant work taking place in order to make tabletop games accessible
- Heron’s Meeple Like Us project
- Rogerson
- Asmodee
- RPG work

Events management

- Calls for inclusive event research taking place ‘generally’ (Darcy 2012)
- What does accessibility look like in order cases and types of events?
- Best practice approaches and ‘check lists’ tend to be managed in a form of ‘one size fits all’
- Much event management research and practice presupposes professional event manager involvement

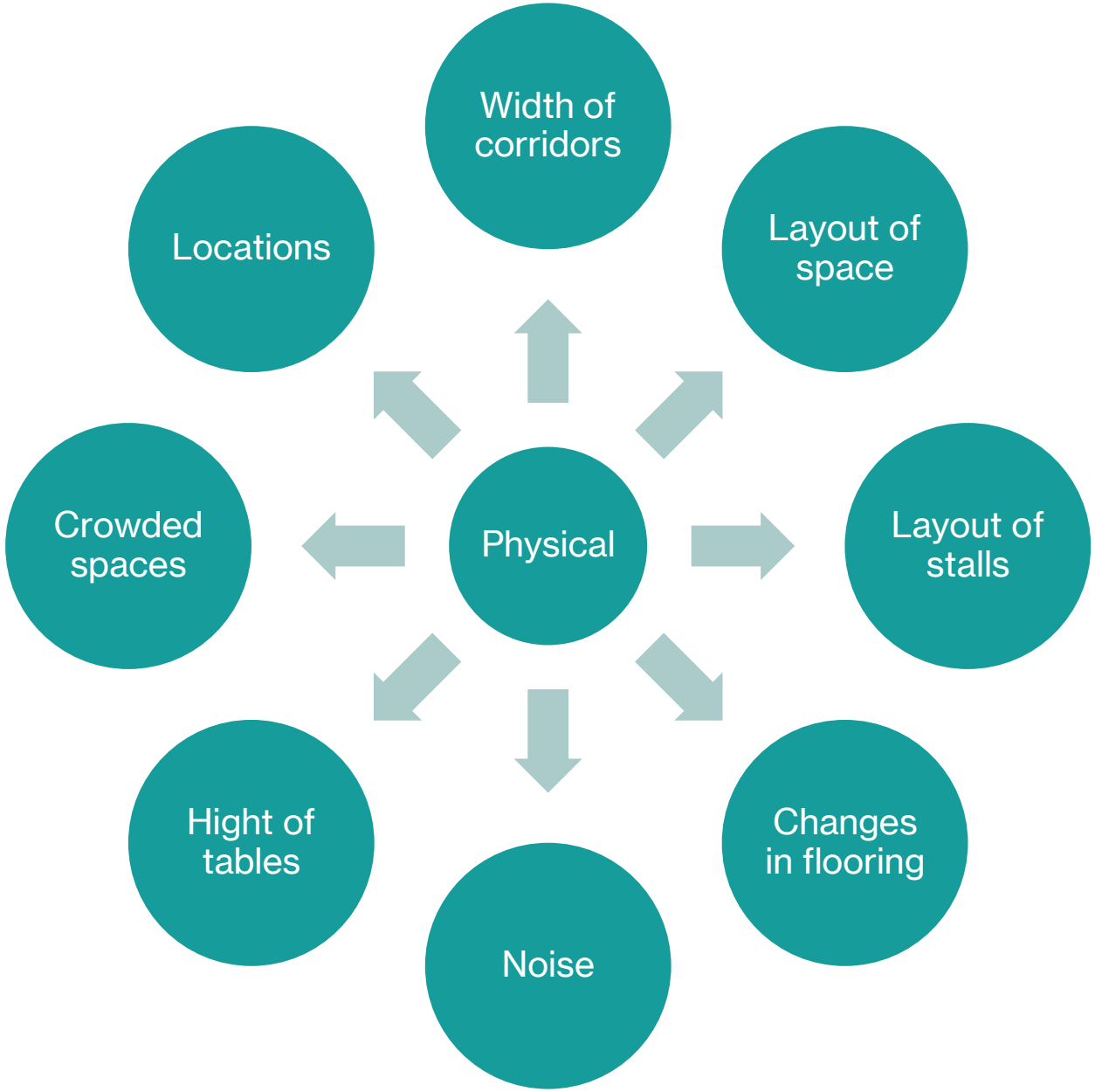
Game events as infrastructures

- Tabletop game events function as infrastructures to allow for play to take place
- Game events primarily provide
  - Spaces, social norms, facilitation
- However, expectations differ as to how spaces should be used/function
  - For example, whose norms? Facilitation to what end?


