

# FROM A BOARD GAME TO A DRINKING GAME

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*One Biography of the Finnish Board Game Kimble*

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## INTRODUCTION

“Kimble is an old and unbelievably boring game but if you use it as a drinking game and modify the rules a little bit, playing turns into serious business.” (man 1991)

The board game *Kimble* was introduced in Finland in 1967. It is based on the American game called *Trouble* which Aarne Heljakka’s family received as a gift from their American relatives in the summer 1967. While watching his children play Heljakka realized that the game might have potential markets in Finland as well. After carefully studying the game he then began the manufacture. He named the game Kimble, a name that was popular in Finland at that time. Heljakka picked it from the American TV-series called *The Fugitive* where the main character Dr. Richard Kimble, accused of his wife’s murder, runs from the police and tracks down the real murderer. The name is said to represent the game’s core idea; to run away from others. Since then Kimble has established its place, and it’s one of the most popular games in the Finnish board game markets. It became a hit already in the 1960s since it was one of the few board games made out of plastic back then. It was and still is argued to be durable and almost impossible to break in normal use. It is

often referred to as a classic. Even still Kimble is intrigued by the players and media because of its simplicity and the Pop-o-matic die container in the middle of the game board (see Image 1). Kimble is produced by the Finnish board game company Tactic Games Ltd (former Nelostuote Ltd, founded by Aarne Heljakka). Their most popular, internationally known and played game is Alias. Tactic Games is a family company lead by the founder's son, Markku Heljakka.



Kimble, like Trouble, is a cross-and-circle race game, and its origin is claimed to lie in the Indian *Pachisi* game. Each player has four pieces in one color. The goal is to be the first to move the pieces once around the game board from the home base to the finish. The game starts when the player rolls “6” by pushing the Pop-o-matic, and is then allowed to move one piece to the starting point. Each “6” allows another try with the Pop-o-matic. The piece is moved according to the die. During the game the player must also prevent others from winning the game. This happens only if one of the pieces lands on another player's piece. That piece is then sent back to the home base. In Finland this is referred to as “eating” which is similarly used in chess.

Kimble is a fundamental part of Finnish culture since almost every Finn has played it at least once in their life, usually in early childhood. It is passed on from parents to children generation after generation. There has also been some tabloid news about Kimble which have caused stir in Finland. Kimble is also used as a drinking game especially among students. It has been described easy and simple enough for that purpose. In this paper, my goal is to study how the use of a non-game element such as alcohol affects the game's playability and meaning. Usually, drinking games are considered harmful to players but does drinking actually harm the game itself? Does the game become more or less a game?

The first part of my research material consists of online inquiry responses (247 respondents) I received when conducting a Kimble themed online inquiry in November 2015. Six out 247 respondents mentioned the use of a Kimble drinking game version. The inquiry led to a contact from students of the Guild of Automation and Systems Technology at the Aalto University in Finland, and to the second part of my research material. In this group Kimble is described as a "Thing", and it has a certain prestige among them. The students invited me to their Kimble happening in the spring 2017, and allowed me to document their Kimble culture. I also interviewed one of the students. In this paper I will be referring to them as students of AS.

The need to study Kimble drinking game rises from the research material but also from Olli Sotamaa and Jaakko Stenros' article "Through a Shot Glass, Darkly: The Study of Games in the Light of Drinking Games" published in *Games and Culture* in 2016. In their article they address a question whether drinking games are just one way to instrumentalize games or the gamification of drinking. Gamification has been defined as "the use of game design elements in non-game context" (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, & Nacke, 2011). Katriina Heljakka (2015), on the other hand, has argued that the concept of gamification has been

expanding, and that it can involve different kinds of products, apps, services, and even the uses of toys.

I will use Sotamaa and Stenros' article as a guideline throughout the paper. I attempt to concentrate on the positive sides of Kimble drinking game versions and describe some distinctive features of these versions. The paper proceeds from a short overview of Sotamaa and Stenros' article to the use of Kimble as a drinking game. I will make some remarks on how Kimble actually verifies Sotamaa and Stenros' results. Lastly, I will attempt to move further by suggesting that we might need to look drinking games (and other uses of board games) as one biography (Kopytoff 1986) of board games, and as something that increases the game's replayability.

