

Charleston's tabletop stores are ready for a re-roll

by [Michael Smallwood](#) July 7, 2021
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Your Tuesday-night adventuring party is coming by, and you need the right dragon figurine to finish the dungeon you've been preparing all week. Or it's Friday night, you've got your black and red Magic deck and you're looking for competition. Maybe you just want to sample a new version of Azul before introducing it to your friends during your weekend board game meetup. You need a place to go.

Charleston's tabletop gaming scene is served by a number of local stores that have you covered, no matter what your game of choice is. Perhaps you're a traditionalist who likes board games. Here Be Books & Games in Summerville might be your go-to destination. If you love card games like Magic: The Gathering or Yu-Gi-Oh, then perhaps you frequent Zenergy Gamers in Goose Creek, The Final Quest in North Charleston or Final Round Game Shop in Summerville or West Ashley. If you're looking for dice and miniatures for your roleplaying campaigns, then The Green Dragon in North Charleston has you covered.



*The Green Dragon's gaming room sat mainly unused during the pandemic, according to owners Scott (left) and Beowulf Carter
Photos by Ashley Rose Stanol*

Tabletop games are communal experiences that draw dedicated participants into close proximity. Social distancing is unheard of in a gaming store, where two or more people are usually sat across a table from each other, poring over cards or a map. When the pandemic forced everyone to stand apart and shelter in place, many local hobby stores found themselves in a difficult situation.

"You'd be hard pressed to pick a category of industry and find that it wasn't affected greatly by what happened last year," said Andrew Braun, owner and operator of Zenergy Gamers. "With game stores specifically, the challenge was the gathering part. I mean, it's literally in the name of the most popular item. So when you took away the gathering, it really caused a lot of us to question how we best survive."

Not only were places shuttered for a few weeks, but they faced new restrictions once things started opening back up. Wizards of the Coast, one of the largest tabletop gaming companies in the world and license-holder for Dungeons & Dragons and Magic: The Gathering, placed a hold on all officially recognized tournament events, effectively putting Magic: The Gathering on hiatus. Other card companies like Konami, which owns Yu-Gi-Oh, followed suit. Game stores were unable to hold official event nights and lost out on a big drawing point for bringing in players to their shops.

The internet also provided a new roadblock. With stay-at-home orders in effect and capacity limits on most gatherings, many board games and roleplaying games moved online. Sites like Board Game Arena and Roll20 allow players to connect and play from the safety of their homes. Local gaming stores were empty.

Scott and Beowulf Carter, the father and son who run The Green Dragon, found their in-person player business suffering despite never fully closing. The entirety of their gaming area, a large room adjacent to the shopping floor, went mostly unused. Here Be Books & Games in Summerville, where customers are welcome to take games off the shelves and demo them, was forced to keep people out at a time when the hobby was seeing an explosion in interest.

“The pandemic hurt us because we did have in-store gaming all the time. Anytime, someone could come in and play for free,” said Tina McDuffie from Here Be Books. “And then, we’d have game nights the first Saturday of the month where we’d stay open ‘til midnight. So with the pandemic, obviously, we were closed for a month or two months. So we had to pivot, and more of our sales were pretty much happening online than in the store.”

Here Be Books also offered curbside pickup and tried to venture into online gaming.

Braun and Zenergy tried offering some at-home deliveries but found the enterprise a bit taxing. As people found Dungeons & Dragons during the pandemic, The Green Dragon saw its miniatures and games sales increase enough to keep them afloat through the worst of the storm. Everyone held on and waited for the winds to shift.

As vaccines rolled out and cases dropped, local gaming stores started opening their doors again to players. Here Be Books has started hosting weekend gaming sessions. Anyone can show up and jump into a game, right off the shelves. Visitors must provide proof of vaccination to attend, but then they are allowed to play unmasked. However, playing it safely, Here Be Books is restricting attendance to 10 people at a time.

Wizards of the Coast recently lifted its ban on organized play and reintroduced Friday Night Magic, thus allowing places like The Final Quest and Zenergy to welcome back dedicated players. A recent visit to both stores on a Saturday saw multiple tables nearly filled with eager and engaged players, huddled over cards and dice. Traders haggled for prices on individual rare cards.

While many players were eager to return, there is some hesitancy. Players are slowly venturing back out. Mask or vaccine requirements don’t seem to be driving the hesitancy for returns. When asked what’s been the hardest thing about getting people back through the doors of The Green Dragon, Beowulf Carter admits some of their most loyal, older players are staying home to play virtually or in very small groups.

But, The Green Dragon has seen a jump in brand-new customers, many of whom discovered tabletop hobbies during the pandemic and now want a new community to share them with. While some are staying away, there’s an entirely new crop of diehards who are finding local game stores and keeping them busy.

Every store in town has special nights and events upcoming for players looking to get involved. Saturday and Sunday are typically the busiest, but most places have something going on most days of the week. And plenty of places, like Here Be Books and The Green Dragon, are always open for players to come in, grab a table and have a good time.

As everyone cautiously opens doors and welcomes back their customers, it seems that the ground is fertile for a new renaissance for the local gaming scene. Many new players are joining the hobby at a time when Charleston has plenty of shops for whatever you’re looking for, and a plethora of games and pieces are on the shelves for whatever you need.