Event norms and expectations
in-group
primarily
in-group
out-group

Physical barriers

- Complications about what is in control of event organisers vs what is outside of control.
- Balancing of available spaces and needs.



I am usually fine when I am working a booth because I don't need to move around, but navigating the crowd is a major concern for me. I don't want to say I feel unsafe at events, but I am concerned and won't walk around alone. I've only had a couple of bad experiences, but I can't handle it again. The crowds, noise, and bright lights are very overwhelming for me, and I often need help finding a place to escape to.

AToM SURVEY PARTICIPANT

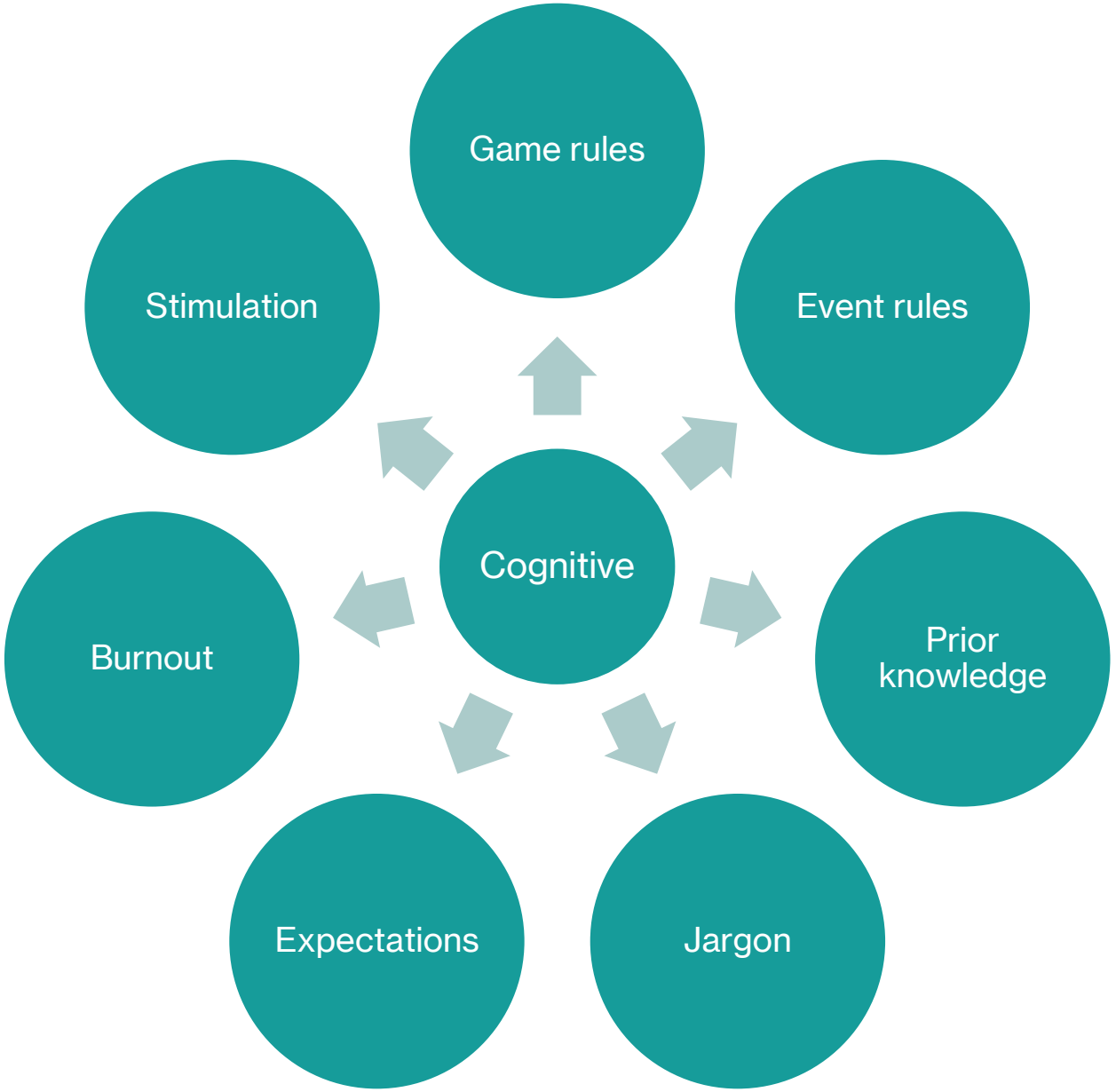
Both local stores and large events never leave space for people who need assistive devices to navigate space. Tables/chairs are too close together for even some able-bodied folks to move without inconveniencing others.