#### NOTES FROM SOTAMAA AND STENROS' ARTICLE

Olli Sotamaa and Jaakko Stenros (2016) have studied drinking games in their article "Through a Shot Glass, Darkly: The Study of Games in the Light of Drinking Games" where they focus on the relations between play and drinking. They note that scholars have hardly touched the drinking and games as part of games studies and, if drinking games have been studied, the aspects of the studies have usually been negative revolving around the theme of bad play (dangerous and in no way nice play). They also remark the fact that the study of drinking games has focused on student groups, and that the players themselves are usually male. Sotamaa and Stenros ponder around the question what the study of drinking games can give to the game studies in general. They argue, for instance, that drinking games can help theorizing game experience, skill, and game design.

Drinking games have different social functions such as breaking the ice among people who are new to each other. One can also practice drinking and search one's limits. The effects of drinking are both physical and social. In drinking games the player becomes worse at the play, not better. Adults also have "the

permission” to do silly and inappropriate things. Sotamaa and Stenros note that most games become drinking games just by adding drinking to them. The consumption of alcohol can be goal oriented and integrated into the rules, and that drinks can serve either as a punishment or a prize. Players are also free to modify the games, and drinking games can be manipulated and modified. Furthermore, it is not only the game that changes but the player as well. (Sotamaa & Stenros 2016.)

Sotamaa and Stenros (2016) argue that drinking can often be considered as a superstructure which is Elias, Garfield and Gutschera’s (2012) definition of something that happens “outside of or alongside the gameplay proper”. This can be, for instance, preparation before the game, stories told, and modifications made to the game. This means that drinking happens outside of the play. One can play the game without drinking (alcohol), and the consumption of alcohol is external to the game itself. They also refer to the term *metagame*, again a term from Elias and others (2012). Metagame means all actions that aren’t part of the play of the game itself but are relating to the game somehow (Elias, Garfield & Gutschera 2012). Drinking alcohol can be part of the metagame, the game outside the game, meaning that it has an important role in socializing and being the theme of the game. Sotamaa and Stenros ask whether drinking games are just an excuse to drink or a way to turn drinking into a game. (Sotamaa & Stenros 2016.)

Next, I will focus on some points they have made about drinking games and will compare them to my own findings from Kimble. The focus lies mostly on student groups but the players are both men and women. As a reference to their article, I will first ask how deeply drinking is integrated into the Kimble drinking game versions. In other words, can you still play the game if alcohol and drinking are excluded? Secondly, what is the purpose of Kimble drinking game versions? Is it intoxication, socializing, or

playing? And thirdly, what else it at stake or should be regarded here?

## THE MANY VERSIONS OF THE KIMBLE DRINKING GAME

### **The online inquiry respondents**

I collected Finnish people's memories of Kimble for my dissertation in the autumn 2015. The idea was to attain information regarding how the playing had changed over the years, which Kimble versions (original or themed) people recognized and owned, and what kind of game experiences they had. In two weeks I received 247 responses. 184 out of 247 of the respondents were women and 51 men. 12 respondents answered "other" or didn't want to specify their gender. Most of the respondents were students or workers due to the channels I used when spreading the online link for the inquiry (university email lists, social media, etc.). 151 respondents were born in the 1980s and 1990s, and 83 of them in the 1960s and 1970s. The oldest respondent was born in 1924, and the youngest in 2000. Most of the respondents played board games "sometimes" or "seldom", and only a few (9 out 247) considered themselves as active players. Even though I knew about the possibility of using Kimble as a drinking game, I didn't inquire about it nor did I expect to receive such detailed responses regarding it. Half of the respondents used here can be considered as highly experienced Kimble (drinking game) players since they've had an active phase of playing Kimble at some point.

Among the respondents there were only six who mentioned that they had played Kimble as a drinking game, and only three of them gave detailed descriptions of the game such as which rules they had followed. Most of the respondents who mentioned Kimble as a drinking game in any way were students or had played the drinking game version as a student, and at least one of them was a member of AS at the time of the online inquiry. Only

one of the respondents said that she had played the drinking game version at her friend's birthday party, and that they had followed the rules they had found on the Internet but she didn't mention the website. The respondents were both men and women, however, men's descriptions of the game were much more detailed and longer than women's.

