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EXPLORING THE DIGITAL HINTERLAND: INTERNET PRACTICES SURROUNDING THE PURSUIT OF “OFFLINE” HOBBIES

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Introduction

The practice of boardgaming is thoroughly material, with abundant pawns, cubes, cards, dice, tiles and other game components contained within the box. However, this rich material engagement is surrounded by a “*digital hinterland*” of online practices that sits behind and frames the way that boardgamers experience games and gaming. Although boardgames are, increasingly, playable in digital form (Rogerson, Gibbs, & Smith, 2015), in this paper we focus on the digital practices that surround offline play but *are not themselves* play. Using the example of BoardGameGeek.com, we demonstrate that these practices provide an environment for knowledge-sharing, collaboration and co-operation (Blau, 2011) in which participants accrue a form of gaming capital (Consalvo, 2007). We extend these findings to show that similar practices exist for other offline hobbies, notably reading (Goodreads.com) and yarn crafting (Ravelry.com).

Method

We conducted eleven semi-structured conversational interviews with serious leisure boardgamers (Stebbins, 2015) in the USA, Europe and Australia, aged from mid-20s to early-60s. Four were female, seven male, and all worked or were retired from white-

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collar jobs. All were regular participants on BoardGameGeek. Through questions like “What do you like about playing games?” and prompting, we sought to understand their motivations – what attracted them to the hobby, and what they enjoyed about gaming – as well as the ways in which they engaged with their hobby, both in person and online. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and were analysed using thematic coding (Cote & Raz, 2015) informed by our engagement with the boardgaming hobby. After we identified five key digital practices, we visited the Goodreads and Ravelry websites to determine whether and how they appeared.

Findings

Although several participants described playing boardgames as an explicitly non-digital practice, and despite the deeply embedded materiality of these games (Rogerson, Gibbs, & Smith, 2016), the internet is central to boardgamers’ description of their engagement with their hobby. Like Ravelry.com (Hellstrom, 2013; Hudson, 2010) and Goodreads.com (Naik, 2012), BoardGameGeek is an information world containing “social norms, social types, information behavior, information value, and boundaries.” (Worrall, 2013, p. 2). Unlike Ravelry or Goodreads, however, which focus on the generally solitary hobbies of reading (Nakamura, 2013, p. 239) or crafting, playing boardgames is *already* inherently social. BoardGameGeek, like Ravelry and Goodreads, extends that sociality from the immediate game environment to the broader practices of researching, collecting, cataloguing, discussing and tracking.

Researching: Participants research games on BoardGameGeek, often in preparation for large events such as the *Spiel* fair in Essen, Germany. They may read reviews, download rules, watch user-contributed play-through videos or listen to podcasts. Research builds and supports the gamer’s emic knowledge and informs wise purchasing. Similarly, Goodreads allows users to browse for recommendations and to read book synopses and reviews, and Ravelry provides encyclopaedic information about yarns and projects, or things that can be made. Each site offers a form of filter which privileges friends’ contributions over those of unrelated participants; this is most overt on Goodreads.

Collecting: As boardgame fans, many of our participants spend several thousand dollars a year on their hobby, acquiring, selling and trading games. Boardgamers know not only how many games they own but also how their collection compares to other gamers’: “It’s about 350 games. ... talk to the average person, they think that’s a lot of games! Talk to my friends, they’ll say that’s a drop in a bucket!” (P6). Gamers maintain wishlists of wanted games; similarly, both Ravelry and Goodreads offer a ‘wanted’ function, in the form of the ‘queue’ and ‘want to read’ options. The collection is as much about the items that *will be* collected or created as it is about those which are currently owned; Woods (2012, pp. 134-135) has suggested that this collecting and curation is itself a form of play.

Cataloguing: BoardGameGeek offers a number of ways to catalogue a game, which include a detailed description including the date purchased and vendor as well as the price paid and specific edition owned. Similarly, Ravelry users are able to relate their “stash” of yarns to possible projects, and Goodreads users can add books to “shelves”.

All three sites offer some form of tagging, as well as the facility to browse others' catalogues, and distinguish between owned items and those which are used (read/played/crafted).

Discussing: Through discussing games, rating and 'commenting', forum postings, formal reviews, and user-curated 'Geeklists' which link a number of games to a specific theme, BoardGameGeek users collaborate to co-create meaningful crowd-sourced descriptions of games, and present themselves as knowledgeable members of the community (Stenros, Paavilainen, & Mäyrä, 2009; Woods, 2012). Elsewhere, Rogerson et al. (2015) have described how these online practices can fundamentally change the offline experience even for those who do not engage online. Participants on all three sites value the opportunity to engage with "like-minded souls" (P1) but also value the rich data that is generated by the active members, most prominently including ratings.

Tracking: Lastly, participants seek to demonstrate and quantify their participation in their hobby: "Since 2006 I've been using BoardGameGeek to write down all the games that I've played" (P8). Another participant logged her games played using an app, "keeping stats on which games I've played, how many games I've played, and who I've been playing with." (P2). These statistics are uploaded to BoardGameGeek, where they can be browsed and interrogated, by the creator and by others. Similarly, Goodreads participants participate in reading "challenges", and Ravelry users track the progress of their projects.

Conclusion

Based on interviews with hobbyist boardgamers, we identified a digital hinterland that surrounds and supports the explicitly material practice of boardgaming. Being a BoardGameGeek is not simply about playing games; in accruing gaming capital, users engage with a specific set of digital practices that support and enable material acts of play, and that invite users to co-create emic information about games and the gaming hobby, even when the user themselves sees their engagement with boardgames as a rejection of technology. Through reviewing the functions of Goodreads and Ravelry, sites that support the traditionally non-digital hobbies of reading and yarn craft, we have extended our findings to show that these practices are not specific to boardgaming but that similar practices are found across a variety of traditionally non-digital hobbies.

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