

# Playing with Players: On the Criticality of Critical Play

**Melissa J. Rogerson & Sasha Soraine**

The University of Melbourne

700 Swanston Street

University of Melbourne. Vic. 3010

Telephone

[Melissa.Rogerson@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:Melissa.Rogerson@unimelb.edu.au) , [Sasha.Soraine@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:Sasha.Soraine@unimelb.edu.au)

## Keywords

boardgames, hybrid play, observation, players

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

We understand games, gamers, and acts of gaming (Björk, 2008) as inextricably enmeshed; games exist and are designed for the purpose of being played (gaming) by players (gamers). Accordingly, our approach to understanding games begins with play and experience, rather than with systems or with textual analysis. Previous research has demonstrated the value and novelty that knowledgeable hobbyists offer to game design (Pollok et al, 2014). This inclusive approach to games research has informed our work in exploring the breadth of technology-supported boardgames and gaining critical input about their novel designs and hybrid adaptations. It reflects our commitment to connecting research to local gaming communities as part of understanding play practices, preferences, and experiences. Accordingly, we present preliminary learnings from the use of a *Critical Play Reference Group* (CPRG).

In early 2024, we convened a CPRG of locals with an interest in boardgames and hybrid play. This group meets monthly, comprising hobbyists who range from casual to serious boardgame players (Stebbins, 2012). During each monthly session, members select game(s) to play from a growing library of approximately 50 modern hybrid boardgames. Post-game, they complete a survey and semi-structured interview to reflect on both their overall playing experience and how it relates to the game's hybrid functions (Rogerson, Gibbs & Sparrow, 2021a). All CPRG members provide informed consent for their participation and the group sessions including survey and interview questions are approved through the University of Melbourne's Human Research Ethics process.

*Breadth of perspectives* – While as hobbyists we enjoy playing and reflecting on these games ourselves, we recognise this could unnecessarily restrict the research's focus to the types of games and play experiences that we value. Through involving the CPRG, we can generate information from diverse perspectives including those of newer players, of highly knowledgeable players, and of players with differing play preferences. Although the CPRG has only been running for eight sessions so far, we have identified three insights which extend beyond our initial expectations. These are:

*Opinions about what is going on in the game* – We note differences in the way CPRG members engage with the functions played by the in-game technologies. Whereas some players delight in unpacking not only the ways that the game uses technologies but also the way these are reflected in the model, others prefer a more superficial approach that touches on the eight domains in the Hybrid Digital Boardgame model

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2025

© 2025 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

rather than on the detailed subcategories that lie beneath them (Rogerson, Gibbs & Sparrow, 2021a).

*Opinions about the value of technology in a game* - Just as CPRG members reflect diversity in their play preferences and practices, so too do we see diversity in their valuation of technology use. While some are optimistic, others are more cautious, preferring to see significant and detailed benefits that ‘justify’ the technology use in some way. This, to some extent, echoes findings by Kosa and Spronck (2018), who reviewed posts about hybrid boardgames from BoardGameGeek and Reddit.

*Questions about boundaries* – CPRG members are interested to explore the boundaries not only of what technology can do in a game, but also the nature of a ‘game’ itself. We see discussion around the differentiation between a game and a puzzle centred around the interaction between players and demands on the game (see similar discussion in Karhulahti, 2013). Moreover, we see questions raised about the nature of hybridity. CPRG members question whether particular games are ‘true’ hybrids or instead offer more of a gimmicky experience (Rogerson, Gibbs, & Sparrow, 2021b) in which the technology fails to do ‘enough’ for the game to be considered a hybrid.

Despite these benefits and insights, we see potential weaknesses with the CPRG model. One risk is the group members’ becoming familiar with the hybrid play context and inured to the novelty or interest value of these games. We plan to address this through sustained and ongoing recruitment, ensuring that new members are welcomed and have an opportunity to join the group and participate in the game discussions and evaluations. Secondly, there is a tendency among group members to explore new games, rather than replaying titles from previous session. Yet, it is often in playing games multiple times that new insights are obtained. We see an opportunity in future to focus attention on specific games, to actively encourage replay, and to encourage attention to key games.

Overall, the CPRG has proven to be a place where insight and ideas are generated and valuable feedback and information can be gleaned. Through players’ exploration of their own interests in play and of the boundaries that they use to surround their play, we build a stronger perspective of the value of play to these individuals – and of what it is that they value in playing – while ensuring that our work is situated in a community of players. This, in turn, leads us to questions around meaningful hybridity and how it can be achieved and sustained in gaming groups.

## **BIO**

**Melissa Rogerson** is a Senior Lecturer in Human-Computer Interaction and ARC DECRA Fellow in the School of Computing and Information Systems at The University of Melbourne. Her research examines the play of boardgames in both physical and digital forms, as well as the characteristics and motivations of hobbyist boardgame players, designers, and developers. She is currently researching the uses and application of technology in boardgames.

**Sasha Soraine** is a Post-Doctoral Researcher in human-computer interaction in the School of Computing and Information Systems at The University of Melbourne. She is currently working on the use and application of technology in boardgames.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is supported by an Australian Research Council DECRA Fellowship to Dr Melissa Rogerson DE240100730. We thank the ARC and The University of Melbourne for their financial contributions to and support of the project. Importantly, we also thank the members of the Critical Play Reference Group, who have contributed both time and thoughtful insights to this project.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Björk, S. (2008, October). Games, gamers, and gaming: Understanding game research. In *Proceedings of the 12th international conference on Entertainment and media in the ubiquitous era* (pp. 64-68). <https://dl.acm.org/doi/abs/10.1145/1457199.1457213>
- Karhulahti, V. M. (2013). Puzzle is not a game! Basic structures of challenge. In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2013 Conference*.
- Kosa, M., & Spronck, P. (2018). What tabletop players think about augmented tabletop games: A content analysis. *ACM International Conference Proceeding Series*. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3235765.3235782>
- Pollok, P., Amft, A., Diener, K., Lüttgens, D., & Piller, F. T. (2021). Knowledge diversity and team creativity: How hobbyists beat professional designers in creating novel board games. *Research Policy*, 50(8), 104174. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048733320302481>
- Rogerson, M.J., Sparrow, L.A., & Gibbs, M.R. (2021a). Unpacking “boardgames with apps”: The hybrid digital boardgame model. In *Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 1-17). <https://dl.acm.org/doi/abs/10.1145/3411764.3445077>
- Rogerson, M. J., Sparrow, L. A., & Gibbs, M. R. 2021. “More Than a Gimmick – Digital Tools for Boardgame Play.” In *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 5 (CHI PLAY), Article 261. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3474688>
- Sparrow, L. A., & Rogerson, M. J. (2023). Lessons from Homebrewed Hybridity: Designing Hybrid Digital Boardgames for Distanced Play. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 7(CHI PLAY), 45-72. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3611022>
- Stebbins, R. A. (2012). *The Idea of Leisure: First Principles*. New Brunswick, NJ, Transaction Publishers.