What was common for some of the respondents was that they chose to play Kimble as a drinking game mainly because it was simple and easy enough to turn into a drinking game. However, it was interesting that the rules were made much harder for the drinking game version. This was also done to give Kimble some extra kick when played without alcohol. Kimble drinking game versions actually seem to move away from the general idea of modifying the game only by alcohol. Being "too" simple Kimble has to be first made more difficult in order to play it with alcohol. It is not necessarily about playing worse but integrating the drinking to the play, and regulating the drinking in the play. For instance, if played so that the player takes as many sips as the die shows, the game quickly becomes unpleasant when the player rolls several sixes in a row.

Drinking was seen either as a punishment or a reward depending on the rules. When the player's game piece is pumped, the player gets a penalty of half a 0,33 liter beer can. All the penalty drinks have to be drunk before the game ends. In other cases when pumped, the player's drink is drunk by the opponent meaning that it is both a punishment but also a reward for the other player for playing well. Sotamaa and Stenros (2016) state that winning means that one doesn't have to drink. In games winning also means that one plays well. Being good at Kimble means that you are lucky but also know which piece to move and when to eat.

One distinctive feature was the group activity around the drinking game versions. For instance, one male respondent reminisced that during his university studies they had founded

a Kimble club for their students' union. Although the club was founded with irony, it became a part of their tradition. One of the annual key happenings was the *Kimbledon* tournament which he described the following way:

“The game was played on a big game board using beer bottles as game pieces. When the opponent's game piece was eaten, their beer bottle was drunk by the opposite team. The tournament was designed so that every team would have a reasonable amount of games so that everyone would be in good spirits and would not turn into drunkards before the final. The finals were quite Fellini-like happenings where four oddly and suitably dressed for the theme teams of four people were playing against each other wobbling and screaming basically all the time during the game. And so was the audience as well.” (man 1969)

The respondent doesn't give a full description how they modified the game rules but more about how the playing felt like, and how they prepared for the game. The dresses of the teams, watching the games, and the preparation of the tournament are definitely part of the metagame of this Kimble drinking game version. The playing had started as casual; hanging out with friends and sipping beer, and then, with an ironic twist it turned into playful competition where alcohol was involved. Another respondent reminisced her playing of the Kimble drinking game the following way:

“We pimped Kimble suitable for the purpose: to replace the lost game pieces we used corks from the beer bottles, and we would write the extra game rules onto the cover of the game box: the green ones were elves, yellow ones Chinese, red ones communists, and blue ones.. I've forgotten! Every team would have a leader game piece which was to be taken first back to the finish before others, ergo gunmen, who had to eat someone before they could be returned to the finish, so sometimes the gunman had to go round the game board several times.” (woman 1983)

She describes how they modified Kimble but doesn't explain how alcohol was integrated into the game, only that alcohol was



involved. She also mentions that they used to have different kinds of sayings or catchphrases such as “Don’t pop on someone else’s turn”. This was also characteristics for the Kimble culture of the students of AS which I will discuss next.

### **Students of AS at the Aalto University**

In the spring 2017 I interviewed one of the students of AS at the Aalto University in Espoo in Finland. The main point was to get an idea how the tradition of using Kimble as “the game” and the playing of human Kimble had begun and developed over the years and how it was maintained. I documented several Kimble versions they had designed and built themselves using parts of old original Kimble versions, IKEA furniture, 3D printed parts etc. I also documented the playing of the human Kimble. The human Kimble version was one of the most interesting ways to create a drinking game version of the game. The huge game board was made from sofas as the home bases and small round carpets from IKEA as the game track. In the middle of the game board, where Pop-o-matic is normally located, there was a table-like self-made game board and the original Pop-o-matic in the middle of it. One member of each team plays around the table, while others move as actual human game pieces “eating” each other (see Image 2).

