

From New Players to Fervent Hobbyists: BoardGameGeeks Unite!

Mark Chen, markdangerchen@gmail.com

Abstract: This is a call for more research on the growing world-wide tabletop gaming phenomenon, which includes sites of rich cultural production, nuanced emerging communities of practice, and examples of the kinds of varied and rich activity we want to see in our designed learning environments. Evidence that tabletop gaming is experiencing a golden age includes the prolific activity found on the website Board Game Geek (<http://boardgamegeek.com/>). This paper will present some of these activities and make a case for why “The Geek” serves as a mirror to reflect on more traditional educational settings.

Previous scholarly work on tabletop gaming includes using them as ways to teach computational literacy (Berland & Lee, 2011; Berland & Duncan, 2012), game theoretical analyses on designing for cooperative behavior (Zagal, Rick, & Hsi, 2006), using and designing board games for classroom use (Nicholson, 2011), and textual analyses of their embedded meanings (cf. essays in Costikyan & Davidson, 2011). Yet no one has stated the obvious: the culture and activity around tabletop games is extremely rich, dynamic, and prolific—as can be seen on the website Board Game Geek (AKA BGG or The Geek, <http://boardgamegeek.com/>, see Figure 1.); it demands academic research.

Like video games, a new generation of board games fall into various categories, both thematically and mechanically. Themes cover a wide range of genres such as Lovecraftian horror, spaghetti western, or corporate space exploration. Mechanically, games can be divided into many different genres that include resource management simulations, dice rolling, and role playing. Some of these games are cooperative, where all players win or lose against a scenario governed by game rules, while others are competitive, often featuring a victory point scoring system where winners are determined at a predefined end-game condition (Nicholson, 2008).

Generally, two schools of games talked about in BGG forums are *Euro* games that tend to focus on novel mechanics, open information, and strategically interesting decisions that require costs / benefits analyses and *Ameritrash* games that tend to focus on immersive themes. One area of possible research is whether the historical roots of these distinctions relate to the parallel narratology vs. ludology debate in digital games, though that debate is largely spurious at this point. Is narratology mostly an American thing (i.e., Ameritrash) while ludology more a European school (as represented in the Jenkins vs. Aarseth debate; HUMLab Blog, 2005)? Also, while these tabletop game categories are mentioned relatively often in the BGG forums, it is generally understood that individual players like all sorts of games, which may help us in thinking about different player “types” in digital games—perhaps it’s another case of how context matters.

No matter a gamer’s predilections, however, she can find a home at The Geek. Indeed, users of BGG share a love of tabletop gaming and feel a strong camaraderie with each other. Part of why BGG is so popular is its comprehensive user-generated database of games. In addition to adding material about individual games, users can ask questions of each other, discuss game releases, submit reviews, session reports, and house rules, and even upload PDFs or other files of fan-made cheat sheets or translations to game text. Users can accrue social and cultural capital through participating in the forums, where they can click a thumbs up button on individual forum posts and award GeekGold to other users. GeekGold can then be used to buy micro badges for one’s profile next to an avatar. (i.e., a user controlled badging system!)

Perhaps most remarkable, a small group of Geeks engage in customizing and modding games, bridging paper and digital crafts through the use of design apps such as Adobe Illustrator and providing their new material for free to others in the community. Like customizing cars or doing casemods, there’s little practical reason to engage in this activity other than the intrinsic enjoyment some users feel in improving their craft and showing off. They’re *hobbyists* engaged in *serious leisure* (Stebbins, 1982). Some users also recreate and redesign artwork for out-of-print games (see Figure 1). These users also share tips and tricks for their craft, an activity akin to that found in DIY communities such as Instructables.

Yet these users did not start as expert hobbyists. In fact, it is possible to track new players’ learning trajectories through forum posts that detail their rising skills and interests in the hobby. We need more research to see what maps onto academic models of community-based learning such as Lave and Wenger’s (1991) description of legitimate peripheral participation.

The fervor found on The Geek is not unique. This kind of excitement is found in many online affinity groups. The

issues this brings up for educators and designers of learning environments are of content and intensity of activity. First, why are schools seemingly continuously unaware of these crazy sites of rich cultural production? Second, why don't learners engage with learning content with as much fervor and self-directed agency? Finally, yes, we need more researchers looking at these pockets of rich, dynamic activity because 1) it's freaking awesome and 2) understanding the activities found on BGG and its social and technical structures that support these activities could lead to better designed learning environments that also wish to generate interest and passion with particular learning goals.



Figure 1: A screenshot of Board Game Geek's homepage (left) and an example of a DIY construction of a redesigned *Magic Realm*, an out-of-print game (right).

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