AToM SURVEY PARTICIPANT

[image removed]

Cognitive barriers

- Higher than average number of neurodiverse individuals
- How can we be clear about expectations at games events?
- How do we make space for new players who feel welcome?
- Social-specific barriers overlap with the cognitive.



As an autistic person, I doubt that I'll be able to visit [convention] again ... unless they reduce the ticket sales. Last year, I found moving around the halls very stressful, due to the narrow aisles and overcrowding. It felt difficult to find quieter spaces within the venue. Generally, I found the experience overwhelming and stressful.

AToM SURVEY PARTICIPANT

Equity is a big concern. Most of my experiences have been 90% male, 90% white. That needs to change.

AToM SURVEY PARTICIPANT

While I felt well treated as a femme presenting individual, I know women are still carving out a space and the community in general tends to be self-monitoring. I would loooove to see more diverse content, but we are shifting this direction.

AToM SURVEY PARTICIPANT

Financial barriers

- Cost barriers to entry for attendees
  - Entry fee
  - Accommodation
  - Meals
  - Additional events, etc.
- The ‘FOMO’ feeling

Using game studies to think about game events

‘The ethics of play is complex, especially since board games often materialize ideologies without taking a clear theoretical stance for or against them’ (Rey Lee, 2023)

What happens when our spaces are that of consumption and don’t leave room for challenge?

‘Critical play is characterized by a careful examination of social, cultural, political, or even personal themes that function as alternatives to popular play spaces’ (Flanagan, 2009)

York Board Games Convention

- Tabletop games convention held in York
- Outgrew initial venue in first year with tickets selling out in less than two hours
- Footfall:
  - 2024 – 361
  - 2025 – 996
  - 2026 – 1450 (estimation)

[image removed]

Volunteers

- Volunteers are a central component to the attendee experience. Also needs to be a meaningful experience for the volunteer.
- However, needs of volunteers also needs to be taken into consideration.
- Additional questions about power dynamics and scope of volunteering.