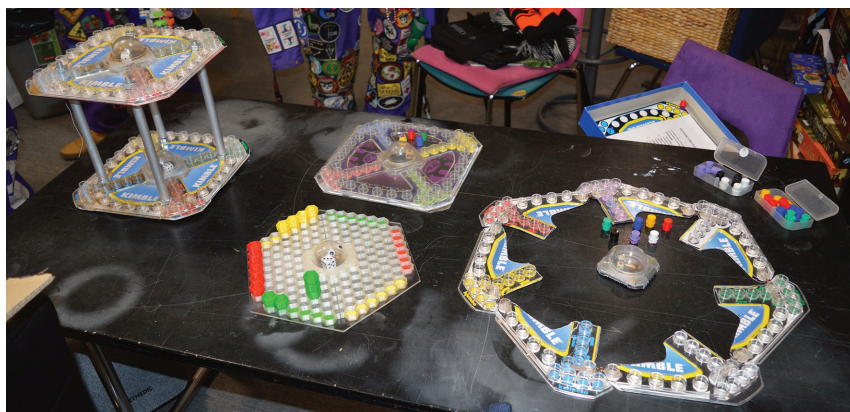


The Kimble tradition is linked to the opening of the *Konttauskausi*, a season that begins long before May Day and means happenings, partying and different tasks especially for the freshmen to accomplish. The name comes from a Finnish word “kontti” which means a shipping container that was in the guild’s use during the first years of the tradition, but the name also carries a wordplay in Finnish since “konttaus” actually means crawling. So, another translation for *Konttauskausi* would be “The Crawling Season”. The guild would open the season with festivities and play the human Kimble. After they gave up the shipping container, the playing of Kimble remained. The student I interviewed, Matti Ojala, couldn’t say for sure why Kimble was chosen as “the game” but it became a way to get to know people and get the evening going. He says that to them Kimble is a game of gentlemen and a matter of heart, and that they have long been playing it. They have a certain person, Jäykkäränne (accurate translation would be The Stiff Wrist), who takes care of the guild’s Kimble tradition, and usually referees the first game. The stiff wrist also refers to the way how Pop-o-matic should be pushed.

Over the years the students of AS have developed their own versions of Kimble such as *3D Kimble*, *Hex Kimble*, *Modular Kimble*, and the guild’s *15th Anniversary Kimble* (see Image 3). All these versions contain some of the basic elements of Kimble: the Pop-o-matic die container is always located in the middle of the game board, the game pieces have the same appearance, and the rule of eating another player’s or team’s game piece is never left out. The versions are played as drinking games, and the consumption of alcohol can be huge, of course, but the game is made a little bit easier for the freshmen, and there’s always the possibility to drink non-alcoholic drinks instead. They even claim to have tried the “euro’s cheese burger Kimble” which, according to them, stopped being funny after the second burger.

They have also tried to replace the alcohol drinks by physical exercises.

The 3D Kimble is built from two game boards. The game begins from the lower game board and proceeds to the upper one. This version takes time since if the game piece is eaten on the upper game board, it has to be returned to the lower one and start again. In the 15th Anniversary Kimble each team has one extra game piece. The Hex Kimble looks a little like a honeycomb, and the players are able to pile the pieces. The goal is to get to the other end of game board. For the Modular Kimble the students have painted old pieces with new colors thus adding more teams to the game. The game board is in pieces and is built a bit by bit when sixes are rolled.



As mentioned earlier, the students of AS have developed numerous sayings and their own versions of Finnish songs by replacing the word Kimble in some of the words. They were also aware of the relation between the numbers of the die which means that the number on the opposite side is more probable to be pushed next than any other number, especially the relation between six and one. They describe the “6-1” as a classic way to start the game. There is clearly a belief in the tactics, even though Kimble is considered as a more luck than tactic based game. When following their playing of human Kimble, I noticed that

some of them had trained themselves to push the die container in a certain way, thus hoping to get the right number. The students have also constructed the idea of Kimble Gods that are present in every game. Indeed, it is possible that the drinking games heighten Kimble's mysterious nature.

The Kimble culture of AS is definitely well maintained and cared for. Although alcohol is involved, it seems that it has been Kimble, and not alcohol, that has been connecting both new and old students for several years. For instance, Matti Ojala states that they enjoy building new versions and modifying the rules since it makes the playing more enjoyable. "It's in our blood", Ojala says.

