Understanding the travel motivations of game hobbyists

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we present the travel motivations of serious leisure hobbyist boardgamers. Building on the Serious Leisure Perspective as well as on the documented practices of sports tourists, we identify two primary underlying motivations for hobbyist boardgamers to travel to boardgaming events. We show that play is a primary motivation for many boardgamers, but that the desire to attend a particular event is also a strong motivator. Further, we demonstrate that the motivation to play or attend is tied not to an individual but to the event itself. We extend these findings to other forms of games, showing that there is a distinct difference between the intrinsic goals of attendance and play.

Keywords

boardgames, travel, serious leisure perspective, hobbyists, games

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we consider the importance of travel – both local and international – as a means of engaging with the boardgaming hobby. The growth in the hobby, together with its inherent sociality, has led to the rise of many events focused on boardgaming. These range from small local clubs and conventions, which attract anywhere from five to 100 or more attendees, to major international events. The two most prominent are August's *Gen Con*, which attracted 60,819 attendees in 2016, and the *Spiel* fair, held in Essen, Germany, which boasted 190,000 turnstile attendees in October 2018.

Our interviews with serious leisure (Stebbins, 2015) hobbyist boardgamers sought to understand the nature of hobbyists' engagement with boardgaming and to uncover the practices associated with the values they place on their hobby. Analysis reveals two primary motivations for attending gaming events. The first is simply to *play*. This delivers on the four pillars of hobbyist boardgaming identified by Rogerson, Gibbs, and Smith (2016): sociality, intellectual challenge, variety, and materiality. Hobbyists describe the pleasures of seeing friends, of playing with different people, of exposure to a

range of games, and of course the tactile and sensual pleasures of playing with physical boardgames. Others attend to compete in organized events.

> for a lot of people it's not about the tournaments, it's a chance to catch up with people you met the previous year and play the games that you like to play with people who like playing that game. (Interview)

Supplementing the desire to *play* is the desire simply to *attend*. Larger and especially international events such as *Spiel* or *Gen Con* are seen as central to participation in the boardgaming hobby. We identify attending such events as a "defining moment" in a boardgamer's engagement with the hobby (Weed & Bull, 2009, p. 95), a pilgrimage akin to an Aussie Rules fan's visit to the Melbourne Cricket Ground (Green & Jones, 2005, p. 177) or a capoeirista's desire to undertake specialist martial arts training in Brazil (Griffith, 2013, p. 2). One interviewee noted that he would "like to [go to *Spiel*] but I'm not sure I would like it" – there is a sense that attendance at such an event represents an important part of hobbyist engagement, but also that it is *different* from other forms of hobbyist play. Another interviewee, who attends several different gaming conventions to play, visited *Spiel* once but found the crowds and the lack of gaming spaces so overwhelming that she returned to her hotel room, to watch BoardGameGeek's live feed from the show.

The decision to play or to attend does not seem to be specific to an individual; many of the hobbyist boardgamers that we interviewed described both habitual enjoyment of attending events and conventions to play and interest in attending larger 'destination' events, which appear to be somewhat interchangeable with one another. One interviewee, who lives in Europe, noted that she has attended *Spiel* for at least ten years, except for one year when she and her partner attended a large gaming event in the USA instead. Another observed that she and her partner are keen to visit *Spiel* as well as *GenCon* and other (named) large gaming events in the USA and UK. She sees this as part of her deep involvement with the boardgaming hobby, which is also represented by attendance at several Australian conventions.

Travel is demonstrably an important avenue for expression of engagement with boardgaming, serving the dual purposes of enabling play and supporting hobbyist identity and engagement. Although not required to play a game, it is nevertheless seen as a very normal part of hobbyist boardgaming. One of our interviewees noted that boardgaming had "opened up a big world" for her – both literally and figuratively. We present these motivations as a starting point for further research into the broader practices of gaming tourism across different forms of game, for example the practices of geocaching (O'Hara, 2008; Skinner, Sarpong, & White, 2018) as well as those surrounding eSports play and spectatorship (Cumming, 2018; Seo & Jung, 2016) and attendance at events such as *BlizzCon* (Seo & Jung, 2016) and *PAX* (Jones, Scholes, Johnson, Katsikitis, & Carras, 2014). Although Green and Jones (2005, p. 177) distinguish between "active" and "passive" sports tourists, we suggest that the desire to *play* and the desire to *attend* both drive *active* participation not only in a specific event but in the game hobby; attendance is a further form of active engagement rather than a passive activity.

BIO

Melissa Rogerson is a PhD candidate in the Microsoft Research Centre for Social NUI at The University of Melbourne. Her research examines the experience of playing boardgames in both physical and digital forms, as well as the characteristics and motivations of hobbyist boardgame players, designers, and developers, applying techniques from human–computer interaction to the study of games and play.

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