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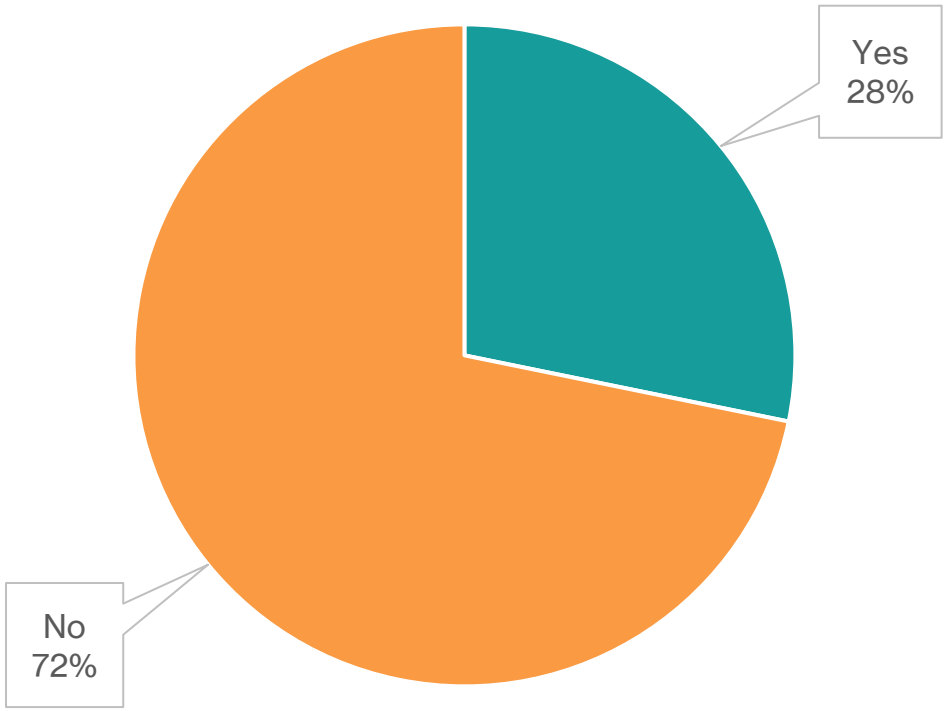
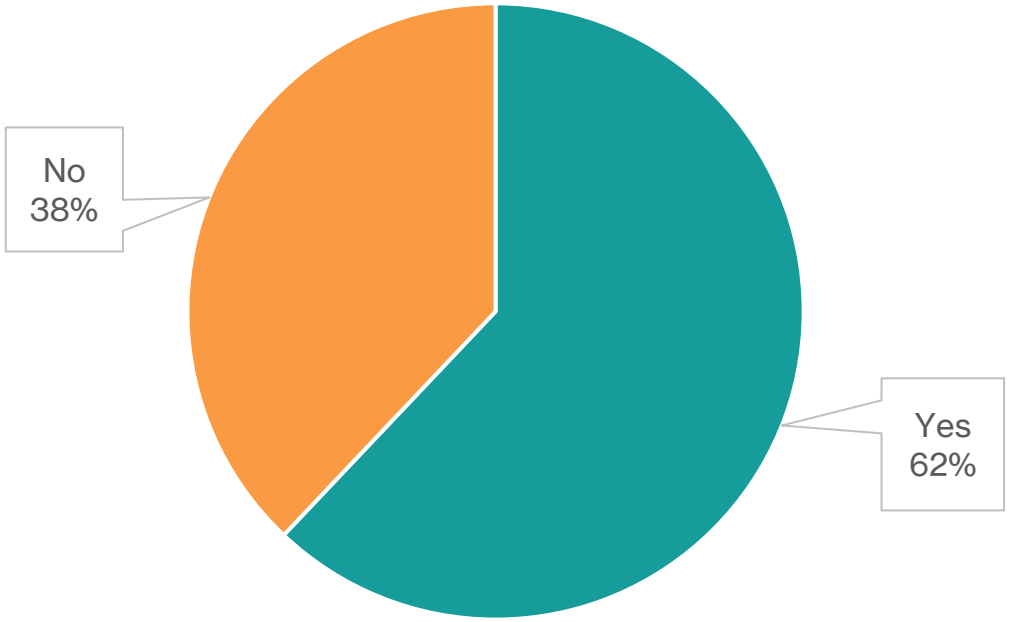
Demons Wake (2025)

Attendee self-defined as having a disability



Attendee self-defined as being neurodiverse



Catering and affordability. Honestly incredible value and so much choice. Really helped with my budget!! All catering staff friendly and accommodating to dietary needs. - Venue. Spacious, lovely, accessible. - Choice of games and what to do. Never felt lost and unable to do anything. - Panels. Great selection, variety, and not too many.

Demons Wake attendee feedback

It felt incredibly well organised. The facilities were perfect for someone like me who needs to eat regularly and use the bathroom often due to physical disability. I was able to fully immerse in the weekend without worrying about access to a toilet or food. Godwin was great for planning games and knowing where I was supposed to be next. It felt like a summer camp with all your friends and lots of new friends and familiar faces all over.

Demons Wake attendee feedback

[image removed]

Always space to improve

- Communication between venue staff to attendees
- Noise levels at some events; making sure there vis space for participants to withdraw to.
- Is the hearing loop enough? What about BSL interpretation?
- Always, always more signage.

Creating discursive spaces

- The best people to ask are those present and who wish to be part of an event
- Individual approaches require an ongoing process of dialogue between participants, organisers and venue
- Treating organisation as a form of informal apprentice work, learning from attendees and participants (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner *et al.,* 2023)

Getting ‘buy-in’

- Co-create with community and partners
- Promises (and perils) of making accessibility and equity issues visible to the community
- Seek confirmation from the community; is this something that they want and will help them?
- Attempt to remain solution focused in approach.

Some tensions

Venues

- Many accessibility features, especially physical accessibility, fall into the purview of venues rather than event managers/organisers
- It is difficult for event managers/organisers to get venues to concede to meet the needs of their attendees

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Event size

- Especially at a large scale, what might work in other cases is not going to be manageable or meaningful.
- For example, a “quiet room” doesn’t work if you have 50,000 unique attendees at an event.
- Pressures in terms of cost, can leave space at a premium for event organisers

Consistency

- Tabletop game events should not feel the same.
- Rare for events to be run by the same people.
- Not enough discussion between event organisers; meaning that knowledge goes unshared; induction to event planning trial and error.
- A long way to go in terms of consistent accessibility at events, due to

Where next?

What can we do?

Thank you for your time!

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