## CONCLUSION

In the beginning of this paper I presented some questions regarding the playing of Kimble drinking game. I asked how deeply drinking is integrated into the drinking game versions, what was the purpose of the games, and what else is at stake here. First of all, it seems that drinking is not a necessity in the game but the games are rarely played without alcohol since replacing alcohol or drinking is difficult. The purposes of these games are both intoxication, socializing, and playing but the relation between these alters. The intoxication was hardly mentioned by the online inquiry respondents or the students of AS although it was there in the background in the form of beer cans and other drinks. Only one online inquiry respondent alluded that her memories of the drinking game times were blurry. Socializing, on the other hand, was the key reason for playing and drinking. Kimble drinking games served as a way to get to know new people and to pass time in a pleasant way. What is more, both the respondents and the students mentioned that these games were modified, and it was fun and part of the game. Especially the students of AS had went pretty far with the modifications and designed new Kimble versions with more

difficult rules and interesting game situations. This also made the non-alcoholic play more fun.

Mary Flanagan (2009) states that one of her prior interests in her work *Critical Play* lies in the board games and how they reflect the given culture, its hopes and values. Drinking games are old, as Sotamaa and Stenros (2016) note, and they tell a lot about culture and the occasionally rising need to become intoxicated. So, it's not uncommon that some player groups modify games suitable for drinking. Drinking games belong to everyday life although they're not played every day. There has long been debates about alcohol consumption in Finland, but none of the respondents or students seemed concerned about their drinking games. Instead, they were excited to tell me about their memories and traditions. They had, however, discussed about the possibility for easier and non-alcoholic games, which indicates that they had found a mutual understanding regarding these subjects.

What is surprising here, is that how one game can inspire different groups around one country to drink. The online inquiry respondents and students of AS hint of a subculture of Kimble where drinking and building of new Kimble versions are part of the superstructure. Indeed, even Kimble's mysterious nature seems to escalate, and this is probably because the players can't control the game that much when drinking.

Kimble is re-gamified by non-game elements, yet at the same time it is also about gamifying drinking. Kimble seems to be better suited for this purpose than any other game. For instance, Matti Ojala says that they have tried playing Beer Pong and other games which are designed to be drinking games but Kimble allows more players to take part in the game because it can be modified so well. When turned into a drinking game Kimble is not only played but experienced as an object which generates fellowship. Memories are special and shared by a small group. The feeling of togetherness increases when Kimble is played as

a team. However, the possibility for individual play does exist. One male respondent (from AS) did state that they usually play the team version first, and then move on to find out who is the champion of the winning team.

What else is at stake here? Sotamaa and Stenros (2016) argue that drinking games have not been studied as games or play. Yet, the same theories can, at least partly, be applied to them. The drinking game studies have been player and drinking oriented, but it might be worthwhile to turn the gaze into the game itself, what happens to it, and how the game is modified. This follows in a slightly reversed way the idea from Samuel Tobin (2015) who has studied cocktail cabinets and suggested that it is not just the game that matters in the cocktail cabinets even though game is the basis for everything. If we study the cabinets from the perspective of the player's body, the cabinets become something more. If we study drinking games from different perspectives, we discover that these non-game elements, not only alcohol but candy, money etc., can play a crucial role in creating a strong attachment to the game (the object), mechanics that might extend the game's life so that it is not that prone to planned obsolescence, and new spatial contexts for the play when games are brought outside and built from furniture.

Tobin (2015) also argues that we re-define and re-name our objects all the time. Tobin criticizes the digital essentialism, the focus on digital which causes us to ignore the genealogy that, for instance, the cocktail cabinets have. He points to the alternate cultural histories of the cabinets or games for that matter. This idea links to Igor Kopytoff's (1986) theories of object biographies. Each object can have several biographies such as social, political, and physical which can change with its age and convey different meanings. Such as the hangers (Tobin 2016) do to the video arcade. The hangers give the arcade a different meaning since they are not playing any games. For instance, the use of Kimble as a drinking game was defined by some of

the online inquiry respondents as “another way to use Kimble”. Drinking game was not considered as the primary use of Kimble, not even among the students, but it was seen as a part of everyday Kimble. The same individual Kimble can be both a board game and a drinking game, yet not every Kimble turns into a drinking version in its users’ hands. Still, the drinking game is one biography of the whole Kimble concept. Users can extend the object’s life by the way they use them, and thus enhance the game’s replayability. Kimble is given other purposes, but it also gives the players a different purpose. It’s about a different biography of the object that follows its user’s life. In the future, the focus could lie more on the “life cycle thinking”, and the idea that games are objects and have lives they aren’t designed or supposed to have.

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